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Salih Yucel

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SAYYID İBRAHİM DELLAL: AN ANALYSIS OF UNTOLD STORIES OF A ‘LIVING HISTORY’

Salih Yucel*

Abstract: İbrahim Dellal (1932-2018) was a community activist and played a pioneering role in establishing religious and educational institutions after his arrival in Melbourne in early 1950. As the grandson of a late Ottoman mufti, being educated at the American Academy, a Baptist missionary school in Cyprus, clashed at times with his traditional upbringing based on Islam, service and Ottoman patriotism. İbrahim’s parents, especially his mother, raised their son to be *Osmanlı Efendisi*, an Ottoman gentleman. He was raised to be loyal to his faith and dedicated to his community. I met him in the late 80s in Sydney and discovered he was an important community leader, a ‘living history’, perhaps the most important figure in the Australian Muslim community since the mid-20th century. He was also one of the founders of Carlton and Preston mosques, which were the first places of worship in Victoria. I wrote his biography and published it in 2010. However, later I found he had more stories related to Australian Muslim heritage. First, this article will analyse İbrahim’s untold stories from his unrevealed archives that I collected. Second, İbrahim’s traditional upbringing, which was a combination of Western education and Ottoman *Efendisi*, will be critically evaluated. He successfully amalgamated Eurocentric education and Islamic way of life. Finally, his poetry, which reflects his thoughts, will be discussed.

Keywords: *İbrahim Dellal, Australian Muslim history, Turkish immigrants, Sayyidhood*

INTRODUCTION

İbrahim Hussein Dellal¹ was a leading Muslim figure in the post-World War II Australian Muslim community. The National Archives of Australia described İbrahim as an enthusiastic community leader and philanthropist in “Uncommon Lives: Muslim Journeys,”² a compilation of material devoted to the history of Muslims in Australia. He became a community activist in the state of Victoria since his arrival in 1950. He played an important role in the establishment of religious and cultural organisations and institutions in the late 50s and early 60s. His role in

* Associate Professor Salih Yucel is a lecturer at Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilisation, Charles Sturt University, and part-time lecturer at Australian Catholic University.

¹ While I was editing this article, İbrahim Hussain Dellal died on Friday, 7 December 2018.

² Salih Yucel, *The Struggle of İbrahim: Biography of an Australian Muslim* (New Jersey: Tughra Books, 2010), 80, accessed December 7, 2018, https://www.academia.edu/1884993/The_Struggle_of_Ibrahim_Biography_of_an_Australian_Muslim.

bringing Turkish immigrants to Australia and facilitating their settlement is unforgettable. He had a hand in many firsts in the Victorian Muslim community, making him a pioneer in educational institutions and religious organisations. It is important to know his background before analysing his untold stories.

İBRAHİM'S LINEAGE

İbrahim has been linked to Muslim history through lineage. He was the grandson of the last Ottoman mufti of Cyprus. His grandfather Sheikh Mehmed's mother was a widow with six children who immigrated to Cyprus in the middle of the 18th century. Apparently, a wealthy Arab businessman named Kanan supported the family in Cyprus. Kanan may have been a relative, since it is Arab custom for the males to take care of female relatives, increasing the possibility Sheikh Mehmed Abdul Aal had an Arab background. İbrahim did not have information about his great-grandfather or why his great-grandmother immigrated to Cyprus.

While Sheikh Mehmed was born in Cyprus, İbrahim did not know his maternal grandfather's ethnic background. He assumes he was Turkish. Looking at his last name, Sheikh Mehmed may have Arab roots. 'Abdul Aal (or Abdu al Aal) is made up of two words and one article. 'Abd is the word for "servant" and ul or "al" is the article "the". The second Aal means family. Sheikh Mehmed also spoke Arabic well. I found tattoos on the left hand of İbrahim's aunt, Cemaliye (see figure 2 in below). This is part of Arab culture in the Middle East rather than Turks.

After completing his studies at Al-Azhar University, İbrahim's grandfather Sheikh Mehmed travelled to the Balkans and worked in religious affairs, though it is unclear if he was assigned the position. He learned Bosnian and Albanian, interacted with Orthodox Christians, and was comfortable working with individuals possessing differing religious and ethnic backgrounds. This made him a suitable choice as a spiritual religious leader of Cyprus. Ozkul provides the list of Ottoman muftis³ in Cyprus between 1571 and 1878. According to this list, 64 of the 114 muftis were Sayyids.⁴ It was Ottoman policy to assign Sayyids due to great respect of the state as well as the people. The genealogical heritage into which İbrahim was born plays out in important and interesting ways throughout his life.

