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Meropi Anastassiadou-Dumont

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Méropi ANASTASSIADOU-DUMONT
CERMOM, INALCO, Paris

Non-Muslim Communities and State Control in the late Ottoman Empire **Administrative Practice and Decision-making within the Greek Orthodox Parishes of Istanbul***

Since the period of the conquest, the Ottoman administration distinguished the Sultan's subjects into categories of Muslims and Non-Muslims. This demarcating line did not change until the end of the Empire. In the course of the centuries, despite multiple inter-communal conflicts which they faced, Muslims, Christians and Jews managed to develop an art of living together in a spirit of respecting their differences. Cultural differences persisted, despite transgression and negotiation. The Ottoman state's tolerance toward the conquered people, the leading principle in the contemporary historiography of the Sultan's Empire, allowed for non-Muslim autonomy in the fields of education, health, and charity. Throughout long periods, Christians and Jews were able to organize the social life of their co-religionists more or less autonomously. One has to wait until the reforms of the 19th century (*Tanzimat*) to see these customary practices become codified. It was at this time that the non-Muslims were integrated into the institutional framework of common rules worked out in consultation with the State.

Since a lot of ink has been spilled on the issue of the millet system,¹ it will not be treated in this short study. It is, however, useful to recall here that beginning in the 1860s, when the Internal Regulations of the principal non-Muslim communities (Greek-Orthodox, Armenians, Jews) were developed and enforced,² the Muslim judge no longer had power to judge family-law matters of the non-Muslims.³ Henceforth, the interested parties did not have the choice as before, and they were confined to use the courts⁴ of their proper

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¹ See mainly GIBB H. A. R., BOWEN H., 1950, 1957; BRAUDE Benjamin, 1982, pp. 69- 87; URSINUS Michael, 1989, no 48, pp. 195-207; URSINUS Michael, 2010, p. 239.

² The texts of the "General Rules" of the three main non-Muslim communities can be consulted in PAPASTATHIS Charalambos, 1984, p. 394 (regarding the Orthodox Greeks); Patriarchiko Typografeio, 1894; GALANTE Avram, 1953.

³ On the other hand, the power of the *cadi* on the issues of succession law was maintained: cf. PAPASTATHIS Charalambos, 1984, pp. 69-77.

⁴ The *cadi* records (*mahkeme-i ser'iye*) of various ridings of the Ottoman Rumelia contain, in relatively small numbers, it is true, petitions by non-Muslims, namely in cases of divorce, inheritance or applications for guardianship.

confessional community (ecclesiastical courts, rabbinical courts). In this way, the State not only validated parallel judicial systems which existed, but also imposed an isolation in the field of private law between the spheres of jurisdiction of the different millet. This isolation significantly reduced the Ottoman intervention into the affairs of their non-Muslim subjects.

The creation of the institutional framework in the 1860s is one manifestation among others of the State's tendency to exercise a centralizing and bureaucratic power in order to better control its territories and populations. In the wake of the *Tanzimat*, the millet were endowed with administrative bodies responsible for internal affairs, namely those linked to the cult, the education and the civil status of the their members. The existence of these structures considerably limited interaction between ordinary people and Ottoman authorities. From then on, a large number of practical issues could be resolved within the community. So, for instance, the *muhtar* of the community, who was authorized to issue various certificates (birth, baptism, marriage, death, burial, and even real estate transactions), functioned as an intermediary between the Ottoman administration and his co-religionists.⁵

The following paragraphs present a synthesis of a research largely drawn from the archives of some of the Greek Orthodox parishes in Istanbul. In the 19th century, the Orthodox Greeks of the city and the surrounding area maintained close to 70 parishes: to the 42 attached to the Archbishopric of Constantinople we should add at least 25 others constituting the neighboring bishoprics of Derkos, Chalcedon and Princes' Islands. The present article is based on material from the parishes of Pera⁶ (Beyoğlu), Kadıköy, the Golden Horn (Fatih) and –to a lesser extent– of Bosphorus. It is important to note that the parishes of Pera were, at the end of the Ottoman period, the most populous of the city. According to the 1906/1907 (Ottoman) census, the Orthodox Greek community of Beyoğlu counted about 35,000 members.

