Rethinking African Image in Turkish Society

It has been almost three years since I came to Turkey for a postgraduate education. Ever since, I have learnt a lot of things about Turkey, its ottoman and later day secular experiences, and more importantly, Turks. For a student and academic like me from Ethiopia, a country in the horn of Africa, Turkey was not that much known for anything, except perhaps for Kemal Ataturk in the making of Turkish republic, and Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent, Abdulhamid II and Muhammad the Conqueror particularly for their Islamic global appeal and importance. Still, these people are well known only either among academics, especially historians, or among religious circles. I'm afraid this is not the only state of affair among Ethiopians like me, but also, I suppose, many others could potentially feel the same in other parts of the African continent as well. This has, however, been changing at least for more than a decade. For this change and for Turkey as we know it today, undoubtedly, is the product of the current AKP government, particularly the efforts of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Abdullah Gul, and Ahmet Davutoglu. Due fundamentally to the structural and policy changes attributed to the existing government, Turkey is becoming more of an open, interactive and accommodative than ever before. Accordingly, these days, compared to some decades ago, Turkey assumes a globally active stature and its presence is considerably felt nation in the world geopolitical landscape.

Whilst this seems to be encouraging, understanding of the "other", such as Africa, is largely missing, at least among the general population of Turkey for many reasons. One possible explanation can be *an inside-looking entanglement* of Turkey, and Turks, in the post-Ottoman and pre-2000s periods. In fact, broadly speaking, it could be argued that for more than eight decades, Turkey had been meditating; searching its soul; a period of reconciliation with its self; and a period of internal contradictions and struggle which, in the later days, shaped and defined its content and form. At this point, Turkey was no longer to be the same. Once discharged from a "hospital" relieved from being "The Sick Man of Europe", a new trajectory and momentum of a global importance was to set its self in motion. This is indeed an unprecedented change no one would dare to deny.

One aspect of understanding the "other", especially among the general population and media platforms in Turkey, concerns the view of Africa and "Africans". I'm specifically interested in a wide array of ideas, prejudices, stereotypes, and (mis)conceptions people (or social institutions like media) have about Africa and the peoples living therein. Of these, I will try, by drawing from my encounters and discussion with other fellows, to reflect upon the challenges of identifying identity (ies) of Africa and "Africans". One broad instance of (mis) identification is the tendency to equate Africa with a particular historical, linguistic, racial or cultural category. In this connection, Africa as a basket full of blacks, colonized, preliterate, unindustrialized, outdated, savages, brutal, and more generally, uncivilized homogeneous entity is the product of early days Eurocentric-Orientalist project many Turks, consciously or not, subscribed and fall into. Now, bear with me, I did not do any attitudinal survey to unveil this condition, nor do I have analyzed any literatures for this purpose, but only drawing from my own lived experiences and those of other "African" colleagues here in Turkey.

A good example that you might have heard or read in Turkey is the use of "Afrikalı" both in print and broadcast media. It is recycled irrespective of conditions positive or negative, for a successful business man from the continent; for a thief red-handed elsewhere in Istanbul; or for a student killed in an accident somewhere in Ankara. The most interesting thing about "Afrikalı", however, is its use being confined, for the most part, to those whom they consider "black". Put differently, the frequency of "Afrikalı" is more likely to increase for anyone considered black-skinned than, for instance, brown-colored man or an "Arab" from the same continent. They are more likely, compared to the rest of countries in the continent, to be called "Arab", or more specifically, "Mısırlı" (Egyptian), "Faslı" (Moroccan) or so.

Unfortunately, the tendency to define North Africa-Egypt, Morocco, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and others in the nearby as Arabs, not necessarily Africans for the mere reason that they are not blacks should not only be a serious cause of concern for printed and broadcast media in Turkey, but also a recurrent theme-and-mistake in the so-called "Middle Eastern" and "Civilization Studies". Fashioned after the British colonial legacy, the "Middle Eastern" countries share, among other things, a language-Arabic, except for, of course, Turkey. For some in the Middle Eastern studies, this may have got something do with the 11th century Arab migrations to North Africa. But it does not, nevertheless, quench the thirst of our question, the question of identity. Geography, in one way or another, is an important ingredient in the making of identity. Even today's nation states cannot assume a full sense of being without it. Following, therefore, a linguistic line, many chose to call those occupying the northern end of the continent as Arabs. The

astonishing part is even though Arabic is well spoken in countries like Sudan (Arabic as an official language), Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea and elsewhere south of the Saharan desert, they are less likely to be called or considered Arabs or so. Instead, they are more likely to be identified as “Afrikalı”(African), “Siyah”(Black), or even, although used rarely among the general population, “zenci” (Negro). This last one, “zenci” taking its etymological root in “zunuj” of Arabic, is these days considered generally offensive for people from the African continent, especially for those living in the west-Europe and North America (probably not different here in Turkey as well, but it is less likely to be invidious, and as such, does not necessarily entail denigration as in the west!).

Put simply, the problem I’m trying to get across here has something to do with the issue of double standard pertaining to Africa. This double standard is applied, consciously or not, for people living in one continent-Africa but given different appellations, a racial category for those located in the south of Saharan desert and a linguistic category for those living in the north of Sahara. Undeniably, however, a significant proportion of peoples in North Africa have an Arab descendant, and thus, Arabic as a language is the natural consequence. Nevertheless, the problem remains that the state of North Africa’s relation with the continent is then diminished and relegated to geography, a landmass, not necessarily sociocultural and historical identification. In other words, an “African”, in this specific context, does not go any further than a geographical place where people live, and as such, it does not represent and reflect a distinct identity. Now, if northern Africa is an Arab by linguistic or racial criteria, then the rest of Africa will have to be something else, not at least African or “Afrikalı”. The problem becomes even more complicated for the fact that except for Swahili in East Africa (excluding the Horn of Africa-Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Djibouti), there is no a single cultural factor, linguistic or otherwise, that would bind the rest of Africa together. Another question is should the rest of Africa need to be one or, as some say, “black Africa”, stringing together people of different cultural, historical and even biological characteristics ? Why should it be?

In fact, if one were to take the question to its logical extreme, one would go so far as to claim that there is nothing African about the African continent, except for a landmass over which people are living. Colonialism and slavery were the experiences of human beings all across the world, not only the “burden” of men in the African continent. History tells us that different peoples, from Greeks, “Asians” to “Arabs” and “Europeans”, have had the same or similar experiences in the past or even in the present albeit its “nature” and “form” might have been changed in some ways. The same thing, more or less, applies to any other cultural factors as well. There are, however, some similarities within the cultures (to some extent biological as well) of the Western, Southern, Eastern, Northern, and the Horn of Africa. Yet, again, similarity of such a sort exists elsewhere around the world, but not likely to be the card for identification, simply see the Indian sub-continent. It is very much unlikely, and in fact, I have never personally encountered, that one hears a person of Pakistani, Indian, or Malaysian origin being identified as “Asian” or “Asıyalı” in Turkey. In short, one needs to decide over which way to go about Africa, between a simple land mass/continent and identity. It is in the later context, however, where, it appears, the bone of contention lies.