

1 Istanbul

Nighttime Illumination in Istanbul

İpek Türeli

In his 1839 account of Constantinople, English architect Thomas Allom (1804–1872) observed that there were

no lamps to illuminate the city by night; no shops blazing with the glare of gas; no companies flocking to or from balls; or parties or public assemblies, of any kind, thronging the streets after night fall, and making them as popular as at noon-day ... At sunset all the shops are shut up, and their owners hurry to their respective residences; and when the evening closes in, the streets are as dark and as silent as the grave.

(Allom, 2006, p. 116)

Italian novelist Edmondo de Amicis (1846–1908) echoes Allom in his 1871 travelogue: “Constantinople is by day the most splendid and by night the darkest city in Europe” (de Amicis, 1888, p. 130). Nighttime Constantinople is typically portrayed by European travelers as a dark city where most of the city’s inhabitants went to bed after the evening call to prayer, with exceptions that included the nights of the holy month of Ramadan, religious festivals, holy days, and other special occasions.¹

During the month of Ramadan, practicing Muslims adhered in their daily habits to a different schedule from in the rest of the year. They abstained from food and drink from dawn to sunset each day. After the first meal of the night, the fast-breaking dinner, both men and women socialized. Religious shrine and mosque visits for prayer or sightseeing were coupled with nighttime feasts, house visits, promenades, street entertainment that could continue until the pre-dawn supper, *sahur*, only after which the city would sleep (Göktaş, 1993–1995; Kadioğlu, 1993–1995). Even government offices observed this schedule (Beydilli, 1988, p. 517). Religious observance was communal, social, and entertaining.

Of the two *religious festivals*, the *Ramadan* (Eid al-Fitr) takes place over several days to celebrate the end of the holy month. And roughly two months and ten days later, on the tenth day of the twelfth and final month in the Islamic (lunar) calendar, the *Kurban* (sacrifice, Eid al-Adha) festival takes place in memory of the ram sacrificed by Abraham in place of his son. Religious nights—Mevlid, Ragaip, Mirac, Berat, and Kadir—are also celebrated by Muslims around the world.² On these nights, mosques and important shrines are open to the public, sometimes with special programs. The names of these holy nights (except Kadir Night) have been supplanted in Ottoman-Turkish with *kandil* (e.g., Berat Kandili), after the Ottomans adopted, in the latter part of the sixteenth century, the tradition of using *kandil*—an illumination device with oil and wick; which probably derives from Latin, “candle”—to light up the minarets of mosques. In the early seventeenth century, this practice was



Figure 1.1 “A mosque” by S. N. Glinka, 1996, *Gravürlerle Türkiye, Türkiye in Gravures*, VI, Ankara: T.C. Kültür Bakanlığı, Yayınlar Dairesi Başkanlığı. p. 30; reproduced from *Obozrenie vnutrennosto Turtsii Evropeyskoy, pocerpnutoe iz' drevih'I novih...* by S. N. Glinka, 1829, pp. 4–5

expanded from holy days to Ramadan nights, and a new practice of hanging illuminations between minarets of sultan mosques was developed. These hanging illuminations, which featured religious words and phrases, were called *mahya*. During Ramadan and other holy nights, streets would be informally lit with lanterns hung by shops and coffee houses some of which would be open until dawn. With individuals carrying their own lights on their way to sultan mosques and shrines, or simply promenading, the crowd on the streets would resemble a convoy of “fireflies” (Adivar, 2009, p. 57).

The association of artificial light with religion is a shared theme in the region. Byzantines lit wax candles in churches and cemeteries. After the Ottoman takeover of the city (1453), Muslims adopted some of the local traditions such as lighting candles in shrines with tombs (Kuban, 1993–1995). Candles continued to be the main method of nighttime illumination.

