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# MODERN AFRICA

## POLITICS, HISTORY AND SOCIETY

University of Hradec Králové
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**Czech Association for African Studies**

MODERN AFRICA
POLITICS, HISTORY AND SOCIETY
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# Special Issue
# The Ottoman Empire's Intersecting Trajectories with Africa and Africans over Five Centuries

2026 | Volume 14, Issue 3

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# AN INTRODUCTION TO STUDIES OF AFRO-OTTOMAN HISTORY IN TURKEY

Kerem Duymus[a]

**Abstract:** This introductory article maps the emergence and institutional consolidation of Studies of Afro-Ottoman History within Turkish academia over six decades. Beginning with Cengiz Orhonlu's pioneering efforts in the 1960s and Ahmet Kavas's revitalisation in the early 2000s, supported by key institutions including İSAM, IRCICA, ORDAF, AFAM, and TTK, Turkish academia now produces multilingual scholarship involving several young researchers drawing from Ottoman Turkish, Arabic, English, and French sources. This article documents the chronology and genealogy of the last twenty-five years of research conducted in Turkey. Despite progress, colonial legacies persist through restrictive visa regimes and closed-access publishing that marginalise Turkish and African researchers. Works on Studies of Afro-Ottoman History in Turkey continue to remain out of reach of Anglophone research literature. This Special Issue bridges these divides by presenting three contributions in English that retain their multilingual source bases. Collectively, these articles recover previously marginalised African agency, challenge colonial historiography through local and Ottoman archives, and illuminate a five-century span of transcontinental connections between Istanbul and the African continent and African people.

**Keywords:** *Afrikâ-yi Osmânî, African diaspora studies, North Africa, West Africa, global history*

Recent scholarship in the United States and Europe has increasingly highlighted the significance of the Ottoman Empire, and its archival material, for the historiography of North Africa, the Maghreb, and the broader African continent. This renewed interest has culminated in recent Special Issue publications, such as *Toward a Maghribi Turn in Ottoman History* by Jessica Marglin and Youssef Ben Ismail in 2024 as well as *The Ottoman Africa and the Ottomans in Africa* by Nicola Melis in the same year (Marglin and Ben Ismail 2024; Melis 2024). The editors of these Issues have argued that the Ottoman contribution to African history has been largely omitted, or

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even erased, from Anglophone and Francophone scholarship. Such neglect stems chiefly from the historic rivalry between European powers and the Ottoman rulers, which prompted European writers to depict the Ottoman presence as marginal or illegitimate, thereby casting Africa as a vacant arena awaiting European colonisation (Marglin and Ben Ismail 2024; Melis 2024). As a result, roughly three and a half centuries of Ottoman activity in Africa have been downplayed or neglected, leaving many scholars in the United States and Europe under the impression that Ottoman sources yield little insight into African history.

In recent years, however, Ottoman historians have begun to turn their attention toward African Studies, while an increasing number of African scholars have acquired proficiency in Turkish. This linguistic and disciplinary convergence has generated considerable enthusiasm within academic circles across the United States and Europe, as researchers recognise the vast, yet "untapped," corpus of Ottoman documents pertinent to African history. Accordingly, some scholars now contemplate the emergence of a distinct subfield, "Afro-Ottoman Studies," and advocate for fresh interpretative frameworks within African historiography.

Nevertheless, this represents merely a fragment of the broader picture. In fact, more than a quarter-century has elapsed since the Studies of Afro-Ottoman History emerged as a newly established discipline within Turkish academia. Today, the field is no longer a nascent, promising avenue of inquiry in Turkey; it has been incorporated into the regular pedagogical curriculum. This raises the question of what transpired during these twenty-five years within Turkish scholarly institutions concerning African research, a development that appears largely overlooked by academic communities in the United States and Europe. Accordingly, the purpose of this introductory article is to outline the evolution of the Studies of Afro-Ottoman History in Turkey, while the overarching aim of the present Special Issue is to offer a snapshot of contemporary scholarship on Afro-Ottoman topics within the Turkish context.

## The Long Way in Establishing Studies of Afro-Ottoman History (1965-2006)

Research on African history, particularly as derived from Ottoman archival material, was not a novel undertaking within Turkish academia. Indeed, a number of Ottoman scholars, such as Aziz Samih İlter, Ercüment Kuran, and Celal Tevfik Karasapan, had produced influential monographs on the

subject dating back to the 1930s (İlter 1934; Kuran 1957; Karasapan 1960). Nonetheless, the primary orientation of these historians remained centred on the broader narrative of the Ottoman Empire, and thus on North Africa. Given the empire's centuries-long presence across the region, it was a logical extension for them to examine the African dimensions of Ottoman history, and not the other way around.

However, Cengiz Orhonlu was the first who aimed to create a field of Studies of Afro-Ottoman History, bringing African and Ottoman history together in 1965. His effort was unique in the sense that he was trying to move beyond North Africa in discovering the relations between African states south of the Sahara with the Ottoman Empire. Deeply interested in African history that left traces in the Ottoman archives, he disclosed his ambitious plan in an article on "Afrika İle İlgili Türkçe Yayınlar ve Kayıtlar [Turkish Publications and Records Regarding Africa]" (Orhonlu 1965). In 1967 and 1969, he published the first concrete works in this field, "Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun Habeş Siyaseti (1540–1560) [Ethiopian Politics of the Ottomans, 1540-1560]" and "Osmanlı-Bornu Münasebetlerine Ait Belgeler [Documents Regarding Ottoman-Borno Relations]" (Orhonlu 1967, 1969). In 1970, Abdurrahman Çaycı joined his efforts with his ground-breaking work *Büyük Sahra'da Türk-Fransız Rekabeti (1858–1911)* [Turkish-French Competition in the Great Sahara (1858-1911)] (Çaycı 1970). In 1974, Orhonlu published a prominent work *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun Güney Siyaseti, Habeş Eyaleti* [Southern Politics of the Ottoman Empire: Province of Ethiopia] (Orhonlu 1974). However, the sudden death of Orhonlu in 1976 put an end to this newly established field. These contributions hold distinctive significance within the broader field of African historiography. They articulated a distinctly global dimension to African historical trajectories, extending well beyond frameworks centred solely on European engagement. Furthermore, the source materials employed by these works offered an innovative interpretive lens that navigated between indigenous documentary traditions and Eurocentric or colonialist archives, a binary opposition that has long occupied a central position in African historical scholarship.

Following the years from the 1980s to the 1990s, many scholars, such as Orhan Koloğlu, Gheder Ammar, Mahmud Ali, Atilla Çetin, and İbrahim es-Sanafiri published important works on the history of the Ottoman presence in North Africa (Koloğlu 1981; Ammar 1982; Ali 1982; Çetin 1987; es-Sanafiri 1993). Yet, their interest was not aligned with the efforts of Orhonlu, as they framed their work as part of Ottoman Studies rather than of Afro-Ottoman relations.

In the early 1990s, Tunisian historian Abdeljelil Temimi, independently of Orhonlu's short-lived ambitions, pushed for the establishment of two fields that indirectly connected the Ottoman Empire to Africa. In 1994, he published *Etudes d'Histoire Arabo-Africaine* [Studies on the History of Arab-African Relations], and *Etudes d'Histoire Arabo-Ottomane 1453–1918* [Studies on the History of Arab-Ottoman Relations, 1453–1918] (Temimi 1994a, 1994b). Indeed, his aim was to create a triangular relation, such as Afro-Arab-Ottoman relations, rather than simply Afro-Ottoman relations. While the field of Arab-Ottoman relations to this day has gained great popularity in Turkish, Moroccan, Algerian, Tunisian, and Egyptian academies, the efforts for Afro-Arab-Ottoman relations has not produced the same results, as this field is still waiting to be reactivated. One of the challenges for Orhonlu and Temimi was the lack of a supportive environment from the institutional side. That is why, following the death of Orhonlu, there was no institutional continuity. Temimi, facing the same problem, came up with the solution of establishing his own association. Still, the challenge reduced all these efforts to being a one-man-driven project, preventing a systematic continuity.

This radically changed in the early 2000s, when Ahmet Kavas found the best conditions to reactivate the failed ambitions of Orhonlu. After completing his studies in Islamic theology at Ankara University in 1987, he received a scholarship from the Turkish Religious Foundation (TDV) to pursue graduate research in France. At the University of Paris Diderot, under the mentorship of Jean-Louis Triaud, renowned for his research on the Sanusi movement in Libya, Kavas earned his doctorate in 1996 with a dissertation entitled *The Evolution of Modern Arab-Islamic Education in Francophone Africa: The Madrasas of the Republic of Mali: The Case of Bamako, 1980–1994* (Kavas 1996). That same year he joined the Centre for Islamic Studies (İSAM) in Istanbul as a researcher. His doctoral thesis was subsequently published in 2003 by the Istanbul Research Centre for Islamic Culture and Arts (IRCICA) under the title *L'Enseignement islamique en Afrique francophone: Les médersas de la République du Mali* [Islamic Education in Francophone Africa: The Madrasas of the Republic of Mali] (Kavas 2003b). In 2006, he secured a faculty appointment at Istanbul University, Turkey's oldest university and a historic hub for Ottoman studies. In 2013 he was designated the inaugural Turkish ambassador to Chad, stationed in N'Djaména, and served as Turkish ambassador to Senegal from 2020 to 2023.

These particulars are far from trivial footnotes; they are essential for grasping the scholarly milieu in which Kavas produced his works. His doctoral training at the University of Paris Diderot immersed him in a broad French academic

network dedicated to the study of Islam in Africa, a field still shaped, in part, by the region's colonial legacy. The Centre for Islamic Studies (İSAM), which offered Kavas his initial professional appointment, remains one of Turkey's preeminent research institutions. Established in 1988 by the Turkish Religious Foundation (TDV), the same organisation that funded Kavas's scholarship to France, İSAM was originally conceived as a component of the expansive *TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi* (Islamic Encyclopaedia of TDV) project, a thirty-three-year endeavour that produced forty-six volumes and to which Kavas contributed over one hundred entries about Islamic parts of Africa. Between 1988 and 2012, TDV, in partnership with İSAM, dispatched numerous PhD students abroad in order to cultivate a research environment in Turkey that met international standards. After 2005, İSAM broadened its scope beyond the encyclopaedia, supporting investigations of Ottoman legal documents and the critical edition of seminal Arabic texts in Islamic history. Many of these initiatives intersected with African history at various levels. Yet, recently, İSAM has launched the *Afrika Ansiklopedisi* (Encyclopaedia of Africa) project under the directorship of Hatice Uğur (a contributor of the present Special Issue). Today, İSAM is an important institution for Studies of Afro-Ottoman History.

Another pivotal institution that has worked closely with Kavas is the Istanbul Research Centre for Islamic Culture and Arts (IRCICA). Founded in 1978 by a resolution of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) adopted in Dakar, Senegal, IRCICA operates under Turkish leadership. Although formally an OIC body, its headquarters have remained in Istanbul since inception, and it continues to function there today. The centre's core mission encompasses the organisation of conferences, workshops, exhibitions, research projects, and the publication of scholarly works pertaining to the global history of Islam. From its earliest days, IRCICA has placed particular emphasis on the study of Islam in Africa, organising myriad international colloquiums and published their proceedings (see the following table of colloquiums and their proceedings).

| Editor | Name of Colloquium | Place of Organisation | Year of Organisation | Year of Publication |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Samba Dieng | La civilisation islamique en Afrique de l'Ouest | Dakar, Senegal | 1996 | 1999 |
| Halit Eren | *Proceedings of the International Symposium on Islamic Civilization in Eastern Africa* | Kampala, Uganda | 2003 | 2006 |
| Halit Eren | *Proceedings of the International Symposium on Islamic Civilization in Southern Africa* | Johannesburg, South Africa | 2006 | 2009 |
| Halit Eren | *Proceedings of the International Congress on the Maghreb and the Western Mediterranean in the Ottoman Era* | Rabat, Morocco | 2009 | 2013 |
| Halit Eren | *Proceedings of the International Symposium on the History of Islamic Civilization in Eastern Africa* | Zanzibar, Tanzania | 2013 | 2018 |
| Halit Eren | *Proceedings of the Second International Congress on Islamic Civilization in Southern Africa* | Durban, South Africa | 2016 | 2019 |
| Halit Eren | *Proceedings of the International Conference on Islamic History and Civilization in West Africa* | Abuja, Nigeria | 2018 | 2020 |
| Halit Eren | *Actes de la Conférence internationale sur L'histoire et la civilisation islamiques en Afrique de l'Ouest, Bilād as-Sudān* | Niamey, Niger | 2019 | 2020 |
| Halit Eren | *Al-tārīkh wa-l-ḥadhārāt al-ʾislāmiyyah fī minṭaqat wāṣṭ Afrīqiyā* | N'Djaména, Chad | 2019 | 2021 |
| Mahmud Erol Kılıç | *Proceedings of the 3rd International Congress on Islamic Civilasation in Southern Africa: History, Contemporary State & Future Perspectives* | Cape Town, South Africa | 2020 | 2024 |
| Mahmud Erol Kılıç | *Proceedings of the International Conference on History of Islamic Learning and Scholarship in Africa* | Kaduna, Nigeria | 2023 | 2024 |
| Mahmud Erol Kılıç | *Histoire de la connaissance et de l'érudition islamiques en Afrique centrale et occidentale* | Yaoundé, Cameroon | 2024 | In publication[1] |

These successive meetings illustrate IRCICA's distinct international character: publications appear in four languages, and the centre maintains collaborative networks with hundreds of African scholars. The centre also published one monograph of Mamadou Ndiaye, titled *L'enseignement Arabo-Islamique au Sénégal* [Arab-Islamic Education in Senegal] (Ndiaye 1985) and one

edited volume under the title *Al-Sudān Khilāl al-Fatrāt al-ʿUthmāniyyah kamā Tazhar fī al-Maḥfūẓāt al-ʿUthmāniyyah* [Sudan during the Ottoman Interregnum as Reflected in the Ottoman Archives] (Demirbaş et al. 2007). Consequently, IRCICA stands out as a significant research institution not only within Turkey but also on the global stage. At present, the centre is planning additional international colloquia throughout Africa, creating ideal conditions for researchers who work on Studies of Afro-Ottoman History.

Another pivotal actor in the development of Studies of Afro-Ottoman History, but also more generally, African Studies within Turkey is the Turkish state itself. In 1998 the government inaugurated its first *Afrika Eylem Planı* (African Action Plan), marking the commencement of formal diplomatic outreach toward African nations. This initiative culminated in the designation of 2005 as *Afrika Yılı* (African Year) and the organisation of an inaugural Turkish-African Summit in 2008, which attracted delegations from forty-six African countries. Although Turkey developed its first African action plan in 1998, due to economic challenges, activities began mainly after 2008 (Akyar 2019: 64–77). In the wake of that 2008 summit, Turkey accelerated the establishment of consular missions across the continent; between 2009 and 2014 twenty-five new Turkish consulates were opened in Africa, a period during which Kavas received his initial appointment as ambassador (Daban 2021: 937).

This diplomatic, political, and economic focus on Africa slowly resonated within Turkish academia, prompting universities to establish new African Studies departments and research centres. Consequently, by 2025 Turkey hosts twenty-two active African Studies units.[1] Given the anticipated proliferation of additional programmes in the coming years, Turkey appears poised to become an important hub for African scholarship on the European continent. Although not all these centres focus on Studies of Afro-Ottoman History, their increasing activities create favourable conditions for researchers in this field to find a broad audience.

Returning to the role of Kavas in the evolution of Studies of Afro-Ottoman History, within this vibrant and evolving scholarly milieu, he commenced the publication of seminal contributions after 2000. Early in his career he turned to *Osmanlı Araştırmaları* (The Journal of Ottoman Studies), a periodical founded in 1980 that remains a principal outlet for Ottoman research in Turkey. In 2000, he presented an article examining the history of Rabih ibn Fadlallah in Borno (present-day Nigeria) and its interactions with the

1 https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/

Ottoman Empire, integrating secondary literature in English and French with primary Ottoman documents (Kavas 2000). The following year Kavas contributed a comprehensive study of the Kuloğlu communities in North Africa, again juxtaposing sources in English, French, and Ottoman Turkish (Kavas 2001). Recognising the wealth of Ottoman archival material pertinent to African history and the legacy of Orhonlu's work, he authored the 2003 piece "Türkiye'de Osmanlı Afrikası Araştırmaları [Studies on Ottoman Africa in Turkey]" (Kavas 2003a), which surveyed prior Turkish scholarship on Afro-Ottoman relations and highlighted the archival richness of the field. This article served as the second founding manifesto for Studies of Afro-Ottoman History after Orhonlu, delineating a prospective research agenda. This article also coincided with Hatice Uğur's master's thesis in English *Understanding Afrikayi Osmani in the Late Ottoman Period: The Case of Zanzibar* submitted at Boğaziçi University in Istanbul in 2003, and subsequently published in 2005 as a monograph in Turkish (Uğur 2005). One of the most important contributions of her work was about considering "*Afrikayi Osmani*" (Ottoman Africa) in a much broader context, showing the global role of the Ottoman Empire in Africa, being active far beyond its imperial borders in the continent. One year later, Kavas assembled his previously published articles into a volume entitled *Afro-Ottoman Relations*, thereby providing a centralised reference work for subsequent researchers (Kavas 2006a). In this regard the period of 2003 to 2006, with the ground-breaking contributions of Kavas and later Uğur, was a reactivation of the period of 1970 to 1974, when Orhonlu and Çaycı had opened the field of Studies of Afro-Ottoman History.

## The Rise of Studies of Afro-Ottoman History after 2006

Following 2006, Kavas maintained a prolific output, publishing influential works on Afro-Ottoman history on an almost annual basis (for instance, see Kavas 2004, 2006b, 2007, 2008). Following his appointment at Istanbul University, he assumed supervisory responsibilities for doctoral students, including Muhammed Tandoğan, Abdullah Erdem Taş, Aydın Özkan, and İsa Gökgedik, in collaboration with his colleague Nurettin Gemici. He urged these students to focus their dissertations on Afro-Ottoman history and organised them to edit extant Arabic and Ottoman-Turkish primary sources concerning African history.

