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**ARMENIAN – KIZILBASH RELATIONS IN DERSİM IN THE
19th CENTURY WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF ARMENIAN
TRAVELLER ANTRANİK'S TRAVEL BOOK
ERMENİ SEYYAH ANTRANİK'İN SEYAHATNAMESİ BAĞLAMINDA 19.
YÜZYILDA DERSİM'DE ERMENİ-KIZILBAŞ İLİŞKİLERİ**

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Abstract

The region which was named as Çemişgezek in the 16th Century, Dersim in the 19th Century, and Tunceli in the 20th Century under the rule of Ottoman Empire has been a virgin land about which not many people have had much information for centuries. During the Ottoman period, an effective state organisation could not be established in the region; accordingly the region has been independent for centuries without being under the rule of any state. Mountainous structure of the region and the lack of central authority made Dersim an unsafe region for the outlanders. For this reason, the region was almost never visited by Western travellers. Due to the weak state organization in the region and lack of travellers who visit the region, gathering information about the territory had been difficult. That is why the work of Armenian Traveller Antranik who visited Dersim in the 19th Century fills the abovementioned gap as it presents fundamental information about the region. This study aims to reveal socio-cultural and religious affiliations of Armenians and Kizilbashs in Dersim within the context of Antranik's travel book. In addition, the debate of these days that is if Dersimi Kizilbashs are originally Armenian is discussed in the light of the information given by the traveller.

Keywords: Armenian, Kizilbashs, Antranik, Dersim, Ottoman

Öz

Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun yönetimi altında 16. yüzyılda Çemişgezek, 19. yüzyılda Dersim ve 20. yüzyılda da Tunceli olarak isimlendirilen bölge, yüzyıllar boyunca hakkında kimsenin çok fazla bilgi sahibi olamadığı bakir bir coğrafya olmuştur. Osmanlı döneminde bölgede ciddi bir devlet teşkilatı kurulamamış, dolayısıyla bölge yüzyıllar boyunca herhangi bir devletin yönetimine girmeden bağımsız olarak yaşamış-

tır. Bölgenin dağlık oluşu ve merkezi bir otoritenin bulunmaması Dersim'i yabancılar için güvenli olmayan bir bölge kılmıştır. Bu sebeple bölge Batılı seyyahlar tarafından neredeyse hiç ziyaret edilmemiştir. Hem devlet teşkilatının bölgede zayıf olması hem de seyyahların bölgeyi ziyaret etmemeleri bölge hakkında bilgi edinmeyi oldukça zorlaştırmıştır. Bu sebeple 19. yüzyılda Dersim'i ziyaret eden ve bölge hakkında önemli bilgiler sunan Ermeni Seyyah Antranik'in çalışması bölge ile ilgili büyük bir bilgi boşluğunu doldurmaktadır. Antranik, 1888 yılının baharında çok genç yaşta, kendisinin ifadesiyle 14 yaşında, Dersim'e bir seyahat gerçekleştirmiştir. Antranik bu yolculuğuna, günümüz idari taksimatına göre, Bingöl ilinin Kiğı ilçesinden başlayarak, "yabancı bir diyara, hakkında konuşanın çok, ama bilen ve görenin az olduğu Dersim'e gidecektik." diye nitelendirdiği Dersim'de son vermiştir. Bu çalışmada Antranik'in seyahatnamesi ekseninde Dersim'deki Ermeniler ile Kızılbaşların sosyal, kültürel ve dini münasebetleri genel hatlarıyla ortaya konulmaya çalışılmıştır. Ayrıca günümüzde sıkça tartışılan Dersimli Kızılbaşların aslen Ermeni oldukları iddiası da seyyahın verdiği bilgiler çerçevesinde ele alınarak bir fikir ortaya konulmaya çalışılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ermeniler, Kızılbaşlar, Dersim, Antranik, Osmanlı

Introduction

Armenians are among the most ancient communities of Anatolia. It is known that Armenians along with Phrygians migrated from Western Thrace in about 1200 BC, and settled around the region which is today named as Aegean Region, then separated from Phrygians and in the 7th or 6th Centuries BC settled in Van-Tuşpa region in which Urartu Kingdom was located (Ertuş, 2015: 34).

Studies on socio-cultural relations between this ancient community of Anatolia and other communities of Anatolia are rather limited. Academic studies in Turkey are mainly centred on political problems encountered with Armenians in the last quarter of the 19th Century in Ottoman Empire, deportation, and the on-going "Armenian Question". Thus, Armenian manners of life, culture, human relations, customs and traditions were neglected. Naturally, Kizilbashs who cohabited and established close socio-cultural relationship and with Armenians in Anatolia for centuries are underemphasized in academic studies.

