

Historical Trajectories and Ambivalences of Turkish Minority Discourse*

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Abstract

This article inquires into the work of modern minority discourse and politics that delineates the boundaries of the Turkish national subject as Turkish-Islamic. It argues that the Turkish minority concept, which is based on imaginaries that justify claims of national and religious sameness and difference, needs to be understood against the backdrop of its historical formation. In the late Ottoman Empire, the socio-political grounds of communal sameness/difference were radically transformed. In this process, ethno-religious *millet*s turned into national *millet*s, culminating in the re-conceptualization of the non-Muslim *millet*s as religious minorities in the early Republic of Turkey. The article further shows how the restriction of minority rights to non-Muslims puts the Turkish concept of minority/*azınlık* at odds with international conventions on minority discourse. It creates ambivalences with regard to citizenship and nationhood status not only for them, but also for disadvantaged Muslim subgroups, such as the Alevis. Drawing in particular on the case of the Alevi community, I will demarcate the contested entry and exit points of nationhood and religion, in relation to which the minority label is organized in Turkey. Having to negotiate the pitfalls of Turkish identity discourses, Alevis employ the semantics of international human rights discourse in their quest for equal rights and recognition, while rejecting the minority label.

Keywords: minority discourse, Turkey, Alevism, Turkish nationalism, Turkish secularism, religion in the Ottoman Empire, religion politics

Introduction

In the Republic of Turkey, public articulation of claims with regard to ethnic and religious difference has always been restricted. The early Kemalist period (1923-1938) established an authoritarian political order that was heavily indebted to

experiences made in the late Ottoman period and managed diversity qua interdiction. In the modernizing empire, inter-communal relations, as well as relations between religious communities and the state, were drastically transformed. Centralization of the state structure, and nationalist and religious revivalism sharpened the

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boundaries between ethno-religious communities and this ultimately pitched the latter as rivals in a political plain under rapid change.

This article argues that Turkish minority discourse is both a result of these historical dynamics, as well as of global political developments and the reception of international discourses on religious freedom and minority rights. It advances a dual perspective on Turkish minority politics, historical-sociological and theoretical-critical. Following the work of Baskın Oran and Samim Akgönül,¹ it aims to account for how current political claims with regard to matters of identity are influenced by particular historical experiences and memories. These experiences form the background of republican Turkish subjectivities and need to be considered when investigating current Turkish politics of doxa as well as minority politics. They are sedimented in collective memories of different scope (from the family to the national level) and in their public representations (both material and discursive). The historical perspective also allows us to make visible the impact that more recent dynamics emerging, since the 1980s, within the political economy of the country, within the global political order and within international human rights discourse exerted on Turkish politics of minoritization. My analysis aims to connect this historical perspective with recent theoretical work on the politics of minority discourse. Critical perspectives informed by post-colonial epistemology have so far been fairly lacking in the discussion of the Turkish case. The recent publications by Elizabeth Shakman Hurd which, engaging the Turkish case, launch a critique of the liberal conception of religious freedom and the politics that it endorses, are an important step in this direction (see Hurd 2014 and 2015). What is still missing, I argue, for a more comprehensive understanding of the Turkish case, is relating this theoretical perspec-

¹ Oran is the major public intellectual in Turkey critically analysing and commenting on minority issues in all their dimensions (for example, Oran 2004 and 2011); Akgönül has more recently added a comparative perspective (see Akgönül 2013).

tive to a historically informed account of the formation of post-Ottoman discourses on religion politics in general, and politics of religious difference in particular.² This article hopes to be a step in this direction.

I hold that the critical perspective on the disciplining and homogenizing work done by discourses of religious freedom in general, and minority politics in particular, offers an important corrective to multiculturalist discourses that too easily take for granted the emancipatory impact of these politics. Such a perspective has been recently advanced by scholars such as Saba Mahmood and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd. At the same time, I would like to stress that we should not overlook the emancipatory promise that discourses on religious freedom and minority rights continue to hold for communities in different national contexts battling their underprivileged positions. Ultimately, the minority concept contains the potential of both emancipation and subordination for those who are subjected to its regime, and/or draw on it voluntarily. It is thus inherently ambiguous. Analysis of the Turkish political field, in which the minority concept has a crucial role in delineating the boundaries of the national subject as Turkish-Islamic, shows this clearly.

The article begins with a discussion of the ideological subtexts of modern minority politics. According to recent critical scholarship, liberal discourses on religious freedom, minority rights and tolerance establish and reify particular ideas about sameness and difference that ultimately undermine these discourses' promises of emancipation. Taking a slightly modified perspective in relation to this critique, I stress the plurality of actual minority discourses, not all of which, and certainly not the Turkish one, can be called liberal in the political theory sense of the term. I argue that one central effect of minority politics, of which the Turkish case is a fine example, is the

² For an exemplary study that connects such theoretical with historical perspectives see White (2012) on the case of French Syria.

creation of a subject that is marked by ambivalences. These ambivalences are the product of uncertain relations to central markers of modern public belonging, namely citizenship, nationality and religion. In minority discourses these ambivalences are invoked as reference points for inclusion and exclusion. The article then turns to the historical and political dynamics of minority discourse in Turkey. It discusses the genealogy of the Turkish minority concept and the imaginaries at work in the reification of claims of national and religious sameness and difference, by means of which majorities and minorities have been constructed since the late Ottoman context. The political dynamics of the late Ottoman Empire, especially the increasing inter-communal rivalry and violence, have been sedimented in collective memories and inform modern Turkish subjectivities in distinctive ways. Drawing in particular on the case of the Alevi community, which is not considered a minority in Turkey, I will demarcate the contested entry and exit points of nationhood and religion, in relation to which the minority label is organized in Turkey. I will emphasize that the Turkish concept of minority is at odds with the liberal definition of minority and minority rights in international human rights discourse. The essay concludes with comparative reflections on the relation between politics of doxa and politics of minoritization, which help me to further my argument about the ambivalences that the Turkish minority concept fosters with regard to national and religious belonging.

The Work of Modern Minority Discourse

Minority discourse as a political project that aims to define and secure the rights and status of communities different from the dominant communities within a state gained momentum in the post-World War One period, when the political landscape of Europe and the Middle East was reshaped and new nation-states were created.³

³ For a historical overview on the development of modern minority discourse since the Westphalian Treaty see Krasner and Froats (1996).

