

Michael E. Meeker, 2001, *A Nation of Empire. The Ottoman Legacy of Turkish Modernity*, University of California Press, p. 48-50.

During another conversation, or at least what had begun as such, the “school director” told me a parable about the Sufi mystic and poet Celalettin el-Rumî, founder of the *Mevlevî* religious brotherhood (*tarikât*). The two of us were seated facing one another in the old town square, surrounded by a crowd of adolescent boys. He spoke directly to my face but in a louder voice than necessary since his intended audience was really not I but all the boys around us:

*One day a man saw Celalettin put something under his robe as he came out of a shop. Curious, this man began to follow the great mystic and poet. As he did so, he met others who asked him where he was going. He explained that he was following Celalettin in hopes of learning what he was hiding. These others then joined him until at last a large, noisy crowd was trailing along behind the sage. Upon noticing that he was followed by a throng of people, Celalettin turned to ask what it was they wanted from him. Their leader replied that he wished to learn what he had concealed beneath his robe. “Bread,” Celalettin replied, exposing the loaf for all to see. The “school director” concluded with the moral: “A man will wish to see the face and body of a woman that much more when she is covered up. The practice of veiling does not keep the peace but sows discord among the believers.”*

I correctly understood the narrow meaning of the story at the time, even if its wider implications had escaped me. The “school director” was obviously criticizing local veiling practices that were regarded as Islamic by most villagers during the 1960s. When women of the villages in the surrounding countryside came to the weekly market, they covered their hair with white scarves and their heads with large shawls of various sizes and colors in accordance with the convention of their particular village. If they happened to encounter a man on the way to the market, or if they asked a shopkeeper a question about price or quality, these women would often draw the shawl across their nose and lips as they did so. The “school director” had told his story in response to my questions about this kind of behavior, and he had concluded it by mocking village women, drawing his hand across his face as though concealing his nose and lips.

I had my first hint of the gravity of what the “school director” had said only a few days later. Hitching a ride with an Ofly trucker near the town of Giresun on my way back to Of, I told the driver about Celalettin’s loaf of bread, simply by way of making conversation. By the time I had finished, the trucker was almost bouncing out of his seat, so angry that he considered stopping his rig and asking me to get out. I regained his good graces only by telling him that it was not my story but a story told to me by one of his own countrymen. “And who was the man who told you this lie?” he asked. This was only the first of many occasions that proved to me how seriously women’s dress was taken. In the 1960s, all the women who were natives of Of, whether they lived in towns or villages, covered their head and hair as I have described, while wearing blouses, skirts, and aprons that concealed their lower arms and legs. When my wife accompanied me to Of the following year, she decided the best course would be to respect local custom because we were guests. She therefore adopted the use of a headscarf and wore a long coat when she left our house to go to the marketplace. This behavior was rewarded with gifts of anchovy pilaf and fresh yogurt

brought to our door in thanks for our respect for Islam. On the other hand, the wife of the pharmacist, also an outsider, was less compromising. Having moved to Of from Istanbul only after her marriage, she was an avowed secularist who detested all forms of veiling. She purposely went to the marketplace with her head uncovered, provoking some of the village women to curse and spit at her.

In retrospect, I realized that the “school director” had been expressing an inflammatory opinion in a loud voice in the middle of the town square, and that it was as though some invisible barrier protected him from any kind of challenge. The trucker had been on the right track when he had asked for his identity. He was indeed a man of a certain social position and background, but not at all the one I had supposed. I am embarrassed to recall that I did not immediately understand that the “school director” himself was a hodja who had studied in a religious academy of the district. Knowing only that he worked at the middle school, I had assumed that he was the highest functionary of that institution by virtue of his reception among the town worthies. The directors and chairmen of public associations invited him to their tables in restaurants to share their meals, listened respectfully to his opinions, and addressed him as “my hodja” (hocam) rather than by his personal name. Without really thinking about it, I had assumed that the title accorded him referred to an earlier career in the classrooms of state schools. After all, it was common practice for Turkish citizens to address their former teachers by the title “my hodja” all their lives. Only toward the end of my initial visit did I realize he was merely the school secretary (as I shall henceforth refer to him). The town worthies deferred to him not because of his employment, which was a post of no particular distinction whatsoever, but rather by virtue of his religious studies, which were entirely unofficial, even illegal, in character.

I was later to learn of various partnerships between leading individuals and religious teachers, especially in the past but continuing during my residence. These took the form of friendships of convenience between an uneducated but socially prominent individual and an educated but socially humble individual. The town worthies did not extend their hospitality to everyone engaged in religious study, far from it. Instead, they welcomed and hosted the school secretary because he was a hodja from Of who spoke with and for them. As I came to understand some years later, his arguments were not intended to persuade religious conservatives that the Republic and Kemalism conformed with Islam. They were instead intended to justify the dominant position of his kinsmen, friends, and associates in public institutions and organizations.