The construction of symbolic power in Ottoman classical age

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Özet

Bu çalışma, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun klasik dönemimde sembolik gücün hangi araçlar vasıtasıyla içselleştirildiğini ve güç kavramının nasıl meşrulaştırıldığını açıklamayı amaçlamaktadır. 600 yılı aşkın bir süre aynı hanedanlık tarafından yönetilen Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda sembolik güç kullanımı ve bunun farklı kişiler tarafından algılanışı önem teşkil etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Osmanlı Klasik dönemi, Güç Sembolleri, Meşrulaştırma.

Abstract

This study aims to investigate the means through which symbolic power is internalized and legitimized. The importance of symbolic power in Ottoman Empire which was ruled under a single dynasty throughout more than 600 years and its perceptions by different recipients should be highlighted.

Key Words: Ottoman Classical Age, Symbols of Power, Legitimization.

The question of how the Ottomans expanded and became an important power has not precisely reached a consensus. The painstaking answer to the question above might be clarified through both an analysis of the Ottomans and the conditions which shaped Anatolia in late 13rd and 14th centuries. The Ottoman state which was amidst many other frontier principalities in Anatolia had to move towards the west due to its geographical location. Even though lots of scholars have asserted that this significant location generated an advantage for Osman's beglik, it is also crucial to elucidate how the Ottomans benefited from it. An analysis by Elizabeth Zachariadou on the frontier struggle indicates the reason why some Byzantine peasants occasioned by the dangers of frontier zone were urged to move towards the Ottoman lands. This, of course, gave way to the proliferation of Ottoman population (in Kunt, 10). Another explanation by Cemal Kafadar points out the Ottoman practice of unigeniture functioned as a means against fragmentation which was an expected outcome of "recognizing the rights of the different heirs according to Turco-Mongol tradition" (Kafadar, 120).

Admittedly, the Ottoman political culture should be examined in the context of bricolage. Whereas it reflects Persian-Islamic synthesis, it is also characterized by the prevalence of thinking peculiar to the Roman Empire. Therefore, in contradiction to other principalities, the Ottomans reshaped what was inherited from Seljuk Anatolia.

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The fact that the Ottoman state was ruled under a single dynasty throughout more than 600 years brings us one of the most crucial aspects of Ottoman history: the maintenance of power. So as to unravel this power system we should focus on the dynamic relationships between the ruling authority and legitimization exerted over the subjects. Hence, it is obvious that the sublimation and idealization of the Ottoman dynasty are involved in this move. The idealization process requires overvaluation, therefore, the ruler's image becomes aggrandized in the subject's mind.

Thus, how did Ottomans construct their legitimate authority which is imbued with many concepts and connotations? The precondition for it lies in the fact that the subjects should not only obey the political power, but at the same time they have to believe in doing so. This also addresses the question of formalization of belief system. As Karen Barkey explains, "Imperial states maintain authority over their population through the legitimation of a supranational ideology that often includes a religious claim to be protectors of Christendom or Islam, and an elaborate ideology of descent and lineage" (Barkey, 13).

In the search for legitimacy, there is a well known claim which resolves around the main aspects: antiquity and nobility. If a dynasty has been ruling for a considerable time period, its authority deepens along with its increasing charisma. Likewise, nobility, to have a kinship with a legendary figure such as a warrior king or a prophet, exalts the antiquity of a ruling dynasty. On the other hand, there is also another claim in order to maintain legitimacy: divine right. This idea undergoes immense elaboration with the concept of self-control over the subject. To wit, if a subject disobeys his/her ruler, this also means that (s)he disobeys God.

The question of how these claims were created in the early period of Ottoman State has some impediments as there is almost no historical account written by Ottomans before 15th century. However, as Cemal Kafadar underlines: "this must be seen as part of a broader phenomenon: the blooming of a literate historical imagination among the representatives of post-Seljuk frontier energies had to await the fifteenth century" (Kafadar, 93).

