

# THE ETIC PERSPECTIVE ON TURKS. SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM: ARABS, GREEKS, EUROPEANS AND TURKIC PEOPLE

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DOI: 10.19062/1842-9238.2026.24.1.7

**Abstract:** *In anthropological studies, the etic perspective represents the exogenous (external) perspective i.e. the alterity's ways of perceiving Turks. Various interactions in various contexts lead to multiple perceptions on someone's identity – this external view is crucial in completing the identity puzzle, according to symbolic interactionism. Turks' neighbours (Arabs, Greeks, Europeans per se and the Turkic people) interact with Turks and define them according to geographical and cultural proximity, but also to other events they encounter, such as ideological interactions or coercive interactions.*

**Keywords:** *Turks, etic perspective, symbolic interactionism, alterity, Arabs and Turks, Greeks and Turks, Europeans and Turks, Turkic people and Turks*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

"Symbolic interactionism is a matter of substance" [1], explaining the way in which "self and environment define each other by means of symbolic communication", in other words, as scholar George Herbert Mead explains, to know what the others are is useful in understanding what we are [2]. Symbolic interactionism describes *taking the role of other* as a necessity in identity construction, under the statement that others' *perceptions* on us help us understand ourselves.

The identity portrait of Turks cannot be completed, according to constructivism, in the absence of others' perceptions on Turks.

We shall analyse the case of Turks from the lenses of other peoples, based on the interactions between them. These peoples are: the Arabs, Greeks, Europeans as an entirety and Turkic people as Turks' alterity. All of them are Turks' neighbours, but also all of them have had different interactions with Turks.

Symbolic interactionism is exceedingly based on *perceptions*, which are difficult to be quantified or presented in their wholeness. Therefore, this analysis is meant to be comprehensive, rather than exhaustive.

## 2. SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

*Symbolic interactionism* accentuates the importance of relations between actors in creating *identities*. Its development has been influenced by *pragmatism*, especially in relation with the ideas of *reality construction* and the importance of language in *naming* and *defining objects* – as one of the most important processes that occur in the thinking of a human being, according to John Dewey [3].

Largely, symbolic interactionism is described as the *conversation* between actors, by means of *language*. In this case, language is not reduced to its main meaning (words); it is a rather inclusive and broad concept used with reference to the *communication* (verbal and non-verbal) with which actors respond to each other step by step. Language and communication are, therefore, *civilising*, an instrument for the construction of civilisations and communities [4]. The appeal to language is broad: it *symbolises* the entity through which individuals interact. In its absence, individuals cannot fulfil their *human condition*, cannot bring it to its *ultimate aim*, therefore would not be able to differentiate from other existing entities [4]. This communication between actors was placed under the umbrella of symbolic interactionism, described as “the most *human* and *humanising* activity”. If we understand humans as *social* creatures – in need of synergy rather than solitude or isolation, than we can understand symbolic interactionism as a process without which communities would not be able to exist (because it creates ties between people). In other words, *to humanise* means to bring to a *superior* level of existence and self-perception [4].

To provide a better understanding of this theoretical framework, we can as well provide a definition of what symbolic interactionism is opposed to – that is *isolation*. The opposite of *isolation* is *human*.

Communities *humanise* themselves by overrunning *idioglossia*, i.e. by exceeding their own specific way of being, thinking and communicating (*identity*, largely) which is unintelligible to others, by adding the others’ way of being, thinking and communicating in relation to them [4].