Before delving into the field of powers of the Greek parish institutions in Istanbul, a terminological clarification is in order. Within the Istanbul context, at least as far as the

One can cite, as example, the cases of Salonica or Veroia (Karaferye). Generally, it concerns persons with relatively loose links to their confessional community. It is in the *berat* (imperial diploma) of the enthronement of Patriarch Ioakeim II (October 1860), preserved in the Library of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, that it is specified, for the first time, that henceforth the Patriarch and the bishops have exclusive power to judge litigations relating to family law and concerning members of the millet-i Rum. It should be noted that the text of the 1860 *berat* was repeated exactly in all the following ones issued by the imperial authorities for the enthronement of each successive Patriarch until the end of the Ottoman period.

⁵ Muhtar: it is a term difficult to translate. In the rural areas, the *muhtar* presided over the Council of the Elders and, in the absence of other representative of authority, he also played the role of the chieftain of the village. In the towns, he served as an intermediary between the State and the constituents of the district (neighborhood) or a part of the district. In the case of the Orthodox parishes of Istanbul, according to all evidence, he was an individual responsible only for the Greek population of the sector. The office of *muhtar* started in 1829 in Istanbul, and it was an elected one. See a brief history of this institution in CADIRCI Musa, 1991, pp. 38-40.

⁶ Pera, Beyoğlu et Stavrodromi are three toponyms which correspond, with few exceptions, to the same space, at least from the point of view of the Orthodox Greek parish administration.

Orthodox Greeks are concerned, the parish was a distinct administrative unit, which we, usually, find also under the name of “community”. The two terms, however, can lead to confusion at times: “parish” and “community” do not have exactly the same meaning and do not always correspond to the same space. Although the words may often be interchangeable, a community can also be formed from more than one parish (but not the reverse). Such is the case of the community of Beyoğlu (*Ελληνική ορθόδοξος Κοινότης Σταυροδρομίου*), formed by a mother parish and two daughter parishes federated into a single unit.⁷ In Kuzguncuk (Χρυσοκέραμος), a small site north of Üsküdar on the Asiatic coast of Bosphorus, the Greek community was made up of two parishes and churches dedicated to Saint Pantaleon (Aghios Pandeileimon).⁸

An administration entrusted to lay bodies

In theory, according to the statutes that most of the parishes/communities adopted from the 1870s onward, in each riding decision-making power rested with the general assembly of the parishioners. The latter determined, by voting, the composition of the various administrative bodies of the community. In principle, the elected members of these bodies are but simple executors of the decisions of the general assembly. In practice, however, it often happened that they overstepped their designated mandate, or that they took initiatives of which the general assembly was informed only after the fact.

In small and medium-size parishes, the executive was reduced to a single body, designated by the name *eforo-epitropi* (*εφοροεπιτροπή*) and charged with the surveillance of the schools and churches located within the geographical limits of the parish. In populous parishes (such as the cases of Pera and Kadıköy), the school installations and the temples were placed under the responsibility of distinct bodies: the ephorates (*εφορίες*) supervised the function of the former, while the committees (*επιτροπές*) monitored the latter. Committees and ephorates were required to provide, at regular intervals, a report on their activities and to submit, annually, their financial records for verification. This task was carried out by the Auditing Committee, specifically elected by the general assembly of the parishioners.

Communities such as those of Beyoğlu or of Tatavla, densely populated and covering quite large areas, were endowed with a considerable bureaucratic apparatus to manage collective affairs. But, in these cases, the complexity of the mechanisms was the result of demographic weight. In reality, the bodies designated to execute the will of the community merely expanded in size. The modes of administration, the principles and the structures are the same as those observed in the other Orthodox parishes of Istanbul: general assembly, executive, auditing committee.

⁷ *Κανονισμός της εν Σταυροδρομίω ελληνικής ορθοδόξου κοινότητας* (Regulation of the Greek Orthodox Community in Stavrodromio), Κωνσταντινούπολις, 1904, p. 76.

⁸ *Κανονισμός της ελληνικής ορθοδόξου κοινότητας Χρυσοκεράμου (Κουσγουντσουκίου) επαρχίας Χαλκηδόνος* (Regulation of the Greek Orthodox Community of Chrosokeramo in Chalcedon), εν Κωνσταντινουπόλει, 1922, p. 24.

The principal duty of the ecclesiastical committees was the maintenance of the churches. Essentially, this consisted in planning and executing building repairs, for which the commissioners were dipping into the church coffers. For major renovation projects, exceptional funds were sought. The committees were also responsible for the maintenance and the replacement of equipment, namely the icons, the vestments and other items of the cult. They were also the closest contacts of the people employed in the churches. The majority of the consulted archives revealed that churches kept rigorous accounts, producing a financial report at the end of every month.

