

The Politicization of Tradition: The New Visibility of *Zikir* in Soldier Send-Off Ceremonies in Turkey

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Abstract

Soldier send-off ceremonies (*asker uğurlama törenleri*) are one of the most prominent rites of passage for males in Turkey. These ceremonies carry old customs, which can be described in terms of their content, form and applied sound aesthetics. Even though these ceremonies contain religious features, particularly due to the popular conception of the army as the prophet's hearth (*peygamber ocağı*), they are mostly celebrated as secular rites of passage. Nevertheless, especially in the last few years, performances of stylized *zikir* are increasingly observable as part of soldier send-off ceremonies as a recent development.

The factors that enable this can be examined through various disciplinary lenses. From the perspective of political science, for example, this new visibility of *zikir* may be considered a reflection of changing socio-political dynamics in Turkey.

The current government of the past fifteen years has been implementing a political agenda known for its explicit Islamic discourse and religiously motivated administration methods. These active policies have also enabled an Islamization of quasi-religious practices both in social and cultural realms. In this new, strategically Islamised socio-political atmosphere, the ongoing activities of local religious orders – whose content and *modus operandi* have been a topic of discussion since their official prohibition in 1925 – have precipitated the rising visibility of *zikir* in the social domain.

Although it is not yet possible to date *zikir*'s first appearance as part of send-off ceremonies, the period after 2010/2012 demonstrates a visible increase. These ceremonies are usually celebrated with specific dances (e.g. *halay*) which are selected from the region's profane music and dance repertoire and accompanied mainly by *davul* (double-sided large drum) and *zurna* (double-reed wind instrument). However, there is no clear data showing whether *zikir* is performed together with (before or after) the conventional *davul-zurna*-dance com-

bination, or in replacement of it. On the other hand, in almost all online video recordings containing *zikir* and soldier send-off ceremonies both in open areas and at bus stations, it is possible to observe a substitution of *davul-zurna* with *bendir* – a frame drum primarily played in religious contexts – and of profane dances with *zikir* movements. The continuity or variability of the above-mentioned political atmosphere in the future will also be decisive in the spread and persistence of this *zikir* form.

La politicizzazione di una tradizione: la nuova presenza dello zikir nelle cerimonie di saluto ai coscritti in Turchia. *Le cerimonie di saluto ai coscritti (asker uğurlama törenleri) sono uno dei più significativi riti di passaggio in Turchia. Queste cerimonie perpetuano antiche tradizioni che si possono descrivere nei termini del loro contenuto, della loro forma e della estetica sonora che vi si manifesta. Anche se in tali cerimonie si ritrovano caratteri religiosi, dovuti in particolare alla concezione popolare dell'esercito come anima del profeta (peygamber ocığı), esse sono per lo più celebrate come riti di passaggio profani. Tuttavia, specialmente negli ultimi anni, si osserva sempre più, come sviluppo recente, la presenza di esecuzioni stilizzate di zikir all'interno delle cerimonie di saluto ai coscritti.*

I fattori che entrano in gioco in tale fenomeno possono essere presi in esame dal punto di vista di diverse discipline. Dalla prospettiva delle scienze politiche, ad esempio, questa nuova presenza dello zikir può essere considerata come un riflesso del cambiamento delle dinamiche politico-sociali in Turchia.

L'attuale governo sta adottando da quindici anni un'agenda politica nota per l'esplicito riferimento all'Islam e metodi di amministrazione basati sulla religione. Queste politiche hanno anche reso possibile una islamizzazione di pratiche quasi-religiose sia a livello sociale che culturale. In questa nuova atmosfera socio-politica strategicamente islamizzata, le attività degli ordini religiosi locali – il cui contenuto e modus operandi sono stati oggetto di discussione fin dalla loro proibizione ufficiale nel 1925 – hanno accelerato la crescente presenza dello zikir nella società. Sebbene non sia ancora possibile individuare una data per la prima comparsa dello zikir nell'ambito delle cerimonie di saluto ai coscritti, il periodo dopo gli anni 2010/2012 mostra una significativa crescita di tale presenza. Queste cerimonie sono in genere celebrate con specifiche danze (per es. halay) appartenenti al repertorio musicale e coreutico profano e accompagnate da davul (grande tamburo a doppia pelle) e zurna (aerofono ad ancia doppia). Tuttavia, non vi sono sufficienti dati che indichino se lo zikir sia eseguito insieme con (prima o dopo) la consueta combinazione danza-davul-zurna, o in sostituzione di essa. D'altra parte, in pressoché tutte le registrazioni video online in cui siano presenti zikir e cerimonie di saluto ai coscritti, sia all'aperto che nelle stazioni di autobus, è possibile osservare una sostituzione dell'insieme davul-zurna con il bendir – un tamburo a cornice suonato nei contesti religiosi – oltre a danze profane con movimenti zikir.

Una prosecuzione, ovvero un cambiamento, dell'atmosfera politica sopra menzionata saranno decisivi anche nella diffusione e persistenza di questa forma di zikir.

Introduction

The continuity of societies depends on, along with many other variables, the togetherness of individuals. Individuals who come together around certain values secure their coexistence through similar, complementary, or, if unavoidable, conflicting interpretations and re-enactments of such values. Following early social scientific approaches to ritual, such as the theories of Émile Durkheim (2001) and Victor Turner (1969, 1974), if we are to consider «ritual as just such a medium of integration or synthesis for opposing

socio-cultural forces» (Bell 1992: 23), we can evaluate initiation rituals as an optimization apparatus designed to appropriate individuals to the norms of their community. In this respect, initiation rites are codified mechanisms, which each group passes through its own filter of values, and which mark and highlight fundamental turning points of an individual's life.

