



Van Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi
Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi
Van Yüzüncü Yıl University
The Journal of Social Sciences Institute
Yıl / Year: 2020 - Sayı / Issue: 49
Sayfa/Page: 13-28
ISSN: 1302-6879



A (Hi)story of a Sewing Machine: *Connecting Broadly* as a Research Technique in the Study of History
Bir Dikiş Makinesinin Tarihi/Öyküsü: Geniş İlişkilendirme Tekniğinin Tarih Çalışmalarında Kullanımı

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Makale Bilgisi / Article Information

Makale Türü / Article Type: Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article

Geliş Tarihi / Date Received: 13/07/2020

Kabul Tarihi / Date Accepted: 02/08/2020

Yayın Tarihi / Date Published: 30/09/2020

Atf: Arıkan, A. (2020). Bir Dikiş Makinesinin Tarihi/Öyküsü: Geniş İlişkilendirme Tekniğinin Tarih Çalışmalarında Kullanımı. *Van Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, 49, 13-28

Citation: Arıkan, A. (2020). A (Hi)story of a Sewing Machine: *Connecting Broadly* as a Research Technique in the Study of History. *Van Yüzüncü Yıl University the Journal of Social Sciences Institute*, 49, 13-28

Abstract

The objective of this study is twofold. First, it connects a domestic artifact, a sewing machine, to history. Second, it interprets the process of studying artifacts as a technique used in the study of history. To that end, in this paper, I take my grandma's sewing machine and connect broadly to bring new insight into how the sewing machine exemplifies the changes occurring in urban Turkish society during and after WW II. By considering my recollections of the machine, studying the object, and doing a thorough literature review, I argue that the sewing machine represents Turkish society's change from modernization to postmodernization especially when its past and present use is interpreted. Furthermore, the paper highlights the importance of studying artifacts by connecting broadly. It is also argued that such knowledge produced through similar inquiries reveal historical records that are of importance in the study of history. It is concluded that studying local and available artifacts from a historical perspective has numerous benefits.

Keywords: Sewing machine, connecting broadly, WW II, Turkey, Singer, Teaching of history

Öz

Bu çalışmanın iki temel amacı bulunmaktadır ki bunlardan ilki, gündelik yaşamımızda evlerimizde kullanılmış bulunan ve geçmişte önemli işlevleri yerine getirmiş olan bir dikiş makinesini tarihsel bir zemine oturtmaktır. Bu ilk amacı gerçekleştirirken de ikincil amaç olarak tarih çalışmalarında kullanılabilir bir yöntem olarak objelerin çalışılması sürecini betimlemek ve yorumlamaktır. Bu amaçla, bu çalışmada anneannemden yadigâr kalan dikiş makinesi geniş ilişkilendirme tekniği aracılığıyla değerlendirilmiş ve böylece Türk toplumunun İkinci Dünya Savaşı süreci ve sonrasında geçirdiği değişime yerel bazda ışık tutulmuştur. Dikiş makinesi ile ilgili anılarımdan, dikiş makinesine ait bilgilerin incelenmesinden ve alanyazın taramasından elde edilen bilgilerin çalışmanın verileri olarak kabul edilmesinin sonucunda dikiş makinesinin 1940'lerden bugüne gelen kullanımının moderniteden postmoderniteye geçişe tanıklık ettiğini göstermiştir. Buna ek olarak, çalışmada objelerin geniş ilişkilendirme yoluyla çalışılmasının önemi de vurgulanmakta ve bu tarz çalışmalarla üretilen bilgilerin aslında tarih bilimine yardımcı olabilecek kayıtları ortaya koyduğu da iddia edilmektedir. Çalışmanın sonuçları yerel ve hazırda bulunan objelerin çalışılmasının birçok yararı olduğunu göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dikiş makinesi, geniş ilişkilendirme, İkinci Dünya Savaşı, Türkiye, Singer, tarih öğretimi

Introduction

This study was born during an online course offered by HarvardX titled “Tangible Things: Discovering History Through Artworks, Artifacts, Scientific Specimens, and the Stuff Around You.”¹ Specifically, potential course takers are informed that in the course, students “will discover how material objects have shaped academic disciplines and reinforced or challenged boundaries between people.” Hence, the skills that students will attain are itemized as follows:

- Understanding of museum curation approaches
- The basics of historical analysis and interpretation
- A sense of the work that historians, curators, and collectors perform
- Strong critical thinking and analytical skills
- How things that seem to belong to different disciplines actually can “talk” to one another
- How close looking at even a single object can push beyond academic and disciplinary boundaries

¹ The course site: <https://www.edx.org/course/tangible-things-discovering-history-through-artwor> (Date of Access: 06.06.2020)

- How things that may seem unrelated to each other can show relationships between art and science, economics, and culture, as well as between people in many different parts of the world.

