RESEARCH NOTE

Ottoman Guilds as a Setting for Ethno-Religious Conflict: The Case of the Silk-thread Spinners' Guild in Istanbul*

ONUR YILDIRIM

> I and my son are bakers and barbers, you and your sons are lapidaries and gardeners, but if you bid one of your sons be barber, a second baker, a third lapidary and a fourth gardener, all is confusion, and how can good come out of it? Furthermore he is no barber nor baker who does not belong to the Guild of the Barbers and the Guild of the Bakers. If your son [does not go] to the *peshkadim* and rank himself among the apprentices; next to the *tehaoosh*, to bid him inscribe his name on the rolls; then to the *kihaya*, to pay him toll, how should he be a member of the guild? Ask of the *scheikh* if I have not spoken well.[1]

So goes the challenge of an Istanbul Muslim guildsman against a fellow Armenian artisan in Istanbul in a nineteenth-century account of "Turkish guilds". This theatrical enactment of the relations between craftsmen of different ethno-religious backgrounds in Istanbul at the end of nineteenth century was written by an American traveller. This text helps us to visualize the final stage of a centuries-long historical process, by which the relations between ethno-religious communities in Ottoman society evolved from peaceful coexistence to often acrimonious conflict. Against this background, this brief study argues that the deterioration of relations between various ethno-religious groups (*millet*s) in Ottoman society began to intensify during the second half of the eighteenth century. I would also contend that the guilds, as the primary organization of production and labour in the Ottoman Empire, were one of the settings where the early stages of this conflict can be observed.

The traditional scholarship on Ottoman guilds portrays these institutions as microconfigurations of the generally unchallenged interconfessional

1. Constance Sutcliffe, "Turkish Guilds", *The Fortnightly Review*, 66 (1896), p. 821.

character of Ottoman society.[2] Accordingly, from the classical era to the nineteenth century, guilds provided a peaceful setting for the coexistence of peoples of different ethno-religious backgrounds. This peaceful coexistence paradigm has been closely intertwined with the Orientalist notion of Islamic society, assuming that the forms of production in the Islamic lands showed no sign of change from the twelfth to the nineteenth centuries.[3] Where the inner workings of Ottoman guilds are concerned, this perspective is predicated on two major assumptions. The first assumption is that production activities carried out within guilds are embedded in their very moral and ethical characteristics. The second assumption underscores the egalitarian distribution of income among the guild members as one of the cohesive attributes of these institutions. Strict adherence to the latter policy has been considered in the light of European experience as a major factor that curtailed the development of clear-cut economic and social differentiation between the guild members. According to this view, it was only during the nineteenth century, when Western capital began to affect the political and economic conditions of the Ottoman Empire, that the internal workings of the guilds, including their interconfessionalism, were subjected to major modifications.[4] As a matter of fact, as part of the economic decline of the Ottoman Empire, most Ottoman guilds were supposed to have failed to respond to the European impact and accordingly experienced an all-out decline and eventual disintegration.

Although recently many of the Orientalist assumptions concerning the structure and operation of Ottoman socio-economic institutions and

---

2. H.A.R. Gibb and H. Bowen, *Islamic Society and the West*, vol. 1, part 1 (Oxford, 1950), pp. 281–292, here 289. Gabriel Baer, "Guilds in Middle Eastern History", in Michael Cook (ed.), *Studies in Economic History of the Middle East* (Oxford, 1970), pp. 11–30, here, p. 18. It should be noted that in addition to "mixed guilds" with members from different communities, there were guilds confined to one community. Baer argues on the basis of meagre evidence that "although there were always mixed guilds, in general, guilds were confined to people of specific community". See Gabriel Baer, "Monopolies and Restrictive Practices of Turkish Guilds", in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 13 (1970), pp. 145–165, here, pp. 156–159. Admittedly, we are far from knowing the actual number of Ottoman guilds, let alone having specific information on the composition of the labour force that would enable us to make a clear-cut distinction between mixed and unmixed guilds. A recent study takes a first step towards this direction for early nineteenth-century Istanbul on the basis of Ottoman archival documents. See Cengiz Kırlı, "A Profile of the Labor Force in Early Nineteenth-Century Istanbul", in *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 60 (2001), pp. 125–140. The author's main focus is, however, on the regional origins of the labourers rather than their ethno-religious affiliations.
3. Bernard Lewis, "The Islamic Guilds", in *Economic History Review*, 8 (1937–1938), pp. 20–37, here, p. 36. Cf. Baer, "Guilds in Middle Eastern History", pp. 25–27.
4. Charles Issawi, "Transformations of the Economic Positions of the *Millet*s in the Nineteenth Century", in Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis (eds), *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire*, vol. 1 (New York, 1982), pp. 261–286.

