The Public and the Private: Discourses and Identifications among Vanlı Women in Istanbul[1]

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This text considers a »public Istanbul« not in terms of a bounded physical space, but as a social field à la Bourdieu, in which people are exposed to public discourses. It is argued that the »public« permeates individuals' lives to different degrees through discourses that are perpetuated by state apparatuses and by other groups. The »private« identity negotiations of women from Van (Eastern Turkey) who live in social housing blocks in Istanbul are explored in the context of public discourses these women experience in their lives. These women from Van are, for instance, exposed to official state discourses about migration to Istanbul, Turkish citizenship, Turkish and Kurdish discourses on Kurdishness, community discourses on their place of origin and on »traditions«, discourses on womanhood, and religious discourses on appropriate Muslim behavior. In this paper, a description of some of these public discourses is followed by an account of how three women, Hediye, Ayla, and Nur, create coherent narratives of identity through interacting with these public discourses. As I will show, the public sphere in which they move is

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diffracted and reshaped by these women's activities in the private sphere.

Research background

This article is based on ongoing research for my PhD. My investigation into the lives of people from Van was initially based on regular visits to a village in Van province as well as Van city for the last ten years. Information gleamed through participant observation, genealogical research and interviews there was then supplemented by seven months of fieldwork among people from Van in a neighborhood of Istanbul I call Tepelik. There I visited regularly and taught English to the children of the residents. This enabled me to meet more representatives of households, most of them women. I carried out interviews, investigated genealogies and took part in neighborhood activities, such as drinking tea together, cleaning carpets and a prayer meeting. I also attended a fundraising dinner of the local Vanlı hometown association and a large-scale picnic for Vanlı in Istanbul organised by all the Vanlı hometown associations together.

Vanlı women in Istanbul's Tepelik neighborhood

The Vanlı women and their families are part of a rural migration to cities which began after the Second World War (Keyder 2000, Erder 2000). The migrants that I am concerned with in this article are mostly Kurdish and from rural parts of the province of Van, in the east of Turkey. None of them, even the children, call themselves »Istanbullu«[2] – rather, they are »Vanlı« [3], or even more specifically, from certain districts of Van. They live in Tepelik [4], a lower-class quarter of central Istanbul. Many of them came to Istanbul after a severe earthquake in Van province in 1976. They were offered temporary housing for the winter in eight housing blocks, totaling eighty flats. Of the original families, thirty-five still occupy their flats. Nine more flats have been bought for some of their

2 See Öncü on the »myth« around *İstanbullu* and the concomitant »others« (2000: 117-119).

3 In this article, I refer to people from Van as »Vanlı«. The ending li/lı/lü/lu designates a person from a certain place.

4 In order to protect the identities of my informants, I have changed the names of the Istanbul quarter as well as personal names. I also avoid the use of district names of Van for the same reason.

children who have married and set up their own households. Thirteen additional Vanlı households later moved to the Istanbul housing blocks from Van to be closer to their relatives. Four flats are now empty, and the remaining nineteen have been bought by non-Vanlı. Thus, of the eighty flats, fifty-seven are now occupied by Vanlı. Fifteen Vanlı households are made up of extended families spanning three generations. The Vanlı in the blocks make up a multi-stranded network of households. They are linked by a common origin from three districts of Van and by being neighbors in the same blocks. Most importantly, many of them are linked by blood or marriage ties. Furthermore, frequent day-to-day interactions between many of the Vanlı have intensified these relations.

While the blocks and their inhabitants are part of Tepelik neighborhood, the spatial organization of the site separates the block slightly from the rest of the neighborhood. Physically the blocks are distinct because they are surrounded by small yards and park and playground areas. It is said that the blocks were originally intended as lodgings for police officers. Other houses in the area have been built much closer together, facing directly onto streets, often even without pavements to separate them from the throughways. Many of the buildings in this denser urban fabric also house textile and woodwork workshops in their basements or on the ground floors, as well as a variety of shops and grocers, thus blurring the line between residential and commercial/industrial area.

By contrast, the Van blocks were specifically designed as residential spaces, with plenty of open space between them allowing children to play in safety; the women wash carpets and wool in the yards, and groups of old men or housewives socialize on benches during the summer months. The block inhabitants can be considered privileged in that they do not pay rent and are thus significantly better off than other families in the area with similar income. Some families who live in the blocks have been living rent-free for the last thirty years. The future of the blocks, however, is uncertain. The land belongs to a foundation, while the blocks belong to the local government. The block inhabitants have recently been asked to pay rent, but would prefer to buy the flats instead. They argue that they have invested a lot of money in the improvement of the blocks, which were bare cement casings without windows or doors when they moved in. Apart from the basic kitchen, bathroom, flooring and paintjobs in the flats, the residents of most blocks have invested in prestigious plastic double glazing, and have had the outside and the stairwell of the blocks repainted several times. Some flats have also had gas-heating installed, replacing the older coal stoves.

While the housing blocks may be physically somewhat separated from the neighborhood, the inhabitants are socially and economically firmly embedded in the quarter of Tepelik. The women do their shopping in local grocery stores and at the weekly market. They also, like many other women, work for piecework shops in Tepelik from home, sewing beads onto clothes. In addition, many Vanlı have relatives who have moved nearby and with whom there is often daily contact. The blocks thus represent a concentration of Vanlı, but their residents by no means constitute a closed group. However, from my observations I would posit that the social relations of the Vanlı women are often restricted to block inhabitants (who may be either non-Vanlı neighbors or people from the same district and/or relatives) and to relatives from outside the blocks. There is, for instance, with the exception of the few Alevi women living in the blocks, little interaction between the Sunni Vanlı women and the many Alevi women in the area.

