

BELIEFS ABOUT PIOUS FOUNDATIONS IN SIIRT**

SIIRT'TE VAKIF İNANIŞI

ФОНД «БЕРА» В СИРТЕ

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ÖZET

Vakıf inancı, Türkiye'nin Siirt şehrinde folklor açısından dikkate değer bir olgu olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır. Bu inanış; cami, okul, medrese gibi kurumlara vakfedilmiş arazilerde yapılan binaların kişiye uğursuzluk getireceği temeline dayanır. Yöre halkı, vakıf arazisi olduğunu bildiği arazilerden yapılan daireleri satın almaz ve kiralamazlar. Siirt'te vakıf arazisinde oturduğu için evin bereketinin kaçtığını, baş ağrısı çektiğini, huzursuz olduğunu veya korktuğunu söyleyen yüzlerce insan bulmak mümkündür. Bu inanış, Siirtli olmayan ancak uzun süre Siirt'te kalan insanları da etkisi altına alır. Yörede birçok binanın vakıf arazisinde yapıldığının söylenmesi, insanları ev ve iş yeri satın alırken/kiralarken sıkıntıya sokmaktadır. Vakıf arazisindeki bir dairede oturan kişinin kira dışında bir miktar parayı sadaka mahiyetinde dağıtması tavsiye edilir. Günümüzde Siirt halkı, yeni nesil de dâhil olmak üzere, vakıf inancının etkisi altında kalmaya devam etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Siirt, vakıf, inanış, korku, uğursuzluk.

ABSTRACT

In the region of Siirt, beliefs about pious foundations (Vakıf) are noteworthy from a folkloric perspective. Those beliefs are based on the perception that buildings for housing or commercial purposes constructed in the lands of Vakıfs in which mosques, schools and madrasahs were supposed to be built will bring bad luck to those who live in. Therefore, the locals do not purchase or rent any housing or commercial units that were built in those lands. There are many locals who claim that they are having headaches, feeling scared and uneasy and complain about the lack of blessing in their houses. Even some residents, who are not actually from Siirt but live there for a long time, are also under the influence of this belief. The locals also are having hard time and confusion when they want to purchase, rent or rent out their houses or commercial units due to that rumors circulating among the Siirtans that those houses or commercial units are built in the lands of Vakıfs. Those who live in those buildings constructed in the Vakıf lands are recommended donating some

* This paper was presented "The Folklore Society Annual General Meeting 2013 & Conference "Urban Folklore" held on 19-21 April 2013 in Cardiff/England.

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money as Sadaqah. Today, the people of Siirt including the new generation are still under the affect of the beliefs about Vakifs.

Key Words: Siirt, pious foundations, beliefs, fear, evil.

АННОТАЦИЯ

Объектом исследования является определить значимость и ценность фонда «Вера», цель которого сохранить фольклорный потенциал г. Сирита (Турция). Мечети, школы, религиозные учреждения как атрибуты фонда «Вера» как стержень будущего народа. С помощью фонда местные жители могут оформить покупку и аренду помещений и зданий. Задачей фонда является – облегчить условия приобретения дома, создать взаимовыгодные условия для обеих сторон при покупке дома. Эта вера позволяет изменить устоявшиеся взгляды людей, которые живут длительное время в г. Сирите. Также в основу деятельности фонда входит разрешать спорные вопросы при покупке или аренде зданий, домов. Фонд предлагает и рекомендует, как материально поощрить арендатора и нанимателя, для стимулирования работы. Цель фонда «Вера» - поддерживать местных жителей г. Сирита и развить свою деятельность для будущего поколения.

Ключевые слова: Сирит, фонд, вера, страх, доверие.

Introduction

“Siirt is a south-eastern city of Turkey, located on 41°57'E and 37°55'N. The province borders Şırnak and Van to the south, Batman and Bitlis to the north, Batman to the west, and Mardin and Şırnak to the south. The provincial area was decreased to 6,186 km² by a regulation enacted in 1990” (Siirt Provincial Almanac, 1998: 55).

“Siirt is believed to have taken its name from Semitic Languages. Some resources indicate that the name is borrowed from Chaldean language, meaning Keert (Kaa'rat). The name has been repeatedly changed in Islamic resources, taking the forms such as Esard, Saird, Siirt, and Siird. Assyrians, on the other hand, called it Se'erd (pronounced *Sert* in the local dialect). In the 19th century, the generally accepted names were Sert, Seerd, Sört (Sö'ört) ve Sairt, but today it has officially been accepted as Siirt” (Yurt Encyclopaedia: 6679).