In that course, to realize the course objectives mentioned above, students are invited to complete various tasks by practicing concrete research techniques based on the basics of historical analysis and interpretation. By fostering students' critical and analytical skills, the course aims to push academic and disciplinary boundaries as students will come to understand that those seemingly unrelated things are, in fact, closely related when history writing is considered.

Overall, as I had stated in one of my course assignments, the backbone of the course as a continuous task to be engaged was *connecting broadly*. By connecting broadly, students selected artifacts, no matter how small or unimportant they seemed, and collected information about them in a way to connect the presence of the item to a rather general reality. As I wrote in one of my course assignments:

To me, *connecting* means using the object under study as a springboard to get into other realities so that I come to see the object as matters of different realities for other users. Such a way of seeing also means re-writing the story of the item as historical material. This task, I realized, is important because we produce (historical) knowledge as we experience the meanings and uses (functions) of the material by using other data gathered from library catalogs or the media.

Connecting broadly is a technique used in the study of history which helps researchers identify an artifact or concept and then put together a web of relations surrounding the object in a multidisciplinary way. As a technique, connecting broadly has become necessary with the advent of the Internet simply because online knowledge is available for users in a growing manner. As Jones-Kavalier and Flannigan (2006: 9) rightly put, "our world today is about connecting the digital dots; unfortunately, the dots are multi-dimensional, of varying sizes and colors, continuously changing, and linked to other unimaginable dots. But one fact remains—to successfully connect in cyberspace, one must be literate, both digitally and visually." Hence, connecting broadly refers to filling in the empty spaces between knowledge pieces and various disciplines, realities, and resources available to the researcher so that accurate interpretations and conclusions can be drawn. With the advent of the Internet, making such connections has become easier, giving historians and other researchers working in various fields of social sciences a chance to discover data and then connect them with other data, yielding data-based interpretations.

In this study, I took the sewing machine and connected it broadly with various information pieces surrounding it to highlight its historical significance. In this paper, for instance, I share my reflection on the process of learning history through an online history course by laying out my findings while, again, by connecting broadly, the benefits and challenges of such instructional procedures. A closer look at the methodology of the study will make the application clearer to the reader.

Method

For the final project of the course I was taking online, the object I chose to connect broadly was my maternal grandmother's sewing machine that I inherited after her death. By following a reflective qualitative research design that incorporates both document analysis as well as (auto)ethnography, I also used my memories mainly composed of my talks with my grandmother (Emine Kuşman Binler) and mother (Neval Binler Arıkan) to learn about the sewing machine, which was the object of my study. The data for this study came from three major resources:

1. A thorough online search regarding the production of the sewing machine
2. My memories about and knowledge of the machine.
3. Literature review.

Collecting the data was a spiral process during which the information found in these three resources were put together, examined closely, and thought carefully through connecting the existence of the tangible item, the sewing machine, with external information in its broadest sense. During this process, a bit of information gathered from the Internet, such as the production date of that machine's, was compared with the raw data- my memories.

This study benefitted from what is, in numerous studies, called oral history. "In recent years, oral history has been celebrated by its practitioners for its humanizing potential, and its ability to democratize history by bringing the narratives of people and communities typically absent in the archives into conversation with that of the political and intellectual elites who generally write history" (Jessee, 2011: 287). Much of my memories of the machine came from my interactions with my mother who was born in 1942 in a town called Eskişehir as the last child of a tradesman with a small fabric shop (Süleyman Binler, born in Trabzon in 1912) and a housewife, a Tatar born in Russia in 1914. She emigrated from Russia after the Communist Revolution. The family

was neither rich, nor poor, but the resources were scarce for the whole society, a reality that framed the everyday life of the whole family.

