
The Veiled Periphery: Rural Kurdish Women in Turkey and the Taboo of Sexuality

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Abstract

Sexuality is the most salient taboo informing many practices in Cibo, a Kurdish village located in Erzurum, Turkey. In this article, I explore the manifestations, permutations, and ramifications of sexual shame through gendered practices. My analysis manifests the complex matrices of the deployment of the practices. That is, the modesty code based on sexual shame emerges at once as an index of traditional, ethnic (Turkish vs. Kurdish) and sectarian (Sunni vs. Alevi) identity, a religious observance, an instrument to attain honor and status, an assertion of morality and virtue, and lastly as resistance to Turkish hegemony and the perceived urban objectification of women. I explore the nuanced ways in which rural Kurdish women assert agency and resistance and in doing so I complicate stereotypic images of “subjugated” rural Kurdish women in Turkey. True to a feminist tradition, I locate the expressed problems of these women not in an abstract category of patriarchy, but in the intersectionality of class, ethnicity, state, and discursive Islamic tradition.

Keywords: modesty code, sexual shame, rural Kurdish women

Introduction

Rather than spending our honeymoon in a resort by the Mediterranean Sea, my husband and I decided to visit the village of Cibo in which he grew up near the city of Erzurum, Turkey. Nothing could have sounded more romantic than the image of a pristine village in the middle of a beautiful mountain range, the vision of pastoral life, the idea of organic food, and the image of contented and peaceful villagers happily welcoming us into their cozy cottages. However, once I arrived at this remote village, a deep sorrow immediately haunted me in reaction to the lower status of rural women. I also soon developed somatic reactions such as itchy sores all over my body, diarrhea, nausea, and a migraine. The “honeymoon” eventually ended with my hospitalization in the nearest city. I traveled to the village four more times after my honeymoon to visit my husband’s relatives. A year later I switched my academic field from English to Anthropology and, in the summer of 2010, I traveled to Cibo again to conduct ethnographic fieldwork on gender ideology in the village.

Cibo is a small Kurdish village in eastern Turkey, surrounded by the Erzurum mountain range. The climate is very harsh in the winter; the village remains under snow for six months. The village is connected to the city by 60-70 miles of unpaved gravel road. Transportation from the village happens once a day with an old minivan, if the weather permits. Unfortunately, the gravel road is closed most of the time during winters due to the excessive snowfall. The population is not more than 150 people. Although the majority of the population is Sunni Kurds, there is a small number of Alevi Kurds as well. They mainly speak Kurdish in the village; however, the younger generation can speak Turkish as they learn it at the elementary school. Villagers maintain a subsistence economy, primarily animal husbandry, and have little engagement with the broader cash economy. They sell one or two of their livestock once a year to buy themselves basic food products like flour, sugar, rice and also some animal feed. The livestock is all they have, and it can be easily observed that the entire life in the village revolves around the needs of the livestock. The gendered division of labor is designed accordingly.

Rural Kurdish women in Eastern Turkey are often stereotypically portrayed in Turkish mass media, such as TV series and films, and pictured in the urban Turkish public imagination as submissive, suppressed, and oppressed by a stern village patriarchy. On my first visit in 2004, as I encountered women who were constantly on the run to serve the men, I too erred in viewing women in Cibo as mere victims of their Kurdish patriarchal tradition. At the time I had neither a clear understanding of the Kurdish tradition (that I immediately labeled as patriarchal), nor a sense of the diversity of women's experiences within that culture. I merely questioned why women in Cibo would live with this oppression with no apparent resistance. I had only one explanation: they must have been so ignorant and uneducated that they did not even realize their oppression. They could not have any agency in this culture, let alone autonomy. As a Turkish urbanite with training in feminist critical theory, I thought the oppressed Other could only be saved through assimilation, and it must be my task to "modernize" and "liberate" them. After I switched my academic field from English to Anthropology, I realized that I was the one who needed to be "liberated" from these preconceived ideas by critically and analytically unpacking the multiple layers of gendered practices.



The author with Cibo behind her.

In daily life in Cibo, one easily discerns many gendered practices like segregation, veiling, homosocial activities, and a sexual division of labor. When asked why they do these things, women say either that it is a sin not to, or that it is *ayip*. The word *ayip* in Turkish which is (*eyb* in Kurdish) means shame, disgrace, or socially inappropriate, and therefore refers directly

to the social norms; whereas “sin” (*gune* in Kurdish and *günah* in Turkish or *haram* in Arabic) is a religious term that is based in the Muslim sacred text.¹

Although most women reported to me that their gendered practices are either God’s will or simply the appropriate form of social conduct- both of which were self-explanatory for them, my observations indicated to me that a deeper structure, sexual shame, underlines the gendered practices in Cibo. Sexuality is the most salient taboo informing most practices in Cibo. In this article, I explore the manifestations, permutations, and ramifications of sexual shame through gendered practices.

