Sobreviviendo a los cambios políticos: reflexión acerca de las formas de hacer historia oral en el “Este”

Surviving Political Challenges: Reflexivity in Doing Oral History in the “East”

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Hakan Yılmaz (Turkey):
“Kemalism, Marxism and Islamism: Interpretive Frameworks, historicisms, cosmopolitanisms in Turkey”.

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Kemalism, Marxism and Islamism: Interpretive Frameworks, historicisms, cosmopolitanisms in Turkey.

Hakan Yilmaz (chair)
(Turkey):

We can discern three dominant “interpretive frameworks” in Turkish politics since the foundation of the republic in 1923: the Kemalist framework, the Marxist framework, and the Islamist framework. The Kemalist framework has been most influential in the early years of the republic, namely the 1920s through the 1950s. The leftist-Marxist framework’s heydays were the 1960s and the 1970s. The Islamist framework passed through its formative stages in the 1970s and 1980s, it has ascended to prominence by the 1990s, and it has become the governing framework since the early 2000s.

Although one interpretive framework succeeded another in terms of influence and prominence, this succession does not mean that the previous framework simply passed away and was totally replaced by the upcoming one. On the contrary, the coming framework usually blended with the old one, borrowing from its predecessor ideas, symbols, models, and sometimes cadres. The Kemalist framework has been by far the most important and the most powerful among the four frameworks we are set to examine. Kemalism, for one, although lost its unquestioned authority by the end of the 1950s, did keep its prominence in the later decades due to its status as the official ideology of the state. Being the founding ideology of the republic, Kemalism did lend many of its ideas, notions, reflexes, syndromes, symbols and attitudes to the succeeding frameworks, giving rise to such hybrid formations as left-wing Kemalism and Kemalist Islamism.

By “interpretive framework” I mean a set of ideas, opinions, concepts, symbols, places of memory, genealogical narratives, tales of a golden age, legends of beginning and birth, sagas of victory and defeat, hopes for a promised better future to come, portrayals of heroes and villains, commonly known songs and poems, communally admired pictures and sculptures, collectively performed rituals, and “scientific” theories that are held to be obviously true and self-evident, in short a whole epistemic and symbolic repertoire that people use to understand why political events occur (their causes), who made them happen and who were involved in them (their actors), what changes they have brought about (their consequences), and why they are important (their significance). Interpretive frameworks, as their naming suggests, help people interpret the events, make sense of the evidently complex events, establish connections among the seemingly disconnected happenings, tell the good from the bad, and in general see order in an apparently disorderly, complex and many times outright chaotic political universe.

Although we should not diminish the importance of the contributions of many single individuals to the formation of collective interpretive frameworks, we must also admit that at each historical period an interpretive framework which has captured the minds and hearts of a great majority of the members of a social group, and in this manner has become the dominant framework in that period, has a significant dimension of being the hegemonic project of a political authority. This political authority could be the state itself, it could be a political party, a religious leader or organization, a communal or tribal head, a communally respected artist, a TV star, a newspaper or magazine, a university, nowadays websites or social media figures, or a combination of some of these. Interpretive frameworks do have a great degree of autonomous nature, but they at the same time owe their existence to the efforts of political elites for building ideological hegemonies.
In the case of Turkey, beginning with Kemalism, each successive interpretive framework produced a specific historicism of its own, a specific cosmopolitanism, and a specific set of institutions to connect with the people and to disseminate its epistemic order and symbolic universe to the wider society.

By “historicism” I mean a line of thinking which sees in history a succession of major episodes, where one episode following another, as a result of major conflicts, obeys a certain metalogic. Sometimes, as in Marxism, this metalogic, termed the laws of motion of history, is said to be derived from history itself by way of scientific-empirical analysis. Sometimes, though, as in religious or nationalist historicisms, this metalogic is said to be dictated by metaphysical, spiritual, divine sources. According to the historicist thinking, although there may be ups and downs, failures and reversions, collapses and corruptions in the history of a nation, religion or society, the long-term trend of the historical curve (which is determined by the metalogic that is believed to be driving the movement of history) exhibits a progression, leading to a predestined end point. What an individual should do, therefore, is to learn about this hidden metalogic of history from the elites and intellectuals who know better than him, submit him/herself to this metalogic, and do the tasks, given to him by the leader, party, guide, that would make a contribution to the realization of the historical logic. To take the right train, to swim in the true sea, to move with the great waves, in short, to be one with History, would also give an individual a sense of moral superiority (by being one of the selected persons who know the truth) and a channel towards spiritual salvation (as opposed to those who walk on the wrong bank of the river).

