

# Circassian Diaspora in Turkey: Stereotypes, Prejudices and Ethnic Relations

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‘Our grand-grand parents did not untie their bales for the first fifty years with the expectation of return to the homeland sooner or later; I, myself, haven’t yet untied the bale in my soul.’

(A 30-year-old Abzakh male from Eskisehir, interview, 2001).

## **Introduction**

In the summer of 1998, Prince Ali of Jordan, who was raised by a Circassian family, organised a trip with a special team composed of ten security guards of the Jordanian King. They were all dressed in ‘authentic’ Circassian warrior costumes and accompanied by horses having a special meaning in Circassian culture. These horse riders went all the way along from Amman to North Caucasia through Syria and Turkey. They received a very warm welcome in those Circassian villages and towns they visited in both Syria and Turkey. Circassians in Turkey were in fact shocked at the sight of all those authentically dressed Caucasian men with their horses, who resembled the mythical figures behind the Caucasian mountains. Every village organised festivals to welcome their kins. This was an opportunity for many Circassians, or Adygei as they name themselves,<sup>1</sup> in Turkey to realise that there were also other Circassians who have shared a similar destiny in long distances. Those imagined distant kins have suddenly become real. This incidence is just one of many indications displaying the recent Circassian ethnic resurgence in Turkey. Circassian associations and some Turkish TV channels (CNN Turk and NTV) recently exposed the video-film of this journey with the soundtrack of Loreena McKennitt, who also believes to be Circassian descent, to a wider audience. This journey has made the Circassians in Turkey publicly visible.

This article primarily aims to explore the basic dynamics of the current ethnic resurgence within Circassian diaspora in Turkey. In doing so, the author shall also address some of the other key issues related to the Circassian diaspora such as the ways in which stereotypes, prejudices, inter- and intra-ethnic relations, and cultural reification

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<sup>1</sup> The notion of Circassian (or Cherkess in Turkish) literally refers to a set of various Adygei speaking tribes (Shapsugh, Abzakh, Ubikh, Kabardian, etc.) originating from North Caucasia. There are also some other co-ethnic tribes who may be included within the definition of ‘Circassian’, i.e., Abkhaz, Chechen, Ingush, Karachai, Balkar and Dagistanis. These tribes differ from Adygei speaking groups with regard to the separate languages they speak. The term ‘Circassian’ is actually a meta-identification made by outsiders to define those groups living in North Caucasus.

are being produced and reproduced in diaspora context. Before scrutinising these issues, a literature survey both on the Circassian diaspora in Turkey, in particular, and diaspora, in general, shall be made in order to situate the Circassian diaspora experience *vis-à-vis* the processes of globalisation.

### **Ethnic Resurgence in Circassian Diaspora**

It is doubtless that ethnic resurgence within Circassian diaspora has already started in the last two decades. There is also a large organisational network in Turkey by which Circassians could raise a popular consciousness within and outside their own community for the construction and articulation of Circassian identity; and there is a strong intellectual movement that concentrates on the peculiarities of Circassian history and culture. Bearing in mind that Circassians have been considered by the majority of Turks so far as having kinship ties with their Turkish ancestors, efforts by Circassian elite to express their distinction from Turkish ‘racial’ stock becomes increasingly important. Recently, there is a growing interest among Circassians about exploring their *pasts, traditions, cultures, languages* and *the processes of migration, or of exile*. I intentionally use these terms in their plural forms because there are various Circassian tribes that had to flee to Anatolia in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These separate tribes, as I will shortly elaborate, have distinct experiences and thus cultural identities.

Circassian ethnic resurgence in Turkey has recently become apparent especially in urban space. The rise of the number of ethnic associations (*derneks*) in urban space is an indicator of this tendency. Ethnic associations provide migrants with a safe haven in capitalist urban life. All associations in every city are alike. Each has similar aims such as organising language courses, culture nights, folk dances and trips to the homeland. Ethnic associations play an instrumental role in the processes of construction and articulation of Circassian diasporic identity. The first association, *Dost Eli Yardimlaşma Derneği*, was established in 1946 with the collaboration of Azeri Turks. This was the time when the Caucasian aspect was being underlined by Circassian elite. During the Cold War period, these associations gained an anti-Sovietic character. Nevertheless, having had a culturalist discourse, *Kuzey Kafkasya Kültür Derneği* (Northern Caucasia Culture Association), which was established in Ankara (1964), distinguished Circassian identity from Turkish ethnic legacy. This association contributed to the reification of Circassian culture in diaspora by giving emphasis on the folklorisation of culture.

*Kafkas Derneği* (*Kaf-Der*, Caucasian Association), that was established in 1993 as an umbrella organisation, constitute the largest Circassian associational network in Turkey. *Kaf-Der* has 34 branches in many cities throughout the country and its headquarter is located in Ankara. *Kaf-Der* goes beyond traditional culturalist discourse by committing itself to different projects such as political representation of Circassian diaspora in Turkey and their adaptation to urban life. *Kaf-Der* has a liberal-nationalist discourse and yields a special emphasis onto Circassian identity. There are two other major associations founded in 1995, *Kafkas Vakfı* (Caucasian Foundation) and *Birleşik Kafkasya Derneği* (United Caucasian Association). These two associations are Islamic oriented and pursue the idea of establishing an Islamic confederation in Northern Caucasus. They are also recently engaged in the Chechen independence movement against Russian authorites. It should also be noted that these organisations are recently more passive as the official policy of Turkey towards the Chechen issue has partly shifted at the expense of the Chechen side. Thus, the activities of these associations are strictly under interrogation by Turkish official bodies. Besides, there are approximately eighty different associations throughout the country.<sup>2</sup>

Circassian ethnic resurgence has recently also attracted an academic interest both in Turkey and abroad (Shami, 1998; 1999; 1995; Ertem, 2000; and Toumarkine, 2001).<sup>3</sup> Seteney Shami is one of the prominent figures in this sense. Her works fit very well into contemporary diaspora studies; and she studies the Circassians in Turkey in comparison to those in the homeland, Jordan and Israel. On the other hand, Gönül Ertem is concerned with the identity formation processes among the Circassian community in Eskisehir (a town in Central Anatolia). On the other hand, Alexandre Toumarkine is engaged in the Circassian ethnic associations in Turkey. There are also some other works undertaken by Circassian intellectuals, which are either on Circassian culture, forced migration from the homeland, roots of the Circassian language, or on the memoirs from Caucasia (Gökçe 1979; Hızal 1961; Aydemir 1991; Berkok 1958; Butbay 1990). There are also some minor academic works touching upon the socio-economic and socio-cultural structure of Circassian villages (Alankuş 1999; Taymaz 1999; Eser, 1999).

