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Representing Identities in Turkish Museums

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Following the foundation of the Turkish Republic (1923), several efforts were made to promote a common cultural identity among Turkish citizens. According to theories formulated by the Turkish Historical Society, Turks were presented as inheritors of Turkish populations, coming from Central Asia, as well as heirs of different civilizations that inhabited the Anatolian plateau. This interpretation of Turkish historical legacies was visually portrayed in a wide range of museums, especially archaeological and ethnographical museums, opened all over the country during the first years of the Republic. It seems that Atatürk himself prompted for the opening of a National Museum and a Museum for Hittite Civilization in the new capital, Ankara. However, the plan for a national museum turned into the realization of the Ethnographic Museum, while the second museum was lately established as Museum of Anatolian Civilizations. Nevertheless, what could be said about the representation of ethnic and religious minorities in Turkish museums? It is widely known that minorities' issues are sensitive topics for Turkey, especially in consideration of negotiations for the admission in the EU. In order to shed some light on the representation of national/minority identity(ies) in Turkish museums, this paper will focus on two issues: the representation of "Turkishness," staged during the early years of the Republic,

and the recent opening of minorities' museums.

The evolution of the Turkish museums' history seems to parallel the evolution in political history; so, observing changes in cultural policies and the museological practice, it is possible to recognize the similar shift from the Kemalist nationalist discourse, dominant until the 1950s, to the multi-voiced landscape of the present Turkish society. Therefore, the article will firstly consider the portrayal of Turkish identity in the Ethnographic Museum and the Museum of Anatolian Civilization. The first museum, recently renovated (2002), was completed in the year 1927, and it hosts several examples of Seljuk and Turkish crafts. Symbolically, the place provides a double affirmation of the Turkish identity, since it hosted for many years (1938-1953) the body of Atatürk.

The second museum, in which are exhibited items of different ages and civilizations, was initially opened as Ankara Archaeological Museum; then, in the year 1967, it was re-organized and renamed with the more encompassing label of "Anatolian Civilization."

Secondly, the paper will consider the issue of minorities' identity, presenting two museums, established by two different communities, the Jews and the Armenians. A brief presentation of those two museums could better serve to illustrate the nature of museums as political institu-

tions, staging different images of Turkish/minority relations. Although the paper discusses a limited number of cases, its aim is mainly to stimulate further debates on the role of Turkish museums as place where different representations are displayed. The research is based on press review and published materials.

Introduction

During the 19th century, museums became an essential instrument in nation-state building discourse, representing the ideal place for displaying objects and collection that symbolically represented the common past, shared by the members of the Nation. Nevertheless, in recent years, the role of national museums has undergone a critical review. In fact, together with the de-construction of nation-state discourse, we are assisting to an increasing debate on the representation of subgroups' identities in museums.¹⁰⁹

Before proceeding to our analysis, it could be useful to spend some more words on concepts like ethnic groups, minorities and heritage in order to explain how this last concept it is often seen as symbolic, political and economical resource for and by groups.

During the 1980s and 1990s, studies in political and social sciences reserved a wide attention to the issue of ethnic identity and nationalism (Eriksen, 1993). In particular, scholars' attention focused on the nature of ethnic groups, differentiating them from similar concepts as "minorities." While some authors believed that identity is essentially based on "primordial" emotions,¹¹⁰ other scholars interpreted groups' identity as an "instrumental factor," which helps groups in gaining access at resources (Cohen, 1994: 144-145). However, it is commonly agreed that ethnic groups can be generally defined, according to subjective criteria, such as cultural and linguistic traits. Moreover, the identity of the ethnic group is generally founded on the belief of a common descent. This belief creates

among the group members an exclusive link, tracing the borders between who is inside the group and who is outside it (Epstein, 1993; Melucci e Diani, 1992). Common traditions became a shared symbolic patrimony, which increase the solidarity and cohesion among groups' members. Moreover, the appeal to a common history, not always real but also "re-created," could foster a sense of stability and continuity (D'Andrea, 2000).

Although similar they could appear, the concept of ethnic group doesn't coincide with that of minority. Defining the status of minorities is a difficult task, which many social scientists, lawyers and politicians have devoted their attention to. It could be helpful look to the definition of minority given by Luis Wirth (1945), the first scholar, in the field of social science, who provided such a definition. Wirth recognized three elements that are still valid for claiming the status of minority: 1) limited access to political power and economic resources; 2) numeric inferiority –which determines an unequal redistribution of power in society;¹¹¹ 3) recognized inequality between majority and minority (Wirth, 1945, in Diani, 1993: 709). Thus, basically, what distinguishes minorities from ethnic group, is the position of disadvantage and discrimination that minority groups have in society. The status of inequality is based both on the subjective perception of the group themselves and the "external" view that other groups may have. The *self-definition* allows minority groups to legitimate their existence on the basis of common traits, which also shape the collective memory. As in the case of shared tradition, collective memory does not need to be real, but it could be based on a "recreation of the past" (Eriksen, 1993; Diani, 1993; Fabietti, 1999).

At the same time, the perception of other groups could be determinant for the definition of a group's identity. In particular, there are two cases that negatively affect the production of minority groups' identities: the refusal and the misrepresentation given by a dominant group. While

the refusal can provoke the social invisibility of the minority group, undermining its internal cohesion, the misrepresentation of a minority group's identity can generate discrimination, stereotypes and prejudices. Stigmatized groups can react in several ways, hiding their identity in official situation or, on the contrary, emphasizing their differences. It is important to remember that, in any case, identity is not a static concept, but on the contrary, it is something fluid, modifiable with changed political, social and economical conditions.

