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Posing for the Republic

Making the modern Turkish citizen in vernacular photographs from the 1920s and 1930s

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CONCLUSION



Figure 7.1 A medical student behind an autopsy table, 15 January 1941.
8.4 x 13.3 cm. Courtesy of the Akkasah Center for Photography.

Figure 7.1 from 15 January 1941 shows a young student of medicine named Nedim Akyüz working on a cadaver. The writing on the print reads “to my dear mother” (*Canım Anneciğime*). Although, to the contemporary gaze, Figure 7.1 may appear as a curious choice of photograph to dedicate to one’s mother, medicine was considered to be one of the most prestigious and sought-after professions at the time, particularly for men, whom it would turn into highly eligible bachelors. Thus, Figure 7.1 speaks to some of the central concerns of the study, highlighting how the performances of certain familial, professional and social roles in vernacular photographs cemented the making of the modern Turkish citizen.

My research has yielded two major conclusions. First, I have shown how vernacular photographs of the 1920s and 1930s point to the classed nature of the modern Turkish citizen image; second, I have made clear how Turkish citizens, especially those of the newly constituted urban middle classes, actively participated in the making of “the aesthetics of citizenship” through self-representations in portraiture (Buckley 2006). In the closing pages of this study I will expand on both these points, evoking specific examples from the corpus of photographs I have analyzed in the preceding chapters. I also highlight some of the more specific conclusions that the different chapters produced, and discuss how I hope my research opens up a path for future work.

Throughout this study, I have demonstrated the ways in which the image of the modern Turk was constructed and affirmed, in and through vernacular photography, as a Westernized, primarily urban and middle-class citizen, explicitly gendered as either the new Turkish “Republican woman” or the new Turkish “Republican man.” I have argued

that vernacular photography played a key role in producing, reinforcing and circulating, but also, to some extent, renegotiating the desired, normative image propagated by the rulers of the newly established nation-state. The overwhelming number of urban middle-class representations in vernacular photographs is an indicator of the regime's success in encouraging and implementing a modern, secular image of Turkishness. However, my analyses have also highlighted that the desired image was not always faithfully reproduced but sometimes tweaked, by incorporating elements from Ottoman and Turkic traditions, by pushing the boundaries of gender norms or by introducing playfulness. Such tweaking was possible in vernacular photography to a greater extent than in non-vernacular photographs, the appearance and circulation of which were under the control of the Kemalist regime. This is precisely why, I contend, it is important to study vernacular photography, notably in periods of rapid and radical social change like the early Republican period.

As Jo Spence and Patricia Holland have suggested (1991: 13–14), family photography, and more broadly, vernacular photographs can operate at the “junction between personal memory and social history, between public myth and personal unconscious.” In an era when visual culture was systematically organized and tightly controlled by the single-party Kemalist regime, vernacular photographs provide a somewhat less structured and regulated site able to illuminate how Turkey's nation-building process, including the formation of middle-class citizenship and the construction of the new public life, unfolded at the level of the everyday lives of its citizens, as they visited photography studios or engaged in sports and leisure activities in public space. Vernacular photographs reveal that urban middle-class citizens largely endorsed and actively participated in the making of the new Turkish man and woman through their own photographic representations. At the same time, their efforts to build a secular middle-class life for themselves, of which photography was an important part, were not just informed by Kemalist policies, but also influenced by other, wider social and cultural developments of the 1920s and 1930s, from Western fashion trends and movies to the increasing availability of modern consumer items such as amateur cameras.

By adopting the officially desired images propagated by the regime, Turkish citizens likely increased their chances of being recruited as teachers, doctors, engineers or, as in the example of the Ziraat Bank employees in Chapter Six, administrators, all desperately needed to build the new Republic. Apart from professional objectives, however, the adoption and faithful performance of Republican ideals was tied to class aspirations; a Western appearance and etiquette was required among the emerging Turkish bourgeoisie to garner respect and recognition. In this context vernacular photographs suggest that the Kemalist reforms catered to the social aspirations of the already modernizing middle classes.

