

**Sultanic and Dark Rituals in the Ottoman Empire:
From Legitimacy of Rule to the Exploitation of the Body (1299–1924)**

الطقوس السلطانية والممارسات القسرية في الدولة العثمانية: من شرعية الحكم إلى استغلال الجسد

(١٢٩٩–١٩٢٤)

Abdelqadir Ibrahim Houti,

عبد القادر إبراهيم هوتي

History and Islamic Civilization

دكتوراه في التاريخ والحضارة الإسلامية

[معرف الباحث في اوركيد \(orcid\)](https://orcid.org/10.65074/zate0598)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.65074/zate0598>



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Abstract

Objectives: This study aims to examine the diverse sultanic, religious, social, military, and coercive rituals that shaped political authority in the Ottoman Empire from 1299 to 1924. It seeks to demonstrate how these rituals functioned as deliberate instruments of governance, legitimacy, and social control rather than as mere cultural traditions. **Methods:.** The study adopts a historical, comparative, and critical analytical approach, drawing on political, religious, and social interpretations of Ottoman ritual practices. Both ceremonial and coercive rituals are analyzed to understand their role within the broader system of imperial power and state formation. **Results:.** The findings reveal that religious and political rituals, such as the Friday *khutba* and palace observances of *Laylat al-Qadr*, projected the sultan as both sovereign ruler and spiritual guardian. Social and cultural rituals including circumcision festivals, naval parades, and Ramadan charity reinforced imperial authority through spectacle, public participation, and benevolence. Military rituals, such as Janissary parades and the veneration of the Sacred Banner, promoted cohesion and loyalty while also exposing tensions between obedience and rebellion. The study further uncovers the coercive dimensions of ritual life through practices such as fratricide, the imperial harem, the *Devşirme* system, and eunuch service, which transformed bodies into instruments of political stability. **Conclusions:** The study concludes that Ottoman rituals—both ceremonial and coercive—constituted an integrated system that sustained dynastic power, legitimized authority, and structured social order across six centuries. These practices reveal

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the deeply ritualized foundations of Ottoman governance and highlight the central role of embodied power in maintaining imperial rule.

Keywords: Ottoman Empire, Sultanic Rituals, Legitimacy. Devşirme, Eunuchs

المخلص

الأهداف: تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى فحص الطقوس السلطانية والدينية والاجتماعية والعسكرية والإكراهية المتنوعة التي أسهمت في تشكيل السلطة السياسية في الدولة العثمانية خلال الفترة الممتدة من عام ١٢٩٩ إلى عام ١٩٢٤. وتسعى إلى إظهار أن هذه الطقوس لم تكن مجرد ممارسات ثقافية أو تقاليد اجتماعية. بل أدوات مقصودة للحكم، وإضفاء الشرعية، وضبط المجتمع.

المنهجية: تعتمد الدراسة منهجاً تاريخياً مقارناً وتحليلياً نقدياً، يستند إلى مقاربات سياسية ودينية واجتماعية في تفسير الممارسات الطقسية العثمانية. ويجري تحليل كل من الطقوس الاحتفالية والطقوس الإكراهية لفهم دورها ضمن البنية الأوسع للسلطة الإمبراطورية وتكوين الدولة.

النتائج: تكشف النتائج أن الطقوس الدينية والسياسية، مثل خطبة الجمعة والاحتفالات السلطانية بلبلة القدر في القصر، أسهمت في تقديم السلطان بوصفه حاكماً دنيوياً وحارساً روحياً في آن واحد. كما عززت الطقوس الاجتماعية والثقافية، كاحتفالات الختان، والعروض البحرية، وموائد رمضان الخيرية، السلطة الإمبراطورية من خلال الاستعراض والمشاركة العامة وإظهار الرعاية. وأسهمت الطقوس العسكرية، مثل استعراضات الإنكشارية وتقديس الراية الشريفة، في ترسيخ التماسك والولاء، مع إبراز التوتر الدائم بين الطاعة والتمرد. وتكشف الدراسة كذلك الأبعاد الإكراهية للحياة الطقسية عبر ممارسات مثل قتل الإخوة، ونظام الحريم، والدوشيرمة، وخدمة الخصيان، حيث تحولت الأجساد إلى أدوات لضمان الاستقرار السياسي.

