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THE MOSQUE COMMUNITY OF
“LOWER-CLASS” TURKS IN THE UNITED STATES:
QUO VADIS?

Abstract

This article investigates a mosque community established by “lower-class” Turkish immigrant tailors in the United States called the “Sultan” mosque. Based on an ethnographic study, the article makes the following points: The mosque is the inclusion project of this group of tailors in a foreign society. Being a “lower-class” community built around the mosque, the tailor community faced exclusion both from the secular and religious upper-class Turkish immigrant groups and so remained a small group. The ecology of the small group produced a politics of tolerance in the mosque despite the first-generation migrants’ efforts to draw strict boundaries between themselves and the others (“us vs. them”), reversing their own stigmatization. The 9/11 event in their host country, moreover, increased toleration in the mosque, as the mosque administration had to take on the new role of fighting against the stigmatization of Muslims as Islamist fundamentalists. More recently, under the influence of politics in the immigrants’ home country of Turkey, the mosque has entered a process of transformation from a modest community of tailors, where moderation is observed, to a community of a *tarikat* (religious sect), where a radical form of Islam is observed.

Introduction

This article aims to examine a particular group of migrants in the United States that is differentiated along class, ethnic and religious lines, namely, “lower-class”¹

¹ I put “lower-class” in quotation marks because of my concerns about labeling the members as lower class, although this category holds true in terms of their educational level and employment.

Turkish immigrants who are the followers of Sunni orthodoxy. It investigates the Turkish community of the Sultan² Mosque in Massachusetts, which was formed by immigrants of a lower-class position, mostly tailors, and which serves as the Boston branch of the United American Muslim Association (UAMA). My main theoretical framework is constructed around three concepts: community, space, and identity. Specifically I investigate the role of the mosque community in the promotion of a certain way of life and collective identity among its members and the challenges it faces. This is supported by spatial clustering around the mosque; increasing numbers of both homeowners and tenants have been drawn to the area not just for the mosque but also for the Turkish community developing there. I address the issue within the framework of the conditions created by 9/11 in the United States and the changing political situation in Turkey. Thus, the formation of a mosque community by a group of tailors and its transformation in recent years in response to political changes in both the home and the host societies are the main focus of this article.

First, I investigate the motive for the formation of the mosque community by this group of “lower-class” Turkish immigrants and the process of its formation. Second, I look at the role of the mosque leadership in fostering a particular set of values and discouraging others by drawing symbolic boundaries between “us and them.” Third, I aim to understand the challenges the mosque community faces to sustain itself given its small size and lower status. And finally, I explore the contestations over the mosque leadership under the influences of politics in the home country.

The literature on lower-class Turkish immigrants is limited to a few fieldwork studies conducted within the Turkish communities, for example, in Paterson (New Jersey) and Rochester (New York).³ The fact that Turkish immigrants to the United States are largely professionals from the middle classes has drawn the majority of academic attention to this group.⁴ However, the Turkish tailors who started coming to the United States in the late 1960s also have received some scholarly attention in the literature.⁵ This was because of their large numbers and their visibility in space when many of them settled in Rochester, “where they opened a school and built a mosque, creating a true Turkish community.”⁶ These studies have demonstrated that

² I use a pseudonym to preserve the mosque community’s privacy. Many Turkish mosques in the United States have names that belong to Ottoman Turkish sultans.

³ Nebahat Tokatlı, “Imported, Informalized, and Place-Bound Labor: Turkish Immigrant Community in Paterson, New Jersey” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Rutgers University, 1991); İlhan Kaya, “Identity and Space: The Case of Turkish Americans,” *Geographical Review* 95, 3 (2005): 425-440; Jami M. Milliron, “Turkish Immigrant Narratives from Western New York” (Master’s Thesis, State University of New York at Buffalo, 1996).

⁴ Birol Akgün, “The Turkish Diaspora in the United States and Its Role in Promoting Turkish-American Relations,” *The Turkish Yearbook* 31 (2000): 100-117.

⁵ Kemal H. Karpat, “Turks in America,” in *Turcs d’Europe...et d’Ailleurs, Les Annales de L’Autre Islam*, ed. J.D.Stephane (Paris: INALCO-ERISM, 1995): 231-252.

⁶ Birol Akgün, “The Turkish Diaspora in the United States and Its Role in Promoting Turkish-American Relations,” *The Turkish Yearbook* 31 (2000), 107.

lower-class Turkish immigrants who have limited linguistic skills and no previous foreign experience differ from their upper-class counterparts in their pattern of settling in the United States: while the latter are more dispersed within American society, the former prefer to cluster in a particular area, as spatial concentration becomes their survival strategy in a foreign land. According to İlhan Kaya, their residential clusters “serve as identity-maintenance and identity-preservation sites, where the customs and habits imported from traditional Turkey are kept alive.”⁷ Or, in the words of Kemal Karpat, the Turks finally have created their own communities “based on the immigrants’ consciousness of sharing a common grassroots culture, language, history and national ethos.”⁸

In the literature on the adaptation of immigrants, some researchers identify “the existence of social networks within a well-established and prosperous co-ethnic community” as an important factor that helps immigrants’ adaptation.⁹ On the other hand, Gustavo S. Mesch and others see it as obstructing the immigrants’ acculturation into the host society by delaying their proficiency in using the host country’s language and institutions.¹⁰ These contrasting views point to the importance of the size of the community. The Turkish community in the field study for this article is much smaller than those of Paterson (New Jersey) and Rochester (New York). Some thirty tailor families and their married children live in Rosetown,¹¹ in houses they own, and there is a fluctuating number of other Turks, some of whom rent homes from Turkish families. In addition to the mosque, Rosetown has a Mediterranean grocery (a Turkish store) specializing in *halal* meats, along with an Islamic school and a Muslim graveyard, which is not exclusively used by Turks but accommodates a wider Muslim community.