It is not by chance that in the debate on identity issues, the construction of a shared heritage becomes crucial. Heritage, as Mason remind us, provides legitimacy to identities' claims, by recalling a common past, which in the case of a Nation State, stresses the homogeneity of the nation's members, generally hiding histories different from those of the dominant groups. Museums are sites where this discourse of a shared past could be physically displayed. Recalling again Mason's discourse on national museum, we should remember that:

"A national museum built along the lines of cultural or ethnic nationalism can be understood as a move of both consolidation and perform activity in that the nation's members are supposedly presented with the national story as a celebration affirmation but also as instruction for how to locate themselves with the national history. Viewed in this light, the relationship between nationalism, heritage and museums seems straightforward" (Mason, 2005: 19).¹¹²

The danger, in national museums, is that while the dominant group's identity and history would be over-represented; social, ethnic and religious minority groups' identities could be under represented or misrepresented (Zedde, 1988).¹¹³

Keeping in mind this warning, we could then proceed to analyze the case of the Turkish museums, where, especially in the early stage of the Republic, museums were instruments of the Kemalist nation-building project.

National identities in Turkey: from millet to nationalities.

"Who are the Turks? What is their historical allegiance and geographical orientation? Are they an East European or West Asiatic people? Asiatic or European? Is their's a Muslim secular (laïque) state? Are they natives of Asia Minor or 'nomadic hordes' from Turanian steppes of Asia? Are they despotic rulers or innocent bystanders despotically ruled? Are they descendants of ancient people from Hittites to Romans or the last surviving mercenaries of Genghis Khan, trying to conquer the world on a divine mission Are the Turks wandering orphans of the Ottoman Dynasty, defending the Muslim faith against the neo-Crusaders?" (B. Güvenç, 1996)

The issue of a "Turkish identity" has been largely debated among scholars from different fields and origins. Nevertheless, it is commonly stated that "Turks," with the meaning we use today, is a construct of the late Ottoman Empire, when the issue of an Ottoman /Turkish identity became relevant. The Ottoman Empire, for centuries, had been composed by an heterogeneous population; while its capital, Istanbul, became the symbol, in all the Mediterranean area, of a cosmopolitan city (Braude and Lewis, 1988). The Turkish element coexisted "side by side" with other religious and ethnic groups, each of them playing its role inside the decentralized ruling system of the Ottoman governors. Under the Ottoman rule, non-Muslim people, like Christians and Jews, were granted the status of *dhimmi* ("protected") or tributary people. These populations were organized in local communities (*millet*),¹¹⁴ under the surveillance of religious leaders, who acted also as their representatives in dealing with the ruling class (Braude and Lewis, 1982: 1-34). *Millet* communities enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy in the management of their own affairs and administrations; as Kemal Karpas noted, the *millet* system:

"was a socio-cultural and communal frame-

work based, firstly on religion and, secondly, on ethnicity which in turn often reflected linguistic differences. Religion supplied to each millet a universal belief system while ethnic and linguistic differences provided for divisions and subdivision within each one of the two Christian millets” (Karpát, 2002: 612).

The pattern of coexistence among different communities began to change in the 18th century, when internal and external factors –as the growing interference of Foreign Powers into the Ottoman’s affairs- caused the slow decline of the Ottoman Empire.

Since the second half of the 18th century, a long process of reforms was promoted by the Ottoman ruling elite, in order to cope with the difficult situation in which the Empire versed. This process affected the political and social life of the Empire and started with the renewal of the military army, realized by the Sultan Selim III (1789-1807),¹¹⁵ and culminated with the “Reform Period” (*Tanzimat*), which took places between the years 1893-1908. The “age of reforms” began with the proclamation of the Edict of Gülhane (1839), which affirmed the adoption of European models of government, the introduction of a parliamentary system and resulted in several administrative changes (Zürcher, 2004).

At the same time, political reforms affected the life of ethnic-religious communities. The edict of the year 1839 affirmed the equality among all subjects of the Sultan, whatever their faiths were. For each community (*millet*), it was reaffirmed the liberty of faith, equality of rights and duties; privileges and immunities were acquired, whereas ecclesiastic properties were also reconfirmed (Scarcia Amoretti, 1998: 186).

A second decree the *Hatt-ı Hümayun*, proclaimed in the year 1856, re-stated the equality among Muslim non-Muslim subjects. In order to transform them into “citizens” of the Ottoman Empire, further measures were taken as the Nationality Law of the 1869 and the promulgation

of the first Constitution of the Empire (1876), elaborated during the reign of the Sultan Abdülhamid II. Nevertheless, the Constitution signaled the limits of reforms: the Sultan was still the protector of Islam. Although a great number of subjects were non-Muslims, the Empire was a Muslim State and even the new law on the equality between Muslim and non-Muslims could not alter this fact.

These measures, released for the pressure of European powers—which had political and commercial interest in the Empire¹¹⁶

—were a double-edged sword, while it aimed at fostering among different groups a shared identity as citizens of the Empire; nevertheless, they signed the end of the *millet* system, since the word became synonymus of “nationalities” and was used for territorial claims.¹¹⁷

At the same time, the interference of foreign powers, which by the time had transformed the Ottoman lands in a semi-colony, had induced the ruling elite of the Empire to rethink about their own identity and to clearly define themselves versus “others” (Deringil, 1988: 217).

