

THE UNCLEHOOD TRADITION IN THE NUSAYRİYE AS INTRODUCTORY
RITUAL TO RELIGION¹

DİNE GİRİŞ RİTÜELİ OLARAK NUSAYRİLERDE AMCALIK GELENEĞİ

ТРАДИЦИИ “КРЁСТНЫХ ОТЦОВ”- РЕЛИГИОЗНЫЙ РИТУАЛ
НУСАЙРИТОВ

Hüseyin TÜRK*

ABSTRACT

Nusayries live in Lebanon, Syria as well as in Southern provinces in Turkey including Adana, Mersin and particularly Hatay. Among several religious and ethnic groups living in Turkey are Nusayries who adhere to a particular religious sect based on the principle of secrecy. The most distinguishing features of Nusayriye are the deification of the Caliph Ali, the strength of Khezr and the shrine belief, reincarnation, the influence of Christianity and “the Unclehood tradition”. The Unclehood tradition emerges not only as a means of enculturation but also as an ritual of puberty, whereby teenage boys are given by “ the Uncles” the religious knowledge on Nusayriye and the forms of social behaviours. The Uncle is determined by “the boy’s”. The Unclehood tradition is not only a form of conjectural relationships but also an educational process in which the boy acquires the cultural identity of Nusayriye.

Keywords: Hatay, Alewism, Nusayriye, Unclehood Tradition, Enculturation.

АННОТАЦИЯ

Нусайриты проживают на южных провинциях Турции, в районах Аданы, Мерсин и в основном, в Хатайском крае. За рубежом Турции – в Ливане и Сирии. Общество Хатайские Нусайритов, по сравнению с другими этническими группами в Турции, более закрытое и засекреченное. Основные особенности Нусайритов: обожествление пророка Али, вера в Хызыр (мус. имя Ильи пророка) и гробницу, переселение, интерпретация и мольба, оказание под влиянием христианских торжеств и церемоний, традиции “крёстных отцов”. Последнее не является только средством энкультурации. В тоже время, она помогает мальчикам Нусайрийтам выучить нывыки поведения в социальной среде и элементы Нусайрийства. Его можно принимать, как ритуал для учения поведению мальчиков при вступлении в половую и религиозную зрелость. Оценить, как пример сознательного приручения. Церемонии по вступлении в религию/путь значительны с точки зрения непрерывности религии, ценностей и разных функциональных элементов, связывающих само общество. Традиция “крёстных отцов”, как виртуальное родство, в тоже время является процессом обучения культуры для мальчиков Нусайрийтов. В данной статье, традиции “крёстных отцов” исследованы нерелигиозным научным подходом т.н. “field work”.

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* Prof. Dr., Ardahan Üniversitesi, İBEF, huseyinturk@ardahan.edu.tr

Ключевые слова: Хатай, алевизм, нусайрийство, традиции “крестных отцов”, церемонии по вступлении в религию/путь.

ÖZ

Nusayriler Lübnan, Suriye ve Türkiye'nin güneyinde Adana, Mersin ve özellikle de Hatay'da yaşamaktadır. Hatay'da yaşayan Nusayriler, Türkiye'de yaşayan diğer etnik gruplara göre, daha kapalı ve daha gizli bir cemaat örgütlenmesine sahiptirler. Nusayriliğin en belirgin özellikleri; Hz. Ali'nin tanrılaştırılması, Hızır inancı ve türbe inancının güçlülüğü, tenasüh, tevil ve takiyye, Hıristiyan bayram ve törenlerinden etkilenme ve amcalık geleneği Nusayriliğin en belirgin özellikleri olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır. Amcalık geleneği, sadece bir enkültürasyon aracı değil, aynı zamanda, Nusayri erkek çocuklarına sosyal davranış biçimleri ve Nusayriliğin dini bilgilerini de öğretildiği, bir ergenliğe geçiş ve dine giriş ritüeli olarak da görülebilir. Dine/yola giriş ritüeli, aynı zamanda bilinçli bir kültürlenme örneği olarak da değerlendirilebilir. Dine/yola giriş törenleri, bir topluluğu birbirine bağlayan toplumsal değer ve fonksiyonlarının yanı sıra, inancın sürekliliğinin sağlanması bakımından da oldukça önemlidir. Bir sanal akrabalık biçimi olan amcalık geleneği, aynı zamanda erkek çocuğa Nusayri kültürel kimliğinin kazandırıldığı bir eğitim sürecidir. Bu çalışmada amcalık geleneği din dışı bilimsel bir yaklaşımla alan araştırması “field work” tekniğiyle incelenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Hatay, Alevilik, Nusayrilik, Amcalık geleneği, Dine/yola giriş ritüeli.

1. Introduction

The unclehood tradition emerges not only as a means of enculturation but also as an ritual of puberty, whereby teenage boys are given by the “uncles” the religious knowledge on Nusayriye and the forms of social behaviours. The uncle is determined by the boy's parents and the boy, during this period, stays at the uncle's home until he acquires that particular knowledge. The boys educated to be Nusayri is swear not to reveal this religious teachings which are acknowledged to be strictly secret. Thus unclehood appears to be one of the fundamentals of Nusayriye based on the principle of secrecy. The boy here adopts his teacher as “the uncle” and the uncle's children as his siblings. Hence the unclehood tradition is not only a form of conjectural relationships but also an educational process in which the boy acquires the cultural identity of Nusayriye.

