

How to Read Acts and Words of Honor in Late-Ottoman Accounts of Banditry

In an anecdote regarding an encounter he had with Greek insurgents in Mandûdköy (Mandoudi in Greece) during the Greek Revolution (1821 to 1832), the narrator of an obscure autobiographical narrative, a certain Deli Mustafa (b. 1791/2), recalls a gory episode he allegedly experienced replete with all of the stereotypical ingredients of what one would think were the basic building blocks of a Mediterranean male honor ethos that also pervaded Ottoman Muslim soldiers across all corps.¹ Alongside recounting all of the male and female Greek slaves that he and his companions acquired in this village, Deli Mustafa boasts that he took one of his enslaved Greek insurgents, forced him on his knees, and then wielded with his sword a powerful blow upon the “infidel’s” neck saying concomitantly “It is God’s will,” after which he adds: “his blood flowed and his soul went away to dwell in hell.” Proudly parading his new trophy, he took it to his father, who according to the narrator responded: “My son, may your fate be blessed, and God willing, may the infidels’ eyes hereby be blinded. Let us cut off many more infidel heads,” after which his father offered him more prayers.² Deli Mustafa also claims that he finally took this hapless head to their commander Çarhacı (i.e., advanced skirmisher) ‘Ali Paşa, who also praised the narrator and gave him golden, “Mahmudiye” coins.³

What is typical about this particular encounter is that it reads like a sacrificial offering, a veritable “rite of passage” into manhood in which Mustafa proudly boasts of a

¹ Leiden University Library, Cod. Or. 1551. The manuscript is dated 22 zi'l-ka'de 1249 (April 2, 1834). It was translated into English and commented upon by J. Schmidt, “The Adventures of an Ottoman Horseman: The Autobiography of Kabudlı Vasfi Efendi, 1800-1825,” in his, *The Joys of Philology. Studies in Ottoman Literature, History and Orientalism (1500-1923)* (İstanbul: İsis Press, 2002), 166-286. In this paper I will be referring both to Schmidt’s translation and to the actual manuscript, especially when it comes to the wording in Ottoman Turkish that might reveal important nuances of meaning. .

² “...ve benim elime bir kâfir geçmiş idi bu kâfîri tutub arkadaşların yanına getürüb bir yerde oturdub niyet-i kazâ diyüb bu kâfirin boyununa bir kılıç urub (vurub) kani revân olub câmi cihenneme munzel ileğde (sic. iledi) evveki kesdiğim kâfir bu idi bundan evvel kâfir kesmemiş idim bu kâfîri kesüb başını alub...bu köyden kalkub orsunun olduğu mandudköyine geldik pederimi bulub görüşdik pederim itti oğlum kazânin (sic.) mubârek olsun inşâllah bundan böyle kâfirlerin gözü kör oldu daha ziyâde kâfir başı keseriz diyü du‘âlar itmiş idi...” Cod. Or. 1551, 79a.

³ Schmidt, “The Adventures...,” 258.

story of honor and vengeance that immediately won him the respect of his comrades, family, and commanders and would probably prompt his target audiences to do the same.⁴ In this so-called act of honor, Deli Mustafa visits extreme forms of ritualistic violence and vengeance onto his Christian adversaries, while throughout the text, he also boasts of avoiding the same type of humiliation his cunning Greek adversaries sought to inscribe upon his own body.⁵ But what is more interesting about this particular anecdote is that while Deli Mustafa claims that this was the first “infidel” that he had slain, its succession after other references to similar types of violence he visited upon Greek insurgents and their communities earlier on in the text suggests that this description was more of a narrative strategy than a reference to a concrete event.⁶ Likewise, throughout his Anatolian journeys relayed in the beginning of the text, Deli Mustafa makes reference to similar types of violence that his network delved out to fellow Muslims but only in passing, which suggests that the author understood the Greek Revolution to be a legitimate context for him to describe the full repertoire of the ritualistic violence and pillaging that men like him partook in *throughout* the Ottoman Empire.

⁴ The authorship of this account is in question, as one can see the mixing of genres in Deli Mustafa’s narrative as well as how he sometimes addresses his audience directly, which suggests that he actually did not write this narrative himself but dictated a series of oral accounts to a scribe of limited literacy. For more on Deli Mustafa’s narrative and its overall meaning in Muslim interpretative communities at the time, see T.U. Esmer “The Confessions of an Ottoman ‘Irregular’: Self-Representation, Narrative Strategies, and Ottoman Interpretive Communities in the Nineteenth Century,” in *The Journal of Ottoman Studies*, Vol.41 (2013).

⁵ Deli Mustafa’s relaying of attributes of what he thought were the requisite ingredients of becoming an honorable hero revolved around inflicting certain kinds of violence onto “infidel” enemies, acquiring lots of prisoners, slaves, and mutilated trophies, and transcending fear to shed his own blood. Throughout the text, the narrator emphasizes his strength and dexterity always tested and his effective use of force in the pursuit of personal prestige. His preoccupation with revenge as a moral imperative and honor infused with a concomitant stress on loyalty as well as good faith reflects an ethos other scholars have noted in early modern Mediterranean warrior society. For instance, Wendy Bracewell provides a cogent analysis of the codes of religious duty, honor, and vengeance that informed the behavior of the Uskokos of Senj, Slavic, Christian pirate/bandits on the Triplex Confinium (i.e., borders among the Venetian, Hapsburg, and Ottoman Empires) who fashioned their contentious pirate activities against Muslims as well as Christians as a crusading war of faith against infidel Ottoman Muslim and Ottoman Christian “schismatics” (i.e., Orthodox Serbs, Vlachs, and Martolos). See W. Bracewell, *The Uskokos of Senj: Piracy, Banditry, and Holy War in the Sixteenth-Century Adriatic* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University, 1992), 159-164.

⁶ For instance, even right before this passage, the narrator relays that after they fulfilled their evening prayers, he and his forces decapitated 600 infidels “as if they were pigs” and then impaled 70 priests to be displayed in front of terrified Christian villagers. See Schmidt, “The Adventures...,” 256. For the interplay between violence and the sacred, see R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. P. Gregory (London, 1988).

This suggests that Deli Mustafa understood that in fashioning his prowess and bravado to like-minded, paramilitary warriors, one had to understand how and when certain vignettes of their experience would be understood as legitimate and something to brag about to selective audiences, whereas, on other occasions like recalling his adventures in Anatolia against fellow Muslims, the narrator had to be much more circumspect in his boastings. In this sense, spatial and human geography plays a principal role in how Deli Mustafa described his violent ways as he traveled from Eastern Anatolia to the Balkans steeped in civil war: it is in his Rumeli adventures that the author becomes unabashed in formulating his tales of honor and prowess. But by juxtaposing the claims, narrative strategies, and social dynamics Deli Mustafa addresses in his account with those featured in other types of Ottoman sources regarding the contentious practices of similar types of paramilitary networks during this period, this essay will argue that much of the macabre violence discussed in these narratives was much more about the struggles, marks of distinction, claims, and polyvalent transactions the Muslim heroes of these texts negotiated with fellow Muslims than it was about honor and vengeance informing inter-confessional enmity.

This essay compares the self-narrative of the “irregular,” paramilitary cavalryman (i.e., *deli*) Deli Mustafa that records the campaigns he took part in between 1801/2 to 1832 (though his narrative cuts off abruptly in 1825) with Ottoman archival sources written about and by Kara Feyzi, a savvy paramilitary soldier (*sekban*) *cum* bandit leader who marshaled a successful, trans-regional organized crime network that pillaged Ottoman Rumeli from 1793 to well beyond 1808. Deli Mustafa, or Kabudlı el-Haccı Vasfi Efendi⁷ as he is fashioned on the title page of the only surviving manuscript of his narrative, provides rare glimpses into the tumultuous everyday life and moral dilemmas faced by countless Ottoman irregular soldiery, or “military laborers,” most of whom hailed from the Muslim peasantry and joined

⁷ I have chosen to refer to the narrator as “Deli Mustafa” (which can also mean “Crazy Mustafa”) since he refers to himself as such in the narrative as opposed to using the his embellished name (El-Haccı) signed at the beginning of the text.

paramilitary bands either because of the opportunities such pursuits provided or because in this way they could protect their kin and communities from similar bands that roamed the Empire.⁸ Deli Mustafa’s narrative and self-fashioning strategies help us understand what common Muslim men serving in paramilitary forces had to do to make a living during this tumultuous period of Ottoman history, and most important, how they explained and legitimated their precarious and contentious way of life.⁹

In contrast, the corpus of sources written about and by Kara Feyzi, or Es-seyyid Feyzü'l-lâh as he fashioned himself in his correspondence, during his insurgency points to how his spectacular trajectory from a common, itinerate soldier like Deli Mustafa into an wily bandit leader *cum* imperial power broker is really a story about empire viewed against the larger background of the “long eighteenth century.” Amidst chronic wars with the Habsburgs and Russians, Kara Feyzi represented a new generation of Muslim borderland warrior-entrepreneurs whose violent ways of life were once sanctioned by the state on along its new Danubian border but who now became agents of social and economic disruption *within* Ottoman society. Despite the similar origins he shared with Deli Mustafa, the scale and breadth of Kara Feyzi’s activities, his prominence in both Ottoman Muslim and Christian sources, and the imbrications imperial and local officials had with his plundering enterprise distinguish his from other contemporary paramilitary and “bandit” networks in terms of scale and make his story an ideal case study for examining social, economic, as well as inter- and intra-confessional relations in the Ottoman Empire on the eve of “national” revolutions in Rumeli. His story is that of a “middling” social actor whose messy interactions with state

⁸ In terms of nomenclature for different types of military forces in Ottoman history, there were many types of “irregular,” mercenary-like forces such as *delis*, *sarica*, *levend*, *sekbân*, etc. that the Ottomans used in warfare. For more on these types of forces, dubbed most recently as “military laborers” by Virginia Aksan because of the blurry boundaries among these different categories, see *idem.*, *Ottoman Wars, 1700-1870: An Empire Besieged* (Harlow, 2007).