The mosque plays a significant role in the lives of those Turkish immigrants from traditional and conservative segments of society. “(T)he American Turkish mosque has become a national cultural institution rather than a purely religious place of worship,”¹² for as spaces of gathering and socialization, they function to preserve identities and produce a community based on nationality as well as

⁷ İlhan Kaya, “Identity and Space: The Case of Turkish Americans,” *Geographical Review* 95, 3 (2005), 432.

⁸ Kemal H. Karpat, “The Turks Finally Establish a Community in the United States,” in *Turkish Migration to the United States: From Ottoman Times to the Present*, ed. A. Deniz Balgamiş and Kemal H. Karpat (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 182.

⁹ Alejandro Portes, Patricia Fernandez-Kelly and William Haller, “The Adaptation of the Immigrant Second Generation in America: A Theoretical Overview and Recent Evidence,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 35, 7 (2009): 1077-1104.

¹⁰ Gustavo S. Mesch, “Between Spatial and Social Segregation among Immigrants: The Case of Immigrants from the FSU in Israel,” *International Migration Review* 36, 3 (2002): 912-934.

¹¹ Rosetown is a pseudonym used for the town where the mosque community clustered.

¹² Kemal H. Karpat, “The Turks Finally Establish a Community in the United States,” in *Turkish Migration to the United States: From Ottoman Times to the Present*, ed. A. Deniz Balgamiş and Kemal H. Karpat. (Madison Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008): 186.

religion.¹³ In other words, they “provide boundaries of difference to resist the dominant culture and celebrate cultural uniqueness.”¹⁴ Until recently, this was more so the case for lower-class Turkish immigrants as the secular and modernized lives of the upper class brought some distancing from the mosque, but this division has been challenged by the immigration of Islamist upper and middle classes from Turkey to the United States.

To understand Turkish immigrants in the United States, it is necessary to look at the ongoing contestation in the home country between the secularist and Islamist groups, more recently defined as “Kemalists” and “conservative democrats,” the latter term being preferred by the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*—Justice and Development Party). In this process of the “Islamization” of society, religious orders (*tarikat*) and religious movements (especially the *Gülen Cemaati*) are pushed towards “normalization,” creating a strong reaction by the secularized elite of the Republic; the outcome is a severely polarized and politicized society.

In response to both of the developments in the political atmosphere in their homeland, immigrants from Turkey in the United States try to redefine who they are and where they belong. In this framework, the article investigates how the Sultan mosque community restructures itself in response to the changes in Turkish society—their homeland—as well as in American society—their country of residence.

Field Research: Ethnography in Boston’s Periphery

Between October 2005 and May 2006, I paid visits to the mosque located in Massachusetts, and I participated in its activities, such as the gatherings and *iftar* dinners during the Ramadan, the religious festival following the Ramadan and the religious festival of Sacrifice, a holy night (*kandil*), and the alternative Thanksgiving Day during which the New York Consul General visited the mosque. I also spent time with some of the families, participating in their daily lives. In addition, I was invited to a wedding ceremony in an upscale hotel, where a young woman who grew up in Rosetown married a young man from Turkey who had come to the United States for graduate study.

The information obtained by embeddedness in the field was complemented by a survey: I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with some thirty persons, either asking the questions in full version, or asking them selectively, depending on the circumstances. I included in my study such other Turkish organizations in the Boston area, as the Turkish American Cultural Society of Boston (TACS), the

¹³ Eldon G. Ernst, *Without Help or Hindrance: Religious Identity in American Culture*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1987).

¹⁴ İlhan Kaya, “Identity and Space: The Case of Turkish Americans,” *Geographical Review* 95, 3 (2005): 435.

Orhan Gündüz Memorial School at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and the Turkish Cultural House. The first two included mainly upper-middle-class Turks of higher educational levels, who were secular in orientation; the Turkish School at MIT was established by a group of people who disassociated themselves from TACS in a dispute over its leadership. The Turkish Cultural House was established by a Turkish nationalist from a Central Anatolian town. There was also the Turkish Muslim community organized by Fethullah Gülen’s Dialogue Foundation around a school-mosque in Revere near Boston. I participated in the events of these organizations, talked to the people informally, and asked them my interview questions if the time was appropriate. My goal here was to place the “lower-class” Turkish community of Rosetown in the larger context of Turks in Boston.

Doing the research was complicated by problems in physical accessibility to the mosque and in social accessibility to some people. Since I did not drive, once I arrived by train at a particular destination, I needed someone to pick me up from the train station and drive me to the mosque. Sometimes the mosque’s president, who ran a tailor shop, or his son would meet me at the station and drive me to their shop, where I would talk with the people working there, all immigrants from Turkey, asking them my interview questions or just chatting with them. The problem was partly solved when the children of some families who lived in Boston let me accompany them in their cars when they visited the mosque on special occasions. Also, as the people in the mosque community got to know me, they took me to their homes in their cars. One of the women was even eager to take me to the town close to Rosetown to show me the factory where she used to work.

