

THE SURETH-SPEAKING VILLAGES IN EASTERN TURKEY

Professor Bruno Poizat
University Pierre et Marie Curie

First**, I would like to apologize for giving this talk in English. As you know, Aramaic is not my native language, and none of my relatives is an Aramaic-speaker. I have learned your language by myself, and I am not sufficiently fluent to conduct a long talk.

I shall deal with some Aramaic-speaking villages located in Eastern Turkey that I have personally visited on several occasions. One of the reasons for the choice of this subject is that the very existence of these villages is barely known to the outside world. The best documented Aramaic-speaking population in Turkey is that of Tur Abdin, the hilly area at the north-east of Mardin surrounding the small city of Midyat. In Tur Abdin, the people speak a rather specific dialect of Aramaic called Turoyo and they are followers of the Jacobite Church, i.e. the West Syrian Church. The villages we shall consider are located at a short distance to the east of Tur Abdin on the other bank of the Tigris in the vicinity of the Hakkari mountains. Linguistically, these villages speak Sureth, the major and most common surviving dialect of Neo-Aramaic. Religiously, they belong to the Chaldean Church which was originally a part of the Eastern Syriac Church that split to align itself with the Roman Catholic Church.

As indicated above, the existence of some thousands of Sureth-speakers within the borders of modern Turkey is a fact hardly known to people. The general feeling is that all Sureth-speaking population of Turkey migrated to Iran and then to Iraq during the First World War. It is, therefore, pertinent to point that this migration concerned only the so-called 'Assyrian Tribes', the followers of Mar Shimmon, whose territory was situated to the east of our villages. The villagers under consideration were not followers of Mar Shimmon; moreover, they were not independent like the tribes(Ashiret). They were (Rayats) subject to the power of some Kurdish chieftains. Thanks to the protection of their landlords, they were spared from the massacres of the War and were able to maintain themselves in the area.

In fact, up to a very recent time, Eastern Turkey was the only place where it was possible to watch Sureth-speaking mountaineers leading their traditional life. This situation is rapidly changing since most of them are involved in a process of mass migration to France where they settle in the northern suburbs of Paris. It is presumed that very few of them will stay in their native homeland any longer.

Location of the Villages:

The first village, ARTVAN, is relatively isolated from the rest; it is situated some kilometers east of Si'irt, the Arabic-speaking city of the upper Euphrates. The dialect of this village was the subject of a publication by Otto Jastrow in 1971 in the Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenlandischen Gesellschaft. The other villages are located to the east of the city of Djezire on the Tigris and are very close to the intersection of borders of Turkey, Syria, and Iraq.

A first group is at south-east; they occupy different places along the road from Djezire to Zakho (in Iraq) with Hassana in the plain, Bospina on the slope, and Harbol on the other side of the pass. A second group—Deran, Djennet, and Birinji are found to the north-east along the road from Djezire to Sirnak. Then further east, on the main road to Hakkari, there are Eshshi and Baznayeh situated on the slopes above Shabona. A third one, Mehre, can be reached after ten hours walking in the high pastures overlooking Eshshi. The last village, Gaznakh, is located further east and some 15 kilometers to the west of Beytishabab.

Description of the Villages:

To give an idea of the main features of these villages, I shall select two of them, namely Harbol and Eshshi.

The design of Harbol is semi-circular; it rests on the mountain slope opening to the south at a very short distance from Iraq border. At night, the lights of Zakho are seen from the terraces of the houses. It is an extremely beautiful village with an elaborate street pattern. The houses are built from dry stones and have flat terraced roofs supported by beams of poplars which are used for sleeping during the summer. The houses are very close to each other and it is often convenient to move from house to house by the roof rather than by using the narrow lanes.