⁹ For more on Deli Mustafa’s fascinating narrative, see T.U. Esmer “The Confessions of an Ottoman ‘Irregular’: Self-Representation, Narrative Strategies, and Ottoman Interpretive Communities in the Nineteenth Century,” forthcoming in *The Journal of Ottoman Studies*, 2013.

and society allow for “macro-historical” inquiries about the nature of Ottoman governance during this period since an extensive grouping of officials from across the Empire over a long period of time wrote dispatches that not only describe Kara Feyzi’s path of violence but also try to explain their own intriguing interactions, correspondence, and conversations with him.¹⁰ In this sense, the comparison between Deli Mustafa and Kara Feyzi juxtaposes how one actor of a humble station in life fashions himself vis-à-vis his superiors and sundry communities throughout the Ottoman Empire versus how disparate imperial officials and communities described and explained their often compromising relationships with the much larger, controversial figure Kara Feyzi and his vast network.

Aside from the obvious fact that there was very little distinction between paramilitary and bandit networks by this time in Ottoman history, this essay revisits the notion of honor as a broader dialogical discourse that mediated encounters among these trans-regional networks of violence, local and imperial officials who were charged with repelling but often found it more lucrative to join them, and the local populations throughout the Empire that were either forced to join or make a stand against these unruly men and their powerful networks. While it starts with assessing some of the ritualistic violence that these social actors either discussed in their own narratives or were attributed to them by other observers, this essay moves the discussion of honor from “acts of honor” to what I will argue are the more important “words of honor” embedded in these sources since much of the violence described in the narrative and official sources utilized here are mediated by embellishments, biases, and agendas of their narrators and authors or second-party intermediaries who recorded selective parts of larger, more complicated stories. What emerges is that the tales of violence, loyalty, companionship, betrayal, and oppression told here point to how it was the morality tales inherent in these stories that reflect how savvy social actors negotiated and vied for limited

¹⁰ For more on Kara Feyzi and his insurgency see, T.U. Esmer, “Economies of Violence, Imperial Governance, and the Socio-Cultural Dimensions of Banditry in the Ottoman Empire, c. 1800,” forthcoming in *Past & Present* (Oxford University), Vol. 214 (August 2014).

resources and status among themselves, their superiors, as well as the local communities with whom they interacted.¹¹ In other words, a lot was at stake in how these men and those around them told their stories.

At a time in which Islamic law (*shari‘a*) and the local courts as well as Ottoman imperial law and sultanic prerogative (*kanûn*) had little control over organized, trans-regional paramilitary and crime syndicates that roamed Ottoman society and the imperial military retinues that were intertwined in these networks’ vast enterprises, a whole parallel set of unwritten laws, tacit agreements, and social contracts emerged that governed the Ottoman government and society’s encounter with widespread crime and violence.¹² While it cannot be a catch-all concept that explains all of the social dynamics and their accompanying narratives discussed here, the relational components of honor and shame, reputation, and gossip combined help provide a flexible framework to study the nexus of material and symbolic struggles, inter- and intra-confessional violence, as well as competing visions of justice and praxis that this essay seeks to address. Words of honor became just as important as the actual power and force wielded by these networks since they were the primary binding social contracts and tacit agreements that informed the cutthroat calculus that governed how different social groups made different claims, competed for limited resources and status, negotiated what was right and wrong, included and excluded different social groups from their enterprises, and forged conflicting partnerships and loyalties with one another. It is this transactional nature of the broad components of honor as a wider discourse that helps us make the epistemological jump from honor as a base discourse or practice marked by

¹¹ I borrow the term and application of “morality tales” here from Leslie Peirce. L. Peirce, *Morality Tales: Law and Gender in the Ottoman Court of Aintab* (Berkeley, 2003).

¹² The corpus of twentieth-century scholarship on the Mediterranean assumed honor and shame as a particular mode of direct action in the absence of moderating institutions; however, this essay will demonstrate how honor and shame were important concepts that mediated social relations among different social groups in conjunction with imperial state actors and institutions. For more literature that challenges the notion that banditry and its accompanying discourses (including honor and shame) can only transpire with weak government, see P. Sant Cassia, “Better Occasional Murders than Frequent Adulteries: Discourses on Banditry, Violence, and Sacrifice in the Mediterranean,” in J. Skurski and Fernando Coronil (eds.), *States of Violence* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2006): 219-268.

primitive violence to honor as a self-fashioning discourse that brokered the dissemination of material and symbolic prestige that governed social relations. It is the “leveling affect” that conflicting words of honor had on “class” and social distinction that makes honor such a fascinating and fruitful inquiry into historical studies. By manipulating notions akin to honor and shame, social actors of humble origins as well as entire communities could check and manipulate more powerful players in Ottoman society whilst legitimating their own contentious behavior in ways that have been overlooked in mainstream historiography.

II. “Acts of Honor:” The Right Occasion to Narrate Sexual and Ritualistic Violence

One of the key features discernible in Deli Mustafa’s narrative is the difference between his mere allusion to his and his companions’ pilfering of local communities in Anatolia merely “to get by” versus his detailed description of the plundering and ritualistic violence they visited upon (and endured by) Greek rebels and communities in the Morea during the Greek Revolution. These narrative shifts add a discernible spatial and human geographic dimension to his story, as his narrative turns much more graphic in its description of the narrator’s plundering and violence he relays in his travels west into provinces steeped in civil war and national rebellion. It is in this context that Deli Mustafa elaborates more fully on the repertoire of violence exhibited by different military groups and local communities throughout Ottoman society.

Keeping in mind Deli Mustafa’s primary audience of like-minded paramilitary, Muslim men, it is clear that he crafts his discussions of his prowess in pillaging Greek homes and shops, capturing and enslaving Greek maidens and children, as well as mutilating the bodies of Greek insurgents while personally avoiding similar fates on multiple occasions in order to bolster his standing among his peers. These tropes were the building-blocks of male honor culture and the basic ingredients of bonding with and negotiating status among men who participated in or whose lives were affected by the paramilitarization of Ottoman

society.¹³ At the same time, these tropes of prowess predicated upon inflicting much bodily harm and suffering on Greek insurgents and their communities represents a larger textual continuum reaching back to the *gâzî menâkib-nâmes* (accounts of religious warrior/heroic exploits) and *vilâyet-nâmes* (hagiographies) of the fifteenth century.¹⁴

In terms of the frequent role Muslim sexual violence against the womenfolk of the Greek insurgents plays in his narrative, one can discern how targeting Greek women was as important a preoccupation to the Muslim warriors as stomping out the Greek insurgency itself, since booty was Deli Mustafa’s and his community’s primary means of sustenance during the war. For instance, the narrator casually mentions that in Kabraniş (modern toponym) he captured a Christian girl. He writes that he grabbed her, looked and saw that she was a virgin, and he took her back to the fortress.¹⁵ What is clear is that the sexual status of his prey played on important role in determining her value on Ottoman slave markets that men like Deli Mustafa helped fuel, but what is less discernable is precisely how he determined she was a virgin: it may have been custom for different communities to wear certain types of clothes that denoted virginity, or he may have simply used another vile method of determining her sexual status. This is the closest the author comes to making an specific reference to his own sexual advances on Christian, female plunder – which one would expect would be a topic of interest to a bunch of irregulars sitting around camp fires listening to Mustafa’s stories. Nevertheless, the fact that the narrator mentions his

¹³ For more on the paramilitarization of Ottoman society from the seventeenth century onwards, see Baki Tezcan and Sam White.

¹⁴ Although a large part of the narrative has the feel of a late-medieval Ottoman chronicle of a *gâzî* epic such as the *Saltuk-nâme* replete with accounts of plundering and slaughtering “menacing infidels” (in Mustafa’s, rebellious Ottoman Christian subjects) and priests, Deli Mustafa uses these established tropes from older genres to bolster his status and make certain claims primarily among his Muslim audience. For more on the implications Deli Mustafa’s narrative has on Muslim interpretative communities at the turn of the nineteenth century and its borrowing from older genres, see T.U. Esmer, “The Confessions...,” See also T. Krstić, *Contested Conversions to Islam: Narratives of Religious Change in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire* (Palo Alto: Stanford University, 2011).

¹⁵ Schmidt, “The Adventures...,” 222.

accumulation of female Christians and their children throughout his relaying his adventures in Greece points to the important role the accumulation of slaves played in his daily struggles.

Perhaps reflective of Deli Mustafa's understanding of what constituted legitimate versus illegitimate violence, he recounts the full glory of his plundering adventures in Greece. His choice to recount his uncanny accumulation¹⁶ of female slaves in Greece contrasts starkly with his guarded references to Anatolian “sweethearts” in Tokat,¹⁷ local Rumeli “beauties” teaming in Malkara and Çırpan,¹⁸ the occasional references to problems he encountered because of local beauties in Anatolian towns, or the circumspect reference to only *other* men among his network deflowering (translation) local girls along the Georgian frontier or other parts of Anatolia. Deli Mustafa’s text is full of all the requisite ingredients for a Muslim man of low stature to bolster his standing as a virtuous warrior of faith in the Balkans among like-minded men by providing them with exciting – and sometimes even self-effacing – tales about his pursuit of Christian beauties.¹⁹ The Greek Revolution provided the context for low-ranking paramilitary soldiers like Deli Mustafa the chance to live up to the tales they might have heard about Ottoman *gâzîs* of ancient times who displayed their masculinity on the bodies of their enemies and pillaged newly conquered territories to their hearts’ content. Oppressing unruly Christians as well as enslaving and seducing/sexually using/marrying their womenfolk were part of a larger Muslim male ethos that resonated with the author’s primarily male audience. In this sense, we see how his text invokes a larger and older corpus of Ottoman narratives.²⁰

¹⁶ At one point in his narrative, Deli Mustafa even relays a conversation with his father in which he states that they had acquired so many female slaves that they should therefore leave Greece, but his father insists that they stay there until there is reconciliation made with the Greeks. See Ibid., 261.

¹⁷ Ibid., 185.

¹⁸ Ibid., 212-213.

