

THE «GECEKONDU» FAMILY

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Introduction

«Gecekondu» is the name given to dwellings which have been hastily constructed (literally, constructed overnight) on land which is, in most cases, state-owned. Since laws governing acceptable standards of construction are ignored, such buildings are invariably void of features normally necessary to meet acceptable standards of sanitation. This definition reflects both the legal and sociological description of the «gecekondu» phenomenon.

«Gecekondu» is only one of the idioms which were created by the people during and right after the Second World War (e.g., «dolmuş» -- «haciaga» ... «türedi ailesi», and «hava parası»).¹ Since then, families who reside in «gecekondu» shacks, and in the settlements consisting of these shacks in the big cities or towns, have been called «gecekondu» families and «gecekondu» communities respectively.

«Gecekondu» families and settlements are largely products of rural origin. That is, they all come from villages, as well as from small, poor agricultural towns, resulting in a process of continuous internal immigration. Such a phenomenon is not «sui generis» to Turkey. It is shared, not only by other Middle East countries, but also by nearly all developing or preindustrial societies. During the past few centuries, similar phenomena were experienced by western nations and are still characteristic of those nations undergoing rapid industrialization.

¹ Dolmuş (shared taxi); haciğa (an upstart of usually rural - village or small agricultural town-origin, in most cases illiterate person); türedi ailesi (nouveau riche); hava parası: when two prospective leasers attempt to lease the same apartment the landlord may tell one that if he will pay a certain initial fee, over and above the rent, then he can rent the apartment. Turks refer to this extra sum of money as «hava parası»). This practice is, essentially, a form of extortion.

However, «gecekondu» dwellings and families constitute a phenomenon rather peculiar to Moslem Middle East countries. Contemporary western slums, and the families living in these slums resemble the «gecekondu» somewhat, but they do not signify the same things, events and processes.

Carolina Maria de Jesus, in her diary, describes the «favela» of South America, in Brazil and Oscar Lewis in his study in Mexico does similar thing in Casa Grande «Vecindad» which both are also the product of varied socio-economic and cultural forces.² However, they differ in many ways from the «gecekondu». Thus, each phenomenon reflects its own environmental imprints. This is the main reason why it is necessary to use the specific term given in the language to describe a universal phenomenon awaiting a general analysis.

Following these introductory remarks we shall now attempt to give a descriptive picture of the Turkish «gecekondu» family as it is found in Ankara, the capital of Turkey.

The settling of families in «gecekondu» districts is affected by certain ethnical and regional conditions from which these people originate. This fact plays an important role in the continuation of the community spirit as a whole. Consequently, «gecekondu» families find it difficult to give up village habits and adopt city ways.

The «gecekondu» family in general is smaller than the village family. However, it is more varied in occupational skills. The material possessions and social values characteristic of this family retains those values in which it sees utility and concurrently adopts equally useful urban values. The combination of rural and urban behavior distinguishes the «gecekondu» family from both the village and the city families, thus placing it in a transitional stage.

In general, the income of the «gecekondu» family is sufficient only to meet the most basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter.

The material and the spritual values characteristics of the life of the «gecekondu» family will now be discussed.

² Carolina Maria de Jesus, *Child of The Dark*, (New York: E.P. Buttont & Co., 1962.)
Oscar Lewis, *The Childron of Sanchez*, (New York: Random House, 1961)

Material Characteristics

Housing

A village family almost always owns its own house, whereas a city family may either own or rent its lodging. On the other hand, the «gecekondü» family, upon its arrival in the city, either rents or shares its shelter in a crowded quarter of the city.

A «gecekondü» family faces great difficulty in obtaining its own house. As a result the immediate concern of the family is to economize as much as possible. Thus, clothing, food and other basic expenses are minimized. Nothing is dispensed of that could possibly be used. No surplus is wasted and no prodigality is allowed. All available resources are immediately put to use, including children. After initial difficulties are overcome, the first thing to do is to rent a «gecekondü». As soon as economic conditions permit, ownership of a «gecekondü» is sought.

Where possible and feasible the «gecekondü» family, immediately after obtaining its own house, begins adding adjuncts to it, such as a poultry coop, a miniature garden, a wood shed, a lavatory (consisting of a roof and a pit), etc. In this way, the house begins to look like the one in the village, and the physical construction with its parts is converted to a place resembling the ancestral home or «ocak».

