

Remembering to Forget: Sabbateanism, National Identity, and Subjectivity in Turkey

LEYLA NEYZI

Sabancı University

I was seven or eight years old. We were walking in Taksim [a neighborhood in Istanbul] with a close friend of my parents I called “aunt.” Accompanying us was an acquaintance of my aunt. There had been some kind of talk about where we were from. “We are from Salonica,” I declared with confidence. In my eyes, being from Salonica was no different than being from Istanbul. When we came home, my aunt pulled me aside. She said, “From now on, you will never say ‘I am from Salonica’ to someone you don’t know. This is very demeaning, people will look down upon you.” I started to cry, protesting, “Why?” All kinds of evil words came rushing to my child’s mind. Were they thieves? Were they immoral? Why should we be ashamed?

According to Fatma Arıĝ, a fifty-one-year-old Turkish woman of Sabbatean heritage, her search for the past began with this shock she recalls experiencing as a child. Her quest was fulfilled by way of history, for lack of memory. Behind her story lies a little-known community, and its three hundred and fifty-year-old relationship with the state and the dominant society in Turkey.

Sabbateanism, known in Turkish as *dönme* (“convert”) or *Selanikli* (“being from Salonica”), refers to the followers of Sabbatai Sevi, a Jewish rabbi from Izmir (Smyrna) who declared himself the messiah in the seventeenth century, initiating a messianic movement that divided the Jewish community. The forced conversion of Sevi to Islam under Ottoman rule resulted in the emergence of a double identity based on dissimulation. Of Jewish origin, Sevi’s followers maintained a Muslim identity in public and a Sabbatean identity in private in their base in Salonica. Descendants of the Sabbatean community of Ottoman Salonica now live mostly in Turkey, in the city of Istanbul. Officially Muslim Turkish citizens, they have been ardent supporters of the Turkish modernity project. Yet the question of origins continues to rankle, even as the community has largely assimilated.

The question of what Sabbateanism means in contemporary Turkey raises a related, even more thorny question concerning national identity itself. In this article, I will argue that Sabbatean identity is a useful vantage point through

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which to examine the contradictions and limits of national identity in Turkey: individuals of Sabbatean heritage both identified with *and* were betrayed by the Turkish modernity project. The case of Sabbateanism in Republican Turkey points up the Janus-faced character of Turkish national identity: while Kemalism—centered on the cult of personality of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey—was based on modernist values predicated on a rejection of tradition, Turkishness continued to be defined vis-à-vis Sunni Muslim *heritage* identified with an imagined Turkish ethnicity.

In this article, I will use the life history narrative of Fatma Arıĝ to examine the consequences for subjectivity of the attempt to create a new basis for individual identity in Republican Turkey. I will show that the rejection of the past resulted in a potential conflict between family identity and national identity on the part of individuals. Performing Turkishness, subjects felt the need to hide alternate histories in the public sphere, and sometimes in the familial sphere as well. As Arıĝ's narrative shows, in Sabbatean families parents colluded in this process of erasure by emphasizing their Kemalist heritage while suppressing the Sabbatean past, for it was those with multiple identities who felt the most pressure to perform a singular identity.

The rediscovery of history in Turkish society in the 1990s suggests that the Turkish modernity project's attempt to create a new basis for identity has been limited by the refusal to acknowledge the cultural heritage of the Ottoman Empire. Unlike her parents, and speaking in the present, Fatma Arıĝ refuses to hide her ethnic/religious origins. Despite widespread political polarization, the turn to the past in Turkish society suggests the emergence of a new subjectivity (and demands for a new concept of citizenship) predicated upon having a *personal history* which necessitates the public acknowledgement of a plural cultural heritage.

CHALLENGING MODERNITY: THE TURN TO THE PAST

Carolyn Steedman (1995a) argues that modernity, as it emerged in England in the nineteenth century, resulted in the development of a new concept of childhood. Over time, childhood came to represent the (lost) past which formed the basis of a sense of self. Steedman's work follows Freud's classic work (1953) in underscoring the central link between an individual's relationship to the past and her personhood. Current reassessments of our notions of—and experiences with—modernity raise anew the relationship between history and subjectivity.

Intriguingly, the futuristic society emerging as a result of globalization has been marked by a distinct turn to the past. In an era in which all times have become contemporaneous, this may signal a search for continuity, an anchor in a sea of flux (Huyssen 1995). The turn to the past is also linked to a disillusionment with the promises of modernity, including those of the nation-state (Shapiro 2000). Turning to the past, modernity's critics have called for a reassessment of the study of history itself, insofar as the latter converges with official/national history (Crane 1996). The growing interest in studies of mem-

ory, including the rediscovery of oral history, attests to the search for alternative means of accessing the past (Antze and Lambek 1996). Yet the past does not simply await discovery: it is reconstructed in and for the purposes of the present (Sturken 1997). Memory might be best conceptualized as *recherché* rather than *recuperation* (Huyssen 1995:3).

The turn to the past in the present tends to work through fractured subjectivities (Kenny 1999): intergenerational relations play a key role in processes of remembering and forgetting, families often colluding in the work of erasure initiated by nationalist projects (Yogi 1996). What then of tales *not* told, experiences *not* shared? Recent work on “post-memory” suggests—as Freud discovered long ago (Wilson 1998)—that memory is as much about forgetting, and the violence embodied in silence, as it is about remembering (Goertz 1998). As Michael Taussig puts it, “secrecy magnifies reality” (Taussig 1999). This raises the question as to how personhood may be generated out of silence, particularly in cases where the relationship to the past is fraught with violence (Bhabha 1994).

THE TURKISH MODERNITY PROJECT

Recent discussions of non-Western experiences with modernity have suggested referring to modernity in the plural to account for the historicity of these alternate experiences (Gaonkar 1999). As Fanon’s pioneering work (1991) shows, due to their deep ambivalence towards a past scarred by colonization non-Western modernities tend to produce subjects particularly divided against themselves (Camus 1996). In the case of Turkey, ambivalence towards the past was the product not of colonization but of the deliberate rejection of Turkey’s Ottoman legacy by modernist elites (Bozdoğan and Kasaba 1997). As the writer Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar poetically demonstrates, the modern Turkish persona is caught between desire for (what is viewed as) an inevitable future and the experienced past (Tanpınar 1997[1949]). This is symbolized by the adoption of Western-style (*alafranga*) time reckoning in the 1930s.

