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Where Traditional and Modern Meet and Sashay Along

By Sabrina Tavernise

ISTANBUL — For every stereotype of a Muslim country, Turkey has a fact to break it.

It has Islamic feminists (a few) and Israeli tourists (lots). Reality dating shows have had the highest ratings on television, and Islamic fashion sashays down Turkish runways.

For decades in Turkey the competing forces of the religious and secular, Christian and Muslim, East and West, were muted, as authorities scrubbed the country of differences while they built a modern state. But Turkey has become more democratic in recent years, and those forces have burst into full view, creating a sort of modern-day identity crisis.

“We have started to think very differently about our history,” said Leyla Neyzi, a professor at Sabanci University, one of Turkey’s first private colleges. “The past is being rethought in terms of the demands of the present.”

Nowhere is that questioning more apparent than in Istanbul, the lively port that is the cultural and intellectual center of the country.

Aynur Dogan is a Kurdish singer with a powerful voice who grew up in war. Turkish forces and Kurdish separatists were fighting in the southern part of the country, where she lived and where speaking her native Kurdish was illegal. Kurdish music tapes were buried in the yard when government forces entered her village. Her family fled to Istanbul in 1992 to escape the fighting.

She took an interest in Kurdish music, but in the late 1990s the only audiences were underground. In Turkish society, Kurdish was a bad word. “It looked impossible,” she said, smoking a cigarette in a dark Istanbul cafe with murals painted on the walls.

By 2004, she had appeared on mainstream Turkish television singing in Kurdish. That year she released her first album, “Kurdish Girl.” It was temporarily banned by the government, but not before it sold large numbers of copies, and finally its sale was permitted.

Now she performs frequently in Europe, and a film about Istanbul’s music scene has featured her singing. But there are still limits in Turkey. Sponsors of Kurdish musical events are difficult to find, and it is harder to get a venue, but young Turks in Istanbul’s music shops eagerly recommend her album.

“I felt there was this new group of people emerging,” she said.

Many forces helped release the river of memory. One has been a steady series of changes Turkey has enacted to gain entry to the European Union. The push to join, led by the pro-Islamic government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, elected in 2002, has recently faltered, souring Turks on the process. But the changes, which have opened Turkey's society and its economy, have stuck.

Another factor has been the changing international landscape. The Muslim world has grown angry at the West, particularly the United States, for what Muslim countries say is behavior that singles out Muslims and creates a backlash of Islamic identity. Turkey is no exception.

But Turkey has also matured. The young professionals who walk along Istanbul's central avenues at a New York pace clutching sleek cellphones are only a few generations away from the time when Turkey became a state in 1923, yet far enough away from the secular revolution of Ataturk, Turkey's founder, to start to question it.

In recent years there has been a flurry of films, books and oral histories about Turkey's past, and the country feels more democratic than at any time in its short history, Ms. Neyzi said. Turkish Jews now have a museum.

Last year, Turkey held a conference on the killings of Armenians in the World War I era, described as genocide by many in the West but not by the Turkish government. Estimates of the deaths given by the Allies at the end of the war ranged from 600,000 to 800,000, and scholars more recently have put the figure at more than a million.

It is a painful process. When Orhan Pamuk, a Turkish novelist who has spoken out on the Armenian issue, won the Nobel Prize for Literature, the president of Turkey did not congratulate him. That is because Mr. Pamuk is seen as a tool of anti-Turkish forces, whose views of his country can be critical, instead of being seen as a writer who made the Turkish novel universal, Ms. Neyzi said.

"All the skeletons in the closet are spilling out," said Ms. Neyzi, who chose to return to Turkey after earning a doctorate from Cornell. "It's creating a lot of conflict in society."

The danger, Turks say, is that too abrupt a process can sharpen nationalist and Islamist sentiments and possibly lead to another coup by the army, a traditional safeguard of the country's secularism. There have been three in Turkey's short history.

That, in turn, would set back efforts at change and roll back debate, and could seriously damage the significant economic gains Turkey has made in the last six years.

To prevent that, Turkish intellectuals like Nazan Olcer, an art museum director, are bringing up the past in small bits. Shortly after the opening of the museum in 2002, it made arrangements to show a collection of an Armenian from Ottoman times.

“It was a hot iron,” said Ms. Olcer, sitting on a gilded loveseat in her office near the museum, which like Ms. Neyzi’s university was financed by the Sabanci family, the Turkish equivalent of the Rockefellers, which began building public learning institutions in recent years. “Everyone warned us not to do it.”

In the end, people came. By the time they left, they understood a little more about the collector and were questioning some of their own assumptions, Ms. Olcer said.

“You remind people to think twice,” she said. In 2005 the museum brought the first Picasso to Turkey, and this year it exhibited Rodin sculptures. The fact that the figures were nude did not seem to bother devout Turks, who came in large numbers, Ms. Olcer said.

On Tuesday, in another dip into the past, the museum will open an exhibit about Genghis Khan, including some of the earliest Turkic writing and inscriptions.

“A very important dialogue is beginning,” Ms. Olcer said. “I want to tell them the history. Not with a heroic approach. Not with strongly accented nationalism. What they were missing was the knowledge.”

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