As far as is known, almost every society has a way of marking the milestone events of an individual's life. These events, by their nature, alter the individual's position in society and enable a safe transition from one state to another; therefore, they are generally highlighted via ceremonial acts. While the arrangement of practices to secure transition between life chapters may vary across different societies, in line with an individual's age-related major biological developments, van Gennep «explored the nature of ceremonies that mark personal or collective changes of identity» (Tzanelli 2007) and roughly divided an individual's life into three main episodes:¹ birth, marriage, and death (Yeşil 2014: 118, van Gennep 1909).

The first episode starts naturally with birth and ends with marked collective celebrations organized either by the nuclear family of the individual or by larger groups (e.g. extended families that may include several close/distant relatives; commune members etc.). Collective celebrations that highlight transition from one state to another may take place either immediately after birth or after a certain period. In line with the group's worldview, these collective celebrations may contain religious/belief oriented practices, such as baptism or circumcision etc., or they may be solely profane events which are not explicitly sacralized, such as the first day of school. The two other ceremonially designated milestone events of an individual's life that follow birth are marriage and death. However, the primary concern of this paper is not the classification or analysis of such events, but the new elements inserted within soldier send-off ceremonies in Turkey. Therefore, I will keep the initiation/transition practices and ceremonies accompanying the birth, marriage and death events out of the frame of this article.

The milestone events of an individual's life and the related celebrations may vary depending on geography and time, as well as on the social, political, and economic conditions surrounding the group and the individual. For instance, some practices may be altered and/or replaced with new elements in order to remain relevant to changing conditions, such as following mass group migrations or technological developments. Due to certain dynamics that appear following culture contacts,² or in the course of transmitting

¹ On occasion, certain events such as puberty, graduation, fatherhood, or conscription may be considered a main episode of an individual's life and thus may expand the number of episodes. However, deducing from van Gennep's division of the chapters in the table of contents of his *Les rites de passage*: V. *La naissance et l'enfance* (Birth and Childhood), VII. *Les fiançailles et le mariage* (Betrothal and Marriage), VIII. *Les funérailles* (Funerals), and several other divisions based on his theory, above all, birth, marriage, and death seem to constitute main chapters in almost all classifications. For more information see references, especially van Gennep 1909; Larson 2014; Grove, Lancy 2015.

² Such as retention, reinterpretation, selection, syncretism etc. following the terminology offered by Melville J. Herskovitz. For more information: Herskovitz 1941. Unlike Herskovitz, who focused on large groups of

in-/tangible cultural goods from one generation to another within the same group, some sub-species may emerge. There may also be delays or abbreviations in the content and application of ceremonies whenever required (Yeşil 2014: 133). Such alterations correspond with the rituals' and ceremonies' «adaptive and adjustive response to the social and physical environment» (Penner 2016). There is no doubt that some of these practices can spread across the community or remain at an individual level. Although military service is not necessarily a key turning point of an individual's life in some communities, it may be conceptualized differently in others. In Turkey, for example, performing military service is a major event in the life of its male citizens and considered as a “debt to the nation”. One can argue that, due to this attributed importance, the events surrounding conscription in Turkey, such as send-off practices and «pre-conscription rituals and parties» (Arjomand 2017: 424), are commonly ceremonial in nature and valued as much as the other major turning points (marriage, death etc.) of life.

The Military Service in Turkey and Soldier Send-Off Ceremonies

Although it varies in intensity and interpretation according to the surrounding environment, the act of performing military service is one of the most decisive constituent elements of male identity in Turkey. The significance of this duty reveals itself, above all, in the famous formulation: “every Turk is born a soldier”. In early schooling, similar and related concepts are repetitively re-affirmed through, for example, the student oath, e.g. “dedicating the existence to the Turkish existence”³ at the beginning of every school day. In this way, the expectations (of the group) are framed as sanctions to be imposed on the individual. Until its successful completion, military service constitutes the focal point of the male individual's life goals. It is, therefore, a “threshold” in the transition from boyhood to adolescence and adulthood (Yeşil 2014: 132). Almost all career, marriage, travel, and other relevant goals of the individual's personal and social life are tied to the timing of the military service, and their realization is usually postponed until after its successful completion.

Military service along with Islamic circumcision are mandatory requirements for Turkish men to achieve full membership in society. If they are not adequately performed, the individual may lose his right to benefit from certain means provided by the society. Forcing every male individual to conform to these two practices to secure their social existence and status in Turkey becomes possible through discourses, doctrines and concepts that prioritize society over the individual.

people, the different dynamics of culture contacts on an individual level are examined in Kubik 2018: 21-36.

³ The last line of the Turkish Student Oath (*Öğrenci Andı*). Although recitation of the Student Oath was officially abolished in 2013, it was reinstated by the Council of State in 2018. However, in practice, the oath is not recited anymore.

Vocabulary used to express the condition of not performing military service in Turkish is mostly negative and derogatory. Males who have not completed their military service are considered to have an “outstanding debt to their homeland”. For those who want to receive a military exemption certificate due to health or other personal reasons/preferences, there is either a “*çürük* certificate”⁴ or a “pink certificate”.⁵ In various segments of society where patriarchy diffused more intensely, similar terminology and methods of effeminizing are used as a sexist humiliation strategy against individuals who do not establish their male identity as idealized by the society and government.

In the ceremonial “asking the girl/daughter” meetings of two families,⁶ one of the conditions set by the bride’s family is that the groom must (successfully) complete his military service. For male candidates, the same problem appears in recruitment processes when they apply for a job. Job applicants who have done their military service are preferred. In addition to this, a male individual’s friend circle may re-arrange their social relationships according to who has completed their military service. Another individual, who managed to keep his private life to himself until the time of his military service, may be both legally and psychologically forced to share his private life with his social circles and with state institutions as the price of not performing his duty. Correspondingly, such an individual may also be subject to a variety of sanctions, systemically or spontaneously, that limit his self-actualization rights in the given society.

As with similar transition practices aiming to “adapt” the individual to the society, military service provides a space for actions that extend beyond daily life (Berger 1968: 11) via ceremonies held both at the beginning and the end. In terms of their functions, such practices both psychologically prepare individuals for military service and inform the society that the customs are being followed.