As the family becomes more citified, or adapted to city life, and when conditions permit, the family seeks to buy a flat in an apartment house.³ This is shown by the fact that a sizeable number of flats in poor or rather modest parts of Ankara belong to the former «gecekondü» families.

This pattern, especially as to the attitude of saving in order to own a house, the conversion of it into an «ocak», and then this to an apartment flat (into a house again), may be considered one of the most dramatic experiences of the village family in the process of integration into the city life (urbanization).

Diet

There are two practices in the «gecekondü» families which are directly linked to diet.

³ To become «citified» denotes only adjustment to the city facilities, physically. Urbanization is a more complex and long process which includes the former.

First, traditional rural provisions are prepared either in the village or in the city during the summer months for consumption during the winter.

Second, most provisions must come from villages. Therefore, some of the female members usually return to their villages to prepare some part of the winter provisions there. These practices indicate that rural eating habits are continued by «gecekondü» families in their urban environment for a long time before the «gecekondü» family completely adopts the alimentation habits of an urban family.

Dress and Finery

Clothing habits within «gecekondü» quarters, in general, conform neither to those of the villagers nor to those of the city folk. The clothing of men, women and children are influenced by both the rural and urban ways.

«Gecekondü» men are inclined to wear custom-tailored suits, which is a marked feature of small townfolk. Sport jackets and trousers, which are sometimes worn by the men, are almost invariably bought from second-hand dealers («eskiciler»). In many ways, the men's daily clothing closely resembles working class outfits. As a rule men more easily adapt to the city way of dressing than do women. Generally speaking, women wear clothes and stockings of village origin. Headscarves, «hirka» (a sort of blazer), and long skirts are all common sights. In accordance with village tradition, bright, eye-catching colors are preferred. Red is the dominant color.

«Gecekondü» women can be grouped under two headings: those who work at home, and those who go out to work. The latter category generally babysit, cook and do laundry and other housework for the Turkish bourgeoisie, who are mainly the high scale civil servants, professionals, merchants, etc. These women form a special sub-group in the city's social strata and are sources of new ideas for «gecekondü» communities. Through close contact with the more affluent class, these women's outlook and habits change, often bringing forth new problems. They bring with them clothing and other materials from the well-to-do families they work for, out of fashion though these things may be. Blouses, nylons, and high-heeled shoes are introduced into gecekondü quarters through them. Some of these women and their daughters, mostly teenagers, like to imitate the ways of city women. These women and their daughters generally react positively to new ideas. Some of them are good homemakers. Also, the husband-wife relations can

be said to take a better turn in these better run homes. However, it would be incorrect to state that this immediately weakens the patriarchal authority within the family.

As for the domestic women, their days are completely filled with doing house work, as their families are generally comprised of many members. These women preserve their village ways longer, as reflected by their cooking, eating and kitchen arranging habits, etc. Their garments closely resemble those of the women of «Old Ankara». These women who wear baggy pants, «şalvars» constitute the majority. Pajamas are rare among «gecekondu» women. Many men wear pajamas, but very few women, excepting some teenagers, actually venture to wear pajamas since they distinctly show the contour of the body. A type of pajamas worn by some women are a degenerate form of «şalvar», rather than proper pajamas. However, «gecekondu» women have adapted nightgowns as a prestigious garment, indicating a gradual change in dressing traditions.

Health and Cleanliness

No matter how one looks at it, «gecekondu» families generally live crowded, inadequate lodging, some of which are nests of poverty indeed. In most cases, these lodgings are built without health standards.

In many ways health-cleanliness habits of families are similar to those of village families. Dwellings are generally characterized by untidiness, but not so much by uncleanness.

Some «gecekondu» districts still lack electricity, sewerage and roads. In some places, sewerage disposal consists of simply a hole in the ground. However, some changes are slowly taking place in this area also.

Speaking generally, in the city, «gecekondu» families have begun to show signs of urbanization with regard to health and cleanliness habits. City families, through their social relationships with «gecekondu» families urge them to be clean. Men and women under city influence begin to frequent the hamams (public bath houses). Men are generally more conscious about their appearance than are women. Depending upon their occupation men shave frequently and carefully tend their clothes.

