

# Royal French Women in the Ottoman Sultans' Harem: The Political Uses of Fabricated Accounts from the Sixteenth to the Twenty-first Century

CHRISTINE ISOM-VERHAAREN  
*Benedictine University*

The Ottoman sultans' harem, characterized by the seclusion of the women who resided there who had limited contact with outsiders, has provided fertile ground for the invention of tales that have often been incorporated into the historical tradition. The purported presence of French women with royal connections in the Ottoman imperial harem has been used for political purposes from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century. While the fantasies concerning these women are fascinating in and of themselves, including dramatic captures at sea in some versions, this article argues that their greater interest lies in their utility to support the political aspirations of states as varied as the Ottoman Empire, France, and the United States for over four centuries. These tales fall into two groups: (1) myths about a fictional fifteenth-century French princess and (2) fantasies concerning Nakshidil, a nineteenth-century valide sultan (mother of the reigning Ottoman ruler), who some authors claim was a relative of Napoleon's wife Josephine. The earlier myths, whose purpose was to explain the alliance between the Ottoman sultan and the king of France, lost political significance at about the time that Nakshidil entered the imperial harem, as the French Revolution and Napoleon's attack on Egypt disrupted diplomatic relations between the Ottoman Empire and France. Fables about Nakshidil continue to have political implications to the present, because authors from the late twentieth to the twenty-first century

have appropriated this myth to symbolize the oppression of women by Islam.

In this article I trace the development of these narratives indicating the changes in the political goals of the two myths of French royal women in the harem. Beginning in the sixteenth century, Ottoman authors such as Selaniki, Mustafa Ali, Peçeви, and Evliya Çelebi used a supposed genealogical link between the Ottoman and French ruling houses to justify an alliance with the rulers of France. French diplomats, even if they did not believe a French princess had ever entered an Ottoman sultan's harem, also employed this connection to ensure their diplomatic preeminence in Istanbul. In the nineteenth century, another purported genealogical bond between the Ottoman and French ruling houses was based on a claim that a relative of Napoleon's wife Josephine, Aimée du Buc de Rivéry, had entered the imperial harem and become the mother of Mahmud II (r. 1808–1839). This second link was used by Napoleon III (r. 1852–1870) to enhance his prestige and by Abdul Aziz (r. 1861–1876) to bolster his position relative to predatory European powers in the 1860s. Since 1969, the publication of four novels about Aimée du Buc de Rivéry, *The Veiled Sultan*, *Sultana*, *Valide*, and *Seraglio*, indicate how the political uses of this myth have been changed to fit current issues.<sup>1</sup> While authors such as Domenico of Jerusalem, Montesquieu, and Paul Rycout used the Ottoman harem as a symbol of Oriental despotism in the seventeenth century, these novels, especially the most recent, *Seraglio* (2003), indicate that the Ottoman imperial harem continues as a symbol of a Middle East characterized by despotic rulers and oppressed women. Although documentary evidence demonstrates that Aimée could not have been Mahmud's mother, novelists still claim to employ historical scholarship to convince readers that they are accurately portraying harem life. Indeed, these novels perpetuate myths of the imperial harem found in accounts by male European travelers, who had no firsthand knowledge of the harem, while ignoring the more accurate portrayal of harem life by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, an Englishwoman who did associate

---

<sup>1</sup> March Cost, *The Veiled Sultan* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1969); Prince Michael of Greece, *Sultana* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983); Barbara Chase-Riboud, *Valide: A Novel of the Harem* (New York: Avon, 1986); and Janet Wallach, *Seraglio* (New York: Doubleday, 2003). Aimée, a relative of Josephine Beauharnais, wife of Napoleon, supposedly was captured at sea and entered the harem of the Ottoman sultan in the late eighteenth century. Two other works should also be included in this category, although they claim to be biographical: Benjamin A. Morton, *The Veiled Empress: An Unacademic Biography* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1923), and Lesley Blanch, *The Wilder Shores of Love* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954).

with Ottoman women. These novels demonstrate that the political uses of portraying the Ottoman harem as emblematic of the nature of the Middle East—despotic, cruel, violent, oppressing women—still continue to be powerful in justifying American actions in the Middle East in the modern period.

I emphasize that these myths were *invented* for political purposes and that these tales are not fictionalized biographies of real individuals. Nakshidil was the name of Mahmud's mother, but she was not Aimée. Although we know little concerning the mothers of fifteenth-century Ottoman sultans, they were certainly not French princesses. Despite the fact that there never were royal French women in the harem, fantastic representations of their lives have had and continue to have a historical impact beyond the level of a history of ideas. A similar phenomenon, "invented traditions," created in support of national communities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been extensively studied. Educated members of aspiring nations, such as academics and professionals, often contributed myths and ideologies to support national movements. They realized that "History" properly configured could solve the problem of making a new entity, a nation-state, seem ancient. In these cases the nationalist historian has the task of selecting which events must be remembered and, equally as important, which must be forgotten, to create a narrative that will promote the political aims of the sponsoring polity.<sup>2</sup>

These invented traditions that help form "imagined communities" have striking similarities to the myths of French royal women in the Ottoman harem. Both shape identity for political reasons. Both employ existing material, which is transformed through fictionalization, embellishment, or by outright forgery. The ends, whatever they may be, appear to justify the means of tampering with the historical record. We also see history being employed as a "legitimator of action." Both sets of myths about French royal women in the harem were used to justify foreign policy, either Ottoman diplomatic relations with an infidel in the case of the first or Western intervention in Muslim society in the case of the second. Historians are involved in this process as they contribute images of the past, which often have a political purpose.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 79, 197, and especially chap. 11, "Memory and Forgetting."

<sup>3</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Tradition," in *Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 1–14.

In *Invention of Tradition*, a collection of essays devoted to the topic, the authors provide several examples of this phenomenon in locations as diverse as Scotland, Africa, and India.<sup>4</sup> Studying these traditions as historiography or the history of ideas is only one aspect of their historical significance. Terence Ranger claims that they may also become part of the history of politics or society because the belief in the validity of these traditions allows them to influence the actions of those who accept their claims. He states: "All this is part of the history of European ideas, but it is also very much part of the history of modern Africa. . . . The invented traditions of African societies—whether invented by the Europeans or by Africans themselves in response—distorted the past but became in themselves realities through which a good deal of colonial encounter was expressed."<sup>5</sup> A similar situation prevails with the myths of royal French women in the Ottoman harem, as these accounts now have a life of their own as some authors persist in presenting them as factual. Thus they potentially influence the opinions and actions of those who accept them as accurate, reliable guides to Islamic society. Therefore, interest in these myths extends beyond understanding the ideas that Ottomans, French, and others created about royal French women in the harem. More importantly, how have these myths influenced the beliefs and actions of those who accept them as historically accurate?<sup>6</sup>

#### THE FRENCH PRINCESS AND OTTOMAN DIPLOMACY

Toward the end of the sixteenth century and during the seventeenth century, multiple versions of a legend of a French princess becoming the mother of a sultan appear in Ottoman sources. The basic narrative begins with the capture at sea of a French princess, who enters the

<sup>4</sup> In Scotland, devising a tradition involved forgery by several individuals. As Anthony Dolphin Alderson accuses Benjamin A. Morton of doing (see n. 80), these individuals claimed to have documentary evidence, "created literary ghosts, forged texts and falsified history in support of their theories." Others relied on their claims and they became accepted as the truth and excited great indignation when they were challenged. Hugh Trevor Roper, "The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland," in Hobsbawm and Ranger, *Invention of Tradition*, pp. 28, 41.

<sup>5</sup> Terence Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa," in Hobsbawm and Ranger, *Invention of Tradition*, p. 212.

<sup>6</sup> Comparing these myths with other examples of invented traditions is instructive as they develop and function in similar contexts and manners. Comparing these myths with captivity narratives of real individuals might be productive to note their similarities and differences, but it would not produce a comparison of similar forms of discourse.

harem of the Ottoman sultan and becomes the mother of his successor. This successor is thus the descendant of both the Ottoman and the French royal houses and a relative of the French king. The main elements of the tale, set in the fifteenth century, remain fairly constant, although the name of the sultan varies. This myth relates to the political ideology of descent as it concerns international relations; its purpose was less to confer legitimacy on the dynasty but rather to reinforce the diplomatic relationship that had developed between France and the Ottoman Empire. Drawing primarily on the works of the Ottoman authors Selaniki, Peçevi, and Evliya Çelebi, I trace the development of this legend over time. Insights concerning the political utility of the narrative emerge by considering the contexts in which these accounts are embedded, in addition to evaluating the details that the author includes.

Selaniki (d. ca. 1600),<sup>7</sup> a secretary in various government departments with access to confidential information, kept a chronicle of the daily activities of the central administration from September 1563 until May 1600. His chronicle, the first known Ottoman source to suggest a genealogical tie between the Ottoman and French royal families, records the arrival in 1597 of the French ambassador, François Savary, comte de Brèves, whom he called “Kabasakal.” Selaniki then attributes a superior status to France among Christian countries because of its extensive territory. In the midst of this description, he inserts a quotation that he attributes to Mehmed II’s (r. 1444–1446, 1451–1481) mother claiming that the French king is “our prince, and of our race.”<sup>8</sup>

Although Selaniki does not elaborate on this claim, he recounts the history of the diplomatic and military alliance between France and the Ottoman Empire. Selaniki believes France deserves Ottoman friendship because French kings rule extensive territory and are superior to other Christian rulers. This reflects the Ottoman practice of referring to the French king as *padishah* (emperor), while other Christian rulers are called *kral* (king) or *bey* (lord). Selaniki depicts France as a historically reliable ally, claiming that from the beginning of the Ottoman State until his time, France had always been the true friend of the Ottomans. In this context he includes the quotation by Mehmed II’s mother and insists on its veracity. He has thus demonstrated the worthiness of this non-Muslim ally, before he describes the special

<sup>7</sup> See Mehmet İpşirli, “Mustafa Selaniki and His History,” *Tarih Enstitüsü Dergisi* 9 (1978): 417–472 for a study of Selaniki and his work.