Manifestations of Sexual Shame

The modesty code, perceived as means of attaining and maintaining honor for women (Abu-Lughod: 2000), largely depends on sexual shame embodied by women in Cibo. Women are careful not to acknowledge their sexuality in their daily lives, even in the domestic sphere. Since extended families live together, there is not much privacy in the domestic sphere unlike what one may find in an urban nuclear family. Thereby, Cibo women internalize their modesty code almost like a second nature which is gradually cultivated in themselves since childhood (Mahmood: 2001). It should be noted that women never use the word ‘sexuality’ or any related term while explaining their modesty code to me. They mostly use phrases like ‘marriage,’ or ‘being husband and wife,’ in order to convey their active sexuality. Pre-marital sex is not an option for any woman in Cibo. There are myths of such “unchaste” women being killed long ago by their fathers or relatives. The women are not necessarily worried about being killed, but they anticipate catastrophic social consequences, such as ostracism, should they engage in inappropriate sexual behavior. Sexuality is perceived as such a threat to society that they do not even talk about it in our interviews without using euphemisms².

In Cibo, where social status is neither determined by blood, nor by wealth or power, the social reputation indexed by one’s honor becomes the marker of his standing within the community. The honor code is associated with morality and propriety. Social status is mainly determined by the degree of honor one has cultivated throughout his life. Since honor is not blood-based, it has to be achieved by observing the rules of the honor code. Honor emerges as the main social capital one can earn and maintain to solidify his good status within the community. They often say that one lives only for his honor. Keeping honor intact is a lifetime ongoing process.

The honor code and modesty code are interchangeably used in Cibo with the same term *şeref*. However, the ways women and men achieve *şeref* are different, as many traditional

¹ As women use these two words interchangeably, they do not necessarily distinguish between the will of God and of cultural tradition. My point is by no means to privilege a text-based orthodox or “mainstream” Islam over a local understanding and practice of Islam. Rather, since Islam as an analytical object of anthropology should be treated as a historically situated discursive tradition (Asad:1986), I eschew formulating a dichotomy between Cibo customary tradition and Islam, and I try to account for their interrelated and overlapping nature.

² Lila Abu-Lughod (2000) analyzes the taboo of sexuality in the Awlad Ali Bedouin community in Egypt by situating sexual shame in their tribal patrilineal system, in which the bloodline mainly determines the honor of family. One’s “nobility of origin” is directly associated with his social status and moral qualities. Marriage is considered as a potential threat to the ideology of the agnatic affiliation. Hence, there is a constant “competing nature of sexual bonds and kinship bonds” (146). However, in Cibo, there is no hierarchical tribal system that values bloodline as such. While in Awlad Ali society a married woman is still considered to be a part of her natal kin, in Cibo she belongs to her husband’s family. Thereby, marriage and/or sexuality are not taboo due to a conflict within the social structure, as it is in Awlad Ali community.

practices are gendered. I will use the term modesty code when delineating the ways in which Cibo women attain and maintain *şeref*. The modesty code is mostly shaped by the taboo of sexuality. As such, sexuality becomes a great threat in sustaining honor. Women take every caution to deny their sexuality that is entrenched in the traditional gendered practices, which become more evident during marriage.

Marriage & Post-Marriage Rituals

During the marriage and post-marriage rituals in the Cibo community, it is possible to examine the sexuality taboo. Starting with the marriage arrangements before the wedding, the groom and bride are never brought together. The groom's family visits the bride's family without the groom to ask for her parent's permission, and to negotiate the bride price. Upon mutual agreement, the groom's family comes a second time with the engagement rings. The groom does not even join the engagement party. The villagers dance for a week at the bride's house to celebrate the engagement. It is not socially acceptable for the fiancées to meet until the marriage.³ The potential for sexual attraction or interaction is avoided by preventing fiancées from meeting or highly policing their meetings. Sexuality is seen as a source for instability.

Once the wedding date is set, the groom's family comes to fetch the bride from her parents' house. Villagers celebrate and dance for two weeks in and around both houses. The bride's family serves dinner to the entire village when the groom's family comes to fetch the bride. The groom does not come to take his bride. He waits for her at his parents' house. In most cases, the newlyweds are required to live with the groom's family. If they are to live in a separate house, which rarely happens, the groom's parents have to stay with them for at least one week.

