

Two worlds, One Soul: Tradition and Modernity in Turkish Life

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Abstract

Turkey occupied a unique cultural position between East and West, blending long-standing traditions with modern influences. This research used qualitative library research, which drew on data from scholarly journals, academic articles, and news sources, examined how traditional Turkish cultural values such as respect for elders, religious observance, and strong family ties were maintained, adapted, or transformed in the face of modernization, particularly in educational contexts. The findings showed that while family values and religious practices remained central in Turkish social life, educational practices reflected hybrid forms that combined traditional respect for authority with communicative approaches promoted by modern pedagogy. Previous studies documented a persistent gap between communicative language policies and traditional classroom practices in Turkish schools. This study concluded that integrating cultural identity into ELT curricula bridged the gap between policy and practice, strengthened intercultural competence, and ensured contextual relevance. By synthesizing multiple sources, the research provided deeper insights into how Turkish society negotiated continuity and change in the encounter between tradition and modernity.

Keywords: Family structure, Modernization, Social identity, Traditional values, Turkish culture.

INTRODUCTION

Turkey occupies a unique geographical and cultural position, serving as a dynamic bridge between East and West. This location between Europe and Asia has fostered a rich cultural heritage that blends long-standing traditions with modern influences. Turkish society remains deeply rooted in values such as hospitality, respect for elders, religious observance, and strong family ties traditions that continue to play a central role in daily life despite rapid modernization and globalization (Demir & Aksu, 2021).

Throughout history, diverse civilizational forces including Ottoman imperial legacies, Islamic heritage, and regional ethnic customs have coexisted and interacted with global norms, producing a hybrid cultural landscape. This hybridity is evident in architecture, cuisine, language, and social practices. While urban centers like Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir have embraced modernization through advances in education, technology, and communication, traditional festivals, kinship roles, and regional rituals still hold symbolic and practical importance (Çelik & Ersoy, 2020).

However, existing research on the interplay between tradition and modernity has primarily focused on cultural, economic, or political domains. Few studies have explored how individuals especially younger generations navigate and reconcile these cultural forces in everyday life. Similarly neglected are comparative insights from both urban and rural contexts, or the role of educational environments where cultural identity and language intersect. This leaves a gap in understanding how cultural values are lived and transformed across different social settings, particularly in educational contexts where intercultural interactions are most visible (Arslan, 2022).

This study offers a novel contribution by situating its analysis at the intersection of cultural sociology and applied linguistics, with a particular focus on English language education in Turkey. Prior research on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Turkey has consistently highlighted a misalignment between communicative teaching policies and the persistence of traditional, teacher-centered practices (Solak & Bayar, 2015). Although many EFL instructors acknowledge the importance of integrating local and global cultural content, they often lack the training or institutional support to implement effective intercultural pedagogy (Bal & Savaş, 2020).

Recent studies further underscore this challenge. Onursoy and Zaimoğlu (2024) found that Turkish EFL instructors generally hold positive perceptions toward intercultural communicative competence (ICC), but cite time constraints and curriculum inflexibility as barriers to implementation. Similarly, Gürbüz and Yıldırım (2024) reported that while EFL instructors perceive themselves as supportive of multicultural teaching, their awareness, knowledge, and skills remain only moderately high. These findings reveal that while the potential for fostering intercultural competence exists, it is often underdeveloped due to systemic and institutional constraints.

Understanding Turkish cultural identity within the context of English language instruction is therefore essential for enhancing learners' intercultural competence and fostering meaningful, context-based language learning. As Khusnah et al. (2024) argue, cultural values are deeply rooted, relatively timeless, and transmitted through education, family, and social institutions, shaping how individuals interact and make decisions, especially within multicultural and globalized environments. By exploring how traditional cultural values are maintained, adapted, or transformed particularly through educational settings and intergenerational experiences this study aims to illuminate the ongoing negotiation between two cultural worlds that shape the soul of Turkish society today.

