

Informal Ways and Means, in Competition with Formal Patterns, in Modern Turkey

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Abstract

Turkey, is undergoing a fast modernization process on one hand; but people still cling to traditional ways, on the other hand. This dual character makes it difficult for the formal and informal aspects of social life to go in parallel. There is a gap between anything officially on paper and the actual social reality of the real world out there.

Keywords: Tradition; Traditional; Formal; Informal; Modern

Introduction

Official structures and policies in a society may not necessarily coincide with the unwritten informal practices. Sometimes full or partial overlapping does occur. But sometimes formal and informal tendencies may be diametrically opposite and even come to compete with each other [1].

For a country, which has not attained complete modernization, conflict between official structures/directions and traditional values and virtues of all sorts, is even more prominent. Even in a modernized country certain sections like ghettos of some subcultures display strong distrust against almost anything official.

In Turkish folk tales, which are like mirror images of historical and cultural realities, the suspicion towards anything official, can easily be detected:

The people and the government appear to be two distinct, opposite ends. When an old woman finds a useful talisman, the government-men deprive her of this talisman by force...The people do not believe that the government-men will act in justice...The sentry, the watchman of the quarter, the village-chief, the executioner can all be bribed and led astray (Tuğrul 1969: 109-110).

The Visible and the Invisible Issues

Official numbers [2], though they look good and “scientific” in print, are not always as telltale as a deep qualitative inquiry when it comes to investigate social aspects of a given society. Especially a traditional society, when it comes to detect problems and delicate (heikel/épineux) areas, it is not easy to find honest informants [3] and the researcher at best should rely on his own observations and Feststellungen rather than given out replies.

It is said that Turkish people do not talk, but rather they mumble when it comes to express their complaints (“Türk insanı söylemez, söylenir”). Indeed, in all tradition-rich societies the grapevine absorbs the complaints. Gossip continues in full swing. But nobody stands up to make a straightforward proclamation.

As Larson (1973: 31) puts it, even if a sociologist would have designed excellent measurement devices he couldn't have applied them extensively due to ethical and other limitations.

Those “other limitations”, when they come into play, could be of considerable weight. It is almost impossible to “extract” the genuine attitudes and the real thoughts of subjects in some kinds of research. Financial issues are usually taboo, for instance. Turks are proud people and addressing a research question may invoke the feeling of being given an exam. The fear that one's ignorance will be revealed is a horrible experience for some.

Here is a case history: In 1975 a social research was designed by Boğaziçi University in some shanty towns (bidonvilles) of İstanbul. Some students were employed in the project. One of them was a friend of mine, Erkan. One of the questions was “what do you understand from the word ‘référendum?’” The injured prides of many respondents put Erkan, a sensible young person, in an uneasy position. Sometimes he had to say “I, personally, don't know this word, either!”

One of the respondents whom he visited was a grocery owner. To the question “what is your monthly income?” the man gave the reply with a derisory sum! Erkan insisted for a realistic figure, which the respondent firmly refused to say so. Finally, the grocer “fainted” and the researcher had to take his leave! One of his respondents had been an army sergeant. Erkan later commented with a sigh of relief that while questioning this sergeant, he had felt as if he had been at home. (To the hypothetical question “in whose place would you wish to be?”, the sergeant had replied as follows: “I wish I were a well-known labor leader, somebody in charge of a big union!”).

As another case history regarding the authenticity of answers to a questionnaire, I remember the following incident: While a lycée student (at Robert College), one Monday morning in the big assembly hall right after the recitation of the National Anthem, they distributed to us questionnaire forms about the food in the cafeteria. One of the questions was open-ended: “If there are no changes in the existing food varieties, would this affect your future attendance to the cafeteria?”

The student sitting next to me wrote: “No, because I am a scholarship student and I am Obligated to eat there”. (I, also a scholarship student, was glad of the food anyhow). Then the school principal said: “Please put your names on the papers”. (We had first had

the impression that the answers would be anonymous). Immediately the above-mentioned student excitedly asked for an eraser to soften his reply!