In partnership with the Association of Middle East and African Researchers (ORDAF), founded by Zekeriya Kurşun in Istanbul, the group around Kavas published the 1913 Ottoman-Turkish chronicle of Mehmed Nuri and

Mahmud Naci in 2012 (Nuri and Naci 2012). The following year, ORDAF released a volume containing two chronicles, one in Ottoman Turkish and the other in Arabic, authored by Nehicüddin Efendi and Hasan Safi (Taş, Tandoğan and Özkan 2013). Also in 2013, Kavas and his students, working directly with Kurşun, produced a second landmark publication since the 2003 manifesto, *Osmanlı'dan Günümüze Afrika Bibliyografyası* [African Bibliography from the Ottoman Era to the Present], which offers a comprehensive catalogue of Ottoman-Era and modern Turkish works on Africa (Kurşun et al. 2013). That same year, under the editorship of Şakir Batmaz with an introduction by Kavas, an influential bilingual volume appeared: *A History of Ottoman Africa: Black Pearl and White Tulips / Afrika'da Osmanlı Asırları* (Batmaz 2013). In 2015, continuing their collaboration with ORDAF and Kurşun, they edited a volume dedicated to the history of the Tuareg peoples of the Sahara: *Afrika'nın Asil Göçerleri: Tuaregler* [The Noble Nomads of Africa: The Tuareg] (Kurşun 2015).

In the meantime, around 2013 the Turkish State Archives Directorate (DAB) released two edited volumes that collected and transcribed pivotal Ottoman archival documents concerning the histories of Libya and Sudan (Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı 2013a, 2013b). These publications have since become essential reference works for scholars investigating the past of these regions. Collectively, these edited volumes of Ottoman primary sources constituted a substantial contribution to African historiography. Through these editorial endeavours, numerous Turkish travel accounts and chronicles pertaining to Africa became accessible to scholarly inquiry, providing historians with a critical opportunity to analyse information derived from European travel narratives that had otherwise dominated the field.

Between 2015 and 2020, scholars mentored by Kavas successfully defended doctoral dissertations on a variety of Afro-Ottoman topics (see Tandoğan 2015; Taş 2015; Özkan 2017; Gökgedik 2020). Concurrently, Kavas extended his supervision to additional PhD students, such as İlhan Zengin and Tuğrul Oğuzhan Yılmaz, who pursued Afro-Ottoman research at other Turkish universities (Zengin 2018; Yılmaz 2020). With an emerging cohort of specialists dedicated to Studies of Afro-Ottoman History, Kavas, together with his previous students Muhammed Tandoğan, Aydın Özkan, and İsa Gökgedik, established "The Association of Researchers on Africa" (AFAM) in Istanbul in 2016. Building on years of collaboration with the Association of Middle East and African Researchers (ORDAF), this newly formed association, wholly committed to African Studies, began publishing edited primary-source editions under its auspices. In 2016, AFAM released a modern edition of a

1910 Ottoman-Turkish travel narrative on Sudan authored by Muhammed Mihri (Mihri 2016). The following year, in partnership with the Research Association of Islamic Science (İSAV) and Istanbul Medeniyet University, AFAM organised the international conference *Afrika'da İslâmiyet: Dünü, Bugünü, Yarını* [Islam in Africa: Past, Present, and Future], subsequently issuing a comprehensive edited volume exceeding 800 pages that gathered the presented papers (Kavas, Tandoğan, and Yılmaz 2017). In 2018, a Turkish firm TAM Group, highly active in Africa, founded the publishing house Alelmas in collaboration with AFAM to disseminate the association's scholarly output; this press later published two monographs by Kavas (see Kavas 2018, 2019). Finally, in 2019 and 2020, AFAM members produced two edited volumes focusing on prominent individuals and communities in Islamic Africa (Kavas and Tandoğan 2019, 2020).

Following 2020, the Turkish Historical Institution (TTK), founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in Ankara in 1931, has markedly intensified its engagement with Afro-Ottoman scholarship, issuing a series of seminal publications. In that year the institute released an edited volume with papers presented at a conference in Djibouti: *Uluslararası Afrika'da Türkler Sempozyumu* [International Symposium on Turks in Africa] (Şenel and Çavuş 2020). Subsequent years saw the appearance of three influential monographs on Tripolitanian history spanning the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, authored respectively by Abdullah Özdağ, Cemal Atabaş, and Abdullah Erdem Taş (Özdağ 2020; Atabaş 2021; Taş 2022). Also in 2020, TTK published a bilingual work by Halim Gençoğlu entitled *Ottoman Cultural Heritage in South Africa / Güney Afrika'da Osmanlı Kültürel Mirası*, which examined the Ottoman imprint on South Africa (Gençoğlu 2020). Most recently, in 2024 the institution issued İsa Gökgedik's study of diplomatic relations between the Ottoman Empire and West African sultanates: *Afrika'nın Sultanları: Bilâdüssûdan'da Çad Havzası Sultanlıkları ve Osmanlı ile Münasebetleri* [Sultans of Africa: Sultanates of the Chad Basin in Bilad al-Sudan and Their Relations with the Ottomans] (Gökgedik 2024).

Collectively, these outputs have positioned Ankara as a secondary hub for Studies of Afro-Ottoman History, complementing Istanbul's pre-eminence. Concurrently, numerous Turkish researchers, such as Hatice Uğur, Halil Kaya, and myself, have defended dissertations about the history of Afro-Ottoman relations at African and European universities, contributing English and French-language scholarship to the field, opening up the Studies of Afro-Ottoman History to European academic circles (for instance, see Uğur 2022; Kaya 2025; Duymus 2025).

Consequently, today, the field of "Studies of Afro-Ottoman History" in Turkey is a well-established field through many years of systematic research that has been supported by several associations and institutions. One of the core characteristics is its multilingualism. The researchers mentioned above use mostly sources in four different languages, such as Ottoman/Turkish, Arabic, English, and French.

Nevertheless, obstacles remain. Studies of Afro-Ottoman History, similar to African Studies more broadly, continue to be hampered by persistent colonial legacies. Turkish scholars and graduate students encounter highly discriminatory visa regimes comparable to those faced by their African counterparts, severely limiting their ability to travel to European research institutions, libraries, and archival repositories that house extensive collections on African history. Moreover, the prevailing closed-access publishing model within U.S. and European academia further marginalises Turkish researchers, who struggle to obtain the latest scholarly outputs because their home institutions cannot shoulder prohibitive subscription fees imposed by major publishing conglomerates.

Additional hurdles impede the advancement of this field. Numerous scholars cited earlier recognise a pronounced deficiency in collaborative ties with African counterparts and a general scarcity of African source material. A pivotal policy response to this shortfall consists of newly instituted scholarship programmes targeting African nations, offered by several Turkish bodies, including the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TÜBİTAK), the General Directorate of Foundations (VGM), and TDV. Moreover, Turkey's liberal visa regime for African countries facilitates the arrival of African students and researchers. As a consequence of these initiatives, the 2023-2024 academic year recorded 49,413 African students and researchers enrolled in Turkish higher-education institutions and research centres.[2] By contrast, German institutions hosted 38,063 African students and researchers during the same period.[3] Accordingly, it is reasonable to anticipate that the next substantial expansion of the Studies of Afro-Ottoman History will be driven by a markedly increased participation of African scholars in the field, especially considering the fact that many of those earlier students now teach the history of Africa as lecturers in several Turkish universities.

2 https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/

3 https://www.wissenschaft-weltoffen.de/de/interaktiv/auslaendische-studierende-in-deutschland-nach-herkunftslaendern/

Keeping this historical overview and challenges of this new field in mind, the primary objective of the present Special Issue is to introduce the work of several highly active Turkish scholars in the field to the Anglophone scholarly community. For this, every contribution in this issue is presented in English, yet each retains a multilingual source base, thereby affording readers beyond the Turkish academy a window to recent investigations of Afro-Ottoman history.

## The Special Issue

The trajectory of the Studies of Afro-Ottoman History in Turkey is a testament to the resilience of scholarly vision and transformative power of institutional support. What began as the solitary, pioneering efforts of Cengiz Orhonlu in the 1960s, briefly interrupted and subsequently revived in the 1980s and 1990s, has blossomed over the last quarter-century into a robust, multilingual, and institutionally anchored discipline. Through the dedicated efforts of scholars like Ahmet Kavas and the foundational support of institutions such as İSAM, IRCICA, ORDAF, AFAM, and the TTK, Turkish academia has successfully unearthed a vast corpus of Ottoman archival material that also contains numerous diplomatic letters and chronicles from Africa. This wealth of primary sources, both African and Ottoman/Turkish, offers an indispensable, non-Eurocentric lens through which to view the African continent's history, challenging long-held colonial narratives and revealing the deep, multifaceted connections between Africa and the Ottoman Empire.

As this introductory article has demonstrated, for too long, linguistic and historiographical divides have obscured these vital narratives from Anglophone and Francophone academic communities. The primary objective of this Special Issue is to dismantle these barriers. By presenting the meticulous, archive-based research of highly active Turkish scholars in English, while retaining their multilingual source bases, this collection seeks to bridge the gap between Turkish academia and the global scholarly community. It invites historians of Africa to look beyond the traditional colonial archives/European traveller accounts and engage with rich Turkish and Arabic documents in Ottoman archives that have long waited to be integrated into the broader African historiography.

In pursuit of this objective, the present Special Issue assembles three contributions, each authored by scholars representing distinct generational

cohorts within the historiography of Afro-Ottoman relations, as their names were mentioned in the previous pages. The inaugural article, "Beyond Barbary Piracy: Ottoman Policy in the Sixteenth Century Maghreb through Ottoman Archival Sources," is written by Abdullah Erdem Taş, a member of the field's second generation of researchers. Drawing primarily on Ottoman *Mühimme* Registers, this article re-examines Ottoman governance of the North African provinces (*Garp Ocakları*) through the imperial centre's perspective rather than through Eurocentric "Barbary piracy" frameworks. Taş argues that these provinces were not semi-independent corsair polities but strategically organised frontier provinces integrated into Ottoman administrative, legal, and military structures. Documentary evidence reveals consistent normative language emphasising frontier defence, justice, public welfare, and accountability of provincial governors. His study demonstrates that interpreting Ottoman North Africa primarily through European diplomatic correspondence and colonial literature obscures the political and administrative realities of Ottoman provincial order in the 16th century.

The second contribution is co-authored by myself, as a third-generation scholar in this field, and Abdoul Karim Hamadou of Mali. Titled "A Global Historical Overview of Ottoman–Senegambia Relations: From the Historical Context in the 15th Century to Direct Relations in the 19th Century," this collaborative article examines transregional connections spanning multiple centuries. This article reconstructs Ottoman–Senegambian connections from the 15th to early 20th centuries, challenging the historiographical assumption that no meaningful engagement existed between the Ottoman Empire and West African Islamic states. The authors identify three phases: (1) Ottoman corsair presence in Atlantic waters (late 15th–mid-18th centuries) who strategically avoided West African coasts due to legal status ambiguities; (2) the rise of Fulbe-led Islamic states in Senegambia (Bundu, Fuuta Jaloo, and Fuuta Tooro) that integrated the region into transregional Islamic networks centred in Mecca and Istanbul; and (3) direct Ottoman diplomatic and commercial outreach following the Tanzimat reforms (1839-1876), including the establishment of consular offices in Dakar. Using a global Afro-Ottoman perspective, our study demonstrates how Ottoman and Senegambian agencies connected these distant regions through merchant networks, pilgrimages, and intelligence-gathering.

The concluding article, "Connecting Here and Hereafter: The Harem Ağalar Teavün Yurdu (1919-1941)," is authored by Hatice Uğur, who belongs to the first generation of specialists in the Studies of the Afro-Ottoman History. Her article examines the Harem Eunuchs' Mutual Aid Society (1919–1941),

founded by former court eunuchs of African origin during the Ottoman Empire's transition to the Turkish Republic. Analysing previously unstudied minute books, she shows how Afro-Ottomans, displaced by the abolition of the harem and empire in 1924, established institutional resilience through collective welfare, religious services, and adaptation to the new Republican regime, including conversion to the Latin alphabet, renunciation of imperial titles, and rebranding as a civilian association. The study foregrounds the African dimension of Darüssaade eunuchs and proposes "Afro-Ottoman" as a more historically grounded framework than "Afro-Turk" for understanding the longue durée of African presence in Ottoman spaces.

Collectively, these articles advance the scholarly discourse on Studies of Afro-Ottoman History while simultaneously expanding the field's reach to international academia. Their contributions include: recuperating previously marginalised African agency within Ottoman imperial and post-imperial contexts; contesting Eurocentric and colonial historiographical frameworks through engagement with Ottoman and indigenous archival materials; illuminating a five-century span of Ottoman-African interactions (fifteenth through twentieth centuries) across West Africa, North Africa, and Istanbul; and illustrating the institutional continuity and adaptive transformation of Afro-Ottoman relations throughout the transition from imperial to republican political formations.

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# BEYOND BARBARY PIRACY: OTTOMAN POLICY IN THE SIXTEENTH-CENTURY MAGHREB THROUGH OTTOMAN ARCHIVAL SOURCE

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**Abstract:** The Ottoman presence in the Maghreb has long been interpreted through historiographical frameworks that depict the *Garp Ocakları* (North African provinces) primarily as corsair polities engaged in piracy and maritime predation. Although recent scholarship has increasingly challenged Eurocentric and colonial interpretations of Ottoman North Africa, comparatively little attention has been paid to how the Ottoman central administration itself conceptualised and governed these provinces through its own documentary record. Drawing primarily upon imperial decrees preserved in the *Mühimme* Registers, together with other Ottoman archival materials, this article re-examines Ottoman policy toward the sixteenth-century Maghreb from the perspective of the imperial centre. It argues that the Garp Ocakları were regarded by the Ottoman government not as semi-independent corsair entities but as strategically organised frontier provinces entrusted with safeguarding the western frontiers of the empire, protecting Muslim communities, maintaining regional stability, and implementing imperial policy in the Mediterranean Sea. By placing Ottoman archival evidence at the centre of the analysis, the present study contributes to the ongoing historiographical reassessment of Ottoman North Africa and demonstrates the limitations of interpreting Ottoman rule in the Maghreb primarily through the enduring paradigm of "Barbary piracy."

**Keywords:** *Ottoman Empire, Ottoman North Africa, Garp Ocakları, governance of Ottoman frontier provinces, Ottoman archival sources*

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## Introduction

Few issues in the historiography of the early modern Mediterranean region have proved as enduring and as contested as the characterisation of the Ottoman Maghreb as "Barbary" corsair polities and the maritime activities of the *Garp Ocakları* (the Ottoman provinces of North Africa) as "Barbary piracy." Since the nineteenth century, much of the British and French historiography has interpreted these Ottoman provinces primarily through the concepts of "Barbary piracy," corsairing, and Christian captivity – presenting the region chiefly as a theatre of maritime violence and predation.[1] Reinforced by diplomatic reports, travel literature, captivity narratives, and later colonial historiography, this interpretative framework has profoundly shaped both scholarly and popular understandings of Ottoman North Africa. As a result, the political, administrative, legal, and strategic dimensions of Ottoman rule have frequently remained subordinate to narratives that privilege piracy as the defining feature of the Ottoman presence in the Maghreb.

This article does not question the historical reality of corsairing, captivity, or maritime violence in the early modern Mediterranean. Rather, it asks whether the mere concept of "Barbary piracy" provides an adequate framework for explaining the political and administrative relations between the Ottoman central government and its North African provinces. It is equally important not to treat European historical writing as a homogeneous body of scholarship. While British and French historiographical traditions often reflect intellectual assumptions closely associated with nineteenth-century imperial and colonial experiences, diplomatic correspondence, commercial records, and treaty documentation produced by states such as the Dutch Republic, Sweden, and Denmark frequently reveal a more pragmatic perception of the Garp Ocakları as recognised political authorities and legitimate diplomatic interlocutors within the Mediterranean order. These contrasting perspectives suggest that European understandings of the Ottoman Maghreb were considerably more diverse than later colonial

1 The period between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed the gradual formation of one of the most enduring anti-Ottoman stereotypes in European political and literary culture. As Ottoman expansion advanced into the Balkans and Central Europe, the image of the "Terrible Turk" (*Türkengefahr* in German) became deeply embedded in European public discourse. On the construction of these anti-Turkish representations, see Turbet-Delof (1973); Jezernik (ed.) (2010); and Sabatos (2020), which traces the image of the Turk in Czech, Slovak, and Hungarian literary traditions from the early modern period to the present. Similar representational patterns are encountered in nineteenth-century British and French diplomatic and consular correspondence concerning North Africa, where Ottoman officials and Maghrebi corsairs were frequently described through a vocabulary of barbarism, piracy, and fanaticism.

narratives have often implied and point to the need for a broader reassessment of Ottoman North Africa grounded in a wider range of historical sources.

Over the last two decades, this historiographical landscape has undergone a significant transformation.[2] Moving beyond inherited colonial paradigms and long-established narratives of "Barbary piracy," a growing body of scholarship has called for a fundamental reassessment of Ottoman North Africa through the political, institutional, and social structures of the Ottoman Empire itself. In particular, Nora Lafi has argued that the history of Ottoman Africa should no longer be interpreted merely as a prelude to European colonialism or through analytical categories derived from nineteenth-century imperial experience, but rather examined within its own historical context and through a critical engagement with Ottoman and local sources. Similarly, Isabelle Grangaud and M'hamed Oualdi have questioned the tendency to explain North African history primarily through colonial frameworks, emphasising instead the plurality of historical actors, political institutions, and archival traditions that shaped the region (Lafi 2015; Grangaud and Oualdi 2014; Lafi 2024). Recent studies have likewise challenged one of the most persistent assumptions inherited from this historiography by questioning the conventional portrayal of the Garp Ocakları as politically uncontrolled "Barbary" corsair states and by demonstrating the importance of examining Ottoman maritime institutions, diplomacy, and legal practices in their own terms (Duymuş 2024). Taken together, this scholarship demonstrates that Ottoman North Africa constitutes a distinct field of historical inquiry requiring analytical frameworks grounded in Ottoman, North African, and European source traditions rather than inherited Eurocentric assumptions alone.

