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CIRCLES OF CORRESPONDENCE: Ottoman letter-writing in the early seventeenth century

Christine Woodhead

Ottoman libraries contain a large number of 17th- and 18th-century letter collections, either as the work of one author or as compilations from different writers. Their contents range from official documents through professional correspondence to friendly communication. Many include both genuine and form letters, and the majority were intended as exemplary texts in the *inşa*¹ style of elite literary prose. Most of this material is overlooked by modern scholars despite its potential contribution to the study of literary taste, friendship and patronage relationships, and of the concerns of educated individuals within Ottoman society. This article assesses a group of leading letter-writers from ca.1600-30, a period of rapid and significant social and political change in the Ottoman Empire. Focusing on the *münşeat*² of Azmizade (d.1631), it suggests how letters can provide evidence for the networks of social communication and professional patronage existing among members of the Ottoman *ulema*³, and with some members of the *ümera*⁴.

Educated Ottomans took letter-writing very seriously. A good letter was not only a means of communication, but also, of equal importance, a demonstration of its author's literary competence, his social status and his professional aspirations. Compiling a collection of one's own letters was equivalent as a work of literary art to producing an anthology of poetry. Most Ottoman library collections in Turkey and elsewhere contain a significant number of such *münşeat mecmuaları*, attributed to members of the literary and scholarly elite, particularly from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Untold numbers of other such *mecmua* and individual letters must have remained and eventually perished in private hands, so that what survives in libraries will be a relatively small proportion of what was originally written or copied. With no equivalent to the European print culture of the early modern era in the Ottoman Empire until the mid-

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nineteenth century, estimates of how often Ottoman letter collections were copied and how widely they were disseminated can only be made on surviving manuscripts. However, collections of Ottoman private correspondence have been relatively little studied. This is partly due to the emphasis placed by historians upon government documents and official writing, which tends to overlook the private and the unofficial. It is also due, perhaps largely, to the perceived literary and stylistic pretensions of the deliberately complex *inşa* prose style in which this type of private correspondence was written in the pre-modern era. Many contain little easily extractable historical “facts”. On the assumption that such exemplary items were either aesthetically contrived to the point of obscurity, or were formulaic and imitative expressions of commonplace greetings and sympathies, it is too easy to conclude that the value of such collections for historical and literary research would be disproportionate to the effort involved in studying them. Yet the fact that *mecmua* continued to be compiled and copied in considerable numbers is surely significant. Ottomanists, as opposed to Ottomans, have not taken letters seriously enough.

Such private letter collections ought to be a valuable resource for understanding certain aspects of Ottoman literary, cultural and social history. Recent studies by Cemal Kafadar and Rhoads Murphey of expressions of individual identity in Ottoman narrative and popular texts indicate the potential found in other types of written sources.⁵ The present study suggests how the surviving correspondence of prominent early seventeenth-century writers may produce similar results for more highly educated groups. Who wrote to whom, on what occasion, for what purpose and (perhaps) with what result, could reveal a good deal about Ottoman social relations, in terms both of personal friendships and of patronage links. Little is currently known about either of these aspects of pre-modern Ottoman society. More specifically, on what grounds were letters subsequently selected for “collection”, their style or the status of their addressee? On whose initiative, for example, were the *münşeat* of six prominent stylists collected together in a composite *mecmua* presented to the current *şeyhülislam*,⁶ Zekeriyazade Yahya Efendi, in the late 1620s? The six writers concerned were contemporaries, all dying within the period 1627 to 1635, but whether they were part of a recognized elite, were particular partisans of Yahya Efendi, or were simply a group of friends and colleagues is unclear. Two had advanced to the second-highest judicial rank, that of *kazasker* (chief judge) of Rumeli; three were judges of professional or literary distinction; the sixth was a former *nışancı* (head of the sultan’s chancery). What was the significance of being included in such a prestigious collection?⁷

VALUES OF OTTOMAN LETTER COLLECTIONS

Seventeenth-century Ottoman letter collections are not private archives in the modern sense. They do not provide a complete, continuous or even coherent record of the writer's correspondence but they do convey the manners, assumptions, and aspirations of their writers. They are therefore "vehicles of value", both dependent upon Perso-Islamic cultural traditions and promoting an Ottoman form of these. Primarily they convey emotion, often some form of misery or loneliness due to separation from friends or neglect by professional superiors, but sometimes in happier vein with congratulations on the receipt of good news. Only within such a set tone and style might some letters convey information. In general, the more abstract and metaphorical the style, the more highly valued was the composition. In this respect, letters in Ottoman collections were very similar to those produced and treasured by other social elites. Margaret Mullett's studies of Byzantine letter-writing raise several points worth considering in the Ottoman context. Ninth- and tenth-century Byzantine letters "were seen as having permanent value only in that they succeeded as works of art". Thus, a carefully crafted letter became a personal gift in itself, a form of transaction or act of communication which was as significant for its existence as much as for what it might say. Together with this is the likelihood that delivery of the letter by a trusted bearer provided a supplementary oral dimension to the exchange, both explaining and enhancing the essential "gift".⁸