It was based on the assumption that “populations are primordially separated into clearly-bounded, coherent units, and that one state can represent only one such unit” (White 2012: 23). In this context, minorities were populations whose nationality was understood to be different from the hegemonic conception of nationhood within the state in which they resided. Consequently, the minority treaties following the Great War testified to and cemented the otherness of the minorities:

On the whole, the minorities treaties only exacerbated the perception of each state concerned that its minorities were disloyal – that their primary loyalty was to the (often hostile, sometimes neighbouring) state within which their own nationality was the majority. (White 2012: 24)

Akgönül has pointed to the tension that the minority treaties thus implanted into the involved nation-states: “The sovereign state will be one and indivisible; and the continuity and protection of minorities under the same state will be guaranteed. This balance is precarious at best” (Akgönül 2013: 74). Despite the very ambivalence that the minority status brought along, the protections that it promised “encouraged a wide range of groups (especially disadvantaged ones) to constitute themselves as ‘minorities’” (White 2012: 25). This observation is important. While it is necessary to critically inquire into the work of disciplining and homogenization that may be advanced by discourses of religious freedom in general, and minority politics in particular, we should at the same time not overlook the emancipatory promise that these discourses may carry for groups who seek shelter in them. It would be a mistake to underestimate the agency of communities that voluntarily subscribe to the discourse of religious freedom and/or minority, well aware of the ambivalences that this carries. At the same time we should ask about the consequences and costs – obviously depending on the national context – of being granted (or denied) a particular minority status. Our analysis of (religious) minority discourses therefore needs to pay attention to a variety of perspectives based on different loca-

tions in terms of geography and power. Accordingly, Saba Mahmood has underlined that the historical impact of the notion of religious liberty has been experienced rather differently in the European context, where it first emerged, and non-European contexts, into which it would soon be translated with the spread of colonial power:

[While] in European historiography, the symbolic birth of the concept of religious liberty is deeply intertwined with the establishment of the principle of state sovereignty...and the creation of an interstate protocol for handling what used to be called "religious dissidents" but later came to be regarded as "religious minorities" . . . the introduction of the principle and practice of religious freedom to non-Western lands was often predicated upon the violation and subjugation of the principle of state sovereignty. (Mahmood 2012: 421)

Mahmood directs our attention to the transnational power imbalances embedded in the minority question. She observes that especially in the encounter between European states and the Ottoman Empire as well as its successor states, "the discourse on religious freedom from its inception has been intertwined with the exercise of Western power". In this context, the figure of the religious minority was produced in the process of the European engagement on behalf of non-Muslim populations, with the purported goal of ensuring their religious liberty (Mahmood 2012: 419). Pursuing a similar line of critique, Hurd has recently directed our focus to the broader political implications of contemporary international religious freedom discourse:

Protections for minority religions are seen as the key to unlocking democratic reform, ensuring the rule of law, and implementing tolerant legal regimes to manage otherwise unwieldy and recalcitrant sectarian differences that are re-emerging after the fall of authoritarian regimes in the [Middle East] region. Support for a right to legal personality for minority religions is part of a European and North American commitment to international religious freedom, and denial thereof is categorized as a restriction on the right to religious freedom. (Hurd 2014: 15)

The post-World War One reshuffling of the political geography of (post-)Ottoman lands was

based on the assumption of minorities constituting more or less coherent social groups distinct from majority populations.⁴ In this context, minority rights were instituted to protect and empower ethnic, linguistic and religious communities that were outside of the fulcrum from which a particular nation was defined. However, against the backdrop of newly enshrined national orders, the new minority discourse not only protected the groups that were defined by it, but also cemented their otherness in relation to the national mainstream, which was reified by discourses of minoritisation. Jane Cowan has cautioned that against a discourse of Manichean otherness, "a minority should better [be] understood as a product of particular ideological, social, political and economic processes" (Cowan 2001: 156). She has given particular attention to the totalising effects that the discourse of multiculturalism has on minority politics. Discourses of authenticity and difference diminish if not eradicate the possibility of cultural ambiguity:

This is the central ambiguity of a minority rights discourse: that it must deny ambiguity and fix difference, in the realms of identity, and of cultural practice, in defence of distinct cultures. Recognition of one's culture is increasingly constructed and consequently increasingly experienced as a deep, primordial human need, as well as an inalienable right, one whose denial brings both suffering and indignation. (Cowan 2001: 171)

This line of critique has been furthered by Wendy Brown's reading of the discourse of tolerance in the United States. For Brown, "tolerance is exemplary of Foucault's account of governmentality as that which organizes 'the conduct of conduct'" (Brown 2006: 4). She argues that liberalism has contributed to the normalization of differences, and the creation of cultural, ethnic as well as religious hegemonies. Since the act of protec-

⁴ This assumption demonstrated evidence not the least through the works of Orientalist scholarship, which was very much interested in historicising and ordering the non-European populations that had entered the radius of European perception and imperial reach.

tion presupposes the existence of clear boundaries between the object of protection and those forces against which it needs to be protected, the discourse of tolerance, she suggests, is systematically implicated in the very creation of these boundaries. It carries the potential to contribute to the essentialization of notions of racial, ethnic, sexual and religious difference: "All otherness is deposited in that which is tolerated, thereby reinscribing the marginalization of the already marginal by reifying and opposing their difference to the normal, the secular, or the neutral" (Brown 2006: 45). Consequently, the empowerment that can be achieved through tolerance remains marked by ambivalence:

[S]ince...tolerance requires that the tolerated refrain from demands or incursions on public or political life that issue from their "difference," the subject of tolerance is tolerated only so long as it does not make a political claim, that is, so long as it lives and practices its 'difference' in a depoliticized or private fashion. (Brown 2006: 46)

Transferring this critical perspective to the question of minority rights helps to explain how the incorporation as minority into a state structure and society may come with a restriction of the right to dissent in the public sphere (Brown 2006: 92). Both tolerance and minority rights always point to their own limits: "The heterosexual profers tolerance to the homosexual, the Christian tolerates the Muslim or Jew, the dominant race tolerates minority races ... each of these only up to a point" (Brown 2006: 186).⁵

Against proponents of multiculturalism, the critiques by Mahmood, Hurd, Cowan and Brown share that they point to how ideas of freedom, equality and tolerance, which undergird minority discourse, can in the political practice contribute to the reaffirmation of difference. I value that criticism and the broader, global perspective that it establishes, although I think that it might not in every instance give enough credit to locally specific contexts and the agency of those involved in

⁵ On the history and semantics of discourses of tolerance in Turkey see Kaya (2013).

the production of minorities and majorities. To sufficiently account for this agency, locally specific parameters and trajectories, as well as specific interests and stakes implicated, need to be considered. The ambivalences that are created in the process of minoritization are the result of a bargain in which rights and recognition are extended to the prize of politicized otherness. The genealogy of the Turkish concept of minority exemplifies this.