Despite these advances, Ottoman archival materials, although increasingly consulted, have generally served to corroborate narratives built primarily on European sources rather than to reveal how the Ottoman central administration itself defined the Garp Ocakları. Addressing this gap, the present study adopts an Ottoman-centred perspective, drawing primarily on imperial decrees preserved in the *Mühimme* Registers,[3] together with

2 Recent scholarship has likewise begun to question some of the long-established assumptions surrounding captivity in Ottoman North Africa. Rather than treating all captives exclusively as passive victims, several studies have highlighted the diversity of individual experiences and the social mobility that could emerge under particular circumstances (Hershenzon 2018; Matar 2021; Velero-Cuadra 2025; Ødegaard 2025).

3 The *Mühimme Defterleri* (Registers of Important Affairs) were official Ottoman registers recording imperial orders and decrees issued by the Imperial Council (*Dîvân-ı Hümâyun*) on matters of state administration, military affairs, provincial governance, and foreign relations.

complementary Ottoman archival materials, in order to examine how Istanbul defined and administered the Garp Ocakları, Ottoman North Africa, during the sixteenth century.

The present article argues that the Garp Ocakları were conceived by the Ottoman government not as semi-autonomous corsair entities whose existence revolved primarily around maritime predation, but as strategically organised frontier provinces integrated into the empire's legal, administrative, and military order. Their functions extended well beyond corsairing to encompass the defence of the western frontiers of the Ottoman Empire, the protection of Muslim communities, the maintenance of regional stability, and the implementation of imperial policy across the Mediterranean. By reassessing Ottoman policy towards the Maghreb through contemporary Ottoman archival evidence, this study contributes not only to the political history of the Ottoman Empire but also to the broader historiographical reassessment of Ottoman North Africa. In doing so, it demonstrates that the concept of "Barbary piracy," while useful for explaining one dimension of early modern Mediterranean history, cannot by itself account for the political, legal, and administrative realities of Ottoman rule in North Africa or the Maghreb, the "western part" of the Arab world.

## Ottoman Expansion into North Africa and the Formation of a Mediterranean Frontier

The Ottoman expansion into North Africa should not be understood merely as a sequence of military campaigns or as the establishment of bases for corsair warfare. Rather, it formed part of a broader imperial strategy that emerged in response to the rapid expansion of the Spanish and Portuguese kingdoms across the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, and the Indian Ocean during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. From the perspective of the Ottoman central government, the Maghreb constituted not simply a maritime frontier but a strategically vital region whose security was closely connected to the defence of the empire, the protection of Muslim populations, and the preservation of the Mediterranean balance of power. It is within this wider geopolitical and ideological context that Ottoman expansion into North Africa should be understood.

Within this broader context, Ottoman expansion into North Africa reflected the convergence of two interconnected political traditions inherited by the empire: the Turco-Mongol ideal of universal sovereignty (Turan 2003) and the

Islamic conception of the caliphate and jihad. The conquest of Constantinople marked a decisive stage in the integration of these traditions, enabling the Ottoman dynasty to present itself not only as a universal imperial power but also as the principal protector of Sunni Islam. Following the incorporation of the Arab lands, the legitimacy of Ottoman caliphal authority increasingly rested upon safeguarding the Holy Cities, protecting the pilgrimage routes, and responding to appeals from Muslim communities facing external threats. Consequently, requests for assistance from Muslims in India (Mughul 1974: 109–113), Aceh (Safvet 1327: 604–614, 678–683; Safvet 1329: 1521–40), Central Asia (Kemaloğlu 2017: 398), al-Andalus, and North Africa (Emecen 2017: 125–41) formed part of a wider imperial discourse in which military intervention was represented as both a political responsibility and a religious obligation. Rather than constituting isolated episodes, these interventions reflected an imperial vision that increasingly linked the legitimacy of Ottoman rule with the defence of Muslim societies across a wide geographical area.

During the sixteenth century, the incorporation of Egypt (1517), Algeria (1545), Tripolitania (1551), Abyssinia (1555), and Tunisia (1573/1574) gradually created an interconnected defensive system extending from the Red Sea to the western Mediterranean. From an Ottoman perspective, these provinces did not represent a collection of isolated conquests but formed an integrated frontier designed to contain Iberian expansion, secure the empire's maritime communications, and protect Muslim populations from external aggression. In this sense, they may collectively be understood as constituting what may be described as an Ottoman "Turkish Shield" in Africa—a defensive frontier whose primary function was to safeguard both imperial interests and the wider Islamic world.

The origins of this frontier strategy lay in the expansionist policies pursued by the Spanish and Portuguese kingdoms following the completion of the Reconquista. King Ferdinand II of Aragon (d. 1516), inspired by both dynastic ambition and crusading ideology, envisaged extending Iberian power beyond the conquest of Granada and ultimately advancing towards Jerusalem (Abulafia 2012: 462). Seeking to establish a Catalan commercial and political sphere encompassing Sicily, Sardinia, Naples, Majorca, and North Africa, Ferdinand—encouraged by Cardinal Jiménez—initiated the conquest of the Maghreb in cooperation with Portugal. Following the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494), Spain occupied Melilla (1497), Mersa el-Kébir (1505), Peñón de Vélez de la Gomera (1508), Oran (1509), Peñón of Algiers (1510), Béjaïa (1510), and Tripoli (1510) (Karasapan 1960: 96; Kavas 2003a: 179). Portugal, meanwhile, concentrated on Morocco and

the Atlantic coast, having already captured Ceuta (1415), Alcácer Ceguer (1458), Tangier, and Asilah (1471), before extending its authority to Agadir (1505), Doukkala (1513), and numerous other settlements along the West African littoral (Hess 2010: 17–37; Chakib 1987: 20). Portuguese expansion subsequently continued around the Cape of Good Hope towards the Indian Ocean, where a chain of fortified bases at Sofala, Mozambique, Kilwa, and Mombasa enabled Lisbon to dominate regional maritime commerce while simultaneously undermining Muslim-controlled trading networks.

The expansion of Portugal into the Indian Ocean and of Spain across the western Mediterranean confronted the Ottoman Empire with a strategic challenge that extended well beyond North Africa itself. Portuguese control over key maritime routes threatened not only the commercial networks of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean but also the security of the Holy Cities and the annual pilgrimage routes, while Spanish expansion endangered the Muslim populations of the Maghreb and the remnants of al-Andalus. Within the Ottoman imperial vision outlined above, these developments were perceived not as isolated regional conflicts but as interconnected challenges requiring an integrated political and military response.

The first Ottoman response emerged in the Red Sea. Beginning in 1505, the Mamluk Sultanate attempted to resist Portuguese advances along the coasts of Yemen and Abyssinia, where Portuguese expansion increasingly threatened Mecca and Medina—the spiritual centre of the Islamic world. Yet the military and financial resources of the Mamluks proved insufficient to contain Portuguese naval power (Bostan 2024). Recognising both the strategic and religious implications of this situation, Sultan Selim I (1512–1520) incorporated Egypt into the Ottoman Empire following the battles of Chaldiran (1514) and Ridaniyya (1517). The annexation of Egypt was therefore not merely a territorial conquest but also the assumption of responsibility for the protection of the Holy Cities and the principal routes of the pilgrimage. Reflecting this new role, Selim adopted the title *Hâdimü'l-Haremeyn* (Servant of the Two Holy Mosques) (Yavuz 1997: 26–27). Under his successor, Suleiman I (1520–1566), Ottoman authority was further consolidated through the establishment of the Yemen and Abyssinia provinces, creating a defensive line along both shores of the Red Sea and strengthening imperial control over one of the most strategically sensitive maritime corridors of the early modern world (Orhonlu 1996).

The incorporation of the Maghreb into the Ottoman imperial system followed a similar strategic logic. Long before the establishment of the

Ottoman provinces in North Africa, appeals for assistance had already reached Istanbul from the Muslim communities of al-Andalus. The first known embassy arrived in 1486, several years before the Fall of Granada, when the rulers of the Banū al-Aḥmar requested Ottoman military assistance against the advancing Castilian forces (Uzunçarşılı 1975: 200; Danişmend 1971: 388).[4] Although Sultan Bayezid II (1481–1512) lacked the naval capacity to intervene directly in the western Mediterranean at that stage, he nevertheless responded by dispatching Kemal Reis with an imperial fleet in 1505.[5] Subsequently, experienced Turkish seafarers—including Kemal Reis, Oruç Reis, and Kara Hasan Reis—continued to operate in the western Mediterranean, combining naval warfare against Iberian forces with the evacuation and protection of Muslim populations fleeing the collapse of Muslim rule in Iberia (1492).

Ottoman expansion into North Africa was therefore neither an abrupt nor an opportunistic development. Rather, it evolved through a gradual interaction between local appeals for protection and the wider geopolitical objectives of the Ottoman Empire. The emergence of Ottoman authority in the Maghreb should consequently be understood as part of a broader imperial frontier policy, in which regional security, maritime defence, and the protection of Muslim communities became mutually reinforcing objectives.

Following the Ottoman incorporation of Egypt, a comparable dynamic became increasingly visible in the central Maghreb. Before the Spanish occupation of Tripoli in 1510, Pîrî Reis, who had accompanied his uncle Kemal Reis in the region, recorded in the *Kitâb-ı Bahriye* (Book of the Sea) that "The people of Tripoli sent a letter to the sovereign with Kemal Reis, requesting a sanjak bey" (Pîrî Reis 2002: 507). This brief but significant statement suggests that demands for Ottoman intervention did not arise solely from imperial ambitions in Istanbul but were also articulated by local political actors seeking military protection and administrative incorporation into the Ottoman state (Koloğlu 2003: 179). Consequently, Ottoman expansion in North Africa cannot be understood exclusively as a process imposed from the imperial centre; it also developed through negotiations with local elites and communities confronting the advance of Spanish power.

4 The appeals from Andalusia continued after 1486. For example, a letter sent from Andalusia during the reign of Süleyman I is preserved in BOA, TS.MA.e. 576/35 (10 August 948/ November 1541).

5 Pîrî Reis, who accompanied his uncle Kemal Reis on these expeditions, later described many of these voyages in the *Kitâb-ı Bahriye*. See Pîrî Reis (2002: 24, 28).

Pîrî Reis provides a similarly revealing explanation for the invitation extended to Oruç Reis by the people of Algiers. He attributes this decision not merely to the military reputation of Turkish seafarers but to the inability of the fragmented Maghrebi principalities to organise an effective maritime defence against the Spanish:

> "*Mağrib pâdişâhlarınun tâkati yokdur ki gemiler donatub denizi bekleyeler… şimdi Rum'dan varmış Oruç Reis'i beklediler; zira ki bir kal'ada Türk olıcak kâfir gelmeğe heves etmez…* [The Maghreb sultans lack the means to equip ships and lie in wait at sea… They waited for Oruç Reis, who had just arrived from Rum; for no infidel would dare to approach a fortress where Turks were present…]" (Pîrî Reis 960/1553: 136b).[6]

This passage illustrates contemporary Ottoman perceptions of the political and military conditions prevailing in the Maghreb. According to Pîrî Reis, the weakness of regional rulers, combined with their limited naval capabilities, rendered sustained resistance to Iberian expansion extremely difficult. Ottoman military support therefore emerged not simply as an instrument of imperial expansion but as a practical response to the security concerns of local Muslim communities. Whether or not every aspect of this portrayal reflected historical reality, the passage remains valuable because it demonstrates how Ottoman contemporaries themselves conceptualised the relationship between Istanbul and North Africa.

Early sixteenth-century Ottoman seafarers consistently portrayed the Maghreb as a region whose maritime resources and political organisation were insufficient to confront the rapidly expanding Spanish presence. Their narratives emphasise both the strategic importance of naval warfare and the military expertise possessed by experienced Turkish commanders such as Kemal Reis, Pîrî Reis, Oruç Reis, and Kara Hasan Reis. The remarkable successes achieved by these figures strengthened Ottoman prestige throughout North Africa and encouraged closer political cooperation between local rulers and the Ottoman state. Once these initially autonomous maritime commanders entered imperial service, their activities became increasingly integrated into Ottoman strategic planning. The major campaigns of Preveza, Tripoli, Djerba, Malta, and

6 The strategic value attributed to experienced Ottoman commanders is corroborated by later events. For example, the Crusaders were able to recapture Mahdia from Turgut Reis only after assembling a large coalition fleet consisting of Spanish, Papal, Maltese, Neapolitan, and Sicilian forces. See İlter (1937: 192–194).

Tunis should therefore be understood not merely as episodes in the history of corsair warfare but as components of a broader imperial struggle over control of the Mediterranean. Through these campaigns, numerous coastal strongholds were gradually incorporated into the Ottoman administrative system, thereby consolidating what has been described here as an Ottoman defensive frontier, or "Turkish Shield," extending across North Africa.

Therefore, the evidence presented in this section suggests that Ottoman expansion into North Africa cannot be reduced to a narrative of corsair activity alone. Rather, it represented the gradual construction of an imperial frontier in which strategic defence, administrative integration, and the protection of Muslim communities became mutually reinforcing objectives. This broader geopolitical context provides the essential framework for understanding the administrative practices and imperial policies examined in the following sections.

## Administrative Integration and Provincial Governance in the Garp Ocakları

The establishment of an Ottoman defensive frontier in North Africa was accompanied by the gradual integration of the conquered territories into the empire's provincial administration. Rather than remaining loosely connected military outposts or autonomous corsair enclaves, the principal North African cities were incorporated into the Ottoman administrative hierarchy through the creation of sanjaks and eyalets (administrative divisions) governed according to imperial institutions. This process demonstrates that Ottoman policy in the Maghreb extended well beyond military conquest and naval warfare, encompassing the construction of a durable administrative order capable of sustaining imperial authority across the western Mediterranean. For example, many cities in Algeria, such as Medea, Constantine, Tenes, and Annaba, were initially sanjaks under the *Kaptanpaşa* (Chief Admiral).[7] When Barbaroszade Hasan Pasha was appointed as the first *beylerbey* in 1545, these cities became sanjaks of the Beylerbeylik (province/provincial governorship) of Cezayir-i Garb (Algeria) (Taş 2020: 250-84). In 1550, Mehdiye was an Ottoman sanjak

7 Until 1534, the Kapudan Pasha (Kaptan-ı Derya) formally held the rank of a sanjak governor. Following the appointment of Barbaros Hayreddin Pasha as Kapudan Pasha in 1534, he simultaneously became Beylerbeyi of the Eyalet of Cezâyir-i Bahr-i Sefîd, and newly conquered Mediterranean territories were gradually incorporated into this provincial structure before later being organised as separate eyalets. See Şahin (1999: 125).

in the Mediterranean, under the administration of Turgut Reis and again affiliated with the Kaptanpaşa. That same year, it was invaded and a few years later, it was first attached to the newly established the Beylerbeylik of Trablusgarp (Tripolitania), and after 1577, to the Eyalet of Tunus (Tunisia) (Kavas 2003b: 387-89).

Within this provincial framework, the western Ottoman provinces gradually acquired a distinctive institutional character. Although Algeria, Tripolitania, and Tunisia shared the administrative principles governing other Ottoman provinces, their strategic location on the empire's western maritime frontier required the development of a specialised military and naval organisation. It was this combination of provincial administration and permanent military mobilisation that eventually gave rise to what contemporaries came to describe as the Garp Ocakları. Unlike Egypt, whose economy rested largely upon agricultural production and taxation, the Garp Ocakları developed as permanently mobilised frontier provinces whose fiscal and military organisation relied upon maritime commerce, naval expeditions, and the revenues generated through legally sanctioned corsairing. Therefore, they were organised as military garrisons that could sustain themselves with the income generated from corsairship, trade, and naval expeditions. Initially, the administration of the provinces was entrusted to famous sailors who had contributed to their conquest. Those in the entourage of the *Reis* (Captain) formed the province's naval forces, while the Janissaries, Azeps, and other soldiers sent from the centre formed the province's land forces. In the mid-16th century, Beylerbeys were generally appointed for one year, although this period could vary in the Garp Ocakları. Barbaroszade Hasan Pasha, the first Cezayir-i Garp Beylerbey, served for six years before being dismissed; Salih Reis, who succeeded him, served for five years and died. Hasan Pasha, appointed for the second time in 1557, served for four years before being expelled from the province as the result of an uprising; when he was appointed for the third time in 1562, he served for five years (Taş 2020: 270). Murad Pasha, the first Beylerbey of Tripolitania, served for five years before passing away; Turgut Reis, who succeeded him, served for nine years until his martyrdom. Subsequent beylerbeys served an average of one to three years in both Algeria and Tripolitania (Taş 2022: 61-63; Taş 2020: 270).

The Ottoman provincial system further limited the concentration of authority in the hands of a single official. The Beylerbeys were the highest-ranking officials in the province, representing the authority of the Ottoman Sultan. As in other Ottoman provinces, the beylerbeyi represented the sultan's executive authority, while judicial and fiscal officials constituted parallel channels of

communication with the imperial centre, thereby limiting the concentration of provincial power (Hathaway 2016; İpşirli 1992). However, they were not the sole authority in this regard. The *qadi*s (judges) appointed to the province also had the authority to correspond directly with Istanbul. Similarly, the treasurers who audited the financial accounts of the Janissary leaders and the Garp Ocakları had similar authority. They were permanent members of the provincial councils in the Garp Ocakları. This established a balance between different powers and prevented the people from being oppressed by the administrators. The Arab element of the local population, constituting the predominant demographic stratum, was appointed to offices such as *kâtib al-dîwân* (council secretary), *mufti* (chief religious authority), and *nâib* (deputy), thereby functioning as an auxiliary yet integral component of the Ottoman provincial administrative apparatus. Particularly significant was the right of local communities to submit collective petitions (*mahzars*) directly to Istanbul whenever provincial officials acted unlawfully or in concert to oppress the population (Taş 2022: 42–43; İpşirli 1992: 70). This mechanism illustrates that imperial authority functioned not solely through military command but also through institutional channels of accountability linking the provinces with the Ottoman centre.