With the mandatory military service, young men who have been roaming in their safe environments composed of immediate family, relatives, friends, neighbors, and/or villagers must enter into a new network of controlled, hierarchical, and closed relationships with numerous people from different parts of the country. In other words, «the individual settles in a cultural time and place other than the cultural reality in which he was born» (Gültekin 2015: 84). During this period, he must “be disciplined” by undertaking some of the responsibilities enforced by the state. In the meantime, when needed, the male individual is conditioned to willingly give his life, or “dedicate his existence”, for his homeland both during and after the military service (Takenaka 2018: 184). In the course of the draft period, for many young people who have reached their military age, these and similar thought patterns can become a kind of *idée fixe*.

⁴ Even though we can find this term translated in almost all dictionaries as “military exemption certificate,” a *mot à mot* translation reveals another context of the term. The Turkish word *çürük* can be translated into English as rotten or decayed, which gives clues as to how such certificates are perceived in Turkey.

⁵ The color pink, similar to many other societies in the world, is perceived as a feminine color in Turkey.

⁶ This is a practice in Turkey developed to ask a family’s permission “to give” their daughter as a bride.

Considering all these, the formation of soldier send-off ceremonies appears to be aiming to reduce possible sources of stress on the candidate or help to reinterpret these stressors. At this point, the first reward (Kamau 2013, Festinger 1961) and affirmative function of the soldier send-off ceremonies comes into play.

Shortly before the conscription day, the soldier candidate goes into a preparation process with the support of his closest circle of family and friends. In this process, the candidate is indoctrinated regarding the importance and holiness of military service, the transition to masculinity, and full integration into society. In some cases, the young individual's desire to be a martyr is particularly emphasized so that the value attributed to the individual is shifted to a higher plane, that of the homeland. This high value given to martyrdom creates a unique terminology. Martyrdom is located at the highest rank in society for every Turkish citizen. The individual, whose identity has been shaped from birth on, is accustomed to the idea that his life is worth less than the symbols of his group (flag, homeland etc.) and can be sacrificed for the sake of the nation's well-being as the following expression/slogan underlines: martyrs are immortal, our land is indivisible (*şehitler ölmez, vatan bölünmez*).

Due to their flamboyant nature, soldier send-off celebrations provide another function as an announcement tool for the organizers to demonstrate that the rules of the community are followed. For that purpose, during the last episode of the send-off celebrations, a convoy of multiple cars drives through the neighbourhood with the participation of the soldier candidate's closest friends. In most convoys, one can see the accompaniment of loud political and religious music, chants, slogans, and anthems. The national anthem, *İstiklâl Marşı*, is usually recited before the conscript gets on the vehicle that will take him to the city where the barracks are located.

Almost all behavioural motifs in the process of sending-off the soldier can be evaluated as exemplary patriotic actions (Takenaka 2018: 181). While these patriotic actions are similar to each other around the globe, due to their intricate connections with the manners and customs in societies like Turkey, they require further, in-depth examination. One of the equivalents of exemplary patriotic actions in the soldier send-off ceremonies in Turkey is the application of *henna*⁷ to the hands of conscripts (see further, Video example 8, 01:48-03:02). The act of applying *henna* to the conscript, which we can see as a continuation of decorating the ritual sacrifices from ancient times until today, means that «the individual is sacrificed for the well-being of the society» (Warner 1962: 8, Lukes 1975: 294-95). As in the soldier send-off, the application of *henna* is a part of the celebratory ceremonies, which usually include festivities and mass meals (Acara 2010: 92). It is important to note that *henna* is also applied to prospective brides and sacrificial lambs, which suggests that conscripts, brides, and lambs are all considered votives (Artun 1998: 97).

⁷ A red-brown colored plant substance, used for temporary tattoos, hair coloring and ritual marking of certain body parts, etc.

If we evaluate the ceremonies covering the different phases of the military service according to Arnold van Gennep's "three-part classification of initiation rites" (1909), it turns out that the soldier send-off ceremonies represent the "separation" section in Gennep's classification (Gültekin 2015: 84). Following this system, the process during which the military services is performed becomes the "transition" section in Gennep's classification, and the returning phase represents the "integration" section. However, an in-depth structural analysis of each section and their suitability to soldier send-off ceremonies in Turkey is beyond the scope of this paper.

Behavioural motifs that appear throughout the initiation/transition rites may have similar forms and contents in different regions. For example, Orlando Patterson (1982) drew attention to the analogical similarities of such common behavioural motifs by comparing the ritualized haircut in different periods and societies, for men and women, slaves as well as their owners. Shaving the head for the military service in Turkey usually takes place at any point during the first phase (separation), but in some cases, it can also be done after submission to the barracks, that is, at the beginning of the second (transition) phase. The act of cutting the hair for the military service takes place to mitigate differences between individuals with distinct «pre-military social position[s] in real life, political preferences, personal interests, and hairstyles representing personal tendencies» (Gültekin 2015: 84). In other words, the act is a symbolic indicator of the transition from one position to another, and the transition from one personality to an idealized one.

Although the haircut's symbolic relationship with status, mourning, and "social death" (Patterson 1982, Králová 2015) may differ from culture to culture, the main lines of practice are regularly reproduced in many regions. For instance, for members of Heavy Metal communities, cutting of long hair devoted to this lifestyle might create a perception of disloyalty and giving up on group ideals. There are several different interpretations and practices of hair cutting, some of which Patterson (1982) emphasizes. In his examples, slaves were condemned to mourn their owners for life by not cutting their hair. The common denominator of all the examples given above is the haircut as a symbol of transition from one state to another.