Beeswax, animal fat and, later in the nineteenth century, imported whale fat were favored materials. In residential buildings, they were used in candleholders, made of materials such as wood, metal, ceramic, and glass. Gas lamps were adopted in wealthier households in the nineteenth century because they provided a brighter, stronger light. In mosques, which were not only religious but also public spaces, two kinds of light sources were used: large candleholders to the sides of the *mihrab* (niche indicating the direction of Mecca) and large chandeliers hung from the ceiling to illuminate the central space of the mosque. Finally, outside, on the streets, torches or lanterns were carried by night watchmen and ordinary citizens.

Beyond these exceptions, nighttime was heavily monitored. Occasionally sultans imposed curfews; it was forbidden to be outside without a lantern after the evening prayer during the reign of Murad IV (1623–1640) (Toprak, 1993–1995, p. 476). The regulation of nighttime was intimately connected to the regulation of public space and the dominant model of sovereignty.

After the takeover of Constantinople by Sultan Mehmed II, Ottoman sultans adopted a protocol of seclusion. Everyday life was controlled in each autonomous administrative unit (Işın, 2001). Unlike Orientalist depictions, women were not constrained to the *harem* or interiors, they could be seen out and about. However, the use of public spaces was highly gendered. Coffee houses and courtyards of mosques were the domain of men; women could access bazaars, market places, religious shrines, and fountains. Picnic grounds outside the city proper provided opportunities for collective recreation.

Starting in the early eighteenth century, Ottoman rule forged a new image for itself, based on visibility. The royal family returned to Constantinople after a forty-year absence, spent in Edirne, started restoring old palaces and their gardens, and commissioned new ones (Hamadeh, 2008). Ahmed III who ascended the throne in 1703 was interested in kiosks and summer palaces outside the confines of the older and architecturally sterner Topkapı Palace. His and his retinue's promenades were sightseeing opportunities for the general public. Frequent entertainments, including nighttime ones, were held in the new locations.

The nighttime festivities held in the gardens typically decorated by tulip beds featured burning lights under every tulip; and tortoises were seen meandering with candles on their shells—referred to by Osman Hamdi in his famous painting, “The Turtle Trainer” (1906) (Mélíkoﬀ, 2011). Barges carried the general public near these palaces, the gardens of which were visible and audible but not physically accessible. Complementing exclusive palace gardens, the sultan, members of his extended household and high-ranking officers sponsored new fountains and gardens for the public (2008). Pleasure gardens of Ahmed III would incite violent opposition and the famed Sadabad Palace and gardens (in today's Kağıthane) were burned down after his deposition in 1730. This period, dubbed the “Tulip Period,” after the tulip obsession among Ottoman court society, is seen in conservative histories of the Ottoman Empire as the beginning of the “Stagnation Period,” or invariably as the beginning of “Westernization.”

Nighttime Illumination as Municipal Service

In 1855, a municipality was established in Constantinople to centrally provide modern urban amenities (Arnaud, 2008, pp. 953–976, 1399–1408). The first contract of 1864 dealt with the installation of street lighting that used petroleum imported from the United States, where large quantities of the material were discovered and put to use as a popular fuel (Toprak, 1993–1995, p. 476). Petroleum storages in Constantinople were kept outside the city, in depots, for fear of conflagration. Coal-gas was introduced in the Dolmabahçe Palace,

during the reign of Sultan Abdülaziz (1839–1861). A *gazhane*, gas production plant, was constructed to provide the new palace—the excess from this facility then supplied İstiklal Avenue (Rue de Pera) and Galip Dede Street in today’s Beyoğlu neighborhood (Akbulut & Sorguc, 1993–1995, pp. 377–378). The historic peninsula was illuminated with street lighting later with the establishment of the Yedikule plant in the 1880s.