The literary style known as *inşa* in which "collected" Ottoman letters were normally written was consciously aesthetic, produced only by the very well educated and principally by those seeking to be well placed in the sultan's service. Although varying in complexity according to genre and intended audience, its essential features included a wide range of wordplay and of Koranic and literary allusions. Its measured rhyming phrases were dominated by Arabic and Persian vocabulary at the expense of Turkish. It was notably more intricate than most Ottoman prose writing, and was certainly regarded as a challenging form of artistic composition. Nergisî (born in 1635), one of the six letter writers included in Yahya Efendi's *mecmua*, wrote proudly of

the Turkish [*şî*] language of pleasing expression, distinguished by its gathering from the surrounding green meadows of various languages the choicest flowers of meaning approved by men of eloquence and, through collecting thence the fruits of clarity, admired for its natural qualities of pure and sound measure agreeable to the palate.⁹

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Similarly, Nergisi's contemporary, the former *nışancı* Okçuzade (born in 1630), emphasized the breadth of good *inşa* composition, in that a true stylist was one who could treat a single theme ten times with equal subtlety without repeating the same images and allusions.¹⁰ Innovation and dexterity in the use of language were the goals.

At one level, development of the Ottoman *inşa* style is associated with manuals of diplomatic style and collections of exemplars and form letters produced for training chancery scribes, particularly during the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. At another level it was used for court-centered historiography and didactic literature, produced by both chancery officials and *ulema*. By the early seventeenth century the acknowledged masters of this heavily-Persianized, metaphorical and semi-poetic rhymed prose were principally *ulema* trained firstly in Arabic and religious law. Moreover, many addressees of early seventeenth-century letters were viziers or beys, members of the military/administrative *ümera* trained in the palace school, who were themselves often poets or literary connoisseurs. Thus, rather than being the preserve of a profession, or of an ambitious or pretentious few, the *inşa* style was, within Istanbul elites, a meaningful and rewarding pursuit which cut across career lines and social origins. If ability to compose well in the *inşa* style was "one of the hallmarks of membership in the Ottoman ruling class",¹¹ the cultural expression of this social and political elite deserves deeper analysis. So formidable was its achievement that only recently have modern scholars, following Andreas Tietze and J.R.Walsh, attempted serious evaluation of Ottoman *inşa* and its place in the Ottoman literary tradition.¹² Nelly Hanna's recent study of middle class culture in Cairo provides an equally valuable model of what can be learnt about a pre-modern Islamic society by assessing its literary output not as a "tradition" or style, but in its practical social context.¹³

A typical *münşeat mecmuası* might begin with a number of *mektubs* (letters) to important state or *ulema* officials, followed by a further number to personal friends at the writer's own social or professional level (sometimes with letters from these correspondents), and might conclude with a long tail of exemplars addressed merely to "a dear friend" or "a noble vizier". This said, however, there appears to be no set order of priority. Letters are not necessarily presented in chronological order of writing, letters to the same recipient are not grouped together, and few items are explicitly dated. Most can only be pinned down, if at all, by reference to the writer's or the addressee's post at the time of writing, or (less likely) to a specific event which occasions the *mektub* or is mentioned within it. Alongside general letters of friendly enquiry and comment, are the expected forms of congratulation (*tebniyet*) upon a new appointment, condolence (*taziyet*) upon the death of a near relation, letters of complaint (*sikâyet*) about professional

disappointment, and requests and recommendations in various forms for personal advancement or that of a protégé.¹⁴ The inclusion of *vakfiyes* (establishment deeds for charitable foundations) and of letters composed on behalf of others illustrates the premium placed by non-writers upon good written style. Unlike the letters and documents contained in manuals of correspondence, with their careful instructions on correct forms of address, salutation, and farewell, many letters in private collections preserve only the body of the text without extended titles and formalities. What remains are short pieces of fine writing largely shorn of their context. Their primary value clearly lay in the literary style for which they were selected. In this light, the modern desire to distinguish between the honest value of “real” letters to real people, and fictitious or form letters is irrelevant.¹⁵

Specific reasons for letter-writing in the first place were many. Writers who then ‘collected’ some of their own correspondence used the collection in much the same way as others used a *divan* (anthology) of poetry or a newly-composed history or treatise, as “career currency” to present to an actual or potential patron.¹⁶ Private correspondence, and subsequent collections of one writer’s letters for “publication”, flourished in the professionally competitive environment around the turn of the seventeenth century. It must be assumed that, in the first instance, writers regularly kept copies of their own letters – or at least the particularly impressive ones – with a view to “collecting” them at some future date. On what basis was the later selection made? As Walsh pointed out with regard to Nergisi’s letters, two collections of the same writer’s work may have slightly different contents. That a second collection simply added a few letters written later may not always be the answer. Equally, what implications did the prospect of “publication” have for the nature of the original communication, and did the recipients reply in kind? These questions are at present unanswerable, though worth asking to keep the social context of letter-writing in mind.

