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Istanbul *mahalle* and Venitian ghetto

Is the comparison relevant?

NORA SENI

The concept of Ottoman "tolerance", allowing the co-existence of different ethnic/religious groups in rural and urban areas, has increasingly been used and much praised in recent years. This capacity for tolerance has supported Turkish candidacy to the European Union being instrumental in proving Turkish aptitude to deal with plurality. However, the reality of tolerance in the Ottoman city was somewhat different. This paper will analyse the regulations that existed in the Ottoman cities and will examine the rationale behind the enactment of these rules in relation to Muslim and non-Muslim communities.¹

From the 16th century to the late 19th century, official decrees (*fermans*) were issued by the Sublime Porte to regulate various aspects of city life stipulating the conditions of the presence of women and non-Muslims (Christians and Jews) in urban areas. These decrees imposed rules about clothing materials, specifying authorized thickness and colours of the veil and of the *ferrece*, designating the length and shape of scarves, giving the maximum value of belts etc. The legal height of buildings

¹ I will use in the first part of this article some of the issues I have discussed in N. Seni "Ville ottomane et Representation du Corps Feminin", *LES Temps Modernes* Juil-Août 1984), pp. 65-95.

were regulated according to the ethnic/religious identity of the owners, the nature of stones for construction. These *fermans* are addressed to city authorities such as the *cadi*, the *bostancı-basi* (the superintendent of the Royal Gardens), the *Subasi*, the *imams* etc.

"To the Cadi of Istanbul

From now on it is forbidden for Jews and other unbelievers to wear attractive and ready made clothes. These people asked for the permission not to dress as they always did. It should be known that they have to follow the ancient tradition: the *ferces* (a coat for woman that covers the whole body) of Jewish women and other unbelievers must be made of black material, the lining must be made of old fur, the belt must be of half cotton, half silk, and its value should not exceed thirty or forty *kurus*, and their sandals must be black and smooth and without any other colour ... And their women should not wear sandals with heels but shoes of ancient manner, they should not wear collars as the Muslims do, and if they wear a hair band or other fabric ornamentation this must be made of smooth cotton, and the Armenians too, should be dressed like Jews but they should wind a red scarf around their head. and this too should not be large." (1568)²

This scarf (*tülbent*) that surrounds the *kalpak* (a high head-gear) is called a "*turban*" and every non-Muslim member of the community had to wear a specific colour of *turban* and shoes. Blue was attributed to Jews, black specified the Greeks. and Armenians were recognizable by a crimson *turban*. In the nineteenth century these regulations were no longer obeyed and all non-Muslims wore black turbans.

These decrees were not only concerned with clothing **but** also about the urban "traffic" which created a division between the Muslim and non Muslim pedestrians of Istanbul.

² Ahmet Refik: *On altıncı Asırda İstanbul Hayati (1553-1591)*, İstanbul, 1933. translated by N. S.

"Order to the Cadi of Istanbul

According to sharia (the religious law) it is important that non-believers do not ride horses and do not wear furs, kalpaks and frank styled embroidered silk material (kemha) And also their women should not wander around in Muslim styled clothing, and should not wear Persian ferece. Although it is important that they are despised in their dressing and clothes ail these regulations are not respected. With the permission of judges, Jews and infidels ride horses, dressed in expensive clothes and do not step down the sidewalks when they come across Muslims. They walk the streets and their wives also in more precocious attitude than the people of Islam.

I order you to forbid them to ride horses and to wear furs...etc." (1630)³

From decrees that regulate prices of meals we learn that the Sublime Porte in sortie circumstances forbade non-Muslim's presence in small restaurants:

"Owners of small restaurants will make food and mutton heads. The presence of a non-believer at the counter is forbidden. They will not cook anything with tallow. The meals boiled, baked or fried should be perfectly cooked. Eight portions of tripe will cost 1 asper. A stuffed paunch will cost 1 asper.

The hierarchy between ethnic/religious communities did not only determine a prevailing group, the Muslims, and a dominated group, the Christians and Jews. There was also a hierarchy among the non-Muslims according to the demographic importance of each community. The Orthodox Greeks were first after the Muslims, then the Armenians. The Jews were the smallest non-Muslim group in Istanbul.

