

Typical Peasant Traits: Turkey's Case

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Abstract: Turkish Peasants, though impossible to stereotype individually since they are so different from one another; nevertheless do exhibit certain more or less common traits and behavior patterns. This fact follows from sharing a common life directly under the influence of the nature and climatic conditions in a small-sized community and is, moreover, a cumulative result of historical roots and a certain life-style, over centuries.

Keywords: Peasant; village; Turkish; traits

INTRODUCTION

Classifying general traits and tendencies into rural and urban categories is not so simple since differences of region and ethnicity also come into play. Attachment to one's compatriot (*landsman*) for instance, which at first sight is associated with peasantry, does not apply to western regions of Turkey even among peasants, themselves. It is a much stronger feeling in eastern people in general even if they are urbanized in many ways. Western people, let alone clinging to one another, might even compete with one another in exile circumstances.

Vedat F. Belli, our former "boss" at *Çukurova* Faculty of Medicine, Chair of Legal Medicine, had been a former assistant of famous psychiatry professor *Rasim Adasal* in *Ankara* School of Medicine at the time. On one occasion *Belli* narrated the following story about *Adasal*, who had been an immigrant from the island of *Crete*. (*Belli* vividly imitated the *Cretan* accent, adding extra flavor to his narration).

Adasal had a rival-professor in the Chair of Microbiology, another immigrant from *Crete*. They disliked each other. The microbiologist talked about him likewise: "When *Rasim* was a child, he looked like an abnormal, maniac boy! Indeed, he grew up to become a lunatic-doctor". *Adasal* used to retaliate by the following information: "When that man was a boy, he was always filthy and snotty and he used to play with horse-shit on the roads. Now that he is an adult, he is still stirring shit in Microbiology!".

Though helpful in distress, compatriot solidarity ensues mutual responsibility and

accountability. Display of individuality diminishes accordingly. He who enjoys the favor and benefits of his compatriot-group must always be ready to pay for a related sanction, in case his behavior is not approved by the compatriots. In a dormitory bull-session in our university days; a student from an eastern *Anatolian* city once said: "When a football player in our city-team scores goals we bestow him with all possible benefits. But if he does badly on a match, then we give him hell".

Mustafa, a scholarship student from *Gazi Antep* came to *Robert College Lycée Prep* class at the same time with me. The notables of the city considered him as a representative in *Istanbul* and "submerged" him with gifts of all kinds (clothing, laundry, stationary and an expensive bed-couch) on his departure. They praised his achievement and urged his further success. As another scholarship student from a western region, who was left all alone; I personally envied his situation, at first glance. But I later saw that *Mustafa* was coping with crushing feelings of gratitude.

The poor boy was really subject to considerable social pressure, at least as he himself perceived it. On one occasion when he took a low grade, he could not help saying:

— "What answer shall I give to my benefactors at home, who had been so generous, so kind to me? I am thankful to those people and I shouldn't disappoint them! What shall I say to the owners of all those good things? I really didn't deserve all those gifts".

He would sometimes go without the free food supplied to full scholarship students. He used to employ this special method as a means of self-punishment or mortification. Some classmates were even teasing him, repeating his constant rhetoric “I don’t deserve this goodness and I don’t deserve that goodness”.

Nevertheless, there are certain behavior patterns and even personality traits which pertain exclusively to peasantry in its entirety whether eastern or western regions are in question.

Being Functional

Villagers are practical and pragmatic. For them, being in immediate interaction with the nature, the functional value comes much before esthetic considerations.

For instance as *M.C. Ecevit* (1999: 140) [1] points out for a *Samsun-Bafra* village, for them *furniture basically serves their needs of living, sleeping, nourishment and preserving. A whole set of sitting-room appliances (one couch, two-three armchairs, buffet and an end table) is non-existing in their houses and owners of such a set, if any, seldom make use it. Floor mats, floor beds, a round wooden table just above the ground, a trousseau chest and a small locker for clothing would suffice for most families.*

Use and functionality gains priority above everything, for any villager. When my mother was a village-teacher, on one spring Sunday, I went to watch the horse races arranged near “our” village with a few peasant football-mates, all my peers. Foreseeing a picnic, we had all brought food with us. At noon time we sat on the grass to eat. One of them seriously suggested that I should spread my (brand new) overcoat (*pardessus*) on the ground as a wide, convenient table cloth. (They themselves were dressed in shorter jackets). The others unanimously seconded him. I, too shy to object and to be a snob, simply took off my dark blue overcoat and spread it on the grass and we all had a hearty meal on top of it. We happily returned to the village in the afternoon. Before entering the house I took off my overcoat again and washed away the tomato seeds and egg-yolk stains, before my mother could spot them.

Being Generous

Villagers (and also provincial people, for that matter) are generous / munificent people. But this generosity is usually mingled with a desire for being ostentatious because they also love to show off. When it comes to having guests in one’s house, they are genuinely respectful and eager to offer their hospitality. My junior high school friend *Turhan* got transferred to *Lüleburgaz* from *Konya Ereğlisi* when his father (a clerk of the Agricultural Bank) got moved to that town.

Turhan once said that he would like to accompany his father in his official trips to nearby villages.

His father commented that they were not so receiving like the peasants of *Konya*. After a period of warm-up, though, he began to take place in such excursions. One day he said laughingly—and with an imitation of their pronunciation—that they always wanted to treat him to “*Chocha Chola*” [coca cola] while he would prefer diluted yoghurt, instead. In a village, the city style of offerings are much more valued. This is a matter of prestige for the host. They’d rather resemble city-dwellers, in that respect.

I used to be a loyal reader of *Turkish Allgemeine*, a weekly newspaper published in Istanbul in German. At a certain point along the course of its publication life, the newspaper unfortunately closed down. Soon after I met the former editor in a passenger-ship at *Kadıköy* Harbor. I recognized him from his picture and introduced myself and inquired into the reasons as to why his periodical ceased to exist. It turned out that a major factor was the ensuing conflict between the editor *Mehmet Savaş Bey* (as he himself put it) and the owner *Kenan Bey*.