“Reviewing the literature is an ongoing activity” in research studies in social sciences (Matthews and Ross, 2010: 106). Because the study of the tangible item necessitated using both numerical as well as verbal and visual data, this type of study should be called a mixed-method study. “A mixed-methods approach often means gathering both quantitative and qualitative data” both of which can help “checking the validity of your data” through a process called triangulation. Through triangulation, then, “in social research, collecting and working with data from different sources but on the same topic can help us to cross-check our findings” (145). In this process, reviewing the literature was both used to collect information as well as to validate the truth value of the data processed throughout the study. The results are then shared with a colleague who has experience in qualitative analysis to make sure that the connections made, and results constructed are meaningful and not far fetching.

Findings

One of my earliest recollections of that sewing machine includes my grandma making pajamas for me when I was a child. Having those pajamas was a tiring but also an adventurous process. We would go and buy the fabric with light blue and brown stripes, my grandmother would measure my body parts and then work on the machine as I would be watching the fabric turning into a comfortable pair of pajamas. As she peddled the machine, I would ask her questions about her homelands, Kazan and Irkutsk, and she would tell me the most compelling stories I had ever heard. After her death, the machine was given to me most probably because I was the one who spent the most time with her around that machine. Or maybe, no one wanted to carry this heavy machine back to their homes- a machine that could have no use anymore for no one we knew could work the machine anyway.

My grandparents’ house was a two-storey house. Only one of these two storeys was used with its two bedrooms and one living room because the other storey was way beneath the earth, so it was used as a dark storage place for old books and unused house gadgets. This small house was made of the adobe and bricks and was right in the middle of Eskişehir, in “Reşadiye Mahallesi” to be more exact. As my mother had stated, “[their] house was in the middle of the city where the poor and the rather well-off lived side by side. Back then, we all lived together in the neighborhood. As children, we played together outside while our mothers cooperated to complete the house chores.”

Little did I know back then that this machine would be mine one day. And little did I know that I, almost every day and up until today, would remember my childhood trips to Eskişehir, my laughter and amazement as I listened to many of my grandmother's stories coming down from *One Thousand and One Nights* and her past experiences in Russia as a Kazan Tatar before they arrived in Turkey in 1923. Little did I know that her sewing machine would be mine one day, maybe, and so that this paper would be written to witness a unique slice of history.

As I learned from my mother when I was a small child, my grandma used to make clothes for her three daughters and only son. She also helped neighboring women make clothes or bed covers and sheets as these women did not possess this machine due to hard economic realities surrounding society before and after WW II. In order to exemplify my argument, I must turn back to my recollections. As I noted down to after having talked to my mother, the place of the sewing machine in their small world was immense:

We would be playing outside with neighboring kids, and one or two of the women neighbors would ask if our mother was home. Learning that she was home, they would rush into our home, with a bunch of fabric in their hands. Sometime later, they would rush out, often smiling, and looking relieved. We would overhear our mother telling our father what happened. The women would be getting help to stitch the sides of bed covers or re-size a fancy dress made before. They did not have a sewing machine, and they needed my mother's.

Taking the sewing machine as my research artifact, my research started during the online course I had taken in the Spring of 2020, during the COVID-19 limitations experienced in Antalya. The sewing machine I inherited from my grandma has a serial number of AE-440369. My online search revealed that the machine was produced on March 23, 1937.² It was a fascinating experience for me to find this information online for two reasons. First, such information gathering was easy due to Singer Company's complete and accurate document-sharing services, while it was surprising to realize that they kept such not-so-important information. Second, it helped me re-assess my knowledge of the machine knowing the exact date of its production. This information helped me accurately locate the exact time of the

² International Sewing Machine Collectors' Society has a comprehensive list that can be accessed here: http://ismacs.net/singer_sewing_machine_company/serial-numbers/singer-sewing-machine-serial-number-database.html (Date of Access: 09.06.2020)

machine's use in my family. This information furthered my research into the history of the sewing machine.

History of the sewing machine

On September 26, 1846, Scientific American introduced Elias Howe's Sewing Machine with the exact date, September 10, 1846, as the date of birth of this new patent. Along with the patent information placed under the column heading "New Inventions," the journal called the machine an "extraordinary invention," and described it as the "machine that sews beautiful and strong seams in cloth as rapid as nine tailors." Two years later, On April 22, 1848, the same journal called this "extraordinary invention" "a wonder" and described it to its readers:

It is represented to sew a foot in length of broadcloth in two minutes, putting in three times the number of stitches usually made in the same length. No lady on earth, nor man either, can do it with the same regularity. The finest cambric stitching appears coarse and unfinished when compared with the work of this machine (243).