Ahraet Refik. *Hicri On Birinci Asirda Istanbul Hayati*. Istanbul Devlet Matabaasi. Istanbul, 1931. s. 52.

Cited by N. Beldiceanu in: *Recherches sur la ville ottomane au XVIe siècle*. Maisonneuve et Larose, 1973, Paris, p. 199.

The decrees were also influential in determining the architectural *decorum* of Istanbul and revealing religious differences in the fabric of the urban space. *Fermons* dictated the authorized height of buildings according to the religious identity of the owner of the building:

Order to the First Architect of the Porte:

"In this big city of Constantinople, for the buildings to be constructed and for those to be transformed and restored, authorisations should be delivered; for the Muslims to build to a height of 12 zira, for the Christians and Jews authorisations to build to a height of 9 zira ...etc.. (1725)⁵

Other *fermans* specified to what extent the staircase of a house could overstep to the pavement.

It is now time to ask if there is another section of the population whose urban presence was regulated by the Porte's decrees. *Fermans* were issued by the Sublime Porte that proscribed the rules to which women, both Muslim and non-Muslim, were to obey in the streets, the shops and inside vehicles. The rhetoric of these *fermans* was very similar to the rules that regulated non-Muslim presence in urban sphere. The specifications concerning apparel were very detailed. Furthermore, the legitimacy of these decrees was first based on their conformity to the *sharia*, the Muslim law, and second from its "ancient" character. The text of the *fermans*, ail containing the phrase "in the way it has always been" (*kadimden olah beri*), appears to be a principle of legitimacy *per se* in Ottoman law that this sentence was compulsory.

To the Cadi of Istanbul, to the "Aga" of Janissaries, to the Superintendent of the Royal Gardens (Bostanci Baçi)

People complain about women taking advantage of the absence of the Court which is in Edirne busy with important matters, these women exhibit new behaviours in the streets,

⁵ Ahmet Refile Hicri *On tkinci Asirda Istanbul Hayati*. Istanbul, 1930, p. 83, translatee! by N. S.

wear clothes imitating those of non-believer women, inventing new postures which destroy innocence and chastity. From now on women will not wear fereces with collars exceeding one "shibir" (approximately 10 cm), they will not use stripes which exceed one inch and scarves that exceed 3 "degirmis". If they do their collars will be torn apart. Imams of the mahalles are informed that have the responsibility to enforce this rule (1725).⁶

The regulations did not apply only to clothing but also delineated the city for women (Muslim and non-Muslim) into streets where women were allowed to go, where they could and could not shop authorized times when they could be outside their homes and forbidden vehicles. They forbid cohabitation between men and women in transportation, for example in small boats (*sandal, kayik, pereme*)⁷ that cross the Golden Horn or the Bosphorus:

"Order to the Boat's Superintendent (peremeciler kethüdası)

Because an instruction banned young women from taking small boats (pereme) together with men, and to walk by the sea, certain old and honest women have been restricted from crossing the water to go to the other side. I ordered that you take good care to obtain that ail these is done in the way it has always been and that you protect these poor women." (1580)⁸

Another criterion for segregation appears in this decree: the age of women. Proximity with men is not forbidden for older women only forbidden for young (*taze*) women.

This proscription does not apply only to vehicles but to shops where men and women are prohibited to be together, as it is shown by a 16th century decree:

6 Ahmet Refik: *Hicri On thinci Asuda Istanbul Hayati*, Istanbul, 1930, s. 83.

7 In the 16th century, Turkish *pereme* means small boat, but it derives from Greek and signifies "to cross, to go to the other side."

8 Ahmet Refik *On Altına Asırda...* p. 41, translated by N. S.

"Order to the Cadi of Eyüb

You have sent me a letter and informed me that Muslims who live in the Cami-i Kebir district complain about infidej who behave badly, disturb the peace of the mahalle, sing ar_ ; dance, preventing people from hearing the call to the prave: They complain about certain women that pretend to buy an; eat kaïmak, who go inside the kaïmak shop (kayrnakci) and consort with men and act against the law Now it is importas: to remind you (or them?) that these matters contrary to the law are forbidden ..." (1573).⁹

Other *fermais* ban female presence in the city if the women in question are not out of their homes for functional reasons It is illegal to be out only for purposes such as leisure, taking the air and wandering around. There must be an acceptable aim which justifies the fact of being outdoors for example, going to a Turkish bath (*hamam*), or to visit a relative.