The main church was recently destroyed and replaced with a cube in concrete with nothing remarkable about it; however, a small church dedicated to Bne Shmuni has survived the tendency toward modernization. This church, which has a plain structure of dried stones, lies at the outskirts of the village and is surrounded by a cemetery in a walnut-tree orchard. It is oriented to the south and has two gates that open on a plain courtyard to the west. Incidentally, the north gate is for women and the south one is for men. Except for two plain crosses engraved on the lintel of the gates, the church has no specific decoration.

Harbol is in close proximity to a coal-mine which is intensively exploited; consequently, it is easy to reach the village since many trucks come the mine from Djezire. The road reaches the gardens of the village, but does not enter it. In fact, the village and the mine are two distinct autonomous worlds which co-exist in immediate neighborhood. The mine will finally be the cause of the destruction of the village. Actually, there are plans to relocate the village in the western regions of Turkey. It is likely that Harbol does not exist any longer.

Eshshi is built at the banks of a steep valley dominated by huge cliffs. It is not so compact as Harbol and its houses, though very similar, are more detached. At the foot of the village runs a stream which operates two mills. The stream is crossed on a single bridge, and the path goes through the orchards and the houses till finally reaches the main square where the priest's house and the church are located. The church is a massive building in dry stones and the nave is a single arch oriented to the east with light entering it only from three openings in the rear wall. Unfortunately, the structure of the wall separating the altar from the nave has been recently modified in a less impressive manner. The nave contains no chairs or benches and the parishioners sit on the ground—the women at the back and the men near the altar.

Public facilities in both villages are either non-existent or very primitive. There are no roads, no electricity, no water system—other than the stream running through the village—and no sanitary conveniences. Most of the villagers are illiterate in their mother tongue; the priest teaches the Syriac alphabet only to some male children who are trained to be deacons. Recently, the two villages have been provided with governmental schools where teachers instruct the pupils in the Turkish language.

Dress, Food and Social Life:

The traditional dress of the villagers is similar to that of the neighboring Kurds. Men wear long cylindrical trousers, a shirt with narrow sleeves and a waistcoat all made of wool tinted with natural walnut color. A broad belt shelters a variety of things: a knife, a watch, a gun, a tobacco set etc... The head is covered with one or two kerchiefs worn in the Kurdish fashion, or with a republican cap or with a combination of both. The old-fashioned shoes made of boar-skin belong to the past due to the inconsistencies in modernization.

The women have a blouse with long sleeves and a skirt above the trousers made of cotton fabrics. They generally cover their long hair with a white kerchief and wear heavy ear-rings and a gold nail in the nose.

The day begins quite early with a breakfast consisting of bread-baked either in the clay-oven(tanura) or on a reversed iron pan(doqa)-butter, honey, yogurt, white cheese etc... For lunch and supper more consistent food will be brought on a large tray with a central dish of rice, burgul, or pasta together with some boiled meat and vegetables. All the males present in the house, and occasionally some elder women, will eat first and then the women and the children take their turn. In fact, the community is marked with strong social stratification.

The women are continuously busy with various domestic chores; by contrast, the men get entangled in lengthy and, at times, endless discussions while smoking hand-made cigarettes and drinking several glasses of black tea. The villagers marry quite early- males at eighteen and females at fifteen. Celibacy is considered eccentric; therefore, even the priest of the village should marry despite the allegiance to the Roman Catholic faith. Of course, an ideal family should have the maximal number of children that a mother can bear.

Economic Activities:

The main business of the villagers is sheep and goat raising. In winter, the females are kept close to the village, but toward the end of April, when climatic conditions allow, almost the entire village will follow the flock to the high pastures where the animals mate and give birth. Each village, both Christian or Moslem, has a specific summer territory(Zozan) at

a distance of few hours from the village. They spend the summer months in Zozani sheltering under long black tents made of goat hair.

For the main part of the day, the men follow their flocks along perilous slopes. If they are too far from the camp, they spend the night in the open under the protection of their heavy felt coat. The role of the women is more substantial; they have to collect some wood from the oak tress, milk the sheep and goats twice a day, carry large chunks of snow on their backs to make some artificial ponds. These ponds are the only sources of drinking water. Moreover, the women have to handle the daily chores of cooking the food, baking the bread, and churning the milk in a goat skin to extract the butter and make the cheese and yogurt.

