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(Hi)stories of Honor in Ottoman Societies

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Contextualizing Honour

Nükheth Sirman

- 1 The papers in this issue represent an attempt by historians to tackle the concept of honour and its practice in the Ottoman Empire, from the sixteenth to the turn of the twentieth century. The concept itself has had numerous academic as well as political ramifications for a long time. As maintained by Lévy-Aksu in her contribution, historians' intervention in the academic discourse on honour, shows the extent to which the content, context and uses of the concept have changed over time. This comes as an important corrective both to the anthropological and political uses to which the term has been put.
- 2 While anthropologists in the 1960s and 1970s used the concept to try and define a unified field they would call the Anthropology of the Mediterranean, many feminists in the very countries that this anthropology defined took to the streets ten to fifteen years later, this time to construct a unified feminist politics. While the anthropologists maintained that honour was a way of producing hierarchy in the absence of a strong state presence, feminists claimed that it was a way of keeping women in their place. What both of these different camps maintained was, to a large extent, correct but still flawed. They were flawed in the sense that they gave a single content to a concept that had multiple meanings, used in different contexts in very different ways, and they were flawed to the extent that they fixed this content once and for all. They did not explain where this concept came from, how it had changed over time, and the conditions which produced it.
- 3 Peirce's contribution to this volume indicates that the polysemy with which the concept of honour can be historically associated does not stretch all the way to the sixteenth century. Her argument to the effect that the concept of honour was not used much in court cases at that time is qualified by the introduction of the term reputation, and especially, its opposite, *töhmət*, blemishing someone's reputation. Yet by the end of the eighteenth century the term "violation of honour" (*hetk-i 'ırz*) becomes quite widespread in courts and refers particularly to issues of sexuality as shown by Tuğ. In between, it seems to be used to "integrate" groups, individuals and communities into

larger entities. Here, honour seems to serve as an ethos that helped in the creation of trans-regional networks of violence as argued by Esmer.

- 4 The relation of honour to violence is also stressed by Blumi in his discussion of its uses by Ottoman officials of Albanian origin in depicting “other” Albanians, those living in the north, often resuscitating old traditions with a view to control local violence. Here too, then, honour is both personal, as in oaths of loyalty, but also serves political goals that have to do with producing modern forms of rule in line with Ottoman reforms of the nineteenth century. But, as Tuğ argues, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries also assigns importance to regulating interpersonal violence, this time as a way of forging a “reciprocal relationship between the state and the subjects” based on legitimacy and justice. Honour is now at the service of the creation of a new, gendered, notion of citizenship, one that nevertheless harks back to the terms established by the earlier notions of “Circle of Justice.” Increasingly, honour seems to be attached in courts to the conjugal family through what Tuğ calls “the partnership of the patriarchal state and the male subjects.” Towards the end of the nineteenth century and up until the establishment of the Republic, honour was put to what Lévy-Aksu describes as “multidimensional uses” by the newly established institution of the police, that serve to include and exclude, but that also introduces new uses such as accountability and legitimacy.
- 5 Even this brief overview of the contributions here attests to the existence of a wide array of ways in which honour was deployed both by the Ottomans as well as by the researchers. It seems to have been applied to men on top of the state hierarchy, as well as to brigands, to ordinary men as well as policemen, to individuals as well as the state or one of its institutions such as the police. It seems to have led to violence or to have stopped it, to accuse as well as to defend, in court as well as in the house or in the street. Researchers themselves also use different concept to define the ways honour is practiced: a masculine ethos (Esmer), codes of behavior (Blumi), a central value (Lévy-Aksu), a rhetoric (Tuğ), and a relational phenomenon that serves to validate (Peirce).
- 6 In spite of this variety and knowing full well that as an anthropologist, I risk to reintroduce immutability, I would still like to hazard some generalizations on the basis of the foregoing and in view of my own work on the subject (Sirman 2004). I would like to propose that we look at honour as a way of dealing with relationships that are ambiguous, ill-defined and therefore relations that produce anxiety. Although these relations may indeed help to define state- subject or state- citizen relations, and even though they may serve as a way of governing society, they are primarily carried out at the personal level. They thus help to agonistically define relations between persons who are intimate but in an unstructured relationship where there are no hard and fast rules to adhere to so that hierarchies remain fluid and changing.
- 7 Not all that the anthropology of the Mediterranean said about honour was useless; on the contrary, a reformulation of some its main tenets can be helpful. The anthropology of the Mediterranean argued that honour could be found in communities that existed in state societies, but which were at the margins of these states. I would like to take this insight, qualifying it at the same time. I propose to look at these margins, not as defining a particular area but as a kind of space that defines its own type of social relations. The frontier is one example of such a space, zones around borders. What is interesting is that social relations in such spaces are less constructed than relations that make up the centre of power and sociality. For example, in Söke where much of