This study is strongly inspired by Elizabeth Edwards' notion of “theaters of the self” (2004) which I have taken, by relating it to Butler's (2007 [1990]) notion of “gender performativity,” as referring to photographs as a performative space in which people can assert and negotiate their emerging positions as modern classed and gendered subjects. At the same time, my analysis draws upon Goodman's notion of worldmaking (1978) as that part of photographic performativities through which people make worlds by enacting

multiple selves, in response to the worlds that are created around them. As this research has revealed, for middle-class Turkish citizens, making a world for their classed and gendered selves in the formative years of the Republic primarily entailed a replication of Kemalist models. Thus, worldmaking and world replication were not mutually exclusive, but largely merged.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the theatricality of vernacular photography, then, referred less to the enactment of an abstract world that was dreamt of than to a world that was aspired to and that could be attained by replicating the world that was being produced and promoted as desirable by the state. This means that the early Republican period can be seen as a context in which one world was heavily privileged and promoted over other worlds, so that photographic subjects were more or less forced to respond to the Kemalist worldview, with only limited room for maneuvering. As the case study of Studio Görçek in Chapter Three indicates, by the 1950s, the studio space had opened up new ways of worldmaking that went beyond world replication, with people taking up the notion of the theater of the self in a more creative and arguably more literal way, enabling the self to also become the director of the image, instead of the photographer taking on this role. This development coincided with the shift in the Turkish state's political focus from a concerted and regimented process of nation-building, to the consolidation of the nation through the promotion of specific forms of economic development and liberal democracy.

My research also produced specific insights into how the new Turkish citizen was visually constructed in vernacular photography. As Chapters One and Two have revealed, while citizens were restricted by gender normativities that, in the case of the early Republican era, were explicitly presented and enforced as norms, there was still some room for subversion, either because the norms could not be fully realized by all photographic subjects or because people found ways of producing and keeping photographs that broke with the norms. Nebahat Hamit's portraits in Chapter One and Figure 2.20 in Chapter Two suggest that multiple selves could be enacted, generating images that to some extent exceeded the homogenous modern classed and gendered Republican self that dominates vernacular photography of the time.

Correspondingly, my analyses in Chapters Three and Four have revealed that while modern Turkish man- and womanhood were quite tightly circumscribed by the Kemalist regime and its policies, certain more traditional elements could be incorporated within the ideal image of the new Turkish man and woman, making it easier for citizens to approximate this ideal image. As highlighted in Chapter Four, ancient traditions such as circumcision ceremonies and childbeds were incorporated into modern Turkish life across geography and class, creating distinct genres within family photography. Akin to sports, where both ancient Turkic traditions like oil wrestling and Western sports like tennis were amalgamated into the modern national Turkish identity, the inclusion of circumcisions and childbeds in modern photographic representations shows how the Turkish nation created a distinct, hybrid visual vocabulary. Enabled by the market and photography archives, pictures that were meant to be kept mostly private at the time are made public today, revealing this hybridity.

My research, particularly the Hamza Rüstem case study in Chapter Five, has also unveiled the affective nature of the nation-building process, embodied not only in the work

of Hamza Rüstem's studio but also in Rüstem's own story as a member of an immigrant family from Crete. The stories behind many of the vernacular photographs I have studied reveal, indeed, how these photographs contributed to the creation of collective memory that worked to reinforce a new national consciousness. A sense of belonging was cultivated in the emerging nation through a plethora of photographic exchanges among family members, friends, colleagues and acquaintances. From the portraits of Nebahat Hamit Karaorman, an educator with a career spanning several decades (Chapter One), to the work of photography studios such as the Kosovar Koro Brothers in Istanbul (Chapter Two) and Hamza Rüstem in Izmir (Chapter Five), vernacular photographs of the time point to a conscious effort on the part of the urban middle-class citizens to adapt to the new nation-state.

