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Emergence of Afro-Turks in Turkish Politics

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Abstract

Since the mid-2000s, Turkey's almost forgotten and invisible Africa-rooted Turkish citizens, the Afro-Turks, have come to the surface. Because of their small number, they have never been conspicuous before. However, since 2003, with Turkey's opening to Africa policy, they have become much more discernable in the Turkish public sphere with festivals and activities. Ankara has also officially supported their activities financially and technically. This article argues that there is a strong link between their emergence as an ethnic minority in Turkey and Ankara's assertive Africa policy to deepen relations with the continent. The case of Afro-Turks indicates that when foreign policy inclination is matched with domestic policy, even a tiny minority can become more discernable and visible in the political arena.

Keywords

Turkey, Africa, Afro-Turks,
Foreign Policy, African
Diaspora

Introduction

The curious case of Afro-Turks as a newly visible ethnic identity in Turkey represents an interesting way of emerging identity in a country where ethnicity has always been subject to a contentious debate. Since the establishment of the Republic in 1923, everything related to ethnic identity, other than *Turkishness*, has been ignored and not recognized by the state (Cagaptay, 2006; Karpas, 1959). This was simply part of the overall nation-building process in Turkey. However, the end of the cold war and subsequent developments in Turkish politics opened a discussion on the nature/founding elements of the Turkish state and its different identity claims, which were to be incorporated into the state. Since 2002, the Turkish state has followed a different path toward ethnic identities, although due to the realities of PKK terrorism Turkish society is still very sensitive.

This study is an investigation on how Turkey's foreign policy inclination can contribute to easy recognition of domestic ethnic identity, such as the Afro-Turks. It is argued that there is a direct link between the rise of Afro-Turks as a new ethnic identity in Turkey and Ankara's assertive foreign policy toward Africa since 1998, along with Turkey's own domestic democratic transformation.¹ This article is neither an anthropological nor a sociological one, however it aims to contribute to a better contextualization of Afro-Turks both in Turkish society and Turkish foreign policy. Afro-Turks are people of African ancestry who arrived today's Turkey in late 19th

¹ Cankurtaran asks rightly the question why not to include Afro-Turks in Turkish foreign policy discourse. This article should even be seen as a response to her request. Cankurtaran (2018).

and early 20th century and now fully incorporated into Turkish culture by way of living, however they are discernable only by their color. They have become more visible at many levels in Turkey since 2005 and received considerable support from society and the government. Considering Turkey's political history, if Afro-Turks tried to claim their identity in a different time period, for example in 1980s or even 1990s, such a move would have probably created a backlash rather than support from both the state and overall society.²

Foreign–Domestic Policy Alignment: Context for the Rise of Afro-Turks

Theoretically, how a small ethnic minority becomes visible, peacefully in a society is not a well-studied subject. Although, there are many studies on how immigrants integrate into society with all the difficulties involved (Kilbride, 2014; Alba & Foner, 2015), an already small ethnic minority becoming visible has not been the topic of many studies. Big ethnic groups, in terms of population, are usually more visible in all societies; and if their rights are denied, they may resort to seeking their political demands by other means, either through a political party or violence. The visibility of Afro-Turks is an interesting case because they are not only small in numbers but also integrated into all cultural elements of Turkish society. They do not have a political demand per se; rather their interest has been mostly cultural revival, culture protection, and cultural recognition at best.

In the literature, it is argued that small ethnic groups may be more visible and easily accepted by overall society only if their struggle or collective projects were undertaken as a means of potentially enriching national narratives of belonging. As Derderian (2004, p.19) argues, “rather than threatening to undermine the unity of nation, efforts to make ethnic minority experiences visible can help to reinforce the ties between the nation and its newest members.” Given the fact that ethnic minorities’ experience of going public is by no means a smooth and unobstructed process, conceptually, this article argues that the visibility of a small ethnic minority may be easier if the state has a special foreign policy inclination toward an area where the majority of that ethnic group originated from. With Turkey’s opening to Africa policy since the 2000s, the invisible ethnic group of Afro-Turks began to take their experiences and aspirations beyond the confines of their community by focusing on cultural elements. Their demand for cultural revival has been well received by the Turkish state as both it has fostered national unity rather than creating a danger and coincided with an assertive African opening. What seems novel in the rise of Afro-Turks is this specific time period that they asked for a recognition and revival in Turkish society.