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed explanation concerning Circassian ethnic associations see, Toumarkine (2001) and Taymaz (2001).

<sup>3</sup> For further inquiry about the Circassian diaspora see, Alankuş (1999); Aslan (1990); Aydemir (1981; and 1988); Ersoy and Kamacı (1993); Ertem (2000); Habiçoglu (1993); Shami (1995); Şen (1994; and 1997); Taymaz (2000); and Toledano (1994; and 1998).

As there are not many works specialised in diasporic identity formation and articulation processes of Circassians both in urban and rural spaces in Turkey, my work in progress aims to scrutinise the construction and articulation processes of diasporic cultural identities developed by Turkish-Circassians in both urban and rural spaces. Using a Barthian perspective<sup>4</sup>, my main starting point is that ethnic identities are socially constructed through the processes of recognition, unrecognition and/or misrecognition of a certain group by surrounding groups (Taylor, 1994). Thus, a social group is usually inclined to form and articulate its ethnic identity as a response to stereotypes and general perceptions produced by ‘Others’. Herewith, there are certain dynamics playing important roles in the identity formation processes: Whether the group in question has a closed social system; whether the group has a strong communication with outside world; whether surrounding groups have developed stereotypes about them; if the group is in minority compared to other groups; the level of communication between co-ethnic groups habitating in separate geographies in the same country; and last but not least, the level of communication between diaspora and homeland. In what follows, I shall discuss two major interrelated conceptual tools: diasporic consciousness and globalisation.

### **Diaspora Revisited**

Recently, the notion of diaspora has been extensively used by a wide range of scholars aiming to contribute to the definition of transnational migrants. The new trend of diaspora studies defines diasporas as exemplary communities of transnational moment. The term ‘diaspora’ is derived from the Greek verb *sperio* (to sow, to scatter) and the preposition *dia* (through, apart). For Greeks, the term referred to migration and colonisation, whereas for Jews, Africans, Palestinians and Armenians the same term acquired more unfortunate, brutal and traumatic dispersion through scattering (Cohen, 1997: ix). Yet, the contemporary notion of diaspora is not limited only to Jewish, Greek, Palestinian and Armenian dispersive experiences; rather it describes a larger domain that includes words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest worker, exile community and ethnic community (Tölölian, 1991: 5). The primary difference between the old and

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<sup>4</sup> The common anthropological reasoning claims that there are aggregates of people who essentially share a common culture, and interconnected differences that set them apart from all others. According to the same reasoning, ‘since culture is nothing but a way to describe human behaviour, it would follow that there are discrete groups of people, i.e., ethnic groups to correspond to each culture (Barth, 1969: 9)’. Friedrik Barth challenges this idea and claims that cultural variation is continuous; and that ethnicity is social organisation of cultural differences. His path-breaking edited volume on ethnic relations, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, which was published in 1969, still has a great impact in the academia.

modern form of diasporas lies in their changing will to go back to the ‘Holy Land’, or homeland. In this sense, the old diasporas resemble the story of *Ulysses* while the new ones have been like that of *Abraham*.<sup>5</sup> After the Trojan War, Ulysses encountered many problems on the way back to Ithaca. Although he had many obstacles during his journey, he was determined to go back home. Conversely, the experience of modern labour diasporas resembles Abraham’s biblical journey. In the first part of the Bible, it is written that Abraham, upon the request of God, had to journey with his people to find a new home in the unknown and he never went back to the place he left behind.<sup>6</sup>

The classification of Robin Cohen is quite influential in mapping out the differences between modern and old diasporas. His historical explanation of diaspora goes back to the Biblical Jewish diaspora, which was based on a forced dispersion experience. He has a clear picture of old and new diasporas, which he separates on the basis of the genesis of global economy. Old diasporas are twofold: a) forced diasporas such as Jewish and Armenian, b) colonising diasporas such as Greek and British. On the other hand, modern diasporas are threefold: a) trading diasporas like Jewish and Lebanese; b) business diasporas such as British; and c) labour diasporas such as Irish, Indian, Chinese, Sikh and Turkish. The main driving force behind the construction of modern labour diasporas is global economic needs, which bring about an extensive immigration from periphery to global and regional centres. According to this classification, the Circassian diaspora fits into the traditional forced diaspora as in Jewish and Armenian experiences.

William Safran, in his study of “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homelands and Return”, draws up the general framework of an ideal type of diaspora. He defines diaspora as ‘expatriate minority communities’

- (1) that are dispersed from an original centre to at least two peripheral places;
- (2) that maintain a memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland;
- (3) that believe they are not fully accepted by their host country;
- (4) that see the ancestral home as a place of eventual return, when the time is right;
- (5) that are committed to the maintenance and restoration of this homeland; and
- (6) of which the group’s consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by this continuing relationship with the homeland (Safran, 1991: 83-84).

