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Identities in-between: the impact of satellite broadcasting on Greek Orthodox minority (Rum Polites) women’s perception of their identities in Turkey

Asli Tunç and Ariana Ferentinou

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Abstract
This study aims to shed a light on women belonging to the Greek Orthodox Christian (Rum Polites) community in Istanbul, Turkey and their perception of their identity with the help of satellite broadcasting (ERT World). This research is the first attempt to analyse Rum women’s viewing attitudes and their correlations with a number of variables such as education, age, family structure, religion, occupation, and their perceptions of themselves as part of a distinctive religious and cultural entity. Since the female members of the community are heavy television viewers, television is a powerful tool to construct a social reality and a sense of self. By conducting in-depth interviews and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), this study aims to reveal how this unique community makes sense of their identities and social worlds through television.

Keywords: Turkey; Greek identity; identity; minorities; media; migration.

We need to know where we live in order to imagine living elsewhere.
We need to imagine living elsewhere before we can live there.

Avery Gordon

Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination,
1997, p. 5.

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Introduction

This study aims to shed light on women’s sense of belonging to the Greek Orthodox Christian (Rum Polites) community in Istanbul and their discourses of identity, as shaped in the context of satellite broadcasting consumption. The definition of the Rum Polites (Constantinopolitan Greeks) does not fully fit into existing frameworks of analysis and conceptual categories widely used, such as minority, diaspora or refugee. This unique population has a long history that can be traced back for centuries to the Byzantine Empire, although present members of the community are mainly migrants from various Greek-speaking areas of the late Ottoman Empire. They are the non-Muslim minority in the Turkish Republic adhering to Orthodoxy maintained by the Ecumenical Patriarchate. According to an official from the Rum Orthodox Patriarchate, as of 24 March 2007, the number of the community is 4,000 in a total population of 72 million, of which 1,500 are estimated to be women. In addition, there are 280 ethnic Rums in Gökçeada, twenty ethnic Rums in Bozcaada and around 1,800 Antiochian immigrants in Istanbul. The number of Turkish-speaking Antakya Rum Orthodox Christians (Antiochians) remaining in Antakya is around 10,000. Thus, there are around 16,100 Rum Orthodox Christians in Turkey. However, only 4,300 of this Greek-speaking population fall under the protection of the Treaty of Lausanne because the Turkish state does not recognize the rest as Rum Orthodox. (Akgönül 2007). After the Lausanne Treaty of 1923, there were over 130,000 ethnic Greeks in Istanbul, Gökçeada (Imvros) and Bozcaada (Tenedos) (Dündar 2000). A thriving community of 200,000 members in the beginning of the last century but now merely 4,000, the Rum Polites have not thus far been analysed at the intersection of gender division, television viewing patterns and their perceptions of themselves as a part of a distinctive religious and cultural entity.

This research aim is twofold. On the one hand, it aims to examine the role of Greek public broadcasting, ERT World satellite television in the construction of identities among Greek Orthodox minority women in Turkey. On the other, it examines whether ERT World satellite broadcasting influences Greek Orthodox women’s perception of Turkish society. The two questions are intertwined and they are positioned within a sociocultural context where television viewing represents a significant element of cultural practice and identity construction within this group.

To present the uniqueness of Rum Polites, this article begins by unfolding the historical roots of the community. Following the historical background, satellite broadcasting’s role in identity construction and ERT World’s influence on the Rum women’s perception
of Turkish society and themselves are discussed. At the end of the study, the findings of in-depth interviews are analysed to understand the correlation between the community’s viewing habits of ERT World and their cultural identities torn between Greece and Istanbul.

