

MARMARA ÜNİVERSİTESİ FEN - EDEBİYAT FAKÜLTESİ

TÜRKLÜK ARAŞTIRMALARI
DERGİSİ

7

Kurucusu:

Hakkı Dursun YILDIZ



Âmil ÇELEBİOĞLU Armağanı

İstanbul, 1993

**KURU KADI HİKAYESİ:
PEÇEVİ, ÖMER SEYFETTİN,
AND THE HEADLESS CORPSE****

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The story of Kuru Kadı probably appears in written form first in the 17th century history of Peçevi. During an enemy attack on a Hungarian frontier fort in the 1550s, Kuru Kadı witnesses a series of strange phenomena, the sight of which pushes him temporarily over the border between fanaticism and insanity. His disturbing visions center upon the headless corpse of a *derviş* fanatic, which the *kadı* believe she saw leap up during the skirmish to chase after and retrieve its newly severed head from the enemy, before collapsing dead on the ground. Later, in the evening of the same day, while maintaining a vigil by the grave of the fallen *derviş*, Kuru Kadı believes he sees a further vision - this time of the inside of the martyr's tomb, where the fallen hero is being embraced and congratulated on his deeds by a *huri* of Paradise, the whole scene being bathed in a wondrous bright light¹.

The tale which intrigued Peçevi was retold two and a half centuries later by Ömer Seyfettin, in his short story *Başını vermeyen şehit*, and published in November 1917, during Ottoman involvement in the First World War².

** This article was originally presented as a paper at the Annual Conference of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies, held at the University of Durham, England, in July 1989; my thanks to Dr. C H Imber for comments on an earlier draft.

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¹ *Tarih-i Peçevi* (İstanbul 1283/1866) I, 355-63; transcription in Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, *Türk folklorunda Kesik baş: Tarih-folklor ilişkisinden bir kesit* (Ankara 1989), 97-103. See also Mehmed Kaplan, *Hikaye tahlilleri* (İstanbul 1979), 54-72, for discussion of Seyfettin's story and texts of both versions.

² *Yeni Mecmua* 1/20, 20 Teşrinisani 1917, 395-98; regularly reprinted in collected

At first glance the Kuru Kadı story may seem little more than an amusing curiosity in Peçevi's chronological narrative, or a quaint mystery for Ömer Seyfettin's literary genius to elaborate upon. Upon reconsideration, however, it is clear that for each author the tale had a particular significance beyond that of entertainment. A comparison of the two versions indicates in each case something of the contemporary Ottoman understanding of the psychology of men under fire, and about the way this could be represented in literature. It also shows the uses to which the same story could be put by two very different authors in very different cultural contexts.

Peçevi's version, while essentially a digression from his main chronicle, may also be considered as a miniature of (or alternatively as one detail from) a typical battle narrative in the Ottoman *gazaname* tradition of campaign histories. These accounts are no more 'accurate' or 'matter of fact' than in any other literary tradition; the earlier the account, the more likely it was to include aspects of the incredible and the miraculous. Moreover, pre-modern battles were by nature chaotic and confusing. No matter how well-disciplined the troops, or how well-planned the maneuvers, such conflicts always came down in the end to hand-to-hand fighting, in which the fortunes of the individual were intensely personal and depended as much upon luck as upon skill or judgment. No two battles could ever be the same; nor could any participant ever have a complete and continuous view of what was happening. Yet accounts of pre-modern battles are often very similar. This reflects partly the influence of existing narrative tradition, whether oral or written, and is a major consideration which remains largely unstudied in the Ottoman context. It also reflects the fact that what all combatants did experience in common was the general atmosphere of battle, and that it was primarily this which the popular battle narrative sought to convey - a sense of atmosphere, of purpose, and of the justice (or otherwise) of the outcome. Emphasis was less upon detail and more upon the experience of battle: upon the noise, dust, heat, and smoke;

editions of Seyfettin's short stories. For bibliographical details of this and the stories mentioned below, see Müjgân Cunbur, 'Ömer Seyfettin bibliyografyası', in *Doğumunun yüziüncü yılında Ömer Seyfettin* (Ankara 1985), 139, 141, 143, 147.

upon the general clamour- horses neighing, men shouting, cannons booming; upon the clash of swords, and the crash of armour. In this type of narrative, the telling anecdote has an important place.