«Gecekondu» families usually seek medical assistance during illness and they get it. Largely because of their low fees, doctors maintaining offices in these districts are the ones most frequently visited. In case of severe illness «gecekondu» people can receive treatment at the state hospitals,

free of charge. Practically all «gecekondü» families are located within immediate reach of a state hospitals.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS

Occupation

Occupational patterns and division of labor are two of the most obvious features which differentiate the «gecekondü» family from the village family.

The «gecekondü» family exhibits more dynamic and complicated characteristics due to its occupational specification and variation as well as to its new social standing regarding relevant responsibilities.

The basic occupations in the villages are farming and animal husbandry, whereas in the city a much wider variety of occupations is available. Thus, in the city, there is an increase in unskilled work and, to a lesser degree, in skilled work. Artisans, craftsmen, retailers, small merchants, small civil servants and various others which are more difficult to classify, become vocations of the «gecekondü» families in the city.

The consequences of these new occupational experiences for the members of «gecekondü» families can be illustrated in two ways.

First, the «gecekondü» family has a much higher standard of living than has the village family, although nowhere has it reached the city family's status.

Secondly, the «gecekondü» family has not yet completed its full development. These two facts increase the future possibilities of the «gecekondü» family.

Under these new conditions, «gecekondü» families are forced to expand their inter-community relations, by becoming members of trade unions and other formal or informal organizations.

The Family Structure

In its formation and structure, as well as in its organization, the «gecekondü» family resembles village families in some respects and deviates from it in others. However, it is far from being urbanized. One manifestation of this fact can be seen in marriage and related traditions of the «gecekondü» family.

Members of the «gecekondü» family tend to marry at an early age. Since this is not the case in urban families, the acceptable marriage age

for «gecekondu» families is more akin to that of the village than that of the city.

«Gecekondu» and village families tend to marry within their own kin or the immediate social group. Urban families, however, do not restrict themselves to relatives when seeking mates, nor do they necessarily seek to marry within their social, economic, or cultural framework. Thus, «küfüv» is more important to the «gecekondu» family than to the urban family.⁴

The institution of başlık (brideprice) is still practiced among «gecekondu» families. However, the amount required, in cash or in kind, by the family is generally less than that required by the village family. Only a small percentage of «gecekondu» families give wedding parties, but civic and religious wedding ceremonies are very much similar to that of the village families.

There are three structural aspects to «gecekondu» families. First, the percentage of nuclear units is increasing more rapidly in «gecekondu» settlement than in the village. Secondly, in addition to this qualitative change, the «gecekondu» family consists roughly of the same number of members as a village family, though eventually this number tends to decrease. Most families want no more children than they already have. Future family planning may definitely affect this aspect.

Thirdly, in extended families there are maternal relatives living under the same roof in addition to the traditional agnates.

Paralleling these structural changes, inner as well as outer relations of «gecekondu» families show various patterns, in some areas resembling, in others differing from village and city families.

Relations with persons outside the family framework are more extensive among «gecekondu» families than among village families. Subsequently, the «gecekondu» family begins to feel new needs. People who have only had contact with their relatives, neighbors and friends in the coffee houses, mosques, village square in village experience a wide range of relations in the city and eventually become members of various groups, organizations and institutions.

⁴ «Küfüv», an Arabic word, signifies the requirement for as much social, economic and cultural equity between the couple as possible when they marry.

Although the income of the «gecekondu» family has reached a higher level than that of the average village family, it does not equal that of the average city family. Due to low income and difficulties of adjustment to city life, «gecekondu» families face a multitude of material and spiritual problems.

The «gecekondu» family's relations with urban society increase with the increase in population. However, these relations, unlike in the village, are impersonal, involving secondary group contacts.

Signs of change and disassociation characteristic of the urban family are reflected in the «gecekondu» family also. This family faces difficulty in adjusting its own values to those of the city dwellers. Thus, the «gecekondu» family encounters many contradicting values, leading to conflict, lack of harmony and restlessness.

Inner relations of the «gecekondu» family are also affected to some extent, resulting in some minor problems.

Women employed in the city eventually adopt a positive attitude toward certain changes. For example, they begin to have a much better conception of birth control, certainly much better than that of their male counterparts. Nevertheless, it cannot be said that the patriarchal authority has become weakened in such families. In fact, a very harmonious man-woman relationship exists. However, as years pass, patriarchal authority does begin to suffer somewhat, a result of the gradual replacement of village customs by urban ones.