By explicitly addressing the underexplored dynamics of tradition modernity negotiation among youth, across urban rural divides, and within EFL classrooms, this study fills a critical gap in the literature. It also contributes to the development of intercultural pedagogical practices and policy recommendations in English language education in Turkey.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative method with an interpretive approach to understand the social meanings and cultural values in the daily life of Turkish society. This approach was chosen because the focus of the study is not only to describe behavior, but to deeply understand cultural practices such as family values, respect for elders, and how traditions adapt in the face of modernization.

Data were collected through a literature review of various secondary sources, including academic articles, books, reports from international organizations, and official documents accessed through Google Scholar, JSTOR, and university digital platforms. This study is supported by sociocultural theory, which emphasizes how cultural knowledge is passed down and understood within a society.

Data collection was carried out through document analysis and indirect observation of cultural expressions shown online, such as documentaries, traditional videos, and social media posts. Religious celebrations, family events, and social interactions in public spaces were also observed as real examples of Turkish cultural practices. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring cultural values and patterns. This analytical technique allows the researcher to categorize data into themes, providing a clearer understanding of how tradition and modernity coexist and interact in Turkish society.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

The findings of this study show that Turkish citizens live within a dynamic balance between tradition and modernity. On the one hand, traditions such as respecting elders, maintaining family ties, warmly welcoming guests, and organizing weddings according to custom are still preserved, particularly in rural areas (Evason, 2019). On the other hand, in big cities like Istanbul and Ankara, lifestyle changes are evident in dress, work patterns, and more open social interactions.

Through various sources, both journals and cultural documents, it appears that this balance between traditional and modern life does not happen automatically. Turkish society seems to be well aware that cultural identity must remain, despite lifestyle changes. Therefore, they do not reject new things, but choose which ones are in line with their values. The results show that Turkish society still maintains many important traditions despite developments in modern lifestyle, especially in cities. One

of the main findings is the family values are still very strong, as seen in the habit of gathering with extended family members when celebrating important days or in everyday life. In addition, the culture of respecting elders is still maintained through polite behavior and active participation of children in caring for their parents. In contrast, people in cities like Istanbul and Ankara are beginning to show a change in lifestyle. The younger generation is more open to adopting international lifestyle, such as working outside the home, delaying marriage, or choosing to live apart from their families. However, they still maintain traditions in adapted ways, for example by holding regular family gatherings even online.

Social Life

Turkish social life is characterized by warmth and solidarity. Traditions such as Altın Günü or “Golden Day,” where women exchange gold coins while sharing meals, continue to strengthen community ties (Bilecen, 2019). Similarly, feeding stray animals and helping neighbors in informal ways reflect the communal spirit of Turkish culture.

Turkish people are also very accustomed to sharing not only food and clothing, but also feelings and secrets. For example, many people feed stray cats that roam cafes, museums and even places of worship. In addition, there is a tradition where parents leave notes about needs in front of the window, and neighbors or nearby merchants will fulfill the needs, usually with money prepared to pay.

Social ties in Turkey are warm and friendly. Sometimes, friendships can feel more intimate than family relationships. One interesting example is the custom of honking a long horn on the road. Not only does this often happen during traffic jams, but it is also a sign that someone is getting married or has completed military service.

Another unique feature is that interactions between generations in Turkey often feel more equal. On large campuses such as those in Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir, students from different backgrounds are often involved in events that bring together different age groups and cultures, resulting in harmonious communication and mutual respect.

Work Ethics

Work ethics emphasize loyalty, hierarchy, and interpersonal trust. Employees are dedicated to their companies, and workplace flexibility is tolerated within limits, provided that fairness and respect are maintained (Moderator, 2025). In law, Turkey employs a mixed system influenced by European legal traditions. Although labor rights are regulated including a 45-hour work week and leave entitlements issues such as judicial independence and corruption remain challenges.

In communication, Turks are open and expressive, but still maintain politeness. Criticism is delivered carefully so as not to hurt the feelings of others. Officially, there are labor regulations that set a maximum working hour limit of about 45 hours a week, the right to take time off, and protections for employees to keep their rights guaranteed.

