



REVIEW ARTICLE

Turkish-Islamic Perspective on Nature

Zeynep Doğru¹ and Sefa Bulut²

¹Department of Counseling Psychology and Guidance, Ibn Haldun University, Istanbul, Turkey

²Head of Counseling Psychology and Guidance Department, Ibn Haldun University, Istanbul, Turkey

Abstract

Throughout the history, apart from the basic survival needs, human beings have had a universal interest and attraction to nature and to natural elements. Characteristics of this affiliation and relationship with nature varies across cultures, religions and countries. Turks relation to nature started to take shape in the Central Asian steppes with the belief of Sky God and Shamanist culture, and continued to change and develop with the acceptance of Islam and adoption of settled life style. Before Islam, the mother nature and the natural elements were considered sacred. With the acceptance of Islam in Turkish societies, the attitude towards nature was shaped through hadiths (teachings of the prophet Muhammad) and verses of the Qur'an, and Turks began to approach nature and all living creatures as their protectors. The importance given by the Turks to nature can be detected from the gardens they built in the Seljuk and Ottoman Empire, the use of natural elements in various branches of art such as poetry, miniatures, ceramics, weaving, and proverbs and idioms that draw attention to the importance of the environment and nature. However, in today's Turkish society, it is observed that the interest and environmentalist attitude towards nature has decreased and the green spaces have been diminished from various areas of life day by day. This negative change in relation to nature is considered as a result of the westernization movements that started in the 18th century. It is thought that with these movements cultural identity has been lost and the relationship with nature has been left to the hands of the authorities.

Keywords: Islamic Perspective about Nature, Nature In Turkish Culture, Tengrism, Turkish Gardens, Turkish Proverbs, Symbolic Meanings of Natural Elements

Introduction

Given the fact that relation to nature has some universal characteristics for all human beings, it is clearly seen that there are some differences in these relationships across different cultures, religions and regions. Hence, it is important to capture the regional and cultural aspects about nature to understand the innate human need to connect with nature more. Turkey has a population which mainly involve Muslim people. Thus, this paper focuses on the Turkish-Islamic perspective on nature to enlighten the subjective characteristics about nature connection of this country.

Religions and Belief Systems of Turks

Throughout history, Turks believed in various religions, such as Tengrism, Manichaeism, Animism, Buddhism, and Islam. Before Turks accepted and practiced the religion of Islam, they widely believed in Tengrism, implying that there is an omnipotent Creator, whose place is in the sky. According to this belief, holiness is attributed to natural elements such as mountains, trees, rocks and rivers. People practicing this religion worshipped *Tengri*, the sky-creator, as well as other sacred natural organisms. For example, people who practiced Tengrism viewed the fire as a sacred element because it helped them deal with the harsh and long winters in the steppes of Central Asia, which was the residence of Turkish nomads before their current residence in Anatolia [1]. Turkish people

were also affected by shamanistic culture before the Islamic era. Shamans believed that the earth was full of souls; mountains, rivers and lakes are living things that can talk, listen, and even get married. For this reason, respect for nature was considered very important for the Turks, who mainly believed in Tengrism and were subject to the cultural influence of Shamanism [2].

After the adoption of the religion of Islam and the transition from a nomadic lifestyle to a settled one, the relationship between nature and human for the Turks began to obtain several dimensions. All aspects of nature had been respected and were considered reflections of the Almighty God on the earth [2]. Gardens can be a very good example about this transformation. Turkish nomads in Central Asia did not restrict natural elements into limited places such as gardens. All living organisms from mountains to trees had considered as nature itself. After Turkish nomadic societies started to settle, they began to create large gardens and parks. Historical records from China, India, and Persia pointed out that there were large and beautiful gardens in Samarkand, Central Asia [3]. In addition, it can be stated that the real relationship between

Correspondence to: Sefa Bulut, Ibn Haldun University, Head of Counseling Psychology and Guidance Department Istanbul, Turkey; E-mail: sefabulut22[AT]gmail[DOT]com, zeynep[DOT]dogru[DOT]nz[AT]gmail[DOT]com

Received: July 23, 2020; **Accepted:** Aug 13, 2020; **Published:** Aug 15, 2020

the Turks and the gardens began when they created Islamic-oriented two great civilizations; Seljuk Empire and Ottoman Empire. In these two empires, the Turks reflected their new vision of life and nature through gardens [4].