The mufti was second in charge after the governor, acting as a supreme judge and head of religious affairs. İbrahim related:

If there was tension or an uprisings in a region, the Ottoman Sultan would send my grandfather to that region. Because he was like a fire fighter. He was seen by the Ottoman rulers, particularly the Sultan, as a religious leader who had the ability to untangle the problems.⁵

³ Ali Efdal Ozkul, "Osmanli idaresinde Kibris'ta gorev yapan muftuler ve faliyetleri (1571-1878)" [The Muftis and their Activities in Cyprus Under the Ottoman Administration (1571-1878)], *Turkish Studies* 8, no. 7 (2013).

⁴ Sayyid is an honorific title given to descendants of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

⁵ Interview with İbrahim Dellal in February 2008

Ozkul's study in 2013 supports İbrahim's assessment.⁶ The muftis' mission was to publish a *fatwa* (authoritative legal opinion) to help solve conflicts. They were also naturally assisting Muslim judges (*kadi-naip*), the heads of Sharia court (*Şer'i Mahkeme*), because they belonged to the *ilmiye* (elite scholars) class. Muftis were councillors to the Sharia Court.⁷ One of the muftis' tasks was to teach sharia in *madrasah* because they were trusted by the people, including non-Muslims, in Cyprus. Sometimes they would be called as witnesses in the courts. Also, the Ottoman Sultans would determine their Cyprus policy based on muftis' reports,⁸ in particular after it came under the control of the British Empire.

Born in 1932 in Larnaca, Cyprus, İbrahim was surrounded by Turks, Greeks, Armenians, Jews and Arabs. He was exposed to a mix of faiths and cultures, which continue to enrich Cyprus. Growing up in harmony with people of different faiths and cultures gave rise to his love of humanity and belief in coexistence. Religion and spirituality were like blood running in the veins of İbrahim's family. Children were named after prophets or their relatives.

İbrahim's educational upbringing showcases the multicultural environment within which he was raised. In Cyprus he attended the American Academy, a Baptist missionary school founded in 1908 by Rev. McCaroll and Mrs McCaroll, who were from the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America.⁹ After graduating from the academy, İbrahim attended the British Technology Institute. The influence of his Western education clashed at times with his traditional upbringing based on Islam and Ottoman patriotism. According to İbrahim, there was anti-Ottoman propaganda at the academy. Ottomans were called "*karasakallilar*,"¹⁰ black bearded people who are not civilised and brutal for achieving their imperialist policy in the island. While his upbringing had an air of multiculturalism, it was also rife with Eurocentric attitudes that were often against the location's traditional culture.

Some of the things İbrahim learned at the academy contradicted what he had learned at home. The purpose of academy was "to provide Christian education, which encompassed not only academic training but a focus way of Christian learning."¹¹ His instructors taught Ottoman history differently to what İbrahim learned from his family. He envisioned the Ottomans as civilised people, dedicated to justice and social welfare, whereas his history books depicted an imperialist empire expanded by the sword. Doubts formed in his mind about the grand empire to which his family was loyal. He was hesitant to voice his doubts to his parents out of fear they would withdraw him from the academy.

There were more issues that added to the clash of cultures. Despite enjoying the dance lessons at school, İbrahim did not attend them due to his religious and cultural background, which enforced separation of the sexes. He was wary of what his parents would say if they

⁶ Ozkul, "Osmanli idaresinde Kibris'ta gorev yapan muftuler ve faliyetleri."

⁷ Ibid, 460.

⁸ Ozcan Mert, "Osmanli belegelerine gore bir Kibris gazetesi: Zaman" [Cyprus Zaman according to Ottoman Archive] accessed December 2, 2018, <http://dergipark.gov.tr/download/article-file/9926>.

⁹ For a history of the academy, see "Our History: Making an Impact in the Community since 1908," accessed November 24, 2018, <http://www.academy.ac.cy/page/history/>.

¹⁰ Interview with İbrahim in February 2008.