Mehmet Savaş Akat is a graduate of German *Lycée*. He lives in *Fenerbahçe* neighborhood. He is a pure *Istanbulite*. (Unfortunately the now-elderly man is on too good terms with ethyl alcohol). *Kenan Bey* is a *Yozgatian*, from central Anatolia. (I had met him even before *Savaş Bey* at the administrative office of the newspaper at *Mecidiyeköy* and had been surprised to notice his Mid-Anatolian accent).

The former editor, though obviously still angry at his former boss; had to admit his generous *gha*-like character, at a certain point. (Like many landowner notables) he is supposed to be fond of donations. “For example, he likes to spend aid to his home-city’s football team, *Yozgat Spor*,” the former editor explained.

Ego-Centric Tendency as a Village-Unit

Another general trait of the villager is his evaluation of world affairs only from an angle pertaining to his immediate surroundings and showing himself indifferent to any other happenings unless he is directly concerned again. This is true for the German peasant as well, as *Kschneider* [2] ^(*) (1976: 49) affirms. The hero of the autobiographical work once takes a

* The book is about a West German School teacher’s persecution in mid seventies by the then-instigated *Oberschulamt* (*Academic Inspection Bureau*). In those years *Baader-Meinhof* gang in West Germany and Red Brigades in Italy used to cause trouble for the “established order” even in those developed western countries. As a consequence of such “subversive” activities; the two countries involved had to take severe measures against extremist youth movements. s.ç.

promenade in wilderness with his girlfriend. They then encounter a villager:

—“A peasant riding a bicycle showed us the way to Rhin”, he says. Then the author goes on as follows:

We had just passed a destroyed bunker concealed behind wild bushes and the peasant spoke in his dialect:

—“Nowadays they are producing nuclear energy so that the electric bulbs will never be off, they claim. But, what will happen in five or ten years if we remain alive? Maybe a war will break out again. There is a war every thirty years and this is the thirty-first year you know [thirty-one years after the end of the Second World War: 1945 + 31 = 1976, the date of the narration]. In a war the first thing to be attacked is an energy-center. This was the case in the last war and it won't be different in the future. Then in a moment a hundred thousand people will die and not a single one will survive. Before the World-War Hitler evacuated us all because this was the eastern front. Next time the prime-minister (Landesfather) will drive us away again. He looks like a ghost already, anyway”.

Indeed, former education-inspector *Shaban Sunar* (1961: 14-15) [3] once convinced a peasant to send his son to school with the following argument:

- Your son has some school-attendance problem. How come?
- He went to school for some time; but he later quit. He could not learn much.
- He will learn a lot, if he attends regularly.
- What of it? Will he become a salaried-official?
- Perhaps.
- No, no, mister. This here is a village. He will be working on the fields again.
- But he will be able to read newspapers and write letters!
- Oh so? Well, in that case, from now on, I will send him to school regularly!

Sincerity and Altruism

Villagers are also philanthropic, candid people. They are curious about others' affairs and love to intervene and offer help. *Elia Kazan* in one of his novels (1969: 698) [4] writes that, on the way to an island near the ocean, a peasant driving a pick-up loaded with potatoes, without the slightest jest on his part, spontaneously offers to take him to the other side of the island.

Human nature being universal, it must be the social circumstances which determine this altruistic tendency in village-life. In a small community people know one another if not by direct encounter, at least through hearsay or by sight. Therefore it is extremely important to build a good reputation. Conversely, it is equally important to avoid a notorious image of oneself.

In a social psychology textbook as I can remember, an experiment was mentioned about. A car was abandoned in an urban environment with the motor-hood open and passerby-behavior was observed secretly. The car soon got pillaged. The same experiment carried out in a rural region revealed totally different reactions. People avoided coming nearby. One person even went ahead and shut down the hood, in drizzling rain.

No wonder robbers and bandits used to employ masks to cover their faces. A similar mechanism of losing one's identity comes into play, regarding an armed robbery. In a similar manner; during a wild party, too, the dim light increases the idea of staying anonymous among participants who are already familiar with one another from previous times. The net effect is compelling frivolous behavior patterns, as if they were mere strangers!

Rich people providing help to the needy, on the other hand, are usually glad to be recognized. (It is known that in Ottoman charity institutions or foundations (*vakif*) men in charge of distributing soup used to serve behind slits covering their faces and revealing only their hands; in order to spare shame feelings and personal gratitude, on the part of the receivers).

Regarding the truly sincere and sociable nature of the peasant, let us relate an army reminiscence from former years: Our commandant was inspecting the officers' mess-hall. The private in charge of the cleaning affairs was a somewhat naive village-boy named *Kemâl*.

Officers used to find him very sympathetic. When the commandant came near to inspect the place; he stood to attention and introduced himself in high voice, as the regulations stipulate. He had no fear of the inspection. On the contrary, he was glad to be nearby the commandant, the important person whom he obviously admired.

Even though not directly addressed to, *Kemâl* said:

—“Sir, I mopped the floors beautifully!”

The commandant had an eye contact with the next senior officer and smiled imperceptibly. *Kemâl*, now further encouraged, keeping his upright attention position perfectly, said:

—“I also watered the flower pots, sir!”

The commandant ignored the second statement and took a few steps sideways. But the naïve-private insistent to squeeze out a word of recognition like “good for you!” or at least to experience a short

dialogue of some sort with the important man. He finally blurted:

— "What time is it, my commandant?"

The commandant now covered his mouth with his right hand and looked at the next senior officer quite openly. The next senior officer, in turn, made a slight "go away now" movement to the soldier and the group marched on, leaving the eager soldier behind, who shouted "attention!", as it should be done upon witnessing the departure of a high rank-holder. Everybody understood the young soldier's sincerity and genuine respect. Nobody hurt him by uttering a negating word.

