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EVERYDAY RESISTANCE IN FOLK TALES AND BALLADS: THE CASE OF OTTOMAN-TURKISH BANDITS

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Abstract

This article aims to analyze the relationship between the representations of banditry and everyday forms of resistance in the Ottoman-Turkish case. In order to frame the discussion of banditry and everyday resistance, Eric Hobsbawm's "noble bandit" and James Scott's "secret transcripts" concepts are employed. This article first and foremost argues that the representations of banditry in folk tales and ballads imply the everyday resistance of the lower classes. In this context, folk tales and ballads on Ottoman-Turkish bandits will be discussed with regard to the everyday resistance of ordinary villagers. The close reading of the bandit tales and ballads shows that the lower classes refrain from engaging an open class struggle, while resorting to secret ways of rebellion. The anonymous character of the bandit tales and ballads is the most prominent feature of the implicit resistance of the risk-averse lower classes. In addition, the mythical features such as heroism, invincibility and immortality attributed to the Turkish bandits in folk tales and ballads disclose how the lower classes honor their implicit resistance. The fact that the bandit narratives have more than one version and are reproduced through oral tradition indicate that the everyday resistance imprint the imaginations of ordinary people.

Keywords: *Ottoman-Turkish Bandits, Folk Tales and Ballads, Everyday Resistance*

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HALK HİKAYELERİNDE VE TÜRKÜLERDE GÜNDELİK DİRENİŞ: OSMANLI-TÜRKİYE EŞKİYALARI ÖRNEĞİ

Özet

Bu makale Osmanlı-Türkiye örneğinde eşkiyalık temsilleri ve gündelik direniş biçimleri arasındaki ilişkiyi analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Eşkiyalık ve gündelik direniş tartışmalarının çerçevelendirilmesi için Eric Hobsbawm'ın "asil eşkiya" ve James Scott'un "gizli transkriptler" kavramlarına müracat edilmiştir. Makalede esas olarak, halk hikayelerindeki türkülerdeki eşkiyalık temsillerinin alt sınıfların gündelik hayattaki direnişini ima ettiği iddia edilmektedir. Bu bağlamda, Osmanlı-Türkiye eşkiyaları üzerine söylenen halk hikayeleri ve türküler, köylülerin gündelik direniş ekseninde tartışılacaktır. Eşkiya hikayeleri ve türkülerin yakın okuması, alt sınıfların açıktan bir sınıf mücadelesine girişmekten kaçınırken, gizli isyan yollarına başvurduklarını göstermektedir. Eşkiya hikayeleri ve türkülerin anonim karakteri, risk almaktan kaçınan alt sınıfların örtük direnişinin en başat özelliğidir. Bunun yanında, halk hikayeleri ve türkülerde Türkiye eşkiyalarına atfedilen kahramanlıklar, yenilmezlik ve ölümsüzlük gibi mitsel özellikler alt sınıfların örtük direnişlerini onurlandırması hususunda ipuçları sunmaktadır. Eşkiya anlatılarının birden farklı versiyonu olması ve sözlü gelenekle çoğaltılarak aktarılması gündelik direnişin halk muhayyilesinde iz bırakmasına işaret etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Osmanlı-Türkiye Eşkiyaları, Halk Hikayeleri ve Türküler, Gündelik Direniş*

Introduction

In the Ottoman-Turkish folktales, the stereotypical bandit story is depicted as follows: Experiencing some sort of injustice by a cruel landlord (or tax farmer), a peasant had no option but to turn into a bandit. He left his village (or town) and headed off to the surrounding mountains. For the peasant community, the bandit's settlement in mountains symbolize his search of justice and freedom. Apart from his wildlife, the bandit sometimes visited lowlands for helping the peasant community and combatting injustices that they had experienced. In such encounters, the bandit is depicted as the undefeated warrior against landlords and other authorities. At the end of story, he disappeared or died, mainly because of a treason, but his legacy remained firm.¹

In the Ottoman-Turkish case, the folk narratives on banditry are composed of mixed feelings, such as grievance, disobedience, honor, passion, loss, mourning and melancholia. In these narratives, the pride of insurgency is suddenly interrupted with the sudden loss of the heroic figure and the persistent trauma of peasant community. As much as the name of bandit became popular and as far as the ordinary peasants embraced struggle of the bandit, the number of folk narratives produced and performed on this figure have multiplied. By telling the stories, poems and ballads on bandits, ordinary peasants do not only commemorate but also reproduced the heroic image of bandit.

