

THE DÖNMES: CRYPTO-JEWS UNDER TURKISH RULE

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The dönmes (converts) are a community descended from the disciples and adherents of Sabbatai Tsevi, who abandoned Judaism and adopted Islam in the late seventeenth century. Wary of their Muslim neighbors, they kept to themselves, maintaining strict secrecy in all their religious practices and general behavior. Our knowledge of the dönmes is therefore rather limited.

The main dönme center was in Salonica, where they had a real impact on social and economic life until 1924, when, as a result of the population transfer, the dönmes moved to Turkey, chiefly to Istanbul and Izmir. This migration caused their communal institutions to break down, and growing assimilation into the Muslim Turkish environment (including intermarriages) diminished the dönme population considerably. The hostility of sections of Turkish ultranationalists and extreme Islamists also affected the community.

*Dönme (convert; also apostate, a pejorative term) was the common appellation used by Muslim Turks to designate the Jewish adherents of Sabbatai Tsevi who embraced Islam in the last third of the seventeenth century, imitating their prophet's conversion in Istanbul in 1666, and their descendants.¹ The dönmes themselves preferred to be called *ma'mīnīm* ("believers" in Hebrew), indicating the conviction that they had inaugurated a new sect within Judaism that reinterpreted messianic Judaism, at the same time insisting on strictly Muslim behavior in public.*

At Sabbatai Tsevi's death in 1676 the sect numbered about two hundred families, chiefly in Edirne but also in Izmir, Bursa, and elsewhere. Some of the direct descendants of the first converts became the sect's leaders. It grew in numbers thanks to new conversions—chiefly a mass conversion in 1683 in Salonica, which thus became the largest dönme center until the 1924 population exchange between Turkey and Greece (when most Salonican dönmes were transferred to Turkey along with other Muslims). Meanwhile, the sect had grown and had its own quarters. The dönmes of Salonica maintained relations with the large local Jewish community, some of whose members sympathized with them. In any case, for many Turks Salonica became identified with the dönmes, so much so that in Turkish "Selânikli" (somebody from Salonica) began to be synonymous with "dönme."

A Divided Community

Internal conflicts and doctrinal differences caused several splits among the dönmes in Salonica and elsewhere.² The Yakubis were at first led by Sabbatai Tsevi's brother-in-law Yakub Philosoph, alias Querido ("dear" or "beloved"), who claimed to be the reincarnation of the deceased messiah. The Izmirliis (those from Izmir) claimed to be members or descendants of the original dönme community. A group that broke away from the Izmirliis around the year 1700, the Karakashes (those from Karakash; known also by other names, such as Konyoses, in Judezmo) were led by Barukhiya Russo (Osman-Baba after his conversion to Islam), who, like Yakub Philosoph, claimed to be Sabbatai Tsevi's reincarnation. They were more radical and adopted a missionary agenda, recruiting members in Germany, Austria, and Poland.

It seems that, according to the traveler Carsten Niebuhr, altogether about six hundred dönme families lived in Salonica in 1774, increasing to more than ten thousand people on the eve of World War I. In principle, the groups avoided intermarriage. The Izmirliis formed the upper strata of the Salonican dönmes; among them were wealthy merchants and bankers, along with middle-class people and intellectuals—teachers, journalists, and lawyers. They were the first to assimilate among Muslim Turks at the end of the nineteenth century. The Yakubis comprised the middle and lower classes—clerks of all sorts. The Karakashes were mostly artisans—barbers, cobblers, as well as butchers and porters.

They all lived in a particular area of Salonica, between the residential quarters of the Muslims and those of the Jews; they had their own schools, clubs, social centers, and philanthropic institutions.³ Each group had its own prayer-house, called *kahal*, and its own school (with Turkish as the language of instruction), but the dönme cemetery was common to all of

them.⁴ Most Salonican dönmes were educated and many were active in the affairs of their city, as described in a book by the journalist Ahmed Emin Yalman, himself a dönme, *Turkey in My Time* (1956), even though they carefully preserved the secret of their dönme identity.

