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Kuş Bahane

Came for the Birds, Stayed for the Fellows

Visual Ethnography

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Abstract:

On one side of a room, there are birds living and on the other side people watching them. Since the pigeons have the desired voice only in the winters, birders tour from house to house, even from village to village just to listen to the pigeons in the winter evenings. An experienced birder listens to the sounds one by one and engraves it to his mind, even during conversation. While the pigeons are singing on the one hand, tea is drunk on the other. Afterwards, the potatoes cooked in the stove are eaten and the conversations on birds never stop.

Keywords:

Birdmen; Visual ethnography; Identity; Masculinity; Community.

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1 *Seki* is the place where pigeons live and birdmen chat and drink tea after their listening sessions. *Sekis* are mostly large rooms adjacent to the house but separate from it; however sometimes wholly separated cabins can be used as a *seki* as well. On one side of the *seki*, there are birds living and on the other side people watching them.

2 When translated directly, Bayburt kuşu means “Bayburt bird”. This is the special breeding of pigeon that belongs to that area. It is also called “çift kukul”.

In between mountains and an enormous fortress on top, my research commenced on the subject of “birdmen” in the very small city of Bayburt, Turkey. As pigeon breeding is a common practice in Turkey, this one is quite different than we are accustomed to. Bayburt birdmen’s approach is significantly different from conventional forms. Rather than keeping tumbler pigeons for the spectacle of the acrobatic backflips, somersaults or rolling, their purpose lay in savoring them singing. Yet, I had doubts about pigeons having attractive melodious voices. So my curiosity piqued for the things I will witness and I knew it would not be an ordinary thing. This is how it all started and ended with me writing this text accompanying the documentary “Came for the Birds, Stayed for the Fellows” which not only encapsulates television documentary techniques but also embodies a strong ethnographic perspective.

Originally commissioned by a TV channel to focus only on the Bayburt pigeon breed. However during the field research, it took an unexpected turn. Instead of meeting a flock of birds, I found myself occupied by the lives of birdmen. In the field I have witnessed that the singing talents of birds were important but the capability of birdmen to make them sing well was more important. The new squab members of the pigeon community were important but the knowledge of breeding them was more important. Listening to them singing was important but coming together with all the birdmen in *sekis*¹ and having a conversation next to birds singing was more important. In this way, this documentary endeavors to introduce the birdmen’s passion for pigeon, specially breeding of ‘*Bayburt kuşu*’², exploring their sense of ownership, their cohesive community in the whole province including its villages and their strong sense of solidarity.

Before delving further, I want to briefly draw the succinct portrayal of the city of Bayburt. Nestled amidst mountains and the river Chorokhi run through the city center, it is placed in a small area, with a population of 84,000, is renowned for its harsh winters and conservative inhabitants. It is noteworthy that during the Gezi protests in Turkey, Bayburt is known being the only city where there were no protests at all. Additionally, in the 2023 elections, Bayburt had the highest vote percentage for President Erdoğan at %82.45. As the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has the highest vote rates in the city, the second one is again a conservative party, Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). The common impression in Turkey is that the people of Bayburt are rather content with the reigning government. However the people I encountered showed me not every single person is very much devoted to the ruling government but still the natural atmosphere of the city seemed to align with the current political climate. During our shootings, while we were recording, Halit started to mention their old days of gatherings in the *sekis*, recounting how much they were drunk and even wasted in those revelries. He brought this up two or more than two times. A few days later, I encountered his fellow birdmen and they requested that these anecdotes be excluded from the documentary. Presumably, this request arose from the fact that the documentary was first hand commissioned by the governor of Bayburt, and they might not want to be portrayed as a frivolous drunk-stories-teller in the eyes of the official authorities or might just want to keep up with the conservative community. So this anecdote serves as a glimpse into Bayburt’s general perception and offers but one example of my observations. After introducing the city and the city people very briefly and maybe even biasedly one might say, I want to turn back to the small but impressive and powerful community of birdmen.

Let us now return to the central focus- the appealing and influential community of birdmen. It is vital to comprehend that, also as expressed by a competent birdman, the sound of those birds is not attractive at all for the uninitiated. This inexplicable passion that drives these people to construct rooms or cabins just for