The representations of banditry offer a unique field of study for exploring the Ottoman-Turkish popular culture from the perspective of history from below. In this article, I will strive to explore the representations of Ottoman-Turkish bandits in terms of everyday resistance of peasants. This article argues that folk narratives on the Ottoman-Turkish bandits uncover the minute details of peasants' everyday forms of resistance. This article does not concern whether the bandits under scrutiny are truly exist in real life or not but aims to disclose how and why they become heroic figures in peasant society. Therefore, the question at stake is how bandit representations were interpreted, articulated and reproduced by the ordinary peasants in the Ottoman-Turkish context.

Who are bandits and how they are represented?

“For the law, anyone belonging to a group of men who attack and rob with violence is a bandit, from those who snatch payrolls at an urban space to organized insurgents or guerrillas” (Hobsbawm 2000: 19). While existing literature associates the banditry with illegal activities, I will opt for Hobsbawm's (2000: 20) conceptualization of “the social bandits” –i.e., “the noble robbers.” The social bandits are the formerly oppressed peasants who turned into bandits for some legitimate reason, thus they could not be interpreted as wicked criminals but well-respected figures in the folk narratives.

The point about social bandits is that they are peasant outlaws whom the lord and the state regard as criminals, but who remain within peasant society, and considered by their people as heroes, as champions, as avengers, as fighters of justice, perhaps even leaders of liberation, and in any case as men to be admired, helped and supported (Hobsbawm 2000: 20).

¹ For a discussion on the schemes of Turkish bandit life stories, see (Moran 2001: 106-107)

In folk narratives, the reality and accuracy of information are not primary issues, even the bandits might be literary inventions (Keen 1961). In the face of adversities, the oppressed peasants might invent the bandit figures with mythical features. It is believed by the oppressed peasants that these noble figures could save them from harsh conditions (Akdeniz 2008). Common stories are told about the noble bandits in the folk narratives all over the world. The bandit figures protect the peasants against cruel landlords not only in the Turkish folktales but all around the world. Therefore, *Koroğlu*, *Yalnız Efe*, *Çakıcı Efe* and *Atçalı Kel Memet* are cousin to legendary bandits from various countries, such as *Robin Hood*, *Billy the Kid*, *Jesse James*. (Moran, 2001: 103). For instance, it is easy to find many commonalities between the tales of the Robin Hood from Nottinghamshire and Atçalı Kel Mehmet from Aydın (Ibeji 2011, Bayrak 1985). Robin Hood was mythical hero of the common people in the English folk tales and his popularity was associated with the Peasant Revolts of the pre-reformation England, whereas Atçalı Kel Mehmet was the symbol of resistance against the cruel local landlords in the late-Ottoman period as he facilitated the “local revolution” against the arbitrary power and excessive taxes of central authorities (Bayrak 1985: 313-314). By comparing folk narratives all over the world, Hobsbawm highlight some stereotypical patterns:

First, the noble robber begins his career of outlawry not by crime, but as the victim of injustice...Second, he rights wrongs. Third, he takes from the rich to give to the poor. Fourth, he never kills but in self-defense or just revenge. Fifth, if he survives, he returns to his people as an honorable citizen and member of the community. Sixth, he is admired, helper and supported by his people. Seventh, he dies invariably and only through treason, since no decent member of the community would help the authorities against him. Eighth, he is –at least in theory– invisible and invulnerable. Ninth, he is not the enemy of the king or emperor, who is fount of justice, but only of the local gentry, clergy or other oppressors (Hobsbawm 2000: 47)