As many argue, both Turkish foreign policy and Turkey’s domestic politics underwent a huge change in the 2000s. These changes do not always happen concurrently. Whenever there is convergence between domestic and foreign policy, the result is likely to happen very

² Of course, the fact that the Afro-Turks never claimed an open identity in 1980s or in 1990s, we never know how the state would have reacted. However, considering the political stubbornness to accept differences at state level in those years, one should easily assume that the state was likely to crash them, if such a claim would have existed before. For a relatively similar experience was the experience of the “becoming visible” of North Africans in France. Despite their struggle since 1940s, until 1980s they have faced huge difficulties. See Derderian (2004).

successfully. Turkey's Africa policy has been one of the rare areas where the all actors converged for only one aim: to foster relations with Africa. The Turkish state took the lead in the process, civil society organizations paved the way, and state agencies like Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD), Turkish Maarif Foundation (Akgun & Özkan, 2020) and Red Crescent (Kızılay), and Turkey's Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) have deepened the relations (Özkan, 2014). Turkish business associations have made Turkey-Africa relations sustainable as they created a situation whereby both sides are destined to gain.

As Turkey deepens relations with the continent, all of a sudden, a new community in Turkey, Afro-Turks, captured the attention of the overall public and both national and international media. Afro-Turks' relatively easy acceptance by all segments of society and state apparatus was not a mere coincidence. It was a perfect timing, because both the foreign policy inclination of Turkey with domestic policy orientation was helpful for the visibility of Afro-Turks.

There were basically three factors that contributed to facilitating rapid ascendance of Afro-Turks to public debate without any negative connotation: Turkey's opening to Africa, democratic opening within Turkey, and the increasing number of African immigrants in cities, like Istanbul, as a result of Turkey becoming a destination country for immigrants.

New Turkish foreign policy toward Africa is the first facilitating reason for the emergence of Afro-Turks. In the Turkish political agenda, Africa did not feature much until the 2000s. Initially Turkey prepared an African Opening Plan in 1998, however, it was not possible to implement that plan due to political instability in Turkey's domestic politics and the economic crisis of 2000-2001. When the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) came to power in 2002, a new Turkish government pushed for an assertive Africa policy. Turkey announced the year 2005 as "the year of Africa", and hosted the first ever Turkey-Africa Cooperation Summit from August 18-21, 2008, in Istanbul with the participation of representatives from fifty African countries (Özkan & Akgun, 2010). In recent years, the Turkish government's interest in the African continent has expanded into the domains of security, humanitarian assistance, and economic relations. The nation's active involvement in Somalia, in particular, has received attention from across the continent and has contributed to the consolidation of Turkey's position in Africa. Thus far, closer economic cooperation, coupled with relatively large amounts of development aid and humanitarian assistance, has formed the basis of this new approach. Ankara opened 29 new embassies on the continent, which makes a total of 42 embassies and trade has increased fourth-fold since 2002 (Siradag, 2013; Tepeciklioglu, 2012; Özkan, 2016, 2012, 2013). As a result of new foreign policy discourse toward Africa in Turkish politics, perhaps for the first time seriously since the establishment of the Republic, Afro-Turks easily became visible and got acceptance from overall Turkish society (Miftah, 2017).

Turkey's domestic transformation and deepening democracy in the 2000s should be seen as the second element to explain the visibility of Afro-Turks. The most prominent discussion of "New Turkey" among the newly rising elite in Turkey is that they refer a type of new national identity for Turkey and a new type of national belonging. Although the search for identity in Turkey dates back to the late period of the Ottoman Empire, it was Atatürk who in the 1920s drew a national map to define the essentials of the modern Turkey today. From time to time, Atatürk's

legacy has been challenged by Islamists, nationalists, and even in some circles of secularists. In the 1970s, Turkey experienced a political rift between political and ideological factions that undermined national compromise and integration. In the early 1980s, then President Ozal started the liberalization process in the economy and began integrating Turkey into the global market. Ozal's policies have changed the sociological dynamics of Turkey as the newly emerging business elite from Anatolia started to emerge. Dubbed Anatolian Tigers, this new emerging/rising middle-to-upper class has established the socio-economic foundation of today's AK Party. Under Erdogan's leadership, Turkey has transformed at many levels. In the early 2000s, the European Union process played a catalyst role in transforming Turkey domestically, the economy flourished, and a new foreign policy was put in place to expand Turkish influence both in the region and on other continents.