The three essential parts of symbolic interactionism are, therefore, related to *meaning*, *language* and *thinking* [4]. Meaning is *how* an entity *understands* or *interprets* the other entity – in what terms. Accordingly, “humans act towards the others on the basis of the meanings they assign to those people”. This interpretation is mainly based on (previous) personal experience. The matter which might arise is in relation to the number of *realities constructed*. Nevertheless, there is only *one reality*, but differently *perceived* and tackled. The ones who perceive the others as similar might be more inclined towards establishing *connections*, while all the others might act in the opposite way and create *distance* [4]. The paradox is that the *concrete* reality is nothing else than the gathering of *abstract* perceptions. In other words, for some, reality is when their perception is shared and multiplied, when it is “*tested*”. When perceptions are different and they meet, their clash might set distance between the entities, but they are enclosed in that one reality anyway and cannot surpass it [4]. Because nobody really know what reality is, people cannot live into thinking that reality is nothing – can something be nothing and still be – and they set meanings to it, to fill that empty space because they search for meaning. That is why the idea of *nothing* is hard to be described by people, who do not know what nothing really *is*. Nothing cannot *be*. *Because if it is, that it is not nothing*; and this is how the need of sense is born and operates. So they do not just respond to events, they first of all encounter them, interpret them and then respond to them, according to their interpretation – because in its absence, events would be *nothing*, just like *reality*.

To sum up, reality is constructed by meaning. But meaning is also constructed, rather than “pre-existent” and it comes from language. People cannot think (emit ideas) in absence of a set of symbols to help them conceptualise. Meanings are, thence, the result of *emotions* added to an object as a result of human interaction. In other words, meanings are associations between *objects* and *symbols* – that is “*symbolic naming*”, (a translation). People know as much as they name. In other words, a symbol is nothing else than “a stimulus to which a meaning and value” are added [4]. A very important point in symbolism is represented by the subconscious.

Very many of the correlations and meanings are to some extent settled in the subconscious, filtered by the environment in which people live, leading to the formation of “*default assumptions*”, especially in relation to aspects which are different from the *common sense* [4].

The importance of the *subconscious* is emphasised and revealed when attributing meanings to the others, filtering them by *thinking*. But in order to be able to define the other, people must first of all be able to define themselves, process which happens through “*self-talk*” or “*minding*” – “*thinking* becoming an inner *conversation*”. The phenomenon of anticipating others’ reactions, for example, cannot come in the absence of social *interaction* and is facilitated by *imitation: taking the role of the other*. This can turn into a self-coercive mechanism, in a way that thinking about what the others might think or how they would react determines people’s actions. The essence of this phenomenon is that unlike the expectations of being able to understand the others, the ones who people actually understand better are still themselves. In other words, the *self* is defined not as much by *itself*, but by taking the role of the other. The unknown or missing pieces of the inside cannot be taken from the inside, only from its outside to complete the *equation* i.e. *the self*. This is, once again, based on certain assumptions and perceptions – people thinking and “imagining how they look to the others”, defined as “the *looking glass-self*” [4].

In *linguistic* terms, we can interpret this as “speaking the *language* of others”, where language is an inclusive term for not only communicating, but also thinking and imagining. This can also be explained through “Speak a new *language* so that *the world* will be a new world” (Mevlana Jalal ad-Din Rumi), i.e. the language of others comes with an entire reality of the others. Therefore, the chronology of the self is more likely “I am because I can speak, express, think” etc. and not “I can speak, express, think because I am”. Moreover, people cannot fully be *them-selves* in the absence of the interaction with *the others* and the self is thence, unlimited – it fluctuates and changes accordingly. People anticipate themselves as they anticipate the others’ acts.

The meeting point is that we are the others, we are an alterity – there are two selves – an objective and a subjective self, this is how people can become their own strangers or stranger to themselves. The *subjective self* or “*the I*” cannot be predicted, the more people try to label it or explain it, the more it becomes stranger as a means of self-protection: “you can never know your *I* because once it is known it becomes your *me*” – i.e. the *objective self*, created by role-taking. The *subjective self* determines the *objective self*, because “there is no <<me>> at birth” [4].

It is to be noted that identity creation and fulfilment based on interactions complete the *portray* of Turks by adding attributes, this time filtered not by Turks themselves, but rather by the people with whom they interact.

The Turkish society is therefore *socially constructed*, rather on a subjective than objective basis, as the “product of shared symbols, events and social interactions transmitted across generations” [5].

There are four main principles of symbolic interactionism: action is based on the (subjective) *meanings attributed* to certain objects, interactions take place “in a social and cultural *context*”, “meanings originate from *interactions* with others” and “meanings are created and recreated through a *process of interpretation* that happens whenever the interaction with others happens” [4].