<sup>8</sup> Selaniki Mustafa Efendi, *Tarih’i Selaniki*, ed. Mehmet İpşirli, 2 vols. (Istanbul: Edebiyat Fakültesi Basımevi, 1989), 2: 657–658.

treatment accorded the French ambassador, who is expected to accompany the Ottoman sultan on military campaigns. Selaniki claims that during Süleyman's reign the French envoy had always attended the sultan on campaign. Moreover, according to the evidence of the old *defters* (Ottoman archival registers), the ambassador's provisions and expenses were paid by the Ottoman State treasury. Selaniki notes that on the occasion of a campaign in Hungary by Mehmed III (r. 1595–1603), the English ambassador accompanied the sultan as the French ambassador's deputy, which did not reflect traditional practice. Selaniki praises the French ambassador as an "esteemed lord" who is so fluent in Turkish that he needs no interpreter. The Ottomans honored the ambassador on his arrival with a great feast and held a *divan* (state council), which many people attended. In summary, Selaniki emphasizes that the alliance with France is prestigious and of long standing.<sup>9</sup>

Ibrahim Peçevi (1572–1650),<sup>10</sup> an Ottoman official with powerful relatives who after his retirement became a historian, elaborates on diplomatic relations with France in his history of the Ottoman Empire from 1520 to 1639. Peçevi recounts that the French sought Ottoman naval assistance in their wars with the Habsburg Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (r. 1519–1555). In 1553 the Ottomans sent a fleet under Turgud Bey to support the French in the Mediterranean. Between a summary description of this campaign and an account of Turgud Bey's early exploits, Peçevi explains the relationship of the French kings to the Ottoman court. According to Peçevi, during the reign of Sultan Murad II (1421–1444, 1446–1451), corsairs captured a great ship carrying a daughter of the King of France, who was traveling with her dowry and retinue to marry a king. When the corsairs discovered her identity, they presented her to the sultan. According to Peçevi, "tradition relates that she did not convert to Islam for some time, until she became pregnant with the Conqueror."<sup>11</sup>

The context of Peçevi's account is similar to that of Selaniki's in that it involves French diplomacy in the Ottoman Empire. Although the princess is supposed to have entered the harem of Murad II, because Peçevi's history begins in 1520 he is not concerned with the reign of Murad II but that of Süleyman. When he relates the exploits

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Pecevi"; Rhodes Murphey, "Ottoman Historical Writing in the Seventeenth Century: A Survey of the General Development of the Genre after the Reign of Sultan Ahmed I (1603–1617)," *Archivum Ottomanicum* 8 (1993–1994): 277–311.

<sup>11</sup> Peçevi, *Tarih-i Peçevi* (Istanbul: Enderun Kitabevi, 1980), p. 345.

of Turgud, he notes that the French had sent an envoy requesting aid from the sultan in their war against Spain. The story of the French princess explains why the French expect Ottoman assistance. According to Peçevi, military aid is provided because the French king is the Ottoman sultan's kinsman. After recording this incident, Peçevi continues his account of Turgud's exploits.<sup>12</sup>

Peçevi also includes his own encounter with a French ambassador, which suggests that the legend was familiar to French diplomats to the Ottoman Empire. Peçevi states that while he was employed in the petition office, he overheard the French envoy and the grand vizier discussing the relationship between the Ottoman and French royal houses. The Frenchman boasted that the sultan who succeeded Mehmed had claimed that the French kings were his relatives. While the Ottomans and the Frenchman agreed on the genealogical tie between the rulers, they viewed the religious affiliation of the mythical princess differently. The ambassador continued to believe that the French princess remained Christian even after Peçevi stated that he had visited her *türbe* (tomb) and talked to its attendant. Peçevi insists that since the Koran was read every morning at her tomb, she had converted to Islam, but he was not able to convince the ambassador.<sup>13</sup> Although the Frenchman does not dispute that a French princess entered the harem of one of the sultans, as will be discussed below, it is questionable whether French ambassadors truly believed this. Nevertheless, in the accounts of both Selaniki and Peçevi, it is the arrival of a French envoy at the Ottoman court that leads to their referring to the myth of the French princess.

The final version of the legend from this period is found in the *Seyahatname*,<sup>14</sup> the travel accounts of Evliya Çelebi (1611–1684),<sup>15</sup> a seventeenth-century Ottoman traveler. Evliya places his account at the siege of Constantinople by the Ottomans in 1453. According to Evliya, before the conquest, the king of France had launched a fleet to raid the coasts of the Levant to acquire a dowry for his daughter. The French captured many Muslim women, including a descendant of the prophet, who was brought to Paris and given to a prince, the brother of the princess who is the heroine of the tale, to whom she bore a son.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 343–346.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 345–346.

<sup>14</sup> I am grateful to Professor Robert Dankoff for bringing the existence of this account in Evliya Çelebi to my attention.

<sup>15</sup> See Robert Dankoff, *An Ottoman Mentality: The World of Evliya Çelebi* (Leiden: Brill, 2004); *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Ewliya Celebi."

Later this prince and his son accompanied the French princess when she was sent to marry Kostantin, the Byzantine emperor. When the Ottomans captured the French fleet of twenty ships near the besieged city, the French princess was given to Mehmed II as part of his share of the booty from the conquest. The princess was instructed in the doctrines of Islam, but she refused to convert. Nevertheless, she became a favorite of Mehmed II and the mother of three sons: Cem, Nurud-din, and Bayezid, who succeeded Mehmed. According to Evliya's tale, her brother converted to Islam, became an official at the Ottoman court, and his son, Su-Kemerli Hoca Mustafa Çelebi, became the friend of Evliya's father during Süleyman's reign. Evliya acknowledges that other historians' accounts differ from his because they claim that the princess became the mother of Mehmed II. But he states that Mehmed was the son of Alime Hanım, the daughter of Isfendiyar Oğlu. He supports his version by inserting, "An explanation of the relationship between the House of Osman and the King of France," which includes information concerning Su-Kemerli.

Evliya Çelebi also discusses the *türbe* of the princess. He had observed that contrary to the usual practice of facing the casket when reading the Koran at a tomb, the readers would turn their backs on her as they read, because she had not converted to Islam. He also claims to have seen Frenchmen come to the *türbe*, which always remained closed, and pay the keeper to open it for them. Evliya presents this information as additional evidence of the truth of his version.

Evliya's account continues with the life of Cem, son of Mehmed II, in order to provide a second genealogical tie between the French and Ottoman royal houses. The historical Sultan Cem (d. 1495), after failing to succeed to the Ottoman throne, sought refuge from his brother, Bayezid II (1481–1512), with the Knights of Rhodes. They sent him as their virtual prisoner first to France and later Italy, where he died.<sup>16</sup> Evliya's version of Cem's life bears little resemblance to historical reality. According to Evliya's invented tale, Cem visits his grandmother, the Queen of France, accompanied by a retinue of three hundred Muslims. During his visit, he hunts and enjoys himself being shown such great respect by the French that seventeen noblemen are in his personal service. Eventually Bayezid dispatches an envoy to France requesting Cem's return, and subsequently Cem is poisoned and his corpse sent to the sultan. However, when Bayezid tries to bury this

<sup>16</sup> See Christine Isom-Verhaaren, "Prince Cem: A Fifteenth-Century Ottoman View of Relations with the Infidels" in "Ottoman-French Interaction, 1480–1580: A Sixteenth-Century Encounter" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1997), pp. 138–222.

corpse at Bursa in the tomb of Murad II, an earthquake prevents the burial because another's body has been substituted for Cem's.

Evliya invents travels to France, during which he claims knowledgeable priests informed him that another man was poisoned and his body substituted, whereupon Cem became the King of France and the ancestor of the present ruler. Evliya claims that it is on account of this relationship between the two royal houses,<sup>17</sup> through Cem and the mother of Bayezid, that the French ambassador has precedence over all others, even the Persian ambassador. Evliya then continues with his account of the capture of Constantinople.<sup>18</sup>

Evliya's *Seyahatname* includes historical information concerning many cities in the Ottoman Empire. Naturally, when he dealt with Istanbul, he included an account of the Ottoman conquest, a crucial event in its history. Since in his version the princess was captured then, it was logical to include the tale there. In his account, the twenty ships with their boundless booty seem to be the important consideration, while the princess is merely included as part of the sultan's share. Evliya refers to other accounts of the princess that differ from his, but when he knows of evidence that indicates their improbability he modifies the tale rather than dismissing it.<sup>19</sup> He insists that his version is accurate, much as earlier Selaniki had also emphasized that the information about this relationship between the Ottomans and the French was correct. Evliya takes this invented tradition to a new level by transforming the captive Cem into the ancestor of the kings of France. He fabricates travels to France and meetings with French priests to create this invented genealogical tradition of Ottoman ancestry of the French ruler. He hints that this knowledge was a secret known only to certain religious leaders, while the general public remained ignorant of the true descent of the French dynasty.<sup>20</sup> This double genealogical bond

<sup>17</sup> Evliya is unaware that the Valois dynasty of France was replaced by the Bourbon dynasty at the end of the sixteenth century.

<sup>18</sup> The full account is found in the autograph manuscript of Evliya Çelebi's *Seyahatname*, which is located in the Topkapı Sarayı Library, Bagdat 304. See folios 27b–29b, 31a–31b. Volume 1 of the *Seyahatname* has been published. See *The Seyahatname of Evliya Çelebi. Book One: Istanbul*. Facsimile of Topkapı Sarayı Bagdat 304, Part 1: Folios 1a–106a, ed. Sinasi Tekin and Gonul Alpay Tekin (Harvard University, 1989). The nineteenth-century printed version leaves out the story of Su-kemerli and Cem. However, this is contained in full in von Hammer's English translation. Evliya Çelebi, *Narrative of Travels in Europe, Asia, and Africa in the Seventeenth Century*, trans. Joseph von Hammer (London: Oriental Translation Fund, 1846), pp. 37–43, 47–48.

<sup>19</sup> With the second French woman we encounter a similar process. When documents prove that Aimée could not have been the mother of Mahmud because the dates do not match, she becomes his foster mother.

<sup>20</sup> Evliya, folios 27b–29b, 31a–31b.

explains why the French ambassador is given precedence before all others, even that of a powerful neighboring Muslim state.

Yet another version of this myth is attributed to Gelibolu Mustafa Ali (1541–1600).<sup>21</sup> He is the probable source of the account found in the French historian La Jonquière's 1914 edition of a history of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>22</sup> La Jonquière writes, "The admiral Sarouce Pasha had captured in 1428 near Gallipoli a ship carrying a princess of France, engaged to the emperor John IV. Placed in the harem of Murad II, she gave birth to Mehmed II and became Muslim under the name of Alime Hanim."<sup>23</sup> As the other sources that La Jonquière mentions in addition to Ali, Peçevi and Selaniki, do not give the precise year of the capture or indicate that Sarouce Pasha was the admiral who was responsible, it is reasonable to conclude that La Jonquière obtained this information from an account found in Ali.<sup>24</sup>

From the descriptions recounted above, it is evident that although the accounts vary in detail, they have many similarities. The common element in the accounts of Ali (La Jonquière), Peçevi, and Selaniki is that the princess became the favorite of Murad II and the mother of Mehmed II. Evliya Çelebi differs from these authors in stating that she was the concubine of Mehmed II and the mother of Bayezid II and Cem. The accounts share the common elements that the princess was captured at sea while en route to a marriage with a ruler, was then presented to the Sultan, and later gave birth to his successor. In Ali's and Peçevi's accounts she becomes Muslim, while in Evliya's she remains Christian. Peçevi and Evliya both discuss her *türbe*. Evliya's version is by far the longest and most elaborate, with its distortion of Cem's experiences in France.

