

THE CULTIVATION OF MEMORY IN THE GÜLEN COMMUNITY

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Abstract

This paper explores the cultivation of ‘memory’ as reflected in the teachings of Fethullah Gülen and the practices of the community inspired by him. For example, it discusses how particular places, themes, and images are remembered within the movement, evoked and re-enacted so as to create community and inspire a sense of participation and allegiance.

Although the history of the Gülen movement is relatively brief-some forty years or less, practices of sharing memories inspires a collective sense of community and even sacrality.

In this paper memory within the Gülen movement will be presented in terms of its resonance with broader themes in Turkish collective memory such as Anatolian/Turkish Islam, the Ottoman cultural ideal, etc. In addition, the relationship of particular remembered symbols and experiences in the history of the Gülen movement to its current practices will be elaborated, for example ‘the Light Houses’ and ‘camps’.

All of this will be set against the background of the topography of a movement that has expanded its imagination and its practice from local to national and ultimately global contexts.

“In great and magnificent nations, dervish lodges and even gravestones are ornamented. One can read a nation’s concept of beauty and art on its places of worship and its tombstones” (Gülen)¹

In this paper I will explore the cultivation of “memory” as reflected in the teachings of Fethullah Gülen and the practices of the community inspired by him. For example, I will indicate how particular images, places, and themes are remembered within the movement, evoked and reenacted so as to create community and inspire a sense of participation and allegiance.

The Gülen movement has emerged as a significant phenomenon in Turkey and now globally so that this community inspired by Islamic preacher and teacher Fethullah Gülen (b. ca 1938) now comprises over six million followers. Beginning with a small circle of members of his mosque congregation in Izmir that crystallized around Gülen the late 1970s, the movement now focuses on globalized service projects, especially in the fields of education and interfaith and intercultural dialogue. The movement prefers not to conceive of itself as a formal organization. While outsiders may refer to it as a “Gülen movement” or in the Turkish style to its members as Fethullahcılar (followers of Fethullah--this may have a somewhat deprecatory ring), it is informally called **Hizmet** (service) by insiders.²

Hizmet has established a global network of over 500 schools world wide that offer a curriculum compatible with the highest local standards and avoid Islamic or other sorts of indoctrination. In the United States and Europe the movement involves itself in various forms of community outreach, cooperating with universities, cultural institutions, and local inter-religious dialogue platforms. Within Turkey, students, teachers, and businessmen support *Hizmet*, many believing that it imparts Islamic values, while bettering humanity and fostering peace and cooperation. The Gülen movement is influential in the Turkish media (Zaman newspaper, Samanyolu television and Burc FM radio), the educational system, in financial companies (Asya Finans-now Bank Asya), as well as in publishing and book distribution. Within Turkey a bookstore chain, NT Stores with over 300 outlets, disseminates the publications of the movement, as well as many other titles, stationery and software items deemed suitable and useful both for supporters of the movement and the general public.

History and Cultural and Political Background: Turkey and the Role of Religion in Society

If we think of the Gülen community as an Islamic religious movement, it puts their status in Turkey under some scrutiny. Turkey is among the most modern and Westernized of the

1 M. Fethullah Gülen, *Pearls of Wisdom* (Somerset NJ: Light, 2005), 109.

2 Etienne Copeaux has discussed the use of the term *hizmet* as used to represent the valuable contribution of Turks to the Muslim world and the world as a whole. He finds this to be an expressional of national pride that is an element of the representations of Turkish history in public discourse and in government sanctioned textbooks. The use of *hizmet* in the Gülen community may draw on this resonance, however, Copeaux seems to think that the term is narrowed from the world to the Muslim world whereas in the Gülen community the object of *hizmet* is increasingly widened. It also would probably represent a sense of “humble” selfless service, without the recipients being “indebted”. (p. 107) Etienne Copeaux, “Hizmet: A Keyword in Turkish Historical Narrative” in *New Perspectives on Turkey* 13 (1996):97-114.

countries of the Muslim world. Even today, almost a century after the time of the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of Kemal Ataturk (d. 1938), this path to being a secular state is both celebrated and contested. Turks are fiercely nationalistic and portraits of the founder of the modern Turkish nation, Kemal Ataturk, adorn all public institutions while his statues dominate every town and village square. Kemalism, the philosophy inspired by Ataturk, is widely espoused in Turkey. It is categorized by strong nationalistic sentiments as embodied in Ataturk's declaration, memorized by school children and inscribed in many public paces, "How happy is the person who can say 'I am a Turk'". Another pillar of Kemalism is the idea of the secular state. Ataturk was a lover of things modern and for him that meant Western European. His biographers note the powerful influence that his early posting as a military attaché to Sofia Bulgaria in 1913 made on Ataturk. In fact, he came to blame religion, that is, a sort of popular and superstitious version of Islam, for the economic and cultural backwardness of his countrymen.

Emerging from the debacle of Turkey's having taken the side of the Axis powers during World War I, and in the aftermath of great civil upheavals, Ataturk, who had become a national war hero during the battle of Gallipoli, was seen as a strong man and a rallying point for salvaging the disintegrating nation. Once in power as a virtual dictator, Ataturk instituted unprecedented secularizing and modernizing reforms. For example, after he took power in the 1920s the Ottoman law codes based on the Islamic law (*shari'a*) were abolished and a new legal system based on French and Swiss models was implemented. Visible signs of religio-cultural identity such as the face veil (*yashmak*) and the headscarf for women and the fez for men were banned. A massive reeducation of the population in European tastes and mores was undertaken by the state.