After the conquest, capable beylerbeys such as Barbaroszade Hasan Pasha, Murad Pasha, Salih Reis, Turgut Reis, Uluç Ali Reis (Kılıç Ali Pasha), and Venedikli Hasan Pasha were appointed to the Garp Ocakları, establishing the classical Ocak system. However, towards the end of the century, administrative problems began to arise in this system. The charismatic, authoritarian beylerbeys were gone, replaced by pashas appointed from Istanbul for a year or two, who had weak ties to the garrison. The janissaries and sailors refused to obey these new beylerbeys appointed from the centre and instead pledged allegiance to influential figures who used titles such as "agha," "dey" and "bay" whom they elected from among themselves. These individuals quickly took control of the janissary corps. From the 17th century onwards, the authority of the beylerbeys in the region gradually declined and the administrative structure changed. This new administrative system emerged successively in Tunisia in 1591, Tripolitania in 1603, and Algeria in 1671, and was known as the "*Dayılar İdaresi*" (Administration of the Deys). During this period, the African provinces resembled the Ottoman Empire's privileged provinces in the Balkans, which were governed by princes elected by local notables. The emergence of the *Deylik* administrations at the end of the sixteenth and during the seventeenth century should therefore be understood not as evidence that the Garp Ocakları had always functioned as autonomous corsair

republics, but rather as the consequence of a gradual transformation within an administrative system that had originally been established as an integral component of the Ottoman provincial order. Distinguishing between these two historical phases is essential for avoiding the retrospective projection of later political structures onto the sixteenth century.

The administrative organisation outlined above demonstrates that the Garp Ocakları cannot be understood simply as maritime communities organised around corsairing. Their incorporation into the Ottoman provincial hierarchy, the establishment of institutional mechanisms linking provincial authorities with Istanbul, and the presence of judicial, fiscal, and military officials appointed by the central government reveal a far more complex structure of imperial governance. While their strategic location on the western Mediterranean frontier gave these provinces certain distinctive characteristics, these features developed within the broader framework of Ottoman provincial administration rather than outside it. Therefore, the following section examines how this institutional framework operated in practice through mechanisms of communication, supervision, and decision-making that connected the Garp Ocakları with the Ottoman imperial centre.

## Imperial Governance and Political Legitimacy in the Garp Ocakları

The administrative integration of the Garp Ocakları into the Ottoman provincial system was accompanied by a distinctive normative language through which the imperial government defined its responsibilities toward North Africa. Rather than treating these provinces as exceptional possessions governed outside the ordinary framework of imperial administration, the Ottoman central government consistently described them through concepts that emphasised protection, justice, frontier defence, and the welfare of the Muslim population. The following documents illustrate how these principles were articulated in official correspondence between Istanbul and the western provinces.

From the 16th century onwards, the Ottoman Sultan, who assumed the caliphate, saw himself as the protector of all Muslims and considered the lands where Muslims lived as his own territory. For this reason, Ottoman documents consistently represented the Garp Ocakları as *suğûr-i İslâmiye* (the Islamic frontier fortresses), thereby locating these provinces within the broader defensive geography of the empire rather than depicting them merely as naval bases or corsair strongholds (BOA A. DVNS. MHM. d,

111/169, 1701). Particularly revealing is a decree issued in 1567 defining the three principal responsibilities expected of the beylerbeys governing these frontier provinces: (1) *hıfz u hırâset-i memleket* (the defence and protection of the territory), (2) *zabt u rabt-ı vilâyet* (the maintenance of political order and lawful administration), and (3) *refâhiyyet ü itminân-ı reâyâ* (the welfare and tranquillity of the subjects) (BOA, A. DVNS. MHM. d, 7/250, 20 September 1567). Rather than emphasising territorial exploitation or the extraction of resources, the decree defined successful provincial government through the interrelated principles of security, justice, and public welfare. This is sometimes briefly expressed in documents as "*reâyâ ve berâyânın âsûde-hâl olması* (the peace and tranquility of the subjects and the people)."

The documentary evidence examined here does not suggest that the Ottoman central administration conceptualised the Garp Ocakları as territories to be governed through a logic of extraction or differential status. Instead, official correspondence consistently represented them as integral frontier provinces whose administration was expected to combine military defence with justice and the welfare of the population.

| **Ottoman Concept** | **Functional Meaning** |
|---|---|
| Hıfz u hırâset | Defence and protection |
| Zabt u rabt | Political order and lawful administration |
| Refâhiyyet | Welfare of the subjects |

Significantly, the decree does not define successful government through tribute, taxation, or military conquest, but through the protection of territory, the maintenance of public order, and the welfare of the population.

### *Trablusgarp [Tripolitania]*

The Ottoman correspondence concerning Tripolitania illustrates how the general principles outlined above were translated into provincial practice. Rather than focusing exclusively on military affairs, the imperial orders addressed a wide range of administrative concerns, including security, justice, fiscal order, relations with local communities, and the responsibilities of provincial governors. The following documents demonstrate the practical operation of Ottoman governance on the empire's western frontier.

In 1559, in a letter written in Arabic by Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent to the notables of Tripolitania prior to the Battle of Djerba, it was emphasised that Tripolitania had been conquered primarily to protect Muslims from infidel attacks,[8] and that the people of Tripolitania were now subjects of the Ottoman Empire and enjoyed the same rights as other subjects. Subsequently, it was mentioned that it was necessary to act together against the infidels and that, for this purpose, they had to obey the administrators at their head. Finally, it was stated that if the administrators sent by the Sultan oppressed the people or imposed unjust taxes, this situation would be reported to Istanbul, the necessary action would be taken, and justice would be ensured for them (BOA, A. DVNS. MHM. d, 3/578, 6 December 1559). The letter sent to Turgut Reis, the Beylerbey of Tripolitania, on the same date also emphasised the three points mentioned above (BOA, A. DVNS. MHM. d, 3/579, 5 December 1559).

Preserving the lands means always being prepared for naval and land warfare. For this reason, the provinces had to maintain a constant naval force and make various preparations on land, such as repairing castles and installing cannons. Sometimes, requests were made to the capital for military supplies and ship equipment, and the province's defense capabilities were enhanced with the resources received from there. At other times, the provinces attempted to meet their own needs using the spoils obtained from naval battles.

The subjugation of the province was aimed at establishing just governance on the one hand and suppressing the uprisings and ensuring public order on the other. Once order was established in the province, the people also gained security and prosperity. Although the period following the conquest of Tripolitania passed peacefully under Murad and Turgut Pasha, unrest gradually began to emerge in subsequent years, followed by the outbreak of rebellions. There were essentially two reasons for the unrest and the uprisings that followed: one was the oppressive practices of the rulers, and

8 Throughout the imperial correspondence, expressions such as *küffâr-i hâksâr* (damned infidels), *küffâr-i bed-girdâr* (infidels of evil nature), *kefere-i la'în ve fecere-i dûzah-mekîn* (cursed infidels and sinners whose place is hell), *küffâr-i mezellet-âsâr-i hezimet-encâm* (despicable infidels whose end is defeat), *zümre-i müşrikîn* (polytheists), *adû-yı hâksâr ve küffâr-ı âteş-karâr* (despicable enemies and infidels destined for hellfire), *a'dâ-yı dîn ü devlet* (enemies of religion and state), and similar formulations function primarily as documentary designations for hostile military powers—principally the Spanish, Portuguese, the Knights of Malta, and their allies—rather than as theological classifications of all non-Muslims. Accordingly, the translation "infidel" employed in this article reflects the terminology of the Ottoman documents and should be understood contextually as referring to enemy forces.

the other was the resistance of the local population to being ruled by what they still perceived as a foreign element.

In 1567, during Mehmed Pasha's governorship, the first rebellion in Tripolitania broke out in Tajura. This uprising, which spread to Tavurga, was suppressed by Kılıç Ali Pasha; the Sultan rewarded him with a sword and two robes of honor (BOA, A. DVNS. MHM. d, 7/250, 20 September 1567; Rossi 1974: 197).

A document dated May 1571 reported to the capital that Egypt, Algeria, and Tunisia were currently safe, and that their people were comfortable and peaceful. Nevertheless, the capital also stated that there was a possibility of the Spanish attacking Algeria and Tunisia, and requested that precautions be taken, that the fleet be dispatched if necessary to damage enemy ships, that actions detrimental to the state's honor be avoided, and that any dangerous situation be immediately reported to Istanbul (BOA, A. DVNS. MHM. d, 10/14, 27 May 1571).

The omission of Tripolitania from this document is noteworthy, as the political landscape of the region remained considerably complex. In 1571, the people of Gabes, near Tripoli, rebelled, refusing to pay the taxes imposed on them and declaring that they would pay the amount they themselves had determined; however, order was restored through the military intervention of Beylerbey Cafer Pasha, and it became possible to collect the taxes (BOA, A. DVNS. MHM. d, 14/1584, 10 June 1571; BOA, A. DVNS. MHM. d, 10/91, 25 June 1571). At that time, Tunisia was not yet an independent province but was attached to Algeria. Although some castles in the region were still in enemy hands, the other conquered areas were first attached to Tripolitania and later annexed to Algeria. The Governor of Tripolitania, Cafer Pasha, objected to the central government, stating that this situation had led to a serious decline in provincial revenues; however, the decree sent from Istanbul stated that the region's ulema and people had complained about the oppression of the Tripolitania rulers and wanted to be attached to Algeria, and that no objection should be made in this regard (BOA, A. DVNS. MHM. d, 14/1597, 1571).

Cafer Pasha's term of office is notable as a period when the deterioration of provincial administration became apparent. The Pasha imposed heavy taxes on the people, and the qadis (judges) he appointed were known for various irregularities and acts of oppression. When the people of Tripoli and Cerbe rebelled against these practices, many Cerbe residents were forced to flee oppression and migrate. Complaints reached Istanbul that Cafer Pasha

had unjustly collected money from the people and seized their property. Consequently, a decree sent to the province in 1572 stated the following:

> "*İmdi reâyâ ve berâyâya bi-vechin mine'l-vücûh zulm ü teaddî olduğuna rızâ-yı şerîfim olmadığı ecilden eğer beylerbeyi ve eğer kâidler aldıkları bi-hasebi'ş-şer' ashâbına reddolunup ol cânibde vâki' olan asker halkı kullarımın nizâm-ı ahvâlleri mühimmâttan olmağın buyurdum ki … vech-i meşruh üzre bi-gayr-ı hakkın malları alındığı şer'le sâbit ve zâhir olursa hilâf-ı şer'-i kavîm alınan hukûku ashâbına bî-kusûr hükmedip alıverip...* [Now, since it is not acceptable to me that my subjects be subjected to oppression and injustice in any way, if the beylerbey and the qadis have taken anything from them,... if it is established and evident according to the law that their property has been taken unjustly, I have ordered that then the rights taken contrary to the law shall be returned to them without fault according to the law, and the order of my soldiers on that side shall be restored...]" (BOA, A. DVNS. MHM. d, 18/306, 9 March 1572).

Accordingly, Istanbul has not yet accused Pasha and has indicated that an investigation into the incidents complained of will be conducted and a decision will be made accordingly. However, as the complaints continued, the situation changed, and a new beylerbey, Mustafa Pasha, was appointed from Istanbul; he was tasked with investigating Cafer Pasha's irregularities and rectifying the situation. The inspection revealed that Cafer Pasha had embezzled 60,000 gold coins collected from the public; half of this amount was recovered through amicable means and handed over to the new governor to be distributed to the rightful owners. Furthermore, the new beylerbey was strictly ordered not to allow any external interference in the internal workings of the Janissary organisation (Rossi 1974: 198; BOA, A. DVNS. MHM. d, 18/306, 1572; 22/214, 1573).

During this period, it was determined that the coins minted in Tripolitania were of poor quality; the new beylerbey was tasked with resolving this issue by collecting the defective coins and minting new coins of high-quality silver to replace them (BOA, A. DVNS. MHM. d., 22/100, 1573). According to records from 1573, Tripolitania had been experiencing famine for about 7-8 years, and as a result, the province's revenues were insufficient to cover the salaries of soldiers and officials. The Beylerbeyi requested that approximately 500 community leaders from the Ibadi groups (Wahbiyya and Mistawa) in Djerba be exempted from taxes, that the wealthy were not

helping the poor, and that only Musa b. Cellud, the leader of the Wahbiyya, was a useful individual. Therefore, he requested that five of his followers be exempted from taxes, while the rest be reclassified as *reaya* (subjects), thus revoking their exemptions. However, Istanbul investigated the matter of the exemptions, asking for a detailed explanation of what they had done in return for being exempt from taxes, and what kind of services they had rendered (BOA, A. DVNS. MHM. d., 22/163, 1573).[9]

During these years, the people of the Awjila region formed an independent structure governed by a sheikh chosen from among themselves, who was not affiliated with Tripolitania; they exerted pressure on the Arab groups in the region. Following complaints, Istanbul authorised an expedition to the region. The Beylerbey stated that Awjila needed to be brought back under control due to the loss of revenue suffered by Tripoli in regions such as Qairouan, Sousse, and Monastir; the central government instructed that action be taken carefully so as not to damage the state's reputation (BOA, A. DVNS. MHM. d., 22/164, 1573).

The Fizan region, south of Tripoli, was located on important trade routes coming from sub-Saharan Africa. The security of the region was vital for the continuity of trade. Fizan was initially governed by a judge appointed from among its own people and paid an annual fixed tax to Tripoli. During the reigns of Murad, Turgut, and Kılıç Ali Pasha, this tax amounted to 1,140 *miskals* of gold. When the taxes could not be collected, an expedition was launched, resulting in the administration of the region being handed over to a *sanjakbey* sent from Tripoli. In 1573, Ali Bey, the Bey of Fizan, sought to increase the tax to 3,000 miskals, citing the need to ensure the safety of the roads; however, the center rejected this request and ordered that only 200,000 *akçe* be collected, stipulating that taxes the people could not bear should not be imposed (BOA, A. DVNS. MHM. d, 23/698, 16 January 1574; 23/706, 1574).[10]

9 Some studies claim that the Ottoman administration unfairly treated the Ibadi people on the island of Djerba, imposing double taxes on them (a type of tribute tax called "katîat" along with taxes like zakat and ushur collected from Muslims). The "katîat" tribute tax, which did not apply to the Sunni population, was an additional financial burden for the Ibadi people on the island. The Ibadi people of Djerba frequently revolted against this injustice, and this unfair situation was only rectified in 1842 by Ahmed Pasha, the Governor of Tunis. See al-Meryemi 2015.

10 In the sixteenth century Ottoman monetary system, 450 akçe were minted from 320 grams of silver. Accordingly, 200,000 akçe required approximately 142,222 grams (about 142 kg) of silver. Assuming one miskal equals 4,8 grams, 3,000 miskals of gold correspond to approximately 14,400 grams. If the gold–silver ratio is taken as 1:11,8, then 3,000 miskals of gold would amount to approximately 169,920 grams of silver in value. In this case, the silver equivalent of Ali Bey's salyâne was intended to be increased from approximately 142,000 grams to around 170,000 grams; however, the request was ultimately rejected. For gold–silver ratios in the sixteenth-century Ottoman Empire, see Pamuk 2000: 63, as well as the relevant studies of Halil İnalcık.

Between 1573 and 1577, Tripolitania was administered by Beylerbey Haydar Pasha along with Tunisia; in 1577, the province was separated again and the governorship of Tripolitania was given to Hasan Pasha. However, by the late 1570s, the order of the province had seriously deteriorated, particularly due to Haydar Pasha's practices. In the decrees of 1579, it was demanded that the villages and districts that the beylerbeys and other administrators had acquired based on the letters of appointment in their possession be transferred to state ownership by paying their prices from the Imperial Treasury. Due to the famine that occurred in the same year, it was decided to send provisions from the Tırhala district to Tripoli (BOA, A. DVNS. MHM. d, 31/462, 1577; 36/226, 1579; 36/941, 5 June 1579).

During this period, serious tensions arose between Tunisia and the Tripolitania garrison regarding sovereignty and revenue sharing. The status of regions such as Qairouan, Monastir, Sousse, and Kaffsa was frequently a source of dispute; despite orders from the centre, the Tunisian military opposed these decisions (BOA, A. DVNS. MHM. d, 36/230, 36/457, 36/621, 36/742, 36/786, 1579). In 1580, a campaign was launched against rebellious groups, and although the expenses were covered by the state treasury, it was determined that the beylerbey had seized all of the spoils. As a result, it was decreed that one-third of the spoils should go to the beylerbey and the remainder to the treasury (BOA, A. DVNS. MHM. d, 39/434, 1580).

In the same year, as provincial revenues became severely insufficient due to the distribution of fiefs and estates, this practice was abolished and replaced with the annual tax system. Thus, provincial revenues were considered entirely the property of the sultan; the lands acquired by soldiers were confiscated, and it was decided that salaries would be paid annually from the central treasury (BOA, A. DVNS. MHM. d, 39/436, 39/438, 39/439, 39/598, 1580).

From the 1580s onwards, signs of deterioration in the Ottoman central administration began to be strongly felt in Tripolitania as well. Most of the beylerbeys prioritised their personal interests over the development of the country during their short terms of office, while the Janissary corps gradually slipped out of central authority's control and began to interfere in administration. The people were greatly distressed by heavy taxes, forced labour, and newly imposed obligations; complaints were frequently brought to the capital. A decree, dated 30 June 1582, ordered the elimination of practices contrary to Islamic law, innovative taxes, and oppression of the people in the province, demanding the establishment of justice (BOA, A. DVNS. MHM. d, 47/416, 30 June 1582).

