

# RETRANSCRIPTION & SYNTHESIS OF SULTAN AKSU INTERVIEW

07.02.25 - 14h30-15h45



## **Sultan Aksu muhtar of Rasimpaşa Mahallesi**

Sultan Aksu is the muhtar of Rasimpaşa Mahalle. She has been elected in 2019. She defines herself as a mother, a feminist activist and a local community member, engaged for the dialog between cultures and communities. Her commitment to intercultural dialogue and the fight against gentrification and touristification is evident in the various public statements he has made on his social networks and in press articles. She is also committed to supporting minorities, notably the LGBTQIA+ community.

## **The function of a muhtar**

A muhtar is the elected village chief. In towns, similarly, each district has a muhtar but with a slightly different status. Muhtars and their village councils are elected during local elections for five years. However, political parties are not allowed to nominate candidates for these positions. Each city has several districts. In medium-sized cities, there can be dozens of wards, and in large cities the number can be well over a hundred. Each has a muhtar. Urban muhtars have fewer duties than rural muhtars, ranging from registering neighborhood residents to providing official copies of birth certificates and identity cards. The muhtar is thus a link between civil society and the public authorities, both a relay for public power (services) and a sounding board for the population's concerns (petitions), in a dynamic that is both top-down and bottom-up.

## **Rasimpaşa Mahalle**

Rasimpaşa is a neighborhood in the Kadikoy district, close to Yeldeğirmeni.

“Rasimpaşa neighborhood constitutes a good example for old mahalle tradition since it preserved the Ottoman heritage and it is officially under the urban protection. (...) Moreover, Rasimpaşa accommodates newcomers such as university students, international visitors (Erasmus students, upper middle-class artists, musicians, travelers).”

Historically speaking, The Ottoman-Turkish mahalle tradition was mainly formed around the religious community centers. Hence people in the neighborhood were relating to each other by “praying under the same roof” . So Mahalle is both a socio-cultural and a moral space, it is à social and physical unit where the inhabitants are physically and socially connected. Physically it was the smallest settlement unit including the sacred places (i. e mosque, church or

synagogue) primary school, fountain(when there was no infrastructure for water), convenient stores, and coffee/tea houses, Turkish bath, playgrounds (parks).

Mahalle was also an ethical universe that connected the locals through ties akin to family bonds. That means there are some common values and norms that the community observes. So, this community ethos was considered as the core of the urban social order. The Mahalle is defined by common values that lead to solidarity, security but also collective surveillance and control mechanisms.

“Hence it is greater than family and smaller than the city.”

Sezgi Durgun, “The Changing Meanings of Neighborhood in Modern Istanbul” - URL

## Synthesis

This interview enabled us to understand the administrative and institutional functioning, at local level, of Kadiköi and the organization of collective life, through the figure of Sultan Aksu and the role of the muthar. An intermediary body between local authorities and civil society, the muthar acts as an interface, a liminal role in the mahalle, itself defined as a liminal space by Sezgi Durgun in his article “The Changing Meanings of Neighborhood in Modern Istanbul”.

During the 75 minutes of the interview, many people entered and left Sultan Aksu's office (dropping off pet food, dropping off or collecting mail or administrative documents, requesting printing, etc.), demonstrating the wide range of local micro-services and the plurality of uses of this local instance. The office of the muhtar is “self-managed common space” as defined by Sultan Aksu herself. It is a place for social interaction and local services, used by the most vulnerable but open to all.

Given the context and Sultan Aksu's personal commitments, her role focuses mainly on day-to-day issues and intercultural dialogue, but also on urban planning and, in particular, issues of urban renewal, the right to the city, housing and healthy living, which she brings to the attention of public authorities through numerous petitions.

While she doesn't directly fight against touristification, recognizing that this phenomenon is also one of the causes of the neighborhood's cosmopolitanism, she does fight against one of its symptoms and the unprecedented development of Airbnb, driving up property prices, and provoking evictions of tenants, thus participating in a gentrification phenomenon. Sultan Aksu has little recourse to resolve this situation, however, as he has no power on his own scale, and cannot mobilize existing local, regional or national legislation. Paradoxically, it's in his office that tenant eviction letters are stored, issued by the court following legal action by landlords.

The role of muthar and its inscription in a physical space make it an alternative instance of the neighborhood, a place for sociability, meeting and debate. This spatial materiality makes it a particularly important instance in neighborhood social relations, where, for example, the various activist movements (environmentalists, feminists, LGBTQIA+...) have no permanent spaces in which to gather (apart from certain regular events such as the Kadiköi sessions, jam sessions also becoming spaces for debate) and exist more online.

This interview has to be linked with :

- The article of Sezgi Durgun, “The Changing Meanings of Neighborhood in Modern Istanbul” - [https://dergipark.org.tr > download > article-file](https://dergipark.org.tr/download/article-file)
- The interview of the owner of “Dimo Café”

## **Interview**

### **What is your work ? What is your role in the neighbourhood ?**

I'm elected by the local people. Caring is important for me, as a mother, to refund purpose of life. It's a full time job, 7/7 day, I have to be there for any kind of social issues everyday, night/day. I'm really a social active that brings important bonds with the neighbor in solidarity. My biggest role is to help on renovation. I myself live in a rent flat and feel insecure. The earth shaking danger creeps everyone, and I want to contribute in order to help solving it.

