

A Century of Turkish Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (c. 1850s-1950s)

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As a “national” tradition attuned to an international scholarship, anthropology in Turkey is of interest to explore from the 1850s, when several anthropological concepts and theories from Europe were skilfully adapted to and came into interaction with the Turkish case. These include, interestingly, social Darwinism and evolutionism and materialism, but also, later, discourses on nationalism – philosophical and ideological trends which the Ottoman elite discussed in a variety of intellectual circles. However, Turkish scholars had to navigate these new scientific ideas within the context of a Muslim society ruled by the Ottoman sultan, who was also the caliph, i.e. spiritual head of Islam.

The interaction between European anthropological landscape and the Ottoman Empire was more than ‘travelling theory’ or theory travelling one way to the Muslim state. Especially in the 19th century, while several European Orientalists – such as Andreas David Mordtmann (Father) – travelled to and produced several ethnographic accounts on daily and political life in the Empire and also taught courses and published textbooks on these themes, travels from the Empire to Europe also became an important activity for some Ottoman “Occidentalists” such as Ahmed Midhat (Findley 1999, 1998). [1]

Much later, in 1925, the institutionalization of physical anthropology was the flagship of

Turkish nation-building to which certain anthropologists such as Şevket Aziz Kansu and historian Afet İnan contributed through the Turkish History Thesis, positing that the Alpine race came from Central Asian and Anatolian populations. Furthermore, the Sun-Language Theory, developed in particular by scholars such as the Austrian H. F. Kvergić, argued that world languages stemmed from a “proto-Turkish” (2002) and promoted a linguistic ethno-nationalism, thus complementing the claims of the Turkish History Thesis (Birkalan-Gedik 2018a, b). While such a racial anthropology, with its physical and linguistic variants spoke to the outside, namely to the European nations, to prove the “superiority of the Turkish race” after the defeat in the First World War, folklore studies also helped solidify these claims and fired the idea of a homogenous nation from within (Birkalan 1996, 2001). A certain version of nationalism is what connected them, but on the other hand, also became a divisive factor concerning the kinds of research and the genres that were considered appropriate within or claimed by each discipline.

From the late 1940s, “ethnology” in Turkey, used in the modern sense, developed, or rather was born from the physical branch of anthropology; it meant a comparative study of cultures, as Nermin Erdentuğ herself, the first docent in this field, outlined (Erdentuğ 1969: 70). Ethnology emerged within anthropology and this was the beginning of several disciplinary truces among anthropology, folklore and ethnology.

The 1950s mark the loosening of ties to continental anthropology in all its configurations. Following this period, the German traditions of *Ethnologie* especially started to fade away. Certainly, this can be understood as a part of Turkish anthropology finding its own disciplinary trajectories and orientations, which are not independent developments but are attached to the larger political ideas and debates. Thus, it could be suggested that the nationalist and the racist paradigm in folklore and anthropology had fulfilled its mission in the formation of the Turkish nation-state. By the 1950s, anthropology in Turkey had especially gained a broader sociocultural meaning and was geared towards the British functionalist school, while also leaning on theories of culture from Britain, the United States, and France (Birkalan-Gedik 2013).

The Turkish “anthropological landscape” thus encompasses anthropology, folklore, ethnography and ethnology. Certainly, these are different terms with different genealogies and sources, which have been effectively used and contested in this landscape. Furthermore, the Turkish case calls for detailed analyses that go beyond the dichotomy of “national” versus “imperial” anthropologies (Stocking 1982). The deductive categorization of “great” or “major” anthropological traditions have been complicated by bringing a distinct focus to a ‘peripheral’, albeit dynamic, anthropological tradition, wherein the anthropological landscape and an emergent nation-state were mutually constructed after the decline of the empire.

Antropolojiya , Etnografya and Etnoloji in the Ottoman Empire

In the 18th-19th centuries, ethnological disciplines saw critical developments when terms

such as “human beings”, “races” and “peoples” became intractably correlated. Broadly named today as anthropology, different research concerns appeared and were handled under different names which owed their genesis, nature and causes to different sources (Vermeulen 2015: 457). *Anthropologie*, as commonly used in German or in French, was equivalent to “physical anthropology” or “biological anthropology” in English; it is linked to the comparative study of human anatomy and morphology. On the other hand, “Ethnology started in the eighteenth century as a systematic attempt to acquire and compare information about the cultures of peoples and nations throughout the world” (Welz 2015: 198).