Once the newlyweds go into the bridal chamber, they cannot step out for a week. It is highly inappropriate for them to be seen even by household members. They have to be very careful not to run into someone even when they need to use the bathroom. The strict avoidance of public, including immediate family, is not interpreted as a romantic escape, but as a requirement of sexual shame. The new couple is ashamed to face other people who evidently know that they have been consummating the marriage. One of my female interlocutors, who had been married for five months at that point, told me that it was not about the authenticity of a real feeling of shame; rather it is the display of shame, as faux as it might be, that matters the most. However, two other married women told me that they had indeed felt deeply ashamed when they left the bridal chamber thinking that everybody had known what they were doing in there.

Since premarital sex is a taboo, as is sex outside the controlled confines of marriage, the bride has to prove her virginity and chastity to the whole village by displaying the sheet that is stained with her virginity blood. Traditionally, she not only presents the sheet to the groom's family, who will make a public announcement, but she also puts gifts in that sheet such as handmade socks, embroideries, and traditional headscarves for the groom's family. As such, the virginity blood itself becomes the bride's gift to the groom's family, an essential part of her dowry. Her womanhood, and later her motherhood, becomes a property of the patriarchy of her husband. She is no longer considered to be a part of her natal family. She will not visit her family for some years to come. However, her family can visit her at her new home with the groom's family. Her body and her labor are dedicated to the groom's family who will protect and shelter her for the rest of her life.

³ However, modern exceptions do exist; I found that some couples do meet a few times under the supervision of their families.

Female Voice

When the bride is brought to the groom's house, the groom awaits her on top of the roof. He throws an apple onto her head. The bride is expected not to cry out but to prove her docility and submission to her husband with silence. Also, the voice of a woman, right after her marriage, is subjected to sexual shame, and should be hidden in public.

This taboo of voice of the bride continues after the nuptial night. The bride leaves the bridal chamber after a week with the lower half of her face veiled. From then on, she will remain veiled in this fashion for the rest of her life. She is not only required to veil in the presence of men, but also in the presence of elder women such as her mother-in-law. However, the brides do not simply cover their mouths with their headscarf, but also restrict their voices with this transition. They are literally muted in front of certain types of company for quite a long time. In my interviews, I could not find a consensus on the amount of time women had to restrict speaking. Some of them waited at least until they gave birth to their first child, while others avoided speaking in front of their elders for a lifetime. One of my interlocutors told me that she did not speak to her father-in-law, whom lived under the same roof, for eight years after the marriage. Since a woman's voice should not be heard once she becomes sexually active, I suggest that the female voice indeed becomes an extension of female physical existence that should be covered as well. In other words, the voices of women become an indispensable part of their sexualized bodies. When sexuality undergoes a taboo, so does a woman's voice.

One of my interlocutors, Ayfer, shared an experience that exemplifies the relationship between a sexually active woman's voice and sexual shame in the modesty code.⁴ Ayfer used to cover her head loosely. She was dynamic, chatty and cheerful. By my fourth visit to the village in 2008, she had married. She came to visit me in the house I was staying in, along with other village women of varying ages. Her mouth was covered appropriately for a married woman. In contrast to my expectations, she neither revealed her face to me, nor talked to me. I asked her why she was behaving in such a way. She whispered to me that there was an elder women present in the room. Another woman explained to me that it would be very *ayib*⁵ if she would talk or unveil her face. Ayfer did not eat anything or drink the tea I offered for the same reason. As I argued earlier, the rationale of *ayib* is directly linked to the public recognition of sexuality. Ayfer became sexually active only after marriage, and she was required to start acting according to the modesty code.

Generational Social Distance

My next encounter with Ayfer revealed another permutation of sexual shame manifested in generational interactions. In 2010, Ayfer welcomed me at the entrance of the village as I stepped out of the minibus. She now had an eight-month-old daughter sleeping in a stroller. When the driver started the engine, Ayfer became terrified. I told her to move her daughter's stroller out of the way as it was evidently going to be hit. However, Ayfer was staring into the minibus speechless, her eyes wide open. I moved the stroller myself and saved the child. When I reproached her for her lack of action in the face of a potential fatality, she told me that her father-in-law was in the minibus, and could have seen her touching or tending to her child, which would be a great shame for her. I was told later by another woman named Zehra that even if a child falls into a fire, the mother cannot act to save her child, but desperately waits for the elders to notice and help the child.