¹¹ "Our History."

found out about the few dancing lessons he took. During the 1940s, Larnaca was still conservative in terms of family values and gender relations. Boys and girls would mingle at the academy, but mixed activities would not occur too often after school.

İbrahim questioned which way was correct: the lifestyle he experienced at the academy or at home. This uncertainty occasionally distracted İbrahim from his studies. Sometimes he was left under the greater impression by his school life, but as he pondered over it, he felt guilty. Most of the time, he wanted to follow his parents' teachings instead of the school's teachings. There were some students who converted to Protestantism from Greek Orthodoxy, Armenian Orthodoxy or Judaism. İbrahim added, "There were a few Turks, but I had not known of any of them to change their faiths at the Academy."¹²



Figure 1: İbrahim at St Kilda Luna Park on the stairs of a model plane

IMMIGRATING TO AUSTRALIA

İbrahim immigrated to Melbourne, Australia, in 1950, following his brothers, in search of a better life. There were few Muslims and no Islamic organisations or public mosques in Melbourne. Still a young man, İbrahim adapted to the dominant Australian culture and lifestyle. It was not until 1956 that İbrahim met with more Muslims. During this time, he met Huseyin Ara Efendi, Ali Acem Efendi and Mustafa Amca, who were all Ottoman citizens and lived with their dignity in Australia.¹³ Huseyin Ara Efendi was blind, but he did not want to be reliant on state welfare. He would fish and sell them in the market to get by. His independence from state welfare left indelible marks on İbrahim's soul. He witnessed these late Ottoman citizens had high goals and big dreams. İbrahim shared the author Mustafa Amca's dream that he saw Turks

¹² Interview with İbrahim in February 2008

¹³ For details, see Yucel, *The Struggle of İbrahim*, 52-61 .

coming to Australia more than a decade before their immigration. Although Mustafa Amca was blind, he went to airport to greet the Turks in 1968. He wanted to find out what he saw in his dream a decade ago. He asked İbrahim about their dress code and physical appearance while shedding tears of happiness. Mustafa Amca's tears left unforgettable marks in İbrahim's heart and mind. İbrahim was very surprised at Amca's pride in his Ottoman identity.¹⁴

İbrahim felt spiritual emptiness and gradually reinvigorated his roots within his new homeland. He played an important role in establishing the Cypriot Turkish Society in 1956, Islamic Society of Victoria in 1957, Preston Mosque in 1963, Australian Federation of Islamic Societies in 1964, Coburg Mosque in 1971, Australian Federation of Islamic Councils in 1976 and Selimiye Foundation in 1991, the last of which established six schools and Sunshine Mosque in 2001. To serve the community was a source of honour and pride for his family. This was due to the emphasis of service in Islam where it is perceived as an act of worship and, in Turkish culture, where it is a fundamental value. The culture of service and hospitality was the legacy of İbrahim's parents. In addition to what he learned from his parents, his missionary school education was also focused on serving the community while upholding high ideals and morals. The academy's motto was "To Grow and to Serve."¹⁵ Despite clashes between his traditional upbringing and American Academy education values, he was able to reconcile and integrate both successfully into his life. He injected Islamic spirituality to his Western style education. This supported him to integrate in Australia without compromising his faith and family values.

In the early 90s, he did not consider retiring from his volunteer work. Despite officially retiring in 1991 from the telecommunications industry, he continued to work as a volunteer six days a week. The thought of decreasing the time he spent helping others did not appeal to him. "If I don't do this, I will die. It is a part of my life, and I will do this until my last breath," he said. İbrahim believed "a peaceful society and a good economy are based on a good education with moral values."¹⁶

UNTOLD STORY: DELLAL'S FAMILY SAYYIDHOOD

In 1984, İbrahim visited his maternal aunt, Cemaliye, in Mersin, a city in the southern part of Turkey. His grandfather owned property in Mersin and Iskenderun, both coastal towns in southern Anatolia. İbrahim's aunt and uncle had moved to Anatolia to manage the family's properties and conduct business.

When İbrahim visited his aunt, he felt as though he had been reunited with his mother. The elderly aunt spoke at length about what had occurred during her lifetime. İbrahim called her 'a living history' and watched her cry over the stories she told. She was like a mother to İbrahim. He stayed with his aunt for a day and described his life in Australia. İbrahim explained the opportunities awaiting the settlers were a blessing as was the natural beauty of Australia.