For Ottomans, the nobility of the ruling family is vital because of being a dynastic empire. In Neşri's history (1485), it is suggested that Ottoman descent was derived from Qayı Clan of Oğuz Khan. Nonetheless, Neşri's version which became the offical genealogy later, is in fact spurious (ibid. 149). Likewise, the unattainable goal to combine the Ottomans to the Muhammadian lineage was displayed in Enveri's epic history *Düsturname* written in mid 15th century. Since this claim provided no political advantage due to being difficult to prove, it merely remained as a marginal endeavour. Furthermore, the attempt to link the Ottomans with Noah also comes to the foreground in the narratives of both Turkish and Mongol dynasties. Until the sixteenth century, the legitimization of Ottoman sultans was reflected through folk religion and not learned Islam (ibid. 148). What we encounter in the early Ottoman chronicles written by Aşıkpaşazade (1484) and Oruç (c.1500), is the narration of *gazi* epics. According to Aşıkpaşazade, Osman, the very first sultan, had a dream in Edebali's house in which he stayed as a guest. The dervish Edebali interpreted his dream as God granted sovereignty on him and

his descents and therefore, he allowed his daughter to marry Osman. This marriage functions as a symbol that justifies the rulership of Ottoman sultans. According to Finkel, it was crucial for the Ottoman dynasty to demonstrate its rule as the natural order of things as many challenged Ottoman power throughout the centuries (Finkel, 11). Nonetheless, "the legend of Osman's dream proved inadequate to neutralize all challenges, [therefore] a more tangible legacy was needed" (ibid.). Hence, by the late fifteenth century, popular epics were posited in order to support the claim that Ottoman sovereignty had a nobler lineage than that of its rivals. To illustrate, a popular epic was asserting that "Osman's father Ertuğrul had been granted his land near Söğüt by the Seljuk sultan of Rum himself, a claim bolstered by a story that the Seljuk sultan had presented Osman with insignia of office" (ibid). This epic, of course, aimed at showing Osman's legitimacy as heir to the Seljuks.

One of the debatable issue on the rise of Ottoman state is the *gaza* theory. To touch briefly on this subject, we should also mention about Ahmedi's writings. One of the first poets and moralists who made an effort to legitimize the ideals of Ottoman rulers is Ahmedi (1334? - 1412). In his literary formulation which is called *The History of the Ottoman Kings*, he depicts Ottoman rulers as *gazi*s, which means the ones who fight against infidels and pursue the duty of Holy War of Islam. It is important to note here that, in the time of Ahmedi, the Turkish words *akın* (raid) and *akıncı* (raider) which have no religious connotations, were replaced by *gaza* and *gazi* respectively (Imber, 140). It is important to note here that, for Wittek, the political and military leadership of the frontiers always pertained to the *gazi*s (Kafadar, 48). However a criticism against Wittek's theory of *gaza* ideology came up with Rudi Paul Lindner's alternative theory (ibid, 50). For Lindner, Wittek's evidence for the *gaza* theory is confined to Bursa inscription of 1337 and Ahmedi's history. As he points out, if the moving force was rooted in *gaza* ideology, the early Ottomans would not have,

1. recruited Byzantines into their ranks,

2. fought against other Muslim forces,

3. exerted no pressure to convert or persecute Christians,

4. displayed moderation and an "interest in conciliation and mutual adaptability,"   or,

5. allowed freedom for heterodoxy and pre-Islamic cults. (ibid, 51).

To scrutinize all of these aspects is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, I will briefly focus on the changing praxis of *gaza* ideology which stems from the alteration of circumstances. This was the case in 16th century when the Safavid Shahs became the most dangerous enemies of Ottomans. Even though they were *şii*, they were also Muslims. Therefore, Ottomans could not pursue the concept of gaza against them. In order to perpetuate the main ideology, the Ottomans depicted *şii*s as infidels, therefore towards whom gaza became legitimized (Imber, 147).

It needs to be noted that symbols of power have their own recipients that can be divided into two main fractions: domestic and external (Yelçe, 503). The domestic audience which comprises of sub-groups

is important for the spread of the messages. Firstly, the household of sultan functions as an instrument for the making and maintenance of the projected image through participation and representation (ibid). Another fundamental group of audience consists of the members of the religious establishment. The last group belonging to domestic audience is the subject population. Finally, the external audience is related to foreign states and it can be also categorized in two groups as friendly and hostile (ibid, 504).

