

**NEW  
PERSPECTIVES  
ON TURKEY**  
No. 42 | Spring 2010

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**NEW  
PERSPECTIVES  
ON TURKEY**

**Dedicated to the Memory of  
Dicle Koğacıođlu**

(1972-2009)

*New Perspectives on Turkey* is published in cooperation with the Chair in Contemporary Turkish Studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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**Özlem Köksal**

# From national humiliation to difference: The image of the Circassian beauty in the discourses of Circassian diaspora nationalists

Setenay Nil Doğan

She smiled as if her beauty was a burden, a chain:  
Circassian woman has to be beautiful.<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The Circassian Beauty, attributed to the women of the Caucasus, is a historical image of idealized feminine aesthetics that has prevailed in Orientalist literature, art and knowledge production as well as Turkish popular culture. This article argues that this image has been central to the gendered construction of diasporic identity among Circassian diaspora nationalists in Turkey. It aims to explore the multiple meanings attached to the image of the Circassian Beauty, and the ways in which these meanings are historically transformed in line with the political and historical transformations of the Circassian diaspora in Turkey.

Keywords: *Diaspora nationalism, gender, Circassians, Circassian Beauty, Turkey*

In September 2006, Mustafa Aksu, in his book *Being a Gypsy in Turkey*,<sup>2</sup> published a list of artists and politicians who, according to him, were “originally Roma.” Among the names on the list, expeditiously reproduced by the media, was Türkan Şoray, arguably the most famous Turk-

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1 “Çerkes kadınına mutlak güzel olmak gerek.” Halide Edip Adivar, *Sinekli Bakkal* (İstanbul: Özgür, 2006), 274.

2 Mustafa Aksu, *Türkiye’de Çingene Olmak* (İstanbul: Kesit Yayınları, 2006).

ish cinema actress.<sup>3</sup> As the “sultana” of Turkish cinema, Türkan Şoray is often considered to embody the characteristics of a “typical Turkish woman.”<sup>4</sup> In the words of Atilla Dorsay, the famous film critic, Türkan Şoray is “very much Turkish, just like Catherine Deneuve is very much French and Sophia Loren is very much Italian.”<sup>5</sup> A month after the list of “originally Roma” artists and politicians was published, Şoray gave an interview during which she denied the claim that she was Roma; she declared herself to be Circassian,<sup>6</sup> and stated that her beauty made her origins apparent.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, Circassians were celebrating the sultana’s announcement of her ethnic identification on the internet: the sultana of Turkish cinema, who was admired as the ideal Turkish woman was one of them now searching for her ethnic past and family history.<sup>8</sup> Among the non-Circassian groups on the internet, the Roma list and the sultana’s subsequent declaration of her ethnic identification as Circassian triggered debates about the Circassians’ origins as an ethnic group: some claimed that they were not a nation *per se* and that they were originally Turks, while others asserted that the sultana’s declaration was just another instance of how they, as a minority group, “did not forget their race” after almost two centuries and of how they embraced racism unlike “we, the Turks.”<sup>9</sup>

I argue that the debate on the ethnic origins of the sultana constitutes an emblematic instance of the gendered relationships between the

3 See “Çingeneler Kitap Sayfalarına Girdi,” *Sabah*, 14 September 2006 <http://arsiv.sabah.com.tr/2006/09/14/gny/gny119-20060914-200.html>.

4 The word “sultana” is appropriated from Seçil Bükler’s article on Türkan Şoray. For her discussion of Türkan Şoray as a “typical Turkish woman,” see Seçil Bükler, “The Film Does Not End with an Ecstatic Kiss,” in *Fragments of Culture: The Everyday of Modern Turkey*, eds. Deniz Kandiyoti and Ayşe Saktañber (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 158.

5 Nilüfer Kuyuş, “‘Türk Erkeđi Gibi Bakmıřım’: Türkan Şoray Efsanesini İncelediđi Kitabında Atilla Dorsay’dan Cesur İtiraf,” *Milliyet*, 26 November 1997, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/1997/11/26/entel/entel.html>.

6 Circassians are the indigenous people of the Northwest Caucasus who were *en masse* deported into the Ottoman lands in the nineteenth century. As a result of the Russian expansion into the Caucasus and the support of the Ottoman Empire, large numbers of Circassians immigrated to the Ottoman lands, such as Anatolia, the Syrian province, and the Balkans. Since the largest wave of immigration was to Anatolia, the Circassian community in Turkey today is considered the largest community of its kind, when compared to Syria, Jordan and Palestine/Israel and other diaspora communities formed through secondary migration to Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States.

7 In Şoray’s words, “as you, too, stated, Circassian women are famous for their beauty. Doesn’t my beauty make it already obvious that I am a Circassian too?” [*Sizin de dediđiniz gibi Çerkez kadınları güzelliikleriyle meşhurdur. Benim de Çerkez olduđum güzelliđimden belli deđil mi zaten?*] For the interview, see “Ben Bir Kabartay Çerkezi’yim,” *Sabah*, 16 October 2006 <http://arsiv.sabah.com.tr/2006/10/16/gny/gny115-20061016-200.html>.

8 “Çerkes Kızı Olmak Hoşuma Gidiyor,” *Vatan*, 28 December 2003 <http://haber.gazetevatan.com/haberdetay.asp?Newsid=19912&Categoryid=1>.

9 For an example of these online debates in 2006, see the debate “Türkan Şoray da Çingene Olmadıđını Açıkladı,” <http://www.frmttr.com/genel/608404-turkan-soray-da-cingene-olmadigini-acikladi-2.html>.

Circassian diaspora in Turkey and the host community, signifying the ways in which multiple nationalisms and groups struggle over/through gendered meanings. While announcing her ethnic origins, the sultana employed the notion of beauty not only because she was considered beautiful; she was also referring to the well-known image of the Circassian Beauty, a historical image of idealized feminine aesthetics that has for centuries been attributed to the women of the Caucasus.

The Circassian Beauty has constituted a prevalent Orientalist figure in European literature, art and various forms of knowledge production;<sup>10</sup> as well as a central place in Turkish popular culture. This article explores the Circassian Beauty as a dynamic and contested image through which Circassian diaspora nationalists relate to the host community and define their identity and history. Through a close analysis of the multiple meanings attached to the notion of the Circassian Beauty by the diaspora nationalists,<sup>11</sup> as well as the ways in which these meanings are historically transformed, I argue that a particular gender discourse has been constitutive of Circassian diaspora nationalism in Turkey in its effort to define and locate “the Circassians” *vis-à-vis* Turkish nationalism and other ethnic groups.

This paper explores, in lieu of Turkish nationalism, the gendered settings of nationalism in Turkey. As the academic debate on gender and nationalism in Turkey has largely focused on Turkish nationalism,<sup>12</sup> recently a growing body of literature has drawn attention to the experi-

10 For an analysis of the Circassian Beauty as an Orientalist figure, see Irvin Cemil Schick, *Çerkes Güzeli: Bir Şarkiyatçı İmgenin Serüveni* (İstanbul: Oğlak Yayıncılık, 2004).

