

Tekgöl, Nil.

*Emotions in the Ottoman Empire:
Politics, Society and Family
in the Early Modern Era.*

LONDON: BLOOMSBURY, 2023.
192 PAGES.
ISBN: 9781350180543.



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ABSTRACT

The study of the history of emotions has blossomed since 2000, but there has been a pronounced Western focus to much of it, and that trend remains. Books such as Nil Tekgöl's are especially welcome in the field as they serve multiple significant functions in the broader historiography. What is most valuable here are the glimpses at a sense of relationality within the emotional regime.

Keywords: History of Emotions, Ottoman Empire, Cross-Cultural Emotions, Power Dynamics, Subjecthood.

ÖZ

Her ne kadar duygular tarihinin tetkiki 2000 yılından itibaren inkişaf etmişse de bu sahada kayda değer bir Batı merkezli bakışın hüküm sürdüğü aşikârdır ve günümüzde bu temayül hâlen devam etmektedir. Bu itibarla, Nil Tekgöl'ün eseri gibi kitaplar, daha geniş bir tarih yazımı alanında pek çok mühim işlevi yerine getirdikleri cihetiyle bilhassa memnuniyetle karşılanmaktadır. Bu eseri kıymetli kılan en önemli hususlardan biri ise, duygusal rejim içerisindeki ilişkisellik duygusuna dair sunduğu bakışlardır.

Anabtar Kelimeler: Duygular Tarihi, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, Kültürlerarası Duygular, Güç Dinamikleri, Öznellik.



MAKALE BİLGİSİ | ARTICLE INFORMATION

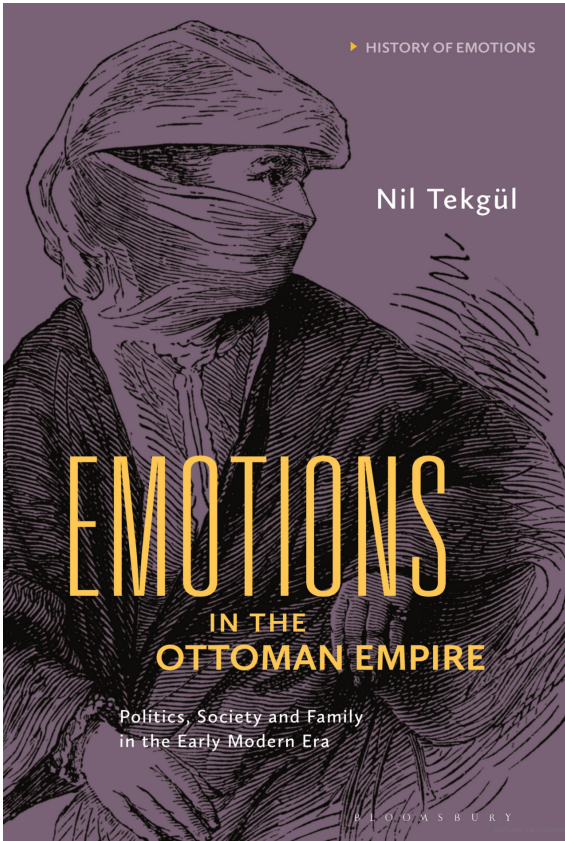
Makale Türü: Kitap Değerlendirmesi | Article Type: Book Review
Geliş Tarihi: 23 Nisan 2024 | Date Received: 23 April 2024
Kabul Tarihi: 10 Eylül 2024 | Date Accepted: 10 September 2024



ATIF | CITATION

Boddice, Rob. "Tekgöl, Nil. Emotions in the Ottoman Empire: Politics, Society and Family in the Early Modern Era." *Kadim* 8 (October 2024), 191-193. doi.org/10.54462/kadim.1472497

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The study of the history of emotions has blossomed since 2000, but there has been a pronounced Western focus to much of it, and that trend remains. Books such as Nil Tekgül's are especially welcome in the field for they serve multiple significant functions in the broader historiography. They supply empirical evidence that the history of emotions is an effective approach when untethered from Western and modern psychological moorings, but they also disrupt any temptation toward psychological normativity. Affective categories and their entanglements with sensory, cognitive, epistemological, theological, and political categories have to be explained from the context up, resisting translation into Anglophone and presentist concepts. The history of emotions has also tended to fall into an orthodox periodization that the sources belie. The broad temporal gaze here is a refreshing move.