The Vanlı are a mixture of lower class and lower middle class families whose financial situation is improved by the fact that they do not have to pay rent for their housing. Of the first generation women, none have worked outside the house. Men mostly worked in semi- skilled jobs, such as drivers or electricians. Quite a few work, or have worked, for the local council, which is apparently a result of the contacts established by one Vanlı who joined the party of the local authority government in the 1980s. Some Vanlı have opened their own stores which are run by several households together. One extended family runs a bakery, another a furniture workshop and store, while a third extended family has just opened its third grocery store. Two men, both middle-aged, are qualified engineers, and two other men have worked as civil servants. Among the second generation of young men a lack of qualifications is still prevalent. Some young women work in the ubiquitous and highly exploitative textile workshops, while a few have managed to qualify and work in professional jobs.

The local primary school is close by and all children attend school, at least up until the eighth year. Some girls then leave or are withdrawn from school by their parents, and some boys have displayed a great degree of disinterest in schooling. Markedly, many of the girls are academically ambitious, aiming for university study and a job afterwards, in contrast to their mothers, who received very little, if any, schooling. When I offered English lessons for the block inhabitants, most of my students were girls, and some parents complained that they could not get their sons to attend.

»The public«: A discourse community

While the group of Vanlı living in the blocks is not completely closed to the outside, they can nevertheless be considered a »discourse community«. Within this permeable community, there are discourse »strands«. Discourse »strands« (»Diskursstränge«, in Jäger 2001) are a collection of discourses that share the same theme, i.e. a strand represents all the things that are said/thought about a certain theme. Discourse »fragments« are smaller units within each strand, and represent different discursive positions on the same theme. Within these fragments, there are collective symbols that allow participants in these discourses to interpret social reality (ibid: 84). In the following paragraphs, I will outline discourse strands I have identified as most relevant to the lives of the Vanlı women in the housing blocks. Within each strand, of course, there is theoretically an infinite variety of discourse fragments; however, in this paper they are sometimes presented in opposites. This simplification is unavoidable but will be balanced by accounts of individual narratives later on.

Discourse strands about places of origin

Most of the Vanlı in the blocks have a rural background since their migration to Istanbul took place over thirty years ago, when villagers from Van province had not yet moved in great numbers to the city of Van. They thus came to Tepelik directly from their villages. While all of the families living in Tepelik now have relatives who have left villages for Van city, the older generation and many of the second generation women (who migrated with their husbands or came to Istanbul in marriage) experienced a childhood, and perhaps also adulthood, in a village. Most of the young adults and children who were born in Istanbul know about their parents' village through visits to Van, visits from relatives to Tepelik, and through the narratives of their parents. The »village« and »village life« are collective symbols that are used by all the Vanlı women and men I have met.

A common discursive position when talking about village life is nostalgia. Nostalgia for village life is particularly strong when a woman has many relatives remaining in the village whom she does not see often, or if she remembers a carefree childhood; often the girls of the house do not need to work very hard, as their mother and the »brides« are available to do housework. Virilocal residence after marriage, i.e. with or

near the husband's family, means that many women lose touch with their friends from childhood and adolescence.

Nostalgia is also embodied knowledge, as contrasts are made between village life and urban discomforts: Istanbul's toxic smell of burning coal in the winter and the sickly-sweet smell of uncollected rubbish in the summer is contrasted with the fresh rural mountain air; the chlorinated undrinkable tap water in the city with the clear cold streams in the village; the white bread loaves of the city with the flat bread baked in the *tandır* ovens of the village; the anonymity and coldness of urban relations with the crowded, happy gatherings in the village; the danger of urban life for children and teenagers compared with the freedom to roam in the village; and the weddings in stuffy wedding »salons« with cheap cake and lemonade are compared to outdoor dancing and home-made food at village weddings. In short, a rural idyll (cf. Rapport/Overing 2000: 315) is evoked. This perceived idyll becomes particularly poignant because there is no return to the village. On the contrary, through the process of chain migration more and more relatives have moved to Istanbul and other Western Turkish cities in an effort to increase their economic and social opportunities. The lack of profitability of animal husbandry in Van's rural areas has forced many young men to work on construction sites outside of Van, while the lack of schooling opportunities in the countryside has led many of them to bring their families to Van or to Western Turkey, in the hope that their children will one day do better.

Thus another discourse fragment sees village life in a much more critical light. All the women I have spoken to are grateful for living in the city, as they say the living conditions are better. Though carrying water in the village is mostly a thing of the past, many women speak of the hard work involved in this task, as well as constantly baking bread for big families, looking after the animals, and living through the harsh winters. Additionally, women who now live in the city are aware of the inherent power they have obtained with the allocation of household budgets. In rural Turkey by contrast, it is usually the men who go to town to do the shopping unless enterprising salesmen come to the village. Furthermore, in Istanbul many of the women even earn their own money with their sewing and embroidery skills, working for the piece-making workshops. Many women also participate in money and gold collection days with neighbors and relatives.[5] When I asked whether

5 Women who trust each other through neighborhood, friendship or family ties come together at regular intervals and contribute a fixed amount of money or gold to the group. The lump sum is then handed to a different woman each time, following a pre-arranged order. This allows the women

their relatives in the villages also practiced this custom, one woman replied, »The women [there] can't lay their hands on a penny!«[6] In addition, the women in Istanbul are able to make use of health services for themselves and their children more easily. At the health centers women can also obtain information about and access to birth control methods. Although health circuits now extend to villages and many women there now have fewer children, village life is frequently still accompanied by too many pregnancies, stillbirths, and even infant deaths. Finally, many women hope that the city can offer their children better educational opportunities.

