

FEUD IN RURAL TURKEY

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Abstract

Feuds depending on collective revenge are among ancient characteristic traits of primitive or underdeveloped societies. In rural sections of Turkey the tradition still lingers in some remote places, despite diminishing tendencies towards the course of modernization. It has been realized that psychological and sociological considerations seem to co-work within this perpetuity..

Key Words: feud, blood money, revenge, reprisal.

TÜRKİYE KIRSAL ALANINDA KAN DÂVASI

Özet

Toplu öç duygularına dayalı kan dâvaları; iptidâî veya az gelişmiş toplumların arkaik özellikleri arasında yer alırlar. Türkiye'nin kırsal alanlarında da bazı ücra yerlerde bu örf, yenileşme istikametinde gelişmelerle birlikte azalış temayülleri göstermekle birlikte, hâlâ sürüp gitmektedir. Bu devamlılığın ısrarında psikolojik ve sosyolojik mülâhazaların el ele gittiği anlaşılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: kan dâvası, kan parası, intikam, misilleme.

INTRODUCTION

Blood-feud (*vendetta*), though a declining tradition, still continues to be a social problem in rural sections of Turkey.

Feuding was encountered in various parts of our planet, but it has been especially prominent in primitive societies, underdeveloped countries or regions (like southern-Italy). ⁽¹⁾

“Feuding is a state of recurring hostilities between families or groups of kin, usually motivated by a desire to avenge an offensive—whether insult, injury, deprivation, or death—against a member of the group. The most characteristic feature of the feud is that responsibility to avenge is carried out by all members of the kin group. The killing of any member of the offender’s group is considered appropriate revenge, since the kin group as a whole is regarded as responsible” (Ember and Ember 1988: 391).

The Situation in Turkey

Even though Turkey is inhabited by an overwhelming majority of Muslims and blood-feuding has no place ⁽²⁾ in this religion; some areas ⁽³⁾ are in fact struck with that calamitous custom.

İçli (1993:151) lets us know that *feuding is the second most important cause of murder cases in provincial Turkey, after affairs involving women’s honor and sexual jealousy.*

The tradition persists because it is compelled by both psychological and sociological motives in an intertwining manner. As Akgün (1987: 82) tells us, *a feud-homicide is committed in compliance with customs in a full or quasi-unconscious state of mind provoked by a blind feeling of anger.*

Nevertheless, for the sake of facilitating the analysis, we might as well consider the psychological and sociological aspects separately.

The More Psychological Aspects

From a psychological perspective, it is possible to talk about feelings of passion and resentment (Tezcan 1981: 74).

Persons whose kin had been murdered, can not go on living as honorable and respectable individuals in their local environments. This conviction leads to successive homicide acts (Dönmezer 1971: 195).

When it comes to taking revenge, it is not obligatory to concentrate the hatred towards a specific person. Especially in primitive ⁽⁴⁾ forms of revenge, the hostility may take as target a whole group of people (Erem 1988: 127).

The insistent suggestions of getting even play their part in the minds of the involved.

Tezcan (1981) vividly describes ways of revenge suggestions: *For instance, the last will of a dying family-head is a very strong persuasion technique. Or else, the blood-stained shirt of the dead person is kept in a trunk and on occasion displayed before the child's eyes to sharpen his vindictive emotions. Similarly, enlarged photographs engraved on tombstones or hung on house walls keep the bitter memories alive.*

Female figures of authority like the grandmother, mother or elder sister may provoke the male child to take action by calling him a coward if he ever wavers. Those themes are commonly handled in movies, plays and novels as a very effective technique of persuasion.

Sometimes the avenger gratifies his grudge by causing property destruction (e.g. arsonage of heaps of straw) or prefer to inflict emotional torture. In the latter case, he might kill the rival's unique little son, his favorite horse, dog etc. (Tezcan 1981: 16).