Accordingly, the self-image is developed through interactions, based on the “*generalised other*”, i.e. on the expectations, responses and attitudes of the other people [4].

To put the four principles in one, we can state that there is a context where interaction takes place, each actor undergoes a process of interpretation and therefore, generates meanings.

If we consider Turks' interactions with other people, we have to take into consideration the degree of (*cultural*) *proximity* between Turks and the peoples they interact with: the closer the people and the culture, the more difficult to tell some attributes apart; the more *exotic* the people, the *harsher* the differences.

Therefore, an *ideal* interaction to be interpreted would be exotic enough to differentiate them, but not too exotic so that the cultural gap is not too wide.

Nevertheless, since the main pillars of our topic are "*perception*", "*symbol*", "*context*", "*construction*", "*interpretation*", "*meanings*" etc. the term *ideal* cannot be tackled due to its belonging to another group of determinants.

Therefore, the condition stated above regarding a form of ideal interaction cannot be completely addressed.

Due to the geostrategic location, Turks have encountered many interactions with the *alterity*, starting from the independence against the Juan-Juans in the VI<sup>th</sup> century – which set the starting point in the ideologically-charged interactions of Turks with other people, due to the fact that it symbolises their wish for independence put in action.

*Coercive interactions* followed a long path in history, since very many interactions of Turks with other peoples were based on *conflicts* – battles in the pre-Ottoman and Ottoman period, expansionist policies in the Ottoman period, threat of losing territories after the First World War etc.

In those cases, conflict was, symbolically, a *necessary harm* for the construction or preservation of identity, and more importantly, it served as a material means for reaching an immaterial aim – an *instrumentalisation* of a *means*, not an aim in itself.

The nature of the context led to a rather *forced interaction* between people, when parties were acting so that to defend their beliefs.

In the case of countries, "taking the role of other" is, to some extent, similar to people taking the role of other people, due to one essential aspect: it can never actually happen and take place materially, but rather metaphorically. Nevertheless, in the case of countries, it is rather difficult to attempt to "take the role of other", due to the fact that unlike people, countries cannot *move*, change environment etc. – i.e. they cannot adopt purely material measures. Nevertheless, they can still imitate other countries, inspire from their actions and patterns.

In the case of the Mesopotamian culture, the very first *symbolic* interactions for meeting the alterity took place in the *context* of battles, after which the victorious party took whatever precious objects of heritage they wanted from the defeated party and brought them to their own lands" [6] as a means of appropriating the other's culture.

### 3. ARABS AND THE TURKS

As we mentioned, Arabs are not only bordering Türkiye, but also are ideologically close to them due to several meeting points, especially in the Ottoman period, due to them having similar (religious) beliefs.

#### 3.1 Ideological interactions

One of the most important interactions of Turks with Arabs is related to the ideological dimension – that is the conversion of Turks to Islam.

Historically, Turks' conversion from paganism to Islam took place in the VIII<sup>th</sup> and X<sup>th</sup> centuries [7] and changed the course of actions in their history.

According to the philosophy of religion, "Islam is the most cogent example for Schleiermacher's thesis that religion is rooted in a sense of *dependency*" [8].

Psychologically, the sense of dependency is always related to *duality* – there is always a binomen, where either one party is dependent on the other, or between them there is *interdependency* – i.e. they are *interdependent*.

In the interaction between deity and *the* people, there is a relation of submission: *aslama* is *to submit*, and *Islam* is *submission* – therefore, of *dependency*; but in the interaction between people, among themselves, there is a relation of interdependency: Turks owe Arabs the *idée mère*, the fundamental, guiding idea creating the *uni-directionism* in Turks' faith and value system; but the sense of interdependency could not have been complete and completed in the absence of Turks, which makes them *sine qua non* in this equation.

This interaction is the opposite of the haggadic one – it does not describe an *exodus*, but rather an *arrival* – Turks' arriving to faith or "*imana gelmek*".

This entity of faith is unbounded and *immaterial*, therefore can be shared and multiplied to different people and shall always remain one. On the contrary, the more it is distributed, the greater it becomes.