the months of October and November are spent in the cotton fields picking cotton, people become more rowdy than in the village. Jokes are more daring, unmarried girls speak up more courageously. It is a space which is less delineated by hierarchical relations and codes of respect that keep these hierarchies in place.

- 8 Another way to think of these spaces would be to consider Victor Turner's notion of *communitas* (Turner 1977). *Communitas*, or anti-structure, as Turner describes it, is the sort of mutual recognition that takes place during ritual processes in what Turner calls liminal spaces. These are spaces devoid of the structuring of society where new ideas, new configurations of social relations can be invented and crises thereby be solved. Liminality as described by Turner is "a 'moment in and out of time,' and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties (p.96). Liminal space is a space where what it means to be social for the people concerned can be faced; a space, where, for example, the meaning of masculinity and femininity can be deciphered without the trappings of everyday exigencies, definitions, and understandings. And yet liminal spaces are also dangerous and uncharted, where encounters can quickly become violent. Turner argues that encounters in this space take place without recourse to social position or privilege; persons encounter each other as the human being that is culturally relevant. Thus masculinity and its most common definition becomes the ground on which men will interact, as Esmer describes for the Ottoman bandits of the late seventeenth century.
- 9 Anthropologists also argued that relations of honour are interpersonal and relational. I suggest that this personalism needs to be carefully considered. To begin with, relations that are personal need not necessarily be face-to-face. When an Ottoman subjects petitions the ruler, he is, from his point of view, writing to a person, rather than an impersonal institution. Şerif Mardin (1991) develops the term *personalistic society* to talk about a social imaginary where everyone occupies a unique place and where the uniqueness of this person is recognized by others who are in contact with them. It is a way of carrying out social relations, not in terms of the function that the person executes, but in terms of the recognition of the person in his or her totality. I have argued elsewhere that it is kinship terms and the imaginary produced by a kinship-based society that allows this recognition of uniqueness, or of the total person (Sirman 2006). This is because kinship is a question of hierarchies, of who calls whom "elder brother", thus of knowing one's place. To use these kinship terms requires intimacy, but only the intimacy that allows to know each person's relative standing vis-à-vis one another. It is the "sense", in Bourdieu's understanding, of recognizing hierarchy like the Albanians described by Blumi, who know who is civilized and who is savage (Bourdieu 1977). We are therefore talking about the intimacy of rivals who shall have to compete in order to remain equal, or to keep the relative standing they are in. Honour, as also described by Bourdieu, is the route through which this rivalry is carried out on a daily basis in personalistic societies among people whose place is not well-defined by existing hierarchies. This would be the case in situations of liminality.
- 10 Charles Taylor, in another attempt to fix the place and meaning of honour, maintains that in traditional societies of the ancient regime, the worth of a person was measured according to the notion of honour while in modern individualistic societies, it is the notion of human dignity that does the same thing (1994). Honour is a relation that may

exist between persons as well as communities of persons such as families, clans, neighbourhoods, villages, nations, ethnic groups, and religious communities. As maintained by Taylor, the competition between these entities might turn into a zero-sum game whereby the more honourable one group is, the less the other. Taylor uses a traditional/modern dichotomy to define the different ways in which societies will define the category of the person. I suggest that when we take that dichotomy away and say that there are certain spaces in all societies where at any given moment relations between the interlocutors are ambiguous, ill-defined, in need of being clarified through competition. It is in these spaces that this notion of honour would work to define the worth of a person vis-à-vis another person.

