

## THE TRADITION AND FUNCTIONAL STRUCTURE OF WEARING ENGAGEMENT FLOWERS IN WESTERN ANATOLIA

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**Abstract:** In this article the “engagement flower” tradition in the mountain villages, namely Tekeler, Yağsılar and Şenköy in Karpuzlu county, and the city of Aydın in Western Anatolia will be described and the functional structure of this tradition will be analyzed

**Keywords:** engagement flower, tradition, Aydın, Western Anatolia, clothing

### 1. INTRODUCTION

An important part of the oral culture consists of traditions and customs. Traditions and customs are the institutions that help to constitute social fabric of a society and to form a healthy relationship among the members of that society. This paper examines one of these traditions, known as wearing an engagement flower or “wearing a flower”. To grow flowers and to include it into daily life (in houses, on balconies, decorating windows and expressing affection for the loved ones, etc.) is a common practice in almost all the cultures in the world as well as in Altaic civilizations of Central Asia. There is a great respect, care and love for flowers in peoples of Turkish origin, as well as in Mongolian, Korean and Japanese cultures. However, the culture has been well-preserved and nurtured among Turks since their earliest days in Central Asia. Wearing flowers indicates not only an emotion or ornament, but also shows a certain status within social strata. I personally witnessed the latter situation during research I was conducting around the mountain villages in the region of the Aegean Coast of Turkey. During my research in some of the villages, Tekeler, Yağsılar and Şenköy of Karpuzlu county, and the city of Aydın I became interested in this particular tradition and concentrated my efforts on its structure and its determining function of social status.

My research around the city of Aydın in 1999 coincided with the season of the Holy Ramadan (*Ramazan Bayramı*). My field trips took me to the villages of Karpuzlu county. I dropped in at one of the local coffee houses. Inside, I observed something interesting: All the young male regulars were wearing flowers over the ears and chatting away with each other. Most of the flowers were red carnations. Moreover, the older patrons were also wearing gillyflowers and hyacinths in their breast pockets. In short, almost all the male customers in the coffee house were decorated with flowers. This colorful spectacle brought this question to mind: Was

there any connection between those flowers and Ramadan festivities? I immediately asked the men and received this reply: “To wear flowers during the days of Bayram is a very old tradition in this village.” This reply convinced me that I had indeed come across an interesting tradition – to wear a flower – and decided to proceed with researching it. I put my current topics of research – dances and folk ballads – aside for the time being and devoted my remaining time to this new subject.

Briefly, I have already mentioned the outer appearance of this tradition that I witnessed at the coffee house. After that, I decided to collect information concerning the structure, content, function and importance of this tradition in the community’s society. I conducted interviews with those following the tradition. I found the opportunity to collect explanatory information from observation and interviews about the current status of the tradition, its applications and conditions. Below, I will try to convey the observations I made and the information I collected from the villagers.

First of all, the practitioners of the tradition are men instead of women or young girls. But, what is interesting is that the flowers are always chosen and given to men by women. They are given as gifts to husbands by wives, to fiancés by fiancées and to young men by their partners (*‘sözlü’*)<sup>1</sup>. Married men wear flowers given to them by their wives especially during Bayram and before going to say Friday Prayers (*‘namaz’*). In the community, those who regularly practice this tradition are primarily young men and bachelors. For this reason, this paper will focus not on the whole process of wearing flowers, but only upon wearing flowers within the context of the marriage engagement process.

## 2. THE APPLICATION OF THE TRADITION OF WEARING ENGAGEMENT FLOWERS

The engaged men in Tekeler, Yağşılar and Şenköy villages of Karpuzlu county, and city of Aydın regularly wear “engagement flowers” over the right ear. A man wears that when he gets engaged. The process of preparing and wearing an engagement flower follows these steps: After an engagement (or *‘söz kesilmesi’*) pledge has been made between two families, and just before the girl’s family says goodbye to the man’s, a bunch of fifteen or twenty flowers is placed on a tray offered to all the guests. The one belonging to the young man is specially prepared and, since it is red, it is easily distinguished from the others (İLERİ 1999; HIRÇIN 1999). On the day of engagement, the flowers coming from the girl’s family are easily set apart from the rest of the flowers they wear.

The young men start wearing their flowers on the day of *‘söz kesme’* or day of engagement, and continue doing so throughout the entire engagement period. A

<sup>1</sup> The words *‘sözlü’* (a marriage pledge for both parties) and *‘sözlenmek’* (a near-pledge), or *‘söz kesmek’*, have no equivalent in the English language. All three pertain to a phase that comes before engagement, and usually refer to some sort of oral commitment or pledge made between the couple. It can sometimes be considered as formal and celebrated by both families.

new flower is sent every Friday by the girl. The girl's family also sends flowers to the young man and his family on Thursday evening, known as "Friday Night" in Turkish culture. It is sent like this: A plate of sweets is prepared by the girl's family and covered with flowers for each member of the man's family. It is sent to their house by a little boy or another family member. After waiting a day or two, the man's family returns the plate filled with assorted nuts and dried fruit. As well, the flowers sent by the girl's family can be worn by both men and women in the family. For example, the mother of the young man could be one of them<sup>2</sup> (BİLGİNER 1999; HIRÇIN 1999).