The ethnological sciences in the Ottoman Empire and in the Turkish Republic must be understood in relation to a political history in which various actors and institutions actively produced anthropological knowledge from a specific habitus. In this framework, the borders of politics and the disciplines became extremely porous since the intelligentsia and political leaders worked hand in hand, facilitating knowledge transfer between different but interconnected actors, sources, sites and institutions.

Despite earlier interactions with Europe and the European anthropological landscape in the Ottoman Empire, the intricate and interesting history of anthropology, folklore and ethnology in Turkey have been insufficiently documented. It must be underlined that anthropology in Turkey was mostly understood through the terms *ethnology* and *ethnography* at the end of the 19th century, using ideas from evolutionism and social Darwinism for its main sources. This branch of anthropology also relied on philosophical material to make sense of human beings by focusing mainly on materialism. Intellectuals in the Ottoman Empire mostly used the term “ethnology” and at the turn of the 19th century, while the term *Antropolojiya* (anthropology) referred to physical anthropology, for example, in the work of Abdullah Cevdet (*Dimağ ve Melekât-ı Akliyyenin Fizyolojiya ve Hıfzı’s-sıhası* – Physiology and Hygiene of the Brain and Faculties of Mind) and appeared much later in the anthropological literature, in 1913. An anthropologist and a medical doctor with undoubtedly racist inclinations, Abdullah Cevdet was influenced by developments in Europe on racial research. On the other hand, the term *ethnography*, or *Etnografya* in Turkish, in the Ottoman 19th-century sense was used interchangeably with the term *ethnology* – *İlm-i Akvâm* in Turkish – or later with *Etnoloji*.

The first source that impacted ethnology in the Ottoman era was philosophy, particularly the German materialism of Ludwig Büchner (Hanioglu 2005; Kalaycıoğulları 2016). Secondly, natural sciences, specifically evolutionism and social Darwinism, contributed to Ottoman anthropological thought (Öktem 2012), in which both the origins and diffusion of humans were discussed and answers beyond religion were sought (Poyraz 2010). The nineteenth-century Ottoman *İlm-i Akvâm* studied human diversity or multi-ethnicity through shifting terms of difference: race, religion, or national and tribal identities (Mordtmann/Osman Bey 1884; El-Husri 1911). *İlm-i Akvâm* also brought a component, ethnography, into play, although not openly spelled out, through the use of descriptive elements on human diversity, revealing

what I would identify as a “cosmopolitan” view that fitted into the Ottoman concept of “millet” – used in the Ottoman sense, referring to religious groups (Karpas 1973).

Ethnological cosmopolitanism was last represented by Satı El-Husrî in his monograph *İlm-i Akvâm* in 1911, who later turned to Arab nationalism. He left Turkey and became very active in Arab politics. His new intellectual route might possibly have derived from the fact that he saw no future in insisting on an “Ottoman” identity. Secondly, the impact of the Young Turks, who ushered Turkish nationalism in the formative years of anthropological thought, also played a role not only in the crystallization of ideologies but providing new ideological grounds of disciplines and disciplinary ideologies. This cosmopolitan view of ethnology was tolerated in a moderate climate before the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876-1908), whereas scientific approaches became even more “scientific” and were firmly established in the Young Turk era (1908-1918). On the one hand, Ottoman ethnologists had to manoeuvre ideas of science under the despotic regime of Ottoman Sultan. On the other hand – as the curriculum of Mülkiye (College of Political Science) illustrates (Toprak 2012) – the concepts of “conviviality” and “multi-ethnicity” were held as important in the ethnological imagination prior to the Young Turk Revolution. Thus, ethnology was offered in an interdisciplinary fashion – even as an “applied” science, educating future state officials on issues of human diversity, which would help them during their posts in Anatolia (Çankaya 1969: 950).

Perhaps a last example for “ethnography” can be provided in the later years. We see the term, this time, connoting material culture and used often with a companion: folklore, as seen in the example of Dâr ül fûnûn’s Faculty of Literature, establishing a department called Etnografya ve Folklor between 1914-1918.

The Rise of Nationalism: Nationalist Folklore and Racist Physical Anthropology

With the 1908 Young Turk Revolution, most of the Mülkiye cadres followed Turkish nationalism (Toprak 2012), which caused a long-lasting impact on anthropology – what was then termed Ethnology – causing a shift from a cosmopolitan, humanist, and open vision to that of a local, national, and introverted one. This paradigm, with minor revisions, still holds true for some anthropological studies even today.