By “cosmopolitanism” I mean a line of thinking that links an individual to other individuals living in different parts of the world, crossing over the political, economic, linguistic and other barriers and boundaries, by way of an affinity of ideas, symbols, values, tastes, common causes and common actions. Cosmopolitanism is sharing a common interpretive framework by individuals in different parts of the world across national, political, cultural borders. A cosmopolitan community can take various forms. At one end it comes in the form of a group of dispersed and disconnected individuals in various countries of the world who share a certain taste (such as the global admirers of a rock band). Sometimes, though, a cosmopolitan community may present itself as a more or less interwoven association of local or national organizations that share a common goal and coordinate their actions at the global scale (such as the Communist International and the Greenpeace).

In Turkey, all three interpretive frameworks depicted above – Kemalist modernism, Marxism and Islamism – have produced their peculiar historicisms and cosmopolitanisms. The main historical conflict, according to Kemalism, was the one between tradition and modernity, between nations staying “backward” and nations moving “forward”. “Tradition”, in this positivist brand of historicism, was embodied by the Ottoman Empire, which was characterized as a politically, economically, scientifically and technologically “backward” society. The Ottoman Empire was believed to be kept “backward” by religious obscurantism and superstition. The Republic, with its secular institutions and mentality, represented a higher stage of historical development. The republic, by way of the newly established, state-controlled High Authority for Religious Affairs, also created a new, “enlightened Islam” to replace the old, reactionary Islam of the Ottoman Empire. The founders of the republic argued that this “enlightened Islam” would bring Islam closer to its original state, very much like the Protestant reformers who had claimed that Reformation would have cleansed Christianity from the allegedly degenerative infringements of Roman Catholicism and brought it back to its roots. The Kemalist cosmopolitanism consisted of a world community of modern states and nations, a convergence of the institutions, mentalities, life-styles of the Turkish people and the state with the ones that existed in the modern countries of the West. Westernization was used synonymously as modernization. Western Europe represented the ideal life-world of Kemalism, a life-world that they wanted to achieve by stripping themselves of their traditional costumes. The West was the measure of all good things, a final destination to arrive at, an object of envy and desire, and an object of suspicion and fear.

The Marxists of the 1960s and 1970s adopted the “scientific” historicism of Marxism, which claimed that Western societies moved progressively from primitive communal societies to slavery, from slavery to
feudalism, from feudalism to capitalism, and from there towards socialism and communism. Although Turkish Marxists – like the Marxists of the other non-Western countries – had a hard time to adapt Ottoman-Turkish history to the Marxist model, they managed to do so by modifying the Marxist model with the help of such concepts as the Asiatic mode of production, national democratic revolution and dependency. The cosmopolitan universe of the Turkish Marxists consisted of the world’s socialist and communist parties, national liberation movements, guerrilla movements, labor unions, student activists. This cosmopolitan universe included the Soviet Union and the Soviet-dominated socialist world for the pro-Soviet Marxists, China and Chinese-dominated countries for the pro-China Marxists, and so on. For most Marxists, however, their cosmopolitanism certainly involved revolutionary and anti-colonial liberation movements in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Islamism in Turkey became a political force to reckon with by the end of the 1960s. The Islamist Welfare Party became the electorally largest party in the 1990s, capturing the local governments in many cities including Istanbul and Ankara. Finally, a pro-Islamic party, the Justice and Development Party, has come to power in 2002 and has been governing Turkey since then. Islamic historicism comes as a blend of facts and fictions from Islamic and Ottoman histories. According to the Islamist narrative, the Ottoman state, which had been set up in western Anatolia around 1300 AD and lasted for about six centuries to collapse at the end of World War I, embodied a unique version of Islamic civilization which was superior to its European counterparts. The modernization movements of the 19th and 20th centuries, inspired by Western and later Zionist powers whose main goal was to see the Ottoman power to erode and the unique Islamic civilization to be displaced and replaced by Western ideas and institutions. In the eyes of the Islamists, modernization was nothing more than a treason of degenerate, decadent elites who sold their souls to their Western patrons. Modernization, the establishment of the Turkish republic, and particularly the secular reforms that were made in the early republican era represents, for the Islamists, a temporary interval in Turkish history, that would pass away and be superseded, once again, by an Islamic state and community. An Islamic party’s coming to power was viewed not simply as a change of governing party but as the beginning of the change of the tide of history towards the country’s re-Islamization. With an Islamic party’s coming to power the Kemalist interval would come to an end and History would restart, leading to neo-Ottomanization and re-Islamization. An Islamist party would act like the motor force of History and the agent that is in charge of realizing a historical mission. Human rights, laws, constitutions, and even moral and ethical values could be easily and legitimately violated if they stood between the agent of history and its mission. Turkish Islamic cosmopolitanism envisions a world of Islamic parties and movements with whom they share common goals, shared values, and an overarching Muslim brotherhood crossing over ethnic, national and geographic boundaries. Since the early 1990s this cosmopolitan Muslim identity has been tested and gained a concrete shape by means of campaigns of humanitarian aid, political support and in some cases military involvement in those hotspots such as Bosnia, Kosovo, Chechnya, Palestine and Iraq where Muslims have been subjected to aggression in the hands of non-Muslims.