Arabs were the essential entity in Turks' religious identity construction process – and if we consider the very *moment* of their interaction, Arabs could be seen in a superiority rapport, in terms of belief system, due to the fact that Turks were primarily not a monotheistic people.

Nevertheless, we can describe the interaction between Arabs and Turks not as Arabs being superior to Turks, but rather as Arabs being the *godparents* of Turks, having facilitated Turks' means to *come to faith*<sup>1</sup>, to an unbounded, immaterial entity.

In order to provide a more applied analysis, we shall follow the four principles stated above. The context of their interaction was immaterial, ideological, therefore having a profound meaning for both peoples.

If we consider the *significance* or interpretation of their interaction, then both of them may be placed on the same scale as a bilateral, circular *giving-receiving* binomen and thence, dual sense of perception.

### 3.2 Linguistic interactions

After converting to Islam, Turks began to adopt the Arabic alphabet as well, but trying to make it fit the specific sounds and letters of Turks' language [9], therefore the later Ottoman Turkish from the Ottoman Empire period took the form of Turkish language written with the Arab alphabet, but also encompassing a number of words borrowed from Arabic.

The writing system was the *Abjad*. Etymologically, the term *abjad* comes from Arabic and it explains how the words are written, only using the *long* sounds – especially consonants.

"the first words that gathered in them the basis words in the Arabic language".

This interaction being rooted in a religious one, Turks also borrowed religious terms and expressions, such as: "*Maşallah*", "*İnşallah*", "*Bismillah*", "*Estağfurullah*" – originally coming from the Arabic words "*Ma sha'a Allah*", "*In sha'a Allah*", "*B-Ism-Allah*", "*Astaghfr-Allah*" etc. In English, there is no direct correspondent for these phrases, but rather some contextual ones.

To be more specific, "*Ma sha'a Allah*" can be said as an admiring term in order to compliment someone and wish them protection against the *evil eye*.

"*In sha'a Allah*" could stand for "*God willing*", "*B-Ism-Allah*" means "*in the name of God*" and "*Astaghfr-Allah*" meaning "*God forbid*".

One of the most significant *cultural proofs* is the *tuğra*. Etymologically, "the word comes from the Oghuz Turks, standing for *seal*" [10]; it is known as the "signature of the Ottoman sultans, containing the sultan's name, the sultan's father's name along with a *dua* (prayer): "*el-muzaffer daima*" ("*the ever victorious*")" [11].

<sup>1</sup> *imana gelmek* – is a Turkish idiom which means "to become Muslim", literally being translated as "*coming to faith*"

The legend behind the origins of *tuğras* states that the first *tuğra* was made by an illiterate sultan using his fingers dipped in ink [10]. The writing of a *tuğra* became then the duty of a specialised person, called *nişancı* or *tughrai*, meaning “calligrapher” [11].

The religious phrases, like “*Bismillah Al-Rahman Al-Raheem*” (“In the name of God, the most gracious, the most merciful”) from mosques are written in the original Arabic form, and one of the most known Islamic calligraphers from the Ottoman Empire is Mustafa Râkım Efendi, who practised two of the Arabic calligraphy forms in the *medrese* (religious school), *thuluth* and *naskh* – and was given the nickname “*Râkım*” (“superior”) for the remarkable works [12].

It is to be noted that nowadays, the Directorate for Religious Affairs, *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, organises courses for Turkish people who want to be able to read the Quran in Arabic, but one of the most important aspects is that in very many cases, Turks can only read the Arabic language without being able to completely understand it – due to the fact that they did not adopt Arabic as a cult language.

This time, the context of their interaction is linguistic, language being a very important binding agent between the two communities. The meanings of the interaction are rather symbolic, Turks appropriating terms of Arabic origins through Islam. In terms of interpretation, the perception of Arabic language is related to Islam, becoming highly symbolic.

### **3.3 Value system. Customs**

It is to be mentioned that there are similarities in terms of cultural identities between Turks and Arabs. The first one to be noted is that both of them are very cohesive and welded communities: like Turks, “Arabs gather in collective communities, generally share the same Arabic Islamic culture and speak the same language” [13].