New and varied occupations and the division of labor influence inter-family relations. As duties of family members change, traditional relations also undergo change. Children become relatively free from rigid discipline. The larger the family, the more strained relations become. However, absolute equality among the family members is not tolerated.

As to housewives, they are constantly involved with children, cooking, laundering and preparation of provisions for winter consumption. Preoccupation with these duties restricts their relationships outside the family circle. Subsequently, these women retain village customs for a longer period of time than do those who work outside the home.

Members of «gecekondu» families who work away from home are obliged to act on a time schedule. This situation represents a most drastic change from the slow and monotonous pace of life in the village. Conse-

quently, the rural value system also suffers deeply.

CHANGES IN ATTITUDE AND VALUES

We can say that some important changes take place in the material and spiritual values of the village family in its long process of adaptation to city environment.

The «gecekondu» family clings less tightly to customs and traditions than does the village family, and it is more liberated in certain aspects. It resembles the city family in dress, eating habits, shelter, etc., to certain extent. However, this does not mean that it has become a city family merely by the acquisition of these new traits.

The woman's position has improved considerably in the «gecekondu» family. Often a father will not prevent his wife or daughter from working outside the home. In this tolerant attitude of the man toward the woman, economic obligations play the most important role. Thus, the «gecekondu» woman has been able to work herself free from the rigid conservative tradition. However, this freedom is still limited.

Those who constitute «gecekondu» families on the whole, have not completely severed their connections with their villages. Their kins still live in these communities and small towns from which they come. They are attached emotionally to the place of their birth. In their living habits remnants of village society remain. In the «gecekondu» family, as in the village family, economic uncertainty prevails. For quite a long time, the family is forced to stick to village customs. For example, most purchase all its annual food supply at one time, and at the first opportunity. Also, some of the food supply for winter must be prepared and stored in summer months. At the same time, the «gecekondu» family is forced to exploit its new environment and possibilities as much as possible to adapt to the urban way of living. Therefore, the family seeks to efficiently utilize the best of that which the city offers, making use of facilities and conveniences such as running water, electricity, carpets, beds, tables, radios, kitchenwares, butane gas burners, etc. The head of the «gecekondu» family, while trying to raise chickens, vegetables, trees, and crops on the plot in the back yard of his house, hopes to realize his dreams of becoming a worker in the city factory, a small civil servant in a state office, a humble merchant or tradesman in his own enterprise. The «gecekondu» family strives to live many different lives, playing several roles at the same time. On the one hand, the son of the family attends Koran courses and tries to learn to read

and write Arabic; on the other hand, he is expected to have a modern and respectable career. Thus, members of «gecekondü» families are constantly in the bosom of conflicting values, an important characteristic of the larger transitional society in which they happen to live.

Conclusion

«Gecekondü» families come from different parts of Turkey. However, differences tend to disappear within the «gecekondü» communities. In other words, these communities can ignore sub-cultural regional differences, when it becomes necessary.

Generally these families live in dwellings illegally constructed on state-owned land. They are in a state of constant anxiety, or uneasiness. This sense of insecurity creates an «esprit de corps» among these families; it unites them.

«Gecekondü» families are well aware of the presence of better-off classes than their own, although they, themselves, may be above the village families from which they have been uprooted. The majority of these families sincerely believe that members of the more affluent strata of the big city did not attain their status by lawful means. The feeling of considering all city families different from their own separates the family of «gecekondü» communities from those of the city. The gap is very wide and deep.

The events of September 6th, 7th, 1955, in Istanbul; later occurrences at Kadife Kale in Izmir and Gülveren in Ankara; the seizure of lots of land in the district of Telsizler again in Ankara, upon the news that it would be given away free; and the pillage of privately owned estates caused by a misinterpretation of Prime Minister Demirel's address in 1962 - these are all open and challenging warnings which need to be seriously considered.

The social structure of the «gecekondü» family, like that of the other families at large in Turkish society, is constantly exposed to change. This hanging phenomena which takes place in «gecekondü» communities is closely related to socio-economic and political changes in Turkey as a whole.

The «gecekondü» family emerged from socio-economic conditions in Turkey during a definite time period and is expected to virtually disappear in the future. When the spectrum of social history is examined, it will be seen that the «gecekondü» family is a rather unfortunate institution with a short life expectancy. But while it remains, it is pregnant with problems which maybe dangerous to the larger society.