The linguistic reform of the Turkish language that took place in 1927 was another remarkable sea change. Linguists from around the world assisted in adapting the Latin alphabet used by the western world to Turkish, itself a language with a complex system of vowel harmony that was more easily configured to the Latin phonetic letters. Vocabulary items associated with the Arabic and Persian tastes espoused by courtly circles--usages that defined a sort of cultural class and religious elitism and could be perceived as obscurantist, were pushed aside in favor of Turkish words and idioms. If these were not easily located, old Turkish ballads and folklore were combed for ozturk--"ur" or authentically, Turkish equivalents. A more dramatic illustration of an erasure of archived collective memory could hardly be found.

The new generation of Turks was thus cut off from the literate heritage of their forebears. At the same time, of course, great changes in literacy were taking place in many Muslim societies due to the advent of compulsory primary and secondary education.³ Large numbers of the rural Turkish population, especially those living away from Istanbul in central regions of Anatolia and eastern Turkey were thus encountering literacy for the first time through the new medium of the Turkish language written in the Latin script. A new generation of Turks would be educated using new texts that promoted a nationalistic, secular and modern identity. No doubt pockets of resistance to these reforms existed and persisted, but overall the change in Turkish national consciousness was pervasive and dominant.

In the light of this historical background, the nature of contemporary Turkish collective memory is necessarily complex and contested. Among the elements that may be drawn on to constitute this memory are the Ottoman heritage and Turkish regional traditions. However, the

3 Dale, Eickelman, "Mass Higher Education and the Religious Imagination in Contemporary Arab Societies," *American Ethnologist* 19, no. 4 (November): 643-55.

Ottoman period may be variously understood as glorious or decadent, and regional traditions potentially subvert the unity of the imagined community of the nation.

Within recent Turkish intellectual life the search for a specifically Turkish articulation of the religion has been undertaken by nationalism intellectuals as well as, on the religious side, some of the followers of the Nur movement inspired by the teachings of Said Nursi (d. 1960).⁴ Some scholars have discussed the relationship of the Gülen movements with the teachings of Said Nursi and the spectrum of groups inspired by him. Nursi is highly respected by followers of *hizmet* where he is referred to as “*ustad*” (venerable teacher). His writings, especially the *Risale-i Nur*, as often invoked and read within Gülen study circles. Recently the Gülen community is offering its own translations of the classic writing of Nursi, in a sense offering an alternative reading of Nursi for the English speaking world. Among the themes associated with Islam in the eyes of the Gülen movement are the Ottoman heritage, Anatolian Islam, and Islamic mysticism (Sufism).

Fethullah Gülen is a retired Islamic preacher and teacher “Hoca”. It is clear that Islamic teachings and values pervade the regular practices of the members of the movement. Negotiating this Islamic element in the highly secularized Turkish public sphere, and with international expansion, in a predominantly non-Muslim world stage, presents numerous challenges to the symbolic articulation of the movement.

Islam and Turkish Public Memory

Another aspect of the “Turkish” Islam concept has political implications in terms of relation to the official state ideology and apparatus. The formulation of a “Turkish” Islam allowed accommodation as it presented classical Islamic political thought as a sort of precursor to modern secularism. For example, in such a reading of Islamic political theory, the ruler himself was presented as being the guarantee of a proper religious order.

The dominant belief was that a truly religious Sultan would govern the state according to the principles of justice, equality, and piety. This approach of keeping religion apart from worldly affairs led to a collective memory that regarded Islam as a flexible and tolerant belief system. Thus, it was assumed that religious institutions should adapt flexible attitudes toward the changing situations of their times. In the Ottoman era there was never a full-fledged theocratic system.⁵

The Ottoman Empire’s social and political order known as the millet system (community-based organization) in which diverse religious communities were governed by their own laws and officials may also be involved positively in this regard. By analogy to this Ottoman system, the heritage of Turkish Islam is portrayed as being able to offer a pluralistic model for society.

For example, Aras and Caha observe that, “Turkish” Islam is characterized by “moderation”, i. e. “That all creatures should be loved as God’s physical reflection and objects of the Creator’s own love. There is no place for enemies or “others” in this system”.⁶ According to the construction of a “Turkish” Islam, Islamic law (*shari’a*) primarily regulated areas of private life for Muslims such as marriage and divorce. Much of the public law, however was based on “custom”. This aspect of Islamic law is invoked today by many moderate Muslim

4 Bulent Aras and Omer Chaha, “Fethullah Gülen and his Liberal “Turkish Islam” Movement. *MERIA_4* (Dec. 2000): 30 ff.

5 *Ibid.*, 31

6 *Ibid.*

reformers in order to demonstrate the flexibility of Islam and its possibility to adapt to diverse cultural and political situations. This view also supports the proposition that Islamic regulations could work in a secular context and even provide an accommodating and pluralistic environment, should Islamic government become the dominant system in a modern state. Of course, this is in contrast to the more rigid and totalizing formulations of an Islamic state espoused by contemporary political Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Jama'at-e Islami. In these, the shari'a is conceived of as a total system that should ideally regulate every detail of public and private life and the Qur'an should be acceded to as the constitution over which only God has sovereignty.

A prominent intellectual of the Gülen community, Enes Ergene, articulates Turkish Islam in terms of the movement's philosophy as follows.

The values of individualism and tolerance which are said to characterize the twenty first century are identified with "the essence of the synthesis created by the coming together of Turkish culture with Islam. Muslim Turks have practiced tolerance and concurrence, which are the essence of the contemporary democracy, over a vast geography for centuries. Islam has been interpreted in this geography with the same tolerance for a thousand years... Gülen, following this very basis, regenerates this tolerant interpretation and understanding of Muslim-Turkish Sufism within contemporary circumstances, albeit high lighting a broader, more active, and more socially oriented vision.⁷

Anatolian Islam

Some academic observers of Gülen and his movement trace some of its distinctive attitudes to an "Anatolian" historical and cultural context.