Getting Ahead with Informal Ways

It is interesting to note that on a macro-scale this discrepancy between people and the government can be seen in local politics. A certain political party member may stigmatize the opponent party as a “state party”, while praising his own as a “nation’s party”, thereby contrasting state (which represents an official concept) with the nation (which represents the aspirations of plain people).

Things set out in written form may assert what is widely different from the actual practices. In the Turkish Law, it is stipulated that any contract/transaction where deceit is involved, is legally null and void. This statement comprises wedding acts also. Now, in reality, in provincial Turkey many would-be grooms lie about their professional, social and financial [4] situations to the would-be brides; just to win those girls! A technician may pose himself as an engineer or a health-official may pose himself as a doctor and so on. (Years ago, in the Çay county of the province of Afyon, a foreman introduced himself as a technician [a technician had higher status than a foreman in the pulp and paper plant where he worked] to the girl’s family. The actual technician, his superior, only collaborated with the foreman. He seconded his man and said “he is a technician and I work under him”).

In primary schools, even two-three decades ago, educational textbooks and magazines used to describe a family as “consisting of father, mother and children”. Now, in village societies those nuclear families are difficult to find even today. Instead, we encounter larger families and even polygyny. The daughter-in-law enters the father-in-law’s household, where a lot of manual work awaits her! Anthropologist, Joe Pierce narrates the following:

(Mahmud’s elder brother got married). “The new bride in Mahmud’s home was of some interest to him, for she was always on the run. When there was work in the kitchen to be done, he heard his mother’s voice snapping out the word *gelin* (bride) almost constantly, always followed by a command to do this or that about the house... Thus she ran from morning till night, trying to satisfy her new family and prove that she was a good housewife... This situation would remain unchanged until Mahmud married and brought a new *gelin*/bride into the house” (Pierce 1964: 43).

Again, in primary schools’ educational curriculum, a breakfast used to be described as consisting of “cheese, jam or honey, butter and tea” (if not grapefruit juice and caviar etc.). Of course, as time passes, urbanization trends and new developments make those clichés more and more valid. But, especially in former times, those were only didactical aspirations/images and would-be-concepts rather than the commonplace reality:

“The step-brother of my maternal grandfather had been a prison-guard in a big city. Once he came to visit my grandfather in Thrace. At the time my mother was a ten-year-old girl (The year was 1942). My mother-as she would narrate it to me in my childhood years-was quite astonished in the morning to see this “guard-uncle” seated at the table (!) in expectation of cheese and jam (!) for the breakfast. My mother’s own family ate all the meals on a cloth spread on the floor, in accordance with the traditional provincial Turkish way at the time; and their staple morning food itself was soup, not cheese and jam” (Çaya 1992: ix).

Even in the army of today, some mornings they give soup to the soldiers as breakfast. Especially in bivouacs during the fall-maneuvers, rice-soup comes out to be much convenient as a substitute for breakfast, instead of the more detailed tea-butter-jam-cheese combination.

Informality in Formal Organizational Settings

In any given formal institution, too, informal works are always at work. Accordingly, informal leaders are also present along with formal authority figures.

Wise leaders [5] can sometimes make the two ends meet in this respect. As late full general (December 22, 1995) pointed out in a leadership conference, informal leaders of an organization must be determined and gained to the cause of the organization (or else, this not being possible, they should be dispensed with).

“No collection of men and women who remain together for more than a few hours can remain ‘unstructured’. Particularly; if they cooperate; they must develop some form of organization (of their own). A new entrant may be trained in the technique of the job and in the formal organization of the company but he will neither feel at home nor be accepted by his colleagues until he is familiar with the prevailing attitudes and until other people are confident that he shares them whole-heartedly” (Fraser 1968: 255, 283).

Even the way people greet one another may be determined by the unwritten law in a given organization. This greeting aspect alone has tremendous significance for any individual involved there.