The school ephorates functioned according to the same model. Firstly, they looked after the smooth operation of the installations (state of the buildings, management of teaching and service personnel, establishing of libraries, mess hall organization, etc.). When they were the only institutions responsible for education, their members developed new programs, provided new teaching posts, transformed the premises, and participated in curriculum design. Both committees and ephorates lacked legal recognition. They could not, therefore, have contractual relations with third parties. The banks, which managed their accounts, only recognized physical persons as holders, even if they accepted, in some respects, modifications every time that there were new elections (and new elected officers).

In the majority of the Istanbul parishes, the representatives of the Church (i.e. the Phanar) organized the life and activities of the clergy. Their internal regulations made no provision, as a general rule, regarding the religious personnel put in the service of the parish. In practice, far from being an “omission”, this silence gave free hand to the Church to define its action. Implicitly, lay members of communal structures were very careful not to interfere in the religious sphere. Whether in the capital or in the provinces, it was a member of the clergy who had the honorific function of presiding over the community bodies.

It is, thus, rare to find references to the local clergy in the statutes, which governed the administrative operation of the parishes. The opposite case, i.e. when the activities of the priests are regulated in great detail, occurred in parishes where the laity ruled without sharing its power. For instance, this was the case in Pera/Beyoğlu. Here, too, there were church committees and school ephorates, which constituted the executive power. Nevertheless, unlike the great majority of parishes/communities, Pera had an additional level known as the Central Ephorate. Charged with supervising and coordinating of the actions of the committees and ephorates, it exercised a strong centralizing authority. It derived legitimacy from the founding regulations (1876, 1904), which accorded to it a wide margin of manoeuvring.⁹ To judge from these texts, but also using the rich correspondence of this body, the clergy of Beyoğlu played a subaltern role relative to the institutional point of view.

⁹ *Κανονισμός της ελληνικής ορθοδόξου κοινότητας* (Regulations of the Greek Orthodox Community), εν Κωνσταντινουπόλει, 1876, p. 52 ; *Κανονισμός της εν Σταυροδρομίω ελληνικής ορθοδόξου κοινότητας* (Regulation of the Greek Orthodox Community in Stavrodromio), Κωνσταντινούπολις, 1904, p 76.

The clergy depended, in fact, on the Central Ephorate. It was the latter who chose and recruited deacons and priests. It also ratified the nomination of the episcopal supervisor (*αρχιερατικώς προϊστάμενος*),¹⁰ contesting thus the Phanar's right to unilaterally appoint the prelate of its choice. At the end of the 19th century, the Orthodox clergy in Pera numbered fourteen priests and five deacons. At least three of them should have had a theological education and six a confessor's permit. Placed under the charge of the episcopal supervisor, they had almost no autonomy in the organization of their work; even the times of the mass were fixed in consultation with the Central Ephorate!

Their financial dependence however, was small. Only the salaries of the deacons were paid by the community. The episcopal supervisor and the priests earned their livelihood essentially from the offerings of the faithful. They received one-fifth of the annual contributions of the parishioners and a percentage on the religious acts conducted. They also received the cemetery offerings, as well as all the offerings collected after any religious act, the product of the collection on 14 September (feast of the Elevation of the True Cross) and the one on Palm Sunday, the benediction (*φώτισμα*) on the day of the Epiphany. All of these revenues were gathered in one common coffer before being redistributed in equal parts among the relevant persons. For any service to a parishioner, the priests were obliged to provide a receipt and keep a copy. The details for the sharing of the collected sums were so meticulously described that they left no opportunity for temptations of cupidity. Finally, in Stavrodromi, the members of the clergy did not have the right to hold any other occupation (remunerated or not) with the exception of the theologian priests, who could, upon authorization by the Central Ephorate, teach the religion course in the schools of the district.

All of these arrangements underline the considerable power wielded by the lay bodies of the Pera community (i.e. the general assembly of the parishioners and the Central Ephorate) against the Church. If the case of Pera remains exceptional, it is equally significant because the Beyoğlu community was by far the most prosperous and populous of all the Empire's Greek Orthodox communities.