11 In order to explore these meanings in the narratives of diaspora nationalists, this paper utilizes, in addition to other resources, semi-structured in-depth interviews with Circassian activists and intellectuals conducted in Ankara and İstanbul between February 2007 and June 2008. In order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity, interviewees will be introduced with pseudo-names. I consider the interview “a site of knowledge construction,” and the interviewee and interviewer “co-participants in the process.” Jennifer Mason, “Qualitative Interviewing: Asking, Listening and Interpreting,” in *Qualitative Research in Action*, ed. Tim May (London: Sage, 2002), 227. Furthermore, the interview responses are treated in this article not as giving direct access to “experience,” but as actively constructed “narratives” involving activities which themselves demand analysis, the ultimate of which is *verstehen* in the Weberian sense. David Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2000), 36.

12 See, for instance, Nükhet Sirman, “Kadınların Milliyeti,” in *Milliyetçilik: Modern Türkiye’de Siyasi Düşünce*, eds. Tanıl Bora and Murat Gültekinçil (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2001); Meltem Ahıska, “Gender and National Fantasy: Early Turkish Radio Drama,” *New Perspectives on Turkey*, no. 22 (2000); Ayşe Gül Altınay, ed. *Vatan, Millet, Kadınlar* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2004); Fatmagül Berktaş, “Doğu ile Batı’nın Birleştiği Yer: Kadın İmgesinin Kurgulanışı,” in *Modernleşme ve Batıcılık: Modern Türkiye’de Siyasi Düşünce*, ed. Uygur Kocabaşoğlu (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2002); Deniz Kandiyoti, “End of Empire: Islam, Nationalism and Women in Turkey,” in *Women, Islam and the State*, ed. Deniz Kandiyoti (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991); Nükhet Sirman, “Gender Construction and Nationalist Discourse: Dethroning the Father in the Early Turkish Novel,” in *Gender and Identity Construction: Women of Central Asia, the Caucasus and Turkey*, eds. Feride Acar and Ayşe Güneş-Ayata (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

ences of Kurdish women and the gendered nature of Kurdish nationalism.<sup>13</sup> My analysis of the Circassian Beauty and the image's historical transformations within diaspora nationalism—which constitutes itself through the republican project of modernity, Turkish nationalism, as well as other minority nationalisms—seeks to contribute to this literature by emphasizing the gendered nature of the relationships between different nationalisms on the one hand, and by exploring the multiple discourses that shape gendered subjectivities, oppressions and resistances on the other.

### Gendering diaspora literature

There is a tendency in the theoretical accounts of diaspora to “talk of travel and displacement in unmarked ways, thus normalizing male experiences,”<sup>14</sup> and leaving the gendered domains of diasporic complexity unexamined.<sup>15</sup> Yet, diasporic experiences, formations, histories and narratives are grounded in gendered meanings, practices, hierarchies, discourses and experiences. Gender relations play a significant role in the reproduction of social capital and the reinforcement of the cultural norms of the historic “homeland,”<sup>16</sup> as women play a key role in the staging of diasporic origin through the family.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the complex and dynamic ways in which the nation and the diaspora interlock are shaped by particular gender ideologies, constructions, and relations: gender ideologies are a fundamental subtext informing the individual strategies that men and women use to straddle the gap between “nation” and “diaspora.”<sup>18</sup> Diasporic identities and belongings are contested, forged, negotiated and reaffirmed through and alongside gender.<sup>19</sup>

When analyzed from a gender perspective, diasporic communities enhance collective identities that are formed through the patriarchal

13 See, for instance, Cihan Ahmetbeyzade, “Negotiating Silences in the So-Called Low-Intensity War: The Making of the Kurdish Diaspora in Istanbul,” *Signs* 33, no. 1 (2007); Handan Çağlayan, *Analar, Yoldaşlar, Tanrıçalar: Kürt Hareketinde Kadınlar ve Kadın Kimliğinin Oluşumu* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2007); Shahrzad Mojab, ed. *Devletsiz Ulusun Kadınları: Kürt Kadını Üzerine Araştırmalar* (İstanbul: Avesta Yayınları, 2005).

14 James Clifford, “Diasporas,” *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (1994): 313.

15 Floya Anthias, “Evaluating “Diaspora”: Beyond Ethnicity?,” *Sociology* 32, no. 3 (1998); Clifford, “Diasporas.”

16 Venetia Evergeti, “Living and Caring between Two Cultures,” *Community, Work and Family* 9, no. 3 (2006): 347.

17 Georgina Tsolidis, “The Role of the Maternal in Diasporic Cultural Reproduction—Australia, Canada and Greece,” *Social Semiotics* 11, no. 2 (2001): 193.

18 Brenda S. A. Yeoh and Katie Willis, “‘Heart’ and ‘Wing,’ Nation and Diaspora: Gendered Discourses in Singapore’s Regionalization Process,” *Gender, Place and Culture* 6, no. 4 (1999).

19 Lok Siu, “Queen of the Chinese Colony: Gender, Nation, and Belonging in Diaspora,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 78, no. 3 (2005).

dominance of male diasporic leaders, through women's cultural invocation as objects of the male gaze, and through the formulation of particular roles imposed on and expected from women.<sup>20</sup> While defining diaspora as "potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings," Brah regards it also as conjuring up images of violence and trauma, in which women's lives are shaped by "articulating relations of power."<sup>21</sup> Women in the diasporic communities are "subject-ed by a double articulation of discourses of cultural difference and patriarchy,"<sup>22</sup> which takes place among the relationships of the diaspora with the homeland, the host community, and transnational networks.

Highlighting the need to gender the diaspora literature, Anthias has suggested two different levels of analysis: the first level examines the ways in which men and women of the diaspora are inserted into the social relations of the host community, within the diaspora communities, and within the transnational networks of the diaspora; the second level aims to understand how gender relations are constitutive of the identities of the groups themselves.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, the exploration of gender relations, constructs, images and discourses is crucial to understanding the processes through which the collective "we" of the diaspora assumes a singular, unified and homogeneous form within a nationalist frame.<sup>24</sup>

There is a growing body of literature that analyzes national projects as simultaneously gender projects,<sup>25</sup> with particular emphasis on the constructions of women as biological reproducers of the nation; as reproducers of the boundaries of the group; as transmitters and carriers of its culture; as signifiers of ethnic/national differences; and, finally, as participants in national, economic, political and military struggles.<sup>26</sup> Although diaspora nationalism has been defined as "a very distinctive, very conspicuous, important sub-species of nationalism,"<sup>27</sup> and as "an increasingly more likely and more important form of ethno-nationalist

20 Anthias, "Evaluating "Diaspora": Beyond Ethnicity?"; Steven Gold, "Gender and Social Capital among Israeli Immigrants in Los Angeles," *Diaspora* 4, no. 3 (1995); Gayatri Gopinath, "Bombay, UK, Yuba City: Bhangra Music and the Engendering of Diaspora," *Diaspora* 4, no. 3 (1995).

21 Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora* (London: Routledge, 1996), 193, 90.

22 Keya Ganguly, "Migrant Identities: Personal Memory and the Construction of Selfhood," *Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (1992): 38.

23 Anthias, "Evaluating "Diaspora": Beyond Ethnicity?," 572.

24 Serin Houston and Richard Wright, "Making and Remaking Tibetan Diasporic Identities," *Social & Cultural Geography* 4, no. 2 (2003).

