The Dönmeh: Sabbataist legacy in the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey

Ömer Bilal Almak – Csilla Morauszki
András Lőrincz – Zuzana Balcová

Abstract: The aim of the article is to introduce to the foundation and the history of the Sabbataist community in the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey. The article is focusing on a relatively small number of Jewish descendants in the mid-17th century whose community could survive and their members managed to reach high societal and administrative positions by the late 19th century. The Dönmehs later played a key role in reform movements which led to a political transition in the 1920s. This paper analyses the relation of the Dönmeh's identities and the community's preferences regarding the form of government.

Keywords: Ottoman Empire, Turkey, Tanzimat, Judaism, Dönmeh, Sabbataists

Introduction

The Jewish religion, Judaism, which is considered one of the oldest religions of human civilization, has been marked by several historical milestones during its existence. Some of them influenced Judaism positively and led to its theological enrichment, some of them, on the other side, had far reaching negative effects on the faith's preservation. Sabbatai Sevi[1] was one of those who contributed momentously to the evolution of Judaism and even nowadays,

[1] The name of Sabbatai Sevi is spelled in various forms in different publications. Sabatay Sevi and Sabetay Sevi (in modern Turkish), Sabbatai Sevi (Cengiz Sisman), Sabbatai Tsevi (Pawel Maciejko), Sabbatai Zevi (in some English references) and – following more genuine way in pronunciation – Shabtai Tzvi (Marc Baer) or Shabtai Zvi (Dovid Rossoff).

his name has an influential meaning in the history of the Jewish faith, particularly with regard to modern-day Turkey. Sabbatai Sevi was a Sephardic Rabbi who proclaimed himself a Jewish messiah and thus started the Sabbatian Jewish messianic movement in the 17th century in the Ottoman Empire. Despite the fact that at the beginning, the Jewish community and religious authorities were suspicious of his real intentions, Sabbatai gradually managed to gain his supporters. He started to be followed by many believers who were enthusiastically eager to join their theological leader on the way to the Promised Land, Israel, in order to achieve the desired salvation. The Sabbatian movement was however ended nearly 20 years after its beginning by the unexpected step of Sabbatai, who decided to convert to Islam. Some of his followers supported him by also accepting a new belief. Since that time, these newly converted Muslims were considered crypto-Jews and called "Dönmeh", the ones that betrayed their own God. Sabbatai was actually forced to convert to Islam by the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed IV and he and his followers continued to maintain Jewish traditions. This community of "Dönmeh" was not latent, but publicly known and was gradually getting its own specific shapes and features. "After the death of the 'converted Messiah' in 1676, some of his believers developed a sectarian life and apocalyptic theology mixed with Jewish, Christian and Islamic beliefs and rituals." (Sisman, 2007, p.38). The Sabbatian community co-lived and was assimilated with other "societies" and during decades, it was transformed into the Ottoman Islamic Sabbatian culture.

The life of Sabbatai Sevi

The founder of the Jewish Sabbatean movement, Sabbatai Sevi was not only a Sephardic Rabbi and Kabbalist but also the 17th century's most often mentioned and most widely known messiah claimant. Although there is no consensus about his birth and death date, some sources claim that he was born in Smyrna (Izmir, Turkey) on the ninth of Av (August, 1626) and died in Ulcinj (Montenegro) on 17 September, 1676. Another interesting thing is that – allegedly – he was exiled by the Turks to Ulcinj on the Day of Atonement. These dates are of

great importance[2] to the Jewish community which might confirm Sevi's "messiah-story" today and might have confirmed it centuries ago, back then his time.

Sabbatai's family roots led back to the Romaniotes, a Jewish group living in the territory of today's Greece. His father, Mordecai Sevi was a poultry dealer who grew into a successful merchant after Smyrna became the centre of the Levantine trade.

In accordance with the prevailing custom of Oriental Jews of the time, Sabbatai was destined to study the Talmud. However, it turned out very soon that he got fascinated by the mysticism and the teachings of Kabbalah that proved to be his real passion. Sabbatai – rather than learning from a master in Kabbalistic knowledge – was entirely self-taught which means that he often isolated himself while studying and practicing asceticism.