The conventional explanations point out that the banditry has risen as a result of class, wealth and power relations in peasant societies and can be considered as “the rejection of inferiority” (Hobsbawm 2000, p.8-9). The transition to the large-central economies, which entails various dispossessions and class conflicts, lead to the peasant rebellions. In this context, the dispossessed peasants become bandits in remote and inaccessible regions. The peasants’ relations to the central and local governments (i.e., hegemonic actors) configure the characteristics of the banditry. In addition, the structural power relations and available resources determine the extent of banditry. The bandits rarely perform a direct resistance to the hegemonic establishment, instead they opt for indirect ways of resistance. In most cases, banditry does not entail collective but individualistic action. However, it is necessary to underline that the bandits are not passive victims but potential/actual rebels who are able to unsettle the existing power constellation. By referring to social movement literature, it is possible to argue that the weakness of the central governmental power pave way for the rise of the banditry (Jenkins 1983). That’s why Hobsbawm (2000) explains the emergence of banditry through the unstable power structure. In the times of administrative inefficiency, economic crisis, pauperization and unpredictable catastrophes (especially during war times), the banditry erupts as a result of the discontent of the peasants. Hobsbawm points that the banditry is especially relevant for the pre-modern agricultural economies

and faded off with the processes of modern capitalism. The critical social transformation from the pre-capitalist to capitalist economies terminates “the moral economy” required for the existence and subsistence of traditional peasant communities (Edelman 2005). In the context of pre-modern agricultural societies, the potential rebels have presumably been peasants who had been oppressed both by the local landlords and rising central-governmental authorities. Not only major economic processes such as tax-farming but various forms of injustices associated with the intrusion of traditional moral economy would have led to the rise of the banditry.

Regarding the Ottoman-Turkish case, Bayrak (1985) cites two reasons in the emergence of banditry, 1) for acquiring wealth in illegal ways, 2) seeking socio-economic justice in rural setting. Without hesitation, Bayrak (1985: 7) claims that the banditry took place in the context of “the Ottoman feudalism.” Accordingly, various types of inequalities in the distribution and use of the land as well as the oppressive practices of the landlords lead to the rise of the banditry. In the case of the Ottoman Empire between 15th to 18th centuries. Barkey shows that the state has successfully absorbed rebellions and managed banditry through bargaining, cooptation and incorporation mechanisms. However, it is necessary to note that Barkey mainly focuses on ex-soldiers (and ex-powerholders) who turned into bandits for material interests, and mostly excludes the noble bandits from her analysis. In addition to the structural political-economic dynamics, it is also necessary to recognize the cultural reasons. For instance, it is not seldom to see that a Turkish peasant turned into bandit because of a love affair, especially when his beloved one obliged to marry with a landlord or a wealthy local.

As stated above, the folk narratives are very significant resource for exploring the representations of banditry. The folk narratives in general highlight that the bandits “right wrongs, they correct and avenge cases of injustice, and in doing so apply a more general criterion of just and fair relations between men in general, and especially between the rich and the poor, the strong and the weak” (Hobsbawm 2000: 30). The social bandits rob the wealthy for legitimate reasons – i.e., especially for distributing their ‘undeserved wealth’ to the poor. Therefore, “it would be unthinkable for a social bandit to snatch the peasants’ harvest in his own territory or perhaps even elsewhere” (Hobsbawm 2000: 20).

Although the banditry itself does often not aim to overthrow all asymmetrical power relations, the folk narratives frequently represent the bandits as precursors of the utopian society based on justice. The representations of banditry are often directed towards emancipation. The subversive tales serve to disengage peasants from the prosaic repression that they experience in the everyday lives. The struggles of bandits often serve a mythical terrain for peasants to articulate their own discontent with the existing conditions. In the folk narratives, ordinary peasants articulate the rise of social bandits as millenarian moments. It is possible to argue that ordinary peasants reflect their own utopian desire for justice upon the bandits. The famous poem of Karacaoğlan illustrates this desire very well:

*Alemi yaradan yetiş imdada
Kati çok bunda kaldı fukara
Günden güne oldu zulüm ziyade
Bir acayip halde kaldı fukara*

It is likely to argue that the social bandits are depicted as wise and compassionate figures who abstain from the arbitrary use of violence in the Ottoman-Turkish folk narratives. Ordinary peasants believe that these bandits represent their own interests as they come out of local communities. As a matter of fact, many of the Turkish bandits had been poor peasants themselves. Peasants believe that the bandits become ruthless only in encountering with the oppressors. Therefore, one of the primary features of the bandits is strong moral standing in the Ottoman-Turkish folk narratives. Some of them are portrayed as very devout figures. They are sometimes shown as intermediary figures between humanity and divinity (like *evliya*). The second feature of the bandits in the Ottoman-Turkish folk narratives is the invulnerability. His enemies cannot easily defeat the noble bandit, even he cannot die in any ordinary ways. His death is an epic event itself. As much as the bandits symbolize the dreams of the ordinary peasants, they become more and more immortal figures. As the metaphors of invulnerability and immortality point out, the dreams of the peasants for the restoration of just world, which indeed constitute one of the primary strategies of the everyday resistance of ordinary peasants in order to deal with the unjust world, will never perish. The third feature that is reiterated in the Ottoman-Turkish folk narratives is the hidden character of bandits, which contribute to the esoteric dimension of banditry. The undercover bandits sometimes dress like ordinary peasants in towns, and even wear women clothes to disguise themselves. With their undercover, the bandits may be among the peasant community in any time. The secrecy and invisibility increase the popularity of the bandits among the local communities.

