

## **Silk Road as a Communication Center between East and West Cultures**

**Celal CAYIR\*, Yakup CETIN\*\***

Culture is the accumulation of incessant social experience of hundreds and thousands of years. It is a superorganic entity which is capable of shaping our beliefs and life styles by approving and disapproving demands regarding law, economy, religion, ownership, labor and other forms of social organization. Every society has physical and spiritual values which are developed and spread as a result of diverse interactions with numerous societies.

Culture is not a stable and concrete construct. On the contrary, its characteristics are flexible, live, dynamic, and influential. As an analogy if we regard culture as a river flowing from the beginning of history, Anatolia doubtless constitutes one of its nurturing banks. From this point of view, Silk Road played an important role in providing direct interaction between different societies, civilizations, and cultures.

Several factors are influential in the transfer of culture from one region of the world to other geographies. While current mass media means either did not exist or were not well-developed in the previous centuries, cultural exchange took place mainly through wars and trade. This study consists of two parts: the first part includes the influence of travel, trade and war on cultural interaction; the second part mentions the socio-cultural aspect of Silk Road inside Anatolia.

### **Influence of War, Trade, and Travel on Exchange of Cultural Values**

#### **Exchange of Material and Spiritual Culture**

Silk Road has been a significant route connecting two continents and three sea basins for two thousand years. Besides the transfer of Wealth from the East to the West, it functioned as a bridge between two great civilizations of the time. It has contributed not only to contact with unfamiliar societies with different beliefs and cultures, but also to exchange of new technology and thoughts between civilizations.

The ancient Silk Road was not limited only to trade interactions. Scholars, adventurers, Christian missionaries and pilgrims had the opportunity to visit different countries in caravans on the 6.400 km long road. The travel of many Buddhist priests to different regions between China and India has already been known. Furthermore, it has been reported that Silk Road played a significant part in the acceptance of Buddhism and Manichaeism – widespread eastern religions in the region- by most Turks before their acquaintance with Islam.

Trade caravans of merchants used to set off several times a year. They visited several cities and countries on their route to take a rest and market their merchandize

---

\* PhD, Uludag University, Turkey

\*\* PhD., Head of American Studies Department, Faculty of Humanities, International Black Sea University

since the long and strenuous journeys took months before they reached their destinations. During their breaks they were able to establish direct and useful contact with various local cultures and societies. Consequently, trade caravans made cultural interactions possible between people who lived in remote distance from each other.

In the first time periods of the Middle Ages, the influence and supremacy of Islam over the West was limited mainly to social life. The Feudal system and church had drastic impact on the socio-economic structure of Europe. As a result of Western crusades, Europeans had the opportunity to meet the so far unknown great Eastern civilization. During this time, Islamic civilization was remarkably superior to Europe in many areas. Wealth and welfare of Muslims in social, official and, economic life greatly marveled the European people.

For the first time in history, the compass was used by the Chinese and introduced to Europe by Arab traders. Similarly, the invention of printing and paper by Chinese were transferred to Europe by Turks and Muslims and thereafter Jan Gutenberg from Germany invented the first printing machine in 1540. It is fairly obvious that trade on Silk Road greatly contributed to the transfer of material culture from the Eastern World to the West.

### **Change of Mind and Prejudice against the East**

European travelers, mariners, traders and their doctors who traveled to the different parts of the world had the live opportunity to tell about their new encounters upon their return. In other words, they had the chance to see and experience many places and societies before known as violent and barbarous. In connection with this, they started to discuss over again concepts such as liberty, justice, prosperity, and so on by referring to civilizations they had visited. As a result of these long contemplations and discussions, it can be concluded that they began to question and abandon their preconceived ideas and dogmas.

Siam Kingdom and its pagan people were once known as uncivilized and savage by European communities. Once French tradesmen, scholars, and priests went there in order to establish trade and relationships with Siamese people. All of them were welcome in a friendly, peaceful, and liberal atmosphere by Siamese people. Without restrictions Christian missionaries were free to practice their worship in all parts of Siam. They were vastly surprised when they found out that Siamese were civilized, honest, and ethical people, contrary to their previous preconceptions. French missionaries received the following judicious response from the Siamese King when they asked him to become a Christian. "If God had wished for only one prevailing religion in the world, he would have done this very easily; however, it can be inferred from the presence of many forms of worshipping that God tolerates religious diversity." They started to doubt and question their own values and belief upon the intelligent response from the Siamese king whose pagan people were once considered as barbarians. Who was more civilized? Europeans were determined to abandon their prejudice and inquire the origin of this extensive understanding and tolerance. If this nation of pagans would come to their land and practice their ordinary rituals as a requirement of their belief system, quite weird for Christians; what would have happened? Doubtless they would be subject to severe torture and persecution. This foregoing example indicates the significant contribution of trade interactions to the eradication of redundant deep-rooted misconceptions.