**Tracing back the story of Rum Polites**

Living mostly in their cultural microcosms does not prevent Rum Polites from carrying out their daily duties in the diverse economic life of Istanbul. In spite of their commitments outside the household or as housewives, Rum women remain heavy television viewers. That is one of the major reasons why the Rum women have been selected as the sample for this study. According to the recent study of the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK) on Turkish women’s viewing habits,$^1$ Turkish women spend nearly 4.5 hours in front of the television set daily; 58.6 per cent of those women prefer domestically produced television series, 18.4 per cent watch news and 5.8 per cent watch daytime shows, talk shows and entertainment programmes. The least popular programmes are educational programmes, health programmes and documentaries. On the other hand, the media use of Rum women is somewhat unique. Satellite broadcasting as a relatively new phenomenon in Turkey entered most of the Greek minority households in the last two decades. This study examines the hypothesis that this development, especially the satellite broadcasting services of ERT World (Greek public broadcasting) might influence the perceptions of this minority towards Turkish society and enhance their own particular identity as Greeks.

If we look at the historical roots of the community, we can see how they have always been, along with the Muslim community of northern Greece, formidable paradigms of historical heritage and how current government policies shape the fates of minorities, meaning they frequently bearing the brunt in confrontations not of their own making. The Greek Orthodox minority has practically vanished from Turkey (Alexandris 1992). The fate of the Greek Orthodox community of Istanbul is almost a mirror image of the history of Turkey beginning in the mid-nineteenth century and reaching the present day. It reflects Turkey’s numerous attempts for westernization and liberalization as well as its lapses into nationalist fervour. The number of the members of the Greek community of Istanbul shot up to as high as 236,000 by some estimates just after the Ottoman sultans declared their reform decrees of 1839 and 1876 (known as Tanzimat). In the wake of these decrees, which granted equal rights to all Ottoman subjects, there was a considerable inflow of Greeks from mainland Greece, which had gained independence from the Ottoman Empire only a few decades earlier (Mazower 2000). Significant numbers of Greeks came and settled in Istanbul from the Aegean islands, Thessalonica, the area of Epirus, Macedonia and
Crete, seeking business opportunities. The beginning of the twentieth century saw this community flourish, gaining considerable control over money, banking and trade in the empire. Ottoman Greeks also succeeded in rising to high government posts, for example Karatheodoris Pasha who led the Ottoman delegation at the Berlin Conference of 1878. The fortunes of the Rums of Istanbul began to take a bad turn after World War I. In 1922 after Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s armies defeated the Greek armies that had landed in Anatolia in 1919, western powers concluded the Treaty of Lausanne recognizing Turkey as an independent state. In a separate agreement annexed to the treaty, 1.5 million Greeks of Anatolia were to be exchanged with some 500,000 Muslims living in Greece and in the Aegean islands. The Rums of Istanbul, Tenedos and Imvros were exempted from this agreement after much argument. The continuing presence of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Istanbul was also contested by the Turks. Following the founding years of the Turkish Republic, the Greek minority of Istanbul became the target of nationalist policies suffering under severe limitations imposed on community activities such as education, and so on. Every single confrontation between Turkey and Greece, beginning with the Cyprus problem in the 1960s, had adverse effects on the life of Istanbul’s Rums. The Wealth Tax levied mainly on non-Muslim citizens in 1941, the government-provoked riots in 1955 and the expulsion of Greeks in 1967 all left traumatic effects on the psyche of the community. In what are known as ‘the incidents of 6 and 7 September’, violent mobs attacked property and non-Muslim individuals in Istanbul in 1955. The main target was the Rum Orthodox community, as a result of the escalation of the crisis between Greece and Turkey over Cyprus. However, Armenians and Jews were also attacked (Güven 2006). Many Rums were extremely traumatized by the events of 1955. Years of fear and uncertainty resulting from the repressive state policies exerted on the Rums of Istanbul have resulted in an introvert psychology within the community, together with conservatism and religiosity that force Rums today to keep every practice that may have been considered discriminatory in the group and to leave no room for any criticism (Ak 2008; Prodromos 2007, p. 59).