Each of the major interpretive frameworks in modern Turkey, Kemalism, Marxism and Islamism, used specific agents and institutions to disseminate and popularize its ideas. For Kemalism, being the founding ideology of the Turkish republic and the strongest among the three major interpretive frameworks, the principal institution of ideological dissemination was the state apparatus itself, particularly the national education system. For decades schools and teachers acted as the sites and agents to socialize children and young people into Kemalist values and attitudes. For Marxism, the principal agent of ideological dissemination was the intellectual and the writer. This Marxist intellectual was sometimes an academic, sometimes a journalist, sometimes a novelist, sometimes a poet, and sometimes a songwriter/performer. We can only mention the iconic names of Nazım Hikmet, the poet, and Yaşar Kemal, the novelist, who played critical roles in the sentimental education of generations of Turkish Marxists. Although there have been a number influential Islamist intellectuals, intellectual and artistic activity have never been the strongest points of Turkish Islamism. In the half-century since the 1960s when contemporary Turkish Islamism was born, only a handful of nationally recognized Islamist artists and
intellectuals have been raised. The principal Islamist disseminators were not artists but preachers. A number of well-known preachers, who then became leaders of Islamic communities and movements that they built, spread their ideas in the mosques, through cassettes and CDs, and later on by means of TV, radio and the internet. Yet another access point between Islamism and the people were the local governments many of them coming under Islamist rule by the mid-1990s. The Islamist mayor became a symbolic person who showed respect to people’s traditions, served the people well, and followed an open-door policy which made it easy for the people to come and talk about their issues and problems. Modernizing and streamlining religious services, such as funeral services, the sacrificial slaughtering of animals, and organizing collective visits of the poorer people to holy sites and places, was one area of innovation that reinforced the emotional bridges between the Islamist mayor and the people.

Personal life-story narratives in Turkey would be largely shaped by one of these macro interpretive frameworks. For many people, who have been socialized into one of these interpretive frameworks, the way they would narrate their life-stories would reflect, at varying degrees, the patterns and structures of historicism and cosmopolitanism of the macro framework. Although the macro frameworks have largely been products of top-down hegemonic projects, individuals too have made their contributions to their formation and consolidation. Oral history research should, therefore, inquire into the interactions and intersections between the hegemonic and individualistic, macro and micro aspects of interpretive frameworks. In this respect, the methodologically important issues become the following: how an individual receives and perceives a given interpretive framework; by what means of dissemination he/she has been socialized into its beliefs and values; whether he/she himself too acted as an agent of dissemination.
The Problematic Guest: Friend to Enemy in Afghanistan.

Margaret Mills
(US):

Resumen: El Invitado Controvertido: Entre Amigo y Enemigo en Afganistán: El ámbito principal de este estudio es la complejidad de las relaciones de investigación a larga distancia y los dilemas relacionados con la recopilación y publicación de datos de historia oral. Desde mi primer viaje a Afganistán en 1969, mi carrera como folclorista dedicada a la recopilación e investigación de géneros literarios oral ha implicado la cambiante investigación de énfasis y reflexiones. En particular, el proyecto en el que a lo largo de 40 años trabajé con un narrador tradicional y su familia para documentar su historia oral para un libro en inglés. No es posible asumir, por supuesto, una posición neutral en la investigación social. Décadas de guerra en las cuales mi país ha asumido diversidad de roles han influenciado el marco de referencia de nuestras relaciones. Por ello, la tarea consiste en reconocer y negociar los objetivos propios, las responsabilidades de investigación, las necesidades y deseos con los propios de nuestros interlocutores, quienes a su vez mantienen cambiantes y fluidas expectativas de formas y efectos de representación de su historia global y local, de su vida familiar y amistades.