Re-Appearance of a Long-Prohibited Ritual

Sudden changes in the flow of life and established customs are usually triggered by strategic interventions or extraordinary events. On July 15, 2016, an extraordinary event took place in Turkey. A segment of the Turkish Armed Forces attempted a *coup d'état*, which backfired due to additional extraordinary events. Following President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's call, thousands of civilians went out onto the streets and squares to fight the putschists. More than three hundred people were killed by the morning.

What is of interest here is the relatively abrupt public appearance in the nation's political capital following the failed coup attempt of a ritual called *zikir*. Various *zikir*

performances took place as part of “democracy watches”, a form of civil resistance organized by the country’s leaders⁸ against the coup attempt, which eventually turned into pro-government rallies. During the democracy watches people were cheering in the streets mostly with religious and patriotic slogans. All around Turkey *salâ*⁹ and various supplications were broadcast for hours from the mosques and *Kızılay* Square, now officially named “July the 15th *Kızılay* National Will Square” and turned into a stage for the long-prohibited *zikir* in the name of democracy (Video examples [1](#), [2](#), and [3](#)).

There is a wide variety of approaches to describing *zikir* with regards to nomenclature, form, and performative aspects; there is also controversy as to *zikir*’s legitimacy in Islam.¹⁰ Awareness of the varied expressions of *zikir* across the Islamic world obliges us to be as mindful of *zikir*’s indeterminable qualities as we are of its universal features. This remains the case even if we limit the scope of study to Turkey.¹¹ Basically, *zikir* is a form of Islamic “ritual prayer” (Nakamura 1971: 9) or “devotional act” (Hasan 2012: 370), performed differently by different Muslim groups throughout the world. It is «the ritual invocation of god and divine authority [...] through the repetition of the Most Beautiful Names of God¹² and usually accompanied by the performance of chanting and bodily movements» (Shannon 2006: 112). Muslims around the globe, especially those who have a *tarikât*¹³ adherence, partake in regular *zikir* events that incorporate «all manners of religious practices: recitation of Qur’an, religious study, ordinary prayer [...] anything at all to remind one of God» (Frishkopf 1999: 321).

Like Arabic *dhikr*, according to the Turkish Language Association, *zikir* means “mentioning” and “remembering”. The encyclopaedia definitions, though helpful, do not cover all aspects of it. For example, in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, *dekr* is defined as remembrance and explained as “the act of reminding oneself of God” or “mentioning God’s name” (Böwering 1994: 229–233). In Brill’s *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, *dhikr* is similarly defined

⁸ Calling a movement organized by a country’s leaders “civil resistance” seems odd, but it did begin following Erdoğan’s call for people to gather in the streets and public squares. Civilians in great numbers voluntarily came out to confront the soldiers. Resistance was not against the government but against the putschist segment of the Turkish Armed Forces, who threatened the “civil democracy and its leader”. In response to Erdoğan’s call, many city governors and government officials repeated the call and eventually, mosques joined the chorus with the call to prayers.

⁹ *Sala* or *salâ* is a form in Turkish religious music. It is composed and performed to commemorate the Prophet. According to the online dictionary of the Turkish Language Association, its main function is to inform the public about a funeral, Friday prayer, and/or Eid prayers. On 15 July, it was used at President Erdoğan’s request to invite people to resist the coup plotters.

¹⁰ For more information see Gardet 2012; Swan 1912; Dakake 1999; Shah-Kazemi 2006; Loimeier 2006; Schimmel 1975; Ibn Teymiyye 2007; Kabbani 2004.

¹¹ For more information see Kara 1985; Markoff 1995; Feldman 1992; Uludağ 2004.

¹² Also known as *esmâ-i hüsnâ* referring to the ninety-nine names of God in Islam. The most recited ones on *zikir* occasions are *Allah*, *Hayy*, *Hakk* etc.

¹³ The term *tarikât*, (Arabic, *tarîqa*, path) refers to a religious school or order with mystical inclinations, which joins a spiritual leader (*mürşid*) and his followers (*mürîd*) in search of a form of esoteric religious practice, aimed at the closeness to God through particular practices, including *zikir* (remembering), *seyr-i sülûk* (spiritual journey; a form of education system particular to *tasavvuf*), and *fenâfillah* (annihilation of the self/ego). In addition to its mystical aims, a *tarikât* might also seek cultural and political influence over society and government, as in the case of Turkey.

as “reminding oneself” (Gardet 2012). In the New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, we find entries for *zikir*, *dhikr*, and *zikr*, defining it as “remembrance” (Neubauer, Doubleday 2001) and “recollection of God”.

In the *Kur’an* also, the term is mostly used for remembering God. Many verses (2: 152, 18: 24, 3: 191, 13: 28, etc.) directly affirm the importance of *zikir*, but do not clearly state how it is performed.¹⁴ Therefore, over time, numerous variants of the practice have appeared, shaped by such socio-cultural factors as regional and temporal variations in the understanding and practice of religion, arts, law, etc. *Zikir* as a religious practice with “mystical” inclinations is well-known in Islamic societies. Today we encounter everything from individually performed silent *zikir* to collective forms of *zikir* performed “aloud”,¹⁵ with or without musical accompaniment. For some *sufi* mystics, genuine *zikir* requires the practitioner to maintain continuous concentration and to restrain the self from all possible earthly attractions (Öngören 2013: 410-411) or “creaturely interests” (Weber 1978: 542). An “authentic” *zikir* requires the practitioner to keep a distance from the world and from the desires of the self (*nefs*), mainly by forgetting everything but reaching out to God.¹⁶ For others, it might be enough “to be attentive to God” (Geels 1996: 232) and do *zikir* while taking care of everyday duties. In sum, any action (Shannon 2006: 112) from simply controlled breathing to the following of strictly organized rules and ritual behaviours can be regarded as *zikir* by different groups of people.