A limited space of manoeuvring: the State control and central bodies of the millet

In the Ottoman administrative system of *Tanzimat*, the parish/community was the basic unit to which befell the task of ensuring compliance to the rules. It was endowed with a certain measure of liberty in order to organize the social life of its members, namely in the fields of education, health, charity, cultural and –of course– religious activities. But its actions unfolded within a clearly defined framework and, in any event, were subject to control by the millet's central bodies and by the State. Those who participated in the parish administration were extremely careful about the strict application of the community regulations and of the Ottoman law, if only to guarantee the legitimacy of their own function and social rank.

¹⁰ Member of the clergy, having the rank of archimandrite, responsible for a geographically precise electoral district.

As for religious affairs, as long as the Muslims of their district were not inconvenienced in the exercise of their faith, the Greek commissioners did not have to render account to anyone except the Phanar. The correspondence of the church committees with the Patriarchate does not reveal the Ottoman State's interference in religious expression. Even the necessary authorizations for building repairs or a fortiori for the construction of a new religious building (a frequent occurrence in the second half of the 19th century) were obtained through the Phanar, which made the application in the name of the parishes/communities.

In reality, this absence of direct contact between the smallest unit of the millet and the authorities was also observed in all aspects of community life –education, culture, welfare, health, etc. The communication was carried out through the religious institution which represented the entire millet on the level of the Empire (in the case of the Greeks, the Ecumenical Patriarchate). It is the latter that communicated to the interested parishes the various directives and decisions of the State or of the central bodies of the “nation”. In general, the same path of communication was also followed in reverse order. The parish documentation gives the impression of a velvet-glove control over most of the initiatives taken within the community. With the constant exception of activities relating to education and the school, which were more closely supervised.

Until around the mid-19th century, the landscape of schooling in Istanbul was characterized by a great heterogeneity. Each parish maintained its school (or even many schools in the case of rich districts), which it operated according to the financial means and the aspirations of its “notables” (responsible). Radical changes to this system began in the 1860s. From then on, the academic affairs of the capital as well as of the entire Empire were followed up and, in the case of the *millet-i rum* (“Greek Orthodox nation”), coordinated by three bodies. They were, first, the Permanent Mixed National Council¹¹ (created in 1862) and the Patriarchal Central Education Committee (1873). Both enjoyed full institutional recognition by the State. Next to these structures, the Greek Literary Syllogos of Constantinople (1861) also featured as an important player in the fields of culture and education. But in this case, we are dealing with an association without legal personhood¹² and forced, for this reason, to act in an informal way, yielding more and more ground to the Patriarchal Committee after the 1880s. The shadow of the state was perceptible behind the supervision of these three bodies.

¹¹ Permanent Mixed National Council: a body equally constituted of 12 members, eight lay and four prelates of the Holy Synod. It supervised the operation and insured the financial management of schools and hospitals of the entire millet-i Rum of the Empire.

¹² The Syllogos paid the price of its founders' negligence, who seem to not have undertaken all the necessary formal steps with the authorities so that their association would operate according to Ottoman law. This omission caught up with them, when in 1890, through the Ministry of Justice and Religious Affairs, the Porte contested the legality of associations the foundation of which had not been approved by imperial *firman*. After this date, the Syllogos was obliged to put itself under the protection of the patriarchal institution: Cf. ANAGNOSTOPOULOU Sia, 1997, note 68. For the work of GLSC, see: EXERTZOGLOU Haris, 1996, p. 194; STAVROU Tatiana, 1967, p. 301. Both Exertzoglou and Stavrou, however, are based only on the journal of the Syllogos, which has been preserved in many libraries. The archives of the association, closed by the Turkish authorities in 1925, were transferred to Ankara and remain hence inaccessible.

The centralization which has been observed in the non-Muslim communities (the situation was in fact identical with the Armenians or the Jews) was the means to which the Ottoman power resorted in order to preserve the control of its populations. The legislative vibrancy of the second half of the 19th century served the same objective. The administrative bodies instituted within the *millet* in the beginning of the 1860s played the role of guardians of Ottoman law in the sense that they functioned as an integral part of the state mechanism. The files relating to the education in the parish archives are very clear on this issue.

At the turn of the 20th century, the school ephorates were bombarded with instructions from the Patriarchate and the Permanent Mixed National Council. In most cases, there are recommendations issued by the Ministry of Instruction (*Maarif Nezareti*) that the central bodies of the millet were called upon to deliver to their constituents. Such is, for instance, the case of a directive dated on 25 April 1914 and addressed to the ephorates and school director of the Archbishopric of Constantinople.¹³ Noticing that, despite repeated incitements, the hygienic conditions in the school premises left much to be desired, the Great Vicar of the Patriarchate issued a series of directives for improving the situation to all interested persons. Even if this is not expressly stated, there is no doubt that the Phanar acted as a guarantor of the Ottoman law, whose provisions regarding public health had been increasing since the mid 19th century.