"Order to the Superintendent of the Royal Gardens (Bostanc: Basi)

In these days of spring that came -thanks to the Ail Migh: - some women, pretending to go out to take fresh air, leave Üsküdar by carriage to contemplate the boats (near the seas-hore) frowning as bad women do, and I have been told that they display attitudes which are not liked (not welcomed) From now on, it is strictly forbidden that women ride in carriages, pretending to take fresh air and wander around ,.."10

It is important to notice that these matters such as where to go, and when, with whom, how to dress and which shops to got to, today, would be considered to be personal choices, taste, evaluation of ones own "honour" (*namus*) are regulated by the authority and unspoken laws of civil institutions like family, neighbourhood, religion, fashion, market and economic

9 Ahmet Refik, *ibid.*, p. 40, translatee! by N. S.

10 Ahmet Refik. *Hicri On tkinci Asirda Istanbul Hayati*, Istanbul, 1930, p. 175. translatee! by N. S.

parameters. The Ottoman State authority acted as if these institutions do not exist, or that they were not able to control the presence of women in the city. These *fermans* show a central power which did not delegate nor share its power with religious authorities and did not take into account the beliefs, traditions, cultural values such as modesty, fear from neighbourhood gossip and pressures of elderly members of family which moderate human behaviour. This position of the Sublime Porte puts individuals in direct relationship with the State with no intermediary institutions denying power to the civil sphere institutions and mechanisms.

The characteristics of the corpus of decrees that aimed to control minorities and women's presence in the city can be summarised as follows:

1) They were concerned with the visible presence in the urban space of non-Muslims and, women of every religion; they attempted to regulate their existence in the city.

2) Paying extreme attention to details they specified the type of costumes and clothing that were allowed.

3) To non-Muslims they attribute the colours to wear depending on the ethnic religious community they belonged. They forbade certain colours to Christians and Jews: green was the colour that specified Muslims. Only Muslim women could wear sandals made of natural, non-coloured leather.

4) They banned women from going to certain places, at certain times. They define the protocol; giving a description of what the "etiquette" in Istanbul streets was to be and reiterated the precedence of Muslims.

5) By attributing architectural rules depending on the religious identity of the owner of the building, these decrees drew up the decorum alongside the religious structure of population.

State viewed the city as a theatre stage, the State being the director, the costume designer and the stage-designer. The clothing regulations, the designation of the colours, the specification of materials, ornaments, value of what people wore, aimed to make visible who was who. When looking from the

palace to the city the Sultan must immediately be able to differentiate the population on a gender basis and an ethnic/religious basis.

Does this corpus of decrees contain evidence that would confirm or refute the possibility of comparing the religiously based urban district, the *mahalle*, to the Jewish *ghetto*" (of Venice, of Rome or of Frankfurt)? Istanbul's topographical mosaic consists of city quarters or residential neighbourhoods –*mahalle*- delineated on ethnic/religious grounds and of ethnically more mixed commercial and craftsman areas.¹² Is this mahalle the Ottoman equivalent of the European ghetto?

There is abundant literature about the Jewish ghettos, which existed all over Europe, until the end of 19th century. One example is the ghetto of Rome walls of which were only destroyed in the nineteen eighties. But before the ghetto there was the *rouelle* that made it possible to distinguish Jews in a Christian city. In thirteenth century, after the 4th Council of Latran and on the eve of the eighth Crusade in 1269, the French king Saint Louis forced the Jews to wear a yellow and a circle of material upon their costumes.¹³ Historiography often ignores that

11 The word ghetto is derived from *gettare* (Italian) in the sense of pouring or casting metal. The ghetto of Venice was next to the municipal copper foundry. "Subsequently, the word ghetto was extended from its specific topographical origin in Venice and was used to refer also to the compulsory Jewish quarters" Benjamin Ravid, "Curfew Time in the Ghetto of Venice" in E.E.Kittel and T.M. Madden (eds.), *Medieval and Renaissance Venice*. University of Illinois Press, 1999, p. 237.