الاستنتاجات: تخلص الدراسة إلى أن الطقوس العثمانية، الاحتفالية منها والإكراهية، شكّلت منظومة متكاملة أسهمت في ترسيخ السلطة السلالية، وإضفاء الشرعية على الحكم، وتنظيم البنية الاجتماعية على الحكم، وتنظيم البنية الاجتماعية على مدى ستة قرون، كاشفةً عن الأسس الطقسية العميقة للحكم العثماني ودور السلطة المتجسدة في استدامته.

الكلمات المفتاحية: (الدولة العثمانية، الطقوس السلطانية، الشرعية السياسية، نظام الدوشيرمة، الخصيان)

Chapter 1: Theoretical and Methodological Framework

1. 1 Research Problem

Even though the political and military history of the Ottoman Empire has been extensively studied, symbolic instruments of legitimacy and control (the

harem, fratricide, child exploitation, and eunuchs) have never been explored in depth (Adiguzel and Kuran, 2024). The point is that these rituals may be introduced as either glorified propaganda or as single scandals, without trying to examine their role in history and within a time frame.

1.2 Significance of the Research

This study is valuable at various levels. The gap that it supersedes in terms of its academic significance is that it brings together a dimension of the political, social and ethical aspects of Ottoman rituals as opposed to considering them separately. On intellectual level, it provides the modern readers with a better insight that these rituals were not merely cultural practices or performance but rather a calculated tool of power and control to enhance the position of authority of the sultan. There is also a humanitarian and moral aspect to the study, in that, it helps to unveil the worst parts of the empire, such as slavery and castration, and puts them in the context of modern human rights theory. Lastly, analytically speaking, the study presents the potential to compare Ottoman rituals with those of other contemporary empires like the Mamluks, the Safavids, and the Europeans, and, in the process, further deepen the picture of how rituals served the legitimate purposes of all empires in the definition of the social order and imperial identity.

1.3 Research Objectives

1. To analyze sultanic and political rituals as tools for legitimizing rule.
2. To study social and cultural rituals and their role in class structure and state propaganda.
3. To uncover darker practices (harem, exploitation of boys, eunuchs) and analyze their motives and functions.
4. To trace the temporal development of these rituals from the 15th to the early 20th century.
5. To reinterpret these rituals in light of concepts of power and human rights.

1.4 Research Hypotheses

H1: Sultanic and political rituals functioned as deliberate instruments for legitimizing sovereign authority and reinforcing hierarchical power structures within the state.

H2: Social and cultural rituals played a central role in maintaining class stratification and served as mechanisms of ideological dissemination and state propaganda.

H3: Practices associated with royal harems, the exploitation of boys, and the use of eunuchs were institutionalized as mechanisms of control that supported political stability and elite dominance.

H4: The form, function, and symbolism of political and social rituals evolved significantly from the fifteenth to the early twentieth century in response to changing political, social, and imperial contexts.

H5: When reinterpreted through modern frameworks of power and human rights, many historical state rituals reveal systematic violations of personal autonomy and embodied forms of domination.

1.5 Research Methodology

This study employs a historical-analytical method to trace ritual evolution, a descriptive-critical method for analyzing Ottoman and Western sources, and a comparative method to contextualize Ottoman practices across empires.

1.6 Research Scope

This study spans 1299–1924, focusing on the sultanlic court in Istanbul and wider Ottoman territories, examining religious, political, social, and military rituals, alongside darker practices like fratricide, harems, child exploitation, and eunuchs.

1.7 Definition of Sultanlic Rituals

The Ottoman Empire rituals of sultan can be seen as a continuum of ceremonial and performative actions that strengthened the political, religious, and social ownership of the ruling dynasty (Baltacıoğlu-Brammer, 2019). On the one hand, these rituals were not traditions or cultural embellishments, but on the other hand, they were the key tools of the statecraft aimed at representing and enacting the power of the sultan (Gurbuzel, 2023). To provide an example, the religious rhetoric that was used by Sultan Murad IV to suppress a Janissary uprising shows how ritualized expressions of piety could become a politicized tool of putting down the dissent (Terndrup, 2021). The definition of the sultanlic rituals does not solely include formal court performances but also acts of religiosity, charity, and spectacle that evidenced that the sultan was a ruler of the world on one hand and a protector of the religion on the other (yalçinkaya, 2025). The prayers in the mosque, the reading of Quran and tours to holy places were not a personal worship but an observable and repeatable activity that was intended to create a sense of divine approval upon the sultan. In this respect, rituals produced what researchers have termed the mystique of royalty, i.e., the leader was endowed with semi-supernatural powers in the minds of his subjects (Allen,