From 1648, Sabbatai increasingly showed signs of a mental illness (Gershom, 1973, p.130), probably manic-depressive disorder which symptoms provided convenient framework to proclaim himself the Messiah. Sometimes, he was able to go for days without sleep than he stayed in bed for two weeks at a time. Since people at that time did not know or understand how manic depression works, they agreed that Sabbatai Sevi must have been meditating or communicating with God. The movement forming around him gained legitimacy in 1665 when a young Kabbalist, Nathan of Gaza verified his story, after recognising the truth of his mandate in one of his visions. (Maciejko, 2010, pp.361–378; p. 362) He became Sabbatai's "publicity agent" proclaiming that the Messiah arrived and Jews are ready to go back to Israel. However, the Turkish Sultan, Mehmed IV was not about to give up the land of Israel to the Jewish community nor was he ready to accept Sevi's claim of being the Messiah.

Worried by the rise of Jewish religious enthusiasm, the Sultan had soon captured and imprisoned him which move brought a turn into Sevi's life as well as to the history of the Sabbatean movement. Allegedly, Mehmed IV made him choose between his life and his faith and – unexpectedly and shocking to most of his followers – Sevi decided to convert out of the faith and became a Muslim.

[2] The ninth of Av is traditionally the date of the Jewish annual fast that commemorates the destruction of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem. Also, according to ancient rabbinic tradition, the Jewish Messiah will be born on this day. Likewise important is the day of his exile: the Day of Atonement – also known as Yom Kippur – is the holiest day of the year for Jewish people.

Sabbatai Sevi, who was exiled by the Sultan in 1673, died three years later in Ulcinj. Similarly to his life, his death is also clouded in mysteries, however most historians agree that he died of natural causes.

The history of Dönmeh

The Dönmeh in the Ottoman Empire

The Jews influenced by Sabbatai Sevi were mainly from the descendants of those who had been expelled from Spain, Portugal, South Italy and Sicily between 1492 and 1537. (Güleryüz, 2013) Around 40,000 Jews had to emigrate from Spain (Kamen, 1999, pp.29–31) and tens of thousands from adjacent Southern European monarchies. Sultan Beyazid II. offered refuge to the sufferers of the Spanish Inquisition and the Sephardi Jews were allowed to settle in the wealthier cities of the empire (Istanbul, Sarajevo, Salonica, Bursa, Tokat, Jerusalem, Damascus and later Izmir). These Jews fulfilled various needs in the Ottoman Empire: the Muslim Turks were largely uninterested in business enterprises and accordingly left commercial occupations to members of minority religions. (Inalcik, 2001)

The status of the Jews in the Ottoman Empire can be described as fair due to the tolerance they enjoyed under the *millet system*[3] which granted autonomous position for the Jewish religious community within the empire. The Ottoman Jews enjoyed similar privileges to those of the Orthodox and Armenian Christians. They were represented by the *Hakham Bashi*, the Chief Rabbi. They were also considered as people of the Book and protected by the Sharia Law of Islam.

During the Classical Ottoman period (1300–1600), the Jews, together with most other communities of the empire, enjoyed a certain level of prosperity. The only problem was the conflict between the Arab and Jewish communities in the Middle Eastern *eyalets* (provinces)[4] along with the lack of unity among the Jews themselves. The Jews came to the Ottoman Empire from different places and bore their own cultural characteristics thus they founded

[3] Millet is a term for the confessional communities in the Ottoman Empire. It refers to the separate legal courts pertaining to "personal law" under which communities (Muslim Sharia, Christian Canon law and Jewish Halakha law abiding) were allowed to rule themselves under their own system. After the Ottoman Tanzimât (1839–76) reforms, the term was used for legally protected religious minority groups, similar to the way other countries use the word nation. (Sachedina, 2007)