Abstract: The main topic here is the complexity of long-term research relationships and dilemmas involving oral history data collection and publication. Since first arrival in Afghanistan in 1969, my career commitment as a folklorist to record and research cultural performance genres, and in particular a 40-year project with one traditional storyteller and her family to elicit and document their oral history for an English-language book, has entailed fluctuating research emphases and reflexivities. There is, of course, no neutral position in social research. Decades of war in which my country has taken a variety of active roles have become a macro-condition of our relationships. Thus the task: to acknowledge and negotiate one’s own developing research goals and responsibilities, needs and desires with those of respondents, who themselves have fluid and varying expectations for forms and effects of representation over the course of local and global history, of family lives and friendships.
I first arrived in Herat, western Afghanistan in March (Nau Ruz) of 1969, on vacation from an English teaching job at a Tehran international school and from Persian language study in Tehran University. The resident foreign presence in Herat in those days consisted mainly of foreign staff initiating a WFP livestock and meat export project, medical staff at a missionary-run eye hospital, Soviet engineers and advisors at work on the national highway project, who kept very much to their own residence, and several US Peace Corps volunteers. These young Americans, encouraged to socialize with Afghans and very happy to do so, included male and female English teachers, female nurse vaccinators, and a pair of young male BA-level college graduates who, mysteriously assigned to give agricultural advice to the very experienced Afghan farmers, changed their mission to create and help run a small tourist office. The purpose of the office, a new thing for Herat, as the volunteers explained it to me, was primarily to create some kind of buffer between the respectable Herati population and the influx of transient “WT’s” – “World Travelers” – mostly young Europeans and Americans, impecunious overland travelers in search of hashish and free love, heading farther down the line to Goa or Nepal. The habits and proclivities of the travelers (dress or rather undress, grooming, demeanor) were not well geared to Afghans’ established, extensive rules of hospitality and social behavior. The tourist office volunteers said I was unusual for keeping some kind of modest dress (long sleeves, loose trousers, head covering) and for my Persian language skills, rudimentary as they were. There had been one notorious acid-throwing attack on a foreign female tourist by a “mulla” deemed to be of unsound mind, in more conservative Qandahar, to the south.

I was coming from urban Tehran, where young foreign women were often aggressively teased on the streets, and media (television, film, radio, print media) were vigorously present. On the basis of my earlier college studies in folklore, epic and mythology, I was interested in the workings of oral traditions and it was clear even to me as a tourist that Herat was much less affected by mass media than urban Iran (no TV, limited-schedule electrical service exclusively in the city, just one cinema in an urban/rural riverine region which may have included 500,000 people in the contiguous settlement area.). There was at the time no foreign military or paramilitary presence to be noticed, though a few foreign advisors (Soviet, American) were attached to Afghan development-related ministries and military sites. It was a much more politely hospitable place for young foreigners than urban Iran, which was already suffering the pressures of foreign economic and political/military interference for several generations, but most obviously since WW II. In Afghanistan, the growth of state-sponsored initiatives in education, economic development, and (lastly) health services was proceeding though at a much slower pace than in Iran or Soviet Central Asia. Male migrant labor to Iran and the Gulf States had become a significant financial supplement to subsistence agriculture for a population that was 85% rural. Men also expected to be internally displaced within Afghanistan during their 2-year mandatory military service, which by policy stationed draftees away from their home areas.

The focus of any oral history project is defined in some kind of negotiation between the historian and respondents. Whose stories? Why this history, these people? When I conducted my dissertation research, having returned to Herat in 1974-76, the history that engaged me was of continuity and change in traditional expressive culture, primarily verbal arts, but also custom, as especially related to marriage strategies, in the environment of slowly developing mass education, the beginnings of popular access to media technology (radio, cassette recorders), and the cultural/economic effects of significant male labor migration.