On another occasion, due to bad weather conditions, bread arrived late into the officers' mess-hall, at noon time. By that time many officers had started their meals without bread. As soon as the bread-bag appeared, our hero *Kemâl* made a leap and just like a plunging goal-keeper, he took over the control of the precious trust, immediately.

First-lieutenant *Yusuf* saw this and laughingly said:

—"There is the brave peasant boy, he appreciates the value of the bread!"

Truly, bread is the staple in the nourishment of peasants. It is not soft and baked and white like in a town bakery but comes out tough and brown, as the whole-wheat version (which, by the way, is more healthy to consume). On the Black Sea coast, corn flour is substituted for wheat, corn-cereal being more appropriate to grow, geographically.

Smoking Habit

Village men usually smoke. Smoking may be associated with virility. In any case, it is another common way to disperse boredom in a small, closed community. According to *Barth* (1898: 12) [5]; *Hermann*, a German agricultural inspector working with the Turkish peasantry more than a century ago wrote the following: *Turkish peasant is kind and likeable in social terms. His frugal manners and satisfaction forms a good portion of his character. His only passion is smoking. If he were to choose between bread and tobacco, he would apt for the latter.*

Interestingly, as *Erdentuğ* (1956: 19) [6] notes for the village of *Hal* in *Elazığ*, breakfast is also called "tüütün altı" (below tobacco), suggesting that it is necessary to enjoy smoking with a full stomach, let alone to keep you going for the day. The village shops sold cheap brands made of crude tobacco residues. Up to late 1970's, while socialist youths took pride in smoking the non-filtered "Birinci", the village groceries commonly sold, let alone "İkinci" (literally The

Second), the "Üçüncü" brand (literally The Third)^(*). When I was a child a villager entering a town shop simultaneously with me asked for "cottoned" (*pamuklu*) cigarettes. This was an exception and after he left the shopkeeper said he must be a rich villager, since he was smoking filter cigarettes.

An anecdote relates that a peasant once swore at Atatürk publicly because good cigarette paper was not available and newspaper pieces were not proper substitutes for wrapping tobacco rolls. They reported this to him officially and Atatürk in person became aware of the incident. However, to the surprise of his yes-men, who anticipated a severe punishment for the villager, he first asked them if they ever smoked newspaper rolls. When they replied no, he said that he had done so, back in Tripoli, and it was horrible! He said that the swearing was well-deserved and pardoned the villager! He said they should provide proper cigarette paper for this peasant instead of suing him and pardoned the peasant right away (Renkliydırım 1985) [7].

After all, he is the man who specified the peasant as the master of the nation^(*), being the primary producer. (The saying has an echo of *Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent*, who had uttered a similar sentence in the sixteenth century. Four decades later, the leftist ballad-singer *Âşık Mahzunî Şerif* was to challenge the saying in a song depicting the situation of the peasant in a crying lamentable voice and repeatedly employing the refrain "Is this the master of that nation? / *Bu milletin efendisi bu mudur ?*"). Atatürk was a heavy smoker himself. The Monopoly^(*) produced a private brand for him alone, carrying his majestic name on the cigarettes.

* Picking tobacco leaves starts from the bottom of the stem and follows upwards. The lower leaves are valueless and they are left over or thrown away. The 'hands' (groups of leaflets) highest and just below the highest portion of the plant are of best quality. Classification and arranging in strings for drying and storing are made all on this basis (M.C. Ecevit 1999: 80) [1]. The above mentioned cheap cigarettes were rolled of lower much less valuable leaflets of the plants

* He had a genuine liking for the peasant. He recognized the virtue of the peasant in the young conscripts facing glorious death shoulder to shoulder in his command in Gallipoli and on other battle fields. One day he visited an old peasant's cabin on a walk around then-rural *Çankaya*. His aid-de-camp *Salih Bozok* (it is him who later told the anecdote to *Naci Sadullah*) inquired about *Gazi* [this title of holy warrior as well as the rank of marshal (*müşir*) was officially bestowed by the Parliament to the ex-Ottoman general in recognition of the *Sakarya* victory, which he had directed without a military rank] and the old man described *Gazi* as a holy man with a beard down to his belly. *Atatürk* winked and played it cool. He could not take it to heart to disappoint the old peasant (*Asker ve Yöneticilere Anlamli Sözler ve Olaylar [Meaningful Words and Events for Military Personnel and Managers]*, 1994: 34) [8].

* The Turkish Monopoly, *Tekel İdaresi*, was then known under the Ottoman word, *İnhisarlar İdaresi*. People in the provinces long continued using the name "Rece" though as a distortion of the French word "Régie", dating back to the foreign-owned Public Debts (*Düyun-*

Perceived Government Image

The typical Turkish peasant regards that awesome entity as the “Government Father” and accordingly holds it responsible for all facets of his life, including his miserable plight in a natural drought! If anything goes wrong in his dealings with any official institution, he angrily sends out a mouthful of swearing words aimed at that very state.

In many folk tales it can be seen that the figures of authority do not really deserve respect; but, they have the capability to hurt plain people: *The Vizier provokes this man against that man or even one man against his own children. He does not refrain from resorting to tricks in order to achieve success. He spends a lot of money in order to win the favor of the Sultan. He even admits to his own daughter's being sold like a slave, by the Sultan. Still, he is not genuinely loyal to the Sultan. On occasion he seduces the Sultan's wife when she has been confined to his protection. When the Sultan falls from the throne and impoverishes, then the Vizier totally abandons him. The Vizier gets involved in conspiracies aiming to assassinate the Sultan.*

Brief, the Vizier is the strongest negative character in folk tales. In three tales and five funny anecdotes s roles are ascribed to the judge. This is the former [Ottoman] “kadi” figure. He is married but he indulges in debauchery...He tries to do injustice to needy people. He abuses his influence and his official position to this end. He proclaims unfair sentences in return for bribes. But he can not always get away with what he does: [A fictitious folk hero] Keloğlan (the bald boy), a dealer of old goods (eskici) and sometimes the Sultan penalizes him (Tuğrul 1969: 48-49) [9].