25 Sylvia Walby, "Woman and Nation," in *Mapping the Nation*, ed. Gopal Balakrishnan (London: Verso, 1996).

26 Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias, "Woman-Nation-State," in *Nationalism*, eds. John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (New York: Routledge, 2000).

27 Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1983), 101.

expansion,”<sup>28</sup> most studies on diaspora nationalism lack gender as a category of analysis.<sup>29</sup>

Drawing from the literature on gender and nationalism, this article argues that diaspora nationalism or long-distance nationalism is shaped by a subtle web of relations with the host community, the homeland, and other nationalisms, especially the hegemonic nationalism of the host society, and that these interconnections are made available to diaspora nationalisms not only by political and technological developments, but also by a particular gender regime. These gendered interconnections of diaspora nationalism are significant to understand how diasporic identities are constructed, transformed, and reclaimed.

### The Circassian Beauty

Before the image of the Circassian Beauty became widespread in the Ottoman Empire as a result of the increasing influx of Circassians and their impact on the Ottoman slave market in the nineteenth century, it already had its place in the Orientalist literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>30</sup> After its initial appearance in the novels and theatrical plays of the seventeenth century, the image of the Circassian Beauty gained popularity in eighteenth-century Orientalist literature, as Circassia, with its perpetual conflicts with Tsarist Russia, attracted the attention of European politicians and writers. Frequent references were made to women being sold willingly, turning Circassia into a land of female availability.<sup>31</sup> Hence, since the eighteenth century, knowledge of Circassia came to be intertwined with the image of its beautiful and available women.<sup>32</sup>

As Orientalism, scientific racism, commodification, and the growing interest in geography as a means of imperial knowledge production contributed to the popularity of the Circassian Beauty as an ideal image, this image also was a reflection of Circassia in the European imagination: Eastern and Western, resistant and doomed to fail *vis-à-vis* Russia. This European image of the Circassian Beauty is significant in that it contributes not only to exploring the power formations of nineteenth-century

28 Zlatko Skrbis, *Long-Distance Nationalism: Diasporas, Homelands and Identities* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1999), xiii.

29 Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

30 Schick, *Çerkes Güzeli: Bir Şarkiyatçı İmgenin Serüveni*.

31 For an example of these arguments on female availability in Circassia, see Denis Diderot and Jean D’Alambert, “Circassie,” in *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire Raisonné Des Sciences, Des Arts et des Métiers* (Geneva: La Société Typographique, 1778), 105.

32 For a detailed analysis of how these discourses and processes intertwined in the image of the Circassian Beauty in the nineteenth century, see Schick, *Çerkes Güzeli: Bir Şarkiyatçı İmgenin Serüveni*; Linda Frost, “The White Gaze, the Spectacle of Beauty and the Circassian Beauty,” in *Never One Nation: Freaks, Savages and Whiteness in U.S. Popular Culture 1850-1877* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

imperialism and encounters between the West and East, but also to the understanding of how multiple identities have been constructed as a result of these historical encounters.

The image of the Circassian Beauty was also related to the historical fact that throughout the nineteenth century Circassians had constituted the human stock of the Ottoman slave market.<sup>33</sup> Although there had been previous contacts between the Ottomans and the Circassians, contacts intensified, and individual visits and relations were replaced by a massive influx of Circassians into the Ottoman lands in the nineteenth century at the peak of Russian expansionist policy.

According to Hakan Erdem, the existence of a hereditary slave caste among the Circassians, the chiefs' or slave-owners' loss of control, poverty, the desire of parents to secure a better life for their children and themselves, and the slaves' own willingness to be sold into a better life contributed to the Circassian enslavement.<sup>34</sup> Social conditions and cultural attitudes produced a clear hierarchy among Ottoman slaves—which was expressed in price, employment, and social standing—at the top being Circassian and Georgian slaves,<sup>35</sup> who were traditionally the slaves most preferred by the ruling elite.<sup>36</sup> A preference for white women prevailed among male members of the Ottoman imperial elite already before the nineteenth century, which led the agents of the Imperial Harem and the leading households to recruit young women from among the Circassian and Georgian populations of the Caucasus,<sup>37</sup> and later, after the mass deportation of Circassians into Ottoman territories, of the Ottoman Empire.

Starting in the nineteenth century, the Circassian Beauty was a character encountered not only in Ottoman elite households, but also in literature. For instance, *Sergüzeşt* by Sami Paşazade Sezai depicts the story of a Circassian girl who was deported from the Caucasus and worked as a female servant in elite households.<sup>38</sup> Nezihe Muhittin, in her *Benliğim Benimdir* similarly tells the story of Zeynep, another Circassian girl sold by her parents.<sup>39</sup>

33 Hakan Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire and Its Demise, 1800-1909* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996).

34 *Ibid.*, 50.

35 Ehud R. Toledano, *Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), 13.

36 Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire*, 61.

37 Ehud R. Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 12-13.

38 Sami Paşazade Sezai, *Sergüzeşt* (İstanbul: Sis Yayınları, 2008).

39 Nezihe Muhittin, *Bütün Eserleri*, vol. 1 (İstanbul: Kitap Yayınevi, 2008).

While the trade in Circassian slaves was reduced considerably by the end of the nineteenth century as a result of Ottoman policies, the demand by the harems of the imperial family and the households of the elite remained.<sup>40</sup> It was during the Second Constitutional Period of 1908 that the emancipation of Circassian women in the Imperial Harem was put on the political agenda and that Circassians on an individual basis or as organizations became part of the process.<sup>41</sup> After the dethronement of Sultan Abdülhamid II in 1909, the Imperial Harem began to be dispersed.<sup>42</sup> Whether officially abolished by the 1908 revolution or much later by the Turkish Republic, “Ottoman slavery died piecemeal, not abruptly, with the end of empire.”<sup>43</sup>

The image of the Circassian Beauty is historically related to the practice of slavery and the Imperial Harem. However, closely related to these connections, there are other implications of this image: it is also regarded as an image through which Circassians in Turkey were inserted into the political mechanisms. For instance, for Şevket Süreyya Aydemir, a Turkish politician and intellectual writing in the 1960s, the status of Circassians in Turkey and the image of the Circassian Beauty were inseparable; through marriages with the ruling elites of the empire, they found their path into the higher echelons of the host state:

Turkey received Caucasian immigrants favorably. [...] In their new homelands, they protected themselves by preserving their tribal organizations, languages and traditions. Furthermore, they established hegemony over the local people, *i.e.*, local Turks, which was almost based on force [*adeta zora dayanan bir üstünlük*]. The fact that Circassians, as a graceful and beautiful race, always gave girls, ladies or even sultanas to the palace and İstanbul’s elite households provided their enduring connections with the palace and İstanbul. It provided them with some benefits.<sup>44</sup>

Apart from the historical and political connotations, Türkan Şoray’s use of the image of the Circassian Beauty finds widespread appeal in contemporary Turkey, whereby being a Circassian is equated with being beautiful and charming. Ayşe Güneş-Ayata, in her research on Cir-

40 Toledano, *Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East*, 12.

41 For the different accounts on the roles of Circassians in the dispersal of the Imperial Harem, see Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire*; Zeynep Aksoy, “Çerkes Teavün Cemiyeti,” *Toplumsal Tarih*, no. 117 (2003); Avni Özgürel, “Cariyeliğin Bittiği Günler,” *Radikal*, 22 June 2003.