<sup>21</sup> See Cornell H. Fleischer, *Bureaucrat and Intellectual in the Ottoman Empire: The Historian Mustafa Ali (1541–1600)* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986).

<sup>22</sup> La Jonquière includes the account in his history in a discussion of Ibrahim Pasha's negotiations with the French ambassador, La Forest, thus indicating once again the political context of Ottoman-French diplomacy for the tale.

<sup>23</sup> A. La Jonquière, *Histoire de l'Empire Ottoman depuis les origines jusqu'à nos jours* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1914), pp. 174–175.

<sup>24</sup> Evliya and La Jonquière both refer to Ali as another source for this story but without specifying where in his vast writings this tale is to be found. Ali wrote his great work of history *Künh ül-Ahbar* between 1592 and 1599. In the portion of this work that was published in the nineteenth century, which includes the reign of Murad II during 1428/831–832, there is no mention of the capture of a French princess ([İstanbul]: Darütti-baatil 'âmire, [1861?]). Nor is the account to be found in more recently published selections from this work. I also searched several manuscript versions without locating this story. However, as seen from the accounts by other authors previously discussed, it is probably included in another section where the topic seemed appropriate to the historian. The account of Ali would be contemporary with that of Selaniki.

The fact that several prominent Ottoman authors believed that a genealogical tie existed between the Ottoman and French royal houses indicates that the tale was widely known and filled a significant need. The Ottoman dynasty was of fundamental importance in Ottoman history, as the lands of the Ottoman Empire were the possessions of the Ottoman house. The unifying factor for the empire, whose population was diverse in terms of ethnicity, religion, language, institutions, and customs, was the Ottoman dynasty itself. Ottoman descent was generally reckoned patrilineally, and the male line as far back as Osman is well documented. In contrast, we know few details concerning the origins of the women who, as the wives or concubines of the sultans, were mothers of succeeding rulers. While the wife or favorite of the sultan might gain power through her influence with him, the mother of the reigning sultan, the *valide sultan*, was the most powerful woman in the empire. These women gained status through their relationships to the sultans, their husbands or sons, not by their own descent; therefore historical records concerning these women include little information about their origins. This lack of precise information about the descent of these women allowed genealogies to be created for them according to the requirements of a given era.

Genealogies are often “invented” traditions rather than accurate records of descent, whose utility has been recognized since antiquity. Genealogies are traditions that not only explain relationships within a society; they may validate relationships between groups, as in foreign relations, as well. Moreover, because relationships alter, genealogies also are modified to meet the new conditions. The genealogical descent of the Ottoman sultans on the male line was well documented and not adjustable, but the opposite was true of the descent of the mothers of the sultans, and this lack of knowledge about the female ancestors could be an asset rather than a liability.<sup>25</sup>

Genealogies vary depending on their function. Vertical genealogies or king lists, which were found throughout the ancient Near East, were utilized to demonstrate the legitimacy of a ruler. The most common form of genealogy of the Ottoman sultans is vertical, reflecting that the empire was in many ways a traditional Near Eastern state. The second type of genealogy, which is horizontal (descent from a common ancestor), indicates relationships between groups of people. In the ancient

---

<sup>25</sup> Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel 1250–1050 B.C.E.* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985), p. 334; Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), pp. 103, 182; Marshall D. Sahlins, *Tribesmen* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 55.

Near East, horizontal genealogies appear only in the Bible, but in the Islamic period Arab genealogies were produced to show relations among many Arabian tribes.<sup>26</sup> The myth of the French princess demonstrates how horizontal genealogies function, as it explains the diplomatic relationship between the Ottoman Empire and France in the world of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This invented tradition, created for diplomatic reasons, does not reflect actual kinship but a relationship people believed existed.

The question of the “descent” of the Ottoman sultans had previously been examined as it concerned dynastic legitimacy, when descent through the male line was the focus of genealogies that appeared in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Many contemporary dynasties in Anatolia and neighboring regions used descent as a means of establishing political legitimacy.<sup>27</sup> The question of descent usually has not been extended to the maternal ancestors of the Ottoman sultans, except for Osman’s (d. 1324?) marriage to Shayk Edebali’s daughter at the beginning of the dynasty. This marriage and the legend attached to it of Osman’s dream were seen as legitimating the new dynasty. The myth of the French princess is another example of how descent was employed for political purposes. Although Orhan (r. 1324–1362), the second sultan, was probably not the son of Edebali’s daughter, nor did a French princess become the mother of an Ottoman sultan, both of these examples of fictional maternal descent played important roles in political ideology.<sup>28</sup> In the case of the French princess, the genealogical tie explained and justified the Ottoman-French alliance.

#### WOMEN AS POLITICAL SYMBOLS

From the beginning of Islamic history women have played central roles as political symbols. Their seclusion from the public gaze did not negate their value as popular symbols. Women’s symbolic power could be great, particularly in the sphere of descent that linked individuals and groups. Fatima (d. 632/3), Muhammad’s daughter, was the ancestor of the Shii imams through whom they could claim descent from

<sup>26</sup> A. Malamat, “Tribal Societies: Biblical Genealogies and African Lineage Systems,” *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 14 (1973): 172, 132.

<sup>27</sup> This use of descent has been studied in Colin Imber, “The Ottoman Dynastic Myth,” *Turcica* 19 (1987): 7–27; Barbara Flemming, “Political Genealogies in the Sixteenth Century,” *Journal of Ottoman Studies* 7–8 (1988): 123–137.

<sup>28</sup> See Leslie Peirce, *The Imperial Harem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 16, 32–34, for a discussion of Shayk Edebali’s daughter.

Muhammad. They were also linked to the prophet through Ali (d. 661), Muhammad's cousin and the husband of Fatima, but Fatima's connection was obviously more direct. For Shiites, other women were prominent symbols also, such as Fatima Kubra, the daughter of Husayn; Zaynab, the sister of Husayn; and Shahrbanu, daughter of Yazdigird III (r. 632–651), the last Sasanian ruler. According to a tenth-century account by Kulyayni, Ali arranged for Shahrbanu to marry his son Husayn. This made her the mother of the fourth Imam, Ali Zayn al-Abidin (d. ca. 712), who is known as the son of the two treasures: on his father's side he is an Arab of the Hashemite clan and on his mother's he is descended from the ancient Iranian monarchy. Kulyayni wrote some three hundred years later than the time of Husayn, and there is little evidence for this Sasanian marriage. Nevertheless, in Iran, traditions have employed this link between the Shii Imams and the land where there were many early converts to Islam. The marriage is probably a legend that, owing to a lack of sources, can never be verified.<sup>29</sup>

Another early leader of the Islamic community also claimed descent through the Sasanians, as well as the Byzantine emperor and the ruler of the Turks. Yazid III (r. 744) of the Umayyad dynasty was a descendent through the paternal line from the Marwanid Umayyad caliphs. He claimed that his mother was descended from Byzantine, Sasanian, and Turkish rulers when in fact he was the first caliph to be the offspring of a slave concubine rather than a freeborn Arab woman. As Bosworth notes, this connection to the Sasanians was probably an invention whose purpose was to "ameliorate this taint of slave blood."<sup>30</sup>

Later, among Turkish and Mongol dynasties, women continued to symbolize genealogical links to other prominent political groups. The Cengizid wives of Timur (r. 1370–1405) and his family gave their husbands increased prestige and entitled them to use the title *guregen* (son-in-law) of the Cengizid family and the prestige that went with being related to the great world conqueror Cengiz Khan's (1162–1227) family. Timur's Cengizid wife, Saray Mulk Khanim, was taken from another

<sup>29</sup> Kishwar Rizvi, "Gendered Patronage: Women and Benevolence during the Early Safavid Empire," in *Women, Patronage, and Self-Representation in Islamic Societies*, ed. D. Fairchild Ruggles (Albany: State University of New York, 2000), pp. 125–126; David Pinault, "Zaynab Bint Ali and the Place of the Women of the Households of the First Imams in Shi'ite Devotional Literature," in *Women in the Medieval Islamic World*, ed. Gavin R. G. Hambly (New York: St. Martin's, 1998), pp. 80–81.

<sup>30</sup> *Lata'if al-ma'arif of Tha'alibi. The Book of Curious and Entertaining Information*, trans. C. E. Bosworth (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1968), p. 73. I am indebted to Professor Linda Darling for this reference.

ruler's harem as booty when Timur defeated him, but this did not decrease her prestige and her symbolic value as Timur's wife.<sup>31</sup> After Timur, the Mughal dynasty of India claimed his legacy, which was passed down through Timurid women: Babur (d. 1530) and Humayun (r. 1530–1555) married female descendants of the Timurid family. These women were welcomed to the harems of the Mughals, even if they were not able to become the mothers of heirs, because their presence in the harem contributed to the ruler's status.<sup>32</sup>

Another example of a woman's symbolic political value as a genealogical link is the Anatolian or Rum Seljuk princess, Safawat al-Dunya wa al-Din, the daughter of the extremely powerful Seljuk official known as the Pervane (d. 1277). This woman, along with several others, is included in a hagiography of the Sufi Rumi (d. 1273), commissioned by his grandson, in order to establish connections to the ruling house. As the daughter of the Pervane, she is also mentioned in three inscriptions found on Sufi lodges in Tokat in eastern Anatolia. While she is only identified by her title, her very anonymity magnifies the royal connection of her father's dynastic claims. Her inclusions in the biography of Rumi and on inscriptions of Sufi lodges are genealogical in nature and serve political ends, in one to show her family's ties to the region of Tokat and in the other to lay claim to Sufi buildings for the Mevlevi Sufi order.<sup>33</sup>

The accounts of the French princess in Murad II's or Mehmed II's harem continue this tradition of women as political symbols that create connections between powerful groups for political purposes. These accounts blend fact and fiction as they relate to the women of the dynasty, revealing anachronism since they project seventeenth-century practices back to the fifteenth century. Leslie Peirce explains how the Ottoman imperial harem functioned during different periods. In the fifteenth century, most women who produced children for the dynasty were slave concubines, some of whom were captured as war booty. Women taken in a battle or a raid were an important symbol of Ottoman superiority; they were "trophy of victory."<sup>34</sup> The Ottomans used marriage as a diplomatic tool, but concubinage as a way to produce off-

<sup>31</sup> Priscilla P. Soucek, "Timurid Women: A Cultural Perspective," in Hambly, *Women in the Medieval Islamic World*, pp. 200–202.