The regularization of the urban fabric and the accompanying institutionalization of street lighting in Constantinople were considerably late compared to other European capitals. London begun using coal-gas for street lighting in 1810, and Paris adapted coal-gas in 1820 and electricity in 1878 (Toprak, 1993–1995).³ For fear of earthquakes, the Ottoman state had encouraged wooden construction in the historic peninsula, but the prominence of that material made the city particularly susceptible to large fires (Zwierlein, 2012). As far as the Ottoman Empire is concerned, the adoption of electricity in the capital city arrived later than in its provincial Arab capitals. It was during the Second Constitutional Era (1908–1918), when the Young Turks seized power from the sultan and restored constitutional monarchy, that the city’s first coal-powered electricity production plant, Silahtarağa, was commissioned to a Budapest-based company.⁴ Silahtarağa remained the sole provider of the city until 1952 when it was connected to the newly established national grid. It was decommissioned in 1983 and has been converted to the privately-owned Bilgi University in the past decade as part of a culture-led revitalization effort around the Golden Horn, the city’s former industrial zone (Türeli, 2010). Although Silahtarağa was operational by 1914, it provided mainly the tramlines, and a limited network of street lights with power. By the 1920s, only primary and some secondary streets were lit with electricity. The Republican years (1923–1950) focused on industrialization; electricity production and access were prioritized. But it was not until the 1980s when city authorities decided to de-industrialize the central city to make space for cultural tourism that they began thinking about how the city was lit or what kind of image it projected. Creative architectural and city lighting schemes are highly sought after by the city administration.

The Ottoman Art of Urban Lighting: *Mahya*

Mahya is a specifically Ottoman tradition and originated in the city. It is viewed as a traditional art, “gradually flickering” (Zaman, 2007). Eccentric collector-writer, artist, and medical doctor, professor Süheyl Ünver (1898–1986) wrote, in 1932, an authoritative article on *mahya* (Ünver, 1932, 1996).⁵ He reports *mahya* began to be used in all sultan mosques only in the Tulip Period (Quartet, 2005, p. 167). Many of the secondary sources cite German traveler Salomon Schweigger’s account and illustration of *mahya* in Constantinople in 1578 (Schweigger, 1619, p. 193).⁶ The illustration is of utmost importance but it may be partially fictive. First, a *mahya* cord is strung between the minarets of two different mosques, which is unrealistic (Kara, 2013, p. 22). Second, there is no religious inscription; the drawn *kandils* seem to make up geometric figures. Ahmed Rasim’s account is used to date the invention of *mahya* to Hafiz Kefevi, the *kandilci* of Fatih Mosque, who, according to the much repeated story, presented to the sultan a version, and the sultan agreed to him setting up a *mahya* featuring a calligraphic inscription from the holy book, between the minarets of Sultan Ahmed (Blue) Mosque as part of the inauguration festivities of that mosque in 1616 (2013).

The word *mahya* derives from *mah* (moon) in Persian; with the Arabic suffix of “iyye,” to mean “specific to the month” (of Ramadan)—since Muslims used the lunar calendar, moon means month in Turkish (Bozkurt, 1988, pp. 396–398).⁷ Another Arabic word transliterated similarly is *mahyâ*. The two have different meanings but are nevertheless connected. *Mahyâ*



Figure 1.2 S. Schweigger, 1639, figure from *Ein Neue Reysbeschreibung Auss Teutschland Nach Constantinopel und Jerusalem*, p. 193

shares the same root with “life” (*hayat*), and was used to refer to the *zikir* (chanting of the greatness of Allah) assemblies (1988). The Ottomans’ innovation in the development of *mahya* was in “writing on the sky”—the combination of night illumination of mosques with the new architectural typology of sultan mosques with domes and minarets deliberately placed on high hills visible from all the city and surrounding waters and lands. In addition, the illuminations broadcast, in today’s terminology, words of Islam. What kinds of images and texts were drawn with *mahya*? Texts included *bismele* (the saying of *Bismi’llah*, “in the name of Allah”), Allah, Muhammad, *La Ilaha Illallah* (“there is only one God”), etc. Figures included outlines of stars, moons, flowers (roses, tulips, etc.), birds, boats, bridges, canons, tents, arrows, fish, etc. Sometimes, some parts of the *mahya* would slide along the horizontal ridge cable between the minarets, e.g. a boat moving across and back. Although the mosques were endowed independently through their *vakif* (foundations), the palace controlled and often provided additional support for *mahya*, which was as much a message from Allah to believers as a message from the Sultan to his subjects. In the twentieth century, textual messages became overtly political.

