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The Hafız Ahmed Agha Vakfi Religion, Learning, and Ottoman Sociability*

Historians have long studied the institution of pious endowments (Turkish: *vakıf* Arabic: *waqf*), an impactful instrument of Islamic urban development. In the case of the Ottoman Empire, it is estimated that more than 35,000 endowments were established in the imperial capitol (Isin 2011, 222-223). More pious endowments by persons of means were registered locally in provincial *shari’a* courts and can offer small glimpses into everyday philanthropic practices. Together these grand and diminutive land and property bequests maintained and sustained urban life but, importantly, extended to develop rural and provincial communities throughout the Ottoman Empire. The Hafız Ahmed Agha Library *vakıf* in Rhodes, established in Istanbul on February 26, 1792, is an enduring example of the vast public works facilitated through private family endowments.

Recognizing that pious endowments varied across the Islamic World, the *vakıf*, in its most basic definition, is a registered piece of income-generating property donated to a religious foundation, a charitable cause, or to one’s heirs in perpetuity. Historian Pascale Ghazaleh has persuasively argued that pious endowments were essential to the economic, social, and religious life in the city and could benefit either individuals or collectivities within or across religious lines (Ghazaleh 2011). Such endowments did not only structure relations in the city but organized relations between city and countryside—agricultural land and waterworks were also endowed in perpetuity by donors. The institution of *vakıf* should, therefore, be understood as both an expression of piety and a form of social contract that, at times, transcended religious bounds.

The original deeds (*vakıfıyya*) preserved in former Ottoman lands provide the contours of these property contracts in the early modern period. Normatively, regardless of the social status of the donor, there were two principal kinds of *vakıf* institutions; the charitable endowment (Arabic: *waqf khayri*), whose proceeds were absorbed back into the social work conducted by foundation, and the family endowment (Arabic: *waqf ahli*) which worked as a family trust. In a family *vakıf*, instead subdividing property according to Islamic law, the property could be registered and the income generated from it could be directed in perpetuity to the heirs designated by the donor (Raymond, 17-18). Historian Randi Deguilhem has found in her study of Damascus that public and private endowments could be combined so that family and charitable foundation would share the income generated in what is called in Arabic a *waqf mushtarak* (Deguilhem 2006, 205). There was yet a third kind of foundation found primarily in Turkish-speaking Ottoman lands beginning in the fourteenth century called the cash endowment (*waqf al-nuqud*) that allowed individuals to borrow money at a designated interest (Zarinebaf 2006, 90, Mandaville 1979, 308).

Many scholars have shown how the institution had particular advantages for women who were able to protect their rights to property and designate how they wanted their property to be used after death (Deguilhem 2006, Zarinebaf 2006, Sonbol 2003, Fay 1997). Abraham Marcus has found in his study of eighteenth-century Aleppo that 36% of family *evkaf* were established by women donors (Marcus 1989, 304). Furthermore, Mary Ann Fay has shown for Mamluk Egypt, women’s property rights are enshrined in Islamic Law, but when it came to endowing those properties, women could

convert those properties into trusts without interference from male relatives. Alternatively, an endowment could completely excise female heirs from their half share of inheritance in Islamic law—men by law were granted a full share (Fay 1997).

In her examination of Ottoman imperial architecture in Aleppo, Heghnar Watenpaugh has observed two models of *vakıf* patronage: imperial architecture endowed by Ottoman elites based in Istanbul and those structures endowed by local nobility (Watenpaugh, 2004, 44). Imperial philanthropy was informed by a “decorum of patronage” embedded in both imperial and religious ethics. In the case of Muslim rulers, this involved the moral responsibility to give back the spoils of war as a gift to his subjects (Necipoğlu 2005). Yet, *evkaf* were not only the purview of imperial elites, but gifts to the community by people of means regardless of religious denomination (Watenpaugh 2004, 10). The gifting of properties and revenue reflected the notion that elites were obliged to provide for the least well off. They had great incentive to do so because blessings and prayers were heaped upon the patron for his or her good deeds (*khayrat*) in this life and the next. In the case for wealthy, charitable giving was embedded in the concept of *zakat*, the obligation of every Muslim to redistribute wealth by gifting a portion of their overall assets annually. Engin F. Isin has argued that *evkaf* served the public good, often employing scores of people and providing crucial services which should be understood as a social contract or even citizenship if we focus on citizenship as a social practice rather than political status bestowed by the state (Isin, 2011). As a result, the *vakıf* institution resulted in a remarkable network of social services for communities under Ottoman rule and, as Amy Singer has documented, aspects of this tradition, while diminished by the modern state, continue to resonate in various ways in the Islamic World (Singer 2008).

Imperial endowments resulted in monumental architecture that continues to define cityscapes of the Middle East, North Africa, and parts of the Mediterranean World. Larger *evkaf*, such as the imperial kind or those donated by wealthy Ottoman notables, can include a wide range of structures that housed, fed, and employed the community. Such deeds included mosques, schools, dervish lodges, public libraries, and guest houses (*khan/caravanserai*). Some of the larger, grander *evkaf* would occupy entire city blocks and include shops, workshops, kiosks, bathhouses, orchards, soup kitchens, hospitals and asylums for the poor and indigent (including poor scholars), cemeteries, and parks (Faroghi 2000, 131-132, Singer 2008). Many of these investments clearly overlap with both religious and public works as they serviced orphans, the poor, the indigent, and the sick. Infrastructure such as bridges, waterways, canals and reservoirs in both city and countryside were yet another aspect of pious endowments that provided vital urban and rural infrastructure (Mikhail 2011, 44-45). In the early modern period, half of Aleppo’s *vakıf* endowments contributed to providing residents with access to water in the scorching summer with many fountain inscriptions heaping blessings on the donors (Marcus, 305).