There are also several possible reasons why copies of collections might continue to be made long after their author’s death. The first assumption is their value as stylistic exemplars for others to learn from. The relatively frozen forms of Ottoman letters from the sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century reflect this. Orhan Şaik Gökyay, having examined seventy *münşeat mecmuası* from different periods in Istanbul libraries, concluded that in terms of language and style there was little to distinguish one from another.¹⁷ This feature is not confined to pre-modern Ottoman, or Muslim, culture. In a study of letter-writing in France, Roger Chartier notes a similar phenomenon, in that certain correspondence manuals and letter collections (*secrétaires*) from the early seventeenth century continued to sell in considerable numbers and relatively unchanged

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for almost two hundred years. Many buyers were, he suggests, ordinary townsfolk and tradespeople who had little pretensions to letter-writing in the elite social style depicted but who were attracted by the representation of “manners, etiquette and a language that were completely alien”. Reading a *secrétaire* provided a glimpse into another, more privileged and perhaps more exotic, world, which in some cases might tend towards an early form of epistolary novel. Although the latter observation may not be relevant for Ottoman letters, the notion of simply reading about a different social thought-world, rather than aspiring to write similarly, may well account in part for the continuing popularity of seventeenth-century letter collections.¹⁸ Even more pertinent is Walter Andrews’ emphasis on the essentially unchanging characteristics of the ghazal form of Ottoman lyric poetry. The lack of individual reference, originality and contemporary context evident in most Ottoman ghazals is not a failing, but a statement of stable, fixed values in a divinely-ordered society.¹⁹ Significantly, most Ottoman letter-writers also wrote poetry.

MEN OF LETTERS

The most prominent Ottoman letter-writers ca.1600-30 were generally members of the Ottoman *ulema*, and aspiring *kadıs* (judges) below them in the judicial hierarchy. For such men, letter-writing was part of a general literary competence which included religious commentaries and other scholarly treatises, fatwas (legal opinions), *vakfiyes* and poetry. From her assessment of the literary output of one hundred high-ranking *ulema* from the reign of Murad III (1574-95), Suraiya Faroqhi concluded that around a third were recognized authors whose literary activity exceeded that required by their judicial or teaching posts, and which had probably contributed to their professional advancement. She noted also the close relationships between top-level *ulema* and *ümera*, in which “the administrators seemed to have been the dispensers and the *ulema* the receivers of patronage”.²⁰ What precisely did this involve, and was it still the case in the early seventeenth century? Were grand viziers petitioned as men of letters themselves, for their own political influence upon appointments, or because they provided a route to the sultan’s attention? Nasuh Paşa, grand vizier (1611-14), was an abrasive and unpopular personality who made several attempts to have the current *şeyhülislam*, Hocazade Mehmed, dismissed. He nevertheless appears to be the only serving grand vizier represented among the addressees of letters in Yahya Efendi’s *mecmua*.²¹ What personal ties were likely between a *kadı* and a *beylerbeyi* (provincial governor) serving at the same time in, for instance, Damascus, which might subsequently be used to help one if the other became *kazasker* or grand vizier? Only a limited number of *paşas* appear

as addressees in the six collections of the *mecmua* for Yahya Efendi. This may reflect a shift in patronage relationships. Equally, however, it may be due to a combination of essential selectivity and the fact that by the time this compilation was made the political scene had changed considerably and with it, the perspective on the importance of preserving letters written to particular persons some ten or twenty years previously. Formal letters of congratulation or recommendation to certain long-dead viziers may not have been considered appropriate. However, the fact that some such letters do exist is a reminder of what was probably a common, and presumably useful, courtesy. A further trawl of Faroqhi's main source, the biographical dictionary of Ata'i, for the early seventeenth century would complement the evidence of *ulema-üimera* relations seen in letter collections.

The first collection in Yahya Efendi's *mecmua* is the *münşeat* of Azmizade Mustafa (1570-1631), known also under his poet's penname Halletî. Indicative of a web of correspondence throughout the empire, his collection includes both letters of friendship and letters to superiors as potential or actual patrons. Some near-contemporaries obviously span both categories.²² Azmizade's surviving letters appear to date mainly from the years 1602-1614 as he climbed the judicial hierarchy as *kadı* of Damascus (appointed in December 1602/January 1603), Cairo (1604), Bursa (1606), Edirne (1611), Damascus again (ca.1611-13), and Istanbul (1614). Roughly half of the 50 or so letters in this collection are addressed to a senior colleague, with at least two letters to each *şeyhülislam* of the period (Sun'ullah Efendi, Mustafa Efendi, Hocazade Mehmed Efendi, Hocazade Es'ad Efendi), and several to his peers in the next rank (including fellow littérateurs Zekeriyazade Yahya, Ganizade Nadirî, Akhisarlı Abdülkerim). Some, especially to the current *şeyhülislam* Es'ad Efendi (in office 1615-22), may relate to a lengthy period in waiting before a second turn of office in Cairo (1618) and promotion to *kazasker* of Anadolu in 1623. Having reached that rank, and being relatively settled in the imperial center, Azmizade would have rather been the recipient of other *kadis'* courtesies and petitions. This indicates, unsurprisingly, that letter-writing to fellow professionals was particularly common in mid-career, especially if this coincided with distant postings which meant leaving Istanbul for long periods of time.