The Turkish case constitutes a particularly early and radical experiment with modernity at the margins of Europe (Zurcher 1993). The Turkish Republic was established in 1923, on the ruins of an Islamic Empire reduced to the space of Anatolia. While the Ottoman Empire served as Christian Europe’s “other,” it included within its domain European territories and interacted closely with European society from its inception. A Westernization movement emerged from the eighteenth century. Yet by the end of World War I, what remained of the Ottoman Empire was on the verge of colonization by the European powers. The nationalist movement spearheaded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1919 had its origins in the Young Turk movement in the nineteenth century. By 1923, the Kemalists had won their battle against outside invasion; now the internal battle to establish a new society began, a battle that continues to polarize Turkish society to this day.

Because their Western education led them to internalize modernist values,

and because of the collusion between the Ottoman dynasty and the European powers at the end of World War I, the Kemalist elite positioned itself squarely against tradition (Atatürk 1989[1934]). The Ottoman Empire was a multicultural society in which communities were organized on the basis of religion (Inalcik 1997). Establishing a secular democracy, the Kemalist elite did away with both the Ottoman dynasty and the Islamic caliphate. Beginning in the 1920s, a series of legal and institutional reforms were promulgated which aimed at modernizing Turkish society from the top down (Zurcher 1993). These included secularization of the legal system, the adoption of a Western-style alphabet, calendar, system of time-reckoning, and dress, including the “heathen” (*gavur*) hat, which replaced the Turkish fez. Turkish national identity is centered on the cult of personality of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, whose black-and-white photographs in elegant European clothes entered the family albums of the urban elite.

The Turkish experience raises the question as to what extent Kemalism has succeeded in creating its own tradition as the basis for subjectivity, and what the relationship of this new subject is to the past. Whereas the population of the Ottoman Empire was multireligious, multiethnic and multilingual, for historical, ideological and pragmatic reasons by the early twentieth century the emerging Turkish nationalist movement had come to identify primarily with the Turkish-speaking population of Muslim origin (Kirişçi 2000). Thus, while Kemalism was centered on a modernist ideology based on what were viewed as universal values emanating from the European Enlightenment, Turkishness remained identified with Sunni Muslim heritage associated with an imagined Turkish ethnicity. In this sense, Turkish national identity is both inclusive *and* exclusionary. It is inclusive insofar as it is defined in terms of a commitment to secular modernist values on the part of citizens of Turkey. It is exclusionary insofar as it is defined vis-à-vis a single language and a single imagined ethnicity associated with a particular religious heritage.

The Janus-faced character of Turkish national identity had important consequences for the population which remained in or immigrated to (or were forced to emigrate from) Anatolia by the 1920s. Although all citizens of modern Turkey were Turkish by law, some Turks were more equal than others (Aktar 2000). After the war between Greece and Turkey following the invasion of Ottoman territories by the European powers in 1919, the Greek Orthodox population of Anatolia was exchanged with the Muslim population of Greece (Ari 1995). Under the Republic, Christians and Jews remained as small minorities whose rights as officially acknowledged minorities were guaranteed by the Lausanne Treaty of 1923. Despite their support for the Kemalist project, though, Turkish citizens of non-Muslim origin remained potential outsiders in Republican Turkey, experiencing discrimination and encouraged (if not forced) to emigrate (Bali 1999b).

Ironically, members of the so-called dominant majority, or Turkish citizens

of presumably Muslim heritage (which includes officially unacknowledged minorities) also have an identity problem. For the category "Turk" (commonly used synonymously with "Muslim") disguises the diversity of linguistic, ethnic *and* religious origins of Turkey's "majority" population. Due to the performance of a singular identity in the public sphere, however, these alternative histories remain unacknowledged, and may even be suppressed at the level of the individual psyche. This has consequences for individuals' ability to develop a sense of self, insofar as subjectivity is predicated on having a personal history.

The term *dönme* ("convert," or she who has "turned") is historically associated with Sabbateanism, viewed as a community with a double identity. Metaphorically speaking, though, the term *dönme*, insofar as it connotes a continuously changing or unstable identity, may well be applied collectively to the citizens of Turkey, whose identities are highly contingent and contextual, pragmatically adapted to performing identity in an insecure environment characterized by a historic separation between the public/official and the familial/private domains. To the extent that Kemalism has created its own tradition—particularly among the educated middle-class—familial and national identity have converged. But this occurred through the invasion of the private domain by the national/official domain (Göle 1997) and the deliberate silencing of alternate histories, particularly in cases where family identity conflicted with national identity. It was often those with multiple identities, such as the Sabbateans, who felt the most need to conform, actively colluding in the process of denying the past. Elders within the family played a central role in this process. Nevertheless, the turn to the past in the present suggests that the Turkish modernity project has been limited in its attempt to create a new basis for subjectivity.

Oriented towards the future for three generations, Turkish society is rediscovering its past at the millennium. The 1990s marked a watershed in the opening up of the Pandora's box of history (Bozdoğan and Kasaba 1997). Globalization, including the incorporation of the Turkish economy into the circuits of global capital, the rise of diasporic communities in Western Europe, and the emergence of a new, privatized media, played a role in this process (Keyman 1995). No longer taken for granted, or able to dominate society on its own, Kemalism has been facing major challenges, resulting in a highly polarized debate on Republican history and national identity (Kadioğlu 1998). During the 1980s, a separatist Kurdish nationalist movement and an Islamist movement challenged the status quo (Yavuz 1999). The neo-Kemalist, Turkish nationalist, and Alevi movements that emerged in response, as well as the unacknowledged war in eastern Turkey, accelerated the political polarization of Turkish society (Mater 1998). Widespread corruption and political violence have resulted in the fragmentation of the state into private mafias, and this has contributed to the delegitimation of the political system and the sense of insecurity and unrest. The earthquake of 17 August 1999 acted as a catalyst for a proliferation of civ-

il organization, resulting in large numbers of issue-based NGOs demanding a more participatory democracy.