¹⁹ What strikes the reader on the subject of sexual economy in the narrative is Deli Mustafa’s almost comical self-awareness of his and his companions’ excessive pining after non-Muslim female slaves, a lust he acknowledges that the Greek insurgents were also very much aware of and used against Ottoman soldiers on a number of occasions. See T.U. Esmer, “The Confessions...”

²⁰ For more on the role of Christian women in Muslim warrior epics, see Krstić, *Contested Conversions*, 64-68 . See also B. Flemming, “Āşıkpaşazâdes Blick auf Frauen” [A Glimpse of Women in Aşikpaşa-zâde], in S.

What Deli Mustafa's uninhibited bravado points to is a sexual economy that played an important role in mediating social relations throughout the Ottoman period but that attains new dimensions in nineteenth-century Ottoman society when Christians clamored for new rights.²¹ In boasting about hunting down Christian women the narrator is asserting himself as a powerful Muslim male whose supremacy in the social hierarchy of the time was beginning to be threatened by non-Muslims in novel ways. The obverse of this assertion of sexual supremacy over non-Muslims and their women was the emphasis on his role as a protector of religious boundaries and gender distinctions when it came to the Muslim community. For instance, when he describes the Greek attempt to take Ağrıboz (Greek toponym) castle, Deli Mustafa fashions himself and his companions as the protectors of Muslim women and children who would have been deflowered and enslaved by Greek men had it not been for their heroic defense.²²

When it comes to violence against Greek men as illustrated by the opening anecdote of this essay, what strikes of Deli Mustafa's narrative is the amount of space he dedicates to describing particular punishments that the narrator and his community of irregulars both inflicted upon as well as endured by their worthy opponents.²³ At first glance, Deli

Prätor and C. Neumann (eds.), *Arts, Women and Scholars: Studies in Ottoman Society and Culture – Festschrift Hans Georg Majer*, Vol. 1 (İstanbul, 2002), 69-97.

²¹ For a discussion of the stereotypical portrayal of the lustful “Turkish” warrior pining after Greek women in Greek and European period sources during the national Revolutions in the Balkans, see İ.C. Schick. “Christian Maidens, Turkish Ravishers: The Sexualization of National Conflict in the Late Ottoman Period,” in A. Buturović and İ.C. Schick (eds.), *Women in the Ottoman Balkans: Gender, Culture, and History* (New York, 2007), 273-305. The insistence on the image of the “lustful Turk” is also prominent in Orthodox Christian neo-martyrologies of women in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. See N.M. Vaporis, *Witnesses for Christ: Orthodox Christian Neomartyrs of the Ottoman Period, 1437-1860* (Crestwood, NY, 2000).

²² Schmidt, “The Adventures...,” Ibid., 252.

²³ It is important to emphasize that according to Deli Mustafa's account Muslim and Christian warriors shared this culture of violence and symbolic language of ritualistic violence. Plenty of work has been done on the role of Christian violence against Muslims in Greece and the Balkans during and after this period of Ottoman history as a similar Christian warrior-ethos against Muslim soldiers, their communities, and their womenfolk emerges. For discussions of this ethos and its attendant, ritualistic violence, see G. Koliopoulos, *Brigands with a Cause: Brigandage and Irredentism in Modern Greece, 1821-1912* (Oxford, 1987), P. Sant Cassia, “Better Occasional Murderers than Frequent Adulterers: Discourses on Banditry, Violence, and Sacrifice in the Mediterranean,” in J. Skurski and F. Coronil (eds.), *States of Violence* (Ann Arbor, 1996), 219-229, and most recently, H. Grandits, Nathalie Clayer, and R. Pichler (eds.), *Conflicting Loyalties in the Balkans: The Great Powers, the Ottoman Empire, and Nation-Building* (London, 2011).

Mustafa's description of his adventures in the Greek Revolution may strike the modern reader as very “primitive,” “fanatical,” or even outright “barbaric” in the ways in which he ascribes religious significance to the violence he and his companions visited upon Greek warriors and their communities. The narrator's obsession with these macabre trophies is even artistically reinforced in the manuscript, for the scribe who wrote the text depicted decapitated heads on a number of folios. This is the only illustrative item featured in the manuscript that does not relate to the landscape represented by staple renditions of mountains, mosques, churches, and fortresses.



Plate One: Folios 78b-79a: This image immediately precedes the narrator's discussion of his “first” decapitation of an “infidel” mentioned in the beginning of this essay. The image depicts decapitated Greek heads alongside Greek trenches.

However, just as in older Muslim legends, the narrator's latter-day *gâzî*-warrior ethos alongside the anti-syncretic tropes of ritualistic violence against Christians speak as much about the claims that men like Mustafa were making among their own co-religionists as they do about inter-confessional violence and enmity. It is not a coincidence that it is within the context of his recalling his pillaging and slaughtering Greek insurgents and their communities that most of the religious facets of the text surface.²⁴ In this sense, a closer reading of Deli Mustafa's narrative betrays how much of his self-fashioning as an honorable warrior or faith ever vigilant and brutal against rebellious Greek communities was largely about the status he was inscribing for himself among Muslims, especially other military orders who competed for the same resources and status-recognition. Understanding the moral and symbolic dimension of economies of violence and their currencies (mutilated body parts being just one of them) is essential for comprehending how social relations and material exchanges were structured during times of political instability and civil war.²⁵

What can be discerned is that the imperial commanders ran vast trading networks of booty, slaves, and even body parts that they accumulated from different ranks of soldiery to

²⁴ Throughout the text, Deli Mustafa makes reference to his and his companions' frequent observance of religious duties like prayers, but they are often in reference to violence against or revenge taken upon Greek soldiers and communities. For instance, at one point the author discusses how they came across a Muslim village whose inhabitants were slaughtered by Greek insurgents. There he mentions that after re-reading the Muhammedan call to prayers (*ezân-i muhammedi*), implying that they reclaimed the place by doing so (in conjunction with unfurling their banners there), they also proceeded to slaughter "infidels" and plunder their homes near the fortress. Ibid., 259. In recanting the number of his companions that were slain in one battle, Mustafa offers a *fâtiha* (prayer) for all of the souls of Muslim martyrs; however, the author also goes on to explain how the Christians similarly did their utmost to fight with holy zeal, often citing the Gospels in the midst of combat. Interesting, the author notes that as a response to the Muslims crying "*Allâh Allâh*" in battle, the Christians would cry "*Lolololo*." Ibid., 247-248.

²⁵ By overemphasizing, respectively, paramilitary and bandit networks' anti-state and religiously polarized activities, Ottomanist and Balkanist historiographies have failed to take into account the fact that banditry actually brought large groups of diverse subjects and officials together in a shared culture of violence that was central to Ottoman strategies of governance during this period. By reconstructing bandit encounters, my work shows how Muslims and Christians, peasants as well as elite ministers participated in trans-regional, plundering enterprises, thus pointing to a much more socially and religiously inclusive economy of violence over which the Porte had limited control and had no choice but to participate in. In this way, my discussion moves beyond restrictive materialistic and/or ideologically-infused explanations of violence (whether imperial, nationalist, Marxist, or Neo-Liberal) recurrent in historiography on the period to explore a more "general economy" in all its complexity. See T.U. Esmer, "Economies of Violence..."

sell to other system-wide networks in order to line their own pockets.²⁶ Men like Deli Mustafa could not possibly deal with the logistics of such a vast enterprise and were thus the “wholesalers” that fed this much larger, lucrative economy. In this sense, in Deli Mustafa’s text one begins to see the larger economy of violence and multiple functions beyond the material and symbolic: it was also entangled with Ottoman governance itself. In his work on the “law of rebellion” during inter-imperial wars (e.g., the 1788-1792 Ottoman-Hapsburg-Russian War) as well as the national uprisings that followed (e.g., the 1804-15 Serbian uprising as well the Greek Revolution), Will Smiley argues that the Porte encouraged irregular military forces to capture and enslave its own *zimmi* subjects (i.e., tax-paying, non-Muslim subjects of the sultan) since these communities were labeled collectively as rebellious. When Ottoman forces confronted domestic, Christian paramilitary bands during inter-imperial wars and insurgencies starting at the end of the eighteenth-century, the Porte exhorted paramilitary forces to “police” Ottoman borderlands by killing Christian insurgents, pillaging their communities, and capturing their kinswomen and children for the Ottoman slave trade since the latter’s collective betrayal of the Porte abrogated their status as protected subjects. But this violence and plundering also served as a legitimate and primary source of income and motivation for Ottoman soldiery like Deli Mustafa at a time in which the government could not compensate the large networks of men it relied upon to wage its massive campaigns.²⁷ Kara Feyzi and his network also emerge from bands of irregulars who were exhorted by the government to plunder the rebellious Serbian frontier during the 1788-92 war but refused to refrain from this lucrative enterprise once inter-imperial peace was established. One can therefore see how the nexus of the symbolic and material exchanges

²⁶ At one point after a battle, for instance, Deli Mustafa alludes to the fact that various groups of soldiery would bring all of their mutilated trophies, booty, as well as bound Christian slaves to line up before their superior officers to sell their loot and receive “bonuses.” Schmidt, “The Adventures...,” 261.

²⁷ W. Smiley, “‘When Peace is Made, You will Again be Free:’ Islamic and Treaty Law, Black Sea Conflict, and the Emergence of ‘Prisoners of War’ in the Ottoman Empire, 1739-1830,” PhD. Dissertation (Queens’ College, Cambridge University, 2012), 113-118

that mark the larger economies of violence outlined in this essay is a by-product of imperial governance.