It is common practice to get one's revenge by waged-killers ⁽⁵⁾ also. Thieves, bums, who need money and are full of hostile attitudes with the target person can be coaxed easily for this purpose (Tezcan 1981: 23-24 by reference to İsa Öztürk 1943 in *Köy Enstitüsü Dergisi [Journal of Village Institute]*, No. 4, Hasanoğlan, Ankara).16).

Sometimes the reprisals are so severe that the rival side kills two or three persons ⁽⁶⁾ at one time. Here another motive is "eradicating" all males to render further retaliation impossible (Tezcan 1981: 16). Having a large family ⁽⁷⁾ is desirable in that respect. Large families may even be less hesitant to start up a

feud to begin with. *The average number of children in families indulged in feuds is seven* (İçli 1994: 149).

Feelings of resentment are also related to status differences. Aswad (1968: 73) gives an account of that in Hatay (Antioch) region: “Vengeance patterns are linked to status. Traditionally if a *shaykh* [a figure of religious authority who also has worldly power and richness] killed a man of lower rank, the *shaykh* paid damages ⁽⁸⁾. In the reverse case [a lesser man killing an important man], the lower ranked ⁽⁹⁾ person was killed and besides his family paid money. If the victim was an important figure, perhaps two or even more men of the lower ranked family were killed [in retaliation]”.

In urban societies many aggressive attitudes of even educated people must have their roots in ancient feud traditions and can be considered their mild and softened vestiges. For instance a teacher may mistreat the child of a man whom he dislikes, now that he has this opportunity in the classroom. A shopkeeper may be impolite towards a customer, who happens to be the brother of a man, with whom the shopkeeper had a quarrel in a coffee shop years ago. A person may get to resent a doctor, who fails to heal ⁽¹⁰⁾ a beloved patient, assuming the doctor did not do his best. Prejudices are not so easy to get rid of completely.

Two Reported Interesting Cases of Suggestion

Tezcan (1981) brings up two suggestion incidents, the first being one based on Özgen’s narration: *In the black Sea region a man was shot dead. His widow buried her husband in the garden of the house. Every morning she put a piaster on the grave for her son to find. When the child found the coin she would say: “Your dead father provides this pocket money for you so that you will, one day, take his revenge”.*

The second incident is based on Velidedeoğlu 1969, who in turn had received the information from the attorney of the province of Rize at the time:

Fourty years ago [in 1929] a man was killed. The killer, after completing fifteen years of prison sentence, escaped the city. The posthumous child of the dead man grew up listening to bitter lullabies and funeral songs chanted by the mourning mother. Ten years after his release from the jail, the murderer got homesick and intended to make a visit disguised with a beard and on board a ship. The compatriots of the widow away from the city learned about this and notified her. The woman then said to her son: "Son, your day has come! Execute your duty!" The lad took a gun and shot the man right on the harbour.

The More Sociological Aspects

Some aspects of feud are of a more sociological nature. To begin with, it is sometimes just group solidarity and cohesion which commences and perpetuates hostilities. It might even be argued that feuds in this sense serve the "latent function" (borrowing Merton's phrase) of strengthening co-existence.

"Conflicts and feuds within a segrementary system in one sense upset the social order. But as Max Gluckman and his students have argued, they also maintain and renew it. Tribesmen seldom unite for anything; they unite against [something]. Without feuds and conflict, social groupings would be much more atomistic and isolated from one another than they are. Moreover, the process whereby alliances of groups settle feuds, reaffirms their unity within a moral social system and moral order. The resolution of feuds thus underlines the webs of kinship that bind groups together rather than the lines of descent that separate them" (Keesing and Keesing 1971: 272).

Stirling (1965: 247) confirms those judgments for the case of a Turkish village of the Province Kayseri, in Mid Anatolia: *"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"*.

As a matter of fact, many kinds of mass behavior patterns can be traced to former feuds, migration being one such example. Emiroğlu (1973: 227) cites *feuds* as one reason for immigration from the village of Edilli in western Black Sea region. Here, 6.2 % of immigration movements originate from this cause.