Most Rum Polites receive their basic education in Greek in the minority schools of Istanbul. They are taught by teachers who either belong to the community or who have been sent by the Greek Ministry of Education as part of the country’s system of supporting diasporic Greek schools. However, those schools are under the control of and are monitored by the Turkish Ministry of Education. Hence the principal or vice-principal of those schools is appointed by the official authorities of the Turkish Republic. Their social life and identity is closely linked to the Orthodox Church. The Rum Polites perform their religious duties freely in their churches, which have been restored...
during the last fifteen years after permission given by the Turkish authorities, and they often organize small groups (non-profit associations – *Vakifs*) attached to their local church where they meet, and carry out philanthropic activities. The community tends to live in a closed circuit where family values are extremely important. They tend to be apolitical as they do not have any affiliation with political parties in mainland Greece and they do not develop affiliation to Turkish political parties either. Most of them tend to see Turkish politics, such as the financial situation of Turkey, according to how much they have an effect on their own community and own lives. Their ‘political’ points of reference are the Greek General Consulate in Istanbul, the Greek Embassy in Ankara and primarily and historically the Ecumenical Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Fener, Istanbul. Due to the historical, cultural, political and religious significance of Istanbul (Constantinople) for the Greek community, the Greek General Consulate of Istanbul has been granted the exceptional status of an embassy and the General Consular has the diplomatic status of an ambassador. The identity of the Rum Polites revolves around their attachment to Constantinople (also known in their vernacular as *Polis*, which means city) and their belonging to the urban areas plays a central role. The Rum women, as the rest of the community, are urban subjects and live in the traditional neighborhoods of Istanbul (Beyoglu, Kurtulus, Ferikoy, Kadikoy). Almost 30 per cent of the community is over the age of fifty-five. Those over sixty-five without the means to looking after themselves are offered care at the old people’s home of Balikli Greek Hospital (Balıkçı Hastanesi Huzurevi) (Akgönül 2007). More than 50 per cent of the whole community is married, 2.5 per cent are divorced and 34 per cent are single. In spite of the fact that there has been a marked improvement in the political and economic relations between Greece and Turkey during the last decade, the negative perceptions of Rums (and Rum women) towards the Turkish majority have not changed much. However, the coming to power of an Islamist-rooted government in the quest to join the EU has eased the tension by implementing a series of laws in favour of minorities. In their daily lives, Rum women still retain a sense of hostility towards the Turkish people and they often say they would not dream of entering into a marriage with a Turk, although mixed marriages are not unheard of. However, the Patriarchate refuses to allow the ‘christening’ of a child born within a mixed marriage and refuses to approve a mixed marriage, considering it an ‘adultery’.

Rum women see the Greek women as very different to themselves. As they do not share any common lifestyle or background, it is no surprise that they cannot see any commonalities. One of the most sharply formulated dimensions of the Rum Polites’ identity is that it differs from being ‘simply Greek’ or Greeks from Greece (Elladites, i.e.
Greeks from mainland Greece) (Örs 2006). In that sense, Rum women’s sceptical and sometimes hostile attitude both towards Turks and Greeks has been a great challenge for Turkish and Greek researchers trying to access them. (This will be further discussed in the methodology section below.)

While the Rum women emphasize their distance from Greeks, they feel closer to Turkish women. Strong friendships between Turkish and Rum women, especially when living in the same neighbourhood, are common. Women of Greek origin who join the Istanbul Rum community through marriage often express a sense of isolation. There is a long tradition of marriage within the Rum community. This is true even among the large community of Rums who have now settled mainly in Athens after being expelled from Turkey or left on their own for fear of reprisals between 1955 and 1974–7.