There were in fact three kinds of *mahya* practiced in Constantinople by its masters (artisans): first, internal *mahya* set under the dome, to illuminate the mosque; second, dressing of minarets (*kaftanlama*, coating, of single *minaret* mosques), and *mahya* between minarets. The last one is the commonly understood version (Göktaş, 1993–1995). The *mahyacı* (*mahya* master) would sketch the design in a notebook to scale, and prepare the materials through the year (Kara, 2010, pp. 103–105). According to Ünver, *mahyacı* would



Figure 1.3 “Welcome Ramadan” by A. Cakar, 2012. Retrieved May 15, 2014 from http://sugraphic.com/images/fotolar/2012/08/15/56_1344979743..jpeg

send to the Sultan a model drawn with pearls on blue or red satin for his approval (Ünver, 1996, pp. 49–63). During application, he would stretch ropes or cables between the minarets; he would arrange the light fixtures to form the telegraphic, and usually religious, textual messages, and from mid-Ramazan onward, to draw figures. Every night the *kandil* would have to be filled again. Historically oil and candle lights, and later gas lights were used, but today electric, even LED lights are preferred, and textual messages are in the Latin alphabet, as opposed to the Arabic calligraphy of the Ottoman language, so as to be communicable to contemporary viewers. Especially with LED, the *imam* can easily change the text from a remote location, and there is no need for a *mahya* master any more.

Since the city is excessively lit today, *mahya*'s relative impact is very limited. A *mahya* competition was organized on the occasion of the 2010 European Culture of Capital program, with the intention to rekindle it as a design object as part of that city's branding event.⁸ Little attention has been paid to this art until an edited and well-illustrated collection came out in 2010 in connection with this competition and as part of the same program. *Mahya* is a disappearing art form yet it is very well known, arguably because it has spread from Istanbul to other cities, and lends itself well to photographic reproduction. Most people in Turkey will have a sense of what it is through images in circulation.

Urban Night Today

Urban lighting has emerged since the 1990s as an effective and economical way to enhance the attractiveness of urban cores for tourists (Evans, 2012). Thus a new area of investment for city administrators is architectural or creative lighting and nighttime events, including lighting festivals, in distinction to practical lighting. The Municipality of Istanbul has a directorate for “City Illumination” that seeks to improve the city image through nighttime

illumination. Many historic buildings are highlighted with designed external lights. Cruising along the Bosphorus, the nighttime view is very pleasant especially during summer months. The most extravagant of all are Bosphorous bridges that are illuminated with digitally controlled LED fixtures, and the technology turns at night into a light show.⁹ The Bosphorus is animated further by fireworks for weddings and numerous lit cruise boats, some with loud music blaring out. It may be difficult to convince a contemporary visitor to Istanbul, especially on a moonlight cruise along the Bosphorus, that this colorful, vibrant, and perhaps also loud city was once dark and deserted at nights, at least for most of the year.

The management of nighttime lighting remains political. The “conquest” of Constantinople by the Ottomans has been commemorated (celebrated) for several years now with laser lights, fireworks, sound and water displays on the Golden Horn, in addition to daytime enactments.¹⁰ The desire of the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) to limit the celebrations of the Founding of the Republic (29 October) has prompted torch-light processions in defiance.¹¹ During the Gezi Park protests during the summer of 2013, citizens in Istanbul and other Turkish cities protested by banging on their pots and pans and switching on and of their home lights.¹² In opposition to the ruling party, its conservative rhetoric, and regime of intolerance and corruption, citizens have been taking to the streets and public spaces during the night, organizing actions of insurgency.