Some outlaws in the past became outlaws because of feuds: During Ottoman eras, one reason for the common bandit ways was the enmity between families or clans. Large groups were taking arms and getting organized. The economical sustaining of their supporters becoming a burden in time, those power-corrupted leaders were eventually heading for the mountains. In 1762 two such families (besides armed conflict with each other) were cutting off the road from Antakya to Adana and plundering passers (M. Öztürk December 1990: 977-978).

In some places in Turkey feud can also occur between relatives like sons of aunts or uncles taking position against one another. Besides core families, big tribes or entire villages ⁽¹¹⁾ may come into confrontation. As for the grounds for enmity; economical reasons count a lot like dispute over the fields, meadows, water sources (Tezcan 1981: 51).

*In eastern and southeastern regions a landlord would favor the continuation of feuds, which would prevent the unity of the peasants against the landlord himself. Those influential aghast play the role of the arbitrator, appearing friendly to both opposing sides, or picking up one side to win, depending on the occasion (Tezcan 1981: 46 [by referring to Bozarslan's work titled: *Doğunun Sorunları*]). Peasants are deadly loyal to landlords. This in turn makes the landlords impudently reckless in indulging in and keeping up feuds (Tezcan 1981: 47).*

Cultural considerations are also significant in the feuding custom. In that respect, we can list factors like lack of trust towards official ⁽¹²⁾ authorities; the folk ways of interpreting honor ⁽¹³⁾ and self-esteem; the tradition of handling guns ⁽¹⁴⁾; fights of all kinds, which break up in drinking sessions, on gambling tables or

because of children's quarrels, personal envy, political partisanship and ignorance (summarized from Tezcan 1981).

A piece of TV news in June 2011 is of special interest from a sociological standpoint. A person originating from the southeastern city of *Mardin* found the trace of another one from the rival feuding family living in *Esenyurt* section of İstanbul, in *Facebook*. He then pretended to be a female intent to start a friendship. Then, at the moment of appointment, he immediately shot his prey dead! It appears that advanced technology can thus be misused in the service of a primitive avenging mentality and all this not even due to sheer personal hostility, but rather for the sake of a blood feud.

They are Detrimental to Both Parties

Definitely a feud is a costly game for both factions. *“After an act of homicide the tension is notably great. Those involved in a hot feud walk in daily fear of their lives. People said that men at enmity normally avoid each other’s part of the village”* (Stirling 1965: 252).

A truce is sometimes possible, usually thanks to inter-marriage between the factions; but the established balance seems to be a delicate one. In Eylen village of Kilis, Tanyol (1964, 1966: 48-49) witnessed the following conversation:

Mehmet Yıldız—“This feud issue is like tuberculosis gnawing at our lungs. Do you see this Mehmet Polat? I respect him all right. I gave my daughter to his family in marriage. We are reconciled. He is the oldest man in our village; but I sometimes get angry with him”.

-Mehmet Polat— (The new relative growls) Hey you! What is wrong about old age? I am old too. But old as I may be, I am still able to clean up all your descendants if I ever wish to do so! You have given your daughter to us out of your fright, haven’t you?

So, the temptation to resume hostilities is always there. The conflict is subdued but has never disappeared for ever.

Relevant Folk Sayings

Turkish is rich in sayings and phrases related to feuds. A collection is chosen by Tezcan (1981: 160). Some sayings aim to aggravate hostilities:

-Reprisal is not to be delayed till the day of judgement.

-The day passes, grudge does not.

-Water fountains fall asleep, the enemy does not!

-Lo, thee, who had been left an orphan, kill, kill so that you can live!

-Let the enemy's life span be only thus far!

-They call a real man he who goes around twisting his moustache high (A verbal suggestion formula narrated by Uran village school teacher Z. Kurban).

However some sayings which propose peace are also there:

-Blood is not to be washed off with blood; blood is to be washed off with water.