practices in general have been duly attacked and subjected to ample revisions, the guilds have by and large remained insulated from such criticisms. There have been several attempts, albeit partial, to challenge these assumptions with reference to the guilds by way of shifting the attention to the micro-aspects of these institutions such as their internal dynamics, regional variations, and sector specificities.[5] However, the absence of systematic information and concrete quantitative evidence has prevented such attempts from modifying the history of Ottoman guilds. Thus, the peaceful coexistence paradigm continues to be quoted as one of the primary attributes of pre-nineteenth-century Ottoman guilds.

GUILDS AND EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ECONOMIC REALITIES

The mid-eighteenth century marked the transformation of Ottoman craft guilds from state-bound institutions to autonomous structures in line with the gradual withdrawal of the Ottoman state from the economic realm.[6] As the Ottoman state tended to limit its provisioning policies to the raw materials needed by the military industries, and to the basic foods consumed by the populace,[7] the guilds, which had traditionally depended upon state agencies for the supply of raw materials, were confronted with a series of challenges that threatened their traditional role in Ottoman economic life.[8] Alternative mechanisms of production and labour recruitment (e.g. putting out, itinerant craftsmen and merchants, migratory

5. For a survey of this literature, see Suraiya Faroqhi, "The Fieldglass and the Magnifying Lens: Studies of Ottoman Crafts and Craftsmen", in *The Journal of European Economic History*, 20 (1991), pp. 29–57. Also Donald Quataert, "Labor History and the Ottoman Empire, c. 1700–1922", in *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 60 (2001), pp. 93–109.

6. Onur Yıldırım, "Osmanlı Esnafında Uyum ve Dönüşüm, 1650–1826", in *Toplum ve Bilim*, 83 (1999/2000), pp. 146–177, and also *idem* "Transformation of the Craft Guilds in Istanbul, 1650–1860", in *Islamic Studies*, 40 (2001), pp. 49-66.

7. During the last decade of the eighteenth century, the Ottoman state created the Grain Administration (*Hububat Nezareti*) to ensure the prompt grain supply of the capital city's population, the palace, and the army. See Tevfik Güran, "İstanbul'un İaşesinde Devletin Rolü, 1793–1839," in his *19. Yüzyılda Osmanlı Tarımı* (Istanbul, 1998), pp. 15–42. Cf. Salih Aynural, *İstanbul Değirmenleri ve Fırınları, Zahire Ticareti (1740–1840)* (Istanbul, 2002), pp. 81–84. During the early years of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman state also established the Leather Administration (*Dabakhane Nezareti*) to regulate the procurement and transportation of leather-related raw materials for the use of the army and the palace. See Onur Yıldırım, "Provisioning Istanbul: Ottoman State, Leather Trade and Tanner Guilds in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century", ERC Working Papers, METU Economic Research Center, no. 98/12.

8. According to Donald Quataert, the most serious blow to the existence of the guilds came with the abolition of the janissary corps in 1826. Alluding to the janissaries as the protectors of guilds, Quataert argues that "bereft of protectors in an age when their restrictive practices kept costs too high, the guilds began to disappear"; Donald Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire, 1700–1922* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 137.

labour etc.), together with the increasing competition of foreign products throughout the imperial territories, led to the steady decline of the guild monopoly over economic activities. These challenges combined to introduce a number of new trends and variables into the structure and operation of the guild organizations, which brought about their gradual detachment from the orbit of the state administration. In the nineteenth century, this development was to result in the destruction or dissolution of the guilds into their constituent elements, namely individual artisanal enterprises.