the birds and dedicating almost all of their lives for those calls or the appearances of the pigeons, in this case *Bayburt kuşu*, might actually be a bit perplexing. Yet through my observations, I discern that this ardor brought their life a profound brotherhood and a solid identity of being a birdman. The pride of being a master in coaxing beautiful melodies from the pigeons, along with being a man from Bayburt were always undeniably a material to show-off and often exhibited through conversations. The birdmen I met, even when having a conversation with another friend of them, were always trying to add a word or two into their sentences about the qualities and traditions of Bayburt, as if they were telling it to the other birdmen but actually they were telling it indirectly to us, film crew or to the audience behind the camera. That's how I realized the importance of traditional values and unity within the community. While Bayburt residency served as a common thread binding them together, being from the neighborhood called Şingah is another commitment. The residents of Şingah took pride in their neighborhood's rich heritage of bird breeding, enriched by the presence of elderly master birdmen who had lived there. Though, some villages outside the city are also famous for their bird breeding and the strong relationship between all the birdmen is pretty impressive. They recounted their journeys on foot through freezing Bayburt winters, traversing villages for bird-listening nights- an activity limited to the breeding season. In those events they set the place for the guests accordingly for listening to birds and for a nice chat about the quality of their singing. Whenever they decide to go to a *seki* to listen to them, they are being a guest to another birdman's *seki* to see other birds singing. The reciprocity works in this case as reciprocal visitings and they show off reciprocally with their birds singing. These nights are also places where they trade pigeons, besides some birdmen indicate proudly that they never sell their birds but just give away. Thus, those visitings are very crucial for the birdmen in order to listen to the birds, get to know qualified bird individuals and to make contacts with other birdmen³.

During these gatherings, being a host or a guest have different meanings. Being a host is conceived as a significant and important role and brings some responsibilities; including without a doubt, welcoming people, but also showcasing male pigeons' songs with the help of female birds. However this act we can call 'make bird sing' is performed by guests as well, especially by competent ones or by a close friend of the host so that guests can listen to it and then comment on it. If the bird would not make the desired voice then they make fun of each other and ridicule their ability to make them sing or sometimes they ridicule pigeons themselves but since pigeons are the property of the host, it is still considered as ridiculing the host.

After all, these mockings do not end up with harsh resentments but contrary, provide relationships to get stronger; the more you're close the less you're heartbroken because you know it is just teasing and what is there behind those words. For the reason that they know very well that the teasing will stay in that *seki* but the praises will stay for a very long time and be told as long as their friendship goes and even after that, it does not cause a problem. Osman, a leading person among the city and among the birdmen, had a great pleasure of telling that other fellow birdmen's good pigeons, besides, that how many fellow birdmen are there even around the world, that he used to travel a lot to İstanbul for visiting a friend's *seki* (who is for sure from Bayburt) to listen to the birds or that even some birdmen moved to Germany and still practicing birdmanship with *Bayburt kuşu*. Yet within the brotherhood, there are hostilities and groupings as well. So it is pretty common to discredit one's birdmanship abilities if you don't have a positive feeling towards that one specific guy. At the beginning of our field trip, we had visited many *seki* in the city and in the villages with three birdmen and one driver. After my first trip I have heard some complaints about me visiting *sekis* with one of those birdmen, Mehmet. The competition between them, later on, turned into hostility and caused group-

3 In Bayburt there are some coffeehouses where only birdmen visit, where they gather and chat, even though they don't have their birds with them at that time. Those coffeehouses are also significant places for birdmen to have contact with each other.

4 As women never have such a habit, they are also not allowed to enter *sekis* during gatherings. When a tea or other kind of service is needed, women may bring a tray at the door and her husband, son or father etc. takes it, so guests mostly don't even see the woman of the house (except little girls).

ings. As a consequence I have realized that in some *sekis* birdmen's communication with me changed very obviously when I visited there without Mehmet and I even heard gossiping about him between conversations.

These groups as you can see consist of a pretty competitive, closed and masculine club of men⁴. Yet what they actually admire and spend their lives with is cute, beautiful, fluffy, round-eyed, poor doves. When I had the chance to talk to the wife of a birdman, she interpreted her husband's fondness for pigeons as love of animals. She mentioned he has a strong love for animals. Yet in the city, when asked people, they said it is an addiction and sickness or just a good hobby. This practice (or identity that comes with it) lies somewhere between win-or-lose type of masculinity and admiration for the cuteness and callings of the birds. However in the *sekis*, even though the love for them is pretty obvious, I have witnessed that, except for some specific pigeons, others are not identified as individuals by their owners and in some cases they are not more than goods to brag about. Male birds are kept in small rooms and females are in smaller cages, they are not allowed to fly outside as it used to be as they say. Because people may steal them or a hawk may hunt one of them. They have to be captive inside for their security. This security has to be provided for the sake of the birds as properties. As for the reason why male and female birds are kept in different places is to get male birds heat and so make them sing better when they are shown female birds (except when they let them get together to breed). Bird individuals don't have proper names and when referring to a pigeon, birdmen define them with some basic adjectives, attributed to birds' feather color or shape. Even though pigeons are domesticated along with an admiration, we can acknowledge that the relationship between birds and birdmen does not come out of a desire to share a close bond. Put differently, those domesticated animals are not treated as pets. Nonetheless, some of them state insistently how they are fond of those beautiful birds and still it is not possible to reject the sincerity.

In the documentary, our aim was to explore the intricate bond between man and bird through the lens of birdmanship. Yet, what unfolded before our cameras primarily revolved around the relationship among birdmen themselves. Through interviews with birdmen and the recordings of the "*seki*" evenings, the documentary shows the small yet tightly-knit community of pigeon enthusiasts in a small city called Bayburt.

Film link: <https://vimeo.com/762794521>
Password: kus2022

