

## **Symbolic Construction of Turkish National Identity as a Factor of International Management**

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**Abstract:** This presentation aims to explore the symbolic construction of Turkish nationalism during the early Republican period in order to trace the origins of the anti-global nationalism in today's Turkey. It discusses the symbolic bases of Turkish nationalism by going back to early years of modern Republic. We identified three main components of Turkish nationalism in this period: history, geography, and language. They are symbolically constructed within a nationalist perspective. The founders of the Republic and the ideologists of Turkish nationalism hoped this to serve two purposes. One was to establish the bases of realizing the unity of Turkish nations. The other, perhaps the most important, purpose was to prove that the Turks were an advanced and civil nation during the course of history, and to respond the western pressures of disruption, defeat, invasion and exclusion (e.g. the western labels of barbarian Turks, backward Muslims). The main argument in this study is that the Turkish national identity tried to co-exist with, and to join, the modern western civilization by placing geography, history and language in a symbolic context and in accordance with the idea that it determines national interests as a part of a Business of Corporations and key factor of Managers within the international competitive environment. In this context, Turkish history was interpreted as the source of human civilization and the geographies of the Central Asia and Anatolia were the home of human civilization while the Turkish language was viewed as the origin of human languages. By doing so, they aimed to repel the claims of backwardness and barbarity and tried to introduce the national identity as an integral part of national culture having great impact on a process of negotiations.

**Keyword:** Symbolic Construction, Turkish National Identity

### **Introduction**

In this historical era of globalized world nation-states experience a great transformation. Some social scientists interpreted this change as the end of nation-states. On the other hand, there are profound controversies and conflicts due to micronationalisms in regional context. Therefore, it is necessary to revisit the early construction of nationalism in Turkey. As a result of the social and political effects of globalization on nation-state and national identity, there emerge new 'national front' movements and new types of reactions to globalization. These developments can also be observed in Turkish society. Especially Turkey's membership talks with the European Union caused a heated debates as to national identity and the transformation of nation-state leading to the emergence of "nationalist front" movements (Bozkurt 2004: 7; Perinçek 2005: 1-2). To understand this new political situation and nationalism in Turkey it is necessary to analyze how Turkish national identity was constructed during the early Republican period and what kind of symbolization is used in this construction process.

The early construction of the Turkish national identity can shed a significant light on today's rejuvenated debates as its role in relation to globalization in particular and Turkey's accession talks with the European Union. While the globalization exposes the country's culture, economy and social structure to global factors such as economy and culture, the EU accession talks cause heightened debates as to the nature and future of the Turkish national identity. In one extreme, there is a clear rejectionist trend toward both globalization and European Union from both secular and religious camps that emphasize the uniqueness of national culture. On the other end, there is a strong accommodationism. This accommodationism appears in the form of incorporation of western and universal values with little attention to traditional Turkish culture, or in a more cooperationist attitude with a strong confidence on traditional identity and culture. While the former represents the traditional secular elites in Turkey, the latter is represented by the Justice and Development Party in power. The fact that both globalization and EU talks began to highlight the need for recognizing the presence of more local elements of national identity that were ignored in the original construction of national identity.

Therefore, Kemalism as an ideology of national ideology began to gradually go away from the strict imagination of national identity (Kramer 2000).

It is surprising that the arguments of today's new nationalist outlook that emerging due to globalization, micronationalism and EU integration is parallel to the nationalist arguments of the early years of the Turkish Republic (Perinçek 2004). This paper elaborates on how nationalist identity was constructed during these early years by arguing that this construction is made through us of geography, history and language. Our main assumption is that nationalist symbolic construction in Turkey aimed to develop alternatives to the western arguments that the Turks were backward and barbarians. This symbolization implies that the Turks are equal to their counterpart in the West and that the Turks lead many great events in history and founded the first civilization and, therefore, deserve to take its place in modern civilization. In this respect this article first elaborates on the symbolization and nationalism. Secondly, it analyzes how and why nationalism was symbolically constructed through the symbolization of homeland or geography, history and language.