Groups determine behavior patterns. This begins just from the way the members greet one another. For instance; a person may originate from a group where in the morning each comer shakes hands with the others who had already arrived; while a stranger or an unsympathetic person will solely receive a cool nodding by the head upon encountering with the others. Now, this same person may enter a new group where the procedure is just the other way around! The group members who like one another utter one another a quick hello, while they shake the hand of any stranger or unsympathetic person. He who does not understand the ‘system’ of the group and so cannot quickly adapt, will suffer under the actual circumstances. The group repulses him. Being gnawed at by tiny bits of behavior against him, the new-comer develops aggressive feelings and is soon stigmatized as an intruder or nuisance (Störenfried/semour). Of course the ‘secret law of the group’ is not restricted to forms of greeting or any other formalities (Äußerlichkeiten/Förmlichkeit) (Kolle 1967: 114, 115).

“How do we know about (such) informal configurations? Usually one knows something about them in one’s own local community, neighborhood, club, or professional organization. This knowledge is gained by personal observation of who visits whom, who avoid each other, the tone of voice in which people speak to each other, how they act when they meet in the street, and a multitude of other hints and suggestions” (Lundberg et al. 1954: 409).

Even the most formal organization, one which just fits the definition of bureaucracy [6], cannot be totally free from informal elements. A modern army probably resembles the ideal type of bureaucracy described by Max Weber in 1922 more than any other kind of formal organization. (The older armies had a lot of feudal aspects, the fief-in Seljuqs and in Ottomans-were purely feudal institutions. But, even the late Ottoman armies were not purely bureaucratic as far as the number of years in a certain rank etc. was concerned). Even in an army the

personality of officers shape the way they apply the strictly definite orders).

“The rules, regulations, procedures, and impersonal relationships prescribed by a bureaucracy only rarely correspond with the realities of organizational life; (because) formal organization breeds informal organization. These informal structures provide means by which people bend and break rules, share ‘common knowledge’, engage in secret behaviors, handle problems, and ‘cut corners’. So work relationships are much more than the lifeless abstractions contained on an organizational chart that outlines the official lines of communication and authority...People are tied to the larger group by their membership in primary groups that mediate between them and the formal organization. Further, the impersonality of the bureaucratic arrangements distresses many people, and they search for warmth, rapport, and companionship in the work setting through informal relationships...In brief, formal organizations do not work strictly by the book” (Zanden 1993: 116-118) (Figure 1).

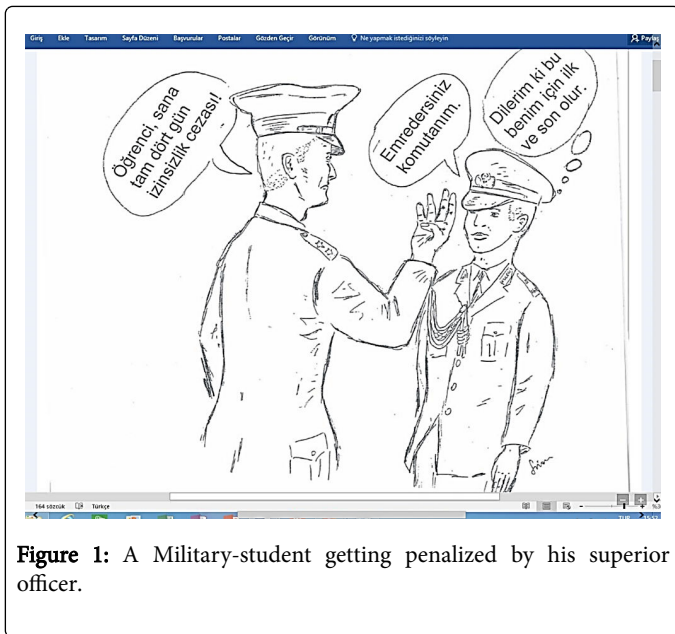


Figure 1: A Military-student getting penalized by his superior officer.