Anatolia is the large plateau that defines this central Turkish region. Until recently, Anatolia could represent the heart of Turkey, but also the area less impacted by European and modern behaviors and tastes.

The concept of an Anatolian practice of Islam draws on elements such as the image of Jelaluddin Rumi (d. 1273). Rumi, whose shrine is located in Konya, a central Anatolia city, was the founder of the Mevlevi or Whirling Dervish order. His poetry is pervaded by love and is often read as promoting religious pluralism.

One observer of the Gülen movement suggests that Rumi has become emblematic of its position of dialogue and tolerance.

The philosophy that comes closest to this kind of humanism within the Muslim tradition is, of course, Sufism, and above all the teachings of Mevlana or Celaluddin Rumi (d. 1273). From this point of view it is no coincidence that there has been a general reorientation in recent years within the Gülen community away from Said Nursi (d. 1960), the original source of inspiration for the movement. Instead, there is greater interest in the works of Mevlana, the initiator of the whirling dervishes and a master of poetry and tevhid (mystic unity).⁸

In fact, during 2007, UNESCO declared "year of Rumi", Gülen communities world wide promoted cultural events celebrating Rumi's life and poetry.

7 Enes Ergene "Introduction" *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance* (Somerset NJ: Light, 2004), viii.

8 Elisabeth Özdalga, "Secularizing Trend sin Fethullah Gülen's Movement: Impasse or Opportunity for Further Renewal" *Critique* (12, 2003), 70.

Another association that makes embracing a Sufi heritage attractive is “moderation”. This strand of Islamic contemporary thought is not unique to the Turkish context. Similar attempts to recover a Sufi background so as to inspire pluralistic, tolerant, and moderate attitudes have been made by intellectuals and government officials, in Pakistan, for example.⁹

History of the Movement

Broadly speaking, the development of the Gülen movement can be described as occurring through three phases. The first and initial period would be from the 1970s until 1983 and that could be characterized as a time for community building by Gülen and his immediate circle. From 1983-1997 the movement focused on educational projects, such as providing dormitories for college students and establishing primary and secondary institutes with a focus on achievements in math and science while forging strong relationship among dedicated teachers and their pupils.

Internationalization of the movement began with an expansion of business and educational projects into the Turkish speaking ex-Soviet republics in Central Asia with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1994. With Gülen’s move to the United State since 1997 the focus has further expanded to inter religious dialogue and a global expansion of projects and institutions.¹⁰

The expansion of the Gülen movement from a local to a national to a global one, correlated with developments both in Turkey and worldwide. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, its state monopoly on economic and cultural life ended in Central Asia and in other areas of the world. Into the vacuum in the Turkish speaking ex-Soviet republics in Central Asia came Gülen students--initially to explore the possibilities of replicated the success of the movement’s Turkish schools in those regions. Soon delegations of businessmen supporters (*esnaf*) followed. The pioneers in these new regions learned on the ground, often facing daunting physical and political challenges.

In difficult political and economic times, a significant Turkish Diaspora of migrant workers and small businessmen had occurred since the 1970s, not only to Western Europe, in particular Germany and the Benelux countries, but also to the United States. With economic prosperity and a more open society of the 1990s, Turkish economic and political relations with non-Muslim societies also increased.

In constructing a narrative of the movement’s origins in modern Turkish history, recollections of senior members of *Hizmet* portray the period of the 1970s as a dark one in Turkish history.¹¹ This era of the 20th century was the full-blown cold war. At the global level the capitalist West faced off against the communist Soviet Union. In individual buffer nations similar conflicts boiled over, often accentuated by class and ethnic divides.

In Turkey the forces of the right and left battled in the streets and many educational institutions became polarized or were dominated by one group or the other.

Those who eventually felt drawn to *Hizmet* seem to be those who eschewed violent conflict. They were, however, often students from more traditional backgrounds and perspectives who felt their faith and values assaulted by their militantly secular teachers. They often felt

9 Hasssan N. Gardezi “Sufi Mysticism of the Indus Valley” <http://www.apnaorg.com/articles/sufi.html> Viewed Sept. 21, 2007.

10 Hakan Yavuz, for example, discusses this development of the movement in *Turkish Islam and the Secular State. The Gülen Movement*. Syracuse:Syracuse University Press, 2003.

11 Interviews.

personally and physically intimidated. The emergence of Gülen's teachings was like a refuge and a ray of hope for such individuals who were rejected in their immediate environment.

The 1980 military coup was a watershed event in Turkish economic and political development. The social violence and ongoing clashes between rightists and leftists had provoked a state of continuous violence. To bring this to a halt the army arrested 30,000 people in the month after the coup. Ideological activity, especially that on the left, was curtailed. In fact, the new military regime, however, supported the idea of a Turkish Islamic synthesis as a way of containing leftist radicalism.

Under the premiership and presidency of Turgut Ozal (1983-1993) Turkey opened up to capitalist economics rather than state control, and to the rest of the world.

The expansion of the Gülen Movement in the early 1980s was the result of two structural opportunities opened under the Ozal regime. First Turkey's economic liberalization schemes gave rise to a conservative central Anatolian bourgeoisie. Second, the 1982 constitution opened up new spaces for social and religious organizing. Such social reforms opened doors for previously restricted religious expression, and led to religious revival throughout the country.¹²

In a complex set of ramifications, space for an expansion of moderate Islamic expression was cleared in the early 1980s. This was, by coincidence, the very period when Gülen and his early circle were poised to take their activities to a new level.

According to the Turkish scholar, Atasoy, Ozal's Motherland Party contained within it a strong pro-Islamic faction. This was able to link Muslim cultural values and economic development.