[4] "Long before the culmination of Sabbathai's mad career, Safed had been destroyed by the Arabs and the Jews had suffered severely" (Mendelssohn, 2008, p.241)

separate congregations. In 1665 Sabbatai Sevi became the leader of the Jewish community of Smyrna.[5] His fame soon extended far and wide.[6] His messianic movement had centres in Italy, Germany (Hamburg) and the Netherlands (Amsterdam). (Kohler and Malter, 1906) There had been concerns that his followers posed a threat to the Islamic characteristics of the Ottoman Empire, thus he was forced to either convert or become a martyr. He chose the former option. 300 Sephardic Jewish families from his followers – regardless of his efforts or their willingness to follow Sabbatai's step – decided to convert to Islam. This group was later known as the Dönmeh (also spelled Dönme), convert. (Kirsch, 2010) There was a shock[7] in the Jewish community after Sabbatai Sevi's conversion, because of the so called Jewish Messiah was converted out of the faith and became a Muslim. Soon after that the mass basis of the Sabbatai's entire messianic movement fell apart. Despite the disintegration of the movement there were a few "true believers" – mostly Sephardic Jews in the Ottoman Empire – who remain loyal to the ideas. They were committed to believe – no matter what happens. Nathan of Gaza exploited these believers to say that the conversion is the true moment of test: only those who believe now, will be privileged to be part of the messianic movement. So there remained a small core of Sabbateans in the Ottoman Empire which soon emerged in abroad as well.

The Dönmeh itself was also divided into several branches after Sabbatai's death. The original sect of Smyrna was called *İzmirli*, referring to Sabbatai's hometown. The first schism happened after Jacob Querido – a relative of Sabbatai Sevi[8] – claimed that he was the reincarnation of the self-proclaimed Jewish messiah. He was followed by many of the Sabbateans who were called as *Yakubiler* after his Islam name, Yakup. (Shaw, 1991) Soon after the death of Sabbatai, a Kabbalist rabbi claimed that the true reincarnation was Berechiah Russo (known in Turkish as Osman Baba), which caused the second split from the İzmirli group. Osman Baba's followers were later called *Karakaş* (Blackbrowed). The

[5] Sabbatai's views gained more popularity among the Jews of Palestine during his visit in Jerusalem. However, he had to leave the Holy Land in 1665 because "the rabbis of Jerusalem viewed Sabbatai's movement with great suspicion, and threatened its followers with excommunication." (Kohler and Malter, 1906)

[6] It is important to realise that the entire Jewish world of 1665-66 believed that Sabbatai Sevi was no mere "prophet" or "teacher" but the Promised Messiah and a living incarnation of God. "It was the only messianic movement to engulf the whole of Jewry; from England to Persia, from Germany to Morocco, from Poland to the Yemen." (Testimonies of Jewish Converts to Islam, p.44)

[7] Baer (2010, p.3) argues that Sabbatai's decision was not that shocking for Ottoman Jews because they traced their origins in Portuguese and Spanish Jews "who had either converted or faced the choice of converting".

[8] Jacob Querido (ca. 1650–1690) was the son of Joseph the Philosopher and brother of Jochebed, Shabbatai Sevi's last wife.

Karakaş group was many times larger than the Yakubiler and became more eclectic sect as it had also links to the Bektaşi Sufi order. (Baer, 2010, p.9)

After the Second Battle of Mohács (1687) and during the following decades the Ottoman Empire lost considerable territories and its regional power status weakened simultaneously with the internal cohesion. The influence and power of Ottoman Jews continuously declined throughout the 18th century as they lost their influential positions in trade mainly to the Greeks. (Gerber, 1999) The process of breaking down the Jewish social structure began in the last decades of the 18th century when many families were forced to leave Smyrna (the then centre of Ottoman Jewish community) due to a fire that destructed their synagogues which were the homes of their original congregates. "In addition to the destruction of the synagogues, the breaking down of the Jewish social structure was exacerbated by the growing gap between the rich and poor." (Jewish Virtual Library, n.a.)

By the mid-19th century the formation of Jewish communities were changed significantly and social divisions based on class began to develop. Throughout the 1860-70s Jews founded their own institutions: schools, hospitals, newspapers and the community began to modernise. The Dönmeh community of Salonica even founded a university as a part of Feyziye Schools Foundation. The era produced a novel Jewish leadership which members were in favour of modernisation and had pro-Western attitudes. Parallel to these changes a reform period started in the Ottoman Empire marked by the modernising Young Ottomans and the nationalist Young Turks. In such political environment the Ottoman Jews held a variety of views on the role of Jews in the Ottoman Empire, from loyal Ottomanism to Zionism. (Campos, 2005, pp.461–463.) In the era the Dönmeh played an enormous role on the Young Turk movement, a group of modernist revolutionaries who later brought down the Ottoman Empire. (Kirsch, 2010)

However, until the second half of the 19th century the inter-communal relations in the Ottoman Empire were merely sound and positive.[9] In most cities residential pattern showed that different communities (i.e. Muslim, Christian, Jewish, etc.) lived separated, however the quarters of the three communities were scattered about in the cities (Quatert, 2005, pp.179–186) which fact indicates mutual understanding in a relatively harmonious milieu.