Notes

- 1 Other special occasions include the births, weddings, and circumcision festivities for princes and princesses, and later in the nineteenth century the return of Sultan Abdülaziz to the city from his travels in Europe, and the visit of Khedive Ismail of Egypt.
- 2 Mevlid marks the Prophet’s birth; Ragaip, the Prophet’s conception; Mirac, his ascendance into heaven; and Berat is the day of forgiveness. Kadir celebrates the first appearance of the Qu’ran to the Prophet.
- 3 For a general account, see W. Schivelbusch (1995), *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press. For London, see L. Nead (2000), *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth Century*. London: Yale University Press, 81–146.
- 4 Toprak, “Aydınlatma”. The Young Turks were a coalition of reformist groups who promoted not only modern forms of government but also infrastructural modernization that would ensure economic and political independence and avoid European interference.
- 5 Ünver’s *Istanbul Risaleleri* (risale: critical explanation, exegesis) were edited by İsmail Kara and published in five volumes by Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality in 1996.
- 6 İsmail Kara cites an even earlier source, Hans Denschwam’s narration of Istanbul *mahyas*.
- 7 A second, related meaning of the word *mahya* in Turkish is roof ridge (*Dachfirst* in German or *faite* in French).
- 8 The competition was organized by the Istanbul 2010 European Capital of Culture Agency’s Traditional Arts Directorate and co-sponsored by Istanbul Regional Directorate of Foundations, Designers Association, and the Design Culture and Management Certificate Program of Bilgi University.
- 9 <http://www.colorkinetics.com/showcase/installs/Bosphorus-Bridge/>
- 10 Istanbul’s conquest commemoration date, May 29, is not listed in the official calendar of the Republic but has nonetheless been celebrated at the local level with minimum official participation. One result of the rise of Islamism in the public sphere since the 1990s has been to challenge the Republican state-sanctioned narrative of national identity. The substitute narratives of nationhood produced by Islamist political organizations have sought to cast Istanbul as a “victim” of the Republic—thus the re-enactment of its conquest symbolically served to “save” it. Since the 1990s, conquest commemorations have taken various forms, including stadium performances, elaborate historical re-enactments, and permanent exhibitions including a nation-themed miniature park and war panorama. Türeli, “Modeling Citizenship”

- 11 Such events have been organized by municipalities with mayors from other parties. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=official-republic-day-celebrations-canceled-2011-10-28>
- 12 A popular video showing this form of protest can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4UcVy1SfRs>