A brief history of Greek satellite broadcasting

Satellite channels first started being transmitted in Greece through the frequencies of ERT World at the end of the 1980s. The first Greek satellite (Hellas Sat) was launched in May 2003. The infiltration of satellite television in Greek households is low (under 10 per cent according to market estimates, although there are no official figures) compared to other European countries. According to AGB Hellas, satellite channels represent only 1 per cent of viewership. Multichoice Hellas is the mother company of NOVA, the only subscription-paying digital TV platform. Free-access satellite channels as well as channels by subscription broadcast via the platform of NOVA reach an audience of merely 1,000 viewers. Those viewers in Greece who watch channels of free reception via a satellite aerial (dish) number approximately 150,000. To access the satellite services of NOVA (almost forty channels – besides the Greek ones transmitted both via satellite and land line), one acquires the complete equipment (dish, decoder with access to a few free channels, access card) and a monthly fee of approximately €35. NOVA is licensed to broadcast in Greece only, but many Rums manage to get it through various means. These include the illegal use of access cards, which they import from Greece or ‘cracking’ the access cards, and recently via the internet. Rum women indicate that Greek satellite television plays a very important part in their life in Turkey. However, they have certain reservations with regards to the programme content. The ideological underlying message in ERT World programming is reaching the ‘Greeks abroad’. The target audience is mainly the Greek diaspora, which lives across the world. Rum women do not consider themselves as ‘migrants’ or diasporic subjects. They are indigenous to Turkey. While their cultural roots and language are Greek, they have always resided on Turkish soil.
and are Turkish citizens. Their homeland is Turkey. Hence, they do not have the same common social background as the rest of the Greeks who live abroad. The term ‘abroad’ does not apply to them, so they cannot relate to some of the programmes broadcast on ERT World such as travel programmes showing the Greek countryside, village life, Greek folkloric customs, and so on. Anything that appeals to the Greek migrants with a common memory of mainland Greece is of no particular interest to the Rums.5

An additional point that applies to the unique situation of the Rums is that they form an overwhelmingly urban community, as they live in one of the oldest and most populous urban centres of the world, Istanbul. Thus they do not have particular knowledge or interest about the ‘village life’ that ERT World focuses on in order to satisfy its target audience of Greeks abroad, most of whom have rural origins. At the same time, Rum women complain that too much television time is devoted to sports coverage on ERT World. However, ERT World is by far the channel most watched by the Rum Polites.

Debates on satellite television viewing, global public sphere and cultural identities

In this study, the concept of ‘in-between-ness’ is used to explore the Rum community where their sense of belonging is a never-ending search for identity. In-between-ness refers to the constant feeling of dislocation, discussed by Bhabha (1994), Gilroy (1994) and Hall (1990) within the context of post-colonialism. As people feel disjointed from the national boundaries, their identities are shaped as a form of resistance identity opposed to their political identities as citizens (Barber 1995; Castells 2004, 2007; Lull 2007). The emergence and sustaining of contemporary global public spheres are largely dependent on new media communication systems and their mediatory role for sustaining in-between identities (Volkmer 1999; Bennett 2004; El-Nawawy and Iskander 2002; Paterson and Sreberny 2004; Dahlgren 2005; Tremayne 2007). Volkmer (2003, p. 9) also discusses ‘how the media infrastructure of the global public sphere has been tremendously differentiated in recent years’, framing identities along the lines of new cultural and political parameters (Castells 2001). As Fraser (2007, p. 7) rightly indicates, ‘a growing body of media studies literature is documenting the existence of discursive arenas that overflow the bounds of both nations and states.’ Those debates are also surrounded by the questions of cultural identities and the potential impact of satellite broadcasting (Harvey 1995; Morley and Robins 1995; Morley 2000; Robins 2006). In the post-1990s, extensive research has been conducted revolving around the concept of ‘transnational communities’ on cross-border television (Kang and
Morgan 1990; Straubhaar, Consuelo and Cahoon 1995; Goonasekera and Lee 1998; Lee 2000). Most of these studies have focused on Indian audiences, their identities, culture, values and their access to satellite television (Gupta 1998; Fernandes 2000; Mcmillin 2001; Butcher 2002). All of these studies pointed out that viewing television was not merely an act of consumption but was ‘rather a complex process of decoding cultural meanings’ (Wang, Servaes and Goonasekera 2000, p. 4). Widely used theoretical frameworks were cultural imperialism and cultural hegemony. ‘Cultural imperialism is the policy of extending a nation’s authority over other nations through cultural means’ (Malhotra and Rogers 2000, p. 409), and hegemony denotes a ‘dominant cultural order which is consistently preferred, despite its articulation with structures of domination and oppression’(Grossberg 1996, p. 161). These studies specifically point out the adaptation of western values and conditions of advanced capitalism by the ‘non-western’ communities. For more than two decades, satellite broadcasting has been seen as a way of ‘electronic colonialism’ (McPhail 1987, p. 17) with negative consequences.