In essence, "Howe's machine was not very easy to operate, but improvements by John A. Bradshaw in 1848 and Isaac Merritt Singer in 1851 gave the first genuinely practical machine to the world" (*Grolier Universal Encyclopedia*, 1966: 218-219).

The historical facts mentioned above were in the context of the US. When the case of Turkey is considered, we see the reverberations of this machine. As stated in the Singer company's Turkish website, the first sewing machines were sold in Turkey as early as 1886. In Turkey, although the first shop selling sewing machines was opened as early as 1904, the first Singer factory produced sewing machines was opened in 1959. Singer company established courses for Turks while selling its products, the result of which was to move sewing production from factories and ateliers to women's homes.

The sewing machine was not only a technological device- but also a socially, culturally, and economically significant one. During the Ottoman Empire, women and girls were encouraged to sew their clothes and their family members' needs. In 1913, a magazine for Ottoman women titled "Kadınlar Dünyası" (Eng. Women's World), used a photo on its cover page, showing a woman behind the sewing machine (Photo 1). As seen in this photo, an advertisement dating back to 1913 introduces the machine to Ottoman women.



Photo 1. Women’s World (1913)

In Photo 2, the advertisement has the heading “Singer Sewing Machines” (Tur. Singer Dikiş Makineleri) written in Arabic script with the drawing of a girl sitting behind the machine (Demir, 2016: 80). For Demir (2016: 83), such visual and verbal depictions functioned as an accelerator of societal change, to be more precise. People living in the Ottomans’ land were, as this advertisement shows, moving towards Westernization and modernization. These photos, along with the other findings of this study, exemplify the modernization period of the Ottoman Empire. As my literature review also showed, “The roots of modernisation in Turkey are located in the final period of the Ottoman Empire (1839–1918)” (Çakır, 2007: 62).



Photo 2. Singer Sewing Machines (1919)

Travelling salespersons who carried their goods from door to door were composed mainly of women during the Ottoman times. Often, female peddlers yelled on the streets, such as “Bohçacı geldi hanım!” (Eng. The peddler with the wrapping cloth came, Mam!). The wrapping cloth containing the peddling woman’s assets can be seen in the lower right of the drawing. The caricature probably from the 1950s or earlier than that shows Bohçacı Kadın as follows (Photo 3). The Singer company, however, used a similar strategy and advertised their goods door to door as the machine’s popularity increased. Sources indicate that Singer’s traveling salespersons visited families in their homes in the evenings. This strategy was new to Turkey, although women selling fabrics to women through home visits were traditionally accepted as a merchandising method. However, this “womanly” trade was without taxation or any other official acceptance. Hence, the Singer company’s selling strategy showed the change occurring in the 1930s and the 1940s, from peddling women to men in business suits.



Photo 3. Subtitle in English reads: One of the travelling salespersons of old İstanbul: The Peddling Woman³

Pınar Kasapoğlu Akyol, a researcher who compiled the photos and experiences of her grandmother who participated in Singer's free-of-charge courses in Turkey in 1948, states that girls and women found these courses useful because they felt they could produce something in society while socializing and learning from each other. However, this

³ <https://www.ucuztarih.com/magazin/eski-istanbulun-seyyar-esnafлари/> (Date of Access: 08.06.2020)

activity started to faint just as the popularity of the sewing machine lessened in Turkey. These findings support the view that Turkish family life has been in the constant influx of clashing ideas the center of whose conflict is mainly on the role of the women whose role started from the modernist idea of the woman of enlightenment to present need for a woman as the money maker (Sancar, 2004).