Such set pieces are, as might be expected, much prone to display conventional imagery, patterned heroics, and rhetorical turns of phrase, increasingly so the more educated the author. Yet at the same time, there is always an underlying sequence of specific events which structures the narrative and moves it forward, episode by episode- a new assault, the fording of a river or the taking of a prominent position, the inspired leadership of a commander, the arrival of reinforcements, etc. Within such sequences, anecdotes or comments about individual behaviour similar to that recounted by Peçevi recur so frequently throughout the *gazaname* tradition that they appear to be as much a narrative motif as an account of something which may actually have happened.³ This does not mean, however, that such 'asides' may be dismissed as irrelevant or fictitious. Amongst various reasons for the use of such anecdotal material is the principal significance of Peçevi's inclusion of the Kuru Kadi story -that is reflects another element common to the experience of soldiers in the same fighting group, that of motivation by example.

The fearless, reckless behaviour of the *deli*, the *derviş/gazi* fanatic, is one of these common themes, illustrating a readiness for exemplary self-sacrifice which serves to spur on and revive the flagging spirits of the ordinary soldier at moments of crisis. It can be identified as an Islamicised version of an ancient and ubiquitous type, that of the inspired heroic warrior- in old Turkish tradition the *alpleren* figure. In the Kuru Kadi story the example of the *derviş* fanatic Deli Mehmed and his comrade Deli Hüsvrev is given in more detail than is usual in longer *gazanames*, and is a useful illustration of the appeal and function of this kind of character

³ Likewise, other motif elements occur in descriptions of eg. climatic conditions, the size and strength of a given fortress, the tendency of the Christian enemy to resort to drink at crucial moments, etc. Some indication of the stylistic devices found in a literary *gazaname* of the late 16th century is given in Christine Woodhead, *Ta'liki-zade's Şehname-i hümayun: a history of the Ottoman campaign into Hungary 1593-94* (Berlin 1983), *passim*.

anecdote. In general, the story is indicative of the kind of campfire tale - telling of unthinking courage and determination in an apparently hopeless situation, of victory or a worthy martyrdom in the service of the Faith - which served as entertainment, inspiration, and comfort in a frontier *gazi* society.⁴ This particular combination of the *derviş / gazi* motif, reinforced by that of *kesik baş*, the severed head, lends an extra air of religious fervour, a sense of the miraculous.

The motif of the severed head, or alternatively of the headless corpse, was also common in Turkish folk literature from the 11th century onwards, a development out of much older Anatolian Muslim, Christian and pre-Christian religious traditions centring on the sacrificial cult of the severed head. Although primarily an oral literature, several written examples show the popularity of this motif in the religious-heroic epic of Turkish *gazi* society, particularly in the Ottoman frontier provinces in the Balkans during the 14th and 16th centuries.⁵ Its appearance in Peçevi's *History* in this form is a reminder of certain structural and functional links between oral and so-called elite written literature in the Ottoman period.

Peçevi introduces the Kuru Kadı story as part of his chronological narrative for the year 1554. It was probably a tale he had heard as a young man with the Ottoman army in Hungary a generation after the supposed event. In essence a simple poem of 95 verses (with two sections of explanation in prose), written in the first person ostensibly by the *kadı* of Grişgal⁶ himself, it opens with the common predicament of a small, poorly-garrisoned Ottoman frontier post suddenly besieged by an enemy force vastly superior in numbers. Having naturally refused terms of surrender, the tiny garrison is prepared for an immediate sortie, but is restrained by the *kadı's* insistence that they spend the morning in prayer and ritual preparation. It is, by coincidence, the eve of the great *bayram*, when pilgrims throughout the Muslim world would be praying for the success of

⁴ For a brief survey of the *gazi* ideal in Turkish / Ottoman literature both oral and written, see Müjgân Cunbur, 'Anadolu gazileri ve edebiyatımız', *Erdem* 3/9 (1987), 777-807.

⁵ Ocak, *Türk folklorunda kesik baş*, 22-26 and *passim*.