2019). Such staged acts also enabled the sultan to be both viewed as a political ruler and the representative of God on earth and the difference between religion and the state became indistinct. Simultaneously, these rites were also not universal. The political leadership was not always taking the holy image of the sultan seriously and considered it as a created art instead of a religious fact (Casale, 2023). Still, the cautious organization of religious events and mass displays of devotion created a symbiotic connection between rulers and ruled: the religiosity of the sultan was seen as helpful in supporting the common good of the empire, whereas obedience of the subjects to his power strengthened the existence of the state.

1.8 Historical Context of the Ottoman Empire

The Ottoman Empire (1299-1924) was a polity which combined both the Turkic traditions of governance and Islamic principles of governance forming a unique ritual culture which developed throughout six centuries (Topal & Wigen, 2019). Since Anatolia and the Balkans emerged as the frontiers of the empire and Istanbul became the imperial capital, rituals were deemed as vital processes of power legitimization in the multiethnic and multireligious empire (Arslantaş, 2019). The very fact that the sultan was a caliph and a guardian of the sacred cities of Mecca and Medina offered him the symbolic center of the Muslim world, which narrowed once again the significance of ritualized religiosity in the domain of statecraft. The political and social order was organized with the help of rituals, which explains the historical importance of rituals (Guilmartin, 2022). The situation of oaths of allegiance and repetition of the Friday sermon (khutbah) in the name of sultan confirmed his dominion in various provinces. The circumcision of princes or the great naval parades of the Bosphorus turned the milestones of the dynasties into the popular displays of continuity and power (Krstić, 2021). The unity of the military forces under the sacred protection of the ruler was strengthened by the Janissary parades, the kissing of the Sacred Banner and other military ceremonies. These performances were not made randomly, but were properly written down to connect the power of the dynasties to the divine will (Altun, 2022).

The religiosity of the sultan was not only conveyed by splendid displays but also real attempts to support the population of the empire. Historical data singles out pilgrimage route protection, the construction of mosques and benevolent organizations, and food distribution during the period of Ramadan (Tozoglu, 2024). These actions helped to strengthen the perception of a virtuous sultan and patron, and guarantee the allegiance of the representatives of various social classes. The oral propaganda, which was achieved by mystical orders, sermons, and subsequently the official gazettes, made sure

that those, who were not even close to the court, were not left in the dark regarding the holy image of the sultan. Nonetheless, there were tensions, too, because of the diverse structure of the empire (Hilsdale, 2020). The sultans attempted to balance the demands of the orthodox Muslim religion and the sensibilities of the non-Muslim people and would frequently visit churches and synagogues or allow them to be refurbished to convey a sense of inclusive custodianship. However, organizations representing heterodox Islamic opinions came to threaten the legitimacy of the rituals of the dynasty, and it is important to remember that the power of rituals did not belong to a vacuum (Brack, 2021). A major drawback of sultanlic religiosity was that the sultans were always absent in the Hajj pilgrimage. Although the exemptions were explained by the political obligations and individual decisions, this omission shows the sophisticated interaction between the symbolic performance and the practical practice. Ritual legitimacy was created as a result of selective displays of religiosity and was tailored to the political and social requirements of the empire (Demir, 2023).

Chapter 2: Religious and Political Rituals (15th–18th Centuries)

2.1 The Oath of Allegiance and Friday Sermons

The Friday sermon (khutba) was one of the most lasting rituals of legitimacy in the Ottoman Empire. In the Islamic tradition, the khutba was a religious duty and a political statement, especially the name of the ruler was mentioned (Ongur, 2020). To the Ottomans, it was a weekly statement of the sovereign of the sultan, their symbolic oath of loyalty. The khutba also consolidated the position of the sultan as both political master and protector of Islam by mentioning him in mosques all around the empire (Saçmali, 2021). It was more than a ritual chant: it made the mosque more of a political platform, with the sacramentality of Friday prayer mixed up with the persistence of dynastic rule. The value of this ritual was that it was able to reach large numbers of people at the same time. To ordinary people, it acted as a visual representation of the sense of obedience to the sultan, connecting his power with the divine order (Muzaffar, 2022). To provincial elites, the khutba was a reminder of the imperial control as well as a chance to show their obedience to the central authority. To the sultan himself, it was a necessary tool of political communication across geographical distance. This weekly ritual in a multi-ethnic empire as large as the Ottomans formed a sense of unity and obedience that would not have been possible to acquire solely with the help of military and bureaucratic actions (Ismail et al., 2024)..