Therefore, the structures of the society are quite similar in their essence, and being collectivist cultures, “their identity and decisions are influenced by social systems” [13].

In fact, the Turkish term used to describe customs is *adet*, coming from the Arabic *adaat*, which originally translates as “common” or “ordinarily”.

Therefore, in both cultures, customs refer to those acts, practices that are not out of the ordinary, that do not exceed the social system.

These similarities have appeared due to geographic proximity, but intensified after the Turks’ conversion to Islam, due to their having the own religion and adopting the Islamic cult teachings – here, the *cult(ural)* identity becomes a *civic* identity.

The structure of the society and relations between individuals share, therefore, similar elements. To exemplify, there is an Arabic proverb that says “*Between coffee and tea, stories are told*”, following the same idea as in the Turkish saying “*The heart does not want coffee, the heart wants conversation, but coffee is a pretext*”.

Even if at a micro level these sayings might appear superficial, they actually underline a very important cultural trait – sharing and coming together in a close environment. Here, the context of the interaction is material, geographical, but also immaterial, spiritual – the material environment leads to the immaterial elements – the values and beliefs, extendedly – the way of life of both communities.

Another significant trait is that for Arabs, family represents the nucleus of the society as well. The idea of family is recurrent in the daily life, under different forms and symbols. For instance, when welcoming someone, the phrase “*Ahlan wa sahlan*” is used, where “*ahlan*” comes from “*ahl*”, meaning “family” and “*sahlan*” comes from “*sahl*” and it means “easy”. The interpretation can be “*welcome to the family*” or “*we welcome you as your own family*”, wishing “*easiness*” to you, i.e. *no difficulty* or *a pleasant time*.

Another such example is the wish “*tusbih aala khayer*”, with the answer “*wa ant men ahluhu*”, i.e. “*may you become good*” and the answer “*may you be from the same family of goodness*”. We can tell that family is associated with goodness in both cultures, being given a positive meaning, the symbol of prosperity and development.

The meanings and interpretation of these interactions underline the similarities between the two communities, emphasising the fact that cultural identity is constructed also as a consequence of combining geographical elements with *ideological* ones.

### 3.4 Komşuluk and asabiyyah

One of the most important similarities between the two cultures is their belonging to the collectivistic cultural environment.

One piece of evidence in this case is the way in which the people of both communities place themselves in rapport with *the community per se* and what value is added to the community. As we described the implications of *komşuluk* and its important role in strengthening the group feeling and sense of belonging, we shall also analyse the concept of *asabiyyah* and its implications.

To begin with, etymologically, the term *asabiyyah* comes from the verb *asab*, which means “*to bind*”; therefore *asabiyyah* is the noun standing for “*tie*”, “*connection*”, or in social terms: “*solidarity*”.

This concept originates from the Arab philosophy, more specifically from *Ibn Khaldun*, an Arab philosopher from the XIV<sup>th</sup> century, describing the group feeling, collective sentiment, or in other words, the sense of belonging to a group or community, underlying the importance of cohesion and unity [14].

We can therefore understand the psychological emphasis of groups, not due to its material attributes, but rather due to its *immaterial attributes*: it is not the form of organisation, but rather the *feeling* and *lifestyle* attached to it that matter the most.

From a gathering of people, the group becomes *one essential entity* for these two peoples and living in tight connection with the group gives its members a sense of security, belonging, but also some *rules* to follow in order to move in the same direction as the entire group does.

In reductionist terms, the group is the mirror of the family, it reflects it, but its construction is in the opposite way: while a family is the sum of its members (one member, plus one member, plus one member – equals family), the group *mathematics* goes like this: the group determines each of its members, not the members determine the group.

This equation shows that in these societies, the group is placed on a superior hierarchical position towards the family, for family is only *a group* of the *bigger group* – only *a constituent part* of the *entirety* which *constitutes its parts*.

Therefore, Arabs might perceive Turks as being ethnically compatible with themselves – as an interpretation of their similar community constructions.

