

TODAY'S ZAMAN

Shopping anywhere

I could be in a supermarket anywhere; the aisles are wide and polished to a high sheen, the brands and products are international.

Çanakkale, a university town in northwestern Turkey with a population of 75,000, was the last place I expected to find a British supermarket chain. Çanakkale's Kipa shopping center opened in a blizzard in January 2006, having people shovel snow in order to get there. Owned by Tesco, the shopping center has proved very popular with students and holiday makers drawn out of town to its self-contained facility, which includes a food hall and 20 small shops. A family



dropping their child off at university can call in and buy everything the student needs here; a bed, a computer, even high-caffeine soft drinks.

To an expat, the familiar brands are ridiculously tempting; cans of Campbell's soup, bottles of Jameson whiskey and, bizarrely, bottles of HP sauce fill my shopping cart. Ironically I never bought any of these things from an Irish supermarket, but their familiar shapes and colors engage my hand before my brain has time to catch up to it. Worst of all are the sweet products; Pepperidge Farm cookies and Cadbury's chocolate are irresistible. I have to run through the dessert aisle keeping my eyes firmly on the floor.

I am slightly worried by the arrival of the British high street in Çanakkale. It represents the development and growth that this town desperately needs; however, the identi-kit nature of the supermarket leaves me a little spooked. Maybe it is comforting to know that whether in Ireland, England or any of the 13 countries Tesco operates in, the soups will still be in the same aisle, but it's a little disconcerting at the same time. Supermarkets do not belong to any culture anymore but blend seamlessly from the US to Britain to Turkey with local products substituted by the multinationals. Ankara repeats this sense of dislocation through whole shopping centers, making it easy to forget what country I am in.

This multinationalism works on unseen levels, too; the cleaners and security guards in Kipa are also employees of international franchises. As these shops and franchises expand around the globe they create a blandness that apparently dilutes the local culture. That's not to say there are no Turkish brands in our local supermarket, there are plenty. To my admittedly homesick eyes the foreign brands stand out. Five years ago upon my arrival in Turkey, a trip to the supermarket was a trip to the unknown, with brands and products I couldn't ever imagine using. Now it is more like a trip down memory lane.

The phenomenon of the identi-kit supermarket and ever-increasing franchising is not limited to Turkey. As brands go global they not only modify themselves to each culture but also modify each culture they come in contact with. In Turkey where foreign is assumed to mean better, they are remarkably successful and are increasing daily. The bottom line is that these multinational firms bring more choice for better prices to moderate-size towns like Çanakkale. And while I know where I'll be shopping next weekend, I wonder how high the price of diluted culture will be in the end.

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Expat Zone

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