The political decision to develop a religious educational system played a significant role in the creation of a new genre of Muslim professionals employed mainly as engineers in the state bureaucracy and private sector. These professionals were the children of religiously minded rural small producers and urban lower classes.¹³

On the whole, this was the period of negotiating a new national culture that reincorporated religion. Religion as a subject could now be taught in the state schools that seemed to be in competition with private and Qur'an schools.

An explosion of private religious education was also taking place. at this time Statistics cite that there were only seventy (70) Imam hatip (religious) schools in 1951-2, while by 1980 there were 588. From 1980 to 1986 this increased to 717--about 22%.¹⁴

My point in citing these numbers is to make a connection between the expansion of *Hizmet* and its reception in a new Turkish public sphere, to a general shift in Turkish public culture during these decades that facilitated a synthesis of nationalist and Islamic religious values, symbols, and memories.

However, the strategy of the Gülen movement schools was not to promote religious education. Rather the focus was on excellence in science and mathematics in particular, the skills needed for a prosperous and successful modernity. At the same time a concern with the moral formation of students was to be addressed by dedicated teachers who would befriend and

12 Joshua D. Hendrick, "The Regulated Potential of Kinetic Islam: Antithesis in Global Islamic Activism" in *Muslim Citizens of a Globalized World: Contributions of the Gülen Movement* ed. Robert A. Hunt and Yuksel Aslalogan (Somerset NJ: Light, 2007), 23.

13 Atasoy *Turkey, Islamists, and Democracy* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2005), 154.

14 Atasoy, 155.

advise their students as true “older siblings” (*abis* and *ablas*).

The emphasis on religious topics and practices, which was characteristic of the Evangelical missions, has never been a distinguishing quality of the Gülen schools. From the start, their syllabi have been under the strict control of the Turkish Ministry of Education, which means that they have applied the same program as other Turkish public or private schools, with no special emphasis on religious topics. Religion has permeated the activities through the religious zeal on the part of the teachers and other personnel, but it has never been part of the curriculum.¹⁵

Topographies of the Movement

The development in Gülen’s outlook from earlier Ottoman/Turkish nationalism to a pan-Turkic and ultimately more global and even universal perspective may be represented by “the map story”. In my interviews I heard the story as follows from a businessman and early supporter, Ali Rıza Tanrıseven:

On the wall in his dormitory room, Hoca Effendi used to have a map of the Ottoman empire with the inscription ‘you are still in my dreams’. Later this was exchanged for a world map and finally for a satellite view from space¹⁶

As Gülen’s own vision expanded from the local Turkish context in the 1990s with educational projects in the ex-Soviet republics and the initiation of dialogue with non-Muslims, his followers also broadened their horizons. For example, when outreach to non-religious Turks commenced, one follower explained how Hocaeffendi told followers to distinguish the *dinsiz* (non-religious) persons from the *din-düşmanı* (enemies of religion).¹⁷ At the same time, some negative impressions by outsiders of Gülen’s use of the Ottoman and world map as suggesting an imperialistic drive were noted by Ünal Bilir.¹⁸

Symbols used to represent the movement are thus subject to negotiation and reinterpretation depending on the audience and on the expanding horizons of its outreach activities.

The Asian Side

The dilemma of Turkey, situated on both sides of the Europe/ Asia divide may also be seen as representing the polarities modernity/tradition, secular/Islamic.

Associating with members of the Gülen community and studying the itineraries of many of the trips on which their foreign guests are taken discloses some of the principles of selection as to which sites are considered meaningful and memorable.

Turkish culture is represented on such tours by monuments familiar to all tourist itineraries-the Topkapı museum. Dolmabahçe Palace and the Covered Bazaar. However, less familiar sites generally visited by *Hizmet*’s guests are situated on Istanbul’s Asian side, in particular Camlica Hill and Uskudar. It is unlikely that many of these visitors will pause to inquire about the significance of Uskudar and Camlica in the history and historical memory of the Gülen movement.

In addition to the Turkish perception that the Asian Side represents religiosity and tradition,

15 Ozdalga, “Secularizing Trends”, 71.

16 Interview, Ali Rıza Tanrıseven, Istanbul, Aug. 13, 2005.

17 Interview, Davut Ay, Ankara, July 22, 2005.

18 Ünal Bilir.(2004: 270).

specific associations pervade Camlica hill. It played a role in Ottoman times as a place of repose and even today the restaurant at the top of Büyük Camlica takes the form of a reconstructed chalet in the Ottoman style complete with poetry inscribed in the Osmanli script adorning the walls. Camlica is also near *Hizmet* institutions including Coskun school and the “Academy”, which is the intellectual center of the movement. Here Gülen’s corpus of lectures and writings as well as other material related to the movement are translated and edited for distribution in multiple languages around the world. The function of the Academy in preserving, shaping, and archiving the “memory” and the intellectual life of the Gülen community is central. It is in close touch with a number of the more “intellectual” *abis* drawn from the early students of Gülen. The model of a movement intellectual would be the graduate of an Islamic studies program with a knowledge of Arabic who then is able to internalize and interpret the teachings of Gülen. The major *Abis* are known to many members of the movement who tend to be drawn from the ranks of teachers and students, i. e. have an interest and affinity for intellectual life and discourse. Examples of such intellectuals are Ali Unal, translator of the Qur’an, biographer of Gülen, and now translator of the new editions of Nursi’s works. Another intellectual is Enes Ergene, an early student who presents the movement in sociological terms in his book, *Geleneğin Modern Çağa Tanıklığı*.¹⁹

Even at more grass roots levels there is scope for the training and development of intellectual within the movement. For example, small “at home” gathering may be convened weekly. An example would be women’s study groups at which one or two members take the lead, offering moral discourses on Islamic teachings or the Qur’an, providing fellowship and moral support to a confirmed circle and also new potentially interested housewives and friends of the group’s members.

