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CONNECTING HERE AND HEREAFTER: THE HAREM AĞALAR TEAVÜN YURDU (THE EUNUCHS' MUTUAL AID SOCIETY), 1919-1941

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Abstract: This article presents the preliminary findings of a research project on the experiences of Ottomans of African origin—referred to as *Afro-Ottomans* in this project—focusing on the *Harem Ağalar Teavün Yurdu* (The Eunuchs' Mutual Aid Society), a mutual aid association founded by former harem eunuchs of African origin who remained free individuals in the late Ottoman and early Republican periods. Contrary to depictions of African-origin Ottomans as "silent" or even "absent/invisible" figures in historical narratives, *the Harem Ağalar Teavün Yurdu* provides one of the clearest examples of their visibility and institutional resilience during the turbulent years of the transition from empire to republic. The discovery and use of minute records, titled *Harem Ağalar Teavün Yurdu Heyet-i İdare-i Mukarrarât Defteri* (Minute Book of the Board of Directors of the Eunuchs' Mutual Aid Society), as a primary source is central to this article. It constitutes a rare micro-historical lens through which the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic can be examined from the very heart of the imperial system—through the voices and practices of those who had once embodied the most loyal and symbolic servants of the old regime. Read collectively, these records offer critical insights into the nature of post-imperial transformation and the ways in which former harem eunuchs reorganised their lives and institutions in response to the collapse of the imperial order.

Keywords: *Afro-Ottomans, Afrikâ-yi Osmânî, harem eunuchs, African diaspora studies, post-imperial studies*

Research Framework

This research is grounded in long-term scholarly engagement with African Studies and the Ottoman Empire's interactions with Africa using the concept of *Afrikâ-yi Osmânî* (Ottoman Africa) as an analytical framework to understand

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the Ottoman Empire's presence in Africa. Rather than approaching Africa as a peripheral frontier of the empire, *Afrikâ-yi Osmânî* conceptualises it as a dynamic space of political, cultural, and economic interaction that shaped both the Ottoman Empire and the continent itself. From this perspective, Africa emerges not as a minor footnote in Ottoman history, but as a deeply entangled imperial domain (Ugur 2022; Ugur Babavatan 2003). Building on this approach, the focus of the research project gradually extended from examining the Ottoman presence in Africa to exploring the presence of Africans within the Ottoman world. This shift was formed by engagement with contemporary *Afro-Turk* communities and the growing body of scholarship surrounding them, enabling this community to be understood as part of the Ottoman legacy of Africa (Olpak 2006; Ferguson 2014; Akpınar 2016; Özsar 2020; Kayacan 2007–2008). At this context, new questions emerged regarding the representation of Africans in the Ottoman world not as passive subjects of imperial policy, but as active participants in shaping Ottoman social, cultural, and bureaucratic structures. These historical trajectories led the research project to increasingly centre on the concept of the *Afro-Ottoman*, developed to historicise the presence of people of African origin within the Ottoman Empire across different periods. The conceptual shift from "Afro-Turk" to "Afro-Ottoman" constitutes a central intervention of the research project. While existing scholarship has largely referred to Afro-Turks as a modern community shaped by the legacies of slavery within a republican and national framework, the concept of Afro-Ottoman aims to situate African presence within the *longue durée* of Ottoman history and focuses on their social visibility and collective organisation by moving beyond nation-state categories (Ugur 2023: 1–19).

One of the latest historical examples through which this presence can be observed is the *Harem Ağalar Teavün Yurdu* (The Eunuchs' Mutual Aid Society; hereafter the Society). This article focuses on this *Society*, examining its institutional structure, social functions, and historical significance within the Afro-Ottoman experience. Founded in 1919 by former court eunuchs who were brought to the empire as enslaved people, it gradually integrated into the imperial elite society and eventually occupied significant positions within the Ottoman palace bureaucracy from 16th century onward. However, with the abolition of the Harem in 1909,[1] and the subsequent

1 Although the Ottoman imperial harem was never abolished by a single official decree, it gradually dissolved through a series of political transformations in the early 20th century. The process began with the 1908 Young Turk Revolution, which curtailed the power and expenses of the palace, followed by the deposition of Sultan Abdülhamid II in 1909, after which the Yıldız Palace harem was disbanded. The abolition of the sultanate in 1922 and, more decisively, the abolition of the caliphate in 1924 marked the effective end of the harem institution. With the closure of the palaces, many

dissolution of the empire, they lost both their institutional roles and social status. The *Society* was established to provide mutual support for these former palace eunuchs during the difficult transition period from empire to republic. Despite its significance, this organisation remains virtually unstudied. Drawing on substantial archival material, the present article aims to investigate its structure and the idea behind its establishment and presents preliminary findings. By exploring the association's post-imperial transformation, the article offers a critical case study for global diaspora studies, shedding light on how displaced communities sustain mutual solidarity, preserve identity, and reconstruct forms of belonging in the aftermath of empire.

Historical Background

The employment of eunuchs in the Ottoman imperial palace constituted a long-standing institutional practice from the early fifteenth century through the late nineteenth century. Following the consolidation of the *Harem* within Topkapı Palace during the reign of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent (1520-1566), the *Harem-i Hümâyûn* (Imperial Harem) emerged as a central administrative and political institution of the Ottoman court (Peirce 1993). A further transformation occurred in the late sixteenth century, particularly under Sultan Murad III (1574-1595), with the formal establishment of the office of Dârüssaâde *Ağalığı* (The Office of the Chief Harem Eunuch), the Harem eunuchs were organised within a distinct institutional body and were formally registered, trained, and incorporated into the palace hierarchy (Hathaway 2018; Karakoç 2005).

