

RE-IMAGINING THE SELF

Religious Conversion in Turkey

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The conversion to Islam of some of the native Greek communities of Trebizond in Pontos, a region on the eastern Black Sea shores of the Ottoman Empire, resulted in their gradual incorporation into the new Turkish Republic in the post-1923 period. Despite centuries of conversion and assimilation, members of these converted groups maintain a sense of distinctiveness from other citizens of contemporary Turkey, expressed in their language, social habits and music.

Three years ago *Ayşe*, a native of Trabzon (Trebizond), now the capital city of the east Black Sea district of Turkey, decided to convert to Orthodox Christianity. She considers her conversion a “return to Greek orthodox roots” and a deliberate decision that was the result of years of questioning and search for hers and her family’s “true” identity and history. Oral narratives from older relatives, her own memories of her grandmother, and the family jokes about their supposedly “Greek roots” mobilized her curiosity and triggered her desire and imagination. What does it mean to convert and to “change identity?” What does this boundary crossing tell us about the human experience of belonging?

In this lecture, drawing on data collected during my fieldwork in Turkey between 2009-2010, I describe *Ayşe*’s attempts to reconstruct memories, collect stories, and to imagine a different past and an alternative future for herself. The presentation, combined with the suggested reading materials, will facilitate a discussion on religious conversion and identity from an anthropological perspective. It will also highlight the crucial role of human imagination in the re-making of the self.