At that time, every dönme used two personal names, a Jewish and a Turkish, as determined by the relevant social context; many retained their original Sephardic names as well. In effect, however, the Jews accused them of apostasy,⁵ while the Turks suspected that they were not truly convinced Muslims.⁶ Both sides held them guilty of promiscuous behavior, such as systematic wife swapping,⁷ but this was never conclusively proved.

The dönmes at first worshipped in Hebrew, then in Judezmo or Judeo-Spanish, the language that they adopted for their literary works, both religious and secular. Among themselves they increasingly used Judezmo; later, in the last years of the Ottoman Empire and in the Republic of Turkey, Turkish. Their prayer books were tiny for better concealment.

In this context and others, the dönmes maintained a strict discretion. As a result, we have only limited information about their history, doctrines, and fortunes, particularly since many of their writings were destroyed in the great Salonica fire of 1917. Some information became available later, however, thanks to their assimilation within the general Turkish environment.⁸

Notwithstanding assimilatory trends in the late empire and afterward in the republic, most dönmes held on to their time-hallowed customs and beliefs. Again, they could be considered neither Orthodox Jews (since they worked on Jewish holy days, to impress the Muslim Turks) nor devoted Muslims (since they circumcised their sons at the age of eight days). Although there is still some lack of clarity about their precise theology and ideology, it seems that their central beliefs are summarized in their Eighteen Precepts (Ordinances), attributed to Sabbatai Tsevi himself. These are supposed to parallel the biblical Ten Commandments, but they are somewhat ambiguous and include instructions on reading the Psalms daily in secret, the recommended comportment toward both Jews and Muslims ("throw dust in the eyes of the Turks"), and strong prohibitions of marriage with either.⁹

The Dönmes in Modern Turkey

Before and during World War I, some dönmes actively participated in the political radicalism characteristic of Salonica, chiefly in the revolutionary movement of the Committee of Union and Progress.¹⁰ Mehmet Javid Bey, a descendant of Barukhiya Russo, reached the position of finance minister

during Young Turk rule, while other dönmes performed important functions as activists in the rebel movement. This was natural for a sect basically revolutionary in social conception, insisting on the equality of men and women, applying advanced pedagogical methods in their schools, and progressive in adopting modern European architecture and fashion.

Some dönmes left the Balkans for Turkey after the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913, when the Ottoman Empire lost some territories. Later, however, the institutional cadres of the Salonican dönmes were shattered by the population transfer to Turkey in 1924, when they were considered Muslims by both parties to the transfer. There they broke into splintered, isolated communities; these survived in Istanbul and Izmir but were negligible in size and impact in Ankara, Edirne, Bursa, Konya, and elsewhere.

The Republic of Turkey, established in 1923, was perceived by its founders as a monolithic framework. Homogeneity was advocated in every domain: secularism for one and all,¹¹ a Turkey-focused education, the general use of Turkish in school, politics, social life and, naturally, in cultural activity. Mustafa Kemal and his advisers regarded modernity as a rejection of the multicultural heritage of the Ottoman Empire.

However, those who shaped public opinion had some trouble, at least at first, in reaching a consensual definition of Turkish identity. Religious and ethnic minorities in the republic wholeheartedly supported governmental measures to foster a civil society, and the dönmes were dedicated partisans of secularism.¹² But many Turks were less than ready to overlook extant differences and were more inclined to adopt an exclusionary approach to minorities. Although all bearers of the republic's identification documents were officially considered Turks, not a few people had reservations, considering religious belonging as the criterion for Turkishness, and, when this notion became less fashionable, dwelling on racial characteristics (in some cases under the impact of Nazi propaganda during the 1930s and 1940s and to some extent even afterward).

