

ANATOLIAN RELIGIONS AND BELIEFS PLATFORM/ VANGUARDS OF OUR CULTURAL HERITAGE / Part 1

"Vakıflı Village Museum" with Lora Çapar

TOPICS: Life in Vakıflı Village, the idea of the ethnographic museum and its establishment, the presentation of the museum, future projects.

We are starting a new series for Anatolian Religions and Beliefs Platform called Vanguards of Our Cultural Heritage in which we will host cultural heritage specialists from different geographies in Türkiye. Each programme will cover a different topic. In the first episode, we talked to art historian Lora Çapar about the last Armenian village of Vakıflı and its ethnographic museum. (The interview took place before the earthquakes of 6 February 2023. Some houses and the church in the Village were damaged. It is reported that repair and reconstruction work will continue until the end of 2024).

Nükhet Everi- Lora, could you firstly introduce yourself to us?

Lora Çapar- I was born and raised in Istanbul. My family originates from Kayseri. I worked at Agos Newspaper for 13 years, 7 of which were with Hrant Dink (1954-2007). I settled in this village in 2013. I came here after marrying my husband Cem Çapar (president of the church foundation). I settled and continued my life here after immigrating.

Nükhet Everi- There are very nice activities in Vakıflı Village, you produce very interesting items in collaboration with women. Can you briefly tell us about them?

Lora Baytar- Women here are very hardworking. Men also work in the gardens and fields, but I can affirm that women really do work more than men. In 2005, women established a cooperative as a union. Everyone participates in the cooperative with their products. Some do needlepoint, some make walnut jam, others citrus jam and pomegranate syrup, and some make all the aforementioned. Most of the income from the products sold here goes to the women and a small portion goes to the church foundation.

Nükhet Everi- The richness and beauty of Vakıflı Village is not limited to this. Something else was being done, there was a movement. Then it turned out that you had established a wonderful museum.

Lora Baytar- Frankly speaking, we decided to establish this museum after putting ourselves in tourists' and visitors' shoes. As you said, this is a village that receives many visitors. Nowadays, it has become a village with a name bigger than itself.

Tourists visit the church and take photos. They look around and, if they are lucky, find someone to answer their questions. They buy products made by the women and leave. Wondering what they remember about this village, we decided to show the visitor that there is more to this village. I confirm that we set out on the journey to establish this museum for this very purpose.

Nükhēt Everi- As far as I understand, you have collected intangible cultural heritage. You have collected the Armenian cultural heritage of Vakıflı Village and the region.

Lora Baytar- As a matter of fact, in this Museum you can find explanations about traces of not only the village with its foundation, but also of each of the 7 Armenian villages located on Mount Moses (Musa Dağı). We tried to display everything in a small space.

We placed texts on the information boards to explain the traditions. We used sample objects in the showcases. We screen movies. We reenacted the *harisa* meal on the Feast of Asdvadzdzin (Feast of the Virgin Mary) with a silicone sculpture. We recorded footage from last year's feast from which we created a film. We made a corner display about marriage traditions. We prepared a documentary consisting of images from old weddings. We also prepared a film about daily life in the village. *(The Feast of the Assumption of the Holy Mother of God (Asdvadzdzin), one of the five major feasts of the Armenian Church, is celebrated on Sunday, August 18th this year (or the Sunday closest to August 14th). This Feast commemorates the bodily ascent of the Virgin Mary (her assumption) into heaven by her son Jesus Christ after her death. On this feast day, the Blessing of Grapes service takes place immediately after the Divine Liturgy. Divine Liturgy will begin at 10:00 am, followed by the Blessing of Grapes Service.)*

Nükhēt Everi- How did you design the sequence from the moment the museum is entered?

Lora Baytar- Certain themes predominate in general Armenian culture. For example, our faith does not change. The beliefs of Istanbul Armenians and Armenians here are the same. We agree on this. However, when we talk about agriculture, the agriculture of this region is a little different. This is one of the first villages to receive an award for organic agriculture. Therefore, the success of the village has been in a specific method of agriculture. Similarly, marriage traditions are the same. Yes, they get married in the church, the same ritual continues, but there are details. We tried to emphasise these details at the Museum.