⁶ Or Grişgal, as demanded by the metre in Peçevi's verse.

gazis such as these. By pausing to associate themselves with these prayers, the *gazis* of Grijgal are thus able to achieve communion with, and the implicit sanction of, the entire body of the Faithful. Once the gates are opened, the *gazis* are led out in two columns, one headed by Deli Mehmed, the other by Deli Hüsrev. With the timely aid of a small number of *gazis* from neighbouring Ottoman forts, the enemy is sent into retreat and Grijgal saved. Thus far the story is not unlike many an actual episode which must have occurred on the Ottoman frontier in the 16th century; there is little remarkable about it. The morning spent in prayer, for instance, shows how the garrison's morale was maintained during the essential delaying tactic of postponing the fight for as long as possible, until the arrival of reinforcements, or of evening, should help redress the odds.

The *kadı*'s narrative then returns to an incident in the midst of the fighting, and it is here that the story takes its mysterious turn. There is little description of any fighting save that in which Deli Mehmed is killed. As an enemy horseman makes off with the severed head, Deli Mehmed's corpse is stirred by a shout from his comrade Hüsrev - 'revadır canı verdin kıyma başa'⁷ ('you may have given up your life fittingly, but do not give up your head'). The corpse leaps up, pursues the thief and retrieves the head, finally collapsing with it under the arm. The only apparent witness to this is the *kadı*, who remains rooted to the spot paralysed with shock. 'Kurudum kaldım anda sanki bî-can'⁸ is the line in the original from which Ömer Seyfettin derived the epithet 'Kuru Kadı', 'the paralysed, petrified *kadı*' - a term which is not used in Peçevi's version.

Brought to his senses by Deli Hüsrev's bullying, the *kadı* returns to the fight, which continues till dusk when the enemy withdraw in defeat and the garrison search the field collecting their dead. Whilst the *kadı* may have been able later to put an acceptable explanation on events up to this point, his composure is shaken a second time when he duly finds Deli Mehmed's body lying as he had imagined, with its head under the arm. The third and final blow to his sanity is his vision during the graveside vigil of the body,

⁷ Peçevi I, 359, v. 43.

⁸ Peçevi I, 360, v. 50.

the *huri* of Paradise, and the bright, all-encompassing light. He loses consciousness and has to be escorted back into the fort raving like a madman.

Made aware by Hüsrev that God has rewarded him for his zeal by allowing him to witness a miracle, the *kadı* becomes a continual visitor to the grave, and derives from his experience a strange delirious joy which endows him with the character of a holy eccentric. However, once he begins to divulge his secret experience to others, he immediately loses this sustaining joy, and is tortured by remorse. He eventually persuades Hüsrev to explain the meaning of what he saw, of why he alone was vouchsafed visions of the headless corpse and its aftermath. On learning that this is a sign from God that he too is destined to be a *şehit*, the *kadı* becomes completely possessed, *mecnun-u-şeyda*, and ends his tale with a plea to God for relief from this state of wretchedness.

To the modern reader, the tone of the narrative is, paradoxically, that of a sane, sensible man trying desperately to understand an abnormal situation and to exorcise it from his consciousness. But the impact upon a contemporary *gazi* audience - and upon the *kadı*, if he existed - would clearly have been quite different, and presumably close to that upon Peçevi. The latter's chapter heading, 'a *gazi* miracle'⁹, and his reason for including the tale - that if it were not for such dedicated *gazi*'s like Mehmed and Hüsrev (and potentially, the *kadı*?) the frontier would have been in danger and major fortresses like Szigetvar would never have been captured - indicates an appreciation of the perceived need for such exemplary behaviour, for undiluted zeal bordering on fanaticism, for the sustaining belief that God's miraculous aid would be to hand when necessary. From the standpoint of the 1630s and 1640s when Peçevi wrote his history, traces emerge also of nostalgia and regret for the loss of old values and qualities.

Ömer Seyfettin's version of the Kuru Kadı story, *Başını vermeyen şehit*, was one of ten short stories published by him in the journal *Yeni*

⁹ Peçevi I, 355: entry headed *Ve min kerâmâtî 'l-güzât*.