The new media has played a major role in bridging the gap between the private and the public spheres in Turkey by bringing previously taboo issues into the public domain (Gürbilek 1992). Growing interest in genres such as autobiography, the historical novel, oral history, and neighborhood and regional history in the last decade reflects a new concern with the past on the part of individuals. At the same time, as the issue of identity and its relationship to history has entered the public domain, it has become rapidly depoliticized, trivialized, and commodified (Kırca 2000). A nostalgia industry has emerged, ostensibly offering up tidbits from a “lost” past such as the cosmopolitan neighborhoods of Istanbul complete with their “lost” minority populations.

Despite its surface treatment in the media, the growing interest in identity in Turkish society shows that the past continues to cast its long shadow onto the present. The question of identity and its relationship to history is a deep wound in Turkish society which requires a deep incision in order to heal. But facing the experienced past, rather than a constructed nostalgia, means facing up to the violence experienced in this society during this century—whether between the state and particular communities, between communities, between generations, or within the individual psyche itself. It means confronting the exclusionary aspects of national identity, and its high cost for individuals. For taboos about the past perhaps do most violence in ways not easily visible or voiced: through the secrecy and fear that works silently within the psyche. Sabbatean identity is a case in point.

SABBATEANISM: A SHORT HISTORY

Terminology

Three different terms are used in Turkish to characterize the followers of Sabbatai Sevi: *Sabetaycı* (Sabbateans), *dönme* (“turned” or convert), and *Selanikli* (“from Salonica”). While the term *Sabetaycı* (as well as *ma’aminim*, “believers”) is a neutral term used by insiders, the terms *dönme* and *Selanikli* are somewhat derogatory terms used by non-Sabbateans primarily as terms of reference.¹

Derviş (1986), who places the term in quotation marks, emphasizes the ambiguity characterizing the term *dönme*: Presumably referring to conversion from Judaism or Sabbateanism to Islam, the term implies a conversion that is not genuine.² There is a stigma attached to the term *dönme*, which, like the term *Kızılbaş*, tends to connote dissimulation and harbors allegations of heterodox practices often linked to incest.³ The fact that the term *dönme* is also used in contemporary Turkish to refer to persons who have undergone a change in sexual identity, adds an additional layer of ambiguity (and notoriety) to this already ambiguous term.⁴

During the exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey in 1923–1924, most families belonging to the Sabbatean community in Salonica moved to Turkey. Since then, the term *Selanikli* ('from Salonica') has been used synonymously with the term *dönme*, despite the fact that many Muslims who came from Salonica were not of Sabbatean origin. The imprecision of the term *Selanikli* only adds a further layer of ambiguity to the confusion surrounding Sabbatean identity.

*Sabbatai Sevi esperamo a ti*⁵

Sabbetai Sevi (1626–1676), the leader of the messianic movement which became known as Sabbateanism, was a rabbi (*haham*) in the Ottoman city of Izmir (Smyrna). During the seventeenth century, messianic ideas associated with Jewish mysticism became highly influential in Jewish communities, affected as they were by the oppression of Jews in places such as Poland and Russia. As a young man, Sevi was influenced by kabbalism as a form of intellectual and spiritual expression, and especially its Lurianic strain based on the teachings of Isaac Ashkenazi Luria of Safed. In 1665, in collaboration with his self-declared "prophet," a young scholar known as Nathan of Gaza (1644–1680), Sevi declared himself the messiah the Jews were waiting for to deliver them from their suffering. He swiftly gained a large following among the masses, and even among the elite (Scholem 1973). This led to a great upheaval in Jewish communities, both in the Ottoman domains and elsewhere, where the daily life of business and trade was disrupted. In synagogues in Ottoman territories, the name of Sevi began to replace that of the Sultan in traditional prayers. Pronouncing God's name, forbidden in Jewish tradition, Sevi allowed the transgression of established laws. A new calendar was introduced which dated from the day Sevi declared himself messiah.

Alerted by the Jewish establishment, The Ottoman authorities responded in a careful and cunning manner to these unprecedented events. Sevi was arrested and eventually brought to the court of Mehmet IV in the city of Edirne, where he was forced to publicly convert to Islam. According to a common tale still told, Sevi entered the Sultan's court with a pigeon hidden under his cloak. By releasing the pigeon after the apostasy, he symbolically declared that the "soul" (*can*) who converted was not his own, but that of the animal upon his breast.

After the apostasy, the messianic movement became a sectarian one, as all outward signs of Sabbateanism were disguised and a heretic theology emerged. Sevi's later life was marked by a double life; this double identity would become the hallmark of Sabbateanism. Sevi's eighteen "commandments" included an injunction to practice dissimulation and a proscription against marrying Muslims. The secrecy associated with Sabbateanism is linked to the community's relationship to the Ottoman state, and the need to maintain a separate public (Muslim) and a private (Sabbatean) identity (Nassi 1992). As Barnai (1992) notes, however, Sabbatean identity was an "open secret," since both insiders

and outsiders were aware of the difference between its two aspects, a difference which was not, however, publicly or officially articulated. This set the scene for the continual circulation of rumour concerning *who* was said to be Sabbatean and *what* this secret difference consisted of.

The Dönme of Salonica: 1683–1923

Sabbatai Sevi died in exile in Albania in 1676. After his death, mass apostasy led to the formation of what became known as the *dönme* sect in Salonica, where several hundred families converted in 1683 (Scholem 1971). Over time, this community split into three separate groups, known as the Yakubi (Jacobites), the Kapancı, and the Karakaşlı (Ortaylı 1998). Jacob (Filosof) Querido was Sabbatai Sevi's brother-in-law, whom Sevi's widow declared to be an incarnation of Sevi (Scholem 1971). Those who followed Querido split off from the main group in 1689, becoming known as the Yakubi. A further split occurred when the son of an early convert, Baruchya Russo (Osman Baba), who was born nine months after the death of Sevi, was also proclaimed to be an incarnation of Sevi. At his death in 1720, Osman Baba was viewed as divine, and his grave venerated. His adherents (Karakaşlı) created their own group. Those who rejected both Querido and Osman Baba, but remained faithful to Sevi became known as the Kapancı. Descendants of these three communities remain distinct up to the present.