In the 2000s, Turkey had a different approach to solve the decades long Kurdish issue (Anaz & Özkan, 2021), and started to talk about Alleviate people's problems within the country. Turkey as a state transformed, so did the people's approach to different issues. It was in this period that Afro-Turks came to the public spotlight and received attention from both the public and the media. Many saw the phenomena of Afro-Turks as adding richness to Turkey and needed to be protected, rather than a negative development. In the past, any identity claim based on ethnicity reminded many Turks of the Kurdish issue with a negative connotation. In the course of time, nobody saw the emergence of Afro-Turks as a danger to Turkish identity or unity.³ This greatly facilitated their slow landing into the Turkish public spotlight. Although one should emphasize here that Afro-Turks have never been seen openly as a danger for two reasons. First, they have never claimed an exclusivist identity like Kurds in the past; second, their small number in Turkey has not prompted such a danger in politics nor in society at large. When Afro-Turks demanded cultural recognition, they did so without politicizing their demand by focusing on only cultural aspects and without threatening the unity of the nation.

Turkish society is not a racist country *per se*, however the fact that there had been few Africans in Turkey as students or immigrants, Turks have always been curious about interacting and knowing these "black people". As one African academic living in Turkey observed, this was mostly emanated from an intention to know an unknown in Turkey, rather than fear or discrimination.⁴ One should note, that rising number of African immigrants in Turkey has made recognition and acceptance of Afro-Turks easy in the overall public.

In terms of immigration, Turkey has been mainly perceived as an emigration country, but recently Turkey has been frequently described as transit country (Fait, 2013, p.25) for many people from Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Especially since the conflict in Syria began, Turkey has become a destination country for immigrants. As of 2020, Turkey hosts close to 3.7 million refugees from Syria, and almost all opposition leaders in Egypt, Iraq, and other conflicting

³ This can be drawn with the support of Turkey openly to these communities. In the past, such an open support would not have been imaginable.

⁴ Kieran E. Uchehara, an African (Nigerian) academic working for years in Turkey, says, "I would attribute the negative behavior of Turkish society to black Africans in Turkey as lack of awareness. One of the phrases I have heard most often in Turkey "Hepimiz insaniz" meaning "we are all human" and I think that most people in Turkey actually follow that motto. Therefore, I do not think it is a racist behavior because there is no judgment attached to the staring at black Africans in Turkey. It is just curiosity and/or admiration". See Uchehara No Date).

countries in the Middle East have made Istanbul their home. While these Middle Eastern dimensions can be explained by the developments in the region, there has been an unnoticed development in Turkey: African immigrants. Less than ten years ago, it was rare to encounter an African immigrant seeking to establish a life in Turkey, but this has changed rapidly. There are Somalis in Konya, Kayseri, Ankara, and other small cities mostly brought by the state, and many Kenyans, Nigerians, Senegalese (De Clerck, 2013), and others from different African countries designated Turkey as their destination country. Some of them are in Turkey for trade, some for dreaming to be a successful soccer player (Budell, 2013), and some are dreaming to travel to Europe. Whatever their reasons are, it is a fact that they are now living in Turkey, making African immigrants more visible in public life. This contributes to the normalization of the lives of Africans in Turkey in public perception, while Turkey is pushing for better relations with African countries. It has been acknowledged that since the late 1980s – early 1990s, a growing number of people from diverse sub-Saharan African countries have arrived in Turkey (Brewer & Yukseker, 2006, p.6), but the total population of Africans never reached a significant level. Today it is estimated that there are around 33,000-35,000 African immigrants living in Istanbul, excluding temporary visitors (Saul, 2013, p.89). Although there is no direct link between the rise of Afro-Turks and African immigration in Turkey, the visibility of more African immigrants in Turkey has contributed indirectly to the “normalization” of seeing “black” people in the public sphere.