According to the Islamic faith, this life on earth is temporary and full of difficulties and suffering. Only for a true believer of *Allah*, the God can bear the difficulties of this life and will be rewarded with heaven in the afterlife. *Jannah*, the heaven was described in detail in the *Qur'an*, the holy book of Islam. It has been described as a magnificent garden in which various beautiful fruits, flowers and trees grow and rivers flow. That is why, Muslims have established a spiritual connection between God and the gardens. Along their history, Turkish Muslims from many civilizations, including the Seljuks and the Ottoman Empire, had tried to create a heavenly garden on earth [4]. This type of spiritual relationship with nature has also been observed by some Western travelers traveling around the Ottoman Empire. The French botanist Joseph Python de Tournefort described his observations of the Turkish people in his letters. In one of his letters, he said: "The most pious Turks were those who water plants and loosen the soil. Caring for plants and vegetation, they think that they are doing good deeds with which God was pleased." [2].

In addition, Islamic teachings care about the relationship between man and nature, intensively. The *Quran*, the holy book of Islam, contains many verses about nature. Furthermore, the most of the chapters in the Quran are named by natural elements like bee, horse, spiders, lightning, wind, sun, stars, elephants, etc. The Quran does not attribute sacred elements to natural elements, as is the case in many other religions. According to Islam, natural elements such as mountains, rivers and trees are not sacred for worship. Moreover, Islam has not described nature as an enemy that destroys human well-being, like in some western ideologies. Islam declares that nature and the entire universe worship and praise the God. The universe, the earth and the nature were given to people as a gift for service. They were all created for the benefit of the people (45:13). For this reason, the duty of humanity has been described as the successor, protector, organizer and administrator of all living beings. Through this duty, Islam guides the ethical views of Muslims about nature. The Quran says that (6:38) all groups of living beings are societies like people. Therefore, Muslims must take into account the rights of other creatures as an *Ummah*, the society [5]. In addition to the verses of the noble Quran, the words and way of life of the prophet Muhammad shape the lives of Muslims. One of the famous words of the prophet Muhammad affirms the importance of paying attention to the environment and vegetation: "If the hour (the day of Resurrection) is about to be established and one of you was holding a palm shoot, let him take advantage of even one second before the hour is established to plant it." And he explained in another statement how important it is to plant trees: "If a Muslim plants a tree or sows seeds, and a bird, or a person or an animal eats from it, it is regarded as a charitable gift (*sadaqah*) for him." [6]. The Quranic verses and the words of the Prophet focus intensely on nature and affirm

that humans are responsible for the protection of nature and living beings, these teachings show the value of nature and living harmoniously with it.

Turkish Gardens, Turkish Art and Turkish Proverbs

Perhaps it is because of their nomadic heritage that the Turks had always been interested in outdoor life, such as traveling and gardening. Whether they were wealthy or poor, they always had gardens near their homes. Historical records indicates that the Turks preferred to name important palaces as gardens. Also, if they wanted to settle down somewhere, they always took into account the beauty of the scenery, the availability of water resources and the possibilities of hunting. As a result of these considerations, construction of buildings and settlements began [4].

The unique styles of Turkish gardens also pointed out that how Turks preferred to relate with nature. Although the structure of Turkish gardens were influenced by Persian, Byzantine and Indian gardens, over time they created their own unique style of gardens. Turks created gardens in a way that they could communicate with and feel nature, unlike most of western societies in which gardens were designed strictly structured and not as a place to contact with nature but as a beautiful scenery to be watched [4]. The Turkish people were also interested in the functionality and benefits of gardens. This is why, fruit trees had always been part of their gardens. The researchers [3] made clear that Turkish gardens had always been as simple and modest as their main characteristics. The least intervention to nature was preferred in these gardens and natural form of mother nature was protected. For this reason, garden soil was preserved in its natural form and tree pruning was rarely preferred. On the other hand, water had always been an important part of these gardens. Therefore, a pool, a river or a fountain had always been included [7]. In addition, the courtyards were built inside or next to the houses because the Turks did not see the gardens outside their homes, but as part of their lives.

