

Platform of Anatolian Religions and Beliefs Platform / Those who are backing our cultural heritage Vanguards of Our Cultural Heritage / Part 9

Nestorian Culture in Anatolia with Yaşar Kaplan and Emin Sarı

"We can rebuild the multicultural life of the past here."

TOPICS: Research on Nestorians and Yazidis, Yazidis of TurkeyTürkiye, presentation of the documentary Sahipsiz Çığlık, Nestorian Cultural Heritage in Hakkari

Nükhet Everi- In this instalment of our interview series "Those who are carrying our cultural heritage on their backs" Vanguards of Our Cultural Heritage, we are travelling to Hakkari and Van. Yaşar Kaplan, research assistant in the Department of History of Religions at Hakkari University, journalist-writer Emin Sarı from Van, and the producer and director of the documentary "Sahipsiz Çığlık" will be our guests. First of allFirstly, Yaşar Hocam, ifmay I ask you to introduce yourself.

Yaşar Kaplan- I did my master's degree on Yazidis, and my PhD on Nestorian churches and Eastern Assyrians. My thesis on Yazidis was published as a book. I also work as a compiler. I have published works on epics, songs, folk songs, and proverbs in Hakkari. I am interested in the history of Hakkari, and I have written articles and undertaken studies on it.

Nükhet Everi- Mr. Emin, please introduce yourself.

Emin Sarı- I am originally from Hakkari, I am currently in Van. I work as a journalist. I have two published two books. I hope it will be a good work, a good start.

Nükhet Everi- Nestorians and Eastern Assyrians are not well known subjects. Yaşar Hoca did very good research. What kind of research did you do on Nestorians and Yazidis?

Yaşar Kaplan- My main field of study on the Yazidis is to takeportray a picture of today's Yazidis. In other words, what kind of a situation does the religious tradition we call Yazidism present right now? Can it harmonise with modernity? Can it preserve its tradition? Can it pass it on to be passed onto new generations? Their situation was better then. I went to Iraq, to the Kurdistan region. They had cultural centres and clergymenreligious leaders. I met with them one-on-one. October is the season of pilgrimage. At that time, Yazidis from all over the world come to Lalesh, their religious centre. I interviewed clergymenreligious leaders, and ordinary religious Yazidis who come for pilgrimage. In the Kurdistan region of Iraq, if there are around 25% per cent Yazidi children in a school, the government immediately assigns a Yazidi teacher, a religious teacher. I obtained books published by the Ministry of National Education;, I obtained works printed in the cultural centre.

But unfortunatelyTragically, a few years after the end of the study, they were subjected to an attack by ISIS attack. This was a very bad massacre. In the 21st century, it was very frightening and frightening to experience such a great horrific genocide. If we compare the Middle East to a rose garden, Yazidism is one of the most important flowers of this rose garden. We need to protect this

flower at all costs and carrypass it to new generations. We need to put our hands under the stone.assume responsibility.

Nükhet Everi- It is a closed society. I am very curious about what you have experienced, and what you have seen. How many villages are there, even if abandoned, are there any Yazidis in the region?

Yaşar Kaplan- Yazidis have always been related to the Hakkari region. They are known because of Sheikh Adi Bin Müsafir El Hakkari. What we call Hakkari corresponds to a wider geography in history. In other words, the name Hakeri is used for the mountainous area from just north of Mosul to the south of Lake Van, from Cizre to Lake Urmia. There were no Yazidi villages in the Hakkari region, which is now within the borders of TurkeyTürkiye, and there are none today. The city of Dohuk was then considered Southern Hakkari. Some nomadic Yazidi tribes from there used to come to the highlands here in summer. This was the only way Ezidis travelled back and forth. But there was no village belonging to the YaEzidis. Their main area was Southern Hakkari, in other words the current city of Duhok. Their religious centre Laleş is also located there. Other important villages are also there. During the rule of Saddam Husseinperiod, all the villages in the mountainous area in the Shengal region were evacuated. Dozens of villages were gathered in a camp. The groups targeted by ISIS attacks were actually the Yazidis gathered in these camps. Apart from this, there was a significant Yazidi population in Siirt, Mardin, the northern parts of Van, Aleppo, Marash and Damascus. Unfortunately, they had to migrate to the Caucasus during the Ottoman period and stayed in the Armenian region. They continue their existence there at the moment. Unfortunately, their number in TurkeyTürkiye has decreased a lot. Most of them migrated from abroad.

Nükhet Everi- Let's move on to Nestorians, Eastern Assyrians. It is a subject that is always overlooked, unspoken, and forgotten. What kind of work have you done on this subject?

Yaşar Kaplan- It is not that Nestorians have not been studied in TurkeyTürkiye. However, the essence of the studies conducted in TurkeyTürkiye is about the 19th and 20th century Nestorians. Sociopolitical issues such as the development of missionaries among Nestorians and their relations with their neighbours the Kurds have always been studied. What kind of a church is Nestorianism in terms of the history of religions? What are the aspects that distinguish it from other churches? There are very few studies on the history of religions. Since I am from Hakkari and I work on the history of religions at Hakkari University, I thought about what I could study. Who are we intertwined with in our region? We have Yazids, Eastern Church, Nestorian Church. But I didn't study the last period. I mean, I got tired of studying this sociopolitical situation. In these studies, everyone evaluates from their own perspective. Some justify the Ottomans, some justify the Westerners.