12 "There is, however, a very basic difficulty in finding references to individual *mahalles* in pre-nineteenth century Ottoman archival sources. The only Ottoman historical sources for Istanbul that are classified on a topographical basis and in which various *mahalles* can be spotted are the Archives of the Religious Courts (*Ser'iyeh Sicilleri/Kadi sicilien*) and even in these archives, homogenous, long, and uninterrupted time series are difficult to come by". Cem Behar, *A Neighborhood in Ottoman Istanbul*, New York, SUNY Press, 2003 p. 3.

13 "Parce que nous voulons que les juifs puissent être reconnus et distingués des chrétiens, nous vous ordonnons à la demande de notre très cher frère dans le Christ Paul Chrétien, de l'ordre des frères prêcheurs, d'imposer des insignes à chaque juif. des deux sexes: à savoir une roue de feutre ou de drap de couleur jaune, cousue sur le haut du vêtement, au niveau de la poitrine et dans le dos, afin de constituer un signe de reconnaissance, dont la circonférence sera de quatre doigts et la surface

this distinctive sign was applied not only to Jews but also to Muslims.¹⁴ It is also known that in Venice, during Renaissance, when the Jews had to live in the ghetto for a limited time they had to wear specific caps, which identified them as Jews.

The first papal bull that banned Jews from taking residence inside a Christian neighbourhood was issued in 1442, during the pontificate of Pope Eugene II.¹⁵ But it was not applied. It was the bull of Pope Paul IV (*Cum Nimis Absurdum*) issued on 23rd of May 1555 that obliged Jews living in all areas of Rome to quit their residences and return to the Jewish district and the Christians living in this Jewish quarter had to move out. The periphery of the quarter was to be walled up and these walls were only demolished in the late nineteenth century.

A similar situation occurred a few years earlier in Venice. In 1516 the Venetian Senate legislated that until it was to be stipulated otherwise, all Jews of Venice were to reside together on the island known as the Ghetto Nuovo. "That legislation further provided that in order to prevent the Jews from leaving the ghetto and going around the city at night, two gates were to be erected. They were to be opened in the morning when the marangona bell sounded (at sunrise) and closed at the twenty-fourth hour, that is, at sunset, not midnight as is sometimes asserted erroneously, for the whole point was to keep the Jews segregated after dark. To enforce compliance, four

assez grande pour contenir la paume d'une main. Si à la suite de cette mesure un juif est trouvé sans cet insigne, son vêtement supérieur appartiendra à celui qui l'aura trouvé ainsi" in *Ordonnances des rois de France de la troisième race*, Paris, t. I, 1723, p. 294, quoted by Daniele Sansy. "Marquer la Différence: l'imposition de la rouelle aux X^e et XIV^e siècles", in *Mediévales*. 41(2001) Paris. PUV pp. 15-37. See also G. Dahan, *Les Intellectuels chrétiens et les juifs au Moyen Age*, Paris, 1990 and, D.Tollet (ed.), *Politique et religion dans le judaïsme ancien et médiéval*, Paris, 1989.

14 A. H. Cuttler and H. E. Cuttler, *The Jews as Ally of the Muslim. Medieval Roots of Antisemitism*, Notre Dame, 1986, pp. 183-204.

15 Rodocanachi in his *Le Saint-Siège et les Juifs*. Paris, Firmin-Didot, 1891 reproduced the text of this bull addressed to Jews "Inter christianas non habitent sed infra certum viculum sen locum a christianis separati et segregati, extra quem nullatenus mansiones habere valeant inter se degant." (p. 38, note 2).

Christian guards, soon afterward reduced to two at the request of the Jews, were to live at those gates, alone without their families, and their salary was to be paid by the Jews. The two sides of the Ghetto Nuovo which overlooked the small canals were to be walled up, as were all the *rive*, thereby cutting the Jews off from direct contact with the water, which constituted the primary and most Venetian form of urban communication, and two boats to be provided by the Collegio and financed by the Jews were to go around the island day and night. Any Jew caught outside after the hour specified was to pay a fine of 100 lire for the first offence, 200 lire for the second C)."16 Until 1797 Venetian government enforced the provision that all the Jews of Venice were to live within the ghetto.