Writing to a friend served to remind the recipient of your existence and to show that you had not forgotten his. Here, the concept of the *mektub* itself as a gift is appropriate, particularly if considered together with the associated notion of its being essentially the literature of separation, favored by those who felt themselves in some way exiled from the political and cultural center.²³ Azmizade's letters to friends tend towards melancholy, dwell upon feelings of loneliness and regret at separation from his

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correspondent's re-assuring company, and are frequently full of apologies for not having written sooner. Life's afflictions shared were perhaps life's afflictions halved, though the powerlessness of the individual always comes through very strongly. On the other hand, life's individual troubles are not shared and personal details remain private. In his study of Azmizade as a poet, Bayram Ali Kaya draws a distinction between Haletî's use of ghazals and *kasides* to protest against the practical blows of fate and the more philosophical, sufistic tone of his many *rubaiyat*. A further comparison of these with Azmizade's letters – several of which are to the same recipients as his *kasides*, on similar occasions – may throw further light on the purpose and tone of his letters. How does the *kaside* of congratulation compare with the *mektub* of congratulation? Why choose to write in one form rather than the other? It must also be significant that, whilst Azmizade's *divan* contains four *kasides* addressed to Mehmed III and seven to Ahmed I, not one *mektub* in his *münşeat* is addressed to a sultan.²⁴

Exemplifying the friendship letter is the second, and one of the earliest, letters in Azmizade's *münşeat*, which was written from Damascus in 1603 to Dukakinzade Osman Efendi (d. 1603), then *kadi* in Cairo.²⁵ The son of a *beylerbeyi* and grandson of Selim I's *damad* (son-in-law) grand vizier Dukakinzade Ahmed Paşa, Osman Efendi would have been at least twenty years older than Azmizade and very much part of elite Istanbul society. Despite this age difference, the tone of Azmizade's letter is one of sincere affection, mixed with only a slight element of pleading. Much of the imagery in this letter is medical, though whether this is connected with Azmizade's real state of health is difficult to tell.

It is a long time since my pen has set down prayers for your health and prosperity, since my hand has knocked at the door of your favour. When you, the wise physician of friendship enquire about your miserable friends, wounded at heart, pray do not overlook the message of this wretched, distant pen and its writer who must live in the infirmary of resignation. When you distribute the reviving drugs of kindness, do not forget this patient. [...]

The weak little wren of my soul has not flown from its bodily nest because attacked by the eagle of death. However, it is certain that the four walls of this house of imprisonment are virtually in ruins through being in the path of the torrent of [anguish caused by] separation. [...]

Such life-destroying times are written on the balance-sheet of existence. I have neither strength in my foot to come to you nor ability in my hand to write a letter. Like it or not, what is in my mind must be left until another time, until the stupor of affliction should be exchanged for the strengthening of friendship. [...]

My dear friend,²⁶ why have you refrained from sending me the restorative drug [of your correspondence]? Is it because you suspect the constancy of my

friendship, or did you think that it would be [too much for me]? From now on, let our correspondence flourish naturally like the fruits in the garden of Paradise.²⁷

Letters to professional superiors remind them of your claims to office, particularly if combined with congratulations on their own recent promotion. Letters congratulating a new *kazasker* or *şeyhülislam* figure prominently in Azmizade's collection, though they tend to be addressed to a relatively small selection of individuals. A letter of June 1604 from Damascus congratulating Sun'ullah Efendi on his third appointment as *şeyhülislam* is noted as coinciding with Azmizade also receiving news of his own appointment to Cairo. Less predictably, in November 1605 he wrote to Yahya Efendi, then *kazasker* of Rumeli, on the occasion of the latter's accompanying Ahmed I on his visit to Bursa. There are four letters to Ganizade Nadirî (ca.1572-1627), a contemporary slightly ahead in the professional hierarchy (becoming *kadı* of Istanbul in 1607 and *kazasker* of Anatolia in 1612), and a fellow *münşi* (stylist).²⁸ A petition (*arzuhâl*) entitled 'to the *şeyhülislam*' (in the context of the surrounding letters, possibly to Es'ad Efendi), written when apparently out of office, contrasts with the letter of friendship to Dukakinzade Osman Efendi in its more abject tone:

Even if it is appropriate for this poor lowly one sitting in the corner of retirement to look up high to enquire about your health, [nevertheless] the wall of grief and despair in the void of my heart, though restored and made firm again, like a hard rock renders the axe of patience and determination into a hundred pieces. The hand of hope is gradually drifting further from the skirt of [ambition] [...]

This broken-hearted servant is [no longer] committed to the completion of the [judicial] path. In the mirror of my imagination I see only the determination to be established in a worthwhile position. [Otherwise] let me be a traveller dwelling in the hospice of sadness in the desert of disappointment, spending the rest of my uncertain existence wandering aimlessly in expectation of death.²⁹

Azmizade's collection includes three *takriẓ* (piece of writing written in order to praise another work) one of which was written for Ganizade's own *münşeat*. Another *takriẓ* by Azmizade, written around 1626 for the *münşeat* of Nergisî, and probably one of many others solicited in his capacity as a literary and professional patron, does not appear here.³⁰ *Takriẓ*-writing as a form of sophisticated literary reference provides another means of assessing *ulema* patronage of aspiring writers, both *ulema* and non-*ulema*, although it is again likely that only a small proportion of these survive. Attached to one copy of an Ottoman history completed around 1619 by the chancery scribe Mehmed b. Mehmed are six *takriẓ* by leading *ulema* stylists of the period, including Ganizade and Yahya Efendi.³¹