There are also more than two thousand African students in various cities in Turkey studying with Turkish Scholarships at all levels (Daily Sabah, 2017). Both the African immigrants and students have made a huge contribution in changing public perception in Turkey about Africa. Although, the impact and perception of Africans may differ depending on the city, context, and conditions, whether they are students or immigrants; their mere visibility in society has contributed to the overall perception of Africans in Turkey, which in turn, indirectly supported the demands of Afro-Turks.

As Fait (2013, p.26) argues, due to the increasing number of African immigrants, the link between foreign policies and decision-making in Turkey about migrants’ policies has already merged in a way that is mutually supportive. Growing trade and humanitarian and political policies with Africa will, and has already included a renewed discussion on the conditions of asylum and residence for African migrants in Turkey (Baird, 2011), leading to the creation of a sustainable migration policy. This is definitely the result of Turkey’s official free-visa policy with all possible countries, and a new direction in Turkish foreign policy towards Africa to become more open and keener to develop partnerships with the continent.

Africa has become so normalized in Turkey that since 2015, there is even an African Entertainment Award (AEA) in Turkey, organized mostly by Ugandan Africans. African embassies support this event and their initiatives aim to foster relations between Turkey and Africa, contribute to the betterment and ‘normalization’ of Africans in Turkey. The AEA mentions that their “mission for the African entertainment awards in Turkey is to promote our strong African heritage, culture, and presence in Turkey.” In their understanding, they “honor, promote, and advertise our African individuals and African owned businesses in Turkey and Turkish businesses and Turkish individuals that also patronize and support Africans in Turkey” (<http://aeaturkey.com> 2020).

Since Turkey announced 2015 as the “Year of Africa”, to further improve Africa in Turkish perception, the Turkish government began to organize events to celebrate the 25th of May as Africa Day on the occasion of the foundation of the African Union. The main aim is to organize conferences, activities in social and cultural fields with a view to raise awareness, and to develop relations with African countries. Each year this celebration has gained more than symbolic value. In 2016, under the auspices of First Lady Emine Erdoğan, the “Africa Handicraft Market” was inaugurated in three historical mansions designated as “African Houses” in Hamamönü, Ankara on May 25, 2016 (Aydoğan, 2016). The purpose of this project is to market the handicrafts of African women in Turkey and return the income in order to contribute to their family budgets. According to the Turkish Foreign Ministry website (2016), this is also in line with “the targets of ‘Agenda 2063’ of the African Union for strengthening women and youth in Africa, constitutes a good example of the support provided by Turkey to the socio-economic development efforts of the African peoples through the contributions and support of the Turkish Embassies in the continent.”

Emergence of Afro-Turks in Turkey

Apart from overall developments at the political level, in recent years, there have been a few developments that have led to the visibility of Turks of African origin in Turkish society. In 2005, a marble worker from Ayvalık/Balikesir, Turkey, Mustafa Olpak, whose maternal family originates from Kenya, published a book entitled “*Kenya-Crete-Istanbul: Human Biographies from the Slave Coast*”, detailing his family history from enslavement in Africa to integrating into modern Turkey in the twentieth century. Its publication opened the door to a new discussion about the history of people of African descent in modern Turkey. In the beginning of November 2006, Mustafa Olpak founded the Africans Culture and Solidarity Society. In February 2007, a documentary on Ottoman Slavery was broadcast by TRT (Turkish State Radio and Television), utilizing his book as a source and inspiration. During the production process of this documentary Mustafa Olpak was one of the greatest supporters of the producer, Gül Muyan. In 2008, the History Foundation (Tarih Vakfı) in Istanbul and UNESCO cooperated and supported an oral history project with the aim of collecting information from Turkish citizens of African descent above the age of 70 living along the Aegean coast of Turkey. The results of the project have been published as “Voices from a Silent Past” (Kayacan, 2008). In the same vein, to contribute to the visibility of Afro-Turks, in 2010, Photographers Ahmet Polat and Erik Vroons (2010), published a photo book of Afro-Turks, documenting the pictures of Turks of African descent living in the region of Izmir. The book’s pictures open the doors to the inner worlds of Afro-Turks to the wider public.