Young parents, both father and mother, are not supposed to touch their children in front of elder men or women. As the children grow older, parents, especially mothers, do not claim

⁴ All the names of my interlocutors are changed in the article.

⁵ *ayb* or *ayip*: disgrace, shame

them in front of the elders and act indifferent to their own children. This formality between children and their parents is very noticeable in everyday life. As a consequence, I observed that children are warmer to their grandparents and distanced with their own parents, who do not touch or even talk to them in the presence of elders. Since villagers maintain a communal life with the extended family, there do not appear to be many cases or moments of privacy available for parents to interact with their children.

They told me over and over again that it was highly inappropriate and *ayib* to show affection to one's own child in front of the elders. They also frequently used the word *hurmet*, which means respect, for the elders in this incident of generational distance. I further suggest that the taboo of sexuality also informs this social distance between the parents and their children. That is, children are seen by default as the embodiment of their parent's sexuality. Since they are byproducts of sexuality, they evince the active sexuality of the parents. Besides, as suggested earlier, the body of the woman and thereby her uterus are considered to be the property of the patriarchy. Children are thus seen as belonging to the elder patriarchy of the father. They are also visible evidence of sexual contact.

Labor & Delivery

The taboo of sexuality is also manifested in child-birth. In Cibo, women give birth in the village with the assistance of an elder woman. They do not even think about going to hospitals for the labor and delivery. I asked 50 year-old Sukran the reason they resisted professional help in a medical facility. Her response was poignant:

"When my contractions started for my second child, my mother-in-law's friends were present in the room. They were chatting without noticing that I was in labor. I did not say anything, or moan a bit. I waited for a long time for them to leave. Eventually they left, and I told my mother-in-law that I was about to give birth. She took me to Emos⁶. I gave birth in half an hour. When the visitors heard what happened right after they left, they said that it was impossible and that I was totally fine with no sign of labor. See, Feyza, that is the way we act. It is *ayib* to show your labor pain even to elder women, let alone men. I could have never ask my husband to take me to a hospital, as it was out of question for him to let his father know that the baby was due. It is very *ayib* to go to a hospital. Everybody would hear that. You must be discreet."

As Sukran describes it, she felt shame in declaring that she was in labor. Interestingly, even the labor pain of women is sexualized and thereby subjected to the modesty code.

People do not display the newborn to outsiders for at least forty days. Ayfer told me that she felt embarrassed to display the baby, the fruit of her sexuality, out of sexual shame. Hence, the baby is symbolically veiled or hidden to cover the sexual shame of the parents. I further argue that, being born through women's vagina, newborns are also treated as an extension of women's sexualized body.

Melike, who was six months pregnant, informed me that she would not show her baby to people for the protection of the baby. I first assumed that she was talking about potential health

⁶ She is the eldest women who attended all the deliveries in the village although not a certified midwife.

issues related to contamination. She, however, was afraid of the “evil eye” which would cause harm to baby. I asked her how the child was protected from the evil eye after forty days. She said: “Well, there is no special protection when the infant becomes forty days old. I actually think that the babies look even much cuter after the first month, and thereby more vulnerable to the evil eye. But, I don’t know why, we just keep the infant out of public for forty days. It is for her/his good.” In light of the inconsistency of local explanations, I argue the structure of the tradition has a base in the sexuality taboo.

Female Dress Code

The modesty code of sexual shame requires hiding eating, sexuality, one’s voice, one’s interaction with one’s children and one’s body. The practice of veiling is particularly significant in covering sexual shame. Lila Abu Lughod has argued that veiling “indicates a woman’s recognition of sexuality’s place in the social system and her wish to distance herself from it” (2000, 162). Veiling among women is the most visibly embodied expression of sexual shame in Cibo. It is considered a prerequisite for a woman to cover her sexualized body and thereby assert her virtue and morality. Since sexual activity begins with marriage, the practice of veiling gains more significance after marriage.

Rural women in Cibo cover their heads with the traditional *hijab* which they call *çit* or *yemeni*. It is a thin square piece of cotton cloth that comes in every pattern and color. What distinguishes them is the handmade embroidery edging or lacework *oya*. Women wear them so the *oya* is displayed on their foreheads. Girls start to veil around the age of ten. Unmarried girls loosely cover their hair with a *yemeni*. They do not necessarily cover their face or neck. Not sexually active yet, they are not required to strictly cover sexual shame. On the other hand, married women tightly secure their *yemenis* to cover not only their hair, but also their mouth and neck. The transition of the woman’s status through marriage is indexed by the dress code. The veiling style differentiates the virgin from the married.⁷

Rather than invoking the culture, they typically referred to religion to justify the underlying reason of veiling. Most women told me that they veil because it is prescribed by God. They veil the way they do because “it is sin not to.” The word they used was always “sin” (*gune*) rather than “*ayib*.” Most of my married female interlocutors strongly emphasized piety as the main reason of their veiling. For instance, forty-five-year-old Gulden, who had been married for twenty years and had five children, told me earnestly that she veiled for religious reasons:

Gulden: I veil and cover my mouth because it is a sin not to.

