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Violence in Rural Regions: the Case of Modern Turkey

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Abstract

The violence encountered on the countryside in Turkey is different from its counterpart in metropolitan areas by nature and this is only expected. Matters of honor regarding chastity, dispute over land, personal conflict and enmity leading to a crime or fights among children drifting along adults or trouble befalling close kin or friends and quickly encompassing those feeling responsible for them are the most frequently encountered forms of infringing the penal law. Some cultural traits also pave the way to possible violence easily. Personal memories are made use of in the article.

Key Words: Violence; crime; rural; cultural.

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Introduction

In rural Turkey it is mostly young people who indulge in violence and crime since young individuals are hot tempered, inexperienced and uncalculative in their dealings with other young people.

G.H. Shaw (1938, 2003: 296) says *Turkey is an agricultural country where people mostly live in villages under simple conditions. The inmates in prisons reflect this fact. The convict is usually a villager between the ages of 22-39 and the crime committed is due to revenge, jealousy or land dispute.*

On the countryside even crimes are of rural nature. Armed robbery, a peculiarity of urban centers ^(*), is almost never encountered for instance. Instead, crimes in accordance with rural life do occur from time to time. Some cultural grounds and reasons appear to back up certain possibilities of violence.

The first and the second bank robberies in Istanbul were committed in 1961 by a Chevrolet admirer, *Necdet Elmas*, who did not kill anybody. He passed a lady-stocking on his head and used a gun to threaten the bank personnel. He was said to have used an evacuated watermelon to conceal his booty. He became a kind of Robin Hood because he spared the savings of a worker, who had happened to be a bank client waiting inside during his second robbery. *Elmas* had a culprit who was his namesake (last name: Sinkil), who somehow did not get to be so well-known as himself. The two buddies were denounced by an informer and got caught after being a cause of sensational news on newspapers, for a time. It turned out that he had also a young *fiancée*, who was very devoted to her handsome gangster. In mid 1970s *Elmas* was granted a one-week-long permission for his good conduct, which re-activated his fame, with various pictures on newspapers. He kept a kiosk in *Beşiktaş quartier* after his release. I once drank refreshments there in early 1980s and read the receipt's logo. It said *Buffet of Necdet Elmas*.

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On Black Sea, Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia regions village boys are taught how to handle guns. Turks, as a war-waging nation, do possess a long tradition of arms. As the expression goes “my horse, my woman and my weapon are my most precious items”. Our people used to keep arms against bandits. Arms symbolize courage as in the saying “the sign of a landlord is his generosity, the sign of a brave man is his marksmanship”. Arms are provided by smugglers, who even access remote villages. Children who grow up with weapons resort to use them in the smallest quarrels (summarized from Tezcan 1981).

Tezcan (1981:48) by reference to an article of *Harmandalioğlu* (*Forum Dergisi* issue number 167) also specifies that *in Pötürge-Malatya, taking life used to be an indication of bravery and gallantry! Men used to stain their hands with blood merely for the sake of being considered as valiant! They used to compete with one another in proving their prowess, which was best measured in terms of the number of killings accomplished!*

Playwright *Haldun Taner*'s unforgettable character *Ali* of *Keşan* eventually claims for a murder — while in jail as a mere suspect— and is converted from the whipping boy of the ward onto a hero and later is engaged to a legendary bullyboy career.

In a similar manner; in one of *Yashar Kemal*'s novels; the hunchbacked town-crier (*crieur public* / official announcer); while innocent and nevertheless imprisoned as a murder suspect; boastfully claims himself as the murderer. But the chief judge is not convinced during his trial. Upon his release, the metallic-voiced deformed man, having once tasted the reputation of a murderer, will actually kill *Kurtbogha* (the real murderer of the blacksmith and the slanderer of himself) just underneath the huge plane tree, in the presence of a dense crowd!

Quick tempers are also responsible for trouble: “People, particularly the men, are quick to anger and quick to draw knives or guns. Even the boys carry knives, and hardly any adult villager goes unarmed. On one occasion a twelve-year-old lad was brought into us with a severe cut across his fingers. He had attempted, exactly like his elders, to intervene between two comrades who had drawn knives in anger, and had caught one knife by the blade. Over the years I had evidence that the total number of acts of violence is considerable, and enquiries in other parts of Turkey led me to suppose that it is not in any way untypical” (Stirling 1965: 246).