Within the Light Houses or dormitories, similar groups often convene. There is usually a space reserved for such meetings, perhaps an auditorium where outreach can occur. During the summer holidays, for example, I observed busloads of teachers in Gülen schools from other areas of Turkey coming to a large dorm located in Libadiye on the Asian side. In several days of meetings they may compare notes on pedagogy and other educational issues. At the same time, there will be a motivational component at which *Abis* will address them on inspirational topics, and they may watch DVDs on Gülen’s sermons or on his life.

Beside the Academy is a large mosque in Ottoman style (as almost all Turkish mosques are) used by members.

Down the hill is the town of Uskudar, a ferry ride across the Bosphorus from Europe and the Sultan Ahmet area. The Uskudar Valide Sultan mosque is also a site of memory for the *Hizmet* community for it is here that Gülen delivered a series of lectures on the Prophet Muhammad during the year 1989-1990. These are still available on DVD and the substance of them forms the background of the book, *Infinite Light (Sonsuz Nur)*.²⁰

The Early Days of the Movement Memorialized and Reenacted

Several themes of the 70s period, the earliest in the development of Gülen’s work continue to be used to evoke memories and in some cases continuities with those times. In the following section of this article I will discuss several of these: the “light houses”, the golden generation, the “fifth floor” and camps.

19 Ergene, M. Enes, *Geleneğin Modern Çağa Tanıklığı* (Istanbul, Yeni Akademi, 2005).

20 *Sonsuz Nur*

Light Houses

One symbol related to the educational and inspirational function of the group is the *Işık evi* (light house):

Gülen calls the *Işık evleri* a tree, the seed of which was planted in the times of the Prophet Muhammad himself (1997: 12). He sees their roots within the Qur'an (24:36f) itself (Gülen 2004: 2), thus giving the cemaat's own form of organization the highest Islamic virtue. For Gülen the *ışık evleri* are the essence of Islamic education par excellence and are viewed to be the basis for the educational activities.²¹ (This gives the teachers a high religious prestige.²²

Balcı describes the houses of light as “flats rented by the cemaat or purchased by cemaat businessmen where students—usually from poor families—are allowed to stay during their studies. Each “house of light” is under the direction of an abi (older brother) who helps to educate the students”.²³ Over time the dormitory system has evolved so that most of the students now pay their own way except for those who may receive scholarship support. Based on my observations of life in a girl's dorm (Istanbul 2006), students from a wide range of backgrounds and lifestyles opt to avail themselves of the facilities that are clean, modern, and well-equipped. The “light house” concept, today, may more likely apply to smaller units of students who form study circles within a dorm or in housing they privately rent.

Beyond this more concrete and specific role of the light houses, they are compared to the ideal functions of madrasas, tekyes, and zawiyas (Islamic schools, dervish lodges, and Sufi retreat houses) that they are said to revive and combine. Their function of *ihya* (revival) is envisioned to have expanded from Anatolia to the world as the movement's horizons broadened.²⁴ This is an example of collective memory because the “light house” is a term particular to this movement. It may overlap in usage with the term “dershane” (place of study), which is typically used within the Nur movement.²⁵

The fact that the light houses are functionally associated by Gülen with madrasas and Sufi lodges, demonstrates how they symbolically bridge the spheres of modern and traditional, Islamic and secular education. In another association, the imagery of “light” evokes the linguistic coinage for being “enlightened” or in a sense modern, whether in terms of the Turkish “*aydın*”, or the Arabic “*manar*” group.

This idea of “function:” also evokes a story about Gülen that is repeatedly told. In the 70s in Izmir he was addressing his early circle of businessmen followers. He told them that since Turkey already had a great number of mosques; their zeal to contribute to good works should therefore be channeled to functions that were more practical and necessary for Turkish society. More practical and useful would be the building of dormitories for the many students who were relocating to new cities or moving to larger cities from the country in the pursuit of education. This Gülen's vision was put into effect in various Turkish cities and the businessmen drew of their networks in cities around the country to clone the success of the dormitory

21 Gülen 1998e: 193

22 Agai, forthcoming

23 Bayram Balcı, “Fethullah Gülen's Missionary Schools in Central Asia and their Role in the Spreading of Turkism and Islam” in *Religion, State and Society* 31, no. 2 (June 2003): 151-77. P. 158

24 M. Fethullah Gülen, *Prizma 2* (Prism 2) Izmir: Nil, 1997, 13. . “Dünden Bugüne Işık Evler” (Light Houses from Yesterday to Today) <http://tr.fGülen.com/a.page/eserleri/prizma/perspektif/a696.html>

25 Hakan Yavuz, “Towards an Islamic liberalism? The Nurcu movement and Fethullah Gülen” *Middle East Journal* (53, # 4 Autumn): 584-605.

projects.

The strategy of imitating successful projects is highly representative of Gülen movement activities. If an event or program, for example sponsoring a performance of the dervishes or distributing “Noah’s pudding” on Ashura day works in one city. The word is quickly spread and the program is replicated elsewhere. Information on what worked and what could be improved is also shared and a healthy spirit of cooperative competition is engendered among the various Hizmet centers.

The Golden Generation

A senior activist in the movement (Sait Aksoy, Chicago, October 23, 2005) described its activism in terms of a relay race in which the current generations are running and passing the torch or flag on to the next generation. Sighing, he explained how they have to run very quickly because previous generations had lagged behind. Various participants in the movement would probably construe the nature of the torch that is being carried differently--but all would agree on the need to make all efforts and sacrifices (*fedakarlık*) to bear it onward and on high.