Feyza: So, do you consider yourself to be a conservative Muslim?

Gulden: Of course. I have always veiled like this.

Feyza: Do you also pray five times a day?

Gulden: No, I do not know how to pray.

Feyza: Do you occasionally read the Quran?

Gulden: No, I have never read it. I do not know how to read Arabic.

Feyza: Do you recite prayers like al-Fatiha?

Gulden: I have not memorized any prayers. I do not know how to recite them.

Feyza: Do you fast during Ramadan?

Gulden: Of course, I do. We all do. Those Alevi don’t observe it, though.

⁷ Similarly, in Awlad Ali society women put on a red belt and a black headcloth after marriage to signify the transition (Abu-Lughod: 2000).

Some women like Gülten do not fully observe mainstream Islamic principles such as the prayer. However, they make statements indicating that it is a grave sin to reveal your face to other men. The religious term “*gune*” is used instead of traditional term “*ayib*” in these interviews. Accordingly, although some women may not comply with what is known as the essential pillars of Islam like the requisite daily five prayers, they nonetheless veil conservatively out of their local understanding of piety. At least for some women in Cibo, the practice of veiling is an obligation of Islam, one of the components of piety and a sign of devotion to God.

I inquired about the difference between religion and tradition perceived by these Cibo women. Most of the women believe that their traditional modesty code is prescribed by their religion in the first place, and therefore see no difference between the two. For those women who strongly emphasize their piety as the reason of their veiling the practice at once becomes a way to index and cultivate their piety. However, I argue that the inner working of this piety is still based on sexual shame. In other words, I suggest that whether it is believed to be prescribed by God or the patriarchal tradition, women in Cibo feel a great need to cover their sexual shame out of the prominent taboo of sexuality.



The veiling style indexes the marital status.

Agency of Sexual Shame

Saba Mahmood, in her study of Egyptian women who participated in the mosque movement, argues that women exhibit agency by achieving a pious selfhood, as a result of “struggle, effort, exertion, and achievement” (2001, 214). I suggest that women in Cibo also assert agency by willingly observing the modesty code of sexual shame. However, what Abu Lughod calls “voluntary deference” is a complicated case of agency, given the scarcity of the women’s options. The ramifications of disobedience should also be acknowledged. Yet, women

in Cibo overtly reveal their agency in some cases, especially when they act as the gatekeepers of their tradition in the face of Turkish hegemony.



Older Kurdish women tend to uphold the traditional values and gendered practices more against the encroachment of the Hegemonic Turkish State.

Identity and Sexual Shame

As mentioned earlier, acting modestly involves avoiding meeting needs and desires such as eating, drinking, smoking and so forth in the presence of certain company. For instance, women never eat together with men at the same table in Cibo. In my first visit to the village, being unaware of this taboo, I sat together with the men when it was announced that dinner was ready. After a disturbing silence, which made me realize the implications of my action, they had to invite their wives to accompany me at the dinner table. First I felt accomplished, as I thought I had liberated women from a taboo. However, my feeling of triumph of breaking through the gender barriers for women suddenly vanished when the eldest woman Elmas uttered in disappointment that, “we are passing for Turkish for the first time after all those years.”

Kurdish villagers in Cibo do not uphold what they consider to be “Turkish” tradition. Hence, what I presupposed as a Kurdish form of female subordination, namely gender segregation, was also a source of ethnic pride for Cibo women. The fact that they willingly observe their customs such as the modesty code, serves to preserve their collective identity. As

such, it serves as a form of resistance against the hegemony of mainstream Turkish culture.⁸ Rather than signaling lack of agency, the women's observation of the modesty code marks their agency and resistance, which should be translated as their "capacity to action" (Mahmood 210). In other words, the performances of women in Cibo, which consists of a customary conduct of behavior and dress, index their agency to maintain their traditional identity.