A Classification of Rural Crimes

Chastity of females having an overwhelming significance; many crimes of honor are committed on such grounds. *İçli* (1993:151) lets us know that *affairs involving women's honor and sexual jealousy constitute the first most important cause of murder cases in provincial Turkey (followed by feuding in the second order).*

In the village community the individual's honor and chastity means the honor and chastity of the entire community. In case of a rape committed against a woman, the whole village lynches the actor. Each villager considers it his duty to conform to the traditions and customs (N. Erdentuğ 1977: 49).

Crimes originating from land disputes are common. Subsistence of the villager depends on land. People's affairs center on what is perceived by them as important, especially on economic terms. Certain writers explain the bride money from an economic outlook, as well. The woman works both in and outside house and contributes to the welfare of the family. This is why bride money comes into question to balance the asset value represented here.

My recent traveling comrade in a bus returning from the Aegean region, *Roll-Bread* (*Sesamkringel*) *Baker Ahmet*, told me about a violence incident in a village adjacent to his own village. A coffee shop owner had a mentally deranged teenager son, who got beaten by two men. The coffee shop owner got into a rage. He took his revolver and shot the two men dead. *Ahmet* sympathized towards the killer and regretted his possible sort. “If it had been a single murder, then it wouldn't be so bad; now the penalty will be much too heavy” he reasoned.

Besides one's own children, a fight involving a kin may ensue comprisal of others into trouble. *Stirling* (1965: 247) confirms those judgments for the case of a Turkish village of the Province *Kayseri*, in Mid Anatolia:

At the seventh grade, a bank cashier's son came to our class from *Konya Ereğlisi*, the hometown of the gangster. Based on hearsay he had heard in that town; the new student once said that the gangster had been a juvenile gang leader in his boyhood, organizing others in acts like stealing hens from the barns.

In 1967 another name, *İrfan Vural* and his culprit *Mehmet Edis* got killed in a skirmish soon after their escape from the prison, allegedly while making preparations to rob the Covered Bazaar. A *commissaire*, *Kenan*, nicknamed “Mike” (after Mike Hammer) was glorified by the press as the star of the police operation.

“The primary function of lineage groups, defense in quarrels, is no minor matter. Normally, it is regarded as the duty of a man to side with his agnates on all occasions and be prepared if necessary, to feud for them”.

Sexual crimes are sometimes committed in rural regions. When my mother was a village teacher; a teenager boy was raped, strangled and the body dumped into a flour bin in the wheat mill. Two accomplices were identified. One was a student in her class. Some time later when I thumbed through my mother’s grade note-book, I ran into that student. On the opinion space she had written “he is serving his prison sentence in the children division of the district jail”.

One of my mother’s colleagues; a green-eyed unmarried female teacher was harassed by words by a few lads while walking towards the village. Joking among themselves to the detriment of the young girl, they said things like “we should grab this green duck and throw her into the river”. She was horrified. I vaguely remember that the lads were scolded and intimidated by the gendarmes upon her report. At the time sexual harassment was not a properly defined offence as it is now. (Even years later my mother used to frequent her former colleague in another city. She once said the retired widow preserved the remnants of her former beauty. “The mosque may long be collapsed but the altar is still erect”).

Homicide

In the village where my mother got appointed as a school teacher, another crime was committed before our arrival. A young man was shot dead by another young man, his peer and neighbor. The house of the killer was separated from the house of the victim by a third house, that of Cypriot *Fatma Hanım* (In her youth she somehow came to settle there) and she rented this house to my mother and moved into her second empty house. The killer’s mother was Z. -Woman.

The rumor circulated that the weapon of crime, a revolver, was found inside her underpants during a frenzied search by other villagers, including the village-watchman and the headman; soon after the crime. The victim’s nephew, *Yusuf*, was my peer and friend. He had a good voice and sang songs. He mourned his uncle and improvised *épopées* after him and propagated his legend.

Yusuf’s family was a well-to-do one. He went to *Kepirtepe* Teacher Training School as a day student and stayed at a paid *Studentenheim* at nights. In later years one day I visited him in his private boarding house. He showed me his dormitory room, his bunker, locker. He expressed his contentment about the life conditions and praised the food. Nevertheless, he kept saying “good, fine, but could it ever equal one’s own house?”.

At the moment I was about to take the entrance test for the state boarding Lycées and looking forward to better opportunities than my house could afford. (*Haydarpaşa* Lycée was my realistic dream). So, this comparison amazed me and upset me. A village boy as he was, he considered his home circumstances far superior.