The decrees issued between 1580 and 1587 are filled with concrete examples of the breakdown of the provincial system. These decrees included provisions such as collecting provincial revenues solely on behalf of the treasury, preventing soldiers from interfering in tax collection processes, preventing the Janissaries from oppressing the subjects by sending them as "*nöbetçi*" (guards), keeping the castle keys out of Janissaries, and ensuring that no one other than the beylerbeys interfered in the administration (BOA, A. DVNS. MHM. d, 62/45, 62/276, 62/282, 62/284, 62/285, 62/308, 62/309, 1587). However, despite all these measures, the weakness of authority could not be overcome, and a major uprising broke out in 1587–1588.

As demonstrated by the official decrees sent to Tripoli, the disintegration observed in the provincial administration essentially stemmed from the inability of three fundamental elements to function in harmony: (1) the Beylerbey and other administrative officials, (2) the Janissary corps responsible for public order, and (3) the subjects (*reaya*), the settled population of the province. The power struggle between the Beylerbey and the Janissaries often directly affected the subjects; the people complained about the injustices they suffered first to the qadis and Beylerbeys, and when they did not get results, they complained to Istanbul. Although the Ottoman central administration responded to these complaints by sending decrees containing harsh language to the beylerbeys and qadis, it failed to establish an effective oversight mechanism to ensure that the measures taken were properly implemented. This vicious cycle ultimately created fertile ground for widespread social unrest and rebellions in the province.

In this context, in 1587, the uprising that began in Tajura as a result of the oppressive attitudes of Beylerbeyi Mehmed Pasha and the provincial soldiers quickly spread to the surrounding regions. The leader of the rebels was a Maghrebi named Yahya b. Yahya es-Suweydi. With his eloquence and influential personality, Yahya managed to gather around him many urban and Bedouin inhabitants of Tripolitania. Declaring himself the "mahdi" in connection with widespread popular beliefs linking the year 1000/1591–1592 to the apocalypse, Yahya claimed authority over Tajura, Giryana, and Misrata. He inflicted a heavy defeat on the Ottoman troops sent against him. Following this victory, Yahya's claims became even more assertive; he spoke of enslaving Turks and Jews, banned the use of Turkish-made goods, and minted coins in his own name (İlter 1937: 215-6; Rossi 1974: 201).

As the rebellion grew, Grand Admiral Hasan Pasha was tasked with investigating the situation. After spending the winter of 1588 breaking the

resistance of local forces in the province, Hasan Pasha arrived in the spring of 1589 with a fleet of fifty galleys. Alongside the naval forces, ground troops were also dispatched from Tunisia, and the rebels were dispersed through this joint operation. As a result of the investigation, Beylerbeyi Mehmed Pasha, who was found to have been negligent and abusive in his duties, leading to the growth of the rebellion, was removed from office and arrested; many high-ranking officials were punished, and the return of property unjustly taken from the people was ensured. Furthermore, the Janissary garrison in Tripolitania was disbanded and the troops were distributed to different regions; in their place, 300 Janissaries, 100 artillerymen, 200 quartermasters, and 450 soldiers from various classes from the navy were stationed. Mehmed Pasha was replaced by the Governor of Algeria, Istanköylü Ahmed Pasha (BOA, A. DVNS. MHM. d, 66/19, 1589; 66/16, 1589; İlter 1937: 217).

However, with the departure of the fleet from the region, the rebels regrouped. Despite the forces sent from Tunisia and Egypt, the new governor Ahmed Pasha was killed by the rebels (1590). During this period, Yahya, lacking military experience and logistical capabilities, requested assistance from the Knights of Malta. The Knights, who had lost Tripoli in 1551, wanted to take advantage of this opportunity; however, despite the supplies and provisions they provided, they failed to achieve the desired outcome from the rebellion and withdrew (İlter 1937: 218; Rossi 1974: 202-3; Hess 2010: 174).

Following the assassination of Ahmed Pasha, the governorship of Tripolitania was given to Mehmed Pasha, son of the Governor of Egypt, Üveys Pasha, on condition that the necessary military supplies and provisions be provided from Egypt. Mehmed Pasha marched against the rebels with the forces arriving from Egypt. Yahya was finally captured with the cooperation of Sheikh Nüveyr of the Mehamid family and sent to Istanbul to be flayed. In correspondence dated 22 *Jumada al-Thani* 1000 (1592), Mehmed Pasha reported to the centre that the rebellion had been completely suppressed and that the people had returned to peace (BOA, A. DVNS. MHM. d, 67/150; 69/271).

Taken together, the Tripolitanian documents reveal that imperial authority was exercised through continuous correspondence, supervision, and administrative intervention rather than through military coercion alone. They demonstrate that the Ottoman central government closely monitored developments in the province and expected its governors not only to suppress threats to public order but also to preserve justice, administrative stability, and the welfare of the population. In this respect, the evidence from

Tripolitania reinforces the broader argument advanced in this article that the Garp Ocakları functioned as integrated Ottoman frontier provinces governed according to established principles of Ottoman provincial administration. The suppression of prolonged rebellions likewise illustrates the determination of the Ottoman government to preserve provincial order and prevent the emergence of competing centres of authority within the imperial framework.

### *Cezâyir-i Garp [Algeria]*

The incorporation of Algeria into the Ottoman Empire followed a different trajectory from that of Tripolitania. Ottoman authority first emerged through the activities of autonomous Turkish commanders responding to local requests for military assistance before becoming formally integrated into the imperial system in 1519 under the protection of Sultan Selim I. From the establishment of the beylerbeylik in 1545 onwards, Algeria evolved into the principal western frontier province of the empire, governed through institutions broadly comparable to those operating elsewhere in the Ottoman provincial system (Taş 2020: 258–271).

In the early 16th century, Algeria was a sanjak,[11] but from the middle of the century it became a province and was administered by beylerbeys for about a century. Following the first beylerbey, Barbaroszade Hasan Pasha (1545-1552), Salih Reis, one of Barbaros' men, became the second beylerbey (1552-1556); after his death, Tekeoğlu Mehmed Pasha was sent from Damascus to Algeria. However, the provincial soldiers could not accept the Pasha, who had no connection to Algeria, and Mehmed Pasha (d. 1557) was killed by the soldiers shortly thereafter. Barbaroszade Hasan Pasha was sent back to Algeria to calm the situation and restore order. Hasan Pasha was tired of the disobedience of the Algerian garrison and, as a precaution, created a military class from the local population. However, this move further angered the Algerian janissaries, who stormed his palace in 1561, captured the Pasha, put him on a ship, and sent him to Istanbul. Ahmed Pasha was sent to Algeria to suppress the capital's rebellion. After Pasha restored peace with harsh measures, he suddenly passed away, and Barbaroszade Hasan Pasha was sent back to the province in 1562. Mehmed Pasha, son of Salih Reis, was appointed to replace Hasan Pasha, who served until 1567, but he

11 In a document dated 1555, Hasan Ağa, who ruled Algeria from 1534 to 1544, is referred to as "*mir-i sâbık-ı livâ-i Cezayir,*" meaning the former bey (*sanjak bey*) of the Sanjak of Algeria. See: BOA, A. RSK. d, Registry No. 1452, p.374.

was dismissed due to reports of corruption, and the province was given to Kılıç Ali Pasha in 1568. Following Kılıç Ali Pasha's appointment as Grand Admiral in October 1571, appointments in Algiers were largely made at his behest. The death of Grand Admiral Kılıç Ali Pasha, the region's patron, in 1587 changed the course of subsequent beylerbey appointments. Although the appointment of beylerbeys with no maritime background, unfamiliar with the region, and appointed for short terms caused many problems, there was not much change in the administrative structure (Taş 2020: 258-265).

The first decrees sent to the province concern the granting of fiefs, estates, or appointments such as captaincy, leadership, or commandership to those who have served successfully in the military, at the request of the beylerbeys. Again, what the state wanted from its administrators here was the protection and security of the country, the control and restraint of the province, and the prosperity and tranquility of the subjects. The following statements in a 1565 decree are noteworthy (BOA, A. DVNS. MHM. d, 6/971, 8 April 1565):

> "*Ol diyârlarda vâki olan cumhûr-ı müslimînin refâhiyyeti ve küffâr-ı hâksârın mezelleti ve nekbeti için hâliyâ deryâya azîm donanma-i hümâyûnumuz irsâl olunup feth ü zabtı vâcib olan ba'zı kılâ'ın muhâsarası emrim olmuştur ümmîddir ki Hakk sübhânehû ve te'âlâ hazretlerinin ulüvv-i inâyet-i fütûh-bahşları ile donanma-i nusret-karînimize feth u zafer müyesser olup Cezayir ve Mısır yolundan küffâr-ı nâ-bekârın mazarrat ve fesâdı def' u ref' oluna…* [The Ottoman Navy has set sail for the prosperity of all Muslims living on the Mediterranean coast and the defeat of their enemies. The Sultan has ordered the navy to conquer the necessary locations and capture certain castles. It is the Sultan's wish that, with Allah's grace, the Ottoman fleet be victorious and that the harm inflicted upon Muslims by the infidels/enemies along the sea route from Algeria to Egypt be completely eliminated]."

This decree is particularly significant because it defines the objectives of the imperial naval campaign not merely in military terms but also through the protection of Muslim communities and the restoration of security across the Mediterranean. The language employed by the chancery therefore reflects the broader conception of frontier governance discussed above.

In a decree dated 1567, the beylerbey, who was asked to take precautions against the Spanish who might attack Algeria, was told, "*sen dahi basîret üzere olup gaflet etmeyip gaflet ile a'dâdan memleket ü vilâyete zarar*

*eriştirmekten hazer edesin*. [You too should be prudent and not be negligent, and beware of allowing harm to come to the country and the province through negligence]" (BOA, A. DVNS. MHM. d, 7/51, 11 August 1567). The warning against negligence demonstrates that provincial governors were held personally accountable for the security of the frontier. Rather than granting unrestricted authority, the imperial centre expected active vigilance and administrative responsibility from its provincial representatives.

In a decree sent to Kılıç Ali Pasha, the Beylerbey of Algeria, dated 1568, the following statements were made regarding the welfare and peace of the people:

> "*Cezâyir-i garb Beğlerbeğisine hüküm ki, hâliyâ ol câniblerde olan reâyâ ve berâyâyı isyân üzere olan aʿrâbdan ve sâir zalemeden sıyânet ve himâyet edip muntazamü'l-hâl olup kemâl-i adâletin ve kılâʿ taʿmîrine mübâşeret eyledüğin istimâ olundu İmdi senden umulan dahi bunun gibi efʿâl-i pesendîde idi ki vücûd ve zuhûr bulmuş… Buyurdum ki vusûl buldukta hilʿat-ı hümâyûnu giyip dahi fukarâ ve reʿâyâ ki vedâyiʿ-i Hallâk-ı berâyâdır kemâkân sıyânet ve himâyet edip daima vazîʿ u refîʿ ve sağîr u kebîrin ahvâllerine (…) adalet üzere olasın ki eyyam-ı saadet-encamımda her biri asude-hal olup ferâh-ı bâl ile devâm-ı devlet ü ikbâlim içün hayr duaya iştigâl göstere.* [I have heard that you have protected the people there from rebellious Bedouins and tyrants, established order, ruled with justice, and repaired the castles to defend the province. This is precisely what was expected of you, and you have fulfilled it well. In recognition of your services, I have sent you a robe of honor. When the robe arrives, wear it. Protect and care for the poor, who are entrusted to you by Allah, and my subjects there, as you have done until now. Monitor the situation of all the people, from the greatest to the least, and treat them justly, so that each of them may live a secure and peaceful life in my reign and pray for the continuation of my state]" (BOA, A. DVNS. MHM. d, 7/2456, 13 November 1568).

Particularly revealing is the combination of military and civil responsibilities assigned to Kılıç Ali Pasha. The decree praises him not only for protecting the province against external threats and repairing its fortifications but also for safeguarding the poor, ensuring justice, and maintaining the welfare of the population. These expectations closely correspond to the principles of

*hıfz u hırâset*, *zabt u rabt*, and *refâhiyyet* identified earlier, illustrating the remarkable consistency of Ottoman provincial governance.

When Kılıç Ali Pasha became Grand Admiral in 1572, Ahmed Pasha, the Sanjakbey of Kocaili, was appointed to the Beylerbeylik (provincial governorship) of Cezayir-i Garb. In a decree sent to the Algerian soldiers and their leaders informing them of this matter, the Sultan's satisfaction was expressed, stating, "*Yüzünüz ağ olsun sizden mercû olan bu idi elhamdülillâh hayır vücûda geldi.* [May your faces be bright, for what was expected of you has come to pass, praise be to Allah]," referring to the two enemy ships they had captured in Ali Pasha's absence. Then, "*imdi vilâyet-i mezbûreye nazar-ı fırsat-âsârım sâir hîta-i hilâfet-i vâsi'atü'l-aktârımda dâhil memâlik-i celîletü'l-i'tibârdan dûn değil belki dâru'l-cihâd olduğu haysiyet ile daha efzûndur ve anda olan beyler ve ağalar kullarım ve sâir asâkir-i nusret-meâsir ve a'yân-ı vilâyet südde-i saâdetimde olan kullarım gibidir.* [Now, my gaze of opportunity falls upon the aforementioned province, which is no less than the other lands within my vast and extensive caliphate, but rather more exalted due to its status as the abode of jihad. It is not inferior in respect, but rather, by virtue of its status as the abode of jihad, it is even more exalted. The lords and nobles there are my servants, and the other soldiers of victory and the notables of the province are like my servants in the seat of my happiness]." Thus, it was stated that Algeria was a land of jihad and therefore more valuable in the eyes of the Sultan than other Ottoman provinces, and that the soldiers of Algeria were as valuable as the statesmen in the Sultan's own palace. After warnings to the new Beylerbey Ahmed Pasha to pay attention to the defense of Algeria, it was recalled that France had long been a friend of the Ottomans, and it was emphasised that French subjects and merchants should not be attacked, but that, conversely, Spanish coasts could be attacked and plundered (BOA, A. DVNS. MHM. d, 18/288, 9 March 1572).

Perhaps the most revealing document examined in this section is the imperial decree of 1572. Far from portraying Algeria as a peripheral dependency, the Sultan explicitly described it as *dârü'l-cihâd* (the abode of holy war) and declared that it occupied a position of even greater importance than many other provinces of the empire because of its frontier role. Equally significant is the statement that the soldiers and notables of Algeria were regarded as equivalent to those serving at the imperial court. Such expressions provide valuable insight into the political vocabulary through which the Ottoman centre conceptualised its western frontier.

Taken together, the Algerian documents demonstrate that imperial authority was maintained through continuous communication between Istanbul and the provincial administration. The decrees consistently emphasise frontier defence, justice, public welfare, and the accountability of provincial governors, while simultaneously recognising Algeria's exceptional strategic significance within the Ottoman Empire. Rather than depicting the province as an autonomous corsair polity, the documentary evidence reveals a frontier province closely integrated into the Ottoman administrative and political order.

### *Tunus [Tunisia]*

Tunisia occupied a distinctive position within the Ottoman frontier system because it lay between the provinces of Algeria and Tripolitania and remained contested between the Ottomans and the Habsburg Monarchy until its definitive conquest in 1574. During this prolonged struggle, the imperial government not only pursued military objectives but also sought to establish a durable provincial administration in the territories brought under Ottoman control (Hess 2010: 107-8, Uzunçarşılı 2009: 29; İlter 1937: 117; Ahmed İbn Ebi'd-Dıyâf 1964: 16)

Following the conquest of 1569, Tunisia came under Ottoman rule. While urban development initiatives were launched, efforts were also made to establish an administrative structure. During this process, the demands of the people were given particular consideration. A decree sent to Ramazan Bey, Kılıç Ali Pasha's deputy in Tunisia, contained the following statements:

> "*vusûl buldukta tamâm basîret ve intibâh üzere olup hıfz u hırâset-i memleket ve vilâyet ve zabt u rabt-ı asâkir ve riâyet-i raʿiyyet cadde-i iʿtidâlden udûl eylemeyip emr-i şerʿ-i kavîm ve müstedʿâ-yı kânûn-i kadîme mütâbaʿat ve aʿyânı vilâyet ile hüsn-i muʿâşeret üzere olup...* [Upon arrival, they shall be fully discerning and vigilant, preserving and protecting the country and province, maintaining order and discipline among the soldiers, and observing the people, without deviating from the path of moderation, adhering to the strong and established command of the law and maintaining good relations with the notables of the province...]."

Here again, we encounter the following fundamental principles: protecting and safeguarding the country's lands, keeping the soldiers under control,

looking after the needs of the people, not deviating from justice and complying with Sharia and ancient law, and getting along well with the province's dignitaries and people (BOA, A. DVNS. MHM. d, 18/287, 5 March 1572).

The decree issued to Ramazan Bey is particularly revealing because it encapsulates, within a single administrative instruction, the principal elements of Ottoman provincial governance discussed throughout this article. Military defence, administrative order, justice, protection of the population, adherence to both the sharīʿa and established imperial law (*kānûn-ı kadîm*), and cooperation with local notables all appear together as complementary responsibilities of provincial government rather than as separate objectives.

In a decree dated 1570, it was ordered that individuals wishing to build mosques in cities such as Tunis and Bizerte be granted concessions (BOA, A. DVNS. MHM. d, 14/609, 22 October 1570). The people of Tunis wanted to be an independent province and did not wish to be attached to Algeria or Tripolitania. Although the capital responded positively to this request, it initially attached the conquered cities to either Tripolitania or Algeria based in their proximity, but left the final resolution of the matter until after the Crusader fleet had been eliminated (BOA, A. DVNS. MHM. d, 14/76, 14/78, 14/1597, 17/6, 17/8; 1571). At one point, the Beylerbey of Tripolitania even wanted to attach the cities of Sousse and Monastir, which were affiliated with Tunisia, to Tripolitania due to their proximity. However, the capital sent representatives to investigate where the people of the aforementioned cities wanted to be affiliated and stated that a decision would be made accordingly (BOA, A. DVNS. MHM. d, 16/637, 13 October 1571).