As Rapport and Overing note, the rural-urban distinction is made using ideas about progress and »modernity« (Rapport/Overing 2000: 320). The city thus represents the future, where most Vanlı villagers will soon end up living. A city like Istanbul, with all its evils of pollution, crime, drug use, and anonymity of social relations, is still seen as the inevitable way forward. Furthermore, as other researchers focusing on low-income quarters of Istanbul have noted (e.g. Erder 1996, White 2002), the living space which might be called *gecekondu mahallesi*, i.e. a neighborhood of shanty housing[7], or more recently *varoş* by outsiders[8], is not necessarily seen in such a negative light by those inhabiting it.

to make bigger purchases without having to use credit cards or making debts.

6 »Kadının ellerine bir kuruş gelmiyor ki«.

7 Gecekondu literally means »put up overnight«. While the first gecekondus were indeed one-storey buildings which were put up quickly and surrounded by a bit of garden, later migrants built multi-storey buildings, albeit in an unplanned manner. Research on gecekondu quarters in the cities can be found in a thematic issue of the European Journal of Turkish Studies 2004, as well as Erder 1996, Wedel 1996 and 1997, Işık/Pınarcıoğlu 2001. Pérouse has criticised the overuse of gecekondu which is used to describe a multitude of phenomena, legal, architectural and social (2004: 1-3).

8 *Varoş*, said to be the Hungarian word for »suburb«, has become part of popular Turkish discourse when describing »the others« in the city. Işık and Pınarcıoğlu quote Oyar's definition: »The term varoşlar, which has been repeated again and again over the last years […], has come to mean settlements which have been founded on the outskirts of and within the city, but which are psychologically, socially, and culturally separate with their rural identity«.(Oyar 1997: 78 in Işık/Pınarcıoğlu 2001: 194, my translation).

Discourse strand on Islam

In both the village and the city, the religious attitude of Vanlı women I talked to could be summarized by a statement one of the women made: »First of all, I am a Muslim, *çok şükür*«[9]. Many of the women described being a Muslim as something to be grateful for, in return for which one should pay one's debts (*borç*). Praying five times a day and fasting during *Ramazan* and during other holy days are taken-for-granted duties that women perform happily – in the women's everyday conversations they spoke approvingly of these duties and of the comfort these rituals bring them. In the city, sending one's children to Quran classes during the summer holidays and attending prayer sessions for special occasions (*mevlüd*) are also valued. Some women took their religious commitment even further, attending women's prayer and religious discussion meetings (*sohbet*), reading the Quran regularly, or taking Quran lessons if they did not know how to, and studying other religious pamphlets and books offering guidelines and rules for everyday life.

The women all agreed on the fact that »there is so much more to learn« about being a good Muslim, but realistically, they made pragmatic choices about their religious commitment. If a woman had small children, she was too busy looking after them and keeping up with her household tasks to sit down for religious study. If she was making much-needed money from the time-consuming piecework, she would think twice about joining the *sohbet* circle. Similarly, I found that although every individual was meant to be responsible for the saving of their own soul, the women were more perturbed by other women than by men who did not fulfill these duties. There is thus a pragmatic acceptance of different religious commitment men and women are expected to make; while men might be too busy working to perform *namaz* regularly, or are drinking alcohol because »men will be men«, similar behavior by women would not be accepted as easily. However, women whose husbands *do* pray, fast and do not drink, give thanks for their good fortune.

Discourse Strand on Traditions (*örf adet*)

»*Örf adet*«, meaning »traditions«, is a phrase which evokes a complete lifestyle. I have heard this phrase used in very different situations: sometimes in order to quash any criticism of the status quo, and sometimes, in

9 »Thank Goodness«

a resigned manner, in order to describe religious/traditional rules that both men and women are required to follow. Thus, denoting behavioral rules as *örf adet* is a strategic way of getting widespread acceptance for them. The elderly generation is often said to be the warden of *örf adet*, but realistically, these rules are kept alive or revived through their appropriation and/or internalization by individuals. »Our traditions« (*bizim örf adetlerimiz*) are an undefined mélange of village, Vanlı, Kurdish and Muslim behavioral rules. Thus for instance, circumcision, semi-arranged marriages, the silence of daughters-in-law in front of their elders, women's modest attire, hospitality towards visitors, the reluctance of some parents to let their daughters go to school or work, respect for elders, and gender-segregated socializing are all behavior said to be based on *örf adet.*

Discourse strand on being Kurdish

It is noteworthy that not all people from Van are Kurds, but that most migrants with a rural background are[10]. Of the Vanlı in the Tepelik blocks, there was only one household that was not Kurdish. The intensity with which the majority of Vanlı identify themselves as Kurds depends on several factors. The first factor is the district they come from. As clashes between the army and the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) have been concentrated in the southern districts of Van province, Vanlı from other districts have been much less touched by the war and appear less conflicted in their ethnic stance. The Vanlı who have migrated to Tepelik are from three districts all to the north of Van, an area with less Kurdish nationalism and pro-Kurdish activism[11]. A second factor influencing how Kurdish Vanlı feel is related to migration; Çelik points out that Kurds who have been forced to migrate by the military's village expulsion policy often form a »resistance identity« in the city (2005: 150), in contrast to Kurds who are part of older migration waves. The Vanlı migrants in Tepelik are of two kinds. The first is an early group which migrated to the city in the aftermath of a destructive earthquake in 1976.