Initially, it was from exponents of the literary circles¹¹⁸ and the ruling elite that the re-elaboration of an “Ottoman” identity had origin. Writers like Namık Kemal, focused mainly on two elements for defining the Ottoman identity: language (Turkish) and religion (Islam, purified by the rigidity imposed by Ulemas). The religious component of the Ottoman identity was exalted during the reign of the Sultan Abdülhamid II (Öztürkmen, 1992: 177). The Hamidian time was one of the most controversial period of the Ottoman History. Although the Sultan continued to promote reforms, based on the European model, he also favored the diffusion of a Islamic identity.¹¹⁹ He used religion and faith as a tool for fostering the unity of Muslims people, living in different territories of the Empire.¹²⁰

Nevertheless, it was only in the beginning of the 20th century that the idea of a “Turkish identity”, intended as “Turkish ethnicity”, started to gain popularity; as Karpát remind us: “It is

around 1911 and 1912 that the idea of a nationality based mainly on ethnicity rooted in language began to appear among the Ottoman elite” (Karpas, 2002: 552). A great contribution to the spreading of Turkish identity’s theory, was given by the sociologist Ziya Gökalp, who became the leading ideologues of the young Turkish republic, who rejected the idea of an Ottoman nation, and refused the concept of Islam linked to Perso-Arabic tradition (Deringil, 1988: 226). His theories were lately adopted by the founding father of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

Identity in the Republic

With the foundation of the Turkish Republic, the Kemalist ruling elite embarked in a vast scale programme for redefining Turkish citizens’ identity and creating an “*ethnically homogeneous community*.” With the aim of breaking with the past, the new Republic had to distance itself by its Ottoman legacy, creating its own identity as “Turkish State,” neither as inheritor of the Empire, nor as successor of the Caliphate (Yenişehirli, 1999). The discourse of the Turkish nationalism revolved around two axes, identified by Karpas (Karpas, 2002: 555) as:

- 1) ethnicity and language
- 2) religion and culture

Although Karpas considered the first point prevalent in the construction of Kemalist ideology; it is worth nothing that other authors, as the sociologist Bozkurt Güvenç, focused more on the debate on the role that religion and culture played in Kemalist’s thoughts.

Starting from the religious dimension, we should focus our attention on the concept of secularism and laicism, which became one of the pillars of the Kemalist thinking. The Kemalist concept of laicism, in Turkish *laiklik*, has often been paralleled with the French term *laïcité*. Although Atatürk was a profound admirer of the French model, he conceived the Turkish laicism as something peculiar to the Turkish case. In-

deed, there was not a definite separation between State and Religion. Islam was conceived as a fundamental, cultural, component of the Turkish identity and so, it had to be controlled by the State; nevertheless, religion became a subjective matter, relegated to the private sphere.¹²¹ Therefore, many reforms were directed to de-establish the previous religious system. Among the main reform, which affected the religious life, there were the abolition of the Sultanate (1922), and the Caliphate (1924).

At the same time, the Ministry of Islamic Religious Affairs was also abolished and replaced with two Directorates, under the control of the Prime Minister, the General Directorate for Religion (*Diyanet İşleri Reisliği*)¹²² and the General Directorate for Religious Foundations (*Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü*), while religious schools were handled by Education Ministry. Religious measures also addressed popular Sufi brotherhoods (*tarikats*); which were considered a medium between popular religion and the official Islam of the Ulema. In fact, according to the promulgation of Law n.677 (2.09.1925), all *tarikats* were officially banned, *tekkes* closed and their properties confiscated (Zarcone, 2004; Kara, 2002:145-147).¹²³ As a consequence, in the early stage of the Republic, the impact of religious reforms was particularly visible in urban areas, where the role of religious buildings –as organizers of public spaces and society- gradually diminished.

Regarding the cultural sphere, as Güvenç affirmed: “Atatürk saw the problem of his nation simply as the “Creation of a new Turk” (B. Güvenç: 1996). This statement shows the centrality of topic like “culture and civilization,” and it is explained by Atatürk’s fascination for the positivist thinking for European sociology. Therefore, the Kemalist concept of culture included every aspects of human activities, included artistic manifestations and represented an ideological means of control. “National Culture” was even included in the six fundamental principles that formed the system of Kemalism, to-

gether with laicism, republicanism, populism, etatism and revolutionism.¹²⁴

Museum as “civic instruments”

As a consequence of the ruling elite’s interest in promoting a national culture, during the first years of the Republic, public institutions flourished. The institution of a national museum in Republican Turkey served two purposes: promoting the identity of the new Republic and promoting Kemalism as public ideology. This was also supported by a variety of “public rituals,” constituting a “civic” religion; which was not completely able to erase the traditional values of Islam. Ultimately, the creation of a Turkish heritage and settlements of museums responded to the common view of museums as both cultural and political institutions, which reflected the spirit of the dominant ruling class.

Carol Duncan’s brilliant analysis on the birth of Louvre (1793), symbol of the fall of the *ancienne régime*, illustrates the political nature of museums, which since the French revolution were used as “agent of social change, political and ethical education.” As the author shows, according to the post-Enlightenment common view, museums are expression of secularity, which is “objective” and publicly displayed in State institutions. Secularity is in direct opposition with religion, displayed in churches, mosques and temples. Nevertheless, according to the author:

“museums resemble older ritual sites not so much because of their specific architectural references but because they too are settings for rituals. Like most ritual spaces, museum space is carefully marked off and culturally designed and reserved for special quality attention –in this case for contemplation and learning” (Duncan, 1995: 10).