<sup>32</sup> Gregory C. Kozlowski, "Private Lives and Public Piety: Women and the Practice of Islam in Mughal India," in Hambly, *Women in the Medieval Islamic World*, pp. 471–474.

<sup>33</sup> Ethel Sara Wolper, "Princess Safwat al-Dunya wa al-Din and the Production of Sufi Buildings and Hagiographies in Pre-Ottoman Anatolia," in Ruggles, *Women, Patronage, and Self-Representation*, p. 47.

<sup>34</sup> Peirce, *Imperial Harem*, pp. 32–37.

spring. Marriages usually symbolized the submission of the state from which a princess came to the Ottomans, and many of them were made with Christian women. Royal Christian women rarely, if ever, converted to Islam, but Christian women who entered the harem as slave concubines usually did. Murad II married Mara, the daughter of George Brankovich of Serbia (1427–1456), but she was not the mother of his son, Mehmed II. As for the harem of Mehmed II, some women from Greek noble families entered the harem, but they were then given in marriage to Mehmed's statesmen and were not wives or concubines of the sultan himself.

Concerning the identity of the mothers of Ottoman royal children, Peirce states that “the genealogical record appears to have been lost early or perhaps deliberately disregarded. Traditions regarding the mothers of the sultans—traditions that persist today at the popular level—are striking in their divergence from historical reality.”<sup>35</sup> Historians were identifying highborn Muslim women as the mothers of sultans at the same period that the actual mothers were slave concubines. The identity of the sultans' mothers interested the public, although a higher status was generally attributed to women who were the real mothers, but they were not the wellborn wives.

Ottoman reproductive practices for the dynasty during the fifteenth century mandated that slave concubines produce one son only. This allowed the mother of a prince, who would be competing with his brothers to inherit the throne, to focus her attention on her sole son in his bid to rule. Mehmed II's sons had different mothers: Bayezid II's mother was Gülbahar, and his younger brother Cem's mother was Cicek Khatun. Cicek fled the Ottoman realm with Cem traveling to Mamluk territory, where she continued to try to assist her son after the Knights of Rhodes imprisoned him in France.<sup>36</sup>

In the sixteenth century this reproductive pattern altered when Süleyman had several sons and a daughter by his concubine Hurrem and then married her. After Süleyman's reign it became common for a favorite of the sultan to bear him more than one child and often more than one son. The favorite's influence increased as she maintained firm ties to the sultan for a long period as opposed to when a concubine bore only one son and remained with her child when he was sent to the provinces to govern, preventing continuous close contact with the sultan.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 31–37.

<sup>36</sup> Isom-Verhaaren, “Prince Cem,” in “Ottoman-French Interaction,” p. 182.

Beginning with Hurrem, also known as Roxelana, the women of the dynasty became more noticeable to the public through their public works, constructing mosques and other public buildings in Istanbul as well as in provincial cities throughout the empire. Although they themselves remained in the harem, the harem also became the residence of the sultan and thus the center of the empire. By the seventeenth century, the sultan's mother, the valide sultan, had considerable power, as she often maintained dynastic continuity and stability in the early seventeenth century.<sup>37</sup>

Even during the early period when the sultans were still contracting marriages with neighboring dynasties, the children of the sultan were descended from slave women. However, historians tended to represent these wives as the mothers of the sultans, because it was more prestigious for the sultan to be descended from a highborn Muslim woman than a slave concubine, even if it did not give him dynastic legitimacy.<sup>38</sup> In the accounts of the French princess, it was not a highborn Muslim woman but a highborn Christian woman who was portrayed as the sultan's mother. Peçevi and Evliya project late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century policies of reproduction and succession back to the fifteenth century, when the harem functioned quite differently. The harem was a dynamic institution that adapted to meet changing conditions in the empire.

#### FRENCH EVALUATIONS

As Peçevi and Evliya Çelebi indicate, French diplomats had heard legends about a French princess in the harem. Saint-Priest, French ambassador to the Ottoman Empire from 1768 to 1778, derides this tale as absurd in his *Memoires sur l'ambassade de France en Turquie, 1525-1770*. He is outraged at the idea, which he claims may be the responsibility of Roxelana (Hurrem).<sup>39</sup> He insists that no French princess had ever disappeared at any time. But he states that according to the dispatches of Girardin, French ambassador to Istanbul from 1686 to 1689, that while he was in Istanbul, the müfti, that is the chief religious functionary of the Ottoman Empire, accepted the myth as fact. Girardin became the French ambassador to Istanbul only about two years after

<sup>37</sup> Peirce, *Imperial Harem*, pp. 101, 277.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>39</sup> Roxelana is often considered as the source of many evils in the Ottoman Empire.

the death of Evliya Çelebi. In Saint-Priest's own time, the grand vizier spoke to him as though he also believed the legend.<sup>40</sup>

Although Saint-Priest and later French historians reacted with indignation when they read or heard this tale, both Peçevi and Evliya Çelebi include in their accounts Frenchmen who appear to accept it as factual. Although one can dismiss the French priests in Evliya's account as being fictional, since Evliya never traveled to France as he claims to have done, the French ambassador in Peçevi's account is another matter. Peçevi states that he conversed with the ambassador during Hafız Pasha's vizerate, at the end of 1631 or the beginning of 1632.<sup>41</sup> The French ambassador from 1631 to 1634 was Henri de Gournay, comte de Marcheville.<sup>42</sup> During his time as ambassador, religion was a contentious issue between the French and the Ottomans. It is scarcely surprising that he maintained that the princess remained Christian while Peçevi insisted that she converted to Islam. Assuming that Peçevi really did speak to Marcheville, a number of questions remain. Was a translator employed for this conversation? If so, did he translate both sides of the conversation correctly? Did the French ambassador actually believe the story to be true or did he use it as a way to enhance his status in Istanbul and gain his diplomatic ends?

Another version of this legend comes from Dimitrie Cantemir, son of the voivode of Moldavia, who lived in Istanbul from 1688 to 1710. Later, while he was living in Russia from 1714 to 1716, he wrote a history of the Ottoman Empire in which he mentions a myth that a French princess entered Süleyman's harem. Cantemir does not believe the tale because he had not found it mentioned by any "Christian Historian or Genealogist." But he said of the French that they "do not scruple to boast at Constantinople [of] their King's affinity with the Othman race, and on that account claim the precedency of all Christians."<sup>43</sup> Thus it seems probable that although the French might not believe this story themselves, they were quite willing to let the Ottomans think that they did, if it would further French interests in Istanbul.

<sup>40</sup> François-Emmanuel Guignard, Comte de Saint-Priest, *Mémoires sur l'ambassade de France en Turquie, 1525-1770* (Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1974), pp. 19-20.

<sup>41</sup> İsmail Hami Danişmend, *İzahlı Osmanlı Tarihi Kronolojisi*, 4 vols. (Istanbul: Türkiye Yayınevi, 1972), 3: 351-352.

<sup>42</sup> Jean-Louis Bacqué-Grammont et al., *Représentants Permanents de la France en Turquie (1536-1991) et de la Turquie en France (1797-1991)* (Istanbul: Isis, 1991), p. 19.

<sup>43</sup> Dimitrie Cantemir, *The History of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Alexandru Dutu and Paul Cernovodeanu, trans. N. Tindal (Bucharest: Association Internationale d'Études du Sud-Est Européen, 1973), pp. 61-62.

French historians in the first part of the twentieth century seem provoked by the myth. La Jonquière dismisses the account as being a widespread story that was accepted without verification even by serious historians such as Peçevi, Selaniki, and Ali.<sup>44</sup> Deny, the author of the “Walide Sultan” article in the first edition of the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, states “It was obviously the Turks themselves who invented these fables, to explain the favoured treatment accorded the ‘padishah’ of France in Turkey.”<sup>45</sup> While Deny understands the political purpose of these myths to explain the favorable treatment of French diplomats in the Ottoman Empire, he does not consider the implications of the timing of their appearance.

The Ottomans had been granting preferential treatment to the French since the late 1520s. By the time these accounts were written, the Ottoman-French alliance was a traditional if occasionally controversial aspect of the diplomacy of both states, but the alliance between them was no longer as important militarily as it had been throughout most of the sixteenth century.<sup>46</sup> Since the alliance was neither a recent development nor any longer of much military importance, other factors must have influenced the development of this myth that reflect changing conditions of the late sixteenth and the seventeenth century. One possible explanation is that at the end of the sixteenth century there was a rise in religious intolerance in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>47</sup> Therefore preferential treatment of a Christian ally may have needed more justification than in the past. Perhaps diplomats and statesmen could no longer rely solely on *raison d'état*, but also employed kinship to support their foreign alliances.

More importantly, by the end of the seventeenth century, it was evident to perceptive Ottoman observers that relations between the Ottomans and the French were changing. Selaniki already noticed a shift in the balance of power between them at the end of the sixteenth century. By the end of the seventeenth century, the French no longer required Ottoman military aid; rather, the Ottomans needed French

<sup>44</sup> La Jonquière, *Histoire de l'Empire Ottoman*, pp. 174–175.

<sup>45</sup> J. Deny, “Walide Sultan,” *Encyclopedia of Islam*, p. 1117.

<sup>46</sup> Isom-Verhaaren, “Ottoman-French Interaction,” pp. 29–92.

<sup>47</sup> Halil Inalcik discusses the rise of religious fanaticism in the context of the conflict between the Ottomans and the Safavids, during which the Shii Safavids of Iran promoted the Kızılbaş in Anatolia and the Ottomans responded with increasingly severe measures against heretics. This sectarian conflict contributed to increased fanaticism in Ottoman society in the seventeenth century. Inalcik, *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age 1300–1600*, trans. Norman Itzkowitz and Colin Imber (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1973; repr., New Rochelle, N.Y.: Aristide D. Caratzas, 1989), pp. 179–185.

diplomatic assistance. During the long reign of Louis XIV (1643–1715), French relations with the Ottomans varied depending upon which foreign territories the king hoped to conquer. In 1685–1687, he sent a spy to the Ottoman Empire to gather detailed information for plans to attack Istanbul.<sup>48</sup> Although Louis XIV never attempted this conquest, his fluctuating and tepid support of the Ottoman alliance coincided with his plans to attack Habsburg territories. The Ottomans developed more elaborate versions of the myth of the French princess that depicted Ottoman power as superior to that of France, after the balance of power had definitely shifted in favor of France.