But being on the ground as a “wholesaler” in this large nexus was marked by brutal competition among the different ranks of Ottoman soldiery, and it is in this context that one must consider the overall meaning of Deli Mustafa’s narration of his heroics. Despite his inflammatory language vis-à-vis Christians, the narrator’s account reveals that the encounters he and his comrades had with Greek rebels are much more complex than the narrator lets on. For instance, in one anecdote Mustafa describes how at the mountain pass of Kandıl Dağı (Kandillio Oros in Greece) he and his comrades engaged in conversations with Greek rebels in a trench before them. According to the narrator, his opponents allegedly addressed him and his comrades: “*Delis, the Persians have come and have taken your country (vilâyet).* The Persians defeated your *paşas* and took your land and fortresses. Tomorrow you should go to the province of Anatolia. [Why] are you fighting us here? Go to your [own] country. Sultan Mahmud outlawed us and sent Janissary troops against us. We will fight them; let us be friends.”²⁸

What is interesting about this vignette is that Mustafa ventriloquizes Greek voices to demarcate differences among groups in his own Muslim community, namely between menacing Ottoman janissaries and itinerate, military laborers and volunteers like himself. According to the narrator, while they were speaking with the insurgents, a regiment of janissaries came upon them both and then mocked Deli Mustafa and his companions for cowardly engaging in dialogue with the “infidels” because they feared them and insulted

²⁸ “...bir depe üzerine çıkış etrafımıza bakarkan (sic. bakarken) bir de öte tarafımızda yol üzerinde kâfirlerin ‘alemlerini gördük ve olduğumuz depe üzerine kâfirlerin metrisleri yakın idi eğer kurşun atlar iriştirdi ama kâfirler kurşun atmıyor hemâne metrisler içinde bizleri deferüc (sic. teferrüc) iderdiler biz dahî depe üzerinde burları deferüc (sic. teferrüc) iderdik ve hem bizim ile lâf iderdiler derler idi delâller sizin vilâyetinizi ‘acem gelüb aldı ve sizin paşalarınızı ‘acem bozdu ve toprak kaleyi aldı yarın anadolu vilâyeti bütün (?) alursuz bizim ile burda (sic. burada) cenk idersiniz siz vilâyetinize giden (sic. gidin) sultan mahmûd bizi fermânlı idüb üzerimize yeniçeri ‘askerini ırsâl etmiş biz anlar ile cenk ideriz ve isdifîl (sic. istif’al) oluruz diyü bize nice kelâmlar söyleyüb...” Cod. Or. 1551, 71b.

them by saying that they were not worthy of the “sultan’s bread.”²⁹ He then adds that one of the volunteer officers among his ranks swelled with anger at this insult, yelling “you janissaries, I have fought with infidels in this country for three years now and no one has ever said such a thing [to me]. Now that you have said this, let us see who will flee from the infidels,” whereupon he charged toward the Greek trench but was immediately shot dead off his horse.³⁰

The narrator more clearly conveys this competition and enmity among the different ranks of Muslim soldiery, especially among the vast paramilitary forces and the janissaries, in the very last passage of his manuscript before it abruptly ends. Namely, Mustafa describes how he and his companions (along with dozens of female Greek captives) came upon a big church near Kûmiye full of “infidels” hiding inside. After taking care to decapitate the Greek men outside of the sanctuary, Mustafa and his men proceeded to take these trophies, slaves, as well as what he claims were five thousand of their sheep back to the camp but came across janissaries on the road. Things immediately went awry according to the narrator when one of the janissary *ağas* who had his eyes on the loot complained that the irregulars were moving in on places ahead of the janissaries and claiming first dibs on the Greek’s possessions, women, girls, and body parts before the janissaries could do so. Deli Mustafa adds that the *ağa* ordered his men to raise their rifles and march upon Deli Mustafa and his comrades while others moved to confiscate the irregulars’ booty. The narrator notes that his

²⁹ “...bizim gönüller ağası ile birbirlerine fenâ kelâm söyleşüb kâfirden korkaruz dimişler idi ve padişah etmeği (sic. ekmeği) sizlere harâmdir dimişler idi...,” Ibid., 72a-72b. Noteworthy here is also that the title page of this text indicates that this text was compiled in 1249 (1834) and deals with Deli Mustafa’s experiences from 1216 (1801) to 1248 (1833). One could argue that this text reflects post *Vaka ‘yi hayrîye* (The Auspicious Event) biases, the fateful event in 1826 that marked the imperial government’s brutal destruction of the janissary corps. Nevertheless, the scribe who compiled the text recorded Deli Mustafa’s oral testimony of his travels and adventures before the destruction of the janissaries, and the text itself ends abruptly sometime around 1825 before this event. Therefore, Mustafa’s understandings of the janissaries and his encounters with them should not be dismissed as a *post* 1826 bias.

³⁰ “...bu kelâmi gönüller ağası işidiüb hemân gözü bakırtaş gibi olub bunlara itdi ay yeniçeriler bu vilâyetde üç senedenber (sic. senedenberi) ve kâfirler ile cenk iderim kimse bu lâfi söylemedi idi biz bu lâfi bana soylediniz şimdî bakalım kim kâfirden geriye firâr ider diyüb hemân oldemde at başı kaldırub yeniçerilerin ‘alemlerini geçüb kâfirlerin metrislerinin dibine irisdi oldemde mezkûr gönüller ağası ağızından uruldu atdan aşağı düştü...,” Ibid., 72b.

comrades fled leaving him there to fend for himself. In addition to confiscating his female captives, animals, as well as decapitated Greek heads, Deli Mustafa complains that the janissaries even robbed him of his horse, rendering him into a “simple foot soldier.”³¹

The procedures behind these types of encounters highlighted by Deli Mustafa underscore much larger, ubiquitous types of exchanges among fellow Muslims that were trans-regional in nature and involved a lot of different groups between the provinces and İstanbul. For instance, when Kara Feyzi and his network of bandits were attacking Ottoman forces in Belgrad (Beograd in Serbia) on 8 October 1796, the Governor of Rumeli Hakkı Paşa dispatched to İstanbul the heads of 18 of Kara Feyzi’s prominent comrades along with a report that discloses their identities so that the Palace would have a story to match the hapless trophies.³² Likewise, numerous documents point out that bounties on Kara Feyzi and members of his retinue were announced to the general public in hope of finally capturing them; however, despite recurring transactions over the years along these lines noted in archival sources, Kara Feyzi’s head was never the one delivered to Topkapı Palace.³³

This post-mortem, state-sponsored dismemberment of fallen Muslim bandits was clearly designed as the ultimate attack upon a criminal’s honor and status, the reputation of his kin, as well as their accomplices. As was the case with Deli Mustafa’s recalling his “rite of passage” inscribed on the head of a Greek “infidel,” the symbolic aspects of these rituals cannot be overemphasized, for in many cultures decapitated heads bespeak the ultimate

³¹ “...biz de yol üzerinde yeniçeri kúllarına rast geldik bu yeniçeri ağaları itdiler sizler bizliden evvel gidüb káfileri firâr itdirirsiz ve gidüb káfırlerin mâlini kari ve kızını alursuz şimdi biz dahî sizlerin mâlini elinizden aluriz diyüb tijenlerini yüzlerine alub bizim üzérimize yürüdiler bu demde bizim ile olan deli atlusu firâr idüb giddiler bendenizin ‘indanda (sic. ‘indamda) bir kız ve bir kari var idi ve iki katr dahî var idi bunları biragub ber-tarafa der‘ab (der‘akeb?) firâr idemedim bunlar irisüb bütün mâlı yağma idüb bendenizde olan kız ile kari dahî aldlar bendeniz hemân piyâde kaldım...” Ibid., 113a. Being relegated to a simple foot soldier (*piyâde*) was a common theme in Mustafa’s narrative when he describes horses being stolen or shot beneath him. It seems that the author took pride in being a *deli* as opposed to a foot soldier or volunteer (*gönüllü*), but he often hints that his leader was a volunteer leader (*gönüller ağası*).

³² HH 8875.

³³ One communiqué sent to İstanbul in 1797 indicates that the going rate for heads of Kara Feyzi’s “lieutenants” was 1000 *kuruş* per head, as one official was granted 25,000 *kuruş* for delivering 25 trophies. Another communiqué on this issue from 1803 indicates that in addition to being rewarded for delivering over 60 heads of Kara Feyzi’s fallen men, another local official was also rewarded for sending to İstanbul 20 extra tongues of some of the prisoners they took from Kara Feyzi’s band. See respectively, HH 2401 and HH 2926.

humiliation and disgrace. Nevertheless, the exchanges revolving around mutilated Muslim bandit body parts among Muslims were of utmost importance not only to imperial officials and local communities who could profit from them but also vast bandit networks as well. As in other early modern societies, decapitation was not just an “official language” of ritual and aesthetic dominated by the state but a common “currency” of the general economy in which other groups participated as well.³⁴ For instance, on 28 June 1797, another Governor of Rumeli El-Hac Mustafa Paşa reported to Istanbul that Kara Feyzi attacked the retinue of a local notable, a certain Osman Usta, near the town of Çirmen (Ormenio in Greece). Though Osman did not slay the bandit leader, he reports that he killed over 30 of his companions, among who were some of Kara Feyzi’s most trusted leaders.³⁵ But what is fascinating about this archival source is that Mustafa Paşa notes that Kara Feyzi risked his life in order to prevent Osman Usta from mutilating the bodies of his fallen comrades. Kara Feyzi and his men allegedly collected and burned the corpses of their slain followers in the house of an “infidel” while under heavy fire in order to spare their decapitated heads from becoming symbols of the state’s victory over Kara Feyzi’s retinue. The governor concludes the dispatch by suggesting that the sultan should nevertheless confer prestigious ceremonial robes, luxurious sable furs, as well as cash, weapons, and supplies onto Osman Usta and his men for the valor they displayed, even though Kara Feyzi denied them physical “proof” of their deeds usually required for securing this type of imperial benefaction.³⁶ But after his reappointment to the position as Governor of Rumeli in 1801, for example, Hakkı Paşa even complains to İstanbul that “infidels” (*kâfirler*) like Kara Feyzi were becoming so successful

³⁴ In her essay on decapitation in the early modern colonial context of Ireland, P. Palmer argues that beheading and the resulting trophies were constitutive of a ‘currency’ that mediated inter-personal as well as society-imperial relations. See S. Palmer, “At the Sign of the Head: The Currency of Beheading in Early Modern Ireland,” in S. Carroll (ed.), *Cultures of Violence: Interpersonal Violence in Historical Perspective* (London, 2007), 141-142. See also R. Janes, *Losing our Heads: Beheadings in Literature and Culture* (New York, 2005).