42 Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire*, 148.

43 Toledano, *Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East*, 12.

44 Şevket Süreyya Aydemir, *Tek Adam*, vol. 2 (İstanbul: Remzi Kitabevi, 1975), 323.

cassian women living in the shanty areas of Ankara, has stated that they are known for being beautiful, respectful, obedient and good housewives talented in domestic responsibilities; hence, being a Circassian becomes an asset, a symbol of status, and an advantage for women in urban areas.<sup>45</sup>

As a contested and dynamic image embraced by the people of Turkey, the Circassian Beauty is also significant for those Circassians who consider it a part of their image in Turkey.<sup>46</sup> This article will now turn to how Circassian diaspora nationalists in Turkey have dealt with this concept during the twentieth century and how their understanding of it has been transformed in line with diaspora politics, identity, and relations with the host community and state.

### The first generation of diaspora nationalists: National humiliation

As the Second Constitutional Period (1908) implied the formation of a public sphere in the Ottoman Empire in general, it led to the emergence of a Circassian public sphere in particular, with the establishment of organizations and publications. For the Circassian Union and Mutual Aid Association (*Çerkes İttihat ve Teavün Cemiyeti*), which was established in 1908 and which problematized Circassian slavery,<sup>47</sup> slavery was not only misery on the side of those bought and sold, but also a national matter as far as their ethnic group was concerned.

Another organization, the North Caucasian Association (*Şimali Kafkasya Cemiyet-i Siyasiyesi*) which was founded in 1914, stated its aims as follows: defending and protecting the national rights of the groups of the North Caucasus; establishing national solidarity and cooperation among them; developing their national character; developing the sciences and applied sciences and especially national education among them; encouraging art and trade; protecting orphans and families in need of help; increasing the national population by fighting against diseases; and protecting the purity of the lineage (*soyun saflığı*).<sup>48</sup> The association ordered its branches the following:

45 Ayşe Güneş-Ayata, "Etnik Kimlik ve Toplumsal Cinsiyet: Ankara'da Çerkes Kadınlar," in 20. *Yüzyılın Sonunda Kadınlar ve Gelecek Konferansı 19-21 Kasım 1997*, ed. Oya Çitçi (Ankara: TODAİE İnsan Hakları Araştırma ve Derleme Merkezi Yayını, 1998).

46 Kenan, a politically active leftist in the 1970s and recently "a democrat" as he defines himself, states: "Circassian girl, Circassian chicken and Çerkes Ethem. This is a trilogy, you know that?" Kenan, interview by author, 20 August 2007, İstanbul. Circassian chicken [*Çerkes Tavuğu*] is a popular and commonly known dish in Turkey, and Çerkes [Circassian] Ethem refers to the militia leader of the early years of the War of Independence (1919-1922), who has been associated with treason in Turkish official history.

47 Aksoy, "Çerkes Teavün Cemiyeti."

48 M. Aydın Turan, "Osmanlı Dönemi Kuzey Kafkasya Diasporası Tarihinden Şimali Kafkas Cemiyeti," no. 172 (1998): 243.

Since the protection of the purity of the race and making the Circassian family life more prosperous is crucial, it will be provided that Circassian men will marry Circassian girls, and the marriage of Circassian girls with elements that are not Caucasian and whose origins and lineage are unknown, especially and solely, in the name of wealth [...] will be prevented.<sup>49</sup>

In 1914, the Circassian intellectual Mehmet Fetgeri Şoenü (1890-1931) wrote an article called "Circassian Women in Ottoman Social Life,"<sup>50</sup> in response to Celal Nuri, an Ottoman intellectual in favor of Westernization, who, as Fetgeri claimed, regarded the women of this ethnic group as one of the reasons for the decline of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>51</sup> Fetgeri stated that "those severe sentences which hurt his feelings and national pride" could be seen "with short but bitter sentences in a work of Celal Nuri."<sup>52</sup> In his article, Fetgeri elaborated on the image of Circassian women in the Ottoman Empire: "When you say Circassian, what comes to mind is only the noble but fallen children of the past who are responsible for breeding girls for the satisfaction of the demands and the lust of some people who appear as the girl merchants and many pleasure-seekers."<sup>53</sup> He argued that Circassian women had not been harmful for the Turks, as Celal Nuri had claimed:

I wonder if the girls of this high nation have become only the tools of entertainment for the Turks. [...] [I wonder if] They caused social disintegration of the Turks. [...] Never... It is probable that Turks took these girls as a tool of entertainment, but they [these girls] fulfilled their educational duties—maybe unconsciously; thus they ensured the beautification of the spiritual purity and physical appearance of the Turks. [...] Circassian girls did not harm the Turks

49 Ibid.: 247. The exact clause includes also a reference to nobility. The Turkish original reads: *İrkin sağlığını koruma ve Çerkes aile hayatını daha çok müreffeh kılmak pek önemli olduğundan, Çerkes gençlerinin Çerkes kızları ile evlenmelerini sağlamak ve Çerkes kızlarının Kafkasyalı olmayan unsurlarla, özellikle sadece servete tamah ederek aslı ve soyu belli olmayan ve hatta soyluluğunu yitirmiş şahıslara verilmesi menedilecektir.*

50 Mehmet Fetgeri Şoenü, "Osmanlı Sosyal Yaşamında Çerkes Kadınları," in *Tüm Eserleriyle Mehmet Fetgeri Şoenü* (Ankara: Kafdav Yayıncılık, 2007).

51 Celal Nuri, in *Kadınlarımız* (Our Women) published in 1915, stated that "The caliphate can abolish the use of odalisques. Because, first of all, it is beyond morality. [...] In the Caucasus, Aziziye, Adapazarı, there are 'human stock farms' [*insan haraları*] [...] These breed and sell odalisques. Fathers sell their daughters. Beys give the girls of their groups in exchange of money." Celal Nuri, *Kadınlarımız* (Eskişehir: T.C. Kültür Bakanlığı, 1993), 95. As the book *Kadınlarımız* cannot be the book to which Fetgeri referred, it is highly probable that he referred to *Tarih-i Tedenniyyat-ı Osmaniye Mukadderat-ı Tarihiye* published in 1914, in which Celal Nuri discussed the reasons of the decline of the Ottoman Empire.

52 Şoenü, "Osmanlı Sosyal Yaşamında Çerkes Kadınları," 11.