### **Who are the mane users helped here ?**

We have local people that is stays in the neighbor, youth people are helping for food, furniture for dogs, other students .... Dog and cats also are a community here helped and nourished  
All types of people in the neighbor can come to me : bank, business, documents for shops, renting, postal handling.

### **How is the network of solidarity here in the neighbor ?**

Historically, working class people were working there and then bought an house here, then it got time a very close community, that always worked together, and with syndicats (trade unions) so everyone is really involved win helping the other by habits.

### **What about the role of touristification and Airbnb ?**

I am against airbnb but there aren't any rules about it at local or national level, but there is not a social movement asking for government rules to regulate it.

### **What are the gentrification effects ?**

Much more housing here in the past, business here is rising a lot since Gezi park (2013) the social center moved to Kadikoi. After the covid pandemic, all the prices for houses raised a lot, people moved here. Every part of the neighbor is gentrified.

There is also lots of drugs also entered in the neighbor, alcohol though was not allowed before then got into it Kadikoi became more famous fancy, because of different vectors of gentrification : alcohol development , transport got really more accessible

People come to Kadikoi to feel free, to party, transport being easier, then it became quickly a party and coffee life neighbor, youth neighbor. The working class is getting replaced by richer people (artist, architects, ...) in terms of householdings. Not good qualities of school in the here, people sent their children in close neighbor beside. No middle class here, here there is only students, old people, working class.

People can easily entertain here, it is also a safe place for not having racism, have a drink... buildings also reflects this by some renovations, colors...

### **What about cultural minorities in the mahalle ?**

Present in the neighbor but it was really old, there are no more minorities really present now (< 100 household).

### **What are the main renewal projects in the mahalle ?**

This neighbor has the oldest buildings, so for the earth shaking, it's not the safest. Needs a lot of papers to construct something new. The patrimonial politic linked to earth shake, is a way to prevent from gentrification. So many buildings are collapsed, they don't fix them.

### **What about the effect of activism in the neighbourhood ?**

Squats in Kadikoy has a long lasting impact and brings activists from other neighborhoods.

Even if the squats no longer exist, they brought an activist spirit in the neighbourhood that last.

### **As a muhtar, is your space a common space ?**

It is very much, more than it, it is a local spaces where people breakfast. All the groups (including here LGBTQIA+) are welcomed too, I am into gathering people as possible. It is a self managed common.

### **What are your relation as a muhtar with local and regional authorities ?**

There is strength relations and bonds with local government and with Istanbul City. No tensions with the state government or municipality, she is part of the government.

*ex: She has a box full of householders that wanna make renters get out of their flats to make airbnbs. She has to handle those papers but she doesn't have any power on it, except that she can do petitions on an upper level.*

### **Context & biases**

We were a group of 4 Frenchmen and 1 Belgian, with a Western outlook on the one hand, and on the other a very Western apprehension - through our geographical contexts (Paris, Marseille, Brussels) - of the realities and challenges of gentrification in popular centralities. Furthermore, our understanding of the role of the public player in preventing gentrification came up against a lack of knowledge of the local, regional and national ecosystem and institutional workings.

Moreover, the interview with Sultan Aksu took place in his office, in the presence at one point of two young men who did not introduce themselves, and a person introducing himself as an agent of the Kadikoï municipality. The exchange took place in English/Turkish translation (by Barish). As a result, we were unable to perceive all the nuances of the exchange, the comments of the other people and the unspoken issues at stake.

### **Initial interview guide**

#### **Herself**

What is your role in the neighborhood ?

Why did you want to do this job?

What are the instances of democracy / are there assemblies / what is the governance of the neighborhood ?

Are you paid for your function ? Do you have another job?

Are the inhabitants activists and what are they fighting for?

Which kind of people are coming to you ?

#### **Usages conflict**

What is the proportion of : shops / hotel hostels / housing / ... ? How it have evolved through time ?

What are the functions of the neighborhood: night life, music in the street, cafes, cat care etc

Is there a new transport line that have changed the neighbourhood population those last few years ?

Appearance / esthetic of the neighborhood ? How it have evolved through time ? To whom is address this aesthetic ?

What is the rent price ? How it have evolved through time ? What is the vacancy proportion ?

What do you think about the non-regulation of prices ?

What are the big projects of urban development ? What are the urban development intentions for the future : from the government / from you / from the neighborhood population ?

**Users**

Who uses the space, in terms of cultural habits / sociological profiles / minorities / tourists / families : ... ? How it have evolved through time ?

From when was a new population ?

How do you feel it specially ?

**Strength dynamics**

Her relations to

\*Kadikoy governor

\*Instanbul governor

\*Central government

**Her vision to prevent gentrification**

Social housing ?

Activist shops / cooperatives ?

Solidarity?