Swearing Habit

Village males take a pleasure in using swear words in the predominant male culture. Even children do and some are even encouraged by fathers to do so! Females are known to resort to swear words only when they reach elderly ages^(*). This is when their social

u Umumiye) of the late Ottoman Era. One neighbor of my maternal grandmother was a “Rece” official's wife. She was an elegant woman with airy ways as my grandmother described her. The public, especially the villagers, in fact, used to have difficulty with the pronunciation of other European words, including the name of the political party “Democrat”. A clever trick of the party's important personages was to change the original open hand palm logo to a horse emblem as a remedy to the problem. Thus, “demir kirat” (iron white horse) facilitated the pronunciation or even came to merely replace the official name of the party for the so-called “ignorant” masses. s.ç.

* Female versions of swearing usually has to do with defecating into the mouth of the opponent instead of copulating with that person. *Güçlü* (2008: 43-44) [10], for the case of e *Nevşehir* village lists some local examples for female swear-words and insults like “let her urine stop!” (*sidiği durasica*), “shitty mouthed” (*ağzı boklu*), “manure” (*fışkı*), “Jewish offspring” (*Yafidi [Yahudi] dölü*), “fertilized egg” (*dölleme*) and some local examples for male swear-words and insults like “shitty anused” (*götü boklu*), “shitty veined” (*damarı boklu*),

status had risen upwards. I remember Stirling relating in his *Sakaltutan* village study, that once a guest neighbor male wants to drive the females off the room for a private talk with the house owner. The females obey but an elderly woman stands her ground. (In my possession I have only some photocopy pages from Stirling's work making page numbered citations possible; but I had read most of the entire book before).

Use of Alcohol

Alcoholic beverages are consumed, usually furtively, even if it is generally despised as a vice. Some *Alévite* villages are exceptions, where alcohol can be openly praised. As *Erdentuğ* (1959: 19) [11] puts it, in the *Alévite* village of *Sün* in *Elazığ*, the religious head figure, *dede* (literally grandfather), arranges meetings where alcohol is drunk. He, in person, fills the glasses of those present and says:

—“Drink thou that wine so that your faith will be enlightened! If there is no smoke in the head, then there is no belief in the heart!” (*İç şu şarabı ki imanın nûr olsun! Kafada duman olmayınca gökûste [göğûste] de iman olmaz!*”).

In his novel titled “Turtles” *Fakir Baykurt* (1995: 41-42) [12] depicts *Abbas Kartal*, an old *Alévite* man in the village of *Tozak* not too far from Ankara. Gray-haired *Abbas* once goes to another village on a borrowed donkey, to buy grapes. The vineyard owner is of Sunnite creed and once he learns *Abbas*' intention of fermenting the grapes, he refuses to sell. *Abbas* uses an intermediary, Sunnite *Fork-Osman* to get the wines.

Merciful Hearts

The villager is merciful by nature. Despite his own harsh conditions he takes pity for those in worse situations. The lunatic of a village is cared for collectively. The city-dweller in comparison is only self-pitying and not sensitive towards those in distress. They leave the fallen man alone by himself (and this is true for one who literally falls on the ground as well as one who is brought low and falls in the figurative sense of the word). When Prime Minister *Bülent Ecevit*

“whose mother I f*cked, “whose c*nt pulled aside”**ına kanırdığım*), “oddly dressed” (*zibidi*), “woman-mouthed” (*avrat ağzılı*). Many verbs like piercing, inserting, emptying out etc. are substitutes for swearing-verbs. We had an American math teacher who once said in class “I understand Turkish is a very good language to swear in”. (He claimed to be the third generation bastard-son of Buffalo Bill and was very popular for that reason).

In some southern regions like *Adana* or *Hatay* swearing at God Almighty —that awful blasphemy, never / *jamaıs* !— is practiced though it is slightly indirect and the format mentions “your God” or “his God”. *Kadir* from *Adana* in our university while I was an undergraduate student explained it in that context: “When a rain falls down it ruins the cotton product”. A private slaughterhouse-owner's son from *Sütlüce*-Istanbul I met on a train trip, explained that when he was a corporal in the service he was especially vindictive towards the men from those regions just because of that reason and gave them hell on the smallest pretext.

offered a general amnesty on the fifteenth anniversary of the republic this was acclaimed with general jubilation. At the time the population was mainly rural in character. When the great statesman did the same (on a less narrow scale) in the year of 2001, upon the insistence of his wife *Rahşan Hanım*, it fell flat. Public opinion gave a cool reaction. Purse-snatchers either then emerged or came under closer media attention and further aggravated the unpopularity of the decision. Now the population was essentially urban in character.

Peasant Names

Many villagers have typical names like *Ökkeş*, *Sürmeli*, *Cumali*, *Satılmış* for males and *Fadime*, *Hatice*, *Düriye* for females. (One of my former female students was upset when I pronounced her second name Hasibe, “an old peasant wife” name in her opinion). *Halime* (Prophet’s wet-nurse) is also common. In the novel *Çalkuşu* by *Reşat Nuri Güntekin*, the heroine, when working as a teacher in an Anatolian village, discovers that the girls are either *Zehra* or *Ayşe* while a certain girl has a unique name, *Munise*. She adopts *Munise*; but the poor, delicate girl dies of sickness). In *bidonvilles* / shanty-towns in cities, though, as a repudiation of their peasant origins, some boys are assigned fancy names like *Şafak*, *Cüneyt*, *Koray* and girls, in a similar manner, are named *Jale*, *Leman* or *Jülide*.