Besides, wider contexts of philology, especially nationalism, revealed through modernizing and secularizing discourses, impacted ethnological disciplines starting in the late nineteenth century. Mülkiye and Dâr ül fûnûn, the first modern university in Turkey (later, Istanbul University) produced and disseminated nationalist sentiments. Ethnology was taught in Mülkiye as early as the 1870s (Çankaya 1969: 950-951); and a Folklore and Ethnography Chair was established in 1914 at the Dâr ül fûnûn (Tarhan/Akün 1994).

On the other hand, nationalism became the main source of folklore, as its scholars turned to philological texts, collecting and publishing them. Interestingly enough, nationalism became the key term that connected these disciplines, especially after the Young Turk Revolution in 1908. A racist version of nationalism was the leading paradigm for physical anthropology in

the 1930s, though it started to decline by the 1940s; but nationalism has not lost its effect on folklore and anthropology until the present.

As a matter of fact, like many of its counterparts in the world, folklore in Turkey has a well-established historical connection to nationalism. A comparatively late – but fervent – nationalism appeared in Turkey at the turn of the 19th century when the ethnic groups in the Ottoman Empire already had left the empire and claimed their national narratives and their folklore. As for the Ottomans, an interest in philological and literary sources, which considered oral traditions, especially proverbs as valuable sources of the folk knowledge, emerged in the Tanzimat (1839–1876), the Reformation Era. Among the first thinkers and writers of folklore in Turkey, important names are Ziya Gökalp, who was a sociologist and was known as the father of Turkish nationalism. Literary scholars such as Şinasi as well as philosopher Rıza Tevfik should be mentioned (Birkalan 1996, 2000). The Ottoman elite's contact with France as a way of modernizing literary forms signalled that literature was more than a means for pleasure, a tool for social criticism. This new, functional understanding of literature stood in direct antagonism to the place and value of literature in the Ottoman elite, which valued literature only aesthetically and used it as a source of personal pleasure.

At the same time, a version of German understanding of 'folk' guided the elite. Folk, in the Turkish sense, was the embodiment of both the Turkish peasant and the Turkish nation, aiming to exalt the term Turk, or *Türk* in Turkish, from its derogative implications. Founded in 1923, the Turkish Republic distanced itself from its multi-ethnic Ottoman past and launched a programme to propagate the Central Asian roots of Anatolian folklore through associations and learned societies (Öztürkmen 1992), for example, the Halkbilgisi Derneği (Folklore Association), which opened in 1928. Semi-scholarly journals published articles on the meaning, usage and scope of folklore. Several learned societies, such as the Turkish Society founded in Istanbul in 1908, propagated folklore forms as icons of Turkish identity, within a sort of "scientific Turkism" (Üstel 2004).

Nationalist ideologues, who were also political leaders and scholars, made systematic efforts. As alluded earlier, Gyula Mészáros, a Hungarian Orientalist and Turkologist, was invited to teach Turkish folklore and ethnography at the Dār ül fūnūn's Faculty of Literature between 1914 and 1918 and became a key figure in the establishment of the Ethnography Museum, Etnoğrafya Müzesi in Ankara, which presented the material of "Anatolian-Turkish culture." The term *ethnography*, here, meant the materiality of culture as we understand it today, and it had a favourite pairing: folklore – the oral side of culture (Birkalan-Gedik 2019).

Ankara University Faculty of Language, History and Geography, Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi, became the first faculty of the newly established Republic, and was established upon the orders of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The new Turkish regime, upon the orders of Atatürk, designed, built the Ankara University Faculty of Language-History and Geography and selected its scholars, featuring anthropology as its flagship department under the name of Antropoloji Kürsüsü (Department of Anthropology) in 1935, as emblematic of institution

building and university reform in Turkey. Anthropology furthered its strategic relationships with Germany and Switzerland – some of which Atatürk himself started, for example inviting internationally renowned scholars such as Swiss Eugene Pittard and others to Turkey and commissioning them to undertake important work in physical anthropology. Interestingly, the Faculty became the “Urform” of the academic establishment of anthropology, ethnology and folklore (Birkalan-Gedik 2019).

The Turkish state formed Ankara University Faculty of Language-History and Geography as its first university and the first autonomous Folklore Department was established here. Yet, it had a very short academic career, opening and closing in 1947-48, thus resulting in a failure. The Folklore Department, founded by Pertev Naili Boratav, was closed and Boratav became subject to a witch-hunt by extremist nationalists during the 1940s. This was a turning point for academic folklore, where the Turkish state itself still considered folklore outside academe as a nationalist field. Folklore meant something to be collected and studied only in the framework of nationalist thought, by practitioners under state folklore units. Yet, by doing so, it diluted the study of folklore in comparison to what was formerly taught in academe.

