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Cultural Sociology of the Middle East, Asia, & Africa: An Encyclopedia

Ottoman Society: 1250 to 1920: Middle East

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The term *Ottomans* identifies a diverse cluster of people associated with the Ottoman Empire. As a long-lived Turkish-Islamic state (1299–1923) and successor of the Byzantine Empire (from 1453), the Ottoman Empire has come to symbolize the epicenter of interactions between Eastern and Western civilizations. By the end of their formative years (1299–1453), the Ottomans had transformed from a rather insignificant principality into a vast empire ruling southeastern Europe, northern Africa, and the Near East. Consequently, a combination of these societies and cultures created what historians call “Ottoman civilization.” A review of the political, economic, and social developments of this civilization provides historical insights into the making of modern eastern Europe, Turkey, and the Middle East.

Geopolitically, the Ottomans began in a favorable location. Unlike the other Turkic principalities huddled within Anatolia, they were on the wavering eastern frontier of the Byzantine Empire. Furthermore, the Ottomans courted Turcoman-Muslim tribes—migrating westward away from the Mongols—in search of safe lands. While these tribes fought fervently to spread and conquer for Islam against the Christian Byzantine Empire, Ottoman leadership developed a concurrent policy of integrating non-Muslims of newly conquered lands into their social fabric. Accommodating politics, growing military power, and the economic dynamism created by an expanding frontier paved the way for the rise of the Ottomans. In the mid-15th century, the city of Constantinople (Istanbul), the largest and wealthiest city of the Middle Ages and the last bastion of the Byzantine Empire, fell to the Ottomans. The conquest of Constantinople laid the foundations of the Ottoman state and transformed it into a full-fledged empire.

The Ottoman Empire emerged as the dominant imperial power of the 15th and 16th centuries. During this time, the Ottomans constructed and consolidated their classical institutions: imperial bureaucrats ran central government agencies under the sultan's authority and transmitted to local state agents specific directives to execute; Ottoman laws and statutory provisions (a combination of Turkish mores and Islamic canon law) were codified. Furthermore, Ottoman millets (a categorization of the population by confessional community) gained the form that would prevail into the 19th century.

Later, in the 17th and 18th centuries, Ottoman political and military expansion went through a period of stagnation in the face of the improved (and sometimes concerted) force of its opponents, such as the Habsburgs, Russia, and Persia. Some historians argue that having reached a natural frontier (i.e., bordering other powerful states such as those mentioned above), as well as fighting a series of protracted wars on multiple fronts, was the cause of Ottoman stagnation. In fact, Ottoman borders progressively shrank over the period, and the imperial monopoly on trade networks (the Black Sea route, for instance) faded with competition and the rise of alternative routes.

Ottoman sultans, statesmen, and scholars took two centuries to attempt to find a panacea to restore Ottoman ascendance. From the Era of Reorganization (Tanzimat, 1839–76) to World War I (1914–18), they formulated and exercised a wide array of reforms in the fields of administration, politics, economy, and education. In particular, influential European ideologies (including nationalism and positivism) inspired a wide circle of Ottoman statesmen and intellectuals in their search for a better political and social order. The end product of their reflections on the roots of the Ottoman decline was the promotion and application of three successive ideologies: Ottomanism, Islamism, and Turkism. Efforts came to no avail, however. The Ottoman masses did not embrace these ideologies; statesmen and officers lacked consensus; military defeats mounted; European imperial powers (mainly Britain, France, and Russia) remained determined to partition the empire; and nationalism undermined the foundations of the millet system. In 1923, after World War I and following the Turkish War of Independence, the empire was officially dissolved and its remnants formed the Republic of Turkey.

Ottoman Formation and Politics

The Ottoman dynasty is said to have descended from the Kayi Tribe of Oghuz, a central Asian Turkic clan. Early Ottomans settled in the pastures of Thabasion (Söğüt, a town in today's Bilecik, Turkey). Their rulers, including Osman I (reign 1299–1324, founder of the Ottoman principality), pursued a hyper policy of conquest

and settlement. With the conquest of Constantinople (1453), the Ottoman principality transformed itself into a veritable empire with elaborate institutions governing the multitude of nations living within its domain.