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<sup>5</sup> The analogy of Ulysses and Abraham belongs to Emmanuel Levinas (1986: 348; 1987: 91). In explaining the attempt of conventional philosophy to seek the knowledge about the ‘Other’, Levinas stated that the history of philosophy has been like the story of Ulysses who ‘through all his wanderings only returns to his native island’ (1986: 348). He preferred the story of Abraham to that of Ulysses. Conventional philosophy has always sought to return to familiar ground of ‘being’, ‘truth’ and ‘the same’; Levinas’ endeavour was to take it elsewhere. He proposed that philosophy should accept that we do not, can not and should not know the Other, rather than seeking knowledge of it.

<sup>6</sup> For further information on the notion of diaspora see Kaya (2000; and 2001).

Safran's ideal type of 'centred' diaspora, oriented by continuous cultural connections to a source and by a teleology of 'return', is very applicable to Circassian diaspora. (1) Circassian diaspora has been dispersed through more than one location outside the homeland since the mid-nineteenth century (Balkans, Anatolia, Syria, Jordan, Israel, Germany, the USA, Holland and even Egypt in the earlier times). (2) Circassian subjects in Turkey maintain a memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland (an increasing number of Circassian based publishing houses in Turkey have published several books on Circassian mythology, history of migration, the role of Circassians during the Turkish independence war, and reception of Circassians by the 'host' society in Turkey). (3) It could be argued that Circassians in Turkey have developed a common belief that they are not very well received by the majority society (increasing consciousness of returning back to the homeland partly derives from such a perception). (4) Circassians have always considered going back to their homeland. The descendants of the first generation express that their ascendants did always articulate their will to return to the homeland. The same discourse is still alive, and furthermore there are Circassians who have already returned home. (5) Circassians are conscious of investing in their homeland (International Circassian Association, which is composed of diaspora and homeland community members, summons each year to develop plans for Northern Caucasia). (6) When Circassians in Turkey are asked to identify where home is for them, they usually point out Caucasia (annual trips back home; listening to Circassian radio broadcasting from Caucasia; sending youngsters to Caucasian universities etc.).

The concept of diaspora should be regarded as an analytical tool that can be used to study the forced migrant communities in the country of 'exile'. However it has to be explicitly stressed that, in order to be an analytical tool the concept has to be seen as an ideal type in the Weberian sense of the term. Bearing in mind the remarks made by both R. Cohen and W. Safran concerning the classical diasporas established in the form of social organisation, the adoption of such a diaspora perspective makes it possible to treat the concept of diaspora as an ideal type. However, it has to be noted that an ideal type is developed for analytical purposes only. The only value of an ideal type lies in its usefulness in describing and explaining reality in terms of clearly understandable concepts. Yet, an ideal type is an abstraction of features from empirical reality and 'ideal' in the sense that it never exists in a 'pure' form in reality. Thus, the deployment of the term 'Circassian diaspora' throughout this text should be interpreted as an attempt to explain the ways in which Circassians identify themselves in exile.

## **Globalisation**

The second key term that this article will incorporate is globalisation, which appears here as an individual consciousness of the global situation (Robertson, 1992). The construction of contemporary diasporic consciousness does not merely depend upon the rigid incorporation regimes of the countries of settlement; it also owes a lot to the processes of globalisation. The wide networks of communication and transportation between Turkish-Circassians and Caucasia, for instance, play a crucial role in the formation and maintenance of a diasporic identity among the Circassian population in Turkey. The modern circuitry connects diasporic subjects both to homeland and to the rest of the world. This is why it becomes much easier for them to live on ‘both banks of the river’ at the same time, both in diaspora and homeland.

This research also suggests that modern diasporic communities exemplify a growing stream of what Brecher *et al.* (1993) call ‘*globalisation from below*’. The constitutive entanglement implicit in ‘*globalisation from below*’ has become a characteristic of modern diaspora networks. The expansion of economic, cultural and political networks between Turkish-Circassians and Caucasia, for instance, points to this growing stream.

The changing nature of space and time in the age of globalism facilitates the emergence of diasporic consciousness. Globalisation emerging as the rise of communications, transportation, migration, de-monopolisation of national legal systems, new international division of labour, and global culture, empowers minorities against the hegemony of nation-state, and breaks up conventional power relations between majority and minority. The modern “communicative circuitry has enabled dispersed populations to converse, interact and even symbolise significant elements of their social and cultural lives” (Gilroy, 1994: 211). For instance, scheduled flights from Istanbul and Trabzon to Krasnodar (Adygei Autonomous Republic), and scheduled ferryboats to Soçi and Sohum increase the interconnectedness between diaspora and homeland. Circassian radio programmes are easily received in Turkey by the Circassian diaspora. The recruitment of Caucasian folk dance trainers brought from the North Caucasus is also very common throughout the diaspora. On the other hand, sending students across the water for the purposes of language learning and university education has become another common practice among the Turkish-Circassians. The official publication of the International Circassian Association is also widely spread out in Turkey by the Circassian ethnic associations. These instruments connecting the diaspora

with the homeland contribute to the formation of a diasporic Circassian identity as well as to the construction of a '*globalisation from below*' movement.

These changes in the global networks have played an important role in the making of diaspora consciousness. Diaspora consciousness seems to be supplementing a minority strategy by means of these global transformations. As Clifford (1994: 310-311) rightfully states, transnational connections with the homeland, and/or other members of diaspora in various geographies break the binary relation of minority communities with majority societies as well as giving added weight to claims against an oppressive national hegemony.<sup>7</sup> Through the agency of these connections, diasporic subjects have the chance to create a home away from the homeland, a home which is surrounded by rhythms, sounds, figures and images of the homeland provided by radio, video cassettes, tapes, and by the local networks they developed in time. Especially the Circassian villages in Turkey provide such a cultural and spatial circuitry: architectural structure of the villages, disconnected houses with huge gardens, public forums in villages, very well preserved ecological structure, languages spoken, distinct folk dances performed, public courts established to sort out communal disputes, celebrated institution of hospitality, *Zekes* nights<sup>8</sup>, and Circassian cuisine.