Apart from this application, fiancées prepare flowers for their fiancés for other occasions, such as bayrams or weddings. Whenever there is a wedding ceremony in the village, the girl always sends a flower to her fiancé in order to not send him to such events and be seen by others without it. During bayrams, a fiancée always gives her fiancé a flower on the eve of that particular day, and sends him to bayram prayer with it.

Presenting such flowers prepared exclusively for bayram days follows a certain pattern, as follows: The young man arrives at his fiancée's house with one of his best friends. This visit is called '*koltuğa gitmek*' (paying a visit with the best man). According to the young people of Tekeler village (ORMAN 1999; GÜMÜŞ 1999), they prefer to say that "my best man and I will pay a visit to my fiancée" instead of "we're off to my fiancée's house". In fact, the word '*koltuk*' refers to the best man. During the visit, the young girl presents her pre-prepared flowers arranged in rows on a tray to her fiancé. The young man picks his favorite one. Actually, his pick is easy because it is prepared with special care and therefore quite distinguishable from the others. The stem of the flower usually is decorated with colored silk threads. Both the fiancé and his best man pick up their flowers from the tray and place them over their ears. Following the visit, both men stroll around the village, show off their flowers and meet other young people in coffee houses who have replaced their flowers (ORMAN 1999; see Figure 1).

During the engagement period, the heavily-favored color and kind of flowers are red carnations. The bucket of flowers prepared for the boy's house contains carnations, as well as thyme. Besides those, flowers such as hyacinths, marigolds and gillyflowers<sup>3</sup> can also be added to those in the bucket. Roses are not favored because the villagers consider them as "big, not appropriate and more likely to fall from the men's ears", and usually do not include them in the bucket of special flowers. One of the most significant features of engagement flowers is that they essentially are prepared from aromatic flowers (ORMAN 1999).

Throughout the entire engagement period, young girls continue presenting flowers to their fiancés. But, in those villages, it is not always easy to find or obtain the most suitable flowers. In such circumstances, women from the neighboring villages come to the girl's help. As a result, such assistance helps to create a social bond.

<sup>2</sup> It is usual for such women as I saw in Tekeler village to wear flowers during bayram celebrations.

<sup>3</sup> The flowers they call marigolds (*nergiz*) are sold as "firezya" in flower shops.



Fig. 1. An engaged boy (with two flowers, engaged) from Yağsılar village chats with a boy (with a single woolen flower, therefore 'sözlü') from Tekeler village at a coffee house in Yağsılar village

At this point, I should call attention to some differences in the tradition's practice between the villages where I conducted research. For instance, in Yağsılar village, situated seven kilometers from Tekeler, engaged young men wear their flowers above both ears (see Figure 2). Also, one of these flowers is real and the other one is a clover leaf made of wool. I asked the villagers the reason for that. I was given an explanation from the old men whose "days with clovers were long gone", that "in the old days, only fresh flowers were used for this tradition and to wear wool flowers is a recent practice because they last much longer than the real ones. That is the reason".<sup>4</sup> (HIRÇİN 1999; İLERİ 1999).

Durability cannot be given as the sole reason for this recent practice. Obviously, there is an economic reason as well. Also, another reason could be the unavailability of the right flowers whenever the need arises.

During my research, I observed that only a part of the youngsters were wearing wool flowers. When I asked why, they explained, "that means they are not formally engaged". In their own terminology, if a "boy is talking to a girl" (GÜMÜŞ 1999; HIRÇİN 1999) he is given a wool flower to wear on special occasions such as bayrams and weddings. Clover leaves are favored for wool flowers. There also is something special about such flowers, prepared by the girls themselves. Each one carries the fragrance of the girl who prepares them. The girl adds her perfume to the flower and

<sup>4</sup> Woolen ones are used as engagement flowers in some of the mountain villages of the city of Manisa.