Another more eloquent example: on 17 December 1915, the same Great Vicar solicited the assistance of the school ephorates in helping the Patriarchate to establish “the statistical tables of the schools of the archbishopric of Constantinople” for the years 1913-1914 and 1915-1916.¹⁴ He demanded the setting up of an organization chart of the teaching personnel based on the archives and records maintained by the schools. For the year 1915-1916 more specifically, the Phanar also required the teachers’ identity cards and residence permits, as well as the professional licenses of all the persons employed by the schools of the district. These documents, the Great Vicar emphasized, should be written in Ottoman Turkish language. If necessary, these documents were translated by certified translators.

27 April 1915: this time, with similar detail and precision, the directive of the Patriarchate’s Central Committee concerned the conduct of the exams planned in May.¹⁵

The examples of such missives can easily multiply. This is certainly true for the turbulent period of WW I, during which the Ottoman state considerably reinforced its control over the non-Muslim populations. But in reality, by the 1910s the state had been trying to put the complex and delicate issue of school education in order for decades.¹⁶

¹³ *Archives of the Greek Orthodox Community of Stavrodromi*, Letters of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, file no 053, 1914-1922.

¹⁴ *Archives of the Greek orthodox community of Stavrodromi*, *loc. cit.*

¹⁵ *Archives of the Greek Orthodox Community of Stavrodromi*, *loc. cit.*

¹⁶ Regarding school education in the second half of the 19th century, see mainly KODAMAN Bayram, 1980, p. 277. See also, FORTNA Benjamin, 2000, p. 280; SOMEL Akşin Selçuk, 2001, p. 414.

The creation of a Ministry of Instruction in 1857 was followed in 1869 by a “Regulation of Public Instruction”, which aspired to creating the foundations of a school system consistent with the spirit of the *Tanzimat*. In practice, it prepared the ground for the segregation of the communities. The network of public schools put in place by the application of this text was destined exclusively for Muslims. Christians and Jews were left “free” to manage their academic affairs. Since their schools were considered “private” (*hususî*), they did not receive any financial support. Nor did they have a free hand in organizing the transmission of knowledge! The school programs and the teaching staff were subject, in the same way as in the Muslim schools, to approval by the Ministry. The same process was required for the textbooks, which also had to have the imprimatur by the Central Education Committee of the Patriarchate. The latter published its list of authorized works every year.¹⁷

During the reign of Abdülhamid II (1876–1909), state control over academic activities was heightened. Starting in 1886 especially, date of the foundation of an “Inspection of non-Muslim and Foreign Schools” [sic],¹⁸ directives and cautions multiplied considerably. It should be noted that the non-Muslims –namely the Greeks– did not miss the opportunity to argue the “private” character of their establishments in order to stall implementation and to minimize as much as possible the compliance of their operation with the Ottoman law. The attitude toward the teaching of Turkish in the Greek community schools is very eloquent in this respect.

The issue of whether it was useful to introduce this subject into the school curricula was already raised in the 1850s and became the topic of a very lively debate within the Greek community of the Ottoman capital. Exceptionally, some secondary schools for boys did propose Turkish as a foreign language from an utilitarian perspective (i.e. since the good knowledge of this language would be suitable in increasing the competitiveness of their students in the labor market). This applied only to boys; girls never had access to such education. In total, until the end of the Ottoman period, the Greek school ephorates remained frigid (and at times even hostile) on the subject. Every time the authorities demanded it, they maintained that they did not have sufficient financial means to cover the salary of a Turkish language teacher. In short, as long as the state did not pay anything to the non-Muslim schools, it should not meddle in their decision making. The Greeks of Istanbul would, thus, turn a deaf ear to these demands even after 1909, when the law on Public Instruction (*Maarif-i Umumiye Kanunu*) was voted, making the teaching of Turkish compulsory in all non-Muslim schools of the Empire.¹⁹ It took until 1915 amidst a highly charged climate that the Greek community finally decided to respect the law.