A deeper reading of ceremonies at the Ottoman Court reveals a coherent interpretation of power relations with the ruler's subjects. One tradition, to be seen in public during meal ceremonies is a very old custom that Aşıkpaşazade and Mihailovic trace back to Osman (Necipoğlu, 19). In one of these ceremonies, Osman received the symbol of vassalage sent from the Anatolian Seljuk ruler whilst a military band played martial music, *nevbet* (ibid.). Obviously, Osman, the founder of Ottoman dynasty, exhibited a set of symbolic gestures that embody his vassalage to the Seljuks and the readiness for *gaza*. The handling of free food amidst Osman's followers reflected the ruler's generosity and this was adopted a decorous custom until the reign of Mehmed II. The conquest of Constantinople affirms the Ottomans as the holder of imperial power, thereby, the rupture from the old custom demystifies the fact that Mehmed II "regarded [it] as an unwelcome reminder of the old days of vassalage, when the Ottoman state had been a minor frontier principality" (ibid.). Mehmed II also relinquished participation in public ceremonies and acquired a curtained window while watching the divan meetings without being seen. According to historian Solakzade (17th century), this practice was adopted so as to differentiate the sultan from his viziers. This story upon which he built his vindication is dubious, however, what is significant is that this control mechanism functioned like a "panopticon" as the position of the omnipotent ruler normalized the gaze of surveillance over his subjects.

The decline paradigm of Ottoman Empire was thought to initiate after the death of Süleyman the Magnificent. Hence the reign of Süleyman I was considered as a "golden age". The concept of golden age is a multivalent word containing a variety of connotations. To begin with, it does not only pertain to the Renaissance. It was also known in ancient Greek and Roman times and even in Middle Ages (Burke, 159). Likewise, it was either conceived as a time of peace or, time of justice, or a time of prosperity, or a time when art blossomed (ibid. 155). In Süleyman's case the dominant aspect was justice and it was strengthened through his association with *kanun*. To be a just sultan is not only an expected virtue for a ruler, but also a God-given feature of kingship. To wit, "by performing deeds of virtue, Sultan Süleyman not only proves that he is an able ruler but also the divine sanction related to his rule is confirmed" (Yelçe, 177).

During his reign, Süleyman participated in the production of the written records, which can be evaluated as he is the creator of his own image (Woodhead, 167). Süleyman's offical history was written by şahnameci Arifi under the name of *Süleymanname* (1558). "The Book of Süleyman", in fact, is a version of *şehname* (King's book). As it can be estimated, the depiction of Süleyman revolves around concepts such as the warrior king, the just ruler, the promoter of Islam, the cultural

patron (ibid, 174). Not only during his reign but also shortly after it, there was a continuity between his powerful image and the written accounts as it can be seen in Peçevi's history (ibid, 167). However we should admit that, the number of the contemporary readers that were acquainted with the written records of Süleyman's reign was very limited. Nonetheless, some scholars of today who are the proponents of Süleyman's Golden Age are mainly engaged with these written records yet, I think that the evaluation of them at a more broad level through close-reading unravels the power relations related to the construction and maintenance of reputation of "almighty" ruler.

Therefore, we should also emphasise the visual means of symbolic power so as to elucidate Süleyman's public image. For Woodhead, "Süleyman's architectural projects and their associated *evkaf* (endowments) were the dominant physical symbols of his status as supreme Muslim ruler and benefactor of his people" (ibid, 169). For this reason, the evaluation of charitable buildings (such as mosques, caravanserais, bridges and fountains) at a symbolic level is very crucial. Süleyman's public image was also consolidated through his various visits in Rumelia and Anatolia. The reasons for these visits were mainly for military campaigns, however, Süleyman stopped in major cities and visited tombs there. To illustrate, during the campaign towards Iraq in 1534-1535, Süleyman halted in many cities such as Kütahya, Akşehir, Konya, Kayseri, Sivas, and Erzican and met with the army in late September (ibid, 168).

As for the ceremonial practice, it was also begun to alter in Süleyman's reign. One example to that was given by Minio, in 1521, Süleyman did not rise to welcome the ambassadors, and during his second embassy in 1527, he declined to speak (Necipoğlu, 25). The greeting of ambassadors was also changed as they began to enter through being surrounded on either side by two gatekeepers. In contrast to their predecessors, they had to stand and not to speak to sultan directly. These examples are fundamental for the analysis of symbolic power relations with the foreign states.

All in all, the symbols of power do not merely exist on their own, thereby, we should focus on the relationship between the sender and the receiver of these symbolic messages. The effect of the insignia of power upon the recipients hinges on legitimacy of political power. Legitimacy intrinsically has a mutual relation. In other words, the subjects should not only obey to the commands of a ruler, but also they should believe in doing so. Admittedly, there should be a common understanding based on the dynamic bond between the subjects and the ruler. This relation is imbued with specific codes that are legible to recipients. Therefore, the analysis of the power symbols will not be sufficient if the perception of them is overlooked.

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