Although the mosque administration and the core mosque community (the president and his family, the *imam* and his extended family, the young people working in the mosque) were supportive of my research and willing to talk to me at great length, a small group of people, probably members of a *tarikât*, were suspicious of my motives for doing this research, and did not want to answer my interview questions. On the other hand, a very friendly young man and his wife, who said they belonged to the *Süleymancı tarikât*, told me in detail how their religious preferences affected their experiences, both negatively, in Turkey, and positively, in the United States. A couple of young women wearing the *hijab*, who also were friendly with me, were born in the United State but committed to living as Muslims, defining it as their right and appreciating the American government for giving them this chance.

My second round of visits to the mosque community was in the summer of 2009. I visited people in their homes upon their invitations, since by then I had become close to some of the families. We talked about the changes in their lives and in the mosque, as well as in my own life. This time it was even possible for me to spend a night in the mosque’s housing across from the mosque. I also talked with the new president of the mosque in his pizza parlor. My main interest was to observe whether there were any changes in the mosque, including the building, the administration and the community.

Creating a Community of Their Own: The Mosque as the Inclusion Project of "Lower-class" Muslim Turks

The people in the mosque community were initially tailors of rural origin, who were contracted by American companies to work in textile factories. The first ones came in the late 1960s to Rochester in New York State. The second wave of migration was in the 1980s: after the firstcomers paved the path for other Turkish tailors, a Turkish immigrant foreman even was sent by his company to Turkey to choose those who were qualified as good tailors after testing their sewing skills. The tailors in the case study first worked in Rochester and then moved to Rosetown in the mid-1980s, as the factories where they worked in Rochester moved offshore and were closed down.

Before moving to the United States, the tailors were unfamiliar with American society and did not know what to expect. When their plane landed in New York and they were taken in cars to the factory housing in Rochester, they were in complete shock. So they grouped together to cope with the strangeness of the new environment, despite their political differences. Those "who voted for Ecevit" (social democrats-leftists) and those "who belonged to the Hearth of Ideals" (ultra-nationalists-rightists) embraced each other in their effort to create a community that would help them survive in a foreign culture. Determined to stay, if only temporarily, they tried to familiarize themselves with their new living and working conditions. Yet, their limited economic and social resources forced them into quite restricted daily routines; some would even cook the same meal over and over again. A man who was stuck with eggs boiled in water said, "I did not know about the food here. I did not know how to cook either." To which the mosque's president, who had been his roommate then, added, "Because of this, I could not eat eggs for years."

As the mosque's founding president noted, they first came to America like "guest workers in Germany," that is, to make money quickly and return to Turkey. As their time in the country was prolonged, however, they felt the need to organize to preserve their culture and religion. The *imam* explained, "We said, 'We are Turks, we are Muslims, we need a place to gather.'" Another man present during the conversation continued, "We needed a mosque. We were spending all our time working in factories. We needed a place to teach our children our culture, our religion." They emphasized the importance of an institution to bring people together to resist the assimilationist American system which was based on work, for when it was accepted as normal to work seven days a week and twelve to fourteen hours a day, family ties weakened; children were left without family surveillance, and neighborly relations eroded. According to the mosque's former president, the first wave of Turkish immigrants to the United States initially thought, "We came to paradise. Who would need religion here?" But, the tailors' low level of education, rural background, and limited English-language skills restricted their relations with American society, and their concerns to preserve their culture and religion in a non-Muslim country made a place to meet their own people vital in their lives.

The establishment of the mosque was never easy for this group of Turks who had little social and cultural capital. The founding president described the process:

We first became members of the Turkish-American Cultural Association and suggested that a small mosque could be opened within the association. But the Association strongly rejected this idea. Then we decided to set up our own mosque. We were twenty-eight families. Disagreement arose among us: some of us wanted a club house (*lokal*) next to the mosque where people would play cards and socialize, but we disagreed. We said, “This is a place of worship. Gambling cannot be here.” When a customer of mine (he was a tailor) told me about an old church that was for sale, we thought of it as a good opportunity. We bought it for \$150,000; the people made payments to us after they got bank loans. We wanted it to be a part of the *Nurcu tarikati* (Fethullah Gülen’s “Islamist” community), but they rejected our offer. So I had to go to the American Muslim Association in New York; and after bargaining until 3 in the morning, we reached an agreement. We finally opened this mosque as a branch of the American Muslim Association ... But problems did not end. Our community split. Some families left us, saying that the mosque belonged to New York; it was not their own.¹⁵ Despite all this, we have survived.

In this quotation, we can identify several factors that facilitated or discouraged the formation of a mosque by this group. First, the lower-class status of tailors acted against their inclusion into the Gülen community, which mainly consisted of young college graduates and Ph.D. candidates, while some of the tailors and their wives were illiterate or merely primary-school graduates. At the same time, their desire to form a religious institution rendered the tailors “undesirable” in the eyes of the secular upper-middle classes of the Turkish-American Cultural Association. Finally, the tailor community itself was divided in its visions for the mosque: some more conservative members insisted on having a place free from “polluting” activities, such as playing cards (which they defined as gambling); others wanted a place to socialize with their people; still others wanted a mosque managed autonomously by the Turks, which was impossible given the limited economic means of the tailors’ community. Instead, the Turkish mosque had to be established within the wider network of the United American Muslim Association and to serve both Turkish and non-Turkish Muslims.

