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Ziyaretler
Reaching for Istanbul's Urban Pilgrimage Sites

Stories about historic architectural sites of religious function, and the contemporary communities of practicing Muslims who use them, flow through the city of Istanbul. The oral histories I have collected reveal aspects of the use of architecture in the expression of belief and identity amongst "mainstream" Sunnis, minority Islamic traditions of various Sufi orders, and the spiritual lineages of Aleviism. These narratives work together with the sites themselves to build a picture of religious life. There are many ways of being Muslim which the city simultaneously forbids, masks, selects, and encourages, depending upon the acceptability of certain affiliations in particular periods of time. This acceptability was and continues to be dependant upon neighborhood demographics, political leadership, legal designations, and power and control over the use of architecture and space. To capture the kinetic animation and the malleability of comportment at different places of pilgrimage, when their very essence and appeal is often in their perceived permanence and historicity, is an exercise in tapping into the experiential element of life in a city built, quite literally, *around* its shrines. This essay is composed in three parts: a series of written vignettes, a photo log, and a short essay. The parts work together, but they also function individually. I see them, in a way, as another comment upon the topic of urban pilgrimage, given that it is something that is all at once experiential, sensory, and narrative, and yet unarguably related to socio-political and economic realities.

Figure 1: A man prays at the Garip Dede Türbesi (tomb) as a small boy watches.

Figure 2: Shoes, removed before entry, are left in front of the Garip Dede Türbesi.

An Istanbul city maintenance employee removes his heavy work boots, steps carefully over the threshold onto the thick carpet, and circumambulates the cloth-draped sarcophagus of the saint. He steps aside to offer his pleas and blessings, murmuring soft words that he has said so many times, since he was a child with his mother visiting a series of saintly figures. Today, he comes alone on this small, lunch-break pilgrimage, but he is watched by a boy who has come with his mother. He prostrates and completes his mid-day prayers, then passes his upraised hands over his face in a gesture that washes him in a blessing, the bereket, of the saint. He backs slowly towards the door as a sign of respect, slips his feet into his boots and goes back to the work site.

Figure 3: Generations of women circumambulate the Karacaahmet Türbesi.

Two girls fetch a string of tespih hanging from a hook inside the entrance to the brightly lit tomb so that their grandmother can count her devotions on the colorful, clacking prayer beads. The younger girl lifts the corner of the cloth that covers the buried saint and kisses it, then shuffles back to sit next to the tiled wall while the other two continue to plead for the returned health of her grandfather. The saint was a doctor, she knows that, and he often helps those who come to him asking for healing. When they exit, the peaceful quiet of the tomb is replaced by the traffic whizzing by on a busy Üsküdar street.

Figure 4: The garden gate encloses the newly restored tomb (left) and tekke building of the Karaağaç Tekkesi.

Five sisters cram into the back of a white mini-bus, each of them carrying a shopping bag filled with their very best cakes, cheese-filled börek pastries, sweet walnuts and the fresh, plump cherries of late spring. Their husbands sit up front, watermelons wedged between their feet. They drive for three hours, cross the Bosphorus bridge that links Europe and Asia, and drive some more, yet they are still in the same city: Istanbul. As the Golden Horn comes into view, they stop for directions, but can find no one to tell them where to locate the little cemetery where the saint is buried. Finally, a man points towards a hill and they pull the minivan up beside the keeper, who has been waiting to unlock the tomb's gate for them. One of the men has brought his saz, a long-necked, stringed instrument, and they sing poems, written by their saintly teachers centuries ago, in an old form of Turkish. They make their picnic beside the budding rose bushes.

Figure 5: Elaborate grilles enclose the tomb of Emetullah Rabia Gülnuş Sultan Türbesi at the Yeni Valide Cami (mosque).

The university entrance examinations, tests which determine the paths of millions of Turkish teenagers, start in less than half an hour. She grips a handful of yellow No. 2 pencils, each one sharpened to a keen point, and mumbles equations to herself like an incantation. There is a break in the traffic at the intersection and she lifts her foot off the pavement to begin crossing the street, when the grilled window in front of the small cemetery halts her mid-step. She leans back, pivots and moves towards it, resting her forehead on the cool stones—one last prayer, one last blessing, one last chance for saintly assistance. The traffic light changes again and she runs across the road to join her classmates, nervously heading towards the examination hall.

Bodies press together, individuals lost to the mass of pilgrims. The air conditioner hums in the background, but the visitors are shielded from the cool air by the warmth of each other. Each of them wanted to be there, imagined taking the trip, what they would wear, what Kuranic verses they would recite, what the 500-year-old tiles, gleaming in white, blue, red and turquoise, would look like. Now they have to capture it, capture their feelings, capture the sight of the saint behind the silver screen, and capture the merits and blessings of their visit. They watch the ziyaret through the screens of their cell phones while it is happening, and they relive it at home.

