CHAPTER TEN
WOMEN, THE MODERN STATE AND RELIGIOUS SPACE IN TURKEY
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Abstract: The proscribed space of popular holy shrines or türbes in the early days of the self-consciously modernist Turkish Republic showed itself to be immune to the constraining orders of an official empirical-mindedness. Elif Ekin Akşit argues that the ontological status of sacred space was poorly understood by a modernist consciousness that saw all space as of necessity measurable, subdivisible and thereby appropriable. As history has documented, proscription did not work and the sacred space of türbes has increased its social-political force in Turkish cities, especially amongst women. Such spaces have emerged as a place of meeting for women of different classes, backgrounds and ideological orientations to the state. Moreover, the türbes of modern Turkey have become strongholds for women outside the religious framework itself. At the same time, these most concrete social and political developments are predicated on the notion and belief in the radical "unboundedness" of space, producing a strangely contradiction-free synthesis of incommensurables, one that Akşit sees as an authentic, intelligent, grassroots challenge to the tenets of modernist thought and politics.

During the early days of the Republic of Turkey the government passed a number of laws designed to impress upon the citizenry the necessity of the project of modernisation. Perhaps the best known and most visible of these laws was the one that changed written Turkish from the script of the Ottoman period to the use of the Latin alphabet. At the same time, in another less-known piece of legislation, passed on November 30th 1925, the Turkish state prohibited entry to the türbes, or saintly tombs.¹ This in turn was a sequel to the law, Takrir-i Sükun ("Establishment of Silence"), passed in March 1925, which interdicted all activity aimed at a return to past practices.² The Establishment of Silence Law, intended to be valid for two years, remained in place for four years, but the locks on the doors of all saintly tombs remained in place until 1950.³

It is interesting to note that nowadays, many young Turkish people are simply unaware of the fact that there ever were locks placed on the doors of the türbes by the state. This can be partially explained by the fact that even though the ban prohibited türbe-going, it emphasised and was primarily directed against the dervish lodges (tekke and zaviye), "the religious orders, sheikhs, disciples, dervishes, caliphs, fortune tellers, sorcerers" related to these places.⁴ For the religious, of course, the material presence of a door-lock is hardly an obstruction to devotional prayer. This paper focuses on the way people adapted to the exigencies of "forced forgetting", often praying in front of locked doors and ruined buildings, and in the process, redefining for the new republic the social and religious space of the traditional türbe. The women who have been interviewed in my study of the türbes stated that saints continued to be intermediaries for their wishes for a husband, a baby, a house, or improved health even though the doors of the tombs were locked. If we are speaking of spatial location, then it must be said that these doors, while physically closed, were open in the "geographies of their souls".

This remark is in fact not as esoteric as it may seem, but neither is the concept of space at play here descriptive of a purely material location, supplemented by the iconic value of the türbe. In geographical and historical Islamic locations where the mosque has primarily been a male space, the türbe has by contrast included women as well as men. Furthermore, women not only attend the türbe, but also claim these spaces with their acts of care. It will be observed in this essay that the ban on the türbe, while seeking to restrict the domination of certain religious sects over social politics, unintentionally prepared the grounds for a relative

¹ Law No 677 "Tekke ve Zaviyelerle Türbe'lerin Seddüle ve Türbedarlıklar ile Bir Takım Ünvanların Men ve İlgiasına Dair Kanun."
² Mete Tunçay, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nde Tek-Parti Yönetimi'nin Kuruluşu (1923-1931), P 146.
increase in attendance on the part of women who do not belong to
such sects.

In general, the place of women in Islamic cultures has been an arena of
intensive and unresolved debate. On the one hand, biased understandings
of the inferior status of women in Islam prevail in a way of thinking rooted
in theories of modernisation. On the other hand, scholars of anthropology
and history have been studying various aspects of women's contribution to
Islamic cultures. Drawing on these latter approaches, this essay
addresses that while the türbe area was a part of the prominent routines
of women's historical exclusion from religious spaces in general,
ironically, helped them to increase their claims over these spaces, despite
the ban. Thus, the case of the saintly tomb also opens up new grounds
for evaluating the implications of restrictive social politics, and this essay
presents patterns of remembering and forgetting related to the constitution
of specific kinds of space with an emphasis on the formative years of the
Turkish republic.