## 4. GREEKS AND THE TURKS

*Greeks* shall be discussed separately, even though they form a part of Europe, because of the problem of Constantinople and inheritance of the Byzantine Empire, but also because of the fact that “Greeks think and talk a lot about Turks”, therefore Turks being “the most significant *other* of the Greeks” [15] – so in terms of *alterity*, Turks represent a *focus* for Greeks. For them, Turkish people are talked about as “*the Turk*”, therefore perceived as a generalised category or group [15].

Despite the fact that Turks represent an important exogenous category for Greeks, they seem to be rather *perceived* than *objectively defined*, becoming a “hollow category” [15] – therefore “constructed from without”, according to Edwin Ardener [16]. In other words, a “hollow category” is a “definitonally and discursively <<empty>> idea that takes on *meaning* through *context*” [17]. We can understand the importance of *context* in shaping perceptions and constructing identities. In the case of Greek-Turkish interactions, Greeks construct an “image” from the position of *neighbours* – the *context* – becoming from an empty concept, a rather “ample one in terms of taxonomic space” [16].

In other words, *Turkishness* is cleared of the meanings Turks themselves impose on it, in order for it to be filled with the meanings Greeks impose on Turks.

Nevertheless, the space of perception is rather unlimited – so that there is always some space left “that can be loaded with additional properties” [16], according to the historical *context* and *interactions* – but also and more importantly, to the symbols those interactions are given.

In terms of cultural identity, the cultural attributes defined as “*stuff* within boundaries” by Fredrik Barth [16] are very prone to interpretation, an important contributing factor being the conflictual clashes the two people have had. The main paradox that appears in this case is the fact that *the origin of conflict is similarity* (of beliefs), and not difference. When two similar mind sets meet, as a consequence of them being both strong and profoundly settled in the collective mind, they produce a clash. Greeks’ perspective is included in the concept of “justificatory rhetoric” – “a rationalisation of difference which can deny the <<most self-evident similarities>>” [16].

One of the most significant meeting points in the history of the two entities’ relation is the *fall* of Constantinople for Greeks and the *conquest* of Constantinople for Ottomans – one moment, two different understandings, same ideological motivation.

One of the most known phrases related to the fall of Constantinople is “*Ya ben İstanbul’u fethederim ya da İstanbul beni*” of Fatih Sultan Mehmet, meaning: “*Either I conquer Istanbul, or Istanbul will conquer me*” – in ideological terms, this approach can be translated as “*all or nothing*” – for Turks, they fought for the expansion of the Ottoman state, religion being the ideological motivation in the background and thence the conquest representing the symbol of an ideologically infused military victory. In the case of Greeks, they fought for the preservation of their territories, as well ideologically motivated to protect and perpetuate their faith. The conquest of an Orthodox centre by a Muslim expansionist power culminated with the reconfiguration of Hagia Sophia from a cathedral to a mosque – symbolising a *pantheist interaction* between the two cultures.

Moreover, Constantinople was of great geopolitical importance as well – Greeks’ cultural identity being forcedly reshaped by Turks taking *the bridge* between the East and the West for themselves. Constantinople was, thence, not the *centrum mundi*, but the point that connected the *worlds* so that the *centrum* could exist – in other words, its condition of existence.

As much as this cultivated *rejection* on both sides, it emphasised similarity of values and for both Greeks and Turks, the importance of acting in the name of faith in order to protect it.

The constructing role of coercive interaction underlined the existence of a sort of *religious nationalism* – protecting the state for its religious foundations.

In other words, *polar opposites* meet at *one single point* which is mutual, shared between them – which makes the *lines* form a *circle*.

In constructivist terms, the memory of *the City* (of Constantine) is perceived by some Greeks as a missing piece of the *complete puzzle*, highly symbolically charged and turned into *enosis* (literally “*union*”), specifically present in the case of Cyprus – advocating for the union with Greece.

Why is it the case of Cyprus that has adopted this doctrine? The answer stands in the meanings attached to the above mentioned events – i.e. a *trauma* – more than it is political, it is rather an ideological trauma, triggered in the mind of Cypriots due to their situation of division between Greek Cypriots and Turk Cypriots.