The history of Afro-Turks is related to slave history in the Ottoman Empire (Ferguson & Toledano, 2007). Most of them were the descendants of the African slaves during the Ottoman Empire period. Their roots in slavery are not too distant, considering that slave trade only ended in the beginning of 20th century in Turkey. After a decree issued in 1857 by Ottoman Sultan Abdulmecid, the slave trade was abolished, but the Ottoman Empire did not completely leave the freed slaves to face their destiny alone. Ottoman bureaucracy had a grand plan for them. According to Ottoman archives, the empire provided more than 1,500 Afro-Turk families each with a house, furniture, two oxen, and some money (Hatemi, 2014). The government saw

property ownership as the key to making Afro-Turks feel welcome in Turkish lands.

This is necessitated by the fact that the ancestors of African Turks who are still unknown and invisible to many in Turkish society were transported to today's Turkey during the Ottoman period as slaves. Thus, in order to be able to comprehend the efforts of the African Turks to attain visibility their past needs to be investigated. However, what is known is that Afro-Turks originated from many different countries, including Niger, Egypt, Kenya, and Sudan. In the Ottoman Empire, most of them lived in Western Anatolia, especially in Ayvalik in the Northern Aegean region; in Izmir, or in a village near popular tourist destination called Bodrum in western Turkey. Later on, some other Afro-Turks came from Crete following the population exchange between Greece and Turkey in 1923. They settled on the Aegean coast, mainly around İzmir. Afro-Turks in Ayvalik say that their ancestors from Crete spoke Greek when they came to Turkey and learned Turkish later. However, as Durugonul (2013, p.1402; 2003, p.281) argues "there is a lack of information on the history of the communities of people of African descent" in Turkey and "in order to be able to obtain sociological, anthropological, and archaeological information on the history of African Turks research should be undertaken".

Afro-Turks have gained more recognition from Turkish society and government in the last two decades. They are the descendants of the black citizens of the Ottoman Empire. Afro-Turks have Turkish names; over time they adopted Turkish traditions, culture, and now practice Islam as their religion. Afro-Turks also insist that they belong to Anatolia as much as other peoples. They speak the local dialect, wear traditional Turkish clothes, and are usually well integrated into the local Turkish cultural life. In an interview, Olpak says that "We have been living in this region for at least 150 years and we don't have any other homeland" (Guzeldere, 2010).

Based on recent estimates, there are roughly 5,000 Afro-Turks inside Turkey (Elibol, 2015),⁵ but nobody keeps track of their actual number, therefore some media outlets claim that their number is around 800,000 (Yurtcu, 2005). In terms of the socio-economic situation of Afro-Turks, one can say that there are very few Afro-Turks who have been to university or who hold prestigious positions in politics, sports, culture, or private industry. That is why there are few role models for the younger generation.

Afro-Turks constitute part of the overall African Diaspora in Turkey today. In this context, studying the African Diaspora in Turkey is of particular importance in order to be able to clarify the place of Ottoman and Turkish Republican history within world history and its position within the system of global relations. Hereby, the place of the African Diaspora in Turkey within the African Diaspora in the world and its importance would be demonstrated. However, sources about the African Diaspora in Turkey are scarce. Sources on the lives of people of African origin after the abolition of slavery in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey are very limited as well. Therefore, neither sources on the past, nor on the present of African Turks in the region of Antalya are available. Consequently, the only way to illuminate their situation in Turkey seems to be assembling pieces of information.

Despite the lack of extensive research and information about Afro-Turks, they have

⁵ The late president of Africans Culture and Solidarity Society Mustafa Olpak argues that there are 2000 Afro-Turks living in Turkey, only few in Istanbul. See Binicewicz (2016).

contributed significantly to Turkish culture and arts, despite their small number. The famous Turkish singers Esmeray Diriker and Melis Sokmen are both descendants of Afro-Turks. Top model, Tugce Guder; singer, Ibrahim Sirin; Melis and Cenk Sokmen; and the ex-boss of the Turkish Football Federation, Hadi Turkmen are also few to mention among famous Afro-Turks in Turkey. While Turkish society knows these people, nobody focused on their ancestors, and many people even initially thought that they are not from Turkey. For example, when Turkish top model Tugce Guder appeared on TV, many people compared her to Naomi Campbell, very few though that she was Turkish. With her fluent Turkish, many people were surprised and learned that there are Afro-Turks living in the Aegean and Mediterranean regions of Turkey.