For the newly built middle class, the desire to enact modernity and project a normatively classed and gendered identity was closely linked with the desire to grow roots in a novel territory, which citizens (whether longstanding or newly arrived) were urged to adopt as their new homeland. In this context, citizens seem to have complied with the Kemalist modernization project as part of a social and sentimental bonding process. As the case study of Izmir's century-old Hamza Rüstem Studio illustrates, photography studios actively participated in the forging of a new urban middle-class Turkish identity and social memory for the cities and towns they operated in. Indeed, the 1920s and 1930s correspond to a period when studio photography had become an integral part of middle-class everyday life, producing an array of portraits that constitute the basis for what is associated with "typical" early Republican imagery today.

As I have shown in Chapter Five, the work of itinerant (*alaminüt*) photographers was crucial in documenting and reproducing early Republican public life in both urban and rural settings, notably of the lower classes and underprivileged communities in remote areas where Kemalist policies on secularization and homogenization penetrated to a lesser degree. My analysis of *alaminüt* photographs highlights, in fact, the discontinuous nature of Kemalist modernization which was adopted in stages and under different levels of public surveillance, as revealed in family portraits like Figures 5.1 and 5.7. Figures 5.1 and 5.7 also suggest that the Kemalist modernization project affected older and younger generations at a different pace in urban and rural settings, supporting the recent oral history and archival work by scholars like Hale Yılmaz (2013). The persistence of inscriptions, written in the Ottoman script throughout the 1940s, as Chapter Six has traced, further points to the varying degrees of public surveillance as well as the lenience of the regime in certain areas, particularly when the habits of the older generation were not seen as a direct threat to the Kemalist revolution.

The growing popularity of snapshot photography in the 1930s allowed citizens to negotiate the regime's surveillance in a new way by introducing playfulness in more intimate settings. From portraying daydreaming girls in a field (Figure 3.10) to flower-gazing men in a park (Figure 3.11), snapshot photographs enriched the types of representations of the new Turkish society, while upholding the modern secular image that the urban middle classes aspired to. In the end, my research into these different types of vernacular photography has revealed that self-representations of Turkish middle-class citizens in studio, itinerant and amateur pictures largely converge and complement each

other in the 1920s and 1930s.

Through in-depth analyses of a carefully selected corpus of vernacular photographs, this study has enriched existing accounts of the formative years of modern Turkey. In particular, this research offers a more nuanced view of how Kemalist modernization was perceived, tailored, and reinterpreted by citizens and photographers themselves in their everyday life, and of how the visual language of Kemalist modernization, propagated through official media like newspapers and, as Enis Dinç (2016) has shown, on film, was replicated and disseminated across public and private space, and across urban and rural spaces. My focus has been the transition from the Ottoman Muslim to the Turkish Muslim identity, which constituted the core of the Kemalist nation-building project, despite its claim of being secular. Recognizing the limits of this focus, I hope that my exploration will serve as a starting point for other scholarly work comparing photographic cultures across different ethnic and religious communities in modern Turkey and the post-Ottoman territories, particularly recognizing the complex position Greeks, Jews, Armenians and Kurds occupied in the new Republic.

This study has placed the photograph, as an object, at the center of a cultural analysis discussing its indexical, iconic and performative qualities, as well as its materiality and market value. Instead of selecting the photographs based on whom they depict, I took advantage of their anonymity, which allowed me to contextualize and theorize my corpus as a whole without needing to know the identity of the specific subjects in the pictures. At the same time, I recognized the value of the micro-histories revealed in the pictures and, consequently, pursued the stories of the sitters or receivers if they could be traced from the image or inscription. This multilayered approach allowed me to identify common visual patterns and photographic practices of the era, while the metadata provided a deeper understanding of the effects of social and cultural changes on citizens and their everyday life. For instance, the photographs I discussed in Chapters One and Two helped me to establish common visual patterns with regard to normative late Ottoman and Republican femininities and masculinities. The revelation of the identities of some of the sitters, namely Şükûfe Nihal Başar in Figure 1.11, Nebahat Hamit Karaorman in Figures 1.1–1.6 and 1.18 and Naşide Saffet Esen in Figure 1.14, further helped me contextualize the meaning and function of vernacular photography with regard to the making of the modern gender identity of a certain class.