As early as the first quarter of the eighteenth century, the practice known as *gedik* ("gap", "slot") had been invented through coordinated action between the state and the guilds, to address the growing difficulties experienced by the artisans. This new practice, which had been originally intended to reaffirm the monopoly rights of the guilds by way of recognizing the right of the guild masters in practising a craft, came to play a significant role in restructuring the property relations in the marketplace. Many craftsmen who obtained a *gedik* certificate as a means of solidifying their control over the workplace gradually came to use these documents as official certificates in order to lay claim to the ownership of the fixed capital in a given workshop. This development provided the guild members with considerable room for manoeuvre when distressed by the vicissitudes of the market, such as increasing rent rises on the part of administrators of the *evkaf* (pious foundations) from which the artisans often rented their shops, the systematization of certain irregular taxes, or else the rising cost of raw materials. In other words, some guildsmen who had obtained the right to exercise a craft, including the usufruct of a shop/workshop assigned to their guild through the *gedik* certificate, waived their usufruct rights and moved out to a more convenient place, thereby breaking up the spatial unity of guild-based production.[9] The same tendency had in fact appeared earlier among the journeymen who had not been able to become masters due to the limited *gedik* quotas allocated to each guild, and who sometimes set up shop in the more outlying districts.

From the first half of the eighteenth century onwards, the Ottoman

---

9. On the adoption and evolution of the *gedik*, see the discussion in Engin Deniz Akarlı, "Gedik: Implements, Mastership, Shop Usufruct among Istanbul Artisans, 1750–1850", in *Wissenschaftskolleg Jahrbuch*, 1986, pp. 225–231. See also the brief section by Suraiya Faroqhi, "Social Life in Ottoman Cities", in Halil İnalcık with Donald Quataert (eds), *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 586–598. Suraiya Faroqhi has made a preliminary attempt to analyse the conditions under which the *gedik* was adopted by the Istanbul craftsmen. See her "Between Conflict and Accommodation: Guildsmen in Bursa and Istanbul during the 18th Century", in Clare Eugenia Nunez (ed.), *Guilds, Economy and Society: Proceedings of the Twelfth International Economic History Congress* (Madrid, 1998), pp. 143–151.

craftsmen also began to formulate and adopt rule books (*nizamname*) to regulate the structure and operation of their guilds. When first adopted, these books enabled the members of the guild to collectively define and sanctify the boundaries of their activities under the patronage of the state. Before the eighteenth century, this had been achieved, in an ad-hoc fashion, through coordinated action between the guild elders, the local judge (*kadı*) and the market inspectors (*muhtesib*). But, in the course of time, due to their restrictive and conservative contents, these books came to hamper the adaptation of the guilds to the changing conditions of the market. As a result, certain members detached themselves from their guilds. These were usually masters whose lines of work were closely integrated with the European-dominated world economy, such as the production of silk. But certain other masters, such as the bakers, whose fortunes were closely bound with the state-controlled provisioning system, and who produced largely for the state and the internal markets of the Ottoman Empire, tended to remain within the guilds. Thus, similarly to the *gedik*, the adoption of rule books, in the short run, revived the spirit of guild cohesion, backfired in the long run and served to hamper changes with the guild structure. These internal developments, combined with factors exogenous to the guilds, such as the changing policy of the state towards the properties of pious foundations or the conversion of the principal guild offices to tax farms determined the historical trajectory of the Ottoman guilds in the face of market constraints. Decreasing supplies of raw materials due to certain political developments in the Balkans also weakened the position of many guilds.[10] But perhaps most importantly, these changes taking place in Ottoman economic life at the macro level impaired the relations between various ethno-religious groups within the guilds, a trend that first had become visible not among artisans, but rather in the realm of commerce.