In the 1950s, the Turkish state supported publications on folklore and the founding of several folklore associations, groups and foundations outside academe. A group of folklore scholars attended a meeting in 1955, agreeing on the establishment of a national folklore institute (Baykurt 1976). Meanwhile, the Research Association of Turkish Folk Arts and Traditions (Türk Halk Sanatlarını ve Ananelerini Tetkik Cemiyeti) was founded in 1955 in Ankara, while the Turkish Ethnography and Folklore Association (Türk Etnografya ve Folklor Derneği) started research as of 1959. ‘Folklore’ in the title meant for a focus on the ‘oral’ or ‘intangible’ part of the ‘national culture’ while ‘ethnography’ meant the material side of the culture. Yüksek Tahsil Gençliği Türk Folklor Enstitüsü Kurma Derneği, the Higher Education Youth Association for Establishing Turkish Folklore Institute, was established in 1964; it became the Turkish Folklore Institution in 1966 and changed to the Folklore Institution in 1972.

Closed in 1952 by the right-wing Democratic Party on the argument that they publicized communist ideas, People’s Houses had originally been opened in 1932 by the Republican Party and had become the centre of folklore research until the academic establishment of folklore at Ankara University. Even during the period of 1938-1947, when folklore and folk literature courses were taught by Pertev Naili Boratav and his assistants, People’s Houses collaborated with Ankara University and collected oral folklore.

With the closing of the Folklore Department at Ankara University, the development of folklore in academe stopped for a long time and mostly developed, with the support of the Turkish state, in state research centres on folklore and ethnography, researching and collecting Turkish folk dances, festivals and material culture. As such, after the 1950s, folklore under the state can be described as a version of an “applied” folklore, while most of the folklorists working there also took active roles in the folklore publishing industry, state supported festivals and museums. While the term *public folklore* had been an issue of debate

in international circles, mainly in the US-folkloristics and in German post-Volkskunde (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2000), the term has been taken as a “natural” outcome of folklore’s dancing to the tune of the Turkish state, both inside and outside academia.

On the other hand, as an internal critique to the discipline itself, folklore in Turkey swung between an essential Turkish “folk” and a call for universal humanism, partly resulted from “importing” western sciences “as they are” at times and resulting in a clash with local, national and traditional structures. The situation can be framed as a part of the on-going discussions on “national agenda” versus “Eurocentrism”. Since the late 1960s, we have witnessed a questioning of the *völkish* ideas in *deutsche Volkskunde* in many European states, predominantly German-speaking Europe. By the 1970s, the German variants of folklore started to emerge and called for a change in name as well as paradigm. This resulted in the emergence of several conglomerations of European ethnology, for example, empirical cultural studies and cultural anthropology, offering possibilities for interactions with ethnological sciences, which we now call the “post-Volksunde paradigm”, trying to free it from fatal nationalistic ideologies, requiring—under new names and research agendas – a separation of “Volkskunde” as a science from the old “Volkstumsforschung”.

While German folklore’s “Vergangenheitsbewältigung” describes processes that have become key in the study of post-1945 folkloristics since the later 20th century, there are certain folklore traditions which had open connections to nationalism and fascism, but did not take pains to face the effects of these ideologies. It is observable that a certain fraction of folklorists in Turkey continue to feel comfortable with their collaboration with the state and its nationalistic ideologies. While self-reflexivity is needed both to perform and develop the autonomy of folklore institutions, it seems we must wait a little longer.

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[1] Not an anthropologist, but a well-versed writer and a careful observer, Ahmed Midhat enjoyed writing from a cosmopolitan perspective, experiencing Europe when writing about it. Invited to the Orientalist Congress in Stockholm as a delegate of the Ottoman State, he began his trip with a ship from İstanbul in 1889. His writing of this journey, *Avrupa'da Bir Cevlân* (A Tour in Europe) which is reminiscent of Levi-Strauss at times, ended at Marseilles, from where he continued to his endpoint by train through several cities in Germany and France, coming to Scandinavia. After the Congress was over, he visited the World Fair, the Exposition Universelle of 1889, to be more precise. His travelogue reports on the extravaganza in Paris, where he also compares what he saw in his homeland, the Ottoman İstanbul. For example, the electrically illuminated Eiffel Tower mesmerized him as much as the Rue du Caire (which he calls Street of Egypt). To Ahmed Midhat, the fair was a great spectacle and he took this chance to “teach” his readers about the European technical developments, welfare and wealth in his travel accounts. In a greater framework, he becomes a compassionate scientist, calling the Ottoman political and intellectual leaders follow the “science” but cautions them not to abandon native, local and traditional values.