At the entrance, you are greeted by an old dress. An old engagement dress was the first artifact I found for the village museum. I went in search of wedding dresses in the village. I asked all the women one by one, unfortunately they did not have any

because all the village brides were married in a single wedding dress. A wedding dress was sewn for one of our elders who married into a rich family here, and those who were subsequently going to get married used that same wedding dress. We found an old dress in a house, and we put it at the entrance of the museum just as we had found it.

Upon entering, you are greeted by the language of this village. A special Armenian language is spoken here which is a dialect called Mount Moses Armenian. It is different from Istanbul Armenian, Western Armenian, and Armenian from Armenia. We prepared a panel to emphasise this language's distinctness.

After a short history of the village, you arrive at the Religion section. In the Religion showcase, we placed the oldest examples we could find of items used in religious broadcasts. There is a glazed muganni (hymn singer) outfit, a holy grail cover, a priest's cloak, special bibles, covers, and other objects of this kind. In this showcase, we have an old bible, a bible from the Pera Armenian Church. We also have a money box from the Armenian Church of Mersin. We display an information board explaining the religious beliefs in the villages of Mount Moses and one explaining the feasts next to it. The most enthusiastically celebrated of these feasts is the Feast of Asdvadzgin, the Ascension of the Virgin Mary on the 15th of August. We give an explanation about the *harisa* dish prepared for that feast.

Harisa is actually a dish that is known as *keshekek* throughout Anatolia, pounded wheat, which is a dish made by cooking meat and wheat together. It is also made here as a holiday meal. We prepared a corner display with a silicone sculpture and an animation with the sound of the cauldron being pounded as well as a film.

Afterwards, we deal with the subject of migration. We saw migration as a metaphor. By making the viewer experience migration through a suitcase, a walking stick, and a photograph, we moved on to the days of Mount Moses in Türkiye and Port Said in Egypt. For the Port Said days, we describe the days in the refugee camps and use a sound effect. There is a folk song called Ganche Grung (Anlat Turnam) which is an expatriate folk song. Then we talked about architecture, music and we put examples of these items in the showcase.

Nükhet Everi- So how did the villagers view the museum? What do they say? Let us also talk about them.

Lora Baytar- We did not build this museum on our own, we established it together with the villagers. Every item in the showcases came from the houses in this village. At first, the idea of a museum was not very warmly received. I mean, maybe a museum meant a change, I don't know. Right now, we are all very happy and we also receive positive feedback from the visitors.

Nükhet Everi- So, when we visit the museum, is there someone to show us around? Or do you say, "Please come in and take a look around by yourself"?

Lora Baytar- One of our young art history graduates is present at the museum and he can give an explanation to whomever wishes. But some of our visitors may want to see the museum by themselves. We can offer a guided tour to our visitors if they so wish.

Nükhet Everi- Lora, can we talk briefly about the structure of the village? How many people are there in the village? What do they usually do? Are there other things women do outside the cooperative? How many people really speak Armenian? Do you speak Armenian among yourselves?

Lora Baytar- Everyone in the village speaks village Armenian with each other. I did not know the language when I came here, but now I understand everything that is spoken, but of course the children don't use it much. Villagers of my age and older only speak village Armenian. This village is a farming community and people usually cultivate citrus fruits. In general, everyone has a garden, and they dedicate the whole summer and winter to it. The women, as I mentioned, spend their time making jam, pomegranate syrup, liqueur, soap, and many other things.

There are 35 households in the village. There are around 100 people. But in the summer, I can affirm that this number multiplies by 5 or 6-fold because relatives also visit from Istanbul, France, and Germany.

Nükhet Everi- Are there any other projects in connection with the museum?

Lora Baytar- Before opening the museum, we prepared a kitchen for products made by women within the Patriarch Mesrop 2 Cultural Centre, where the museum is located. We did a SODES (social support program) project for this. With the support of an institutional affiliated with the Hatay Governorship, we provided certificates to the women here. Afterwards, we undertook and finalised this museum project. We cannot foresee the future, but there are many things we want to do at the museum. For example, we want to organise a symposium and make this a regular activity as well as to display temporary exhibitions.

Nükhet Everi- I hope the museum will receive many visitors. I wish you the very best for all your projects.

Lora Baytar- I hope you will also come to visit and to see it *in situ*.