Gülen uses the term Golden Generation (*altın nesil*) to refer to future Hizmet members or perhaps more broadly to those positively impacted by the movement, for example, graduates of the schools. This concept has historical resonance with the Islamic idea of the “best generations” of early Muslims. Within the evolving discourse of *nesil* (generation) the Golden Generation has been transformed from indicating a specifically Turkish Islam to a universal ideal.²⁶ A conference was convened on this topic in 1977, whose proceedings are available on two cassette tapes or CDs [Istanbul, Nil, 2004]. Key concepts articulated in those sessions included the idea of inner self-evaluation (*muhasaba*), love, friendliness (*dostane*), self-control, and reflection (*muraqaba*). Since these terms refer to particular practices and spiritual stages of the Sufi path the influence of Sufism on these formulations is quite clear. The Golden Generation is also seen as being antithetical to the chaos and hopelessness that some Hizmet members believe marks the current age.²⁷ Gülen has written that he has

always dreamed of a generation with minds enlightened by positive science, with hearts purified by faith, who would be an example of virtue and who would burn with the desire to serve their nation and humanity, and who would live, not for themselves, but for others. Inspired by the verse and hadith I just mentioned, I called them the “Altın Nesil” (Golden Generation). I described the characteristics of this generation twenty-two years ago in conferences I gave in some cities. This is an expression that I coined and used. But without making any distinctions it’s being used in the accusations for all the activities done by our Muslim people. This strange situation shows how well things are or are not understood.²⁸

Balcı describes the significance of the Golden Generation in terms of the educational activities of the movement.

The concept of *altın nesil* (the Golden Generation) is an important one for Gülen and his followers. The aim is to provide ‘a perfect education for a perfect generation in order to obtain a perfect

26 Bekim Agai, *Zwischen Netzwerk und Diskurs: Das Bildungsnetzwerk um Fethullah Gülen* (Schenefeld: EB Verlag, 2004), 255.

27 Ibid.

28 Gülen, “Claims and Answers” *Aksiyon*, 06.06.1998, Claim #19. <http://en.fGülen.com/a.page/press/interview/a1216p2.html> Viewed Nov. 2, 2005. *Aksiyon*, (1998:2).

society'. 'Altın nesil' also requires the young people of the community to show a great respect for religious and national values. This generation has to be modern and disciplined. The community therefore offers its members the best schools and the best teachers.²⁹

Members of the Turkish left have suggested that the altın nesil concept could inculcate neo-conservative, elitist attitudes (Bilir 2005: 265).³⁰ There is also some question as to whether the phrase's meaning is context specific depending on whether the audience is within or outside Turkey, and what its political implications might be. Agai argues that the Golden Generation constructs an alternate version of modernity in which religion will remain an essential component.³¹

As in other elements of Gülen's thought, the Golden Generation concept has evolved from a nationalistic project of saving Turkey to a project of offering hope to the entire world through imbuing the pursuit of science and progress with spiritual and moral values.³² While the term Golden Generation evokes the *hadith* that the early generations of Muslims were the best and a model for those who come later, in Gülen's thought this admiration of tradition persists along with an evocation of "hope" that a "new generation" may restore and recover what has been lost, and perhaps even continue to evolve, at least in the sphere of scientific knowledge and accomplishment.

The Fifth Floor (*Beşinci Kat*)

Another designation for aspects of the Gülen movement that carries a special spatial referent is the *Beşinci Kat* (fifth floor) (Gülen 2003c: 196). This originally referred to the top floor of a dormitory in which Gülen stayed in the mid 1980s. This period is remembered fondly by the senior students who had to humbly serve any guests that came so that the students would not develop a "*hoca*" mentality.³³ It also has the sense of representing "another world" so that its interpretation could be further related to the concept of levels of heaven, as in the Mi'raj, or Night Journey of the Prophet Muhammad. Indeed, the atmosphere of the fifth floor represents a "sacred space" in which, for example, followers would cultivate attitudes of utmost kindness, service, and tranquility becoming almost "angelic". The number "five" in itself is not supposed to be significant – Gülen states that it could have been the fifteenth floor, for example—it is rather the concept of "height" or sublimity that is important.³⁴ The fifth floor also represents an experience of a spiritual retreat, and a vantage point at which Gülen received inspiration for future projects, "seeing" them on the horizons from the terrace of the fifth floor.

The "fifth floor" motif would be an element of community identity generally known only to insiders. It is, therefore, noteworthy for demonstrating that among the metaphors used for describing the Hizmet community there appear to be both exoteric social definitions and esoteric/spiritual symbolism.

29 Balcı 2003a: 159

30 Ünal Bilir, "'Turkey-Islam': Recipe for Success or Hindrance to the Integration of the Turkish Diaspora Community in Germany" *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* (24, #2, Oct.2004): 259-283

31 Agai, *Zwischen Netzwerk und Diskurs*. 256.

32 Bekim Agai, "Fethullah Gülen and his Movement's Islamic Ethic of Education". *Critique:critical Middle Eastern Studies* 11 (1): 27-48. pp. 36-7

33 Reşit Haylamaz, Istanbul, August 9, 2005.

34 Gülen, *Işığın Görüngüsü Ufuk* (The Horizon of Light) (Çağ ve Nesil-7) Istanbul: Nil, 197).

Camps

I was first invited to a *Hizmet* “camp” during the winter season, in fact, the Christmas Holidays of 2005 in the Chicago area. My pre-existing impression of camps was of tents pitched in a forest. This camp however, was held in a summer resort hotel for which a very appealing rate could be negotiated during the winter season, especially at a time when most American families are at home with relatives.

The activities of this camp consisted of reading and discussing *Risale Nur* and Gülen’s book on the Prophet Muhammad.³⁵ No dramatic religious practices took place, just a simple round of communal ritual prayers and devotions.³⁶ Evening lectures were presented by visiting senior *Abis* and a few outside guests. Almost all sessions were conducted in Turkish. It was a family atmosphere with special classes and activities for children and young people.