While *zikir* as described above is not usually performed in public spaces in Turkey, the unique environment created by the democracy watches on the evening of July 15 enabled such performances. On the other hand, this new visibility of *zikir* should not be considered merely as the product of a single night. Although *zikir* performances were removed from the public sphere and officially prohibited with the law no. 677 in 1925,¹⁷ *zikir* continued to be carried out unobtrusively at the meetings held by *tarikats* members. Otherwise, one could not expect to witness groups of individuals suddenly appearing with uniform dresses and performing highly organized *zikir* rituals on the streets of An-

¹⁴ Some verses give clues on how to perform *zikir*, but these are only partial and remain open to interpretation; see for example 3: 191 and 7: 205.

¹⁵ Though it may evoke pejorative meanings, the term “howling dervishes” is still used to address certain groups of *zikir* performers.

¹⁶ Abstinence from “earthly delights” immediately recalls Weber’s theory of “world-rejecting asceticism”, but the variety in the expressions and objectives of *zikir* means that it cannot be reduced to a single theory. On the other hand, while Weber’s understanding of asceticism is that it is supposed to lead to “salvation”, an isolated performance of *zikir* (without the obligatory forms of worship in Islam) is less likely aimed at ultimate salvation. Certain verses of the *Kur’an* (8: 45; 13: 28; 33: 35; 62: 10) state that *zikir* brings different types of felicity in this world and the next – success against an enemy, assurance or peace (from God), forgiveness, and great reward. These do not fit Weber’s formulation. It remains possible that an individual or a *tarikats* member may conceive felicity differently and perform *zikir* accordingly. Some of these *zikir* forms, e.g. *daimi* (perpetual) *zikir*, can last a lifetime, and then they do approach Weber’s formulation of asceticism as a way of life. It is worth noting that certain practices from *tasavvuf*, such as *teccirüd* (isolation) and *halvet* (seclusion), can also incorporate types of extended *zikir*.

¹⁷ Law on the Closure of Dervish Lodges Hospices and Shrines and Abolition and Prohibition of the Use of Certain Titles.

kara. This suggests that those who performed *zikir* as part of the democracy watches had previously rehearsed their performances, most likely multiple times.

Even though we cannot precisely date the initial re-appearance of *zikir* in Turkey, it has become increasingly visible in the period after 2010. Thanks to the technology that allows any individual with a smartphone or a similar device to record and upload videos on various online platforms, we are now able to reach (and even participate in) numerous events with a couple of keystrokes. The same applies to *zikir* events as well. It is now possible to find a myriad of uploaded *zikir* recordings online from around the world. The data for this work was obtained from these personal videos uploaded to certain online platforms by the participants of the given event. The content of the events and the structure of the performances are interpreted by the author through a comparison of the antecedent, more or less settled, versions of the send-off ceremonies as well as through personal experiences. A preliminary look at the recent developments, concerning a strategically heightened piety in Turkey and the visible mutations within the soldier send-off ceremonies, reveals that *zikir* ritual has gained a new usage among certain segments of the Turkish society. The diversity of recent *zikir* occasions in Turkey is therefore quite intriguing. Along with soldier send-off ceremonies, there are now elementary school shows containing *zikir* contests, the national anthem being recited as accompaniment for a *zikir* performance ([Video example 4](#)), television series with *zikir* scenes broadcasted by the state's radio and television corporation, or a *zikir* event taking place within the Presidential Complex ([Video example 5](#)). This re-appearance of *zikir* in different forms can be explained through an analysis of Turkey's "wind of change".

Turkey's Recent Political Atmosphere in a Nutshell

Portraying themselves as "conservative democrats"¹⁸ representative of a modern and "moderate Islam",¹⁹ the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party, JDR) led by the current President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan succeeded in gathering enough votes for a parliamentary majority in 2002. They have been governing Turkey ever since. The JDR went on to pass the constitutional amendment package in 2010, and then to set out an explicitly Islam-based policy strategy. Roughly since then, the adjustments and reforms (or counter-reforms) the JDR has introduced and their methods of implementation can be viewed as markers of conservatism and the formulation of a New Turkey, designed to undo "ultra-modernist" reforms introduced by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk that had been shaping Turkey since the 1920s.

The builders of the New Turkey are agitating society to reclaim pious Muslim identity as the primary marker of self-definition. The conservative movement in Turkey, like any other political movement, intends to expand its sphere of influence into new milieux.

¹⁸ For more details see the series of interviews with the AKP's founders by Ruşen Çakır available online.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

Various examples of the gradual Islamization of Turkey could be cited. For instance, a new mass education programme has brought an Islamicized curriculum «in line with the Sunni faith» (Gürsel, Bila 2014), with the number of religious vocational schools (*Imam Hatip* high schools) rising about 73% in a couple of years (Education Monitoring Report 2013). Also, the Directorate of Religious Affairs has widened its sphere of influence, with a dramatically increased budget that «surpassed the budgets of 12 ministries» (Gökdemir 2016).

As one of the results of these socio-political processes, religious forms such as *zikir* performed by certain orders have found a more comfortable place of existence than in previous periods. As political powers in Turkey repeatedly reproduce and propagandize ideal piety, not only has the *zikir* ritual reappeared in different contexts, but certain religious orders (*tarikât*) and organizations have also been encouraged to strategically increase their activities throughout the social sphere.

The Content of Soldier Send-Off Ceremonies in Turkey

Symbolic associations of military service with the religious contexts of the rituals linked to military service are important indicators of «the fluidity between tradition and religion» (Şahin 2011: 123) in Turkey. Before anything else, the military – which is regarded as the “prophet’s hearth” (*peygamber ocağı*) – has been consciously sanctified over time through the association of “the hearth”²⁰ with the (Turkic) ancestors, and the cult of the prophet with Islam (*ibidem*: 119). At the same time, prayers read at many stages of the send-off ceremonies indicate the sacredness of the duty and the intended pious state of mind of the conscripts.

Although send-off ceremonies contain intensive religious elements due to the features mentioned above, the musical accompaniment in the departure phase has a remarkably profane character. In recent years, however, one can observe ceremonial and group forms of *zikir* ritual as a new element in soldier send-off ceremonies. It is possibly a new trend in Turkey; therefore, the practice is only sporadic and not yet entirely established.

