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Kâtiş Çelebi’s Novel Attempt to Know other Geographies and Cultures in the 17th Century Ottoman Empire: His Narration of North Africa in Tuhfet’u-l-Kibâr

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There is no doubt that, if Ibn Haldun is one of the thinkers most frequently referred to in the history of Islamic thought, Kâtiş Çelebi is surely the other most frequently referred to intellectual. Çelebi is distinguished as one of the leading intellectuals who, in the course of his 48 years of life, achieved great skill in many realms of knowledge in the history of Ottoman thought. This study essentially aims to examine Çelebi’s depiction of North Africa on the basis of his Tuhfet’u-l-Kibâr while also discussing his wake-up call for the neglected spheres of knowledge, such as the science of geography. First of all, a brief illustration of the environment in which he was writing would give the reader a better understanding of what Çelebi was attempting.

**Historical Context**

The Ottomans in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were confronted by a number of concrete predicaments such as the military and fiscal crises that were to become a chronic feature of Ottoman political life in the future. In the several decades following, bureaucrats and administrators in the state as well as scholars, whether ulemâ in higher official positions or low-ranking religious functionaries, were all engaged in endless conversations and discussions in a plethora of treatises, books and chronicles not only on the future of the Empire but also on how to reform and reinvigorate the classical system of Ottoman governance internally without damaging the ancien régime. Several late sixteenth and seventeenth century Ottoman writers believed that their country was indeed in a state of deterioration and decline and engaged in discussions in their works on the causes of this decline while at the same time suggesting various reforms as a means of protecting the Empire from this worsening

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situation. Gelibolulu Mustafa Ali in the 1590s, Hasan Kâfi Akhisâri in 1596, 
Veysi Efendi in 1608, Peçevî in the 1630s, Koçu Bey—who advised Murad 
IV concerning the failures of the Empire—in the 1630s and finally Kâtib 
Çelebi in the 1650s1—including the authors of several other anonymous 
treatises—all warned of the rise of corruption in state affairs, the decay 
of the judicial system and the educational institutions, i.e. madrasas, as well 
as the collapse of leadership, usually dating from the second half of the 
sixteenth century. Kâtib Çelebi adopted a critical stance on all these issues, 
which distinguished him from almost all of the rest: The Ottoman state, as 
he noted, had no thorough knowledge or up to date information on other 
cultures and geographies, especially in Europe.

His Novel Attempt

Çelebi strove to fill this critical gap, a much neglected sphere of knowledge 
in the Empire, with his Cihannümâ (A Guide to the World) written from an 
innovative perspective that comprised both cartography and geography. 
Unlike the European historians who generally wrote world history from 
their own particular perspective with a classification of countries starting 
from Europe, i.e. from a Euro-centric perspective, Çelebi made a novel 
choice in classifying the countries of the world starting from the far east 
(Aksay-ı Şark), from Japan and from the place where the sun rises, instead 
of starting from the far west, from al-Andalus (Aksay-ı Garb).2 

He started work on the first version of this important work in 1648 
by collecting a mass of information, but on failing to access accurate 
knowledge and updated information and maps on certain countries such 
as England and Iceland he ceased work on the project and put it to one 
side. When he managed to access more reliable sources, such as works by 
well-known cartographers and geographers such as Abraham Ortelius, 
Gerhard Mercator, Philippus Cluverius, Giovanni Lorenzo d’Anania and 
others, he resumed work on his book from where he had left off; which was 
now well on the way to becoming a new benchmark for the conception of