It did not occur to me to ask--why call it a “camp”, and it was only later that I learned about the first *Hizmet* camps and their place in the memory of the Gülen movement. This I was to hear from one of the first members of Gülen’s circle in Turkey, a man who was an early follower of *Hoca Effendi* from the Days of the *Kastanepazari* mosque in Izmir, Ismail Büyükcelebi.³⁷

After an evening (*sohbet*) with members of the movement in Chicago, I was granted an interview, conducted in Turkish. The following account of the first camp is based on my notes.

At the first camp in 1968 (check date) there were about 50 students. They lived in tents in an open field at Kaynaklar village near Izmir. It was in the open air and there was a row of pine trees on one side of the field. There was a one room house that had been used as a barn and had to be cleaned up. For cooking they made a hearth out of stones.

All the students (male) were used to dorm life and had never cooked. They learned by experience, taking turns and having Hoca Effendi comment on the meals as they were progressing.

The water came from a well and there was no electricity, only the light of oil lamps.

The only place to do laundry was in a stream about 30 minutes away.

The second year of the camp there were 120 students and in the third 275.

In the 70s Hoca Effendi moved to the city of Enderem and so did the camps for four years. During this period, in fact, after the 1971 coup there was more pressure on the movement from the state authorities. Gülen himself was jailed for holding the camps as they were viewed as being potentially subversive.

Soldiers would routinely come and check for clandestine activities.³⁸

When the students were alerted that such a raid was imminent they would hide their religious books such as copies of the *Risale-i Nur*. In order to give the impression that fewer attendees were at the camp, they used to put one bed roll on top of another.

They recited litanies of protection such as the prayer (*du'a*) of those who were at the early Islamic battle of Badr. Once Gülen saw a dream of the Prophet’s uncle, Hamza, just as a raid

35 *Infinite Light/ Sonsuz Nur*

36 Primarily from *al-Jawshan al-Kabir* (Somerset NJ: Light, 2006).

37 Interview Chicago April 16, 2007.

38 At that point visibly practicing Islam was considered subversive.

was immanent. They later learned that at that very time the jeep of a party of soldiers who were coming to investigate had an accident on the road delaying the raid.

At one time in the late 1960s the future leader of the Refah party, Najmettin Erbakan, came to the camps to attempt to rally support for his party. This type of political solicitation, however, was not an interest for Gülen's students.

In addition to its intrinsic historical interest, my purpose in recounting this camp narrative is that it typifies the type of account that members of the movement would listen to in a group session (*sohbet*). Often senior Abis will visit local groups and tell them stories of early struggles to establish schools in new and remote areas of the world. In fact, just prior to the interview at which Ismail Büyükcelebi told me about the camp, he had been presenting a *sohbet* at which he recounted his adventures in starting schools in South East Asian countries such as Thailand and Malaysia.

This would be an example of the sharing and implantation of shared memories--shared very explicitly of events some thirty or forty years old--clearly before the birth of many of the young followers of the movement, yet still relatively recent.

The fact is that such camps may be held by Gülen communities in far-flung situations and locations. They may be viewed as new seeds that are being planted in the hopes that they will flourish and inspire as those first camps did. There is also, perhaps a note of relief that the persecution of the 1970s had abated.

But has it entirely? I was staying at a *Hizmet* girls dorm in central Istanbul (summer 2006). In the middle of the night there was a loud banging at my locked dorm room door. I awoke, bewildered, and was told that the “*mufattishler*” (inspectors) might show up any time and my door must be kept unlocked.

According to the wardens, these official dorm inspectors were not so much concerned about who was in the dorm, but apparently would be offended by conspicuous signs of religious practice such as Qur'ans or prayer carpets unrolled for easy use. How much of this was substantial I never ascertained, because I did not encounter any actual “inspectors”. The story does, however, resonate with the account of students needing to clean up or secularize the early *Hizmet* camps.

This in turn leads back to reflection on the dynamic of shared, overlapping, and potentially conflicting stores of memories. Nationalist memories are part of Turkish experience and followers of *Hizmet* in my experience, are very comfortable with combining the paradigms and creating a space of identity/memory in which they can comfortably co-exist.

For example, in *Hizmet* public institutions such as schools and dorms, one finds prominent displays of the obligatory pictures of Kemal Ataturk and his proverbial sayings. In fact, the selection of which of the founder's sayings will be prominently displayed on the walls of the entrances seems to consciously strive to conjoin moral and nationalist elements.

Images and Symbolism in the Creation of Memory

It is also worth noting how certain symbols and themes seem to be evoked in literature, imagery, and means of identification among the *Hizmet* community.

This provokes a reflection as to whether such “symbolic” names are an obfuscation of the identity and purpose of the group. There is a preference for natural symbols, some of which

may have some vaguely Islamic relevance.

The earliest journal “*Sizinti*” began in the 1970s--the later English version is called the “*The Fountain*”. “The underlying idea of the name implies that it represents the leakage of the essence of the absolute truth, of the revelation.” The major themes in the journal turn around catching the dispatches from the God which are embodied through a striking and mysterious order of the world.³⁹ Many later books of Gülen are compiled from his articles that were regularly prepared for this journal.

The preference for water associated names was explained by one movement scholar as follows,

Water refers to purity. It also refers to humility, simplicity etc. It also refers to universality as everyone needs it and nobody would object to it... Generally, river names are used⁴⁰ -but never lake names-emphasizing dynamism and constant action... Sometimes ocean or sea names may be used to refer to the horizon, vision and so on... Similarly, star or planet names or celestial references⁴¹ are also used to convey the same meanings, i.e. the horizon, high and lofty ideals etc.⁴²

A relatively early publication of the movement is the book, *Truth through Colours*.⁴³ It contains images, composite photographs geared to evoke emotional responses. Each is accompanied by a brief textual observation or query designed to inspire the reader to reflection.