³⁵ Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (Prime Ministerial Ottoman Archive, İstanbul, hereafter “BOA”), Hatt-1 Humâyûn (Imperial Rescript collection, hereafter “HH”) 2113.

³⁶ Ibid.

in their battles with imperial forces that in addition to devastating the local populations throughout Rumeli, they were the ones who were slaughtering, burning, and decapitating the bodies of fallen imperial soldiers.³⁷ Rather than their heads being severed and displayed outside Topkapı, it was the “vermin” and “infidels” who were mutilating and parading their victories over the state in a symbolic reversal of moral claims.

Imperial officials strove hard to control the narrative about bandits since it was a useful morality tale meant to address the sultan’s and the military and administrative elites’ numerous failures to protect society from different types of violence and threats coming from within and without the Empire.³⁸ However, by approaching banditry and paramilitarism as a phenomenon that was a product of imperial governance that also operated across the state-imposed system of law and social order as well as local systems of vengeance and grassroots conceptions of justice, one can see how this dialectic produced its own alternative version of order. It is no wonder that these types of polyvalent exchanges that marked Kara Feyzi and his networks’ encounters with the Ottoman state and society would mark the encounter between Ottoman forces and Greek insurgents only a couple of decades later when Deli Mustafa was in Rumeli, an important continuity that prompts us to look more closely at the meaning of the “words of honor” that accompanied these narratives of ritualistic and sexual violence.

III. Words of Honor: Narrating Conflicting Loyalties, Deception, and Legitimate Practice

It is really in Deli Mustafa’s more guarded descriptions of his travels in Anatolia that one begins to understand how his narrative is more about the struggles paramilitary forces had with their Ottoman commanders and other ranks of soldiery than with the ritualistic and sexual violence they inflicted upon “infidel” insurgents and their kin in a civil war-torn

³⁷ HH 3199.

³⁸ I borrow the term and application of “morality tales” here from Leslie Peirce. L. Peirce, *Morality Tales: Law and Gender in the Ottoman Court of Aintab* (Berkeley, 2003).

Rumeli, and it is this facet of this narrative that makes it comparable to sources revolving around Kara Feyzi's insurgency. For it is his descriptions of the dizzying array of intimacy, deception, and conflicting loyalties that marked relations among paramilitary networks, imperial commanders and their retinues, and sundry local communities that one sees how attributions of honor are opposed to the universals twentieth-century anthropologists connected to the complex of honor and shame – not only with regard to the sexes but also, and more importantly, with regard to different social groups. What is particularly interesting is how sources give us clues regarding how men like Deli Mustafa or Kara Feyzi behaved differently towards different categories of a person or community and vice versa.³⁹ Descriptions and narratives strategies from Deli Mustafa's ego document address many of the larger dynamics reflected in the corpus of sources written about Kara Feyzi, thus providing a “text” of how the words of honor commenting on acts of honor mediated social relations during this period and how different groups of different status used the discourse of honor to check one another whilst legitimating their contentious ways.

Among the countless hardships that Deli Mustafa and his companions were subjected to on account of their superiors, unemployment was the most common one featured in his account. The narrator's discussion of this issue hints at how paramilitary forces understood their position as both contested commodities in inter-elite imperial intrigues and victims of the same. It is in the context of discussing unemployment that Deli Mustafa also reflects on what he and others like him consider was the “legitimate” as opposed to “illegitimate” plundering of local communities and blurry boundaries between banditry and the necessity of survival.

Deli Mustafa begins his manuscript by describing his journey from north-central Anatolia eastwards towards Erzurum in search of employment. It was in Erzurum sometime

³⁹ For more on how the discourse of honor and shame helped different social strata negotiate difference and manipulate one another, see P. Horden and N. Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 499-501.

in 1816 that he and his companions came into the employment of a certain Baba Paşa who sent them to the Georgian borderland in the retinues of a Yegan Paşa and *böliükbaşı* (leader of irregular forces) Mahmud Kiran to lay siege to the fortress of Ahıska occupied by a *pasha* who was declared an outlaw by İstanbul.⁴⁰ But it was after completing this mission that the narrator reports that while they were awaiting further orders from their commander Baba Paşa, they had obtained news from informants that the inhabitants of the region had lodged complaints against Baba Paşa and his men (presumably Deli Mustafa and his comrades included) to the sultan because his forces had allegedly deflowered no less than 500 local girls and decapitated the heads of several thousand Ahıskans while repelling rebels. As a consequence, the author informs his audience that Baba Paşa was dismissed and ordered to assume a new post in Diyarbakir, which prompted Deli Mustafa and his companions to return back to Erzurum to their employer, presumably to collect their pay before the *pasha* left for his new post.⁴¹ Baba Paşa managed to escape Erzurum without paying his men; however, this lead Deli Mustafa's leader and others whom the narrator labels as “mischievous soldiers” to assault Baba Paşa's possessions and even *harem* in Erzurum, which hints at the possibility that even Ottoman imperial elites could be subject to the ultimate disgrace of having their womenfolk dishonored by Ottoman irregulars if they double-crossed the wrong men. Even though he distances himself from the violence his comrades visited upon local communities and Baba Paşa's *harem*, Deli Mustafa nevertheless betrays the fact that he and his companions later joined forces with Mahmud Kiran only *after* the Baba paşa incident.⁴² In

⁴⁰ Schmidt, “The Adventures...,” 189-191. According to Schmidt, Cevdet calls this *böliükbaşı* [division leader] Mahmud Tiran. See Cevdet, *Tarih-i Cevdet*, Vol. X, 249.

⁴¹ Noteworthy in his narrative is that although Deli Mustafa recounts the complaints that were lodged against Baba Paşa and even adds that he and his men cut off the heads of 270 other “schismatics” before the *pasha*'s dismissal, he carefully distances himself from the excessive carnage and sexual violence – perhaps because he understood it as illegitimate in nature. *Ibid.*, 193.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 193-194.

other instances, however, Deli Mustafa is much more explicit about his and his comrades' marching against commanders who conned them out of their pay.⁴³

What is clear in the text and indicative of a recurring trope throughout his travels in Anatolia is that Deli Mustafa blames his superiors like Baba Paşa for his misfortunes and accuses the *paşa* of tricking him and his companions into believing that they would be paid their monthly salaries for their services, while in reality, the *paşa* had no intention of paying them and simply abandoned them along with 15000 other irregular soldiers.⁴⁴ It was after recurring episodes like this that the narrator explains that he and entire communities of his comrades were left unemployed ("*kapusuz*," i.e., without a patron), and they were *forced* to roam eastern and central Anatolia "from this village and that" (*bu köyde şu köyde*) to make a living.⁴⁵ Noteworthy in this context is that Deli Mustafa often distinguishes between elite officials who were labeled "outlaws" (i.e., *fermânlı*, those whose recalcitrance elicited an imperial edict against them) by İstanbul versus local "robbers" (i.e., *harâmî*, those engaged in unlawful activity) whom they encountered in skirmishes and battles throughout Anatolia. However, when it came to him and his companions' having to resort to "roaming" Anatolia for sustenance, he is completely mum as to what specific forms of coercion and violence they inflicted in order to expropriate food and resources from the local populace. This distinction suggests that the itinerate soldiers' "roaming" became sort of an "accepted" practice tacitly condoned by their superiors who clearly realized that their bamboozling their men out of pay would result in their oppressing the local populations.⁴⁶ For Deli Mustafa "unlawful"

⁴³ For instance, near Erzincan another *paşa*, a certain Hafiz 'Ali Paşa, refused to pay Deli Mustafa and his fellow *delis*; thus, the narrator claims that they organized and marched against the *paşa* and were successful in extracting their pay through outright aggression. Ibid., 198-199. In another instance, Mustafa notes that he had another quarrel (*nizâ' edüb*) with a *paşa* on the Persian frontier in skirmishes with Persian troops. Once the *paşa* cut off their monthly allowance, so they abandoned him at Kars and left for Sivas. Ibid., 207.

⁴⁴ Schmidt, "The Adventures..," 194

⁴⁵ Cod. Or. 1551, 13a.

⁴⁶ For more on this link between elite complicity in paramilitary violence later on in Ottoman history, see J.A. Reid, *Crisis of the Ottoman Empire: Prelude to Collapse 1839-1878* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2000).

violence and plundering seems to be something pertinent only to other groups as opposed to his own plundering on account of being victim to the deceit of his elite superiors.

Whilst describing how he and thousands of irregulars were the victims of their superiors' intrigue and abuse, however, the narrator boasts that the paramilitary contingents to which he belonged were very savvy networks capable of dealing with the adversity brought on by the whims of their superiors and taking advantage of their position as "contested commodities." Put simply, their strategy consisted of entertaining, soliciting, and accepting more advantageous propositions of rival factions, be they elite *pâşas* or infamous "robbers."⁴⁷ For instance, while he and his companions lay under siege in Ardanuç castle prior to their patron Baba Paşa's dismissal, the narrator relates that one of their assailants, a local robber named Kara Kadı (i.e., the "Black" Judge) actually gave them clemency (*bizlere re'y veriib*) as well as food and shelter prior to their return back to Erzurum to deal with their patron. The fact that Mustafa and his companions accepted the overtures of their assailant points to the fact that these types of soldiery clearly understood their position as men whose skills were very valuable in Ottoman society. This is what put them in a position to negotiate better deals, salaries, and access to plunder for themselves if need be, thus prompting one to take the narrator's recurring trope of victimhood and unemployment with a grain of salt.