1 For further discussion of their works from different angles, see Pal Fodor, “State and Society, 
Crisis and Reform in 15th-17th Century Ottoman Mirror for Princes,” Acta Orientalia 
Observers of Ottoman Decline,” Islamic Studies: Journal of the Central Institute of Islamic 
geography in the Ottoman world. In *Cihannüma*, Çelebi tried to develop a new perspective in geography by integrating medieval Muslim studies into modern European geographical sources and illustrations. The new perspective that he essentially endeavoured to establish was the study of geography as a science of the physical description of the Earth rather than merely a passive observer of the manifestation of God on earth based solely upon *tefekkür* (contemplation) and *tezekkür* (recollection). He even described, in the first pages of *Cihannüma*, how frustrated he felt when he saw how Muslims insistently "rejected and ignored" the study of this branch of knowledge while Christians were making significant advances by using Greek sources. Because, as Çelebi pointed out, books written in Arabic, Persian and Turkish on other geographical areas, cities and the policies of the various states contained many mistakes and confused information, he felt obliged to write the *Cihannüma*, a comprehensive book on this neglected sphere of knowledge. In this work, not only did he correct mistakes in various works written by Muslim scholars but also errors made by European intellectuals regarding Ottoman polity and ceremonies as well as erroneous information concerning the people and names of the cities located in Africa and Asia. Of course, he did not stop there, and added another book, this time writing about the history of Ottoman maritime expeditions and campaigns, especially in the Mediterranean. He wrote *Tuhfetu'l-Kibar Fi Esfa'ı'l-Bihar* (A Present to Majestic Leaders on Maritime Campaigns) where he gives a fairly detailed account of major events and wars that took place up to his day in the history of Turkish naval battles.

In this work he was basically trying to restore the self-confidence the Ottomans had once possessed by narrating the success stories of former generations. He talks not only about the victorious sea wars but also about the battles that were lost, and explains the reasons and the mistakes made, and, moreover, as an Ottoman bureaucrat, makes some recommendations on how to avoid those errors. While giving us a more comprehensive picture of Ottoman maritime affairs, Çelebi also provides an account of the Ottomans' first contact with North Africa starting more particularly with Algiers and later with Tunis and other countries in the region. In addition,
the book also presents some fascinating stories of Oruç Reis and Hızır Reis (Barbaros Hayrettin Paşa), two legendary heroic brothers during the heyday of the Ottoman Empire.

In his book Çelebi not only examines and gives important information on several significant cities and coasts situated in North Africa, Southern Europe and the Balkans, but also sends out a wake-up call for the neglected spheres of knowledge such as the science of geography and the knowledge of other people and their social characteristics and political systems in surrounding countries of the Ottoman Empire. "Cosmography and geography," he says "are required for the good ordering of human civilization and society. If someone knows its rules and maps, and can recall them, he would have learned more than anyone else could have done with thousands of pains and hardships in several thousand years of travel." These ideas were quite new and not to be heard from any Ottoman intellectual before Çelebi.

We also learn some details from this book about how and when the Ottomans made their first contact, as mentioned earlier, with the shores of North Africa.

We learn from Çelebi and other sources that several cities on the shores of Algeria and Tunis in North Africa such as the cities of Algiers, el-Marsa'l-kebir, Vehrân, Bicâye, Annâbe and others were invaded by Spaniards in the early sixteenth century (1512). The residents of Algiers, Çelebi narrates, sent a letter to Oruç Reis, the elder brother of Hızır Reis (Barbaros Hayreddin Paşa, originally from Midilli/Mytilene or Lesbos), inviting him to the city for help against the harassment by the Spaniards. Oruç Reis received the letter while he was in Çiçel (or Ciceli) in 1513 and, responding positively to the call, went to Algiers and apparently captured the city with ease just as he had seized Beâye earlier, and expelled the Spaniards. The first Ottoman contact with the region started in 1513 with this event. The two brothers, Oruç Reis and Hızır Reis, settled in Algiers in 1516 on the invitation of the

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6 Çiçeli, p. 16. To make his point even more convincing, he gives an example of the owner of a large house who knows all the rooms and chambers in his palace, but does not know which quarter or neighborhood of the city it is situated. "In the event that a fire or a rebellion occurs in the city," he says "he does not know if it is far from his house, or close, and will eventually fail to take appropriate measures. Thus, it is important for him to know the environs of his house, its neighborhood, the adjacent places, even the more distant and remote areas."

7 Tuğru'l-kibâr, pp. 42-43.
local inhabitants. Oruç Reis, however, was killed in Tilemsan in 1518 while fighting against the Spaniards. Hızır Reis took up residence in the region, especially in Algiers, and established a long-lasting political connection with the Ottoman Empire when the first khutbah was pronounced under the name of Selim I in 1519.

Algiers and Halku'l-Veda were attacked twice while Hızır Reis was in the region, but both attacks were successfully repelled. The Spaniards attacked Algiers with 110 warships but lost many of their ships and their marines during the battle and then withdrew leaving over three by the name of Ferdinand. A special envoy from Spain offered Hızır Reis one hundred thousand gold pieces to set those thirty six captains free but he refused.