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Azmizade's letter-writing was not confined to his leading *ulema* contemporaries, nor was it all focused on Istanbul. Among fourteen letters to *paşas* are several to the grand vizier Nasuh Paşa during his vizierate of 1611-14, including one congratulating him on his appointment, and another on his marriage to a daughter of Ahmed I. Two are addressed to Hafız Ahmed Paşa, poet and governor of Damascus during Azmizade's second period in office there (and subsequently, in 1625 and in 1631, grand vizier), and one each to Ca'fer Paşa and Çığalazade Mahmud Paşa, then governors respectively of Yemen and Baghdad. An associated purpose of these letters to distant viziers was to recommend to each the bearer of the letter, the newly appointed *kadı*s of Moha (Mocha) and Baghdad respectively, allowing Azmizade himself to exercise an intermediate form of patronage. More numerous and more intriguing than letters to viziers and *paşas* are those to judicial and political figures of slightly lesser standing, especially in cities where Azmizade had served as *kadı*; to Şeyh Hasan al-Burini, one of the local *ulema* of Damascus, and to several Cairene associates of varying status, including Dukakinzade Osman Efendi, Hattat Osman Bey and Emir Hasan Çelebi. The inclusion of letters to such lesser figures suggests relative unconcern with hierarchy beyond that of the senior *ulema* and the likelihood of friendship rather than professional utility. One particular item to note is a letter apparently written by Azmizade on behalf of Derviş Paşa (d.1603), governor of Bosnia, to the Khan of the Crimea, Gazi Giray II, himself a considerable man of letters. Probably written around 1600 or shortly thereafter, while Azmizade was a *müderriş* (teacher) at the Süleymaniye, it indicates an early reputation for fine writing, and perhaps, an instance of *ümera* patronage of a member of the *ulema*.

By comparison, the *münşeât* of Akhisarlı Abdülkerim Efendi (1569-1629), as included within *şeyhülislam* Yahya's presentation manuscript, appears rather more formal and organized with a purpose.³² His range of correspondents is more restricted. The first 23 of 46 letters are all to senior *ulema* figures, beginning with eight to Yahya Efendi and including six to Hocasade Es'ad Efendi, four to Ganizade and three to Hocasade Mehmed Efendi. The majority of these date from the late 1610s/early 1620s while their author was *kadı* successively of Yenişehir, Jerusalem, Aleppo, Cairo, Bursa and Edirne. Several comment on political affairs, including the actions of the grand vizier Mere Hüseyin Paşa and the ill-fated assembly of *ulema* in the Fatih Cami'i in June 1623 which sought to have the grand vizier dismissed for his improper treatment of a fellow *kadı*. The collection contains only three letters to viziers, two of them also to the grand vizier Nasuh Paşa. Miscellaneous items added at the end of the collection include five or six letters to lesser *ulema*, two more to *şeyhülislam* Yahya, and three to the *kadı* and leading *inşa* stylist Veysî Efendi (1569-1628). In the middle of the collection are five rather

different items, also specimens of fine writing but here not letters but biographies, and not of *ulema* but of *ümera*. They form part of a projected biographical dictionary which Abdülkerim Efendi never completed.

Azmizade and Abdülkerim Efendi both reached the second-highest *ulema* appointment, that of *kazasker* of Rumeli. However, the learned profession necessarily contained many letter-writers who were less successful professionally and whose letters hold a different interest. Nergisî (ca.1586-1635) is a prime example. Despite his later reputation as one of the principal exponents of Ottoman *inşa* prose, he remained a provincial *kadı* who never rose above the middle ranks, and who spent much of his career “exiled” in various Bosnian towns. He attracted the intermittent patronage of a number of senior *ulema* through his literary ability. The collection of around 40 letters published by Walsh contains six written on behalf of his chief patron, the *müderris* and poet Kafzade Faizî (d. 1622).³³ As *kadı* of Salonica in 1619-20 Faizî employed Nergisî as his deputy and secretary. Partly as a result of this patronage, and partly due to his own skill in other genres of *inşa* prose as well as letter-writing, Nergisî’s literary talent was recognized and his letters were included in the composite *mecmua* for Yahya Efendi. However, his judicial career did not advance in parallel. Nor did that of his contemporary and fellow contributor to Yahya Efendi’s *mecmua*, the *kadı* Veysî Efendi, whose judicial career took him no further than Skopje despite a large and much-admired literary output. Ability to write well in *inşa* prose, “one of the hallmarks of membership in the Ottoman ruling class”, though highly desirable, was clearly not sufficient to ensure professional success.

