

Michael Meeker's *A Nation of Empire* examines the way in which certain tactics deployed by the imperial Ottoman state have been redeployed in the context of the modern nation-state of Turkey. He is particularly concerned with the supposed conflict between local elite rulers and the centralized state government. Meeker views the presence of the local elite not in opposition to the central government, but rather as an extension of the centralized government (Porte) that arose during the decentralization processes of the post-classical imperial period.

Key to understanding this development are two aspects of life in Of: a support of universalism, in the guise of both normative Islam and Ottoman imperialism, and a system of interpersonal association.

The localized forms of power, invested in the aghas, their mansions, associated clans, and later affiliations with parties "had arisen as district social formations in the course of local participation in the imperial system" (30). By means of this, the Oflu "turned away from parochial customs and habits and turned toward the universal norms of the imperial system" (39). This resulted through the orientation of the Oflu to places other than their homeland, reminiscent of the account Rutherford provided of Biak. Meeker argues that because of economic orientations and a predisposition to leave subsistence work to women, Oflu men "tended, then, as both individuals and communities, to see themselves as participants in universal projects of power and truth" (97) and that "local and global factors combined to reinforce a preoccupation with... 'the horizon of elsewhere'" (98). This orientation provided a subjective experience, such that they "conceived themselves in relationship to all kinds of elsewhere" (100). The result, according to Meeker is that

“in the absence of technological modernity, a collection of peoples living in a rural landscape more or less without towns had become a state-oriented society” (108).

Interpersonal association was crucial to this orientation, as it was a recursive application of the power dynamics used by the emperors in their palace machine. That is to say that the local elite of Of were able to redeploy “a distinctive imperial tactic: sovereign power through interpersonal association” (152). In the same way that strangers, eunuchs, deafs, and others removed from any local connections were employed as slaves in the interpersonal association that was the palace machine, Meeker remarks that “anyone at all no matter who he was could become an Ofli through interpersonal association” (44). The modular aspect of interpersonal associations allowed power to be diffuse in ways that are similar to that of Foucault’s analysis of the Panopticon, but different in that the gaze was not fixed individuals, but rather on associations of people. This type of interpersonal association is evidenced in the most recent fieldwork Meeker completed, where as before “salons were places of interpersonal association, and hence the instruments of building a following, and therefore a move toward the assertion of sovereign power” (344). Such “everyday interpersonal association was still based on a discipline of Islamic sociability” (63), just as was the case in the palace machine. Both in the palace and in the coffeehouses, Islam served as the universalizing tendency such that “ordinary townsmen... would have been inclined to claim moral standing and social prestige by their performance of the discipline of official Islam” (78).

Through this deployment of power tactics, seen as a recursive application of the principle of sovereignty through interpersonal association, Meeker argues that “the Muslims of Trabzon were the creatures of imperial undertakings and accomplishments,

not a marginal people at the fringe of the Ottoman Empire” (228). That is to say that the local elites, in redeploying the same tactics of the imperial and later nationalist government, were creating themselves in the fashion of the state bureaucrats. Rather than being a local enclave, in resistance to the modernizing government, Of represents a situation in which the continuous application of principles of governing appropriated from the state serve to incorporate Of entirely within the purview of the state.

The picture that Meeker presents is not one of a region that is left outside of modernity, but rather a place that is coming to be modern in its own way. The French consul who had difficulty dealing with the Oflu interpersonal association, could not understand the alternative modernity expressed by his interlocutor in Rize who “also feels himself to represent the future, one based on an ethical rather than an instrumental relationship to self and other” (237). The ethical stipulations of Islam for interpersonal associations form the basis of Oflu modernity: a modernity that is fundamentally state-oriented, especially for the elites, whose “ability to reposition themselves with changes in the state system had always been a feature of their very existence as a local elite” (80). Rather than seeing a conflict between local elites and the rapid increase in economic productivity, urbanization, and new technology associated with modernity, Meeker argues that the “new awareness of aghas and agha-families was actually a harbinger of a new degree of institutional rationalization that was accompanying economic differentiation and expansion” (386). Sovereignty through interpersonal association was not going away, nor was the oligarchy that relied on this novel imperial tactic for its secure power base. In contemporary Of “the city was an anonymous urban environment, but it enabled interpersonal associations by concentrating the population, facilitating

communication, and expanding economic opportunities” (388). What we see in *Of* is not a remote area of the world suffering from rupture and intense globalization, but again like Rutherford’s account of the Biak, a people who are in some senses pre-adapted to modernity, *Oflus* connected to the outside as they have been for centuries, where the political situation involving the local elites and their new ventures into tea cooperatives serve “as indications of the transformative and inventive potential of the old imperial devices in the environment of modernity” (395).