-One should not take his revenge by killing.

-Where there is faith is no place for spite.

-They apply the law to him who sheds blood.

-You only harvest what you sow [Another version is: He who sows wind will harvest storm]

Feud and the Law

The Turkish jurisdiction has always been harsh against feud killers to provide deterrence. [But] *in spite of heavy penalties specified in the penal code feuds have been regarded as means of resolving conflicts* (İçli 1994: 150).

Capital punishment ⁽¹⁵⁾ *for homicide with the intent of feuding is an indication of the anxiousness of the state in view of protecting and preserving the well-being of social groups (Nirun 1968: 125).*

The related law about feuds dates back to June 1937 and has number 3236 (Dönmezer 1971: 196). The law differentiates personal revenge motivation from feud-revenge. In the feud-revenge, there is no subjective relationship between the murderer and the victim and the act is committed with a consciousness of duty (Türk Ansiklopedisi volume XXI 1974:185). The law specifies that murder due to blood-feuds further aggravates the penalty. The law also foresees banishment of feuding parties by the decision of the cabinet if necessary (Ana Britanica volume 12 1988:478).

No doubt, the harsh application of the law throughout years did not yield the desired positive outcomes. A person under the influence of the feuding tradition travels thousands of kilometers to reach his goal. Positive results are to be obtained only with changes in societal conditions (Önder 1976: 232-233).

Indeed, the vindictive man can go about and find the enemy who conceals himself in a big city ⁽¹⁶⁾ like Istanbul or Ankara. He can even locate the rival who works as a guest worker (*Gastarbeiter*) in Germany.

A common trick was to instigate a boy to carry out the killing duty, a minor deserving a much mitigated prison sentence ⁽¹⁷⁾ with respect to an adult at the time.

When we view case histories we see that most of the actors are either illiterate people or drop-outs from primary schools. They are captives of their natural instincts within their narrow worlds. Education is a process whereby the attitudes and the behavior patterns of a person are improved. When the level of education rises, people grasp the worth of life much better. The rates of all homicides decrease accordingly (Tezcan 1981: 52).

Conclusion

Despite steady modernization and despite heavy penalties, primitive feuding traditions still live on some regions of the country. Obviously; relinquishing some attitudes deeply rooted in cultural history can not be accomplished so fast in a given society. It will probably take some more decades for the tradition of feud as a social problem to be eradicated from the surface of Turkey.

NOTES

1) *The origin of the tradition starts in the form of collective revenge and some parts of Germany and Scandinavia, Greenland, Balkans (especially Albania), Sicily, Sardunia, Corsica, Cyprus, Apalachian Mountains as well as Kentucky, West Virginia (to which Mark Twain refers to in Huckleberry Finn, while depicting life on the Louisiana region) and California native lands in America, ancient China, Colombia are mentioned by Erdentuğ (1982).*

Feud is also known to be common practice among Arabs before Islam. As Benet (1970: 180) says so, “Before the advent of Islam, in Arabia blood feuds and tribal feuds were dropped only at a specific season of the year (the maswin or monsoon months), a time allotted to trading”.

2) As Tezcan (1981: 104) mentions retaliation (*kisas*) is permitted in Islam but it pertains to the person of the guilty. Besides, the victimized individual might demand an indemnity, instead.

It is known that the blessed Prophet verbally forbade blood feuds in his farewell address to roughly 120.000 Muslims.

Tezcan (1981: 44) goes on to say that *in regions where feud prevails, it is common procedure to try and justify the practice vis-à-vis Islam by dwelling on*

thoughts like “he who takes his revenge deserves Paradise” or “if revenge is accomplished, the victim rests in peace in his grave” etc.

3) A research carried out by the Criminology Institute of Istanbul University Faculty of Law verified that feuding exists especially in Gaziantep, Konya, Mardin, Urfa and Trabzon provinces (Dönmezer 1971:196).

