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Stagings of Sacrality in Istanbul's Topkapı Neighbourhood

This paper looks at how the liminal space of Topkapı, right outside the old Istanbul city walls has been a space for competing sacralities, from Byzantine times to the Ottomans and the Turkish Republic. As the necropolis of the Byzantine city, the sacrality of the area was consolidated by the establishment of monasteries, churches and cemeteries and served as a heterotopia¹ for the ever-growing capital. It developed into a space that leads to other spaces and realms, physical and/or spiritual, and I argue that claiming it represented claiming authority over Istanbul, and its connected hinterland. The need to claim this space spiritually led Ottomans to 'discover' Muslim sacrality in the area and build holy sites after the conquest, such as tombs for *velis* and sufi houses of worship. The abandonment of this space by the secular republican authorities in the early republican period also shows that what this place had to offer was primarily 'spiritual capital', a resource the ruling elite was ready to forego.² As fortunes of the neighbourhood show, the substance of sacrality in this instance is this luminal space itself, which is reconfigured and built upon according to the changing understandings of the sacred through time. The liminality that characterizes the area is due both to the walls that determine the limits of the city, and to the memory of the rituals carried out by both Muslim dervishes and Orthodox Christian monks at the holy sites scattered in the area. The 'liminal sites' include the walls themselves, mosques, monasteries and shrines, and the tekke whose history I will go into in some detail to expose how Istanbulians' engagement with these spaces have changed particularly when participating in religious rituals.

With the establishment of the Republic in 1923, Turkey started to dismantle the religious edifice and what I would call the religious infrastructure in the country, to the extent that they banned Arabic from the mosques and changed the alphabet. In a country known for its religious orders, the state banned all dervish orders and allowed only a handful of mosques to continue as places of worship, while a good number of them were locked and fell into disuse.³ Topkapı, which for Ottomans had been the scene of military and spiritual feats- the breach of the Byzantine walls and the spiritual succour the various mosques and tekkes provided to the afflicted- was left to fester in early republican times, for the secular urban ruling class in Istanbul, this space had no semantic importance in their conception of the nation. There was a constant effort to downplay its importance to Ottoman/Turkish history, so much so that in the 1970's it was made into the town's central bus station, which hastened the destruction of the already dilapidated Ottoman worship spaces in the area. So in many ways, the current push for restoration in the area is an attempt to realign historical narratives and recenter the city's past on Ottoman rather than republican achievements and monuments.

¹ The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.

<http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>

² Pointed to again and again by Pamuk. Abandoned tekkes are one of the items that lend Istanbul its *hüzün*.

³ The Ottomans had seen the area just outside the western city walls as very symbolic and had tried to lay claim there as a way to lay claim to Constantinople. Indeed, through its history, the area has represented reclaiming authority over Istanbul, and its connected hinterland.

At the moment there is an attempt to rediscover and restore the various sacred places in Istanbul, both in and outside the city walls. When you look at bulletins of municipalities you can see the precedence given to projects that claim to renovate old dervish lodges and mosques. These moves to renovate old places of worship on the part of the Islamic leaning government comes as no surprise, still it will serve us to look at the symbolic meaning of these endeavours. Those places of worship themselves have very symbolic stories when it comes to their stories of establishment in the context of their own period.

Topkapı, (cannon gate in Turkish) is the name given to the Byzantine St. Romanus gate through which the Turks entered Constantinople. The first entry to the city is so important that the seat of the Sultans that was later built at the meeting point of the Golden Horn and the Bosphorus was named after this gate and this district where the first imperial tent had been erected. The conquest itself has, of course, become the stuff of legend, with stories of the much beleaguered population of Constantinople helping the Turks to get in because they were oppressed by their rulers and stories of improbable feats of physical strength demonstrated by Turkish soldiers. However, apart from the stories that happened during the conquest, many Turks believe that it was predestined with the prophesy of the Prophet who is reported to have said some thousand years before the event 'One day, the city of Constantinople will be conquered; what glorious commander is that commander, and what glorious army that army' The Turks took this saying of the prophet to heart and did indeed manage to get hold of the city.