Suspicious and Discrimination

Although Turks were well acquainted with such long-established minorities as Greeks, Armenians, and Jews, they were less certain about the dönmes who had moved to Turkey in 1924. This was not merely because dönmes were willing to divulge little information about themselves, a reticence that was, perhaps naturally, considered suspect. Instead, it was a reflection of Turkish suspicions of closed groups, cosmopolitan in nature, such as Freemasons, who had been suspect in the late empire and were banned in the republic during its first generation.¹³

Indeed, Turks to whom Islam was still very important suspected the dönmes of cheating in their conversion and of being neither Muslims nor Jews. Regarding the minorities, many Muslim Turks in an ethnolinguistic nation-in-the-making felt that those born outside the genealogy of the majority had no right to be accepted as equal citizens and should be excluded from the body politic.¹⁴ In this mood, which prevailed in some circles, it is perhaps not surprising that the *varlık vergisi*, the war capital-tax imposed unequally in Turkey from 1942 to 1944, discriminated against the dönmes, imposing on them levies somewhere between those of Muslims, who paid least, and Jews, who paid most.¹⁵

This seems to indicate that arguments accusing the dönmes of having a non-Turkish identity carried more weight with the general public than did the response of advocates of the dönmes' cause who maintained that they were part and parcel of the national secular identity in Turkey. The calumnies voiced against the dönmes, sometimes extremely virulent and far-fetched, increasingly assumed the flavor of an anti-Semitism imported from Europe, as recently proposed by Bernard Lewis.¹⁶

In the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey, anti-Semitism was not very widespread, being generally sponsored by fringe elements.¹⁷ In the republic, it was mainly expressed by spokesmen of the militant ultranationalist Right and of the extreme Islamists—elements whose political activities have increased dramatically since the early 1970s.¹⁸ These identify the dönmes as outsiders in Turkey, whereas the dönmes strive to be considered insiders.

Anti-dönme publications (including accounts by dönmes themselves,¹⁹ some authentic, others spurious) have affected the community despite a tendency of not a few of its members to assimilate, even to intermarry with Muslims. The anti-dönme campaigns have been studied,²⁰ and their apparent result is the breakup of the community into individual cells, the better to escape observation.

The extreme nationalists have accused the dönmes of taking a leading part in the Young Turk plot in Salonica (a very exaggerated claim), thus contributing to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the destruction of its traditions. The Islamists have accused them not only of still being Crypto-Jews rather than Muslims, but also of abolishing the Caliphate and plotting to introduce secularism into Turkey, thus causing the decline of Islam there. Both groups (and some others as well) have accused the dönmes of participating in—or even masterminding—a worldwide conspiracy to Westernize Turkey and of being in league with communists and other subversive elements aiming to dominate Turkey and the world. Some of these arguments were used against Jews as well, making both Jews and dönmes supposedly guilty of the same misdeeds. An instance is the claim that Jews and dönmes were chiefly responsible for the tragedy of the Armenians in 1915.

Hostile Views of the Dönmes

A debate about the dönmes and their true nature that had started in 1919 continued in the republic during the 1920s, mostly in the Turkish press and a few pamphlets.²¹ It maintained that the dönmes had remained Jewish in outward appearance and in innate characteristics, these being chiefly duplicity, vain superstitions, and unacceptable sexual practices. They were accused of harming the republic economically and politically. A supposed evil conspiracy of dönmes, Jews, Freemasons, and communists was presented time and again in this literature as an anti-Turkish coalition. All this was originally expressed mostly in newspapers and periodicals, but since the 1970s not a few books have been written about the dönmes, frequently repeating earlier, usually hostile, arguments.

A rare case of a monograph that attempts more balance is Selahattin Galip's *Belgelerle Türkiye'de dönmeler ve dönmelik* (Dönmes and Dönme-ism in Turkey, with Documents).²² The one-page bibliography lists works in various languages. Half the book (80 of 155 pages) deals with Sabbatai Tsevi, whom Galip repeatedly calls a "false messiah" (48, 55) and, worse, a "false Muslim" (76). The rest deals with the Salonica dönmes, their main groupings and customs, their 1924 transfer to Turkey, and their assimilatory trends, but there is very little about the dönmes in the Republic of Turkey. In other words, since this is mostly a historical account at best, rather than a description relating to the author's own time, Galip can allow himself to be less biased against the dönmes.