The founding president of the mosque expressed pride in his community’s achievements. “By establishing the mosque, we constructed our own identity; we created our own society. We succeeded.” To be sure, the mosque, which was originally a church, became the spatial reflection of what they conceived themselves to be, that is, Turkish Muslims. Yet it was not purely Turkish; rather, construction of the spatial entity to reflect their identity required compromises.

¹⁵ This group eventually rented an apartment for its house of prayer and applied to the Turkish government to send an *imam* during the Ramadan.

The mosque was opened in 1996 after the old church was renovated to make its spaces proper for Muslim worship practices. According to the president and the *imam*, the change was perceived positively by the Rosetown community. Previously the abandoned church had been taken over by homeless people and drug addicts, while dog walkers allowed their animals to soil the ground with waste. But the mosque brought safety and cleanliness back to the site.

Over the years, as some forty families clustered in Rosetown, a private Islamic school (2001), a Muslim graveyard (2004), and a Turkish grocery store (2005) were opened. Because of the positive image of the mosque, the mosque president reported, the mayor supported selling an empty school building to the mosque community for a very cheap price (\$100) to become the Islamic Academy. These developments increased the Turkish people's sense of belonging to their locality in the United States. As an interviewer responded:

I am comfortable living here. It is like my village in Gölcük. I have my people around me. There is our mosque and our graveyard; you can be buried by Muslim ways. There is also a Turkish grocery store; it brings food from Turkey. It freed us from the fear of eating pork.

A middle-class migrant from Turkey, however, offered a more condescending interpretation, "those in Rosetown cannot survive without each other."

Forming a Mosque of Moderation and Diversity: "Our Mosque is the Best. It Is Not High Society (Sosyetik), and It Is Not Too Conservative (Kapalı)"

During the first period of the field research, between October 2005 and May 2006, the mosque served a larger group of Muslims that included those from Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Bosnia, along with a few American converts, though 70 percent of the membership was Turkish. Accordingly, parts of the sermon would be delivered in Turkish, Arabic and English. As the mosque president explained:

Our mosque is not a Turkish mosque. We run the mosque by the donations of other Muslim groups. Especially the Pakistanis are very generous. Among the Pakistanis, there are many doctors; they practice the *zekat* (alms), donating 2.5 percent of their annual income to the mosque. I saw one Pakistani doctor writing a check of \$20,000 to the mosque. Turks do not give money for the mosque. We could not survive financially if we depended on the Turks. Among the Turks who attend the mosque, there is only one person, a doctor, who is really wealthy and well educated. He comes to our mosque because he is from our *imam*'s hometown, and also because he grew up in a religious environment.

Although the mosque administration had to accept this reality, I often heard complaints about “foreigners,” especially the Arabs who would walk bare-footed after ablution.

The mosque president at the time was a tailor who ran his own alteration store. Active in the process of developing the mosque community from the very beginning, he had good ties with groups and organizations ranging from the secular Turkish-American Cultural Association to religious Pakistani groups, and he was able to cross borders built upon class and national identity to promote the interests of his mosque community. Just as he would don a suit and tie to attend dinner parties given by the Turkish-American Cultural Association, he would participate in conferences organized by Muslim leaders, listening to their speeches while sitting next to Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, and he was nice enough to invite me to such varied occasions, which I attended. We also participated in a dinner of Gülen’s Dialogue Foundation at a large hall, during which a diverse group of Muslims and non-Muslims, sitting around tables of eight, applauded those receiving awards for their contributions to the dialogue between religions.

The mosque, apart from offering prayer services that different ethnic groups attended, was used as a community gathering place only by Turks. Turks living at a distance from the mosque would travel there in their cars on special days, such as during the Ramadan, and for special occasions, such as the celebration of the birth of Mohammed (a religious event), the day of remembrance of the Çanakkale martyrs (a Turkish national event). As they usually would extend their stay beyond the particular event, chatting with their fellow Turks about the news from Turkey, such as football games and political developments, as well about their acquaintances, such as who was in hospital, who was unemployed, and the like, they would create community of their own.

The mosque was significant even for some non-religious Turkish families, who usually had higher social standing than the average members of the mosque community. Some such families said they attended the activities of the mosque to familiarize their children with the Turkish culture. As one woman put it, “You cannot teach your children to be a Turk; it is your culture, they have to live in it in order to understand it, to internalize it.” However, another woman who attended the mosque only on special occasions voiced her reservations, “We call the people attending this mosque the ‘tailor group.’ The majority are uneducated. They gathered around the mosque to keep their children inside the Turkish culture. Other Turks, who are high-society (*sosyetik*), never come here.”

Indeed, I observed that the building did not quite fit into the ideal image of a mosque. Its tiny minaret had replaced a former chimney, but its height was restricted by municipal regulations. A “community room” inside the building promoted the idea that the mosque was not strictly a place of religious practices. It was divided into men’s and women’s sections by a movable partition at human height. Children were to stay in the women’s section, but, in their running and playing, they would often transgress the boundary set by the partitions into the men’s section. When the New York Consul General visited the mosque, he delivered his speech in the men’s section, yet he was easily heard and seen by the

women. And as a researcher, I was able to sit up front in the men's section since the physical boundary between the two sections was not so rigid and formal.