It should also be noted that in her ethnography on Egyptian women, Mahmood delineates specific actions that "cultivate" rather than "express" a preexisting self (2010). Mahmood is interested in the link between agency and practices like veiling. She explains how "moral virtues are acquired through a coordination of outward behavior with inward dispositions" (2010: 215). However, in Cibo, not all the women are necessarily worried about such a "program of self-cultivation" (2010: 210). Rather, they take the modesty code as an ideal and indispensable part of their culture. Thereby, they often embody it as an expression of their collective identity. This emerges as a socio-historical response to the hegemonic discourse of Turkish nationalism. In other words, women's embodiment of the modesty code is a public manifestation of traditional values. As such, it is a means to recuperate a marginalized identity.

Morality and Sexual Shame

Elmas' despair in passing for Turkish was an indication of the loss of not only identity, but also morality. "Turkish culture" has negative connotations because of its perceived treatment of women. Based on their imagining of the lifestyle of a Western Turkish woman, many believe that all Turkish people essentially lack morality and Islamic ethics. In one of my conversations with Elmas, she conveyed to me her feeling that Turkish women had no sexual shame:

"Turkish people are Westernized, and corrupted. They live like *gavurs*.⁹ They are not afraid of God. They live in sin. Women do not have any shame. They freely mingle with men, even the married ones. They eat at the same table with men. They do not respect their elders. Turkish culture is full of levity, impudence, immorality, and corruption."¹⁰

People in Cibo perceive a strict dichotomy between Turkish and Kurdish cultures. They do not acknowledge the diversity that exists within each ethnicity, and that for instance, not all Kurdish

⁸ Though it is out of scope of this paper, the backdrop of this Kurdish resistance against Turkish hegemony, which is related to a very long history of ethnic inequality, discrimination, violence, and social insurrection should be mentioned briefly here. It is important to mark its beginning with the construction of Turkish nationalism in 1920s which "aimed to create an ethnically, linguistically and culturally homogeneous nation and nation-state out of the remnants of the Ottoman Empire, which was a multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic and multi-cultural entity" (Yuksel 777). In other words, the new monolithic national identity was created "either by suppressing or by ignoring the multiple identities that came to be imprisoned in the periphery" (Kadioglu 191-2). Thereby, rural Kurds were subject to the agenda of the modernization/Westernization project and considered backward and largely unassimilatable due to their rural customary ways of life.

⁹ *Gavur*: infidel (in a condescending and condemning tone).

¹⁰ Moments like this were a bit awkward for me as a Turkish woman listening to these assumptions on Turkish people. At first I used to get a little offended thinking that they were directing these thoughts to me. Later, I came to understand that because of my husband I was mostly being considered as one of "them." However, being an insider or outsider was a gray area, and always shifting and contingent upon the context or situation.

people observe the modesty code and not all Turkish people live a Westernized life style. Nevertheless, Cibo residents like Elmas conform to the regulations of the socially constructed modesty code in order to attain and maintain certain valued characteristics of their tradition.

This embodiment of tradition is further reinforced in the context of the Turkish city. Veiling becomes instrumental for women in Cibo to access public spaces in the city. Women in Cibo are not allowed to travel alone. They do not leave the village to venture in the city on their own. They must be accompanied by a male relative. Furthermore, they also need to veil by adopting *çarşaf*, which literally means 'sheet' or 'linen' in Turkish. It is a black garment that covers women from head to toe, revealing only their eyes and forehead. Women do not normally wear *çarşaf* in their daily lives, but only adopt it when they leave the village as an extra layer of covering.

The women believe that *çarşaf* not only functions to demonstrate their traditional identity outside the village, but also protects them from any potential sexual or verbal abuse. Villagers from Cibo perceive the city as a potentially dangerous area, especially for women, primarily because of assumed Turkish lack of sexual shame. As such, wearing *çarşaf* in the city emerges as a response to the perceived objectification of women, which, according to people from Cibo, is particular to urban Turkish culture. Through a demarcation of the modesty code as a distinct Kurdish custom, compliance with traditional Cibo dress asserts their membership in the community. As such, they think that their strict modesty code distinguishes them from their Turkish counterparts and asserts their moral superiority over the urban Turkish community.

Ramifications of Sexual Shame

In the previous section, I have discussed Cibo women's "voluntary deference" to the modesty code. Here, I would like to analyze the potentially unpleasant outcomes of when women observe and do not observe the modesty code of sexual shame.