10 This is true today, as there are no Armenian rural settlements remaining in the Van area.

11 They have, though, in the past, voted for the pro-Kurdish parties. In the 2002 general elections, there was considerable support for the DEHAP (Democratic People's Party),: in district 1: DEHAP 26.44, ANAP (Motherland Party, centre-right) 23.76, AKP (Justice and Development Party, religious-conservative) 16.35, in district 2: AKP 31.19, DEHAP 23.82, DYP (True Path Party, centre-right) 8.10, in district 3: DEHAP 53.86, AKP 15.03, CHP (centre-left) 8.49 (source: http://www.belgenet.com).

This migration preceded the formation of the PKK and the armed conflict which began in the early 1980s. The second group consists of families who have come to Istanbul since the 1980s, principally for employment rather than political reasons.

A third factor influencing the degree to which Vanlı identify as Kurds are their socio-economic ambitions. Çelik notes that even some forced migrants cut themselves off from politically active relatives and acquaintances because their priorities are economic survival (ibid). In the lower and lower middle class families I have met, parents are very concerned about getting by and offering their children better opportunities, be it through education, a good marriage or a good job. Nevertheless, I have been told that up until a few years ago, there was a lot of rioting in Tepelik and neighboring quarters by left-wing[12] and Kurdish youth, particularly on sensitive days, such as 1 May or 21 March (*Newroz*)[13]. Some young men from the blocks were said to be involved. However, these activities seem to have petered out.

A fourth factor shaping Kurdish identity is the social network that individuals belong to and the dominant discourses present in these networks. Among women, being Kurdish is often a taken-for-granted or unpoliticized attribute. It means that the women of the older and the middle generation can joke, fight, and talk in Kurdish to each other and their spouses. It does not necessarily mean that they speak Kurdish to their children, who grow up speaking Turkish in Istanbul, or worry about whether their children will learn Kurdish. For most people, categorical identification as a Muslim is more salient than being Kurdish. Judging from my interviews and research, for most of the women, the prospect of their children marrying a non-Sunni or a non-Muslim is a much more worrying prospect than their not speaking any Kurdish or marrying a Turk instead of a Kurd.

Finally, it is important to note that a discourse of Kurdish solidarity is often unable to overcome entrenched regional prejudices. A discourse of Vanlı solidarity, for example, may be more powerful than a Kurdish

12 Many inhabitants of Tepelik are Alevi, many of whom have strong links to left-wing politics. Graffiti on the walls in the area shows support for the centre-left CHP and for more radical organizations.

13 Newroz/Nevruz, with the Kurdish and Turkish spelling respectively, is a spring holiday celebrated all over Central Asia. The lighting of fires is said to commemorate the celebration of the death of a tyrant. However, in Turkey, the day has been appropriated as a symbol of Kurdish nationalism and the call for cultural rights (the spelling in itself is controversial, as the »w« is banned by a »Turkish alphabet law«), ever since Kurdish prisoners set themselves on fire in a prison in Diyarbakir in 1982 in order to protest against the torture under the military regime of 1980.

one, and I have often heard Vanlı diatribes against Kurds who come from other Kurdish cities, such as Diyarbakır. Similarly, on a sub-regional level, many Vanlı are still able to evoke tribal loyalties among people. This becomes particularly obvious during local and general elections, when candidates have in the past managed to collect thousands of bloc votes on the strength of shared tribal membership.

Today, children in Tepelik, unlike their parents' generation, are enrolled at school for at least eight years, during which time they are exposed to the hegemonic discourse fragments about Turkishness that silence other discourses about Turkey's ethnic and religious variety. Even if the children are exposed to discordant discourse fragments at home, educational and professional ambitions seem to outweigh concern for minority ethnic solidarity. At school Vanlı share classes with children from all over Anatolia who have migrated to Tepelik. They are unified in their efforts to »do better« than their parents, especially the girls. Particularly mothers support these efforts because they have experienced their own participation in urban life as impeded by illiteracy, lack of general knowledge, and poor Turkish language skills.

I observed the only explicit, and thus perhaps politized, identifications as Kurds during Vanlı hometown association meetings. Officially, hometown associations provide a network of mutual support for Vanlı, just as they do for migrants to Istanbul from all over Anatolia, but its members also strive to establish and maintain contacts with local authorities and political parties. Vanlı with political ambitions sometimes become active in the hometown associations, of which there are several in Istanbul and one just next to the housing blocks in Tepelik; political parties may flirt with the associations in order to obtain bloc votes. The DTP (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi* – Democratic Society Party) seems to have most contact to the associations due to its Kurdish interests. A fundraising dinner and a large-scale annual picnic I attended as part of hometown association events featured Kurdish singers and some speeches in Kurdish. It is noteworthy that the use of Kurdish in public alone often suffices to label an event »political«. Because the local hometown association in Tepelik does not include any female members, these politicized identifications seem more salient to the men, and furthermore only to those particularly active in the association.