The contemporary diaspora consciousness requires the idea of dwelling *here* in the country of residence and a connection *there* in the homeland. The diasporas in the current age are no longer immigrant communities; they are rather sojourners. Diasporic discourses, as Clifford (1994: 311) has stated, reflect the sense of being part of an ongoing transnational network that includes the homeland, not as something left behind, but as a place of attachment in a 'contrapuntal modernity'. Clifford borrows the term 'contrapuntal' from Edward Said who has used the term to characterise one of the positive aspects of conditions of exile:

...For an exile, habits of life, expression or activity in the new environment inevitably occurs against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus, both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally (Quoted in Clifford, *ibid.*: 329)

The diasporic subject constructs his/her cultural identity in a dialogue between the past and the future, 'there' and 'here', local and global, and heritage and politics. The particular experiences of diaspora bring back the memories of the counterparts of those

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<sup>7</sup> For further information on transnational connections see Hannerz (1996).

<sup>8</sup> *Zekes* literally means gatherings, which usually last until the early morning hours with games, music, dances and courtship (Ertem, 2000: 328-335).

experiences that were once undertaken in the homeland. Memorising those experiences, on the one hand, reinforces the habits of life; on the other, it reminds the diasporic subject of the condition of dispersal or diaspora. There are some social practices that remind the Circassian diaspora of the condition of diaspora: the preference for those lands that are identical to the lands left behind in the homeland; transmission of the stories of migration from one generation to the other; construction of a homogenous majority as the constitutive ‘other’ (Turks); and celebration of ‘authentic’ Circassian folklore (recently dance instructors are being recruited from Caucasia to Turkey).

Contemporary diaspora discourses are developed on two paramount dimensions: *universalism* and *particularism*. The universalist axis refers us to the model of diasporic transnationalism, in the form of ‘third space’ (Bhabha, 1990), or ‘process of heterogenesis’ (Guattari, 1989), or ‘third culture’ (Featherstone, 1990). The universalist dimension, which contains the use of all aspects of globalism and transnationalism, refers to diasporic consciousness constituting a post-national identity. Members of post-national diasporic communities can escape the power of nation-state to reinforce their sense of collective identity. In this new space it is possible to evade the politics of polarity and emerge as ‘the others of our selves’ (Bhabha, 1988: 22). This is the cultural space where the quest for knowing and othering the ‘Other’ becomes irrelevant, and cultures merge together in a way that leads to the construction of syncretic cultural forms.

On the other hand, the particularist axis presents the model of cultural essentialism, or diasporic nationalism. The process of home-seeking, as Clifford offers, might result with the existence of a kind of diaspora nationalism, which is, in itself, critical to the majority nationalism, and an anti-nationalist nationalism (Clifford, 1994: 307). The nature of diaspora nationalism is cultural, which is based on alienation, and celebration of the past and authenticity. The resurgence of cultural diasporic nationalism, in the first place, derives from political, social, economic and cultural constraints and restrictions of the ‘host’ country. For migrants as well as for anybody else, fear of the present leads to mystification of the past (Berger, 1972: 11) in a way that constructs ‘imaginary homelands’ as Salman Rushdie (1991: 9) has pointed out in his work *Imaginary Homelands*:

It is my present that is foreign, and... the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time... [Thus,], we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands.

As Clifford rightly states, those migrant and/or minority groups who are alienated by the system, and swept up in a destiny dominated by the capitalist West, no longer invent local futures. What is different about them remains tied to traditional pasts (Clifford, 1988: 5). Remaking the past, recovering the past, or developing a culturalist discourse serves at least a dual purpose for diasporic communities. Firstly, it is a way of coming to terms with the present without being seen to criticise the existing status quo. The ‘glorious’ past is, here, handled by diasporic subject as a strategic tool absorbing the destructiveness of the present, which is defined with exclusion, structural outsiderism, poverty, and institutional discrimination. Secondly, it also helps to recuperate a sense of the self not dependent on criteria handed down by others - the past is what the diasporic subjects can claim as their own (Ganguly, 1992: 40).

The concept of diaspora is used within several academic traditions. Contemplating the modern diasporic situations as the unsurprising feature of globalisation (particularly involving the advance of telecommunications and the ease of travel), Vertovec (1997, 1996b) states that there are three different approaches to the notion of modern diaspora, put forward by contemporary scholars. In sum, the first standpoint regards diaspora as a *social organisation* (Boyarin and Boyarin, 1993; Safran, 1991, Van Hear 1998; Cohen, 1997; Wahlbeck 1999). Diaspora as a social form refers to the transnational communities whose social, economic and political networks cross the borders of nation-states. The second approach conceives diaspora as a *type of consciousness*, which emerges by means of transnational networks (Clifford, 1994, 1992; Hall, 1994, 1991; Bhabha, 1990; Gilroy, 1993, 1987; Vertovec, 1997, 1996b). This approach departs from W. E. B. Du Bois’ notion of ‘double consciousness’, and refers to individuals’ awareness of being simultaneously ‘home away from home’ or ‘here and there’. And the last but not the least, is the understanding, which regards diaspora as a *mode of cultural construction and expression* (Gilroy, 1987, 1993, 1994; Hall, 1994). This approach emphasises the flow of constructed styles and identities among diasporic people. A fourth approach may be added up to Vertovec’s classification, i.e., an approach emphasizing the political dimension of contemporary diasporas (Scheffer 1986, 1995). This approach particularly addresses the importance of political relations between diaspora, homeland and country of settlement.

