

# TODAY'S ZAMAN

## Turks with African ancestors want their existence to be felt

While preparing a barbecue in the crowded picnic area of İzmir's Eşrefpaşa district, they sing old Turkish pop songs and eat Turkey's indispensable picnic food: stuffed grape leaves cooked with olive oil.

As in any typical Turkish family, the men are preparing the "mangal" barbecue while talking about soccer matches or recent political developments. The heroic acts of their grandparents in the War of Independence also feature prominently in discussions. The old women chat with one another and wear headscarves, as do most older women in Turkey.



Who are these people? Mehmet, Ali, Ayşe, Rabia, Arzu, Emine, Hatice and Hüseyin, to name a few. Everything is typically Turkish except for one detail: They are black. Afro-Turks, as they prefer to be called, are the descendents of African citizens of the Ottoman Empire. They have come together under the African Solidarity and Cooperation Association (ASCA) to revitalize one of their oldest traditions -- a holiday celebrated by their grandparents: Dana Bayramı, or the Calf Festival.

According to Deniz Yüksek, a professor in Koç University's department of sociology, gave a speech on the culture of Afro-Turks during a conference held at Ege University. Dana Bayramı was celebrated from 1880 until the end of the 1920s. "Leaders of the Afro-Turk community, known as 'godya,' used to collect money in order to buy a cow. On the first Saturday of each May, they sacrificed this cow. Failing to make this sacrifice would cause draughts, according to popular folklore," Yüksek explains.

She adds that in those years, Dana Bayramı was celebrated in İzmir for three weeks. Things have changed over time and this year's celebrations only lasted two days. On the first day, Yüksek presented at the conference on the history of Afro-Turks and a photo exhibit prepared by Özlem Sümer showed snapshots from daily life as experienced by the community. The second day saw a large picnic at which Boğaziçi Gösteri Merkezi and Ege University's Music Band performed. Melis Sökmen, a famous jazz singer whose grandmother is from Ghana, joined the band and gave a small concert.

During this year's Dana Bayramı, the focus was on having fun and a cow was not sacrificed. "Some of our friends said that it would be fine to sacrifice a sheep, but maybe next year," says ASCA Chairman Mustafa Olpak. He points out that Dana Bayramı used to be an opportunity for their ancestors to have a family reunion. The festival served as a venue at which members of a family dispersed by slavery would come together.

Gülay Kayacan, who works for the History Foundation, an institute that

researches and publishes articles on Turkish history, says that some of the Afro-Turks are descendents of slaves who used to work on farms or in houses. Slaves working in agriculture were concentrated in areas where cotton production was high. It is for this reason that most Afro-Turks today live on the Aegean coast and some in the Mediterranean region.

“Some 10,000 slaves, black and white, were brought into the Ottoman Empire every year. During the constitutional monarchy period (1876-1878), slavery was abolished and former slaves settled in areas where they used to work. Some of them were even given land by the government,” Kayacan says.

Kayacan is the coordinator of the History Foundation’s “Voices Coming from a Silent Past” project, supported by the European Union Commission Delegation in Turkey. She underlines that their oral history project aims to form an archive that will aid in researching the cultural, economic and social status of Afro-Turks today and to place them in the mosaic of history. To this end, the foundation is recording the personal histories of the Afro-Turk community.

“Unfortunately, most of the elders of the Afro-Turk community who could remember the stories of immigration and the cultural aspects of the community have passed away. Written documentation is also scarce, so we are trying to preserve this undocumented past before it is too late,” Kayacan says. According to personal accounts collected so far, the ancestors of Afro-Turks came from various countries, including present-day Niger, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Kenya and Sudan. In fact, the Embassy of Sudan sent a representative to participate in this year’s Dana Bayramı.

Kayacan also notes that some of the descendents of former slaves remain poor. Educational opportunities for them have been scarce and they are generally not property owners. The number of Afro-Turks graduating from universities is below the national average and most women tend to be agricultural workers if they live in villages or housewives if they live in the urban areas. The women that have found opportunities to become educated work as mid-wives or nurses.

Not all of the Afro-Turks’ ancestors were slaves. Some came from the island of Crete following the Lausanne Treaty, signed in 1924. This treaty called for a population exchange between the Greek Orthodox citizens of the young Turkish Republic and the Muslim citizens of Greece. Most of the black on Crete were Muslims, so they were subjected to this population exchange. Like many others who were moved through this population exchange, they settled on the Aegean coast, mainly around İzmir. Eighty-year-old Emine Konaçer’s mother and Olpak’s family were among these immigrants.

Konaçer’s mother spoke only Greek, which explains why Konaçer is bilingual. She and her husband have four children, including Mehmet Konaçer (48), a physical education teacher.