However, the walls which they so prophetically and valiantly breached through are a constant reminder that the Turks are late-comers to this city, and this informs their attempts to make it theirs, through infusing the area around this gate with stories of heroic battles and the presence of spiritual leaders, conquering it, as it were, both militarily and spiritually. The Ottomans when they took hold of Constantinople, or Konstantiniya in its Ottoman usage, (Istanbul does come quite late) repeated the Acropolis-Necropolis arrangement of the Romans and while they had the seat of government in one of the high hills of the city, they had the cemeteries outside the city walls. Thus, after the conquest, Ottoman cemeteries were added to the Orthodox Greek ones, just as Islamic spiritual centres were added to the Christian monasteries that were already there. In that sense the Topkapı area corresponds to what Foucault calls heterotopia, the neither here nor there, at once physical and spiritual. Apart from the Mevlevi tekke that I speak about in this paper, quite close there's a more orthodox religious complex that draws the faithful in great numbers called Merkez Efendi. And leaving the Mevlevi Dargah and the Merkez Efendi Mosque aside, again within walking distance there are *yatirs*, tombs of people who had visions- and in folklore these visions are always connected with Ottoman military prowess such as the tomb of a *veli* who had a vision of the conquest of Baghdad by Ottoman troops and died subsequently.

The Ottoman relationship to unorthodox sufi practices practices such as veneration of sufi sheikhs was a complicated one: while the state's official religion was orthodox Islam, the popularity of unorthodox practices led the state not only to make its peace with them but also appropriate their pastoral help with the populace. The state both criticised and exploited the presence of the sufi tekkes- and so keeping them outside the city walls was the perfect solution to this problem. These were Muslim houses of

worship as far as the state/Porte was concerned but better kept at bay, as sentinels at the city's borders. The encouragement of religious orders in Topkapı also has to be read within the context of the churches and monasteries around the area, particularly the Balıklı Greek Orthodox complex.⁴ It was not enough that the Ottomans had shown military superiority, it had also to demonstrate a spiritual presence that equalled that of the Orthodox. It would be good to remember that the best example of this religious competition is actually at the very centre of the old town: the Ottomans built the Blue Mosque right across from the Hagia Sophia to demonstrate that they could crystallize their belief just as majestically as the Greek Orthodox. This battle of buildings, of course, was within the orthodox (small o) realm, whereas the curing power of saints and visions fought it out, outside the city walls. However, Christian or Muslim, this area remained a heterotopia, and if we take the Foucauldian reading, a crisis heterotopia, in that it was the spiritually and the physically afflicted who came here to seek cure through the intervention of these men and sites.

The establishment of the area as a heterotopia goes back, according to several reports, to 457 AD (Burçak Evren, p. 26) when the Byzantine Leon,⁵ who was later to become Emperor, was wandering about the area outside the city walls. He comes upon a blind man who asks for water, but Leon has none. He feels terrible to have failed the old man and in his remorse God speaks to him and points him in the direction of a spring. When they find the spring not only do they drink and wash their faces, but the blind man starts to see and the voice from the Heavens tells him that he will be emperor one day which duly becomes true. And naturally when he becomes an emperor he builds a church there and then many miracles are worked in that vicinity, which is then named *Zoodochos Pigi, or life giving spring*. The water then became known for its curative properties and in 726 the famous Queen Theodora enlarged it to make it into some kind of health resort.