From the sixteenth century onward, especially after the establishment of the Habesh (Abyssinian) province, the Ottoman palace relied increasingly on transregional slave-trading networks to supply eunuchs for imperial service. The conquest of the Mamluk Sultanate by Selim I (r. 1512-20) facilitated access to African slave routes through Sudan to Cairo, while Ottoman expansion into Abyssinia under Süleyman integrated the Red Sea and eastern African regions into the imperial sphere. As a result, large numbers of Abyssinian and other East African eunuchs entered the Ottoman palace and elite households. Over time, Abyssinians—known as Habeshis—came to be regarded as the most valued eunuchs, distinguished

women of the harem and their attendants were either exiled with members of the royal family or integrated into civilian life. By 1924, the Ottoman harem, once a powerful and symbolic center of imperial authority, had ceased to exist as an official structure.

from other sub-Saharan Africans collectively labelled as Zanj (Hathaway 2005: 11–16; Zambaco Pacha 1911). Entry into the *Zenci Ağalar Ocağı* (Corps of the Black Eunuchs) marked the beginning of palace careers that, following extensive education and training, could result in service as Harem eunuchs (Turan 1999). Until the eighteenth centuries, the Dârüssaâde *Ağalığı* (The Office of the Chief Harem Eunuch) developed into key power brokers within the Ottoman political order. Positioned third in the imperial protocol hierarchy after the Grand Vizier and the Sheikh al-Islam, the chief jurist of the Ottoman Empire, the Dârüssaâde *Ağası* functioned not merely as a court servant but as a central political actor. As discussed by Hathaway, figures such as Habeshi Mehmed Ağa and Hacı Beşir Ağa exemplify the extraordinary influence achieved by the Chief Harem Eunuchs. This power became stronger under Sultan Murad III, when the imperial harem expanded and the office of chief harem eunuch was created, giving black eunuchs control over the harem and the dynastic household. Their power was later reinforced by *Evkâfü'l Haremeyn* (The Pious Foundations of the Two Holy Sanctuaries) which entrusted the Dârüssaâde Ağası with the administration of extensive religious and financial endowments linked to Mecca and Medina (Hathaway 2018: 57, 60–63). Economic resources enabled Harem eunuchs to sponsor mosques, madrasas, libraries, and other charitable institutions, reinforcing their legitimacy and social prestige within Ottoman society. Some also distinguished themselves through cultural patronage, contributing to calligraphy, illumination, and miniature painting, and by founding libraries (Açıl 2020: 65–68) that supported Ottoman intellectual life. Being close to the sultan and the *Valide sultan* (mother of reigning sultan), together with control over patronage networks, and *waqfs* (pious endowments) administration, as well as training in Islamic sciences, administration, accounting, and palace protocol enabled black eunuchs to operate as autonomous political actors rather than merely court servants (Hathaway 2005: 85–102).

The Dârüssaâde *Ağası* preserved much of their authority until the second half of the nineteenth century. The proclamation of the *Gülhane Edict* in 1839 marked a turning point in the institutional history of the Harem, as the power of Harem eunuchs gradually declined. Administrative reforms, the suppression of slave trade, and the construction of new European-style palaces—such as Dolmabahçe Palace and Yıldız Palace—physically and symbolically marginalised the harem within the imperial order, confining the eunuchs' responsibilities largely to internal palace service. Hathaway emphasises that the *Tanzimat*-era transformation dramatically diminished

the visibility of Harem eunuchs in the sense that they no longer sponsored major architectural projects nor appeared prominently in illuminated manuscripts (Hathaway 2018: 235–238).

The proclamation of II. Meşrutiyet (the Second Constitutional Era) in 1908, followed by the deposition and exile of Sultan Abdülhamid II, further weakened the already fragile position of the Harem eunuchs. Current literature has generally treated this moment as the end of their historical significance and studies on slavery and Harem eunuchs have largely concluded their analysis with the Tanzimat reforms or, at the latest, the Second Constitutional Era. Evidence suggests that the Zenci Ağalar Ocağı (Corps of the Black Eunuchs) did not disappear after the Tanzimat but continued in a transformed institutional form known as the Ağavat Ocağı (The Corps of the Harem Aghas). Although it has received limited scholarly attention, valuable information is provided by Halit Ziya Uşaklıgil, who served for nearly four years as the Chief Secretary of the Imperial Privy Chamber (Mabeyn Başkâtibi) under Sultan Mehmed Reşad. According to Uşaklıgil, the Ağavat Ocağı (The Corps of the Harem Aghas) functioned as a centralised institution in which harem Aghas, serving not only in the sultan's palace but also in the palaces of princes and imperial women, were registered according to specific ranks. Appointments were made with this institution as needed, and those found unsatisfactory could be returned to the *ocak* (corps) and replaced. These eunuchs resided collectively in a large residence near Dolmabahçe Palace in Beşiktaş under the supervision of the Chief Harem Ağa. A similar description, drawing directly on Uşaklıgil's account, is also found in Pakalın's work (Uşaklıgil 1940-41: 216; Pakalın 1971: 24).

This continuity suggests that traditions of solidarity and collective organisation among Harem Aghas persisted well into the late Ottoman period through institutions such as the Ağavat Ocağı, challenging narratives that framed their post-Tanzimat history as one of decline and disappearance. As a result, relatively little attention has been paid to the fate of the members of this deeply rooted imperial institution during the final years of the Ottoman Empire and the early decades of the Republic – that is, in the post-imperial period. What happened to the hundreds of harem eunuchs who had served for centuries as guardians of the imperial household after the collapse of the empire? With no families or descendant of their own, where did they find themselves during the years of dramatic political transformations? These questions become particularly significant in the context of the crisis that followed the Mondros Armistice of 30 October 1918, when the Ottoman army was largely demobilised, and the empire's remaining territories were opened to Allied occupation.

The years between the armistice and the abolition of the Sultanate in 1922, followed by the abolition of the Caliphate in 1924, marked a turbulent transition from empire to republic. Following the deposition of the last Ottoman Sultan Vahdeddin and the dissolution of the imperial court, eunuchs had to leave the palace and seek new means of livelihood. Yet the turbulent decade that followed—from the Balkan Wars through the First World War and the Allied occupation of Istanbul—reveals a far more complex picture. Exhausted by nearly four decades of continuous wars and facing the social and economic devastation of the Armistice period (1918-1922), Istanbul experienced important transformations marked by occupation, mass displacement, and political uncertainty. It was within this context of imperial collapse and social dislocation that former palace servants sought new forms of collective survival. While some accounts suggest that some returned to Ethiopia and even served in the Ethiopian army, others reportedly migrated to Tunisia or Egypt, there remains remarkably little knowledge about how these former guardians of the Ottoman Empire survived, adapted, and sustained their lives in the early Republican period (Junne 2016: 272).