Figure 6: Pilgrims take photographs and video clips at the Eyüp Sultan Türbesi.

The small grave sits in front of the entrance to the wooden lodge outside Istanbul's ancient city walls. For several hundred years, the pilgrimage site looked out at the fields and a cemetery. Now it faces a cluster of luxury condominium towers that rise 40 stories up like a monolith. The court has ruled that the towers violate the heritage of the city's skyline and must come down, but they have already been sold to the wealthy. It is always difficult to change the course of the rich. The lodge anchors a patch of green, a small garden, and a courtyard, where friends meet to continue their connections with each other, with the saint and with their heritage.

Figure 7: Two luxury residences tower over Erikli Baba Tekkesi while a bird soars overhead.

Figure 8: The community gathers for çay (tea) and conversation at the Erikli Baba Tekkesi.

Figure 9: A pilgrim prays before tombs at the Şahkulu Sultan Dergahı.

A dolmuş, one of the thousands of crowded minibuses that shuttle the people of Istanbul from place to place, opens its doors and he steps out. Life in the busy city has overwhelmed him today, and he walks with purpose towards the old lodge of the Bektaşis. He is seeking peace within its gardens, surrounded and protected from the outside world by tall stone walls. Once, Sufi initiates studied here, provided food for the poor, and welcomed guests in this lodge,

Figure 10: Graves and boxes for votive candles are part of the Şahkulu Sultan Dergahı.

their tekke. Today, the visitor walks alone to a space at the back of the old ceremonial hall, where the trees have grown tall next to the graves, their leaves bigger than dinner plates. He lights a votive candle and places it on a little tin shelf, its dripping wax mingling with that of the others. He clears his mind and focuses on the rites of a pilgrim, on the ancient trees, and on the exemplary lives represented by the headstones rising around him.

There is a Turkish saying that one should not look to fortune telling…but, one should not go without having his or her fortune told. This outlook might apply to the practices of Turkish Muslims who visit pilgrimage sites – offering prayers at a tomb is not the most modern or even religiously orthodox action to take, yet students hoping to pass exams, couples yearning for children, families planning to buy a home, and people wishing to express gratitude for returned health or other positive experiences, are drawn to the burial sites of saintly exemplars in the metropolis of Istanbul.

Istanbul is one of the most populated urban centers on the planet. Rich historical layers of architecture, constructed to facilitate the act of pilgrimage under the Byzantines and the Ottomans, continue to provide many potential opportunities to visit sacred precincts. For the most part, this is pilgrimage in its most traditional understanding, as peregrination towards a meaningful location. These places are known as *ziyaretler* in Turkish, a word with Arabic origins and a more general meaning of visitation. Essentially, one might visit an entombed ruler, a martyred warrior, or the burial of a member of a spiritual lineage, to seek blessings, guidance and a connection to the religious geography of the urban landscape. As the vignettes above illustrate, pilgrimage may be undertaken surreptitiously, by happenstance on the way to or from other places, or as a pre-meditated event accompanied by trappings such as candles, coins, or bread for an offering, or even a picnic lunch to symbolically share with a buried saint.

Many of the issues that stratify urban pilgrimage in Istanbul go back to a series of historic shifts, including the reformations of the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century, the formation of the Turkish Republic in the 1920s, Istanbul's exponential population increase following twentieth-century migration from rural communities, and the unchecked construction and development of

fields, forests and other previously unbuilt landscapes in the city's environs. Attitudes towards ziyaretler have changed continuously according to era, dominant schools of religious thought, and more personal dynamics such as family traditions, and the degree of need or desire to seek saintly intervention on the part of pilgrims. These conditions determine the importance of pilgrimage sites in the lives of the city's residents, and have shaped current praxis, as well as the resultant categorizations of people who seek and enter into these relationships with pilgrimage sites. Some pilgrims, for example, risk being labeled as "superstitious" adherents to old and pre-Islamic traditions, practices deemed heterodox by religious authorities.