However khutba was not necessarily the direct expression of the will of the sultan. Its performance was usually influenced by local dynamics. The sermon

might be slightly tailored to dominant local grievances or interests by provincial governors, influential imams, or urban notables (Marwat & Latif, 2022). In other instances particularly when there was political crisis, the failure or change of the name of sultan in khutba was an indicator of rebellion or opposition. Therefore, the central power tried to introduce uniformity but the khutba was a negotiated practice that demonstrated the relationship between the ideas of the empire and the localities. This two-sidedness highlights the intricacy of Ottoman political life: the legitimacy was imposed on the centre and mediated by local actors who added the ritual its social appeal (Sultan, 2022). The khutba thus illustrates how the politics were introduced into the religious practices in the Ottoman world. What was more powerful about it was not just its symbolism, but its repetition as well. The sovereignty of the sultan was reaffirmed time and again every week, every year and loyalty became an experience that was lived and embodied. The khutba ritual was therefore a devotional practice and lawful practice simultaneously as it was a reminder to all there that they could not disobey God as it would lead to disobedience to His designated ruler (Shaikh & Seedat, 2022).

2.2 Laylat al-Qadr in the Palace

Although the khutba had to legitimize the sultan into the rest of the social fabric of the empire, ceremonies such as Laylat al-Qadr at the palace areas assured his power among the core of the Ottoman court (Chowdhary, 2024). The Laylat al-Qadr or the Night of Power in Ramadan is celebrated as the night on which the first verses of the Quran were revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. To the Ottomans, this holy eve in the palace was turning into one of the most significant political and religious celebrations. The palace festivities were to run the image of the sultan as not just a territory conqueror, but also a defender of Islam (Ahmed, 2019). The sultan led prayers and religious recitations during this night and by doing so he became the embodiment of a rightful ruler whose leadership was ordained by God. The fact that the high-ranking officials, scholars and courtiers attended these ceremonies also served to strengthen the relationship between the dynasty and Sunni orthodoxy. By doing this, Laylat al-Qadr at the palace became a visible reminder that the Ottoman sovereignty did not lie just in political power, but in spiritual governance too (Balci & Kardaş, 2023).

This celebration also had a ritual meaning which spread outward. The reports of the ceremonies in the palace spread around in the chronicles and the court records, which is why even ordinary people who were not a part of the court knew about the role of the sultan as a religious leader (Kalinowska & Spangler, 2021). This is reminiscent of the wider Ottoman approach of ritual

as a resource of communication where practiced performances communicated a message of power to a number of audiences. In the same way the khutba might be influenced by local realities, Laylat al-Qadr was influenced by imperial politics (DeLong-Bas, 2022). The sultans were sending a message on how they were going to protect Islam against internal heterodoxy as well as external threats by focusing on the Sunni orthodoxy during the palace celebrations. These rites therefore bore a certain political connotation; the Ottoman dynasty was not ruling by its power only, but by its approval by God, which was enhanced by some visible manifestations of piety.

2.3 Religious and Political Legitimacy

The religious-political interactions in the Ottoman Empire prove that the rituals were not ornamental, but they were strategic tools of governance (Çevik, 2024). The Friday khutba as well as the ceremonies in the palaces such as the Laylat al-Qadr was also a demonstration of how symbolic acts maintained the political power. The dynasty has instilled its power in the religious life of the empire by making sure that the name of the sultan was recited in all the mosques of the empire and also by attending holy nights in the palace. The main significance of such rituals lies in the fact that they also served as both universal and specific (Stephanov, 2022). This khutba, repeated every week, formed a beat of devotion that ran not only down to Istanbul but also to the furthest provinces, and the rituals of the palaces exhibited dynastic piety in the very heart of the empire. The two of them created a web of legitimacy, which united the ruler and the ruled in a common moral universe.