On the other hand, it should be kept in mind that the role of satellite broadcasting in global communication flows is steadily growing in importance and contributes to ethnic cohesion and cultural maintenance as well as to helping members of communities integrate into a larger society (Riggens 1992). In fact, a number of developing countries’ governments express concerns that satellite broadcasting might erode their sovereignty by transmitting foreign programming to their populations in an unregulated manner (Karim 2007). In addition to extensive research conducted on Indian culture, there is also research on Italian and German communities in Canada (Lofaro 1994), Arabic-speakers in Europe (Gillespie 1995; Chouikha 2007), religious groups like the Mormons, and the Jewish Lubavitch and Ahmadiyya sects in various countries such as the USA, Germany and Pakistan. Satellite channels carry out similar types of programming schedules and advertising. However, apart from those similarities in programming, the major differences lie in the languages and cultural content. Milikowski (2000, p. 460) points out that migrant viewing of television should be analysed from a uses and gratifications point of view as she observes ‘non-ideological and non-political gratifications usually go a long way to explain a certain popular interest.’ However, can such a simplistic approach be valid for the complex experiences of the Orthodox Greek minority living in Istanbul?

Methodology

This research is based on in-depth interviews conducted among thirty-two female Greek Orthodox viewers in households located in Istanbul.
Respondents were asked about the role and significance of Greek state television programming on satellite, about how their viewing habits had affected personal and family attitudes, perceptions of their identities and awareness of political developments in Greece and Turkey, and whether satellite broadcasting had been a point of identification for women, as well as how much satellite broadcasting had influenced their viewpoint on social and cultural life. The central concern of this study is the understanding of Rum women’s experiences at a holistic level. The major challenge of the study was to earn the trust of the members of the Rum community. While they were assured that their identities would be kept confidential, they remained wary towards the researchers. A large research literature examines the ways in which researchers can plan a qualitative research project, conduct in-depth interviews and fieldwork, and analyse qualitative data (Mishler 1986; Burawoy 1991; Corbin and Strauss 1990; Booth, Colomb and Williams 1995; Lofland and Lofland 1995; Wolcott 1995), when the interviewee or the topic is emotionally sensitive (Corsino 1987; Campbell 2002). However, in this research, the bridge of trust had to be built between the interviewers and interviewees because of their different cultural and historical background. The Rum community in general is reluctant to interact both with the Greek and Turkish population and, for that matter, to participate in any research conducted by a Turkish and a Greek scholar. The researchers needed to consider how their own identity may have an impact on the respondents and how they might seek to probe beyond ethnic, religious and historical positions based on mistrust of the other side. Gaining trust of the community was not an easy one. Both of the researchers regularly attended masses. The Turkish researcher took Greek lessons to have a sense of the intricacies of the language, while the Greek researcher spent a considerable amount of time with the Rum women in social circles. However, the researchers benefited from community leaders’ connections and recommendations to reach the community.