During celebrations of religious festivals at the mosque, women and men would readily mingle. Among the women, there would be covered women as well as women dressed fashionably in tight skirts and high-heeled shoes. Among the covered women, there would be some Turks and a few women from other nationalities. But, in general, modesty was the rule; as expressed in a respondent's words, it was "a community of humble people." As both the mosque's president and a woman outside the tailors' group remarked, "Our mosque is the best. It is not high society (*sosyetik*) and it is not too conservative (*kapalı*)." In short, the mosque itself and its community room can be seen as an inclusion project carried out by Turkish immigrants of humble origin and limited human capital to reproduce their traditional Turkish-Muslim culture and bolster their self-esteem.

Interestingly, the community room was meant not only to create a place for the Turkish people to socialize but also to create a positive image in American society that the mosque was not limited to providing religious services. As the president told me, they aimed to change the correlation between Muslims and terrorists that emerged in the collective American imagination in the aftermath of 9/11. Summer picnics organized in the mosque's backyard once or twice monthly were open to everyone and announced by emails and fliers distributed to non-Muslim Americans living in the mosque's vicinity in order to achieve mixing (*kaynaşma*). While elderly neighbors especially welcomed the invitation, inviting the heads of the police and fire departments, as well as local politicians, helped improve the mosque community's relationship with American authorities. In the context of the 9/11 event, the mosque had to take on the role of fighting against the stigmatization of Muslims as terrorists and Islamist fundamentalists, showing Islam's humane and tolerant face.

Drawing Boundaries between "Us and Them": Reversing Stigmatization

The "us versus them" distinction was strongly made by the mosque leadership, and it was accepted more by first-generation migrants. Both took great pains to draw and protect the cultural/religious boundaries between the Turks (Muslims) and the Americans (non-Muslims) by attaching negative meanings to symbols, such as pet dogs, Christmas trees and pork. As a result, I heard teen-age daughters complain that their parents never dined out because of concern that pork might have touched the plates. Similarly, I met a young man who had worked in a pizzeria since he was ten, yet gave up the idea of opening his own pizza place because of his concerns about serving ham. A young second-generation woman complained of her parents' generation, "They make offensive remarks when we decorate a Christmas tree; they say, 'These children have become hundred-percent foreigners.'"

In contrast, positive meanings were attributed to customs defined as the main elements of Turkish culture, for example, taking off shoes before entering an

apartment and kissing the hands of the elderly. Illustrating how these were viewed as distinguishing them from mainstream American society in a positive way, the *imam* said:

We are inside a very different culture. In our culture, people show respect to each other, they stand up to say “welcome”; they share their soup if someone drops in; there is respect for the elderly; they preserve the right to talk first.

Similarly a young woman, who grew up in the United States, observed:

Our people make a distinction between “we, the Turks,” and “they, the Americans,” all the time. Our people, by differentiating themselves from Americans, place themselves in a superior position to Americans: they say, “we are clean, we eat good food, we eat *halal* meat.”

Using these quotations, I argue that the Turks of Rosetown tried to reverse their stigmatization by American society, as well as by upper-class Turkish immigrants who were acculturated to American ways of life. As those with rural backgrounds and limited schooling, who lacked the chance to master the English language, and who lived quite limited lives, they did not possess qualities that received recognition and respect and led to high status in mainstream American society. So, by distancing themselves from it and by defining it in inferior terms, they protected their self-esteem.¹⁶ This argument does not ignore the fact that their *habitus* in their home country in which religion defined their identities and everyday practices is an important factor that shaped their lives in the United States.

The Sustainability of the “Us and Them” Distinction: The Ecology of the Small Group

The Rosetown community is much smaller than the Turkish communities in Paterson (New Jersey) and Rochester (New York), where a “Turkish space” is produced by many institutions and commercial places, such as mosques, schools, community centers, health centers, coffee houses, restaurants, supermarkets, *halal* meat markets, barber shops, travel agencies, and music and video stores. In Rosetown, because the Turkish residents’ everyday needs could not be satisfied within the community, they had to interact with the larger American society, and many Turks, especially the younger generation, had relations that extended beyond the mosque community. For example, the mosque president’s tailor shop had almost exclusively American clients. In sum, due to its small size, the mosque

16 Portes et al., interprets the working-class families’ practice of telling their children stories about “who they or their ancestors ‘really were’” as a means of sustaining their dignity despite their humble present conditions. “Adaptation of the Immigrant Second Generation,” p. 1099.

community failed to create a *habitus* for the reproduction of either its culture or its next generation.

This is clearly seen in finding marriage partners for the young generation. The strong objection against marrying Americans by the core mosque community, which insisted on religiously and ethnically endogamous marriages, put the grown-up children in a difficult position. The upper-class Turkish-Americans did not consider this small “lower-class” community when selecting their marriage partners. More important, as one of the daughters explained, “I cannot marry young men in our community. We grew up together; they are like brothers to me.” So, some dated Americans, keeping it a secret from their community. Recently, some young women started marrying Turkish men who came to the United States to study for their master’s or Ph.D. degrees. Interestingly, as Islamist groups increase their political power and economic resources in Turkish society, more and more graduate students with Islamic views arrive in the United States, acting as a transformative force in immigrant communities. As I witnessed during the field research, young women in the mosque community would be asked to practice *hijab* by their Islamist husbands after marriage. At the same time, young men in the mosque community were pressured to marry girls from their villages back in Turkey. During the fieldwork, I met mothers who were planning visits to Turkey to find marriage partners for their sons. As a result, through these transnational connections, the mosque community was being transformed into a more conservative one.