The Representations of Banditry in the Turkish Culture

The main problematic of Turkish literature from the Tanzimat period to the 1950s is modernization vis-à-vis Westernization. However, starting from the 1950s onwards, “Anatolian novel” started to rise in the Turkish literature (Moran 2001: 7). It is difficult to call these works as “village novels,” as conventional studies assume, as not all novels of the period talk were constructed on the rural life. However, in general, it is likely to say that problems of peripheral populations (against the center) come to the fore in the Anatolian novels. Yaşar Kemal’s *İnce Memed*, Hasan Giyim’s *Gominis İmam*, Timur Karabulut’s *Çepnel Dünya* were prominent examples of these novels (Moran 2001: 105). The reason for this change were the deepening of class differentiation and the increase in peasant poverty between 1923 and 1950 (Moran 2001: 11) Two main features of the Anatolian novel are, first, the rebellion against the established social order, and second, the use of folk references.

Moran suggests that the main themes in Turkish literature after the 1950s is “injustice problems arising from the social structure” and the accompanying “rebellion” (Moran 2001: 7) Therefore, the banditry became the main motifs of the Turkish-Anatolian literature in the post-1950 period. It is possible to contend that the real transformation in Turkish literature took place with Sabahattin Ali’s novel *Kuyucaklı Yusuf* (the story of a “noble bandit”), which was published in 1937. Yaşar Kemal’s novels (especially, *İnce Memed* and *Çakırcalı Efe*) and writings became very influential in the introduction of banditry into Turkish folk literature (Moran 2001: 106-107) Nevertheless, it is Ömer Seyfettin’s rarely known novel, *Yalnız Efe*, which addressed the subject of banditry in the Turkish literature. In the rise of the Anatolian canon and the theme of rebellion in Turkish folk literature, socialist intellectuals of the Republican period (e.g., Sabahattin Ali and Nazım Hikmet), on the one hand, and the intellectuals trained in the Village Institutes (e.g., Yaşar Kemal and Orhan Kemal), on the other hand, had been very influential.

In addition to the Turkish literature, the heroic stories of the Ottoman-Turkish bandits can also be found in other genres – especially in the poems, songs and ballads. Although I look into the reflections of banditry in the oral and written culture in this article, these mediums are not the only available venue for exploring the reflections of Turkish banditry. In the Yeşilçam era, Turkish tackled the banditry in numerous films. Some notable examples of bandit stories in the Turkish cinema are *Kibar Feyzo* (1978), *Erkek Güzeli Sefil Bilo* (1979), *Davaro* (1981), *Eşkiya* (1996). All these films address the socio-economic inequalities of rural life, the remaining of the Turkish feudal structure, and the resistance of the ordinary peasants in Turkey. In these films, the bandits are portrayed as the advocates and speakers of rural public (Dinç 2018).

Conceptualizing Everyday Resistance in its Relation to the Bandit Tales and Ballads

In this part, I will strive to reinterpret the bandit tales and ballads in terms of the everyday resistance perspective of Scott (1989). Scott primarily shows that “culture cannot be [totally] subsumed within hegemony” (Sivaramakrishan 2005: 347). The hegemony is constantly being contested, negotiated, and modified by ordinary people. From this perspective, the seeming complicity of peasants cannot be viewed as the total hegemonic control. “Decoding the language of deference” and reading “the hidden transcripts” in the folk narratives give hints about how hegemonic control is challenged by peasants. The emergence of banditry produces “the climate of opinion” that make the everyday resistance possible (Scott 1989: 12).