I remember an editorial by *Zeynep Oral* in *Cumhuriyet* Newspaper about the great singer *Ruhi Su* at the time his death in 1885. (I attended to his burial at *Zincirlikuyu* Cemetery). The orphan boy had excelled in Music in *Adana* in his childhood. Studious orphans were brought to Istanbul and registered to the military junior high school in *Halıcıoğlu*. But before, the guide in charge told them to give up their former peasant names and adopt polite, city names instead. It was then that he was given the name *Ruhi*. (The boy implored to a military physician to record him sick in order to avoid a military career. Instead he came to Ankara and graduated from the Higher School of Music teachers). (The same article said his voice was maybe equaled by Black American singer Paul Robeson and when in America, my first task was to obtain a record of Robeson).

Ruhi Su trained our folk music chorus at *Bosphorous* University for a short time. A few extreme leftist students upset him for his adapting the ballads into proper Istanbul accent. He once said: “We should stick to our own culture. Why did we get education then? We should not emulate the peasants in singing”. In a *zeybek* balled he insisted on “*ateş*” instead of the authentic rough version “*ataş*” (fire, to lit a cigarette). The rumor goes that one day he played with his *saz* and sang with his voice a folk song in front of *rhapsode Âşık Veysel* and waited for an approval. But *Veysel* criticized him for “having picked up a beautiful (*gozel*

[*güzel*]) flower from the meadow and putting it in a vase in a house.

I later in my life discovered that some of my classmates in *Lycée* had concealed their traditional first names at the time successfully. Years later in their visiting cards *Saadettin Ufuk* or *Abdurrahman Levent* etc. were to appear, while in adolescence they had adhered to the former modern names only. The name means a lot, suggests a lot and can be inferred to guess more about its “carrier”.

As I were to discover later, many of my classmates had their other little lies, too. Many adolescents are somewhat mythomaniac. One “reflected” his health official father as a practicing doctor. One gave his quartermaster-officer-father in the Air Force as a pilot. I concealed my parents’ separation and later divorce. The vice-principal of Robert College once in an informal dormitory visit chat with us (which comes close to something like an “official” bull session) openly encouraged embellishments and lies about our school in our home cities. The school was extremely anxious for publicity.

My father had concealed his peasant origins and put up his junior-high-school-city, *Edirne*, at the front line. His desk mate *Recep Ergun* from downtown *Kayseri*, met my father and step mother in *Kırklareli* Officer Club during his inspection of the 33. Division. One was a four star general commanding the Fist army. The other a humble retired major. The general immediately recognized his former classmate and exclaimed. “*İbrahim* from *Edirne*”. The couple were honored.

Loose Care of Hygiene

Villagers, as a rule of thumb, are not so meticulous about cleanliness and good hygiene conditions just because the conditions demand it so. From a book about Russia written by an American journalist I remember about memories of *Crutschev*’s youth memories. Russian peasant soldiers were so unconcerned about sanitation that some simply urinated from their bunker beds down, without bothering to go down. *Crutschev* himself walked to the latrine pit on wooden slits. The restroom in most villages is a cabin outside the house ^(*) with a cesspool dug underneath.

* When we were in the village where my mother got a teaching job, my parents’ separation was yet new and my mother’s rage against my father in full swing. One day I girded myself with my father’s ceremonial sword belt in the room. My mother caught me and she confused my child enthusiasm for the military with a longing for his profession and therefore an admiration for him. She got furious. She took the belt, went all the way to the exterior toilet cabin and threw it inside. Some minutes later I sneaked into the cabin and looked at the belt from the hole. Perpendicularly below in the cesspool the belt was floating in filth. The waterproof gold gilt threads were in good shape but the red velvet lining was soaked and irreversibly spoiled. I regretted that horrible scene many a times!

My villager paternal grandfather used to order my paternal grandmother to fill the jug so that he could “pay a visit to the latrines”. As the author *Nihat Genç* told on a TV screen about six months ago, up to 1970’s, even in towns certain empty areas between habituated houses were used as urination places. People went to public baths from time to time. The houses were not even designed in a way enabling washing the body.

I know that in *Adana* bus terminal passengers urinated in far corners up to 1980’s. A foreigner once described the city as the most populated village of the world. From mid1980’s I remember the headline of a local newspaper praising the new improvement carried on by the municipality: “The ‘Big Village’ is Breaking its Shell!”.

In the novel *Yaban* by *Yakup Kadri*, the hero is an ex-officer with one arm amputated. He takes shelter in his former orderly’s village during the National Struggle. The village excludes him as an outsider. His former orderly once tells him politely not to shave his hair every day, not to wash himself so often etc. if he wants to better integrate with the village.

Crowded and Precious Family

Villagers choose to have many children since it is also a prestige to have many children, especially sons. But, more important, they represent aid in hard manual work. If the peasant has few children, he has a hard time accomplishing the necessary work. A crowded family achieves work better. It is desirable to have many children and to marry them at young age. This is called “tying their heads”. This is not a bad tradition since it prevents the emptying of the village. Besides the attractions of the city may drift the young person to futile adventures and eventual disappointment (Sunar 1961:6) [3]. (Let us note that Thrace is an exception. In Thracian villages young men can marry only after the completion of the compulsory army service).

In my high school days in a debate session in Sociology course guided by our valuable teacher *Dr. Mediha Esenel*, Little Can (a small sized, charming classmate) explained the high number of children in the village family with the well-known “no copulation, no population” concept, stressing the idea that the only leisure in the village was nothing but sexual activity. *Mediha Hanım* smiled; she approved the ingenious approach but specified the non-sociological line of thought. Indeed, even the villager finds contraceptive method if he believes they are what he needs.