Mecmua between August and November 1917, which were later republished posthumously as the collection entitled *Eski kahramanlar*, 'heroes of old'. As part of his contribution to the *millî edebiyat* movement, such stories gave particular emphasis to the Turkish / Ottoman military tradition.¹⁰ Although nine of the ten stories are set in or just before the reign of Süleyman, the period of the greatest Ottoman military achievement, they are not simply self-congratulatory blood and thunder adventure stories, offering a crude comparison between 16th-century success and 20th-century failure. Rather, they present a series of situations through which Ömer Seyfettin explores more subtly values such as loyalty to the general cause, and courage to do the right thing no matter what the consequences. He is writing not about war itself, but about the environment in which the 'heroes of old' played their part. The *Eski kahramanlar* stories show not merely the action which is the outcome of adhering to such values, but more significantly the psychological dilemma in which the hero is placed. This is by implication the kind of dilemma common to any soldier under stress; it is the human, not the glorious, face of war.

A brief consideration of three of the other *Eski kahramanlar* stories will serve to illustrate this point. In *Ferman*¹¹ the young hero, a rising, popular star of Süleyman's army, is sent by the sultan on an urgent, confidential mission to a Balkan provincial governor. Before reaching his destination he becomes aware that the document he carries is nothing other than, quite inexplicably, his own death warrant. For the hero, and for the governor who is to carry out the execution, the dilemma is the common one of steeling oneself to obey an apparently senseless command. In *Teselli*¹² emphasis is upon the anguish suffered by a governor of Erzurum who daily expects the arrival from İstanbul of a warrant for his execution, on account of an error of judgement which had led to a minor Ottoman defeat at Safavid hands. As a loyal servant of the state, he is prepared to

¹⁰ See, briefly, İnci Engünün, 'Ömer Seyfeddin'in hikayeleri', in *Doğumunun yüzüncü yılında Ömer Seyfettin*, 40-42.

¹¹ *Yeni mecmua*, 1/7, 23 Ağustos 1917, 136-40.

¹² *Yeni mecmua*, 1/16, 15 teşrinievvel 1917, 315-17.

accept his punishment unflinchingly, yet this does not prevent him suffering all the agonies of regret and remorse. In the event, the sultan sends him not an executioner, but generous consolation on his misfortune, and an expression of confidence based on his previous good service. Taken together, these two stories both emphasise the need for unquestioning loyalty to the higher cause, whether justice or injustice to the individual is to be the result.

The counterpart to this is treated in a third story, *Kızilelma neresi?*¹³ Here, in the midst of an army intoxicated by the notion of *kızilelma* - the city of dreams, the ultimate prize - Süleyman suddenly asks himself the obvious question: where, indeed what, is *kızilelma*? What is the policy which his army believe him to be following, and which leads them to place such blind faith in him? It is a moment of self-doubt in which the supreme commander no longer knows for what it is that he is responsible. He does not know; the combined wisdom of his vezirs and state officials cannot provide a satisfactory answer. The response of the common soldier - that wherever the sultan leads, this is the desired *kızilelma* - merely adds to Süleyman's despair. Can *kızilelma* simply mean going on from conquest to conquest - Vienna, Rome, India, China - or is there something more to it than that? 'Is war an end in itself?' is the implied question; Further, what is the commander's ultimate responsibility towards his followers?

The psychological element in Ömer Seyfettin's treatment of the Kuru Kadı story is primarily that of the environment of combat, of the effects of mental and physical stress upon a man in a constant state of nervous alert. Hence his hero is the *kadı*, in his various states of mind, while the *gazi* heroes of Peçevi's tale appear here as secondary subjects. Although as a natural story-teller, Ömer Seyfettin elaborates and dramatises his material, the essential details of the story do not differ from those given by Peçevi, aside from a whimsical postscript describing the mysterious death of the *kadı* by the side of Deli Hüsrev at Szigetvar twelve years later - a neat fulfilment of the martyrdom prediction, and a kind of happy ending.

¹³*Yeni mecmua*, 1/21, 29 Teşrinisani 1917, 418-20.