- 11 The workshop from which the papers in this volume are drawn included a number of papers on honour drawn from present-day Turkey. All of them show the extent to which interpersonal relations are resolved through appeals to notions of honour. There are times when central Anatolia is less regulated by the centre and behaves like a frontier, and times when the Balkans is in this state. The papers also show that these ambiguous relations that lead to competition may exist between state officials when competition is fomented by the centre to determine who the better governor is. Peirce's paper shows that a person's worth is made visible through the operation of reputation. Reputation is conferred by others and expresses a delicate balance within the community. In many examples the issue is one of masculinity, that is, the ability to protect, which quickly turns into the ability to control.
- 12 Historians show us that honour operates between the state and the subject as these relations become more and more contested. The more these relations undergo transformation, the more a space of ambiguity develops, the more there is room for the operation of honour. The papers also show that honour as a concept can change itself. It can be appropriated by state officials to better govern as shown by Blumi and Esmer. It can also be centralized and codified, and the workings of the state may get to be carried out under its terms, as the state undergoes transformation as shown by Tuğ and Lévy-Aksu. As gender relations become the target and the means of a new regime of government, its associations with masculinity and femininity allows it to be further sexualized (as is the case when a new conjugal unit is legally created) and genderized (as is the case when a new unit of law and order such as the professional police is created).
- 13 The main point is that we need to understand honour as something that is done as opposed to something that is. In other words, honour does not refer to a rule that is applied but a concept that has many uses. That is exactly what the authors in this volume have stressed using different concepts such as code, rhetoric, value and ethos as analytical tools. One such term that I have found useful is the term 'root paradigm' that has been introduced by Şerif Mardin in his study of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi and the way in which religious social change takes place in Turkey (1989). Taking the term from Victor Turner (1977) to mean "clusters of meaning which serve as cultural 'maps' for individuals" that "enable persons to find a path in their own culture," Mardin argues that Said Nursi was able to appeal to a large number of people when 'customs and rules' have lost their legitimacy and no longer serve as guides for behavior (Mardin 1991:3). It is under such circumstances, circumstances that spell a state of liminality, that these root paradigms affect the way persons behave. According to Mardin, honour is one such root paradigm, but there are others such as *ghāzī*, *hürmet* and *kanaat* that

form a cluster of meanings and provide “lines of force which shape social relations and at the same time enable these to be transformed” (Mardin 1991:5).

- 14 Thus, following Mardin and Turner, I would like to argue that honour as a root paradigm that allows a doing, that is, a performative act, can be and is used to change and/or give a particular direction to existing social relations. So the question is to trace the differential operations of honour in spaces that are, or are becoming, undefined. What we see from the contributions here is that as a performative, the term has been primordialized, moralized and sacralized by successive operations it has undergone at the hands of various actors, including social scientists. The circumstances under which the term is put to use change its operation and scope. As a polysemic root paradigm, it seems from the reading of these texts that honour does lend itself to being centralized by the state. As states increasingly lose their claim to legitimacy, the moralization of the concept may serve as a way of reclaiming this legitimacy. Through various means, doing honour opens up a space for the intervention of more and more organized powers so that not only families but states, courts, the police may also do honour in situations of uncertainty. This type of appropriation by a locus of power is effected by placing its main emphasis on one of the many meanings associated with it.
- 15 Being such a useful root paradigm, the term has continued to be used by different claimants to hegemony. To follow the vicissitudes of the term also shows that each appropriation also prepares for another reading of the term that will subvert this hegemony. Thus, in the twentieth century, honour as a paradigm has worked as a way of creating difference between the immoral colonizer and the colonized. Or, it has been cast as a primordial relation, thus relegating those who use it to the status of the primitive and backward. Thus, judges in Turkey, but also in places like Sweden who see it as a sign of a backward culture judge their cases according to the place the polity wants to open for difference and multiculturalism. But then many Kurds in Turkey will vote for a particular political party on the basis of their honour, thus subverting the power of the central state. Similarly, in circumstances where the changes brought about by modernism, work and poverty turn the family into an undefined space, feminists who target the concept of honour as a cultural construct that serves the subordination of women end up by sexualizing and moralizing it themselves.
- 16 As an affective term that has been acting as a root paradigm in circumstances of uncertainty, the concept of honour, as shown by the contributions to this volume, show the different contexts in which it has been put to use and the kinds of effects such usage has produced. In this brief introduction, I have suggested that the best way to explain the tenacity as well as the variations in its meanings and usages is to consider it as a root paradigm that helps overcome periods of uncertainty, albeit for a limited period of time.

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