Rule of Law

Turkey utilizes a diverse legal system, drawing influence from Swiss, German, and Italian law. The Turkish Constitution is the highest source of law governing the state and society. The government plays a significant role in enforcing the law, especially with regard to public order, the right to speech, and people's civil rights.

However, in recent years, the cost of the independence of the judiciary and the implementation of the law has often come under scrutiny, both from within the country and abroad. This points to the challenge of ensuring the law is administered fairly without interference from other parties.

In terms of employment, Turkey has regulations governing employment contracts, a maximum working week of 45 hours, leave, and protections for workers. Trade unions are allowed to operate, although their influence varies depending on the sector. Despite the existence of strict legal regulations, issues of corruption and unfairness in the application of the law remain a challenge, especially in the bureaucratic and political sectors. This makes fair application of the law a task that Turkey must

accomplish.

Education System

The learning system in Turkey has gone through many changes in recent years. The government continues to strive to improve access to education, especially in previously hard-to-reach areas. Education from primary to secondary level is now compulsory, and more and more children are able to go on to university. In Turkey, children are required to attend school from the age of six to 18, and their education is divided into several stages. The first stage is elementary school, which lasts for four years (grades 1–4). This stage includes national subjects such as Turkish Language, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. The next stage is middle school, also lasting for four years (grades 5–8). Here, students study additional subjects such as Foreign Language, History, and Geography. At the end of middle school, students take the LGS exam to enter the next level. High school also lasts for four years. It is divided into general programs that prepare students for the University Entrance Exam (YKS), and vocational programs that focus on practical skills. Higher education includes bachelor's to doctoral programs. Admission to universities is mainly based on the results of the YKS exam (Vicky Lui, 2024).

The education system in Turkey has expanded significantly in recent decades. Compulsory schooling from age six to eighteen has increased access, and competitive national examinations such as the LGS and YKS determine advancement. In metropolitan areas, education quality is higher due to better facilities, while rural regions still struggle with access to technology and teachers. Digital learning has also grown, particularly after COVID-19.

In large metropolitan areas such as Istanbul and Ankara, the quality of education is usually superior due to better facilities and teachers. However, in rural or eastern parts of Turkey, issues such as teacher shortages or lack of access to technology are still obstacles.

Education in Turkey is also starting to integrate digital technology. Some schools and universities have implemented online learning and digital platforms, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. However, not all students can easily access them due to different economic and geographical situations.

The learning environment in Turkey is quite competitive, especially when entering universities. The national entrance exam is the main factor to be accepted into the desired public university. This system sometimes causes considerable study pressure on students.

In addition, cultural values influence the country's education system. Teachers are highly respected, and families play an important role in supporting their children's education. Many parents encourage their children to achieve higher education as a way to secure a better future.

Personal Relationships

Relationships between individuals in Turkey are known to be very close and warm. Turkish people tend to be open, friendly, and enjoy building strong social relationships with family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers. One important characteristic of personal relationships there is the value of mutual trust and respect, which is highly valued.

Within the family, the closeness between members is very strong. Children generally stay with their parents until they get married, and after marriage, many still get together for meals or visits. Relationships between siblings are strong - they help each other out and look after each other's affairs, but not in a negative way, but as a form of care and belonging. In Turkish culture, honor (*onur*) is very important and influences individual behavior. This value not only reflects personal actions, but also includes the reputation of their family or social group. Therefore, a person is obligated to maintain his or her good name (*namus*) so as not to bring disgrace to his or her immediate environment. To maintain a respectable image, individuals often display a dignified demeanor, accentuate positive values and follow prevailing social norms (Nina Evason, 2019).

With friends, Turks can be very close. They don't hesitate to share personal stories, joke

around, or even argue with passion. Friendly relationships can feel like a second family. In their culture, it is common to think of friends as one's own siblings. even argue with passion. Friendly relationships can feel like a second family. In their culture, it is common to consider friends as one's own siblings.