Turkish gardens also played an important social role in Turkish culture. Historical records showed that especially in the Ottoman Empire, the weddings and festivities were held in the gardens and different beautiful flowers were used in these ceremonies. Today, Turkish society also prefer to held weddings in the countryside and in gardens. These types of weddings are getting more and more popular. It can be stated that the Turkish people are instinctively following in the footsteps of their predecessors. Although flowers and trees that were planted in gardens and used in these ceremonies for their beauty and usefulness, they also have a special symbolic importance for the Turks. For example, the plane tree is considered as a source of life, and for this reason these trees were planted in the gardens of mosques, palaces and the lands of the newly invaded cities of the Ottoman Empire. The cypress trees symbolize the singularity of God because of its shape and longevity, and they were especially planted in cemeteries [2]. Red roses symbolize the love of *Muhammad*, the Prophet of Islam. This is why, the Muslim Turkish folks chose to plant red

roses in their gardens to remember their love for the Prophet. Another important fact about Turk's relation to nature can be viewed from historical records. A very important political and social era in Turkey's history is called by the name of a flower; The Tulip Era. At during the Tulip Era (1718-1730), there were huge tulip gardens throughout the capital city of Istanbul, and these flowers symbolized peace, wealth, and the singularity of the God [8]. Indeed, the tulips were Anatolian-oriented, their origin came from the lands of Anatolia. The Turkish people took enormous care of tulips, especially after the 12th century, and used symbolic meaning of this flower in their art, poetry, and literature. In his letters, the Austrian ambassador Busbecq mentioned his remarks on the Tulip Gardens in Istanbul. In one of his letters, written in 1559, he wrote that "Tulips are hardly smelling, but their beauty and the diversity of their rich colors inspire the viewer." Busbecq was dazzled by the beauty of these colorful gardens with different kinds of tulips. Returning to Augsburg, he took many samples of this flower and thanks to this ambassador's efforts, European societies were introduced with the tulip [9].

The authentic connection to nature of the Turkish people can also be found in the various branches of art. Especially in the Ottoman Empire, in the art of stonemasonry, ceramic, miniatures, carpet weaving, woodcuts, etc., many characters related to nature such as leaves, red poppy, daffodils, carnations, lilies and roses could be seen. The art of *Tezhip*, the illuminated manuscript of the Qur'an, also contains many characters related to nature. In Turkish literature, there were some special poems for certain types of flowers. Some poets revealed their love for nature through these poetries and used metaphorical meanings of flowers to reflect their feelings [2]. Today, the remains of this profound association with nature are clearly visible in historical buildings, mosques and museums.

Furthermore, this deep and inherent relationship with nature can be found in certain Turkish sayings, idioms and proverbs such as "There is no flood in the land of trees" or "A drop of water is like a grain of gold" [10]. These proverbs are used by the true meaning of these natural elements as well as their symbolic meanings that serve as educational guides for life. Most Turkish proverbs refer to the importance of nature for human life and also include environmentalist teachings such as "If you cut green wood, then you cut a head" or "Drop by drop a lake come out" [11]. These proverbs illustrate the importance of protecting woods and saving water.