## Nationalist Identity and Symbolism

Nation-states that emerged as a result of modern political theorization focused on constructing national identity as a social collectivity. Individuals attempted to find meaning around this new identity. In this context national identity is constructed around a common land, myths, a historical memory, duties, rights and economy (Smith 1994: 31-32). The two main criteria in defining national identity: continuity over time and differentiation from others (Guibernau 1996: 73). The nation that is a basis formational identity refers to a group of people organized as a community. This community is based on the assumptions of a common culture, land, history, future and self-government. Nation gradually tends to define itself as a sentiment by differentiating from nation-state with its various forms of nationalisms. The members of the community define themselves as a whole of sentiment with various symbols (Guibernau 1996: 47). These symbols try to construct a common meaning to national identity.

Symbols are the stocks of meaning for a society and provide "a capacity to create meaning". Therefore, community members assign similar meanings to the world they live in by using the same symbols (Cohen 1999: 14). These meanings are a "social map" shared by society (Mardin 1982: 91). With this map individuals obtain a common consciousness, values, views, behaviors and beliefs. At the same time, there emerge a culture with consistent meanings around a system of symbols. This culture gain unity by means of meanings provided by these symbols. For example, in Turkey there is a culture unified as around such as a land, flag and bravery (Mardin 1982: 101).

Symbolization can transform a community into a symbol by emerging in the minds of community members. Whey a community is transformed into a symbol, community members can easily perceive themselves a part of the same collectivity (Cohen 1999: 83). Therefore, symbols function as an important concept that constructs a sense of with in community. In this context the nation transforms itself to the status of the similarities from the differences of realities. Therefore, people invest in the ideological integration of the community. This explains the ability of nationalism to connect people from different cultural and social positions. Symbols point to a difference and similarity to create a group feeling. People construct the community and use it as an expression of their own identity (Guibernau 1996: 82). Yet through symbols people speak the same language, act similarly, participate in the same rituals, pray the same God and wear similar dresses (Cohen 1999: 20; Smith 1994: 123). The differences in society can also help to eliminate and reinforce unity (Cohen 1999: 82). Symbols have the capacity to transform opposing messages into a single slogan or image and to transform them into an action. Combined with conflict, symbols' capacity to condense, unite and narrow messages can mobilize meanings and political symbols (Brown-Roger,2003).

Also, symbols function to draw boundaries that are important in the construction of national identity. The exclusionary and unifying role of symbols in drawing the boundaries are also critical to maintain group identity and its solidarity. As Armstrong put it, like traffic lights, symbols can constitute the markers of boundaries for entrance and exit. Each group, community or state can develop colors, flags or historical references mobilized for certain goals as symbolic inventories (Brown-Roger, 2003: 83-108). As Cohen (1999: 19) mentioned, sharing the same symbols leads to distinguishing themselves from other communities by perceiving themselves as separate.

Symbols define national boundaries. The nation attains a sense of unity through symbols by differentiating themselves from others. A symbol can be an object, a sign or a word, to make it easy to recognize each other. Therefore, members of the nation will have a sense of difference and the nation becomes instrumental in differentiating the nation from others (Guibernau 1996: 81). National flags, names of the states, geographies, and histories and languages contribute to the construction of national unity while they contribute to the sense of their being different from other nations. Symbols may change their content in time. They express a transfer to the future with continuity with the past. Symbols are not static; they passed from generation to generation or can emerge with a new generation. Nationalism use this dynamic feature of symbols to maintain the national unity and improve them the interpreting them in new ways (Guibernau 1996: 82). The rich

associations provided by symbols and potential to create new meanings facilitate the construction of national identity. Symbols' capacity to create meanings (Cohen 1999: 17), are instrumental in creating new meanings to legitimize national identity. For example, religious symbols are strategically employed to reinterpret the concept of modern national identity.

When the symbols are located within a national context they greatly contribute to the perception of a nation by improving the meanings. In this context symbols try to create "single meanings" by constructing the same language, geography, and history. Through symbols national identity is constructed and reality is transferred to old ultra-reality. Nation states' land, languages, history, names, cities, etc. are carried to extra-reality and gain new meanings through symbols.

