REVIEW


Anna Tozzi Di Marco
University of Padua, Italy

1720 Imperial Circumcision Celebrations in Istanbul offers an in-depth analysis of the sumptuous festivities and symbolic representations associated with the grand public celebrations staged by the Ottoman court to celebrate the circumcision of Sultan Ahmed III’s four sons in early eighteenth-century Istanbul. The overall period of the festival, a total of three weeks, was preceded by two months of planning by the Ottoman bureaucratic machine. Thousands of citizens from all social classes, foreign guests, courtiers, military corps, attendants, clerks, supervisors, guildsmen, religious authorities, and others participated in the festival, which took place from September 18 to October 7 at different sites within the capital and outside its walls. Thousands of boys from the city were also circumcised.

The author of the book, Sinem Erdoğan İşkorkutan, whose research focuses on early modern Ottoman visual culture and cultural history, has documented each of the constituent stages of the festival, the first such account in the relevant scholarly literature. She examined archival, textual, and pictorial sources, which consist of the registers of the imperial chancery and the imperial head treasurer, Vehbi’s illustrated book and Hafiz’s unillustrated book of the event, the books of previous festivals, panegyric poems, chronicles of the time, and foreigners’ accounts.

Unlike previous studies, which were merely descriptive and/or focus on iconographical analyses of the paintings, she approached the sources as representations of the process of the construction of social reality. The distinctiveness of this volume lies in her analysis of the preparatory phase of the festival. İşkorkutan aims to highlight the ideological motives behind the Ottoman court’s commission of this event and the semiotic dimension of its planning, organizing, staging, and representation phases.

In order to demonstrate the complexity of this extraordinary occasion, she also describes in detail the emblematic role, social position, and tasks of each contributor. She studies how the festival reflected the Ottoman society and culture of eighteenth-century Istanbul and how the Ottoman court represented this festival. Her comparative analysis with the previous 1582 and 1675 circumcision festivals aims to better understand the continuity of this tradition and its transformations over time.

This publication contains many documents, including several lists of the people employed in preparations, parades, and spectacles; schematic and detailed tables of the items borrowed or purchased to use during the ceremonies and rituals; tables indicating the food provided at the banquets, served according to the hierarchy of the participants; a list of performers, a list of guilds, et cetera. Moreover, the text is embellished by images taken from the illustrated book of the festival, the so-called sūrnāme, a peculiar literary genre (prose or verse) to record imperial
festivals on the occasion of circumcisions, marriages, and births. Through the display of these textual and pictorial records, the author accompanies the reader in her overall conceptual framework. Her holistic analysis has the merit of covering all the aspects of the event, from its historical background to its social and political dimensions to its financial aspects.

In the introduction the author focuses on the historical context of the Ottoman court in the early eighteenth century. Ahmed III’s reign started with a deficit of legitimacy because of the 1703 rebellion of large groups of citizens including artisans, Janissaries, students, and ulema who fought against the dignitaries’ nepotism and the choice of the city of Edirne as the seat of government. The result was the return of the court to Istanbul, imperial architectural patronage, and an unprecedented number of public ceremonies as manifestations of imperial power to the end of regaining public consent. In particular, the political reason behind this magnificent festival was the recent military failure against the Habsburgs, which caused the loss of Belgrade and western Wallachia with the Treaty of Passarowitz (1718). Ahmed’s reign became known as a period of peace called the “Tulip Age,” during which the Ottomans expanded their international relations through diplomacy and trade. They opened to Western influence in social life, in the arts, and in material culture.

Previous studies underlined the new spirit and culture of pleasure and enjoyment during the Tulip Age and argued that the 1720 circumcision festival reflected this Westernization, for instance in the choice of Frankish music and the Frankish style of interior decoration. In contrast, İskorkutan stresses the lack of a break with the past and suggests that these choices were meant to propel a political agenda with international audiences. Further, she considers the revitalization of some court celebrations, continuity with the 1675 festival in the morphology and organizational scheme of the rituals, and the revival of high-ranking elite and the dynasty’s architectural patronage. Even the commissioning of the two books to represent the 1720 festival symbolized the revival of the tradition after a one-hundred years break. Moreover, because of the military defeat, the sultan and his court had to emphasize the enduring power of the rulers and the state through the display of benefaction in the form of distribution of money, gifts, clothes, food, circumcision, and positions to thousands of people from all social strata.

The two benefactors were the sultan, Ahmed III, and his grand vizier, that is, his chief deputy, Ibrahim Pasha. Over time the grand vizier increased and consolidated his prestige through patronage and marriage, with the result of curbing the Ottoman court’s patronage/clientage. Ibrahim Pasha, as shown by his central position in the imaginary of the festival, was the real patron behind its planning and the commissioning of its illustrated books.

The first chapter analyzes the fifty-two-day preparatory stage of the festival, a process that required meticulous organization and also the involvement of citizens outside the court. It started with the appointing of some supervisors along with personnel and budget. The first appointed court official was the superintendent of the festival, and other officials were assigned the roles of supplying food products, utensils, tableware and kitchenware items, and other objects. Some clerks were appointed to register every object supplied, others the names of uncircumcised boys and the names of performers such as musicians, dancers, jugglers, and singers along their places of origin. About seven hundred performers participated on a voluntary basis although for
many others participation was compulsory. They enjoyed relative autonomy within the festival program and received daily food allowances. Other attendants worked on the configuration and decoration of festival sites. Accordingly everyone had their own task in a very organized scheme of the preparatory plan. The festival's sites were served by over five thousand attendants. Among them were cooks, barbers, and physicians temporarily employed from outside the court, and they received a daily wage.