Equally noteworthy is the imperial government's decision to investigate the wishes of the inhabitants before determining the provincial affiliation of Sousse and Monastir. Rather than imposing an immediate administrative solution, the central government instructed its representatives to ascertain local preferences before reaching a final decision. Although such consultation should not be interpreted in modern democratic terms, it nevertheless illustrates a pragmatic concern for local conditions in the process of provincial integration.

As Crusader naval activity intensified in the Mediterranean, the imperial government repeatedly instructed the governors of the western provinces to strengthen the defence of Tunisia by taking precautions against enemy fleets and repairing and reinforcing the coastal fortifications (BOA, A. DVNS.

MHM. d, 14/1532, 4 June 1571). The Ottoman defeat at Lepanto, following the conquest of Cyprus in 1571, temporarily weakened Ottoman naval supremacy, enabling the Spanish under Don Juan of Austria to recapture Tunis on 11 October 1573 (Naki 2016: 133–36; Kavas 2016: 19–24).

The loss of Tunis immediately triggered a large-scale imperial response. Under the direction of Grand Vizier Sokullu Mehmed Pasha, the Ottoman government rapidly mobilised ships, troops, provisions, and ammunition for a major expedition. In the summer of 1574, the combined forces led by Sinan Pasha and Grand Admiral Kılıç Ali Pasha, reinforced by the provincial contingents of Algeria, Tripolitania, and Tunisia, as well as troops drawn from across the empire, besieged the Spanish positions at La Goulette (Halkulvâd), Tunis, and San Jak Island. Following a month-long campaign, the Ottoman forces reconquered Tunisia in September 1574, thereby bringing an end to Habsburg ambitions in the central Maghreb (Kavas 2016: 24–36; Naki 2016: 136–41).

The scale and speed of these preparations demonstrate the strategic importance that the Ottoman government attached to Tunisia as a key component of its western frontier. Rather than accepting the temporary Spanish occupation, the imperial centre committed substantial military and logistical resources to restoring Ottoman authority in the province.

Following the reconquest, the Ottoman administration immediately established a permanent provincial organisation. Approximately 4,000 Janissaries were stationed in Tunisia under their own military hierarchy, while Haydar Pasha served as beylerbeyi. Alongside the military establishment, an *Emîrü'l-Evtân* was appointed to supervise provincial revenues, a *qadi* was assigned to administer justice, and a provincial council (*divan*) coordinated civil and military affairs (Maksudoğlu 1966: 193).

In Tunisia, under the rule of the Beylerbeys, things began to deteriorate in the following years. The Janissaries, disturbed by the atrocities committed by the division leaders, stormed the provincial council in 1591 and killed them. The Beylerbey did not have the power to maintain stability and was forced to bow to the soldiers' demands. The soldiers obeyed influential individuals among themselves whom they called "*Dayı*." About 300 *dayı*, who were the leaders of small groups, would gather to discuss administrative matters and express their opinions. However, due to the large number of *dayı*, it was impossible to reach a common decision. Beylerbey Cafer Pasha found a new solution by appointing Rodoslu İbrahim, who had the most followers among these *dayı*s, to the provincial council as the representative

of all the *dayı*s (as the leader of the soldiers). From then on, the people who had the real say in the province were those who were selected as *dayı*s in this way (Maksudoğlu 1966: 194-95). Therefore, the emergence of the deys represented a transformation in the internal distribution of provincial authority rather than the disappearance of Ottoman sovereignty.

The Tunisian evidence demonstrates that the establishment of Ottoman authority involved considerably more than military conquest. Alongside the defence of the frontier, imperial correspondence consistently emphasised the organisation of provincial administration, the maintenance of justice, cooperation with local elites, and the welfare of the population. Even after the administrative transformations of the late sixteenth century, these principles continued to shape the functioning of the Garp Ocakları, supporting the broader argument advanced in this article that North Africa formed an integral component of the Ottoman provincial order rather than a peripheral or exceptionally governed possession.

Viewed collectively, the evidence from Tripolitania, Algeria, and Tunisia reveals a remarkably consistent conception of Ottoman provincial government. Despite differences in local circumstances, imperial correspondence repeatedly emphasises frontier defence, justice, the protection of the population, administrative order, and cooperation with local elites. The recurrence of this administrative vocabulary across different provinces and decades suggests the existence of a coherent normative framework through which the Ottoman court defined the governance of the Garp Ocakları. This documentary consistency forms the principal basis for the broader argument advanced in this article that the sixteenth-century Garp Ocakları functioned as strategically integrated Ottoman frontier provinces rather than as loosely connected corsair polities.

## Conclusion

The evidence presented in this article suggests that the sixteenth-century Garp Ocakları should be understood primarily as strategically integrated Ottoman frontier provinces rather than being interpreted through the later historiographical paradigm of autonomous Barbary corsair states/republics. Although corsair activity undoubtedly constituted an important component of their military and economic life, the Ottoman documentary record consistently presents these provinces as integral elements of the imperial provincial system.

Equally significant, the imperial correspondence examined here does not indicate that the Ottoman central administration conceptualised North Africa as a territory to be governed through a logic of extraction or permanent differential status. Instead, official decrees repeatedly define provincial government through the interrelated principles of frontier defence, justice, public order, and the welfare of the population. Although such normative language should not be interpreted uncritically as a direct reflection of administrative practice, its remarkable consistency across different provinces and decades demonstrates the normative framework through which the Ottoman court sought to define, legitimise, and organise its authority in the Garp Ocakları.

Accordingly, the findings of this study invite a reconsideration of historiographical approaches that have predominantly interpreted the Garp Ocakları through European diplomatic correspondence, travel narratives, and nineteenth-century colonial literature. Incorporating Ottoman administrative documentation does not eliminate the need for critical source analysis; rather, it broadens the evidential base and enables a more balanced reconstruction of Ottoman rule in North Africa. Rather than arguing for the superiority of one documentary tradition over another, this study seeks to demonstrate the analytical value of Ottoman administrative documentation for understanding how the imperial government conceptualised and sought to govern its North African provinces. Read alongside North African and European sources, these documents contribute to a more balanced reconstruction of Ottoman rule in the early modern Mediterranean.

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**Archival Material**

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**Appendix 1.** BOA, TS.MA. e, 757/63, 10.11.925 (3 November 1519): Letter sent by the leaders of the city of Algiers to Yavuz Sultan Selim.




*The leaders of Algiers reported that Algiers was weak against its enemies in the Mediterranean, that Oruç Bey, who protected them from attacks, had passed away and been succeeded by his brother Hayreddin Bey, and that the people of Algiers were loyal to the Ottoman Empire.*

**Appendix 2.** BOA, TS.MA.e. 576/35, 10.08.948 (November 1541): Petition sent by the Muslims of Andalusia to Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent.


T.C. BAŞBAKANLIK OSMANLI ARŞİVİ DAİRE BAŞKANLIĞI İSTANBUL

TSMA.E.0576

*Request for the Muslims residing in Granada and other cities of Andalusia to be relocated to Algeria to save them from the oppression of the Spaniards.*

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# A GLOBAL HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF OTTOMAN-SENEGAMBIA RELATIONS: FROM THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT IN THE 15TH CENTURY TO DIRECT RELATIONS IN THE 19TH CENTURY

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**Abstract:** This study reconstructs Ottoman–Senegambian relations from the fifteenth-century historical context to the mid-nineteenth-century direct relations, challenging the assumption that there was no engagement between the Islamic states in the Senegambian region and the Ottoman Empire. Employing a global Afro-Ottoman perspective and integrating Ottoman, African, and European archives, alongside newspapers and merchant correspondence, the analysis reveals three phases and backgrounds of interaction. First, Ottoman corsairs were present in the Atlantic waters from the late fifteenth century to the mid-eighteenth century yet deliberately avoided West African coasts for various reasons. Second, from the early eighteenth century onward, Fulbe-led jihad movements established Islamic states in Senegambia (Bundu, Fuuta Jaloo, Fuuta Tooro), integrating the region into trans-regional Islamic networks centred in Mecca and Istanbul. Third, following the Tanzimat reforms in the 1830s and the Berlin Conference in 1884–1885, the Ottoman Empire pursued diplomatic, commercial, and intelligence-gathering outreach with the Senegambian region, establishing consular offices in Dakar while maintaining spiritual claims over the region's Muslim communities. This history demonstrates the global interplay of Ottoman and African agencies connecting two distant regions previously treated as separate.

**Keywords:** *Bundu, Fuuta Jaloo, Fuuta Tooro, Atlantic Ocean, West Africa*

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## Introduction

In recent years, significant scholarship on Afro-Ottoman relations has illuminated previously undocumented connections between the Ottoman Empire and distant regions of the African continent. The defining feature of these relations comprised the diplomatic and administrative activities undertaken by Ottoman officials and envoys who travelled to states within the Chad Basin, including Borno and Wadai, as well as to East African islands such as Zanzibar and the Comoros, and even to South Africa (Gökgedik 2024; Duymus 2025a; Duymus 2025b; Uğur 2006; Özkan and Yılmaz 2023; Gençoğlu 2020). Beyond these direct diplomatic engagements, contemporary studies have also identified indirect linkages between the Ottoman Empire and West African polities, notably Sokoto and Agadez (Duymus 2026; Duymus 2025c).

Such indirect connections present considerable challenges for historical reconstruction, as they generated minimal documentary evidence in central Ottoman archives, unlike administrative missions which produced substantial archival records. Nevertheless, disparate fragments dispersed across various archives in multiple languages collectively reveal evidence of Ottoman connections with regions that have hitherto received little scholarly attention, including the Senegambia region.

The absence of scholarly inquiry into potential Ottoman–Senegambian connections can be attributed to several interrelated factors. Primarily, the Ottoman Empire lacked direct terrestrial access to this region, whereas, owing to Ottoman control over Fezzan, the Empire maintained reach to central Bilad al-Sudan, including Sokoto, Borno, and Wadai, from the sixteenth century onward. Although historical evidence indicates that Ottoman merchants were present in Timbuktu during the nineteenth century, no diplomatic correspondence records exist within the Ottoman archives in Istanbul. Secondly, even during the nineteenth century, when numerous East African Islamic polities, such as Zanzibar and the Comoros, sought diplomatic engagement with Istanbul, Islamic states in the Fuuta regions of Senegambia apparently demonstrated no comparable interest. Consequently, no Ottoman diplomatic missions were dispatched to these territories. Finally, Ottoman activity in the Atlantic remains a significant lacuna in Ottoman Studies, attributable to the scarcity of relevant sources within Ottoman archival collections. In this context, establishing any potential Ottoman–Senegambian connection via the Atlantic necessitates first determining whether an Ottoman presence in the Atlantic existed at all.

The objective of this article is to address these historiographical limitations through the utilisation of multiple archival collections and multilingual source materials. The methodology involves analysing diverse primary sources, including newspapers, judicial registers, and correspondence, while most critically, integrating the history of Islam in the region into this inquiry to comprehend the global character of these connections, wherein African and Ottoman agents played a significant role. Accordingly, this article applies an Afro-Ottoman perspective to narrate a global history in which the main driving actors were the African and the Ottoman agents, while historical events driven by European powers played only a secondary role.

## Ottomans in the Atlantic

### *Period of the First Ottoman Contact with the Atlantic (1430s-1550s)*

The initial linkage between the Ottoman Empire and the Atlantic realm can be traced back to the establishment of diplomatic ties with the Emirate of Granada. Historical records from Spain indicate that by 1439, certain Ottoman naval officials were present in Granada (Lopez de Coca Castaner 2005: 230). Furthermore, following the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul in 1453, Sultan Mehmed II (d. 1481) promptly dispatched an envoy to Granada to announce his triumph (Pertusi 1983: 26). Coincidentally, this period also marked the commencement of Portuguese maritime expeditions along the West African coast, which were encouraged and legitimised by Papal authorities in the wake of Istanbul's fall (Boxer 2006: 37–39). At this nascent stage, it was predominantly the Emirate of Granada and various Muslim communities in Andalusia that captured the Ottoman Empire's attention, drawing it towards the far western regions up to the Atlantic. In 1477, the Emir of Granada formally requested military aid from Istanbul against the Castilian Kingdom (Sılay 2011: 73). However, the Ottoman Empire, still largely an Anatolian state with no significant foothold on the North African coasts, was unable to provide substantial assistance to such a distant region.

The dynamics underwent a significant transformation circa 1486. During this period, an additional emissary from Granada sought audience in Istanbul, underscoring an imperative for military intervention (Masala 1983: 122). Concurrently, the Ottoman authorities were inundated with pleas from Muslim communities in Valencia, imploring for deliverance from Castilian dominion (Meyerson 1991: 67–68). As a direct response, Sultan Bayezid II (d. 1512) dispatched Captain Kemal Reis (d. 1511), accompanied

by a contingent of warships, to extend aid to Granada in 1487. That same year, the fleets under Kemal Reis conducted naval bombardments against Castilian forces stationed in Malaga, marking the inaugural instance where Ottoman military forces ventured in proximity to the Strait of Gibraltar (Masala 1983: 126–128). Meanwhile, during the same era, Portuguese vessels reached the shores of the river Congo, thereby establishing initial trade connections with the region (Radulet 1988: 112–113).



*Figure 1. Famous "Göke" Warship of Kemal Reis, built in 1495, and presented in an Ottoman marine book.*

*Source: Topkapı Sarayı Kütüphanesi (T.S.K.), 1495*

Despite the concerted efforts of Kemal Reis, Granada succumbed to the military forces of Castile in 1492. Four years later, in 1494, a coalition of Ottoman corsairs, departing from the western coasts of Anatolia, launched an unsuccessful assault on Almería on the Iberian Peninsula with the intent to re-establish the Emirate of Granada (Meyerson 1991: 67). Subsequently, in 1495, Sultan Bayezid II entrusted Kemal Reis with the monumental task of overseeing the construction of a formidable warship, the Göke, which was among the largest of its era and intended to assert dominance over all seas (B.O.A., BA, MAD, no. 23051). Consequently, Kemal Reis was dispatched to Granada once again during 1504–1505, but not for military confrontation

and rather with the mission to evacuate Muslim populations from Andalusia to North Africa first. Notably, he took his nephew, Piri Reis (d. 1553), on this expedition (López de Mendoza 1996: 193).

During this particular mission, the naval forces under the command of Kemal Reis seized a sailor from the Castilian fleet, who had provided navigational support to Columbus during his voyages to the American continent following 1492. Piri Reis, who had received navigational training from his uncle Kemal Reis, gleaned precise and detailed information about the Atlantic, the coastlines of the American continent, and West Africa from this captured individual and the Portuguese maps he provided. Upon his return from the expedition in 1513, Piri Reis presented his renowned world map to the Ottoman Sultan Bayezid II. Hence, by 1513, the Ottoman Empire possessed a map of the Atlantic with the information on the coasts of America and West Africa, despite the fact that no Ottoman vessel had ventured beyond the Strait of Gibraltar at that time (Franco Sánchez 2003; Sarıcaoğlu 2013).

Ottoman captains were, from at least the fifteenth century, instrumental in charting navigation maps for both the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, with these maps playing a pivotal role in the extensive corsair operations of the Ottoman naval forces across distant regions (Sarıcaoğlu 2002: 303–312). Notably, the Atlantic coastlines of Europe and West Africa were already delineated in Ottoman cartography prior to Piri Reis. However, Piri Reis's contribution lies in his comprehensive depiction of the Atlantic. The emergence of his map coincided with a period of intense Ottoman activity around Gibraltar. For example, the Ottoman corsairs made their initial passage through the Strait of Gibraltar in 1515, mere two years after the creation of Piri Reis's map, and conducted an attack on Conil de la Frontera, situated on the Atlantic side of the Iberian Peninsula ("Crónica de los duques de Medina Sidonia" 1861). Subsequent years were marked by continuous confrontations between Ottoman and Castilian naval commanders around the Strait of Gibraltar. The outcome of these engagements led to the commencement of substantial fortress construction along the Iberian Peninsula's coasts by the Castilian forces in the 1550s (Rodríguez-Salgado 2004). Paradoxically, these newly established fortresses in the southern Iberian Peninsula redirected the focus of Ottoman captains and corsairs towards the Atlantic, steering them away from engaging in the increasingly challenging confrontations with well-defended fortresses.

### *Ottoman corsairs in the Atlantic (1550s-1730s)*

Following the 1550s, while the official Ottoman naval forces reoriented their focus back to the eastern Mediterranean for major naval engagements, a significant number of Ottoman corsairs chose to venture further into the Atlantic rather than re-join these official naval operations (Maziane 2007). A notable example of their activities is the attack on Cadiz, located on the Atlantic coast of the Iberian Peninsula, in 1559 (Hernández Sande and Galbarro García 2018: 1–35). Following years, these corsairs extended their operations even further, reaching the coastal regions of the Portuguese Empire. A case in point is the capture of a merchant vessel originating from Lübeck near the coasts of Porto, which occurred in 1584 (A.H.W., Abt. X. 1.2, 1580).

The year 1584 marked a significant juncture in the historical trajectory of Ottoman corsairs in the Atlantic. During this period, while the Portuguese and Spanish Empires exerted substantial control over numerous ports across Africa and Asia and initiated the colonisation of the American continent, following 1584, these empires began to experience a decline in their ability to secure their own coastal regions. A notable example is the 1585 assault on Lanzarote, the capital of the Canary Islands under Spanish dominion, by distinguished Ottoman captain Koca Murat Reis (d. 1609), who had previously participated in expeditions alongside Piri Reis and the prominent captain Barbaros Hayreddin Paşa (d. 1546). This attack was so unexpected that it severely compromised the Spanish defence, culminating in the capture of the local governor by Koca Murat Reis's soldiers (Lane-Poole 2011: 172). Emboldened by this success, Ottoman corsairs increasingly targeted less fortified coastal settlements and cities across the Atlantic. For instance, in 1606, a group of these corsairs launched an attack on County Cork in Northern Ireland (Wilson 1995: 103). Although in 1617, the focus shifted back to the central Atlantic, with an assault on Madeira Island under Portuguese control (Lane-Poole 2011: 199–204), subsequent years and decades saw a redirection of their activities towards the north. By 1625, Ottoman corsairs had targeted locations such as Lundy Island and Plymouth in western England (Büyüktuğrul 1981: 42–47). Some corsairs, following trade routes to Newfoundland, even ventured as far as the American continent, capturing vessels before the port of Newfoundland (modern-day Canada) (Calendar of State Papers Domestic 1858: 320). In 1627, two prominent figures among these corsairs, Arif and Bayram Reis, extended their reach to Iceland, launching attacks on several coastal settlements (Helgason 2018: 31–50).