Western ideas began to influence Ottoman society beginning in the eighteenth century, leading to a radical change in mentality, particularly among the educated elite (Hanioglu 1986). These new ideas associated with the European Enlightenment were particularly influential in cities such as Istanbul, Izmir, and Salonica, port cities with a cosmopolitan population and close ties to Europe (Georgeon 1993). The Jewish and Sabbatean communities in Salonica played a central role in the dissemination of these ideas, and it was out of the convergence between the Jewish, Sabbatean, and Muslim Enlightenment that the Young Turk movement emerged to challenge the Ottoman regime.⁶ As Hanioglu notes (1986), all forms of opposition to the regime of Abdülhamid II joined in support of the Young Turks.

Westernized education played a key role in this transformation. Following the opening of the French-based Alliance Israelite Universelle schools in Salonica, different communities competed to establish schools offering a Western education (Georgeon 1993). Sabbateans excelled as educators. The new schools established by Sabbateans in Salonica included Feyz-i Sıbyan, Terakki (a Kapancı school that would reemerge as Şişli Terakki Lisesi in Istanbul), Feyziye (a Karakaşlı school that became Işık Lisesi in Istanbul) and Feyzi Atı (a Yakubi school that became Boğaziçi Lisesi in Istanbul). Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the first president of Republican Turkey, was himself educated in a Sabbatean school in Salonica run by the well-known educator Şemsi Efendi.

By the late nineteenth century, Sabbateans had become increasingly power-

ful in Salonican society, distinguishing themselves in government service as well as in trade, the professions, and the press. In the 1880s, young Sabbateans established a journal called *Gonca-ı Edeb*, in which they argued in favor of a secularist world view and challenged the conservative older generation (Ortaylı 1998). Sabbateans played key roles in the first government of the Young Turks in 1908; Mehmet Cavid Bey from the Karakaş group acted as Minister of Finance.⁷ The marriage in 1915 of the progressive journalist Zekeriya Sertel to a young Sabbatean woman, Sabiha (who would become a renowned journalist and writer in her own right) was supported by the Young Turks' Committee of Union and Progress as a sign of the changing times (Sertel 1977).⁸

Who is "From Salonica"?: Under the Turkish Republic

The Sabbatean community in Salonica numbered ten to fifteen thousand persons by the first decade of the twentieth century (Scholem 1971). With the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, a population exchange took place between Greece and Turkey. Muslim subjects of Greece were exchanged for the Greek Orthodox subjects of Turkey (Arı 1995).⁹ At this time, most Sabbatean families moved to Turkey, and to the cosmopolitan and wealthy districts of the city of Istanbul in particular. The assimilation of the Sabbateans, which began in the Young Turk period, accelerated under the Turkish Republic. Already distanced from a Sabbatean identity as a result of their secular education, they identified with the Turkish modernity project personified by their fellow Salonican, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

Based primarily in the city of Istanbul, individuals of Sabbatean origin maintained their commitment to Western education, raising their children as highly educated urban middle-class citizens prominent in trade, industry, education, and the media. Committed for the most part to assimilation, they kept a low profile concerning their origins and remained largely invisible in the public sphere—the few notable exceptions only served to reinforce this commitment.

Two major events brought Sabbateanism into public view in Republican Turkey: The Karakaşlı Rüşdü Affair of 1924 and the Capital Levy of 1942–1944.¹⁰ In January of 1924, Rüşdü Bey, who belonged to the most conservative group of Sabbateans in Turkey, made an appeal to the Turkish Parliament in which he critiqued Sabbateans for not being “true” Muslims/Turks (Ortaylı 1998). This unusual public statement, caused, it seems, by Rüşdü Bey's excommunication due to his marriage to a person from outside the group, resulted in widespread public debate on Sabbatean identity. Reportedly, many documents were destroyed during this period by families fearing an official investigation (Zorlu 1998), and the Karakaşlı Rüşdü affair seems to have strengthened the resolve of Sabbateans to assimilate.

After the Karakaşlı Rüşdü affair, Sabbatean identity faded again from public view until the Capital Levy of 1942.¹¹ During World War II, the Turkish government instituted a head tax, the declared goal of which was to tax those who

had made fortunes as a result of the war economy. The Capital Levy, which remained in force between 11 November 1942 and 15 March 1944, had another goal that was not officially stated: to make possible the transfer of capital from the non-Muslim communities of Jews, Armenians, and Greek Orthodox to the majority population of Muslim origin (Akar 1999). The Capital Levy largely succeeded in replacing the non-Muslim bourgeoisie of the city of Istanbul with a bourgeoisie of Muslim origin (Aktar 2000).

Although they were officially Muslim, individuals of Sabbatean background were charged higher taxes than Muslims, and treated in the same manner as non-Muslims during the Capital Levy episode (Ökte 1951). Of the two individuals charged the highest amount of tax during this period, one was Jewish and the other of Sabbatean origin (Tavşanoğlu 1999). The Capital Levy was experienced as a great shock by persons of Sabbatean background who identified with the Turkish Republic and Turkish national identity, and who had largely ruptured their ties to a Sabbatean identity. The Capital Levy episode did more than demonstrate the exclusionary nature of national identity in Turkey; it suggested that *anyone* can be considered a potential outsider in a society where the basis of identity is essentially unstable. The deep-seated paranoia and the constant search for “the enemy within” which characterizes Turkish political culture is a product of the Turkish modernity project’s refusal to acknowledge the past.

Whereas fear and the experience of discrimination had historically reinforced the practice of dissimulation, most families of Sabbatean background, committed as they were to assimilation under the Turkish Republic, took a more radical stance after the Capital Levy episode. With the goal of protecting their children, they chose to deny their heritage even within the family, and to encourage mixed marriages. As a result, the Sabbatean community has largely ceased to be a separate community, while a wall of silence within the family has created a rift between parents and children.