The small size of the community may also have had a reverse effect, promoting some tolerance to differences. I saw young women wearing in high-heels, tight skirts and make-up at events in the mosque’s community room, where an atmosphere of tolerance and diversity was apparent. I argue that the mosque community had to relax some of its norms in order to accommodate the younger generation who grew up in the United States. Too small to be able to discredit its members easily, the community had to compromise the tailors’ initial aim of forming a community to keep their children in touch with the Turkish culture and Islamic religion so that they would not get lost in a foreign society. Emphasizing this point, one of the founders of the mosque and an established tailor said:

We should be flexible in practicing our religion. We should try to attract the youth here. There can even be a pool table in one corner. It should not be a problem if they (women) wear their hair open or covered or wear short dresses.

Even the member of the *Süleymancı tarikat* who would become the mosque’s president in 2009 told me then that since there were few Turks, they were obliged to be nice to each other.

In brief, two conflicting forces impinged on the mosque community. On the one hand, its small size led it toward a politics of tolerance. On the other, the mosque administration, under the influence of political developments in Turkey, was being restructured, orienting itself more strongly to Islamist views disseminated from Turkey.

Increasing Islamist tendencies were observed during the field research. For example, a young, modern-looking woman, who grew up in the United States, graduated from college and was employed in a bank, agreed to cover herself (*hijab*) and give up her job when she married a man who had recently come from Turkey to study in a master’s program. This marriage created much dispute in the community. The woman’s best friend, one of the young people who drove me to Rosetown several times, became very angry and refused to go to the wedding ceremony, which was announced as a “Muslim wedding.”

During the wedding ceremony, there was no music and no dancing. Instead, some verses from the Quran were recited; then three *hodjas*, the Sultan mosque’s *imam*’s brother from Rochester, the Sultan mosque’s *imam* and a *hodja* from Rize, Turkey (the groom’s uncle) made their speeches of advice to the newlywed couple, talking about the importance of the family, patience, and being thankful for what they have. This was a new practice in the mosque community.

Among other new practices were alternative Thanksgiving Days at the mosque. In addition, a family-organized Islamic memorial service (*mevlüt*) at the mosque would be repeated every year, with families taking turns. The covering of girls at a young age, be it nine or nineteen, was also encouraged by those who belonged to the *Süleymancı tarikat*, who presented it as a basic requirement of being Muslim. Moreover, the use of alcohol was fiercely criticized by the same group although, among the tailors, it had been fine before.

The disassociation of the Alevis from the mosque strengthened such conservative Islamist practices. The politics of recognition adopted by the AKP government in Turkey affected the mosque community; the few Alevis in the community distanced themselves from the mosque. The tendency towards stricter practices of Islam was accompanied by the contestations over the identities of the mosque community, presented below.

Contestations over the Identities in the Mosque Community: Muslim, Turkish, American?

This section aims to provide information about the collective identities of members of the mosque community that are either promoted or discouraged by the mosque leadership. It is important to know about the desired identities of the people in order to anticipate the future of the mosque community.

The first-generation immigrants in the community, who were mainly tailors, defined themselves both as Turks and Muslims (“we are Muslim Turks”). They said that national and religious identities could not be separated—Turks were naturally Muslims, and these identities were at the core of who they were. However, the Turkish and Muslim identities recently started to compete with each other. For those who were not from the tailors’ group, namely, recent arrivals from Turkey,

some of whom were moving to the United States for their graduate education,¹⁷ Muslim identity was the overarching identity: they were Muslims first and Turks second. On behalf of the tailors' group, the founding mosque president said of the newcomers:

They are radical Islamists. They say, "I am a Muslim, I am not a Turk." It is fine with me to wear a *fez* (men's headwear in Ottoman times, which became the symbol of backwardness in the Turkish Republic). But I ask you, "how can you be a Muslim without being a Turk?"

On the other hand, a man, a newcomer from Turkey, emphasized his Muslim identity and said:

Religion ensures that one also maintains his/her national identity. Here there are many Turks who have lost contact with their religion and who have forgotten about their Turkish identity. But Arabs did not do wrong on this issue; they have been successful preserving their religion.

Those with the Turkish Muslim identity, who made up the majority of the first-generation immigrants in the mosque community, did not think of themselves as Americans. One of them underlined his "formality Americanness," "I am an American citizen, but I am not an American. In this country, people have the right to become citizens after five years of permanent residence, and so I am just using this right." Another one, who embraced his Turkishness, said, "We are Turks who live in America. Being a Muslim and being a Turk are very important to me. I still speak Turkish without an accent. I am proud of being a Turk."

The Alevi members of the mosque community, who recently moved away, on the other hand, defined themselves as Turks who lived in America. As for many Alevis in Turkey, who define themselves as secular, being Muslim was not part of their identity.