Sexual Abuse of Animals

It is no secret to state that village boys usually find an outlet for sexual satisfaction in the “person” of donkeys and maybe dogs. In her research at an Ankara village, Delaney was curious about sexual matters but as a woman she had a hard time obtaining information in that point. She reasoned that “sheep would seem to be the most likely candidates for sexual activity, since boys are often alone with them and they are docile”. Informants of other authors then corrected her that “it was only possible with animals one does not eat”. In a footnote (1991: 51) Delaney says “I have since been told informally (and not by a villager) that sheep are not used for intercourse, but donkeys are”.

In fact a shepherd would never do such a thing. He would not let others to abuse his sheep in that sense, either. Shepherds are respected personalities. They are friends of the nature and the stars. Many last names employ the word shepherd. Prophet Moses is said to be a shepherd by trade. French author *Alphonse Daudet* praises a shepherd (*berger*) in one of his stories.

One day, the daughter of the owner of the herd (approximating the *agha*) brings his food, substituting herself for the regular food-bringing *valet*; but she gets marooned on the mountain top, following heavy rainfall and the accumulated water pools.

The shepherd starts up a dialogue with her, which is an honor for him. The inaccessible girl so often dreamt about is in his reach now. She finally falls asleep from fatigue and he covers her delicate body against the cold. Regarding her as the most precious lamb of the herd, he admiringly watches her beauty and listens to her easy rhythmical breathing for the rest of the night. He later thanks heavens for having protected him from a wrongful sinful act towards his platonic love.

In some regions like Central Anatolia, an expression in the sense “haven’t you ever copulated with a donkey?” is directed towards a person who is clumsy and unskillful with his hands. I remember a scene from the comedy “*Hastane mi Kestane mi?*” (Is it the hospital or the chestnut? — the two words rhyme in Turkish — from years back, where this donkey issue is insinuated though not openly expressed. A nurse is taking the amnesia of a young man. He replies that he has no medical history of illness except for being kicked by a donkey once upon a time. The nurse goes on: “Why did the donkey kick you?”. Then the counter reply follows: “Don’t inquire into the reason why; that is a romantic affair”.

In classical legal medicine texts, sexual propensity for animals is defined as *zoophilie* or *bestiality* under the title of deviant behaviors or *paraphilias*; but here insistent and adult behavior is in question rather than a passing adolescent phase enabled by environmental opportunities and non-condemned if not provoked by cultural structure. (In a similar sense, for instance, passing “bosom friendships” between two perfectly normal girls in puberty has nothing to do with committed adult lesbianism).

An Islamic cleric said on a TV broadcast that the act is sinful and the doer should regret it and renounce it. It appears that abusing donkeys is not much of a horrifying thing in the peasant culture of Turkish society. In some societies it is not the case. For instance, I once attended a class of the humanity course Ancient Anatolia in Bosphorous University. At that session, late Professor *Bahadır Alkım* said that Hittites issued that penalty for such behavior.

Flirting Between Sexes as Potential Trouble

Flirting between young lads and girls is not explicitly done in eastern and southeastern and even in central Anatolian regions on the countryside. Elopement of a girl is almost always followed by serious trouble. In western villages boys may have furtive dealings with girls despite all preventive attempts by the village society. (Mutual jealousy then may lead to trouble among competing suitors).

While my brother was in summer holiday in high school days he got friendly with Ali, a village originated waiter. Ali had a girlfriend in his village. On some summer nights he secretly met her in a barn, putting my brother and another friend of his nearby as loot-out men against the danger of getting busted by the family or village people. My brother confessed to that perilous cooperation only years later.

During my recent Aegean trip, while I took the train from *İzmir* to *Aydın* via *Germencik*, watching the countryside from the window, I saw an enlaced couple just near the railroad but protected from the opposite side by a hedge. The teen-ager peasant girl was on top of the teen-ager peasant boy, kissing him passionately, just at that moment!

After the separation of my parents, during the next summer holiday, my mother sent my elder brother to my paternal grandfather’s Thracian village, merely to convey the idea of the hardship in caring for a child. He had a hard summer, waking up early and leading the cows to the meadow for grazing, barefoot. (My paternal aunts deliberately hid his shoes to make him resemble his peers). Nevertheless, he had his first platonic darling in the village, *Hamiyet!*

After his return, the poor girl is said to have wept just behind the garden wall. Later on my elderly brother in school got paly with another *Hamiyet*, a modern and also frivolous modern girl, the daughter of an official at the state-owned sugar plant. Perhaps her name, as a tribute to the first one, meant more to him than the girl herself. (He was an athlete at school; he died at a very young age).

