

Powerful Corps and Heavy Cauldrons

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This study aims to examine food as an instrumental way of expressing power by focusing on some customary practices of the janissaries, the disciplined body of military corps in the Ottoman Empire, and the sultan. Just as almost all armies depend on food, so too did the Ottoman army. The janissary corps stand as a unique military formation whose military vocabulary and symbols were predominantly based on the terminology of the kitchen. It is also quite telling that they define the sultan as ‘the father who feeds us’.

The word janissary means ‘new soldier’; they became elite forces of the army through a special recruitment process. Janissaries were taken from their parents at the age of eight or nine on the order of sultan and assigned to that special purpose. After being converted to the Islamic faith they were educated by the Palace in the arts of war and transformed into loyal and obedient servants and fearless warriors of the sultan. They enjoyed many privileges, but marriage was forbidden. The whole corps or *Ocak* (meaning hearth) was composed of several *ortas*, regiments. Each regiment was headed by a *çorbacıbaşı* (*tchorbadjibashi*), meaning the master of the soup, and he held the highest rank in the hierarchy of the janissary corps. Therefore, it is no surprise that cooking utensils were, for them, a manifestation of attachment and fidelity to the group; they were a symbol of the family and were taken along on their military expeditions (Eskenazi, 2016, p.25).

Of the kitchenware, the cauldron held special significance for janissaries, who held various ranks in the court and its kitchen. In Anatolia, a cauldron was the symbol of hospitality according to the Bektāşi tradition, a dervish order with which janissaries had connections. In the tekkes (convents) of Bektāşis, the soup in the cauldron was continuously served to both the guests and the needy. Besides being a symbol of hospitality, the cauldron was seen as a medium to convey messages, displaying power in various forms. Hence, for janissaries, the cauldron becomes a symbolic object beyond being a functional utensil for cooking. Therefore, this provides us with the context to understand the symbolic nature of the material culture of food.

Within this framework, two customary practices are intriguing in terms of displaying power; one is *çanak yağması* (dish plunder) and the other is *kazan kaldırma* (toppling of the soup cauldron). In the Ottoman capital city, during celebrations and feasts, by the order of the sultan, dishes with plenty of food were placed on the ground outside the palace for the crowds to plunder; this was known as dish plunder (*çanak yağması*). Feeding the hungry was a way to assure loyalty to the sultan and also a way to display his power. Another aspect of this ritual was that

when janissaries wanted to achieve a privilege or to express their discontent, they kicked over and upset the cauldron.

These two occasions may be defined as social performances, in the sense that the human being is a performing animal as well as a tool making or symbol-using animal (Turner, 1988; p.81). Janissaries had power in the eyes of both the ruling class and the ruled. The upsetting of the cauldron was a form of reaction, an opportunity to show power; it was a performance in front of both the authority and the popular classes. The scale of the ceremonies under discussion here in terms of the numbers and ranks of the people attending, the quantity of food prepared and offered, meant that they were intended to be defined as a spectacle, i.e. a performance to be watched.. When one considers both the size and the number of the utensils for preparing the food for these special occasions, the cauldron becomes a particularly significant actor in terms of the performance; in other words, it has a ceremonial function.

Offering soup prepared in the main kitchen of the palace to the soldiers (janissaries) was one of the rituals of the Divan-ı Hümayun (Council of Ministers) meetings, regularly held on each Tuesday in the Second Courtyard of Topkapı Palace. These meetings comprised a set of ceremonies mainly displaying imperial power. Also displayed was the power of one of the high rank janissaries (Çadır Mehterbaşısı Ağa), who presided with a stone in one hand, soup and a *fodla* in the other.¹ The Grand Vizier and the other high officials then took a couple of spoonfuls from this soup and a piece of *fodla*; then, the Grand Vizier ordered the soup to be served to the soldiers attending the ceremony. The soup as enjoyed by the soldiers was an indication of obedience; if not, it signaled a rebellion. (Koçu, p.37). Divan-ı Hümayun meetings became more impressive when they coincided with the payment of *ulufe* (three-monthly salary) to the janissary corps.² The ambassadors were also invited to these ceremonial meetings, as they were perfect occasions to show off the mighty power of the Ottoman state (Koçu, p.49). Janissaries were offered soup, *pilav* (rice) with meat, and *zerde* (saffron pudding) within the boundaries of the palace when their three-monthly salaries were paid. If they were discontented, they refused the food and would not touch the dishes. Added to this, they toppled the huge and heavy cauldron in order to convey their message in a powerful way. Refusing food offered by the sultan was the sign of a rebellion.

There are two different perspectives in Ottoman historiography concerning janissaries and their

relationship with society. According to the older paradigms, the general picture was of a decaying central state, and the 19th century reforms which aimed to modernize it on the one side and the groups against this change and modernization on the other (Shaw, 1971; Berkes, 1964; Lewis, 1961). From this perspective, the janissaries and the *ulema*³ were considered to be the major forces of reaction and opposition against change and progression. The second perspective regards the janissary corps as a weighty group who tried to find ways of existing within the social and political system. In this perspective, janissaries appeared to have strong connections with society; they had become strong voices of popular urban groups, helping them gain a political stance (footing?) (Mardin, 1988; Timur, 1989).