What Nergisî and Veysî both lacked was an appropriate family background to give them the right connections at an early age. By around 1600, the higher judicial ranks were dominated by members of Istanbul-based families whose sons received their *mülazemet*s (certificates of competence) from the best teachers, gained experience teaching in Istanbul *medreses* (a school where Islamic theology and religious law are taught) and transferred into judicial posts at a high level. Ganizade, the fifth contributor to *şeyhülislam* Yahya’s *mecmua*, was the son of a former *kazasker* and received his *mülazemet* from Hoca Sad’eddin Efendi, tutor to Murad III and in 1598-99 *şeyhülislam*. He became the son-in-law of the *şeyhülislam* Sun’ullah Efendi and was appointed *kadı* of Salonica in 1602 after ten years teaching in Istanbul *medreses*. Azmizade, himself the son of another tutor to Murad III, also received his *mülazemet* from Hoca Sad’eddin Efendi, and followed a similar ten-year teaching career in Istanbul before his first posting as *kadı* to Damascus. Of the five sons of Hoca Sad’eddin Efendi, two reached the rank of *kazasker* and two others, Mehmed and Es’ad both became *şeyhülislam*. In such a climate

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outsiders like Nergisî and Veysî could establish themselves only through literary ability and polite letters, of which the higher *ulema* were probably willing patrons only at the same time as they kept professional posts among themselves. Epistolary cries of frustration and disappointment from men such as Nergisî and Veysî are of a different order to the letters of exile by the more privileged Azmizade and Ganizade. *Ulema* patronage had its limits.

Slightly tangential to the experience of Nergisî and Veysî is that of the sixth contributor to Yahya Efendi's *mecmua*, Okçuzade Şah Mehmed Efendi (d.1630). As he was neither a *kadı* nor, essentially, a littérateur, the inclusion of Okçuzade's *münşeat* in this collection initially appears rather odd. A former *nişancı*, head of the central chancery, he was an administrative rather than a judicial official. The son of a former *reisülküttab* (chief clerk) who had become *baş defterdar* (chief treasurer) and then *beylerbeyi* of Cyprus, Okçuzade's background was mixed, though reasonably privileged. He achieved rapid promotion in his chancery career during the 1590s through the patronage of the grand vizier Ibrahim Paşa, becoming *reisülküttab* in 1596-7 and *nişancı* 1599-1601. He did not hold another important post in Istanbul until re-instated as *nişancı* briefly in 1621 and again in 1622-3, the latter period coinciding with the second reign of Mustafa I and Yahya Efendi's first term as *şeyhülislam*. Okçuzade attributed his twenty-year lack of office to the adverse influence of the Hasan Canzadeler (family of Hoca Sa'deddin), an instance of patronage working against him. Okçuzade's *münşeat* is slightly different from the other five in the *mecmua*. It begins with two imperial letters (*name-i hümayun*) from Mehmed III to the Shah of Iran composed by Okçuzade as *nişancı* around 1600, followed by three other imperial letters to the Shah concerning the accession of Mustafa I in 1622. Some half dozen other imperial documents occur later in the collection. Most of the 70 or so items are either form letters or miscellaneous petitions to various officials which probably date from Okçuzade's twenty-year period out of office. Coming from, and being addressed to, a slightly different readership, his letters reinforce the notion of *inşa* as a widely acknowledged badge of Ottoman identity, both in its composition and in its appreciation.

TERMINOLOGY OF PATRONAGE

The overlapping relationship between friendship and patronage has been much studied in other fields, but relatively little in the Ottoman case.³⁴ The fact that modern Turkish terms often used for the type of cultural patronage described above, such as *patronaj/patron* or more recently *mesenlik/mesen* (from the French *mécénat/mécène*), are of non-Ottoman origin may suggest lack of appropriate Ottoman terms for this

phenomenon. More likely, however, it indicates the fact that patronage systems were so diverse and widespread that no simple Ottoman term, or even set of terms, could describe them all. While *intisab* may convey the general sense of clientage or affiliation, and *hami* that of protector, the vocabulary of patronage in actual use was of necessity variable and carefully nuanced.

Ottoman letter collections are an obvious source for the study of cultural and professional patronage as well as of friendship. Although differentiating between ties of fidelity and friendship on the one hand, and of clientage and self-interest on the other is not easy, one key to understanding is offered by the terms letter-writers use to describe themselves in relation to their addressees.³⁵ The usual self-deprecating phrase *bu hakir*, “this humble one”, is far too commonplace and simple to suffice. Azmizade writes to friends as *bu muhlis*, “this/your sincere friend”, with various elaborations such as *bu muhlis-i riṣa-cu*, “this sincere friend who strives to bring pleasure” or *bu yar-i gar olan muhlis-i safa-keṣ-u-vefa-guṣ*, “this sincere friend and intimate companion, pure in heart and faithful” (both phrases in a letter to Mehmed Rıza Çelebi in Cairo). To more senior colleagues, *bu çaker*, “your servant” is the principal term, with variations such as *bu çaker-i meveddet-keṣ*, “your servant and friend” (to Yahya Efendi), or *bu çaker-i batır-ṣikeste*, “your broken-hearted servant” (to a *ṣeyhülislam*). In letters to the grand vizier Nasuh Paşa, Azmizade describes himself variously as *bu çaker-i sadakat-keṣ*, “your servant and supplicant”; *bu ‘abd-i hakir*, “your humble slave”; *bu zerre-i kem-kadr*, “this worthless speck of dust”. Although the *inṣa* style encourages a wide variety of such terms, both simple and complex, there is a clear gradation of meaning from friendship to abject petitioning which is worth closer examination.³⁶

CONCLUSION

The present survey suggests how study of letter collections has much to offer for the understanding of social, cultural and professional relationships concerning the Ottoman *ulema*. Despite their essential selectivity, *münṣeat mecmuaları* demonstrate inter alia the importance of maintaining contact over long distances with both friends and potential patrons, the significance of the letter of friendship as a treasured possession, the concept of literary art, and something of the nature of relations between *ulema* and *ümera* office holders. Although the sultan was always the cultural and professional patron par excellence, he was never the only one. In the context of rapidly changing social and political systems in which treatise writers identified *ulema* corruption and declining standards as a major problem, early seventeenth-century letters allow the voice of an individual to present his own case.