Another interesting thing which is not commonly mentioned to note here is the fact that a pregnant woman has a lot of respite from work as well as an acquired extra value. Men coddle and spoil

pregnant wives and they therefore keep getting pregnant to enjoy the connected privileges!

Villagers often marry with their blood relatives. This is a big social problem since it generates hereditary deformities. In this respect again Thrace (*) constitutes an exception. As *Çavuşoğlu* (1993: 151) [13] notes in *Pomak-Turks and generally in other Turkish groups in the western [and for that matter eastern] Thrace, a very meticulous rule is to avoid marriages between blood-relatives.*

His livestock is the most precious possession of a peasant after his family. This we can see in the memories of a German author. She is the wife of the chief archeologist of a team who did digging and excavating of ancient monuments in *Adıyaman-Kâhta* region in mid 1970’s. She then published her impressions in a marvelous book illustrated by a friend of hers:

One early morning our employee Mehmet was standing before the tent of our doctor. His dark eyes were filled with the whole world’s grief. In his arms he was holding a kid [here the English word for the young goat coincides with the synonym for child and renders the situation more meaningful!] affectionately. It was bitten by a snake. When my husband asked for a serum injection for the animal the doctor grumbled: “Is our expensive serum intended for human beings or for animals?” But then he could not endure the grief-furrowed face of Mehmet and conceded as Mehmet’s eyes filled with tears of happiness (Dörner 1983: 148) [14].

Love of Naïve Poetry in Villages

In mid 1970’s in a socialist reunion of songs and celebrations in Istanbul a folk ballad singer (*halk shairi*) named Mustafa Koç performed his radically composed work in escort of his *saz*. One of the stanzas was: “*Both the mother and the spouse of whom he regards the peasant dirty [deserve to be fucked!] (“Köylüye ‘pis’ diyenin anasını avradın hey!”)*. The verb designating the shameful act was actually left out but implicitly understood. (In mid-seventies some of the folk singers were very much politically oriented, late *Mahzunî Sherif* and late *Âshik İhsanî* being two.

* For such reasons Thracians have a high opinion of themselves in compared to Anatolians no matter how low their social status may be. One of my paternal aunts; Hatice; a blue-eyed, fair skinned village girl in her blossoming youth, got married to *Hâlis Karagöz*, an assistant at the Faculty of Agriculture in Ankara. This happened during his service as a reserve officer in Thrace. When I visited them in *İzmir* in mid 1990’s, on one occasion my aunt whispered to me in a tone the professor could not hear: “You know, my husband’s side is from *Malatya*. They are not so civilized as we are”. I could not help grinning. So she thought she was better (!) than a man of science merely by her “western” origins.

One ballad composed by the latter was depicting the torture suffered by political detainees in the Second Department of Security Directorate of Istanbul, then in *Sirkeci* district. The absurdly small rooms were called coffin-booths (*tabutluk*). The song went like “*The three of us are confined into one coffin*” (“*Üç kişi bir tabuttayız*”).

In a *rhapsodes*’ night held in Istanbul, one certain ballad singer was even bitterly hard towards the blind poet *Veysel*. In his melodious poem he compared him with another name from the same city (*Sivas*), *Pîr Sultan Abdal*, a historical symbol of protest and called *Veysel* an obsequious praise singer of the oppressors: “*Whereas the other performed in palaces*”).

Love of naïve poetry is a very conspicuous trait of the peasant culture. Of course few peasants are poets themselves but almost all do appreciate and evaluate poetry as they conceive it. Certain well-known rhyming couplets are employed by children competing in reciting repartees. He who is quicker in response is always cheered by the audience composed of other children.

As a matter of fact poetic tendencies apply to all people of Turkey to a lesser degree. In all walks of life poetic people are held in esteem. About fifteen years ago a harmless, half-crazy young bum used to enjoy a certain poet-prestige in the neighborhood of a Thracian town. Some people were eager to buy him tees and soft drinks in exchange for a recital of his original erotic / homoerotic poetry. Once he appeared in a coffee-house in his shabby clothes when I was there.

An elderly shopkeeper was just in the right spirit for some of his stanzas. He ordered the bum a glass of tea. The bum guzzled the tea in a few hasty sips. Then he paused for some time with a grin on his face as if concentrating and remembering. But he was in actuality probably increasing the thrilling effect of the oncoming verses. When the suspense was ripe enough, only then mouthed he his most recent couplet: “The caravan comes from Yemen, with rugs made of tail-hair and all ! / Let me pierce you with that (member of mine), pubic hair and all !” (“*Yemen’den gelir kervan, çulunla mulunla ! / Haydayim*”^(*) *bunu sana, kilinla milinla !*”).

* In my junior high school class *Zahit* was my friendly rival in our competition over the honor roll. One day he was philosophizing about this very verb with his other students: “I understand it is a very interesting and prolific verb. Firstly, it means to drive a vehicle. Secondly, it means to shepherd cattle, sheep or geese. Thirdly, well, you guys know better than me!”. As a matter of fact; the above case history and thus the related next one flashbacked in my memory in a tea-house in *Kırklareli*, when a teenager shouted in protest in the direction of the cooking furnace: “You screwed us with stale tea!” (“*Haydadın bize bayat çayı !*”).

In April 1993 I stepped into the roof of an officer club with my father. In a dark corner we spotted a group of 1944 graduates, my father’s peers, all long retired. They were all smiles and all ears, listening to a half a century old poem’s rehearsal by a popular^(*) colleague, *Hüsamettin Sevengül*, alias *Hüsam-Pasha-from-Scutari*. (The Istanbul boy had made it to the rank of a brigadier general). The retired general’s autobiographical verses were about his lingering in the school’s bath and masturbation in a solitary booth as a horny teenager when the officer on duty checks into the bath at the very wrong moment and spoils his pleasure! (At the time, showers were not even known in Turkey. A domed Turkish bath partitioned into booths with marble basins equipped with hot and cold taps were in use for body washing. One such domed bath is now converted into a canteen for the military school in question).