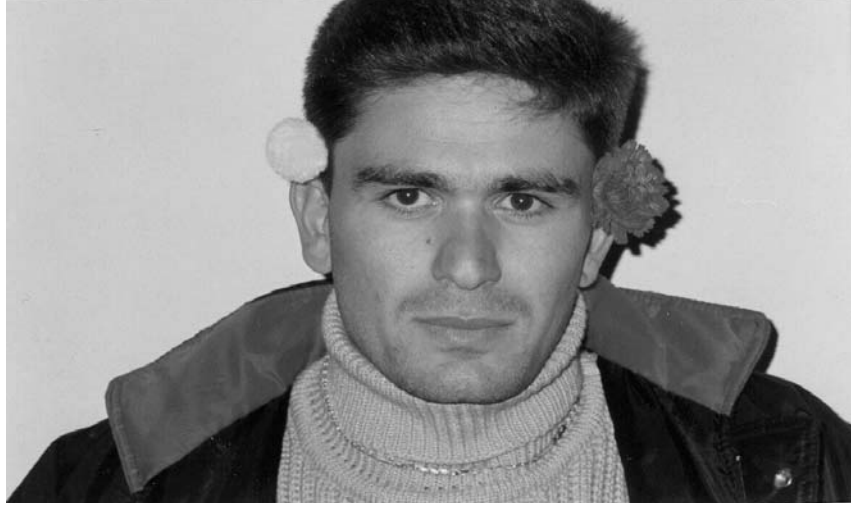


Fig. 2. An engaged boy (with two flowers, one woolen and the other one real) from Yağşılar village

gives it to the boy to whom she is “talking”. The reason behind the preference for wool flowers during the engagement period is durability, and the ability to absorb and hold the fragrance. It is all because young men and women do not find much opportunity to see each other, and the young men have no chance to replace their flowers. To give an artificial, woolen flower during the pre-engagement period takes place as follows: The girl sends a message to the boy: “Come and get the flower!” The flower, which is secretly prepared, is given to the boy late in the evening in similar secrecy when the girl’s family is away or relaxing in the garden (GÜMÜŞ 1999).

When the youngsters are first seen wearing their flowers, they are offered “congratulations, good luck”, and asked from whom they have received their flowers. But, since there are no official engagements, the youngsters do not reveal the girls’ names. That is a part of the tradition because such relationships might not result in official engagements. In such circumstances, no one wants to know the identity of the flower-giver. In order to prevent any difficulties, should either party later get engaged to someone else, the youngsters destroy those flowers (GÜMÜŞ 1999). If such pre-engagement periods end in marriage, such flowers are always kept safe (HIRÇİN 1999; ORMAN 1999).

If an engagement is broken, the girl’s family may place some demands on the man’s family for all the flowers sent to him and his family. They may want reimbursement for the flowers as “flower money”. Such cases may cause disagreements, and a committee under the village’s chief (*muhtar*) determines the amount to be paid when such circumstances arise (UYGUÇ 1998: 57).

After observing and researching this tradition in the villages of Karpuzlu county, I also learned that it is practiced at different levels within the vicinity of the city of

Aydın, especially in the mountain and forest regions (BAŞ 1999; DEMİRDÖVEN 1999; SIVACI 1999). According to the information I collected, the tradition of wearing flowers is still in practice, but is not as strong as it was in the past, especially in the city of Aydın, the mountain villages in the area between Tire and Ödemiş, the counties of İzmir and some mountain villages of İncirliova county. Yet, the application of the tradition is somehow a little different than I had observed in other places.

Such differences could be listed as follows: More mature men are wearing flowers in their breast pockets, on their jacket/coat lapels or the brim of their hats. The most common practice is to attach flowers to jacket lapels. The direction of the clover indicates the bearer's marital status. If it points downwards, it means that its bearer is a bachelor; if it points sideways, the wearer is engaged; if it points upwards it means the man is married. In this region, 40–50 years ago, the flowers of choice were roses, since clover leaves were hard to find. During that period, young people preferred clover leaves, whereas more mature men preferred red roses attached to the brim of their hats (DEMİRDÖVEN 1999; SIVACI 1999).

### 3. ANALYSIS OF THE ENGAGEMENT FLOWER TRADITION, AND CONCLUSIONS

It was observed that the tradition of wearing engagement flowers is practiced in mountain villages situated in the areas around the city of Aydın. As a result of my observations, there emerged a functional structure which we will analyze in this section.

In light of my data collected through observation and interviews conducted within the framework of the tradition, it could be said that it has an important function in the social life of those three villages of Karpuzlu county. Moreover, it also has a ritualistic content for the area. We find these results below when we analyze the structure and functions of this particular tradition:

1. In a social environment, this symbolic object shows a man's marital status, and by doing so, indicates his social status (see Figures 1, 2 and 3). This function is valid on both personal and family levels. The engagement flower, especially for bayram celebrations, is sent to the man's family, and all the male members, sometimes the women, too, wear them. At the same time, the tradition appears to be a determiner of social identity. As well, engagement flowers serve as a reminder for the bearer about how to behave in his social environment. Those who share the same social environment also determine their behavior according to the bearer's flower (ENNINGER 1992: 222).

