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JOS DE MUL

Turkish Delight

The lesson to be learnt from Commagene

Of all the times I met with Jale Erzen over the last couple of decades, our meeting in May 2002 was perhaps the most memorable. Jale had invited me to take part in the 6th International Symposium of SANART about "Art and Social Engagement", held at the Middle East Technical University (METU). The Symposium took place shortly after 9/11, a time when many heated discussions were held in Turkey, just as in other countries, about the political Islam, the role of religion in society, and the separation of religion and state, and in Ankara the tension was running high between the Kemalists and the politicians inspired by the Islam.

Following the conference, I went on a short trip with Jale and about ten other philosophers, from five different continents, to the east of Turkey, which was planned by her. We flew to Diyarbakır and then travelled on by bus and later by jeep through the south east part of the country, mainly inhabited by people of Kurdish origin. It was a memorable trip because of several reasons. In the first place because of the awe-inspiring endless bleak mountains around us, in which the only humans living there seem to be goatherds herding their flocks in search of the last remnants of vegetation. It was difficult to imagine a bigger contrast with the polders in Zeeland where I grew up. The impression of the vast and rugged landscape made on me was intensified by the realisation that we were surrounded by thousands of years of history. This vast region situated "between the rivers", Euphrates and Tigris, used to be called Mesopotamia in ancient times and was full of fig, olive, walnut and pomegranate trees, vines and oleander bushes. According to tradition here was once the Biblical Garden of Eden.

Every fifty kilometres or so our illusion of travelling through the past was broken by the road blocks where modern armed Turkish soldiers checked the identity

papers of each and every passer-by. The American fighter planes, taking off from Diyarbakır to protect the Kurdish population in Iraq north of the 36th latitude degree against the troops of Saddam Hussain, also reminded us regularly of the actual political reality. Six months after 9/11, the "clash of cultures" and the threat of the political Islam were hot topics of hefty discussions. It is perhaps not surprising that Jale, who is part of the distinctly large number of female professors at METU (in comparison to the Netherlands), was outspoken about these matters. Since the declaration of the republic in 1923, Turkey has had a strict form of secularism (*laiklik*), whereby religion is radically banned from politics and the public domain, inspired by the French idea of *laïcité*. The fanatic secularism and modernism of Kemalists (followers of the founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk), is extremely controversial in this predominantly Islamic country. *Laiklik*, however, had its staunch supporters, a rather uncomfortable coalition of the extremely westernised political, economic, intellectual and cultural establishment and (not in the least) the army, who did not shy away from using violence to defend the secular state against Islamic fundamentalism. An example of this took place in 1980, when the army organised a coup to ensure that the Kemalistic legacy remained intact, while the country was in economic and political turmoil caused by the oil crisis and by the shift of power to the *ayatollahs* in neighbouring Iran. And back in 1997, the army managed to convince the Constitutional court, using the necessary intimidations, to depose Necmettin Erbakan, who had won the national elections in 1995 leading the Islamic-inspired Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*), and to ban his party. Also during my visit in 2002, I was aware of the persistent threat of violence. Even on the beautiful campus of METU, where you would find groups of students lounging on the grass, chatting and chilling in the warm spring sunshine, a group of soldiers stood on guard on nearly every corner, carrying stenguns in order to defend this bastion of secularism against terrorist attacks. And to encourage those female students who were audacious enough to enter the campus wearing a headscarf to continue on their way bareheaded. At the same time they managed to intimidate in this way (not always successfully) the left-wing students in order to prevent their criticism of the prominent role of the military in society from ending in public protests.

I thought it was all rather confusing. I support the secular state and as a western intellectual, I felt closely associated with the modern, emancipated way of life Jale and her colleagues and students have. I could see how indignant they felt when they indicated how many new mosques were being built with Saudi-Arabian capital, centres from which poor people, who are worst off due to the economic crisis, are being enticed (by being offered financial support) to follow a strict, Islamic way of life, which, for women, includes wearing a headscarf. And I could also imagine something of the fear female students must feel when, while they spend most of their time on the campus, they have to change their western clothing when they want to visit the more traditional neighbourhoods of Ankara. At the same time the continual military threat put me at unease. Does anyone have the right to enforce secularism and female emancipation using violence? Are you allowed to "liberate" people using force?