## **The Preparation of Conditions for Renaissance and Reforms**

As a result of crusades, Europeans had the opportunity to meet the advanced East via this majestic trade route. During this period, the Islamic Civilization was far superior to them in every aspect of life. They were amazed by the wealth and prosperity of the Eastern world experienced in social, cultural, religious, economic, and other social life forms.

A new world view was inevitable formed in the mind of many Europeans by means of long lasting Crusades. In connection with this, novel concepts and understandings were born such as freedom of expression, individual liberty, the sharing of welfare, and the formation of social life. Thus, the great role of Christian Crusaders to the development of European civilization cannot be denied.

The western scholar Simon Ockley was frank enough to reject the incorrect conception of Western superiority to the East in the 1700's. According to him, the East not only produced more scholars but also offered better life conditions and facilities than the West. Regarding this, he stated openly the following quotation: "... I accept my total ignorance if ever (at all) the West added a stamp to the Eastern treasure of wisdom."

## **Social-cultural Importance of Anatolian Silk Road**

Anatolia, the crossroad of many ancient Silk Road routes, has many important characteristics. Trade caravans which set off from China traveled through Central Asia whose majority population consists of Turks eventually reached Anatolia. Social, cultural, and trading aspects of Anatolia will be mentioned in the following part.

## **The Importance of Anatolia as an Example to Cultural Pluralism**

Anatolia, a rather significant location on the Silk Road, used to host the most dynamic geography and culture from the economic, social, political point of view between the West and the East. Because of its geographical position, Anatolia has been the cradle of many civilizations as well as a bridge of transfer of culture between the East and the West since the ancient times.

Anatolia has been a peaceful place for various populations to maintain their diverse religion and ethnicity. Conclusively, it has been one of the rare places with liberal conditions for people to express and practice their religion and culture. An exemplary model of cultural pluralism has been maintained successfully for many years in this part of the world.

## **The Influence of Anatolia in Changing the Western Misconceptions about the East**

Because of its transit location, Anatolia played a major role in contributing to the interaction between the West and the East. Although one aspect of Anatolia looks at the West, the other aspect of it is inevitably related to the East. From this point of view, it has been a convenient and preferred place for many European people to get to know the wealthy East. Embassy Secretary Sir Paul Rycaut's book written about Turkey used to be one of the top travel classics about the East until 1666.

In 1686 a western traveler and trader French Chardin, in his book about his expedition to Iran, highlighted the fact that even though the Asian life style was quite different from the West, it was by no means inferior. The prevailing delusion of

Western supremacy until that time started to vanish. Accordingly, the climate to appreciate differences emerged and the rigid philosophy of Western superiority was abandoned short after.

### **Exemplary Social Solidarity Institutions: Caravansaries and other Charity Organizations**

Solidarity of Anatolian people is well-known and its examples can be seen in different areas. A highly developed social state with elaborate institutions used to be present in Anatolia several centuries ago. Travelers were able to stay for three days without language, religion, and race discrimination in caravansaries and khans which included bedrooms, bathrooms, stables for horses and camels, blacksmith, checkroom, doctors, veterinarians, maintenance service for carriages, and many other facilities to meet the needs of travelers. Surprisingly, these safe places for many travelers were free of charge in spite of the invaluable services they were offering like food, bathroom opportunities, and so forth. As far as their functions are concerned, these praiseworthy establishments which took in all kinds of people regardless of religion, color, and creed were the best models of social solidarity incomparable at that time. Correspondingly, traders, explorers, travelers worldwide found the opportunity to meet their fellows from other cultures and during their stay in these edifices with their stone ornaments and impressive design.

