The Turkish “Version” of Vendetta

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Abstract

Vendettas (feud), based 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 along the course of modernization. Psychological and sociological considerations seem to co-work to perpetuate it.

Keywords: Blood money; Revenge; Reprisal; Vendetta/feud

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" [1].

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.

İÇLİ [4] 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 [5] 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 [6].

Persons, whose kin had been murdered, cannot go on living as honorable and respectable individuals in their local environments. This conviction leads to successive homicide acts [7].

When it comes to taking revenge, it is not obligatory to concentrate the hatred towards a specific person. Especially in primitive forms of revenge, the hostility may take as target a whole group of people [8].

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

Tezcan [6] 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 partly autobiographical short story Çaya [9] 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 wailing!” 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 them! What a ‘heroic’ folk literature will follow!”

As the Turkish movie Hemso (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!\(^{1,5,6}\)

\(^{1}\)The origin of the tradition starts in the form of collective revenge and some parts of Germany and Scandinavia, Greenland, Balkans (especially Albania), Sicily, Sardinia, 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 Erdentüg [2]. Feud is also known to be common practice among Arabs before Islam. As Benet [3] 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 [6] 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.

\(^{3}\)It is known that the blessed Prophet verbally forbade blood feuds in his farewell address to roughly 120,000 Muslims. Tezcan [6] 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.

\(^{4}\)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 [7].

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Received November 28, 2014; Accepted December 16, 2014; Published December 23, 2014


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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. [6].

It is common practice to get one's revenge by waged-killers also. Thieves, bums, who need money and are full of hostile attitudes with the target person can be coaxed easily for this purpose (Tezcan [6] by reference to Isa Öztürk [10] in Köy Enstitüsü Dergisi [Journal of Village Institute], No. 4, Hasanöglan, Ankara),16).

Sometimes the reprisals are so severe that the rival side kills two or three persons at one time. Here another motive is “eradicating” all males to render further retaliation impossible [6]. Having a large family 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 [11].

Feelings of resentment are also related to status differences. Aswad [12] 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 riches] killed a man of lower rank, the shaykh paid damages. In the reverse case, he might kill the rival’s unique little son, his favorite horse, dog etc. [6].

Payment of blood money may in some societies prevent the very commencement of coffee-shop conversation circumstances: “If a family is insulted by a family, the better off you are. They cannot finish them by shooting” (Tezcan [6] by reference to İsa Öztürk [10] in Köy Enstitüsü Dergisi [Journal of Village Institute], No. 4, Hasanöglan, Ankara).16).

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.

Case Histories of Suggestion

Tezcan [6] brings up two suggestion incidents, the first being one based on Ozgen’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, who in turn had received the information from the attorney of the province of Rize at the time: Forty 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 companions 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.

As Tezcan [6] registers it again; in the play Kezban [a common female peasant name] written by Turan Oflazoğlu; a grandmother typically screams provocative statements to arouse her grandson, Ali, to take his revenge:

• You coward!
• How come you quit visiting the village-café? Are you frightened or something?
• The dead get happy thanks to the living, Ali!
• Now I can tell: You can’t even play a hen, Ali! You don’t even deserve the bread you eat!
• I am sure the souls of your father and uncle do need some relief!
• It takes a manly man to decide on vengeance. It is just the miserable fellow who goes to sue his enemies in official courts! (Figure 1).

The Theological Aspects

In 2005 a surgeon of Cerrahpaşa Faculty of Medicine, Professor Kalaycıoğlu, was assassinated in a garage while running his car. The assassinators were reported to be the close relations of a patient who had died while being operated on by the surgeon.14
"Conflicts and feuds within a segmentary 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" [14].

Stirling [1] 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. Emirgılı [15] 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 between families or clans) 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" [14].

In many places in Turkey the village constitutes a real focus of the arbitrator, appearing friendly to both opposing sides, or picking up one side to win, depending on the occasion (Tezcan [6] [by referring to Bozarslan’s work titled: Doğunun Sorunlarısı]). Peasants are deadly loyal to landlords. This in turn makes the landlords impudently reckless in indulging in and keeping up feuds [6].

Cultural considerations are also significant in the feuding custom. In that respect, we can list factors like lack of trust towards official authorities; the folk ways of interpreting honor and self-esteem; the tradition of handling guns; 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 [6]).