This story has had resonance not just for the Christians but also Muslims who would later come to live in Constantinople. It is no wonder because God pointing to sources of water for his true servants in their hour of need is a very well known narrative for Muslims, who commemorate Abraham's wife Hagar's search for water in the Meccan desert during their pilgrimage rituals. In the Hagar story, she is alone with her son Ismael, Isaac's half-brother, and she frantically looks for water for her son God speaks to her and tells her to stomp the ground with her feet, and indeed, a spring appears and this water Zam Zam, is still considered to be holy by Muslims. As B. Baha Tanman states, many sufi dervish lodges have wells whose water is deemed to be curative. Now one can take this tradition back to the Zam Zam well in

⁴ The church was said to have a spring that cured the blind. Also, when the Turks conquered Constantinople and the news reached the monastery, a monk was frying fish. He was astonished and said he would believe the news if the fish he was frying jumped out of the pan, which they obligingly did.

⁵ Outside the Imperial City of Constantinople, near the [Golden Gate](#) (*Porta Aurea*) used to be found a grove of trees. A [shrine](#) was located there with a spring of water, which from early times had been dedicated to the [Theotokos](#). Over time, the [grove](#) had become overgrown and the spring became fetid.^[7]

The [traditional](#) account surrounding the feast of the Life-Giving Spring is recorded by [Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos](#), the last of the Greek ecclesiastical historians, who flourished around 1320. It begins with a miracle that occurred involving a soldier named Leo Marcellus, the future [Byzantine Emperor Leo I](#). Leo heard a voice say to him, "Do not trouble yourself, Leo, to look for water elsewhere, it is right here!" Looking about, he could see no one, and neither could he see any water. Then he heard the voice again, "Leo, Emperor, go into the grove, take the water which you will find and give it to the thirsty man. Then take the mud [from the stream] and put it on the blind man's eyes.... And build a [temple](#)[church] here ... that all who come here will find answers to their [petitions](#)." Kovalchuk, Archpriest Feodor S. (1985). *Wonder-Working Icons of the Theotokos*. Youngstown OH: Central Satates Deanery, pp.67–70. The [Theotokos](#) is frequently likened to a "[holy fountain](#)" in Orthodox hymnography, and an ikon depicting her over a font or spring is found in most Orthodox countries. Sometimes a connexion is made to the [Annunciation](#) or to the story of [Rebecca](#) at the well in Genesis. [Bright Friday](#) is celebrated as "the Feast of the Life-Giving Fount".

Kabaa; equally, one can look for its precedence in older traditions. As Tanman goes to explain:

These wells are seen to be embodiment of the Shafi (he who gives cure) name of Allah, a name, or attribute that sufis believe pass from the prophets to the friends of prophets who are known as veils, it is also thought that this belief has passed on from the Asklepios cult to Orthodox Christians' ayazma/hagiazma (zoodhohos pigi) or holy water tradition and from there to Anatolian Turkish culture. Like others, this syncretic tradition lives on in Sufi culture, and examples of this are the wells in the Yenikapı Topkapı Mevlevi Lodge and Nureddin Cerrahi Lodge. (270)

No wonder then, that one of these holy well tekkes, Yenikapı Dervish Lodge of which I'll talk about later, was built not 15 mins walk away from the Zoodochos Pigi, which after the conquest of Istanbul became known, and is still known, as the Balıklı (with fish) monastery, a name change that is worth explaining since it demonstrates the syncretism of beliefs in Istanbul, and how stories and prophecies of one tradition gets embedded in another. Oral traditions of both Muslim and Greek origin report that when the Turks conquered Constantinople from the very gate we have been talking about, a monk was frying fish at the Pigi monastery and when news reached him he said that he would believe it – so strong were the city's defences- if the fish jumped from the pan into the water. Which they obligingly did. Now the fish still to be found in the monastery pool are believed to be the descendents of those fish that came back to life.(holy fish also exist in Urfa)

The Muslim religious order that chose Topkapı as its headquarters in 1597, because of the spiritual and political pull I have outlined above, was the Mevlevi order, the sufi order established by Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi in the 13th century. In an attempt to prove their spiritual provenance in the area and to authenticate their connection to the area, the sufis too, tell of a story which suggests divine validation of their presence in Topkapı. The establishment of the Yenikapı mevlevi tekke is connected to a wealthy and influential janissary, who becomes the member of the mevlevi sufi order. The distinctive feature of the mevlevi is that they do a whirling dance that is said to replicate the dance of planets around the sun, of the moth around light etc, and the whirling position with one hand held up and one down, symbolizing taking divine wisdom from the heavens and sharing it with the earth below. In this gesture the dervish embodies the 'neither here nor there' and becomes the threshold through which wisdom passes to the earth. The dervishes body itself, as it were, becomes a heterotopia.