The public debate about Sabbatean identity was reopened in the 1990s with the work of Ilgaz Zorlu, a writer of part-Sabbatean heritage. In 1998, Zorlu published a book entitled “Yes, I am ‘from Salonica.’” With this provocative title, he appealed to persons of Sabbatean heritage to acknowledge their ethnic/religious identity. Ostensibly an attempt to come to terms with his personal past, Zorlu’s work, combined with his exposure in the media, has turned into a media campaign to bring Sabbateanism into public view as an ethnic/religious identity. It has done so in a way that has unfortunately encouraged pre-existing stereotypes about the community to resurface, has played into the hands of anti-semitic groups (Bali 1999a), and made it more difficult for *individuals* of Sabbatean heritage to publicly discuss their identity (Baer 1999).¹²

THE LIFE HISTORY NARRATIVE OF FATMA ARIĞ

There is little contemporary research on Sabbateanism in Turkey due in large part to the reluctance of persons of Sabbatean heritage to speak publicly about

their identity. This makes it difficult to understand what this identity *means* in contemporary Turkey, and the extent to which a community may be said to exist.¹³ Historically, families belonging to the Yakubi group are known to have assimilated earliest, and today individuals of Yakubi background tend to deny their Sabbatean origins altogether. A minority of Karakaşlı families, on the other hand, are said to maintain group endogamy and Sabbatean beliefs. Because of their historic commitment to public silence, though, little is known of this conservative minority. Kapanacı families are located in-between: closer to their Sabbatean origins than the Yakubi, they have become committed to assimilation under the Turkish Republic. Today, individuals of Kapanacı background are more likely to acknowledge their origins.

In a recent study, Özgür Canel (1999) writes that she found *individuals* engaged in the process of searching for their past, rather than a discrete community.¹⁴ She notes a search for the *meaning* of Sabbatean identity on the part of her informants, whose sense of “we” appears highly contingent and contextual. Canel also mentions significant generational differences: she points out that members of the first generation that migrated to Turkey chose to hide their identity, while members of the second generation became increasingly distanced from an identity they knew little about. According to Canel, only in the third generation did individuals express a desire to know more about the past.

Canel’s findings are confirmed by a French documentary film made about Sabbateanism (Blumental and Grosman 1992). In this film, several witnesses of Sabbatean background speak about the perception of Sabbateanism in Turkish society, their own experiences growing up, and their personal search for the past and the meaning of Sabbatean identity.¹⁵ The filmmakers note that interviewees tend to use the term “them” rather than “us” in referring to Sabbateans, expressing the measure of distance they feel towards this identity. Witnesses in the film tell stories of growing up without being told of their origins. At the same time, they acknowledge an awareness of being different in some way, without knowing what this difference consists of.

The interviewees represent Salonica as a lost paradise. They state emphatically their belief that modern ideas came to Turkey by way of Salonica. Assimilation has meant that persons of Sabbatean origins have lost their links to Sabbateanism as a belief system, while not becoming Muslims either: they approximate the secular ideal aspired to by Kemalism. It seems that, no longer associated with Sabbatean beliefs, their difference now consists of their sense of being more modern, more enlightened, more educated than the rest of society. Ironically, though, their origins continue to matter, insofar as Turkishness is defined vis-à-vis an imagined Turkish ethnicity. The anti-Semitism of the Islamist and Turkish nationalist movements has not helped. This is why persons of Sabbatean background are so reluctant to face their personal past: they fear being treated as outsiders in their own society.

As the work of Blumental and Grosman (1992), Zorlu (1998), and Canel (1999) shows, the turn to the past in Turkish society has had its effect on per-

sons of Sabbatean background, who have also begun to search for their personal history—although most continue to hide their origins in public. As the life history narrative of Fatma Arıĝ demonstrates, there is a growing demand on the part of Turkish citizens for the right to a personal history which acknowledges the plural cultural heritage of the people of Turkey. Fatma Arıĝ, an articulate, professional woman living in Istanbul, was among the small number of people of Sabbatean background willing to be interviewed for the film *Sazanikos* (Blumental and Grosman 1992). Several years later, she accepted my invitation to narrate her life history and allowed her name and photograph to appear in the Turkish media.¹⁶ Arıĝ's critical perspective and her willingness to speak out derives in part from her experience with the left during her student years. But it is also a sign of changing times: at a time when Turkish society is rediscovering its past, Arıĝ felt ready to confront the silence which she believed had poisoned her life. The interview itself was highly structured—not by my questions as much as by the way she herself constructed her narrative. Fatma Arıĝ had a point of view, and was ready to speak publicly.

Fatma Arıĝ's narrative makes it possible to address the question of what it means to be raised in a family of Sabbatean heritage in contemporary Turkey.¹⁷ She expresses anger against her family and community for colluding with the Kemalist state in denying the past. She believes that her difficulties in developing a personal identity were caused by the silence, secrecy, and shame concerning the past. From her youth she had tried to learn about the past by reading about the history of Sabbateanism, and through an archaeology of the silence that constituted her memory. Yet, despite her acknowledgement of her ethnic/religious origins, Arıĝ's narrative demonstrates the extent to which her identity has been shaped by Kemalism, which has for generations replaced Sabbatean identity in assimilationist families.

Fatma Arıĝ was born in Istanbul in 1949. Her family belongs to the Kapancı group of the Sabbateans. She was educated in Istanbul, attending Şişli Terakki (a private school founded by the Kapancı group) and a German high school (a private school mostly attended by children of the educated elite). Arıĝ worked for many years for the Turkish daily *Cumhuriyet*, a newspaper known for its leftist views—a peculiarly Turkish left wedded to Kemalism. Most recently, until a tragic debilitating illness, Arıĝ was working as the manager of a private research foundation in Istanbul.

Fatma Arıĝ's grandparents were born and raised in Salonica. While stating that Sabbateanism was a belief system rooted in everyday practice for her grandparents' generation, Arıĝ nevertheless describes her own grandmothers largely in terms of their commitment to modernist values: "If my grandmother had lived, she would have been over a hundred years old today. In that era, she was a woman who had graduated from high school and spoke French. Both my grandmothers read novels, and knew French poems by heart. There is a Europeaness about being from 'the other side of the water.'" ¹⁸

Arıĝ's mother, whose family moved to Izmir from Salonica after the Balkan War (1912–1913), ran her own business in the textile industry until she retired. Fatma Arıĝ's father was a chemical engineer, born in Salonica. He came to Istanbul in 1923 at the age of twelve during the population exchange between Greece in Turkey. According to Arıĝ, her parents' generation, largely brought up under the Republic, identified with the Kemalist project in the hopes that they would belong to the "we" that constituted the new nation. For them, the Republic signified "an event which expressed a modern outlook on the world, which they shared, believing that they would gain a respectable place in the mainland following the exchange of populations."