Although Afro-Turks have integrated into Turkish society as a whole over the years, their process was out of public sight. Naturally, with the passing of the older generation, they have started to lose the few connections they have to their past. Only a few of the elderly members of the community remember their past and there are very few written records of their traditions. New oral history projects are attempting to revitalize their almost forgotten traditions. For example, the Istanbul-based History Foundation ran a project titled, “*Voices from a Silent Past: An Oral History Study on the Past and Present of being an ‘Afro-Turk’*” to re-write the history and experiences of Afro-Turks in Turkey (Salman, 2008). Among the many findings in this research, what stands out is that they have not been discriminated against because of their color or ethnicity (Kayacan, 2008, p.41) as some people claimed (Love, 2016; Zalewski, 2012); and most of the time they are called “Pele”, or “Esmeray”. The case of Esmeray Diriker is not only interesting but also very important, as she is remembered mainly for her 1977 hit, Gel Tezkere Gel (Discharge Letter to Come) even today, which talks about the homesickness felt by Turkish soldiers during their mandatory military service. Many segments of Turkish society loved Esmeray just for this song. While Esmeray was born in Istanbul in 1949, her ancestors are reportedly of Moroccan origin (Binicewicz, 2016).

In recent years, visibility of Afro-Turks has been expanded to the political arena. In the 2018 Parliamentary Elections in Turkey, the People’s Democratic Party (HDP) officials presented Yalcin Yanik as one of their candidates in Izmir (Kamer, 2018). Yanik is an Afro-Turk with extensive experience in Afro-Turk civil society organizations and is a leatherworker in Izmir. Similarly, another Afro-Turk from Selcuk, Izmir, sought to be a candidate for MP from the IYI Party in Izmir but failed to enter the party list (Vaziyet 2018). However, the following year, he ran as a Democrat Party (NTV, 2019) mayoral candidate for Selcuk in the province of Izmir and finished the race in the third place.

Calf Festival as a Symbol of Visibility and Identity Builder

Since the mid-2000s, Olpak has worked with local political support to organize an African festival in Izmir and surrounding villages, modeled after the Calf Festival (Dana Bayramı), celebrated by the emancipated African community of Izmir in the late Ottoman period. In the past, it was considered a festival that was against Islam, therefore was subjected to attempted bans by Ottoman authorities in the 1890s, before being forced underground and stopped in the early twentieth century. The Calf Festival is now the symbol and the centerpiece of the rise of Afro-Turks.

The Afro-Turk traditional feast has been celebrated again since 2007 in Izmir. This feast called the “Calf Feast” was celebrated from 1880’s until the end of the 1920’s according to different sources. The leaders of the Afro-Turkish community would collect money to buy a calf and the calf would be sacrificed the first Saturday of May otherwise disasters would occur. The feast was celebrated for three weeks in past times but today is celebrated during one weekend in May with support of the above-mentioned association in order to revitalize one of the oldest Afro-Turk traditions. Each year this popular festival has attracted both international and national media attention. As the Festival became a huge success, Olpak became the informal leader of the emerging Afro-Turk community, raising their profile and publicly discussing the history of slavery in Turkey for the first time.