In the case of the second-generation immigrants, the issue was more complicated: some emphasized their Turkishness and other emphasized their Americanness, both without rejecting either their American or Turkish identities. Those who were connected with the tailors, however, put stronger emphasis on their Turkish identities. For example, a married man in his late twenties, said:

A man, who looks definitely Chinese, says, "I am an American." He has forgotten his native language, his religion. This is so sad. When I was a teenager, I criticized my father for his close involvement in the mosque. But now that I have a child of my own, I understand him. I don't want my daughter to forget about her culture, her roots, and of course Turkey, my beloved home country. I don't want her to end up being like the Chinese American.

¹⁷ Some of them had attended religious schools (*Imam-Hatip* Schools) and were involved in Islamist politics.

On the other hand, rejecting the American identity completely was regarded as undesirable by the upwardly mobile second-generation immigrants, since they believed that it would create serious disadvantages, particularly for their children. A young woman, who grew up in the United States and who recently married, said:

I would not let my child grow up outside of my influence. I want him to understand that he is Turkish and Muslim. But of course he will also be American. I don't want him not to think of himself as an American, experiencing exclusion.

The solution to the conflict between the two identities would be to broaden the definition of being an American. In the words of the daughter of an *imam* (the Sultan mosque's *imam*'s brother in Rochester), who grew up in the United States and who practiced *hijab*:

The only real Americans are Native Americans. Everybody else came to this country from abroad. So I can say that I am an American because to be an American you don't need to have your ancestors living in America for generations. I have my social security number; I am an American citizen.

In her case, an American Muslim identity was the ideal. She did not care much about being a Turk. A similar emphasis on the Muslim identity over the Turkish identity emerged in the tailors' group as the daughters married “Islamist” men from Turkey. For example, one such woman, who was born in the United States and who married a newcomer Turk with strong Islamist tendencies, said:

My parents preserved Turkish culture in our family; they talked to us in Turkish; we kept our relations with other Turkish families. But I am a Muslim in the first place because of the way I am dressed. I go everywhere wearing *hijab*.

Her mother did not veil herself, and neither did she before she got married, but her husband married her on the condition that she would start practicing the *hijab*.

Although the emergent interpretation of Islam that requires women to veil themselves is partially the reflection of political changes in Turkey, the increasing emphasis on the Muslim identity also has its roots in the changes towards Muslims in American society. The stigmatization of Muslims in the aftermath of 9/11 strengthened the Muslim identity in the Turkish community of Rosetown once the young generation began to perceive the Muslim identity as a political position to be defended against its stigmatization. In the words of a young woman who veiled herself: “I am a Turkish Muslim, but here I am a Muslim first because in this country you should defend your religion. I heard people cursing at me many times after 9/11.”

The identity issue among second-generation migrants was made more complicated by the mosque leadership's attempt to draw strict boundaries between Turks and Americans. For example, the son of the mosque's *imam* said:

I am neither Turk nor American. Children kiss adults' hands in Turkish culture, but I don't; I am not used to it. So Turks find me distant, treat me like a stranger. American men of my age talk about just girls and money. They want to buy the biggest of everything, bigger TVs, bigger cars. I am not interested in these subjects. I want to talk about capitalism, about social problems.

Thus, as one moves towards the boundaries that separate the two cultures that are defined strictly, one feels alienated and isolated, burdened with not being embedded in either of the cultures. If the mosque leadership defines Turkish-Muslim and American ways in strict terms and presents them as contradicting each other ("us and them"), this tends to push the American-born youth away from the mosque community, rejecting their connections with their parents' traditional Turkish culture and Muslim religion. Meanwhile, the growth of a more radical form of Islam in the mosque, especially through the newcomers from Turkey, has created concerns among the tailors—the founders of the mosque community, who try to come to terms with the changes. The recent changes in the mosque administration presented below provide clues about the direction towards which the mosque is rapidly moving.

Recent Transformation of the Mosque Community: From a Migrant Community to a Branch of an Islamic Order (Tarikat)

When I visited the mosque again in the summer of 2009, the mosque building was in a state of transformation, growing horizontally as well as vertically downward, below ground. The first floor was extended, turning the previous rectangle into the shape of a square by adding a big hall as a men's prayer space. The walls of the hall were covered by porcelain tiles in Ottoman motifs imported from Turkey after they were ordered on the Internet, and the floor was covered by wall-to-wall carpeting, bearing signs pointing to the qibla (*kible*). Now the room previously used by men during the prayers was reserved for women's prayers. The former "community room," which had been separated by a partition into men's and women's spaces, was redesigned to be used exclusively by men. Under construction in the basement was a large room, where the *imam* said, "Women and children will spend time here away from the disturbances by men." Or, as the new president commented, "In the previous use when women and men shared the same floor divided by a partition, children would slip into the men's section, and women would move there to bring their children back. This was unacceptable."

The new design of the mosque brought a stricter separation between women and men, not only in physical terms but also in terms of the roles attributed to them, with men in charge of the community and women in charge of the children. While men

would meet in their room upstairs to discuss politics and to listen to speeches delivered by Turkish and American authorities, below them in the basement, women would spend time with their children in the company of other women. The previous, somewhat relaxed environment in gender terms was gone now that a separate floor was reserved only for the use of women and children and the rest of the mosque spaces were left for the use of men, free from women and children.