Ömer Seyfettin wrote a third person narrative which allowed him to stand back and observe the *kadı*'s behaviour. His story begins the day before the enemy besiegers appear, and shows the *kadı* on watch under constant tension, aware of his responsibility for the safety of the fort while its military governor is absent. He is portrayed as a harsh, unbending character, regarded as rather odd by the rest of the garrison - 'adeta deli gibi bir şeydi'- constantly praying never sleeping, an obsessive and an insomniac. Such a background character portrayal renders subsequent visions more understandable. Ömer Seyfettin's insertion of a small, almost unnoticeable, but ultimately very significant detail further indicates his preferred interpretation of the series of 'miracles'. It is that, as the *kadı* runs across the battlefield towards Deli Mehmed's corpse, he stumbles and falls. It is not difficult to infer from this that the effect of a sudden jolt, or a blow to the head, upon a mind already strained and a body with little sleep and probably little food would be to produce hallucinations. It is between his fall and his fainting at the graveside that the *kadı* sees his visions; when he recovers from his faint, his body shakes and trembles, he acts as though drunk. It is likely that Ömer Seyfettin's interpretation was here determined by his own experiences as a soldier in the Ottoman army, and thus by a sympathetic understanding of the kind of psychiatric disorder now known as shellshock.

The early collected edition of the ten *Eski kahramanlar* stories was prefaced by an additional story under the added rubric *Yeni kahramanlar*, 'modern heroes' (also first published in September 1917)¹⁴. This explains much about Ömer Seyfettin's approach to the 'heroes of old'. The story takes the form of a dialogue between a Seyfettin character, an İstanbul-based litterateur writing nostalgic stories about the lost values of the 'heroes of old', and his younger cousin, an army doctor with extensive service in the Ottoman medical corps during the First World War. For the latter even the support troops and the medical orderlies are many times the greater heroes than the medieval, swashbuckling sipahis.

Modern heroes, argues the doctor, are vastly superior to their old-

¹⁴ Story entitled 'Kaç yerinden?', *Yeni mecnua*, 1/9, 6 Eylül 1917, 178-80.

style predecessors because their horizons are wider. They fight not for personal fame, family honour, or mercenary reward; they do not wish to be made exemplary heroes. They fight instead as an integral part of the army, on behalf of the *millet*, of the people at large. They are well aware that what they experience and suffer is no more and no less than that experienced and suffered by the next man. Each has his part to play, and it is the combined contribution of all ranks, but especially the little men, the unsung heroes, which makes a modern army successful. The fictional Seyfettin was convinced by this argument. And thus, in writing his *Eski kahramanlar* stories, the real Ömer Seyfettin emphasises the human, potentially fallible side of the 16th-century soldier, with which his modern counterpart could readily identify. Yet at the same time, everyone knew that 16th-century Ottoman armies nevertheless did pull together and achieve great success. So too, by implication, could the modern Turkish army. Moreover, by fighting for the wider cause, for the Turkish *millet*, the modern soldier could be closely identified with the rising Turkish national movement fostered by such writers and intellectuals as Seyfettin and Ziya Gökalp.

Other comparisons could no doubt be made between these two versions of the Kuru Kadı story. The point here is to show the different uses to which the same story may be put by two sensitive writers of different eras, who naturally come up with contrasting analyses of the experiences of individuals in time of war. To Peçevi it is significant as a story of exemplary behaviour and faith, reinforced by an element of miracle. Such tales of *dervişgazi* exploits were required both to edify and to motivate the ordinary soldier in moments of extreme military difficulty, with elements of the incredible and the miraculous lifting the entire endeavour onto a higher plane. Ultimately, motivation is external, by example. To Ömer Seyfettin, the story is part of a wider plea for a more sympathetic understanding of the problems faced by the common soldier, and for a recognition that each is a hero in his own right, and is contributing to the realization of common ideals. This provides the personal motivation. Individual fallibility is not to be overcome by imitation of an ideal behaviour, but by the knowledge that, together, the

efforts of ordinary men in a common cause can achieve their goal through discipline and understanding.

Neither to Peçevi nor to Ömer Seyfettin was the story of Kuru Kadi merely an amusing curiosity. Their differing use of it is a vivid, if admittedly rather extreme, example of the susceptibility of 'incidents' to the interpretation of different authors. It emphasises the importance of evaluating fully the use of anecdotal material in earlier Ottoman historiography, particularly that which appears at first glance to be primarily repetitive or gratuitous, and that which to the modern mind seems improbable, if not imaginary.