We owe much to recent studies which contribute to historians capacity to delineate the social and political scene of 18th and 19th centuries Ottoman life in a detailed and unbiased way, rather than the reductionist approach of opposing the dichotomy of the central authority who wanted modernization and progress against the opposition group which the janissaries lead. As one of these studies, Sunar puts forward various lines of thought, helping us to view the janissaries as being part of the dynamics of the Ottoman society. He describes them as a significant part of 'the social forces which started to enjoy more autonomy and liberty', reminding the central authority of its limits (Sunar, p.13). The lower ranks of Janissaries, were mostly occupied by tradesmen such as barbers and coffeehouse owners; they were 'wage laborers and petty artisans' (Sunar, p.22). In that connection, they were part of the *esnaf* population and had close connections with the guilds.⁴

The kitchens of the Topkapı Palace were capable of serving thousands of people of various ranks, from the Sultan, his family and high officials to the lowest ranking personnel. The grandiose scale of the ceremonies and processions as well as the daily life in the courtyards of the Palace was described repeatedly by Western artists. In one of these accounts, which accompanies an engraving by Melling, the cauldron was described as an 'object of respect' for the Muslims.⁵ In this engraving, in the first courtyard of the Palace, two men carry a huge cauldron hanging from a pole which rests on their shoulders. This was probably part of the everyday routine of distributing food for thousands of people living and working within the boundaries of the Palace.

These big cauldrons, while performing as everyday kitchen utensils, sometimes become very precious gifts, which janissaries offered to their spiritual leaders on special occasions. An example survives of just such a cauldron in one of the Anatolian dervish lodges of Hacı Bektaş (Faroqhi, 2000; p.156). It is called *Black-Kettle* and is inscribed with the name Sersem Ali Baba who was the

leader of that dervish community. In more recent times, it was mostly used for preparing *aşure*, sweet wheat pudding, in a ceremonial manner (Faroqhi, 1976, p.194).⁶ In the first month of the Muslim calendar, Muharram, *aşure* was prepared in large cauldrons in *tekkes*, convents of dervishes in Anatolia and Rumelia, for the souls of those killed in Kerbala; dervishes from other *tekkes* were invited to a commemorative dinner at which *aşure* was served. Dervishes refer to *aşure* as *aş*, which means cooked food (Gölpınarlı, 1983; p.62). The term Black-Kettle was also used to denote a person in Bektaşî culture who was responsible for the preparation and distribution of food during ceremonial religious practices called *cem ayini* or *muhabbet* (Günşen, 2007; p.338)

Conclusion

More than two hundred years have passed since the abolition of janissaries. Yet a question still arises: are pots and pans simmering the oppositions and protests in the streets today? In Turkey, as it is in many parts of the world, it is not rare to see crowds who want to raise their voices marching in the cities with their metal kitchen utensils, preferably with pots and pans. Making noise by banging pots, pans and other utensils is a popular way of protesting. Sometimes, cacophony becomes the music of the protest, a perfect expression of discontent.

Now, there are no janissaries, no huge cauldrons full of soup to be toppled; but the apparatuses of protests are still from the kitchen. There is a slight change, pots and pans are empty, and however they are still full of message. People are armed with kitchenware. These are non-military homemade weapons used in humanely and they enrich active participation in civil disobedience. They become appealing for all ages, particularly for children. It costs nothing, requires no preparation, training or skills; it is a participatory and democratic way of protesting. The pots and pans still help to keep solidarity between people. What is new is that the scale of 'publicness' has changed; protests can be and are made without being in the street; everybody can make it from his/her window. Thus, the sound and spirit of the opposition rapidly spreads, even if nobody is marching.

About the author

Nihal Bursa is an Assistant Professor and Head of the Department of Industrial Design, Beykent University-Istanbul, Turkey. She has taught between 1985 and 2009, at Middle East Technical University, courses of architectural design and fundamentals of design. Her major area of research focuses on the dynamics of the relationship between architecture and patronage. She is a collector of all paraphernalia about coffee and Turkish coffee. Not only as a collector but also as a designer, her interest extends to food related objects with special focus

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Notes

1. *fodla* or *fodula* (from the Greek *pitula*, meaning 'little pitta'): good quality, flat, round bread most widely consumed in Istanbul until the end of the 18th century (Yerasimos, Marianna. 500 years of Ottoman Cuisine, Boyut Pub. Group, 2005, p.133)
2. Janissary corps were among the soldiers in the Ottoman army who were paid by the state treasury; their salary was called *uluşe* and paid every three months.
3. *ulema* or *ulama* : n [Ar, Turk & Per, Turk & Per 'ulema, fr. Ar 'ulama, fr. pl. of 'alim knowing, learned, from 'alama to know]: a group of Muslim theologians and scholars who are professionally occupied with the elaboration and interpretation of the Muslim legal system from a study of its sources in the Koran and *hadith*, are *usu* found gathered in groups at various urban centres where they function individually as teachers, jurisconsults, and theologians, and constitute the highest body of religious authorities in Islam (Webster's Third New International Dictionary)
4. *esnaf*: Ar *aşnāf* فانصاف [#snf af'āl çoğ.] sınıflar, gruplar (classes, groups) < Ar *şinf* فنص [t.] sınıf, kategori (class, category); Meninski, Thesaurus, 1680] *asnāf*: *Species, formae & varii, diversi*. (www.nisanyansozluk.com) artisans, shopkeepers (Comprehensive Turkish-English Dictionary)
5. '...comme un détail minutieux d'avoir montré la marmite d'un des corps de Janissaires, portée par deux cuisiniers et précédée par un sous-officier janissaire qui tient une énorme cuillère. Cette marmite est un objet de vénération pour les Musulmans.' (İstanbul'da ve Boğaziçi'nde Resimlerle bir Gezinti, Resimleri Yapan M. Melling, by

Şevket Rado, 1969, reprint of the book Voyage Pittoresque de Constantinople et des Rives du Bosphore, D'après les Dessins de M. Melling, Paris, pub. By MM. Treuttel et Würtz, 1819)

6. Naming *aşure* as the English translation is in fact reducing the content of it. Main ingredient of it is not only wheat, but also chick peas, white haricot beans, rice, dried sultanas, figs and apricots, walnuts, hazelnuts, pine nuts, sweet almonds.

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