In order to develop an understanding of such socio-historical patterns, I
will situate the narratives regarding the twenty-five year ban on the türbe
in the context of three saintly tombs in Ankara. Then, I will focus on the
historico-political signification of these spaces, asking what makes them
preferable to women, emphasizing women's marginal position in
mainstream religious spaces. In short, the social relation of space and
politics in Turkey will help us resituate the citizen at the space she claims.

The Türbe

The türbe is known to be a Turkish contribution to Islamic culture. Despite
the fact that the Abbasids built their first türbe after encountering the
Turks, there still are not many türbes in non-Turkic cultures. The form of
mausoleum in the Islamic world that is most similar to the türbe is the
Iranian Gonbadh, or tomb. The word türbe comes from the Arabic word
turnah, meaning earth. Although the word has lost its original meaning,
the connection between death and the eternal return, signified by earth,
remains. However, while the tomb expresses a spatial form of death, it
must be differentiated from the türbe, which has stronger spiritual
connotations still. Moreover, the repeated visiting patterns associated with
the türbe transform this spirituality into concrete social reality.

Building ostentatious graves for the dead is an activity sanctioned by
the Koran, but the visiting of the shrines of the saints is an act that
combines pilgrimage and praying for the dead, both of which are advised
by the Koran. To put it differently, the religious validity of türbe-going is
highly contentious. Yet, in any case, the türbe constitutes a spatial form
of remembering and tangible reflection of a socio-historical form of Islam.
During the nation building process in Turkey, when the cities began to
extend well beyond their previous boundaries, the cemeteries that were
once on the outskirts became engulfed by expanding city centres and were
thus demolished. A considerable number of the remaining tombs belonged
to saints or awliya, friends of God. Some of the türbes belonged to
Ottoman statesmen and their families as well, yet people prefer to narrate
stories about the awliya rather than the statesmen, stories that have become
a concrete component of the tomb. These stories reflect the unwritten and
the unofficial aspects of the past.

Halil Berktay defines the türbe as “the mapping of the abstract to the
concrete by primitive thought” in his article concerning saints, relics,
pilgrimage and tombs. While Berktay’s notion of “primitive thought” is
itself obsolete, the notion of the mapping of the abstract to the concrete
is a fitting description of the mediating function of the türbe. Moreover,
when we form our view based on the priority of social practices as
opposed, for example, to the formal characteristics of the architectural
features of the türbe, the inverse of Berktay’s hierarchy becomes feasible;
namely, the mapping of the concrete as it emerges from practice onto the
abstract. The patterns of pilgrimage or other forms of religious visits to
the holy place denote an internalisation of the physical spaces through devout
behaviour. In this case, for example, through the process of the hajj or of
daily worship of God in Islam, as-salat, the Ka'be ceases to be a physical
structure, and starts to exist in the “geography of the soul.”

“Geography

of the soul” may also be referred to in terms of the habitus, the social,
psychological and symbolic structures that are established through

5 Margot Badran, Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist (1879-
1924) (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1987);
Lois Beck, Women in the Muslim World (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978);
Nikki R. Keddie, Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex
and Gender (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Fatima Mernissi, Women,
Saints and Sanctuaries (Lahore: Women’s Resource and Publication Centre,
1987); Women in Muslim History: Traditional Perspectives and New Strategies
(Lahore: Women’s Resource and Publication Centre, 1989); The Veil and the Male

6 Sadik Albayrak, Social Structure in Ottoman Empire and Istanbul under the
Light of 60 Original Documents, 70 – 71.

7 Halil Berktay, “Azizler, Cismani Kalıntılar, Haslar, Yatırılar: Tektanlık içinde
Özünsenmiş Paganizm”, 35.

collective habits as a reflection of the mind in relation to the surrounding environment and that of the surrounding environment to individual and collective behavioural patterns. In this sense, Ka'be exists in the habitual geography of every Muslim who turns towards it daily. In considering the constitution of spatiality in Islam then, it is not just the architecture of mosques and türbes that must be taken into account, but also phenomena like sounds—the call to prayer (ezan) or even the sound of the traffic that surrounds the türbe.