Historians emphasize that Ottoman military success (and their rapid expansion) depended on various crucial factors. To begin with, the Ottomans were gifted with a geopolitical advantage. Positioned between two worlds—fragile but rich Byzantine townships on their western flank and quarrelling Turkish principalities on their other—they attacked the former while waiting out the latter. Being a frontier principality, they were able to quickly step into the vacuum left by the disintegrating Byzantine Empire.

A second factor in early Ottoman progress was the steady number of Turcoman migrants moving westward toward Anatolia. These migrants, recent and fervent Muslim converts fleeing the marauding Mongol Empire, needed safe pasture for their herds. The Ottomans were happy to oblige, parlaying their manpower and fighting talents into further expansion. In waging holy wars to spread Islam, the zeal of these newcomers provided them with remarkable incentive to join the Ottomans and fight the Christian Byzantines. In addition, the idea of fighting for religion (later established as the Ottoman-Ghazi tradition) legitimized the Ottoman strategy of expanding toward the Byzantine Empire and to stay ambivalent within the struggles among Turkic principalities in Anatolia.

The Ottoman battle cry was religious in tone and predominated until later centuries when ethnic and religious diversity determined Ottoman social and cultural dynamics, supplanting the earlier Turkish-Muslim constitution. However, a significant nuance in Ottoman military conduct existed. Although justifying war with the message of Islam, the Ottomans demonstrated empathy and remarkable respect for non-Muslim (mainly Christian) residents of newly conquered lands, integrating them into their administration and society.

More specifically, Ottoman authorities sent dervishes (semiautonomous Muslim ascetics) with the mission of colonizing newly acquired lands and calling their residents to Islam, but they did not consent to forced conversions. Consequently (and thanks to the millet system), freedom of religion was maintained throughout the life of the empire.

Imperial Discourse

The conquest of Constantinople marked the arrival of the Ottoman Empire. Halil Inalcik notes that this began a period (roughly between the mid-15th century and the early 17th century) known as the Ottoman “Golden Age,” distinguished by competent sultans, the consolidation of imperial institutions, and flourishing agricultural and commercial activities.

The conquest of Constantinople connected Ottoman eastern and western territories, and facilitated further political and military accomplishments. Ottoman borders eventually reached central Europe, and merchants of the empire dominated commercial activities along the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean coasts. Furthermore, the annexation of north Africa, Egypt, and the holy cities of Mecca and Medina (in the late 1510s) earned the Ottomans the *de facto* leadership of the Muslim World—the Ottoman sultan came to be called by the prestigious title of caliph, or the leader of the Islamic world.

A succession of decisive victories on the battlefield added more and larger territories to the Ottoman domain, from Algeria to Belgrade, and a secure access to the Persian Gulf. Furthermore, Ottoman diplomatic overtures bore strong alliances with the Dutch Republic, England, and France, all of whom hoped to contain Spain, the Italian city-states, and Austria, their common opponents.

Challenges to the Ottoman monopolies over lucrative trade networks (linking ancient spice and silk routes to European markets) and failures to adjust to the changing requirements of global trade and to adopt the latest technologies hindered Ottoman power. Unlike their predecessors who were open to innovation, late Ottoman

institutions tended to be conservative and less receptive to change. Essentially agrarian, the Ottoman economy lost competitiveness with the dynamic economies of early industrializing Europe.

There is a risk of creating a false correlation between the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of European states, as it discounts the influence of internal Ottoman dynamics that played as significant a role as outside forces. An alternative to the comparative approach, which is popular among several historians, is an appreciation of the informed views of contemporaneous Ottoman statesmen and scholars who emphasized a collective alienation from Islamic principles, extensive bureaucratic corruption, and a lack of proper military training and motivation to fight, as well as the aforementioned external considerations. Nor was Ottoman decline a continuous phenomenon. The decades known as the Köprülü Era (1656–1703), named after the grand viziers succeeding from the Köprülü family, marked relative diplomatic and military revival despite conclusive defeat to a Christian alliance in the War of the Holy League (1683–98).