“Siirt was under the reign of Sheikdom and the squirearchal system called *Ağalık* throughout the first half of the 19th century. Following the declaration of Tanzimat, Siirt became a district, and a governor was appointed thereafter. Subsequently, the Ottoman Empire enacted some administrative regulations which brought about the establishment of provinces in place of states and in this way Siirt was linked to the Diyarbakir Province as a county. Then, in 1884, the County of Siirt was linked to the Bitlis Province, and after that, on September 26, 1919, the county became an independent county as per the No.48 decree of the Administrative Board (called *Heyet-i Umumiye* in Ottoman), and finally became a province in the early years of the Turkish Republic (Siirt Provincial Almanac, 1973: 22).

Livestock breeding constitutes the major part of the economy for the rural people in Siirt; however, the people moving to urban areas are generally involved in trading activities. There is also an increasing demand for the sectors like growing pistachio and pomegranate, and beekeeping. Specifically, the honey produced in Pervari (a county of

Siirt) has a nationwide fame. The ubiquity of livestock breeding has also inspired the handcrafts; the blanket and *sajjada* (Islamic prayer cloth) made of angora wool are the quintessential symbols of Siirt.

Vakifs

“*Vakif* (literally meaning *devotion*) is the ritual or procedural act of donating one’s funds or properties for charitable purposes (Large Larousse: 12065). Moreover, this term has been expanded to refer to the foundations in charge of controlling these acts. Vakifs have adopted different names depending on the methods and procedures of donation. Also, they have always been a part of the community beginning from earliest cultures. Even the properties donated to the churches and monasteries in the west could be regarded as a variety of vakifs. “In ancient times Egyptians used to exert utmost care for the preservation of their vakifs. This can be clearly seen in their ancient covenants. Vivid examples of their ancient vakifs include the Library of Alexandria, Jerusalem pools, the Zamzam Well, shrines, roads, and bridges. Further, the Kaaba (the holy site for pilgrimage located in Mecca) was granted as a vakif to the public, by Prophet Abraham” (Yeni Hayat Encyclopaedia: 3237).

“Vakif has been an ever-present concept in the Islamic Law. According to this law, once a property has been donated with the intent of vakif, that property gets depersonalized and thus becomes the property of Allah” (Large Larousse: 12066). “The ever first vakif in Islamic History has been performed by Prophet Muhammad in Medina in the 32nd month following the Hijra. Prophet Muhammad devoted his seven date groves for the “Defence of Islam”. Besides, upon receiving the divine message ‘Thou shalt not attain the merits of eternity unless you devote your valuable properties for the sake of others’, Muslims started to bestow their possessions as proposed by the God. Clearly, this message has played a key role in the development of vakifs in Muslim communities” (Yeni Hayat Encyclopaedia: 3237).

Ottoman vakifs were administered by five distinct directorates before the founding of The Ministry of Vakifs in the 19th century:

1. The Haremeyn Directorate
2. The Vizier Directorate
3. The Shaikh ul-Islam (the chief religious official in the Ottoman Empire) Directorate
4. The Tophane Commanders Directorate
5. The İstanbul Cadis (the Islamic magistrates) Directorate

“Once the Ministry of Vakifs was inaugurated, all of these directorates but the Haremeyn Directorate were turned over to the administration of the Ministry” (Yeni Hayat Encyclopedia: 3237).

“The ever first act on vakifs (No.2762; date, June 3, 1935) used to classify the pre-Civil-Code vakifs under two headings: (I) the vakifs that are controlled by government-elect administrators (called *mülhak vakifs*) and (II) the ones controlled by the General Directorate of Vakifs (called *mazbut vakifs*). An amendment (No.903) was enacted on July 13, 1967 which not only brought about many changes but also rearranged the Act on Vakifs (No. 2762) with a new version of third section in the second chapter of the first volume” (Large Larousse: 12066). The current vakifs in Turkey are still governed by the General Directorate of Vakifs.

The Vakif Faith in Siirt

Over the last century, there have been many philanthropists in Siirt who have donated their properties to charities like mosques, madrasahs, and soup kitchens, with a view to providing collaborative aid to the needy. These properties have always been used for any kind of caterings. In the years between 1940-1945, however, the government put up the vakif lands for sale. Upon this, the wealthy families in Siirt joined together and bought these lands, in an attempt to preclude the extinction of vakif properties. This has been the primary factor that has enabled these vakifs to continue their existence. Nonetheless, once the landowners died, their inheritors did not display the same sensitivity and they sold these lands bit by bit. The lands were then used for the construction of multi-storey buildings.