Following the Scottian perspective, everyday resistance can be defined as the continuous, unorganized and disguised forms of resistance of subordinate classes. Scott argues that a great deal of the politics of the subordinate classes occur as everyday resistance because they lack necessary sources and logistics to engage in direct confrontation with the dominant classes. Rather than open confrontation, peasants choose safer ways of resistance. Forms and scope of everyday resistance depend upon the “tactical wisdom” of ordinary peasants and “the tacit cooperation” among the community (Scott 1989: 7). Some practices of everyday resistance are foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, feigned ignorance, desertion, pilfering, smuggling, poaching, arson, slander, sabotage, surreptitious assault and murder and anonymous threat. Everyday resistance also involves the peasants’ linguistic maneuvers to unsettle the hegemonic claims of authorities. Although peasants pretend to obey the rules of the game, at the backstage they declare their autonomy.

Scott states that the disguised forms of resistance are often overlooked by scholars because of the two primary reasons. Firstly, resistance is not openly declared “in the sense of politics”, and secondly, it is not a collective action that directly disturb the authorities (Scott 1989: 4). Although it is possible to establish some relations between everyday resistance and class struggle, everyday resistance is “a matter of nibbling, of minute advantages, and opportunities that can little effect overall relationships of power” (Scott 1989: 13). As much as peasants are aware of surveillance and they fear from coercion, everyday resistance remains to be the only available option. This form of resistance is meaningful because open defiance involves high danger. The practices of everyday resistance of peasants have mostly remained unnoticed because of two further reasons: First, it is hard to recognize its appearance and disappearance, second, the anonymous characters of everyday resistance do not call attention to themselves.

Scott (1989) underlines that gossip, slander and withdrawal of deference compose the symbolic dimension of everyday resistance. There is a normative consensus –which is hidden and untold by its very nature- among peasants about the legitimacy of everyday resistance. The silence of the peasants regarding the act of resistant could be considered as sign of the tacit cooperation and consensus. Scott calls this hidden cooperation as “the climate of opinion.” The folk narratives play critical role in the emergence of such climate of opinion. It is plausible to argue that the folk culture creates a habitus-or-cosmos for everyday resistance. Th representation of bandits show the “peasant sub/culture that underwrites dissimulation, poaching, tax evasion and etc.” (Scott 1989: 23).

There are some common characteristics of everyday resistance tactics. One of the most salient features of the everyday forms of resistance is the anonymity. The public silence surrounding the resistance leads to the anonymity. Risk aversion of ordinary peasants also facilitate the anonymous character of the resistance. It is necessary to remark that most of the Ottoman-Turkish bandit tales and ballads are composed by anonymous/ordinary peasants. Another common feature of the practices of the everyday resistance is the dissimulation. Scott argues that the peasants perform on stage behavior of deference against the dominant actors. The visible deference is a necessary pose that makes the hidden resistance possible. Behind the apparent submission, peasants operate their tactics for the everyday resistance (Scott 1989, p.23). This is what Scott calls as “the politics of dissimulation,” in which “the symbols and the practices of the resistance have been veiled” (Scott 1989: 24). Beneath the surface of the compliance lies the particular moments of resistance. For instance, the peasants use nicknames in gossiping each other. The politics of dissimulation are an integral part of the folk tales and ballads on bandits. Moreover, the metaphorical phrases that have double meanings are often used in these folk narratives. The folk narratives have some sort of disguised language. In many cases, ambiguous messages are delivered by anonymous messengers. The disguised forms of aggression are applied by employing ambiguous language. For this reason, folk tales and ballads provide implications for what Scott calls as “the hidden transcripts” of the everyday forms of resistance (Scott 1989: 30).

In order to elaborate the nature of everyday resistance, it is also necessary to discuss “popular metis” in the folk narratives (Erdoğan 2000). Popular metis imply various forms of tactics of “subaltern groups”, such as desertion, disguise, dissimulation and subversion. Popular metis is a useful concept in understanding unsystematic and ambiguous resistance practices of ordinary peasants. The framework of popular metis suggests that the subaltern politics can be traced through tales, rumors and other mundane narratives. While accommodating with the existing power constellation on the surface, subalterns perform disguised forms of resistance at least on the linguistic level. In the case of Ottoman-Turkish banditry, the ballads can be interpreted at the background of popular metis, and ordinary peasants are practitioners of subaltern politics in performing bandit ballads and tales. The mythical characteristics of bandits in the ballads imply the disguised form of resistance of subalterns. In addition, the anonymity of the authors of the ballads can be understood as a significant tactic. Moreover, performing these ballads – as the peasants sing those songs among themselves- in everyday life can be considered as another tactic.