From Ottoman Millet to Turkish Minority: Changing Parameters for Politics of Communal Difference

The socio-economic, cultural and political transformations that the Ottoman Empire underwent since the 19th century brought to the fore powerful ideas of nationalism, citizenship and secularism that severely impacted the ways in which ethnic and religious communities were perceived by the State and by each other. Analysing late Ottoman changes in discourses and politics of communal difference, and later republican reverberations of these changes, both locally specific and transnational contexts need to be considered.

Already prior to the Tanzimat reform period, inaugurated in 1839, had the non-Muslims' legal privileges, stipulated by the capitulation treaties between the Ottomans and the European powers, raised questions with regard to their loyalty to the Ottoman state (Akgönül 2013: 69). From the Tanzimat reform period onwards, European interference on behalf of the non-Muslims influenced Ottoman attitudes toward them as well as Ottoman reform policies and contributed to the transformation of the *millet*s (Mahmood 2012: 421-423).⁶ In this period, European states (especially Great Britain and France) positioned themselves as mentors of the Ottoman Chris-

⁶ The term *millet* referred in the Ottoman usage to religious communities with a certain degree of recognition by the empire and autonomy in their internal affairs. This became known as "*millet system*" in Western literature. See van den Boogert (2012), Akgönül (2013: 69-73), Rodrigue (2013: 37-41).

tians. From the European perspective, the success of Ottoman reform was measured not the least by the development of the situation of the non-Muslim Ottoman subjects, in particular the Christians. Ussama Makdisi has described this in terms of religion becoming an important site of the colonial encounter (Makdisi 2000: 3-12). The major Tanzimat declarations themselves had been strongly pushed for by the European powers, even if they also found support among the newly emerging elite of Ottoman bureaucrats. The Tanzimat edict Hatt-ı Şerif from 1839 introduced the idea of equality among all subjects, now made citizens, independent of religion. These notions and basic human and individual civil rights were then formulated more explicitly in the Hatt-ı Hümayun edict from 1856 (Hanioglu 2008: 72-76).

The Tanzimat reforms have to be situated within the context of a perceived need to modernize (that is, to centralize and rationalize government and state institutions) in a period in which the Ottomans realized that their sovereignty was under threat from various directions. In the light of heightened nationalist and separatist sentiments and activities, initially in particular among the Christian subjects of the Balkan parts of the Empire, ethnic and religious differences were increasingly understood as a political problem of international significance – both within the Ottoman state as well as in European public opinion. Matters of religious difference and inter-communal conflict, which used to be resolved on the local and inter-communal level, became thus connected to much larger political contexts (Deringil 2000: 566; see also Becker 2015).⁷

In the following, I would like to outline some crucial moments in the epistemological transformation of ideas about communal difference in the late Ottoman period. Aron Rodrigue has argued that it was in fact only in the modern period that

the Ottomans began to embark on a politics of eradicating difference, based on enlightenment-rooted claims of universal equality and nationalist claims of homogeneity, in the context of which the majority/minority distinction would become relevant (Rodrigue 1995: 83-86). Prior to that period “the Muslim/ non-Muslim relation was *never* formulated in terms of majority/ minority” (Rodrigue 1995: 84). The crucial point is that until the first half of the 19th century Ottoman governance was oriented toward managing difference, not toward creating equality among its multi-ethnic and multi-religious population (Barkey 2008). This mode of governance was legitimated within a sharia framework that privileged the Muslims (*ahl al-islam*) against recognized non-Muslims (*ahl al-dhimma*) (Masters 2001: 18-31; Rodrigue 2013: 37). It found expression in a hierarchical order, institutionalized in a system of a conditional legal pluralism, which allowed, within certain limits, the recognized non-Muslim communities to handle legal issues within their communities autonomously. The Muslims, too, sometimes had choices, for example, with regard to which judge/*qadi* they consulted in a particular matter. This Ottoman system of conditional legal pluralism varied from place to place and from period to period, before modernization of the state apparatus in the 19th century also began to reorder the legal system (see Rubin 2011). As for groups at the margins of the Islamic tradition, the state tended to not interfere in their internal affairs as long as they remained loyal to the central authority.

With important changes already under way since the 18th century, Ottoman reform in the 19th century was a catalyst for the gradual transition of the empire into a modern nation-state (Barkey 2008). Benjamin White suggests understanding the Tanzimat reforms as an attempt of the Ottoman state “to widen its repertoire of legitimating practices” by introducing the principle of representative government in contrast to the earlier imperial system of rule based on dynastic and religious legitimacy alone (White 2012: 29). He points to the connection between

⁷ For a critical discussion of the dynamics of inter-communal violence and how they contributed under pressure of Ottoman and European interests to the formation of majorities and minorities in Mount Lebanon see Makdisi (2000).

the concept of representative government and the gradual formation of a concept of national identity. Only within the semantics of new concepts of citizenship, nationality and national homogeneity as well as the formation of a public sphere could the distinction between majority and minorities make sense (White 2012: 30-36; see also Rodrigue 2013: 42). For the emergence of nationalist politics, the secularization and rationalization of the rights and organizational forms of the non-Muslim *millet*s as part of the Tanzimat reforms played an important role.