The eighteenth century witnessed the growing domination of the Ottoman economy by foreigners and the members of the non-Muslim communities.[11] Although this development took place primarily in the commercial world, the manufacturing sectors (organized according to traditional guild structures) that catered to the needs of the European markets, came increasingly under the control of non-Muslims who were better able to weather the tide of change, thanks to the close ties of their communities to the local agents of European trading companies.[12] Thus the Muslim and non-Muslim members of the guilds began to present

---

10. See the discussion by Traian Stoianovich, "The Conquering Balkan Orthodox Merchant", *Journal of Economic History*, 20 (1960), pp. 234–313.
11. Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire, 1700–1922*, pp. 127–128.
12. Peter Sugar, *Southeastern Europe under Ottoman Rule, 1354–1804* (Seattle, WA, 1977), pp. 226–228. Cf. Ali İhsan Bağış, *Osmanlı Ticaretinde Gayri Müslimler, Kapitülasyonlar Avrupa Tüccarları, Beratlı Tüccarlar, Hayriye Tüccarları 1750–1839*, 2nd edn (Ankara, 1998).

different patterns of behaviour in their market activities. True, all the Ottoman craftsmen, whether Muslims or non-Muslims, continued to share a common administrative structure and observed traditional procedures in their relations with the Ottoman government, known especially to nineteenth-century authors as the Sublime Porte. But, unlike the Muslim craftsmen, who opted to stay within their guilds, the non-Muslim artisans, who began to feel uncomfortable in organizations in which their potential expansion was limited, chose either to organize themselves in separate guilds or turn into independent artisans or guild-free craftsmen and shopkeepers, a process reminiscent of earlier European experience.[13]

A clear sign of this emergent tendency is found in the contents of various official decrees issued by the Imperial Council as a response to the petitions of the non-Muslim members of the silk-thread spinners' guild in Istanbul, who specialized in the manufacturing of a particular type of silk thread largely for foreign markets.[14] The remainder of the current paper will examine several documents that address the conflict between the non-Muslim (e.g. Greek and Armenian) members and Muslim practitioners of this particular craft. This dispute evolved from an ordinary controversy over the practice of a collective ritual to a complicated incident in which conflicting economic interests came to be overtly articulated. But, before discussing this issue, it is necessary to say a few words about the importance of rituals within the Ottoman guilds.

GUILD RITUALS

Eric Hobsbawm argues, with respect to the manual workers of Europe, that "collective manual labour is by tradition a rather ritualized activity, deeply intertwined with the ritual structuring of personal lives and social collectivities, the cycles of the seasons, beginnings and endings, the rites of passage and the rest".[15] Ottoman guilds, similar to their counterparts in Europe, traditionally used rituals as a way to maintain group solidarity

---

13. For the European experience, see Richard Mackenney, *Tradesmen and Traders: The World of the Guilds in Venice and Europe c.1250– c.1650* (London, 1987). For an interesting argument regarding non-Moslem artisans in Crete, see the work by Theocharous E. Detorakes, *Historia tes Kretes* (Athens, 1986). The author argues that in the nineteenth century, Christian artisans and merchants began taking charge of their economic situation by creating urban guilds of their own. See also Michael Herzfeld, *A Place in History: Social and Monumental Time in a Cretan Town* (Princeton, NJ, 1986), p. 18.

14. For silk trade and manufacturing in the Balkans, see Michael Palairet, *The Balkan Economies, c.1800–1914* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 42. For the developments in the Arab provinces especially during the eighteenth century, see Abraham Marcus, *The Middle East on the Eve of Modernity: Aleppo in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1989), pp. 164–165.

15. Eric Hobsbawm, "The Transformation of Labour Rituals", in his *Workers: World of Labor* (New York, 1984), p. 69.

amongst members[16] and to sanctify the status of each member within the hierarchy of labour.[17] Thus, the occasions considered crucial to the workings of guilds were highlighted by a series of rites and ceremonies, performed in private or in public.[18] Among these solemnities, the promotion of apprentices to journeymen (*başka çıkmak*) and of journeymen to masters constituted the most significant and conspicuous as these promotions entailed a series of changes in the internal life of the guilds involved, and also a revision of the hierarchical organization of labour.