Following a string of defeats on the battlefield, a widespread search for fundamental reforms gained momentum in the early 19th century as national revolts (including the 1804 Serbian revolution, a precursor to others in the Balkans) and rebellions grew in severity. Feeling a sense of Ottoman inferiority vis-à-vis Europeans, Sultan Mahmud II (1808–39) paved the way for the Reorganization Era (Tanzimat, 1839–76), a period of comprehensive reconstruction. During this era, imperial institutions and the military modeled themselves on European practices; the banking system was likewise reformed, and more rights were granted to non-Muslim minorities.

Unable to stem the decline, Ottoman statesmen tried to instill an ideological reformation in the vain hope that collective affection for the empire could save it, but neither Ottomanism, Islamism, nor Turkism struck a nerve with the population. Furthermore, during the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II (1876–1909)—the last sultan with real authority—the empire had to declare bankruptcy when loans from Europe (especially those taken out during the mid-19th century Crimean War) could not be paid. Soon thereafter, an energetic patriotic society, the Young Turks, many of whom had military careers, gained political and military authority and advocated parliamentary representation as a panacea for centuries of lackluster governance. Later on, the Committee of Union and Progress—the political coalition of certain underground factions including some Young Turks—allowed the empire to drift into World War I.

Ottoman mobilization and the consequences of World War I proved disastrous. Ottoman peoples (mainly Armenian, Kurdish, and Turkish civilians and soldiers) suffered massive casualties, while forced deportations were not uncommon. The empire eventually dissolved with the Treaty of Sèvres (1920). A majority of Turks, who had rejected the treaty, united and took up arms under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk) in the Turkish War of Independence (1919–23). The Independence War ended with the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which acknowledged the fledgling Republic of Turkey on what remained of the empire's territory.

State Formation

The Ottoman notion of state authority relied on the “circle of justice,” an ancient Middle Eastern philosophy that Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) dates back to the Aristotelian notion of politics. The circle of justice runs as follows: justice is necessary for the world; the world is a vineyard and its wall is the state; the state is governed by law; law cannot be maintained without a sultan; the sultan cannot govern without soldiers; soldiers cannot be assembled without wealth; the people accumulate wealth; and justice protects the people. Accordingly, Ottoman institutions formed a circle of authority and responsibility between the ruling classes and the ruled.

Classical Ottoman administration contained a number of departments with sophisticated functions. In theory, the sultan's authority was absolute, but other agents—the grand vizier (his office was called the Sublime Porte and later the term referred to the imperial government), Seyhülislam (Supreme Judge in Islamic canon law), Defterdar (Treasurer), the officials in foreign and domestic affairs, Nişancı (Sealer, a high-ranking official

who legitimized the validity of imperial edicts with the sultan's monogram), Beyler-beyleri (governor-generals), Kazasker (chief military judge), and so forth—were actively involved in the imperial decision-making process.

In legislative matters, the sultan presided over the imperial bureaucrats employed in a variety of departments, and approved and legitimized laws and regulations. On an executive level, the imperial state relied on local authorities. Religious leaders ruled on matters within their confessional communities and put into effect all manner of directives transmitted from the central government. In addition, the central government supervised local judges and guards (headquartered in city centers and available to the residents of surrounding towns and villages). Judges (*Kadis* in Ottoman terminology) resolved local cases in their regions, while guards acted as a monitoring and law enforcement agency. Both central and provincial governments were involved in legislative and executive matters.

Ottoman code considered contextual interpretations of Islamic canon law and Turkish customs. The more diverse Ottoman society became, the more flexible and problematic these interpretations came to be. For instance, Ottoman code apparently relaxed the dimensions of the Islamic law with its application of a type of meritocracy, making possible upward mobility of the followers of any religion and motivating those with ability. In certain cases, Ottoman non-Muslim subjects (Armenians, Greeks, Hungarians, and Jews) were preferred in bureaucratic positions (as demonstrated in the *devshirme* system). In another example, the sultan was allowed to kill (for the safety and security of the state) fellow heirs who could claim the throne (after the late 15th century). These both were in stark contradiction to Islamic law, but were secured with the ruling (*fatwa* in Islamic terminology) of the *seyhülislam*.