Interestingly, the generation who was first exposed to the sewing machine thought that it was made in Germany, although Singer is an American company. Many people in Turkey thought Singer was a German company. As Turks believed that Germans were already bombing Greece and Bulgaria, the next target country in a row was Turkey, so serious cautions were taken by families who used fewer lights during the nights while the windows were covered with newspapers and curtains so that lights did not provide German pilots with attractions for bombing them. As VanderLippe rightly put, "While Ismet Inonu considered Turkey a friend to the Allies, Turkey's vulnerability to both German and Soviet aggression dictated that Inonu maintain a "cautious balance," aiding the Allies as much as possible" (65). Germany was the major contributor to Turkey's growing economy in the 1930s. By 1938, "Germany took 44 percent of Turkish exports and supplied 46 percent of its imports" (66). As the war progresses, as VanderLippe argues, "The Allies were unwilling to purchase the surplus exports, with the result that prices of Turkish exports dropped and imports grew scarce" (66), resulting in giving flour, bread, sugar, and many other foods through coupons. By connecting these, I realized that various misconceptions regarding the origin of the machine were possible in society mainly because of Turkey's close economic relationship with Germany back then.



Photo 4. Kuşman Family: Children's clothes made by grandma's sewing machine (Eskişehir, Turkey, 1945)

Photo 4 shows Kuşman Family, who fled from Russia after the Communist takeover at the beginning of the 1920s. In the photo, the youngest children wear the clothes made by my grandma, who used her newly bought sewing machine. Apart from the boy on the left (with a jacket), these five children enjoyed the clothes made for them during the tough times of World War II, during which food and clothes were carefully obtained. Note that the two girls in the front (my aunts) wear clothes of the same pattern and design, probably showing that my grandma used the same model to save time and energy. Most likely, the women in the photo wore dresses made by using the Singer sewing machine as my informant noted that it was cheaper to make dresses home rather than buying them.

Traditionally, mainly children and young adults were given new clothes for special occasions like festivities and ceremonies. The sewing machine provided a cheaper production of clothes for families who could afford its price. As my mother testified, numerous neighboring women came to my grandma to use her machine during these hard times caused by World War II. Hence, it can be seen that although one single machine entered only a select number of Turkish homes during the 1940s and 1950s, because of Turkish society's emblematic feature of neighboring and solidarity along with hospitality, the sewing machine was used to minimize rather than maximize class differences. However, the opposite should be expected because only a few select could afford the machine.

However, textile and clothmaking started to change rapidly, which can be seen in Turkey's dependence on foreign economies and lifestyles. This gradual yet effective change occurred until the 1990s, during which the popularity of the sewing machine decreased just as women's participation in works outside their homes increased, and textiles became cheaper and more available. Today, the sewing machine is rarely used in Turkish homes while most women are employed in businesses, offices, or in agriculture. Hence, the sewing machine has a new place and function in Turkish people's homes, although a significantly different one.

My grandma's sewing machine is still in my home, one of the most precious tangible items that I inherited from my grandparents (Photo 5). I occasionally rub with olive oil so that the wooden skeleton does not dry out. Apart from that, no one has used it for over 25 years, although we know that when needed, it can work fine in the hands of a person who knows how to use it. One of my MA students, Aykut Aktav, who learned the mechanics of the machine to help his mother with her stitching, promised me to buy the machine's worn-out pieces so that we

could make the machine work again, after 83 years of its production. Thus, we can never be sure what the future holds. Maybe, the machine will work again to create new outfits or household items for two generations preceded us. With the help of such research practices, we can then demolish borders of space and time and realize that history is an ongoing process with various connections and infinite possibilities. When the limitations of this paper are considered, reaching one tangible item sitting in my living room causes the body of knowledge and human activity to spring from their static state.

We continue witnessing the fast change in Turkish society. Once a symbol of modernization and progress, my grandmother's sewing machine, for now, functions as a desk, carrying and neighboring a wealth of memorabilia. This present status of the sewing machine signifies a postmodern space of pastiche and bricolage as the machine is in the corner of my home, exemplifying the postmodern multiplicity of various cultures (Photo 5). A pair of Sufi drums, a copper teapot belonging to my grandma's father, a silver plate I got as a gift from a friend, prayer beads coming from my grandparents, Allah's 99 names given by a contemporary newspaper during the Ramadan, a small table from Pakistan, my grandmother's prayer rug, two handmade keys from Mardin, are all sitting there, waiting to be called "history." These tangible items from Turkish, Tatar, and Islamic cultures, along with various Buddha statues, rings, and vases from the Far East, a handmade ceramic mask I bought in Germany, a JBL speaker whose cords and cables are visible, a candlestick from the store "English Home" and boxes of incense sticks from India, continue to coexist. Perhaps, one day, my nephews or their children will pick some of these up, and by reading this paper, extend the life of the sewing machine from the 1930s to the 2060s or even, who knows, the 3000s.