Vakıf properties were either registered in the Imperial Porte in Constantinople or locally with judges (*qadi*) in the *shari’a* courts. One impressive Aleppo endowment preserved in the Ottoman capitol was the Bahram Pasha *Vakıf* (1583), was an impressive imperial endowment bestowed upon Aleppo in the name of a grand vizier of the Ottoman Empire, Sokollu Mehmed Pasha, assassinated by his political enemies in 1579 (Behram Paşa Vakıf Ev.Vkf 11 991 Z 29, 1583). Extensively documented by both Jean-Claude David and Heghnar Watenpaugh, the portion of the endowment dedicated to the central market included a fountain for passersby and a large Ottoman style mosque with a prominent dome supported by a unique five-sided apse (David 1982, Watenpaugh 2004). But

central Aleppo was not the endowment’s only location. The *vakıf* extended to another location in the emerging Christian quarter of Judayda to support non-Muslim residents of the city and support an emerging secondary market in the city with the Bahram Pasha bathhouse (*hammam*). Impressively, portions of the Bahram Pasha *vakıf* supported facilities far beyond Aleppo, including regional cities of Antioch, Aintab, and Diyarbakir, but extended as far as Ottoman Palestine and the Hijaz, Mecca and Medina, mapping the boundaries of the empire in West Asia (Sauvaget, 1941, 263-265).

The official *vakıf* register designated how endowment revenue, which was not subjected to taxation, was to be distributed. The patron could name any party, individuals, descendants, or institutions. The dynamic institution of endowments was not only used by Muslim donors, but non-Muslims, merchants, and any persons of means. These more modest endowments could include homes earmarked for the poor and valuable or useful objects donated places of worship. For example, wealthy Christian men and women endowed homes for poverty relief in the city specifying the poor within their own community as the recipients. However, this form of charity was not that common because larger endowments such as fountains and religious spaces offered far more prestige to donors. There is also evidence that Christian community endowments often channeled revenue back into the community to defray the cost of the poll tax for the poorest members (Marcus, 216).



Hafız Ahmed Agha Library
with Bianca in front
Photo: T. Tuten.

Historian Yaron Ayalon has similarly found that Aleppo’s Jewish community frequently used the *vakıf* system to offer public and private forms of charity. Such giving offered prestige to wealthy families and could work to preserve inherited properties within the community and guard against debt collection (Ayalon, 2014, 79-81).

The Hafız Ahmed Agha Library fits the charitable traditions of *vakfiyya* found in Ottoman lands. As a complex, its main function is educational centering on a library. In the same courtyard, a two-story stone building served as a classroom and a second stone building provided housing for the librarian (*hafız-ı kütüb*). The main building contained a reading room and an adjoining library. The original endowment lists 828 texts that bear the founder’s original seal. Overtime, his descendants expanded the collection to include 459 manuscripts. The manuscripts were categorized into 20 different branches

of knowledge including Islamic science, history, medicine, literature and astronomy. The founder of this *vakıf*, Hafız Ahmed Agha, clearly focused his pious giving on producing a repository of knowledge that could be accessed by literate elites who were predominately clerics, who could, from there disseminate the knowledge to school children and the general population through their preaching.

As with other waqfs, the Hafız Ahmed Agha was a multiuse space for charitable activities inextricably linked to religious holidays and obligatory charitable giving that included fooddistribution. These activities included clothing distribution and hot meals during the month of Ramadan. The caretakers of the *vakıf* have continued this tradition to the present and extended it to Orthodox Christian neighbors even in the wake of the Greek financial crisis (2007-2008). Even the library has served multiple fuctions. The reading room and adjacent courtyard is a space for scholarship and a space of sociability where the community socializes and creates friendships.

Imperial and local endowments can provide illuminating insights into urban planning in the Ottoman Empire. An array of donors from different gender and religious backgrounds co-constituted spatial relations in the early modern Ottoman cities. Often forgotten is how this system of endowments also shaped the countryside as farm land and water works were developed through the charitable endowment system entangling city and with countryside. The *vakıf*, therefore, is arguably a space where religion and urbanity meet and the Hafız Ahmed Agha is a remarkable example.

Endnotes

¹The original copy of the endowment can be found at Vakfiye-i Rodosî Ahmed Ağa, 743/37/11, Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü Arşivi (VGMA) (Archive of the General Directorate of Foundations), Ankara, February 26, 1792 (1206H). The following year, the library was inaugurated by a *zeyl vakfiye* (amendment) located at 743/79/26, VGMA, November 18, 1793.

²A few sample early modern Christian awqaf for the poor were registered in the shari’a court in Aleppo and include: (Armenian) SMH 45: 201:495 and SMH 55:136:432 and (Assyrian) SMH 45:201:495.

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