Founded by fourteen former harem eunuchs, the *Harem Ağalar Teavün Yurdu* emerged as a mutual-aid society aimed at providing material and moral supports to its members. Unlike many contemporary charitable organisations that addressed broader segments of society, it focused on solidarity among Harem eunuchs. This organisation may thus represent a critical "transitional institution," showing the power of African-descended former palace elites to collectively manage the transition from empire to republic. It also shows the African-origin Ottomans resilience, communal ties, and organisational capacity to survive and adapt to the early twentieth-century socio-political order under a new regime and in a new world. This study therefore seeks to understand their collective organisation through primary sources.

Literature and Sources

Despite its historical significance, the existing literature on the *Harem Ağalar Teavün Yurdu* and its activities remains limited with two articles published in *Toplumsal Tarih*, the first, authored by Okay in 1997, introduced the institution by providing a brief commentary accompanied by a transcription of its eight-page constitution dated 1335 (1919) (Okay 1997: 48–49). The second one, published in 2003 by Karakışla, offers an overview of the harem

eunuchs and includes its second constitution 1339 (1923) as a full Turkish transcription text (Karakışla 2003; 12-21). Both studies focus primarily on the *Nizamnâme-i Esâsî* (The Founding Statute) which proves the formal establishment of the Society.

The minute records titled *Harem Ağalar Teavün Yurdu Heyet-i İdare-i Mukarrarât Defteri* (Minute Book of the Board of Directors of the Eunuchs' Mutual Aid Society) (hereafter *Mukarrarât Defteri*), which contains the complete records of the Society's board meetings from its establishment in 1919 to 1931, has not been studied yet.[2] The present research brings this crucial source to light for the first time, offering detailed insights in its activities.



Figure 1. Harem Ağalar Teavün Yurdu Nizamname-i Esasidir. [This is the Founding Statute of the Eunuchs' Mutual Aid Society], Türk Tarih Kurumu Kütüphanesi [Turkish Historical Society Library], 7206; A/5263.

The *Mukarrarât Defteri* is a bound manuscript consisting of 90 folios, currently held in the Rare Works Collection of the Istanbul University Library. Except for the final two pages and a few blank spaces, the manuscript was written on both sides of each folio. It serves as the official record of the routine board meetings held

2 Harem Ağalar Teavün Yurdu Heyet-i İdare Mukarrarât Defteri [Minute Book of the Board of Directors of the Eunuchs' Mutual Aid Society] (1919–1931), Nadir Eserler Koleksiyonu [Rare Works Collection], 48489.

by the executive members of the Society, covering exactly November 1919 to 6 April 1931. The manuscript opens with an index (*fihrist*) section that categorises the decisions by topic. The main body follows a highly structured format for documenting the gatherings that each entry begins with the exact date, followed by a hierarchical list of the attending participants—harem eunuchs—along with their specific board titles, such as President *(Reis),* Treasurer (*Veznedar*), or Inspector (*Müfettiş)*. This is followed by the resolutions taken during the meeting, listed point by point. The entry concludes with designated spaces for the handwritten names and signatures of the attendees. Occasionally, specific notes indicating dissenting votes (*muhalefet şerhi*) on certain articles are penned next to the participants' names or signatures, personally, by the attending eunuchs during or after their meetings.

A striking technical feature of the manuscript is its historical reflection of the Turkish Alphabet Reform. While the earlier records were kept in the Arabic Script (Ottoman Turkish), the entries officially transition to the new Latin alphabet starting with a meeting dated 3 June 1929. In addition to the main minute book, two supplementary documents are incorporated into the research. The first is a three-page document recording a general assembly meeting held on 22-23 *Teşrîn-i Sânî* 926 (22-23 November 1926), which was kept separate from the main book. The second is a fourteen-page file documenting the general assembly meetings held in 1335, 1337, 1338, and 1339 (1919–1923).[3] Based on these sources, it is evident that the Society remained active at least until 1939. Over the course of its activity, the *Society* held approximately 190 to 195 documented meeting records. Most of these entries consist of about 185 routine decision-making meetings held by *the Society*'s board of directors (*Heyet-i idâre*). During the initial years of the society's establishment (1919-1923), the board operated highly actively, convening almost every week; in the subsequent years, it was decided that meetings would be held every fifteen days; and in the years following 1925, the frequency of the gatherings gradually declined, resulting in gaps lasting months. In addition to routine board sessions, the documents include records of the widely attended annual General Assembly (*Heyet-i Umumiye*), during which budgets were approved, votes were tallied, and new board members were elected. The primary general assembly dates identifiable from the documents are as follows: 24 March 1337 (1921), 24 March 1338 (1922), 16 March 1339 (1923), 22-23 November 1926, and 29 June 1928.

3 İBB Atatürk Kitaplığı, Harem Ağaları Teavün Cemiyetini'nin 9 Teşrin-i Evvel 1335 Tarihli Kabul Edilen İdare Heyeti Listesi ve Toplantı Tutanağı [List of the Accepted Board of Directors and Meeting Minute of the Harem Aghas' Mutual Aid Society, Dated 9 Teşrin-i Evvel 1335], Nadir Eserler Koleksiyonu [Rare Books Collection], no. 48543.