Until the 1640s, Ottoman corsairs remained present over the Atlantic coastlines of the Iberian Peninsula and frequently orchestrated surprise assaults along the northern English coast (Calendar of State Papers Domestic 1880: 438–450). In following years, European powers gradually reclaimed control over the central Atlantic region. Nevertheless, the maritime incursions of Ottoman corsairs persisted in the Atlantic until 1737 (Vázquez Lijó 2005: 69). After this date, the dynamics of interaction between the Ottoman Empire and European powers shifted markedly from conflict to diplomacy and commerce. Ships previously engaged in raiding European coasts for plunder began to transport diplomats and trade goods.

## The Limits of Ottoman Atlantic Expansion: Legal Geography and West Africa in the Arab-Ottoman Mapping

Following the extensive presence of Ottoman corsairs in the Atlantic for nearly a century, a pertinent inquiry emerges: Why did the Ottoman corsairs refrain from venturing further south beyond the Canary Islands toward the coastlines of West Africa, while simultaneously extending their maritime endeavours as far north as North America and Iceland? At first glance, it appears that the corsairs aligned their operations with prevailing merchant activities, naturally gravitating toward the northern Atlantic. While this rationale holds for certain episodes, such as their forays into North America, it is crucial to note that the primary ramifications of these corsair attacks were not solely the losses suffered by European merchant vessels, although such losses were significant,[1] but rather the frequent incursions upon European coastal settlements. A document from the Spanish governor of Galicia in 1616 elucidates an intriguing perspective on these assaults. The governor lamented that "…*they attack our coasts in a manner similar to the Portuguese raids on the coast of Guinea and São Tomé. While the Portuguese load their ships with black captives, the Turks load theirs with Christians*…" (R.B., Sig. II/2159, doc. 71, 23 October 1619, Bayona). This statement underscores a hierarchical framework within which the presence of Ottoman corsairs in the Atlantic was perceived; and thus, must be read more metaphorically. It is indeed a fact that Portuguese did not raid Guinea and São Tomé as the Spanish governor represents, since they mainly engaged in trade with some goods and African enslaved people in those regions. Yet, what is clear in the narrative of the governor is the fact that the Portuguese, wielding their

1 For instance, only in 1621, Ottoman corsairs captured over one hundred English merchant ships (Hebb 1994).

considerable naval power, were able to create a great demand for African enslaved people, considering them legitimate targets of enslavement. Conversely, Ottoman corsairs exercised their naval power over the European Atlantic coasts, treating Christians as similarly legitimate and feasible targets, not for enslavement per se, but for ransom. These comparative views highlight a structured pattern of maritime supremacy and domination in different geographic contexts during this period.



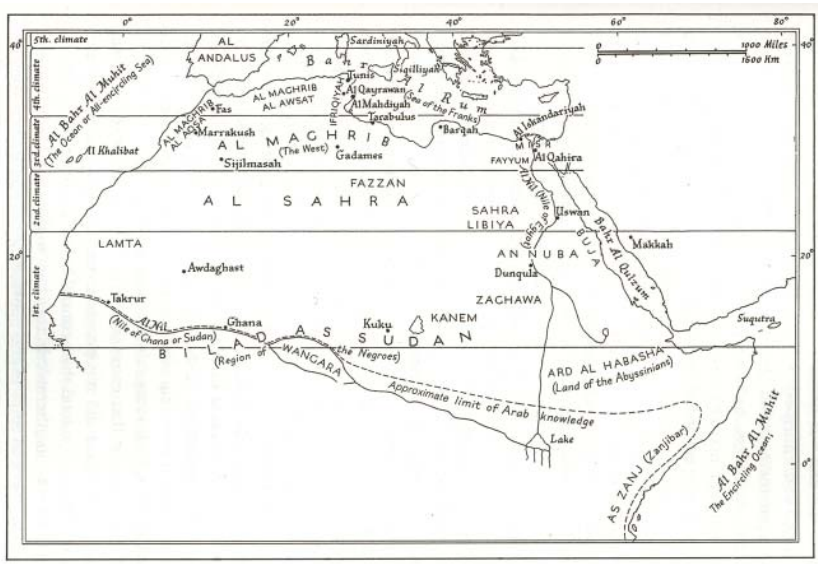
*Figure 2. Piri Reis's Map of West Africa*

*Source: Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi (T.S.M.), No. H 1824*

While such a comparison of the Portuguese and Ottoman systems regarding maritime activity is analytically problematic, due to fundamental differences in their approaches to slavery and enslavement, this comparison illuminates a critical, yet often misrepresented, aspect of Ottoman corsair operations within existing scholarship. For instance, these Ottoman corsairs were indeed not "Barbary pirates" as they are regularly named in the European sources (Duymus 2025d). Ottoman vessels present in the Atlantic regularly frequented Ottoman ports for resupply and the sale of captured goods. Moreover, these corsairs operated within a framework partly dictated by the Ottoman Empire, receiving intelligence regarding diplomatic relations with various states and adhering to corresponding operational constraints. For example, attacks on Muslim merchants or landings within territories considered Dar al-Islam (territories at peace with Islam) were prohibited. Furthermore, unlike the sixteenth-century European practice of utilising captives for chattel slavery, Ottoman corsairs primarily targeted individuals for ransom. Liberation typically resulted from the payment of a specified ransom following complex diplomatic relations. Consequently, two key criteria governed Ottoman corsair activity: targeting states classified as Dar al-Harb (territories at war with Islam) and capturing individuals whose rulers maintained diplomatic ties with the Ottoman Empire, facilitating ransom negotiations (Domingues da Silva 2017; Green 2012; Solow 1991; Engin 1998; İnalcık 2008; Bostan 2022; Gürkan 2025).

This characteristic may partly explain the missing interest of Ottoman corsairs in extending corsair operations south of the Canary Islands into West Africa, where the political status of the region was ambiguous—neither definitively Dar al-Harb nor Dar al-Islam—and consistent diplomatic channels were absent.[2] However, this does not preclude the existence of knowledge regarding West African territories. For instance, according to Robinson, already in the thirteenth century, there was a mind-map of Africa in Arabic traveller accounts, dividing the continent with certain climatic spheres (Figure 3) (Robinson 2004: 75).

2 Indeed, there might also be some technical aspects to this lack of interest. Upon going beyond Cape Verde, the Trade Winds that bring ships to the Caribbean coasts would make a turn back to the Mediterranean very challenging. That was the exact reason for the triangular travel routes of the European ships (Europe–West Africa, West Africa–Caribbean, Caribbean–Europe) that created the core dynamic for the Atlantic slave trade for centuries. Since the Caribbean was under the control of the European powers, the Ottoman corsairs might have considered not taking the risk to sail beyond Cape Verde.




**MAP 4** The Arabs' conception of Africa in the thirteenth century C.E. Adapted from John D. Fage and Maureen Verity, *An Atlas of African History*, New York, 1978.

*Figure 3. Arap Mind-Map of Africa in the 13th Century.*

*Source: David Robinson, Muslim Societies in African History (2004: 75).*

The foundational cartographic understanding developed during this period was disseminated to the Ottoman Empire from the early fifteenth century onwards. A notable example is a map created by Al-Mursi al-Katib, a Tunisian scholar of Andalusian origin (d. 14??), dated 1461 and preserved within the Ottoman archives. This map demonstrably depicts continental climate zones of Africa (I.D.M., Asar-ı Atika, nr. 882). Similarly, Piri Reis's 1513 Atlantic map provides a detailed representation of the West African coastline (Figure 2) (T.S.M., No. H 1824).

Consequently, the limited Ottoman engagement with the West African coasts during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries stemmed not from a deficiency in geographical knowledge, but rather from a strategic and technical calculation based on the region's complex legal status and the absence of established diplomatic relations compared to European counterparts. These diplomatic ties were crucial determinants in shaping

the operational parameters of Ottoman corsairs. This example shows that geographical knowledge did not automatically translate into political or military interest. Such interest rose from the Ottoman side only in the mid-nineteenth century, as will be seen in the following sections.

## Expansion of Islam in Fuuta Jaloo and Fuuta Tooro (1600s-1850s)

The aforementioned complexities regarding the region's legal status and the absence of formal diplomatic ties underwent a fundamental transformation in subsequent centuries, driven by the expansion of Islam within Senegambia. While the Ottoman Empire experienced a gradual retreat from its global aspirations following the late seventeenth century, this period coincided with a profound religious and political metamorphosis in Senegambia. This transformation was characterised by the progressive dissemination of Islam, which subsequently emerged as the foundational pillar of the regional political order. Although Islam had been introduced to the area as early as the medieval period via trans-Saharan trade networks, it was not until the eighteenth century that it assumed a definitive, structuring political dimension (Robinson 2004: 45–52).

The dissemination of Islam into Senegambia unfolded within the framework of trans-Saharan trade networks linking West Africa to the Maghreb. Muslim merchants and itinerant scholars occupied a pivotal role in its incremental propagation (Levtzion and Hopkins 2000: 63–85). During this initial phase, Islam coexisted with indigenous political structures without displacing them, as its adoption was largely confined to commercial and intellectual elites. Consequently, Islam functioned primarily as a conduit for social prestige and esoteric knowledge rather than as a hegemonic political system. Commencing in the seventeenth century, however, the influence of Muslim scholars intensified significantly. The proliferation of Qur'anic schools facilitated the formation of distinct religious elites, a dynamic intrinsically linked to the development of Islamic intellectual networks across West Africa (Robinson 2004: 58–64). Furthermore, educational journeys and the pilgrimage (Ar. ḥajj) undertaken by Senegambian scholars to Mecca from the early seventeenth century onward facilitated the circulation of religious knowledge and practices. This scholarly mobility contributed to the integration of Senegambia into a transregional Islamic intellectual sphere, thereby fostering interaction with the Ottoman Empire, given that Mecca had been under Ottoman sovereignty since 1517 (Kane 2016: 145–152).

The eighteenth century represented a decisive turning point with the emergence of Islamic reformist movements that precipitated the formation of states grounded in Islamic principles. The preliminary event that paved the way for radical transformations in the Senegambia region was the migration of Fulbe scholar Malick Sy into the Bundu region (present-day eastern Senegal), a sparsely populated territory in West Africa under the suzerainty of the Gajaaga State, in 1690. Benefiting from considerable autonomy, Malick Sy transformed a small Muslim community into a nascent yet rapidly expanding Islamic polity prior to his death in 1699 (Curtin 1975: 190–192). This successful precedent inspired other Fulbe scholars in neighbouring regions; by 1716, under the leadership of Bubu Malick Sy, Malick Sy's son, Bundu had emerged as the preeminent power along the upper Senegal River (Clark 1996: 28).

However, Fulbe scholars operating in neighbouring regions faced markedly distinct conditions. These territories were densely populated and characterised by a multiplicity of ethnic groups and political powers, rendering the peaceful establishment of an Islamic state, as achieved in Bundu, unfeasible. Consequently, a religious revolution (Ar. jihad) erupted in Fuuta Jaloo in the centre of Guinea during the 1720s under the leadership of the Fulbe scholar Alfa Ba. Although Alfa Ba was killed in 1725 while the jihad was ongoing, his son Ibrahim Sambegu assumed leadership, guiding the jihad toward the establishment of the Islamic state. He subsequently adopted the name Karamokh Alfa and assumed the title of *almamy* (Ar. *imam*) (Diallo 2002: 35–43). This transformation constituted a significant rupture in regional political history, forcibly replacing aristocratic legitimacy with religious legitimacy (Barry 1988: 120–135). Nevertheless, the Imamate of Fuuta Jaloo is distinguished by a unique political structure that integrates religious authority with consultative regional bodies. This system was predicated on a balance between the various provinces, each with its own local leaders, and the religious lineages (Camara 1992: 45–60).

Following the success of the jihad and the consolidation of the Imamate of Fuuta Jaloo, a parallel movement emerged in Fuuta Tooro in present-day northern Senegal during the 1770s, spearheaded by the Fulbe scholar Sulayman Baal (Wane 1981: 40–45). Upon Baal's death in 1775, amidst the ongoing jihad, a council of scholars elected Abd al-Qadir Kane as the new *almamy*, initiating the establishment of the Imamate of Fuuta Tooro (Ware 2014: 125). This succession was distinctive among the region's newly formed Islamic states, as Abd al-Qadir did not inherit leadership through dynastic right—as he was not Sulayman Baal's son—but was instead selected by the scholarly elite. In subsequent years, Abd al-Qadir oversaw significant

territorial expansion while simultaneously reinforcing his religious authority through scholarly discourse. Consequently, he attained the status of a heroic figure in the region, with narratives concerning his life profoundly shaping communal consciousness for centuries to come (Kane 2004: 544–560).

Consequently, by the mid-nineteenth century, these Islamic states, each possessing distinct characteristics, were accompanied by profound social transformations, particularly within the economic and educational spheres. These developments contributed to the emergence of a complex and multifaceted Islamic political landscape in West Africa, as these dynamics were not isolated phenomena but integral components of broader regional movements, notably including the establishment of the Hamdullahi and Sokoto Caliphates in the early nineteenth century (Bello 2019; Traore 2012; Kani 1999; Levtzion and Hopkins 2000: 63–85 and 200–215; Sanankoua 1990; Tahir 2023). Furthermore, the establishment of these Islamic states facilitated Senegambia's integration into the intellectual networks of the wider Muslim world. The scholarly centres of Fuuta Jaloo and Fuuta Tooro evolved into major hubs for the production and dissemination of Islamic knowledge (Hunwick and O'Fahey 2003: 23–30). In this context, the Ottoman Empire's renewal of global ambitions in the early nineteenth century intersected with the extensive dissemination of Islam, the expansion of Muslim communities, and the presence of well-established Islamic states in the Senegambia region. Consequently, from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century, a new epoch commenced for Ottoman–Senegambian relations. While indirect relations existed through the visit of Senegambian scholars to Egypt and the Hejaz region, which were under the control of the Ottoman Empire (Kavas 2013: 7–61), their agency in propagating Islam in their homeland and institutionalising it as a political system rendered the region a focal point of subsequent Ottoman interest. Thus, these Senegambian agents constituted, in effect, an indirectly vital component of Ottoman–Senegambian relations. Furthermore, as will be examined in the following section, numerous Muslim merchants and pilgrims from the region supplied the Ottoman Empire with crucial intelligence regarding local conditions during the late nineteenth century.

## Ottoman-Senegambian Relations (1850s-1910s)

The Ottoman Empire's renewed engagement with the Atlantic world after the 1730s assumed a distinctive character, particularly from the 1830s onward. Over roughly a century of intensive diplomatic, cultural, scientific, and commercial interaction with European powers, the empire embarked

upon a period of reform, called *Tanzimat* (Çakır 2001; Şakir 2020; Özyaşar 2022; Saydam 2024). These reforms enabled the Ottomans to revive their global aspirations—not through corsairs as before, but via economic development and diplomatic outreach. New manufacturing enterprises were founded, and Ottoman merchants began exporting their products to international markets. Simultaneously, the empire forged fresh diplomatic ties with Muslim communities and rulers across distant regions, notably in Africa. By the mid-nineteenth century, Ottoman agents (such as official envoys and traders who provided reports to the Ottoman administration) traversed routes from Timbuktu to Kuka, from Zanzibar to the Comoros, and from Khartoum to Cape Town (Kavas 2006).

A particularly noteworthy episode in these new global aspirations involved the deployment of two warships. In 1864, two princes, Sayyid Muhammad and Sayyid Abdullah, originating from the Comoros Islands and sons of Sultan Abdullah of Anjouan, arrived in Istanbul seeking Ottoman assistance to liberate their homeland from French encroachment (Özkan and Yılmaz 2023: 70–86). Concurrently, the Ottoman governor of Basra petitioned for naval vessels to safeguard the empire's economic interests in the region. In response, the Ottoman administration conceived an interesting solution.

The Ottoman authorities resolved to dispatch two warships from Istanbul to Basra, charting a circuitous course around the African continent while transporting the sons of Sultan Abdullah to their homeland for the organisation of a jihad. The captains received explicit orders to halt at numerous African ports and harbours, where they were to display the vessels to local populations and rulers, thereby inaugurating the first formal diplomatic contacts between the Ottoman state and African polities, particularly with the Muslims. Although the plan to deliver Sultan Abdullah's sons to the Comoros Islands was aborted at the last moment, the expedition set sail in 1865. After calling at Algerian and several West African ports, the fleet lost its intended trajectory upon departing Cape Verde due to the Trade Winds.[3] Within a few weeks the ships reached the Brazilian coastline, ultimately anchoring in Rio de Janeiro. Exploiting this unforeseen arrival, the crew invited Emperor Pedro II of Brazil to board the vessels, establishing

3 This is very probably due to the lack of detailed knowledge on the wind belts of the Atlantic Ocean by the Ottoman captains and engineers. Ships that wish to travel further south and east had to stay very close to the coast. Considering the Ottoman ships lost their route after Cape Verde, they were probably too far from the coast and caught by the Trade Winds. Ironically, it was exactly these Trade Winds that enabled Columbus to land on the Western Hemisphere in 1492 (Vigneras 1976: 49).

the inaugural direct diplomatic relationship between the Ottoman Empire and Brazil. Following necessary repairs, the flotilla resumed its voyage to Cape Town and, after traversing the coasts of East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, finally arrived in Basra (Korkmaz 2019: 87–112).

The engineering reports from the expedition provide scant detail concerning the encounters along the West African shoreline. Yet, it seems that the caution of the earlier Ottoman corsairs about sailing beyond Cape Verde caused a technical gap in the Ottoman marine regarding the nature of the Trade Winds. Nevertheless, this initial direct Ottoman presence, despite the navigational mishap, marked a pivotal shift in the empire's strategic interest in the region, as their global aspirations did not cease with this technical challenge but even increased.