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NOTES

¹ From Arabic, meaning ‘creation, construction, composition’ and also used in Arabic, Persian and Ottoman for ‘epistolography’.

² From Arabic, meaning ‘a collection of writings and letters’, similar to the Western tradition of *belles-lettres*.

³ Plural of the Arabic word “alim”, a scholar of Muslim religious law.

⁴ Plural of the Arabic word “emir” or “amir”, a ruler in some Islamic countries.

⁵ Cemal Kafadar. “Self and Others: The Diary of a Dervish in Seventeenth-century Istanbul and First-person Narrative in Ottoman Literature”. *Studia Islamica* LXIX (1989): 121-50. Rhoads Murphey. “Forms and Expression of Individuality in Ottoman Society”. *Turcica* 34 (2002): 135-70.

⁶ From Arabic, meaning ‘chief jurisconsult, head of the *ulema* hierarchy’.

⁷ *Münşeat Mecmuası*. Istanbul University Library TY 1526. Several copies of this compilation exist (in addition to other copies of the individual collections, some with slightly different or additional contents).

⁸ Margaret Mullett. “Writing in Early Medieval Byzantium” in Rosamund McKitterick (ed.). *The Uses of Literacy in Early Medieval Europe*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1990. 173-185.

⁹ Mehmed Nergisi. *Hamse: Nihalistan*. Bulak: Bulak Matbaası, 1868 (1285). 6.

¹⁰ Okçuzade Şah Mehmed [or Mehmed Şah] Beg/Efendi. *Münşeatü'l-inşa*, Istanbul University Library TY 3105, 5b, quoted in Christine Woodhead. “Ottoman *İnşa* and The Art of Letter-writing: Influences Upon The Career of The *Nişancı* and Prose Stylist Okçuzade (d.1630)”. *Osmanlı Araştırmaları* VII-VIII (1988): 143.

¹¹ Cornell H. Fleischer. *Bureaucrat And Intellectual in The Ottoman Empire: The Historian Mustafa Âli (1541-1600)*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986. 22. Quoting Mustafa Ali’s view of Ottoman Turkish as ‘a pure gilded tongue’.

¹² Andreas Tietze. “Mustafâ ‘Âlî of Gallipoli’s Prose Style”. *Archivum Ottomanicum* V (1973): 297-319 and his editions *Mustafâ ‘Âlî’s Counsel For Sultans of 1581*. Vienna: 1979, 1982 and *Mustafâ ‘Âlî’s Description of Egypt*. Vienna 1975; J. R. Walsh. “The *Esalibü’l-mekâtib* (*Münşe’at*) of Mehmed Nergisi Efendi”.

Archivum Ottomanicum I (1969): 213-306. See also the entry by Mustafa Uzun, “İnşa : (c) Türk Edebiyatı”. *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* [TDVLA] 22: 338-9. Many 19th and 20th century histories of ‘Ottoman literature’ focus primarily upon *divan* poetry, giving little consideration to prose works. For aspects of the Arabic *inşa* tradition, see Adrian Gully. “Epistles for Grammarians: Illustrations From The *İnşâ* Literature”. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 23/2 (1996): 147-66.

¹³ Nelly Hanna. *In Praise of Books: A Cultural History of Cairo’s Middle Class, Sixteenth to The Eighteenth Century*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003. On the emerging value of once-disparaged Byzantine letter collections, see M. E. Mullett. “Originality and Byzantine Letter-writing: The Case of Exile” in A. R. Littlewood (ed.). *Originality in Byzantine Literature, Art and Music*. Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1996. 39-58.

¹⁴ For a brief survey of Ottoman letter-types, see İ. Çetin Derdiyok. “The Tradition of Letter-writing in The Ottoman State”. *Great Ottoman-Turkish Civilisation* IV. Ankara 2000. 237-48; esp. 243 ff. For examples of most types, see Walsh’s *Esalibü’l-mekâtib*.

¹⁵ Cf. J. R. Henderson. “On Reading The Rhetoric of the Renaissance Letter” *Renaissance-Rhetorik Renaissance Rhetoric*. Ed. Heinrich F. Plett. Berlin 1993. 143-62, esp. pp. 155-6.

¹⁶ See fn. 20 below. Mustafa Âli’s almost constant search for an influential patron is well attested: cf. Fleischer, *Bureaucrat and Intellectual, passim*.

¹⁷ Orhan Şaik Gökyay. “Tanzimat Dönemine Değın Mektup”. *Türk Dili* 30/274 (1974): 18.