An historical/ideological frame shared by the prewar Afghan government, many of its citizens, and the foreigners who were sent there in various capacities by their governments, was that Afghanistan as a polity was capable of and striving toward gradual economic and social development. The details of the sought-for changes varied among different factions in the processes at play. Afghanistan’s dramatic subsequent history has provided ample reasons to refocus the historical frame over the last 35 years, both for Afghans and their interlocutors. In the more public historical register, and in the words of many individuals, certain older narrative threads dating even from the 19th century have remained and now intensified, especially the Afghan “national” narrative theme of determined and ultimately successful
resistance to foreign attempts at colonization or occupation. Yet another chapter of this narrative of resistance is just now playing out, as is well known from daily international news feeds.

My own initial focus was rather narrow and virtually apolitical though concerned with economic effects on cultural matters, in my first, peacetime research period, 1974-76. At that time, while recording oral story performances for a doctoral dissertation, I elicited personal experience narratives related to the storytelling, not usually full life histories, from individual storytellers I was recording. I asked about their access to traditional indigenous or modern (national) education, their work and travel experiences. Generally only men travelled, mostly for national military service, local labor or guest work abroad. Risks (and potential benefits) of travel and separation, as structural themes in folk tales and folk songs, resonated with experience both for labor migrants and for those they left behind. My initial interview goal was also to know more about storytellers' levels of literacy, mostly none or very limited, and their access to media (usually only radio and more recently, cassette recordings), their direct or indirect access to written texts since book reading aloud was a possible form of entertainment in families where readers were present, and any attention they gave to sermons presenting religious narratives. Such narratives could be heard either in live mosque sermons attended by men, or in cassettes that went from hand to hand. I wanted to learn what I could about how male and female storytellers understood and remembered their oral repertoire, their oral and written sources of performance material, how, when and where they learned individual stories for entertainment, and if they could tell me, from whom or from what other sources. Thus initially, my focus was not on general Afghan social history, but on its manifestations in connection with verbal art performance.

In a few cases, storytellers with whom I recorded extensive performances became such friends that I heard much more about their lives up to that time, either while we were recording or not. If I asked about the source of a story, on a good day I might get a sketch narrative of a particular performance event or locale, or of a person or persons in that storyteller's social network with whom they shared stories. Generally, though, a set of batteries that would last a few hours in an ordinary boom-box cassette recorder could cost a day's wages for an ordinary Afghan. For this among other reasons, most respondents did not see the point of recording informal dialogue. Taping was for story performances, not for casual conversation. In two cases, the personal narratives of 1974-76 reached the scope of autobiography. This caused me to put into my ultimate "bucket list" of research goals the autobiography of one of these two, "Madar Firuz," the 28-year-old mother and master storyteller whose story learning became the subject of my 1978 doctoral dissertation. An enthusiastic teller and learner of folktales and singer of traditional songs for the tape recorder, she was, even then, more interested in telling and recording her own life history and experiences than most people I came to know.

She was also the wife of a Peace Corps-employed cook. Her strong xenophilia evidently predated her husband's acquiring that job, and likely contributed to his actions to seek and hold it. A job that was wage-paying and more than subsistence-level was a rare thing for a landless, uneducated working man in that era. Madar Firuz was proud of the fact that, while her husband worked for foreigners, she had met all or nearly all of the handful of foreign women posted for work in Herat. At the same time, she was deeply conservative, proud of the fact that the only one of her husband's male Peace Corps employers who had ever seen her face, was one who had saved the life of her infant son by taking him to the doctor when her husband was away. She as a woman could not go alone to the doctor's office, even for such an emergency. She said she had met him face to face only on the day he left for home in the US, to thank him.

At the same time, Madar Firuz had complex, ongoing relations with the spirit world. As a very young mother, she had been cured of a psychologically damaging form of spirit possession by a religious healer. He became a spiritual father to her as a result. For a few years thereafter, she exercised under his authority what turned out to be very limited capacities as a diviner in trance contact with the world of the jinn. Her communicative skills, opportunities and ambitions thus were broad for an Afghan woman of the most minimal formal education born in abject poverty. I hoped that we would stay in touch over years while I continued research among Persian-speaking Afghans, allowing me to trace the development and
maintenance of this master storyteller’s large repertoire and her spiritual life experiences, alongside her family’s economic and social history over different life stages in a gradually changing society. She and her family were and are both atypical and typical Afghan citizens in different aspects of their experiences. Telling their story became an agenda for both of us.