In 1873, photographer Pascal Sebah captured Ottoman Empire ethnic groups. Left, (men): A shepherd from Diyarbekir, and Kurds from Mardin and Al-jazeera. Right (women): A peasant, a Druze, and a woman wearing pearl-inlaid bath shoes. They were from Damascus.



Imperial Economy

Although prizes of war were an important asset of the treasury in the early centuries, the Ottoman economy remained essentially agricultural, with the peasantry and merchants acting as the backbone of imperial economic power. In the absence of hard currency, Ottoman elites (bureaucrats, officers, and scholars) were also paid in kind. A typical example of an in-kind payment is the application of fief holding (*timar* in Ottoman terminology). This system granted a tract of land (made available through conquests) to soldiers who fought bravely on the battlefield. In return for the grant of land, these soldiers had to partake in coming battles and raise conscripts from their land.

Ottoman economic structure assumed its traditional model from the 15th century. Mehmet Genç formulates three underlying principles of Ottoman economy. The first principle was provisionism—the Ottoman economy prioritized provisioning basic needs (food and shelter) regardless of the balance between supply and demand. The second principle, fiscalism, required that Ottoman state income (be it from war gains, tributes, or provincial taxes) be maximized and expenses be kept at a minimum. The third principle, called traditionalism, emerged in later centuries. According to traditionalism, the goal of the imperial economy was stability. Any changes to the status quo had to be avoided unless they served the other two principles.

Although agricultural production was the main economic sector, the Ottomans put considerable effort into industrializing and commercializing their major cities, including Aleppo, Bursa (Brusa), Istanbul (Constantinople), Izmir (Smyrna), Kayseri, Sofia, and Trabzon (Trebizond). These cities turned into commercial and industrial hubs of fur processing, carpentry, precious metals (jewelers and banking), and textile manufacturing, as well as exchange centers for agricultural produce. Moreover, ancient silk and spice routes, which were active until the 17th century, promised a lucrative trade network that Ottoman merchants exploited by transferring Eastern goods to European markets.

A seminal institution in the development of Ottoman industry was guilds, or exclusive and orchestrated artisan societies established in urban centers. From the 16th century to the end of the 18th century, major Ottoman industries organized their own guilds (such as the guilds of cloth makers, porters, fur processors, bread makers, and carpenters) and used them to train apprentices, standardize prices, and monopolize their industries.

Ottoman Civilization

The Ottoman Empire is conventionally divided into stages of formation, growth, stagnation, decline, and fall. However, a periodization of this sort is based mainly on political and military developments, and thus is not very informative in terms of socioeconomic and cultural developments. Furthermore, historical realities in Ottoman society and culture present a degree of inconsistency with the periods. On the whole, Ottoman social classes (briefly mentioned above) remained relatively stable and so did the millet system until the 19th century. Likewise, Ottoman production and dissemination of knowledge (literature and sciences) did not follow this theory of an organic periodization.

Several historians use elite and folk traditions as an alternative categorization in their analysis of Ottoman civilization. In their view, Ottoman intellectuals and their patrons (usually men of power and wealth) monopolized the production and distribution of knowledge. As a matter of fact, intellectuals used a more-sophisticated language (Ottoman language blended with Arabic and Persian idioms and syntax) and discussed abstract issues in a wide variety of fields (including linguistics, ethics, mathematics, philosophy, and astronomy as well as religious concepts). However, it should be noted that folk culture was an important part of Ottoman civilization, with its creative content and forms whose legacy can be seen to this day.

More properly then, Ottoman civilization emerged as a fusion of elite and folk cultures, both imperial and local. Visible in the development of abstract and applied sciences (e.g., algebra, logic, mathematics, metaphysics, natural philosophy), architectural works, food cultures, literature (both written and oral), music, and political

sciences (administration and law), the Ottoman civilization represented a vivid and inclusive civilization with assorted elements carefully adapted from Asian, Balkan, European, and Middle Eastern cultures.

- empires
- Ottoman Empire
- shari'a
- canon law
- Muslims
- conquests
- imperial power

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