During the farewell party held in Jale's garden, situated in one of the neighbourhoods of Ankara on higher ground, we admired the amazing view of the city and enjoyed the Turkish delicacies on offer. On that fifth of May 2002 we seemed pretty far away from the world, until my French colleague, Cathy Maurey, asked our host for the television to be switched on to watch the results of the second round of French presidential elections. Everyone there felt relieved, albeit with mixed feelings, to hear that Chirac had beaten Le Pen convincingly with 82 per cent of the votes. Cathy called me fortunate that I was able to return to the tolerant paradise that is called The Netherlands the next day.

The next evening, when I landed at Schiphol, the whole country was in turmoil. The populist politician Pim Fortuyn was murdered that afternoon in the Mediapark in Hilversum. The following days there was political chaos in The Netherlands. Many people wondered in hindsight what would have happened if the killer had been a muslim. Two years on that "what if"-question was overtaken by reality. The murder of Theo van Gogh by the islamist Mohammed B. on 2 November 2004 made it appear that the "clash of cultures" had also become a reality in The Netherlands. Panic was rife in the Dutch polders.

Nemrut Dağı

The absolute highlight of the trip to South-East was a visit to the mountain Nemrut Dağı (in Kurdish: *Çiyayê Nemrûd*). The mountain is situated in the region of the town of Karadut in the province Adiyaman, at the upper course of the rivers Euphrates and Tigris. Although it is a modest mountain, measuring 2206 metres high, it is the highest point of the surrounding Taurus mountain range. Between 80 BC and 72 AD this was a territory belonging to the Kingdom of Commagene. The mountain Nemrut, which has a man-made, conical tumulus on its summit and which can be seen from miles afar, was the religious centre of the kingdom. The christians, who later populated this area, assumed that the tumulus must have been built by the legendary king Nimrod from the Old Testament, which is why they gave his name to the mountain, by which name the mountain is still known today. During many centuries nothing but the howling wind used to disturb the peace of the three kings of the Commagene dynasty who are buried there. In 1881, the sanctuary was rediscovered by the German Karl Sester. Not long after this discovery, the Turkish archaeologist Hamdi Bey started excavations on the site, which have been carried on by Turkish, German, American and Dutch archaeologists right up to this day. In 1987 the Nemrut mountain was declared a world heritage site by UNESCO. In 1989 and 1990 geophysical research was carried out which indicated the presence of three tombs buried deep inside the mountain. Archaeologists believe that the tombs, of which the entrance still has not been found, will prove to be as important as the tomb of the Egyptian pharaoh Tutankhamun.

The mountain is only accessible in summertime; the other parts of the year it is covered in snow and ice. Over many kilometres a rocky, worn-out track leads to the old sanctuary at the top. It consists of three enormous terraces situated on the east, west and northern side of the mountain, of which an

estimated 200,000 cubic metres has been cut away by hand. The stones were then used for the construction of the tumulus. This tumulus is more than 50 metres high and has a diameter of 150 metres. Apart from these impressive terraces and tumulus, evidence of huge statues, originally 10 metres high and reliefs with inscriptions of more than 500 metres in length, was found on the East and West terrace. Over the centuries nearly all of the statues fell to ruin and became severely weather-beaten. Of some statues only the head is left over. The best time to climb Nemrut is at sunrise. Anyone who has managed to reach the summit after a tiring climb in the night and, standing there in the freezing cold, watch the sun rise and the glorious landscape of Mesopotamia slowly unfold before his eyes, will experience an awe-inspiring moment, something which cannot be described, even by a staunch atheist, in any other than religious terms. For the first time during our trip, we all fell silent for a long time.