The Marxist coup of 1978 and ensuing Afghan-Soviet war of 1979-1989, followed by years of civil war, radically disrupted any gradualist scenarios of social change. They also resulted in an 18-year hiatus in our meetings. I was able with the help of Veronica Doubleday, author of Three Women of Herat, to recontact Madar Firuz and learn that she had returned to Herat in about 1990 after 9 years of refugee life in Mashad, Iran. I first saw her again in 1995. At that one-month visit, she, her husband and I explicitly undertook to record her life narrative and that of her husband, including their experiences of war and exile, for a book in English that would be published in their own names. When I was able to return for another month in 1996, we continued recording, covering some of the same experiences from a slightly different temporal angle, affected by some unfolding events of the year.

One month after I left Herat in August 1996, the Taliban took the city without firing a shot. I was not able to see the family again until 2003. The life history project was resumed, with vignettes of life under the Taliban (with great scarcity of foreign employers for her husband and sons), and some high hopes for the return of a secure and internationally connected economic and social future. From 2003 I have been able to visit about every two years, and each time there was a new chapter: She and her husband made the hajj pilgrimage, a life’s ambition, and their spirituality received some new nuances of attention. Further chapters concerned marriages of their last two sons; uneasy step-parenthood in an elder son’s case; the splitting of households grown too large to live together; the very marginal economic states of one son and one daughter and slightly more secure state of others; decisions, sometimes contested, about residence and work, about grandchildren’s education and hopes and plans for their marriages; some recent extremely difficult decisions about health matters. All have become chapters of the family saga.

Yet these quite normal tests and tensions within a growing extended family were projected against economic and political conditions, at first hopeful, then deteriorating. The ensuing ten years, put briefly, have now returned my friends to the prospect of civil war and new kinds of social and economic hardship. Madar Firuz’s husband died in his 80’s of natural causes last year. She is a widow with eight living children, all with families of their own. During these later years, besides managing her husband’s two years of declining health, she has been concerned with the marital strategies of her grandchildren, who themselves are less than enthused about traditional endogamy and arranged marriage.

A marginally secure Afghan family today, in a situation of emerging educational and work opportunities as well as extreme social and political uncertainty, has real dilemmas over responsibilities for making economically secure, socially advantageous marriages for their children. This latest “chapter” in particular is a sensitive one, though other choices faced by this extended family have also been unavoidably contestive for them. Families in Afghanistan, as the most basic social, economic and political unit, have a vested interest in maintaining corporate harmony or at least the public appearance of it. By the same token, the real dilemmas they face expose family fault lines, potentially damaging to their reputation and even their capacity for advantageous social action. This returned refugee couple’s ambition in the 1990’s to have their story of trials and survival publicly told, with all credit for how they managed in challenging times, runs up against the problem of privacy. How can some of their real dilemmas and disagreements be represented without harming their social position? Intrafamily complications are now probably bringing back the necessity of publishing their lives under pseudonyms, without photos, not for reasons of Madar Firuz’s privacy and female seclusion, as we were concerned to do in the 1970’s, nor for fear of political reprisal as during the Soviet and perhaps the Taliban periods, but for reasons of micropolitics, intrafamily politics and public exposure of private matters. At least two Euro-American women writers have published memoirs of their association with Afghan hosts and co-workers in the post-9/11 period that have been extremely damaging to those Afghans who supported their work. Yet folklorists in general, like this family, regard life stories as stories of trial and achievement for which due credit
should be given. “My” family wished to be known for what it had achieved, and survived. I will probably have to go with my sense of risk and proceed with the option of pseudonyms, knowing that confidentiality and deniability are necessary for their well-being, potentially in more than one way over an unpredictable future.

In the sequence of events, I have also become an ancillary member of this family for economic purposes. Madar Firuz’s candid, patient willingness to teach and help me in the 1970’s and after, resulted in a doctoral dissertation and other publications that secured my academic career. Not charity, but the very tangible fact of my debt and their partnership in my success, motivated me to a choice in 2004. On the eve of their last son’s expensive, showy wedding, her husband was dismissed from his last job as a house guard with a bad letter of reference for reasons of age. I then promised her and her husband that while any two of us three survive, I will continue his husband’s modest salary. In their lifetime, they had opted out of Afghan traditional forms of economic service and clientship to which they might have had access as rural tenant farmers, to stake their economic future on a higher-risk, higher-gain internationally connected labor market that lacks any social safety net. I choose to fill that void as best I can.