That, however, is not the case with many other Turkish publications about them. Abdurrahman Küçük's *Dönmeler ve dönmelik tarihi* (Dönmes and the History of Dönme-ism)²³ is longer than Galip's work and takes a definite stand against the dönmes as well as against Jews, Freemasons, and Zionists. This is a rewriting of Küçük's dissertation in the Ankara University Faculty of Theology. His mentor there was none other than Hikmet Tanyu, who had studied Hebrew at a Jerusalem *ulpan* (a brief, intensive course in this language) in the 1950s and on this meager linguistic basis wrote a virulent 1,348-page book, *Tarih boyunca Yahudiler ve Türkler* (Jews and Turks throughout History), in which hardly a page does not contain errors of fact or understanding or both. (*Ulpan* Hebrew is not designed to prepare the student for reading classical Hebrew texts.)

Nevertheless, Tanyu became a professor in the Faculty of Theology and later its dean; Küçük, too, became a professor. Both Tanyu and Küçük were active members of the Nationalist Action Party, an extreme-Right grouping some of whose leaders preached Turkish racism.²⁴ The Ötüken Press, which published Küçük's book, was closely connected to this party at the time.

After a lengthy exposé (not devoid of errors) of Jewish history, Küçük discusses Sabbatai Tsevi and his career, and then the dönmes, whom he

repeatedly accuses of remaining Jewish. As in other works that had already appeared in Turkey, he deals with the Sabbatean groups and with dönme beliefs and customs, then with their supposedly huge share in the Young Turk revolution, devoting only a few pages (227-60) to recent times. There too Küçük strings together, without any serious analysis, a number of quotations from different sources, chiefly the Turkish press, intended to present the dönmes—along with the Jews—in the worst possible light. They are accused, without any solid proof, of stealing from Turks, hostility to Turkey, and taking control of the country. The general picture is of a deceitful, ungrateful minority with many evil characteristics.

Yesevzade's (pen name of Şükrü Alparslan Yasa) *Yahudilik ve Dönmeler* (Jewry and Dönmes)²⁵ is part of a series of volumes bearing such titles as *Yahudilik ve masonluk* (Jewry and Freemasonry), *Masonluk ve Kapitalizm* (Freemasonry and Capitalism), and *Şeytanın dini masonluk* (Freemasonry: Satan's Religion), all published in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Yesevzade's book is a 501-page hotchpotch of anti-Semitic and anti-dönme attacks of the most scurrilous kind, accompanied by tendentious photos from various sources intended to support the author's allegations.

These are directed at "proving" that many politicians and businessmen in Turkey and elsewhere are in fact Jews or dönmes, part of a universal plot (together with Freemasons) to dominate the world. In this, Yesevzade follows in the steps of both Tanyu—to whose book he devotes a whole chapter (35-73)—Küçük, and others. To convince the reader, Yesevzade photocopied numerous texts from various Turkish books and newspapers, not stopping to consider whether the information supplied is trustworthy. In most cases, indeed, it is spurious—certainly so in Chapter 8 (277-374), focusing on the dönmes but, again, mixed up with anti-Jewish and anti-Masonic calumnies.

A stir was caused soon afterward by a series of articles by Ilgaz Zorlu and, later, a 174-page book that reprinted some of these articles. Zorlu claimed to be a dönme; in any case, he was believed to be one and his writings were widely quoted, often with interpretations. Under the title *Evet, ben Selanikliyim* (Yes, I Am a Salonican),²⁶ the collected articles fall into three categories: the history of Sabbateism; the beliefs of the dönmes; and other issues. Zorlu's productions were taken seriously as dönme confessions, despite the numerous factual and other errors as well as the uncritical commentary.²⁷ An example is his statement that one hundred thousand people of dönme origin now live in Turkey (146)—a much inflated figure. His unscholarly approach may have added fuel to the controversy surrounding the book, in which the dönmes themselves took no active part, probably waiting for the public excitement to die down.