The term Kizilbash is used to point out Turkmen communities who started to adopt Islam by the 10th Century and associate some of their previous beliefs and traditions with this new religion (Üzüm, 2002: 546). Kizilbashs, many of whom originate from Marwan-nahr, Khwarezm, Khorasan, Azerbai-

jan and Arran, migrated to Anatolia by the 11th Century and these migrations kept up to the 19th Century. After migrating to Anatolia, Kizilbashs mostly spread to the inward and eastward of the region (Üzüm, 2002: 546). There is no precise information in which period exactly Kizilbashs settled in Dersim region along with these waves of migration (Kevorkian-Paboudjian, 2013: 385). Here, it should be stated that Kizilbashism is mainly prevailed among Turkmen communities, and this caused Kizilbashism to be identified with Turkmens over time. However, Kizilbashism was also interiorized by other people with various ethnic origins as well as it is prevailed among Turkmens. Hence, even though the term Kizilbash is generally used for Turkmen communities, it is also used for Kurds who share the equal belief (Kaplan, 2015: 261). Indeed, a large number of Kizilbash Kurds live in Dersim, the region which is the subject of this study. In fact, Dersimis are named as Kurd in Ottoman sources and archives (Gül-Özdemir, 2014: 17, 203, 233). Antranik's travel book, analysed in this study, also names Dersimis other than Armenians as Kurd. Due to this reason, the word Kurd used in this study implies Kizilbashs in Dersim.

The region, which is known as Tunceli at the present time but organised under the name of Dersim in the 19th Century Ottoman "has utmost importance in the ancient history of

Asia Minor. Indeed," it seems "this mountainous islet which is surrounded with forests, inhabited with introvert people as a result the ancient territorial characteristics, has almost always been driven away the history" (Kevorkian-Paboudjian, 2013: 384) Thereby, this depiction about Dersim resumes the state of the region: "homeland of a conservative, sui generis community and the name of a virgin land" (Gül-Özdemir, 2014: 38). From this point of view, it can be stated that information about the 19th Century and earlier times of Dersim and people who lived there are considerably limited. Public records about the region in the Ottoman period are also notably limited as an effective state organisation could not be established in the aforesaid region. Primary sources of information about the mountainous and outlying Dersim are the oral literature and the information given by a limited number of travellers who visited the region. Information gathered from the oral literature consists of some fragmented stories and tales. When it comes to travel books, as Dersim was known as a danger area, it was almost never visited by the Western travellers (Kevorkian-Paboudjian, 2013: 385). In this sense, Antranik's travel book, subject to this study, has a great importance. In spite of the fact that the authors of travel books may reflect their own biases to their works, both limited availability of the archives and lack of works about Dersim region make the aforementioned travel book more precious. Moreover, when the subject of the study is social and cultural life, travel books are considered to be among the most important sources. Antranik, in his travel book, presents important information about life in Dersim in the 19th Century, tribal structure in the region and the relationships between Armenian tribes and Kizilbash tribes. Thence, Antranik's travel book fills an enormous gap with the important information it gives about the region, Dersim, and its socio-cultural structure before 1915.

There is no information on the life of Armenian traveller Antranik (Yeritsyan) whose impressions about Armenian – Kizilbash relations in Dersim will take place in this study. However, Antranik was quite young when he set out for this travel. It is known that he started this journey in 1888, or with his own words, [on] "the fourteenth spring of my life". Antranik's journey started from Kiğı town of Bingöl province and ended in Dersim about which he had stated that he would go "to Dersim, an unknown land about which many spoke but few knew and saw" (Antranik, 2012: 9).

The travel book used in this study is the Turkish translation of *Dersim: Canabarhortutyun yev Değakrutyun* (Dersim: Travel and Topography [Eng.] and Dersim: Seyahat ve Topografi [Tur.]) which was written by Antranik and published in 1900 in Tbilisi. This book was translated into Kurdish by Têmurê Xelîl under the name of *Dêrsim: Rêwîti û Erdnîgarî* and published in 2009. One year later, the travel book was published in Zazaish (Zaza language) as *Dêrsim: Raywanî û Cografya* by the translation of Roşan Lezgîn. The work was translated into Turkish by Payline Tomasyan and this version was published by Aras Publishing as *Dersim: Seyahatname*.