Reinforcement

In this small society in this little village, people know one another very well. Despite the apparent solidarity among them, there is an unspoken competition, if not an implicit enmity. Gossip is the main social tool to distribute the news about a slight of inappropriate behavior. In order not to be targeted by gossip, people in Cibo, both men and women, are extremely cautious not to deviate in any way from the honor and modesty code. Nonetheless, there are often unavoidable comments made by people about the probability of a misdemeanor in his neighbor's behavior. There is a constant feeling of being watched in the village because of the social policing that occurs. In the given circumstances, women, as "natural sexual beings," are more vulnerable for targeting, and are therefore more conscious about observing the modesty code of sexual shame. The fear of ostracism and exclusion is a binding reinforcement, because it will affect the whole family rather than a single individual. I first struggled to understand the harshness of punishment and stigma attached to a simple bit of gossip or a minor misconduct. Saliha told me that it was because of the harm and taint to the family's name and honor: "Honor is everything we have. We cannot afford to lose it." It became clear to me that honor is, in Bourdieu's terms, the main 'social capital' and it was essential for survival in this social 'market.' Accordingly, honor is the only prestige and worth that a woman can own, and it can be attained through compliance with the modesty code of shame.



An old couple.

Secondly, domestic violence is an undeniable social fact even though it is no longer as rampant as it used to be. Every women I interviewed around or over the age of 40 reported to me her personal story of domestic violence in the early years of their marriage. Elmas, who was an ardent gatekeeper of her tradition, said to me: "I never loved that man [her husband] even one day in my life." Surprised by her statement, I asked why. She said:

"I remember. I married when I was 14. I had my first child at 15. I started to live with his family of course. It was a tiny house. We were living not only with his parents, but also with his elder brother and his family. She was so jealous of me, his wife. She always found something to complain about me. Each time, my husband beat me, beat me and beat me. It was not important if she was telling the truth. Whenever he was challenged by someone for not keeping his woman in her place, he had to beat me in front of others. But I did not care. I hated him because he was so harsh to my daughters. One day, our neighbor showed up at the door and said that my daughter had passed through his grazing land while she was shepherding the herd. I tried to stop him, my husband. But he went up to the hills, dragged my daughter down the village pulling her hair and beating her madly. Everybody was watching and nodding in agreement. She had to be taught a lesson people thought. She passed out, and I was worried that she was dead. She was not *Alhamdulillah*, but you see, I don't forgive him for beating my daughters."

This poignant narrative exemplifies the severity of the abuse a woman would receive if not in compliance with the appropriate social conduct. In another interview with an elder woman, she

justified the domestic violence as a pedagogical method to teach the essential tenets of the honor code which would eventually serve the beaten woman's prosperity and wellbeing in the long run. Domestic violence used to be the way of constructing and asserting one's masculinity in the public realm. Younger women said that physical violence is not common anymore in Cibo, but it has not completely vanished. It could still be used as a means to reinforce the honor and modesty code. I met Elmas in summer 2012 again and found out that her husband died six months earlier. To my surprise, she was devastated from losing her partner. She was blaming herself for her misdeeds towards him. She said with tears in her eyes: "I wish I could have been a better wife. I mistreated him. I should have been more compassionate and caring and loving." It turned out that Elmas did love her husband after all. She might have come to terms with the social functionality of domestic violence, as she said "He loved us so much. He was a great father." In other words, it was not a personal fault that men mistreated their wives and daughters. Rather, it was one of the ways to uphold the honor code which was the greatest social capital.

Discrimination

Observing the modesty code of sexual shame also might have negative outcomes for women in Cibo. I observed that many Turkish urban residents including state officials, medical and education staff appear to be prejudiced against these Kurdish rural people, internalizing the prevalent stereotypical images of Kurdish peasantry. The most conspicuous index of women from Cibo's rural identity is their peculiar practice of veiling. I observed that, as long as they remain in their own rural context, women from Cibo's "traditional" veiling is not only tolerated by the urbanites, but also treated as an authentic indigenous custom that should be preserved, albeit in the local context. However, once these women transgress the boundaries of the rural into the realm of the urban, their veiling is promptly transformed into an emblem of contested ideology. The Kurdish peasant women's veiling in the Turkish city is seen as a sign of ignorance and backwardness that threatens the modernist ideals of the Turkish state. Accordingly, women from Cibo, whose "traditional veiling" is perceived as incompatible with the "modern" urban setting, are not welcomed graciously in the city of Erzurum by the urbanites.

The discrimination resulting from veiling became apparent to me on my third visit to the village in 2006, when I was five months pregnant. Unfortunately, I suffered from food poisoning and was hospitalized in Erzurum. I happened to be dressed like a woman from Cibo in her rural environment, with a traditional *yemeni* covering my head. The treatment I received was traumatizing. After listening to my symptoms without even looking at my face, the female doctor talked to me in a condescending manner. She said indifferently: "Lie down by the ultrasound machine, and let me see if the baby is still alive in your uterus." After asserting that the baby was alive, she told me to wait outside without explaining anything else. A couple of minutes later, I was told by a janitor to follow her upstairs.