During Atatürk’s time, the creation of a national heritage and the foundation of national museums followed a path similar to the one established during the French Revolution. In fact,

the Civil Constitution of July 12, 1790, provided the basis for the nationalization of Church properties and the institution of Republican Monuments. Similarly, in the Turkish case, buildings and objects belonging to the Imperial family and religious communities were confiscated by the Turkish State.¹²⁵

An active role in this “patrimonialization” process was played by the “General Directorate for Culture,”¹²⁶ which was established during the War of Independence (1921), became part of the Ministry for Public Education and had as its principal function to survey antiquities, direct libraries and provide to registration of historical monuments, collection of ethnographical materials. The first “Commission for the Conservation of Historical Monuments” was indeed created in the year 1924. At the same time, dismissed mausoleums, convents, *medreses*, and hospitals were turned in museums, as: “il ne suffisait pas sauver les monument historiques. Il fallait aussi les faire perpétuer. Pour cette fin, nous avons dote chaucun d’eux d’une fonction sociale” (Arik, 1953: 26-27).

Regarding the content, museum collections aimed at displaying the past of Turkish people that, according to Atatürk’s theories, was mainly the past of Anatolia itself, with all its civilizations. As Copeaux affirmed, this *new past* was a consequence of the new *Thèses d’histoire*, promoted during the Kemalist era, to which was the relevant the creation of the Turkish History Society and the Institute for Research on Turkish Language (Copeaux, 1991 : 195).¹²⁷

It is worth nothing that the use of museums as vector for promoting a shared identity was not a innovation introduced in Republican times. Some scholars, especially Wendy Shaw, have already noticed that during the end of the Ottoman Empire, the display of museum collections, could serve the political purposes of the ruling class. In particular, the creation of the collection of Muslim Antiquities, in the Imperial Museum of Antiquities, established in Hamidian time, served for promoting a common percep-

tion of Ottoman identity.

At the same time, referring to Ottoman and Byzantine heritages, it was possible to preserve their material culture into the Turkish museums, through a double process of decontextualization of buildings and objects, which were removed from their contexts, and subsequent re-contextualization “within the Republican ethical value system.” As Yenişehiroglu affirms, this double process has been enacted in both the cases of S. Sophia and Topkapı (Yenişehiroglu, 1999).

Representing “Turkishness:” The Ethnographic Museum:

One of the first museum founded during the 1920s was the Ethnographic Museum (*Etnografya Müzesi*), established in the new capital, Ankara. Regarding the aim of the museum, there are several opinions: Arık and other authors stated that the museum was initially created for hosting an exhibition of “universal” collection of ethnographic materials (Arık, 1953); on the other hand Yavuz, Ötkan and other authors relate the origin of the museum to the will of exhibiting objects of the “Turkish people” (Yavuz and Ötkan, 1984).¹²⁸ The first museum, opened to the public its doors on July 18, 1930, and was arranged in a new buildings, appositely created.¹²⁹

The architectural style chosen for the museum could be seen as one of the first element that link the museum to the national discourse for promoting a Turkish identity. In fact, the rectangular building, with a domed ceiling was designed by the eminent architect Arif Hikmet Koyunoğlu, representative of the National Style, diffused in the early year of the Republic as expression of the national ideology. Among the main features of this museum, there is a collection which includes objects used by Turkish people, showing their habits and daily life.¹³⁰ Therefore, in different rooms there are exposed examples of Turkish artifacts and crafts, like

examples of embroidery, tapestry, calligraphic works, and wood carving exemplars (Önder, 1999).

The choices made for displaying objects are quite relevant, especially the glass boxes which include mannequins. They recreate “rooms,” such as the “Ankara house,” which reconstructed the environment of a classic house of the 18th century. A similar display’s strategy has been used in the new display that followed the recent restoration (2000-2002). This new display shows, on the right side of the museum, scenes of daily life ceremonies of Anatolian people, also staged in glass boxes. In particular, the recreation shows elements of Turkish culture quite popular in the common imagination of the Turks, like scenes addressing to the habits of drinking coffee or ceremony of circumcision (*sunnet*).¹³¹

Another aspect of the museum that deserves some speculation/consideration is the inclusion of religious objects in museum collection, in a section entitled “*Hall of objects from Tekkes –dervish retreats.*” In particular, this collection includes objects which belonged to Sufi orders, collected soon after the banishment of Sufi *tarikats*. The display of religious items recalls discourses about the creation of Islamic Art collections, during the last years of the Ottoman Empire. Religious objects possessed a special value, connected to their practical daily use of those objects; therefore, they were invested with a meaning that surpassed the merely aesthetic or historical value (Shaw, 2000: 59).¹³² Thus, the inclusion of Sufi objects in an Ethnographical museum shifted their symbolic meaning from religious items to elements of cultural identification.

It is worth nothing that several objects were later returned to their lodges, also transformed into museums, like items hold by the Bektaşî brotherhood, later turned into the lodge of Hacı Bektaş (near Nevşehir), opened as a museum in the year 1964.

As it was said before, although the focus of the museum should be on the Turkish people

portrayed in the museum, nevertheless, the place is widely known for having been transformed in the burial place of Atatürk, from 21.11.1938 until 10.11.1953, when the Anıtkabir, the Mausoleum was opened.¹³³

The Museum of Anatolian Civilization (Anadolu Medeniyetleri Müzesi)

Actually considered one of the most renewed archeological museums in the world, the creation and evolution of the Museum of Anatolian Civilization well serves to explain the relation among Turkish identity and its cultural heritage. The present museum, located in two beautiful Ottoman buildings –the Mahmut Paşa Bazaar and Kurşunlu Han¹³⁴ –was created in order to host the collection of the first Archaeological Museum of Ankara,¹³⁵ established in the year 1921.¹³⁶ Its foundation was expressly decided by Atatürk himself, who initially aimed at creating a Museum of “Hittite Civilization.” The inclusion of Hittites into Turkish history was part of the historical synthesis (*Türk Tarih Tezi*) promoted by the Turkish Historical Society during the 1930s, which regrouped together European, Mesopotamian and Anatolian populations (Gür, 2001:222). The relevance of the “homogeneity of the past” for Turkish culture was initially expressed by the name chosen for the museum: *Ankara Archaeological Museum*.