53 Ibid., 13.

in terms of civilization and development; quite the contrary, they changed their nation towards beauty and maturity. [...] [Even if that is not true,] Who is responsible for that? For that, one should not look at Circassianhood and Circassian women but at Turkish social life and Turkishness.<sup>54</sup>

As Fetgeri reversed the power relationship between the slave and owner, the Circassian and the Turk, he also criticized Circassians harshly for the ongoing practice of selling their girls and discussed the reasons behind this. According to him, the act of selling the girls was being done to reverse the national humiliation that Circassians experienced after the immigration to the Ottoman Empire: "Poor Circassians were encouraged in several ways," especially "by the government of those times"; some material benefits were given to the fathers whose daughters went to the palace of the Sultan, and with these material gains "it was as if the honor of Circassians that they wasted in the Caucasus was being regained."<sup>55</sup> Yet, these practices of slavery and forced marriage constituted a source of grief for the Circassian nation. What Fetgeri saw in these practices were "the fallen goddess of today, Circassian women who are an old part of womanhood and a huge nation that is insulted every day as a result of the bad conditions in which they found themselves [...] with all its humiliation."<sup>56</sup>

As Fetgeri considered Ottoman Turks responsible for the practices of slavery as much as his own ethnic group, the existence of Circassian girls in the palace or the practice of selling and buying girls harmed not the Turks of the Ottoman Empire, but rather the Circassian nation. These practices not only led to misery for individuals, but they also were a national matter, since they stained the national history and traditions of the Circassians: they "stained the magnificent history of a grand nation just like black paint put into a cup of water."<sup>57</sup> Hence, the shame that Fetgeri mentioned pertained to the Circassian nation in its totality:

54 Ibid., 17-18.

55 Ibid., 26. The original reads: *Vatandan ayrılmakla meyus, asaletini, yerini tanıtamamakla, servetini heba etmekle, elemli, zavallı Çerkesler birçok yönden teşvik görüyorlardı. [...] Hele o zamanın hükümetinin eskiden beri izlediği ve o günlerde büsbütün açığa vurduğu bir teşvik, bir özendirme uygulaması vardı ki hepsinden fazla bir etkiyle Çerkeslerin örselenmiş ruhlarna tesir etmişti. Bu, padişah sarayına giden kızların babalarına giydirilen sırmalar, takılar kılıçlar idi. Çerkeslerin bununla güya Kafkasya'da heba ettikleri onurları tekrar kazandırılıyordu.*

56 Ibid., 21. The original reads: *... bugünün düşkün tannçası, kadınlığın eski bir parçası olan Çerkes kızları ve düşüklükleri kötü durumla günbegün hakarete uğrayan koca bir ulus, aşağılanmış haliyle hayalimde beliriyor.*

57 Ibid., 27.

What is harmed with this is not Turkishness, but it is Circassianhood. Most of the time Circassian girls who leave their homes in this way cannot return to their homes; in the places where they go, most of the time they marry a miserable man or spend their lives as odalisques or concubines. [...] This is how Circassians waste their Circassianhood. With each girl that is separated from them, from home, Circassian social life does not lose one person but a chain of families reaching to the future.<sup>58</sup>

Hence, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the problem of slavery and the practice of selling humans had become a national issue for Circassian nationalists. The problem of slavery was synonymous with the fall of the nation, since the times when the Circassian Beauty came to be celebrated and commodified in Europe and the Ottoman Empire pertained to the times when the Caucasus was the target of an expanding Tsarist Russia. Therefore, for the Circassian diaspora nationalists in the early twentieth century, the image was emblematic of the failure of the project of nation-building in the Caucasus.

Ironically, the problematization of the image by Circassian nationalists came not in the heyday of the slave trade, but in the final years of the Ottoman Empire. Two dynamics that shape this history are the problematization of slavery in the Ottoman Empire at the end of the nineteenth century and the emergence of Circassian diaspora nationalism in the early twentieth century. A third dynamic can be identified as the weakening of the Ottoman state. Associated with the Imperial Harem and the Ottoman ruling elite, the Circassians came to be identified with the decline of the Ottoman state and its multiple failures. In this context, the Circassian Beauty became an image associated with national humiliation and national mistake. Such a reaction by the first-generation diaspora nationalists implied not only the demand to end the multiple miseries associated with Circassian women, but also the demand to transform Circassians from a group associated with the ruling elites of the waning Ottoman regime to a group victimized by the regime.

### **Second-generation diaspora nationalists: Assimilation and the national mistake**

Between the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, the relations between the Ottoman state and the Circassians were relatively harmonious. Circassians were well-accepted in state

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58 Ibid., 28.

mechanisms (such as the palace, the bureaucracy, and the military), and the Ottoman state's foreign policy that identified Tsarist Russia as an expansionist force threatening the empire paralleled Circassian interests in the Caucasus. However, the alliance of Circassians with the political system changed in the 1920s, with the transformation from the multinational, multi-ethnic and multi-religious empire into the new nation-state.

For the Circassians in Turkey, the Turkish War of Independence and the Çerkes Ethem affair constituted major turning points.<sup>59</sup> Although the Çerkes Ethem affair, the elimination of independent guerrilla forces in favor of a regular army during the Turkish War of Independence,<sup>60</sup> was seemingly unrelated to ethnic and national causes as far as Circassians in Turkey were concerned, its results were destructive for this ethnic group. As early as 1923, the Turkish government closed down all Circassian organizations. Furthermore, the residents of fourteen Circassian villages in Western Anatolia, numbering approximately 10,000, were deported to the country's eastern provinces (although subsequently they were allowed to return).<sup>61</sup> Circassians had been implicitly and explicitly considered relatives of Çerkes Ethem, who was associated with treason after the War of Independence. The Law on the Maintenance of Order in 1925 enabled widespread censorship of the press, resulting in the silencing of the organizational and publishing activities of the North Caucasians.

During the single-party period, between the 1920s and the mid-1940s, the Circassians lost all their social and political power as an ethnic

59 In the Turkish War of Independence, two Circassian groups were visible: those who were for independence and later became leading figures in the establishment of the Republic of Turkey (such as Ali Fuat Cebesoy, Rauf Orbay, Yusuf İzzet Paşa and Bekir Sami among others), and those who, due to their loyalty to the caliphate and the Sultan, were against the government in Ankara (such as Ahmet Anzavur who was interestingly crushed by another Circassian, Çerkes Ethem). Cemal Şener, *Çerkes Ethem Olayı* (İstanbul: Okan Yayınları, 1986), 21. A third exceptional group, the *Şark-ı Karip Çerkesleri Temin-i Hukuk Cemiyeti* established in İzmir in 1921 and composed of members from the Marmara region, stated that the final source of annihilation for the Circassians was the forced Turkification policies of the Committee of Union and Progress; that the Circassians were forced to fight first in World War I and then in the War of Independence; and that at the time they were forced to support "the throne of Mustafa Kemal." Tarık Zafer Tunaya, *Türkiye'de Siyasi Partiler*, vol. 2 (İstanbul: Doğan Kardeş Yayınları, 1952). The association then declared its loyalty to the Greek forces.

60 William Hale, *Türkiye'de Ordu ve Siyaset* (İstanbul: Hil Yayın, 1996), 67.

61 In 1923, in response to the deportations Mehmet Fetgeri Şoenu wrote a letter to the Grand National Assembly (*Çerkes Meselesi Hakkında Türk Vicdan-ı Umumiyesine ve Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi'ne Arz*). He stated: "Circassians do not seek independence in this country. They are not here to take some parts of Turkey. This should be known by all. All should believe this as much as they believe God exists. [...] If it was the Turks who embraced these poor people who were expelled from their countries, [...] the one who encouraged them [...] was a sultan at the time." M. Fetgeri Şoenu, *Çerkes Meselesi* (İstanbul: Bedir Yayınları, 1993), 41.

group. There was no mention of them—except for Çerkes Ethem—in between those years, and the alliance between the state and this ethnic group, the Circassian soldiers, bureaucrats and intellectuals became invisible. Hence, the first generation of Circassian activism that had started with the Second Constitutional Period became invisible with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the formation of the new republic.

