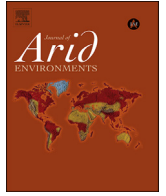




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The suburbanization of rural life in an arid and rocky village in western Turkey

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ABSTRACT

In this longitudinal and qualitative study of rural life in western Turkey, I argue that ecological conditions, state policies, and villagers' agency play a significant role in the suburbanization of villages. This paper traces the history of how villagers in the Yuntdağ north of Manisa, an arid and rocky region, used nomadic heritage and Islamic culture as economic resources. I argue that villagers have gone from being cultural heritage entrepreneurs to wage laborers, incorporating and identifying with the ethno-national identity of the nation while adjusting their lives to the state. In so doing and with the bureaucratic redefinition of the villages in the region as urban neighborhoods, the meaning and definition of rural life gradually is erased. Based on over fifteen years of ethnographic fieldwork, 2000–2015, this paper considers the suburbanization of rural life and the highly gendered economic decisions villagers make.

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1. Introduction

Rather than a story about the dissolution of villages due to migration, this paper traces the ecological and cultural foundations of villagers' integration into an urbanizing region as they shift focus from sustaining rural life through heritage-based entrepreneurship to becoming wage laborers. As this existential, economic, and material transformation takes place, the definition of the village begins to vanish until the very nature of villages is erased through a bureaucratic redefinition of these spaces as urban neighborhoods. Through an historically attentive analysis of villagers' lives over the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, this paper considers the move to more closely integrate psychically, economically and culturally into urban-oriented state structures and national ideologies. I argue that ecological conditions, state policies, and villagers' agency play a significant role in the transformation of rural life in the arid and rocky region of western Turkey called the Yuntdağ, north of Manisa.

In the past, a residual nomadic economy kept village households alive. In this area, heritage and culture, carpet weaving and religion, as well as herding and cheese making have been economic resources, while agriculture has not been a significant source of income generation. Due to the aridity of the region, villagers can only cultivate vegetable gardens and small fields of wheat. For this

reason, like many other ecologically and politically marginal places, villagers in Kayalarca turned to culture as an economic resource (Cohen, 1999; Milgram, 2000). Through savvy entrepreneurial activities, villagers created employment in carpet weaving by founding a cooperative with the assistance of foreigners, Harald Böhmer and Josephine Powell who were knowledgeable about dyeing and export markets in textiles. Islamic education has also been an important source of employment as men have a tradition of aspiring to become imams.

2. Method

This piece is based on approximately twenty-eight months of ethnographic research spanning from 2000 to 2015. As an ethnographic and qualitative study, I strove to understand village life from many dimensions. While I initially began with a study of the women's carpet weaving cooperative in 2000, due to tension in the village resulting from suspicion about the cooperative director, I diverted this work to consider marriage practices. I then connected the two by studying household economy and the economics of marriage. This became my dissertation. Typically working in blocks of three weeks to a month, I visited the ninety-plus households with questions I used as a guide for conversation. I interviewed the women, although I also made an effort to interview men when I turned to studying household economy and later, Islamic practice (2008–2010). After gathering material based on these questions, allowing my informants to elaborate or change the direction of the

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discussion, I would return to Istanbul to consider my findings and formulate a new set of questions for another round of research. In addition, I participated in events such as weddings, funerals, and special prayer events, as well as lent my labor to the many tasks of rural life, such as baking bread, cooking, preparing feasts, collecting firewood, harvesting olives and so on. Because this is a small village with about one hundred households, I easily met and interviewed every household several times, though I formed closer relationships with some. To understand the shifting nature of rural life, I visited villagers who had moved to the city. Later, as I began to study Islam (2008–2010), I studied two imams from the region and their communities in two mosques in Germany, as well as saint veneration, the legacy of Islamic education and contemporary Koran schools in nearby villages (Hart, 2013).

2.1. A nomadic heritage: history and ecology

This longitudinal research uncovers an interesting case of women's agency in making illiberal choices, much as Mahmood argues (2005:5–10). To understand why women weavers who were once engaged in an internationally famous carpet-weaving cooperative would aspire to become urban housewives, it is important to consider the ecological and cultural foundations of rural life in this region and their critical assessment of life in such a place. The southern end of the Yuntdağ is a strikingly arid place with rough volcanic rock and little vegetation. The region has recently been the subject of work by the Food and Agriculture Association of the United Nations (<http://www.fao.org/forestry/18491-0837d2fa2485fed48fef42843053ebf80.pdf>). The project was designed to assist people living in marginal mountainous regions, including the Yuntdağ to decrease their tendency to migrate out. Describing this region, Ceci and Hofer write,

“Economic conditions are poor there, and livelihoods depend mainly on crop production, livestock and forest resources. The Yuntdağı Mountains are affected by problems that include soil and forest degradation, limited agricultural productivity, lack of access to markets, low living standards, unemployment, and out-migration (2009:95).”