However, no meeting records dated between 1931 and 1939 have been identified in the currently accessible sources. The absence of additional *Mukarrarât Defteri* covering these years does not necessarily indicate that the Society ceased to hold meetings during this period. Rather, the relevant documents may remain uncatalogued or stored under different classifications. Consequently, the frequency and regularity of gatherings in these later years cannot be established with certainty. Although the Society is known to have changed its name in 1939, the extent of its continued existence remains unclear. Nevertheless, a notice published on the last page of the *Akşam* newspaper dated 11 July 1941 announces and invites members to attend the annual meeting of the *Eski Emektarlar Birliği* (Association of Former Servants) scheduled to be held on 19 July 1941 at its headquarters in Divanyolu, one of the principal administrative and commercial neighbourhoods of the Historic Peninsula in the late nineteenth century, extending between Sultanahmet Square and Beyazıt Square.[4]



Figure 2. Harem Ağalar Teavün Yurdu Heyet-i İdare Mukarrarât Defteri [Minute Book of the Board of Directors of the Eunuchs' Mutual Aid Society], Nadir Eserler Koleksiyonu [Rare Books Collection], 48489.

The Structure of the Harem Ağalar Teavün Yurdu

The Establishment

The Society was established in 1919 with official governmental authorisation (*ruhsat-ı resmiye*), following a preparatory phase during which the founding executive board was constituted on 9 October 1919. The records note that the Society was successfully founded on 1 November 1919 by fourteen former

4 Akşam, 11 July 1941.

Dârüssaâde Aghas; the founding members were: Ser-musâhib-i sâbık Lâlâ Enver Ağa, Tahsin Celâl Ağa (mostly recorded as Muallim Tahsin), Beşîr Fuâd Ağa, Musâhib-i pâdişâhî Hayreddîn Ağa (Sabık Musahib Hayreddin), Musâhib-i pâdişâhî Nevres Ağa (Sabık Musahib Nevres), Mes'ûd Halîl Rıf'at Ağa, Muhiddîn Cevâd Ağa, Yâver Rıdvân Ağa, İsmâil Şevket Ağa, Hâcı Hayreddîn Ağa, Yâver Şevket Ağa, Cevher Beşîr Ağa, Hâcı Hâlid Ağa, Yâver Kâmil Ağa (Nadir Eserler Collection, no. 48543, p. 4). Their titles, such as Ser-musâhib, Musâhib-i Pâdişâhî (imperial confidant), Yaver (aide-de-camp), and Lala (tutor) make clear that the Society was not founded by ordinary palace servants but by a group of highly ranked, trusted, and influential Harem eunuchs within the Ottoman court.

According to the founding statute of the Society, the membership categories reveal a hierarchical organisation centred on harem eunuchs as its core members and divided into ordinary members (*A'zâ-yı Tabiiyye*) and distinguished members (*A'zâ-yı Mümtâze*) according to their level of financial contribution. On the other hand, the Society was not limited to Harem eunuchs but also incorporated members of the Ottoman dynasty (Hanedân-i Âli Osman) as well as high-ranking state officials. They were registered as *A'zâ-yı Hâmiye* (Patron Members). *A'zâ*-yı Müessese/Âmile include members who became active in the establishment and organisation of society from the beginning. Another category of membership was *A'zâ-yı Muâvene* (Supporting Members) including eunuchs who enrolled as members of the Society by paying annual or monthly membership dues.[5]

It's Character as a Charitable Organisation

The Society defined itself as a charitable organisation (*Cemiyet-i Hayriyye)* in the first article of its founding statue of 1919 with the primary aim of fostering collective belonging and mutual solidarity among harem eunuchs employed in palaces, private households, or working independently, thereby reinforcing communal bonds and shared identity (Harem Ağalar, 1). To sustain the material and moral cohesion of this vulnerable community, the Society developed a wide range of welfare, religious, and educational activities. These included instruction in literacy, arithmetic and bookkeeping to prepare younger members for commercial activity and economic self-sufficiency as well as covering medical expenses and facilitating hospital

5 Harem Ağalar Teavün Yurdu Nizamnâme-i Esâsîsi [The Founding Statute of the Eunuchs' Mutual Aid Society], (Istanbul: Necm-i İstikbal Matbaası), Türk Tarih Kurumu Kütüphanesi [Turkish Historical Society Library], A 5263, 5.

treatment and providing shelter for elderly and needy members. At the same time, the Society assumed responsibility for funerary and posthumous services, including burial, grave construction, and the regular recitation of *Mevlid-i Nebî* (poem commemorating the Prophet Muhammad's birth) and Qur'an for deceased members. Through this dual commitment to worldly welfare and spiritual continuity, the Society functioned as an institutional bridge between here and hereafter, offering its members both material protection in life and ritualised belonging hereafter. This concern was closely linked to the fact that the biological lineage of harem eunuchs would not continue, a condition producing another crucial function of the Society, the question of legacy and endowment. Anticipating the eventual extinction *(inkıraz)* of the harem eunuch community, the Nizâmnâme specified the disposition of the Society's assets upon its dissolution. According to this provision, half of the remaining property was to be endowed to the *Gureba-yı Müslimin Hospital* [Bezm-i Âlem Hospital for Destitute Muslims], the first modern civilian hospital (Ataseven 1996) while the other half was designated for the establishment of primary schools in the most remote villages of Anatolia, thereby transforming institutional loss into a collective and national form of "social memory."

The Financial Resources

The Society's income was mainly driven from various sources including institutional support from the imperial treasury, membership contribitions, and charitable donations. Among these the *Ağavat Sandığı* (Fund of the Corps of the Harem Aghas) constituted one of the most significant and institutionalised sources of income for the Society with regular support.[6] It was originally established within the *Hazine-i Hassa-i Şahane [The Imperial Privy Treasury]* (Terzi 1998) as a special fund for the welfare and social security of harem eunuchs. The *Ağavat Sandığı* functioned as official

6 Although there is not much information available on the Ağavat Sandığı (which can be translated as "the Fund of the Corps of the Harem Aghas"), it was the common financial fund attached to the Ağavat Ocağı — the centralised institution in which harem Aghas were registered in the late nineteenth-century Ottoman palace administration. It must have operated as a mutual fund, or financial solidarity chest, that collected the contributions of Aghas registered with the corps (including not only those serving in the sultan's own palace, but also those serving in the palaces of princes and of the valide sultan/imperial women), and that provided mutual assistance, support during periods of temporary unemployment, and presumably care in old age. By imperial decree, the Society regularly received an annual allocation. Because these Aghas, being eunuchs, had no families of their own, they were especially dependent on this kind of institutional solidarity.

financial reservoir that sustained the Society's core activities. By imperial decree, the Society regularly received an annual allocation, typically amounting to 600 liras,[7] which was used to cover the essential expenses of impoverished members, including emergency cash assistance for those facing illness or extreme destitution (*Mukarrarat Defteri*, 41). In addition to this annual subsidy, the management of funds previously reserved within *the Ağavat Sandığı* for funerary services and religious rites, was transferred to the Society, including expenditures for the recitation of *Mevlid-i Şerif* and annual Qur'anic readings on behalf of deceased members (*Mukarrarat Defteri*, 13).