Selaniki in another section of his work complained about what he saw as the undue influence of the French ambassador at the Ottoman court, which he interpreted as evidence of the growing power of the infidels.<sup>49</sup> The anxiety this produced is lessened by this legend, for it portrays Ottoman might and the Islamic religion triumphing over the plans of the infidels. In Evliya's account, the young sultan is depicted as mourning when he heard of the infidels' successes raiding Muslim territory. His advisor prophesied that when he conquered Constantinople he would secure a sweet to replace his bitterness. After the conquest, in the section titled distribution of the booty, the advisor of Mehmed tells him that the French princess is that sweet. She is given the name Akide, which means sugar candy.<sup>50</sup> Bitter Muslim defeats are transformed into sweet Ottoman successes.

Women from the families of defeated dynasties were known to have passed into the Ottoman imperial harem. Mehmed II placed royal women from many of the territories that he conquered in his harem, later presenting some of them as wives to his leading supporters. Selim I (r. 1512–1520) placed the wife of the Safavid Shah of Iran, Ismail (r. 1501–1524), in his harem after he defeated him at the battle of Çaldiran, but later he gave her to one of his statesmen.<sup>51</sup> To an Ottoman reader, the account of the French princess would evoke memories of those events. Capturing a royal woman and placing her in the sultan's harem demonstrated victory over the country in question. Her conversion could be viewed as also demonstrating superiority. In Peçeви's account, the French envoy insisted that the princess remained Chris-

<sup>48</sup> Henri Omont, "Projets de prise de Constantinople et de fondation d'un empire français d'Orient sous Louis XIV," *Revue d'histoire diplomatique*, 1893, pp. 195–246.

<sup>49</sup> Selaniki, *Tarih'i Selaniki*, 2: 805–806. See also İpşirli, "Mustafa Selaniki," p. 468.

<sup>50</sup> Evliya, folios 27b, 28a, 31a, 31b.

<sup>51</sup> Anthony Dolphin Alderson, *The Structure of the Ottoman Dynasty* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), Tables 27 and 29.

tian, because he viewed Christianity as the true or superior religion. To Peçevi it was equally important that she became Muslim because this supported his view of the superiority of Islam.

Therefore, during the seventeenth century, as the Ottomans came to question their power in relation to the states of Europe, especially their traditional ally, France, the myth became more elaborate. In the later versions, the placing of a royal woman in the harem and her possible conversion to Islam help support an Ottoman view of their superior power and religion even as it became increasingly clear that the balance of power had shifted away from the Ottoman Empire. This myth about a French princess entering a sultan's harem and bearing his successor was an invention whose development was made possible by the minimal information known about the backgrounds of the mothers of sultans. Although the myth was not based on a historical individual, the myth itself had a historical influence. The princess represented both the diplomatic bond between the Ottomans and the French and the earlier French dependence on the Ottomans. Both the Ottomans and the French accepted this myth and utilized it as long as it served their political purposes.

#### THE HAREM: SYMBOL OF ORIENTAL DESPOTISM

While the Ottomans were elaborating the legend of the French princess in the seventeenth century, English and French authors who wrote about the Ottoman Empire became increasingly fascinated with the harem and began to develop the concept of the harem as a symbol of Oriental despotism.<sup>52</sup> For Westerners, the symbol of the harem, especially the harem of the Ottoman sultan located in his *Saray* or palace, has been a politically charged image since at least the seventeenth century. Western political theorists utilized the harem symbolically to exemplify despotism.

One of the earliest accounts of the harem is found in the *Relatione* of Domenico Hierosolimitano, who served as the third physician of Murad III before leaving the Ottoman Empire and converting to Christianity from Judaism. His account was written about 1611 in Rome, and later authors plagiarized his work, embellishing it with more lurid

---

<sup>52</sup> For a more general discussion of the Western construction of Oriental despotism, see Patricia Springborg, *Western Republicanism and the Oriental Prince* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992); Lucette Valensi, *The Birth of the Despot: Venice and the Sublime Porte*, trans. Arthur Denner (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993).

details in regard to the sultan's relations with the women of the harem. The Frenchman Michel Baudier used Domenico's *Relatione*, as well as *Relazioni* by Ottavio Bon, a Venetian *bailo* in Istanbul from 1604 to 1607, as major sources for his popular book, *Histoire générale du Serrail, et de la Cour du Grand Seigneur, Empereur des Turcs*, which was published in 1624 and reprinted and translated throughout the seventeenth century. This work greatly influenced the seventeenth-century concept of the *Saray*, which continues to the present.<sup>53</sup> As a doctor to the sultan, Domenico had more access than most men to the palace, but he did not have access to the harem as he makes clear in his account.<sup>54</sup> Therefore he was not an eyewitness to what he says about the sultan's relations with his women. Even less so were the men who plagiarized and embellished his account, nevertheless they have become the foundations of the "mythology of the harem."<sup>55</sup> Historians have warned of the unreliability of the earlier European travelers accounts of the harem and the sultan's life, "which are often invented" because they could not have known anything certain about the intimate life of the Sultans.<sup>56</sup> Michael Austin, the translator of Domenico's account, describes the sources of our "knowledge" about the imperial harem.

I have laid particular emphasis on the Harem passages in this edition of Dominic, because they show us clearly how little information about the Harem was available even to a man who was placed as close to the Harem as it was possible for anyone who was not in the Inner Service to be. Yet many of our conceptions about life in the Harem, although much distorted by plagiarization and adaptation, originate in Dominic's account and in the account of his near contemporary Bon. We can see, therefore, upon how fragile a foundation the whole elaborate structure of Harem mythology stands. Halil Ethem concurs: ". . . les récits tout à fait fantaisistes des européens sur le Harem, toujours impénétrable, doivent être acceptés avec une grande circonspection comme appartenant presque toujours au domaine du roman." This in turn calls into question the accuracy of all foreign accounts not only of the Harem but of the *Saray* and the inner corridors of Ottoman power in general.

<sup>53</sup> Domenico Hierosolimitano, *Domenico's Istanbul*, ed. Geoffrey Lewis, trans. Michael Austin (Warminster, Wiltshire: Aris & Phillips, for the E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 2001), pp. i, xvii, 144, 149.

<sup>54</sup> Domenico, *Domenico's Istanbul*, pp. 36, 87, 107, 117.

<sup>55</sup> "Chierici's material forms a part of accepted 'harem mythology,' and both plagiarizers demonstrate the unreliability of the plethora of *Vere Relationi* and *Nouvelles Descriptions* upon which so much modern work is based." Domenico, *Domenico's Istanbul*, p. xviii.

<sup>56</sup> Domenico, *Domenico's Istanbul*, p. 107.

Far too much credence has been given to these accounts, all of which need to be placed under the most thorough scrutiny.<sup>57</sup>

These accounts continue to be the shaky foundation upon which historical novels about a later French woman in the harem, Aimée du Buc de Rivéry, rely.

A tiny proportion of all that has been written about the harem is based on actual eyewitness accounts. Few men, even those who actually traveled to the Ottoman Empire, were in a position to know anything about life in the harem, but this did not prevent them from writing about it, and the influence of their descriptions continues. Paul Rycaut, who traveled to Istanbul in 1660 as private secretary to the English ambassador, introduces readers into the area where the women of the sultan live: "And though I ingenuously confess my acquaintance there (as all other my conversation with Women in Turkey) is but strange and unfamiliar;" nevertheless, he proceeds to tell about the life of these women. "When the Grand Signior resolves to choose himself a Bed-fellow, . . . he throws his handkerchief to her, . . . she comes running and kneels before him, and sometimes enters in at the feet of the Bed, according to the ancient ceremony."<sup>58</sup>

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu traveled to the Ottoman Empire in 1717 with her husband, the English ambassador. She learned Turkish and frequently visited the elite women of the empire, including a favorite of the previous sultan, Mustafa II (1695–1703), in their harems, allowing her to be an eyewitness to their life. Therefore she repeatedly claims that her letters are a more reliable source of accurate information about the harem than accounts by men. She describes her meeting with a favorite of a previous sultan during which she asked her many personal questions:

I went to see the Sultana Hafise, favourite of the last Emperor Mustafa . . . I did not omit this opportunity of learning all that I possibly could of the seraglio, which is so entirely unknown amongst us. She assured me that the story of the Sultan's throwing a handkerchief is altogether fabulous and the manner upon that occasion no other but that he send the Kuslir Aga to signify to the lady the honour he intends her. She is immediately complimented upon it by the others and led to the bath where she is perfumed and dressed in the most magnificent and becoming manner. The Emperor precedes his visit by

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>58</sup> Paul Rycaut, *The Present State of the Ottoman Empire* (1668; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1971), pp. 38–39.

a royal present and then comes into her apartment. Neither is there any such thing as her creeping in at the bed's feet. . . . We travellers are in very hard circumstances. If we say nothing but what has been said before us we are dull and we have observed nothing. If we tell anything new, we are laughed at as fabulous and romantic, not allowing for the difference of ranks, which afford difference of company, more curiosity, or the changes of customs that happen every twenty year in every country.<sup>59</sup>

Lady Mary identifies the historiographical problem concerning information about the imperial harem. Mostly men traveled to the Ottoman Empire, and as men they were not in a position to encounter women who were in the harems of the elite. As a consequence their accounts are based on hearsay at best. But since they have created a vast literature on the subject, when a woman who actually interviewed a sultan's concubine attempted to modify what was the established view, her information was ignored because it did not agree with what was "known" about the imperial harem even though that was based on the imaginings of Western men.

Lady Mary continually complains that other travelers have not been accurate in their descriptions of the harem and women because they were men and never saw them.

You will perhaps be surprised at an account so different from what you have been entertained with by the common voyage writers, who are very fond of speaking of what they don't know.<sup>60</sup> Your whole letter is full of mistakes from one end to the other. I see you have taken your ideas of Turkey from that worthy author Dumont, who has writ with equal ignorance and confidence. 'Tis a particular pleasure to me here to read the voyages to the Levant, which are generally so far removed from truth and so full of absurdities I am very well diverted with them. They never fail to give you an account of the women, which 'tis certain they never saw, . . .<sup>61</sup> I have had the advantage of forming friendships with Turkish ladies and of their liking me, and I can boast of being the first foreigner ever to have had that pleasure. I have visited a Sultana, widow of the late Emperor and by this means I have learned all about the intrigue of the seraglio. She assured me that the story of the handkerchief, so firmly believed among us, has not a syllable of truth.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, *The Turkish Embassy Letters*, ed. Malcolm Jack (London: Virago, 1994), pp. 113, 116, 118.