*Enosis* is a self-protection and self-preservation psychological mechanism turned into political terms which support the *Megali Idea* (the *idée mère*) of reviving the Byzantine Empire, similar to the Neo-Ottomanist doctrine of protecting and promoting the Ottoman inheritance.

## 5. EUROPEANS AND THE TURKS

One of the first aspects to be mentioned is the geographical difference or more precisely *distance* between the two entities.

It is important due to the fact that it is accompanied by different ways of life and thence different cultures and identities.

In this case, the emphasis is on the differences rather than similarities – Turks are perceived as “*exotic*” by Europeans and the reverse is also valid.

From the very beginning, Turks were perceived as a *threat* by Europeans. The Seljuk Empire and the Christian world encountered in the eleventh century [18]. What we can understand from this is that their very first encounter was filtered through *religion*.

Throughout history, both had been perceived by the others also as a “*threat*”, under different aspects and circumstances.

This was very profound in the Ottoman expansionist period, when Europeans developed the “*missa contra turcas*” sentiment, or “*masses against the Turks*”, stating that only with the help of God could they defeat the Turks [19]

This means that not only territorially, but also ideologically, Turks were perceived as a threat, portrayed in some cases as being “*bloodthirsty*” or “*God’s punishment*” as they were the “*enemy of Christianity*” [19].

Moreover, different *pejorative terms* were used to describe the Turks as an entirety, i.e. the Turkish people, constructing the image of a people *without moral values* [19] due to the fact that they triggered fright in the collective mind of Europeans.

Therefore, we can tell that in the early times, the first interactions between Turks and Europeans were based on conflicts, due to which the perception of Europeans towards Turks was limited to aspects they (had) witnessed – religious ideology, military force etc.

Nevertheless, some aspects took a different turn along with the more various cultural interactions.

For example, the Turkish Janissary music represented a source of inspiration for European composers such as Mozart, leading to what was later called as “*alla turca*” music [19].

Extendedly, this was part of “*Turquerie*” (or *Turkery*), a Turkish trend in Europe, where the source of inspiration was the Ottoman Empire as being of significant importance for the Oriental world, described as having “*tolerance*”, “*strength of faith*” and “*goodness*” [20] and being seen as a model due to its development.

We can, therefore, trace a connecting line between interactions and symbols – according to the type of interactions they had with the Turks, European labelled Turks.

When they were perceived as a threat to their territories, ideology etc., Turks were seen as barbarian, bloodthirsty, a series of bad habits being associated with them.

When the dynamics of the interactions changed, Turks became a source of inspiration and even a model for the Europeans, in terms of music, clothing and arts in general.

This explains the “*good-bad*” framework in which identity is framed – if the *context* of the interaction is of good consequences for the Europeans (in this case), then the identity of those whom they interact with is labelled positively and vice versa. The elements of interaction which determined identity construction in this case were mainly military (territorial expansionism) and ideological (religious-based).

One of the stalemates in the interactions between these two entities can be traced in the immediate period after the First World War, when Ottomans were not victorious and they were facing the threat of their territories being shared by the victorious powers [21].

The Ottoman Empire had already been through a series of reforms – *Tanzimat* – meant to strengthen the weakened Ottoman State, but the supreme reform was its complete replacement.

The paradox is that even if Europeans then represented a threat for the Ottomans, they later constructed or re-constructed their identity by imitating the European model – that is due to the fact that in Turks’ *perception*, Europeans symbolised *modernity* – that is development and progress in their understanding. Therefore, if modernity was labelled positively, then so were their representatives.

From these, we can understand again the importance of the *circle* – a constant in Turks’ cultural identity – if the flourishing Ottomans were taken as a *model* in the period of *Turquerie*, the Europeans were also taken as a *model* starting from the 1923 moment – involving elements of progress, development and modernity. Nevertheless, when the context of the interaction was territorial, both of them perceived the others as *threats*.

We can therefore trace the symbols according to which these happened: whenever one of the two entities was in a position of superiority related to intangible matters such as way of life, music, arts, reforms etc. it was appropriated, but when the matter was related to tangible aspects, such as the above mentioned lands, the symbols of perception turned negative.