Some accounts say that the Janissary Malkoçoğlu, who at the time had been dismissed from the army, first encountered his sufi mevlevi sheikh, Kemal Ahmed Dede in the hollow of a tree, spending all his time in prayer, in a grove in the area where the Greek monastery was- one can only conjecture that he liked living close to monks who devoted their time to prayer as well. Impressed by the sheikh's otherworldly aura, the Janissary decides to become a disciple. He then wants him to intercede in the restitution of his position in the army. The sheikh gives him a piece of paper and tells him not to open it before he is back in his post. Then Malkoçoğlu does indeed return to his post, and when he opens the piece of paper he sees that the sheikh has written the exact day and hour of his restitution to his post. Upon this 'miracle', Malkoçoğlu

decides to build a lodge for mevlevi sufis in the grove where he first encountered the sheikh. (Tekke Kapısı, p. 18)

Throughout the Ottoman Empire the mevlevi fell in and out of favour and the dargah suffered fires both in the Ottoman and republican periods. However, its final end came when in 1925, the Turkish republic decided to close all tekkes that the state considered to be disseminating superstitious beliefs that did not agree with the secular state's subject constituting project. After its closure, it was used as a depot for a period and then as a students' dorm, and after a series of fires was left to rot. However, throughout this period people continued come to the garden to pray in the spiritual presence of the many sufi sheiks who had taught and were buried there. In sufi belief, those who live a life that is full of God-consciousness never die, and visitors feel the 'presence' of these sheikhs who have lived and worked wonders centuries ago. In that sense, while the buildings had been destroyed, the space itself remained and continued to draw the faithful.

With the election of the current Islamic leaning government, the neglected Islamic heritage has been revived, and been pulled back into state's legitimate fold for better or worse. The drive to museumize has placed obstacles to the 'entry' of the faithful both at physical and spiritual levels since 2010 when the place was rebuilt according to plan, and turned into a cultural attraction where the dervish whirling is staged for the consumption of domestic and international viewers (including former heads of state). The visitors are asked for IDs at the entry to the garden where the sheikhs are buried and if they want to attend the whirling, they need to book places in advance.⁶ The viewer is expected to sit at chairs (totally foreign interventions in Muslim prayer spaces) watch and guess at the experience of the whirler, rather than whirl and experience the hidden meanings of the movements- a prime example of the society of spectacle at work.

While both the Orthodox Greek and the Islamic places of worship in the area claim sacrality through narratives of miracle feats, they are both connected to manifestations of earthly power; the founder of both these sites Leon and Malkoçoğlu being 'divinely' restored to high earthly office- stories which add even more depth and layer to the importance of the area as harbouring both sacred and political capital. Looking at how the use of the Topkapı 'wilderness' and spiritual locations have transformed through time we get a sense of what kind of political organization/regime imposed what meaning on to space. Venerated by both Byzantines and Ottomans as a space where miracles and spiritual salvation occurred, Topkapı was abandoned during the republican period. Aware of the spiritual capital of the place the current government tries to redeploy Topkapı's spiritual capital. However at present the attempts to revitalize the area seem short of a vision that could make it once again a heterotopia, a curative and spiritually fulfilling place for the populace. Rather it offers modes of gaining newly promoted citizenly competences, primarily, that of being a participant to the society of spectacle, in which social and spiritual rituals have been replaced by their representation.

⁶ Here, we witness the prioritizing of abstracted experience over lived experience.