After the republic was founded, the core of the city of Ankara, Hacettepe, where people both lived and came to express their wishes to various saints, was rebuilt as a hospital area. The state not only took over the deserted homes of the Armenians and Greeks but also bought up historic Ankara houses from the residents for bargain prices and demolished them to build the Hacettepe Hospital and University. The remnants of the past were either destroyed or maintained in a state of isolation when appropriate, like the tomb area.

A similar isolation is experienced in relation to the multi-layered memory of the history of the nation, but obviously in this case, memories can not be purchased like houses, or successfully replaced by a new history. Ankara was rebuilt with boulevards and state buildings that Weimar architects designed according to styles that were prevalent in Europe in the 1920s. In contrast to the narrow streets, poor and modest homes and the saintly tombs of the old Ankara, buildings like the new Assembly and Hacettepe Hospital were built as indicators of the new power structures. At the time that Ankara was being transformed from a village into the capital of the republic, state officials unofficially forbade villagers to walk along the new boulevards of the city, as they did not consider them modern enough to inhabit these new spaces. The boulevards became the new face of the capital city, and the buildings that graced them as well as the people who walked them had to conform to the new ideals of civilisation. In short, one had to adopt a certain appearance in order to be part of the new nation and the new city.

During this period of reconstruction, characterized, amongst other things, by the prohibition on the past, there emerged an unbearable tension between villagers and “modern” city dwellers. In fact, the saintly tombs that survived demolition came to play a crucial role in resolving this tension. The saintly tombs are still today among the most important landmarks of the city both for city-born women who have internalised the values of the nation and for people who maintain the traditions of their villages. The former voice these values as they subtly swing their arms along the streets of the changing city that itself has become part of their psychology. Some of these women relate to the traumas of the past and the demands of the modern nation through a delicate balance, respecting the ban on the türbe by not visiting these saints any more, while at the same time continuing to respect the memory of saints by refusing to forget them. Similarly, for the village women who migrated to the city during the period of the ban, the locks on the doors of the türbe did not mean much, since they went anyway to saintly locations to pray in the vicinity of the building.

The case of the tomb of Tezveren in the city of Ankara is an example of how the constitution of space, while intrinsically political, transcends the realm of politics narrowly defined, and how certain spiritual spaces are capable of transforming politics in turn. Tezveren is one of the saints whose tomb used to be a part of the old city of Ankara. In the midst of the demolition and reconstruction of the early republic, this tomb proved to be the one that could not be destroyed in the course of building a highway that connected different university hospitals situated around Hacettepe. It stands today in the middle of a main highway, at the top of a hill.

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10 Personal interview with Ms N. filmed by Ersan Ocak, Middle East Technical University, Center for Audio Visual Systems (Gisam) Archive, August 1999.
12 Ms. K., Personal interview, April 2005.
morning air and started walking. The guards were surprised. One of them

prayed in front of the tiirbe of the sheik. As dawn broke, it is said that the

lock fell open, and from the wide open door came Haci Bayram-l Veli out

the door.

of the tiirbe with his beautiful, holy face; he looked around, inhaled the

towards his own tomb during the period of the ban: the doors of the tiirbe,

remained open. This was noted upon several different occasions.