Nevertheless, it took several years (1938-1968) before the chosen buildings were restored and opened to the public. By the end of this period, a section was already opened to the public, in the bazaar, during the year 1943, thanks to the efforts of a commission chaired by the German Archaeologist H. G. Guterbock.¹³⁷ At the time of the opening (1968), the museum was already renamed Museum of Anatolian Civilization. The name shifting was also a demonstration of the semiotic change that occurred in the years between the foundation and the opening of the museum. While, initially the focus was on a “national” archaeology, lately, it shifted to a

representation of history that showed a multi-layered past.

Practically, by the end of the restoration, the bazaar was transformed into an exhibition hall, while the *han* was used to host offices, administration buildings, a library, and a conference hall. The peculiarity of the museum resides in its collection, which regroups artifacts and objects dating from the Paleolithic Age to the Ottoman time. Many of those objects, like the ones found in Catalhöyük—belonging to the Neolithic Age—were found during archaeological excavations of foreign missions.

The display of the collection generates a particular emotional effect. As Önder explains:

“The objects at the exhibition hall are divided into two categories. The central hall covered with domes is devoted to stone objects, while the adjacent halls to minor findings. The stone objects are exhibited in the way they were found. The archeological findings are arranged in chronological order” (Önder, 1999: 43).

The display follows an evolutionary path, mediated by explication panels, which lead visitors along the hall, taking them on an imaginary journey through different epochs until recent times. It could be possible to infer that the evolutionary concept of history, which emerges from the visit, is emphasized by the choice of the buildings used to host them. In fact, by choosing a bazaar and a *han* of the Ottoman time, there is a temporal continuity, until the “past’s ending,” which coincides with the Empire’s age. As the sociologist Asli Gür noted, during the museum tour, visitors acquire a common sense of the nation history, but also of geography; since, the centrality of the museum is on the Anatolian plateau and people who live within the Anatolian borders.

During a survey carried out in 1988, the same sociologist interviewed several people, asking them their opinion about objects exhibited in the museum. The survey, which explicitly was carried out by the method of participant obser-

vation, revealed that people interpret in several ways what they see in the exhibition; so, the experience of their visit acquires different meanings, depending on their background (Gür, 2001). Nonetheless, the experience of the visit helps them in structuring their historical past, making also connection among different civilizations. An extreme example is given by one interview, during which the interviewed recognized a Rock goddess, of the Neolithic age, as anatomical prototype of Turkish women (Gür, 2001).

However, the interpretation given to cultural identification can also shift according the need of the time. If during the first year of the Republic, the focus was on cultural identification for protecting the new territorial boundaries, in recent time, it could serve to promote a cultural continuity with European countries, showing a common past and common heritage. This is a choice that has been reaffirmed with awards such as the one received in Switzerland, on April 19, 1997, as "European Museum of the Year."

The last decade: nostalgia for the past

With the election of the Democratic Party (1946), and the introduction of the multi-party system, the emphasis given by the Kemalists to a national, secular and homogeneous culture, was slowly replaced by the emergence of a multi-focal representation of the Turkish cultural identity.

This process for redefining the nature of identity was accompanied by the re-emergence of the Islamic religion in the public arena.¹³⁸ According to Reşat Kasaba and Sibel Bozdoğan, it was during the last decade that Turkish society went through a rapid change, which affected several aspects of public life (Kasaba and Bozdoğan, 2000). In particular, following the same authors, there are "three areas" in which 21st century Turkey is different from that of the 20th. In particular, those three areas are: ethnic identity, economic development and globalization. For the scope of this analysis, it will be necessary to concentrate on the first topic. As both authors

stated: "When the modern Republic of Turkey was established, it was assumed that ethnic, linguistic differences would disappear and there would have been an homogenous community of Turks" ((Kasaba and Bozdoğan, 2000). History proved, on the contrary, that there was a new interest in ethnic issues, and a return of Islamic religion's visibility in society.

Particularly meaningful was the re-examination and revaluation of the Ottoman past. The cosmopolitan nature of the Ottoman Empire and the magnificence of its capital, envisaged a feeling of nostalgia for the Ottoman era, which led to a phenomenon called "Ottomania"¹³⁹ (Kasaba and Bozdoğan: 2000).¹⁴⁰ Nonetheless, reaching back to Ottoman cosmopolitanism also served as a political discourse used both by Islamist¹⁴¹ and nationalist/secularist parties, which in turn gave emphasis to the religious or ethnic component of the Ottoman society (Kasaba and Bozdoğan: 2000; Bartu: 1999; Yenişehiroğlu: 1999). On the other hand, an essential point of this "nostalgia" for the past is represented by a gaze back to the multiethnic nature of the Ottoman Empire, a dimension that brings us back to minority issues.¹⁴²

Minorities

In the aftermath of the Republic foundation, the status of non-Muslim population within the territorial boundaries of Turkey, was defined by the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which recognized only three minorities: Greek Orthodox ("Rum"), Armenians and Jews; while, smaller communities, like Syriacs, were endowed with the right to use their own language (Oran, 2003:33-62). This definition excluded several Muslim and non-Muslim groups, which live in Turkey but are not of Turkish ethnicity. In particular, among unrecognized minorities, there are non-Muslim groups, such as Assyrians, Protestants, Chaldeans, Georgian, and Maronite Christians. At the same time, the definition of minority cuts off Muslims of different ethnic ori-

gins, such as Kurds, Arabs, Laz, Muslim Georgian, and Roma; moreover, it leaves other religious minorities, such as Alevi communities, on the margins.