### Turkish national identity and symbolic construction

Turkish national identity is also constructed through various symbols and gained new meanings in the keep nation-state and its relations to the West. Above all, Turkish national identity emphasizes the "integrity" of the nation in contrast to local, regional, ethnic and religious differences in the Ottoman society (Mardin 1982: 135, 137). Singular meanings are constructed through symbols. Since Turkish nationalism perceived the pluralist nature of the Ottoman society as fragmented, the nation was envisioned as national unity that tried to avoid such fragmentation. The available symbols served as a stock of meanings in this envisioning as symbols of history, geography, and language were reformulated in order to attribute new meanings to the nation.

While Turkish national identity seeks symbolization the meaning it involved against the West becomes important. This meaning of westernizing against the West played a primary role in the symbolization of national identity. As well-known, the fragmentation old empire and the invasion of Anatolia by the West always frightened the intellectuals. Even before the war, the intellectuals said in 'we either westernize or collapse ... if we don't westernize, the West will expel us not just from the West not from the whole world' (Safa 1988: 20). Against the Western accusations of retardation and the shocks experience by the intellectuals, the nation state that was declared to be Republic simultaneously tried to response to West. The message here was simple: Turks are not backward and have the right to join the West as a developed modern nation.

### Symbolization of Geography/Space

In the graveyard tablets that reflects the 17th century Istanbul' classical culture, the homeland is defined as a place where someone was born and grew up (Yildirim 2005). Therefore, homeland carries a local emphasis. Along with modernity, the notion of homeland keep is totally transformed within a new cultural and political paradigm. In this paradigm homeland is placed in a national context and is identified with a national geography and it is perceived as a soil where the sovereignty of nation-state is realized.

Homeland is certainly not solely territorial space where the national sovereignty is practiced. It rather carries a symbolic dimension in relation to a set of more pervasive and deeper meanings. As Smith (1994) pointed out, 'homeland is a sacred place with historical memories, a sacred place with lakes, rivers, mountains, cities... With these features, homeland is a main source of identity' (p.25).

In Turkish nationalism related to modernity, homeland carries a significance as a symbolic geography that involves various emotions, values and beliefs as a part of national identity. The notion of homeland (*vatan*) was first used by Namik Kemal that deserved to the title of homeland's poet due to his ability to artfully use literature and poetry. In his play called "Homeland or Silistre" that was screened in 1873, Namik Kemal, perhaps for the first time, draws a striking picture of homeland:

Homeland! Homeland! I said homeland is in danger. Don't you hear? Allah created me and homeland raised me. Allah is feeding me ... Homeland filled my stomach. I was naked and was dressed by homeland ... My body is from homeland soil ... My breath is from homeland's air. If I am not to die for the sake of homeland, why was I born? (Kemal 1996: 8).

Believing that homeland's under siege, Namik Kemal tried to establish a belief in saving the homeland by identifying it with human breath, a feeder and a value to die for. After Namik Kemal, homeland continued to be constructed by Turkish nationalists as under siege in order to promote a belief in saving and defending it. For example, *Turk Yurdu*, a journal first published in 1911 as a forerunner of Turkish nationalism, keep similar depictions. Many parallel stories, poems, and articles were published in this journal. A poem that describes homeland as a cluster of feelings: In the poem, homeland is described by referring to various feelings and actions such as seeing, sleeping, hearing and thinking. Individual is thought to be unified with its land both symbolically and materially.

Somewhere else in the journal, land is conceptualized as a "symbolic land", as a mother giving birth to humans and is perceived as an entity that teach the individual humanity. Homeland is thought to be a source of love, to involve belongingness to the birth place with an aspiration to maintain religion and race, to help to enter

human community with a Turkish Muslim identity, and to provide sovereignty and future. Homeland is where someone and his ancestors are buried. Homeland must be loved as a place where one obtains identity and where nations obtain happiness. Homeland is beautiful and symbolizes loyalty to ancestors and the past and, therefore, there is a sense of appreciation for the homeland (Tevfik 1912: 18-21).