All these changes in the mosque building are not the end of the spatial transformation of the mosque. The ideal mosque would add another floor of rooms to accommodate students in Quran courses, the former president explained, “Süleymanlılar do not want Diyanet’s (the Directorate of Religious Affairs in Turkey) *imams*; they want to train their own. So we need a dormitory in the mosque for students receiving religious training.” For that reason, the roof of the room recently added to the building has been left flat so that this second floor can be built in the near future, along with a small dome, to complete the full transformation of the old church into a mosque.

Besides the mosque’s spaces, its administration was in the process of transformation. The tailor-president who was in office for many years had turned his office over to a young man from the *Süleymanlı tarikat*. Unlike the former president of humble educational background, the new president was a college graduate with a master’s degree in management. His wife, during her school years, had stayed in the dormitories of the same *tarikat*. Both were very friendly and active. The husband ran a pizza parlor, but he worked hard to spare time for his mosque duties. Although the young mother of three small children, his wife was also very active, driving in her car to organize women’s home meetings during which Quran was recited, running a Quran course at the mosque and planning to open a “Women’s Union” (*Kadınlar Birliği*) connected to the mosque. Under this new mosque presidency, a more conservative interpretation of Islam also was being introduced. For example, New Year’s Eve and birthday celebrations were defined as foreign elements that should be avoided in a Muslim way of life.

The former president from the tailor’s group held concerns about the future of the mosque community:

I am not *cemaatçi* (someone from a religious community). I am neither *Süleymanlı* nor *Fethullahçı*... I would like an educated young man at the head of our mosque. But the *imam*’s older son is not interested and his younger son is not knowledgeable about religion.

Yet, he thought the new *Süleymanlı* president better qualified than he was:

I am a straight peasant. But he is from the group of *Süleyman Efendi*. He lived in their dormitory and received religious education. He also has a good command of English. He can write in English. He came to America for his master’s degree.

Nevertheless, the former president seemed to prefer *Fethullahçı* over *Süleymancı* and expressed his frustration with the *Fethullahçı* who distanced themselves from the “tailors’ mosque” as follows:

I was the one who introduced them to the people here. For me, the important thing is to come together as Muslim Turks. But they (*Fethullahçı*) don’t understand me. I would like them to come to our mosque and also to invite us to their events, and so we would be united. But they don’t want it. They have connections with every place in the world; they have money and high educational levels. They organize a “*himmet* (aid) evening” and collect much money. If they invite me, I would go and contribute my money. But they don’t... The Revere mosque is high class; they are the university group (*üniversite takımı*). Ours is the tradesmen’s group (*esnaf takımı*). But today our children are university graduates.

The mosque leadership was in a state of restructuring because the tailors who originally established the mosque community failed to reproduce the mosque leadership. Their younger generation was not interested in running a mosque and lacked the cultural/religious capital to do so. The *Fethullah* community (“*Cemaat*”) concentrated in Revere was not interested in this small mosque so it was the *Süleymancı* (“*Tarikat*”) who ended up controlling the mosque. *Süleymanlılar*, however, were alien to the tailor’s group. During a home visit, a woman, who used to work with non-Muslims in a factory and became friends with some African American women, and who visited Mecca for pilgrimage after her retirement, said:

All the time we learn about the symbols that differentiate religious orders from one another. *Süleymanlılar* pray keeping their hands together, but we pray keeping our hands apart. I was so shocked when I found about this difference. Aren’t we all Muslims?

Conclusion: Quo Vadis?

The mosque community was initially organized by a small group of tailors. Political differences were insignificant. Alevis were also a part of this Turkish community, suppressing their Alevi identity. In this early stage, the mosque was envisioned as more than just a place of worship; it was intended to be a place where the young generation would learn about their culture and religion, and where cultural rituals and values would be reproduced. In the course of time, it became a place of gathering where people socialized, exchanging news about Turkey and their people. The mosque also increased the visibility of this small Turkish community clustered around it and became a center where relations with Turkish and American politicians and authorities were sustained. In this way, these “lower class” Turks resisted both their exclusion from and their children’s assimilation into the dominant culture while trying to have a voice in American politics.

Today in Rosetown, the mosque leadership is contested, and the mosque community is fragmented. The Alevi tailors and their grownup children have distanced themselves from the community, and the Sunni tailors have failed to reproduce a mosque leadership that sticks to their Turkish Muslim identity. The *Süleymanlılar*, who are likely to increase their power in the mosque, by contrast, emphasize the Muslim identity over the Turkish identity and support a stricter interpretation of Islam. Accordingly, the Turkish Muslim identity may be redefined, setting new cultural and religious boundaries between “us and them.” The Turkish character of the community then may be suppressed by an overarching Muslim identity, for recent arrivals in the mosque community have a closer relationship with and a more positive image of Arabs and want to unite the different ethnicities under the umbrella Muslim identity. Nevertheless, the relatively small size of the mosque community exerts some constraints on the inclination of the mosque leadership to draw strict boundaries between the “Turkish” and “American” identities and to pressure the second-generation migrants to forget about their American side.

With the mosque community in a state of transformation the answers to key questions are yet vague. Will it continue to be a Turkish Muslim community despite the fact that it provides religious services to a wider Muslim group? Will it turn into a radical Islamic community, repressing its Turkishness? If so, in what ways will this transformation affect the relationship with American authorities? To what extent will it be tolerant of those who also make claims for their American identity? All that seems likely is that this mosque community of tailors is bound to take more conservative forms and embody Islamist practices under the influence of increasingly powerful religious groups in Turkey.

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