1. Armenian – Kizilbash Relationship in Terms of Ethnicity

Antranik, in his travel book, gives important information on the hotly-debated¹ allegations like 'Dersimi Kizilbashes are originally Armenians'. First of the assertions in question is that Kizilbashes in Dersim region are originally Armenian who became Kizilbash by converting their religion; second is that Armenians took Dersim as a shelter in 1915 deportation and continued their existence in Dersim under Kizilbash identity by converting their religion. Even though one of the recent academic studies tries to prove the opposite (Gül-Özdemir, 2014: 17, 203, 233), information given by Antranik reveals that first allegation is not actually new, it was – to

the contrary – per se spoken out by Kizilbashes of that period. Besides, according to the information given by Antranik, ethnic origins of Dersimis were also being discussed in the 19th Century.² In order to clarify the issue, these allegations dealt by Antranik will briefly be discussed in the first place, then the allegation that Dersimi Kizilbashes are originally Armenians will be analysed.

Antranik states that about 200,000 non-Muslim Kurds lived in independent tribes in Dersim region at that time and they were generally called Kizilbash. He also adds that some of them were named as ‘çerağ söndüren’ (The Extinguishers of Light [Eng.]) (Antranik, 2012: 118). The author points out that there is no concrete evidence on which race or nationality that Kizilbashes has descended from. In addition, he also reports that some insistently argue that Kizilbashes sprung from Persians. Accordingly, as it is indicated, Persians, after leaving their homelands, settles in the Dersim Mountains and led their lives isolated. Antranik states that, what the defenders of this argument cite as evidence is that Persians are occasionally named as Kizilbashes and Dersimis and also have similar beliefs and traditions with Persians. Antranik puts his own observation this way: *“Indeed, in Dersimis, faith and worshipping peculiar to ancient Persians, or to be more precise, paganism is seen. However, it should be kept in mind that, similar beliefs and habits remaining from paganism are still seen in Armenian-Christian peasant families, too.”*

After all these allegations, when it comes to the allegation that Dersimi Kizilbashes are Armenian-origin, Antranik points out that some of the Armenian Mirakian³ tribe has Kurdized as they have knowingly or unknowingly lost their native language with the influence of various events. Antranik states that aforesaid tribe comes from the Armenian Mamigonian dynasty, namely Mirakian tribe is a branch of Mamigonian dynasty (Antranik, 2012: 53). Besides, Antranik also includes views of Dersimis concerning the issue *“if not*

all, most of them have the opinion that their ancestors are Armenians. They are completely convinced at this and try to convince others that there is no peculiarity in this opinion” (Antranik, 2012: 120). Antranik had requested information from a sayyid, who was Antranik’s host in his Dersim travel, about their ancestry, and quotes as: *“We have no doubt that our ancestors are Armenians, there are several proofs. My grandfather used to tell, his great-grandfather’s uncle had been the archpriest of Havlor Surb Karapet Monastery. A few books left from him are passed down from generation to generation as sacred heritage”* (Antranik, 2012: 120). Antranik expresses that the sayyid showed some dispersed manuscripts in order to verify his words. There were some notes consisting information about their ancestry among those manuscripts and there was also a Bible (Antranik, 2012: 120-121). However hard Antranik tried to buy that Bible, the sayyid refused to sell it telling *“Sacred properties are neither sold, nor given as gift”* (Antranik, 2012: 121).

2. Religious Relations

Antranik gives important information about the common faith and worship forms among the Armenians and Kizilbashes in Dersim region. Antranik, who mentions that Kizilbashes have no distinctive daily prayers and specific house of prayer, makes this remark about the faith of Kizilbashes: *“Dersimis have a unique religion, independent of any book, which is orally passed down. However, we cannot know what name is given to this religion. Neither Christianity, nor Islam or Judaism. A blending of all; old and new religions. Apparently, they are more inclined to Judaism. Judaic religious rituals are seen on a large scale, but they believe that Ali is the only holy man sent by God. They also esteem Jesus as they esteem Ali. Because sayyids and dedes say that ‘same saint sent by Allah was seen as Jesus by Christians and Ali by us. In fact, there is not a significant difference in religion between you and us; only the names are different, Alevi and Isevi (Christian)”* (Antranik, 2012: 122). Antranik notes that when Kizilbashes wish for something from God, they make a vow to a holy

place and this holy place is usually the Havlor Surb Karapet Monastery (in Halvori/Karşilar village of Tunceli) which belongs to Armenians. Antranik also states that Dersimi Kizilbash visits this monastery with precious gifts and offerings and adds bewilderingly that Kizilbash visits the monastery as compared to Armenians. Antranik describes the monastery visits of Kizilbash thus: *“When they go to monastery for oblation, both men and women form a line 40-50 steps away from the monastery and move along like this to the church. They only approach the holy altar after kissing the sills of both inner and outer doors three-five times.”* (Antranik, 2012: 123).