While Sabbateanism was on the wane as a belief system, the community remained a sociological fact during Arıĝ's childhood. The community remained distinct due to established social networks, relatedness, inmarriage, a custom of helping the needy, and the sense of being perceived as 'different' by the dominant society: "It's as if I was raised with countless aunts, uncles and cousins. Some kind of relation could always be found between people. Whenever misfortune befell anyone, all members of the group became mobilized. My parents spent most of their lives with the children of their parents' friends. They all went to the same schools, where children of the needy were given scholarships."

In Arıĝ's generation, on the other hand, endogamy has decreased. Although inmarriage is still practiced by certain conservative Sabbatean families, Arıĝ, like her counterparts among the Westernized Turkish elite, tends to critique these families (or Anatolians who marry their cousins) for maintaining "non-scientific feudal practices." According to Arıĝ, the question of origins was irrelevant in her choice of marriage partner: she claims that she found out that her mother-in-law was of Sabbatean background only after she was married.

Arıĝ was raised in the 1950s, at a time when the Sabbatean community was still smarting from the effects of the Capital Levy, when "they felt the fascism of the state upon them. This is a blow they did not expect." Although no one in Arıĝ's family was sent to a labor camp, they had to pay large sums as tax, and it was the sense of being treated as outsiders that affected them most: "They looked at people's birth certificates to see if they were born in Salonica. They were told: 'You are *dönme* and must pay this tax.' It's not just the money. That sense of rejection affected them deeply. They felt shame for being called '*dönme*.'"

Arıĝ claims that the reason she experienced a personal identity crisis beginning with the shock she lived at the age of seven, is because her family denied the past: "'Who am I?' This is a perfectly natural question to ask. Yet when I say 'I am from Salonica,' I am told to be silent." Arıĝ recounts that repression only aroused her curiosity and desire to find out about the past. Yet it was difficult for her to learn anything from her family: "They said, 'Some people are born in Istanbul, and others in Salonica. We are not different in any other way. We are Muslim, but modern and Kemalist.'" It was as a young adult that she

began to study the history of Sabbateanism through books: “We were raised without learning these customs. They had been totally repudiated in our family. I remember noticing that an uncle of mine was fasting, but it wasn’t the month of Ramadan. When I asked about this, I was told he was making up the fasts he had missed. Yet the same person did not fast in Ramadan. Years later, I discovered that this fast had its origins in Judaism, being associated with the prohibition on eating lamb during a particular season.”

Challenged by the secrecy that surrounded her, Arıĝ analyzed the minutiae of everyday life in order to find clues to a silent past. In her narrative, she focuses on remnants of custom and ritual, cuisine, the use of language (including regional accents, expressions, and jokes), visiting patterns, and social networks. Arıĝ’s search is reminiscent of psychoanalysis, which looks for traces in the present of a lost past (Steedman 1995b): “Assimilation is not something to be proud of. These people were defeated in the struggle for a sense of self. The existence of *something* about which one could not speak created a psychological burden. Vague rumors abounded.”¹⁹

Arıĝ says that no material traces of their Sabbatean heritage remained in the family home. This was due, in part, to the largely oral nature of cultural transmission in this community.²⁰ It was also because existing documents had been destroyed during periods of fear of public exposure: “The written culture of Sabbateanism was destroyed. When I asked my father whether prayers were available in written form, he told me that my mother had burned them all. Not only were documents destroyed, but people themselves refused to speak, saying ‘I do not remember.’” Arıĝ, who came of age during the highly politicized 1960s and 1970s, compared her community’s experience to her own as a leftist: “During the 1970s, we burned not our traditions but our ideas. I remember burning books that had been declared ‘highly dangerous’ for reasons I could never understand.”

According to Arıĝ, the use of language, including regional accents and family jokes, provided clues to a hidden past:

There were family jokes that were incomprehensible to me as a child. For example, I would sometimes leave my bed to join my parents in their own bed. Whenever I did this, my grandmother would refer to my own, empty bed as ‘Osman Baba’s bed.’ Much later, I found out that those families who believed in Osman Baba kept a special room in their homes where a candle would burn all night by an empty bed, awaiting the messiah. I once encountered such a bed in a friend’s house. In our home, all that remained was a joke.

Food is a central clue to communal identity.²¹ Arıĝ, an accomplished cook herself, claims that certain dishes can be directly linked to Sabbatean tradition. She recalls encountering a dish known as *mafiş* at a restaurant in the city of Bursa. Her conversation with the manager confirmed that the owners of the restaurant were of Sabbatean origin.²² Arıĝ also remembers that when she visited her classmates in their homes, she would sometimes encounter dishes similar to those found in her own home. She recalls that when she mentioned this, fami-

ly members would laugh in mysterious fashion. She later understood that this was because they had realized that the family she visited was also of Sabbatean origin.

In Arıĝ's childhood home, both Sabbatean and Muslim rituals were more evident by their absence than by their presence: "My family did not follow Sabbatean customs, but it didn't occur to them to think of themselves as Muslim either. Few of my mother's friends fasted or performed the Islamic prayers." Among Sabbatean rituals, funerary rites seem to have been the most resilient. Arıĝ recalls that Sabbatean funerals were always followed by huge communal feasts: "As a child, I thought that in all families, death was associated with food." According to Arıĝ, it is sometimes the case that both Islamic *and* Sabbatean prayers are performed at funerals. While Islamic prayers are public rituals, though, Sabbatean prayers are performed silently and privately. Today, persons of Kapancı origin are buried in Muslim cemeteries. However, individuals belonging to the more conservative Karakaş group still tend to be buried in a Sabbatean cemetery known as Bülbülderesi in the district of Üsküdar. As Arıĝ notes, however, this cemetery is not publicly acknowledged: "You sometimes see funeral ads in the paper which state that the burial will take place in 'the family plot on the Asian side.' There is this huge cemetery over there, yet people still act as if it doesn't exist."