Ziya Gökalp, a sociologist of nationalism, provides one of the most interesting symbolizations of homeland in the journal *Turk Yurdu*. For him homeland is a sacred country for which lives are sacrificed. While other countries are not considered sacred, homeland is thought so. Those who consider homeland sacred can sacrifice their families, lives and their most beloved ones. The value of homeland comes from its sacred qualities rather than its material features (Gökalp 1914). Homeland is the place in whose mosque *ezan* is called and in whose school the Qur'an is recited with one language and one religion, capital, science and knowledge, shipyards, factories and trains belong to the Turkish nation (Gökalp 1976:1).

Mehmet Emin, one of the pioneers of Turkish nationalist activist-thinkers, was an important figure in the symbolization of the homeland (*vatan*) concept. For him, homeland was the future place where one would be free with his temple, school and everything, where no one would be persecuted, where there was no oppressor or oppressed, the poor and the rich would be equal before justice, where everyone would have a land and a farm living there happily and peacefully and where remote villages would come alive (Emin 1914). In this respect, Mehmet Emin attempted to create a hopeful utopia about future in the face of despair due to disruptions and fragmentations in the Ottoman society.

Homeland is named after the 'pure soil where the Turks shed with their own blood and live' (Sabir 1913). Therefore, the conception of the 'pure and sacred' soil is emphasized by many nationalist elite. For example, Nihal Atsız found the prevalence of this approach in the journal *Orhun*, one of the most important representatives of civil nationalism. In its most extreme form, Atsız (1934) said in the homeland 'everything is at war. Everyday is a holy war (*gaza*) against the nature, against the enemy, and even against God... This land is a place of martyrs throughout'. He named the enemies as "subversive communists", "disgraceful Jews", "sneaky and hybrid traitors". He even says that these enemies cannot dismantle the homeland, "let alone God that established the world's system" (p.1).

In the journal *Ülkü*, one of the most important source of official nationalist ideologies during the Republican period, one can find many articles that emphasized the homeland's sacred, metaphysical, emotional features (*Ülkü Mecmuası* 1935). However, in real politics homeland is constructed in relation to Anatolia. In the 1930s the official textbooks of history and in the Turkish thesis of history, we notice a symbolic construction of geography in a new way. In this construction the Central Asia is constructed as the motherland, Anatolia represents the last phase of its continuum. In the case of Turkish humanity, the motherland first emerges in the Central Asia and matures in Anatolia seen as a place the Turks adopted a homeland in their most civilized and developed phase. Hittites and Sumerians were Turks as the most advanced structures of Anatolian geography. With Hittites and Sumerians, Anatolia reached the highest level of civilization as a Turkish homeland (Tarih I 1931).

The conceptualization of Anatolia as a geography of a superior civilization aimed to disprove the Western claims that the Turks are backward and, therefore, must be expelled from Anatolia. In this perspective Anatolia becomes the Turkish homeland and represents an advanced civilization (Copeaux 1998: 15). Accordingly, we can interpret Ataturk's thesis transcribed by Afet İnan that the earlier races that lived in Anatolia were Turks in this line.

In 1918 Ziya Gökalp, a sociologist that advanced Turan symbol, tried to answers the question 'where is the homeland for the Turkish nation?' as follows:

'Homeland is neither Turkey nor Turkistan;

Homeland is a great and eternal land: Turan... '(Gökalp 1950: 48).

For Gökalp, 'Turan is an ideational land that includes its parts and excludes others. Turan is the sum of 'the countries where the Turks inhabit' (Gökalp 1950: 48). The Great Turan represents a single land in the Turkish spirit, a single ruler and a single language and reflects a general and comprehensive unity, excluding individuality, lineage and tribal components (Gökalp 1989: 101).