Tezveren, that is, “apt provider,” is either referred to as Tezveren Dede

(father) or, by some, as Tezveren Hatun (lady). The ambiguity in his/her
gender does not hinder pedestrians from praying by the tomb while
crossing the highway. The positioning of the tomb can be an effective
agent in constructing this pattern because Hacettepe-Numune Hospital
region is an extremely public place where there are very few residential
buildings. The people who come by, take three rapid clockwise turns
around the tomb and then say their prayers usually at its foot.

Whereas the “miraculating” of the saintly tomb of Tezveren took place
during the nation’s rebuilding process, there existed another saint who was
responsible for other miracles during the twenty-five year ban on tiirbes;

namely, Haci Bayram, (1352-1439 CE; Hegira, 753-833), who was a
prominent guild organizer and spiritual leader in his time. The narrations
of his miracles are numerous, but his most recent miracle was directed
at the ban, and after it was lifted they simply continued with their practices of
care and worship. As a result, the women who attended the türbe
transformed but maintained the religious habits of their female lineage.

A series of renovation projects wiped out everything from this area
except the famous Haci Bayram Mosque and tomb, and finally the
cemetery was replaced with a wide concrete square in 1995. The isolation
of the area on top of the smaller one of the two hills that used to constitute
old Ankara started in the early decades of the republic. As the city grew,

and became mute and the other started slapping his friend. Nobody dared to

guard the türbe after this occasion. The wide open doors became a
peculiarity of the saintly tomb during the ban, while lock-opening is still a

common part of the visitors’ act of ritual.

Almost every woman that I have interviewed knew this story, but the
most interesting account belonged to Ms F., who denied that Haci
Bayram’s türbe had ever in fact been locked. Interestingly, this particular
türbe, due to its central location, came to be the one where the imposition
of the ban that prevailed between the foundation of the republic and the
first revival of Islam in 1950s was the most severe. However, in general
women were not prevented from attending the türbes during the period of
the ban, and after it was lifted they simply continued with their practices of
care and worship. As a result, the women who attended the türbe
transformed but maintained the religious habits of their female lineage.

In fact this area is rich in historical artefacts. The Temple built for the
Roman emperor Augustus in 25-20 BCE may be found next to the mosque
and tomb of Haci Bayram. However, while the mosque is in full usage,
the temple is preserved but has not been restored. In the past the temple
was used as a medrese, a school for the disciples of Haci Bayram. In

13 Numan bin Ahmed bin Mahmud, Haci Bayram Veli
(http://www.blogueu.com/yunusum/136295, last visited 31. 06.06); “O Kapılar
Kapanınaz” Yeni Mesaj
08-31, 31.08.2004).
14 Yaşar Kalaflat, “Hacı Bayram Veli ve Bayramı Türbeleri Etrafında Oluşan Halk
İnançları”, 59. Also see Fuat Bayramoğlu, Hacı Bayram-ı Veli: Yaşamı, Soyu,
Vakfı.
15 The Ministry of Culture, The Augustus Temple of Ankara
CFB32E14B9518503C732676)
modern day Ankara, this area is generally very crowded, as many funerals take place there.

Ankara is full of surprising patterns laid down during its long history. The carnage of successive waves of invasions has left few traces in the city. But what of the past has remained is right before you in an uncanny jumble. There are very few places in the region where Turkish culture has mixed and intermingled with the remains of previous civilisations in such a vivid way. The most meaningful of such irregular patterns is the contrast between the remains of the Roman marble temple, built in honour of Emperor Augustos, and the Mosque of Hacı Bayram-ı Veli, both of which exist today side by side.\(^\text{16}\)

It is also possible to observe through moments of crossover and contact the subtle interweaving of religious institutions and those of the state. One of the women interviewed in the present study tells the story of Hacı Bayram, and in so doing indicates a web of family connections that includes a leading politician of the new republic, as well personalising the nation-building process:

Actually, when my grandmother died, that stork came and it did something near [Hacı Bayram’s] shrine, so they buried her there. She is there. Also, I had another sister that I have not mentioned. We were five girls. She died when she finished primary school. She used to be very pretty, they say. She is also there. From the lineage of Hacı Bayram. ... Look, İnönü’s mother is also there. I think it was İnönü’s [mother]. He also was a prime-minister [of Turkey]. It must have been a close relative of İnönü, probably his mother. She is also buried at Hacı Bayram. It used to be a cemetery, ... Then the place was all cleaned away: for example, we do not know [where] our grandmother’s bones [are].\(^\text{17}\)

At a more official level, Mustafa Kara draws on Şapolyo’s *History of the Tariqat’s* to describe the religious ritual that formed part of the opening of the National Assembly that marked the institutional inauguration of the new secular state:

On April 23\(^\text{rd}\) of 1923, the day that the National Assembly of Turkey was going to open, all the representatives had been to the Mosque of Hacı

\(^{16}\)Ahmet Handi Tanpınar, *Beş Şehir*, 15.


Bayram. After the *salat*, extracts from the Koran were read. ... The tariqat flag of *Hacı Bayram Veli* was brought (several rituals took place) and the community came before the assembly while they were announcing the unity of God. Mustafa Kemal Pasha welcomed the group there. Two sacrifices of sheep were made in front of the assembly before the group entered. Hacı Bayram Veli’s flag, which had many verses from the Koran on it, was erected on the rostrum. The holy Koran and a part of Mohamed’s beard were also put there. ... The assembly was opened by making use of Hacı Bayram Veli’s spiritual influence. The spiritual soul of this saint embraced the Turkish republic, which came in place of the down-fall of the Ottoman State. Ankara became the centre of the new Turkey. The spiritual influence of Hacı Bayram Veli tied all the intellectuals to Ankara.\(^\text{18}\)

\(^{18}\)Mustafa Kara, *Din, Hayat, Sanat Açısından Tekke ve Zaviyeler*, 328.
of modern Turkey from the richer newly-built parts of the city used to visit Karyagd during the 1960s, after the ban was lifted. Women from different social classes still intermingle there today.

Built in 1577, the Karyagd türbe represents the moment of childbirth. The etymology of the name refers to snow—"it snowed" in Turkish—a reflection of the story of the female saint to whom the türbe is dedicated. It is said that the anonymous saint buried there prayed to God for snow—"mihiberek biraz es" (blessed wind, blow some)—in the middle of August, the 8th month of her pregnancy. When it finally did snow, she ate several mouthfuls and died. Thus, Karyagd Sultan can be considered an expression of the theme linking the bringing of life into the world with death: she is a pregnant woman whose saintliness and death both reside in the same desire—the element of snow. And accordingly, this "female generative spirit" also becomes "a source of death" for herself.

The story of Karyagd is familiar to people who have lived long enough in Ankara, especially women, and for many it is the kind of location that one visits every once in a while. There are others, however, who express a more powerful devotion to it. Hikmet Tanyu has given an account of an old woman who volunteered as the caretaker of the türbe during the ban and lived on the tips the visitors granted her. Nezih Araz also remembers her and relates a saying of hers: "When everybody is in their deepest sleep, something comes down from the skies. I wouldn't know whether it is snow or the divine light. I only know that it disappears before it touches the ground." The old woman lived in a small cottage near the türbe. It appears that when the state appointed personnel to take care of the saintly tombs during the time of the ban, she became a self-appointed employee of the saint rather than the state.

At the present moment, there is a middle-aged man who opens Karyagd in the mornings and closes it at 6 o'clock in the evenings. He is a state official who has been working there for the last twenty years. He says that the spirit of Karyagd Hatun influences his family as well as himself. He believes that there is an undeniable connection between him, his family and the saint. Prior to his employment, immediately after the ban was lifted, the türbe became the private property of an association, which started collecting money from the visitors. The caretaker is of the opinion that the visitors were being exploited, and that the state take-over that

19 Elif Ekin Akşit, Kil'erin Sessizliği.
followed was the best solution to the problem, concluding that in the end, Karyağdı Sultan punished those people who would exploit it.