The Society also assumed responsibility for legal expenditures related to the fund, such as court fees and attorneys' payments incurred in inheritance disputes or debt recovery cases. With the transformation of the *Hazine-i Hassa* during the early Republican period, the administration of the *Ağavat Sandığı* was formally transferred in 1925 to the executive board of the Society effectively integrating this imperial-era fund into the Society's own financial structure. In this sense, the *Ağavat Sandığı* functioned as a crucial financial backbone, enabling the Society to sustain its welfare, funerary, and religious services while bridging imperial legacies and post-imperial institutional survival.

The minute records further demonstrate that allocations received from the *Ağavat Sandığı* were not obtained through informal or discretionary means, but through a strictly regulated bureaucratic procedure based on official correspondence, authorisation, and documentation. Rather than relying on direct cash collection, the Society operated a formal system of official petition and *makbuz senedi* (receipt). When an allocation was to be drawn, the president (*Reis*) of the Society submitted a written petition to the Directorate of the *Hazine-i Hassa-i Şahane*, specifying the amount requested, the intended purpose of the expenditure—such as essential aid for impoverished members—and the name of the authorised recipient. Payment was made only upon the presentation of a pre-issued receipt prepared by the Society, explicitly referenced in official correspondence as being delivered "in accordance with the submitted receipt." Funds were released exclusively to a designated and named person, most commonly

7 Since the Society was founded in the post-war years during a period of severe economic turmoil and high inflation, it is difficult to determine the exact amount for today's equivalents. Nevertheless, the available sources suggest that the monthly salary of an ordinary teacher in Istanbul was 840 kuruş (8.4 Liras), whereas the total cost of basic consumer goods according to the costs of living index was 4594 kuruş (Dölek Sever 2015: 57).

the Society's collector (*tahsildar*). In cases involving large transfers or the formal assumption of control over the fund—most notably following the full transfer of the *Ağavat Sandığı*'s administration to the Society in 1925—payments and authorisations were confirmed through a collectively sealed (*memhur*) receipt issued on behalf of all harem eunuchs (*Mukarrarat Defteri*, 69). Through this system, every financial transaction was documented, traceable, and formally recorded within the registers of the *Hazine-i Hassa*, underscoring that the *Ağavat Sandığı* functioned not as an informal charity reserve but as an institutionalised revenue source integrated into both imperial and post-imperial bureaucratic frameworks.

Seondly, membership contributions such as the entrance fees paid by the eunuchs for membership were also an important source of income for the Society. It varied according to their membership type: 24 liras for *A'zâ-yı Müessese* (Founding Members) or *Âmile* (Active Members), 12 liras for *A'zâ-yı Muavene* (Supporting Members), and 6 liras for *A'zâ-yı Tabiiye* (Ex Officio Members). In addition, members were required to pay regular monthly or annual dues: 1 lira monthly for *A'zâ-yı Müessese* or *Amile*, half a lira for *A'zâ-yı Muavene*, and 25 kuruş for *A'zâ-yı Tabiiye*. The association's financial resources were also supported by donations from *A'zâ-yı Hamiye* (Patron Members) and *A'zâ-yı Mümtâze* (Distinguished Members), who appreciated and endorsed the Society's mission (Harem Ağalar, 5).

Thirdly, charitable donations were another source of income for the Society, although their amount could vary over time, taking not only monetary forms but also in-kind contributions such as allocations of houses and land. For example, in its response to an official government inquiry on 28 January 1923, the Society reported that it had received 8000 liras in donations from members of the Ottoman dynasty, state dignitaries, and other benefactors (*Mukarrarat Defteri*, 108).

The management of all these revenues—including cash, movable and immovable properties, dues, and donations—was supervised by the board of directors (*Heyet-i İdare*). These resources were used officially and legally with the approval of either the president or the majority of the board. The president was authorised to make expenditures up to 1,000 kuruş independently, while expenditures exceeding this amount required the board's approval. Additionally, the president was responsible for preparing a monthly report on the Society's activities and financial status and ensuring that account statements were regularly published so that members were consistently informed of the financial situation.

The Structure of Governance

The Society's structure of governance comprised two main bodies: the General Assembly (*Heyet-i Umumiye*), which included all members, and the board of directors (*Heyet-i İdare)*, responsible for day-to-day operations. The General Assembly was held annually at the Society's headquarters, with additional meetings held as needed. During these meetings, the assembly reviewed and approved annual activity reports, financial statements, and budgets, and elected new executive board members. Meetings were chaired by a president, vice president, and secretary, all elected by secret ballot. A quorum required the presence of more than half the members from each category; if sufficient members were not present, a second meeting would be scheduled the following week with the members present.

The Executive Board consisted of 12 to 18 members elected by the General Assembly. Within the board, roles such as president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, and collectors were assigned through secret ballots. Meetings were held once a week or as needed, with decisions requiring a majority vote. The board's responsibilities included increasing membership, enhancing revenue, ensuring timely collection of dues, managing the Society's operations, and striving to achieve its charitable goals.