Back in Time

Commagene, a kingdom of no more than 100 kilometres in diameter, first appeared in the annals of written history around 850 BC. In those days it was a satellite state belonging to the Assyrians. According to their writings, the people had to pay a yearly tribute consisting of huge quantities of gold, silver and cedar wood. In the following centuries Commagene, a small state, but flourishing and strategically well-positioned, was ruled and exploited successively by the Babylonians and Persians, before finally being conquered by the Greeks led by Alexander the Great. Around 300 BC one of his heirs, Seleucus I Nicator founded the Seleucid dynasty, after which, at around 130 BC, Commagene becomes an independent kingdom for the first time. Due to its turbulent history, Commagene was considered a multicultural community, a melting-pot of cultures from the east and the west. The kingdom was threatened not only by an instability from within, as a result of the various cultures present, but also by the powerful surrounding empires, who kept their eager eyes on the tiny kingdom.

King Mithradates, whose Persian lineage hails back to the legendary Persian ruler Darius, tried to unify his people in several ways, including instituting games, held in honour of their ancestors and modelled on the Olympic Games of the Greeks. As the king excelled in various sports, he gained many victories himself and was given the honorary title of *Kalinikos* (he who wins in Beauty). Mithradates also made a brilliant move in the field of religion. He made a covenant with all the gods that were revered by the various peoples by building small sanctuaries (*temene*) everywhere in the region, on prominent locations, in such a way that they all had a view of the most important sanctuary on mount Nemrut. Each *temenos* consisted of five plates (*stelai*), vertically positioned, on which King Mithradates was shown shaking hands with one of the most important demi-gods, who had a Greek as well as a Persian name Apollo/Mithras, Heracles/Artagnes, Zeus/Oromasdes, Hera/Teleia, Hermes/Helios). Every fourteenth of July (the day on which Mithradates was crowned) the "Manifestation of the Great Gods" was celebrated, during which the king received representatives of the various gods and the joint covenant with the gods was honoured in solemn celebration.

Mithradates also put his Hellenistic multiculturalism into practice on a personal level by marrying the Seleucid princess Isias Philostorgos, descendant of Alexander the Great. His son and heir, Antiochus I, further expanded the cult that was founded by his father. He invited artists and scientists from the east and the west to come and work on the sanctuary on Mount Nemrut, which reached its completion under his leadership. The architecture of the sanctuary and the ten gigantic statues (on both East and West terraces the five leading gods were placed in a row) were examples of how the Persian and Greek orders were combined in harmonious tension. This period embodied the great heyday of Commagene. Its capital city, Samosata, became one of the most important trade centres in antiquity, as this was the place where Commagenians, Parthians, Romans, Greeks and Arabs used to meet each other and exchange precious goods (including exotic herbs and animals from India and silk from China).

The Commagenians also had control over the passes on the Taurus mountains as well as the wading places of Euphrates, which not only allowed them to collect high tax revenues (from toll payments), but also gave the kingdom huge political, military and strategic importance. Both the mighty Parthians and the Romans, who had managed to gain foothold in Western Turkey in the first century BC and had started to conquer the kingdoms of Asia Minor one by one, prepared themselves to take over the kingdom of Commagene. Around 70 BC, the Romans marched on to the city of Samosata, having already subdued the surrounding kingdoms of Pontus and Armenia. The unimaginable happened: the Roman war machine was thwarted by the tough Commagenians. The Romans were bombarded by a mysterious substance, which caused them and their weapons to go up in flames. They panicked and retreated. A couple of decades later, the Romans led by Marc Antony managed to defeat the Parthian army, after which Antiochus I played host to the surviving members of the royal family. While Marc Antony amused himself with his beloved Cleopatra at his royal palace in Tarsus, he ordered his legions to conquer the tiny kingdom of Commagene once and for all. However, when the expedition failed again, Marc Antony decided to take control of the situation himself and called in the help of King Herod of Judea and his troops, so as to rule out any possibility of failure again. The chronicles are not clear on what happened next, but the result was that Herod and Marc Antony lost. It is not known whether it was a case of sheer generosity or diplomatic cunning, but Antiochus I sent 300 talents (which is equivalent to seven tons of silver) to Marc Antony, in order to soften somewhat the humiliating blow he suffered.