Some episodes of the soldier send-off ceremonies which employ music are distinguished from the other religiously loaded episodes by their festive atmosphere. These episodes usually incorporate specific dances, e.g. *halay*, selected from the region’s profane music and dance repertoire ([Video example 6](#)). Mainly accompanied by *davul* (double-sided large drum) and *zurna*²¹ (double-reed wind instrument) – the same duo which performs at weddings – soldier send-off ceremonies came to be known as “soldier’s wed-

²⁰ In Turkish, as in many other languages, the word hearth (*ocak*) also has metaphorical meanings of home, family, and lineage.

²¹ Depending on the location some other instruments can be used. In many parts of Thrace (European Turkey), for example, clarinet is used instead of *zurna*.

ding” (*asker düğünü*). Additional practices such as recitation of the Tenth Annual March (*Onuncu Yıl Marşı*) and a moment of silence for the martyrs are also part of the mass celebrations organized by the municipality or a similar institution. In some organizations, participants recite stories and poems that praise martyrdom and underline its importance. For the past several decades, private orchestras are rented to accompany such recitations with a mixture of *arabesk* and *türkü* music styles. In this way, the emotional state of everyone participating in the event, especially the conscripts and their families, is raised to a target peak (Video examples 7 and 8). Thus, the stress and intense emotions created by the separation – which can result in death – are, at least to a certain extent, relieved. With the new music options brought by increasing urbanization, and thanks to the accessibility of electronic instruments, the use of the *davul-zurna* duo has gradually decreased (Kılıç 2012: 353). It is usually replaced with hybrid genres such as a mixture of *türkü-arabesk* styles with popular electronic beats played by a DJ (Video example 9).

There is no clear information yet whether the *zikir* performances at soldier send-off ceremonies are performed together with the established practice of dances accompanied by *davul-zurna*, or instead of this practice. However, in some videos on the internet showing *zikir* being performed in the open or at the bus station as part of send-off ceremonies, we observe that profane dances are completely replaced with *zikir*-specific body movements and the *davul-zurna* duo with the *bendir* (frame drum), an important accompaniment instrument in Turkish religious music.

The *zikirs* of post-2010 soldier send-off ceremonies are generally performed in groups and accompanied by multiple *bendir* players. In some of these *zikir* performances, such as those of a Konya-based congregation affiliated with the *Kadiri tarikat*, uniform clothing stands out as an indication of *tarikat* membership, while in other performances of *zikir* as part of soldier send-off ceremonies the participants are in their everyday clothing. Unlike *davul-zurna*-based profane celebrations, another point that draws attention in all soldier send-off ceremonies accompanied by *zikir* is that only men are in the frame, while women have lost their visibility completely.

In these new *zikir* contexts, which are manifestations of both a politicized (Takenaka 2018: 180) and a more intensely Islamized aesthetic understanding, it is impossible to measure to what extent performers’ minds are engaged only with the idea of God.

In terms of form, *zikir* performed at soldier send-off ceremonies shows similarities with *zikir* rituals both in Turkey and in different regions of the world. Along with certain forms incorporating one to seven *bendir* players to provide the rhythmic structure and tempo (Video example 10), there are also other *zikir* forms accompanied only by a *cap-pella*²² chanting (Video example 11, first four minutes). In the latter, rhythmic structure is formed according to the prosodic features of the recited names of God (*esmâ-i hüsnâ*) such as *Allah*, *Hayy*, *Hakk* etc. and Islamic declaration of faith (*kelime-i şehadet: la ilahe*

²² Here the term is used in the sense of having no instrumental accompaniment, not “in the manner of the chapel” as the original meaning suggests.

illallah). *Bendir* players do not often actively participate in *zikir*'s bodily acts, and they form a separate group from those who chant and sway. The number of these chanting and swaying individuals may vary from a few to a few dozen. All the videos available on the internet are amateur shots and the recordings may start at any point in the *zikir* performance. Therefore, we cannot determine the beginning or the end of any of these performances. For the same reason, it is not possible to detect an increasing tempo, which is a common feature of practically all *zikir* rituals around the world. Therefore, a healthy analysis of the form cannot be done. These performances were presumably a part, or imitation of systematized *zikir* rituals adapted to the soldier send-off ceremonies. The *zikir* of soldier send-off ceremonies is performed in different settings such as the bus station, where the last stage of ceremonies takes place ([Video example 12](#)); a street where the candidate's house is located; or a place for *tarikât* gathering designed particularly for *zikir* occasions. Therefore, we also cannot determine at which stage *zikir* became a part of the send-off ceremonies.

Regarding the movement repertoire and dance, unlike the *davul-zurna*-based celebrations accompanied by profane dances and *halay* varieties, the prevalent movement motifs of collective *zikir* are reproduced in the send-off ceremonies. These motifs can be summarized as moving the upper part of the body and head back and forth (in a sitting or standing position), in line with the rhythmic structure and general tempo of each word (*esmâ-i hüsnâ*) that is repeated orally (e.g. Video examples [4](#) and [12](#)). According to Durkheim's view (1912), such activities where "collective effervescence" may occur provide a common ground where participants synchronize their movements, emotions, and even their heartbeats. The *zikir* performances that started to appear at soldier send-off ceremonies can also be regarded as techniques aimed at achievement of a form of euphoria. Euphoric feelings are expected products of *zikir* rituals. One may obtain such feelings at the peak of the performance. Thus, they provide an emotional discharge for participants, who adjust their chanting and movements according to the rest of the group.

Conclusion

Traditions inevitably change over time to adapt to changing conditions. With these dynamics, we can see traditions as cultural practices in which both present and past are formed together, while their executors and participants experience time in a multi-layered manner.