In short, the doctor without troubling herself to explain anything to me, had ordered me to be hospitalized for a day to receive an IV treatment. When I saw her four hours later in a follow-up, I told her that I was not a local woman, but that I was a graduate student in the US. Her attitude towards me changed at once, and she began treating me more respectfully. She explained to me her diagnosis and treatment. She apologized for her previous demeanor which was based on her assumption that I was a peasant woman because of the *yemeni* I was wearing. She said that she was sorry for those rural women who did not care about birth control and kept having children despite their miserable living conditions. Evidently, the prejudiced assumptions surrounding rural women go beyond their practice of veiling, and need to be further investigated. This experience hinted to me the ways in which rural women are treated in the city.

Conclusion

I critically observed that the gendered practices in Cibo are informed by a distinctive modesty code that is founded on sexual shame. My analysis of the gendered practices also manifests the complex matrices of the deployment of the practices. That is, the modesty code in Cibo emerges at once as an index of traditional, ethnic (Turkish vs. Kurdish) and sectarian (Sunni vs. Alevi) identity, a religious observance, an instrument to attain honor and status, an assertion of morality and virtue, and lastly as a resistance to Turkish hegemony and the perceived urban objectification of women. My analysis is informed mostly by postmodern feminist theory with its acceptance of multiple truths (Foucault: 1978, 1983, Butler: 1990, 1993, Scott: 1991). As such, in the course of my fieldwork I started to discern the nuanced ways in which rural Kurdish women assert agency and resistance without necessarily revolting against their patriarchal culture. I complicated the stereotypic images of “subjugated” rural Kurdish women in Turkey.

My study, employing a cultural relativist analysis, destabilizes universal concepts of agency, resistance, and gender oppression. I have shown that women in Cibo intentionally internalize the modesty code as a means to preserve their honor and social status. They do not embody sexual shame as a sign of oppression imposed by men; rather, it functions as a sign of integrity, virtue, and dignity. In other words, the modesty code, which requires “masking,” “formality,” “self-effacement,” and occasionally “complete avoidance,” is a central part of their identity and way of life (Abu Lughod 2000: 116).

When I spoke to Ayfer in my last visit to the village in the summer of 2012, she told me that she had finally spoken in front of her father-in-law after eight years of marriage. When I asked her how it felt, assuming that it must have been an exciting breakthrough, she responded: “I don’t know, nothing much changed in my life, it wasn’t a big deal after all.” Like many other gendered practices, most women in Cibo do not resent the voluntary silence of women.

Through a direct examination of the everyday lives of the women in Cibo and a thorough exploration of their desires and motivations, I tried to acknowledge as many factors as possible that may lie beneath their practices, and to understand the meaning of their practices within context. I have critically observed that in order to understand the status of Kurdish rural women, one must have an accurate understanding of the multiple, and even contradictory discourses, that simultaneously inform the women’s situation. Since “power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations,” pointing to a single discourse to explain these women’s “victimization” fails to account for the complexity of their experience, and their knotty situation that is socio-historically situated (Foucault 1978: 94). True to the feminist tradition, I locate the expressed problems of the women not in an abstract category of patriarchy, but in the intersectionality of class, ethnicity, state, and discursive Islamic tradition.

Any situated knowledge is constructed by a situated knower, so the researcher should transparently situate herself in her research. Sandra Harding, one of the leading figures of standpoint feminist epistemology, argues that there is an obligation of reflexivity in feminist research so that “the researcher appears to us not as an invisible, anonymous voice of authority, but as a real, historical individual with concrete, specific desires and interests” (Harding 1987: 9). Similarly, I acknowledge that my positionality undoubtedly informed my research questions and analysis of the collected data. However, it should be noted that we have multiple identities which may sometimes contradict one another. Hence, in this study, not only the sociopolitical context of Turkey, but also my own positionality as a veiled Muslim feminist Turkish scholar is not fixed, but fluid and shifting. I was undeniably perceived as an outsider, belonging to a different ethnicity, culture, class, ideology, and discourse. It was an unspoken gap between us that was not easy to bridge, and I cannot claim that I have completely achieved such a connection. I do not also claim that my work is “the” truth of the

Cibo culture and practices; rather, it is an informed interpretation of the interpretations of the local people (Geertz: 1973).

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