2. The second function of flower-wearing is that it helps to protect and preserve group-identity. The group in this situation consists of people who share the same social circles, and therefore help the tradition to continue as it was. As is known, norms and traditions of given groups – just as language does – determine social borders, helping group members to distinguish themselves from members

of other groups, and thereby helping them to express their own identity more clearly (ARKONAÇ 1998: 291).

3. The tradition of wearing an engagement flower creates a feeling of unity among those practicing it within the social groups to which they belong, and strengthens friendship between its members. To see people gathered and “chatting away” in a coffee house while wearing real and fresh flowers demonstrates that such a tradition indeed functions well.

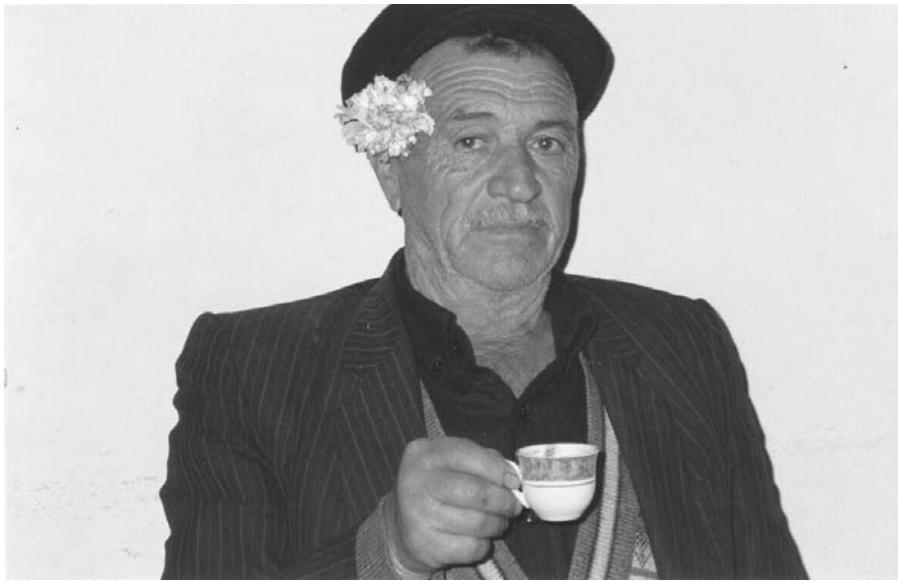


Fig. 3. A villager (with a real flower, therefore married) at the coffee house in Yağsılar village at the evening of a bayram

4. Apart from its sociological and socio-psychological aspects, wearing an engagement flower has psychological aspects, as well. Although it appears to simply be an expression of social status, the tradition also serves as a tool for expressing personal feelings and emotions. Just as using the word patterns of folk poetry expresses personal feelings, this tradition gives young lovers a way to express their feelings for each other. To present a flower is one of the key factors that regulates the communication between engaged and pre-engaged couples. Most of all, it presents a perfectly acceptable excuse for couples to see each other in person. The practice of sending and wearing flowers also reinforces emotional communication between people. Therefore, as with some other traditional practices, it is not possible to claim that this particular one owes its existence to some type of its practitioners’ “habit”. In that context, it also must be added that, whereas the frequent presentation of flowers signifies the intensity of love, its infrequent presentation is interpreted as a dissension between the

couple. That type of perception is valid for both the young couple and the members of that particular community.

5. Another psychological aspect of this tradition is that it positively effects the emotions of the man who has received his engagement flower and found his place in his community. A man in such situation would feel justified in his natural desire to belong, to love and be loved and to be able to openly express his feelings if all those are requited and adequately reinforced by his fiancée's practice of the tradition. And that undoubtedly would boost his self-confidence.

6. The tradition of wearing an engagement flower is not just a matter of communication between members of a couple, but between their families, therefore developing good relationships. During the engagement period, both families send and receive flowers and gifts, and such traditional behavior helps to positively regulate and cultivate healthy relationships between the two families. Additionally, since there are seasons when it is difficult to find the desired flowers, engaging in the frequent exchange of flowers and assisting one another during such periods of difficulty would contribute to establishing good relationships between neighbors.

7. The tradition of engagement flowers, since it determines the conditions of the relationship between families, also has a type of legal function. In the case of broken engagements, the man's family is expected to reimburse the girl's family for "flower expenses".

8. When girls present their fiancés with flowers, it also serves a very practical and economical purpose, since it is not easy for girls living in mountain villages to go to bazaars often, and buy gifts for their fiancés. Therefore, such a flower becomes a very meaningful gift for the girl.

In conclusion: The tradition of wearing engagement flowers, and everything pertinent to it, which I observed around the city of Aydın, has sociological, socio-psychological, psychological, legal and economic functions. In other words, this tradition functions as a social institution. As a famous folklorist (BAUMAN 1992: 29–40) has pointed out, folklore as a discipline working with forms of expression, continues to change, and its symbolic structure preserves its existence by receiving energy from the dynamic process of traditions.



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