Simultaneously, the rituals never remained the same. They were negotiated, adapted and even disputed all the time (Thomas, 2021). When the local realities contradicted the imperial decrees, the khutba might turn into a venue of resistance. The ceremonies held in the palace might change depending on the political requirements of the dynasty. It is a more general fact about Ottoman rule: legitimacy was never once established but was constantly being re-performed through ritual (Felek & İşkorkutan, 2019). In a larger sense, a tendency toward the Ottoman dependence on religious and political rituals is a standard characteristic of the early modern empires. Rulers in Safavid Iran or Habsburg Europe employed the social rituals to demonstrate power and holiness. However, the Ottoman experience is unique in the extent to which practices of the Islamic rituals sermons, Quranic recitations were incorporated into the machinery of government (Krstić, 2025). The political and the sacred were closely mixed together, to the extent that devotion to the sultan was explained as a religious obligation.

Chapter 3: Social and Cultural Rituals (16th–19th Centuries)

3.1 Circumcision Ceremonies of Princes

The circumcision of imperial princes was one of the most important social and cultural ceremonies of the Ottoman Empire, and it was organized in the form of massive state festivals that were full of symbolism as a dynastic and religious and political one (Demirbaş, 2024). These festivals were not only family achievements, but also occasions of imperial theatre when the Ottoman dynasty was able to show off its prosperity, authority, and authenticity. One of the most researched festivals is the 1582 festival dedicated to Şehzade Mehmed that was held in Istanbul under Sultan Murad III and lasted fifty-two days and nights, which engaged vast masses of people in the city (Torun & Turna, 2024). Other comparable grand circumcision events took place in 1675 and 1720 which strengthened the continuation of the dynastic rule and adjusted the ritual provisions to the shifting social and political situations. These rituals were usually initiated by parades around the city, during which the guilds and craftsmen were shown in their costumes, showing their skills, their products, and their allegiance to the dynasty (Houston, 2020). The existence of guilds emphasized the assimilation of the household of the sultan with the city residents and showed that the political authority was not based solely on military forces but also on the unity of society. The festivals also were quite theatrical: there were mock battles and allegorical performances, adorned floats and so on in the streets (Felek, 2019). The city became a stage where the imperial grandeur was performed and the whole population was involved in the play of the Ottoman power. The religious practice of circumcision, of the princes, was, however, the centre of the ceremony, which was a sign of their initiation into the Islamic society. This ritual of physical conversion was imbued with the connotations of dynasty: the future of the Ottoman family was guaranteed by the ritualist inclusion of its representatives into the Islam religion (Alimen & Askegaard, 2020). Therefore, the circumcision rituals brought personal, religious, and political levels together in a single performance. These rituals had symbolism outside of Istanbul. The festivals were captured by the chroniclers, poets, and European eyewitnesses, and this way the message of dynastic continuity and imperial power was spread around (Hathaway, 2019). By organizing such enormous occasions and demonstrating them to the world, the Ottomans portrayed the image of stability, prosperity, and divine blessings, without which the maintenance of loyalty among the people and respect among the competitors was impossible.

3.2 Naval Parades on the Bosphorus

The Ottoman domination of the main strategic waterway, naval exercises in the Bosphorus demonstrated the power of the Ottoman Empire and its control of the waters (Ory, 2020). The sultan and the court rode in the adorned barges with warships and ritual boats and made a spectacle before great crowds. It was depicted in the parades through military strength and imperial war defense (Balci & Kardaş, 2023). Along the political lines, they affirmed the role of the sultan as the safeguard of commerce and the wealth of Istanbul (Odabasi Tasci, 2024). Music, fireworks, and feasting socially turned the event into a national celebration and combined entertainment with political symbolism, demonstrating the Ottoman rule as grandiose and approved by the divinity (Marghelis, 2021).

3.3 Ramadan Feasts for the Poor

One of the most important Ottoman social and cultural rituals that underlined the position of the sultan as the provider and protector of social justice were Ramadan feasts of the poor (Hasan, 2024). As one of the fundamental Islamic virtues, generous feasts held in the sacred month put on show the religiousness of the ruler and his interest in the poor. These banquets were organized in the mosques, in the court of the palaces, and in the open areas, and offered vast numbers on state subsidies (Alterkait, 2022). The ritual was a combination of religious duty and political act, which depicted the sultan as a father who was meant to take care of the people. The magnitude of hospitality was observed by European spectators, whereas charity became a governmental system in the works of the chroniclers (Joassin, 2020). Finally, Ramadan feasts were considered ritualized forms of social safety nets that helped to build loyalty and display peace between rulers and the subjects (Adiguzel & Kuran, 2024).