<sup>60</sup> Montagu, *Turkish Embassy Letters*, p. 85.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

Yet Lady Mary's letters made little impact on the traditional European view of the harem, which was developed by men who had never been admitted to the harems of the elite of the empire. It is their writings that continue to be the sources for the authors of popular fiction.

Alain Grosrichard in *The Sultan's Court: European Fantasies of the East* studies the use of accounts of the harem written during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which served as an "ideological weapon" during the Enlightenment's arguments about the nature of government. The uniformity of accounts by Western men about the harem makes them suspect rather than believable, as they all seem to be copying from one original.

Now it is striking to observe just how much the descriptions of the seraglio of the Grand Turk—the obligatory *topos* of all the accounts of travel in the Orient—are alike, to the point often of repetition in the very same words. This is not to be taken as evidence of corroborative information, nor as proof of their accuracy. Quite the contrary: there is repetition, there is copying (each time with the pretense of contributing something new, something never heard before), because the stereotyped image of the seraglio which was produced at the beginning of the seventeenth century, probably coincides exactly with what is expected.<sup>63</sup>

Repetition is not proof of the accuracy of these accounts; rather, they project an image that is inaccurate but accepted. Later authors to support their claims resort to the argument that since all "observers" related similar scenes, they must be true. Accuracy is of little importance; what matters is the illusion.<sup>64</sup> This ideological weapon that was constructed to combat absolutism in France and England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries continues to be potent to justify Western involvement in the Middle East in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Because of a concern with despotism, which was more a fear of absolutism in France than a genuine understanding of the Ottoman Empire, authors such as Montesquieu and Voltaire wrote on the subject of the sultan's harem.<sup>65</sup> The harem had become a symbol of the ultimate results of despotism; as a symbol, the accuracy of their infor-

<sup>63</sup> Alain Grosrichard, *The Sultan's Court: European Fantasies of the East*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1998), p. 125.

<sup>64</sup> Grosrichard, *Sultan's Court*, pp. xiii, xiv, 125, 169, 185.

<sup>65</sup> Grosrichard, *Sultan's Court*, pp. 26–52.

mation concerning the harem, either that on which they based their writings or what they wrote themselves, was of minor importance.<sup>66</sup>

As a symbol, the political significance of the treatment of women in Islamic societies increased throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. With the change in the balance of power between the Middle East and western Europe, which culminated in the imperial occupation of much of the Middle East by France and England, harems and veils became symbols of a contested ideological battleground.<sup>67</sup> Literature and travel reports continued to be employed as weapons in this political contest. Antoine Galland, a French scholar and traveler, published the first translation of *Arabian Nights* in a European language between 1704 and 1717. This work, whatever its literary merits or failings, became the chief literary work of the Middle East that was available in translation in Europe. Galland published what he admitted was a loose translation that dwelt on the sensual and violent aspects of the Middle East.<sup>68</sup> His version was popular for over a century until in 1840 Edward Lane, an English scholar and traveler, published a new translation, with explanatory notes. Lane informed his readers that he would not describe certain events in the stories because they might find them offensive. He also used the text of the tales as a pretext to include many scholarly notes providing a historical and sociological background to the tales, which he considered had accurately depicted "the character, manners and customs of the Arabs."<sup>69</sup> The next major publication of *Arabian Nights* (1884–1886) was done by Richard Burton, who used the stories as a vehicle to provide information about deviant sexual practices in detail in his notes.<sup>70</sup> The tales became accepted as faithfully representing the norm of behavior in Islamic societies.

Politically, a great transformation occurred in the region when the

<sup>66</sup> The Englishman Paul Rycaut's account of the Ottoman Empire should also be read less as an accurate account of the Ottoman Empire and more as a commentary on English politics; see Linda T. Darling, "Ottoman Politics through British Eyes: Paul Rycaut's *The Present State of the Ottoman Empire*," *Journal of World History* 5 (1994): 71–97. Therefore, any inaccuracies in his account of the harem can be seen less as unwitting errors and more as deliberate distortions to prove a point.

<sup>67</sup> For a spectrum of views on this subject see the following: Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992); Rana Kabbani, *Europe's Myths of Orient* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); and Derek Hopwood, *Sexual Encounters in the Middle East: The British, the French and the Arabs* (Reading, U.K.: Ithaca Press, 1999).

<sup>68</sup> Kabbani, *Europe's Myths*, p. 27; Hopwood, *Sexual Encounters*, pp. 13–14.

<sup>69</sup> Edward W. Lane, *The Thousand and One Nights*, 3 vols. (London, 1838–1841), 3: 686, quoted in Kabbani, *Europe's Myths*, pp. 37, 40.

<sup>70</sup> Kabbani, *Europe's Myths*, pp. 55, 64; Hopwood, *Sexual Encounters*, p. 203.

Ottoman Empire changed from a weak but still formidable state at the beginning of the eighteenth century to a powerless entity that was regularly stripped of territories that various European countries decided they wanted to add to their colonial empires. Imperialists such as Lord Cromer, British consul general in Egypt from 1883 to 1907, used the treatment of women in Islamic societies to justify their foreign rule over these areas. As a result anything that supported the view that these societies were backward and needed to be reformed by Westerners was incorporated into the ideology to serve colonial ambitions.<sup>71</sup>

During the late eighteenth century and into the early nineteenth century, a new French woman, who some authors claim was Aimée du Buc de Rivéry, resided in the Ottoman Imperial harem. Whatever the historical truth about this woman, later in the nineteenth century and then extending into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries she also has become a symbol with political uses that have changed over time. That symbol is still functioning today in the “biographies” or historical novels about Aimée du Buc de Rivéry. While the story lends itself to the genre of romance novels, which explains some of its popularity, another factor is the nature of relations between the West and the Middle East, especially since the later 1960s. Once again, because it is the symbol that is important, the historical accuracy of the tale is immaterial.

#### NAKSHIDIL

Aimée du Buc de Rivéry, a cousin of Josephine, Napoleon’s first wife from Martinique, is the second French woman with royal connections who is rumored to have entered the harem and become the mother of a sultan. Supposedly, Aimée was captured by corsairs from Algiers and later presented as tribute to Abdul Hamid I (r. 1774–1789) by the dey of Algiers. Under the name Nakshidil, she then became the mother of Mahmud II. This identification is impossible because documents show Aimée was still in France in 1788, after Mahmud was born.<sup>72</sup> Some versions of this legend tackle this issue by making her the foster mother of Mahmud while others ignore it altogether. Evidence that Mahmud’s mother was French is found in a letter written by the mother-in-law of

<sup>71</sup> Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, pp. 150–154.

<sup>72</sup> Deny, “Walide Sultan,” p. 1117; Alderson, *Structure of the Ottoman Dynasty*, Table XLIV, n. 3.

the French ambassador to the Ottoman Empire at the time of Nakshidil's death in 1817. She writes:

The Valide sultan is dead. . . . It is said that the deceased Sultane was French, of American origin, and that she was born in Nantes; it is added that at barely two years old, her parents embarked with her for America and they were captured by a corsair who took them to Algiers, where they perished. The little girl was purchased by a slave merchant, who judged by her beauty at such a tender age, that she would one day amply compensate him for the care that he lavished upon her. He was not mistaken in his expectation; at fourteen she was a dazzling beauty, sold to the Dey of Algiers to be included in the tribute that he owed to the Grand-Seigneur. She was sent to Abdul Hamid, who found her beautiful and elevated her to the rank of Kadine, that is to say he married her. She gave him Mahmud, the reigning sultan. Mahmud has always had a great respect for his mother. It is said that she greatly surpassed in amiability the Circasians or Georgians which is not surprising since she was French.<sup>73</sup>

The comtesse who wrote these letters does not identify the source of her information so we are unable to evaluate its reliability. However, if the valide sultan's parents died when she was very young, it is difficult to see how anyone would know much about her background before she arrived in Algiers. Nevertheless, this story, while a little improbable, is quite believable in comparison to claiming that she was Aimée, about whom the comtesse says nothing. Even a woman whose son-in-law was an enemy of Napoleon would surely have mentioned that the Valide was a relative of Josephine if she had heard the story.<sup>74</sup>

However, fifty years later, in 1867, when Sultan Abdul Aziz, son of Mahmud, went to Paris to be entertained by Napoleon III, "He was greeted with great enthusiasm by Napoleon III, who told the press that their grandmothers were related."<sup>75</sup> Another invented tradition concerning a French woman with royal connections in the Ottoman harem was being created to support the political aspirations of the rulers of the Ottoman Empire and France. As in other examples of invented traditions, this legend was loosely connected with a historical phenomenon. Initially this legend also emphasized the relationship between the two rulers, just as the earlier myth had done.

<sup>73</sup> Comtesse de la Ferté-Meun, *Lettres sur le Bosphore, ou relations d'un voyage à Constantinople et en différentes parties de l'Orient pendant les années 1816, 1817, 1818, et 1819*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Chez Locard et Davi, 1822), letter 87, pp. 329–331.

<sup>74</sup> Bacqué-Grammont, *Représentants Permanents*, pp. 52–53.

<sup>75</sup> Wallach, *Seraglio*, p. x.

I include here a more generally known example of an invented tradition created by the Ottomans at the end of the nineteenth century, which indicates how pervasive this phenomenon had become. The invented tradition that the Ottomans elaborated during the reign of Abdul Hamid II (1876–1909) of the Ottoman caliphate also pertains to the history of ideas as well as political history, while relying on a foundation that is vaguely historical. The Ottoman ideology of the caliphate, which Ottoman rulers employed in various ways from the sixteenth to the twentieth century to promote the legitimacy of their rule, achieved its most fully articulated form as the empire crumbled. In the sixteenth century, after the Ottoman Sultan Selim I (r. 1512–1520) conquered Egypt, he brought a descendant of the Abbasid caliphs, Al-Mutawakkil, from Cairo to Istanbul. According to a myth apparently devised in the eighteenth century, Al-Mutawakkil transferred his rights to the caliphate to Selim and his heirs in an official ceremony in Istanbul. There is no contemporary record of this event. In the political ideology of the sixteenth century, as expressed by Lutfi Pasha, grand vizier of Süleyman (r. 1520–1566), the use of the title “caliph” was rightfully claimed by the Ottoman sultan because of his superior might in the Muslim world and his role as protector of it—a concept similar to that of the title *gazi* claimed by the earliest Ottoman rulers. The legend was elaborated in the eighteenth century and still more in the nineteenth precisely because the Ottoman Empire was losing power in relation to the rising states of western Europe. In the nineteenth century, Sultan Abdul Hamid II recognized the political potential of claiming to be the leader of all Muslims in the world, both within his empire and those who lived under British, French, or Russian imperial rule. He used this claim to be caliph of all Muslims to promote unity within his empire, among his ethnically diverse Muslim subjects, especially the Arabs. In his foreign policy, it also gave him leverage with European imperial powers, for example with the British, because of the influence he could exert over Muslims in British India after the British deposed the Mughal ruler.<sup>76</sup>