Other citizens of the guilds and religious institutions included non-Muslims (except Jewish residents) who had the obligatory duty to supply utensils and other items, which were returned to their owners after the festival. Every loaned object was registered in a book along with the name of the owner, who received a receipt from the imperial official in charge of the utensil provisioning process. The most valued items coming from imperial treasury were for the exclusive use of high dignitaries. Within this chapter the author dedicates a very interesting paragraph to the making and the rituals of *nahils* and candy gardens. The *nahil*, literally “date palm,” was a large-scale wooden pole decorated with wax, flowers, and ornaments. Forty attendants carried it through the streets during the closing procession of the festival. Supposedly the *nahil* embodied the protagonist of the event during the rite of passage from boyhood to manhood. The candy gardens were huge-scale architectural models made of confections and sugar paste. Considering that sugar was a luxurious, expensive product, these candy gardens represented the host’s wealth and power. The less an object cost, the lower the status of the host and the prince to be circumcised.

The clerks documented every detail of the preparation of both the *nahil* and candy gardens, as well as their design process and construction. A superintendent and other court officials were in charge of supervising each stage of the entire project and the delivery of necessary materials. However, the few skilled craftsmen who were highly specialized in this kind of work were underrepresented in the official narrative of the festival.

In the second chapter Işkorkutan examines the staging phase of the event from a semiotic perspective, in particular three ritual aspects: the food, the gifts, and the performances. These rituals and performances were staged outside the walled peninsula in new sites instead of the Hippodrome, the major site of Ottoman celebrations where the sultan and his courtiers were secluded from the public. The choice of Okmeidani and Tersane Palace and the ways in which the sultan and his court were represented projected a new imperial imagery. A large open site designed to host a large group of spectators, the sultan’s tent was surrounded first by those of the guests and the grand vizier, then the high dignitaries, the middle-ranking officials, the imperial armory, and the court units, all arranged in a hierarchical order.

The food-related events started with a bountiful banquet offered to the ruling elite and invited guests every afternoon. On the fourteenth day a banquet was offered to the citizens. During the daytime performances, honeyed water was offered to all spectators. Each night, trays of confections were offered to the members of the Imperial Council and the royal family. Daily allowances of meat and bread were provided to court officials and attendants for their services during the festival. Also, some Janissaries and other beneficiaries such as inner palace personnel, superintendents, the chief of the eunuchs of the imperial palace, and judges received
food donations. Even the sultan’s grant to someone for his service consisted of food. Of course, the quantity, quality, and variety of food differed according to the individual’s status. Every beneficiary and his food donation were noted in the festival registers. The central role of the food events reinforced imperial power and the hierarchical structure of Ottoman society.

The gifting ritual was another peculiar aspect of the festival. At different times of the day the sultan and the grand vizier granted gifts to the dignitaries, officials, circumcised boys, and performers, but the beneficiaries also had to give presents to the sultan as a sign of their gratitude. These gifts, which were staged publicly after the banquet, could vary widely according to social status, ranging from a few coins to luxurious robes of honor. The reciprocal aspect of the gifting ritual was a fundamental strategy of the patronage system, which followed a precise protocol. For instance, a monetary gift to a superior official was a customary practice in the Ottoman gifting system.

The third ritual aspect that the author highlights consists of the many performances enacted daily. Shadow plays, puppet shows, games, dance spectacles, fireworks, guild parades, acrobatic and jugglery shows, horse races, and music shows were presented in a certain order following a repertoire. Guild performers were unique in that their participation in the festival was not compulsory, as it was for others.

The last chapter clarifies the ways the narrative and pictorial books of the festival served as representational strategies. The court commissioned two illustrated sūrnāme copies, one for the sultan and another for the grand vizier, which present some differences in terms of size, binding, and description of the concluding scene. Unlike the previous illustrated festival books, these two manuscripts were planned simultaneously with the event, and they were commissioned and addressed to the elite by the grand vizier, who often intervened concerning the content. The author and the painter focused more on the involvement of high-ranking participants, among whom the figure of the grand vizier was prominent and more frequent than the sultan. Festival books were constitutive parts of the multilayered representation of royal and vizierial power and patronage.

In conclusion, the real strengths of this volume, which make it more original than previous studies, are its dialogue between the different sources and analysis of all stages of this festival from new points of view, including the semiotic dimension.
AUTHOR BIO

Anna Tozzi Di Marco is a cultural anthropologist whose work focuses on Mediterranean and Islamic societies. Her first long-term fieldwork, on Cairo’s City of the Dead, resulted in two books, Il Giardino di Allah: Storia della necropoli musulmana del Cairo (2008) and Egitto inedito: Taccuini di viaggio nella necropoli musulmana del Cairo (2010). Her next two books, Un sarcofago egizio per Giuseppe Parvis (2016, cowritten with Riccardo Manzini) and Agiografia e culto dei Sette Dormienti nel Mediterraneo (2023), concerned the interaction between memory, place, and identity in the Mediterranean world and beyond. She has published numerous articles in Italian and international journals and was the director of the Anankelab Publishing series Studies on Islam and Mediterranean Societies. Her latest research focuses on votive tabernacles on the island of Procida (southern Italy).

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