The Bitlis Directorate of Vakifs issued title deeds for vakif lands to the name of some trustworthy people in Siirt; some of them accepted but some pious people rejected to get them (P1)¹. Emrullah Tren (P1), for instance, states that two lands had been issued to his name but he rejected to get them fearing the God: “My father had rejected these lands so why would I accept them?”.

Notable vakifs in Siirt include Hajji Hüseyin Vakif, Sheikh Musa Vakif, Sheikh Halef Vakif, Kırk Şehitler (meaning, *forty martyrs*) Vakif. Indeed, every mosque has its own vakif. The Hajji Hüseyin Vakif is believed to be over 370 years old and this is clearly visible in the will that supposedly belongs to Hajji Hüseyin.

A belief in Siirt holds that a property ought to be donated to vakifs if it has not been handed down to an inheritor. And even the heirs do not have any right to that property since, it is believed that, that property is the product of that person’s own endeavour and thus cannot be used by anybody else without his/her own will. As an example, all the properties left by Sheikh Ali (a deceased person from the village called Doluharman) have been turned over to vakifs and thus even his own children cannot utilize any of these properties just because he did not hand them down those properties. Consequently, his properties are now regarded as the assets of vakifs (P2).

Nedem is an official type of vakifs in which a landowner voluntarily donates a portion of his land-based income (e.g., 10%) to charities like mosques, madrasahs, soup kitchens, and caravanserais. Moreover, this donation can be in the form of cash, wood, bulgur, wheat, or bread.

The vakif lands in Siirt comprise almost 75% of the total area. Interestingly, in a street in the city centre, called Güres Street, almost all the buildings are said to belong to vakifs. On the other hand, the overwhelming existence of these lands plays a key role in the city planning as well. Another problem is that the people sticking to the vakif faith have difficulty in finding a house which has been built on non-vakif lands.

Some rumours have it that the vakif faith dates back to Prophet Suleiman. People believe that one day, Prophet Suleiman gathered all the animals and told them that he would distribute all of them their sustenance. All the animals, but the hoopoe, arrived on time. Thereupon, Prophet Suleiman rejected to give the hoopoe what it deserved. As a response, the hoopoe provided an instinctive reaction by saying, “If so, I will get a handful of soil from the vakif land and throw it onto you, and then you will verily find your trouble” (P1). What is clear from the rumour is that even a small portion of a vakif land may be enough to harm a person.

In a similar vein, another story claims that “Once upon a time, two people quarrelled with each other for some reason. One of them slandered the other. The other cursed the slanderer in response. The slanderer then asked, “How do you think you will make your curse come true?”. The curser replied, “I will only use a handful of vakif soil to destroy you”. In the meantime, a bird grabbed some soil with its paws and spread it onto the slanderer’s house and then the house became demolished immediately” (P2).

There are some tales telling about the people who have been inflicted with diseases, loss of wealth, unrest, social problems and even death just because they had been residing on a vakif land. People also believe that the person living in a vakif house sometimes loses his/her household items on no apparent reason, and even his/her lineage dies out. In addition, the vakif faith is further intensified by the beliefs that people who buy a vakif land lose their estates like houses and shops and that the ones who reside on a vakif land experience incessant headaches, their hairs are stroked by an invisible hand, they hear supernatural voices and are seized with fear, etc. It is also believed that not only the ones who reside on vakif lands but also the ones who build such houses are in trouble. Therefore, some local builders refrain from using vakif lands for construction. To note an example, recently an accident took place during a construction which was being made on a vakif land, and people attributed this accident to the common vakif faith. More specifically, one of our resource persons, Emrullah Tren, who is an official expert on real estates, clearly expresses that he never quotes a price for any vakif land due to his faith in vakif.

Much of the lands in Siirt are regarded as vakif lands. It is stated that many recent buildings along with a private hospital have been constructed on vakif lands. Living on a vakif land is believed to bring bad luck for the resident. As well, it is believed that a person who works on a vakif land may not benefit from his income in any way.

Another rumour holds that there is a person who constructed a mall on vakif lands in Siirt and has never stayed away from trouble ever since. A similar one claims that a businessman who built a factory has been inflicted with bankruptcy and the businessman who built the mall called Grossmall is in a debt crisis. The idea behind these rumours is that all these happened just because those people used the vakif land. People believe that Grossmall was erected on the land belonging to Sheikh Musa Vakif, and they argue that this land cannot be used for personal interests by any means, otherwise that person becomes prone to be inflicted with trouble.

Overall, this faith insinuates that a person who buys a vakif house will be in an obvious danger of losing his/her comfort and of being inflicted with any kind of trouble. Further, buying that house allegedly means committing a great sin and also being destined to get harmed either by one’s spouse, children, or grandchildren, in possible future.