The strict observation of these rituals was essential to the maintenance of order within the guilds, since these rituals were intended to inculcate the guild members with the prevailing norms of behaviour and ways of thinking, with a view to reproducing the power relations within the guild. At a more general level, the rituals served as a means for the members to express their loyalty to the guild tradition.[19] Thus things were made more stable, values were more clearly lived by and the community became more ordered and supportive of individuals. This ritual was enhanced by the mediation of the guild elders (*esnaf ihtiyarları*) in the workplace and, for the Muslims especially, by that of their sheikhs within the religious orders (*tekkes* and *zaviyes*). Any disruption in the ritual framework of the guilds was therefore to be interpreted not merely as a sign of degeneration in the morale and discipline of these organizations, but also as a concrete manifestation of the failure on the part of the guild members to reproduce

16. For an interesting approach to the formation of group solidarity in Istanbul, see Cemal Kafadar, "Self and Others: The Diary of a Dervish in Seventeenth Century Istanbul and First-Person Narratives in Ottoman Literature", *Studia Islamica*, 68–70 (1988–1989), p. 148.

17. The only study that deals with the ritual aspects of craft guilds in the Ottoman context focuses on the guilds of Janina. See Giorgos Papageorgiou, *He matheteia sta epangelmata, 16.–20. ai* (Athens, 1986).

18. Except for the public rites, the majority of the rites and ceremonies in the crafts of Istanbul were derived from the *futuwwa* traditions. See Fahri Dalsar, *Türk Sanayi ve Ticaret Tarihinde Bursa'da İpekçilik* (Istanbul, 1960), pp. 122–124. Cf. R.D. McChesney (trans.), "Ilyas Qudsi on the Craft Organizations of Damascus in the Late Nineteenth Century", in F. Kazami and R. McChesney (eds), *A Way Prepared: Essays on Islamic Culture in Honor of Richard Bayly Winder* (New York, 1988), pp. 80–106. Qudsi's account gives a comprehensive list of the rites and ceremonies as performed by various craft guilds in Damascus towards the end of the nineteenth century. For the rites and ceremonies in craft organizations in Ottoman Syria, see Abdul-Karim Rafeq, "Craft Organization, Work Ethics, and Strains of Change in Ottoman Syria", *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 3 (1991), pp. 495–511.

19. The same ritual language was also adopted by the guilds as a response to the calls of the state for celebrating an event, such as a successful military campaign, a circumcision of princes or a public ceremony (*Surre-i Hümayun)* for the sending of a caravan to the Holy City. These events provided "an opportunity to establish and renew the bonds between the sultan and the population", and thereby became an occasion for the state to demonstrate its legitimacy. For a chronological documentation of the *Surre-i Hümayun* see Münir Atalar, *Osmanlı Devleti'nde Surre-i Hümayun ve Surre Alayları* (Ankara, 1991). Also Faroqhi, "Social Life in Ottoman Cities", p. 592.

the integrated relationships which previously had been characteristic of their guilds.

THE CASE OF THE ISTANBUL SILK-THREAD SPINNERS' GUILD

Our story begins with the visit of an el-Hacc Ahmed, the warden (*kethüda*) of the silk-thread spinners guild – located in the Fazlı Paşa Sarayı and comprising thirty masters – to the Imperial Council in December 1759.[20] The reason for his visit was apparently to complain that the conduct of certain rituals within his guild had recently been the subject of much dispute among guild members. Certain non-Muslim masters of the guild had attempted to carry out their own excursion (*teferrüc*)[21] in order to celebrate the promotion of apprentices to the rank of journeymen, thereby violating the traditional procedures and scheduled timing of such rituals. According to the warden's account, this attempt to organize separate excursions for each religious group within the guild ran contrary to the tradition of such a small guild; therefore it had the potential to disrupt the traditional order of the organization. This attempt also defied the principles of an official decree, dated 1731 (Islamic date 1144), the original of which had been lost, whereby the representatives of each religious group had agreed to perform this ritual concurrently, if not collectively, and without violating the rights of one another. In the light of this information, the warden demanded from the Imperial Council that a new copy of this decree be reproduced on the basis of official records. The document under consideration was then prepared and handed over to the Judge of Istanbul, who then confirmed that such a decree had been given to the warden upon his request.