The perceptive surveys by Rıfat N. Bali and Paul F. Bessemer²⁸ offer additional information on certain Muslim Turkish attitudes toward

the dōnmes in recent years. Another interesting book appeared in 2004 by Toksöz B. Karasu, himself a Jew, seventy-one years old, born near Erzurum and educated at Yale, where he now heads the Department of Psychology. His 2004 novel, *Yahudi Efendi* (Mr. Jew),²⁹ is partly based on the career of his famous ancestor, Emmanuel Carasso, a Freemason and key dōnme activist and leader in Salonica for the Committee of Union and Progress. The novel is of interest, among other things, in that it touches openly on the hostility toward dōnmes and Jews.

Conclusion

Thanks to the research of Gershom Scholem, Rıfat Bali, Marc David Baer, Paul F. Bessemer, Jacob Barnai, and others, more is known about the history and traditions of the dōnmes than about their present condition (at least since their transfer to Turkey in 1924) and social, economic, and cultural activities. Although some serious research has been published in the West and, more rarely, in Turkey,³⁰ what is known is often unreliable and is chiefly contained in the writings of non-dōnmes in Turkish, many of them unscholarly and tendentious. Even the few available publications by dōnmes tell little that is new, except on a few points of folklore.³¹ It is imperative to make a concentrated effort—by the dōnmes themselves or, failing that, by others—to save and record all available information before this community passes into historical oblivion.

Notes

1. On Sabbatai Tsevi's conversion, see Geoffrey L. Lewis and Cecil Roth, "New Light on the Apostasy of Sabbatai Zevi," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 53 (1962-1963): 219-25; Marc David Baer, "Messiah or Rebel? Jewish and Ottoman Reactions to Sabbatai Sevi's Arrival in Istanbul," *Kabbalah*, Vol. 9 (2003): 153-79. On Sabbatai Tsevi's career the studies of Gershom Scholem are still valuable; see his *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971) and also Nikos Stavroulakis, "Shabbetai Zevi and the Dōnme of Tessaloniki," *Forum on the Jewish People, Zionism and Israel*, Vol. 53 (Fall 1984):103-14. See also Avram Galante, *Histoire des Juifs de Turquie*, Vol. 8 (Istanbul: Editions Isis, 1985), 167-292 [French]; Matt Goldish, *The Sabbatean Prophets* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).
2. Details in Harris Lenowitz, "Leaving Turkey: The Dōnme Comes to Poland," *Kabbalah*, Vol. 8 (2003): 73-79.
3. François Georgeon, "Selanik musulmane et deunmè," in Gilles Veinstein, ed., *Salonique 1850-1918* (Paris: Autrement, 1992), esp. 115-18. [French]
4. Jacob Barnai, *Shabbeta'ut: heybefīm hevratiyim* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar

- Center, 2000). [Hebrew]
5. Jacob Barnai, "Shetey te'udot le-toledot ha-shabbeta'ut be-Tūnis w-ve-Izmir," *Zion*, Vol. 52 (1987): 191-94. [Hebrew]
 6. See below for illustrations.
 7. Yitzchak Kerem, "The Deunmeh: From Catholicism to Judaism to Islam," in Charles Meyers and Norman Simms, eds., *Troubled Souls* (Hamilton, New Zealand: Outrigger, 2001), esp. 156-60.
 8. About the writings that were saved and later investigated by scholars, see Aron Freimann, *Inyeny Shabbetai Sevi* (Berlin: Itzkowski, [1912]) [Hebrew]; Moshe Atias, *Sefer shirot we-tishbahot shel ha-Shabbeta'im* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1947) [Hebrew]; Gershon Scholem, "The Sprouting of the Horn of the Son of David: A New Source from the Beginnings of the Doenme Sect in Salonica," in D. S. Silver, ed., *In the Time of Harvest* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), esp. 368-74.
 9. Haïm-Vidal Sephiha, "Les Deunmeh, ces 'marranos' de l'empire Ottoman et de la Turquie: Leurs ordonnances," *Yod Revue des Etudes Hébraïques et Juïves Modernes et Contemporaines*, Vol. 20 (1984): 57-72. [French]
 10. M. Şükrü Hanioglu, "Jews in the Young Turk Movement," in Avigdor Levy, ed., *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1994), 522.
 11. Jacob M. Landau, "Islamism and Secularism: The Turkish Case," in Shlomo Morag et al., eds., *Studies in Judaism and Islam Presented to Shelomo Dov Goitein* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1981), 361-82.
 12. Some researchers have argued that there always was an innate sympathy for secularism among the dönmes. See Avrum Ehrlich, "Sabbatean Messianism as Proto-Secularism," in Mehmet Tütüncü, ed., *Turkish-Jewish Encounters* (Haarlem: SOTA, 2001), esp. 293-94. For a more detailed discussion, see Marc Baer, "The Double Bind of Race and Religion: The Conversion of the Dönme to Turkish Secular Nationalism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (2004): 682-708.
 13. Jacob M. Landau, "Muslim Opposition to Freemasonry," *Die Welt des Islams*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (1996): 186-203; idem, "Farmāsūniyya," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., Vol. 12 (Supplement), 296-29 and bibliography.
 14. Jacob M. Landau, *Politics and Islam: The National Salvation Party in Turkey*, Research Monographs, No. 5 (Salt Lake City: Middle East Center, University of Utah, 1976).
 15. Rifat N. Bali, *The "Varlık Vergisi" Affair: A Study of Its Legacy, Selected Documents* (Istanbul: Isis Press, 2005) and the bibliography cited.
 16. Bernard Lewis, "The New Anti-Semitism: First Religion, then Peace, then What?" *The American Scholar*, Vol. 75, No. 1 (2006): 25-36. His remarks are about the Arab environment, but some could apply to Turkey as well.
 17. Jacob M. Landau, "Muslim Turkish Attitudes towards Jews, Zionism and Israel," *Die Welt des Islams*, n.s., Vol. 28 (1988): 291-300.
 18. Jacob M. Landau, *Radical Politics in Modern Turkey* (Leiden: Brill, 1974).
 19. Such as Leyla Neyzi, "Remembering to Forget: Sabbateanism, National Identity, and Subjectivity in Turkey," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2002): 137-58.
 20. The most extensive accounts are the following: Rifat N. Bali, "Another

- Enemy: The Dönme or Crypto-Jews," *Kabbalah*, Vol. 9 (2003): 77-108; Bali, "What Is *Efendi* Telling Us?" *Kabbalah*, Vol. 13 (2005): 109-39; Paul F. Bessemer, "Who Is a Crypto-Jew? A Historical Survey of the Sabbatean Debate in Turkey," *Kabbalah*, Vol. 9 (2003): 109-52; Bessemer, "Recent Turkish Works on the Dönmes," *Kabbalah*, Vol. 13 (2005): 141-55.
21. Details in Bessemer, "Who Is a Crypto-Jew?" 113-24.
 22. Selahattin Galip, *Belgelerle Türkiye'de dönmeler ve dönmelik* (Istanbul: Kıracı Yayınları, 1977). [Turkish]
 23. Abdurrahman Küçük, *Dönmeler ve dönmelik tarihi* (Istanbul: Ötüken, 1990). [Turkish]
 24. Jacob M. Landau, "The Nationalist Action Party in Turkey," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (1982): 589-605.
 25. Yesevizade, *Yahudilik ve Dönmeler* (Istanbul: Araştırma Yayınları, n.d. [1994?]). [Turkish]
 26. İlğaz Zorlu, *Evet, ben Selanikliyim* (Istanbul: Belge Yayınları, 1998) [Turkish]; several editions followed. Cf. review by Giacomo Saban in *Kabbalah*, Vol. 4 (1999): 207-23.
 27. Details in Bessemer, "Who Is a Crypto-Jew?" 142-148.
 28. Bali, "What Is *Efendi* Telling Us?"; Bessemer, "Recent Turkish Works," 141-55.
 29. Reviewed at some length in *Gündem*, 7-13 September 2006, 70-74.
 30. Such as a special issue of *Tarih ve Toplum*, Vol. 223 (2002).
 31. Such as an interview with Fatma Arıg, a dönme woman, in Neyzi, "Remembering."