For interactions between men and women, social norms can differ depending on the context. In big cities, interaction are more free and modern, while in more traditional areas, there are stricter social rules. However, in both contexts, one thing is the same: respect is highly emphasized. Maintaining etiquette in speech and behavior is part of the important values in personal relationships. One interesting thing is the way they express affection. For example, hugging or kissing on the cheek upon meeting is commonplace, even among men. To an outsider, this may seem excessive, but to Turkish society, this is how they show how important the person is to them.

Overall, personal relationships in Turkey are more than just formal ties. There is a warmth, care and sense of connection that makes relationships very human and genuine.

Table Manner

Dining etiquette in Turkey is not only about the food but also about how one behaves at the table. Traditions such as waiting until everyone is ready before eating, giving elders the priority, and using the right hand while eating are still practiced today (Özay, 2024). This action shows respect for the people who are there. The country's dining culture is rich and meaningful. From the way food is served to the way people sit together, everything reflects deep social values.

The first thing you will feel is the hospitality of your hosts. If you visit a Turkish home, you will be warmly welcomed and served plenty of food. Even if you say "I'm full," it's usually still offered and considered polite to have a little more. This is not a compulsion, but rather a form of attention and affection.

Turkish people also like to eat together. Whether it's breakfast, lunch or dinner, it's usually with family or close friends. Meal time is a time for chatting, sharing stories and having fun. Food is usually placed in the center of the table to be enjoyed together, unlike in Western restaurants where portions are usually served per person.

Norms when eating are also very much observed. For example, the right hand is used to pick up and eat food, while the left hand is rarely used. When eating bread, you don't bite straight into it, but instead pinch it into small pieces. If you are eating with your elders, you will usually give them the best seat or let them take the food first.

Specialties such as kebabs, dolma or meze are often present on the dining table. But there are also little quirks, like the almost-always-available yoghurt. In Turkey, yogurt is not just a dessert, but an important part of the meal-it can be enjoyed with rice, soup or meat. Turkey can be considered an interesting geographical region for the social and cultural aspects of traditional drinks. The geographical position of Turkey as a bridge between Europe and Asia, the Turkish presence over a wide geographical area throughout history and the nomadic lifestyle of the Turks have bestowed on Turkey a rich variety of traditional drinks (Batu and Batu, 2018).

On the other hand, drinks are also very important. Black tea (*çay*) is the go-to drink after meals. It's bitter and served in a small tulip-shaped glass. It is not just an accompaniment to the meal, but a symbol of hospitality and social custom. In fact, enjoying tea together can last for hours while chatting casually.

Overall, Turkish dining rules reflect strong social values, respecting others, upholding togetherness and showing care through food. Eating together is not just an ordinary activity, but an important part of everyday social life. These rules and traditions have continued to flow through time. Modern Turks still apply and preserve earlier customs, even as their eating habits and lifestyles are increasingly influenced by modernization.

Family and Marriage

Family values remain one of the strongest aspects of Turkish life. The habit of gathering with extended family during important celebrations or even in daily routines highlights the resilience of kinship ties. Respect for elders is still reflected in children's active role in supporting and caring for parents. In contrast, urban youth tend to adopt global lifestyles, such as working outside the home, postponing marriage, or living apart from family. However, even in these cases, traditions adapt to modernity for instance, by holding family gatherings virtually.

Marriage in Turkey plays a big role in people's lives. Although times have changed, many customs are still maintained. However, the way the younger generation of Turks view marriage is changing. People are generally free to choose their partner in urban areas. Families can be more heavily involved in rural areas. The average age for marriage is 22 for women and 25 for men. Most Turkish marriages are conducted as a civil service in addition to a religious service (officiated by an Imam). Among more traditional families, it is a strong cultural requirement that a woman be a virgin/untouched (*bakire*) before marriage. Cohabitation before marriage is also uncommon, as many believe men and women should only live together if married (Nina Evason, 2019).

In many areas, especially in villages, weddings often involve extended family. The husband and wife are sometimes introduced by parents or relatives. However, in big cities like Istanbul or Ankara, many choose their own partners, even through social media or friends at college.