Between the end of the War of Independence and the mid-1940s, Circassians established not a single organization in Turkey. The Circassian associations<sup>62</sup> established in the 1950s consisted of urban and less active provincial organizations.<sup>63</sup> Until the 1960s, Circassian organizations and the magazines they published were quite ephemeral; they appeared under the guise of North Caucasian “Turks”; and timidity and anti-communism provided the common framework for the organizations and publications of this period.<sup>64</sup>

Starting in the mid-1960s, the discourses of the diaspora changed: the idea that Circassians were a Turkic tribe was rejected; slogans such as “our god is our freedom, our temple is the homeland” and “to serve a foreigner and neglect one’s own interest is an error” became increasingly popular.<sup>65</sup> The politically turbulent decade of the 1970s led to the emergence of two groups—namely, the *devrimci* (revolutionaries) suggesting that Circassian rights could only be attained through a socialist revolution, and the *dönüşçü/göççü*, (returnists) who advocated a return to the homeland.<sup>66</sup> Borrowing their terminology from the politics of the late 1960s and 70s (particularly the ‘68 movement) and very much affected by the rise of Turkish nationalism, the returnists problematized assimilation in the diaspora and argued for return as the only way to live as Circassians, while the revolutionaries envisaged a socialist revolution that would result in their emancipation. As they used a new nationalist language for newly defined national problems, assimilation, return, exile, repatriation and the national right to self-determination were among

62 The Friend’s Hand Mutual Aid Association (*Dost Eli Yardımlaşma Derneği*) was established in İstanbul with the collaboration of Azeri Turks in 1946, the Caucasus Association (*Kafkas Derneği*) in İstanbul in 1952, and the North Caucasus Cultural Association (*Kuzey Kafkasya Kültür Derneği*) in Ankara in 1964.

63 Alexandre Toumarkine, “Balkan and Caucasian Immigrant Associations: Community and Politics,” in *Civil Society in the Grip of Nationalism: Studies on Political Culture in Contemporary Turkey*, eds. Stefanos Yerasimos, Gunter Seufert, and Karin Vorhoff (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2000), 405.

64 Lowell Bezanis, “Soviet Muslim Emigrés in the Republic of Turkey,” *Central Asian Survey* 13, no. 1 (1994): 141.

65 Ibid.

66 Setenay Shami, “Circassian Encounters: The Self as Other and the Production of the Homeland in the North Caucasus,” *Development and Change* 29(1998): 624.

the themes used by the second-generation of Circassian diaspora nationalists.

In the 1970s, when second-generation diaspora nationalists were at the peak of their activism, they explored the practices of forced marriage, human sale, and the implications of the Circassian Beauty in nationalist terms. It was in 1975 that Karden D., a Circassian woman writing for the Circassian magazine *Yamçı* stated: "The emancipation of Circassian woman [...] from her image as a commodity and a product that is being sold with the maximum price is not far."<sup>67</sup>

The second generation of diaspora nationalists harshly criticized Circassians and Turks for arranged and involuntary marriages in exchange for material benefits. Kanuko Cemil's poem published in the same magazine in 1976 is an instance of the frequent themes of forced marriage and human sale in the periodicals published by diaspora nationalists in the 1970s:

Far away... In the East  
 Maybe in Ahlat, Otluyazı  
 Circassian girl is in the arm of the foreigner  
 [...] Circassian girl, the mother of the future  
 The father of her child should be Circassian  
 In the spring of her life  
 Circassian girl is 19 years old  
 When she is sold viciously  
 The foreigner takes the girl, he is sixty years old  
 Another signature of dissolution  
 It is sad but its reflection is true  
 [...] The master is on the mirror of shame.<sup>68</sup>

During the 1970s, the problems of slavery and involuntary marriage in exchange for money were portrayed not only as a problem of human rights but also, and mostly, as a national problem, leading to assimilation and mixing with "foreigners," who were generally summarized as "Turks."

The image of the Circassian Beauty was narrated as a national "mistake" that needed to be corrected by the diaspora nationalists. Nezih, an activist throughout the 1960s and 1970s, narrates his experience with the image in Southeastern Anatolia at the end of the 1950s:

67 D. Karden, "Kadınlar Yılında," *Yamçı*, December 1975, 9.

68 Cemil Kanuko, "Utañ Aynası [Mirror of Shame]," *Yamçı*, February 1976, 38.

Between 1950 and 1963, our Circassians survived a full drama of selling their daughters. I personally know twelve or thirteen girls [...] who were sold in this manner. I even have a very interesting memory on that. Seven or eight people, some religious people were gathered at our house and they were discussing the issue. My uncle was a good imam there and he told: “who will marry whom is written on the receipt. Saying that I gave [my daughter] to the Turk or else is against Islam.” [“Vallahi” dedi, “makbuzda yazılı kim kimle evlenecekse. Onun için Türke verdim, şuna verdim, buna verdim demek Müslümanlığa aykırıdır.”] And other people there supported that. [...] It was in 1958 or 1959. I said whether I could ask a question, I was bringing tea to the table, I was waiting there, and they permitted me. I asked whether God was a Turk; that was the question. [...] I told them that there were at least twenty Circassian girls in this village and no bride who was Turkish. Secondly, I told that among these twenty Circassian girls there was not a single one who married a bachelor. They were all second wives, *kuma*. I told that among these twenty girls there was not a single one who had a civil marriage, all of them were religiously married. The price was 3,000 liras back then, it was the price of the girls. They were all given in exchange for 3,000 liras. Fourthly, I told that among these 20-25 girls, there was none who was not raped by the sons of her husband. I asked them whether God was acting so partially. [*Allah bu kadar mı yanlış davranıyor dedim.*] This was my rebellion in 1958 or 59. [...] There were so many examples of that. [...] This is the naked truth, and we survived that as a very degenerated and dirty reality. This did not get erased easily. This is why the Turks have stigmatized us that Circassians are selling their girls. Well, it is true.<sup>69</sup>

Although involuntary marriages in exchange for material benefits were not specific to this group, but a nationwide practice in Turkey, the ways in which Circassian girls were put on sale and the general demand for them in Anatolia were regarded by second-generation diaspora nationalists as a national problem that resulted from the fall of the nation. Hence, second-generation Circassian nationalism—just like the first generation, as represented by Fetgeri—resented the idea of involuntary forced marriages as a symbol for the fall and failure of the nation. Yet, unlike Fetgeri, they regarded the image of the Circassian Beauty as a mechanism of assimilation employed by the Turks. They were not only against arranged marriages in exchange for money, but against all marriages to non-Circassians.