The series of thirty-two semi-structured interviews discussed in this study were undertaken over a period of six months with the Rum women residing in Beyoğlu, the Princes Islands, Feriköy, Bosphorus and Kurtuluş. The women were from various age groups and the interviews lasted from thirty-five to forty-five minutes. All the interviews were conducted in Greek and translated into English. All were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. In the pre-interview process of the Rum community, the researchers acknowledged the possibility that there might have been a degree of scepticism on the part of the interviewees, wondering ‘why us?’ (Bogdan and Biklen 2003), and the possibility of resisting any scrutiny ‘by anyone not belonging to their own group’ (Whitty and Edwards 1994). According to Adler and
Adler (2001), once respondents perceive themselves as marginalized, sensitively placed or vulnerably positioned, they are reluctant to share any information. In this framework, the Rum women, as a part of the whole Rum community, show reluctance to share their experiences, feelings and opinions with anyone not belonging to their community. Ironically, the researchers (one Greek and one Turkish) could not escape from being a part of the perception of ‘us vs. them’. Although each researcher had to experience her own difficulties in contacting the community, the different identities of the researchers also enriched the scope and vision of the research. In other words, their personal feeling of being ‘in-between’ left a mark on the research itself.

For this study, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) has been used. IPA is concerned with trying to understand lived experience and with how participants themselves make sense of their identities and social world. IPA is phenomenological in that it wishes to explore an individual’s personal perception or account of a state as opposed to attempting to produce an objective record of the state itself (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009). In other words, IPA is concerned with trying to understand what it is like from the point of view of the respondents. The Rum female community is a fairly homogenous sample that can be studied with the use of IPA.

Rum women’s perception of their identity through satellite viewing

Locating the self within a nation

The study’s starting point was that identity is ‘a reality in motion’, ‘a bundle of territorial and mental adherences’, which are conjugated ‘according to diverse alchemies, the local, the regional, the national, the international’ (Mattelart 1996, pp. 12–7).

The Rum identity is profoundly constructed within a social context where the influence of historical heritage, community structures, the strength of the religious centre of the Patriarchate and family structures play a significant role in their combination. Community identity researchers (Cohen 1985; Wilkinson 1986; Moodie 2000; Dominy 2001; Sampson and Goodrich 2005) have tended to focus on how places are repositories of both personal and shared (symbolic) meanings that serve to distinguish communities from other groups of people. One of the major identity markers of the Rum Polites is their religious affiliations and their dedication to the Patriarchate. The other major pillar of their identity is the Greek language. Rum Polites protect and cherish their language as a tool for resistance against the dominance of the Turkish language in the city.

For the women in this study, the selection of a certain genre of programmes, such as documentaries, daytime shows or news
programmes, was an important rite of signification in locating their identities within Turkish society. To be truly ‘Rum Polites’, they were aware that they needed to know the Greek language. For example, eleven of the respondents indicated that ERT World programmes facilitated geographic mobility in that they could ‘visit’ remote parts of Greece. Understanding the language provided them with a sense of belonging to the culture in Greece yet imparted to them a sense of rootedness within Turkish society. Satellite broadcasting provided the Rum women with a window into seeing Greece beyond the national boundaries of Turkey. The Rum women’s relationship with ERT World satellite broadcasting does not represent an irreversible break from the Turkish mainstream TV channels, since the Rum female audiences are also heavy viewers of domestic popular serials or current affairs programmes. An Istanbul-born sixty-eight-year-old retired school teacher who lives in Kurtuluş (Kurtulus) said: ‘I have been watching ERT World for twenty years and the main reason is keeping my ties with the Greek language, culture and history and to feel that I belong both to Greece and to Constantinople.’ On the question of whether they identify themselves as Rums of Constantinople, all respondents reacted by strongly emphasizing that they cannot describe themselves as anything else but that.

