Officialdom and the Woman Who was “Meant to be Dead”

The Ethnography of an Exfoliation

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8 April 2000. First day in the field at Sorgun, a town of some 50,000 people and one of the district capitals in the Province of Yozgat, in Central Anatolia. As soon as I arrived on the night bus from Istanbul my friends took me around the various administrative offices and the police station. Finding it hard to stay awake and difficult to understand what the point of all this was, they ended up giving me some begrudging information. A month ago my host's wife had lost her father. His children had started the process to enable his wife to enjoy the usufruct of the house. It was then that “they” (the administration, but who exactly?) had declared that Sati K. my host's wife, was dead—and had been so since 1965. Two witnesses were taken to the police station—one of whom was the paternal uncle of the woman who was ‘supposedly dead’—to confirm that there was a mistake and that there had never been two Satis in the family. The woman who had died with the name Sati was apparently born in 1951. Sati was apparently born in 1948. Finally it was admitted that there had indeed been another Sati, but that it was not her. The affair was closed. “We came to an agreement with the police,” Sati's husband told me.

[…] I was surprised by how calm the ‘supposedly dead’ woman was about the whole thing. She seemed to think it a fairly normal sort of procedure to have to prove that you are alive. Then I was surprised by the ease with which it had all been sorted out. Two witnesses and everything was 'agreed'. (Excerpt from field log, 2000)

I have to admit that for a long time this story did not surprise me. On several occasions during field studies for my doctorate I sought to unravel this affair with the help of my informants, but without any real success. Thinking that there was nothing here to understand and that it was a simple administrative error, I did not push my investigations any further, putting it down as one of the very many anomalies of the Turkish administration. Are not such things a common occurrence? Everybody knows this sort of anecdote, a mistaken date of birth, an incorrectly transcribed name, the sex erroneously indicated for unisex names, and so on. These errors in recording information are so standard
that they have been singled out in works of literature and especially in a very well-known novel in Turkey called Yaşar Ne Yaşar Ne Yaşamaz, by Aziz Nesin.¹ This book tells the tale of the misadventures of a poor peasant who finds himself condemned to not existing in official registers due to an administrative error that officials refuse to recognise, in which he was declared dead at the Battle of Çanakkale in 1915 even though he was only four years old at the time. A series of misfortunes befall him as a result—he cannot go to school, cannot inherit from his father on his death, find a job, get married, etc.—and he ends up in prison.

So there was nothing surprising in this story of the ‘supposedly dead’ woman. And yet if we look a bit more closely there are various things that do look odd here, starting with the fact that this woman, who was about fifty at the time, was recorded as having two dates of birth and that this had not caused any particular problems even though she had got married officially in 1965, had declared the births of three children, and then migrated legally to France, where she had worked, had passed her driving test, and so on. She had returned to Turkey in 1997, where she drove, had a bank account and health insurance. Sati cannot really be seen as some isolated peasant in a remote village, as a stowaway, or as some phantom in the administrative apparatus. How could such a situation have come about? Was it mere administrative oversight, fraud, or a case of negligence?

When you look at it more closely the story of the two Satis seems a lot more confused than it did initially. It was only when I started studying the relationship Turkish people have with the administration, ten years later, that I remembered this anecdote. Looking through my field notes, and at the copies of the records of births, deaths, and marriages to which I had had access, I came to appreciate just how complex and interesting this case was.² I also realised that I had not understood much at the time, as my field log indicates. I therefore got back in contact with Sati. She then told me what I already doubted, that she had officially taken the date of birth of her older sister, and that she was quite

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¹ Aziz Nesin, Yaşar Ne Yaşar Ne Yaşamaz, Istanbul, Nesin Yayınevi, 2011 [1977]. The character’s first name, Yaşar, means “he who is alive” or “living,” and so a literal translation of the title would be “Alive, neither alive nor dead.”

² I had access to the records of births, deaths, marriages for this village quite by chance. It was while looking for the records of a neighbouring village that had disappeared since the 1980s, that a former village headman (mühtar) allowed me to consult them. Originally these records were held in the district administration office, and the village headmen regularly sent in the declarations of births, deaths, marriages that it was their duty to keep. The records for this village cover a period going from the middle of the nineteenth century to the middle of the 1960s.