Ultimately, the status of minorities was still defined in terms of both ethnicity and religion. Non-Muslim minorities are recognized as “citizens” (*vatandaş*) of Turkey, but not “Turks” (Oran, 2003:58). Practically, this restricted legitimization implied a policy of assimilation and limited minorities’ access to political and economical resources. Even in the cases of recognized minorities, there are frequent debates, which focus on the limited implementation of their rights, in particular those concerning four issues as language rights, education, acquisition of properties, religious/ cultural rights.

Concerning non-Muslim properties, the Declaration on non-Muslim Foundations (1936), stated that non-Muslim people had to submit a list of their properties, especially immovable goods, to the General Directorate for Foundations. Whenever it was not possible for members of minorities’ communities to demonstrate the legitimate property—confirmed by the act of the *vakıf* (*vakıfname*)—the State could expropriate their goods, since non-Muslim foundations were not allowed to acquire immovable properties.¹⁴³ This controversy was recently mitigated by the introduction of the Paragraph 4 of the EU Harmonization Package, which recognizes to minorities the possibility of acquiring immovable properties (Oran, 2003). Indeed, it is this debate which brought action to the implementation of minorities’ rights, as requirement to access to EU that we could proceed to discuss the recent opening of museums dedicated to minority groups.

**Representing harmonious relations:
The Quintecennial Foundation
Jewish Museum of Turkey**

If one believes that relations among majority and minorities are always controversial, he or

she should visit the Museum of Jewish Turks, located in district of Karaköy in Istanbul. Jewish (Sephardim, Ashkenazim and Karaites) people represent one of the three minority groups officially recognized. Actually, they account for about 25,000 people, and live mainly in Istanbul and other big cities, like Izmir and Adana.¹⁴⁴

The history of the Jewish presence in Asia Minor is almost as long as the history of Jews themselves. Nevertheless, during the year 1492, after their expulsion from Spain, a great number of Jews floated in the Ottoman Capital, finding refuge there. This historical event left a positive impression in both Ottoman/Turkish and Jewish communities. On the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the Jews’ arrival in Istanbul, the Quincentennial Foundation Jewish Museum of Turkey was established (opened on November 25th, 2001), and arranged in the building of the 17th century synagogue, Zülfaris, and created with the efforts of a member of the Jewish community.

The museum is distributed between three floors. On the first floor religious objects are shown, ceremonial artifacts and religious scrolls; while, on the second and third floors, it is possible to find a photographic exhibition—organized on panels—and a sort of ethnographic department, which portrays scenes from the daily life of old Jewish communities. The construction of this part resembles the fictive recreation of “rooms” in the Ethnographic Museum of Ankara.

An interesting feature of this museum is its communication program, which shows the efforts made in presenting itself to Turkish and foreign people. It is quite remarkable that, on its website, there is an open invitation to people to loan objects and documents in order to increase the museum’s collection. Thus, the museum itself runs from the old schema of museums as storage places, mere archives of the collective memory, to transform itself in an active “producer of memory (ies).”¹⁴⁵ The theme of personal memory is also one of the main topics that

emerge, giving a look at messages written in the museum's guestbook.¹⁴⁶

**Memory and messages:
the creation of Armenian Museum.**

Armenians represent today one of the biggest Christian communities in Turkey. About 50,000 Armenians live in Istanbul,¹⁴⁷ while there are other communities mainly in the south-east of Turkey.¹⁴⁸

The relationship between Turkish and Armenian people was negatively affected by the sad epilogue of the Armenian Question, which Armenian communities erased from their ancient settlements in Eastern Anatolia during the last century of the Ottoman Empire. Although the definition of an univocal initial date is still controversial, it is largely recognized that the Armenian Genocide can be seen as the final stadium of a long period of violence, started in the year 1878, culminating with a massive, planned, extermination of Armenian people during the years 1915-1917 (Flores, 2006).¹⁴⁹

The topic of the genocide has been negated for long time by the Turkish Government; based on the assumption that the number of declared death was too high. At the same time, until the 1960s,¹⁵⁰ the Armenian communities themselves avoided the topic for its emotional implications. Nevertheless, the issue of the genocide and the assimilation politics implemented by the Turkish government toward the Armenian community acquired international relevance in light of Turkey's European candidature. It was in this frame that in December 5, 2004, the first Armenian museum, *Surp Pırgıç Ermeni Hastanesi Vakfı Müzesi*, opened its doors.

The two-room museum is located in the Armenian Hospital of Yedikule (*Yedikule Ermeni Hastahanesi*). The hospital was built during the reign of Sultan Mahmud II (1832), and is one of this recognized minority's foundations (*vakıf*) which, on the basis of the Treaty of Lausanne, allowed religious minorities to provide assistance

to their communities. In fact, it is considered a modern and functioning hospital, in which not only Armenians but also Turkish people could find help.

The museum was created in the office of the building and, according to official statement, its creation derived from a long-cherished idea of endowing the Armenian communities with a place for remembering their history. Therefore, it was the same foundation that took care of restoration works and exhibition choices.

The nature and the nucleus of the exhibited objects are quite heterogeneous, since the first section of the museum contains portraits and photos and objects of eminent Armenian people. The second part includes *firmans* and decrees of the Ottoman time, religious objects belonging to the annexed church, medical equipment used in the Hospital, and finally a section with examples of ceramics.