The dynamics Deli Mustafa conveys as "legitimate" behavior calls to mind similar situations that marked the Ottoman government and its society's encounters with Kara Feyzi's network a couple of decades earlier in Rumeli. For example, on the other side of the Empire along the Danubian frontier in October 1795, the Protector of Belgrad (*belgrad muhâfizi*) reported that the retinue of Kara Feyzi was pillaging communities on his path to take the city in conjunction with rebellious janissaries who were exiled from the city because

⁴⁷ Ottomanists working on the Balkans around this period have also noticed similar types of negotiation strategies among itinerate warriors in the Balkans, groups often labeled collectively as "Albanian." See F. Anscombe, "Albanians and 'Mountain Bandits,'" in F. Anscombe (ed.), *The Ottoman Balkans*, 95-102.

of their abuse of the local population.⁴⁸ But what stands out in the *paşa*'s correspondence is the fluid nature of the boundaries between his own military forces and Kara Feyzi's network, betraying the perpetual dilemma officials faced in terms of recruiting reliable forces to fight Kara Feyzi's insurgency. In this case El-Hac Mustafa Paşa voices his concern that his *sekban* troops (irregulars) defending Belgrade were unreliable because Kara Feyzi's agents were among their ranks persuading them to join their network. However, the *paşa*'s correspondence concomitantly betrays that he withheld the pay of his men and refused to allow them to return to their places of origin when their contracts ended in order to prevent them from joining the bandits. Such imperial policies would back-fire time and time again and encourage his various types of auxiliary soldiery to join Kara Feyzi's bands.⁴⁹ Similar to the Kara Kadı option that Deli Mustafa alludes to, Mustafa Paşa's comments underline Kara Feyzi's recurrent contact and negotiations with low-ranking warriors who were supposed to protect local communities from him but elected to join him either because of the ill-treatment by their superiors or Kara Feyzi's enterprise simply promised them a more lucrative deal or access to plunder.

What these recurring dynamics in Kara Feyzi's long insurgency reveal is that in addition to recruiting and coercing local Muslims and Christians into his plundering confederacy, Kara Feyzi would soon be poised to establish symbiotic relationships with elite administrators who hailed not only from Rumeli or İstanbul but also Anatolian and Arab provinces. These recurring dynamics further call into question the nature of the Ottoman state and how it governed at the turn of the nineteenth century. Two extreme but nevertheless intertwined options for elite Ottoman administrators emerges: repelling Kara Feyzi versus plundering local communities alongside him because a "legitimate" economy in the form of a constant flow of cash, weapons, man-power, and promotions was forged upon the promise of

⁴⁸ B.O.A. HH 2402C.

⁴⁹ Ibid. For more on Kara Feyzi, see T.U. Esmer, "Economies of Violence,"

destroying Kara Feyzi's "illegitimate" economy of plunder, smuggling, kidnapping, and slaughter. By comparing successive dispatches regarding Kara Feyzi's network written by the same officials over a long period of time, it becomes clearer how imperial elites benefitted from the Kara Feyzi's menace in their own struggles with one another and how they manipulated accompanying discourses of honor, violence, banditry, and justice to secure their own footing in the topsy-turvy world of Ottoman imperial intrigue and fierce competition over scant resources and prestige.

Kara Feyzi's rapid ascension onto the imperial stage came after 1797 with his increasing exposure to imperial officials charged with repelling him. For instance, the aforementioned El-Hac Mustafa Paşa in his new position as the Governor of Rumeli sent in a dispatch to İstanbul regarding Kara Feyzi on 21 September 1797 that began a series of heated disputes among himself, his counterpart the Governor of Anatolia Seyyid 'Ali Paşa, Kara Feyzi and his companions, and the local population in city of Filibe (Plovdiv in Bulgaria).⁵⁰ Mustafa Paşa explains in his initial statement that he engaged in a series of talks with Kara Feyzi and his companions in order to co-opt their retinues into his own permanently. However, things went awry rather quickly because while Kara Feyzi and his companions met with the Governor of Rumeli and were on the verge of settling down in Filibe, Seyyid 'Ali Paşa's troops brutally assaulted their demobilized troops as well as local bystanders who were guilty of nothing more than the misfortune of Mustafa Paşa's imposing unruly bandit divisions onto their community.⁵¹ This resulted in Kara Feyzi and his companions' rearming, regrouping, and pillaging the region in conjunction with infuriated members of the local population who joined the bandits in protest, and this left Mustafa Paşa incapable making a

⁵⁰ B.O. A. HH 2521 İ.

⁵¹ Ibid.

stand against both them as well as ‘Ali Paşa’s unruly Anatolian troops who also threatened his Rumeli forces.⁵²

The resulting correspondence among Mustafa Paşa, Seyyid ‘Ali Paşa, and the Porte makes evident how imperial officials could manipulate the figure of Kara Feyzi to make the case to the sultan that their respective approaches to combating bandits were bound to yield more success, all with the view to their own interests and welfare of their respective retinues. For his own part, Mustafa Paşa describes Seyyid ‘Ali Paşa as little better than a cowardly bandit who fumbled a successful co-optation of Kara Feyzi because his troops seemed more interested in plundering the local population, torching all of their homes, and killing wounded men who incapable of defending themselves than in relieving the province of the bandit menace.⁵³ Mustafa Paşa argues that he would have “fixed” the bandit problem in southern Rumeli because he had Kara Feyzi and his companions on their knees begging for mercy and employment in his administration. More important, Mustafa Paşa conveys the shame and dishonor (*haclet-i ‘azîm*) that Seyyid ‘Ali Paşa’s intervention into local affairs and unauthorized use of force brought to his reputation because the local inhabitants of the city had heard that the followers of Kara Feyzi and his companions among them were actually pardoned and given amnesty by his administration, yet the Governor of Anatolia attacked these men along with innocent bystanders.⁵⁴ In another letter he wrote to İstanbul regarding this fiasco a couple of days later, the Governor of Rumeli reported that the local townsmen sent a messenger to Mustafa Paşa to inform him that they had just joined the bandits, presumably because they were the ones powerful enough to protect their collective security

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ “...anadolu vâlisi müşârunileyh tarafından karyehâ-i mezkâre cânibine gönderilen ‘asâkir mahall-i mezkâra vurûd ve merkâmânun karîndaşlarının hânelerini basup izâlelerine cidd ü sa’y itmişler ise dahi hemân karîndaşlar canlarını halâs idüp firâr itmişlerdir ve lâkin karyelerinde mâl itlâk olunur gerek merkâmânun ve gerek ahâlî-i karyenin her neleri var ise cümlesini yağmâ ve gâret itdiklerinden başka hânelerini dahi bi'l-cümle ihrâk idüp kurâda kudret-yâb olmayan mecrûhları katl u i‘dâm itdiklerinden...” Ibid.

⁵⁴ HH 2521 İ

and property against Seyyid ‘Ali Paşa’s unruly Anatolians. Echoing the local population’s fears, Mustafa Paşa also reports that these events threatened the security and welfare of the imperial troops in his retinue, and they were likewise infuriated. The governor adds that his troops were saying “All of the *vezîrs* are (supposed to be) one. Here we take refuge in the protection of one *vezîr*, yet meanwhile he kills us off one by one. Does such behavior befit the prestige of an exalted *vezîr*?⁵⁵ Thus, this fiasco was a tremendous blow to Mustafa Paşa’s reputation, because Seyyid ‘Ali Paşa’s attack on the community must have been seen as yet another failed imperial effort to curb banditry on account of the intrigue between two *vezîrs*. Both local inhabitants as well as imperial soldiers all expected the *vezîrs* to act in unison and uphold a degree of compassion for their respective communities, but now, all of the bystanders’ and loyal troops paid the price for this dissonance in imperial policy. The talk of further confrontation between Rumeli and Anatolian forces only further exacerbated everyone’s fears.

Replying to a *fermân* (imperial edict) he immediately received as a result of Mustafa Paşa’s incriminating letter to İstanbul that censured his men’s conduct, on 23 September 1797 Seyyid ‘Ali Paşa expressed his frustration and shame with the fact that the sultan ordered him and his retinue to return back to Anatolia and even take the menacing Kara Feyzi and his network back with him to Diyarbekir. But he also takes the opportunity to defend his behavior by accusing his Rumeli counterpart of being too soft on bandits, arguing that draconian measures were required to rid the province of these bands. The Governor of Anatolia makes the point that: “...even if Kara Feyzi complies with the order to return back to Anatolia with us, other like-minded men will thereby not be properly punished (i.e., executed). Criminals will therefore feel that they are safe [from the justice of the state] and

⁵⁵ “...keyfiyyetin vech-i muharrer iżzere vukû ‘i bu tarafda olanların sem‘lerine vâsil olduğu esnâda bu tarafda mevcûd bulunan ‘asâkirin mecum‘u tahdîş idüp vüzerânın cümlesi birdir, bir vezîrin himâyesine ilticâ ve i‘timâd itdik şimdi bizi birer birer i‘dâm itdirmek vüzerânın şân-i ‘aliyyelerine şâyân midir? diye vâfir güft ü gû vâki‘ olub...” HH 2521O.

soon increase in number and openly maraud the region because the mountains are teaming with other bandits...”⁵⁶ Not only does the author express reprobation that a respectable *vezîr* like his counterpart would personally engage in talks with someone like Kara Feyzi, but he also takes the opportunity to write that his peer was misleading the sultan and covering up a larger “Rumeli conspiracy” that only a powerful outsider like himself could stamp out.⁵⁷ After all, El-Hac Mustafa Paşa was from Filibe as was Kara Feyzi’s intimate companion Kara Mustafa, while Kara Feyzi himself and his other companion Eminck were from nearby Hasköy/Kırca‘âli. The implication was the El-Hac Mustafa Paşa would never be able to resolve the bandit problem in Rumeli, because his administration was part of the problem.