¹⁸ Roger Chartier. “*Secrétaires* for The People? Model Letters of The Ancien Régime: Between Court Literature and Popular Chapbooks”. *Correspondence: Models of Letter-writing From The Middle Ages to The Nineteenth Century*. R. Chartier et. al. London: Polity Press, 1977. 59-111; esp. 97-8

¹⁹ Walter Andrews. “A Revisionist Thesis for The Esthetics of The Ottoman Gazel”. *Türk Dili ve Edebiyatı Dergisi* XXIV/XXV (1980-86): 1-21. Esp. 7-9. Walter G. Andrews and Irene Markoff. “Poetry, The Arts, and Group Ethos in The Ideology of The Ottoman Empire”. *Edebiyat* 1/1 (1987), attempts to assess the ‘high-culture’ Ottoman *gazel* in its appropriate social context. For a brief comparison of Ottoman poetry and letters, see Woodhead’s “Ottoman *İnşa* and The Art of Letter-writing”, 156-9.

- ²⁰ Suraiya Faroqhi. “Social Mobility Among The Ottoman ‘Ulema in The Late Sixteenth Century”. *IJMES* 4 (1973): 207-9.
- ²¹ Cf. M T Gökbilgin. “Nasuh Paşa”. *İslam Ansiklopedisi* 9: 121-7. Madeleine Zilfi. *The Politics of Piety: The Ottoman Ulema in The Post-classical Age 1600-1800*. Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1988. 81-127, comments on political tensions affecting the *ulema*.
- ²² Cf. Haluk Ipekten. “Azmi-zade Mustafa Haleti”. *TDVLA* 4: 348-9. Azmi-zade reached the rank of *kazasker* of Rumeli in 1627/8, and retired in 1629. The copy of his *münşeat* used here is British Library, OR. 1169; other copies contain additional items. For more detailed assessment of Azmi-zade as poet and literary scholar see esp. Bayram Ali Kaya (ed.). *The Divân of ‘Azmi-zâde Haleti* (v. 2). Cambridge: Mass., 2003. 2-33.
- ²³ Cf. Mullett. “Originality and Byzantine Letter-writing: The Case of Exile”. On other aspects of pre-modern friendship, see the various essays in Judith Haseldine (ed.). *Friendship in medieval Europe*. Stroud: 1999.
- ²⁴ Kaya (ed.), *Divân of ‘Azmi-zâde Haleti* (v. 1). Cambridge: Mass., 2003. 49-92, for his 34 *kasides*.
- ²⁵ Mehmed Süreyya. *Sicill-i ‘Osmani* [SO] (III). Istanbul: Darü’üt-Tıbaatü’l-Âmire, 1890-97. 417; cf. Abdülkadir Özcan. “Dukaginzade Ahmed Paşa”. *TDVLA* 9: 550-1.
- ²⁶ The phrase *benim sultanım* is translated according to the overall tone of the letter. In other cases it could be ‘my lord’, or ‘my dear sir’.
- ²⁷ British Library OR. 1169, 2b-3b.
- ²⁸ Mustafa Uzun. “Ganizade Mehmed Nadiri”. *TDVLA* 13: 355-6.
- ²⁹ British Library OR. 1169, ff. 13b-14b. The *şeyhülislam* is here addressed as *mürüvvetlü sultanım hazretleri*.
- ³⁰ *Takriż* printed in Walsh. “The *Esâlibü’l-mekâtib* (*Münşe’ât*) of Mehmed Nergîsî Efendi”. *Archivum Ottomanicum* I (1969): 305.
- ³¹ See Christine Woodhead. “Puff and Patronage: Ottoman *Takriż*-writing and Literary Recommendation in the 17th century”. *The Balance of Truth: Essays in Honour of Professor Geoffrey Lewis*. Eds. Çiğdem Balım-Harding and Colin Imber. Istanbul: Isis Press, 2000. 395-406.
- ³² SO III, 353; Nevizade Ata’i. *Zeyl-i Şakayık-ı Nu’maniye*. Istanbul: 1852. 718-9.
- ³³ Sabahattin Küçük. “Kafzade Faizi”. *TDVLA* 24: 162-3.
- ³⁴ Cf. Halil İnalçık. *Şair ve Patron: Patrimonial Devlet ve Sanat Üzerinde Sosyolojik Bir İnceleme*. Ankara: Doğu-Batı Yayınları, 2003. (Published in English as “The Poet and the Patron: A Sociological Treatise Upon the Patrimonial State and the Arts”, in 2005, at *JTL* 2). For the value of biographical dictionaries of poets (ch. 4) and Fuzulî’s seeking the patronage of the *nişancı* Celalzade (pp.61-63). For comparison, see Sharon Kettering. “Friendship and Clientage in Early Modern France”. *French History* 6 (1992): 139-58.
- ³⁵ On a range of alternative terminologies, see Sharon Kettering. “Patronage in Early Modern France”. *French Historical Studies* 17/4 (1992): 839-62.
- ³⁶ Cf. Virginia Aksan. *An Ottoman Statesman in War and Peace: Ahmed Resmi Efendi, 1700-1783*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995. 23-33 on patronage, esp. p.29, fn. 103 on phraseology.

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