Speculating about the existence of this museum, it is difficult to forget its political role and function in mediating between Turkish and Armenian communities. While this topic will be the object of future analysis, at the moment, it could be interesting to note how the opening ceremonies received a full coverage from all major Turkish daily news and media (also websites). Many sources reported the words pronounced by the Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan (representative of the moderated Islamic Party, AKP), who stressed the importance of tolerance and unity among the two groups.¹⁵¹

On the other side, the opening of such a museum offers an invaluable opportunity to the Armenians to visibly affirm its presence, and deal also with the other Armenian communities of Armenia and of the Diaspora.

Indeed, although not in a decisive way, we are assisting in these days to an increasing public discussion over the admission of the Armenian genocide. Although this discussion probably won't lead to the expected public admission of "Turkish fault" in the genocide; nevertheless, it opens a window for a public confrontation be-

tween the two parties (now, at least, in an academic environment), which could help future generation to understand their past and look forward to a practical enhancement of minority rights.

Final Remarks

This article aimed to show the evolution that occurred in Turkish society from the nationalistic regime of the Kemalist period to the more diversified political and social landscape, which characterize the present Turkish society. The study of cultural policy and museological discourse serves as an example for showing political and social debates. Those two museums seem to work as a binary system, as they complement each other, giving an image of the complex past of the Anatolian land and people.

At the same time, the evolution of both museums went far from the simplistic portrayal of national discourse about giving spaces to a different interpretation of museum spaces and objects.

On the other hand, changes in the political, social and economical landscape, which occurred from the 1980s, allowed for reconsidering and re-discussing topics such as the Ottoman past heritage and the multi-ethnic nature of the Ottoman society. In this frame, together with the rediscovery of the Ottoman art and architecture, there was a re-evaluation of the contribution of “minorities” to the Ottoman /Turkish past. The opening of minority museums is both a consequence of this new interest for the past and a chance for minorities’ communities to affirm their presence in the Turkish society.

Notes

¹⁰⁹ The critical review of museum’s nature, initially, touched those museums created in colonial countries, but it could be also adopted for museums dedicated to religious and ethnic minorities.

¹¹⁰ Regarding the „subjective“ dimension of the ethnic groups’ identity, see Barth (1994).

¹¹¹ Actually, the numeric inferior does not always imply the status of minority, as we could remember by just mentioning the example of numerically inferior, but politically powerful, white communities in Africa.

¹¹² However, as the author states, this connection is only apparent; in fact, the processes of portraying national identity in museums is complicated when it comes to the point of creating collections and displays (Mason, 2005: 19).

¹¹³ According to Zedde: „In state museum representing the dominant view of a nation’s identity, therefore, the museum is in danger of disinherit non-participating social, religious, and ethnic groups outside the mainstream. In doing so, the dominant group overtakes the agenda and ignores or distorts other views or historical experiences“ (Zedde, 1988).

¹¹⁴ According to Braude, Lewis and Karpas, the first

millet was established at the time of the Sultan Mehmed II, after the Conquest of Constantinople, with the appointment of Gennadios Scholarios II as head of the Greek Patriarchate (Braude, 1982: 13; Karpas, 2002: 615).

¹¹⁵ Further and more incisive measures, were taken Selim III’s son, Mahmud II (1809-1839), who tried to centralize the power in his hands, diminishing the role of religious authorities. Among his innovations, there was the institution of the Imperial Ministry for Religious Foundations (*Evkaf-ı Humayün*), in order to exert direct control over the administrative system of the *evkaf* (pious foundations) on which many religious institutions relied for their financial incomes.

¹¹⁶ Christian foreigners resident in the Empire had the *aman* (mercy) safe-conduct under Islamic law. These grants gave rise to the regime of capitulations, originally voluntary concessions of the Sultan to foreign friendly States; nevertheless, since the eighteenth century they had acquired the status of treaties.

¹¹⁷ Regarding the importance of Balkan wars (1860s - 1870s), see Karpas (2002:546).

¹¹⁸ Many of those writers were part of the movement called *Young Ottomans*.

¹¹⁹ Regarding debates on „Islamic“–“Pan-Islamic identity,” see Karpas, (2002:549).

¹²⁰ The Sultan claimed to be a universal Muslim caliph with a right to religious over lordship of the mosques everywhere.

¹²¹ Indeed, the passage to a secularized and laic State was not subitaneous; yet, it was in the second stage of Kemal Atatürk’s government that it sped up. It was only in April 10, 1928, that the constitutional provision stating that Islam was „the religion of the State of Turkey“ was deleted, while the principle of secularism was embodied in the Constitution on February 5, 1937.

¹²² The General Directorate for Religion became later a Constitutional organ of the Turkish State.

¹²³ As Zürcher affirmed „these measures met with the stubborn resistance from the population. *Tekkes* and *türbes* played an important role in everyday Muslim life“ (Zürcher, 2004: 173).

¹²⁴ The six fundamental principles, forming the system of Kemalism–enounced in the Party programme of the year 1931– were embedded in the Art.2 of the 1937’s Constitution. These six principles, or “six arrows” (altı ok), are: Republicanism, which is based on elective constitutional government; nationalism, founded on culture and national loyalty; populism, based on dignity and necessity of common people; Etatism, which implied State responsibility; Laicism, which reject of every common religious privilege; and revolutionism (reformism). These principles were subsequently complemented by principles of national sovereignty, Independence and national unity (Zürcher, 2004: 181).