The Institutional Activities

Although not explicitly identified in official documents, the archival records consistently refer to Beşiktaş from 1920 onward, indicating that the early administrative activities of the *Society* were concentrated in this district. These locations generally represent buildings that were allocated, donated, rented, or later acquired by the society over time in response to shifting institutional needs and material constraints. Records from 1920 note that a "private office within the Beşiktaş Imperial Palace" *(Beşiktaş Saray-ı Hümâyunu dâhilinde bir daire-i mahsusa)* was allocated to the association, with its maintenance costs covered by the Society's own budget. Frequent references in meeting minutes to gatherings held in the "assembly room in Beşiktaş" further confirm the district's enduring role as the administrative centre of the Society (*Mukarrarat Defteri*, 11).

From its establishment in 1919, the Society had several activities, aimed at both securing the physical survival of harem eunuchs displaced by the First World War and enabling their adaptation to the social and institutional framework of the early Republican period. The records of the *Mukarrarât Defteri* reveal

that the Society functioned not merely as a charitable association, but as a comprehensive welfare, solidarity, and survival institution.

One of the Society's most concrete and sustained activities was the provision of housing and care for members who were elderly, infirm, or left without shelter. In this sense, the Society established and managed a series of residential care facilities (*nekahethane*) for harem eunuchs who were effectively left "without a home." Initially, a rented house in *Akaretler,* the first large-scale planned housing project of the Ottoman Empire, was used for this purpose, followed by a mansion in *Kuzguncuk* granted to the Society by the sultan. In the final phase, during a period of financial strain, Lala Said Ağa's mansion in Çamlıca served as a care facility for dependent members. These residences functioned as important shelters for society's welfare activities (*Mukarrarat Defteri*, 20, 176).

Healthcare provision constituted a core function of the Society's activities. It facilitated hospital admissions to major hospitals such as *Cerrahpaşa, Gümüşsuyu* and *Haydarpaşa* covering medical and surgical expenses, and arranged for physicians and medications for members who were unable to access hospital treatment (*Mukarrarat Defteri*, 26, 73, 79). Between 1919 and 1931, the Society provided medical assistance to more than fifty individuals through hospital admission, home-based care, or the direct coverage of physicians' and medication costs not only in Istanbul but also during treatments in Switzerland, Egypt, or France. Alongside health care, the Society provided financial assistance for members with urgent needs, and special aid for war-displaced "migrant" eunuch returning from regions such as Medina and Damascus (*Mukarrarat Defteri*, 13, 42, 52).

Another central function concerned funeral and religious services, particularly significant given the absence of biological families among members. The Society conducted burial procedures and grave construction. Funeral expenses were covered directly from the Society's treasury. The Society also organised Mevlid recitations and Qur'anic readings (*Hatim*) in memory of deceased members which were embedded in the Society's calendar and often performed collectively. The preparation and distribution of *mevlid* sweets (*mevlid şekeri*) acquired a distinct symbolic function. They were formally presented by designated delegations to the members of the Ottoman dynasty and palace circles including Sultan Vahdeddin, Sehzades, and Ottoman princesses such as Ulviye Sultan. Through these acts, the Society sought to be in contact with elite networks and keep its visibility and recognition (*Mukarrarat Defteri*, 14).

The Political and Economic Networks

According to the records of the *Mukarrarât Defteri*, the relations between the Society and Sultan Vahdettin were not limited to a single ceremonial encounter but consisted of a series of formal visits, delegations, and exchanges conducted in accordance with palace protocol. These interactions took place on various occasions, including illness, condolence, and institutional milestones, and elicited direct responses from the Sultan, which were carefully recorded by the Society. In early 1920, for instance, a delegation headed by Lala Enver Ağa and Lala Elmas Ağa conveyed the Society's wishes for the Sultan's recovery during a period of illness, communicating through Mazhar Ağa, the Second Musahib [Sultan's Trusted Companion], rather than appearing directly before him (*Mukarrarat Defteri*, 7). The Sultan's reply—expressing satisfaction and sending personal greetings to all members—was recorded with evident pride. Shortly thereafter, following the death of Emine Sultan, another delegation led by Tahsin Efendi, the Society's president, paid a formal condolence visit to the Imperial Palace (*Mukarrarat Defteri*, 8). Beyond the Ottoman dynasty, the Society also cultivated formal and symbolic relations with non-dynastic but sone imperial figures such as the Shah of Iran. During the opening of the Society and the accompanying Mevlid ceremony in 1920, *mevlid* sweets were formally presented to the Shah of Iran, who was then in Istanbul (*Mukarrarat Defteri*, 14).

Alongside its continued relations with members of the imperial dynasty, the Society gradually and actively sought to reposition itself within the political, legal, and symbolic framework of the new regime. Following the consolidation of authority by the Government of the Grand National Assembly (TBMM), the Mutual Aid Society was subjected to an official administrative investigation conducted by the National government in 1923 as part of its broader supervision of voluntary associations (*Mukarrarat Defteri*, 48). According to the association's executive board minutes, government officials requested detailed information from its president, Tahsin Efendi, concerning the association's founding purpose, its charitable activities since its establishment, its principal sources of income, future plans, and overall mission. In response, the executive board resolved to prepare a comprehensive written report addressing these issues and to submit it to the relevant authorities through Tahsin Efendi. The scope of the requested information indicates that this was primarily an administrative inspection. The report prepared by the association presents it not as a political organisation but as a charitable institution established to support elderly and impoverished former harem eunuchs. It emphasises that the

association had provided financial assistance, medical care, and funeral services for its members while also contributing to the Hilâl-i Ahmer (Ottoman Red Crescent), refugees, and the National Army during the Turkish War of Independence. These statements appear to have been intended to demonstrate the association's loyalty to the National Government and to reinforce its legitimacy in the eyes of the new regime.

Subsequent entries in the executive board minute suggest that the investigation did not result in any adverse consequences for the association and was not transformed into a criminal or political prosecution. Instead, it appears to have formed part of the National Government's broader effort to register, supervise, and monitor voluntary associations during the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey (*Mukarrarat Defteri*, 51).