**A community of heavy television consumers**

Almost all respondents in this research have spoken about their heavy television viewing (at least three hours a day). The ways in which this choice was discussed made it clear that television viewing plays a significant role in their lives and in the construction of their identities. The heavy viewing was not correlated with their educational background or socioeconomic status. From the college graduate secretary of the Patriarchate to the elementary school-educated housewives or the high-school dropout gym teacher, they all indicated that they watched literally everything on Turkish and satellite television except sports programmes. Yet, they preferred to watch news and discussion programmes on ERT World.

A wealthy sixty-three-year-old with a university degree who is an icon painter and who divides her life into two by spending half of the year in Greece and the other half in Istanbul (Şişli), is a heavy viewer. As she said, she keeps the television on all the time while working. She was almost offended when asked whether her feelings and ideas towards Greece or Turkey have been affected by watching Greek satellite television: ‘I have made up my mind already. I don’t need television to decide how I feel towards those two countries.’ However, she thinks that watching Greek satellite television has influenced the Rum women in Istanbul on many levels. According to her, the reason
for watching ERT World is to maintain her links with Greece. She feels that she belongs to Greece. She also watches ERT World to keep up with the latest developments in Greece and to be entertained. She also indicated that watching ERT World is ‘the natural thing to do for every Rum who lives in the Poli (Istanbul).’

A fifty-four-year-old high school graduate who is currently working in the tourism sector and lives in the centre of the city (Cihangir neighbourhood), watches both Greek and Turkish television, but she is not interested in the political developments in Greece. Her selection of genres of Greek television resembles those she chooses on Turkish television. She watches serials, game shows, travel shows, music programmes and documentaries. She travels to Greece five times a year.

Another participant is a seventy-five-year-old housewife with an elementary school education, living in the house in which she was born and where her parents and grandparents were born. She is currently the only Rum resident of the Balat area on the Golden Horn. She is a heavy television viewer with ten hours of viewing a day. She lives alone and looks after a local church. She feels incredibly proud of her Greek and Orthodox identity and says:

On my name day, the Patriarch himself paid a visit to my house. I have never been happier in my whole life. That gives me strength to live here until the end of my days where my parents and grandparents lived. I am totally alone. I watch television all the time. I watch Greek television mostly just because I don’t want to forget my Greek.

She stays in Turkey and does not travel to Greece. The higher the level of education, the more Rum women prefer to watch both Greek and Turkish television. Respondents also stated that they follow the political developments in both countries through television programmes.

A fifty-eight-year-old university graduate high school teacher living in Şişli, indicated that since she started watching ERT World twelve years ago, she has become more knowledgeable of what was happening in Greece and at the same time the level of her Greek has improved. However, she also watches most of the Turkish channels on a regular basis and she frequently visits Greece. Drawing from a book she wrote about her family history, she describes the feeling of alienation of the community:

[M]y biggest grief however is that while we, the Rums of the Polis, live in this place where we found ourselves for generations and generations, which undoubtedly is our land and the land where the
bones of our ancestors are buried and it is the land of our people and our families, some consider us foreigners and outsiders and are looking at us with evil eyes. We are the ones who sent our men to the Turkish Army to fight, we are the ones who never complained and never made any demands. We have always been exemplary, law-abiding, dignified citizens of this country, paid our taxes, never broke the law.

A perpetual love for the city of Istanbul

The city of Istanbul occupies a unique place in the heart of all Rum community members. According to them, it has cultural, historical and emotional value. They refer to it by its Byzantine name, Constantinople, or as ‘the Polis’ for short. It is ‘The’ city for them. They describe the lifestyle, tradition, habits and social behaviours of citizens and even the architectural structure of Istanbul with a profound feeling of nostalgia. One of the interviewees said:

In the old times the city was beautiful. The Greek we were speaking was the best in the world, even better than the Greek spoken in Greece. Even the Turks were speaking Greek then. But those were different Turks. We used to be friends with each other. Today everything changed. The city is now full of Kurds from Anatolia.