This undertone of emotion, perhaps a sadness, longing, and so on, is carried through in the choice of music played at Gülen meetings or in the dervish flute scores played on Burç FM. Certain pieces of instrumental music are repeated used as background on DVDs and at Hizmet community dinners etc. so as to become almost emblematic anthems.

Media and Memory

Having the ability to create narratives and have them performed is a very important means of influencing public consciousness in the contemporary period. This would be the characteristics of some of the popular programs produced by Samanyolu TV which merit separate study on their own. For example, the popular series, “Fifth Dimension”, could be considered a Turkish Islamic version of “Touched by an Angel” where the hero Salih is an observer and occasionally a participant in human affairs. Another major drama is “*Büyük Buluşma*”, the “Final Meeting”--or “Great Encounter” the premise of which is a newly deceased person’s arriving at the gate of judgment where they encounter an ambiguous, figure--an angel or as the program notes describe him, a personification of their conscience. Their life at this point, “passes before their eyes” and the audience views the sequence of moral decisions and circumstances leading up to the moment of the individual’s death.

The ambiguity of whether such imaginary productions are geared at moralizing or Islamicizing the society remains. “Good characters” may be portrayed as rural or urban, they may be identifiable as practicing Muslims, for example, women wearing Islamic dress, or secular.

39 Yasin Aktay, “*Body, Text, Identity: The Islamist Discourse Of Authenticity In Modern Turkey*”, PhD Thesis, 1997, The Graduate School Of Social Sciences of the Middle East Technical University, Ankara).

40 For example “nil” (Nile) publishing.

41 “Light” TV was used for a time. Mehtap (Moonlight) is the name of a satellite network, Samanyolu (Milky Way) the Gülen movement TV station.

42 Personal e--mail communication Sept. 30, 2007 drawing on the expertise of Ahmet Kurucan.

43 Fethullah Gülen, *Truth through Colours* (Izmir: Nil, 1992). Turkish original *Renkler Kusagında Hakikat Tomurcuklari* (1985).

The dialogue certainly makes reference to specifically Islamic concepts and teachings, and on some occasions the symbols of moral reform or repentance are portrayed in terms of Islamic observance and tranquil domesticity.

Additional “dramas” or “soap opera” type programs may deal allegorically with challenges faced by the movement in Turkey, and certain characters have been identified with the role of Gülen himself.

An interesting example of the evolving role of media and the arts in the movement is that of a sort of cultural center, *Firat Kultur Merkezi* (FKM), sponsored by the community near Sultan Ahmet. Here discussions may be held. There is a coffee bar, art on the walls, the sort of space that would appeal to university students or graduates. I was also told that plays are performed at this center and films shown. One of the plays, *Tuna Boyu*, was written based on the story of a Gülen teacher who so loved his students in a remote area of Central Asia that when one of them fell into a river he attempted to save him, and in the course of this action lost his own life.⁴⁴ Naturally, this touching story is inspirational and emblematic of the role of the ideal teacher.

Conclusion

The Gülen community, despite its relative youth, has developed a rich array of symbolic self-understandings and representations. This development of shared symbols and memories creates a sense of unity and collective identification beyond the interests and experiences of individual members. These memories combine elements of Turkish identity such as Ottoman cultural achievements with a range of references to Islamic spirituality including Sufism. In addition they serve to bridge various realms of symbolic identification, the nationalist/Kemalist ethos of modern Turkey with its Islamic Ottoman heritage; and now with the group’s expansion, a sort of global universalist consciousness with the sharing of specific features of Turkish cultural symbols, whirling dervishes, *ebru* arts, and so on. This symbolic exchange is concretized in the Turkish Olympiad, in which school children from Gülen sponsored schools around the world gather in Istanbul and perform songs and recite poems in the Turkish language.

The movement as it develops is also in the process of creating certain “heroes”, Gülen himself, the second layer of *Abis*, and the teacher as a hero. Among these heroes are Hacı Ata, the late Hacı Kemal Erimez (d. 1997), Gülen’s friend since 1968 who passed away while trying to open schools in Tajikistan. A play has been written about him, a web site is dedicated to his memory and DVDs about *Hizmet* containing video images from his funeral are presented as part of the narrative of heroic sacrifice.⁴⁵ A further example is the 2006 publication of a book written by Harun Tokak, head of the Writers and Journalists Union in Istanbul, eulogized various Turkish teachers who had gone to far-flung reaches of the world to work in Gülen schools.⁴⁶ For example, Adem Tatlı, a 39 year old teacher and school officer in Mongolia, was tragically killed in an auto accident on his way to see his family in Turkey. It is said that his last request was to be buried in Mongolia, near his school.⁴⁷

44 Ali Fuat, *Marallar İnce Suyu*, (Ankara: FM Yayınları, 2005) features the plot of a teacher who goes to Central Asia, and loses his life there while trying to save one of his students in a lake.

45 This may be viewed on Youtube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KIwtBAzmrGE>. See also the book by M. Küçük, *Adanmış, Bir Gönül İnsanı Hacı Ata*. (Istanbul: Kaynak, 2006).

46 Harun Tokak, *Önden Giden Atlılar* (Istanbul, 2006).

47 <http://tr.fgulen.com/content/view/10242/94/>

Some of these memories are replicable and performable while others are spontaneously generated around particular times and spaces. In the study of this contemporary movement, we are able to see the making of “sacred history” from the perspective of insiders, almost as it happens.

Interviews

Davut Ay	July 22, 2005
Enes Ergene	July 23, 2005
Cemal Türk	July 24, 2005
Reşit Haylamaz	August 9, 2005
Ali Ünal	August 9, 2005
Ali Rıza Tanrısever	August 13, 2005
Ismail Büyükcelebi	Chicago, April 2007