Seyyid ‘Ali even writes to Selim III that if he were to send out spies (*câsus*) into Rumeli to inquire precisely which official, himself or current governor, possesses the requisite power and moral rectitude to destroy men like Kara Feyzi, the sultan would soon learn that he was the proper choice.⁵⁸ But by claiming a kind of popular mandate over Rumeli, what Seyyid ‘Ali Paşa was really after was Mustafa Paşa’s position, since the bandit problem guaranteed years of resources, promotion, and opportunities to distinguish oneself.⁵⁹ Period sources confirm that Kara Feyzi’s network’s ubiquitous presence throughout the region made Rumeli a coveted venue for *vezîrs* and *paşas* hailing from other regions of the Empire during the tough times of peace between the Habsburg-Russo-Ottoman War of 1788-1792 and Russo-Ottoman War of 1806-1812 when cash and provisions to build large military

⁵⁶ “... ve Anadolu tarafında mansıbımız olan Kütahya’ya teveccih ve ‘azîmet ve sâlifi’z-zikr tarafımızda olan böyükler giderler ise der-mai’iyet istishâb ve yâhûd ‘azîmetde tereddiid iderler ise vezîr-i müşârunileyhe teslim olunmaları emr ü fermân buyurulmuş emr ü fermân evliyâ-yi na ‘imâ...keyfiyyet-i mezkûre egerçi bu vechile sûret-yâb ve kalibe ifrâq olunmuş ise dahi külliyyen gâ’ileleri ber-taraflar olmayup cebel tarafları öteden beri me’vâ-yi lüsûs olduğundan el-hâletü hâzîhi Dadî Dere sükkânından Haci Musaoğlu İbrâhîm ve nice anın emsâli muhtefî ve celi erbâb-i şekâvet bî-şümâr ve haklarında lâzım gelen te’dibât terk ve yâhûd imhâl olunmak lâzım gelse sâ’ir şekâvet-kârların ferec-yâb olup yine karîben eşkiyâ peydâ olacağı müllâhazardan ba’id olmamağla...” Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid..

⁵⁹ Seyyid ‘Ali soon managed to replace El-Hac Mustafa Paşa, but only a year later in November 1798, he was executed because of his own suspicious ties to bandit networks in northern Rumeli. See HH 4124.

retinues did not flow as freely from the imperial coffers as in times of war.⁶⁰ It was in Rumeli that Ottoman grandees could display or project a semblance of their military and strategic acumen in hunting down bandits and guarantee a livelihood for large retinues that were building-blocks of power in Ottoman politics but extremely difficult to preserve during the tough times of peace. For all their braggadocio and professed desire to catch Kara Feyzi, however, it was really in the *vezîr*'s best interest that Kara Feyzi continued to thrive and grow in his brazenness.

While one of the most common criticisms of literature on twentieth-century anthropology of honor in the Mediterranean is that values like honor or shame are based mostly on backwoods communities in the region, these dynamics recorded in this urban encounter in Filibe counteracts the thrust of this criticism. Critics of this scholarship build on twentieth-century ethnographers like Pitt-Rivers and Peristiany to argue that honor and shame are the preoccupations of individuals in small scale, rural societies marked by face-to-face personal relations, as opposed to the anonymous relations of urban spaces; however, what one sees from Kara Feyzi's combined encounters is that these face-to-face relations were of paramount importance in neighborhoods within the city as much as it was in the village and countryside.⁶¹ In addressing trans-regional, plundering enterprises like Kara Feyzi's and their encounters with urban communities as well as the retinues of powerful *vezîrs* who hailed from "urban" settings themselves, the urban versus rural divide has less relevance. What is notable is how fast alliances and loyalties could shift based on the fallout of broken words of honor and different groups' constantly changing perception of which networks represented their best interests in an age in which the force exerted by competing power configurations that roamed Ottoman society could impact them in equally adverse ways. Just as with the paramilitary contingents like Deli Mustafa's or those in Belgrad

⁶⁰ See footnote 64.

⁶¹ Horden and Purcell, 498-9. See also Peristiany, 1965, 11.

mentioned earlier, the inhabitants of Filibe calculated was that it was in their best interests to side with Kara Feyzi's network than with imperial forces. To be sure, such calculations were also informed by the reality that long when imperial forces left their community, Kara Feyzi's network would remain a veritable force in the region; thus, making a stand against them could be much more detrimental to their security than combating imperial forces, for members of Kara Feyzi's network were members of the same the community throughout the province and took down names.

Moreover, while poverty and dishonor were often noted by twentieth-century anthropologists as something that often go hand-in-hand (J. Campbell et al), what encounters described by imperial officials in the Kara Feyzi saga consistently demonstrate is that the constant alternation between professed words of allegiance and deception among all groups of society caught in this zero-sum game point to how discourses of banditry and paramilitarism had a leveling affect of social “class” and distinction that put actors of humble social origins on par with elite officials. The Filibe scandal demonstrates how Ottoman elites caught in compromising situations vis-à-vis Kara Feyzi's network found themselves in hopeless situations because since they had to maintain a modicum of honorable behavior to different audiences, they were being judged on upholding their promises to men like Kara Feyzi, whereas, the latter could consistently break promises yet be judged more favorably by the local populace because of the power that they wielded over local society. *Vezirs* were concerned about the sense of honor comprised in their sense of self-worth and their reputations in their constituent retinues and surrounding communities, and they could be subject to public shame and disgrace for failing to act according to social values, yet savvy bandit leaders like Kara Feyzi were immune to this disgrace on the one hand but could

manipulate it when it came to the reputation of Ottoman elites whom he interacted with.⁶² In this sense, one can see not only how different groups were held to different criteria revolving around conflicting notions of honorable behavior based on class and status but also how groups like Kara Feyzi's network and the populous could manipulate elites in compromising situations whilst legitimating their own contentious ways.

Subsequent sources on the Kara Feyzi insurgency after this fiasco in Filibe consistently demonstrate that elite administrators would catch onto these contradictions and adapt their behavior to these “norms” forged from below in order to benefit themselves. Namely, those elites who fell out with İstanbul after 1797 would fare much better in the world of Ottoman politics if they *overtly* participated in Kara Feyzi's enterprise than if they tried to pursue their grievances through more licit channels such as direct consultation with the sultan, which clearly demonstrates the extent to which the moral order of society became inverted on account of the state's reliance on paramilitary forces to wage its wars and police its society. For instance, a dispatch sent to İstanbul in June of 1799 indicates that soon after the Filibe scandal, the Governor of Adana Hüseyin Paşa who was commissioned to bring his Anatolian retinues into Rumeli to fight men like Kara Feyzi calculated that it was in his best interest to pillage communities near Edirne in conjunction with Kara Feyzi when he heard the news that he would be sent back to the Arab provinces because of his ineffectiveness in fighting Kara Feyzi. In terms of his motivation, like Seyyid ‘Ali Paşa, Hüseyin Paşa apparently demanded that he be promoted to Governor of Rumeli, except rather than merely blaming his Rumeli peers for having suspicious ties to Kara Feyzi, he chose to pillage alongside this menace to make his case for promotion.⁶³

⁶² For more on how honor and shame “worked” in society, see F.C. Stewart, “Honor and Shame,” in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavior Sciences*, 6904.

⁶³ Apparently, Hüseyin Paşa could act so boldly without any damage to his record, because he was soon afterwards appointed to combat the remnants of Napoleon's forces in Egypt. See HH 2930.

Gürcü Osman Paşa was yet another high-ranking official who overtly joined Kara Feyzi's band upon news of his demotion as the Governor of Rumeli. Gürcü Osman Paşa protested this decision by plundering Rumeli alongside Kara Feyzi's bands for many months beginning in December 1801, first along the northern Danubian borderland and then hundreds of kilometers south near Edirne in a series of multi-pronged attacks against different communities.⁶⁴ When Osman Paşa was finally read to seek pardon from İstanbul and leave Kara Feyzi's protection in the summer of 1802, however, one officials reports that he even crafted a self-serving narrative to the effect that he was in great danger because he owed Kara Feyzi and other bandits a great deal of money and that he feared for his life. Osman Paşa apparently got away with this story because he agreed to leave Rumeli and Kara Feyzi in exchange for the governorship in Anatolia and keeping his rank as *vezîr*.⁶⁵ The fact that Osman Paşa could send in such a request despite his transgressions suggests that he calculated – perhaps with good reason – that if he portrayed himself as a victim of Kara Feyzi's promises like others before him, then such an allegation would fall on sympathetic ears.

A similar strategy was also employed by yet another fallen *vezîr*, Koşancalı Halil Paşa a year earlier on 9 February 1801 when he was negotiating a truce with Canıklı-zâde Mahmud Tayyar Paşa.⁶⁶ Koşancalı Halil Paşa was notorious for his involvement in leading *yamak* and janissaries that were expelled from Belgrad in 1792 but would later go on to play a crucial role in combating the same Serbs he was outlawed for oppressing during the Serbian Revolution in 1804 and consequent Russo-Ottoman War of 1806-12. He was also one of

⁶⁴ See HH 2300, HH 2303F, and HH 2215. Although the imperial chronicler Ahmet Cevdet Paşa discusses the rebellion of Gürcü Osman Paşa in detail using the same type of archival sources that I use here, he omits the central role that Kara Feyzi played in it. See *Tarih-i Cevdet* [Cevdet's History] Vol. 6 (İstanbul, 1309/1891), 291-295.

⁶⁵ See HH 3890H, HH2683, and HH2536.

⁶⁶ B.O.A. HAT 82, 3388C [25 N 1215 (9 February 1801)]. “Koşanca” is Gušanac, a town in Serbia near Belgrade. .

Kara Feyzi's most intimate companions who plundered Rumeli for years on end alongside Kara Feyzi's network.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, when negotiating alone with Mahmud Tayyar Paşa, Halil Paşa claimed that he was “taken captive” by Kara Feyzi who *forced* him to plunder Rumeli by his side.⁶⁸ Halil Paşa also pledged to betray Kara Feyzi and his men and help neutralize them if Canıklı-zâde promised to take him and his men back to Anatolia and reinstate his rank of *vezîr*, but Halil Paşa never betrayed Kara Feyzi. On numerous occasions Ottoman officials also negotiated alone with Kara Feyzi and offered him amnesty and promotion if he delivered Halil Paşa’s head to them; however, though temporarily feigning willingness to cooperate, Kara Feyzi instead demanded that Halil Paşa’s rank of *vezîr* be reinstated.⁶⁹

The fact that the perennial attempts to offer separate truces to these men and wedge gulfs between them shows how Kara Feyzi as well as his elite and commoner companions consistently beat the state at its own game. At the same time, Kara Feyzi’s menace was consistently used as a pretext for officials to obtain favors, promotion, and pardon from the sultanate. Repeatedly cast as dishonorable men would gladly forsake each other if given the chance of co-optation or promotion by the state, Kara Feyzi and his companions continued to wrong-foot imperial efforts to combat his network by feigning their willingness to betray one another. Indeed, on a smaller scale, Deli Mustafa’s narrative also points to how paramilitary soldiers spoke different languages and feigned conflicting allegiances to different elites in order to place themselves in powerful enough positions to cope with the adversity stemming from fickle patrons who were always willing to forsake them. As a consequence, men like

⁶⁷ Given that Halil Paşa played a central role in the initial Belgrad uprisings after the Habsburg-Russo-Ottoman war in 1792, it is most likely that Kara Feyzi established a relationship with him in the beginning of this career as a borderland warrior *cum* rebel leader along the Danube in the early 1790’s.