In addition to marine activities, Ottoman merchants also pursued overland routes toward West Africa. The mass production of textiles and paper in port cities such as Izmir enabled merchants based in Tripolitania to distribute these commodities through local merchant networks from Ghadames, Murzuq, Kano and Timbuktu deep into West Africa via trans-Saharan trade networks. Moreover, the spread of Islam throughout the far reaches of West Africa facilitated regular pilgrimage caravans linking Fuuta Tooro and Fuuta Jaloo with Ottoman territories—including Tripolitania, Egypt, and the Hejaz—thereby fostering reciprocal exchanges of information and merchandise.[4] Consequently, for instance, the papers produced by the *Izmir Kağıt Fabrikası* (operational from 1844 to 1855) circulated as far as Fuuta Jaloo, where they were incorporated into local family archives.[5]

While Ottoman agents were trying to reach Senegambian Muslim communities through diplomatic channels and merchant networks following the 1850s, the same interest also existed among some Senegambian Muslim communities. In the early 1860s, a considerable group of emigrants from the Fuuta regions travelled to Istanbul and settled in the city. In fact, in 1866, this community became so large in Istanbul that the city administration had to take some measures to organise their settlement and manage to overcome language barriers (B.O.A., MVL, 874/68). In the following years, the community continued to grow; however, it seems that the rulers of

4 Indeed, the dissemination of Islam in the very early ages around the Sahel region already enabled dense trade connections between the western Sahel region and Anatolia as well as Egypt since the fourteenth century (Silverman 2015: 375–395).

5 For example, see the papers imported from Izmir in a private archive in Lélouma (Guinea): Fonds El Hadj Alpha Mamadou Diallo Lélouma, Lélouma (Guinea). We are grateful to Alfa Mamadou Diallo Lélouma for this information.

Fuuta Tooro and Fuuta Jaloo did not prefer to use this reciprocal interest and exchange for creating a diplomatic channel with the Ottoman Empire, as no single diplomatic exchange could be found so far.[6]

Nevertheless, the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 became a turning point for the Ottoman Empire's connection with Senegambia. Although the Ottoman delegation was initially excluded from the Berlin Conference, Ottoman diplomats recognised the conference's pivotal relevance for Africa's future and mounted a concerted diplomatic effort to obtain representation (Ibrahim 2024). Because the conference did not partition the continent but rather established the principle of division (Craven 2012), the Ottoman Empire resolved to monitor the whole of Africa, with particular attention to Muslim communities and Islamic states. Accordingly, the western African littoral, especially the Senegambia region and its links to Fuuta Tooro and Fuuta Jaloo, became a focal point not only for Ottoman economic and diplomatic activity but also for intelligence gathering.

Deeply interested in the Muslim communities and Islamic states in Senegambia, the Ottomans decided to gather intelligence on the region. For this, the Ottoman authorities relied on two principal information streams. The primary source comprised European newspapers. Ottoman consuls stationed in major European capitals, particularly Madrid, Paris, London, Rome, and Berlin, regularly surveyed the press to extract any references pertaining to the Senegambian territories and the Islamic states there. For example, as early as 1885, European newspapers relayed to Istanbul the report of an individual identified as Sambou Waron (sic!) who purportedly proclaimed jihad against French domination in the Senegambia region, mobilising approximately ten thousand fighters near Timbuktu and advancing toward Sierra Leone (B.O.A., HR. SYS., 59-20). This was very probably the war of Mahmadu Lamine Drame (also known as Ma Lamine Demba Dibassi) (B.O.A., MVL, 874/68) in the Imamate of Bundu against French forces, and was rather limited in its scope despite the exaggeration

6 This is indeed a striking point, considering that, even during the French invasion of the region after the 1880s, prominent anti-colonial war leaders such as Samory Touré (d. 1900), Boubacar Biro (d. 1896), Ahmadu Tall (d. 1897), and Mahmadu Lamine (d. 1887) did not attempt to reach the Ottoman Empire, while as will be seen in the following pages, the Ottomans closely monitored the jihad of Mahmadu Lamine. Did they consider the Ottoman Empire irrelevant for asking help due to the distance or visible weakness of the Empire at the moment? Did they consider the Ottoman Empire not a possible ally despite common Islamic heritage because of reasons not clear for historians? How did they perceive the emigration of some of their communities to Istanbul? These are open questions that hopefully further research might answer one day.

of the newspaper (Clark 1996: 1–23). Another illustration occurs in 1893, when the Ottoman consul in Madrid conveyed that French officials were formulating a scheme to construct a railway linking Algiers to Dakar, thereby reinforcing their colonial foothold (B.O.A., Y.A.HUS., 250-5).

The Ottoman authorities also drew upon a second vein of intelligence: reports supplied by Ottoman merchants and Muslim pilgrims travelling within Africa. In 1888, Sultan Abdülhamid II (d. 1918) instructed his special envoy, Besim Bey, to produce a detailed assessment of the Senegambia region. Besim Bey consequently delegated the task to Rıza bin Ali, who gathered information from merchants and pilgrims. Rıza bin Ali's resulting dossier referenced the Fuuta Jaloo area and noted that the Kalfa islands[7] remained autonomous at that time (B.O.A., Y.PRK.MYD., 6-87). Yet, in 1889, it is reported that these islands were invaded by French forces (B.O.A., Y.A.HUS., 209-35). From the same line of source, in the same year, some reports were received informing that the French colonial administration in Senegal was obstructing local Muslims' ability to undertake the Hajj pilgrimage (B.O.A., Y.A.HUS., 365-29).

After 1890, even Ottoman newspapers began to turn their attention toward the Senegambia region. For example, the newspaper *Ceride Gazetesi*, published in Edirne (modern-day Turkey) between 1890 and 1892, recorded in its 25 September 1890 issue that British missionaries were attempting to penetrate the interior regions of the Gambia and Guinea in order to propagate Christianity against Islam, thereby laying the groundwork for a prospective colonial incursion (*Ceride Gazetesi*, 25 September 1890: 1). In this regard, the existence of Muslim communities and Islamic states in Senegambia intersected with the Islamic Union policy of the Ottoman Empire,[8] letting Istanbul establish relations with the region (Sır 2022; Eraslan 2023).

Notwithstanding their capacity for intelligence gathering, the Ottoman Empire was powerless to intervene against the French colonial conquest of the Imamates of Fuuta Tooro, Fuuta Jaloo, and Bundu following the 1890s. Moreover, to date, no extant records indicate that these states attempted to establish diplomatic relations with the Ottoman Porte, despite such

7 We believe that these might be the Bijagós Islands on Bissau's offshore, as only these islands in the Senegambian coasts were more or less independent during the late nineteenth century (Henry 1994: 66–68). However, these islands were not invaded in 1889 by the French forces, as the mentioned Ottoman report states.

8 The main idea of this policy was to bring all Muslims in the world together under the religious authority of the Ottoman caliph, without necessarily being part of the Ottoman Empire (Sır 2022; Eraslan 2023).

initiatives being relatively common elsewhere in Africa, as evidenced by the case of the Comoros. Nevertheless, the subjugation of these Islamic polities under French colonial rule did not preclude the Ottoman Empire from pursuing connections within Senegambia. This persistence was partly rooted in the Ottoman Caliph's theological and political conception of universal responsibility over all Muslim communities, irrespective of their specific political allegiances. Consequently, the Ottomans continued to gather intelligence and cultivate ties with Muslim populations in Senegambia. Additionally, a new dynamic emerged in the early twentieth century, characterised by the migration of Ottoman merchants, predominantly from the Lebanese provinces, to West Africa.

Already in the 1880s, an increasing number of Ottoman merchant vessels were visiting West African ports, especially those of Senegambia.[9] Some traders even established permanent residences in the region. To facilitate liaison with local authorities, the Ottomans began to appoint vice-consuls. The first vice-consul (a French merchant active in the region called Max Astrié) was appointed for the coasts of Guinea, being active in Boulam and Bissau in 1884 (Société académique franco-hispano-portugaise de Toulouse 1887: 21). The Ottomans also instituted a *Şehbenderlik*[10] in Dakar in the 1890s. However, the empire's fiscal difficulties and the modest size of the Ottoman mercantile community led to the closure of this office in 1895 (B.O.A., HR.TH., 160-9). When in 1908, a large number of communities in the Lebanon province began to immigrate to the Senegambian coasts, this triggered the Ottoman authorities to make detailed registers of these people in order to estimate whether Istanbul should open new consulates in the region (B.O.A., HR.İD., 11-11). After completing their registers, considering the large number of Ottoman citizens in the region, the Ottomans decided to re-open the *Şehbenderlik* in Dakar in 1909, and a French jurist named Geoge Vidal, who was already working in Dakar as a lawyer, was appointed as *Şehbender* (B.O.A., BEO., 3673-275437). After his resignation in 1913, a British officer in Dakar, called Mr. Stormon, was appointed as the new

9 This expansion had a dual character with the ongoing European colonisation in the region exactly in the same era. While the Ottoman merchants took the advantage of new trade activities in the region following the European colonial invasion, the Ottoman administration took the advantage of these expanding Ottoman merchant networks to monitor the European colonisation in the region (Brosselard-Faidherbe 1889: 20).

10 *Şehbenderlik* was a traditional institution in the Ottoman Empire. It was opened in the ports of foreign countries where the Ottoman merchants were active. Its aim was to manage the relations between the local administration and the rights of the Ottoman merchants. Later, most of the *Şehbenderlik* were integrated into the western consular system.

*Şehbender* (B.O.A., HR.SFR.3., 696-61). The following years proved the necessity of this consul for the Ottomans. For example, in 1912 the adjudication of a commercial dispute originating in Biga (modern-day Çanakkale, Turkey) involving a local trader and an Ottoman merchant, Esed Abdullah al-Haccar,[11] who resided in Khombole[12] (present-day Senegal), was transmitted to Dakar (B.O.A., HR.UHM., 129-24). Furthermore, Dakar became the diplomatic centre for the whole Senegambia region. For instance, in 1914 a merchant from the Lebanon province named Emin Hamud al-Neccar asked for the heritage of his deceased son in Bafata (present-day Guinea-Bissau), and the information was sent to Dakar.

The outbreak of several wars after 1911 once again turned the eyes of Istanbul to Senegambia. In 1912, to support resistance forces in Tripolitania against the Italian colonial invasion, the Ottoman foreign office sent a secret agent to Guinea in order to buy weapons from the black markets and smuggle them to Benghazi.[13] With the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, Ottoman authorities became increasingly aware that the French Empire was conscripting soldiers, among them Muslims, from the Senegambia region to fight against the Ottomans. Consequently, a substantial body of reports detailing the composition and origins of these troops was forwarded to the Ottoman government and the sultan throughout the period 1914–1918.[14] Ottoman merchants residing in Senegambia likewise continued to appear in official Ottoman records up to 1918. Following the occupation of Istanbul by British and French forces that same year, the Ottoman state effectively lost its sovereignty. Thus, the Ottoman relations with Senegambia came to an end.

11 The name of the merchant implies a connection to Ottoman Lebanon. Following the 1860s, there was a large emigration from the Ottoman Lebanon region, mostly merchant families. These families travelled along Mediterranean coasts but also reached the American continent and West-African coastal cities. In the case of West Africa, they actively joined the local businesses. However, only a small number of these Lebanese merchants continued to have trade or juridical relations with the Ottoman Empire, and most of these lived on the Senegambian coasts (Nouhou 2012: 135–151).

12 Khombole was situated along the Dakar-Bamako railway line and became a hub of the colonial peanut economy. The Syrian-Lebanese presence in Khombole is linked to this economy (de Garine 1962: 218–265).

13 Since the coasts of Tripoli and Benghazi were under the control of Italian marine invasion forces, it seems that the Ottoman military aimed to transfer weapons from Guinea to Tripoli via land. It is however not clear from the source if this was actually carried out (M.S.B.A.T.A., 110-9-1-5, 54-251-1).

14 For an example about Muslim Senegalese in the French empire who were sent to Çanakkale for attack, see B.O.A., DH.EUM., 3.Şb. 5-13.

## Conclusion

This study has sought to reconstruct the fragmented yet significant history of Ottoman–Senegambian relations from the earlier historical context in the fifteenth century to the direct connections in the nineteenth century, challenging the prevailing narrative that views the Ottoman Empire as disconnected from the Atlantic world, and the Senegambian region as having no connections with the Ottoman mainland. By adopting a global Afro-Ottoman perspective and integrating disparate sources, from Ottoman court registers and European newspapers to local oral traditions and merchant correspondence, we have uncovered a complex web of historical contexts and interactions.

Initially, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Ottoman presence in the Atlantic was defined by the maritime dominance of corsairs. While these forces pushed as far north as Iceland and as far west as Newfoundland, their strategic avoidance of the West African coast was not due to a lack of geographical knowledge, as evidenced by the detailed cartography of Arab and Ottoman captains, but rather a calculated adherence to the legal frameworks of Dar al-Harb (territories at war with Islam) and Dar al-Islam (territories at peace with Islam), as well as technical complications. Without established diplomatic channels or a clear legal definition of the region by the Ottomans, and being beyond the Trade Winds, the Senegambian coast remained outside the operational scope of Ottoman naval power.

The second phase, spanning the eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries, was characterised by an internal transformation within Senegambia itself. The rise of the Islamic states of Bundu, Fuuta Jaloo, and Fuuta Tooro created a new political and religious landscape. These states, founded by Fulbe scholars, established Islamic legitimacy and institutional structures that later served as the bridge for Ottoman engagement. Crucially, the scholars, Muslim merchants, and pilgrims from these regions acted as vital agents, integrating Senegambia into the broader trans-regional Islamic intellectual sphere centred in Mecca and Istanbul, thereby laying the groundwork for future relations between the Ottoman Empire and Senegambia.

The final phase, from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, witnessed a diplomatic and commercial outreach driven by the Ottoman *Tanzimat* reforms and the geopolitical pressures of European colonial states. The Ottoman Empire, recognising the strategic importance of the region connected to their Islamic Unity policy amidst the "Scramble for Africa," utilised intelligence gathered from the European press and from

local Muslim networks to maintain a presence in the Islamic part of Africa. The establishment of *Şehbenderlik* offices in Dakar and the appointment of vice-consuls alongside the Senegambian coasts marked the formalisation of these ties. While the leading figures in the region did not initiate any direct diplomatic exchange with Istanbul, some communities immigrated to the Ottoman capital in response to the Ottoman interest. Even as the French colonial administration dismantled the independent Islamic states in Senegambia, the Ottoman Caliphate maintained its spiritual and economic claim over the region's Muslim communities, viewing them as part of a global Muslim community (Ar. *ummah*) under its protection, as well as the Ottoman diaspora there.

Ultimately, the history of Ottoman–Senegambian relations is not merely a footnote in the history of the Ottoman decline or European colonial expansion. It is a testament to the global interplay of Ottoman and Senegambian agencies that, through imperial and Islamic ambitions as well as administrative and religious reforms, paved the way for the connections between these two distant regions. Future discoveries of archival materials may well allow scholars to fill remaining gaps and elucidate further details of these complex relations.

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No potential conflict of interest is reported by the authors.

**Archival Material**

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Abt. X. 1.2, 1580.

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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.

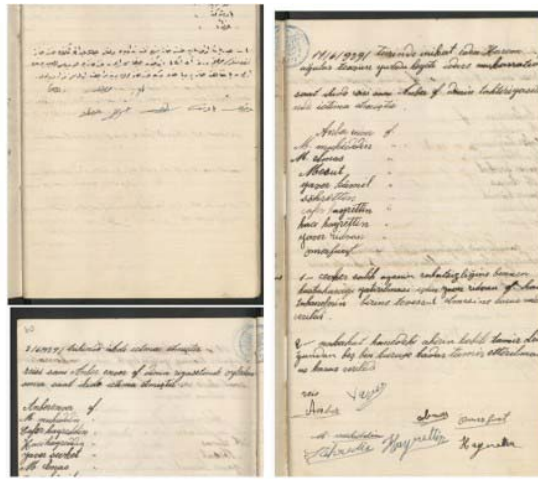


*Figure 3. Meeting minute illustrating the transition from the Arabic to the Latin alphabet on the same page.*

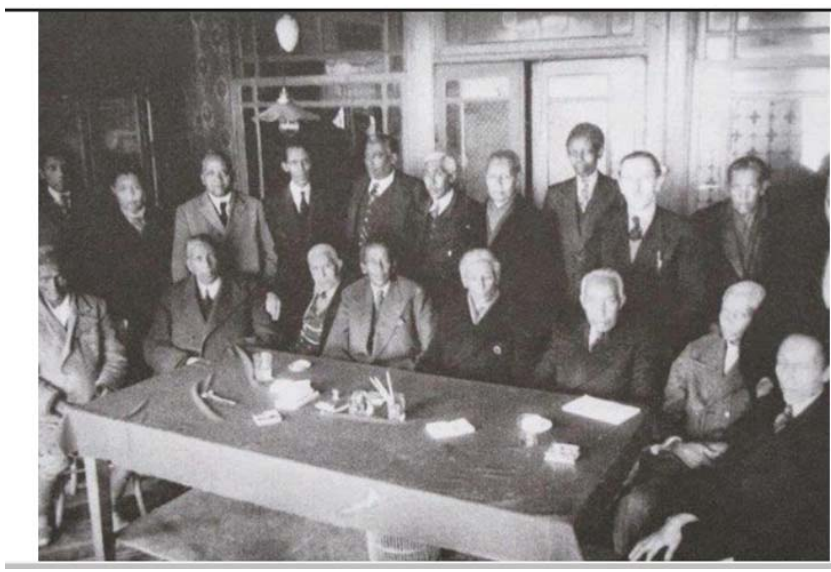


*Figure 4. Meeting at Divanyolu, Cumhuriyet Gazetesi, 8 Ocak 1939 (8 January 1939), 9.*

## 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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