Antranik, who states that Havlor Surb Karapet Monastery is a very important holy place for Dersimi Armenians and Kizilbash, also makes this remark: *“Havlor Surb Karapet Monastery is for all and all is for Havlor Surb Karapet Monastery. Both Armenian and Kurdish worship it. They come for oblation from every part of Dersim once or twice a year with big gifts and offerings.”* (Antranik, 2012: 73). Antranik points out that the monastery has great spiritual influence on Armenians and Kizilbash and that when a person wants to make somebody swear an oath, the oath would be taken on the name of Havlor Surb Karapet Monastery (Antranik, 2012: 123): *“Everybody swears on the monastery, and this oath bears more meaning than swearing on the name of God. Because they have sometimes witnessed the miracles of the monastery; how it would punish the ones who look down on it and do not believe in its power. They have seen that the monastery has made some blind, some deaf and dumb and some totally paralyzed.”* (Antranik, 2012: 74). Antranik thus tries to present the magnitude of spiritual power of monastery on the society.

Antranik highlights that Kizilbash also hold high esteem in Armenian saints. The author lays emphasis on how big the esteem is by these words: *“Faith of Kurds in our saints is more than the faith of us, the Armeni-*

ans in our saints.” (Antranik, 2012: 75). Furthermore, Antranik expresses that Dersimis hold great esteem even for the archpriest on the monastery: *“They, above and beyond, having faith in the monastery and Armenian saints, also idolize the archpriest of the monastery; because he ‘knows to read and write’, he has the power to turn all the Kurds, or at least the ones who are opposed to monastery, into ‘foolish animals’ or totally turn them ‘into stone.’ He is the man of Allah, and always speaks to Him and can do anything. Such that, when a clan leader with a 15-20 thousands army comes to Havlor monastery for oblation, after completing all the rituals, he has to kiss the hem of archpriest’s garment first and then his shoulders as if he was a saint. Moreover, he has to wait standing until the archpriest offers a seat* (Antranik, 2012: 75-76).

Apart from these, Antranik tells that Dersimis steal objects from the shrines of Armenians, take them to their homes and light candles in the face of these objects. Antranik states that Kizilbash believe that books are talismanic and mighty, and protect their owners from trouble. From this point of view, Antranik tells that they express their pride about these robberies by saying *“Armenian saints are with us. They protect us and contribute our well-being.”* (Antranik, 2012: 121).

3. Neighbourhood Relations

Antranik who also quotes his observations about the neighbourhood relations between Armenians and Kizilbash in Dersim paints a very promising picture on this subject. He states that the social ties between Mirakian tribe in the region and their Kurdish neighbours are considerably strong. He emphasizes that the relationship between Armenians and Kurds is more like fraternity than being neighbourhood relation: *“Dersimi Kurds takes a special fancy to not only neighbouring Armenians but also all Armenians, and consider them as ‘saint neighbour’ or with their own words as ‘brother’.”* (Antranik, 2012: 148). As stated by Antranik, Kurds pay visit to Armenians,

and take vows in churches and monasteries. Likewise, many Kurds in the region knew Armenian and spoke Armenian when they encounter with Armenians (Antranik, 2012: 148).

Antranik states that even though Kurds outnumber Armenians in Dersim, Armenians have spiritual influence on Kurds. He associates this to the position of Mirakians, the dominant power, in the region with their tendency to weapon, courage, wealth etc. Mirakian tribe, which features with combativeness, largely predominates in the region, and even Ottoman did not intervene in them (Antranik, 2012: 131-132). According to Antranik, even though there were frequent fights among the tribes in Dersim, Kurds did not fight with Armenians. Armenians took no side in the tribal fights; however, Armenians did not hesitate to help Kurds in their fights with external powers (Antranik, 2012: 148).

In contrast to the positive relation between Armenians and Kizilbashs in the region, the relation of these groups and Ottoman administration was vicious. Antranik describes the approach of the Ottoman administration to Armenians and Kizilbashs in the region as: "*Ottomans attitude towards Armenians and Kizilbashs is most often or always contrary to this. In Ottomans words, Kizilbashs are rafida.*" (Antranik, 2012: 148). Similarly, the Author states that Kizilbashs have also negative attitude towards Ottomans in the same way (Antranik, 2012: 148).