Sufi lodges, known as *tekkes* (or as *dergahs*, especially if the complex includes the tombs of spiritual exemplars), were a significant contributor to the religious, educational and economic life of the Ottomans. Some of Istanbul's earliest Muslim architecture was constructed for Sufi orders that settled around Constantinople as far back as the fourteenth century. A number of them were constructed amidst or adjacent to earlier Christian buildings. The tombs and cemeteries of leaders and devoted followers of the orders formed an important part of their design. Lodges might provide training for initiates, shelter for travelers, food for the poor, and sites of regional pilgrimage. They were places of safety and support, offering soup and bread as an act of pious charity that sometimes earned them devotees. Funded by endowments and foundations called *vakıf*, they were a force in regional economies and, therefore, in politics. The Bektashi Order of Sufis also took on the role of the chaplaincy to the Ottoman Empire's elite Janissary military corps. When the Janissaries were dissolved in 1826, the forced closure and confiscation of the lodges of the Bektashi Order in Istanbul followed within a month. Many of their properties were razed, turned over to other Sufi orders, or

converted into mosques and schools, although tombs and cemeteries were left standing. New Ottoman laws gave control of Sufi vakıflar to government administrators, who paid the Sufis a stipend, rather than allowing them to control their own, often sizable financial holdings. When the Turkish state was formed in the 1920s, the decision to close tombs, and the lodges of all Sufi Orders, was made into constitutional law. In 1925, these places were cleared of remaining initiates and keepers and removed from the public religious sphere and pilgrimage circuits. The Turkish Constitutional Act No. 677 of November 30, 1341 (1925) regarding the "Closure of Dervish Convents and Tombs, the Abolition of the Office of Keeper of Tombs and the Abolition and Prohibition of Certain Titles" changed public access to ziyaretler by shutting their gates indefinitely.

These laws and prohibitions of the newly formed Turkish state altered the logistics of navigating urban pilgrimage sites in Istanbul with the added effect of disengaging ziyaretler from the adjacent provision of important social services. Yet, these changes did not quell the desire of believers for the blessings these pilgrimages could offer them. Even when the surrounding buildings were razed, repurposed or simply succumbed to collapse and ruin, pilgrims maintained a knowledge of the graves at the core of these sites. This begs the question of how much the landscape of pilgrimage is dictated by architecture and setting, and how much by memory and experience. The law regarding the closure of Sufi lodges and tombs still stands as part of the Turkish Constitution, although permission to reopen many religious sites was granted in the intervening years, and restoration and upkeep has gradually been taken on by municipal governments as well as private citizens and associations. A large number of tombs are designated as museums, allowing government control and ostensible neutralization of their religious leverage while also permitting

visitation by pilgrims. For example, the tomb of the thirteenth-century Muslim saint, Karacaahmet, is overseen by the Istanbul Tomb Museums Authority with the Turkish Republic's Ministry of Culture and Tourism (T.C. Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı). It is popular with the Alevi community, who erected a place of assembly next door in the late twentieth century, and who offer something of the old community services, such as public meals shared as part of the commemorations during Muharram.

The Alevis, a minority Muslim community that shares many common teachings and a lineage of poet-saints with the Bektashis (including their eponym Hacı Bektash Veli, d. 1271), have taken on the stewardship of a number of these ziyaretler and their associated Sufi lodges on both the Asian and European sides of Istanbul since the early 1990s. Ownership, however, remains in the hands of the Ministry of Foundations and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (T.C. Başbakanlık Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü). Many of Istanbul's pilgrimage sites were intentionally constructed near features in the natural landscape, including water and trees, which are revered and often form a close relationship to the human-built components of ziyaretler. The cemeteries in which tombs are situated are often planted with trees, bushes and flowers. Very few tekkes still sit on the outskirts of Istanbul's settled communities, on small remnants of their once plentiful pasture and farmland holdings. In these ways, Sufi lodges and tombs have participated in the preservation of Istanbul's last remaining green spaces. The juxtaposition with their urban surroundings is dramatic—a major overpass circles around the Şahkulu Sultan Dergahı; the OnaltıDokuz luxury residential towers are now subject to a court ruling, surprisingly delivered in favor of Istanbul's heritage skyline, that will see them razed, but they hover ominously for the time being behind the Erikli Baba Tekkesi. The

fragments of nature that skirt the walls of these ziyaretler hang on tenaciously as the city continues its expansion.

Urban pilgrimage sites in Istanbul stand in defiance of the aggressive claims that the modern city has staked on heritage, the environment, and traditional religious practice. Pilgrims become part of a lineage that stretches back centuries, linking their actions, prayers and priorities to saintly exemplars, a millennia of political activists, and movements with service-driven approaches to assisting the community at large, particularly those with the greatest need. In spite of the constitutional law, now almost one century old, prohibiting the operation of Sufi lodges and tombs and signs posted by religious authorities warning against activities "counter to the faith"—for example, circumambulation and leaving votive offering—people have continued to visit and pray to the saints, with as much proximity as they can manage. Urban ziyaretler are measurable dots on a pointillist map of a city that is expected to be all things to all people. By chance or by design, pilgrims of many backgrounds seek out these points of convergence, continually moving towards sites where they may receive blessings from the dead to help the living.

Opposite: Raymond Moriyama, Eberhard Zeidler, Ontario Science Centre, Toronto, 1964-67. Photograph by Sarah Ramsey