Photo 5. My Grandma's Sewing Machine (2020)

Conclusion

My grandma's sewing machine symbolizes the historical change that has occurred in Turkey, starting in the 1930s until today. More specifically, I argue that the sewing machine represents our cultural change in Turkish society from past to present. Specifically, my argument developed into a data-based one: although it was once a symbol of modernization and progress, especially before and during the 1950s, it now constitutes and exemplifies a postmodern space of pastiche and bricolage. Thus, the machine's present presence signifies the postmodern multiplicity of various cultures.

The sewing machine was not popular in Turkey only. Its popularity was widespread all around the world. As Gordon (2012) articulated, as his study of the machine progressed, he "was impressed to learn in conversations with numerous friends and colleagues how common it had been to own a Singer sewing machine, at least for middle-class city dwellers in Japan of the 1930s or later" (xi). Similarly, he further confesses that he "was further impressed by the emotional resonance the sewing machine held for so many" (xi). This present study has shown that the case of Japan was almost the same in Turkey. For my mother and Kasapoğlu Akyol's (2017) grandmother, bringing the sewing machine into their homes brought emotionally significant experiences not only for their families but also for their neighbourhoods. Supporting each other by using the machine, building unique solidarity, and sharing "the wealth" can be considered what the machine symbolized for the period during which resources were scarce because of the world war.

In this study, one artifact was used as the single object of historical analysis. Hence, the essence, as well as the value of the object, changed throughout the research process from a tangible object surrounded by personal and emotional experiences to a historical artifact representing various connections ranging from economics, defense, and textile and domestic household as everyday realities. This transformation has repercussions for the study of history at present that is characterized by the wealth of online resources. Waring, Torrez and Lipscomb (2015: 28) rightly argue that "As history teacher educators, we remain passionate about the integration of digital artifacts; however, there is much to be said for holding a postcard from 1945 in your hand and wondering about its journey rather than simply viewing a digital image of the same postcard." Hence, studying history today should entail the use of digital resources to understand the past and present of realia used as everyday objects.

This study was based on a storytelling exercise, a written report in which (auto)biographical information, a tangible thing, and historical data worked harmoniously to build onto our personal and national memory. When storytelling based on biographies is considered, researchers in Turkey such as Öztürk and Kardeş (2018: 61) have already advocated its use especially in history courses because utilizing such learner-centered activities "students can experience durable learning through hands-on activities in an enjoyable manner while improving their oral and written communication skills." From an instructional perspective, as Sliwka (2008: 61) rightly puts, "By its very nature, history is composed of stories about people who are no longer alive to speak for themselves. Perhaps this is why so many students find it difficult to relate to social studies-- the participants seem so far removed from the students' own lives." Thus, my overall experience in the online course I participated in supports these claims. During my online learning process, I was involved in various hands-on activities, including the study of my grandmother's sewing machine. Researching, writing, reflecting, and talking made my history learning concrete and meaningful.

Another positive outcome of this overall research experience was about the end-product. By recording and sharing my findings, I add to our knowledge of history. It is noteworthy that such knowledge is not found in history coursebooks. Remembering my memories, I came to learn about the history of my family and my country. During my research, once an object sitting silently in my living room, turned into a significantly important ignition key that started a series of knowledge pieces come together to form *history*. Hence, younger generations should listen to their parents and grandparents carefully, record their stories and connect all findings broadly to understand their world. Historical data can be unearthed and can then be used in official history writing projects. Similar calls have been made by historians who underlined the importance of connecting broadly to understand the meanings and significance of local historical data concerning world history by and large:

Unearthing connections and networks – however defined – within and across Europe's borders, determining where they break or peter out, will recast our understanding not just of European history, but our understanding of the modern world (Clavin, 2010: 636)

The present state of my grandmother's sewing machine, when connected broadly to the stories and facts put together throughout this study, signifies Turkey's shift from a modern to a postmodern space in

time. However, future generations' treatment of such artifacts will show a somewhat more complete picture of changes occurring in our society, as well as in the world. This, however, requires my nephews' treatment of the sewing machine that they will, one day, inherit from me.

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Acknowledgment

I dedicate this study to my ancestors, who did their best to nurture their own families and neighbors. In this spirit of solidarity, our women deserve special recognition and thanks.