Ritual processes associated with events such as weddings, circumcisions, and soldier send-off ceremonies could last for days in previous periods. With the effects of modernized city lives and globalization, these rituals are now transforming at a much faster pace. As a result of modern life, the rituals related to birth and circumcision are now taking place at hospitals instead of houses or neighbourhoods. This differentiates their processes

(inclusion of hospital rules, etc.) and reduces what used to be a days-long transition period to a single day. A striking example is the changing condition of *mukanda na makisi* “annual initiation/circumcision rite for boys”. This practice, which required days of seclusion in forest as part of the initiation process, have changed in light of illegal Chinese forestry in Angola. In addition to that, attempts to bring stricter health regulations have pushed this practice to near extinction (Kubik 2014–2020).

Similarly, traditions accompanying soldier send-off ceremonies in Turkey are also subject to transformation as briefly described above. These ceremonies, which have gained new features in parallel with the technological developments that emerged a few decades ago, may also be subject to further changes in the future depending on the social environment, personal preferences, and economic and political variables. The recent occurrence of a form of religio-patriotism in Turkey unquestionably has a fundamental influence on how soldier send-off ceremonies are performed. As the most obvious indicator of this influence, I aimed to highlight the attachment of an essentially religious practice, *zikir*, to these ceremonies. This new visibility of *zikir* reflects the adaptability of traditions to new habitats, a process continually re-shaped by numerous variables. However, it is important to note that traditions do not adapt themselves. It is the individuals’ reinterpretation – to return to Herskovitz’s term – as well as analysis, experiments, and even feelings that reform traditions. As the example of *zikir* demonstrates, relocation, context switch, and structural variations of certain applications are indicative of the needs of a particular group of individuals (not traditions themselves) and as a result, their strategic adaptations.

What we see here is that those groups of people who prioritize their Muslim “profile” (Kubik 2018: 23) over the others (for example profiles based on ethnicity, career, dietary habits etc.) may prefer to perform *zikir* instead of profane dances accompanied by *davul-zurna* duos or electronic music beats. While this was not possible before the active policies of the JDR, the state is now directly and indirectly promoting *zikir* and providing safe spaces for its performances. Another important point is *zikir*’s suitability and relevance to soldier send-off ceremonies.²³ Thanks to its simple structure based on repetitions and its flamboyant character, *zikir* appears to be a good match. With *zikir* at soldier send-off ceremonies, performers can both bluntly display their loyalty to the group and at the same time actively deal with their emotions.

Before anything else, the continuity or lack thereof of the above-mentioned political atmosphere will be the main determinant regarding the spread and persistence of this form of *zikir* in Turkey.

²³ Victor Turner examines this with the term “functional equivalence” (Şahin 2011: 119; Turner 1974: 65). However, I do not claim that *zikir* is functionally equivalent of the practices in soldier send-off ceremonies, as each practice has its complex semantic realms.

Video examples

1. *Ömer Efendi Dergahı Kızılay Meydanı* (Ömer Efendi Dervish Lodge, Kızılay Square) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6PhHcYMn6E>>.

2. *Ankara Kızılay Meydanı Zikir Ordusu* (Zikir Army in Ankara, Kızılay Square) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1dRn2OhKvFE>>.

3. *16 Temmuz 2016 Ankara Kızılay Meydanı Zikir* (Zikir in Ankara, Kızılay Square, 16 July 2016) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wAnQQZAcPC0>>.

4. *İstiklal Marşıyla zikir çekerek asker uğurladılar* (They Sent off Soldiers by Chanting the National Anthem in their Zikir) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-tLDAKpEqp4>>.

5. *Cumhurbaşkanlığı Külliyesi'nde Zikir Ayini* (Zikir Rite at the Presidential Complex) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mlVjxKcaDkl>>.

6. *Bayburt'ta Asker Uğurlaması Davullu Zurnalı Olur* (Soldier Send-off in Bayburt is Celebrated with Davul and Zurna) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kggLaLqAGFE>>.

7. *Asker Kınam Yakılıyor* (My Soldier – henna is being applied) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SeJqMPFIswE>>.

Example for the targeted emotional states with the accompaniment of *arabesk* music.

8. *Kına. Bu İnsan Benim Babam* (Henna. This Man is My Father) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZ4_WPfBtMQ>.

Example for the targeted emotional states with the accompaniment of *arabesk* music.

9. *Bağcılar Asker Eğlencesi* (Soldier Celebration in Bağcılar, İstanbul) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qv83qcCqxb4>>.

Example for pre-recorded *davul-zurna* mixed with electronic beats and *balay* dance.

10. *Asker Böyle Uğurlanır. İlabilerle Gaziantep Aşkı Semazenler İlahi Grubu* (This is how Soldier Send-off is done. Hymns from the Gaziantep-love Whirling Dervish Group) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ccWYP2KaZM>>.

11. *Samimi İhvanların Asker Uğurlama Zikri Eğlencesi* (The Zikir of Soldier Send-off Celebration by the Sincere Brethrens) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4F15eG6DYAY>>.

12. *Otogarda Zikir. Asker Böyle Uğurlanır* (Zikir at the Bus Station. This is how to do Soldier Send-off) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WUBO0aam06E>>.

Text of the songs

Video 7:**Song: *Eledim Eledim****Eledim Eledim**Eledim eledim, höllük eledim**Aynalı beşikte yavrum bebek beledim**Büyüttüm besledim asker eyledim**Gitti de gelmedi yavrum buna ne çare**Yaktı yüreğimi canan buna ne çare*

(I sifted dry earth over and over / to make a diaper for my baby / In a mirrored cradle I swaddled my baby / I raised and fed him and made him a soldier / He went but didn't come, oh my baby, is there any remedy / It tore my heart out, oh beloved, is there any remedy)

This song is performed to describe the emotional state of a conscript's mother. She is lamenting the loss of her son during his military service. Using this song as part of a send-off ceremony prepares both the mother and the conscript for an outcome that may result in death. Various shifts in the emotional state of the conscript can be seen from his facial expressions. In this video, what we see is only the first half of the song. The content of the second part narrates a passion for love and fascination for a beautiful face. Since this second part is irrelevant and not "in the mood" for the aimed emotional states in a send-off context, it is excluded from the performance.