Chapter 4: Military Rituals (15th–19th Centuries)

4.1 Janissary Parades

One of the most remarkable military rites of the Ottoman Empire was the Janissary parades, which symbolized the trained force of the sultan elite household soldiers but played a political role (Özdil, 2024). Janissaries were more than soldiers; in the public space, particularly Istanbul, where their marches were highly choreographed, they cast an image of the state integrity (Kirca, 2010). The parades were accompanied by the mehndi band, and with martial discipline, they were enforced with a highly symbolic force strengthening the ideals of conquest and unity. They were performed on major religious and political events, such as accessions, departure of campaigns and

popular holidays, to underline the notion of stability and continuity of the dynasty (Kontani, 2021).

However, by the eighteenth century, these rituals had an ambivalent nature to them. Processions were more frequently used by Janissaries to express grievances and to express a sense of collective power and turn marches into performances of negotiation and protest (Masson, 2019). Mobilization in major urban areas was ritualized and did not distinguish between loyalty and rebellion (Karakaya, 2020). Therefore, Janissary parades depicted obedience and power resistance at the same time, which symbolized the power of the state and its vulnerability (Kalinowska and Spangler, 2021). Even the abolition of the corps in the Auspicious Incident of 1826 was itself organized in the form of a victory ritual, transforming repression into a legitimizing spectacle of the centralizing rule of Mahmud II.

4.2 Kissing of the Sacred Banner

The kissing of Sacred Banner of the Prophet (Sancak-ı Şerif), a relic that supposedly belonged to Prophet Muhammad, was one of the most sacred Ottoman military rituals (Baltacıoğlu-Brammer, 2019). The banner was taken out in wars or in crises and indicated to the soldiers the approval of the gods and to the sultan the devotion of soldiers to both faith and the sultan (Janson and Kınıkoğlu, 2021). The military service became a religious mission based on the ghazi tradition as the troops kissed or touched it during campaign departures (Hagen, 2021). It also rallied loyal troops in civil warfare; its flying in 1826 was the suppression of the Janissaries framed as a holy action and not civil war (Ottomanica & Hagen, 2021).

4.3 Rituals of Victory

Victory rituals were important in maintaining the legitimacy of the Ottoman sultans, as they had the nature of well-organized performances that attested the divine privilege on the dynasty (Işıksel, 2019). Following large-scale campaigns, elaborate Istanbul ceremonies were involved in parades of spoils, prisoners and thanksgiving prayers. The sultan was welcomed back with triumphal processions, where the army presented conquered banners and treasures and the ruler looked like a conqueror and a godlike ruler (Guennouni Idrissi, 2025). The victory was interpreted as an affirmation of God will using sermons, reading Quran and banquets in which divine sanction was put in focus. Success was assigned to the spiritual authority of the sultan even in case of campaigns which were led by generals (Menchinger, 2020). Victory rhetoric changed to the defense of faith and maintenance of order in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when it started to lose ground (Stephanov, 2022). An example of this change was the thanksgiving rituals of Mahmud II in 1826 following his subduing of the Janissaries where internal repression

was displayed as a victory in the name of morality and religion. Finally, rituals of Ottoman triumph restated the legitimacy of dynasties by transferring power based on the divine providence instead of victories on the battlefield alone (Ginio, 2019).

Chapter 5: Dark Rituals and Abuses

The darker practices associated with the Ottoman sultanlic order fratricide, the institutional harem and concubinage, the coerced exploitation of boys (*Devşirme* and related practices), and the centrality of eunuchs within palace life occupy an ambivalent place in the empire's political grammar. They were simultaneously instruments of dynastic survival, bureaucratic utility, and social control; and, as such, they demand analysis both as ritualized practices and as ethically fraught mechanisms of domination.