However, a new “chapter” of dilemmas, possibilities, responsibilities and limitations emerges as one of the effects of such a family’s years-long residence in Iran with its well-developed social infrastructure, with better access to education for their children and grandchildren, and with some (but not enough) expansion of health facilities. Basically, life-lengthening health care is available in Iran, Pakistan and India which is not available in Afghanistan. This care, while Afghans know it exists, is prohibitively expensive to Afghan families of ordinary means. My Afghan family resorted to costly artificial feeding and other means to keep Madar Firuz’s husband alive for a period of weeks or months while his inoperable throat cancer took its inevitable toll. Even in his last weeks of life last year, when I was present, he was hoping the foreign military’s small medical facility might be able to help him in some way. That unit had, from time to time, held open clinic days for Afghans, mostly female, who presented themselves or their children for care. The unit, staffed by Italian NATO troops, is soon to withdraw from Herat, or has already done so.

Madar Firuz still resides with their two youngest sons, who have diametrically different approaches to family health interventions, as she herself observed to me. One, the family’s so-called “Taleb,” (a very conservative Muslim taxi driver) is much less inclined to seek medical intervention of any kind than his younger brother, who is less religious, unemployed yet prompt in seeking medical care for his own family. Madar Firuz and the youngest son both have kidney disease which has been diagnosed (in Iran and Pakistan) but not yet effectively treated, they find. Like the American health system, the currently available international standard health care is quite effective at draining the resources of ordinary families if they seek it. My friends’ dilemma, what to expect and what to strive for in health care, is modulated by their experience of life abroad and of foreign presence in their country. At what point is an acceptance of disability or mortality appropriate either spiritually or practically? I am also in the extremely uncomfortable position of trying to discover what would be most effective for them, from afar, and how much I can support their decisions. We now conduct these discussions over scratchy phone connections. I do not know what, or how much, is to be done.

Most oral history interviewing is conducted within a more circumscribed time period, documenting the respondents’ perspectives on past events which may themselves stretch over considerable periods, but from a certain temporal angle or moment, that of the interviews. Long-term research relationships with single respondents or small groups of respondents yield a portrait of shifting historical perspectives. Memories and the meanings put on them vary with time and experience, and as our lives lengthened together, the variability of memory became one of my topics in this oral history, as it had been from the outset in my studies of folk narrative. The thematic chapters of their life histories that I have outlined above reflect my own life stages as well; the things my friends could tell an age-mate of years-long acquaintance are on the one hand typical of Afghan family life and its morphology in this particularly challenging historical period, yet some topics, such as the effects of their individual children’s
personalities on family dynamics, are not things they might easily discuss with someone of a different age who had not been alive and known their children during the time periods they seek to explain.

I have also been cautioned by a colleague or two, not to focus so exclusively on one person or family to tell the [or an] Afghan story. Yet the shifting perspectives, density of data and range of thematic foci provided over 40 years by this one couple and those of their children who have been available to interview during my different visits, have presented a level of complexity itself not easy to render in a coherent narrative.

Furthermore, there is one great set of ambiguities in their perspectives that I feel not yet able to assess sufficiently, and that is the “friend to enemy” perspective created by my country’s military occupation of their country. As I have discussed, this impoverished couple was able to develop a better resource base and some upward social and economic mobility in peacetime, prior to 1978, by finding paid service work with foreigners employed in development projects. In the 1980’s, their years of work with Americans in particular put them in danger from the communist regime. In the early 1990’s, before the arrival of the Taliban in Herat, their middle son, otherwise the black sheep of the family, had access to good money and adrenalin-laced thrills while doing UN-funded mine removal work around Herat. This same son, now physically and emotionally fragile, also became a supporter of certain “warlords” in the post-Soviet period, a patronage relationship that endures to support his family in some obscure, untold (even to me) ways despite his disabled, unemployed condition. In his words, he “helps” them and they help him. He is also the most verbal, together with his “Taleb” younger brother who drives a taxi, in articulating ordinary Afghans’ critical views on current US interference in Afghan political and military affairs. The oldest grandson is a self-educated computer systems worker with the best paying job anyone in the family has had, managing logistics for military fuel delivery for an Afghan-international logistics firm. This work is entirely war-dependent and he has relocated at least once away from Herat because of death threats for his collaboration with the military occupation. He believes his work experience and skills will enable his labor migration to gain similar technical work outside Afghanistan if or when the present foreign engagement ends.