Discourse strand on Vanlı women

»If you are writing about women, I'll tell you about my mother and sister and make you cry. You will see how incredibly difficult their lives

have been«, one young Vanlı woman who lives near the blocks told me. During the course of my research in Van and Istanbul I have heard many stories about the difficulties Vanlı women face, particularly in the village[14]. In my conversations with them, women of different ages drew attention to their being »married off« at a young age, some of them barely having reached puberty. They talked about the many children they had, some of whom died. They remembered the hard physical work in the village and women ageing before their time. They spoke about how, if they were married, their happiness depended more on good relations with their mother- and sisters-in-law and fellow brides rather than with their husband. In this discourse, rural life is considered more difficult than urban life, perhaps for two reasons. First, the physical hardship of village life takes its toll on women, and second, women feel more in control of their lives in the city.

While urban life is portrayed as providing women with the opportunity to attend literacy courses, earn money from home, and visit health centers, there are still complaints about the problems of being a woman. As mothers, women worry about their children's safety in the city; as wives they make do with the money their husbands bring home and thank God that their husbands don't drink or gamble; as daughters-in-law women look after their parents-in-law and probably observe some traditional *örf adet* avoidance rules such as refraining from eating, drinking, speaking or caressing their children in front of their fathers-in-law.

Despite the small income some woman have managed to secure through their piecework, they are financially dependent on their husbands, and should they be unhappy in their marriages, would mostly be unable to get a divorce. They would, as housewives, have paid no social security contributions, and realistically, many of the men earn too little money to pay alimony, even if they were prepared to do so. A woman's decision to get divorced is often not supported by her family, who may refuse to support her morally and financially. Furthermore, while the state mostly awards women custody of children, Vanlı *örf adet* »demand« that children stay with the father's family after a divorce.

While I am not suggesting that most marriages are unhappy, it is also true that the penalties incurred by a separation or divorce are understood by women and weighed carefully. As a result, women who do experience an unhappy marriage may be forced to remain in the relationship. In my research among the Vanlı migrants in Istanbul, I noted three

14 Bora and Üstün describe the collective narrative of experienced violence that women in Turkey pass from generation to generation (2005: 23).

cases of divorce in the wider area[15]. In each case, the woman's family supported her decision for divorce, two women returning home to their parents, and one middle-aged woman being supported by her son. On the other hand, I noted two other cases in which women were extremely unhappy in their marriages, but were unable to leave. In one of these cases, the father told his daughter to stay put despite physical and psychological abuse; in the other case, the reason for staying in the marriage was largely financial.

At the same time, however, it is misleading to depict Vanlı women as only the victims of male domination. We might argue with Bourdieu that a »legitimate world-view« in a certain social field is not questioned by individuals because »objective power relations« that exist in the social field encourage the acceptance of this world view (1985: 728). Indeed, many of the women seem to have internalized a discourse on proper female behavior which perpetuates a lot of the domination. As in any tightly-knit group, like that which the inhabitants of housing blocks represent, gossip is a powerful way of keeping others in line. Dress codes, demeanor outside of the blocks, housekeeping skills and child rearing are topics of conversation through which women can show up failings in others while simultaneously warning their listeners not to trip up themselves.

»The private«: Three women, Hediye, Ayla and Nur

This part is concerned with the impact which the discourse strands described above have on women's lives. I introduce three very different women, Hediye, Ayla, and Nur, who all live in the Tepelik blocks. They are between twenty-five and thirty-five years old and their families are from three different districts in Van. While Ayla and Nur grew up in the blocks, Hediye came to Istanbul in marriage six years ago, after growing up in a village. Through their narratives, I will show how these women make sense of their own lives. Thus I will refer to their »identification« rather than »self-understanding«, that is an explicit rather than tacit process of making sense of one's self (cf. Brubaker Cooper 2000). This means that I accept as a premise that it is impossible to know fully how these women see themselves, but I know them through their representations to me. I argue that these women, like us all, are influenced by dis-

15 There are of course many more cases of divorce; this should be understood as anecdotal rather than statistical evidence.

courses current in their discourse community, but that they interact with them and reshape them into unique autobiographical narratives.

Hediye

The first woman, Hediye is 32 years old and grew up in a village in Van, in Yeşilköy. She is the fourth of ten children, eight of whom are married. Her recently widowed mother still lives in Yeşilköy with her two eldest sons, their families and her youngest unmarried daughter. Another of Hediye's sisters is married to a relative and lives in Yeşilköy, too. Yet another sister is married and lives in Van, while four of Hediye's brothers live in the village, but come to Istanbul to work in a nightclub, three of them leaving their families behind. In Istanbul there are several nightclubs run by men from this village, and working there is an alternative to working on building sites for migrant laborers from Van.