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### **Circassian Population in Turkey**

Being subject to forced migration from the north Caucasus; having been settled in separate geographies; being both excluded and included in the process of nation-state building by the political and military elite of the 1920s<sup>9</sup> (there were both republican and royalist Circassians); being subject to the assimilationist Turkish Republican policies after 1920s; banning the use of mother tongue and of the Circassian names by the Turkish Republic; and many other exclusionist policies have eventually shaped the ways in which Circassians developed their identities. To survive in Anatolia, former generations preferred to assimilate to the mainstream political culture in Turkey, which was dominated by homogeneity, Sunni Islam and Turkishness. This choice has partly

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<sup>9</sup> During the foundation years of the Turkish Republic, there were both royalist and republican Circassian groups in Anatolia. The Royalists highly concentrated around the southern districts of Marmara region. The reason why Abkhaz groups in the region still have a concrete Abkhazian identity is partly due to their historically defined peculiarities, which set them apart from their kins living outside the region. Having a rather Royalist and religious identity in the past and composing a homogenous Abkhazian population in the region these groups do not identify themselves as 'Circassian'. Their primary identity is Abkhazian as opposed to the other Abkhaz groups that I encountered in Samsun, Amasya, Çorum and Kayseri.

led to the emergence of a general conflict between the Circassians and other non-Turks such as Kurds and Alevis (although Alevis in Turkey are mostly of Turkish origin in terms of their ethnicity, it is still publicly believed that they are mostly Kurdish). Furthermore, Circassians have been usually presented by the political elite and professional intellectuals as a part of Turkish heritage, or as some relative Turkish tribes. Thus, their state of being different has been hitherto denied. In what follows, some informative data shall be provided in order to expose the rationale behind the Circassian existence in Turkey since the beginning of their exile experience in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Although there are not official figures, it is said that there are approximately 2 – 2.5 million of Circassians in Turkey (some even give exaggerated numbers such as 5 to 7 million). As known, once the Russian expansion started in Northern Caucasus in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Circassians had to find a refuge to save themselves from the Russian atrocities. Being the gateway to the resources of Transcaucasia and springboard to the Middle East, Northern Caucasian lands greatly attracted the Russian state that was eager to establish a great Asiatic empire including the fertile settled heartland of old Turkistan in Central Asia. The peoples of the north Caucasus performed a desperate struggle against the Russians with insignificant external support. Pacification of the region occurred only after overwhelming force was used in a model effort following the humiliations of the Crimean War (1856), and after the capture of the leader of the greatly weakened *Murid* movement, Imam Shamil (1859).

The eventual result of the Russian success in the region was a series of refugee waves in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, by boats, carts and foot, from North Caucasia to the Ottoman Empire. The Circassians considered Istanbul, which was the centre of the Muslim world then, to be the safest place to ask for refuge. This is how thousands of Circassians began to flee to the Ottoman Empire. The refugees arrived in waves between 1860-64/65 and, again, following the Russian-Turkish war of 1877-78. The number of refugees is a matter of contention with figures ranging from 500,000 to 2 million (Berkok, 1958; Karpat, 1985, 1990).

The Ottoman government faced immediate problems in integrating her new subjects as well as the Crimean Tatars and Nogai who preceded them and the Muslims from the Balkans who followed. Nevertheless these newcomers constituted a principal human capital for a country that had been ravaged in successive wars, economically impoverished, and increasingly overwhelmed by the separatist movements in the

Balkans, the Middle East and the southeast Anatolia. The new human capital primarily served the Ottoman government in two ways: as a manpower source for the Ottoman army, and as a buffer against the separatist powers in the country. The Ottoman government accommodated the refugees in some very particular places where there had already been centrifugal forces in opposition to the centre such as the Kurdish, Balkan and Arab nationalists. Therefore, the Circassians were at first considered by the Ottoman political elite to be a kind of balancing instrument and a new stock of military potential for the future of the Empire. They were often used as security detachments and pioneers in remote and uncontrollable areas (Dündar, 2001: 130-134). As a reliable, countervailing force used to interdict and discipline Kurds, Turkmen, Druze, Bedouin and other nomads, they were an asset to the Empire from a demographic and military standpoint.

One of the main earlier destinations for the Circassian diaspora was Rumeli. The refugees joined the Crimean Tatars and Nogai who had previously been settled there. The region was economically prosperous and had strategic importance for the Ottomans. As Russia was overwhelmingly propagating Pan-Slavism in the region, security issues gained a vital importance for the Ottoman government. The Circassians were settled in Constance, Varna, Sofia, Pristina, Kosovo, Plevne and surrounding regions (Pinson, 1972). Yet, after the Russian-Turkish war of 1877-78 was lost, most of the Circassians remigrated from Rumeli to Anatolia (mostly to the southern Marmara region) and to the Middle East (mostly to the Golan Heights). Recently, some of the remnants of the Circassian diaspora in the Balkans (80 households in Kosovo) have been moved to the Adygei Autonomous Republic in the Russian Federation (Atalay, 2001). Nevertheless there are still some Circassians left in the ex-Yugoslavian territories.

Circassian migration to the Middle East gained acceleration when there was no land left in Anatolia and Rumeli for settlement. First Circassian settlement in the region dates back to 1871. These migrants were accommodated in Aleppo and the province of Damascus; subsequently, the newcomers were located around the Golan Heights and Amman. Nevertheless, many of the migrants asked the Ottoman government to be sent back either to western Anatolia or to Rumeli due to the inconvenient land and climate conditions. Although some of the migrants were sent back to places they wished for, the settlement of Circassians in the region was carried on. The numbers increased especially after the Russian-Turkish war of 1877-78, arriving in two major groups. One group

came by boat to Turkey's Black Sea ports before coming overland to Syria with a stop-over in Kayseri (Uzunayla). The other group was withdrawn from Rumeli due to the on-going war. Recently, there are approximately 60,000 Circassians in Jordan (mostly Shapsugh, Chechen, and Kabardian), 40,000 in Syria (mostly Abzehk, Kabardian and Abkhaz), and 3,000 in Israel (mostly Shapsugh and Akhaz). The Circassian population in Jordan enjoy essentially a privileged position having long been closely connected to the Crown, whereas Syrian-Circassians have had to cope with oppressive Arab nationalism and the Baath regime. Yet, the Circassians in Israel are also quite privileged in the sense that they could enjoy their culture as freely as possible, and also that Adygei language is the language of instruction after the sixth grade in primary school.