Interestingly, this belief is highly common among Arabic-origin residents while it is relatively rare among Kurdish-origins. This notion is a determining factor in the merchandising of the vakif lands in Siirt. On the one hand there are those who have had no problem with buying such a land, and on the other, there are people have allegedly been inflicted with trouble after buying that land. This dichotomy is explained as follows: “A person who buys a vakif land will apparently be inflicted with a trouble – no matter whether he resides or works there – only if he believes in the vakif faith; however, if the person has no faith in vakif, he will have no problem at all” (P1). Additionally, if a vakif land is used for some other purposes, then the granter of that land (often times a deceased

person) is believed to visit the misuser in his/her dream, and this visit means a menacing warning for that person.

There is a family who proclaim to be a *sayyid family* (a Muslim or a family who claims to be descended from Muhammad's grandson Husain) from outside Siirt, who bought a house in Siirt not knowing that the house had been built on a vakif land. They assert that throughout their residence in that house they had been in a continuous unrest and thus had to sell the house as soon as they had learnt about the truth. The family rented a non-vakif house thereafter and has been living in it ever since. In addition, another family is said to have had the same experience, but they left the vakif house only on the second day of their residence.

People living on a vakif house are believed to experience frequent nightmares. Likewise, even occasional visitors are said to be negatively influenced by the atmosphere in a vakif house. Some of them claim that they were extremely terrified and some of them even asserted that their hairs were being stroked by an invisible hand while lying down in a vakif house.

There is also a religion-based aspect of this faith. A belief holds that even the prayers which are done in a vakif house (*e.g.*, Salat and Fasting) will not be accepted by the God. So, the people sticking to this belief unhesitatingly say: "I would never accept a vakif property even if it were given complementarily".

"Today some builders seek for a *fatwa* (a formal legal opinion or religious decree issued by an Islamic leader) to vindicate their construction activities on vakif lands. In doing so, they not only utilize the land but also present it to the vakif's use: once the construction is over, some of the flats are granted to the vakif and the rest belongs to the builder. Hüseyin Agha Vakif, for instance, is said to have shared some of its lands in this way" (P4).

On the other hand, some people believe that a family who have rented a vakif house should pay the vakif both its rent and also a fixed amount of money which would account for the income that would have been gained through the wheat that would have been harvested on the land that house is built on. This belief is thought to be a decree of Islam itself. Also, if that house has been bought, then the family is required either to grant a certain amount of money – regardless of the amount of vakif's share – to the vakif or to give alms to someone needy on a regular basis. Otherwise, the family is believed to be burdened with the risk of getting into trouble.

People who have no other option but to reside on a vakif land have another alternative to preclude possible problems: they just bake dozens of bread in a *tandoor* (a clay oven) and then deliver them to the poor. In modern times, however, people simply go to a baker's and orders, say, 100 breads by paying cash and then delivers them. Conversely, "the ones who cannot afford this may only recite *El-Fatiha* once and *Ihlas* three times (the first and last suras in the Quran) to prevent such troubles" (P2).

Another salient point about the vakifs is that each of them dictates different goods for distribution. The most common goods are gold, wheat, bread, or cash. As an example, a person living in a house belonging to Kirk Şehitler Vakif is required to deliver an enormous amount of wheat (P3). More to the point, a baker who tenants on a place of Sheikh Halef Vakif is known to deliver about 400 or 500 rolls of bread to the needy in the name of the vakif every Friday.

Conclusion

The vakif faith, which refers to granting one's funds or properties for public use, has led to a number of diverse beliefs in the Siirt Province. Due to changing socioeconomic conditions, the once-vakif lands have been used as construction sites and also the resultant buildings and offices have either been sold or rent out. On this issue, the vakif faith emphasises that vakif lands can by no means be used for such purposes, nor they can be used for construction, merchandise, purchase, renting or renting out; otherwise, the doer will be inflicted with trouble, diseases, or unrest.

A great many people in Siirt have deep faith in this concept. Since it plays a determining role in the buying and selling procedures of houses and offices, the vakif faith is a major problem in Siirt, where more than half of the area is believed to be vakif land.

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Resource Persons

P1: Emrullah Tren, (Haci Gido), born in 1933, retired expert on real estates, Municipality Board Member, Siirt (centre)

P2: Ferah Şiker, born in 1979, undergraduate student, Siirt (centre) P3: Gamze Başar, born in 1994, undergraduate student, Siirt (centre)

P4: Abdülhakim Kayra, born in 1990, undergraduate student, Siirt (Kurtalan county)