When and how did Christianity spread east of the Euphrates? Who became Christians? When did the Nestorian Church become an organisation? When did they come into conflict with other churches? What was their situation under Islamic rule? There were also monkish organisations and missionary activities. They brought Christianity to a wide geography as far as China and Mongolia. They contributed a lot to our culture. They have not been sufficiently researched and analysed. I went to Cambridge University in England for a year in order to try and understand them. I continued my

research there, because the majority of the sources are there. Syriac manuscripts were also transferred there in the past through the missions. Somehow they were preserved, which is a good thing.

Nükhet Everi- Mr Emin Sarı, I would like to talk a little bit about your documentary. Why did you want to make it? Where did it come to your mind? What did you go through?

Emin Sarı- We have recently finished shooting the documentary. There are stages such as editing, voice-over and so on. When I decided to make a documentary about Nestorians, or more precisely about the Assyrians of the East, I did some research to see who I could get help from. I had met Yaşar Hoca before. I made a very right choice. He was a great help to the documentary. Now I would like to thank him through you. I am making a documentary about the Eastern Assyrians, but I could not find a Nestorian to interview. It was a problem I had been thinking about from the beginning. After the news about the documentary was publicised, we met two Eastern Assyrian friends.

The geography of Hakkari is really a very virgin geography, especially in terms of archaeological studies. There are no serious archaeological excavations in Hakkari. If there is such a study, I will participate even as a labourer if necessary. My main starting point is to draw attention to the structures in Hakkari geography. There is no serious protection for them. There are two historical artefacts in Hakkari that have been restored. They are the historical Meydan Madrasah and the Kayme Palace in Şemdili Bağlar. There is a magnificent castle, it needs to be repaired, archaeological studies should be carried out on it, but they are not being done. I wanted to do a study on Nestorian buildings. The Journalists' Association of TurkeyTürkiye had a programme in cooperation with the European Union. My project was accepted. The central church of the Assyrians is located in the village of Konak/Koçanoz in Hakkari. We did all our work in historical buildings. We did not conduct any of our interviews at a desk. Our first place of work was the Koçanis church. Nestorian buildings are very simple. When you look at Armenian churches, they are very flamboyant. But the Nestorian structures, the structures of the Eastern Assyrians are a little more simple. But Koçanis Church is a little more flamboyant. There is a very serious destruction in Koçanis. Yaşar Hoca accompanied us during all these works. Now there are monasteries in Hakkari besides churches. We were able to reach this monastery after a two-hour walk. They had built a magnificent structure there, but there was a very serious destruction. How did the treasure hunters get here? We also filmed this destruction. There are talks, writings and drawings about Nestorians, but there has never been a serious study on these structures. I think the most important message we want to give is the protection of these structures. I hope that this documentary will be an occasion for this, and that there will be an effort to protect the buildings.

Nükhet Everi- Is there any other documentary work or book you want to make?

Emin Sarı- We concentrated on these three buildings, but we were also able to visit about 15 other buildings. We also filmed in these places. You will also see the documentary when it is published. Apart from these three yachts, there are actually very important yachts. Now, I have touched upon the structures and the destruction there. The most important factor is actually treasure hunting. It is something that happens all over TurkeyTürkiye, but there is also such a problem in Hakkari region.

There are many rumours, rumours, etc. that there is treasure in these structures. So people carry out excavations here. The destruction of these structures is related to the last 20 years. The people living in the Hakkari region are 99-100% Muslim, and these buildings were really well protected until 30-40 years ago. Although people were of a different religion, they respected, valued and tried to protect these structures. Now there are also churches protected by the villagers. I want to make a second documentary. We have improved our technical facilities. I want to make a study on the castles in the Hakkari region. I hope we will succeed in that.

Nükhet Everi- Yaşar Hocam, you were also involved in this documentary work. What did you do?

Yaşar Kaplan- When Emin Hoca came with such a project, I gladly accepted it because it was a subject I was already working on. Together with him, we went to the places he had determined. We presented our suggestions and so on. There, we were interested in the recognition of the church structures on the subject, how they were named in Aramaic, what were their functions, when they were established, what were their functions, what were they doing. We tried to add a colour to the event by sharing what we knew about them, and our other historian friend shared what he knew about them. As soon as you start to understand the world, you look around you. There are various structures and things that exist outside the lives of the people already living there. Curiosity arises in people. Who were the owners of these? Where are they? Why did they leave us? How did we get along when we were together? Who lived in Hakkari Castle opposite our house, what was done? One wonders. By chance, we became academics and had the opportunity to get to know, read and learn more closely. Still the whys, hows and whys do not end.

Emin Sarı- I have received positive feedback from Assyrians. They also want the negative events of the past to be mentioned. We wanted to deal with the historical artefacts they left behind rather than their history as a whole. But there was also such an expectation. Indeed, these lands have suffered a great deal. Suffering is still going on. I hope that what happened will be researched by scientific and objective institutions in the future.

A Hakkari identity is also emerging. You can see that too. It is a very beautiful thing. I mean, it can be Assyrian, Kurdish or from another faith, but Hakkarilik is emerging as a super identity. We are not trying to keep a multicultural land alive. We should try to develop this. We can re-establish the multicultural life of the past here, we can keep it alive again. In this respect, I hope the documentary will be an occasion.