5.1 Fratricide: ritual, legitimacy, and its abandonment

Fratricide in early Ottoman practice must be read as a brutal, instrumental ritual of succession. In its classical formulation it operated as a literal, political solution to the problem of competing princely branches: the removal of potential rivals internalized the principle that dynastic continuity required the elimination of reciprocal claims (Asiss-González, 2024). The practice was framed as a stabilizing ritual that prevented civil war by converting violent succession into an enacted mechanism of order. Over time, however, fratricide's legitimacy eroded for institutional and ideological reasons (Hafez, 2020). The late-pre-modern shift toward "contained sultans" and the growth of constitutionalizing practices the delegation of authority to viziers, the institutional weight of the ulama, and the Janissaries' role as a check on arbitrary power made wholesale execution of princes increasingly problematic (Uribe & van Baalen, 2025). Thus, the abandonment of routine fratricide can be read as both a legal-institutional transformation and a ritual recalibration: by the early modern and modern periods, dynastic security was sought through confinement, legal mechanisms, and palace ritual rather than bodily annihilation (Wright, 2022). (This argument links the constitutional/'contained sultans' scholarship to the history of succession rituals and explains the shift from lethal to non-lethal solutions.)

5.2 Harem and Concubinage: spatial regulation, dynastic reproduction, and political utility

The imperial harem and the system of concubinage functioned as much more than private domestic spaces: they were part of a political architecture that regulated the reproductive and symbolic future of the dynasty (Atanasoski & Jaleel, 2024). Confinement of royal women and princes served to control lineal claims and to ensure dynastic succession in ways that were

visible through ritual (ceremonies, access protocols, and the staging of princely life). The harem's internal hierarchies the valide sultan, mothers of princes, senior concubines were institutions of political brokerage (Ali & Naz, 2020). As court observers and cultural histories show, the harem translated the regulation of intimacy and reproduction into authority: the social status of women, the timing of princely marriages, and the public presentation of family events (circumcisions, celebrations) were all ritual sites where dynastic continuity was produced and displayed. The same sources note the darker underside, the commodification of bodies, and the subordination of women's autonomy to dynastic exigency (Faroghi, 2020).

5.3 Exploitation of boys: Devşirme, palace education, and coercive transformation

The levying of Christian boys through the Devşirme system and their transformation into palace servants, soldiers, or administrators constitute a central form of bodily exploitation that blurred education, indoctrination and coercion (Yilmaz, 2023). These boys were ritualistically removed from natal communities, ritually transformed (through naming, conversion, and training), and inserted into palace and military hierarchies where loyalty was remade. While some became powerful state agents, the process itself was a form of systemic domination: the bodily conversion of a child into a slave-servant and instrument of the state (Arvas, 2021). Sources and legal frameworks reveal the tension between the rhetoric of “meritocratic incorporation” and the reality of coerced service and cultural rupture. In many cases the ritualized “gift” of boys to the sultanate masked extensive human costs.

5.4 Eunuch rituals and the politics of castration

Eunuchs occupied a paradoxical position: legally marginalized in some respects (bound by restrictions on marriage, property transmission, and social roles) yet politically indispensable as palace servants, stewards, and power brokers (Nacchia et al., 2023). Byzantine and Ottoman legal and administrative sources show that rulers repeatedly legislated against castration even while employing eunuchs at the heart of palatine government; this ambivalence is crucial to understanding how castration and eunuchage functioned as statecraft (AL-Mamari, 2023). Eunuch rituals formal investitures, access protocols, ceremonial roles in palace liturgy and household management sacralized their service while marking them as liminal figures whose bodies had been materially altered for the needs of the polity. The legal discourse (restrictions, permissions, testaments) reveals a state trying simultaneously to control supply, limit social claims, and secure the administrative advantages eunuchs provided. The result was a routinized, administrative exploitation that relied on bodily mutilation and legal

exceptionalism: a dark ritual economy embedded in the heart of imperial governance (Barnett, 2022). Taken together, these practices expose a pattern: rituals that institutionalized bodily control and gendered hierarchies served as technologies of domination. Whether theatrical (palace circumcisions, staged displays), administrative (Devşirme, eunuch offices), or lethal (fratricide), they converted the body into an object of political management (Tian, 2024). Yet the same rituals carried symbolic legitimating power they were the means by which the dynasty dramatized continuity, piety, and filial order. The historical arc from early lethal solutions to later legal/institutional management, from elite spectacle to bureaucratic control allows us to see not only continuity of function (power maintenance), but also important transformations in how violence and bodily control were justified, regulated, and concealed (Morgentaler, A., & Hanafy, 2024).