As Ferguson and Kayagil (2016) explain in his obituary, Olpak worked until his death in November 2016 to build support for the Afro-Turk community and attempted to hold meetings with politicians from any party or background who were willing to work with him and support his cause, despite the fact that his own political views were rooted in the labor movement (Ferguson, 2013). He, on many occasions, expressed his frustrations with politicians who did not taken him seriously or treated him contemptuously. Olpak’s ideological closeness to Turkey’s main opposition party, the Republican People’s Party (CHP), did not provide much support for his endeavor, despite the fact that the places where most Afro-Turks live, has always had a strong electoral base for the CHP. As part of his frustration, in 2010, Olpak told the local media in Izmir that if Erdogan’s AK Party is serious about giving real support to the cause of the Afro-Turks, he would ask the members of his association, numbering around 1,500 at that time, to wear an AK Party pin and support the party’s democratic reform initiative (*Hurriyet*, 2010). Olpak was very careful not politicizing his association. While his ideological inclination kept him far from the AK Party, and close to the CHP; interestingly, it was the AK Party government that had been pushing for an African opening since 2002 in Turkish foreign policy and recognizing the existence and the need of Afro-Turks.

We do not know the basic reason, however, perhaps as a result of Olpak’s ideological inclination, neither he nor his association has never openly announced their support for Turkey’s Africa opening, except his above-mentioned conditional statement. It is clear that that Afro-Turks have been one of clearest winners as a result of Turkey’s Africa opening, bringing them wide-range recognition among Turkish society and creating awareness that there are forgotten ethnic groups within Turkish society. Less than two decades ago, before Turkey’s opening to Africa started, it would have been unimaginable that Afro-Turks would receive so much attention, both at the social and state level in Turkey. The mere opening to Africa policy created an environment where issues related to Africa could be discussed with interest and attention.

Since 2009, the Turkish Ministry of Culture has continued to support the Calf Festival as part of Turkey’s cultural diversity for preservation along with local municipalities in Izmir (Olpak, 2013, p.136). In attendance at the first festival in 2007, there was representation from Senegal, Nigeria, Kenya, as well as Sheila Warren from the US African Diaspora department as Obama’s special representative (Kayhan, 2013, p.19). Similarly, the visibility of Afro-Turks in the Turkish social and cultural scene is part of Turkey’s reconciliation with its own Ottoman past, acceptance of multi-ethnicity, and religiosity in today’s Turkey; and therefore, state institutions and the public, without any prejudice, easily accept Afro-Turks.


Turkey's Ministry of Culture's official support for Afro-Turks' cultural activities is an extension of Ankara's opening to Africa policy. Official state support for activities and visibility of Afro-Turks in Turkey connects Ankara's opening to Africa in foreign affairs with the acceptance of Turkey's African citizens ethnically in domestic politics. Ankara could not follow a policy of neglecting the cultural demand of its own African citizens while it is focusing on Africa in the last decade and supporting hundreds of developmental and cultural projects in Africa through various state institutions.

Conclusion

The community of Afro-Turks as a new ethnic minority in Turkey is now much more organized than they were in previous years. They are also much more visible and known to Turkish society compared to a decade ago. This certainly indicates Turkey's important transformation as a state and its policies toward ethnic minorities. Today, Afro-Turks may constitute a tiny minority of the population, however that does not make them insignificant. From culture to politics, their discernibility is rising, thanks to Turkey's opening to Africa and the domestic transformation of the country.

The Mustafa Olpak's foundation of the Africans Culture and Solidarity Society and the demand for Afro-Turks' cultural recognition coincided with the increasing Turkish interest in Africa at the political, economic, and cultural levels. This perfect timing helped to vindicate and preserve the Afro-Turk community's traditions and memoir by bringing them into public space. If there were not an opening to Africa policy, such initiatives would not have been that visible at the social level and not likely to be acceptable at the state level. Olpak's leadership was also very creative in the way he utilized press coverage to their benefit. The visibility of Afro-Turks is likely to stay in the spotlight after his unexpected death in November 2016. Today, Afro-Turks are an already known minority experiencing a renewal of their traditions and running for positions on different political parties' tickets. The Turkish government continues to support the Calf Festival and value their search for their roots. The emergence of Afro-Turks in the Turkish public sphere matches perfectly with Ankara's intention to deepen relations with Africa. Although so far, the issue of Afro-Turks has not been utilized in the policy discourse toward Africa, as Afro-Turks make an inroad into Turkish society with more visibility, they are likely to be a factor in Ankara's future Africa policy. The case of Afro-Turks demonstrates that when a foreign policy inclination is matched with domestic policy, even a tiny minority can become more discernable.

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