In August, when the snow melts, the villagers return to their villages to hold the annual big bargain. They sell all the males of the flock in Djezire. For most of them this is the only occasion in the year to have some cash. This is the time to buy requirements for survival throughout the long winter. In particular, they buy tea, sugar, rice, and wheat which is either boiled into Burgul or ground into flour in the water mills.

Before stocking up their winter provisions, they shear the sheep and dye the wool. Then the women spin it even when they are relaxing; in fact, you can hardly see a woman without her spinning top. The girls sit at the corner of a roof or on a branch of a tree to have a sufficient height for the spindle to hang down and stretch the wool thread. When this is done, the weaving is left for the males; they spend most of their winter days in front of their primitive horizontal looms.

There are only a few cultivations in the villages; they grow some fruits and vegetables and raise some poultry. Another substantial economical activity, which is quite profitable though very dangerous, is trading across the nearby border.

Emigration:

Up to the end of the sixties, these villages were naturally oriented toward the south; the border between Turkey and Iraq was purely administrative line with almost no effect on the life of local people. They still remember the Jewish peddlers of Zakho who used to tour their villages before 1952. For them, the main city was Mosul, and they used to visit their relatives as far south as Baghdad without holding and kind of legal

documents. The first villagers to go to the west was a young boy who was sent to Istanbul in the late fifties for education in a French seminary. This was for him a total breakaway since he had totally no knowledge of both French and Turkish.

The conditions have changed drastically during the last fifteen years because the borders became less permissive. A road was also constructed between Djezire and Hakkari. When the transportation system suddenly improved in Turkey, it was easier to reach Istanbul than Mosul. Moreover, schools were constructed in the villages and Turkish became a language familiar to them.

The villages were obviously overpopulated, and it was natural that an important number of their inhabitants went to seek fortune in the big cities. Some of them were not satisfied even with their life in Istanbul; consequently, they decided to go further west, and settle in France, thus constituting a community that was increasing every year. This opening to the west had a strong effect on the mind of the villagers. During the past two years, they finally took the collective decision to leave their native homeland and migrate "en masse" to France which they manage to reach legally or illegally. Only a few Christian families remain in the villages and many houses are now occupied by local Kurds.

The reason they give for this migration are ideological; they claim they want to join the Christians. They soon realized, with great disappointment, that the French make no distinction between them and other Turkish migrants. Obviously, there were other reasons both economical and political. Economically, life was getting more difficult in those mountains, while politically the Turkish military were tightening their grip on Turkish Kurdistan.

Presently, most of the villagers dwell in compact groups in lodgings in a rather depressing and unattractive industrial area apparently without regret for their native mountains. They find their way, somehow, in the French society. The young men work in confectionery business imitating the Turk immigrants. As for the elderly they are idle. In fact, most of men above forty have no social role and they depend upon their families for living; they do not even try to learn French. Strangely enough, the women seem to adapt themselves better to the ambient society and to learn the language faster although they are confined to domestic works.

It is too early to note any deep change in the social structure of their colonies in the suburbs of Paris which are an imitation of their native villages. Undoubtedly, certain changes should take place soon; changes that they did not foresee when they took the decision to move to the unknown world with no hope of returning to their homeland. It is anticipated that these people, especially the younger generations and the oncoming generations will soon learn or acquire the French language and adopt the French culture, thus endangering their very existence as an ethnic group. Being only a small minority, without deep-seated awareness of their language and culture, will facilitate their early acculturation and assimilation.

* Professor at Universite Pierre at Marie Curie

** This is the text of an address to the Assyrian Academic Society given at the University of Loyola in Chicago, on April 27, 1986. During the Spring Semester of 1985-1986, the author was a Visiting Professor at the University of Notre Dame/Indiana.