69 Nezh, interview by author, 17-18 August 2007, İstanbul.

### Diaspora nationalists in the 2000s: Difference and inclusion

The meanings and effects of the Post-Soviet conjuncture—that is, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War, and the formation of new nation-states—have been manifold for Circassians in Turkey. As the 1990s implied the formation of new organizations and new forms of activism for the diaspora, it also brought entirely new challenges, problems and debates. The collapse of the Soviet Union and its aftermath challenged all Circassian activist groups in Turkey and the existing discourses with regard to identity, homeland and ethnicity. In the 1990s, no revolutionaries were left,<sup>70</sup> and the “utopia of return” was challenged by the changing meanings of “homeland”: instead of being a space that symbolized the immemorial past, the homeland became a real territory,<sup>71</sup> which could now be settled and repatriated by the Circassian diaspora in Turkey. While *glasnost* and the collapse of the Soviet Union fuelled an initial enthusiasm about the homeland, return, and repatriation, living the ideal proved to be far from unproblematic.

Furthermore, since the 1990s, with the impact of globalization, the end of the Cold War, as well as liberalization and democratization in Turkey, Circassian activists have tried to redefine their relationships with the Turkish state, demanding multi-cultural citizenship policies. In the 1970s, the prevailing way of relating to the Turkish state for Circassian nationalists was through a problematization of assimilation. Since the 1990s, activists have started to imagine cultural regeneration and revival through state policies and now call for positive discrimination. Unlike the activists’ discourses of the 1970s, which regarded the Turkish state as an assimilating, Turkifying and homogenizing mechanism that implicitly or explicitly, consciously or unconsciously worked towards the disappearance of Turkey’s Circassians, activists today demand multi-cultural policies from the state in terms of broadcasting, language education, citizenship rights and cultural rejuvenation for the achievement of a substantive equality among the citizens of Turkey.

70 It should be noted that the transformation in the 1990s was also closely related to the *coup d'état* of 1980, after which all associations were closed and the official documents of all Circassian associations were confiscated. One interviewee underlines his close experience of the *coup d'état* of 1980: “September 12 knocked us down. We were just scattered. [12 Eylül öyle bir vurdu ki bizi. Hallaç pamuğu gibi dağıttı.] Of course I was arrested; I was the head of the association. In the interrogation, it was as if the responsibility of all the history of the diaspora was attributed to me. I was asked about the old, dead Circassian people, what they did and what they did not do.” Cezmi, interview by author, 7 February 2008, Ankara.

71 Shami, “Circassian Encounters: The Self as Other and the Production of the Homeland in the North Caucasus,” 643.

The current perspectives of diaspora nationalists on the Circassian Beauty still include the remnants of the approaches of the first and second generations, but for contemporary activists it is an image with two facets: on the one hand, it is still associated with mistake, assimilation and “shame.” On the other hand, the notions of mistake and shame are now being accompanied by a discourse of difference, which marks the encounter with “the Turks” and “the others.” As Cezmi, aged 65, a retired state official born in Central Anatolia and an activist since the early 1960s, states:

Given the physical appearance, the structure of the Avshar woman and given her neglect of herself, suddenly there comes a character who is very slender in beautiful clothes. Oh my god, she is like a fairy. It starts from there. Also, when Circassian girls’ attitudes, their behaviors in accordance with *xabze*,<sup>72</sup> [and] their dances were such an opposite of the Anatolian woman or even the Thracian woman, all Ottoman aristocracy ran after the Circassians.<sup>73</sup>

Hence, for the diaspora nationalists of the 2000s the image of the Circassian Beauty does not only pertain to Circassian women and their alleged beauty, but it also symbolizes the difference that pertains to the community itself. To that extent, they redefine the image as their difference from other ethnic groups in Turkey. As İzzet explained,

But despite all, the Circassian girl is different as a wife. Whoever that is, the understanding of moral responsibility of the Circassian girl is still different today; despite the degeneration produced by urbanization, it is still different. Especially when we look at the societies in which we are living... [...] The general characteristics of the Circassian girl, her sense of responsibility in the family, her support of her husband, her ability in forming a family... With these qualities, she is not similar to any of the [other] ethnic groups; there are 25-26 ethnic groups in Turkey, she is different.<sup>74</sup>

The difference of the Circassian woman that is employed by diaspora nationalists in order to explain the image of the Circassian Beauty pertains to the difference of the ethnic group: it is a myth that highlights the

72 *Xabze* here means tradition. *Xabze* is a concept that refers to the traditional and unwritten codes of behavior for Circassians.

73 Cezmi, interview by author.

74 İzzet, interview by author, 10 February 2008, Ankara.

characteristics of Circassian social life; it is the essence that makes them different from other ethnic groups in Turkey.

Hence, a Circassian identity that is accompanied by such a positive image is claimed to be an identity that one can easily announce to the general public. As Meral exemplifies in reference to her encounter with a sociologist,

In a meeting of civil society organizations, we were chatting with [a sociologist in Turkey]. She told me that people do not avoid calling themselves Circassian, because for a girl saying that she is Circassian means that she is beautiful, she has a thin waist and what differentiates its meaning is the meaning embedded in it. She said that for a man, it means that he is brave and handsome, so Circassians used to say it.<sup>75</sup>

As the image of the Circassian Beauty becomes associated with difference from other ethnic groups in Turkey, its historical associations are reversed and challenged. As Köksal exemplifies:

The Circassian girl is found in these novels as a symbol of pride, nobility, beauty and elegance. There has never been a negative image in the novels, the literary products. There is not a bit of that; there is nothing that symbolizes immorality, disgust, unchastity. This is why it is a basic theme in the songs, the folk songs, and this is a privilege.<sup>76</sup>

In some instances of reversal, the exotic and available Circassian Beauty of the Orientalist literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth century has turned into an asexual image for the diaspora nationalists. For instance, Zekeriya, aged 88, who is among the founders of the first Circassian associations in Turkey, as a Circassian elder unexpectedly mentions the lack of sexuality in the image: "As a necessity of tradition, most of the Circassian women are educated in a way that leads to a high level of maturity. Their clothes are beautiful, but they do not provoke sex."<sup>77</sup>

Since the 1990s, the Circassian Beauty has not only symbolized the difference of the community, but it also has transformed into a figure that allows diaspora activists to identify and reclaim the roles of Circassians in the Ottoman Empire and the republic. Over the past two decades, Circassian activists have defined themselves as a constitutive

75 Meral, interview by author, 7 June 2007, İstanbul.

76 Köksal, interview by author, 28 August 2007, İstanbul.

77 Zekeriya, interview by author, 28 February 2007, İstanbul.

element (*kurucu unsur*) as far as the Republic of Turkey is concerned. Such an argument not only refers to the contemporary existence of Circassians in state institutions, but also includes historical claims—such as an emphasis on their significant roles in the Ottoman Empire, in the modernization process throughout the nineteenth century, the War of Independence, and the foundation of the Turkish nation-state. According to Yasemin, Circassian women were exactly what the founding fathers of the Turkish nation-state and the early modernizers of the Ottoman Empire constructed as “the modern woman”:

It is very visible; even today when you walk on the street and bring a thousand people, you will still notice that Circassian girl, at least physically. Still you will notice her kindness. Still we are not dead in the fullest sense. [*Daha tam anlamıyla ölmedik.*] [...] Atatürk, in order to improve this society, organized republican balls. Women wore evening dresses. [*Talking about a photograph taken in these balls:*] A woman was uncovered, she put a rose here and opened her two legs like this; [*opening her legs*] she sat just like this. Well, my sister, you ought to know how to sit, too; the work is not finished with the clothes [*Kardeşim oturmasını da bileceksin, giyinmekle bitmiyor iş.*]<sup>78</sup>