The Usually-Encountered Village Bouncer

In some villages a tough man, the village bully, may establish a domination by force over the other males and enjoy the resulting prerogatives. If the village is small in size his presence is more irritating. My gym teacher cousin used to be a village teacher. (He is a strong, bulky man who had placed third in inter-universities weight-lifting championship). He once mentioned about the bouncer-type of his village and I inferred his annoyance by the presence of the man around. When the bully was away, traveling or working elsewhere or serving another prison sentence, the village gained some respite.

When my mother as a new bride visited my father’s village she witnessed an incident in the grocery shop. A tall man with a stern face just walked in and practically took away all the candies from a huge jar. The grocer moved away from the counter as far as possible and kept silent. The man had a murder in his history and more than a decade of prison time. The title of “Killer” was a glorification for him rather than a stigma. Even though in Turkish

penal code the penalty for forced robbery was extremely (and disproportionately) heavy, he did not “give a damn” about it, obviously.

A closer friend of mine than *Yusuf, Hasan*, one day revealed more about *Yusuf*'s shot uncle mentioned above. He had been a man seeking excuses to challenge others to fights: At wedding and circumcision ceremonies he used to spoil the calm atmosphere. Once he died, his former misdeeds were unmentioned and even forgotten. The saying says “the blind man dies and he becomes almond-eyed”. His killer was a submissive person, probably one day he got fed up from the other's oppression and killed him.

He had done it in an ambush, not in a one-to-one confrontation. This point was stressed in *Yusuf*'s legendary narrations of the killing and his glorification of his dead uncle. (At the age of twenty-one I encountered *Hasan* in a Thracian town. We embraced each other, had tea together and commemorated old memories. We played the wrist game and he beat me. Ironically, he had kind of grown into the new bully of his village, in a sense! He said “I have neither schooling nor a wife and children; so I am fearless in front of probable trouble and don't hesitate to fight and get my way, under all circumstances!”). The statement upset me for his sake.

In his superb novel, *A Painted House*, John Grisham deals with the theme of bullies in a cotton farm in rural Alabama in early 1950s. The events are narrated from the eyes of a child, who at his small age also has his share in collecting cotton. The grandfather is a relatively poor cotton farmer. When the harvest time approaches he employs waged pickers. They are mountaineers or Mexicans. They set up their own camps at the barn or in the open. One of the mountaineers, Hank, is an all-muscles, defying type. One of the Mexicans, nicknamed “Cowboy” is a switchblade master with a dark history behind. One day the wagers play baseball and then trouble emerges when Hank and Cowboy roughly compete with one another:

[Cowboy had just pulled out a knife]. “He jerked it, and a very long switchblade popped free. Cowboy made a beckoning motion, as if to say, Come on big boy. Hank was staring at the blade. The knife shocked everyone, and for a few seconds there was silence. Then my father, holding the bat, stepped between the two” (Grisham 2001: 148). (A few days before, downtown, a young man from the feared local Sisco family, had been badly beaten by the mountaineer “Hercules” Hank and he had already gained a fighter's reputation in the vicinity of the farm).

Then Cowboy disappears with Tally, Hank's sister. On an early morning hour before his departure he stabs Hank to death on a bridge. The narrator boy sees it all but keeps it secret. Hank's absence is not noticed because he had departed before his family. As the narrator boy's father guesses, “Cowboy and his new bride would simply blend into a vast city”.

(Later a rain soaks the cotton fields. The cotton gets too wet to pick and the ground too soft. Mud cakes on boots and sticks to picking sacks and the harvest is spoiled. Finally the wagers break camp). “They had been camping out for six weeks in our front yard. Their old tents were sagging under the weight of the rain. Their sleeping mattresses were splattered with mud. We sat on the porch and watched them gather their junk and pack it all. I was suddenly frightened by their leaving. They would be home soon, and Hank wouldn't be there. If they had picked another farm, Tally wouldn't have met Cowboy. And Hank might still be alive, though given his lust for violence he was probably doomed to an early death” (Grisham 2001: 376-377).

Conclusion

Violence on rural Turkey is different from the urban violence and occurs from time to time because of various causes peculiar to rural life style and human relations. The actors are predominantly young people. Love of firearms and their illegal carrying seems to accelerate crime rates. While a committed crime means trouble for those parties directly involved, any crime is a lesson for the others and a source of annoyance spoiling the pleasure of life for a certain time interval.

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