¹⁷ The annual list was published under the following title: *Κατάλογος των υπό της Πατριαρχικής Κεντρικής Εκπαιδευτικής Επιτροπής επιθεωρηθέντων και ως μη επιληψίμων εγκριθέντων διδακτικών βιβλίων, εν Κωνσταντινουπόλει, εκ του πατριαρχικού τυπογραφείου*. The collections of the Patriarchal library preserved the majority of the editions from 1873 on.

¹⁸ *Mekâtib-i Gayrimüslime ve Ecnebiye Müfettişliği*. See: ERYILMAZ Bilal, 1996, p. 175.

¹⁹ KOCAK Cemil, 1985, pp. 485-494, 488.

This resistance makes think that the ephorates were successful in preserving some of their prerogatives. In reality, it was nothing of the sort. They were administering rather than “piloting” the academic life within the parishes. They formed the base of a control pyramid at the top of which was the Ottoman ministry. Half-way there, the Patriarchate and the Permanent Mixed National Council ensured the communication and verified the enforcement of the legislation.

The powers of the community bodies in civil status affairs

Centralization and delegation of powers are not contradictory. As long as it maintains the control of the apparatus, a state can demonstrate its trust toward players in the periphery of the decision centers by transferring some of its prerogatives to them. This is more or less the attitude that the Ottoman authorities adopted toward demographic reality. Until the mid 19th century, the criteria which were privileged in approaching issues regarding the population were almost exclusively fiscal and/or military. Dozens among thousands of records preserved in the archives of the Council Presidency in Istanbul (*Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi*) were produced for the purpose of identifying and numbering individuals liable to taxation or military service. For many centuries, only the men drew the attention of the administration. With the exception of widows, subject to certain taxes when there was no support by a male family member, women are totally absent in the Ottoman documentation. Furthermore, as a general rule, in this material, which often has the form of names’ lists, we rarely find jumbled inventories of Christians, Muslims and Jews.

In the same period, the parish/communities also produced administrative information. A part of it was destined for the Ottoman authorities. This is particularly the case with the population lists, which, although drafted in Greek, presented many similarities with those released, in Ottoman Turkish, by state agencies: the same vocabulary, syntactical forms, types of data, etc. Another part of the community materials was most likely destined for internal use and is characterized by great disparity both in their external aspect as well as in their content (lists of parishioners, baptism acts, death certificates, cadastral inventories, etc.).

Although distancing itself from earlier practices and considered as the first “modern” initiative as far as population is concerned, the 1831 census was not any less useful for military purposes.²⁰ It was the same for the 1844 census, carried out at a time when the state was seeking to reorganize the army. Both remain of limited value, since a number of provinces could not be visited by the census officers. In spite of some population listings (1856) or attempts of listing (1870) on a large scale,²¹ it was only in the 1880s and 1890s

²⁰ A few years after the abolition of the Janissary Corps (1826) and in the aftermath of the Treaty of Adrianople, which put an end to war against Russia, it was important to know in the most precise way possible the male population of the Empire in order to set up the new army. Summary results of the 1831 census have been published by the Turk historian KARAL Enver Ziya, 1943, p. 216

²¹ KARAL Enver Ziya, 1943, p. 10.

that the first census organized according to the principles of modern demographic science and including women were carried out in the Ottoman Empire.²²

A centralized civil status service, attached to the Ministry of Interior was created in 1881,²³ the date when the “Regulation on Population Records” came into force. Within the framework of this law, the non-Muslim communities were endowed with institutional powers which they did not have in the past or which they were exercising unofficially. In this respect, the muhtar’s field of powers in the Istanbul parishes was important, so was the authorization given to the communities to grant them the responsibility of listing their members for the Empire’s electoral lists or census records.

Elected by the parishioners’ assembly for a two-year mandate, renewable once, installed in his office by the religious leader (in the case of the Greeks by the Patriarch) and the mayor of Istanbul (*şehir emini*), the muhtar was a key-person in the parish administration.²⁴ Being the only legal representative of the parish, he was the keeper of its seal and signature. The documents submitted to him were various. All the parish certificates relating to vital statistics of the individuals passed through his office: documents required for the issuing of an identity card or a passport, attestations for the people applying for marriage permits, burial permits which the parish had to transmit to health authorities and inheritance certificates. The *muhtar* also signed attestations of real estate transactions (and especially property sales).