Hediye was married at the age of seventeen to a relative of hers in Yeşilköy. After the religious betrothal (*imam nikahı*), Hediye moved in with her husband's family. Before their marriage, Hediye's husband[16] went to work abroad for long periods of time and came back for the wedding. Three months after the wedding, the husband left again, and did not come back to the village. Gradually, all communication ceased between him and Hediye, leaving her in the humiliating position of living with her in-laws without her husband. Eventually, after three years, Hediye's own family put their foot down and took her back. They put pressure on their son-in-law's family in order to force him to return to the village and face her, at least for a divorce. Finally, he did come back and they got divorced. In our conversations, Hediye expressed her thanks to God that there were no children from this union. She bitterly recounted that through this marriage she had become a »second hand good«. Although she had only been with her husband for several months and was still a young woman of marriageable age, she said, it was clear that she would not marry a young, single man again. In the following years, she had dozens of marriage offers, mostly from widowed men looking for someone to care for their children, or from married men looking for a second wife. It was her paternal cousin working in Istanbul who recommended her to Doğan Bey, a man who was recently divorced himself. Although Doğan Bey was twenty years her senior, Hediye accepted his marriage offer. She had learnt from past experience and in-

16 Hediye never mentioned his name; it was as if he had been delegated to the past.

sisted on seeing his divorce papers and on having a registered marriage, entitling her to her husband's pension in the event of his death.

When Hediye came to Istanbul six years ago, she moved into the blocks, into the flat that Doğan Bey »owned«. Together they have had two children. Hediye's new neighbors in the blocks had also been her husband's ex-wife's neighbors for over twenty years; his five children had grown up in the same flat too. Indeed, one or two of the block inhabitants are relatives of both Doğan Bey and his former wife. Out of this difficult situation, Hediye has managed to create a narrative of contentment. She says that she keeps herself to herself, socializing mostly with her immediate neighbors in her block, and with her husband's and her own relatives who live further away. Keeping a low profile, it seems, has been her strategy to gain acceptance. After all, the divorce of her husband must have been the cause of much gossip and disapproval in an environment where divorce is considered antithetical to »our traditions«.[17] She describes her aim in life as looking after her husband well and also adheres to the discourse on good housewifery, placing emphasis on cooking and keeping the house clean. Hediye says she is grateful for marrying a man she loves and finds attractive, for her two children, and for now living in the city. She does piecework very well and cooperates with other women in the block to meet shop deadlines. She deals with her husband's ambiguous attitude towards piecework by doing it mostly out of his sight, well aware that the financial contribution of up to 150-200 YTL [18]a month is welcome.

One source of conflict between Hediye and Doğan Bey, particularly in the beginning of their marriage, has been their differing attitudes towards religion and traditions. Doğan Bey is very active in the local hometown association, and has repeatedly expressed his frustrations with *örf adet* and religious beliefs, which he thinks »imprison« Kurdish people. Doğan Bey is part of a network in which identification as, and politicization of Kurds is very important. At the beginning of their marriage, he took Hediye to association activities. However, he could not get her to comfortably wear her hair open, in a style that for him presumably symbolizes the »modern« Kurdish woman, and he laments her lack of interest in »bigger matters«, claiming that she refuses to develop further, or take on a leading role among the women to match his own

17 I should note that Doğan Bey's anti-traditional stance has meant that his unmarried children (one still at school) live with the mother and that he has bought a business for one son in order to support the fragmented family.

18 10 Turkish Lira is about 5 Euro.

among the men. Hediye, who is normally keen to support her husband, has quietly resisted this pressure.

I believe that Hediye's priority is to get along well with the women in the blocks, whom she spends time with every day. It is these women who help her to look after her children, lend her sugar or money, accompany her to the health center, help her finish piecework, invite her round for a chat and tea, or tell her about special offers in shops. In order to get along with them, Hediye must conform to certain behavioral expectations. All of the Vanlı housewives in the blocks cover their hair, and many of them wear a *pardesü,* a long loose coat*,* when they go out. Not only would a new style of dress be alien to what she herself is accustomed to, it would also alienate her from her neighbors. In the long run, Hediye's relationship with her neighbors is more crucial to her integration into the blocks than her relationship with her husband. Fully aware of this, Hediye has, during the last six years, aimed to fit in with her neighbors rather than to stand out. As identification with a Muslim way of life has great salience in these women's lives, Hediye has had immediate access to shared symbols, such as the *namaz* (prayer), the *abdest* (ritual cleaning), and the *oruç* (fasting). Asking her, as Doğan Bey has, to denounce much of what she perceives as Muslim practice means asking her to give up a mainstay in her life as well as to distance herself from much neighborhood activity. On the other hand, Hediye also does not get involved in all the religious activities, as she considers her children and her husband her priorities. Thus, in a quiet way, Hediye has balanced her husband's and her neighbors' expectations in order to find contentment.

Ayla

Ayla is in her mid-thirties. She was born in a district town of Van, but her family moved to Tepelik after the earthquake in 1976. She grew up and went to school there with her sister and brother. Ironically, the three siblings do not speak any Kurdish, although their mother could hardly speak any Turkish when she got married. Ayla is a mother of three children herself. With her husband and children she lives in the same block as her parents, in a flat that she bought after marriage. Ayla is a lively and outspoken woman. While she expresses contentment with her marriage and her children, she also conveys her frustration with her current life. Her narrative traces the difficulties she has come up against through the *örf adet* beliefs of her family and her environment.

Ayla is still bitter about her parents' decision to withdraw her from school after only five years, sending her to work at a young age instead.