General Characteristics of the Ottoman-Turkish Ballads on Banditry

As Yaşar Kemal underlines, “the folk songs provide a rich literature for the researchers to investigate the beliefs, dreams, expectations, and disappointments of the ordinary people” (Bayrak 1985: 99). In this context, folk tales and ballads on the Ottoman-Turkish bandits become significant. In analyzing the ballads on Turkish banditry, Bayrak (1985) argues that there is a strong emphasis on the moral qualities of the bandits. He interprets this emphasis as the sign of the popular recognition of the bandits by peasant community. Bayrak further underscores the significance of anonymous character of the bandit ballads. The authors and composers of these ballads are ordinary people who express their feelings after the tragic death of the heroic figure. If this mythical figure was killed traitorously, then the author/composer express deep sorrow for this undeserved end. Bayrak claims that the author/composer of the ballad might be a friend or follower of the bandit himself who witness the tragic death incident. This initial witness account become the source of the ballads. In many instances, there is not unique but many authors of the ballads, thereby there are different versions of story and word selection. It is significant to note that these bandit ballads are transmitted through oral tradition. Each and every author adopted the ballad for himself/herself. The ballads have gone through many adaptations. There is no last version of the ballads. By passing over generations, these ballads become more public and anonymous. The initial version become the source and inspiration for the following tales and ballads that are told on the bandits. Moreover, these folk songs and poems have not only transformed through temporally, but also spatially. The details of the story may differ, but the patterns of the tales and ballads remain same in many adaptations. It is necessary to remark that the reproduction of tales and ballads has not only epistemological but also ontological dimension. Each individual and generation adopt, transform and reproduce the original version to express their own feelings on particular events that they experienced or witnessed. The adaptations and transformations that these ballads are the salient features of oral tradition. The folk singers have become critical figures, as their musical performances, especially with their bağlamas, have helped the reproduction of the bandit stories.

Some recurring motifs can be distinguished in the Ottoman-Turkish bandit ballads. These ballads are to large extent based on the fault lines between the wealthy and poor, the powerful and weak. In a parallel manner, the most common theme in the ballads is the manifestation of repression, insult and marginalization of peasants. However, this theme cannot be interpreted as the submission of peasants to the hegemonic control. They challenge the hegemony by articulating their own bandit tales. The close reading of ballads often implies the forms of hidden resistance of the peasants. The power asymmetries in the ballads disclose the minute details of the peasant consciousness, in which the disguised everyday resistance can be found. In the ballads, the traces of the life stories of noble bandits can be found but in a mythical quality. Most bandits are obliged to leave their homes and beloved ones behind, and live honourable lives in isolated regions, particularly in the mountains that symbolizes the search for justice. Most bandits experienced injustice and then were persecuted by the oppressor authorities. They were often killed in conflicts with landlords or authorities as a consequence of betrayal. The ballad on İnce Mehmet express this point very well.

*Kır atın boynunda püsküllü koza
Kanlarım damladı çimene toza
Bu işten kurtulursam sorarım size
Tut elimden Ince Mehmet gidelim
Dağlar gidelim of...*

Most bandits in the Ottoman-Turkish ballads are portrayed as exempt from any imperfections and glorified as messianic figures. The heroism of bandits is remarkable. In the ballads, the exclamations (“hey,” “bre,” “aman aman”) are utilized to express the heroic character and the courage of the bandits. Another prominent feature of the Ottoman-Turkish bandit ballads is an emphasis on the harsh conditions of rural life, since the banditry is closely associated with the mountains. In many instances, spatial metaphors imply the resistance of bandits. The famous phrase of the Dadaloğlu, “ferman padişahın, dağlar bizimdir,” illustrates this point very well. Another famous ballad on Köroğlu shows the relationship between the spatial metaphors and resistance:

*Köroğlu'yum kayaları yararım
Halkın kılıcım hakkı ararım
Şahtan padişahın hesap sorarım
Uykudan uyanan katılır bana*

The Ottoman-Turkish Bandits: Micanoglu and Hekimoğlu

In this part, I will closely scrutinize the portraits of the two notable bandits –Micanoglu and Hekimoğlu – to illustrate the relationship between Ottoman-Turkish folk narratives and everyday resistance. It is necessary to underline that there are various versions of stories and songs told on these two noble bandits, however, considering the limited scope of this article, I will stick most common version and omit the details of their life stories.