The Tanzimat reforms also paved the way for Ottomanism, which emerged in the middle of the century and in 1869 found its legal expression in a new citizenship law (Rodrigue 2013: 40). Şükrü Hanioglu characterized Ottomanism as an “inherently secular ideology” (Hanioglu 2008: 76).⁸ Based on the discourse of religious freedom introduced in the Tanzimat period, Ottomanism was anchored in the idea that all citizens of the empire were equal with regard to rights and duties independent of religious (and implicitly also ethnic) belonging. As a discourse of judicial and political inclusion, Ottomanism appeared, at first sight, to transcend the separation between the *millet*s, which had been one of the building blocks of Ottoman society.⁹ The Greek Orthodox and Armenian *millet*s were, however, interested in maintaining their distinction on religious grounds, which increasingly gained a national colouring. While often supporting Ottomanism politically, they at the same time resisted any levelling of established notions of communal

difference. The formal acknowledgement and specification of their rights, and the demand by the Tanzimat edict of 1856 to inner reform led to internal changes, through which the bourgeois lay classes of the *millet*s were given a more pronounced role in the communities’ organization and representation. In particular, the religious elites of the *millet*s harboured resentment against the secularizing aspects of the Tanzimat reforms and Ottomanism.¹⁰ In effect, the reforms increased ethno-religious consciousness and intensified competition among the religious communities. In this way, they politicized ethno-religious identities and prepared the ground for nationalist discourses (Masters 2001: 133-141; Dressler 2013: 63-66; Rodrigue 2013: 40-41).

The secularization of the *millet*s was an important step in their gradual nationalization, foreshadowing the re-signification of the non-Muslim communities as ethno-religious minorities, defined in juxtaposition to a Turkish-Muslim national subject. Sections of the newly emerging secular elites among the *millet* populations, particular those of the Greek Orthodox and later the Armenians, began to embrace nationalist rhetoric against Ottomanism. Aware of the declining power of the Ottoman state, some of them began to aspire to political independence, a factor that contributed to the inter-communal violence of the late Ottoman Empire, which would reach its peak in the genocidal policies of the Young Turks during World War One.

With the transformation of religious into ethno-national *millet*s, religious boundaries began to turn into national boundaries. Consequently, the nationalized *millet*s/minorities were seen as outside of the Ottoman, and later the Turkish nation. In this context it is significant that

⁸ Similarly, Makdisi speaks of the Tanzimatists’ aim to develop a “secular Ottoman subjecthood” (Makdisi 2000: 11), and Rodrigue describes Ottomanism as a program that aimed to push religion and ethnicity into the realm of the private (Rodrigue 2013: 40).

⁹ It has to be noted, however, “that the Millet System is not the ONLY social framework in which the [O]ttoman society was organized. There are other social structures as geographical hierarchy or professional stratification which cross the Millet system. In other words this system is not a mechanical and pyramidal social classification one” (Akgönül 2013: 65 FN1).

¹⁰ The Muslims, too, were sceptical about the changes in the system of Ottoman rule. Hanioglu claims that “[t]he reconciliation of this new, nondenominational ideological basis of the state with Islam’s traditional centrality in the legitimizing framework of the empire remained the most delicate and challenging issue for the administration until the end of the Ottoman era” (Hanioglu 2008: 74).

the term minority (Ottom. *ekaliyet*)¹¹ was “introduced to the Middle East in the last decades of the nineteenth century by the European Powers, who cited the protection of Ottoman Christians as justification for intervening in Ottoman domestic affairs” (Longva 2012: 4). It began to be widely used concomitant to the policies of demographic engineering that the Ottomans embarked on in the Young Turk period:

En ce qui concerne l’Empire ottoman et l’espace balkanique, la construction des minorités nationales est donc un phénomène historique contemporain de la violence de masse qui s’abat sur les populations considérées comme minoritaires *i.e.* comme non assimilables à la nation. (Sigalas and Toumarkine 2008: §5)

In accordance with such late Ottoman perception, the minorities served within the Turkish minority discourse, which emerged during the Turkish nation-building process, as the others against which the religious and ethnic contours of the nation could be defined. As Mahmood has argued in her discussion of the Egyptian case, “[t]he terms ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ came to serve as a constitutional device for resolving differences that the ideology of nationalism sought to eradicate, eliminate, or assimilate” (Mahmood 2012: 424).

Nation-Building and the Interpellation of Religious Difference in Turkey

The understanding that a “real” Turk is a Muslim forms a core element of Turkish nationalist imaginary. Its roots can be traced back to the formative period of Turkish nation-building in the last decade of the Ottoman Empire (Cagaptay 2006; Baer 2009; Dressler 2013). In the hegemonic narrative, the time span of almost ten years from the Balkan Wars through World War One to the Greco-Turkish War (or Turkish War of Independence) is remembered as a struggle of Turkish (and implicitly Muslim) people against foreign and/or inimical (non-Muslim) forces. This

perceived antagonism played a constitutive role in the formation of the nationalist ideal of ethnic and religious unity and homogeneity. In the nationalist Turkish narrative, the primary “others” are always non-Muslims: inimical outside forces, or enemies from within.¹² The modern Turkish concept of minority (*azınlık*) is intrinsically connected to these ethno-cum-religious others. It is anchored in a mixture of memory and amnesia of inter-communal and political rivalry and violence that has itself become a marker of Turkish identity and motor of nation-building (Akçam 2004).

A foundational document for the Turkish understanding of minority is the post-World War One Treaty of Lausanne (1923), an important section of which deals with the minority problem posed by the dissolution of the empire into nation-states. The treaty replaced the earlier Sèvres Peace Treaty (1920), in which minority rights had been extended to Muslim and non-Muslim groups based on racial, linguistic and religious criteria. Following the Greco-Turkish War, the Lausanne Treaty overwrote the Treaty of Sèvres in recognition of the changed political constellations, which boosted Turkish nationalist claims. Consequently, it neither acknowledged protection of ethnic or language-based minorities, nor protection of religious minorities in general, but only protection of non-Muslim religious minorities (Rodrigue 2013: 42-43). In the articles of the treaty dedicated to the rights of the non-Muslim minorities in Turkey (articles 37 to 44) there is no mention as to which communities should actually be granted the minority status. Interpreting the treaty within a post-Ottoman framework, the Republic of Turkey would grant the minority status only to Greek Orthodox Christians, Armenians and Jews – those communities that had been the most prominent *millets* in the late Ottoman state. Contemporary Turkish minority discourse and policies need to be ana-

¹¹ The Turkish neologism *azınlık* only emerged in the middle of the 20th century (Rodrigue 2013: 42).

¹² In the context of the conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdish PKK, Turkish nationalist discourse variously depicts the latter as uncircumcised, Zoroastrians, atheists or of Armenian descent (Estukyan 2015).

lysed on the background of this very particular post-Ottoman framework, which, as I will show, puts Turkey at odds with multiculturalist discourse and international human rights conventions.