Up to 1970s, even a sensational crime would present an occasion for certain *rhapsodes* to compose poems and sell them. While the incident still fresh on the collective memory, a *peoples’ poet* would deal with this theme.

Then peddlers would sell the cheap one-page-long prints in towns and villages by reciting certain striking verses through *haut-parleurs* in order to make their own publicity. People anxious to read rhyming verses would readily pay 25 *piastres* for such printed sheets.

From mid-1960s in the small Thracian town of *Alpullu*^(*) I vividly remember a *vendor* selling the tragedy of a beautiful young girl victimized in an intricate deadly love affair. In accordance with the convention, one of the last verses used to be a sign and stamp destined to commemorate and immortalize the poet himself, by mentioning either his true name or his pseudonym. In that particular case the end went as “He who had written my ballad, *Rhapsode* Mustapha; bla bla bla...” (*Destânımı yazan Âşık Mustafa...*”).

* Normally a colonel, once promoted to the rank of general, wins a lot of jealousy and witnesses a start of distancing away from the part of his peers, former pals and confidants. For that matter, any officer certified as a *mouchard* (informant) for the higher levels in the chain of command and control, is discarded from a young age onwards and is never forgiven again. For the cast off individual this is a horrible outcome very similar to the situation of an adolescent rejected by peers.

The mutually enjoyed closely-knit solidarity developing over the years is a wonderful psychological support and a rare prerogative compared to other professions. Within the group everybody is at home, at ease with nod secrets to hide and no pretensions to claim. Weaknesses and strengths, vices and virtues are known and accepted as such. Even friendly exchange of obscenities (ritual insults) is part of the routine.

* My father, after his forced retirement from his rank of major in the army following the *coup* of 1960, got settled in this town for the sake of a part-time English teaching post at the local junior high school. s.c.

Some years before that date, an opportunist rhapsode trying to make a profit of a misfortune must have emerged in the aftermath of the ominous first *coup d'état*. As a matter of fact; a seller with a megaphone was heard climbing down the steep streets of *Yıldız quartier* in *Beşiktaş*, Istanbul; while we small children were playing on a pavement.

In a melodious tone the malicious gloating couplet hit us all at once: “Oh Menderes, Menderes oh! In a poultry house stuck is the great man now!”. (“*Ya Menderes e Menderes! Kümesinde girdi koca teres!*”).

The Turkish word “*teres*” is a somewhat pejorative version of “man” approximating the American word “guy”, the British word “chap” or the German word “Kerl”. A superb translation of a piece of some poetry into Turkish by late poet *Can Yücel* employs this word in the verse “*metressizdi teres*” for the sake of a beautiful alliteration effect. It literally means something in the sense “the poor devil had no mistress” but is used as an interpretation to describe a sheer bachelor, connoting his horny and miserable situation, which was to lead him into fatal trouble (**).

Moreover, the very first stanza as well as the melody itself were obviously plagiarized from a popular song dedicated to a then-legendary football player—and this despite his small stature—in the *Fenerbahçe* team, famous *Micro-Mustafa!*

A French teacher, my friend *Sertaç Bey* originating from the Aegean town of *Turgutlu*, once narrated his reminiscences of a pavement-poet from his childhood days:

The March-12-1971 military coup had been in full effect. The parliament was hushed into obedience (if not dissolved as it had been during the previous and first coup of May-27-1960 or as it would be during the next future coup of September-12-1980). A pro-junta deputy, *Nihat Erim* in favor of martial leaders was “appointed” prime minister.

The pavement-poet was an old *Romani* (gypsy) (*) shoe-shiner named *Kerim*. All day long he would shine

** The epilogue (and the moral) of the anonymous song is an advice to the audience to quit the bachelor style of life: “*et voilà mes braves gens / la goulante du pauvre Jean / qui vous dit en vous quittant / aimez-vous !*”. *Can Yücel*'s translation goes as: “*Çıktım ben aradan; / Size öğüt garibandan; / Diyor ki idamlık Jan: / Sevişin, sevişin lan!*”.

* Like in many settlements, in *Turgutlu* and other big Aegean towns *Romani* neighborhoods are present. In January 2010 an incident involving the *Romani* families (living there barely since 1978) broke out in the tiny town of *Selendi*. The law against smoking in public places had just got into force and a young *Romani* man was warned by a coffee-shop owner for smoking inside. The young man (most

customers' shoes beautifully (and meekly) right at the town center, until night time.

Then he would *guzzle* his two bottles of cheap wine right there on his shoe-shine box; slowly transform himself into a roaring lion; load his *gagne-pain*-box on his shoulder by its leather belt and stagger towards his shanty house, shouting out his quadruple all the way:

“In (capitol) Ankara (Premier) *Nihat Erim !*
And here in *Turgutlu*, I, drunkard-*Kerim !*
I'd go ahead *f*ck* the mother and spouse (*)
Of anyone claiming to be a man [daring challenge me]!”

(“*Ankara'da Nihat Erim !*
Turgutlu'da Sarhoş Kerim !
Ben adamın anasını
*Avradını s*kerim !*”).

Let alone the town folks, even the security forces with their extra-swollen egos due to the prevailing martial law would not lay a finger on him. (Perhaps his paying some tribute to the prime minister in the first stanza might have helped somewhat in that respect).

Drunkard-Kerim, the pavement-poet, used to be considered a colorful character and tolerated, even implicitly approved.

In one of our visits of the paternal grandparents in a Thracian village during my childhood, my cadet-cousin *İbraam [İbrahim]* wanted to impress me with his capability about finding rhymes.

Just across the house a naughty boy named *Emin* had his house. *İbraam* cupped his hands around his lips like a megaphone and shouted his short poetry in the *Pomak* language:

probably touchy due to his ethnicity) took offense, considering this an excuse for discrimination.