¹⁴ Ibid, 80-81.

¹⁵ "Our History."

¹⁶ Interview with İbrahim, March 2008

However, what he loved most about Australia was the opportunity to serve the community. He stated,

I was helpful to the first migrant Turks and other ethnic migrants such as the Greeks. I would help in translation, finding them homes, jobs, organising the community and religious events, building mosques. This is my satisfaction and a part of my life that I love. If I do not make these a part of my life, I feel greatly bothered.¹⁷



Figure 2: Ibrahim with his aunt Cemaliye in 1984

*With Cemal Hala
in
Mersin/Turkiye
August-1984*

Cemaliye revealed a secret of Dellal's family. She said, "my darling do you know why you love to serve your religion, the community and humanity?" Ibrahim was silent for a while and felt his aunt wanted to say an important thing. She continued, "It is the primordial nature of descendants of the Prophet to serve the religion and humanity. I have a secret about our family which I would like to share with you. We are Sayyids, the descendants of Prophet Muhammed (pbuh)."¹⁸

This was the last time Ibrahim saw his aunt. Her death in 1985 caused Ibrahim great sadness. However, his belief in the Hereafter remained strong. He knew that life in this world is temporary and no one will live forever. He also knew only the deeds of that person would remain on this planet after the soul has departed.

Ibrahim kept their Sayyidhood secret even from his family. During my interviews in 2008, I noticed all his uncles were named with the common names of Sayyids. I already knew his

¹⁷ Interview with Ibrahim, March 2008

¹⁸ Interview with Ibrahim in April 2008

family had some connection with Arabs. When I asked him if his grandfather had any relation with the descendants of the Prophet. He said “yes,” but did not want me to include this in his biography. I think he did not want this revealed because of his humble character. Last September, he was sick and during a conversation with a group of visitors, he unintentionally revealed his family had biological connections with the Prophet. Sayyid, as a title, is used often for Prophet Muhammed (pbuh) and his descendants. The Prophet first used the title Sayyid for himself¹⁹ and then gave it directly to his grandson Hasan²⁰. In Islamic literature, it is an honorific title denoting male accepted as descendants of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).²¹

Contemporary Islamic scholar Said Nursi (d.1960) considers the Prophet’s descendants the centre for the spiritual, moral progress of the ‘World of Islam’ and the source and guardians of the Prophet’s practices. Also, they are charged with complying with the Prophet sunnah in every respect.²²

Most of the Sayyids do not want to be identified as İbrahim. He even did not tell his children until the age of 86 when he was very sick and had had two surgeries. He felt a moral responsibility to reveal his family genealogy.

RELATION WITH THE AJAYOGLU FAMILY

One of the few Muslim families the Dellals were close to in the 1950s was the Ajayoglu family, which immigrated to Australia in 1952. İbrahim and Mehmet Ajayoglu were good friends and worked closely together for the betterment of the Muslim community until Mehmet’s death in 1978. Mehmet’s experiences and views left a deep impression on İbrahim, who took Mehmet as a mentor in community service despite some cultural differences. Mehmet was a Pan-Turanist (some call Pan-Turkish), which was one of the three major philosophical and political groups before the fall of the Ottoman Empire.²³ Pan-Turkism ideology was based on secularism and nationalism, which aimed to unite all Turks under one flag.

The Ajayoglu family originally lived in the Karachai region, which was populated by the Muslim Turkic people of North Caucasus. Karachai is on the border of Russia near Georgia. When Germany invaded Russia during World War II, the German army occupied Karachai. The people of Karachai lived under Ottoman rule before the Russian annexation of Karachai in 1828. However, they always resisted Russian domination and periodically established an autonomous state.

Mehmet was an activist and community leader in Karachai. The Ajayoglu family and others who remained behind in Karachai and did not resist the German occupation were branded as

¹⁹ Tirmidhi, Hadith no. 3615, accessed April 17, 2017, <https://sunnah.com/urn/634770>.

²⁰ Bukhari, Fadıilü ashâbi-Nabî, 22, Sunan Abu Dawud, Hadith no. 4662, accessed April 11, 2017, <https://sunnah.com/abudawud/42/67>.