Two of the most interesting characteristics of Hızır Reis revealed in the Tuhfetu'l-Kibar was his religiosity, and his keenness on the ritual of istihare (the ritual of asking God to select and decide between two or more courses by means of a dream) before he made any major move or engaged on any campaign. Apparently, a certain coldness somehow developed between the soldiers of Hızır Reis and the people of Algiers, and Hızır Reis wanted to move to Çiçel. He made an istihare, and, according to the book, he saw the Prophet in a dream helping him in his preparation for a move, whereupon he decided to migrate, but the people of Algiers were worried by his decision and asked him to stay. He promised to return in three years and fulfilled his promise by returning to the city exactly three years later. He defeated the Spaniards in Penon, a harbour in front of Algiers, and succeeded in driving them out of the city in 1529. Hızır Reis was appointed as the Governor-General/Beylerbeyi of Algiers, and in the same year was promoted to the rank of Chief Commander of the Ottoman Navy (Admiral/Kapudan-ı Derya).

One of the most striking aspects of Çelebi's work is the section that he wrote at the end of some stories, called "the lesson to be learnt/Kısadan hisse." After relating the story of a bureaucrat who failed in a given project, he bluntly criticizes the appointment, and concludes, "it is not right to appoint a little guy for a big job," or vice versa, – in other words, it is unfair to appoint an unqualified, incompetent person for an important job that requires higher competence and qualification, and it is also wrong to appoint a highly qualified, competent person for a minor task – as he strives

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8 Tuhfetu'l-kibar, pp. 48-49.
9 Tuhfetu'l-kibar, p. 127.
to decipher what lessons are to be learned from his failure.

In giving us important information on the history of the Ottoman navy and its chief commanders Çelebi also spells out the rules and orders on which the navy bases its campaigns. He concludes his work by giving certain advice to the commanders of the Ottoman maritime forces. In the meantime, one should clarify the term that he uses when he gives that advice. He use the term "korsan," which literally means "pirate" but the forces he is talking about are not pirates but rather maritime forces that abide by the rules, regulations and hierarchies determined by Ottoman law. Therefore, when you read “korsan” in Çelebi’s works, do not imagine that he is talking about pirates of the Caribbean or the Mediterranean. Actually, the Sultan allowed the Ottoman maritime a certain freedom of manoeuvre and campaigning in the Mediterranean.

One piece of advice regarding candidates for the position of captain in the largest frigates or galleys is that they must have ample experience of travel to Algiers, not once, but a number of times. In other words, when the Sultan decides to appoint someone as the captain of a galley, a reasonable amount of travelling experience to Algiers, besides other qualifications, is a must that should be checked in a candidate’s CV\textsuperscript{10}. One final note about his writing style and his method: the manner in which he treats a phenomenon or the way he criticizes an idea or corrects information regarding historical events can surprise us in modern times and make us wonder whether we are reading a pre-modern or a modern text. In reading Cihannümā, Tuhfetu’l-Kibar or Mizānul-Hak, we will realize that his explanation of a problem or an idea generally starts with etymology and the description of the genesis of the issue, describes the fact just as it is without adding his own interpretation, and finally makes his personal judgment on it. (whether you read the section on smoking in Mizan or his inquiry in Tuhfe into the reason why infidels are so timid\textsuperscript{11}).

Çelebi wrote Tuhfetu’l-Kibar in a troubled political climate. It was a time when Ottomans were losing their control over the Mediterranean, and even the Ottoman navy was locked within the Marmara and Black Sea and could not issue from the Dardanelles for fear of the Venetian threat\textsuperscript{12}, which leads

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{10} Tuhfetu’l-kibar, p. 237.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Tuhfetu’l-kibar, pp. 69-70.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Tuhfetu’l-kibar, p. 5.
\end{itemize}
him to complain how such a small country could threaten a great Empire that dominated both East and West. In fact, he wanted to advise the leaders of the country to revive the interest of the Ottoman world in other cultures and polities, and, more importantly, to learn new branches of knowledge such as geography and cartography by means of which the Europeans had succeeded in making new geographical discoveries to the New World, in America and in other parts of the world. He did not feel envy at the Europeans' continental travel and colonization of different regions, but rather endeavoured to encourage Ottoman intellectuals to adapt to the spirit of the age and to realize what was really going on in the world, especially in neighbouring cultures, and to develop adequate strategies accordingly.