According to Arıĝ, her family appealed to Kemalism to account for the absence of a tradition of Islamic practice: "When I asked why my grandmother did not perform the Islamic prayers, the answer I received was, 'We believe in Atatürk.' As the concept of secularism made them feel comfortable, they hid behind the figure of Atatürk, declaring themselves as Kemalists rather than 'from Salonica.' Yet there is something missing. I experienced this firsthand." This description uncannily resembles middle-class Kemalist households in Republican Turkey, where daily life became largely desacralized.²³ In this sense, the appeal to Kemalism on the part of Arıĝ's parents might be viewed less as a disingenuous attempt to hide the "truth" from their child than as their presenting her with the "truth" as they viewed it at the time. For Arıĝ's parents, national identity was expected to subsume communal identity. For Kemalism meant transcending tradition and cultural *difference* in the belief in a *single*, shared national identity based on (what were taken to be) universal values. In fact, such a modernist meta-identity was achieved only among an educated urban middle-class. Ironically, the experience of discrimination under the Republic only strengthened Sabbateans' belief in Kemalism's *promise* of a national identity which would supplant all prior tradition.

Arıĝ claims that in her relationship with her own daughter, she made a conscious attempt to break with the model she was raised with: "I told my daughter everything I knew about our heritage, emphasizing that she should be proud of who she was. Even though I have no religious convictions, I am 'from Salonica' insofar as my people come from this culture, this faith."

Ultimately, though, what Sabbatean identity means for Arıĝ in the present is linked to a particular civilizational stance:

This identity is not just about how to cook a particular dish, a regional accent or religious ritual. For me, pride has to do not with faith but with the fact that this community was highly sophisticated culturally. They were Europeans: I had a grandmother who was highly educated. They even had an hour of sports in school back in those days. I am proud to have come from the European territories of the Ottoman Empire rather than from Central Anatolia, because I can relate much more easily to a European.

Here, Fatma Arıĝ comes full circle to her initial discussion of her grandparents. While identifying Sabbateanism with a modernism highly reminiscent of the discourse of Kemalism, she accuses the latter of ethnic nationalism. Intriguingly, her response to betrayal is not to turn to a rediscovered Sabbatean identity—but to argue for the right to a *personal history*.

Fatma Arıĝ has been criticized for speaking out: “In speaking to you now, I am breaking the rules. When you try to expose the mask, you are viewed as a traitor who exposes the secrets of the community. I speak because I am not ashamed of who I am or where I come from. When I accepted to be interviewed for a documentary film, my mother would not speak to me. She said that I was making up tales about things that were long gone. She claimed not to remember anything. But how can I know, and my mother not?”

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have argued that Sabbatean identity is a useful vantage point through which to examine the doubly inclusive and exclusive nature of national identity in Turkey. I have showed that individuals of Sabbatean heritage both identified with and were betrayed by the Kemalist modernity project. Individuals of Sabbatean heritage identified with Kemalism for historical reasons and because secularism promised a national identity which would transcend tradition. Yet the continued identification between Turkishness and Muslim heritage/Turkish ethnicity meant that individuals with different personal histories felt compelled to hide their origins. This resulted in the suppression of memory within the family, creating a rift between parents and children.

The Turkish experience raises the question as to whether Kemalism has succeeded in creating its own tradition as the basis for subjectivity, and what the relationship of this new subject is to the past. Fatma Arıĝ identifies with what she considers the “Europeanness” of Sabbateanism as opposed to the “Muslim Turks of Anatolia.” This both replicates and points to the heart of the contradiction within Kemalism itself, which vacillates between a Eurocentric modernism posing as cultural universalism and the attempt to construct a local identity based on an imagined ethnic-religious heritage. Kemal Kirişçi (2000) has shown that in the early Republican period, Muslim immigrants from the Balkans were viewed as the ideal citizens of the Turkish Republic. The story of Sabbateans in Turkey suggests that it may well be that Sabbateans are true Kemalists, but not for the reasons suggested by Islamists.

The case of Fatma Arıĝ shows that, while creating its own tradition, the Turkish modernity project has been limited by its refusal to acknowledge the multicultural heritage of the Ottoman Empire. Speaking in the present, Fatma Arıĝ is willing to publicly acknowledge her ethnic/religious origins. She has no wish to be a Sabbatean though: she only desires her personal past—to have access to memory, which was denied her by the silence within her family and in the public sphere in Turkey.

The greatest fear of individuals of Sabbatean background is that they will be viewed as “outsiders.” This is the fate of a society in which the ambiguity which characterizes national identity means that it is difficult to know who is “inside.” The Turkish Republic was established on the assumption that acknowledging the plural cultural legacy of the Ottoman Empire would threaten the creation of a singular national identity. Three generations on, despite political polarization, there is growing pressure from below for the acknowledgement of the past by subjects searching for their personal histories. Today, accepting the different personal histories of citizens who share a commitment to a democratic society can only contribute to societal unity, rather than posing a threat to it (Shapiro 2000). The promise of Turkish national identity was its performative, presentist, incorporative dimension. Its failure was its exclusionary practice.

NOTES

1. According to an informant of Sabbatean background, terms used within the community centered on the opposition between insiders (*içerlikli*) and outsiders (*dışarıklı*). On the other hand, *dönme* and *Selanikli*, when used as terms of address, invariably have a derogatory meaning. Persons of Sabbatean background tend to recall first hearing these terms as children—often as a jeer or insult by a stranger (Canel 1999, Blumental and Grosman 1992).

2. Officially Muslim, Sabbateans tend to be absent from the official record. Selim Deringil (1999:208) notes that they are referred to as *avdeti* in Ottoman documents of the nineteenth century. *Avdet* implies a return, or homecoming, and in this sense is closer in meaning to the term for genuine conversion (*mühtedi*) than the term *dönme*, which puts the emphasis on a *previous* state or identity. Nevertheless, in the case discussed by Deringil, a young woman who takes up with a Muslim is referred to as a convert, even though the *dönme* were technically Muslim.