Turks' Current Relation to Nature

However, the Turkish people's current state of the relationship with nature is an important issue that needs to be discussed. Although the Turks have a deep connection to nature and this connection is visible in history through the historical Turkish gardens, the exact opposite situation prevails in the life of the Turkish people today. Unfortunately, there is a limited place for nature in the areas of education, social life, health and architecture. This alienation from nature started in the 18th century when westernization movements increased [2,3]. These movements, which influenced the military, educational

and social systems, also changed the perception of nature of Turkish society. Western authorities were appointed in the Ottoman palaces. In addition to extensive renovation work in military and education, these authorities redesigned the gardens of the Turkish palaces with their own perspectives. Due to the fact that Western ideology portrays that nature is only beautiful if it receives appropriate and strict interventions [5]. These western authorities in Ottoman Palaces changed the design and use of palace gardens. In time, this alteration about perspective of nature expanded from the ruling class into the society. The Turkish people left their relationship with nature in the hands of the authorities[2]. To sum up, with the cultural change that began with Westernization movements in the 18th century, the Turkish people were isolated from nature and from their own cultural identity.

Conclusion

Neither Islamic belief nor historical Turkish culture did not ignore the importance of nature. Turkish gardens, Turkish Proverbs and Turkish art were clear examples about this giving importance, culturally. Islamic ideology and teachings also restructured and valued the importance of nature and role of human beings as in the charge of all living beings. While their history, culture and belief system encourage Turkish people to connect with nature and to protect environment, Western ideology which has been dominant in Turkish lives since 18th century alienated Turkish people from their own perspective on nature. It can be observed that the green settings and natural elements has been decreased in the areas of education, health and social system in Turkey, day by day. In order to reconnect with nature again, Turkish people can connect with their cultural hereditary and history.

References

1. Eroğlu, T & Kılıç H (2010) Türk inançları ve inanışlar [Turkish beliefs and faiths] J Social Policy Conf 49: 750-770. [[View Article](#)]
2. Çınar S & Kırca S (2010) Türk kültüründe bahçeyi algılamak [Understanding gardens in Turkish culture] J Faculty of Forestry 60: 59-68. [[View Article](#)]
3. Tazebay İ & Akpınar N (2010) Türk kültüründe bahçe [Gardens in Turkish culture]. Bilig 54: 243-253. [[View Article](#)]
4. Demiröz Z (2002) Tarihsel süreç içinde bahçe sanatı, Hint-Moğol Bahçeleri Örneği ve İslam Bahçelerinin Türk bahçe sanatına etkileri. [Gardening art in the historical process, according to the example of Indian Mongolian Gardens and Turkish garden art of Islamic Gardens](Unpublished Master Thesis). İstanbul Teknik Üniversitesi Fen Bilimleri Enstitüsü, İstanbul. [[View Article](#)]
5. El-Karadavi Y (2011) İslam'da çevre bilinci [Environmental consciousness in Islam]. İstanbul: Nida Yayınları.
6. Fathi M (2019) 10 Green hadiths. Retrieved March 20, 2020 [[View Article](#)]
7. Nemlioğlu C (2010) Artuklu'dan Osmanlı'ya Bahçe Kültüründe Suyun yeri, Havuzlar ve Fiskiyeler [The importance of water on gardening culture through Artuklu to Ottoman]. Paper presented at Symposium of Water Civilizations Konya 302-314. [[View Article](#)]

8. Nemliođlu C & Mazak F (2009) İstanbul Lalesi'nin Türk ve Batı Kültürüne Etkisi [The effect of Istanbul Tulip on Turkish and Western Culture]. Paper presented at 7th International Congress on Turkish Culture. [[View Article](#)]
9. Ünver AS (1971) Türkiye'de lale tarihi [The history of Tulips in Turkey]. Vakıflar Dergisi 265-276. [[View Article](#)]
10. Külüm K (2009) A research on proverbs Turk and Turkmen (Turkmenistan) articulated on nature that can be used in geography teaching. Social Sciences J Mehmet Akif University 1: 51-58. [[View Article](#)]
11. Bozyurt O & Koca N (2011) Main proverbs with geographical content and their analysis in terms of Turkish national culture. J Social Sci 13: 89-100. [[View Article](#)]

Citation: Doğru Z, Bulut S (2020) Turkish-Islamic Perspective on Nature. Sociology Insights 3: 001-004.

Copyright: © 2020 Bulut S, et al. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.