Circassians migrating to Turkey were predominantly settled in central Anatolia, composing a vertical belt between Samsun (middle Black Sea coasts in the north) and Reyhanli-Hatay (Syrian border in the south). There are also various pockets around southern Marmara and eastern Black Sea regions. The Circassian diaspora in Turkey is not homogenous, it is rather composed of various tribes (Abkhaz, Shapsugh, Kabardian, Ubikh, Abzehk, Chechen etc.) who speak different dialects and have diversified cultural identities. Although there is a strong ethnic bonding between these tribes *vis-a-vis* the majority society, which they stereotypically name Turkish, there are also strong inter-ethnic boundaries amongst themselves – a point to which I will come back shortly.

### **Cultural Reification in Circassian Diaspora**

In the summer of the year 2001, I conducted a field research with a Circassian-origin student of mine in the central Black Sea region, Samsun, Çorum, Amasya and Tokat and their surrounding villages. These districts are the most densely populated areas by Circassians. However, Circassian communities around Samsun, Çorum and Amasya habitate in long-distance spread-out villages and neighbourhoods. Following the first part of the research, I conducted the second part of the fieldwork with another Circassian origin student of mine in Kayseri, Uzun Yayla (Long Plateau), Kahramanmaraş and Hatay, each of which poses a very different picture compared to the former districts with regard to the density of population. For instance, the Circassians constitute the majority (mostly Kabardian) in Uzun Yayla with non-Circassian Turkish nomads, Yoriks, living in the surrounding villages. That is why, cultural and ethnic identities constructed and articulated by the Circassians in Kayseri differ from those formed and articulated in the other regions.

What is striking with the locations of settlements of Circassian diasporic groups is that they preferred to settle down in places, which then resembled those lands left behind in the homeland. Those who left their villages, for instance, by river in the homeland, found a new place by another river in diaspora; or those who used to live in the outskirts of a green mountain found a new home in a similar geography in diaspora. It is not only the selection of the place to settle down, which displays the commitment of the Circassians to construct a diasporic home, or space, away from the homeland, but also the way they reified their culture poses the same tendency.

According to the figures given by P.A. Andrews (1992) there are around 900 Circassian villages in Turkey. This estimated number should actually increase because he did not include some of villages in eastern and southeastern Anatolia. There are also great numbers in big cities such as Istanbul, Ankara and Samsun. During the fieldwork that I have recently conducted throughout the vertical belt between Samsun and Reyhanli-Hatay, and in Istanbul and western Black Sea regions (Adapazarı and Duzce), I have come across the fact that most of the Circassian villages are still alive, but there have been strong waves of migration throughout the last two decades. However, these villages are still very well preserved by permanent inhabitants and seasonal returnees.

What is striking with these villages is that the understanding of public space and private space is very different from that of majority Sunni Turkish villages. Unlike the Sunni Turkish villages, Circassians build up their houses in a certain distance to each other. There is usually no concern for secrecy among Circassians as there is no tradition of *kaç-göç* (the practice of women covering their faces in the presence of men). Circassian villages, in this sense, provide us with an illustrative example to refer to the fact that secrecy is actually a concern in places where there is no secrecy as such. Circassian villagers also possess a strong environmental consciousness. One could, for instance, easily figure out which villages belong to the Circassians in Anatolia: those that still have forests (e.g., Fakihahmet village in Corum – a Central Anatolian town).

Living as a minority, often in territories dotted by concentrations of Circassian villages had its positive results as well as negative for the maintenance of identity. Enough people migrated, so that a real sense of community could emerge in the pockets they eventually settled. Overall, North Caucasians exhibited tribal unity in their new diaspora settings and a popular commitment to maintain their traditional culture. The

maintenance of traditions such as *khabze*<sup>10</sup>, *haynape*<sup>11</sup>, *thamade*<sup>12</sup>, *Zekes*, *Kaşen*<sup>13</sup>, *Semerkho*<sup>14</sup>, *Istanbulako*<sup>15</sup>, folk dances, folk songs, cuisine and hospitality has a special significance in the process of constructing a symbolic home in diasporic space away from the homeland. These diasporic spaces provide the Circassians with a *symbolic wall* or *fortress* protecting them against misrepresentation, prejudices, exclusion and discrimination. Accordingly, the sense of being a member of a ‘different’ people with historical roots and destinies outside the time/space of the ‘host’ nation provides them with distinction and pride.

### **Stereotypes, Prejudices and Ethnic Relations**

The Circassian pride is, in general, overwhelmingly celebrated by Circassians *vis-à-vis* non-Circassian groups in Turkey. Turks are stereotypically called *Tlepagh* among the Circassians themselves. *Tlepagh* is a Circassian term, which means short, plump, fat, and dwarf. Turks are usually belittled and made fun of. The notion of Turk as it is used by Circassians is also very problematic. What is meant by ‘Turk’ is generally non-Circassian. The notion of ‘Turk’ is considered to be homogeneous, whereas it may, in fact, connote various ethnic groups such as Sunni Turks, Yoruks, Turkmens, Turkish-Alevi, sometimes even Kurds. The way the term ‘Turkish’ is constructed by the Circassians indicates that Circassians in Turkey have come across various exclusionary acts throughout history.<sup>16</sup>

There are also strongly manifested stereotypes developed by especially Sunni-Turks for Circassians. Relatively more democratic gender relations within Circassian

<sup>10</sup> *Khabze* is a Circassian word which refers to rule, tradition and/or custom.