The Society's efforts to build a relationship with the new Republican regime were also reflected in symbolic gestures of loyalty. The executive board minutes record that, in 1927, the Society resolved to dispatch an official delegation to Gazi Paşa (Mustafa Kemal Paşa Atatürk) to convey its respect and gratitude. The delegation consisted of the Society's president and its accountant, Muhyiddin Efendi, and two sets of formal attire were commissioned at the Society's expense specifically for the occasion. The minutes, however, provide no further details about the visit. They don't indicate the exact date or location of the meeting, whether any issues were discussed or how Mustafa Kemal received the delegation. The only additional evidence is that the delegation signed the guest register. Taken together, these ceremonial acts may be interpreted as reflecting the Society's effort to demonstrate its loyalty to the new Republican leadership (*Mukarrarat Defteri*, 72).

Adaptation to the Republican Era

The revolutionary transformation (*inkilab*) created immediate material, legal, and symbolic challenges for the Society. The abolition of imperial structures resulted in the loss of regular income for some members, which in turn forced the association to reorganise its finances. This was followed by deliberate legal and institutional realignment. The first step was introduced in 1923 regarding the future of the Society. According to this regulation, if one day no harem eunuchs remained or the original purpose of the Society ceased to exist, the Society's moveable and immovable assets would be

allocated to charitable purposes. Accordingly, part of these assets was to be transferred to institutions assisting destitute Muslims (*gurebâ-yı Müslimîn*) and organisations dedicated to child welfare (*himâye-i etfâl*), while another portion was intended to be used for the establishment of primary schools in the most remote parts of Anatolia for the education of the children of the nation. This transformation was followed by an important institutional change in 1925. The *Ağavat Sandığı*, which had previously been administered under the Sultan's private treasury (*Hazine-i Hassa*), was transferred to the direct control of the Society. In this way, a welfare fund that had once operated under palace supervision was integrated into a civilian association, strengthening the institution's organisational structure in the Republican period. The process of adaptation was completed in 1928, when prolonged negotiations with state authorities resulted in the recognition of the Society's right to acquire property under its own legal personality rather than through individual intermediaries.

Cultural reforms were also rapidly practiced by the Society during the Republican period. Following the Alphabet Reform on 1 November 1928, the Society adapted not only its written practices but also its institutional symbols and modes of representation to the new regime. At an executive board meeting held on 12 January 1929, the Society resolved to replace its official seal and stamp with versions engraved in "the new Turkish letters," thereby formally invalidating its Arabic-script seals. This decision marked the Society's legal and symbolic alignment with the new alphabetic order. This symbolic transformation was soon followed by practical changes in record-keeping. Beginning with the entry dated 3 June 1929, *the Mukarrarât Defteri* explicitly notes the transition to the Latin alphabet. From that point onward, all minutes were recorded in the new script, and it was formally stated that the signatures appended to these documents were "entirely in Latin letters." The register thus constitutes rare documentary evidence of the precise moment at which an Ottoman-era association fully converted its internal documentation to the Republican writing system (*Mukarrarat Defteri*, 80).

A parallel transformation occurred in using titles and forms of address. During the early Republican years (1923-1929), official records continued to employ court-derived titles such as *Ser Musahib*, *Lala, Yaver, Hacı, Cevher,* and *Ağa*. Meeting minutes from as late as 1925 still refer to figures such as Lala Elmas Ağa, Musahib-i Sani Mazhar Ağa, and Anber Enver Ağa, while even in 1929 titles explicitly denoting palace hierarchy—such as *Müfettiş Lala Elmas Ağa*—remained in use (*Mukarrarat Defteri*, 90). By the end of

1929, traditional titles were employed by the modern Republican honorific "Bey." Figures formerly recorded as Tahsin Efendi or Mesud Efendi now appeared as Reis Tahsin Bey, Mesut Bey, and similar formulations. This shift was not merely stylistic; it marked a fundamental transformation in self-representation. Titles such as *Lala* or *Musahib*, which had signified proximity to the sultan and refer court hierarchy, were replaced by *Bey*, a designation associated with the Republic's egalitarian and civic conception of citizenship.

This process of institutional adaptation continued well into the Republican era. A photograph published on 8 January 1939 in an issue of the newspaper *Cumhuriyet* reveals that the former eunuchs convened for a congress on 7 January 1939 at their headquarters on Divanyolu. According to the news, the organisation's original name, *Harem Eunuchs' Mutual Aid Society*, had officially changed its name to *Eski Emektarlar Yardım Birliği* (Association of Former Servants).[8] The reason of this renaming of the Society was explained in an interview with one of the Harem eunuchs. "In a Turkey without *harems* or *selamlıks*,[9] we no longer wish to be called Harem Ağası." This statement reflects more than a simple request that the institutional and political world from which its members had derived their identity had disappeared. The title "Harem Ağası" no longer denoted an existing occupation but had become a reminder of the abolished Ottoman palace system. Renouncing it therefore represented not only a rejection of their imperial-era name but also a desire to redefine themselves within the social fabric of the new regime Republic. The interview went on to highlight how many of these Afro-Ottoman figures had integrated into the new society as active citizens. One such example was Tahsin Efendi (Nejad), a former eunuch who had become a literature teacher at Erenköy Girls' High School. The journalist described his admiration to his students, referring to him poetically as "a dry African branch grafted onto the body of true Turkey (Güngör 1939)."

8 *Cumhuriyet Gazetesi*, 8 January 1939,10.

9 The "harem–selamlik" system refers to the spatial and social organisation of Ottoman households, particularly among the imperial and urban elite. Rather than simply denoting two separate architectural sections of a house, it embodied a broader system of privacy, gender relations, and household governance. The harem constituted the private domestic sphere, where the family—especially women and children—lived, while the selamlık functioned as the semi-public space in which male members of the household received guests, conducted official business, and maintained social and political relations.