While it is admirable that a project to assist villagers was developed, one should consider the fragility of the environment and past mistakes in development (Özden et al., 2004). This development scheme fails to note that agriculture has not been the primary means of economic survival for the obvious reason that the land is too arid and rocky for intensive farming. The villagers are former nomads who survive on the basis of a residual nomadic economy based on herding, cheese making, and carpet weaving. Considering the many efforts villagers have made to create businesses, such as weaving cooperatives, minibus cooperatives and cheese-making workshops, it is clear that culture and heritage have been economic resources for generations. While it is true that weaving requires water (for dyeing wool and washing finished carpets) and cheese-making needs water for raising animals and cleaning the equipment, neither of these businesses is as dependent on water as is agriculture, especially in the cultivation of delicate plants like strawberries. As well as working to create businesses based on a residual nomadic economy, religion is another resource of economic survival. As I learned, religious education with the goal of becoming an imam, has been an aspiration of men for over a hundred years (Hart, 2013).

In other words, the villagers are well aware of the challenges of survival in their arid and rocky environment and they have made efforts to maintain village life over the decades using the cultural resources available. Yet, as I argue in this paper, the outcome of

these efforts has lead many to conclude that migration is a good solution to trying to eek out an existence in villages. This is the same conclusion millions have arrived at in Turkey but my point is that there are multiple reasons why rural people migrate to the cities (Kirişçi, 2008). Aside from those fleeing war, in most cases, it is the failure of the government to address the lack of services to rural regions, which pushes people to move. But the choice to move is also based in the agency of rural people who carefully consider their options. The fact that regional economic development has improved some aspects of life without the government catching up to provide health and educational services, demonstrates that villagers consider the accessibility of state services when they balance out the equation. In short, development projects, such as the one undertaken by the UN, need to be accompanied by state resources and infrastructure in order to assist in the reduction of out-migration.

During my last visit to the region in 2015, I learned that the Manisa government was adjusting to the reality of a shifting nature of rural and urban spaces. As of 2016, the government changed the status of the villages in the Yuntdağ region to become neighborhoods (*mahalle*). Therefore, in the future when villagers choose to move to the city, they will simply be changing neighborhood and not “migrating.” Redefining villages thereby eliminates them and bureaucratically erases the visibility of migration. From an economic standpoint, this redefinition will have an immediate consequence on one entrepreneurial effort. During my visit in 2015, I learned that the minibus cooperative would most likely close because urban bus services would extent into the mountainous Yuntdağ region. This much cheaper means of public transportation to the city, villagers speculated, would assist many in commuting to job and to schools. Thus, in recent years, the municipal government is working to improve living standards for rural residents and is increasingly more involved in creating projects to help villagers sustain their lives, yet there is more work to do, such as garbage collection and indoor plumbing.

To contextualize life in this area, I will step back a few generations and answer the question as to why people live here from an historical standpoint. The answer to this question addresses the nature of regional cultural resources. This history demonstrates how rural people accept national ideologies of ethnic identification and work to integrate themselves into the narrative of national identity. Therefore, I am making the argument that national ideologies and state structures do not merely penetrate into rural regions and force people to integrate into their narratives of identity and culture but that rural people can chose to accept these identities and ideologies, structures and services.

While my village informants assert a Turkish identity because they identify with the ethno-national and sectarian identity of the state, that of being a Turkish Sunni Muslim (White, 2013:19), upon closer inquiry, some are willing to include being Yörük (Yürük) or Türkmen. While the term Türkmen refers to an ethnic group, Yörük, in a confusing manner, refers to nomadism (though Türkmen were also nomadic) but also gestures towards ethnicity (Bent, 1891; Geray and Özden, 2003). This means that at some point in the past, the people who now populate the small villages of the Yuntdağ region were nomadic, regardless of how they choose to identify themselves ethnically. It would be good to know exactly when and under what conditions they settled, but clues to these questions are buried in the Ottoman archives, beyond my ability to access. It is safe to say, however, that the villagers in this region most likely are part of the people who migrated with flocks of domesticated animals to pastures in tune with the land's seasonal variations during the Ottoman Empire (Kasaba, 2009).

Though there is a denial of a Yörük identity, there is evidence of a former nomadic life in the geography of the place. Many names

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