3. *Kızılbaş* is a derogatory term for Alevism, a heterodox belief system historically defined in opposition to Sunni identity in Anatolia (Olsson 1998). Like Sabbateanism, Alevi identity is based on dissimulation. Regarding incest, it is no coincidence that a contemporary author refers to the Sabbateans as the “Jewish Shiites” (Yelda 1996): rumors concerning the ritual practice of incest have been historically circulated in relation to both Sabbateans and the Alevi. According to some accounts, the Spring Equinox coincided with a celebration known as the “holiday of the lamb” (*kuzu bayramı*), when Sabbateans were rumored to perform a ritual in which couples exchanged partners. Nassi claims that this ritual resembles ancient pagan celebrations of rebirth in nature in the ancient Middle East (Nassi 1992). However, as in the case of the Alevi, it is difficult to distinguish between insiders’ practices and outsiders’ allegations. There is need for historical and ethnographic research to better understand the relationship between practice and myth—yet the very reluctance (or inability) to discuss these identities in public contributes to the circulation of myth.

4. Canel (1999) notes that a taxi driver in Istanbul, upon hearing the term *dönme*, assumed she was working with persons who had undergone a change in sexual identity.

5. “Sabbatai Sevi I await you” (in Judeo-Spanish) was a common prayer among Sabbateans who waited for their messiah near the watercourse (Baer 1999b).

6. As Selim Deringil (1999) demonstrates, modernization had deeply penetrated Ottoman society, including the Hamidian regime.

7. Mehmet Cavid Bey, who was also a prominent politician in the Republican period, was hung in 1926, accused of being implicated in a plot to assassinate Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

8. Somewhat later, in 1922, another well-known journalist of Sabbatean origins, Ahmet Emin Yalman, would marry a woman of Muslim heritage in Istanbul with the blessing of her father, despite the protests of acquaintances (Korle 1997). It is intriguing (though hardly surprising) that neither Sertel nor Yalman refer to their Sabbatean origins in their memoirs (Sertel 1969; Yalman 1970).

9. At this time, some members of the Sabbatean community made an unsuccessful plea to the Greek government to remain in Salonica on the grounds of their Jewish origins (Scholem 1971).

10. It should also be noted that Hasan Tahsin (Osman Devres), one of the heroes of the Turkish nationalist movement, known for “aiming the first shot” at occupying Greek troops in Izmir on 15 May 1919, was of Sabbatean origin (Ortaylı 1998).

11. In a book published in 1939, İbrahim Gövsa, who worked as an administrator at a school run by Sabbateans in Makriköy (Bakırköy) in Istanbul, claimed that Sabbateanism was alive and well: he reportedly discovered Sabbatean prayers in students’ notebooks, noted that the Sabbatean proscription against eating lamb before the Spring equinox was followed, and that prayers were offered to Sevi near the watercourse (Gövsa 1939).

12. Sabbatean identity has also come into public view through the work of Islamists and extreme nationalists. The goal of these writers is to expose the “Jewish origins” of individuals, particularly those in the public eye, in order to confirm that “real” Turks (e.g. Anatolian Muslims) are dominated by “outsiders” who have imposed the Kemalist project on Turkish society (Bali 1999a). Thus, the argument about Atatürk’s supposed Jewish origins makes it possible to “explain” the betrayal of tradition represented by the Kemalist project. This increases the pressure on individuals of Sabbatean background to hide their origins. At the same time, though, a belief in Mustafa Kemal’s Sabbatean origins tends to circulate among persons of Sabbatean background, or at least their common origins in the city of Salonica creates a special bond. Though there is little historical evidence of a genealogical connection, there were undoubtedly close ideological ties between Muslims and Sabbateans committed to a modernist vision in Salonica.

13. Due to secrecy, mixed marriages, and the fact that Sabbateans are officially Muslim, it is difficult to estimate the number of individuals of Sabbatean heritage in Turkey. According to Itzhak Ben Zvi (1963), Sabbateans numbered 15,000 in 1943. Saban (1988–1991) concurs with this view. Gad Nassi (1992) gives an estimate of 40,000–60,000, while Zorlu claims (1998) there are as many as 100,000.

14. Özgür Canel interviewed several individuals of Sabbatean background who acknowledged their identity but spoke on the condition of anonymity.

15. In this film, produced and circulated in France, only the first names of interviewees are provided in order to protect their privacy (Blumental and Grosman 1992).

16. I interviewed Fatma Arıç on 22 September 1997. A newspaper article about her life (Neyzi 1997) was later included in a book on oral history (Neyzi 1999).

17. The work of Blumental and Grosman (1992), Özgür Canel (1999), and Ilgaz Zorlu (1998) suggests that Arıç is not alone in her search for a personal history. Subsequent

to interviewing Fatma Arıĝ. I interviewed three other informants of Sabbatean background in Istanbul. These informants, though acknowledging their heritage, preferred not to have the interview recorded or their names cited. These interviews largely confirm the analysis presented here. Needless to say, it is difficult to discuss Sabbatean identity with persons who deny their heritage altogether, or who may be in favor of maintaining a separate identity.

18. The notion of *Rumelilik*, or being from the European territories of the Ottoman Empire, remains a central trope within Kemalism. Not only are Mustafa Kemal and other leading elites themselves from Rumeli, but as Kemal Kirişçi (2000) shows, special preference was given to immigrants from Rumeli in the 1930s, as they were considered a “civilizing” influence on the “backward” Anatolian mainland.

19. In a similar vein, Ilgaz Zorlu (1998) claims that a pervasive fear of the outside world and a belief in the need to protect family members has resulted in an inward-orientation and in undue pressures on children in the community.

20. However, one type of document historically valued by Sabbateans was genealogies, important means of keeping track of relatedness and marriage. Referring to a privately compiled computerized database of genealogies among Kapanıcı families, Arıĝ notes the transnational networks of Sabbatean families: “Someone who begins to put together their family tree might run across a gardener in Italy or an investment firm in Switzerland. People’s roots and networks extend to places like Italy, Austria, and even America.”

21. A cookbook published in Athens attests to the central role played by cuisine (and by women) in the transmission of culture in families of Sabbatean origin (Eden and Stavroulakis 1997).

22. The recipe for this dish can be found in a Sabbatean cookbook (Eden and Stavroulakis 1997).

23. On the other hand, continuity in what may be termed a meta-religious spiritual tradition in Turkey should not be underestimated (Ocak 1999)—perhaps this made it easier for many to adjust to the loss of the outward trappings of organized religion in the early Republican period.

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