When she got married at the age of nineteen, her father told her that she should stop working, now that she was married. This angered Ayla. She told me that she replied to her father by saying: »When I was working under your roof, was I prostituting myself that now you consider it dishonorable to work?« Despite her father's instructions, Ayla did continue to work after her marriage, first in textile workshops, and later in a better job. Her mother looked after her children while she worked. Ayla told me that through her contacts at work, she was also able to provide other women in the neighborhood with work too. However, her mother has stopped looking after her children because of ill-health, and so Ayla has had to stop working too. She is bitter because she feels that her mother's health problems are an excuse which masks a general disapproval of her working. She repeatedly told me that she wants to provide her children with a happier and wealthier childhood than she herself had; she sees herself engaged in a struggle with financial difficulties and ignorance around her in order to achieve this. She is willing to work at any job to provide a good living standard for her children. She dramatically remarked more than once, »I wouldn't do anything dishonorable, I would not steal, I would not prostitute myself, but I would clean sewers«[19].

Ayla is remarkably dismissive of the commonly expressed theme of loyalty among fellow Vanlı. In her opinion, the local hometown association is passive and does nothing to improve the situation of women, particularly when it comes to enabling them to find work or childcare. She also criticizes the other women in the blocks for being more interested in gossip and material possessions than collaborative action.

Ayla would like to move out of the blocks, nearer to her sister, who lives in a quarter Ayla considers more desirable. However, as the flats do not officially belong to the Vanlı, she cannot sell hers in order to move. A move to her sister's would mean geographical as well as psychological closeness. In her narrative, Ayla frequently contrasts her sister's situation to her own; her sister, despite initial resistance from the parents, has opened a small business. She divorced her first husband and remarried later. In front of their parents, Ayla's sister does not follow *örf adet* rules of behavior or dress. Ayla says she herself always wears a skirt in front of her father, while the sister wears trousers, does not cover her hair and even dyes it. Ironically, Ayla thinks her parents are fonder and prouder of her sister because she has »made it« and they do not have the same expectations of her. Her sister's example, Ayla says, shows that resistance to dominant discourses can result in liberation. For Ayla,

19 »Namussuzluk yapmam, hırsızlık yapmam, orospuluk yapmam, ama lağım temizlerim«.

finding a good job would be her start of resistance. She would be able to contribute much-needed money to the household and thus raise her status within her nuclear family. She would wear more modern clothes and maybe not cover her hair (to find a good job she may be required to uncover), but this would not attract the criticism of the Vanlı women, because different standards are applied to working women.

Nur

Nur is twenty-eight years old. She was born in a district town of Van but came to Istanbul with her parents and siblings when she was six. Just like two of her brothers, Nur moved into a separate flat in the blocks after marriage. When I first met Nur, she was wearing a headscarf and a *pardesü*, but during the summer of 2006, she began wearing the *çarşaf*, literally »sheet«, a black loose shroud draped over her entire body, covering her forehead and lower face up to the nose, and also buttoning the sleeves at the fingers in order to cover her wrists and the backs of her hands. Nur is an eloquent self-assured young woman, tall and good-looking, and to see her in the *çarşaf* was a great shock for me. For me, the çarşaf represented a male invention, one aimed at making women »safe«, as in »asexual«, for anyone but her husband. The Kemalist discourse in Turkey has always represented head covering, and in particular the *çarşaf*, as an insidious political symbol in danger of spreading and undermining the secular republic.[20]

In order to go beyond my initial reaction, I decided to ask Nur to tell me her story herself. It turned out that her self-representation is a narrative of personal reinvention and liberation rather than subjugation. She represents her current situation as the climax in a long search for happiness.

When Nur was 17 years old, she got married to her mother's nephew, a young man who had grown up in Istanbul too. She had been going to an İmam Hatip boarding school (a religious high school) and said she did not know anything about boys, nor was she interested in them. Nur said that her family was »much more ignorant« then, and that

20 Despite the common impression that headcovering has been encouraged and has increased under the current religious AKP government, a recent study by Çarkoglu/Toprak for the Turkey Economic and Social Studies foundation (TESEV) has found that there has actually been a decrease between 1999 and 2006: The percentage of women wearing a türban has dropped from 13% to 11%, another kind of headcovering from 53.4% to 48.8%, and the percentage of women wearing the çarşaf from 3.5% to 1 %. While in 1999, 27.3% of women said that they did not cover their heads, in 2006 it was 36.5% (Çarkoğlu/Toprak 2006: 24).

neither her parents nor her siblings knew better than to have her married at an early age. Her husband is an understanding man, and has encouraged her to develop herself further and to venture out of the domestic sphere. He himself, though working as a security guard, has just received a degree in law from an open university.

Nur describes her life since marriage as a constant search (*arayış*) for meaning. She spent some time writing a book and reading a lot. For one and a half years, Nur then volunteered at a local orphanage. Later she joined a foundation and participated in pedagogy and psychology seminars. Meanwhile her husband discovered that he was infertile and they underwent long and psychologically taxing fertility treatment. After five years without success, they finally decided to give up and »leave it up to Allah«. Nur founded a discussion group which met and discussed religious books in its members' homes. After a while this led Nur to teaching other women at home. Yet, despite all of these activities, Nur said, she still had not found the meaning in her life. Finally, a friend suggested that she help set up a learning center at the local mosque. Nur was ecstatic, and they set to cleaning the basement of the mosque and turning it into a Quran course center. For the last two to three years she has been working at the mosque as a volunteer Quran teacher (*hoca*). Technically, her courses are illegal; only the Ministry for Religious Affairs is allowed to organize such lessons. However, in practice, every neighborhood has its own courses and they are very popular with local families.