The only *exception* in this case is *faith* – due to its dual character – it is an intangible aspect, but also tangible by means of the places of worship (mosques and churches).

## **6. TURKIC PEOPLES. SYMBOLIC INTERACTION OF TURKS WITH THEIR TURKIC ALTERITY**

As we described the importance of *family* for the Turkish cultural identity, we can understand the Turkic people as members of *the Turkic family* – in this understanding, Turks’ *relatives* are the peoples that originate from the same roots, bear similar values and speak languages from the same family.

The vehicular term is “*Türk Dünyası*”, meaning “*The Turkish World*”, defined as “an entirety made up from Turkic people, who are spread to a large geographical area, tied by means of speaking a mutual language, having a mutual history and having cultural bonds” [22].

Turks do not face *an alterity*, but *their own alterity* – the interaction of Turks with themselves, but as an alterity – as a memoir and reinterpretation of the *millet* in the Ottoman Empire, that was the gathering of the different peoples under the roof of the Ottoman Empire [23].

This reminds Turks the ideas of *unity* and *plenitude* – the symbol of *force* – together and united, they are stronger. As Turkish language is one of the most important supporting pillars of Turkish nationalism, Turkic languages extendedly take the same role as a *family* and within this family.

As a political and diplomatic representation of this, the slogan of the Turkish Cultural Institute “Yunus Emre” is “*Türkçe Dünyanın Her Yerinde*”, meaning “*Turkish can be found in every part of the world*”.

These attributes might be framed into a form of sacralising the ethnicity or *ethnic or ethno-cultural nationalism*, placing ethnicity, therefore, in the *centrum* of cultural identity – in other words, cultural identity is what results from the mass-shared ethnicity.

The elements of *ethnic nationalism* or *ethno-cultural nationalism* (or *multi-nationalism*) can be exemplified by the case of the relations between Türkiye and Azerbaijan, often referred to as “*one nation, two states*” [24].

This case helps us return to the idea of proximity, which determined the construction of a shared identity between the two entities. Even at the linguistic level, Azerbaijani is sometimes called “*Azerbaycan Türkçesi*”, i.e. “*the Turkish from Azerbaijan*”.

Even if geographically far, the Northern part of Cyprus is also culturally and ideologically included in the Turkish world denomination, being of great importance for Türkiye, the only state which recognises the “*Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus*”.

Therefore, in terms of the context of the interaction, this case bears a special character – Turkic people mirror Turks, but the reflection is not completely accurate; it is rather similar to the branches of a tree – despite their slight difference in aspect, all of them come from the same root and are related in a way that makes their tie strengthened, but also strengthens the *root*.

Here, the root can be understood both *materially* and *spiritually* – materially as lands or language; spiritually as cultural identity per se – beliefs, values, customs, traditions and the feeling of belonging to a widespread Turkish identity or mass identity.

We can state that every different people analysed above has had different types of interactions with the Turks, when in the case of symbolic interactionism even the *constant* is *alterable*: Turks are the constant in each binomen, but nevertheless different for Arabs, Greeks, Europeans in general and Turkic people.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

The etic perspective refers to the alterity’s response to the question “*Who are the Turks?*”.

In the case of Arabs, the ideological dimension (religion) is what brought them close, culminating with Turks’ conversion to Islam, the *idée mère* which Turks owe Arabs.

For Greeks, Turks are their most significant other (alterity), representing a *hollow category*: that is a category *constructed from without*. In other words, Turks are perceived by Greeks contextually. In the context of neighbours, the paradox resulting from their interactions is that the origin of conflict between the two is the similarity (of beliefs), but different meanings assigned to same events.

When it comes to the interactions with the Europeans in general, both categories perceive the others as “*exotic*” and the context and type of interaction is decisive for the perception of the alterity.

The case of Turkic people is the mirroring of Turks as *an other* – Turks take the place of themselves, becoming their own alterity, leading to the increased sense of unity and plenitude in the case of the widespread Turkish identity: cross-border Turkish values leading to coinciding emic and etic perspectives.

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