[9] The status of the Jews in the late 19th century is probably well demonstrated in a statement sent by the Jewish community of Salonica to a Parisian Jewish journal, the *Bulletin* in 1893: "There are but few countries, even among those which are considered the most enlightened and the most civilized, where Jews enjoy a more complete equality than in Turkey [the Ottoman Empire]. H. M. the sultan and the government of the Porte display towards Jews a spirit of largest toleration and liberalism." (Dumont, 1982, p.221)

In this societal atmosphere the Young Turk movement – which had its origins in secret societies (Demonian, 1996, p.11) – was favouring to foster radical changes. Its ideology was based on contemporary Western political philosophy infiltrated through the newly founded schools: liberalism, materialism, positivism and nationalism. This nationalist movement was later the driving force of the revolution in 1908 (which resulted the gradual creation of a new governing elite and the replacement of the ruling elite in the religious communities) and also had a key role in the Armenian genocide. The Jewish members of the Young Turk movement worked for the cooperation of various Jewish organizations in Turkey, and many of them insisted that Turkish Jews were Turks first and Jews second. Prominent Jewish Young Turks included Emmanuel Carasso (a Sephardic Jewish lawyer from Salonica who pioneered the masonic movement within the Ottoman Empire), Mehmet Cavit (a Sabbatean economist, who became minister of finance in 1909) and Marcel Samuel Raphael Cohen (known as Munis Tekinalp, who became one of the founding fathers of Turkish nationalism and an ideologue of Pan-Turkism, then of Kemalism, after 1923).

The Dönmeh in the Republic of Turkey

The proclamation of the republic and the adaptation of Western institutions could have brought relative benefits for the Jewish minority in Turkey due to the Kemalist principles[10] and the provisions of the Treaty of Lausanne[11]. However the nation-building process meant social homogenisation in the same time: all who lived within the new Republic, were regarded as Turkish citizens "possessing equal rights, regardless of language, religion, and race; at the same time, they expected the various non-Turkish and non-Muslim inhabitants to wholeheartedly adopt Turkish customs, language, religion, and culture." (Bali, 2011) Consequently the Jews were subjected to heavy pressures toward assimilation (Turkification). Soon the relative failure of Turkish Jewry to fully "Turkify" themselves led much of the country's elite to view them as an ungrateful minority. (Bali, 2011) Another reason of that was the economic and political success of Jewish elites. The conflict coupled with increasing external intervention during the Great Depression. In the mid-1930s the English, Germans and Russians transformed Turkey into a vast stage for propaganda and espionage. The Nazi

[10] The six principles of Kemalism are: republicanism, populism, secularism, reformism, etatism and nationalism.
[11] The Treaty of Lausanne was a peace treaty that officially ended the state of war between Turkey and the Entente Powers since the onset of the World War I. The Treaty of Lausanne covered a broad range of general issues, but Articles 37–45 specifically regulated the status and rights of non-Muslims – the Armenians, Greeks and Jews – living in Turkey. (Toktas, 2005, p.398)

propaganda machine was also stressing the "Judeo-Masonic danger." (mason.org.tr website, n.a.) Many of the former Jewish leaders of the Young Turks lost favour of Atatürk and even his close associates were exiled or assassinated. Certain communities of the Dönmeh were also blamed by Dönmehs themselves: in 1924 Mehmet Karakaşzade Rüştü (a Karakaş Jew) accused Dönmehs of lacking patriotism and not having been assimilated. Soon discussions spread into newspapers including the ones owned by Dönmehs: Ahmet Emin Yalman, in the newspaper (Vatan) he owned, accepted the existence of such groups. (Nefes, 2013, pp.247–264)

As a consequence a debate emerged about the role of Sabbatean newspaper owners and media moguls in Turkey. This debate then was re-emerging in the 1950s and also in the 1970s in the case of Abdi İpekçi, who was the editor of the leading Turkish daily Milliyet, and his relative, İsmail Cem (İpekçi), the editor of the newspaper Politika. (Bali, 2001, pp.414–415) Since the early 1920s conspiracy theories and accusations were generally in connection with Sabbateans in Turkey. As a matter of fact, many Dönmehs managed to keep their positions during the 1960–1990s. Members of the Sabbatean community could hold high positions in the society – which were often regarded as disproportionately high compared to their number.