The inscriptions on the photographs assisted me in multiple ways, from identifying some of the sitters through their signatures, as in the wedding portrait of Cavit and Sabahat Yenicioğlu in Figure 2.16, to reconstructing the narratives around the images, such as the graduation of the Ziraat Bank trainees in the Şükrü Bey series in Chapter Six. My study of the inscriptions has unveiled significant details about the social fabric of the 1920s and 1930s, helping to gauge the cultural circles in which vernacular photographs were circulated, as Chapter Six has demonstrated. Indeed, the fact that I was able to trace so many stories from the photographs points to an intriguing social aspect of vernacular photography in the early Republican years, namely the involvement in it of a relatively small part of the emergent well-educated middle class, including a large number of soldiers (e.g. Cavit Yenicioğlu in Chapter Two); teachers, a preferred profession for women (e.g. Nebahat Hamit Karaorman, Naşide Saffet Esen and Şükûfe Nihal Başar in

Chapter One); government employees (e.g. the Ziraat Bank muavins in Chapter Six); and photographers (Hamza Rüstem in Chapter Five, the Koro Brothers in Chapter Two and S. Süreyya Bükey in Chapter One).

While studies focusing on vernacular photography, materiality and archives have multiplied in the past two decades, there is still a dearth of scholarship with regard to vernacular photography from Turkey and the broader Eastern Mediterranean region. Further theoretically-ground, collection-based, archival research can open up a path for more work in this area, which is vital for diversifying historical narratives across generations, classes and geographies, particularly towards including those underrepresented in studio photographs of the time. My intent is to encourage more research on family photographs not only in the early years of the Republic but throughout the history of modern Turkey, and to inspire future research on popular photographic practices across regions before the digital era. The oral history work I have done for this research, including my interviews with Hamza Rüstem's grandson Mert Rüstem, Orhan Cem Çetin and Yusuf Murat Şen, has offered great insight into the studio practices and photographic cultures of the era. I have also conducted interviews with various vendors of photographs in Istanbul and Izmir, who shed light on the dynamics of the Turkish market. Additional oral history research into photographic practices and the photography market would be extremely useful for reaching a fuller understanding of the social, political, cultural, economic and affective functions and meanings of photography.

Furthermore, the personal accounts of researchers navigating the Turkish photography market may also spark a debate about the relationship between vernacular photographs and the cultural economy, which has rarely been discussed in the context of modern Turkey. The study of vernacular photographs is closely associated with scholarship on archives, memory and cultural heritage, which has become popular in recent years and has led to an increased awareness of and expertise on digitization and photographic preservation. I have addressed some of the issues I encountered related to access and heritage in the introductory chapter of this dissertation, reflecting on my dual role as collector and researcher of the Akkasah collection. The fact that I was involved in building and cataloguing the collection on which my corpus is based, as well as the public nature of the Akkasah archive, placed me in a privileged position with regard to access. However, the issues I encountered relating to the structure of the Turkish photography market, questions of the negotiation of ownership, and claims to cultural heritage deserve a more in-depth discussion, which is beyond the scope of this research. Indeed, apart from a few works, including Lucie Ryzova's writings on the case of Egypt, very little has been written about the relationship between photography, the market and the cultural economy in post-Ottoman geographies. More generally, there is an urgent need for further scholarship on photographic heritage in a global cultural economy and long-term photographic preservation, as well as on issues related to open access, privacy and ownership beyond narratives of "saving" photographs.

Before the digital era and the introduction of social media, a vernacular photograph's audience was much more intimate and relatively controlled. Today, the ever-evolving digital platforms allow for more accessibility but also greatly extend the intended audience beyond those to whom the photograph was originally intended. The viewers may now also