In some detective movies “the tip of the iceberg” is reflected, regarding the effectiveness of informal ways even in the pursuit of formal objectives. The hero of the movie; a humane, understanding detective; may establish rapport with prostitutes, drug sellers or small thieves! He is very lenient towards those tiny out-laws. He sometimes even literally protects them! All this is for the sake of revealing a more serious crime like a case of a horrible murder or for gaining information in order to prevent a would-be assassination.

The above sociological considerations are even more valid in traditional societies like Turkey. Group membership counts more for a Turk than it does for a European. Here, individuality is despised by the general community and group conformities are attached much more importance than in an industrial, truly urbanized society.

“In Turkey, consultation and cooperative effort rather than individual initiative are the accepted norms of behavior. Primary emphasis is placed upon the family and kin...It is only with some difficulty that the tradition-oriented villager trusts and cooperates with individuals and groups outside the village context, including the national government” (Roberts et al. 1970: 168, 169).

It is true that Turkish society is a young society and the change is an accordingly fast and on-going process. But; how could any society be analyzed without considering its traditional and historical traits?

Whether a work place or a school, whatever organization we consider, the new-comers (novices) all have their own worlds with their own popular culture, slang, jokes and informal value understandings, to begin with. Further, the prevalent informal culture within the organization is acquired and processed, all merging together and building up a large volume of unwritten codes, which is at least as heavy as the official regulations. The individual complies with them as much as with the official regulations in all his actions within the organization. The formal and informal words just co-exist [7].

Informal Codes Could Be of More Noble Nature

It is true that informal codes mostly reflect puerile and hedonistic desires and make fun of serious commitments. Anything official and serious is “corny” and one should just pretend to respect them. Nevertheless, sometimes informal values could be originating from loyalty towards a high, noble cause.

As retired infantry colonel, author and history researcher Ferit Erden Boray [8] explained (Feb.23, 2002); Fevzi Çakmak Pasha, while still a young cadet in Kuleli İdadisi was one day imprisoned there. While in jail, he wrote on the wall the following sentence: “He who does not enter here (this jail) is a donkey; but he who enters here more than once, is more than a donkey, being also the offspring of a donkey (un âne, de père en fils!)” (“Buraya (nezarethaneye) giren eşek, birden fazla giren eşeğün eşek!”). The burgeoning leadership potential of that young lad can be inferred right here! Here is an adolescent who knows what it is to take a lesson from a wrongdoing! This lad was destined to become a marshal in the future, one of the saviors of the country in the War of Independence. He was not to become just any officer!

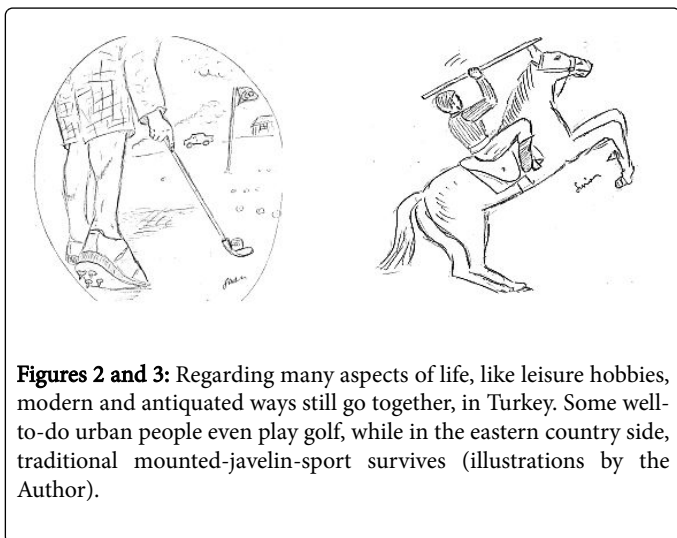
Informal attempts might aim for the betterment of a conceived wrongdoing, which the official view is not in a position to defy. This was the case of the French resistance works in World War II. They were not complying with the orders of Marshal Pétain, the official prime minister, who was lenient towards or even collaborating with the invading Nazis.