“When I was young, our neighbors would sometimes speak in Greek on our street in Ayvalık and I used to shout at them: ‘Citizen, speak Turkish!’” he says. At the time, the Turkish government had launched a program calling on all citizens to speak only Turkish.

Mehmet Konaçer enjoys dancing the traditional folklore dances of the Aegean area and he performed a dance for the crowd at this year's Dana Bayramı.

As with every teacher, his students coin nicknames for him. "They first used to call me Clay [after the famous African-American boxer Cassius Clay, later known as Muhammad Ali]. But nicknames come and go. As other blacks become famous, the nickname my students choose for me changes," he says.

Konaçer is married and has two children. As is the case with multiracial children, they take on the features of both parents. This is the case with many Afro-Turks as the small community has many interracial marriages. Some Afro-Turks are blond and some have green eyes, like Konaçer's cousin, Hüseyin Hançer.

Being "different" has, however, also led to discrimination. The society at large holds many misconceptions about Afro-Turks.

"Our interviews show that Afro-Turks living in villages do not feel discriminated against. They are not labeled as the 'other' or excluded. In a village, everyone has known one another since birth. Cities, on the other hand, are a different matter altogether, though Anatolia is still a land that is able to absorb a variety of cultures," Kayacan says.

Ayşe Sözer, a young Afro-Turk, says that Turkish society does not have a racist approach, but that sometimes the Afro-Turk community does experience "exaggerated interest" and social discrimination from society.

"I am asked many odd questions; for example, some ask if I get whiter by taking baths. Sometimes people stare at me and end up tripping or bumping into a pole. I have learned to not get angry at people, but when I was at the university, my roommate left our dorm room because she said she was afraid to live with someone that is black," Sözer says.

Sometimes people have a hard time believing that Afro-Turks are Turks. On one occasion, Sözer was shopping in Denizli and the shopkeeper, mistaking her for a tourist speaking in perfect Turkish, tried to complement her by saying she speaks Turkish better than him, a native Turk.

Not being considered a "Turk" can at times be problematic. Most Afro-Turks live in the Aegean region, famous for human smuggling. This has cast suspicion on the Afro-Turk community.

Locals in the Aegean region also have some superstitious beliefs about "black people." Some believe that if they see a black person and pinch the person next to them, their wishes will come true. Sözer recalled one case in which two ladies pinched each other upon seeing her. She was understandably upset. "I told the ladies that if they really wanted their wishes to come true, I also had to pinch both of them! They accepted and I pinched them very hard," she says, laughing.

Another superstition some hold is that the kiss of a black person can bring luck. "When I was small, I was asked to kiss many girls because there was this superstition that if a girl does not get kissed by a small African child, she would not find a husband," Olpak says.

Apart from being the focus of some superstitions, most Afro-Turks say they have never been humiliated or discriminated against by the society. However, overcoming prejudice while looking for someone to marry is not as easy as one would hope. Kayacan notes that sometimes the family does not approve of their son or daughter marrying an Afro-Turk.

Afro-Turks are often called "Arabs" in Turkey. They also refer to themselves as Arabs, at times. This has led to a situation in which "Arab" means "black." Ege University Professor Ahmet Yürür explains. "For the Turks, Africa was only the northern part of the continent: from Egypt to Morocco. This part was of course under Arab influence. Turks were never really interested in the south of the continent. This is why this community has come to be called 'Arab,'" he says.

Yürür suggests that Turkey can build bridges between itself and Africa with the help of Afro-Turks. But even establishing an association was difficult, Olpak says.

"Our people did not even know of the word 'association.' They were suspicious at first, but in Turkey, all ethnic groups have solidarity associations except for us. We had some difficulties at first because we lived in a closed society," he says. This is not to say that Olpak is pessimistic. The Dana Bayramı is evidence that the Afro-Turk community is being revived.

Olpak has authored two books: "Slave Woman Kemale," which tells the story of his own family, a slave family from Kenya that lived on Crete and had to migrate to Turkey, and "The Shores of Slaves," in which Olpak presents a collection of stories by other Afro-Turks.

"I am a third-generation Afro-Turk. My grandparents were slaves. The first generation lived through the sad events, the second generation tried to forget and deny these events, but the third generation wants to know what happened and how," Olpak says, adding: "We are black and we are from here. We are a part of this rich Anatolian culture and we are ready to make an effort to be noticed by the society. I believe that in this way we will be able to contribute to the tolerant culture of this beautiful land." Olpak has a wish for his community: to celebrate Dana Bayramı on the national level one day as a festival of tolerance.

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Features

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