¹²⁵ In principle, every building that was not a *vakıf* –deed– had to be nationalized, while objects and movable goods were included in national treasures for their artistic, historical and ethnographical value.

¹²⁶ As Önder reported, historical cultural heritage: remains task of the General Directorate of Monuments and Museums of the Ministry of Culture. This General Directorate was attached to the Ministry of Education till 1971, under the name of General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums and then to the Undersecretaries of Culture of Prime Ministry, before being attached to the Ministry of Culture, in 1975 (Önder, 1999).

¹²⁷ During the early stage of the Republic Turkey, not only museums but also research institutes were opened for researching on Turkish origins and pre-historical roots of Anatolia.

¹²⁸ According to public information given by the Ministry for Culture and Tourism, the establishment of the museum served for showing „material and spiritual cult inheritance.“ Worth nothing that for creating this museum, it was asked the opinion of an Hungarian Turkologist, J. Meszarow, chief of the Budapest Ethnography Museum.

¹²⁹ A first commission was established in Istanbul for defining the collection and purchase items. This commis-

sion was chaired by two of the most eminent art historian of the time, Celal Esad Arseven and, then, Halil Erdem.

¹³⁰ „On commença par y installer les collections d’ethnographie nationale aussi bien que du monde entier. Mais on a vite constaté ..., un buit si universel, cette petite construction reste insuffisante, meme insignifiante“ (Arik, 1953:17).

¹³¹ Halls located in the other side of the museum host exhibitions of porcelain, glasses, examples of calligraphy art dating from Ottoman Time.

¹³² According to Shaw, during the Young Turks regime (1908-1910), the concern over Islamic antiquities began to enter in public discourse, in large part because of the Young Turk’s interest in increased communication between the State and the population“ (Shaw, 2002: 63). Therefore, the use of religious heritage became a tool in political discourses over Ottoman identity (Shaw, 2000: 67).

¹³³ The bronze sculpture, in front of the Museum, portraying Atatürk on horse was realized by Italian artist Cononica.

¹³⁴ According to the information provided by the Ministry for Culture and Tourism, the 15th century bedesten were erected by the Gran Vizier of Mehmet II; then, used for selling wool. Instead, the Kurşunlu Han dates to the 14th century

¹³⁵ The first Archaeological museum was hosted in the Castle of Ankara.

¹³⁶ It is worth reminding that archaeology in the Middle East has often been used to legitimize territorial claims. See Shaws, (2002; 2000) and Meskell (1998).

¹³⁷ As it is reported in public information message „the repair projects of this part were carried out by Architect Macit Kural and repair work upon tender was performed by Architect Zühtü Bey. Five shops were left in their original form, and the walls between the shops were destroyed and thus a large location was provided for exhibition“ (Ministry for Culture and Tourism).

¹³⁸ Islamic religion experimented a sort of political rehabilitation during the 1970s and 1980s, because both right-center and left-center secular leaders perceived religion as a potential tool in their political struggle.

¹³⁹ The phenomenon of so-called „Ottomania“ consisted of the rediscovery and reproducing of literary, musical, artistic and architectural works, which explicitly recalled to the time of the Empire.

¹⁴⁰ As the same authors note, it was after the Balkan War that people started to look at Ottoman Heritage with pride.

¹⁴¹ See for example the debate that occurred in Istanbul over the Levantine Heritage (Bartu, 1999), or the debate aroused by the proposal of Ankara mayor, exponent of the Islamic party, to change the city logo from an Hittite to an Islamic symbol (Kasaba and Bozdogan, 2000).

¹⁴² On this topic, see Bozdogan and Kasaba’s statement : „This growing attention that researches and writers

have begun to pay to the multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature of the Ottoman Empire and how it compares with the ethnic nationalism of the modern Turkish State and intolerance of other contemporary modern nationalism" (Kasaba and Bozdogan, 2000).

¹⁴³ As it is stated in the Paragraph 4 of the EU Harmonization Package: „Religious community foundations, whether or not they possess a charter (*vakifname*), may acquire real estate by the permission of the Cabinet of Ministers, in order to provide for their needs in religious, charitable, social, educational, sanitary and cultural needs.“

¹⁴⁴ See: Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (2005).

¹⁴⁵ See the introductory message of Naim Güleriyüz, Vice President of The Quincentennial Foundation and Curator of the Museum: „We would also like very much appreciate your loans to the museum of any artefacts, documents, religious objects...By allowing us to put them on display you will not only be enhancing the exhibit but your name will be also acknowledged for posterity“ (Naim Güleriyüz).

¹⁴⁶ The topic emerged together with statements on the widespread impression of tolerance showed by Turks, and curiosity from visitors who don't belong to Jew com-

munities.

¹⁴⁷ In Istanbul, Armenian settlements could easily be found in the European area as Kurtuluş, Yedikule.

¹⁴⁸ See: Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (2005); Flores (2006); Herzig and Kurkchian (2004).

¹⁴⁹ According to estimates, during the genocide period, approximately 1.5 million Armenians were killed. On the 24th April 1915 in Istanbul more than 800 representatives of the Armenian intelligentsia were arrested and subsequently shot. During the following two years from a population of approximately 3 million Armenians in the eastern regions of the Ottoman Empire, were killed 1.5 million. More than 600,000 became refugees (Guerzoni).

¹⁵⁰ The year 1965 signed the commemoration of fifty years from the Genocide.

¹⁵¹ Thanking the Armenian citizens for their contributions to the Turkish civilization, Erdogan said: „ääletäs see how the message given here will be reflected to the world? We will continue developing humanitarian values in the light of universal criteria. Long live our unity in these territories“ (Anadolu Agency: 2004)

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