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 Emsinouyt section of Istanbul, 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.

In his novel Kan Dâvası [Blood Feud], author Reşat Nuri Güntekin mentions about 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 Emsinouyt section of Istanbul, 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.
solidarity. The inhabitants may consist of an entire clan, while marriage between cousins stays the rule. In this manner, quasi-tribal structures are preserved and sometimes feuds break out between whole villages [17].

It is a fact that in southeastern Anatolia even the rural architecture is affected by the feuding tradition. In many village-houses the windows are tiny and toilets are absent in the interior. If a curious visitor asks the reason why, he will be given the reply narrated in Nihat Nirun’s seminar-work: All because of the feud. If the windows are small, you are less exposed to your opponents. If one has a fixed toilet inside, he may receive a bullet while defecating, unarmèd as he is at the moment [17].

Unsal [17] also supplies us with the following information by reference to a news clipping dated July 12, 1989: The vindictive motive knows how to travel and find its target even in a big city. If necessary, it will voyage even longer. So, this was the case of that poor guest-worker (Gastarbeiter) in Kreuzberg (the Turkish-populated neighborhood of Berlin), who got shot because of a 27-year-old feud while he was on the verge of getting on his car.

Feelings “tickling” the feud tradition may emerge in quite unexpected persons: A hard-tempered young artillery officer I knew once mentioned about a conflict he had had with a superior, sometime in the past, somewhere in a remote eastern garrison. On one occasion he had threatened his senior with the following words: “If you keep picking on me, I’ll make you pay for it! Maybe in the future, but I will. I swear! If I cannot harm you, I will do it to your household!”

[Indeed] Scipio Sighele [1869-1913] believes in the innate murderous propensity of mankind. He confirms in Thomas Carlyle’s [1795-1881] wording that “the civilization is just an outer shell beneath which the savage passion of man can burn with its infernal fire” [18].

Sometimes related feelings get “mixed into” other situations, as well. An army major in Ankara (1995), a confirmed bachelor very fond of his mother, told me about the following incident: Years ago he had taken his sick mother to a private doctor recommended by the neighbors. He had given the doctor a roll of banknotes as well as three pistol bullets (an insinuation of a menace in case he would not cure his mother). Looking at the doctor in the eye, he had firmly told him to take good care of the old lady. The physician had given him a mature, understanding smile; returning the bullets and keeping the roll and had added those words: “Pull yourself together, young chap! I give you my word that I will heal your beloved mother!” In fact, his mother did recover.

Truly; a doctor may be picked as a target if he fails the hopes of a patient’s agnates. A professor of surgery, M.D. Necip Göksel Kalayıcı was assassinated in the parking-lot his faculty of medicine, by a patient’s escort in Istanbul. His photograph hangs on the inside wall of a building at Çapa Faculty of Medicine, as a commemoration.

In my childhood, I once happened to eavesdrop a plain soldier talking to his fellow-soldier in a movie-theater before the film show (In small towns soldiers were allowed to go to the movies in official clothing on Sundays): Soon before his conscription, the young man had to bury his younger brother. The brother had eaten hot soup and drunken ice-cold water immediately afterwards, which made him gravely ill (probably a crack in the mouth mucosa or food pipe deteriorating into an infectious wound). He took this brother to the nearest town-doctor and offered him payments in kind (en nature) like cans of home-made cheese and frozen meat besides his regular doctor’s honorary in cash.

The doctor, nevertheless, neglected his best performance, allegedly. The soldier said: “I was determined to shoot the doctor, but my mother dissuaded me”.

Vendettas 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” [16].

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 [19] witnessed the following conversation:

Mehmet Yildiz—“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 Tetzcan [6]. Some sayings aim to aggravate hostilities:

- Reprision is not to be delayed till the day of judgment.
- 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 Urán 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 [10].

Capital punishment11 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 [20].

The related law about feuds dates back to June 1937 and has number
The new, advanced Turkish penal code (valid since 2005) foresees safety of life much better. The rates of all homicides decrease accordingly [6].

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 [23].

Indeed, the vindictive man can go about and find the enemy who conceals himself in a big city16 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 sentence17 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 [6].

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 cannot 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.

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

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