In 1747, well-known as an enemy of Turks, counselor Guer mentioned in his book "Moeurs et Usages da Turcs" his admiration and confession of Turkish Muslims with the following quotation: "Moslem Turks have developed several forms of charity: they donate money to the mosques whose Imams hand them over to the needy who are ashamed to reveal their identity; they establish Madrasah (a Muslim College) in order to contribute to science and philosophy; they build foundations as a memorial after their deaths; they construct khans and caravanserais, hospitals, fountains, bridges and so on. His expression of amazement of this civilization manifests their great compassion for animals, for they have numerous foundations where only animals can find food and receive medical treatment. Despite what has been mentioned, according to the author, Turks are still barbarous. It does not matter and change his fixed prejudice even though the author considers them as the most hospitable and sincere people.

### **Reliable Justice and Trade System**

In the time of Anatolian Seljuks', the trade caravans were insured and protected so that they could safely cross this territory without being targets for bandits and plunderers. With trade agreement with neighboring countries, they assured the transportation of merchandise without loss and theft from the East to the West. It is not wrong to say that they were the first to introduce the State Insurance System to protect and promote trade transaction through tax system. It is necessary to stress that the insurance and guarantee provided to trade caravans during that period has not been on the international agenda until recently. Thus, it essential to highlight the great role Anatolia played in the development of concept of insurance system in international trade regarding the protection of trade products. In the past the trade privilege of protection of caravans and their trade goods in Anatolia was a great relief for the traders especially in insecure places of the route. Accordingly, if Turks had not taken the responsibility to provide security in Asia and the Middle East, it was possible for Silk Road to loose its importance as a trade route.

Undoubtedly, the importance of Anatolian justice and jurisdiction system is unquestionable in the long survival of Silk Road. Disagreements in trade and marketing among merchants were resolved by means of these respected and authoritative institutions. Without religious and racial discrimination the impartial and objective judges were able to overcome all forms of trade problems and disputes taken to their law courts. Traders from different nations and countries had complete faith in the justice system on this highly civilized geography. The study of Ottoman archive reveals records of numberless trials and law decisions in connection with Silk Road Trade. These historical documents are very valuable in that they offer a very detailed description of trade activity during that period. It is obvious that the justice system in Anatolia provided safety and protection to the traders which facilitated the business in both directions in the region.

### **Conclusion**

From the economical, social, and political aspect, Silk Road still constitutes the most dynamic geography in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In the previous years Silk Road has been named "Dialogue Road" by UNESCO because of its remarkable contribution to dialogue and friendly interaction between the West and the East.

According to Ali Yasar Sarıbay, an incessant dialogue between civilizations is an alternative to Huntington's notorious doctrine of clash of civilizations. Unfortunately, his optimism is fragile as long as current powerful forces continue to act according to their egocentric interest and policies. He argues that the conflicts in the Middle-East look as if they depict already clash of civilizations, in fact they are based more on clash of religions which seems likely to spread further.

It is certain that nobody desires the disappearance of important values - language, culture, religion - in the formation of any new identity as a result of globalization. Therefore, in order not to vanish in this unavoidable process of globalization it is the right of every nation to develop dynamic strategies so that they can maintain their cultural identity in the new world design.

### **References**

1. Asman, Jan, Kültürel Bellek, çev: Ayşe Tekin, Ayrıntı Yay, İstanbul 2001, s.145.
2. Atçeken, Zeki & Bedirhan, Yaşar, Selçuklu Müesseseleri ve Medeniyet Tarihi, Konya 200, s.121-124.
3. Gürkan, A.g.e., 172-173.
4. Gürkan, A.g.e., 174.
5. Gürkan, Ahmet, İslam Kültürünün Garbı Medenileştirmesi, Nur Yayınları, Ankara, s.274.
6. A.g.e., s.34.
7. Hazard, a.g.e., s.36.
8. Hazard, A.g.e.,35.
9. Hazard, Paul, Batı Düşüncesindeki Büyük Değişme, çev: Erol Güngör, Ötüken Neşriyat, 1.Baskı, İstanbul 1981, s.25-26.(17.Yüzyıl Avrupa'sında dünya seyahatleri ile öne çıkan en meşhur gemiciler olarak Dampier, Gemelli Carreri, Wood Rogers gibi kişileri saymak mümkündür.)
10. <http://www.blogcu.com/gelinciklerim/509727>
11. Sarıbay, Ali Yaşar, Global Toplumda Din ve Türkiye, Everest Yayınları, İstanbul 200, s.119-120.