The first aim of this regulation was to keep Jews in their place as infidels, to demonstrate their inferiority for general theological reasons but also to restrict as much as possible social contact with the Christian population. "Accordingly, legally Jews could pursue only a very strictly limited range of economic activities and, among other restrictions, were not allowed to own real estate or to employ Christian servants on a regular basis. Additionally in order to be immediately recognizable as Jews, they were required to wear a special coloured head-covering."¹⁷

Louis Wirth proposed four criteria that specify the Ghetto.¹⁸ The *constraint* meaning the obligation imposed on a population to reside inside an urban district which is generally circled by walls plus rules that determine time of the day when the

16 Benjamin Ravid. "Curfew time...", p. 238, for the establishment of the Ghetto Nuovo, see also Robert Finlay, "The Foundation of the Ghetto: Venice, the Jews and the War of the League of Cambrai", *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 126 (1982), pp. 1140-154; Alisa Meyuhar Ginio (ed.), *Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the Mediterranean World after 1492*, London, 1992; Ennio Concina, "Owners, Houses, Functions: New Research on the Origins of the Venetian Ghetto", *Mediterranean Historical Review* 6 (1991-92) pp. 180-189. For the Polish ghetto, see Daniel Tollet, *Histoire des Juifs en Pologne*. Paris, PUF, 1992.

17 Ravid. "Curfew...", p. 237.

18 Louis Wirth, *The Ghetto*, Chicago, 1928.

doors of the ghetto are open to give way to go out and come back; the *homogeneity* the residents of a ghetto must share a characteristic, for example, a religious identity. The ghetto is also a *microcosm* containing all layers of society. The last criteria, the *control* refers to the inner organisation of the ghetto, to the institutions -either elected or nominated-that regulate civil life. Taking Wirth's definition, my first point is that to implement the ghetto Christian Europe had to develop an image based on the belief that this separation aims to prevent contact with Jews, the absolute *others*, because Jews are marked with *infamy* (Jews ^{are} the deicide people). The ghetto protects Christians from being contaminated with this infamy; it protects them from *abjection*. Jews represent abjection, the image of Jews functions as a container to deposit all the projections of impurity and feelings of disgust. Thus, in the eyes of the Christians, the Jews had to be placed in a visibly circumscribed area and this will therefore create a feeling of security that contamination have been prevented and that they are protected from this filth. This is the basic imaginary mechanism that "justifies" the ghetto organization.

Whereas the Ottoman decrees which ruled the urban presence of ethnic/religious minorities in the *mahalles* aimed principally to create a *transparency*. The *fermans* showed that it was important for the Sublime Porte to see immediately who was who based on ethnic/religious identities and gender differentiation. The Porte's desire to be able to differentiate the population of Istanbul was not related to the phantasm of being protected from abjection, impurity, infamy. It has more to do with the status of the Sultan and the capacity to "see" from his palace: "To be the master (...) is to see. The despot can be crazy ignorant, drunk, sick... it is not important as long as he sees. Not to see is to be condemned to obey. In despotic regimes where one obeys *blindly*, to be blind is the emblematic figure of the subject."¹⁹ This is also why in Ottoman tradition

¹⁹ Alain Grosrichard, *Structure du Serail*, Paris, le Seuil, 1979, p. 73, translated by N. S.

during the race to the throne the best way to destroy the rival candidacy is to blind him. These are the two different justifications "regimes", two different "dispositifs" for territorial segregation.

My second point consists of briefly looking at the obvious differences between the ghetto and the mahalle: 1) The *mahalle* is not totally homogenous as far as the religious identity of its inhabitants is concerned, no rules prohibit families from different religions from moving to a neighbourhood. 2) Even though in some Ottoman cities the *mahalles* had walls and doors, their "*raison d'être*" was not to protect the rest of the city from the abjection of the ethnic/religious *mahalles* inhabitants.

These two points support the idea that the city in Turkey in Ottoman times did allow for the tolerant co-existence of different religions as opposed to the European ghetto System, which forcibly segregated a specific population, the Jews, from the remainder of society. Therefore, the comparison between the Istanbul *mahalle* and Venetian *ghetto* cannot be seen as relevant