Turan is where the Turks are buried and Turkish martyrs fell (Aktuğ 1913: 50-52). Turan is depicted as a broad and great world where the knowledge of the era prevails and happiness and life are created (Ziya 1913: 197). In the years of decline when the Ottoman empire was under siege by the West it was said 'Turan is crying in the land of Islam' (Gündüz 1913: 465).

According to Turkish nationalists the Turanis are the most ancient communities of Asia and they come from the same race as the Turks. The picture of a double-headed eagle is a result of the experience of Turan civilization. Just as today's Europe, Byzantium, Rome and Russia attempted to destroy the Turanism in history. Turks, Yakuts, Mongolians, Japanese and Korean people constitute the Turan that belong to the Ural-Altaic race. Japan was founded by the Turanis that established the most powerful state. Mongolians, Seljukis, Ottomans and the like are interpreted as the forces of Turanis that founded states. Asia, Far Asia, Central

Anatolia and India are the geographies where several civilizations are founded by the Turanis (Marki Efendi 1912: 231-234).

The homeland symbolized as Turan covers the eastern geography of the world. This perception of geography is a symbol of a ‘great east’ against the Western destruction and cultural pressure. Through this symbol they try to substitute the real homeland that faced the danger of falling apart, invasion, shrinking and extinction with a idea of imagined homeland. They try to provide the members of the nation with an idealist, great, respected, valuable geographical meanings.

The Turan concept remained alive in the republican era’s nationalism and was advocated as a cultural geography and a political construction. For example, in the Turkistan night organized in April 20, 1940 the slogan was ‘The road from Anatolia to Caucasus goes to the Turan’. The representatives of Azerbaijan, Turkistan, Anatolia, Caucasia, Idyl-Ural regions participated in the night (Bozkurt 1940: 78-79). The new Turkish thesis of history and the Sun Language Theory also involved Turan in a cultural sense. We will focus more on it in terms of the symbolization of history.

### **Symbolization of History: National Construction of Time**

The symbolization of history reflects the spirit of the day since it is constructed selectively. The past is symbolically remembered, creating simple historical labels to describe complex and ideological messages. These views can be found especially in political rhetorics (Cohen 1999: 112,115). The expression of temporal continuity through symbols means ‘the reconstruction of a cultural unity in the face of its disruption by the forces of change’ (Cohen 1999: 118). Therefore, following the Ottoman decline, Turkish society experienced a deep cultural and political crisis. In order to overcome the danger of “becoming meaningless”, Turkish nation used historical symbolization to define its place in history or world.

In Turkey, the founders efficiently institutionalized a national history and their support for nationalist narratives were well popularized and canonized by the new state apparatus (Canefe 2002). The nationalist intellectuals advanced an image of a common nation with historical heroism and victories in community. For them the Turks won all the victories for a great and honorable nation (Gökalp 1941: 13) and become a nation through Mete, Bilge Han, Jangyz and Timurlenk’s raids that played a unifying role (Gökalp 1950: 44). As Turks, Timurlenk made other people obey, to himself Bayazed distracted the enemy, the Sultan Selim rushed in to Europe, Asia, Africa and found the world too small while making Istanbul a capital and bringing Caliphate to Istanbul and defeating the United Europe in Mohach. The word ‘Turk’ became as dreadful and fascinating as God. The Turk becomes the God’s elect in the world’ (Türkkan 1940: 1).

The Turks are claimed to be the first people that established a civilization. Cities like Samarkand, Tashkent, Bukhara, Konya and Istanbul were the centers of this civilization. They thought that, as a result of excavation the Central Asia as the motherland of the Turks was a home for the most ancient civilization and that the first civilization started there as animals were domesticated and metals were shaped for the first time (Tarih I 1931: 35). Similarly, many mines in the Altai Mountains are claimed to prove that the Turks were the first to discover metals to extract copper, iron and gold from those mines (Tarih I 1931: 38). In the early historical era when, in various regions of the world, people used to live in the holes of tree and rocks,

Poetry is a good example of the symbolization of Turkish history. The nationalist perspective of the Republican era portrays the Turks’ historical role as the initiators related to discovering, and creating, civilization and by using the symbolization potential of poetry. As can be seen in the poetry above, they, for example, make distinctions between the Turks and other human societies with the words ‘us’ and ‘others’ as well as between a ‘shepherd’ and a ‘herd’.

