

# Hayrettin Effendi, The Last Black Eunuch in Turkey

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## African Eunuchs in the Ottoman Empire

For centuries child trafficking was a widespread practise in those countries and regions of Europe, Asia and Africa that had fallen under Ottoman domination. Generally known as “blood tax”, this practise was organized for the various palaces of the Ottoman sultan in Constantinople (Istanbul). White and black children were the victims of this form of enslavement. The fate of young girls was to join the harem as concubines or to become servants. The boys served in the Ottoman army or administration and were used for menial or domestic labour. Some of them would be used as pageboys at the palace or eunuchs in the sultan’s harem.

The first black eunuchs in the Ottoman Empire were introduced in 1485. The sultans had them sent over from Ethiopia and the Lake Chad region. Up to the late 15<sup>th</sup> century only white eunuchs would watch over the concubines in the harems. In 1587 a black man was made Chief of the Eunuchs. Known as Kizlar Agasi, he had the rank of a pasha and was the commander of the Halberdiers. He held command over various high-ranking officials of the empire and had important religious offices. He was the manager of the imperial mosques and the holy sites of Mecca and Medina. He was on excellent terms with the sultan and was the most feared man in the country. On his retirement he settled in Egypt, where he lived in luxury.

To this very day, the building that housed the apartments where the black eunuchs from the sultan’s palace used to stay can be visited in the former Turkish capital of Istanbul. A total of six hundred of these black eunuchs used to live there all at the same time! Africa, their continent of origin, lingered on in their imaginations. Thus one can discover African landscapes sketched on the walls of some of the apartments.

## The Last Black Eunuchs

The publication of *Meyyale*, a book in Turkish by Dr Hifzi Topuz, sheds some light and gives precious insight into the daily lives of the last eunuchs of the Ottoman Empire in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The eunuchs were only freed in 1918, the year when the *Mesutiet* was adopted, the abolition of slavery in Turkey. Chapter 8 of Hifzi Topuz’s book focuses on the eunuchs of the

harems. In no uncertain terms, the author describes the suffering of these men: from being torn from their families and home regions in Africa, to the painful procedure of castration which only 10% of the children survived, to their transfer to Turkey.

In the 1960s, in the streets of Istanbul, in particular the neighbourhood of Bostanji, one could still encounter the last black eunuchs. The eunuchs usually kept quiet about their past, taking their secret to their graves. However, one year before his death in 1976 Hayrettin Effendi, the last eunuch of the last Ottoman sultan, Resat, decided to tell his life story to a friend in the neighbourhood. This was 70 years after he had been removed from Ethiopia.

Hayrettin was a physically distinguished and elegant man. Tall, friendly and generous, he lived in a house with a garden, which he shared with a Circassian woman whom he deeply loved and respected. Hayrettin was a Galla from Ethiopia. His story is the story of all the black eunuchs of the Ottoman Empire, which for centuries had remained a secret. His testimony reveals the suffering of the eunuchs. It is the insight of a highly lucid man into the perversity of human nature in his time. It is a powerful appeal to humanity never to allow such atrocities to occur again. It is also a message of hope

### **Hayrettin Effendi's Testimony**

The testimony of Hayrettin Effendi, last eunuch of the last sultan, appears below.

I remember my childhood as if it was yesterday. I come from the Habesistan. I am a Galla. My name used to be Gülnata. We lived in a small village. We were very happy. I was 7 or 8 years old. I played with the children of my age on the village square. We always used to play the same game. We used to run after each other. One day horsemen arrived. They did not resemble the men from our area. Their faces were lighter. They were armed. They caught us. One of them held my mouth and I nearly choked. My eyes nearly came out of their sockets. They captured me and all my friends and took us away. I could not understand their language. Later I was to find out they spoke Arabic. Once we arrived in a village, they placed us in a courtyard. There were other children like us. They spoke the same language as ours. They were sobbing. We could not understand why they had taken us away. We shared the same grief. For three days we went without eating or drinking. We were frightened. A few days later we were castrated [in Massawa, a peninsula on the Ethiopian coast, occupied by the Turks]. For many years, I have never been able to forget the pain and the torture endured. Two weeks after the castration we started to heal. We were taken to harbours. There were boys and girls like us. We did not all speak the same language but we all shared the same destiny. All the boys had been castrated. We all got along well. Then we were taken aboard a boat. We rejoiced at having escaped from monsters. But where were we to be taken to? We thought they would throw us into the ocean. We knew nothing. Everything was completely uncertain. Our villages, our brothers, our sisters, our mothers were far behind. Would it ever be possible to see them again one day? Some of us cried incessantly. We all feared being drowned. It was the first time we had seen the sea and we were scared. We kept together on the boat. We watched the waves. What further misfortune was awaiting us?<sup>2</sup>

The children were screaming and shouting out of joy, as they thought we would go back to our villages. Our joy was short-lived. The interpreter told us that it would be very difficult to bring us back to our villages. Slavery was abolished. We were free... [In Aden] we were disembarked ... We were led to the market square. The English commander gave a speech that was translated into Arabic. We understood nothing. It was then translated into Habesh for us. Since the slave trade was prohibited, we would be given to families of military commanders and civil servants whom they trusted ... The commanders were Ottomans and the civil servants Sanjkas.<sup>3</sup>

... It was winter. It was the first time I had seen snow. I was cold. Yakup gave me to someone famous in Istanbul. I was disappointed. I loved Yakup like my father. He gave me to Cerkez Mehmet Pasa. Can a human being be given as a present? I then understood that this could happen ... In 1918 came the *Mesutiet* and we were freed ... We bought this house together with a friend, a lady from the palace. We manage. It is our destiny.”

#### Notes

1. This is an excerpt from Hifzi Topuz, *Meyyale*, Istanbul, Remzi Kitabevi Publishing, pp. 69–72. We wish to thank Ozan, who orally translated this text and the whole chapter on the black eunuchs for us, and also Mrs Oya Göker, who brought this publication to our attention as soon as it was published in Turkey.
2. During the crossing, the slave boat was boarded and inspected by an English patrol boat and the Arab slave traders were arrested. All were led to the harbour of Aden in Yemen.
3. An Ottoman officer, Yakup whilst on a mission to Aden, took him and brought him back to Istanbul.