In spite of the legal weight of his signature, it was, nevertheless, rare for the *muhtar* to issue documents directly destined for the Ottoman administration. More frequently, his documents were addressed to the appropriate offices of the Phanar, the only authority for producing official documents, in the Ottoman Turkish language, and addressed to the State services. In other words, the office of the *muhtar* constituted the first level of bureaucratic procedure. The information that he provided and certified –by his seal and signature– were later taken over. Being “first hand”, the result of detailed verification and gathered during an “on the ground” investigation, his information is almost impossible to contest. The active implication of the community bodies in the population census conducted for the whole Empire and the setting up of electoral lists signals a transfer of powers to the non-Muslim communities.

This transfer, however, was not explicitly provided for in legislation. According to the law (for instance, the one on civil statute of 1902), the census was conducted by committees constituted by state agents and servicemen. They travelled through the relevant districts and collected the declarations of the residents. Accompanied by two

²² BEHAR Cem, DUBEN Alan, 1991, p. 15.

²³ Cf. BEHAR Cem 1996, p. 105; BEHAR Cem, 1998, pp. 135-145.

²⁴ On the powers of the *muhtar* in the Greek parishes of Istanbul, cf. *Κανονισμός των μουχτάρηδων των ενοριών Κωνσταντινουπόλεως* (Regulation of the muhtars of the Istanbul parishes), Κωνσταντινούπολις, τύποις Ανατολικού Αστέρως, 1880, p. 8. One of the objectives of this regulation published by the Patriarchate, was to distinguish between the *muhtar* sent by the imperial government in the provinces to preside over the councils of demogerontes (*ihtiyar meclisi*), and the *muhtar* attached to the parishes of Istanbul with totally different duties.

witnesses, the latter appeared before the committee and orally attested to their identity. A first inventory was thus established, which was co-signed by the religious leaders and the community councils, who kept a copy of it. In areas with mixed population, each community drew up its own inventory, following which the census committee consolidated the lists.

This procedure does not seem to have been respected in the Greek Orthodox parishes of Istanbul. The available archival material hardly shows the presence of state agents, especially during the census. All the abundant documentation which was kept during those operations is in the Greek language. There is no trace of any officer of the Ministry of Interior. Furthermore, in general, the order to proceed with a census came from the Patriarch and not the Ottoman authorities.

This allows us to think that the Ottoman authorities gave free hand to the non-Muslim communities to organize based on the listing. In obvious discrepancy to the letter of the law, the community archives bring parish priests to the fore. In actual practice, they were the ones keeping the voluminous census records in both 1885 and 1907, and even later. The correspondence files contain numerous witnesses to this effect.²⁵ This power, which, according to all evidence, was tacitly recognized by the priests, should be explained by the trust which the Ottoman authorities placed in religious persons and persons of clerical office.

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Should we see in these various procedures the signs of a certain autonomy granted to non-Muslim communities, at least as far as administrative practices are concerned? The powers of parish services, particularly on the question of population, are sufficiently broad to consider them as reflecting a very liberal conception of the relationship between the Empire and the communities. Within a context clearly marked by the emergence of nationalisms and the proliferation of separatist movements, but also by the excesses of an authoritarian political regime, such flexibility is surprising. In reality, the trust enjoyed by the administrative bodies of the millet were entrenched in the distinction between “faithful” and “infidels”, distinction upon which the entire Ottoman Imperial edifice had been constructed since the conquest. Paradoxically, in a period full of reform promises, the old principle of differentiating between Muslims and non-Muslims retained its force. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising –neither for the imperial administration nor the communities– that, regarding questions of civil status, the subjects of the Sultan continued to be divided into two categories and subject to different procedures. And it goes without saying that foreign citizens (*ecnebi*) were also treated separately under the

²⁵ This role of the clergy is mentioned in black and white in a letter sent by the episcopal supervisor of Pera to the president of the Greek community of the same district: *Archives of the Greek Orthodox Community of Stavrodromi, Correspondence of the Central Ephorate, 1909–1910*; the episcopal supervisor Elaias Agathangelos to Eftstathios Evgenidis, president of the Central Ephorate, 6 February 1909.

law.

Cult, education and population are, therefore, the main fields of power that the non-Muslim bodies, created after the 1860s, had to administer. The parish archives make abundantly clear the role of “management”. According to this material, the community bodies were part of the Ottoman administrative machine, like any other element of the state mechanism. In other words, from a strictly regulatory point of view, this autonomy, so often attributed to the communities in the period of Reforms, was, in reality, extremely limited. At least this is what the documentation of the Greek parishes suggests.

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