Tekgül pulls all of this off with aplomb. At various points, the narrative gestures at conceptual categories in English – love, fear, shame, gratitude, compassion – without ever committing the situated linguistic concepts she is conjuring with to be contained within them. Here is a rich affective vocabulary (mainly in Arabic) serving multi-ethnic communities across several centuries. The book denies anyone the opportunity to arrive with a pre-established set of emotional norms from the copybook of modern psychology and expect to be able to explain these complex societies and their equally complex politics.

Establishing a lexicon is, of course, only the beginning of a historical intervention. The question most often put to historians of emotions concerns access to the felt experience of historical actors. Just how do you get at it? On the face of it, Tekgül's sources do not, seem to offer much hope: decrees, court cases, advice literature, divorce cases. It is all formal, official, and at arm's length from what was lived and what was experienced. Nevertheless, Tekgül is astute enough to know that the emotion words she discovered in the sources are signposts to silences rather than indications of the literal presence of these named emotions. She organizes the book around 'protection' and the embodiment and exercise of power. Indeed, the book might very well have been effectively titled *Power and Protection in the Ottoman Empire*, for all the emotional mining here leads precisely to a novel analysis of the way authority was maintained

and enacted, whether at a high-political level concerning the delivery of justice, at a social level concerning neighborly conduct and communal relations, or at a domestic level concerning the relations of families, husbands, and wives. Here is an enduring emotional regime in which the lines of accepted and expected forms of expression are clearly delineated, which in turn define the terms of transgression, correction, and reproach.

Tekgül handles many of the operative emotions, especially the leading concept of compassion, as metaphorical figures: ciphers that indicate how power operated, how it was feared, and how it could serve. Therefore, the book is obliquely a history of highly situated and contextually specific management of fear or uncertainty: what will happen to society if the expectation of protection is not upheld? What will happen to society if instances of injustice are allowed to go uncorrected? What will happen to society if the shame poured upon a plaintiff is not formally corrected? What will happen to the institution of the home if the authority and superiority of the husband/father are allowed to slip? Official acts of rhetorical compassion from on high are revealed as shared understandings of the responsibility of authority to protect the subject. However, they exist within a framework of the continual endorsement of that power and authority. As much as Tekgül pursues how it felt to be protected at the political, social, and familial levels, the book inevitably amplifies how it felt to be subjected to power at all these levels. What is most valuable here are the glimpses at a sense of relationality within the emotional regime. Expectations ran in both directions, with appeals to the protection of the powerful existing within the same emotionological idiom as expressions of that power in policing transgression.

The author introduces temporal change toward the end of the book, with political and legal reform, population change, and the displacement of community-based feelings with identitarian concerns. Yet wherever one looks in this book, one finds a connection between emotional rhetoric and the concept of social harmony. The central irony is that the deployment of such rhetoric becomes visible – findable for the historian – only because of the presence of disharmony. Tekgül shows the reader, in detail, the instruments of affective conformity, which are revealed, ironically, only in the breach: divorce, disruption, crimes, and misdemeanors.

Of course, for historians of the Ottoman Empire the book will be required reading. But it would be germane for all historians of emotions, especially those who know nothing of the language of emotions beyond Anglophone or European contexts, to seriously engage with this work. It presents a significant disruption and a welcome addition to a growing body of knowledge on the emotional dynamics of the exercise of power. Scholars of modern Turkey will also undoubtedly benefit from a deep analysis of the ways in which emotions are recruited for political ends, as expressions of power, and as a means of delimiting and defining the experience of those subjected to authority. Moreover, the book demonstrates concretely how to read between the lines of highly mediated primary material. It is a common refrain that historians of emotions have to amplify the silences in the sources, but few show how the magic is performed. Tekgül has, on the face of it, a festival of emotions in her sources but they are a tempting rhetorical distraction: an instrument of authority. The real history of emotions is at one stage of remove, implicit, and revealed only by the hand of the historian.