References

- Adıvar, H. E. (2009). *House with wisteria: Memoirs of Turkey old and new* (S. Erol, Trans.). New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers. First published in 1926.
- Akbulut, R. & Sorguc, C. (1993–1995). *Gazhaneler. Dünden Bugüne İstanbul Ansiklopedisi* (Vol. 3). Ankara: Kültür Bakanlığı, İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı.
- Allom, T. (2006). *Constantinople and the scenery of the seven churches of Asia Minor*. In M. W. Wilson (Ed.), Pictaway, NJ: Gorgias Press.
- Arnaud, J.–L. (2008). Modernization of the cities of the Ottoman Empire (1800–1920). In R. Holod, A. Petuccioli, & A. Raymond (Eds.), *The city in the Islamic world*. Leiden: Brill.
- Ayvazoğlu, B. (2010). Candles, mahyas, and Turkish identity. *Göklere Yazı Yazma Sanatı: Mahya [The Art of Writing on the Sky: Mahya]* (pp. 49–61). İstanbul: Avrupa Kültür Başkenti.
- Beydilli, K. (1988). Osmanlı Devlet Geleneğinde İftar. *İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (Vol. 21). Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı: İslâm Ansiklopedisi Genel Müdürlüğü. Retrieved from <http://www.diyaretislam.com/iftar.html>
- Bozkurt, N. (1988). Mahya & Mahyâ. *İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (Vol. 27). Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı: İslâm Ansiklopedisi Genel Müdürlüğü. Retrieved from <http://www.diyaretislam.com/mahya.html> and <http://www.diyaretislam.com/mahya-2.html>
- Celik, Z. (1986). *The remaking of Istanbul: Portrait of an Ottoman city in the nineteenth century* (pp. 49–56). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- de Amicis, E. (1888). *Constantinople* (C. Tilton., trans.). New York & London: G.P. Putnam's Sons.
- Evans, G. (2012). Events, cities, and the nighttime economy. In S. Page & J. Connell. (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of events* (pp. 415–430). Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Göktaş, U. (1993–1995a). İftar Âdetleri. *Dünden Bugüne İstanbul Ansiklopedisi* (Vol. 4, pp. 140–141). Ankara, Kültür Bakanlığı, İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı.
- Göktaş, U. (1993–1995b). Mahyacılık. *Dünden Bugüne İstanbul Ansiklopedisi* (Vol. 5, pp. 275–276). Ankara, Kültür Bakanlığı, İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı.
- Hamadeh, S. (2008). *The city's pleasures: Istanbul in the eighteenth century*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.
- Işın, E. (2001). *Everyday life in Istanbul: Social historical essays on people, culture and spatial relations* (V. T. Saçlıoğlu. Trans.). İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Publications.
- Kadioğlu, N. (1993–1995). Ramazan Geleneği. *Dünden Bugüne İstanbul Ansiklopedisi* (Vol. 6, pp. 303–304). Ankara, Kültür Bakanlığı, İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı.
- Kara, I. (2010). Mahya Book. *Göklere Yazı Yazma Sanatı: Mahya [The art of writing on the sky: Mahya]*. İstanbul: Avrupa Kültür Başkenti.
- Kara, I. (2013). Mahyacılar. *1453 Dergisi*, 18, 22, 18–25.
- Kuban, D. (1993–1995). Aydınlatma: Tanzimat Dönemi, Cumhuriyet Dönemi. *Dünden Bugüne İstanbul Ansiklopedisi* (Vol. 1, pp. 474–476). Ankara, Kültür Bakanlığı, İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı.
- Mélikoff, I. (2011). Lâle Devri. In P. Bearman, T. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, & W.P. Heinrichs (Eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2nd ed.). Brill Online. Retrieved from http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_COM-0566
- Quartet, D. (2005). *The Ottoman Empire, 1700–1922*. Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Schweigger, S. (1639). *Ein Neue Reyssbeschreibung Auss Teutschland Nach Constantinopel und Jerusalem, Etc*. Nürnberg: Endter.

- Toprak, Z. (1993–1995). Aydınlatma: tanzimat dönemi, cumhuriyet dönemi. *Dünden Bugüne İstanbul Ansiklopedisi* (Vol. 1). Ankara, Kültür Bakanlığı, İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı.
- Türel, İ. (2010). Modeling citizenship in Turkey's miniature park. In D. Göktürk, L. Soysal, & İ. Türel, (Eds.), *Orienteering Istanbul: Cultural capital of Europe?* (pp. 104–125). New York: Routledge.
- Ünver, S. (1932). *Mayha ve Mahyacılık*. İstanbul: Belediye Matbaası.
- Ünver, S. (1996). *Mayha ve Mahyacılık, İstanbul Risaleleri*, (Ismail Kara, ed.) (Vol 1 pp. 49–63). İstanbul: Büyükşehir Belediyesi Matbaası,
- Zaman (2007) Mahya tradition gradually flickering out. 21 September, Retrieved April 12, 2014 from <http://www.todayszaman.com/>
- Zwierlein, C. (2012). The burning of a modern city? Istanbul as perceived by the agents of the Sun Fire Office, 1865–1870. In G. Bankoff, U. Lübken, & J. Sand (Eds.), *Flammable cities: Urban conflagration and the making of the modern world* (pp. 82–102). Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.