At the time that the invented tradition of the Ottoman sultan as

---

<sup>76</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of the elaboration of the Ottoman ideology of the caliphate, see Halil Inalcik and Donald Quataert, *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 20–21; Halil Inalcik, “Islamic Caliphate, Turkey and Muslims in India,” in *Shariah, Ummah and Khilafa*, ed. Yusuf Abbas Hashmi (Karachi, Pakistan: Dr. Ishtiaq Husain Qureshi Chair, University of Karachi, 1987), pp. 14–34; Selim Deringil, *The Well Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire, 1876–1909* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1998), pp. 46–49, 169–175.

universal caliph was being promoted to the fullest extent, contemporaries understood that the sultan was modifying the ideology of caliphal succession in response to the political needs of the empire in its final years. Muir states, “the Osmanly Sultans make pretensions not only to the sovereignty of the Moslem world, but also to the Caliphate itself—that is the spiritual as well as political power held by the successors of the Prophet. . . . a fond anachronism.”<sup>77</sup> Twenty-five years later William Ramsay Mitchell states, “Abd-ul-Hamid introduced the new religious idea: he revived the idea of the khalifate . . . [as a scheme for] strengthening Mohammedan feeling and making Turkey the center of Mohammedan revival.”<sup>78</sup>

In the late nineteenth century, the Ottomans utilized invented traditions as other political leaders were doing in the competitive international climate of growing nationalism and exploding imperialism. They appropriated a concept or ideology that already existed in an undeveloped form and elaborated it to meet the needs of the current political situation. The reason these “traditions” were “invented” was precisely to influence contemporary foreign relations. They were effective to the degree that others could be convinced that they were representations of reality. In this international ideological competition, myths about a relative of Josephine in the Ottoman harem flourished as the political climate was conducive to their growth, just as three hundred years earlier legends about a French princess had complemented the diplomatic requirements of that era. The Ottoman sultan and the French emperor were both in need of support for the legitimacy of their rule in the competitive nineteenth-century political context.

The advantages for Napoleon III, a parvenu on the European royal scene who sought legitimacy as a ruler, were clear. He originally came to power by being elected president of the French republic, after which he declared himself emperor. He had no claim to power as his uncle, Napoleon I, had by virtue of his military genius. He was not even the son of Napoleon but of his brother, Louis Napoleon, and Josephine’s daughter by her first marriage, Hortense. Now, through Josephine, he claimed kinship with a dynasty that was founded in the late thirteenth century and that had ruled a great empire.

<sup>77</sup> Sir William Muir, *The Caliphate: Its Rise, Decline, and Fall (From Original Sources)* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1891), p. 590, quoted in Selim Deringil, “The Invention of Tradition as Public Image in the Late Ottoman Empire, 1808 to 1908,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35 (1993): 27.

<sup>78</sup> William Ramsay Mitchell, “The Intermixture of Races in Asia Minor,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 1915–1916, pp. 359–422, quoted in Deringil, “Invention,” p. 11.

The desired benefits for Abdul Aziz were also substantial. The Ottoman Empire, now under intense European pressure, had already lost territory in North Africa to the French and in the Balkans to independence, Russia, or Austria-Hungary. The empire's debt to French and English bankers was growing, which in 1881 would lead to the loss of control over state finances by the government. This invented tradition supported the claims of the Ottoman Empire to be on equal footing with the great powers of Europe, rather than despised as the "Sick Man of Europe." Therefore for both rulers "discovering the fact that they are related" through their mothers gave them power and prestige both within their empires and in their international relations. But this invented tradition initially created to display a connection between the rulers of France and the Ottoman Empire would soon be transformed in conformity with the ideologies of imperialism to demonstrate the despotic nature of Middle Eastern government and Islamic societies' oppression of women.

#### CURRENT POPULARITY OF HAREM NOVELS

None of the novels written about Nakshidil in the twentieth or twenty-first century, *The Veiled Sultan*, *Sultana*, *Valide*, and *Seraglio*, represent her as the contemporary report by the French ambassador's mother-in-law did in 1817: as a French woman of unknown ancestry who was raised by a slave merchant of Algiers from the age of two and sent as tribute by the dey of Algiers when she reached the appropriate age. While one wonders how the Comtesse de la Ferté-Meun could have learned about the early life of Nakshidil, at least she was in Istanbul at the time of Nakshidil's death and might have heard rumors about her. However, the novels do not exhibit any resemblance to this account. A brief consideration of their authors' intentions reveals why they do not follow this report in their plots. First, this woman has no connection to Napoleon, while Nakshidil's relationship to Josephine is a crucial factor in all the novels. Second, Nakshidil is portrayed in these novels as having been a major influence on Selim and especially Mahmud, both noted for the reforms that they initiated in the Ottoman Empire during their reigns. Rather than credit these sultans with the perception to realize the necessity to promote changes, they identify a Western woman as the source for reforms in the Ottoman Empire. But this woman must have been old enough to have been educated in France as Aimée was. How could a woman, even though she was

French, who was raised from the age of two years by a slave merchant in Algiers be a source for reforms and foreign policy in the Ottoman Empire?

All four novels assume Nakshidil to have been Aimée and to have been blond, beautiful, and an important influence on policy, especially foreign relations, in the Ottoman Empire. Since they are all works of fiction, the authors take historical liberties with their plots, which they develop according to their individual agendas and interests. Some authors portray Aimée as the sexual partner of Abdul Hamid, some of Selim, some of both. Some novels portray her as the foster mother of Mahmud, some as his actual mother. Two American women wrote the most recent books, *Valide* and *Seraglio*, which create the most distorted image of life in the harem.

*The Veiled Sultan* was published in 1969 by Margaret Mackie Morrison, under the name March Cost, who published at least seventeen novels from 1932 until her death in 1972.<sup>79</sup> She does not indicate as later authors do that it is controversial to identify Aimée as the mother of Mahmud, but assumes it to be true. She informs her reader that she obtained her information from Benjamin A. Morton, *The Veiled Empress*, and Lesley Blanch, *The Wilder Shores of Love*, neither of which are noted for historical accuracy.<sup>80</sup> Cost wrote a play about Aimée that was never produced, many years before she published the novel, which she wrote on the suggestion of her American agent. Its appearance in 1969 indicates an awakening interest in the Middle East by Americans after 1967 in relation to the Arab-Israeli war. Reeva Simon notes that before this time Americans were scarcely interested in the region. That

<sup>79</sup> Morrison appears to have originally come from Scotland, and there is a British perspective in her novel.

<sup>80</sup> "The theory set out in Morton, *The Veiled Empress*, and elsewhere, to the effect that . . . Nakşidil . . . is to be identified with Marie Marthe Aimée Dubuc de Rivéry of Martinique, does not bear examination. By courtesy of the late Dr. J.K. Birge—himself a believer in the theory—this writer was enabled to see photostats of copies of the documents on which Morton based his argument; careful collation of these with the book showed that Morton had completely misused and even falsified the evidence. Above all there is no proof whatsoever that Aimée even reached Istanbul, let alone become Princess-Mother." Alderson, *Structure of the Ottoman Dynasty*, table XLIV, n. 3. "Anyone wishing to see this sort of fantasy carried to its extreme should read . . . *The Wilder Shores of Love* (New York, 1954). In it there is the story, purportedly based on fact, of one Aimée Dubucq de Rivéry who, captured by corsairs, found herself in the harem of Abdul-Hamid I. There she became the valide sultan Nakşidil, mother of Mahmut II, brought about the pro-French policy of that monarch and instigated reforms. She was helped in all this by being the cousin of Empress Josephine!" Domenico, *Domenico's Istanbul*, p. xxiv.

changed dramatically and the interest intensified after 1979 with the impact of the Iranian Revolution and the hostage crisis on American views of the world.<sup>81</sup>

March Cost's novel does not aspire to be a serious work of fiction, but the author identifies her sources and admits to changing historical events to suit her plot. She does not name the sultan because she combines Abdul Hamid and Selim into one person. Aimée comes to love him and he is the father of her son, Mahmud. An important episode in the book occurs when Nakshidil persuades Mahmud to side with the British. Nakshidil influences Mahmud to support the Russians against Napoleon because she is angry that he divorced Josephine, her cousin.<sup>82</sup> *The Veiled Sultan* differs from *Seraglio* and *Valide* because it depicts a mostly positive image of Aimée's life in the imperial harem. Although Aimée is not allowed to leave, her slave from Martinique sees no reason to do so since the food, the housing, and the company are all superb.

*Sultana* was published in 1983 from an earlier French version, *La Nuit du Serail*, published in 1982 by Prince Michael of Greece. The author, who has written several historical novels, is a member of the royal family of Greece that was a branch of the royal family of Denmark. He was raised in France and Spain and resides in Paris. His portrayal of the Ottoman Empire has many positive aspects. His character Aimée is not a victim but chooses power and comes to love two sultans. In *Sultana* Aimée is given permission to leave, but she chooses to stay because she loves Selim.<sup>83</sup> The author describes her early life in France in detail, emphasizing that she is well educated and that she remains in contact throughout her life with the head of the convent where she had studied in France. Her education and connections enable her to influence Selim with new ideas. In this novel Mahmud is her foster son, whom she persuades to make peace with the Russians to defeat Napoleon.

*Valide*, published in 1986, is by Barbara Chase-Riboud, an African American expatriate who lives in Paris and Rome. She is best known for her novel *Sally Hemmings*, about Jefferson's slave mistress, but all of

<sup>81</sup> Reeva S. Simon, *The Middle East in Crime Fiction: Mysteries, Spy Novels, and Thrillers from 1916 to the 1980s* (New York: Lilian Barber, 1989), pp. vii, viii, 42, 66.

<sup>82</sup> In 1809 Napoleon divorced Josephine because she had failed to produce a child by him.