The above document suggests that by the mid-eighteenth century religious affiliation had come to denote a significant variable in the routine of the silk-thread spinners' guild. Almost four years later, in September 1763, the non-Muslim (Greek and Armenian) members of the same guild bypassed the Muslim warden and directly approached the Imperial

---

20. Ottoman Archives, (Istanbul) [hereafter, BOA], İstanbul Ahkam Defterleri, No: 5/135 (5 indicates the volume number of register book while 135 shows the case number recorded in this particular volume), Fi Evahir-i Ca Sene 1172 (1759).
21. The excursion (*teferrüc*) formed one of the major ritual activities of the Istanbul craft guilds. Evliya Çelebi notes that in the seventeenth century, only the most popular crafts such as jewellers (*kuyumcular*), and saddlers (*saraçlar*) could organize excursions due to the high costs involved. Evliya also adds that the recurrence of these events at the rate of "once every twenty or twice every forty years" varied from one craft to another. The organization of an excursion was mainly intended to celebrate the promotion of journeymen to the status of master craftsmen and their moving into their own workshops by obtaining *gediks*. Evliya Çelebi, *Evliya Çelebi Seyahatnamesi*, Zuhuri Danışman (trans.), vol. 3 (Istanbul, 1969), pp. 265–266.

Council with a follow-up to the above case.[22] Their complaint mirrored the earlier petition of the warden. Although the non-Muslim masters had several government decrees in their possession, which authorized them to organize their own excursions to the countryside independently of their fellow Muslim guildsmen, and forbade the latter to interfere in these affairs, the Muslim masters of the guild had recently begun to exert pressure on the complainants, with the intention of organizing these rituals jointly. In the non-Muslims' view, the Muslim guild members had been motivated by covetousness and greed. The complainants added that recently the number of offences on the part of their fellow Muslim craftsmen had increased; these included harassment and insults. Perhaps more importantly, the complainants had been forced to meet a large portion of the expenses incurred in these excursions. As the Imperial Council found the non-Muslims' complaints justified, the Judge of Istanbul was ordered to ensure that non-Muslim masters of the guild could organize their own excursions without the interference of their Muslim fellow guildsmen.

In his magnum opus, *Mecelle-i Umur-ı Belediyye*, in which the above documents have been fully reproduced, Osman Nuri Ergin has interpreted the contents of these documents as a testimony to the just rule of the Ottoman sultans.[23] Be that as it may, the incident documented here is also emblematic of the crude fact that the Muslim craftsmen felt they possessed the right to impose the cost of guild ceremonies on their non-Muslim fellow members. This emergent attitude, which can be interpreted as a surfacing of the embedded "subordinate" standing of the non-Muslims vis-à-vis the Muslims within the guild, should be read against the background of certain traditional arrangements sustaining the supremacy of Muslim members over non-Muslims. For example, the principal guild official, the *kethüda*, who acted as an intermediary between guild and government, had always been appointed from amongst the Muslim members.[24] Perhaps more importantly, the ritual language of the guilds was made up of elements embedded for the most part in Islamic traditions (e.g. *futuwwa*). As far as we know, this Islamic bias of the guilds had not previously caused incidents in which the Muslim members of a guild showed collective hostility against their non-Muslim

22. BOA, İstanbul Ahkam Defterleri, No. 6/535, Fi Evasıt-ı Ra Sene 1176 (1763).
23. Osman Nuri Ergin, *Mecelle-i Umur-ı Belediye, Tarih-i Teşkilat-ı Belediye*, vol. 1 (Istanbul, 1922), p. 188. Also see n.a. *Cumhuriyetin Ellinci Yilinda Esnaf and Sanatkar* (Ankara, 1973), p. 63.
24. Suraiya Faroqhi has already documented that in the guilds containing both Muslim and non-Muslim members in Cairo and Istanbul, the principal offices such as that of warden (*kethüda*) were always manned by Muslims, while the minor offices such as that of *yiğitbaşı* were elected one for each group. *Yiğitbaşı*s acted as representatives of their respective constituencies. See Faroqhi, "Social Life in Ottoman Cities", pp. 592–593.

fellow masters. Therefore it can be assumed that a new variable had entered the picture, to alter the traditional dynamics of intercommunity relations within the workplace. Considered against the background of eighteenth-century economic realities, it is argued that this new variable was closely linked to the changing economic circumstances of the two groups. In other words, the non-Muslims had been better able to weather the changing economic conjuncture than their fellow Muslim guildsmen, and had accumulated a certain amount of wealth, thus subverting the guild principle of economic equality among masters. Not surprisingly, the Muslim silk spinners reacted negatively to this challenge. Obviously, an argument of such broad scope is hard to defend on the basis of just two documents. Nor is it appropriate to draw a far-reaching conclusion from this particular case concerning the pre-modern sources of ethno-religious conflict, which came to undermine the established structures of Ottoman economy and society. But a series of other documents, concerning the circumstances under which the guild of silk-thread spinners operated prior to this particular incident, provides further clues permitting a preliminary argument in this direction.