Even nowadays, there can be found contemporary followers of Sabbatai Sevi in Turkey. However, only little information is provided about this community. Even estimates of numbers of Sabbateans still living on the Turkish territory differ widely. Regarding the more pessimistic probability, according to some resources, there are only about 100,000 followers of Sabbatai Sevi in modern-day Turkey. Some of the resources speak about several hundred thousands. In general, Jewish society is accepted by Turkish Muslims, but only if they do not claim to be Muslims even if they are clearly not. Sabbateans still have good positions in Turkish society. It is generally known that most of the Sabbateans have left-wing preferences and are part of the Turkish cultural elite.

In comparison with the rest of Turkish society, the Dönmehs' level of education and culture gives them the appearance of an elite group that has risen above the masses. The Dönmehs, who along with the non-Muslim sectors of Turkey's population dominated the country's economic life in the first years of the Republic's founding, were viewed as powerful competitors by others who desired a greater share of the economic pie. They were also seen as an interest group that collaborated with the Jews, with the two communities looking out for one another. (Bali, 2001, p.430)

The ideology of the Dönmeh

The ideology of the Dönmeh was evolved by the millenarian ideas of the approach of the messianic time[12] – which ideas were quite popular around 1666. It was also formed by Kabbalistic traditions during the second half of the 17th century and revolved primarily around the Eighteen Precepts, an abridged version of the Ten Commandments.[13] After the conversion to Islam, the Sabbatian believers were careful in complying with Islamic rules and regulations.[14] (Sisman, 2007, p.41)

Despite their conversion to Islam, the Sabbateans secretly remained close to Judaism and continued to practice Jewish rituals covertly. They recognized Sabbatai Sevi as the Jewish Messiah, observed certain commandments with similarities to those in Judaism, and prayed in Hebrew and later in Ladino. They also observed rituals celebrating important events in Sevi's life and interpreted Sevi's conversion in a Kabbalistic way. Much of Dönmeh ritual is a combination of various elements of Kabbalah, Sabbateanism, Jewish traditional law, and Sufism. (Baer, n.a.)

Baer claims (see Doğan, 2011) that their syncretistic religion, along with a rigorously maintained, distinct ethnic identity, meant that they were neither Jews nor orthodox Muslims. Since the convert of the first Dönmehs, "Jews did not consider them Jews. They did not consider themselves Jews. According to Islamic and secular Ottoman law, they were not Jews because their ancestors had converted to Islam." (Doğan, 2011) As a matter of fact, they cannot identify themselves as Jews openly because of some reason. This reason could relate to their aim of not losing current positions and keeping the opportunities for existence in the future. As formerly mentioned, Jews had a declining role in the 17–18th century Ottoman Empire. In the same period the Dönmeh maintained the former urban character of the Ottoman Jewry with important centres in Istanbul and Salonica – which fact could later play a role in forming the political thought of the Dönmeh.

[12] The readiness of the Jews to believe the messianic claims of Sabbatai Sevi may largely be explained by the desperate state of European Jewry in the mid-17th century. The bloody pogroms of Bohdan Khmelnytsky had wiped out one third of Europe's Jewish population and destroyed many centres of Jewish learning and communal life (Cohen, 1948). There is no doubt that for most of the Jews of Europe there could not have been a more propitious moment for the messiah to deliver salvation than the moment Sabbatai Sevi made his appearance.
[13] The additional commandments were concerned with interactions that may occur between the Dönmeh and the Jewish and Muslim communities. Their aim was to avoid marriage between these groups.
[14] "Outwardly Muslims and secretly Jewish Sabbateans, the Dönmeh observed traditional Muslim holidays like Ramadan but also kept the Jewish Sabbath and major holidays." (Yardeni, 2009)

Being eclectic the Dönmeh itself since the beginning of the Sabbatean movement, the 19th century brought more serious cleavages within the entire Jewish community. The Dönmeh's social structure was also challenged by new social and financial divisions. The most numerous Jewish communities has transformed or dissolved due to several accidents.[15] The societal transformations, the new possibilities to leave the declining Empire as well as the narrowing chances for getting ahead were together the factors which have fostered the changes. As a consequence, Dönmehs got further from Judaism and become more cosmopolitan. In this period Salonica became the centre for crypto-Jews instead of Smyrna.