<sup>83</sup> Compare her love for Selim to the standard view of relationships between Western women and Middle Eastern men found, for example, in Shakespeare's *Othello* and Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio*, in which such love is either viewed as doomed or impossible.

her novels, including *Valide*, deal with the subject of slavery in America. The main character in *Valide* is nameless, a Creole from a convent, until she becomes Nakshidil, thus evading the issue of her identity although the context identifies her with Aimée. The account of the prophecy of Euphemia David on pages 144, 290, and 396 creates the connection with Josephine because the story of Euphemia David, a slave woman on Martinique, predicting that Josephine would become empress, is widely known. The author's note on the identity of Nakshidil at the conclusion of the book states that there is no historical evidence that Aimée was Nakshidil, but by introducing the prophecy about Josephine and her cousin into her novel, she connects Nakshidil to Josephine. Nakshidil, as in the previous novels, is the inspiration for the Ottoman policy that leads to an alliance with Russia that destroys Napoleon when he invades Russia in 1812. Among the many characters in the novel, the chief black eunuch's importance equals that of Nakshidil, who is not a sympathetic character. Her experiences in the harem transform her into a heartless fanatic dedicated to increasing Ottoman power. So although Chase-Riboud does not explicitly identify Nakshidil with Aimée, she has her play the same role in this novel as characters identified as Aimée do in the others.

In an author's note, Chase-Riboud leads the reader to believe that her novel is historically accurate: "The characters in this novel are real. Some are famous, and some, just as extraordinary, have never had the right to a biography of their own."<sup>84</sup> She implies that she is writing the biography of Nakshidil. She begins her narrative with a letter written by the French ambassador's mother-in-law and ends with a note about Nakshidil's identity that lists her sources of information including scholarly works on the Ottoman Empire. All of this is meant to persuade the reader to accept what she fantasizes as historically accurate.

*Seraglio* by Janet Wallach, the most recent novel about Nakshidil, also raises the issue of the difference between fiction and history. On the copyright page it states in very small print: "This book is a work of fiction. Although many of the names, characters, places, and incidents are based on historical research, the work is a historical novel drawn from the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual living persons is entirely coincidental."<sup>85</sup> But then Wallach begins the book by stating in a prominent author's note that: "This book is based on the

<sup>84</sup> Chase-Riboud, *Valide*, p. ix.

<sup>85</sup> Wallach, *Seraglio*, p. vi.

life of Aimée . . . who was seized by pirates and sent to the sultan's harem in Istanbul. There at Topkapi Palace, she became the wife of one Turkish sultan and the mother of another," thus leading the reader to believe that this is an account based on fact. She continues with a quote from the *Journal de France* about Sultan Abdul Aziz's visit of 1867.<sup>86</sup> Wallach's intention is clearly to persuade readers that they will find history here in the form of a novel.

This book includes multiple clichés about life in the harem, which is characterized by violence and unnatural sex, following Rycout rather than Montagu in depicting relations between the sultans, the eunuchs, and the harem women. Since it is written from the perspective of the chief black eunuch, Tulip, one never truly empathizes with Aimée. She is a victim whose chief attraction is that she knows how to dress with French flair.<sup>87</sup> Tulip calls the sultan a "lecherous old Turk" who indicates his choice of Nakshidil by dropping his handkerchief. She is instructed to kiss the hem of the bedcover and crawl into the sultan's bed.<sup>88</sup> Nakshidil becomes a favorite of Selim until Napoleon attacks Ottoman territory, leading to his disenchantment with all things French. She influences his policy because of her background and is more than just his sexual partner. The obstacle of documents placing Aimée in France at the time of Mahmud's birth in Istanbul is resolved by making Aimée Mahmud's foster mother and giving his birth mother the same name, Nakshidil. As valide sultan, Aimée tells Mahmud to turn to France for the survival of the Ottoman Empire.

The book exhibits an unmistakable prejudice against Islam, especially on page 258, where Tulip asks himself, "Who is this Allah in whose name young boys are castrated, young girls are raped, and tens of thousands of all ages are enslaved? What god does he represent that brings out such evil in man?" He then continues with thoughts that all religions are associated with violence.<sup>89</sup>

Returning to the author's note at the beginning, Wallach's reasons for retelling this fantasy relate to current events in the Middle East.

This book is based on the life of Aimée du Buc de Rivéry. . . . The story has always been controversial. Was Aimée, in fact, the same person as the harem woman called Nakshidil? . . . After several years of

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., pp. ix, xii.

<sup>87</sup> Wallach has also written a biography of Coco Chanel, the French fashion designer, and a book on how to dress for success.

<sup>88</sup> Wallach, *Seraglio*, pp. 11, 71-73, 128.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 258.

## Isom-Verhaaren: Royal French Women in the Ottoman Sultans' Harem 193

research, visits to Topkapi and to the impressive turbe where she is buried, and with the help of Ottoman scholars who combed the Topkapi Palace archives, I had to concede that little specific information exists about Aimée/Nakshidil or, for that matter, any of the women in the Ottoman sultan's harem. No journals or diaries were permitted inside the imperial harem, no contact was allowed with the world outside, the women's pasts were deliberately erased, their futures defined by the palace. . . . It was harder to prove that she was the missing daughter of the Martinique plantation family du Buc de Rivéry, yet many students of Turkish history believe it to be true. . . . I began this book as a biography and ended writing it as a historical novel. . . . I hope it will provide a glimpse of her mysterious life in the seraglio two centuries ago. Perhaps too it will shed some light on the Muslim world today, whether it be a handful of rulers ensnared in plots for power and succession or the millions of women who still live cloaked behind the veil of the harem.<sup>90</sup>

This quote reveals the author's attitudes about historical accuracy and the Islamic Middle East. Reeva Simon states in *The Middle East in Crime Fiction* that readers might be motivated to read novels set in exotic locales because "They are a painless means to soak up information about parts of the world foreign to the reader and about subjects he would not be willing to research actively." Moreover, if an author claims to have used the archives, then the reader believes that the resulting work of fiction "must be accurate."<sup>91</sup> Unwary readers naively believe that they have easily obtained accurate information about either the past or another area of the world. An excellent example of this phenomenon is the furor over Dan Brown's thriller, *The Da Vinci Code*. Because Brown claims on the first page of the book "Fact: all descriptions of . . . documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate" readers forget that this is a work of fiction.<sup>92</sup> Some readers assume while others question its accuracy. Books about an area of the world or an aspect of history with which readers are less familiar are more likely to be accepted as accurate because readers are less able from their own knowledge to question their reliability.

The author's note also reveals Wallach's true purpose in retelling this story: her inaccurate novel set two hundred years ago is supposed to "shed some light on the Muslim world today," which she character-

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., pp. ix–x.

<sup>91</sup> Simon, *Middle East in Crime Fiction*, pp. 135–136.

<sup>92</sup> Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

izes as controlled by a handful of rulers ensnared in plots and inhabited by millions of women living in harems. We are presented with the idea of an unchanging Middle East, where what was purportedly true of two hundred years ago remains the same today. Once again we see a connection made between the harem and Oriental despotism, where the plotting rulers and the veiled women are combined in the same sentence.

Both time and nationality affect how the authors have interpreted the myth of Aimée in the harem. Although Chase-Riboud's novel is closer in date of publication to that of Prince Michael, it more closely resembles in intent that of Wallach. Both these American authors create fictional female characters that are victims of the Islamic Middle East. Both understand that identifying Aimée with Nakshidil is implausible but yet continue to steer the unwary reader to accept it as carefully researched history. Both emphasize the violence, cruelty, and slavery of the Ottoman Empire; no woman could possibly adapt to this life unless she had been brutalized or was deprived. *Valide* and *Seraglio* both depict life in the Middle East as one that is threatening, backward, one that changes women for the worse by enslaving them in the harem. Their images of the harem include the venerable stereotypes that Lady Mary derided at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

Both *Valide* and *Seraglio* reflect the United States' troubled relations with the Middle East. *Valide* is a product of the 1980s with concerns over the Iranian revolution and the American inability to successfully free the hostages from the U.S. embassy. *Seraglio*, published almost twenty years later, reflects the more troubled world at the beginning of the twenty-first century, when after the end of the Cold War the threat of communism has been replaced in the United States by fear of Muslim terrorists. Religious extremists of many persuasions have committed violent acts around the world, but none has had the impact on the American consciousness that Muslims have had. In light of September 11, 2001, and the current war on terrorism that has led to military engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq, the American public is receptive to fiction that represents the Muslim inhabitants of the Middle East as unalterably violent, backward, scheming, and oppressive, especially to women, in order to justify American actions in this troubled region of the world.

Books about women in the Middle East, fiction or nonfiction, are popular at the present time. Two recent examples, Geraldine Brooks's *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* and Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, while providing fasci-

nating anecdotes about some women's lives in some Islamic countries in the Middle East, do not portray the whole spectrum of women's experiences in the region. Brooks deliberately chose not to write about Turkey: "Why dwell on the extreme, when it would be just as easy to write about a Muslim country such as Turkey, led by a woman, where one in six judges is a woman, and one in every thirty private companies has a woman manager?" She dismisses Turkey because she does not believe it is a model for the radicals of the Islamic world.<sup>93</sup> These books on women in the Middle East are not neutral; they support a view of the Middle East that justifies western intervention to reform the area. On the other hand, books such as Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam* demonstrate that this very intervention has inflamed the issue of women's rights by connecting it to strategies of Western imperialism.<sup>94</sup>

History in the form of invented traditions has often been enlisted to justify the actions of the present. Academic historians generally attempt to portray the complexity of current conditions in the Middle East, with the understanding that the United States and other Western nations have some accountability for the circumstances there owing to past policies; in contrast, popular history in the form of historical novels presents a simpler picture in which Oriental despotism is tied to the harem. In this portrayal, the Middle East's only acceptable future is to change in accordance with Western values. If the struggles of the region are all the result of flaws in Islam and the traditions of the Middle East, then no difficult changes are demanded of Americans and U.S. foreign policy. For many readers, these novels about the harem reinforce their anti-Muslim prejudices, as they believe that they accurately portray life both in the past and the present.

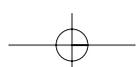
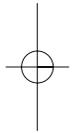
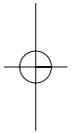
The reign of French women in the imperial harem has extended from the sixteenth century into the twenty-first century. Where once they symbolized the alliance between a Muslim sultan and a Christian king, now they symbolize the pretext for Western domination of the Middle East. Ottoman authors fabricated the fifteenth-century French princess to ensure support for cooperative diplomacy between Muslims and Christians. Western authors continue to weave tales about Mah-

<sup>93</sup> Geraldine Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* (New York: Random House, 1995), p. 177; Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (New York: Random House, 2003).

<sup>94</sup> Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, pp. 2, 162–168.



rud's mother, the valide sultan Nakshidil, to support Western intervention in the Middle East. Where the invented tradition of kinship between the Ottoman and French dynasties was once symbolic of their friendship, the mythical Nakshidil is now a symbol of the oppression of women in Islamic societies, which has been used since the nineteenth century to justify the occupation of these societies for their reform. While women have been used symbolically in the Middle East for centuries to create connections between groups, now their symbolic value is to justify the disruption of peaceful international relations.



Copyright of *Journal of World History* is the property of University of Hawaii Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.