In its early years, Kemalist nationalism was still ambivalent with regard to the ethnic and religious requirements of Turkish nationhood. Turning away from Islam as the outward marker of the national self, since 1924 territorial and citizenship-based definitions of the nation were promoted. The first Turkish president and mastermind of the Kemalist project, Mustafa Kemal (the later Atatürk), thus declared that “the people of Turkey, who established the Turkish state, are called the Turkish nation” (quoted in Cagaptay 2006: 14). Nevertheless, emblematic of the early republican quest to fix the boundaries of the national body, the question of where to position the non-Muslims in relation to the nation was controversially discussed during the preparations for the 1924 constitution. While some demanded that everyone living in Turkey should be considered Turkish by nationality, the majority tended to side with the position expressed by the prominent nationalist Hamdullah Suphi, who argued that “although they could be citizens, it was not possible to acknowledge Armenians and Jews as Turks unless they abandoned their language, as well as Armenianness and Jewishness” (Cagaptay 2006: 15). This position, which suggests that the concept of Turkish nationhood was not only based on language, but also on some vague notion of religious, ethnic and/or cultural identity, has indirectly found its way into the 1924 constitution. Paragraph 88 of the constitution declared: “The People of Turkey, regardless of religion and race, are Turks as regards citizenship” (transl. Cagaptay 2006: 15).

Distinguishing citizenship from the dominant attributes of nationhood at that time, namely religion and ethnicity/race, the 1924 constitution thus followed the logic of Hamdullah Suphi’s argument.¹³ In this way, all inhabitants of Turkey,

¹³ Akgönül wrongly translates the Turkish term

independent of ethnicity and religion, could, in principle, be Turkish citizens. This civic inclusivism may be regarded as an achievement of the early Kemalist state. However, already in the first years of the republic, many laws and policies were put into place that targeted non-Muslims and revoked certain citizenship rights.¹⁴ In the mid-1920s, the Turkish government pressured the minorities to renounce many of their privileges as granted by the treaty (Cagaptay 2006: 28). Such incursions into the non-Muslims’ rights were justified by their proclaimed otherness from Turkish nationhood. This argument retained the principal differentiation between citizenship and nationhood in theory, while at the same time undermining civil rights based on national difference. From early on, the Kemalists perceived in particular the Christians as “a separate ethno-religious community; citizens outside the body of the Turkish nation” (Cagaptay 2006: 39). Even today, institutions and members of minority communities, although many of them have lived in the country for many centuries and are Turkish citizens, are at times referred to as *yabancı*, “foreigners” – often by state representatives, and in official documents (Başbakanlık İnsan Hakları Danışma Kurulu 2004: 3-5). The position of the recognized minorities in Turkish society has thus remained ambiguous. Legal and political practice shows that minorities have, throughout the history of the Turkish republic,

vatandaşlık (“citizenship”) of the constitutional text as “nationhood”, therefore missing the important differentiation between nationhood and citizenship that was here pronounced (Akgönül 2013: 71). For the original text of the constitution see Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi (n.d.).

¹⁴ This involved first of all policies of (de-)naturalization. While it was comparatively easy for Muslim immigrants to obtain Turkish citizenship, local non-Muslims could be denaturalized on various grounds. For example, denaturalization could occur if they could not prove residence in the country during the Greco-Turkish war. Non-Muslims were also discriminated professionally, such as being prohibited from certain professions (this applied to medical doctors, midwives, nurses, maids, chauffeurs, stockbrokers and others) and from government offices (Cagaptay 2006, chap. 4).

been marked¹⁵ and disadvantaged to a degree that their citizen rights were seriously curtailed. Major disputes between the minority communities and the state continue with regard to autonomy in education, ownership of old community properties annexed by the state, representation in and support by state institutions as well as the symbolic recognition of being Turkish nationals – not foreigners with Turkish passport. What is at stake for non-Muslim Turkish citizens is equality in terms of civil and political rights (Oran 2011).

From a comparative perspective, Turkish republicanism remains close to the French model, which emphasizes

equal citizenship with the notion of a common public culture and with the relegation of particular cultural and religious identities to the private sphere. Inevitably the common public culture is aligned in certain respects with the majority culture: it is the majority's language that serves as the common language of the republic; it is the majority's sense of political community that determines the boundaries and internal constitution of the republic; and it is the majority culture that influences the choice of public symbols and norms. (Patten 2014: 3)

This model is at odds with more accommodationist arrangements, such as those institutionalized, for example, in the United States, and with multiculturalism broadly speaking.

Identity Politics since the 1980s

Given the authoritarian approach to matters of identity in the Turkish political tradition, conflicts were bound to occur after identity politics emerged as a major arena of contestation since the late 1980s, when Turkey was confronted with Muslim groups demanding religious (in the case of the Islamist and subsequently also Alevi movements) or ethnic (in the case of the Kurds) freedom. Following the military coup in 1980,

¹⁵ Until recently, Turkish citizens used to have their religion inscribed on their ID cards as Muslim, Christian or Jewish, with no other options available. Only since November 2006 is it possible, upon request, to have the religion entry on the ID card left blank. At the same time, it became possible to have the information on religion in family registers changed. See Commission of the European Communities (2007: 16).

the generals had masterminded a new constitution that increased the state's control over the public sphere, and strengthened Islamic institutions as a bulwark against the left. The left was in the cold-war scenario perceived as the major threat to the sovereignty of a country that was as a NATO member part of the Western hemisphere (Öktem 2011: 58-78). This and a gradual liberalization of the public sphere created, since the mid-1980s, new opportunity spaces for a growing Islamic movement and also contributed to the going public of the heretofore largely invisible Alevi community.¹⁶ However, any claims for recognition of particular ethnic and religious identities challenge the secularist and nationalist conventions of a state and society ideologically geared towards ethno-religious homogeneity.

Global political changes were conducive to the re-emergence of ethnicity and religion based identity politics. The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, through which new nation-states came into being, prepared the ground for a new politics of recognition. Notions of authenticity and cultural diversity now received a public re-evaluation reflected in international discourses demanding recognition of difference and minority rights – the latter had lost political momentum in the aftermath of World War Two (Taylor 1994; Cowan 2001: 153 and 156; Mahmood 2012: 427-428). While earlier human rights discourse had been based on a “presumed congruence of state membership, individual rights and national identity” (Koenig 2007: 96), after 1989 the increasing specification of minority rights through international organizations came along, within the framework of multiculturalism, with the recognition of minorities as collective identities, independent of citizenship and nationality (Koenig 2007: 106-107).