4) In a partly autobiographical short story Çaya (June-July 1992: 27) as a sub-theme makes an allusion to the connection between primitive ways and a strong longing for heroic revenge, through the words of his characters:

Peasant women were loudly weeping just outside the brain surgery section. A female research assistant was conversing with her male visitor, a pharmacist.

— *“If only those people could accept death silently! If only they could stop those primitive lamenting funeral songs and wailings!” She was uttering the words ostentatiously, almost as if she were courting. The young man replied:*

— *“What else could they do? Poor beings!”*

— *“I don’t say they should do something,” the female assistant resumed. “But if all patients’ families and kins let out such improvised crying songs, what is going to become of us; daily witnessing all those scenes? Now, if the wounding occurred at a fight, just you watch then! What a ‘heroic’ folk literature will follow!”*

As the Turkish movie *Hemşo* (produced by Ömer Uğur in 2001) depicts, the avenger (in the movie actor Okan Bayülgen) regards himself as a noble justice-maker. He even saves the rival’s life from others so that he, himself will avenge! s.ç.

5) This is what Dervish Bey does in Yashar Kemal’s splendid two-volume-novel, *The Lords of Aktchasaz*. *The rich farmer’s young favorite sharecropper Mahmud kills the opponent. Dervish kisses his henchman on the forehead. Times are changing and with the advent of capitalism the power of feudal lords are fast diminishing. So, Mahmud will die under the oppression of the gendarme, refusing to confess the true instigator (The rivaling Akyollu family had also been influential*

and this is another factor). Dervish will resort to the same procedure years later. This time he will order Yusuf, the very son of the henchman Mahmud, to kill crazy Hadji (Yusuf grew under the lord's protection. crazy Hadji insulted Dervish Bey in public, upon instigation of Mahir, the secret enemy of Dervish).

I re-read the French translation by Munevver Andach in 1993. My first reading the novel dates back to my childhood, while it was being published as a serial in a newspaper. Yusuf's licking the bloody knife-blade as a superstitious precaution was especially embedded in my memory. s.ç.

6) This is what happened in Sakarya on May 7, 1997. *Two lycée boys (cousins) and one man, all from the same family of Memishoglu were assassinated in an hour by the rivaling faction (Star TV News).*

7) *A visiting journalist was surprised to learn that his driver in Rize (an eastern Black sea province) had eight brothers. The driver replied "Here, the more crowded your family, the better off you are. They can not finish them by shooting" (Tezcan 1981 based on Hürriyet Newspaper July 11, 1971).*

8) *Payment of blood money may in some societies prevent the very commencement of a possible feud: In Kirghiz societies, all murders and crimes are compensated with specified number of domestic animals like horses, sheep or camels. Those gifts may also be accompanied by proofs of humility (Encyclopedie Française 1936, tome VII pp.13-14).*

9) Years ago a Thracian primary school gym teacher (Selahattin Bey) who had worked in Eastern Turkey, expressed his former observations about status differences in coffee-shop conversation circumstances: *"If a family is insulted by a richer family, the insult goes unnoticed. But, if a family owning a herd of a hundred sheep is insulted by a family in possession of, say, twenty sheep, than it becomes a matter of honor"*. The teacher even made an analogy with a well-known scientific concept, the pecking order among hens in a given poultry-house. (Psychology was a basic course in teacher-training secondary schools).s.ç.

10) In 2005 a surgeon of Cerrahpaşa Faculty of Medicine, Professor Kalaycıoğlu, was assassinated in a garage while running his car. The assassins were reported to be the close relations of a patient who had died while being operated on by the surgeon. s.ç.

11) In his novel *Kan Dâvası* [*Blod Feud*], author Reşat Nuri Güntekin mentions about the enmity between two villages Aşağı (lower) and Yukarı (upper) Sazan (carp fish). However the proper place names are fictitious code names. Moreover, the very title of the novel is misleading. The main plot is only a platonic love affair between a tall school teacher and a mysterious woman. s.ç.