Only five years prior to the first appeal to the Imperial Council in November 1754, the Muslim and non-Muslim members of the guild had filed a collective petition to this office to complain about the constant disruption in the supplies of raw silk to their guild.[25] They argued that the merchants, who were involved in the supply of raw silk to Istanbul from the provinces, had not been able to procure enough raw silk to maintain an uninterrupted supply. Certain unauthorized individuals, having purchased the raw silk from these locations, were taking the raw silk in bulk to Bursa, Edirne, and Tokat, where it was reeled and then shipped to Istanbul for marketing. Furthermore, within Istanbul some individual silk-thread spinners, who had no connection to the silk-thread spinners' guild, had been illegally involved with reeling raw silk. These people had also established links with the guild of silk-cloth manufacturers (*kazzaz esnafı*) who purchased the thread thus produced. Although there is no precise information as to the identity of these interlopers, apart from the fact that they were clearly from the local populations, another document, dated few years later, reveals that the people engaged in the reeling of raw silk outside the guild organization were Armenians,[26] while those engaging in the manufacturing of silk cloth were Armenians and Jews. These men no longer belonged to a guild and opened their shops whatever location was convenient for them.[27] As for the professional backgrounds of these people, it is very likely that they had previously been masters without a *gedik*, masters with a *gedik* who had

---

25. BOA, İstanbul Ahkam Defterleri, No. 3/1181, Fi Evahir-i M Sene 1168 (1754).
26. BOA, İstanbul Ahkam Defterleri, No. 5/2, Fi Evahir-i Z Sene 1171 (1758).
27. BOA, İstanbul Ahkam Defterleri, No. 5/107, Fi Evasıt-ı Ra Sene 1172 (1758).

broken with their guilds, or journeymen who had not been able to obtain a *gedik* at all in order to become a master. What is clear in both documents is that there were also some outsiders illegally involved in various silk-related activities in Istanbul. Under these conditions, the masters of the silk-thread spinners' guild, who had been suffering due to the shortage of raw silk, implored the state authorities to take measures to restore the previous conditions. This invitation was apparently unsuccessful, and nearly three years later, in February 1755, the guild masters filed yet another request, of similar content, to the Imperial Council. The evidence suggests that the answer to this latter inquiry was issued nearly three years later. In January 1758, the members of the silk-thread spinners' guild attempted one more time to prompt the state to take action, and their plea was once again without results. This vicious circle continued for several more years, and the state authorities seem to have never taken effective measures to eliminate what was considered a major threat to the existence of the guild.

It is obvious from the above developments that during the mid-eighteenth century the guild of silk-thread spinners had been experiencing significant difficulties in obtaining the raw materials crucial to the activities of its members. And the state which had almost always undertaken the necessary measures to eradicate the source of such problems in the past, now seemed to adopt a more passive attitude, leaving the guild at the mercy of circumstances, not to say the "market principle".[28] It is against the backdrop of this reality that the problems within the guilds mounted and the differences between the Muslim and non-Muslim members began to surface.