After the quarrel he returned with a group to damage the place (strong solidarity among persons with a shared persecution perception). Trouble escalated with a climax whereby a mob of “whites” in rage retaliated by attacking the Roman households. Fortunately, security forces prevented life casualties. The Interior Ministry intervened promptly and tactfully, by deploying the victimized families first to *Gördes* and soon after relaying them to *Salihli* and *Kula*. s.ç.

* That second half of the poem is not a unique original invention unlike the rhyming first half; on the contrary; it is a horribly provocative and very commonplace “format” in known swearing forms in the Turkish language. Indeed, It must sound familiar from a previous page in the beginning of this section mentioning about the folk-song by *rhapsode Mustafa Koç* in mid 1970's in a socialist reunion of songs and celebrations in Istanbul.

“Emiiiiin!
Kış tatatibes kumin !“

Ignorant of the *Pomak* language but curious about the meaning of the perfectly-rhyming second stanza, I asked him about the translation into Turkish. In an equally proud manner; her elder sister and my peer-cousin *Fahriye* volunteered to provide me with the Turkish translation for his sake; while the poet of the household started playing with his fingers and looking down shyly, following his wonderful performance:

— “ Here ‘kış’ is ‘house’ and ‘kumin’ is ‘chimney’; so the meaning is: ‘Emin, whose house has no chimney’ ”.

CONCLUSION

Snobbish *citadin* may brand all villagers with the same stereotype “stamp” and lump together under the common category of village people. But each villager is an individual and as many distinct personalities, talents, mentalities and physical differences among them is observed as in the thickest urban center. Nevertheless; historical roots and the shared socio-cultural “molds” somehow do shape people in a common melting bowl at least in certain respects. Turkish peasant is usually possible to describe as pragmatic, generous, self-concerned as a peasant, candid, aid-anxious, conservative, heavy smoker and prone to swear often if male, somewhat slovenly in cleanliness and secure in the bosom of a big family and kinship circle.

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SUPPLEMENT: SOME VISUAL MATERIAL



Fig. 1. Peasant children love to eat sugar coated chick peas. (Scanned by the Author — S.Ç.)



Fig. 2. (Scanned by the Author — S.Ç.)



Fig. 3. (Drawn by the Author— S.Ç.)

Tiny flasks with fragrant scent, for men. Itinerant essence-vendors sell them in glass-paned wooden boxes. In Islamic culture good smell is a blessing. It is believed that good smell expels the devil and attracts the angels.



Fig. 4. Bauernmädchen—(German) farmer-girl (Scanned by the Author — S.Ç.)

The way the trinket is depicted, she is not very different from her Turkish counterpart with her plaided (if only blond) hairstyle; colorful top clothing; long conservative skirt and even naive, plain facial expression.



Fig. 5. A miniature carpet (Scanned by the Author — S.Ç.). Peasant women love colorful rugs and carpets and they manually weave them in many regions. Towns like *Bünyan*, *Gördes*, *Hereke* are world-known focal points in carpeting.



Fig. 6. and Fig. 7. A pocket mirror with the picture of Atatürk, dating back to 1950s, from the rural paternal house

(Its equivalent with the picture of Prime-Minister *Menderes* got broken) (Scanned by the Author — S.Ç.). Peasant youths used to carry such pocket mirrors. A folk song goes like: “My lion is robust like the chip of an apple / And carries his mirror in his right pocket, yes he does” (*Elmaların yongası, aslanım aman! / Haydi sağ cebinde aynası*”).

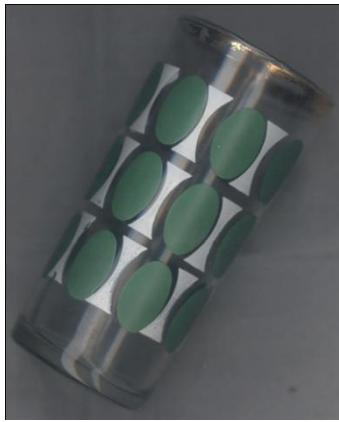


Fig. 8. A colorful water glass which appeals to peasant tastes (Scanned by the Author — S.Ç.).



Fig. 9. Hand-made *Bursa* pocket-knives with horn handles (Scanned by the Author — S.Ç.).



Fig. 10. A ceramic bowl much favored by villagers and a glazed earthen bowl (Scanned by the Author — S.Ç.).



Fig. 11. After the home-made moccasins got forgotten, for many a years, villagers used to slip their woolen-sock-covered feet into cheap black plastic shoes in summer and plastic boots in winter (Scanned by the Author — S.Ç.).

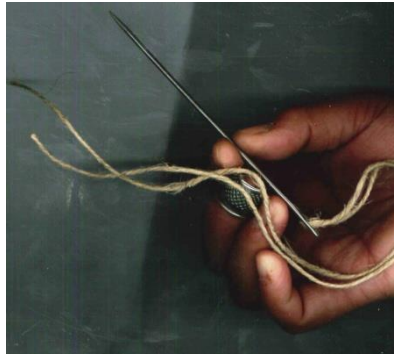


Fig. 12. A gigantic needle (*çuvaldız*), usually used for repairing rugs (Scanned by the Author — S.Ç.).

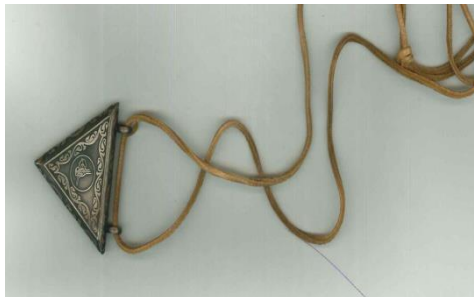


Fig. 13. An amulet containing prayers, for hanging around the neck (Scanned by the Author — S.Ç.).