The theme that, with migrations, the Turks spread around the world and pioneered in developing civilizations in other regions was an important example of historical symbolizations. This theme was first advanced in the journal *Turk Yurdu* a main intellectual representative of Turkish nationalism. Here, the ‘Turani race’ is said to have left their barren lands and steps, Atilla, Jangyz, Hulagu and Timurlank to spread from Spain to China and from Yemen to India. It was claimed that they mixed with people when they went to Arabia and Persia, they united with Germans and Russians when they arrived in Europe they became a shah in Iran, a sultan in Yemen, a khan in China a king in Hungary. Therefore, the Turks revitalized the hearts and minds by spreading around the world and this was due to a mission assigned by God (Hikmet 1912: 189-192). The same perspective can be found in the journal *Ülkü Mecmuası* that was the most important documents of official nationalism during the Republican era. In the journal the Turks are said to have gone to China, Japan, and the Okan islands and then to Mexico, Peru and America, from above the Black Sea to Ural, Volga regions, then to Thrace and Macedonia, to the Mansh Sea from there they went to France and named the Alps. Again, they claim that the Turks founded a culture and civilization called Etrusks in Italy and that they influenced the native peoples of America and Europe in growing animals (Muzaffer 1934: 249-254).

The Turkish Thesis of History claims that a major climate change in the Central Asia forced the Turks to migrate from their homeland toward China, India, Africa, Levant and Europe. And, the Turks are said to ‘carry civil knowledge, high and noble morals, pure and simple faiths to these regions’ (Tarih I 1931: 28).

According to this thesis, the Turks established a civilization wherever they went, for example keep in Mesopotamia by drying out swamps and opening up water channels. When they reached Egypt, they settled in the Nile delta and established the Egyptian civilization. The westward migrations found the Aegean basin as suitable for settlement. Again, history shows that the brackicephal tribes founded Mediterranean civilizations in the regions known with the names of Troy, Crete, Lidia and Ionia. The origin of the brackicephal tribes is the Central Asia, the motherland of the Turks. This explains the similarities between the antique pieces in Crete and Troy (Tarih I 1931: 30-31). Again, the Turks are said to have brought civilization to Europe in the shores of the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea, reaching the Atlantic Ocean from Europe and invaded Britain and Ireland, carrying the arts of the iron, age polished rocks, copper, rice. The Turks freed the natives peoples of Europe from cave lifestyle by teaching them agriculture, farming, domesticating animals, pottery (Tarih I 1931: 33).

## Conclusion

National identity plays an important role in the continuity of a state or a nation as it provides meaning for the current state of affairs. In Turkey history is interpreted within a cultural perspective consistent with the modern nationalist identity and it is 'reinvented' within a new set of meanings. These meanings aimed to refute the charges of backwardness and they served to associate Turkish society with universal, developed and modern Western civilization. The main theme in the attempts of symbolization of history, geography, culture and language were that the Turkish society as a whole were a part of modern western civilization and that, as a great nation, the Turks played an important role in history. It was claimed that the Turks founded the first civilization and that they served as the forerunner of the Anatolian civilizations and they inspired the Greek civilization. The main function of Turkish History Thesis was to create a meaning for that cause rather than being purely scientific. This thesis claimed that the Turks were leading figures in the history of civilizations and contributed to major civilizations of the world.

Probably due to their desire to distance themselves from the Islamic past represented by the Ottoman Empire, the founders of the new-nation state focused on the pre-Islamic origins of Turkish culture and its relations with the western civilization. For that purpose, the language was used as an important symbolic mechanism in constructing the national identity. The Sun Language Theory claimed that all world languages stemmed from Turkish language. Early nationalists criticized the Ottoman language for being under a heavy influence of Arabic and Persian and emphasized the need for nationalize and purify the Turkish language, thinking that a unified and purified language will help realize the national unity and integration.

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