While many (by now probably most) Afghans for various good reasons resent a foreign military occupation that has not even provided everyday security for them, American/NATO (ISAF) departure is also viewed by many Afghans as a dangerous moment, and a repeat of the American “abandonment” of Afghanistan after the Soviet departure, when a civil war ensued. My long-term sense of responsibility for this family, along with my palpable interest in their experiences and views, gives me the status of personal friend, but constantly reminds me of the story of the Bear’s Friend, told among others by the Herati Sufi mystical poet Jami. The story goes that a man befriended a bear, who used to go around with him. One day the man is out in the countryside, lying down having a nap, and the bear is sitting with him, protecting him. A fly comes along and lights on the man’s forehead. The bear waves it away repeatedly but it keeps coming back. Finally the bear picks up a huge rock and drops it on the fly, on the man’s forehead, killing his friend. The poet warns against taking such a powerful but brainless creature for a friend. I used to associate this bear with the Russian one whose protection of a nascent Marxist regime turned out so disastrously for Afghans. Now I think the American/ISAF presence another, even more stark example of having a bear for a friend. The levels of corruption, foreign and Afghan, in the last ten years or more of “capitalist democracy,” make some Afghans volubly nostalgic for the Marxist time, and/or for the Taleban.

There was an Afghan joke, toward the end of the Soviet war period, asking “Why did the Soviets come to Afghanistan?” --“Because they were invited.” --“Why did they stay ten years?” --“They were looking for the guy who invited them.” This joke could appropriately be recycled now, applied to the Americans, looking for our next best friend for our own security reasons, after the political departure of the now-unfriendly President Karzai. But at the micro level, my adopted family’s history illustrates how deeply and ambivalently entangled many Afghans’ lives now are with foreign presences that, at the same time, they have good reason to distrust. How shall I, as a nonpolitical individual player who is nonetheless implicated and enabled by my country’s actions, sustain my own trust relationship with people for whom I feel great concern and responsibility, but for whom my own resource base may soon prove inadequate to their
needs? What is the relationship of deeply shared knowledge of oral history, and shared human responsibility between researcher and respondent?
Fighting for Democracy and New Fields of Study: Turkey, Japan and the World of Islam.

Selçuk Esenbel
(Turkey):

Resumen: Esta presentación analiza cómo la historia de vida de un erudito afecta en gran medida su investigación académica. Selçuk Esenbel de la Universidad Boğaziçi ha trabajado en los campos de la historia y estudios del asiático, en el contexto de la guerra fría y golpes de estado, gastando grandes esfuerzos en perseguir sus curiosidades académicas bajo difíciles. Erudito fundadores de estudios japoneses en Turquía, Esenbel tiene que construir este nuevo campo a través de una lucha por la democracia en la década de 1980 el post. La historia de su vida multi-situada entre Japón y Turquía, en forma de su especialización en el campo de los estudios asiáticos. Como hijo de un embajador, creció en un hogar político, viajando entre Japón, Turquía y los Estados Unidos. Su aterrizaje a Turquía coincidió con el golpe militar de 1980, que tuvo un impacto severo en la vida académica. Su viaje tanto como una mujer, sino también como el pionero de los estudios asiáticos en Turquía, se había convertido en paralelo a los desafíos políticos del siglo tarde 20.

Abstract: This presentation analyzes how a scholar’s life story greatly affects her academic research. Selçuk Esenbel of Boğaziçi University has worked in the fields of history and Asian Studies, in the context of cold war and coups d’état, spending great effort in pursuing her academic curiosities under difficult times. Founding scholar of Japanese Studies in Turkey, Esenbel has to build this new field through a fight for democracy in the post-1980s. Her multi-sited life story between Japan and Turkey, shaped her specialization in the field of Asian studies. As a child of an ambassador, she grew up in a political household, traveling between Japan, Turkey and the US. Her landing to Turkey coincided with the 1980 military coup, which had a severe impact on academic life. Her journey both as a woman, but also as the pioneer of Asian studies in Turkey, had developed in parallel to the political challenges of the late 20th century.