Song: *Havar (Help)*. [02:18]*Böyle bir başıma bırakma beni**Zaten yaralıyım vurmayın beni**Boynu bükük bir gül çiçek misali**Dalımdan koparıp almayın beni**Aman havar havar havar komşular havar**Askerim vurulmuş komşular havar**Garibim vurulmuş komşular havar*

(Don't leave me alone like this / I'm already injured, don't shoot me / Like a bent rose flower / Don't tear me off my branch // Aman help help help neighbours / My soldier was shot, neighbours, help / My poor boy was shot, neighbours, help)

Havar is the Turkish version of the Kurdish *hawar*, which is used to express a cry for help. Like *havar*, *aman* is a sort of cry for help and an expression of intense emotions. It can also mean "for God's (or Heaven's) sake". An intriguing link is inclusion of *aman aman* as a musical expression (of intense emotions) leading to a Greek musical style, *αμανέζ* (*amanés*), developed, most likely, in İzmir (*Smyrna*) and İstanbul (*Constantinople*), during the late Ottoman Era.

Song: *Zahide*. [03:28]*Zahide kurbanım oy ne olacak hâlim**Yine bir laf duydum büküldü belim*

*Gelenden geçenden oy haber sorarım
Askerim bu hafta oluyor gelin*

(My Zahide, for God's sake, what will become of me? / I heard a word again, and have become poor and helpless / I ask every passer about the news / My soldier is becoming a bride this week)

The word soldier is not present in the original version of *Zahide*, but here, to make the song relevant to send-off, it is added by the performer. At some point during the performance of this song, the singer asks the conscript, whether he is crying. Suggesting that the singer aims at that end.

Video 8:

Song: *Gülümse Anne* (Smile Mother).

*Akşam olur, hasret büyyür dağ olur
Bu dağlarda kurşun atsan çığ olur
Sen oğlunu geri dönmez say anne
Ben ölünce belki vatan sağ olur.*

The Dj addresses the mother of the conscript and asks her to hug her son. The Dj attempts to raise the intensity of the emotional states of both sides, which will be released throughout the performance.

*Belki dağlar duman duman savrulur,
Belki sesim çığlık çığlık duyulur,
Belki yavrun bir tabuta koyulur,
Üzülme annem.*

*Bir yangın ki ciğer ciğer kavrulur,
Bir yangın ki kardeş kardeş vurulur,
Belki kalbim bir bayrağa kan olur,
Gülümse annem*

(Evening comes, longing grows and becomes a mountain / If you shoot a bullet in these mountains, it will become an avalanche / You count your son as not coming back mom / Maybe the homeland will be alive when I die // Maybe the mountains will blow in smoke / Maybe my voice will be heard screaming / Maybe your baby will be put in a coffin / Don't be upset, my mother // A fire where it burns my liver / A fire where brothers are shot / Maybe my heart will be blood on a flag, Smile my mother)

The DJ waggishly says: «let's not raise our mother's blood pressure anymore», suggesting that the DJ controls the participants' emotional and psychologic conditions. In an attempt to change the mood, following this piece, the DJ plays another song with a completely different mood and upbeat.

Instrumental: *Ölürüm Türkiyem* (I die for you my Turkey). [02:01]

This piece is one of the most commonly performed songs not only in soldier send-off ceremonies but also in various other gatherings of certain groups with nationalistic tendencies. Here in this event, this piece is played when the henna was applied to the conscript. Most likely symbolizing the mother's willing sacrifice of her son for the well being of the nation.

Song: *Bu Adam Benim Babam* (This Man is My Father). [03:08]

The DJ asks the father of the conscript to take his place (almost head to head with his son) for both sides (father and son) to confront their current emotions. After the father took his place, the DJ says: «I got this», meaning he is about to play a song that will bring a similar result with the mother and son situation before.

*Ağlama naçar babam
Dert etme aslan babam
Kara gün geçer babam hey*

*Bir kapıyı kapayan gene açar babam
Allah Kerim, Rabbim büyük babam*

*Ah bu adam benim babam, sekiz köşe kasketiyle,
Omuzunda sakosuyla hey hey*

The DJ, addressing the father and the conscript: «Come on, let us see you hug each other»

*Cebinde yok parası, bafradır cıgarası,
Ciğerindedir yarası
Altı çocuk büyütmüş gariban maaşıyla
Bu adam benim babam hey*

*Ağlama naçar babam
Dert etme aslan babam
Kara gün geçer babam hey
[...]
Bu adam benim babam
Derdi dağlardan büyük
Biçare beli büyük hey ...*

*Bir gün olsun gülmemiş
Rahat nedir bilmemiş
Göz yaşını silmemiş
Bir parça ekmek için kimseye eğilmemiş
Bu adam benim babam hey hey
Ağlama naçar babam
Dert etme aslan babam
Kara gün geçer babam hey
[...]*

(Don't cry, my desperate father / Don't worry, my lion father / The dark day passes my father, hey // When a door closes another one opens, father / God is gracious, Lord is great, father // This man is my father, with his octagonal cap / With his jacket on his shoulder hey hey // No money in his pocket, smokes tobacco / which is the cheapest / His wound is in his heart / He raised six children with his poor salary / This man is my father hey // Don't cry, my desperate father / Don't worry, my lion father / The dark day passes my father, hey // (...) This man is my father / His heartache is bigger than the mountains / Wretched and broken hey... // He

didn't laugh for a day / He didn't know what was comfort / Never wiped his tears / He didn't bow to anyone for a piece of bread / This man is my dad hey hey // Don't cry, my desperate father / Don't worry, my lion father / The dark day passes my father, hey).

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