Furthermore, through the image of the Circassian Beauty, diaspora nationalists situate their nation as a constitutive element in Ottoman history, turning this ethnic group into an historical actor. Taner, for instance, speculates on the implications of such an existence:

But the Circassian domination in the Ottoman dynasty has been a source of pride for us. [...] In the historical process, that is obvious. When we look at the contemporary reflections of history, it is obvious. It is a dominant theme in the books. Well, then it is being said: “You, Circassians [*ulan siz Çerkesler yok musunuz*], you were like that in the palace, you are in the *MİT* (National Intelligence Organization), you are in the armed forces.” It is a feeling that ranges between assault and envy; this is what the other side feels. That makes me a little proud. Though it makes me proud, when you say Circassian, if somebody says “Circassian girls are very beautiful,” then sorry but [...] [*he swears*]. I say whether there is nothing else about Circassianhood that remains in his mind. Then I get angry.<sup>79</sup>

78 Yasemin, interview by author, 16 August 2007, İstanbul.

79 Taner, interview by author, 15 August 2007, İstanbul.

For Circassian nationalists, appropriating agency in the Ottoman and republican eras and the modernization process at large is a strategic move which enables them to claim significance *vis-à-vis* the autochthonous people of Turkey, to reject discrimination, and to demand inclusion and equal rights as citizens of Turkey. From such a perspective, Turkish national history becomes not only a ground to be rejected or challenged, but also one that is desired and in which Circassians in Turkey would like to participate. Thus, diaspora nationalism strategically searches for paths of inclusion in the history of the host state in order to overcome “the guest position.”<sup>80</sup>

Although many contemporary diaspora nationalists still underline the significance of intra-group marriage as a national strategy to overcome and slow down assimilation (like the second-generation diaspora nationalists), there are also alternative perspectives that regard marriage as a diasporic strategy which may act as paths of inclusion in the host and other communities. Köksal, based on real examples in Turkey and in Europe, sees inter-group marriage as creating hinterlands that empower Circassians:

I think that marrying a random stranger produces degeneration in our culture, in our people who are already in small numbers. But I also encourage the marriage of a Circassian with a foreigner when that is necessary. Because these marriages give people a lot. Is it bad that George Hewitt’s wife in England is Abkhazian?<sup>81</sup> It gives us something in England, it gives us an opening, it gives us a hinterland. Is it bad that Bülent Arınç’s wife is Circassian? Is it bad that Cemil Çiçek’s wife is Circassian?<sup>82</sup> It enables us to move into every sphere.<sup>83</sup>

80 The “guest position” of the Circassians in Turkey to which diaspora activists refer in several of the interviews has two levels. One level concerns the self-identification of the Circassians. For instance, Esat narrated “the guest position” through his father’s self-identification: “And a continuous feeling of being the guest. Well, my father grew up in Turkey naturally, but till he died he said that he was a Caucasian immigrant when people asked from where he was.” Esat, interview by author, 10 August 2007, İstanbul. However, the guest position is not only internal, but also further highlighted when Turkish nationalism uses slogans such as “Either Love or Leave.” Nezi̇h remembers these instances of exclusion: “In terms of the Caucasus, they still tell Circassians to leave Turkey if they do not like it [Turkey]. [This implies that] You are not a man of this land. Well, Circassians still have not been the real people of here.” Nezi̇h, interview by author.

81 George Hewitt is professor of Caucasian languages at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. With his works on Abkhazia and Abkhazian culture, he is considered a part of the Abkhazian struggle *vis-à-vis* Georgia. He is one of the most respected scholars as far as the Circassian and Abkhazian diasporas are concerned. Köksal here highlights that Hewitt is married to an Abkhazian woman he met in Tbilisi.

82 Bülent Arınç and Cemil Çiçek are contemporary politicians who have worked as ministers in the governments of the Justice and Development Party (AKP).

83 Köksal, interview by author.

In short, beginning in the 1990s, diaspora nationalists have added new meanings to the image of the Circassian Beauty: it is not only a national mistake or a mechanism of assimilation, but also connotes their difference from other ethnic groups in Turkey. The claim of difference is critical for activists in order to posit their demands from the state as a policy-making mechanism and to ask for multi-cultural policies in broadcasting, language education, and cultural rejuvenation. Furthermore, the Circassian Beauty has been an image through which the roles of the Circassians in the Ottoman and Republican eras can be traced and claimed. Starting in the 1990s, these claims on Ottoman and Republican history have been significant for the activists, since they have problematized their invisibility as Circassians in Turkey: “it is a weird thing to live as if no Circassians live in the Republic of Turkey.”<sup>84</sup> As activists of the 2000s seek ways to overcome this invisibility, they simultaneously seek ways to overcome “the guest position” attributed to them. Hence, the claims that Circassians are part of Ottoman and Republican history, maintained through the image of the Circassian Beauty as well as other elements, are indeed part of the attempt to overcome the “silence of the guest.”

### Conclusion

I argue that the image of the Circassian Beauty is a contested historical image that has played a crucial role for the diaspora to locate itself *vis-à-vis* the host community, other nationalisms, and other geographies (such as Europe). For the Circassian diaspora nationalists in Turkey, it has worked as a dynamic concept whose meanings and implications have shifted in line with diasporic identity, political developments in Turkey, and the world at large.

In the final years of the Ottoman Empire, when the Circassian Beauty was associated with the ruling elite of the waning regime and criticized as degenerate; Circassian nationalists considered it a source of national humiliation. In the 1970s, the image became a symbol of assimilation and inter-group marriages. Hence, it became an item on the agenda of the second-generation nationalists, as a national problem to be solved: for them, the image was closely related to the assimilating and Turkifying Turkish state, and the lack of the national consciousness that they aimed to awake. Starting in the 1990s and intensifying in the 2000s, the image of the Circassian Beauty has gained new meanings; although its relations with slavery, the Imperial Harem and forced marriages are

84 Neval, interview by author, 6 February 2008, Ankara.

still emphasized, it has now become a mark of difference through which Circassians claim a place in Ottoman and Turkish history and base their demands for inclusion.

Recalling the two different levels of gender analysis lacking in diaspora studies identified by Anthias,<sup>85</sup> one can argue that the Circassian Beauty is an image through which men and women of the Circassian diaspora in Turkey are inserted into the social relations of the host community, while also contributing to the dynamic constitution and transformation of diasporic identity. For the diaspora nationalists in Turkey, the Circassian Beauty has been a contested image through which the idea, identity and history of the diaspora can be claimed, reclaimed and constructed. Furthermore, it has been constitutive of the relationships of Circassian diaspora nationalism in Turkey with the host state, the host society, and other nationalisms. As a repertoire of positions of power and resistance, domination and dependence constructs the colonial subject (both the colonizer and the colonized),<sup>86</sup> the image of the Circassian Beauty, for the Circassians in Turkey has been part of such a repertoire that constructs the diasporic subject.

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85 Anthias, "Evaluating "Diaspora": Beyond Ethnicity?," 572.

86 Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse," in *Twentieth Century Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Ken M. Newton (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 296.

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