<sup>11</sup> *Haynape* is a Circassian word which is used to refer to those unmannerly and disgraceful acts that are not ethically and religiously accepted by the community: not to stand up when someone comes into the room is *haynape*; or to interrupt an elder person speaking...

<sup>12</sup> *Thamade* is a Circassian term which refers to the elder men in community, who deserve special respect for their age, wisdom and experience.

<sup>13</sup> *Kaşen*, or *psetluk*, refers to a young man who expresses his interest in a young woman. A *Kaşen* relationship does not necessarily result in marriage; nor does it entail an intimate relationship in the form of a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship. It is rather a verbal and emotional practice, which intimates flirtation by giving male competitiveness the upper hand in its implementation. For further information about the term see, Ertem (2000).

<sup>14</sup> *Semerkho* refers to the gendered interactions, games, conversations and courtship in the form of joking or teasing. It is usually undertaken by unmarried men and women to expose one’s interest, attraction and desire towards the other through ritualised acts.

<sup>15</sup> ‘*Istanbulako*’ or ‘*psishxo yiciji*’ (crossing the Blacksea) has become a very popular form of music developed and vocalised by the people in exile. ‘*Istanbulako*’ refers to the act of crossing the Black Sea on the way to Istanbul, the mythical capital of the Islamic world from which the Circassians were expecting aid. This journey was vocalised with many melodies before and after the acte of jorney itself.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, when Sultan Abdulaziz decided to accommodate the Kabardians in Uzunayla (Kayseri), they encountered a strong resistance by the Turkmens who had previously settled there. The resistance resulted in many casualties among the Circassians. For further information see Habiçoglu (1993: 167-169).

population in rural space may prompt surrounding Sunni-Turks to develop certain stereotypes. These stereotypes mainly involve the common belief that Circassians commit sin and disgraceful acts among themselves. Another stereotype is the common belief that Circassians are thieves – a belief, which is more often referred to Abkhaz people. This stereotype has its roots in the beginning of the migration process, when Circassians had to break into the locals' properties due to the difficulties of adaptation to the new life in Anatolia.

There are also some stereotypes manufactured within diaspora. To illustrate this point, it is stereotypically believed by Circassians that 'Ubikhs are the ones who have the talent of good speaking and the reputation of gentleness' (most literate); 'Abzekhs beg the best' (religiously oriented); 'Shapsughs swear the worst' (most illiterate and mountainous people); 'Abkhaz people are religiously more tolerant'; and 'Kabardians are very much bound by their traditions' (most traditional and conservative people). The sources of these ethnic labels can be traced back to the life worlds of these tribes in Caucasus. These ethnic labels, as well as stereotypes and prejudices, derive from the ways in which cultural differences are socially constructed. The social organisation of cultural differences, which is shaped by ecological and demographic factors (Barth, 1969), corresponds to the construction of ethnic groups and boundaries.

Circassians in Turkey also display different characteristics regarding their relation to 'authentic' Circassian traditions, Islam and modernity. Circassian traditions are generally applied both in urban and rural space. *Haynape* (disgraceful), hospitality and respect are the three pillars of these traditions, and they are all carried out in diaspora context. Yet, their relation to Islam varies. In rural space, for instance, those villages, which are surrounded by Sunni Turkish villages, are more oriented towards religion. It is likely that Circassians habitating in these kinds of villages find it more reasonable to assimilate to the Sunni-Turkish way of living. This form of life requires them to practice Islam in public space as a survival strategy, and keep the constituents of Circassian culture in private space. Nevertheless, in some of the villages located in Carsamba, a district of Samsun (middle Black Sea region), this assimilation goes to the extent that performing Circassian folk dances is considered to be *haynape* (disgraceful) by Circassians themselves. In fact, almost all the Circassian tribes but Chechens embraced the Islamic religion almost three or four hundred years ago. Chechens adopted Islam almost one thousand years ago under the Iranian influence. That is why Chechens are renown as having deep-rooted Islamic sentiments. The difference of

religious orientation has lately led to the reinforcement of ethnic boundaries between Circassians and Chechens. Circassians, Adygei-speaking tribes, have become eager to express this religious difference as there is lately a lively discussion in Turkey concerning religious fundamentalism. Thus, it becomes rational for Adygei people to emphasise their distinction, which is not to have a fundamental Islamic orientation.

Nevertheless, there is a common denominator of Circassian tribes, that is their addiction to joy. Almost all the Circassians whom I interviewed stereotypically raised their excessive fondness towards enjoyment. Mostly, this common attitude is pointed out as the primary reason of the poverty of the Circassian diaspora in Turkey. Although this general remark made by diasporic subjects is phrased commonly without any material and objective reference, it has a certain value in itself. In fact, this statement calls our attention to the fact that Circassians have so far applied an anti-capitalist economic system. Unlike the Weberian thesis underlining the Protestant ethic as the main driving force behind the capitalist socio-economic system, Circassians have rather adopted another ethical model as their socio-economic system: *Potlatch system*.<sup>17</sup> While in the capitalist economic system, social wealth and welfare are based on work, investment, saving, and commodification of goods and services, the Potlatch system essentially rests on the idea of ‘feeding’, ‘consuming’ and hospitality. In the capitalist system, the source of power is money and material wealth, whereas in the Potlatch system it is the ‘gift’ which delivers legitimate power. What is taken in return of the gift is loyalty and power. A Circassian subject is expected to consume for his/her guests in accordance with his/her social status. This act of consuming for others is essentially patriarchal, and reproduces traditional power relations within Circassian communities.

All these intra- and inter-cultural differences as practiced by Circassians in Turkey contribute to the identification of individuals both as a fellow member of a tribe (such as Shapsugh, Abzakh, Ubikh, Kabardian, etc) and/or as a fellow member of Circassian diaspora. The social organisation of cultural differences refers to the construction of intra- and inter-ethnic boundaries. The dichotomisation of others as strangers, as members of another tribe and/or ethnic group, depicts a recognition of limitations on shared understandings, differences in criteria for judgment of value and performance (Barth, 1969: 15).