When Antiochus died, he was buried in a tomb deep in mount Nemrut, just as his father had been; things then took a turn for the worse for the tiny kingdom. Under the leadership of his son, Mithradates II, Commagene proved no longer a match for the armies of the Roman Empire and soon it was annexed as a satellite state of Rome and incorporated in the province of Syria. For a short period of time, Commagene regained its independence under the rule of Antiochus IV, but the kingdom was then finally beaten by the Romans, who, as a preventative measure against any future rebellion, destroyed all buildings and sanctuaries reminiscent of the grandeur of the kingdom. The huge sanctuary on mount Nemrut was also demolished, in so

far as this was actually possible, in view of its colossal size. This was the time in which Commagene fell into a long hibernation, only to be reawaken many centuries later.

An Interreligious Paradise

While crossing the Euphrates on a rickety boat, which was overloaded with dirty trucks stuffed with goats and melons, my mind wandered off, thinking about the many parallels between the multicultural and multi-religious Commagene and modern-day Netherlands. Was the huge success story of Commagene not due mainly to the intentional polytheistic policies of Antiochus I? This *polytics*, and even more so his Hellenistic *quatorze juillet*, allowed not just for many different cultures to feel at home in and identify themselves with Commagene, but will also without any doubt have contributed to its success as a trading nation. Commagene was a place with an open, cosmopolitan character, and one that welcomed newcomers.

Naturally, it required the city to have a righteous ruler. The Commagenians were fortunate to have a ruler like Antiochus I. Among the inscriptions found chiselled in the statues of deities on the Nemrut, they found the Holy Law (*nomos*) of Antiochus, which was shown to all the "Commagenians and strangers, kings, rulers, freeborn men and slaves, anyone who is part of humanity and differs from others only by birth or fate. The credo is as follows: "Of all the qualities a man may possess, righteousness is the best possession and brings him the most perfect happiness." And the text continues: "After having acquired the kingdom from my father, I announced on the basis of my righteous mind that the kingdom governed by my rule must remain the abode of the gods." The Holy Law continues to describe in minute detail the festivities and various offers and rituals that were required "for the honour of the gods and ourselves". The entire text exudes tolerance and hospitality, even including catering instructions for the guests. And Antiochus put considerable demands on future generations: "All future generations, who are, in the course of endless time, predestined by their special fate to possess this land, are ordered to obey this Law without reservation."

Je suis Antiochus

A few months after our trip to mount Nemrut, the recently founded Party for Justice and Development gained more than 34 per cent of the votes in the parliamentary elections and in 2011 it achieved a majority of nearly 50 per cent in parliament. Turkey has changed indisputably under conservative-Islamic premierships. During this time, the democratic system has been undermined by curbing press freedom and taking control of the judicial powers of the courts. And when the military coup that took place in July 2016, the system was thwarted and tens of thousands of arrests were made, the last bit of resistance in the army in the government and in education all now seems to have been broken.

Just as in 2002, I find the situation very confusing. The hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees and the attacks by ISIS and the Kurds have now caused Turkey to be in a permanent state of emergency. Naturally, as a democrat,

I condemn any military coup carried out against a democratically chosen leader, even when I do not agree with his political ideas. But what if the democratically chosen leader does not consider democracy as an aim, but only as a vehicle to "protect the people from democracy"? The 4000-year-old historic centres in the east lay in ruin. It is clear that freedom and other basic human rights in Turkey are under enormous pressure and the future is not looking bright. Let us hope that the spirit of Commagene will descend once more onto this plagued land. *Je suis Antiochus*.