In a similar fashion, in the Ottoman State, during the turbulent times following the signature of Mudros Armistice in 1918, Kuleli Military High School's cadets were more aware of the awful situation of the country than those holding offices in the Sublime Port. Their extraordinary vision can be seen in the following extract, where a retired colonel in 1956 narrates the contribution of Kuleli high school' (İdadi) to the national struggle:

In evenings we cadets used to shout in chorus: “Long live the Sultan!” (Padişahım çok yaşa!). I don't know how it happened and who instigated or suggested the idea; but somehow; one evening we just found ourselves shouting this rhetoric in a different manner. We elongated some the uttering of some words and it came to sound as if we were saying “The Sultan upside down!” (“Padişahım baş aşağı”) [9]. This was an extraordinary event that time! Indeed, though the administration noticed it and warned us about it, this same lullaby went on the following evenings. The time coincides with the dissipation of the school. Some of us then took shelter in old boats around Kâğıthane and some of us were sent home (Türk Kahramanlığı III, 1956: 174-175). (The narration is mentioned to be based on the information taken from the memories of a retired colonel. In the full

text, the narrator also refers to a few military teachers who implicitly supported the developments in Anatolia. Those courageous men were simply risking the capital punishment, in those days!).

In the above text what is conspicuous at first sight is the modern-minded school-trained-officer's [10] understanding of honor and duty. According to them, in case of a dilemma, loyalty is directed to a higher entity, the Motherland, rather than a sheer person, the Sultan himself (Figures 2 and 3).



Figures 2 and 3: Regarding many aspects of life, like leisure hobbies, modern and antiquated ways still go together, in Turkey. Some well-to-do urban people even play golf, while in the eastern country side, traditional mounted-javelin-sport survives (illustrations by the Author).

So, there is no paradox to be seen here. After all, such “informal” patriotic actions taken up were stemming from modern minds shaped at the very best schools for those times.

Military as a Modernization-Motivator

Since Selim the third and Mahmud the Second, the reform movements in the Ottomans had been yielding their fruit, especially in the field of education. (Abdulhamid the Second, too, in spite of his paranoid-like suspicious personality and political repression, gave permission to the educator-minded pashas to further the schooling activities in the western style. As Sherif Mardin notes, unlike politics, sulfuric acid, was not conceived by this sultan as a relevant/immediate threat for himself).

During the following Turkish War of Independence, in paramilitary units (mobile militia groups), the loyalty of the men went to actual people (instead of high ideals) in accordance with the eastern type of blind obedience (biat etmek) tradition. These men were full of fighting spirit. Some secondary leaders were formerly sheer outlaws and now they might as well fight against the oncoming Greek Army.

As a matter of fact, the reconstruction of a regular army was a crucial turning point. (The army had been discharged in accordance with the clauses stipulated by the Mudros Armistice and only Kâzım Karabekir Pasha kept his own army corps intact, in the East). Many did not like the idea of a formal army at first but were eventually subdued. In the regular army order and discipline comes first. Display of individuality and flattery of personal egos is accordingly frowned upon.

The very highest commandant in a particular place on a certain occasion may only enjoy a rightly-placed subtle compliment at most [11]. But he cannot and should not allow his own praising and

glorification to propagate in folk ballads like for instance that of the folk hero and warlord Yörük Ali Efe (1895-1951): (Look at) the sleeves of his vest/Shining is his embroidery/Ali-the-Nomad is coming/Let the roads of (the province of) Aydın open up!” (Cepkeninin kolları/parıldıyor pulları/Yörük de Ali geliyor/Açıl, Aydın yolları!).

Coincidence between formal and informal ways is, accordingly, best observed in the military institution, in Turkey. The hypocrisy is of the least amount, if any. Paperwork is achieved in a manner which really would correspond with the reality, more than in any other establishment.