The global resurgence of religion as a legitimate ground for public engagement and, more generally, as a factor in the new rise of identity

¹⁶ For the history of the Islamist movement see Yavuz (2005); for the emergence of the Alevi movement see Massicard (2012).

politics was strongly felt in Turkey and began to influence public sentiments and discourses (Akgönül 2013: 86-87). As part of this development, the language of religious freedom, originally directed against the authoritarian mainstream interpretation of Turkish laicism, has, since the 1990s, powerfully entered political discourses in and about Turkey (Dressler 2010). Turkish reactions to reports of various human rights organizations, and the annual reports of the EU Commission monitoring Turkey's progress toward fulfilling the criteria for EU membership, bear witness to how the minority question re-emerged as an issue that connected highly sensitive topics, including the question of state sovereignty, the question of national identity and the question of the legitimacy of communal difference. These reactions show that the Turkish concept of minority is incompatible with the much broader definition of minority and minority rights in international human rights discourse (see Akpınarlı and Scherzberg 2013).

While the minority question gained new significance in international human rights discourse, and Turkish minorities (according to the terms of international minority language) in fact adopted the rhetoric of this discourse, using the term for Muslim communities has remained a taboo. Whenever international organizations or prominent politicians label as minorities Muslim ethnic or religious groups in Turkey, this produces a nationalist reflex denying the applicability of that term to groups considered by the dominant national discourse as part of the nation. For example, the 2004 annual report by the European Commission documenting Turkey's progress in fulfilling membership criteria admonished that "Alevi are still not recognized as a Muslim minority" (Commission of the European Communities 2004: 166). This created furious reactions in the Turkish public and among Alevi themselves, united in their rejection of the application of the term minority to the Alevi. The two main arguments put forth were legal and political: First, Lausanne had restricted the application of minority rights to non-Muslim religious commu-

nities. Accordingly, since the Alevi were Muslim, even if not Sunni, they could not be a minority. Second, the Alevi would be "original elements" (*asli unsur*) of the Turkish nation-state and therefore not a minority (implying that minorities are not founding members of the state). The same report also discussed aspects of the Kurdish issue under the term minority rights (Commission of the European Communities 2004: 18). And the Kurds, too, were quick to reject the minority label, much like the Alevi arguing that they belonged to the majority – understood as the majority of Muslims who had built the nation.¹⁷

As these examples illustrate, communities of nominal Muslims that have clear social boundaries based on either religious or ethnic criteria (such as Alevi, Alawis, Kurds and Arabs) normally refrain from using the term *azınlık* in their inner-Turkish struggle for rights and recognition, even if they are aware that their engagement in politics of recognition is in congruence with international minority discourse.¹⁸ In their responses to the EU Commission's 2004 report, both Alevi and Kurds indirectly drew on Islam as a boundary marker of the nation (Dressler 2014: 146-153). Within their reasoning, being non-Muslim turned into an argument for exclusion. The experience of an acquaintance of mine who belongs to the Sephardic Jewish community in Istanbul aptly illustrates this point: She has a secular lifestyle and keeps only remote relations to the local activities of the Jewish community. Though she makes clear that she sees herself as Turkish, even if her Jewish background is part of her social and cultural identity, she nevertheless is regularly confronted by acquaintances in Istanbul, by fellow residents from her conservative and nationalist Turkish neighbourhood, and when traveling in Turkey with questions such as "How is it that you don't have an Israeli passport?" and "How can you identify yourself as Turkish if

¹⁷ For a more detailed discussion of the contestation around the Alevi' and Kurds' minority status see Dressler (2014), also Akgönül (2013: 87-90).

¹⁸ For a stark example of this from the Alevi case see Dressler (2014: 152).

you are Jewish?”¹⁹ Similar experiences have been recorded by Esra Özyürek, who observed that Turkish Christians, often accused by nationalist discourse of being disloyal to the state as well as the nation, and pursuing hidden agendas, tend to firmly and often emphatically emphasize their Turkishness (Özyürek 2009: 410). It is also interesting to see that Turkish converts from Islam to Christianity do not aspire to the minority label. They instead tend to emphasize their Turkishness, which they understand would be challenged by the minority status (Özyürek 2009: 411-412).

Alevis fear to be excluded from the nation, as well. Their responses to the debate on their minority status, which furthered suspicions as to their loyalty to the Turkish nation-state, clearly demonstrated this. Aware of the negative connotations of the term minority in Turkish nationalist discourse, most Alevis rejected the category. The example shows how awkwardly Turkish minority discourse relates to the universalist claims of international discourses of human rights and religious freedom. Due to the negative connotations of the concept of minority/*azınlık*, it is not a useful tool for the Alevis to fight the discrimination they complain of in their public campaigns.²⁰ But there is an even more principal problem with the impact of liberal discourses of equality and religious freedom on Turkish religion politics. Hurd has argued that in addition to Turkish state institutions' negative responses to the Alevi demand

of being recognized as legitimately different from Sunni Islam, the international human rights based response to the Alevi demands

formalizes and entrenches forms of social and religious difference...[and] also limits the spaces in which Alevis can individually and collectively articulate alternative forms of subjectivity, agency, and community. It stabilizes Alevi collective identity in *religious* terms, fixes its relationship to Sunni tradition, and reinforces a conventional Turkish statist approach to governing religion. (Hurd 2014: 4)

I have argued above that the Western interest in the minorities' situation has historically been implicated in the minority problem in Turkey. From the nationalist Turkish perspective, international discourses and politics of equality and religious freedom are not neutral, but carry biases and hidden agendas. This is evidenced by the fact that outside supervision in a context of unequal power relations is quickly perceived as undue interference in the internal affairs of the country, igniting national sensibilities that reinforce the nationalist interpretation of the minority concept, in which the Alevis themselves partake. Similar dynamics have been analysed by Mahmood in her discussion of the situation of the Copts in Egypt, and their conflicted relation to the minority question. As Mahmood shows, the dominant position of the Copts, until rather recently, was to reject the minority label since they regarded it as part of a European and (historically mainly British) attempt to increase political influence at the expense of national sovereignty. Considering themselves Egyptian nationals first, the Copts perceived the minority label as an imperialist act of protectionism. For them, loyalty to the Egyptian nation-state used to be more important than emphasizing their religious difference from the Muslim majority (Mahmood 2012). The examples of the Egyptian Copts and the Turkish Alevis point to the fact that – something easily forgotten when positioning social groups within seemingly antagonistic vectors of identity politics – “minorities share many cultural values and practices with the majorities. They are as much part of the local societies as

¹⁹ Personal communication and email exchange (August 2014).