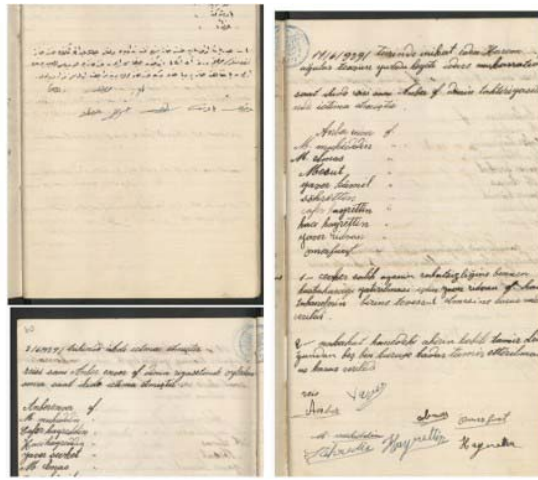


Figure 3. Meeting minute illustrating the transition from the Arabic to the Latin alphabet on the same page.

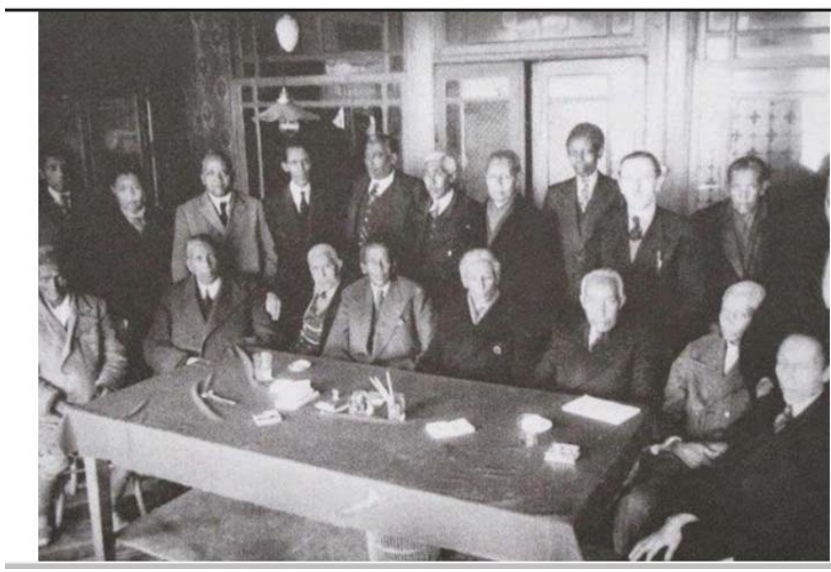


Figure 4. Meeting at Divanyolu, Cumhuriyet Gazetesi, 8 Ocak 1939 (8 January 1939), 9.

Conclusion

This article primarily seeks to shed light on a little studied period in the history of the harem eunuchs, focusing on their ability to survive in the post-imperial period. It examines the turbulent historical context in which the Society was established and explores the founding principles of the association in order to understand how former palace eunuchs attempted to adapt to the post-imperial conditions of the early twentieth century. Within this environment of occupation, economic hardship, and political uncertainty, former palace officials developed new strategies for survival after the collapse of the imperial structures that had sustained them.

The Society held its first official meeting on 7 November 1919, with the participation of fourteen former harem eunuchs and its history in the subsequent years can be traced through surviving minute records and supplementary documents mentioned above. The Mukarrarât Defteri ends on 6 April 1931, but other sources provide evidence of the Society's later activities. It changed its name to *Eski Emektarlar Birliği* in 1939, and a notice published in *Akşam* on 11 July 1941 announced its annual meeting on 19 July. As the exact closing date remains unknown, this study takes 1941 as the latest documented evidence of the Society's continued existence, rather than its definitive end.

Our main source, minute records reveal that members were concerned not only with material survival but also with preserving moral and spiritual bonds within their community. Attention was devoted to the condition of kinlessness. As individuals without biological heirs, many feared dying without anyone to remember them or pray for their souls. The association therefore developed practices intended to ensure that its members would not remain *bi-kes*—"without anyone"—even after death. Through collective funerary arrangements, memorial prayers, and institutionalised remembrance rituals, the Society created a form of surrogate kinship extending beyond life itself. In this sense, the Society functioned not merely as a welfare organisation but as a moral community that sought to secure its members here and hereafter.

Another important contribution of the present article is to foreground the African dimension of the Dârüssaâde eunuchs, which has long remained underemphasised in Ottoman historiography. Although these individuals were of African origin from as early as the sixteenth century, this aspect of their identity received relatively little attention until the pioneering works of Jane Hathaway, which highlighted both their African background and

their broader historical significance within the Ottoman imperial system (Hathaway 2018). By examining the history of *the Harem Ağalar Teavün Yurdu*, this study also situates the experience of these eunuchs within the broader field of African diaspora studies, a field that has increasingly emphasised the agency, mobility, and social adaptation of African-descended communities across different imperial and post-imperial contexts.

Exploring whether similar institutions emerged among African diasporic communities in other regions, or among former court servants in imperial systems such as the Safavid (Baghoolizadeh 2024), or Qing courts, may reveal broader patterns of how displaced communities developed collective mechanisms of survival and adaptation. In other words, this article invites comparison with other African diasporic communities such as Afro-Iranians (Mirzai, Montana and Lovejoy 2009), Afro-Arabs (Hunwick and Troutt Powell 2002) and Afropeans (Pitts 2019), revealing both shared patterns of displacement, adaptation, and solidarity, as well as distinctive historical trajectories shaped by the Ottoman imperial context. More broadly, this case contributes to discussions of African diasporic experiences in post-imperial settings. The history of the Society demonstrates how a community of African origin within the Ottoman world reorganised itself after the dissolution of empire and sought to redefine its place within the framework of an emerging nation-state.

Finally, this study suggests that the term "Afro-Turks," which is commonly used in the current literature to describe people of African descent in Republican Turkey, may not be sufficient to capture the deeper historical roots of this African presence. The historical evidence examined here indicates that these communities were shaped not only within the social context of modern Turkey but also within the institutional, cultural, and political structures of the Ottoman Empire. In this respect, the concept of "Afro-Ottomans" may offer a more historically grounded analytical framework for understanding the longue durée of African presence in the Ottoman world and its continuities into the Republican period. A more detailed discussion of these conceptual and historiographical questions, particularly regarding the analytical usefulness of the term "Afro-Ottomans," will be pursued in future studies.

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