Chapter 6: A Contemporary Critical Reading

6.1 Rituals as instruments of domination and control

Rituals that appear on the surface as religious or cultural performance also operate as technologies of political control (Paredes, 2019). The weekly khutba, palace night rites, circumcision festivals, Janissary processions and the rites surrounding the Sacred Banner together constitute a repertoire of performances that naturalize the sultan's authority. At the same time, the darker rituals fratricide, castration, coerced child levies, and the institutionalization of the harem reveal how ritual practice could be mobilized to manage bodies and legitimate domination (Sachdev, 2019). Contemporary critical theory enables us to read these phenomena not simply as "traditions" but as strategic practices that combine symbolic meaning with coercive social effects. In other words, ritual functions both as legitimation narrative and as an apparatus for materially disciplining populations.

6.2 Dark rituals and human-rights discourse

While reading through current human-rights frameworks, many Ottoman practices acquire an ethically condemnable character: slavery and the coerced servitude of children, the institutional use of castration, and forced confinement are forms of bodily violence that modern rights discourse categorizes as abuses (Archibald et al., 2020). Historical contextualization is essential legal systems, norms, and social imaginaries were different but so is moral evaluation. The paradoxical imperial stance (publicly condemning castration while depending on eunuchs, or ritualizing charity while tolerating exploitation within the harem) provides a point of departure for contemporary ethical critique (Goszczyński & Wróblewski, 2020). This allows the historian to hold two tasks simultaneously: to explain how such practices fit into

systems of rule, and to situate them within broader debates about dignity, bodily integrity, and the legacy of state power.

6.3 Comparative view with other empires

A comparative lens enhances interpretation. Byzantine legal debates over castration, Safavid theatrical rituals of sacrifice, and European court spectacles share with the Ottoman case a recurring dynamic: rulers employ ritualized manipulations of bodies and symbols to secure authority (Meyer & Messis, 2024). The Byzantine legal materials examined in the eunuch thesis reveal legal approaches to castration that help explain Ottoman continuities and divergences; the Safavid comparison (e.g., Muharram camel rituals) clarifies shared symbolic economies of fertility and victory; European court rituals show convergent uses of spectacle to naturalize dynastic authority (Gevorgyan, 2024). Comparative analysis thus supplies both contrast and corroboration: it underlines the structural similarity of ritual as technology of rule and highlights culturally specific manifestations.

6.4 Final reflection: toward ethical historiography

A critical reading in the present should not be biased towards historical sympathy or immorality. The role of rituals in the creation of political power should not be imposed on the human suffering that they made (dos Santos, 2021). The duty of the historian is to recreate the context of the institution and show what the rituals meant to the people at the time, as well as to evaluate what the rituals left by them meant to future readers in a way that can be understood. This paper introduces Ottoman ritual practice into the lineage of power by combining such close cultural description (festival, prayer, parade), legal history (laws and fetvas), and political analysis (Janissary rebellions, constitutional constraints), in a way that can be explained by scholars and ethically questioned (Lydon, 2019).

Conclusion

As this study has shown, Ottoman sultanic rituals were not just symbolic practices but conscious tools of power, which supported dynastic legitimacy, projected power, and made centuries of domination seem natural. Rituals, including religious, social, military, and coercive, played a role in the Ottoman state by the Ottomans being used to exhibit, negotiate and maintain sovereignty as a mechanism since the inception of the Ottoman state in 1299 to its dissolution in 1924. Sacred performance was bound to governance, and worship was converted into political confirmation through religious and political rituals like the Friday khutba and Laylat al-Qadr ceremonies. The social and cultural rituals such as circumcision festivals, naval parades and Ramadan feasts employed spectacle and generosity to reinforce the paternal image of the sultan and to attach the various communities to the imperial

center. Military ceremonies, especially Janissary processions and the cult of the Sacred Banner, both emphasized the martial roots of sultanic power and also exposed domestic conflicts as Janissaries transformed into servants into political adversaries. The darker rituals explored (fratricide, the harem system, the devsirme, and servitude of eunuchs) revealed the coercive aspect of imperial rule showing how bodies could be ritualized and institutionalized as instruments of rule. Their slow deterioration was based on larger changes such as restriction on the power of the sultan and the introduction of the constitutional ideas.

Critical modernist viewpoint reveals that, although ritualized control was widespread in the empires, contemporary moral systems demand reconsideration of the practice of enslaving people and applying physical force to their bodies. In conclusion, the Ottoman rituals produced a two-fold heritage of unity and grandeur as well as exploitation and domination, which sheds light on the profound fact of performance, power, and human body within the imperial dominion.

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