Our first case is Micanoglu (Yaşar 2006). Often called as “lovely bandit,” Micanoglu was born in 1864 in Giresun. His real name was Hüseyin. Peasants said that he was handsome, brave and well-educated man. While he was doing his military service, his fiancée was obliged to marry with the son of the wealthy landlord, Memiş Hoca. As soon as Micanoglu heard off this dramatic news, he deserted from the military service. When he arrived at the village, her fiancée had already been married to the wealthy man. Yet Micanoglu was a persistent man, he hid himself in the village for some time and kept his relationship with his ex-fiancée. One day, Micanoglu openly confronted Memiş Hoca, and accidentally killed him. He was arrested and sentenced for 18 years. In the prison, he met with a bandit named Eğribel Mehmet, who was the gang member of another famous bandit named Deli Reşit. Micanoglu escaped from the prison along with Eğribel Mehmet and joined the gang of the Deli Reşit. After a while, Micanoglu became the leader of this gang. He raided the caravans and robbed wealthy traders in the region. The gendarmerie attempted to capture him several times but failed. He disguised himself very well and even sometimes wore woman clothes. Micanoglu sought for a shelter to escape from gendarmerie, and he usually hid himself in the house of Kel Seyit, another powerful landlord of the region. In

every gendarmerie attack, he successfully escaped. In the public eye, he became an invincible figure. The mythical stories began to be told about him: Micanoglu once was trapped and even shot by soldiers, but he escaped with the help of God. Peasants indeed believed that the God's blessing was upon him. After a while, Micanoglu asked for a tribute from the French mine company operating in the Karagöl. The owners of the company refused to pay tribute to the Micanoglu, as he ceased the water sources of the company. The following ballad depicts this story:

*Ben de vardım maden baskınına
Yar yağmur yağmış taş üstüne
Beş yüz asker kalkmış Mican üstüne
Karagöl altından kırk atlı geçtim
Martin kurşununun suyunu içtim
Sağımdan vuruldum, soluma düştüm
Dilbilmez çerkezler eline düştüm*

The owners of the French company called the Ottoman authorities for help. The gendarmerie sought ways to catch Micanoglu, then gave an official order to Kel Seyit to capture and kill him. Soon Micanoglu was killed by Kel Seyit. The peasants shocked by the tragic death of this mythical figure. The betrayal of Kel Seyit can be found in the famous ballad told on Micanoglu.

*Martinimin pulları
Gece kestim yolları
Aslan Mican geliyor
Saymaz karakolları
Oy benim canım Mican'ım
Dünyalarda bir canım
Rakı koydum fincana
Hele bakın Mican'a
Kör olası Kel Seyit
Nasıl kıydın Mican'a
Oy benim canım Mican'ım
Dünyalarda bir canım
Karagöl obasında
Su içtim kana kana
Mican'ın ağaları
Ağlıyor yana yana*

Nevertheless, there are various tales about the end of the story on Micanoglu. One version told that although the men of Kel Seyit catch Micanoglu, they did not kill him and allowed him to escape. Peasants believed that they killed another man and told the gendarmerie that the dead man was Micanoglu. Instead, Micanoglu went to the holy lands, Mecca. Peasants believed that Micanoglu devoted himself to Islam until his actual death. Some peasants

claimed that they had seen Micanoglu in Mecca when they visited there for Hajj. The folk narratives on Micanoglu emphasize his noble character. For instance, one day Micanoglu ran into an old woman carrying woods in her back in nearby forest. Micanoglu asked where she was going. She said that she was going to the local bazaar for selling these woods so that she could buy some food. He bought all her woods. While she was leaving, her son arrived. Micanoglu asked the old woman whether her son was married or not. She said that her son could not marry because of poverty. Micanoglu turned towards the young man and asked him whether he loved someone or not. He confessed that he was in love with the imam's girl. Micanoglu went to the village and asked imam to marry his girl with this poor boy. Then, Micanoglu went to the bazaar to buy wedding dresses and gifts for the bride and groom. When the shopkeeper asked for money, he took off his veil and uncovered his face. As soon as the shopkeeper noticed that he was the noble bandit, he refused to take money. Micanoglu undertook all expenses of the marriage ceremony.