Nor was the tension between Muslims and non-Muslims the only source of contention. In April 1758, the principal guild officials, that is the Muslim warden and two Muslim supervisors (*yiğitbaşıs*), accompanied by the guild elders (a Muslim master and several masters representing the non-Muslim constituencies), appeared before the Imperial Council.[29] They had come to submit a mounting grievance between masters and journeymen over the violation of a traditional practice, whereby the established masters had been giving some of the raw silk, brought to them by the warden, to the journeymen for reeling. Each journeyman who held a loom in his possession – these were separate from the thirty looms operated directly by the guild masters – was supposed to return the manufactured silk in the form of thread to the guild masters; the journeymen were paid for their labour. The masters would then put the reeled silk on the market and divide the generated income proportionally between themselves. According to the account of the masters, some of the

---

28. For the elaboration of the term "market principle" see the discussion by Steven Kaplan, *Provisioning Paris: Merchants and Millers in the Grain and Floor Trade during the Eighteenth Century* (Ithaca, NY, 1984), pp. 25–27.
29. BOA, İstanbul Ahkam Defterleri, No. 3/1293, Fi Evail-i N Sene (1)171 (1758).

journeymen had recently begun not to return the silk thread to the guild. Instead they gave it to the guild of dyers (*boyacılar esnafı*) and the guild of cloth printers (*basmacı esnafı*). The masters of the silk-thread spinners' guild complained that these journeymen were not contributing anything to the rent of the workshops where they turned the raw silk into thread, and therefore should be banned from involvement in such independent activities.

Although the above facts illustrate the growing tendency on the part of the journeymen to act independently of the guilds, and the mounting tension between the masters and journeymen within the guild, they offer no clues about ethno-religious conflict between the guild members. However, such clues are found when we scrutinize the documents more closely. Apart from the complaints with regard to the illegal activities of the journeymen, the representative guild masters, whether Muslims or non-Muslims, also felt the need to reiterate the conditions for the promotion of a journeyman to the rank of master. They stated that the only way for promotion was the availability of an "empty slot" vacated by the decease of a master. Of a total of seventy journeymen, "the most active and deserving" among the ten "journeymen attached to a master with a *gedik*" was considered qualified for this promotion. On the other hand, the remaining sixty journeymen seem to have been "condemned" to the rank of journeyman for life. In addition, the document on hand reveals the names of all ten journeymen, who belonged exclusively to the Greek and Armenian constituencies.

Under these circumstances, if the peaceful coexistence paradigm held true, we would expect the disadvantaged journeymen to join forces on the basis of their common economic interests, regardless of their ethno-religious affiliations, with a view to condemning the above practise upheld by the guild masters. But this was not the case. Instead, the Muslim journeymen emphasized ethno-religious differences within the guild, and attempted to win over the Muslim masters to their cause. This dispute concerning the excursion celebrating the entry of new masters into the guild, which we have discussed in detail, should be considered as evidence that the Muslim journeymen aligned themselves with the Muslim masters, whose economic fortunes had been steadily deteriorating vis-à-vis their non-Muslim colleagues. Hence, the resentment on the part of the Muslim journeymen carried over to the Muslim masters, and moved them to collective action against their fellow non-Muslim craftsmen. Once established, this unity in action took the most expedient form, that is, the Muslim artisans cultivated the embedded, albeit previously unchallenged, notion of Muslim and non-Muslim inequality within the guild. In addition, by disturbing the ritual undertakings of their fellow non-Muslim guildsmen, the Muslim masters challenged the comparative advantage of the non-Muslim craftsmen in the market. It is against this background that

the relations between the Muslim and non-Muslim members of the silk-thread spinners' guild deteriorated. The same thing applied to the silk-cloth manufacturers (*kazzaz*), who also took part in the production chain of silk. In consequence, the Muslim guild members appeared before the Imperial Council to submit their complaints against their non-Muslim fellow artisans.[30]

From the foregoing discussion, it can be concluded, at least until the contrary is documented to be true, that during the eighteenth century the relations between the silk-thread spinners were no longer characterized by a matrix of equity and justice. As we have noted, the non-Muslim members were subjected to the discrimination and harassment of their fellow Muslim guildsmen on account of their faith. True, many guilds in Ottoman cities, especially in Istanbul, continued to contain members of more than one ethno-religious community for the greater part of the nineteenth century. But elements of ethno-religious conflict among guild members, especially those producing for external markets, were irreversibly established during the eighteenth century. Later on, this potential was to be easily translated into an even more hostile attitude when throughout the Ottoman Empire the demonization, discrimination, and expulsion of various ethno-religious groups became the rule of the day.

30. BOA, İstanbul Ahkam Defterleri, No. 8/73, Fi Evail-i M Sene 1181 (1767).