²⁰ Alevis complain that in Turkey, only Sunni Muslim institutions receive state support, with religious services concerning Islamic education and practice being controlled and financed by the state. State institutions consider Alevis a Muslim subgroup and thus not eligible for any extra subventions. In this context the most contested issue is the status of their places for ritual assembly, the *cemevi*, which is (unlike mosques, churches and synagogues) not recognized as place of worship and therefore not financially supported by the state. Alevis further have been battling the mandatory religious education in school, which shows biases against Alevism. They also complain everyday discriminatory practices due to their alleged heresy from the traditional Sunni Muslim viewpoint. See, e.g., Massicard (2012).

the majorities” (Longva 2012: 4). Longva therefore cautions not to reduce minority discourse to a discourse of victimization, and to pay attention to the agency of both majorities and minorities (Longva 2012: 3-4).

Secularism, Politics of Doxa and Minority Discourse

Following the destruction of the Ottoman Empire and the formation of the Turkish nation-state, Turkish secularism (*laiklik*) established nearly total control over the political and public roles of religion. Connecting the legitimacy of religion with the question of state sovereignty, religion was politicized in a new and confrontational way. The Kemalists were not only convinced that religion was a threat to the sovereignty of the state, but regarded it an obstacle on the way to modernization. Nevertheless, the semantics of Turkish secularism and nationalism has retained religious biases, through which hierarchies between different religious traditions continue to be reified.

In the following pages I employ the term “politics of doxa” to foreground how matters of religious difference become part of public and political contestations. In doing so, I follow Bourdieu’s conception of the religious field as organized by unequal power relations embedded in broader structures of domination, to which it responds. As for the politics of doxa in this field, I am sympathetic to Bourdieu’s assertion that “a system of practices and beliefs is made to appear as *magic* or *sorcery*, an inferior religion, whenever it occupies a dominated position in the structure of relations of symbolic power” (Bourdieu 1991: 12). At the same time, I would not endorse the extent of autonomy that Bourdieu’s concept of the religious field suggests, and neither the functionalist understanding of religion that it is tied into. Challenging the assumption of the religious field having gained a large degree of autonomy in structurally differentiated societies, there is manifold evidence that puts doubt on the extent of the differentiation of religion from other spheres in the modern context, rather suggesting the con-

tinuous implication of religion in society, politics and the legal sphere (Asad 2006: 208-209). Secularist regimes themselves, as the Turkish case shows most clearly, are often directly implicated in the reification of religious knowledge (Dressler 2011).

Inquiry into politics of doxa offers an interesting angle on the implication of secularism in the regulation of religious difference in modern states. But as the dynamics of Turkish minority discourse demonstrate, analysis of Turkish politics of doxa needs to also take into account the work of nationalism. Together, these two knowledge regimes, and the norms and practices they regulate in the public sphere, normalize a Sunni-Muslim Turkish ideal as fulcrum of national identity formation. Since the Turkish minority concept is based on a rationale of religious difference, the question as to whether and how a group relates to Islam is of immediate relevance for the identification of majorities and minorities. Within this semantics, the issue of “Muslim minorities” is a non-issue since Muslims are by definition majority, as discussed above. This does not, of course, mean that groups considered by the hegemonic political discourse as Turkish, but still carrying ethnic or religious particularities that distinguish them from the Sunni-Muslim Turkish mainstream, could not be subject to a politics of minoritization. The way in which Alevi are represented as different from Sunni Muslims is a case in point (see, for example, Dressler 2011).

To further work out the ambivalences created by Turkish minority discourse, I would like to point to the parallels and differences between minority politics and politics of doxa, which establishes orthodoxies and heterodoxies. Both politics express unequal power relations. Minorities are not necessarily minorities in a numerical sense, and heterodox groups are heterodox not due to particular doctrines that they uphold, but due to their subordinate position in a particular religio-political field. It is such subordination through which both minorities and heterodoxies, and by default also majorities and orthodoxies, are established, evidenced and maintained. In

the Turkish context, both minority politics and politics of doxa need to be analysed against the backdrop of the homogenizing aims of secular nationalism, which regards difference as a problem to overcome. The differences between the two politics are, however, significant. In Turkey, minority discourse establishes the boundaries of the nation, whereas politics of doxa are concerned with defining and legitimating the dominant theologico-political position within Islam. For the Alevis, the two politics pull in different directions. On one side, the nationalist perspective declares that the Alevis as Turks and Muslims cannot be a minority. On the other side, the religio-political discourse continues to perceive the Alevis through their religious otherness (rationalized as heterodoxy) that keeps their integration into the nation incomplete and makes full social and political integration impossible. They are thus left in a state of ambiguity with regard to their place within Turkish nationhood.²¹ The ensuing enigma for the Alevis cannot, in my opinion, be resolved within a framework of a secularist-nationalist knowledge regime that is bound to the inscription of ethnic and religious identities. The predicament of the Alevis as well as other groups othered from the perspective of the hegemonic national subject could only be overcome through a concept of citizenship that subverts the reigning politics of doxa, as well as ethno-religious distinctions, allowing instead for a pluralism that does not – drawing on registers of communal difference, such as religion, ethnicity and culture – create hierarchies with regard to citizenship and nationality.²² But this would require a post-nationalist framework, which from today's view seems rather utopian (cf. Kadioglu 2007).

²¹ For an analysis of how Turkish Alevism has been rendered "heterodox" by academic discourses akin to Turkish nationalism see Dressler (2013: esp. chapters 5 and 6; 2015).

²² Kabir Tambar has in a recent book addressed the tension between the promise of pluralism and the nationalist goal of unity and homogeneity intrinsic to the Turkish nation-state project (Tambar 2014).