For many in the Circassian diaspora, the cultural baggage brought from home is an absolutely vital element in the negotiation of identity, but it comprises a renovated

set of practices and discourses, too. Reification of culture serves as a social strategy for diasporic individual. Representing pre-immigrant lifestyles as in their dressing styles and recollecting the hardships of the past as in their daily discourses, immigrants tend to justify their act of immigration as the right option. By reifying culture, maintaining pre-immigrant social networks (*hemşehri*, fellowship) and familial connections, those immigrants attempt to adopt themselves in diasporic context where they find themselves alone and without the traditional support systems they were brought up with.

Culture is a continuous process of change, whereas it could be transformed into a heritage by migrants. In other words, for diasporic communities cultural processes become transformed into cultural heritage, that could be reified in order to enculturate young generations and to construct a cultural fortress of their own in relation to that of the majority society. Remaking, or recovering, the past and the culture serves at least a dual purpose for diasporic communities. Firstly, it is a way of coping with the conditions of the present without being very critical about the *status quo*. Secondly, it also helps to recuperate a sense of self not dependent on criteria handed down by others - the past is what diasporic subjects can claim as their own (Ganguly, 1992: 40). The quest for authenticity, in fact, springs from diasporic subjects' rationality and politicisation, but not from their parochialism. This depicts that culture remains to be a 'dimension of phenomena'<sup>18</sup> even when it seems to be substantialised and reified by diasporic subjects.

### **Conclusion: A Community of Sentiments**

The journey of the Prince of Jordan as well as many other contemporary forms of representation initiated through the means of electronic capitalism contribute to the construction of a 'community of sentiments' amongst diasporic subjects who live across borders (Appadurai, 1997). Seeing these kinds of video-tapes and listening to Circassian folk songs, reading popular journals and/or magazines<sup>19</sup> preparing special issues about Circassians and their culture, and reading their own community journals or magazines<sup>20</sup>,

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<sup>17</sup> For *Potlatch* system see Marcel Mauss (1990).

<sup>18</sup> For further information about culture as a dimension of phenomena and as a substance in diaspora see Arjun Appadurai (1997: 13).

<sup>19</sup> *Tarih ve Toplum*, a monthly history journal, released a special issue in July 2000 with the title of *Kafkasya Dosyasi* (Caucasian File, Volume 34, No. 199); *Atlas*, a popular monthly geography magazine, released a special issue on the Jordan-Circassians in August 2001 with the title of *Çölün Çerkesleri* (Circassians of the Desert, No. 101).

<sup>20</sup> Circassians have hitherto published many journals in Turkey. The first journal known is *Guaze* (Guide) published in Istanbul in 1911. Recently, the journal, *Nart*, has become widely distributed in Turkey. It is published by *Kaf-Der* (Caucasian Association) in Ankara. On the other hand, there are also a few

almost each member of diaspora constructs a symbolic collectivity by which diasporic subjects experience an imaginary return to the homeland. These imagined communities or imaginary collectivities, which are formed by the modern means of communication, and which have become social practices (Appadurai, 1997) also resemble what Diane Crane calls ‘invisible colleges’ functioning as informal scientific institutions whereby individuals add more to their accumulation of knowledge.<sup>21</sup> Circassian associations as well as many other ethnic associations fit very well into the category of ‘invisible colleges’ where Circassians reproduce their cultural continuity in the urban space along with Circassian customs and traditions (*Adygekhabze*).

This work primarily suggests that the contemporary diasporic consciousness is built on two contradictory axes: *particularism* and *universalism*. The presence of this dichotomy derives from the unresolved historical dialogues that diasporic communities experience between continuity and disruption, essence and positionality, tradition and translation, homogeneity and difference, past and future, ‘here’ and ‘there’, ‘roots’ and ‘routes’, and local and global (cf., *interalia*, Clifford, Hall, Gilroy, Cohen and Vertovec). By the same token, it should also be stated that the particularist constituents of diaspora identities such as inheritance, tradition, religion and ethnicity are all deferred and altered in diaspora as spiritual, cultural and political metaphors. Hence, losing their essentialist nature, these particularist constituents are put into play by diasporic subject as key ingredients for a politics of identity. For instance, the idea of reification of culture among Circassians is, in fact, a counterculture of self-defence. Secondly, this article has claimed that diasporic spaces constructed by Circassians both in urban and rural places provide them with a *symbolic wall* or *fortress* protecting them against misrepresentation, prejudices, exclusion and discrimination. Accordingly, the sense of being a member of a ‘different’ people with historical roots and destinies outside the time/space of the ‘host’ nation provides them with distinction and pride.

The study of contemporary diaspora cultures may also provide us with an epistemological ground by which one could understand that culture is produced and reproduced in the processes of social interaction, and that it cannot be substantialised and essentialised. At this point it may also be beneficiary to state that the discourses of culture and ethnicity are lately being overused for essentialist, particularist and ethnocentrism purposes. Recently, culture is popularly considered to have a substance,

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publishing houses in Turkey concentrating on Circassian classics. *Nart Yayincilik*, located in Istanbul, is just one of them.

essence and a primordial character. Thus, the notion of culture, which was employed at the beginning of the twentieth century in order to tackle the ideology of racism and to promote the idea of relativity, has itself turned out to be a term legitimising racism and political exclusion. On the contrary, if culture is defined as having no substance and essence, and as a social construction produced in accordance with a respective time, space and context, then the belief that culture is a domain of struggle can be challenged. Disapora studies, hence, is exemplary in the sense that it considers cultures to be produced and reproduced along with the antithetical forces of home – diaspora, here – there, local – global, past – future, and particular – universal.

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<sup>21</sup> For a detailed explanation on ‘invisible colleges’ see, Crane (1972).

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