The second bandit tale is about Hekimoğlu (Bayrak 1985). His real name was Halil İbrahim and was a poor peasant boy living with his mother in a village (presumably, Çiftlice) of Ordu. Hekimoğlu was represented as an honest, clever, and brave man. There was a powerful landlord of Georgian origin who ruled the region. One day, the landlord wanted to marry with a pretty girl named Ayşa who was indeed the lover of Hekimoğlu. As the landlord found out the love affair between Ayşa and Hekimoğlu, he called Hekimoğlu to fight a duel. When Hekimoğlu arrived for the fight, he realized that the landlord had brought his men. The terrible clash took place between the men and Hekimoğlu, but Hekimoğlu was able to escape. He said goodbye to his mom and took the way to the mountains. The peasants who had already known him before and ongoing conflict started to support Hekimoğlu. Peasants served him food and provided moral support. Hekimoğlu soon became the heroic figure of justice in the region. He robbed wealthy and helped to the poor peasants. The landlord hired some men to capture and kill Hekimoğlu and collaborated with the gendarmerie to entrap Hekimoğlu. Once, the house in which Hekimoğlu was a guest had been surrounded by the gendarmerie. However, Hekimoğlu achieved to escape from behind by digging a hole under the wall. After Hekimoğlu heard that the landlord killed his cousins, he immediately went to the house of the mukhtar. When Hekimoğlu arrived the house, he noticed that the mukhtar set up a trap. The house surrounded by the gendarmerie. Hekimoğlu fought honorably but could not escape and killed there. The ballad of Hekimoğlu show the mourning of ordinary peasants after the tragic death. In this ballad, Hekimoğlu is depicted as an ideal-typical noble robber.

Hekimoğlu derler benim de aslıma
Aynalı martin yaptırdım narinim kendi nefsim
Konaklar yaptırdım döşetemedim
Ünye de Fatsa bioldu narinim baş edemedim
Konaklar yaptırdım mermer direkli
Hekimoğlu'nu sorsan yarınim demir yürekli
Bahçe armut dibinde kaymak yedin mi
Hekimoğlu'nu görünce narinim budur dedim mi
Çiftlice muhtarı puştur pezevenk
Hekimoğlu geliyor yarınim uçkur çözer
Hekimoğlu derler bir ufak uşak
Bir omzundan bir omzuna narinim yüz arma fişek

It is easy to recognize that in both stories –on Micanoğlu and Hekimoğlu– ordinary peasants identify themselves with the noble bandits. They interpret the struggle of these bandits as their own search for justice. Again, in both stories, it is seen that some mythical features are attributed to the bandits. Both bandits are represented as invincible, yet they are killed because of betrayal. The tragic ends of bandits make the ballads told on bandits more widely disseminated and embraced.

Conclusion

In this article, I strived to reinterpret the popular representations of the Ottoman-Turkish banditry through the folk tales and ballads. This article suggests that the operation of hegemony is not stable among the peasant communities, but it is disturbed, contested and challenged through disguised ways of everyday resistance. I argued that the representations of the bandits in the folk tales and ballads can be considered as fragments and moments of everyday resistance. I pointed out that the folk tales and ballads can be read as the hidden transcripts of everyday resistance of ordinary peasants. The bandit ballads encapsulate the climate of opinion for producing everyday resistance.

Since ordinary peasants cannot openly confront the authorities and upper classes, as it might involve fatal dangers, they embrace and appropriate the stories of those bandits who were able to resist. The anonymous character of bandits in the folk tales and ballads provides an opportunity for the ordinary peasants to express their own feelings in disguise. In other words, being afraid of risks, ordinary peasants opt for reproducing and articulating the bandit stories instead of putting their life stories forefront. Through these narratives, they glorify not only the lives of the insurgents but also their own feelings. Last but not least, the fact that ordinary peasants could not openly confront with the powerful does not mean that they have no agency. I emphasized that ordinary peasants attribute mythical qualities to the bandits in folk tales and ballads in order to operate subaltern politics towards emancipation.

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