12) Some cultural tinting plays some role in this lack of trust against the government. *Köroğlu*, the recalcitrant folk hero and poet said: "Neither rely upon the state nor go around trusting your richness!". Historically the state was perceived as the tax-collector and the soldier-recruiter force. As for the republican revolution, this movement was somewhat slow in reaching out and affecting the country side. s.ç.

13) The virtue of a woman is of outermost importance for Turks, so it is natural for an elopement incident to grow into a bitter feud.

"People said that the two causes of lineage hostility which can never be settled are homicide and insults to women. Sometimes third parties with ties to both sides may attempt to bring the hostile sides together. But if the matter involves violence or interference with the honor of a woman, then in theory no reconciliation is possible. Revenge is necessary to satisfy honor and in turn leads to further revenge. Not even time was recognized as a palliative" (Stirling 1965: 248).

Tezcan (1981: 48) by reference to an article of Harmandalıoğlu (*Forum Dergisi* issue number 167) says that in *Pötürge* district of *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 Keshan 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.

Similarly the (hunchback) town-crier (*crieur public* / official announcer) in *Yasar Kemal's* previously mentioned novel, while innocent and nevertheless imprisoned as a murder suspect, boastfully claims himself as the murderer. But the (honest, decent) 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!

s.ç.

14) *In Black Sea, Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia 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, causing feuds* (summarized from Tezcan 1981).

Stirling (1965: 246) confirms this argument for the region of Kayseri: *“People, particularly the men, are quick to get in rage and 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”.

15) *Turkish Penal Code* has been thoroughly revised in June 2005 and the capital punishment is abolished. In the new code (item number 82) homicide with the intention of feud deserves heavy life sentence, the biggest valid penalty. s.ç.

16) I remember a movie in black-and-white starring the late actor *Yılmaz Güney*, after so many years. A vindictive peasant arrives in Istanbul in search of his blood-enemy. His enemy had worked for a factory and later quit. Having found his former trace, the “hero” constantly deranges a female clerk in the personnel service. He keeps saying “you are obliged to know where he went”. Along the course of this interaction, the female clerk falls in love with this resolute, eastern man and expects a response towards her tender feelings. Alas! The avenger is blindly determined to go after his own cause. He must run through the “holy” mission. When the “hero” finally detects his prey, he comes to pay his farewell visit to the heroine. He apologizes for his rudeness, now aware that she was not responsible to learn about the whereabouts of a former worker.

The young girl understands that all is finished between them. She sadly reproaches her tough idol for a final time: “Go stain your hands! What a fool I was to get to like you! How could you ever appreciate love, a cozy house, a wedding, children, a brand new life?” The man stays imperturbable. He then turns his back and walks on. Soon the camera zooms on the panic-stricken face of a peak-capped compatriot, imploring our “hero” with his trembling moustache not to pull the trigger! A vain effort! The bullet will attain him right in the middle of his face. I watched the movie with my mother at the time and her sighing words nearby were: “So, what did you gain, you fool!” s.ç.

17) The new, advanced Turkish penal code (valid since 2005) foresees safety measures instead of prison penalty for children, that is, persons below the age of eighteen. In fact, the law prefers the term “children drifted to crime” rather than “criminal children”. In the past children served sheer jail sentences in

separate wards for minors. When I entered the *Lycée* division of Robert College, I became friends with another scholarship student coming from a southern province. His father was a farmer, wearing the typical peasant-cap (peaked cap / *casquette*). A few days later the father returned and took the brought the boy away. When I inquired into the reason why, my friend kept silent while his father only said that it was a necessity. Later my grandmother, a wise elderly woman, inferred that a family feud was probably in question and this boy was destined to take the revenge, his young age granting a much more lenient penalty. sç.

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- (Yeni) *Türk Ceza Kanunu [(the new) Turkish Penal Code]*

ENDNOTE: The preliminary version of this article was a graduate term-paper with a high mark at Middle East Technical University, Department of Sociology, Ankara.