The military constitutes an all-compassing environment where almost no privacy is available for the individual. For instance, where else can the authorities periodically examine the pubic-hair and armpit shaves [12] of their men? Maybe in no other organization the needs of the people are so thoroughly recognized and admitted by the authorities! Even officially accepted strip-tease shows are organized in the army for the men from time to time. A marginal journalist in an article depicts a “cross-section” of such army practices. Though he uses a sarcastic style in his descriptions, a lot of factual information is to be found there:

Male children all of whose health problems and needs are taken care of by their commanders, thus receive an excellent reward. Once every two to three months, a provincial belly-dancer makes her show in front of a whole brigade. Screams arise for the woman to remove her clothing. Everybody encourages her, shouting like lunatics “open! open!” The experienced ritual resembles more a lynching session (Türker 1998: 6).

Since orders are to be executed no matter what, the crucial point is to issue logical orders which can be literally carried out.

With this realistic understanding and mentality, the High-command does his best to be flexible whenever it is ever possible, allowing a peaceful compromise to happen between what is formal and what is informal (Figure 4).

Anthropologist Pierce lets us know that in rural regions in 1960's even the time of the military service (a must from which there can be no escape) could be somewhat negotiated (In urban centers this was never possible. The “contingency approach” is easy to recognize at first sight).

Pierce describes all the aspects of a central Anatolian village (Demirciler near Kaman, Kırşehir) through the eyes of a ten-year-old boy, Mahmud. One day a jeep brings two officers to the village. The officers want to see the village-chief, the muhtar.

“The Muhtar shook hands with his two guests and walked away, as they resumed their seats to await his return. He was on his way to visit the fathers of the men who would be eligible to be called up for service that fall [13-18].

Mahmud followed him, remaining quietly outside each house while the Muhtar talked within, until they reached his own home. There he followed the old man inside and listened to the conversation with his father concerning his older brother”.

“The father agreed, but asked that the Muhtar come back in a few days to discuss the possibility of having his son held over until the following year. The Muhtar agreed that he would at least come back and discuss the matter, and then went on about the job of informing the other family heads” (Pierce 1964:41).



Figure 4: When it comes to raising children, many mothers cling to the old practices, even if some of them contrast with the advice provided by modern medical authorities. (illustration by the author).

(A few days later Mahmud's father renews his "strong plea for his son's being deferred until the next year; this the Muhtar accepts". The author hereby stresses that birth days of these young men are known only approximately. He also describes the physical examinations of the youths by the army doctors).

Conclusion

In Turkey, discrepancy between the actual reality and the "reality" represented on paper is indeed present. This is to be attributed to the highly rich traditional aspects of the country. Increasing urbanization is expected to balance out the differences in the future. Indeed, while for many years the growing shanty towns (bidonvilles) were ignored by officials and euphemistically referred on paper merely as "unwarranted" constructions; eventually the problem was to be recognized and referred to, by its true name. This alone is a sign like many others that, at least an attempt to confront the formerly avoided issues is long under way.

Notes

- A prominent inconsistency between the registered and the unregistered economy, apparently a vast topic to deal with, is beyond the scope of this article.
- At this point one might as well agree with the giant sociologist Georges Gurvitch (1891-1965). He regarded sociology as an explaining field. He hated numbers and technical obsessions. He even used pejorative terms like test-mania and quantity-craze (paraphrased from Mitchell 1979: 93).
- The idea of speaking his piece of mind upon perception of some wrongdoing is a sheer peculiarity of the most modern societies. Even there, courageous and resolute people, few in number, are up

to such an act. They are the ones who can differentiate between betrayal (or denunciation or spying) and whistle blowing.