²¹ Engseng Ho, *Graves of Tarim* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, Berkeley, 2006), 149; Kazuo Morimoto, “Introduction,” in *Sayyids and Sharifs in Muslim Societies: The Living Links to the Prophet*, ed. Kazuo Morimoto (London: Routledge, 2012).

²² Said Nursi, *The Flashes*, trans. Sukran Vahide (Istanbul, Sozler Publication, 2001), 39.

²³ The other two groups were Pan-Europeanists and Pan-Islamists.

traitors by Stalin. When the German army began withdrawing from Russia in 1943, many residents of Karachai feared the Communist government's harsh punishments and fled with the German army. They were prepared to settle in any land where they would be safe, since those who remained behind were executed or deported. However, they could not imagine it would take seven years to finally settle nor could they imagine their final home would be Australia.



Figure 3: Mehmet Ajayoglu (second from right) with Said Samil (in the middle, the grandson of Shaikh Samel who is considered as hero for Caucasian Muslims and an idol of nationalism) in Beyazit Mosque, Istanbul

The Turanian Cultural Festival was organised by the Turanian Historical and Cultural Association, of which Mehmet Ajayoglu was the president, at Estonian House in West Brunswick on Sunday, 25 September 1977. In his speech at the festival, Ajayoglu said: "I am sure this good beginning of Turanian Cultural Movement will progress to remedy many human problems..." In his talk, he was very proud to be of Caucasian ancestry and referred to noble blood running in his veins.²⁴ Although a friend for more than two decades, I could not observe any ideological influence of Ajayoglu on İbrahim. After the World War I until the late 80s, nationalism had a very strong influence on Turkish peoples throughout the world. However, there is no mark of nationalism on İbrahim's philosophy. It can be said İbrahim encountered all political and religious movements and he was able to get along and work with them without confrontation. He encountered Sufis, Salafis, political Islamists, religious radicals from different faiths, nationalists, aggressive secularists, Islamophobists, racists, self-interested and aggressive atheists. Instead of clashing with their views and actions, he tried to find common ground with all. However, sometimes he failed.

In my view, İbrahim strongly believed Islam flourishes in a peaceful environment and society. If there is conflict, then truth cannot be heard. In his view, without peace and security,

²⁴ I found Mehmet Ajayoglu's written speech notes and a publicity flyer for the Turanian Festival in İbrahim Dellal's personal archive and the author received a copy of both.

there is no good education or economic prosperity. This is mentioned many times in his talks and poems.



Figure 4: İbrahim singing at a wedding

İBRAHİM AS A POET

Initially, the author was not aware İbrahim wrote poems. It was only by working on his archive that his poetry came to light. He wrote more than 20 poems, mostly in Turkish. The poems are lyric, allegorical and emotional. Love in the poems is more about God's love, humanism and nature rather than a lover. He does not neglect epics and imaginary heroism in his poetry. İbrahim was not just a believer of education in practice, but also his poems. He imagined the idealistic educators in his poems and views them as heroes. For some, it can be considered as utopian. There is no rhythm in his poetry as they are mainly prose. The quality of his poems can be questioned literally; however, I found them inspirational.

LIFE IN A NUT SHELL

Life is short
Time is limited
We are travelers passing through
Life will end...

In this poem, İbrahim's focus is on striving hard to do right, be just and live a healthy life. He ends his poem with accepting destiny. Also, he feels a strong faith in the Hereafter by saying "the bird flies back to home." İbrahim often uses "Life is too short and there are important things need to be done." His 20 unpublished poems can be roughly classified according to themes of moral values, the betterment of society and his vision of a bright future. In the moral category, he focuses a lot on *muhabbat* (love) of humanity, love he inherited from his parents, a love that is not merely theoretical, but one that is embodied in practice. The word *muhabbat*

(love) is used frequently in his poetry. He views *muhabbat* as an indispensable source of peace and social harmony in brotherhood, which is like a garden with different fragrances, flowers and fruitful trees with various colours living together. Like the 13th century Ottoman mystic Yunus Emre, İbrahim writes “*sevelim ki sevilelim*,” which means “if you love, you will be beloved.” In one of his poems, İbrahim says “love is a power with which to overcome every wrong and a key to open every heart.”