The mid-19th century brought differentiation in Jewish communities. Jews originally handled the towns' commerce, but they were gradually replaced by the Armenians and Greeks who used more up-to-date methods and mastered the foreign languages required for the export-import trade. As a result of this, many of the Jewish communities scattered. Large number of them impoverished and became frustrated thus disappointed with the existing establishment. Those who belonged to the wealthier could reach better education (even in abroad) and later turned from commerce towards politics during the Tanzimât reforms and the First Constitutional Era. Some of them welcomed the political reforms, which was also true in the case of the Jewry of the big cities due to the large number of minorities who supported Ottomanism[16].

During the 19th century the relations between the Dönmehs and the European Jewry became tighter due to the great number of wealthy Dönmehs, who went to European schools. Their identity was at that time questioned by the nationalist Turks, who regarded their growing influence as a national security risk. Their fears were increasing as the Jewish immigration started after the establishment of the Israel in 1948. The dual-loyalty accusations were intensifying in Turkey as many of the Dönmehs made close relations with Israeli organisations.

[15] As mentioned earlier, in 1772 a huge fire broke out in Smyrna (Izmir) and all of the synagogues were destroyed. The synagogue in Bursa was burned in 1851, in Edessa (today Urfa) Jews survived a big fire in 1880, in Edirne all the 13 synagogues were burned to the ground in the great fire of 1905. In Istanbul there had been several fires in the 18th century (in 1704, 1715, 1729, 1740, 1751, and 1756) devastating the Jewish quarters. Fires broke out during the 19th century in 1872, 1874, 1883, 1890, 1891, 1894, and 1896. Further fires broke out in various quarters in the years 1900; 1905, 1908, 1909, 1911, 1912, 1915, 1918, 1921, 1922, 1923, 1924, and 1941. (Jewish Virtual Library, n.a.)

[16] Ottomanism promoted the equality among the millets. The idea originated amongst the Young Ottomans in areas such as the acceptance of all separate ethnicities in the Empire – regardless of their religion – to Ottomans and to equal their civil rights. (Shaw, 1977, pp.55–171)

It is generally known that still nowadays most of the Sabbateans have left-wing preferences and are part of the Turkish cultural elite. (One reason for that is right-wing parties and Islamists were usually regarded them as enemies of the nation or the religion. Another reason is the Dönmehs close ties with secularism, left-wing political thought and liberal Western ideas.)

Proving that Sabbatean views are still presented in our modern time, some thoughts should be marked about a neo-Sabbatean group called Donmeh West. The organisation was founded in California in 1972 under the leadership of Reb Yakov Leib HaKohain who is a descendant of Turkish Sabbateans. Donmeh West has almost 1000 members and – according to its official webpage[17] – the group is still growing. Its main goal is to disseminate and practice the more than 300 year-old Kabbalistic transmission.

Conclusion

The story of the Dönmeh is the chronicle of a relatively small community emerging in the 17th century which members later managed to play a key role in the history of Turkey. The community could survive due to their concealed identity for a long time. However this fact caused fragmentation within the Dönmeh and in the same time it caused aversion of the Turks towards Jews. The members of the Dönmeh found themselves in a situation during the 20th century that they are members of hostile group in the eye of the nationalist Turks whose number was continuously growing for decades. Besides that the identity of the Dönmehs was not clear either. As the Dönmeh's role in the formation of the republic is inevitable, they were also regarded as "agents of some external interests". Their role in establishing the modern-day secular republic shall not be disregarded; however it would be misleading to state that the current political system is exclusively shaped by the then influential Dönmehs of the late 19th and early 20th century. What is certain is that the Dönmehs would preferably be a part of a community in which national and religious identity is overshadowed while secular values and civil rights are more displayed.

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[17] Besides the webpage, the private foundation is also operating a Facebook, a Twitter and a Google+ page which shows well how active it is in the social media. (donmeh-west.org)

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http://culturalrelations.org
institute@culturalrelations.org

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