- In Lawrence's unforgettable novel, *Sons and Lovers*, the newly-married bride (Mrs. Morel) discovers the next day the bills in the suit pockets of her husband, Mr. Morel (a coal miner prone to drink). She then realizes that the furniture was only bought on credit and the debt must be later paid!
- My own mother, Makbule Hanım, a retired primary-school teacher, had her own way of doing this: While choosing the class-head-student, instead of the more common practice of picking out a studious child, she used to appoint a natural leader to this "post". A "tough-boy", automatically respected by his peers, when endowed with formal privileges, invariably reconciled obedience to authority with hedonistic puerile tendencies. On one hand; he became more mature now that a responsibility was given him; on the other hand; on the part of the class; defying this boy would also mean defying an admired fellow class-mate, instead of meaning a revolt against the administration.
- "The larger and more complex a formal organization becomes, the greater is the need for a chain of command to coordinate the activities of its members. This need is fulfilled by a bureaucracy, a hierarchical authority structure that operates under explicit rules and procedures. It is the most effective means ever designed of making a large organization work. Sociologists therefore use the word bureaucracy in a neutral sense, without the overtones it usually has in ordinary speech (meaning red tape)" (Robertson 1979: 149).
- An interesting example signifying the separate world of the student body as distinct from that of the teachers is given here: In 1996, one of the favorite riddles of a boys boarding school in a provincial town was only accidentally discovered by the eavesdropping of a teacher. It then came to the attention of the other teachers as a popular joke. The riddle was based on a then-popular advertisement for a "winged" hygienic band (a certain brand of a sanitary napkin against menstruation): "It has a honeycomb but no honey; it has wings but can't fly; (so what is it?)" (Peteği var balı yok; kanadı var uçamaz).
- Retired infantry colonel, author, and near-history history-researcher Ferit Erden Boray is the officer in question. The discovery was made in 1956. At the time, part of the North Tower of the school was a confinement-place for the cadets deserving such a penalty. A partition separated the jail from the store-room where the suitcases (most of them made of wood, at the time) were kept. Cadet Oğuz Turan (later a brigadier-general, now dead for a decade), good at deciphering Ottoman-scripture, put many suitcases one on top of the other and scrutinized the inscription on the wall. Dating from early 1890s and never covered with a layer of whitewash ever since; the Ottoman letters were all too conspicuous! The signature was that of Kavaklı Fevzi, the official nickname of Cadet, who had come from Kavak quartier of Beykoz, near Istanbul. Captain Sabri Demirbağ (later major-general, dead in 2005) was informed, who in turn notified school-commandant Staff Colonel Şefik Erensu (later lieutenant-general, dead in 1989). The commandant publicized this historical discovery, all over the school.
- Here a subliminal message from a melody is in question. Sometimes an instrumental piece of music is heard and one can make out words there as if such words were actually pronounced.
- During the Ottoman Reformation process, the Mektebli (school officer) first contrasted and conflicted with the Alaylı (the officer

- who had advanced from among the ranks). As Swanson (1975: 368) points out, the importance of the distinction lay between Mektebli's being progressive and Alaylı's being reactionary: "As late as 1894 the Mekteblis made up only a small percentage of the Ottoman officer corps". [The percentage was to increase gradually. By 1918 only the Imperial School of Military Sciences (Mekteb-i Harbiye-i Şahane/Today's War College of Land Forces) was the source of permanent combat officers. During the First World War, especially in Gallipoli actions, many officers were lost].
- This is what the national poet Behçet Kemal Çağlar (my Turkish Literature teacher in lycée-one year) did to his friend General Faruk Güventürk (1912-1992) in a local opening ceremony. He improvised four stanzas for his friend the General and recited them aloud to the information of the civic protocol present: He is the Turk who loves his nation/He is the Turk who praises Atatürk/He is the Turk who curses reactionaries/Here he is: General Faruk Güventürk! ("Milletini seven Türk/Atatürk'ü öven Türk/Gericiliğe söven Türk/General Faruk Güventürk!").
 - The Turkish-Moslem tradition foresees such a shave. In the army, hygienic purposes also come into play. The officers carry out such inspections, following the simple order "open the rows!" (rompez les rangs!/sıra açıl, marş!). (In addition, lack of privacy and the power of the authority is also stressed, by the practice).

Hygienic considerations also gain utmost importance in collective places. (Steinbeck's novel in Dubious Battle is about apple-collecting American labors (in 1930s) who get on strike because of low wages. One big trump of the employers is to rationalize hygienic issues and disperse the strikers on the grounds that their camp is liable to endemic diseases. The labor leaders accordingly arrange for sanitary installations [water treatment, field toilets etc.] under the supervision of a physician, who is sympathizing for their cause).

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