⁶⁸ B.O.A. HAT 82, 3388C [25 N 1215 (9 February 1801)].

⁶⁹ See B.O.A. HAT 79, 3298 [5 N 1215 (20 January 1801)]; B.O.A. HAT 83, 3443 [30 N 1215 (30 January 1801)]; B.O.A. HAT 55, 2537 [17 N 1215 (1 February 1801)]; B.O.A. HAT 82, 3388A [18 N 1215 (2 February 1801)]; B.O.A. HAT 75, 3100I [23 N 1215 (7 February 1801)].

Kara Feyzi and Deli Mustafa managed to embed their networks in communities throughout the Empire and become privy to a vast information web that gave them and their companions the upper-hand in processing not only information regarding the whereabouts of local resources, wealth, and commodities but also all of the conflicting rumors regarding troop movements or other types of constantly changing power configurations that threatened their respective organizations. More importantly, official participation in this honor culture from below also points out how Ottoman elites also learned how to appropriate the trickster narratives of men like Deli Mustafa and Kara Feyzi to mediate their own standing in the topsy-turvy world of Ottoman politics at the turn of the nineteenth century.

IV. Conclusion:

By comparing the claims, narratives strategies, and social dynamics men like Deli Mustafa addresses in his ego document with those featured in the corpus of Ottoman official sources regarding the contentious practices of the paramilitary/bandit leader *cum* imperial power-broker Kara Feyzi during his long insurgency, this essay revisited the notion of honor as a broader dialogical discourse that mediated encounters among these trans-regional networks of violence, local and imperial officials, and local populations. What I argued were the more important that the ubiquitous “acts of violence” are the “words of honor” embedded in these same narratives since they address the array of conflicting allegiances and loyalties that notions of client-patron relations or households completely misses, how different groups had to speak different languages to different social players and groups outside of their own, and how social actors tried to explain and legitimate their contentious ways.

At a time in which normative law and the sultanate had little control over organized, trans-regional paramilitary networks and crime syndicates that roamed Ottoman society, a whole parallel set of conflicting unwritten laws, tacit agreements, and social contracts

emerged that governed Ottoman society's encounter with widespread crime and violence. It is this transactional nature of the broad components of honor as discussed in this essay that point to how narratives of honor became just as important as the actual power and force wielded by the networks discussed in this essay, because they were the primary binding social contracts and tacit agreements that informed the cutthroat calculus that governed how different groups made different claims, competed for resources and status, and negotiated what was right and wrong. Even if the historical actors discussed in this essay ranging from *vezîrs* to peasants did not always directly use the word "honor" in their narratives,⁷⁰ they still used a discourse that put them on par with one another in ways that have been overlooked in mainstream historiography.

Though what became of Deli Mustafa is impossible to tell from his narrative because of its abrupt ending in missing pages at the end, one final anecdote from his travels in Anatolia hints what the narrator felt was at stake in his telling his story. In describing his travels outside of İzmit, Mustafa alleges how he stumbled upon a leather bag full of a considerable sum of coins (12 *kîses*, or purses) on the road; however, he claims that he took it to a local coffee shop to inquire about its rightful owner since it was not property legitimately acquired (i.e., *harâm mâldur*). After waiting three days before he could leave İzmit, Deli Mustafa claims that he personally returned it to its rightful owner who rewarded him with a more modest sum of 50 *kuruş*, upon which the narrator comments: "Indeed, this is property lawfully acquired" (i.e., *helâl mâldur*).⁷¹ It is not clear whether portraying his restraint when it came to this his claims to other peoples' property was his attempt to impart some sort of didactic moral story onto his audience or a narrative device he conceived to show him in a lawful light, but this anecdote contrasts greatly with narration of carnivalistic pillaging and

⁷⁰ This is a common critique of the whole corpus of scholarship on the anthropology of honor in the Mediterranean.

⁷¹ Cod. Or. 1551, 27a-27b.

visiting ritualistic violence upon Greek communities and helps explain his more circumspect of having to “roam” because of the abuse of his superiors.

In contrast, Kara Feyzi was finally co-opted by the state in 1805 as an *a'yân* (local notable) after the outbreak of the Serbian Uprising (1804) and related Russo-Ottoman War (1806-12) along what would become the Serbian national border in the towns of Breznik and İznebolu (Trün in Bulgaria) as long as he directed his networks of violence across the border against Serbian insurgents. On 18 September 1805, Kara Feyzi sent in a petition (i.e., ‘*arz u hâl*’) to İstanbul thanking the sultan for finally inquiring about and co-opting him and his men after their long, successful insurgency and charging them with a noble cause against the Serbs, but in addition to trying to explain why he led so many different men into organized crime for so many years, he also threatened the sultanate as much as he expresses his loyalty and devotion.⁷² The primary purpose of his letter was to ask Selim III to convert some more of the *mîrî* state and imperial *hass* lands in Breznik and İznebolu into tax-farms (*iltizâm*) under Kara Feyzi’s control so that he could use the revenues to accommodate all of the unruly troops in his retinue, and thus, *prevent* them from roaming Rumeli and continuing their devastation of the region. Kara Feyzi even asked the sultan to grant him and his men the right to control tax-farms in nearby Şehirköy (Pirot in Serbia) by affixing them to his holdings in Breznik and İznebolu. The Imperial Council’s marginalia written on top this document points to the fact that İstanbul duly granted Kara Feyzi his request, because as Selim III’s marginalia atop of this document also attests, İstanbul feared that if Kara Feyzi and his men were not granted this request, they would abandon this frontier as the Serbs were rebelling and war with Russia was imminent.⁷³

⁷² B.O.A. HAT 58, 2633 [23 C 1220 (18 September 1805)].

⁷³ The Imperial Council’s comments even point to how it suggested Selim III could also award tax revenues that comprised his sister Beyân Sultan’s stipend from Şehirköy to Kara Feyzi and his men, a proposition to which the sultan agreed. Ibid.

However, it is in his explanations regarding why he led such a successful insurgency and oppressed the sultan's subjects that underlines how Kara Feyzi's words of honor directly echoed the fantastical accounts of the *pâşas* and *vezîrs* who forged symbiotic ties with Kara Feyzi's network yet tried to blame him for seducing them into dishonorable behavior. Kara Feyzi writes:

“...I was not always prone to roaming as a form of employment. In addition to the fact that my current enemy Kırca‘alı Emîn Ağa and the executed Tokatçıklı joined together and pillaged my property and possessions, they also took my family and children as captives. Without the consent of God—may his name be Exalted—they drove me away from my home, children, and my peers...”⁷⁴

Indeed, just like his elite companions before him, Kara Feyzi legitimates his dishonorable conduct by claiming that two of his other intimate companions who roamed Rumeli for years on end alongside Kara Feyzi plundered his possessions and took his family as captives, thus forcing him to pillage Ottoman society for years on end. Like Deli Mustafa, Kara Feyzi writes that he was *forced* to wander and pillage for all of these years, but now that Selim III has personally inquired about his condition, Kara Feyzi pledges that he would no longer maraud and repent for all of the evil acts that he committed over the years.⁷⁵ In conveying that he was not an enemy of the faith and state since he prays that the sultan be protected from all of the other evil hypocrites of the day,⁷⁶ however, Kara Feyzi also implicitly threatens the sultan by pointing out that for all of these years he and his men could not be defeated by countless local militias and imperial forces. But if he did not have more funds to maintain his large network, upon his dismissing them they would continue to cause much

⁷⁴ “...ötedenberü bu kulları gezmeğe kâr kesb idinmiş değilim hemâن hasmım olan Kırca‘alı Emîn Ağa ve makîl Tokatçıklı ile yak-dîl (sic. yek-dîl) ve yek-cihet olup mâlı eşyâlarım yağma eylediğinden başka evlâd-ı ayâlüün (sic. ‘iyâlüün) el-‘an (sic. el-ân) esîrdir Allâhu te‘âlânın rizâsı yok iken emsâl-i akrân arasında beni evimden ve evlâdimdan dûr eylediler...” B.O.A. HAT 58, 2633.

⁷⁵ “...çâr nâ-çâr biz dahi bu kâra irtikâb idüb güzâr eyledik merhametli efendimiz gibi bir kimse bu hâlim sormadan bu def‘a hak te‘âlâ hazretleri efendimize ilham (sic. ilhâm) viriüb bu gezdiğimiz su’âl buyursanız bundan böyle biz dahi cümle eylediğimizden feragat (sic. ferâgat) ve cümlesinden tevbe olsun ...” Ibid.

⁷⁶ “...Hak te‘âlâ şevketli pâdişâhumiza ‘ömr virsün âmîn ve siz efendimizi hak te‘âlâ münâfîk şerrinden hifz eylesin âmîn...” Ibid.

misery and hardship for the sultan's poor subjects.⁷⁷ Though the scales and proportions are different, what these final anecdotes point to is that Deli Mustafa, Kara Feyzi, and all of the other actors caught in encounters with these networks were trying to fashion themselves as honorable men in dishonorable times.

⁷⁷ "...hemân bir dem bu 'askerin perîşân eylemek mümkün değildir zirâ benden mâ 'adâ içimizde 'asker başları vardır eğer ayırmak iktizâ eylese Rumeli'nde yine güzâr iderler fukarâ râhat olmaz..." Ibid.