Every day, Nur teaches women how to read the Quran at the mosque. During the day, she sometimes also organizes *sohbet*s (religious discussions around a theme), and might attend or lead a prayer meeting (*mevlüd*) at someone's house. During the summer holidays many families send their children to Quran courses and Nur teaches the girls. When I visited her at her flat just before the holy month of Ramazan, she later went off to a prayer meeting she and her friend had organized in an empty flat in her block. Women from the block and from neighboring blocks had cleaned the flat, and they came together every day during Ramazan. Their aim was to read the Quran through from start to finish (*hatım etmek*), a task believed to have special merit.

Nur feels that she has gradually gained a new identity, and this is due to the fact that she has »fallen in love«. She declared this with passion, observing my reaction, to see if I understood what she meant. She described herself as being in love with Allah and in love with her *örtü*, her covering. It is only quite recently that she has changed her name from the worldlier »Gülşen« (rose garden) to »Nur«, meaning divine

light. The new name and her *çarşaf*, she says, are outward expressions of her love.

Although most of the Vanlı women are covered in some way or other, the *çarşaf* is considered a radical way of dressing. Indeed, Nur recounted that her family told her not to wear »that ugly thing«, and her husband, too, was dismayed. A mother of one of Nur's students expressed concern that her daughter would adopt Nur as a role model and be too heavily influenced by her. Nur herself acknowledges that the *çarşaf* has brought her many negative reactions; she says that people who do not know her consider her to be ignorant, backward and helpless. However, although many of the Vanlı women may say that the *çarşaf* is »not for us« and criticize it as exaggerated, they respect those wearing it and acknowledge their religious commitment. It has to be said that the acceptance of the *çarşaf* is probably dependent on the urban context; wearing it in the village would be quite impractical.

Wearing a *çarşaf* makes Nur unemployable in the secular world. Her husband has expressed ambitions for her to work and do well for herself, and Nur herself agrees that she could make a career. She has the intelligence and self-confidence to do well. However, she has no interest in any other work than her current one. Indeed, in many ways, she *is* a »working woman«. She leaves the house every morning, goes to the mosque and to other women's houses. She says she often leaves the house even in the evenings, when her husband is at home, and on holy nights (*kandil geceleri*) hardly comes home, something that is inconceivable for most of her fellow Vanlı women. She has a wide social network of her own, which goes beyond the neighborhood and relative relations that other Vanlı women have. Although she works voluntarily, she does sometimes receive money or gold presents from her students. So, despite the misgivings that some may express at her wearing the *çarşaf*, her occupation with religious affairs and her garb give her the license to ignore certain discourses on *örf adet* and appropriate behavior for women.

Some may argue that by wearing the *çarşaf*, Nur has internalized the male hegemonic discourse on appropriate female dress and is deluding herself if she feels that it is her own choice. This is a point which needs contextualization and has troubled many social scientists studying »Muslim women«.[21] It is a question of cultural relativism versus the insistence on universal human rights. Taken to an extreme, followers of the cultural relativism theory accept anything, in this case the veiling of

21 I use quotation marks in order to point to the artificial nature of this category.

women, as »part of their culture«,[22] while critics argue that the »culture« label is being used to excuse violations of human rights. Abu-Lughod is highly critical of the Western perspective, perpetuated in scholarly and media circles, that »Muslim women« need to be »rescued« from the veil: »First we need to work against the reductive interpretation of veiling as the quintessential sign of women's imprisonment, even if we object to state imposition of this form, as in Iran or with the Taliban« (2002: 787). She points to the variety of veiling practices, asking her readers to respect them. She argues that a constant reduction of »Muslim societies« to the »veiling issue« blinds observers to transnational political and economic processes, such as the American support for the Taliban in reaction to the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviets, which create inequalities. Similarly, Mojab tries to synthesize a particularist approach, which sees women first and foremost as individuals, with feminism. She, too, argues that individual veiling should be respected if it is voluntary, while veiling and gender-based segregation as imposed practices should be criticised (1998). While the issue of women's veiling is being debated in academia as well as political circles in Turkey and Europe, Abu-Lughod and Mojab's perspective is helpful when considering Nur: While one may not agree with the necessity for veiling, it is at the same time patronizing to assume that women like Nur who cover themselves are »unfree« just by virtue of their clothing. Interestingly, when one compares Nur to her fellow Vanlı women, she seems to have more »freedom« of movement and decisions than many of them.

Conclusion

This text has described a »public Istanbul« not found in the physical spaces that are used by people; rather, Istanbul has been described as an arena for discourses of different degrees of »publicness« such as the education system, regional »traditions«, rural migration to cities, ethnic identity politics, and gender relations. A description of these public discourses was followed by an analysis of how individual women, who are both producers of and produced by those discourse fragments, synthesize, reject and/or adapt these fragments when they create the »private« narratives of their lives.

22 In the debate between cultural relativism and human rights the veiling of women has often been debated, as well as female circumcision, »honour killings«, and Indian sati/suttee (the death of widows on their husband's funeral pyre).

Discourses are »public« in that they are shared, but they are not necessarily shared consentingly. There are thus fragments of discourses revolving around the same themes and symbols. On an individual, »private«, level, individuals make sense of their lives by creating a unique blend of discourse fragments through which they present their lives to others. Hediye, Ayla and Nur are only three of many Vanlı women. Arguably, they are part of the same discourse community, meaning that they are exposed to and interact with similar discourse strands. However, they have presented themselves to me in very different narratives, showing the dangers of generalizing about perceived »groups« of people. As Nur said herself, »Just because we are from Van, it does not mean that we are the same!«

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