He imagines an idealistic society in his poems. He says “*Hepimiz asigiz, Aydinlik yariniz, Ulkumuz dogruluk, bu bizin farkimiz*” – “We are lovers, tomorrow will be bright, righteousness is our ideal, which differentiates us from others.” For Dellal, the way of gaining happiness after attaining faith is to have a vision, know his mission and then put the vision and mission into practice. He praises heroism in compassion and it is one of his goals to achieve through education in his poems

One of his poems is dedicated to Isik College (now Sirius College), one of its campuses in Sunshine, Victoria, is named as İbrahim Dallal. İbrahim's poem about Isik College was provided a musical accompaniment for the campus students by the music teacher Berat Bahure Antepioglu.

Sometimes, like a spiritual traveller, optimism and pessimism are reflected in his poems because of the immorality in secular society. However, optimism often overcomes the pessimism. He says:

HAVE HOPE
 Have hope
 Have faith in Allah
 Strive hard
 Have patience
 Only Allah gives and Allah takes
 There is nothing you can do
 But strive and strive hard
 To do the right.

He thinks nothing can be done and looks determined, but then strongly encourages striving hard. First, it looks like he is pessimistic, but then injects hope to the human soul in the poem. I observed optimism is not imaginary in his poems, but in practice of his works and daily activities.

In some of his poems, İbrahim expresses admiration of the Ottomans while being critical of the 1916 Sykes–Picot Treaty. He viewed the treaty as a secret agreement between France and the UK to divide the Muslim world into many countries as a result of “divide and rule.” İbrahim reflects this agreement in his poetry as putting the Muslim world into a long and deep sleep. In a few poems, he addresses Muslims: “Wake up wake up, Enough is enough. You have had more than enough rest.” He is proud of his Ottoman lineage. In his poem, “*Kibris’li Turkum, Atam Osmanli, Yanlisi alkislayamam, Zalimi sevemem, Atam Osmanli*” – “I am a Cypriot Turk, My forefather is Ottoman, I cannot applaud wrong, I never like the tyrant, My forefather is Ottoman.”

The family is another theme İbrahim writes and talks about. İbrahim views family as a cradle of civilisation and love is one of the strongest ties in the family. He is critical of secularism in regard to the erosion of family values, particularly about children. In his poem, he says: “They live with us but they do not think like us. We gave them our love, but we could not give them our thoughts. They came through us but not belong to us (to a different world).” However, he always reflects his love for his children and dreams to be a role model for them. His poetry skills are amateur, but the words are powerful.

CONCLUSION

İbrahim was one of most important figures in the history of Muslims in Australia since 1950. He will be remembered for his substantial contribution in establishing educational and religious institutions. Based on his biography, İbrahim’s life can be categorised into three stages. The first İbrahim is undecided about his identity. On one hand, he cannot neglect his family values and traditional upbringing, while on the other hand he is an admirer of the Western lifestyle due to the influence of his education at American Academy. This dual identity was part of his life until the late 50s. The second İbrahim felt emptiness in spirituality and sought to fill that gap. After encountering Ottoman citizen Huseyin Ara Efendi, Ali Acem Efendi and Mustafa Amca, he began filling that gap. İbrahim became active in the community works, particularly with the new arrival of Turkish immigrants in 1968. This stage continued until 1991. The third İbrahim is after his retirement. He fully dedicated himself to voluntary community service, as former lecturer of the University of Melbourne Dr. Abdul Khaliq Kazi summarises, “İbrahim never quit and left. He never just sat at home. İbrahim never divorced himself from the community.”²⁵

This article discussed İbrahim’s untold stories, such as his identity crises when he was young, Sayyidhood and relationship with the Ajayoglu family. All three stages of İbrahim’s life, vision and goals are reflected in his poetry and these are an important and previously unexamined aspect of his biography. İbrahim successfully blended Eurocentric education without losing the practice and value of Islam or hindering his practical engagement with the wider Australian society, which can be a model for integration. As someone who has lived in Australia and the US more than 31 years, I have never seen any immigrant who has successfully amalgamated Eurocentric education and the Islamic way of life as much as İbrahim did. How did he do it? This requires further study, which is out of scope for this article. İbrahim will be remembered through this legacy by future generations.

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²⁵ Yucel, *The Struggle of İbrahim*, 174

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