

## How Turkish taboos perpetuate immaturity

**Professor Ayşe Kadıoğlu of Sabancı University speaks of her experience growing up in Turkey where taboos, many imposed by law, have trapped citizens "in a state of immaturity".**



Growing up under the spell of taboos is a debilitating experience. It can imprison one's mind in a state of infancy despite the inevitable physical growth of a person. In his book *Life of Reason or the Phases of Human Progress*, the Spanish-American philosopher George Santayana says: "Progress far from consisting in change, depends on retentiveness. When change is absolute there remains no being to improve and no direction is set for possible improvement – and when experience is not retained, as among savages, infancy is perpetual. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." When I understood the magnitude of these words, I was already an adult enrolled in graduate school in the US.

I grew up in Turkey where the prevailing education system still conceals certain historical facts in primary and secondary school curricula lest they would harm the "indivisibility of the state with its country and nation", an expression that is used several times in the current Turkish constitution. Perhaps, the fear about deeds that can harm the unity of the state and nation is best symbolised in the Turkish national anthem that begins with the lyrics "Do not Fear!" When fears nurture and

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sustain taboos, the ability to retain experiences declines. Enduring an education that is laden with either false historical facts or an eerie silence makes it impossible for people to exit the state of self-imposed immaturity.

When I encountered Armenian-American students in Boston who examined me as “the Turk” in flesh and blood, at first, I could not understand the reason for their unfettered curiosity. As soon as we began to talk, I also began to read about the tragedy of the Armenians during the demise of the Ottoman Empire. It almost felt as if I was from another planet! I had grown up under the spell of nationalist taboos and was educated to be ignorant on certain issues. Yes, progress is diminished to cosmetic change in the absence of retaining knowledge. Taboos perpetuate immaturity.

There are many taboos in Turkey that mainly concern the protection of the “indivisibility of the state and nation”. There are also many laws that make it a crime to break these taboos. When taboos are sustained by law, the minds (and, many times, bodies) of citizens end up being imprisoned. One such taboo involves the founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. In Turkey, there is a law against crimes about Atatürk. It is a crime to insult his memory and harm his statutes. Another taboo involves the sacredness of the Turkish Armed Forces. This is sustained by a law against discouraging people from performing their compulsory military service. Many conscientious objectors as well as writers have faced criminal charges on the basis of this law. “Turkishness” is another taboo and there is a law in Turkey against insulting “Turkishness”. Armenian-Turkish journalist Hrant Dink was charged and found guilty for insulting “Turkishness” on the basis of an opinion piece that he had authored despite a report of experts presented to the local criminal court who opposed the charges against him. This indictment ignited the fire of events that led to his assassination in 2007.

The notion of the “indivisibility of the Turkish state with its country and nation” is the most pervasive taboo of the Turkish Republic. The Turkish state’s unremitting drive to protect the fantasy of a unified nation has led to the denial of the identity of its Kurdish citizens. They were banned from speaking Kurdish in the aftermath of the 1980 military coup. Thousands of Kurds were killed or “lost” in Turkey in clandestine acts in the 1990s. It does not seem possible to heal the wounds of this dark past without widening the channels of public debate and deliberation.

Taboos, enforced by law, are fetters in front of the ability to reason. It is possible to be released from the spell of taboos and strengthen the ethos of democracy by upholding the realm of public debate and deliberation. Therefore, yes, “We allow no taboos in the discussion and dissemination of knowledge,” because we try not to be trapped in a state of immaturity and want to do our utmost to fulfil our capacities as reasonable human beings.

*This article was republished on the [Guardian Comment Network](#).*

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Published on: February 17, 2012