In the state documents on the türbes it is repeatedly mentioned that male saints were the owners of the very important tombs. Accordingly, Karyağdı Sultan was not considered a Turkish or Islamic hero. However, academic works by writers like Hikmet Tanyu and popular books such as that of Nezihe Araz provide a counterpoint to these state-oriented accounts by introducing to a wider audience the figure of the female caretaker to the story of Karyağdı. These works belong to the 1967-68 period, which happens to be the time when the ban on this particular türbe was lifted—Karyağdı Sultan being one of the last saintly tombs to be officially restored to use. It is worthwhile noting that while the old woman who took care of the türbe during the period of the ban encouraged people to continue in their devotion to the saintly tomb, the visitor frequency has increased from a daily number of three to four during her time and fifteen to twenty since 1968.

Since then, with minor space re-arrangements, a small library that consists of the Koran and prayer books is now maintained for the use of visitors. Unlike other saintly locations, this türbe and its library serves as a private female space. It is very much a part of the local environment, which is a shopping area, where the majority of the shop-owners and the shoppers are male in higher proportion to other parts of the city. Thus, in this social situation, Karyağdı Sultan provides a private space much needed by women in this district. Recently the surroundings of the türbe were rearranged to keep the blacksmiths, tinsmiths and repairmen away from the shrine, giving female devotees their private space.

**Women in Religious Spaces and the Politics of Religion**

Whereas in Turkey, the mosque is considered the primary religious space, the türbe is secondary to it in terms of religious importance. As has been seen in this essay, however, the usage of religious space tells another story. The noun mosque (cami) literally means “coming together” but merely defines the behaviour of men as they go to mosques as a group on a regular basis. Women, by contrast, attend mosques more independently and in a less regulated way. In fact, the only time women regularly attend the mosque is for the extra night prayer of teravih, during the religious season of Ramadan. The reserved sections for women in Turkish mosques are separated from the main spaces reserved for men. Women use either underground, second floor spaces isolated from the real structure or curtained off spaces within the main structure of the mosque. They are obliged to use back-door entrances. Being isolated in the mosque, it is natural that women do not frequent the space regularly. Such behavioural patterns of mosque-going change little between urban or rural contexts. For example, in order to demonstrate that gender was a privilege relating to praying in mosques, a young female journalist from an urban environment went to her local mosque and performed her salat behind hundreds of men, to the exasperation of the mosque attendees. By the same token, Delaney reports that in a particular village near Ankara men spend their days with their friends, usually within the precincts of the village mosque, while women may not.

A similar isolation has been the case historically. Marginality for women in official places of worship existed before the ban. Leyla Hanım’s case is such an example: A poet of the early nineteenth century, she is known to have shed bitter tears at the gate of the dervish lodge. The place was then forbidden to female disciples, and Leyla Hanım was imploring God to explain why “a small piece of flesh”—the male organ—was denied

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24 Law 3/10990.


During the early twentieth century, in a period of revolutionary activity in the Ottoman Empire as well as one of global transformation, the process for the inclusion of urban women in social life was experienced. Men and women were to be together in political and social institutions such as the National Assembly or schools. This was not the case for the mosques.

Accordingly, it would be fallacious to conclude that the ban on the saintly tombs has destroyed the spatiality for the exercise of women’s religion. The ban has only destroyed a good chance of a multiple spatiality for women’s visibility in public spaces but not their religion. But it could not prevent women’s communication with the türbes, which provided them with a space for the exercise of religion. Thus, ironically, for many women, the türbes, transcended their function as tombs and began to serve as a space of coming together on an independent, but non-exclusive basis during and after the ban. In other words, the türbe, as a space for the regeneration of life from death, also provided the grounds for inclusive religious practice both within the context of, and despite, the ban. In short, as an unintended consequence of the state politics of religion and gender, women acquired a private space for themselves in mainstream religious culture that the state did not approve of, but ironically made possible with its Laws of Silence.

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