When asked whether ERT World helped them in knowing their city better, most of them pointed out that serialized novels such as Loxandra written by Maria Iordanidou, an Istanbulite Rum who lived in the early twentieth century describing life in the Polis in the late nineteenth century, helped them feel closer to the city. Apart from serials, documentaries and travel programmes about the city also enhance the sense of belonging. Besides Loxandra, another popular serialized novel in a similar setting, Hadji Emmanuel by T. Kastanakis, was widely watched among the Rum community.

The recent Greek–Turkish rapprochement began with the destructive successive earthquakes in both countries in 1999. This generated a big interest in knowing each other’s lifestyles through popular culture. A number of documentaries were produced as a result of this interest, such as The Suspended Step of Turkey in 2005. This was a production by the Reporting Without Frontiers team and was shown on ERT and ERT World, depicting the contemporary Rum community. Additionally, the programme Diaspora, produced by ERT3 based in Thessalonika, frequently covered stories associated with the Rum Polites community.
Orthodoxy holding the community together

The Rum women described their identities revolving around their religious routines and practices. All of them indicated how the Patriarchate played a significant role in their lives and existence within the Turkish society. They all pointed out that they performed their religious duties regularly and freely in Turkey. They rarely miss attending mass at the Orthodox church and follow the religious calendar. The church also provides them with a platform for social interaction. At the same time, they regularly watch mass on ERT World, especially those who are unable to attend physically. For instance, at the old people’s home at Balikli, ERT World on Sunday mornings is always on. In that way, television becomes an alternative choice for major religious events such as Easter and Christmas mass.

Discussion of the findings

In this study we have observed that the choices and interests of the Rum women tend to underline the affirmation of the ‘in-between-ness’ of their identity. They show special interest to subjects that have an immediate proximity (i.e. events between Greece and Turkey) or particular religious affairs associated with their own practice. They tune into ERT as the channel revives familiar forms of entertainment or representations of daily family life in Greece. Although they all said that they watch Greek news on ERT, they also indicated that they would like to see fewer political discussions that deal almost exclusively with domestic political issues in Greece. Instead they asked for more television serials, music programmes, concerts, theatre performances and comedies. They were particularly interested in historical and biographical programmes in order to ‘increase their knowledge of Greek history and to know the personalities involved’, as some of them said.

The findings revealed variations between different generations of Greek Orthodox women, also associated with differences in class and education. We have also observed that televised images of the city of Istanbul are received, appreciated and interpreted in ways that reinforce their sense of both rootedness and in-between-ness. Along the same lines, these women expressed significant interest in watching documentaries produced by ERT in the post-1990s that depicted their life as a minority in Turkey. The value attached to this kind of viewing in informing participants’ identities is captured in the anger caused by a documentary drawing a gloomy picture of a dying community of Rums.
Conclusion

As a conclusion, this research confirms the fluidity of the sense of belonging of a unique community and gives voice to the female members of the Rum community to define their identities through the experience of television watching. It also reaffirms the significance of satellite broadcasting for identity construction and maintaining of linguistic identities among diasporic communities. For the Rum community, their identity is torn between their linguistic and cultural affiliation to Greece and their total devotion to their beloved city that symbolizes the continuity between a historical past and a lived present. As Istanbul sustains a role as the ecumenical centre for Orthodox faith, their devotion to the city is grounded as much on urban, cultural, and religious elements of their identities. This research has also shown how demographic indicators, such as social and economic status, and educational level do not solely define their perception of their identity, especially as ERT World has opened up new ways for reflecting on their identity and its limits.

Notes

1. These are the findings of a research on the television viewing patterns in Turkey conducted by RTÜK on 10 March 2009; 2,570 participants in twenty-one cities took part in the research. See http://www.rtuk.gov.tr
2. See http://www.megarevma.net/tarihce.htm
4. The authors are indebted to the administration of ERT World for providing us with detailed information about Hellenic Satellite Broadcasting Services.
5. See http://www.ejc.net/media_landscape/article/greece

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