4. Marriage

While Dersimi Armenians and Kizilbashs are closely bound and social relations between them are positive, no matrimony was seen between the two communities. Antranik does not give detailed information about the matter. He only mentions that there is no affinity relationship between Armenians and Kizilbashs in a part of his work (Antranik, 2012: 148). When the literature is reviewed on this subject, it is seen that matrimony is an extremely important social event in Armenian culture, and marrying to someone from a

different nation or communion is unacceptable even if the other side is Christian (Ertuş, 2015: 80-84). Likewise, marriages between Dersimi Armenians and Kizilbashs are scarcely seen in Republic Period, after Ottoman time. To a question whether "*there were intermarriage between Dersimis and Armenian community in your time*", the Dersimi Armenian responds: "*No, no. Vallahi, I have never heard such a thing.*" (Kahraman, 2015: 108). However, from time to time, matrimony between Armenians and Kizilbashs was seen as a consequence of abduction. Nevertheless, it should be noted that these are very exceptional cases and women who marry with men from other nations are excluded from the society and even disinherited (Ertuş, 2015: 86-87; Kahraman, 2015: 108-72).

5. Armenian – Kizilbash Common Public Beliefs

Antranik gives important information about some of the prevalent public beliefs between Armenians and Kizilbashs in his travel book. A considerable part of the beliefs that Antranik included into his work are based on pagan beliefs and practices of ancient times, or consist of the combination of their beliefs at that time and their pagan beliefs. To mention yet a few of these public beliefs cited by Antranik will be sufficient in order to provide insight:

- Rainbow is believed to be the belt of God. Rise of the rainbow is considered as an indication that God did not forget human beings whom He created. Besides, it is believed that boys who pass under the rainbow turn into girls and girls into boys.

- Sun and moon are believed to be the doors of the sky. When one of them grows dark they believe that there is a combat between devils and angels. This fight is for an innocent, sinless soul whom devils try to take to hell while angels try to prevent this. In connection with this belief, when there is a lunar or solar eclipse, inhabitants of Dersim point their guns and rifles on moon and sun and fire in order to drive the devil away and

save the innocent soul.

Seeing a stray comet in the sky is interpreted as a portent of damnation from God and seeing a fallen star is interpreted as a sign of the death of someone. Because, according to their beliefs, everyone has a star in the sky and this star is his or her life light. Consequently, as this light goes out, one passes away.

If the horses snigger and cows and oxen low, these are interpreted as the coming of a storm the fall of hail. If these animals sniff skyward, it is a sign of rain (Antranik, 2012: 126-127).

CONCLUSION

It is a fact that scientific studies on the cultural life of the Armenians who are among the ancient nations of Anatolia are too few. Congruently, Kizilbashs who have close socio-cultural bounds with Armenians are not also included into scientific studies too much. Dersim has always been secluded both due to the absence of an effective state organisation in Dersim throughout the centuries, and mountainous and stiff structure of the region which is far from big cities. Furthermore, as determined by Antranik Dersim is a region in which 'privilege belongs to the powerful, and the power is the law'. Because of these characteristics, the region has not been in outsider travellers' field of interest. Dersim, which was seen as an unsafe region by outlanders, was almost never visited by the Western travellers. Hence, at this juncture, Antranik's travel book becomes an important reference and a main source. The work presents a lot of important information particularly on demographic and tribal structure of the region, socio-cultural and religious relations between Armenians and Kizilbashs.

Antranik gives important information on the debate of these days that is whether Kizilbashs of Dersim are originally Armenian. In the light of the information given by Antranik, it can be deduced that the allegation

was also the matter in question in that period and this allegation was also put into words even by some Kizilbashs. Owing to the information gained from Antranik, not all part of Dersim, but some part of Armenian Mirakian tribe has Kurdized over time.

With reference to the information in the travel book, relations between Armenians and Kizilbashs in Dersim were fairly intimate, there were good neighbourhood relations, and even the relationship between Armenians and Kurds was more like fraternity than being neighbourhood. Additionally, there were many common faith and worship forms among Armenians and Kizilbashs like Kizilbashs' visiting churches and monasteries which belong to Armenians and taking vows in these places where they embrace as holy.

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ENDNOTES

¹ See. <http://www.internethaber.com/tuncelinin-yuzde-90i-donme-ermenidir-527098h.htm> (06.05.2015).

² See also. Molyneux-seel, 1914: 49.

³ A study on the ethnicity of Dersim states that there is not a tribe called Mirakian in Ottoman archives (Gül-Özdemir, 2014: 178). However, having no records about the aforesaid tribe in the archives can be taken for granted since Ottoman had no good relations with the region and had almost no control of the region.

⁴ I swear to God