Before marriage, there is usually a formal engagement, which is marked by a meeting between the two families. In this event, the man's family comes to the woman's home with flowers and sweets, and proposes. This moment is very meaningful and considered special. One unique feature is when the bride-to-be gives her husband-to-be a very salty tea. If he drinks it without complaint, it is considered a sign of seriousness and patience.

After that, there is henna night, which is a special party for women before the wedding. In this event, the bride-to-be is given makeup and surrounded by family and friends. Traditional songs are sung, and henna is applied on the bride-to-be's hands as a symbol of good luck and protection. However, many young couples now opt for a simpler wedding, without a long series of activities. Some even choose to get married civilly without a big party. This is often due to practical, financial reasons, or simply as a lifestyle choice. Among young professionals, marriage is no longer the only goal in life. They are more open to equal partners, talk of household responsibilities and mutual agreement in the relationship.

Interestingly, both old traditions and new lifestyles can co-exist. There are couples who still hold henna nights, but also choose to live independently from their parents. Or there are those who marry without customs, but still appreciate the values of honor and togetherness between families. So, marriage in Turkey today is not just about two people loving each other, but also about how the younger generation is finding new ways to stay connected to their culture, while remaining relevant to the modern world.

DISCUSSION

The results demonstrate that Turkish society is navigating modernization without losing cultural identity. This reflects the principles of sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which argues that human behavior and identity are shaped by cultural and social interaction. The persistence of traditions, especially family values and respect for elders, shows how cultural tools remain central even when lifestyles shift.

Comparing urban and rural contexts highlights the selective adaptation of modern practices. As Kağıtçıbaşı (2007) emphasizes in her research on Turkish family systems, Turkey exemplifies a "family model of emotional interdependence," where modernization changes external behaviors but does not eliminate underlying cultural values. For example, virtual family gatherings illustrate how technology supports rather than replaces traditions.

The endurance of communal practices such as Altın Günü, feeding stray animals, or hospitality

rituals underscores the role of collectivism in Turkish society (Hofstede, 2011). These findings resonate with earlier studies that identify Turkey as a society that blends individual aspirations with strong communal values (Güngör & Bornstein, 2010).

In the work environment, the balance between hierarchy and loyalty illustrates the intersection of tradition with professional structures. While workplace flexibility exists, dedication to the organization remains high when employees feel respected an example of how cultural expectations of honor and fairness extend into professional life.

Educational reforms illustrate the dual challenge of modernization and cultural continuity. While the adoption of technology and expanded access signal modernization, the continued respect for teachers and family involvement reflects traditional cultural norms (Özcan & Acar, 2020). Similarly, the legal system demonstrates efforts to balance modern democratic principles with long-standing challenges of governance.

Overall, Turkey exemplifies the idea of “Two Worlds, One Soul.” The coexistence of tradition and modernity is not accidental but a conscious cultural choice, where society negotiates change by integrating new practices with enduring values. This finding supports the argument that modernization does not necessarily lead to cultural homogenization but can foster unique hybrid identities.

CONCLUSION

Life in Turkey demonstrates a dynamic balance between modernization and the preservation of traditional cultural values. The education system adopts contemporary approaches while respecting cultural heritage, the family structure in urban areas shifts toward a nuclear model, and interpersonal relations become more open and egalitarian. At the same time, traditional practices such as hospitality, respect for elders, and strong extended family bonds remain deeply rooted, ensuring that modernization does not erode cultural resilience.

These findings align with the sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the role of cultural traditions in shaping social behavior and identity. For education, this implies the need to integrate cultural values into curricula, especially in language teaching, to promote intercultural competence and strengthen students' cultural identity. In a broader societal context, Turkey illustrates how modernization can coexist with cultural continuity, serving as a model for societies undergoing similar transitions.

Future research could explore how cultural values are transmitted to younger generations in formal and informal settings, particularly through schools and family life. Comparative studies between Turkey and other culturally diverse nations could also provide deeper insights into the interplay between modernization and cultural preservation. Practically, policymakers and educators are encouraged to design programs that blend innovation with tradition, ensuring that cultural values continue to guide social and educational development.

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