There are other aspects in which politics of minoritization differ from politics of doxa. As a legal status, minority always comes with recognition of difference and generally with certain rights tied to that recognition. Nevertheless, minorities (as in the Turkish case) may not be considered as fully part of the nation, and their members may therefore be subject to restricted citizenship rights. By contrast, in the context of the modern state, groups that are othered through particular politics of doxa are not automatically excluded from the nation. In Turkey, the attribution of heterodoxy to the Alevis does not *necessarily* impinge on their standing within the Turkish nation, especially within a nationalist discourse that locates the roots of Alevi religious difference in pre-Islamic Turkish shamanism (Dressler 2013). Nevertheless, integration of the Alevis into Turkish nationhood in practice appears to be incomplete since the religious difference of the Alevis can always be used to marginalize their position within the nation.

While minority is a juridico-political term, while notions of orthodoxy and heterodoxy are situated firstly in theological and scholarly discourses that do, as such, not directly impact on matters of legal or political status, but are first of all devices of symbolic othering.²³ The term heterodoxy has its origins in Christian apologetics, from whence it evolved as a concept in the study of religion that qualifies religious beliefs within a particular tradition as secondary – either, when the term is used in a dogmatic manner, indicating deviation from a particular "main" tradition, or when it is used in an interactional manner, as a subordinated religious interpretation within a particular religious discourse. I argue that it is exactly this haziness of the concept, carrying the potential of being employed in both descriptive and normative ways without always distinguishing between the two, that makes it such a

²³ Of course, as Bourdieu argues in his analysis of the religious field, we need to acknowledge that politics of doxa are embedded in broader dynamics of social and political control and therefore never unpolitical (Bourdieu 1991).

powerful means in the hands of those who use it as device to explain, reify and regulate inner-religious difference. A similar dynamic between alleged neutrality and more or less explicit normativity is characteristic also for liberal rhetoric that undergirds minority discourse. Equality and freedom are key principles of liberalism with claims of universal validity and interpolate minority discourse as a rights discourse. At the same time, the legal and political reification of groups as minorities reifies their difference and puts a normatively grounded doubt to more open-ended approaches to diversity.

Both politics of minoritization as well as politics of doxa keep the groups subjected to it in a state of ambivalence – be it with regard to their belonging to the nation, or with regard to their belonging to a religious tradition. They both need to be analysed against the backdrop of the homogenizing aims of secular nation-states, in which difference is constituted as a problem that needs to be dealt with either by minimizing it, as in the Turkish assimilationist approach, or, as in the liberal approach, by addressing it through postulates of equality or pluralism. Nations by their very nature feel a need to monitor the boundaries of the grounds of nationhood, and secular states are interested in defining and controlling the role of religion in the public. These two interests are not unrelated. Privileges for particular religions are justified, often tacitly, through assumed historical and cultural bonds to the nation. Accordingly, other religions, or religious interpretations within the same religious tradition, are discriminated against with references to demands of national unity. The web of hierarchies and domination spun in this way is organized by nationalist and religio-secularist semantics through which (acquired or, allegedly, primordial) cultural, as well as religious differences (and claims of sameness) are constantly reified. In the process, subordinate ethnic and religious groups are transformed into minorities, and subordinate religious interpretations within larger religious traditions are rendered heterodox.

Conclusion

I have argued in this essay that contemporary developments, both local and global, need to be considered when assessing the recent Turkish debate over matters of religious difference in general, and the concept of minority in particular. International minority discourse has, since the late 1980s, been increasingly employed by minoritized Turkish communities in their struggle for recognition and equal rights. At the same time, the notion of minority itself has maintained its specific vernacular meaning, which is incompatible with international human rights discourse, and is therefore usually avoided. This creates confusion among more distant observers, not familiar with the intricacies of the Turkish case, and raises interesting questions with regard to the problem of translating internationally operating, flattened discourses into national contexts, shaped by particular and complex experiences and knowledges.

The Turkish example shows clearly that minority discourse should not be naively understood as a liberating or emancipatory discourse that as such empowers groups marginalized due to their ethnicity or religion. Liberal discourses on equality and religious freedom in general, and secularist regimes in particular, can contribute to the reification of religious boundaries, thus fostering the religionization of differences between socio-cultural communities. In this way, they create ambivalent positions for those who fall through the dominant rasters through which national subjects are defined.

I have emphasized that certain dynamics central to the reification of collective identities and boundaries in Turkey are the result of specific historical trajectories. In the late Ottoman context, ethno-religious plurality was not based on an ideal of tolerance or equality as claimed by neo-Ottoman nostalgias. Rather, the Ottomans took differences and hierarchies between religious communities for granted and were interested in how to manage them. Gradually, with the transformation of religious *millet*s into proto-national *millet*s, religious boundaries became national

boundaries, and *millet*s were reconstituted as religious minorities and national others. In this way, the non-Muslim *millet*s, which constituted an organic part of Ottomanism, were rendered into internal others of the Turkish nation. Due to the hegemonic memorization of the political dynamics of the late Ottoman Empire, which gives evidence to very specific claims of national and religious sameness/difference and justifies politics of inclusion/exclusion based on these claims, the citizenship rights of the non-Muslims remained contested from the beginning of the Turkish republic until today.

As a consequence of the secularization of Turkish state and society since the late Ottoman Empire, the public role of religion has changed considerably. While previously the major public and social function of religion was to define and supervise licit behaviour and practices in public spaces and to organize communal boundaries, religion now, within the semantics of secular nationalism, was transformed into a source of social morals and national belonging. Whereas Islam was, in the Ottoman Empire, not of major importance for aligning the subjects of the sultan-caliph under Ottoman leadership, in the last three decades of the Empire and then in the Turkish republic, religion has been linked to notions of nationhood and citizenship in new and distinctively modern ways. As a result, the modern Turkish subject, atheist or pious, is defined not only by secular-national, but also by religious belonging, which has remained the main marker of difference/sameness for the social boundaries of Turkish nationhood.

Within Turkish nationalism, minority discourse is an important site for the production of a homogeneous Muslim nation that excludes the non-Muslims. Contrary to the egalitarian promise of the secular nation-state and the promises associated with the minority concept in international human rights discourse, Turkish minority politics created a two-tier model of citizenship, marked by constantly reified ethno-religious boundaries. Historically, the nationalist fixation on ethnic and religious homogeneity worked toward the

Turkification of the non-Turkish Muslim (e.g., the Kurds), and the Sunnification of the non-Sunni Muslim population (e.g., the Alevi)s, respectively. Any further investigation into Turkish minority politics will need to consider this boundary work in light of both local historical trajectories and knowledges tied into these, as well as the impact of international politics and discourses.

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