Nusayries live in Lebanon, Syria as well as in Southern provinces in Turkey including Adana, Mersin and particularly Hatay (Ollsson, 1996:216). Hatay, a southern province in Turkey, has been among several regions where groups of different identities have been living for ages. It has been ascertained through findings from several excavation works held in the region in different times that a number of different cultures existed in Hatay throughout history from Palaeolithic period. Groups from different ethnic roots and religious still live in Hatay. One of the several ethnic and religious groups living in Hatay is also Nusayries. When compared to other Nusayries, the ones living in Hatay have formed a more closed and more secret community. Nusayriye which has particular features is a sect based on the teachings of the Batinites and as well as Alawism. Among prominent features of Nusayriye are the deification of Saint Ali, the Caliph, the strength of Khezr and the shrine belief, reincarnation, tev'il² and takiyye³ influence by Christianity and “the Unclehood Tradition” (Türk 2001). In this paper the unclehood tradition is given with

“field work” approach rather than a religious one. Yet the subject under research being much too immediate to the secrets of Nusayriye sect not to be revealed in addition to the closed nature of the community based on the principle secrecy, the participants interviewed were reluctant to supply any information initially; however, this handicap was coped with upon explanations on the scope of the research and assurance of confidential identity.

2. The Origin of the Unclehood Tradition

Following the separation of Muslims into two branches as the Sunni and the Alawi groups after the Kerbela event, the Alawi concealed their identities and their religious belief and developed the “Batinite” approach. The batinite claims that certain verses in the Koran have some secret meanings and that they could only be understood properly when interpreted rather differently from they are (Hançerlioğlu, 1994: 36).

To Nusayriye, some İslamic Instruction have stayed undiscovered due to their intrinsic and mystic nature. Prophet Mohammed himself also adopted secrecy and mysticism and revealed only general convictions. Some verses in the Koran have secret meanings different from their evident meanings in Sunni approach. Mystic practice in Alawi teachings emanate from the maturity of Islam as revelations of secrets could harm the essence of Islam (see Et Tavi, 2000: 63,104,147).

Discredited by the Sunni group, the Nusairies have maintained a sect based on the Batinites approach and secret convictions which in turn have caused this sect to form a closed system of belief. Confidence and secrecy form a determining factor in unity of the disciples. The unclehood tradition plays a fundamental part in building up a way of existence of Nusairies based on secrecy against severe oppression caused by its closed nature. This unclehood tradition which ensured the transfer of customs and belief has enabled the Nusayries to furnish their confided male teenagers with their secret teachings on condition of confidence. Thus the prominent condition for being a distinguished and proficient Nusayri is the forbearance in keeping the secret.

3. The Practice of the Unclehood Tradition: The Collective worship Ritual

The tradition, regarded to be introductory ritual to religion (Olsson, 1999: 231), can also be considered as an example of conscious and planned enculturation. Enculturation can be defined as an acquisition of proficiency of oneself in his culture as a youngster or adult including a number of conscious and / or unconscious conditioning acquired throughout the training period (Güvenç, 1984: 131).

Teachings given to the individual through enculturation period in early age are likely to form deep and indelible effects on the further stages of the youngster’s life. These teachings as well as the practice given during introductory rituals, despite having a determining function in social relations in the community, doesn’t mean much for the children. On the other hand they influence the future lives of them deeply due to the importance and meaning given by the family and the community (Hökelekli, 1998).The teenager will go in a new position in the community after these rituals. Henceforth he will be considered as an adult Nusayri member who could even take part in other religious rituals. In this connection, the tradition can be compared to rituals of puberty practised in most primitive communities (see Kottak, 2001: 469-470). The rituals of puberty held for both sexes can be defined as “the ceremonies practised for training the adolescent in religious as well as worldly knowledge in order to prepare them for the community”(Örnek, 1971: 75-76).

During this process the adolescent is taken somewhere out of sight where he or she is given the necessary knowledge by the instructors or the old men and goes under certain

painful rituals. Having gone through these procedures, the adolescent is accepted into the community as an adult.

The unclehood practise is particular to the Nusayries, it is maintained with the intention of transferring to the next generations the secret religious knowledge and social behaviours pertaining to the Nusayries. This practise is restricted to 10-14 year old boys as a compulsory training after primary school age. Women are entirely excluded from this tradition, nor are they to come near the location of rituals. They are only to cook for the feast. Should the women happen to be much too near to the ritual room, they are required to plug their ears.

In the unclehood tradition both the candidate and the uncle are supposed to bear certain qualities. Candidate, the boy, have to be honesty and maturity enough to keep a secret. He is unfailingly to have been born to a Nusayri couple. Any boys having committed a shameful crime, or rather slow learners and/or indiscreet ones aren't given this training. The man chosen as the uncle is to be one popular in the community, virtuous, believer and good at praying. However he is not to be next of kin to the boy. This choice once used to be restricted to the Sheikhs respected in the community; however, today any respected man with an adequate religious wisdom could be nominated. While the nomination once used to be done by the father of the boy, the boy today may choose the one whose home he prefers for convenience. The uncle, so called "gammu sala" in Arabic, is at least as precious and important as the real father. As for the uncle's children, they are regarded as close as his true siblings, which in turn makes intermarriages inadmissible. Trainees of an uncle are regarded to be brothers in religion. The unclehood tradition can be seen as a conjectural relationship. The unclehood can be likened to the tradition of the brotherhood to religion (so called "müshahiplik" in Turkish) valid in Anatolian Alawism and collective worship (so called "namaz" in Turkish) for unclehood can be also likened to collective worship (so called "cem" in Turkish) for this brotherhood⁴.

Unclehood tradition has gone under certain changes. In fact until recently the collective worship held before the boy left for the uncle's home used to be a three-stage activity in different times whereupon the boy was accepted to the uncle's home. Today a one-stage collective worship to be held is common alongside the old practice. In fact the whole ritual is now rendered in three-stages in which the dates of the collective worship seem to be determined according to the evolutionary phases of the embryo in the mother's womb. The reason for the three-stages practice in unclehood tradition is to ensure the confidentiality of the secret knowledge. The candidate is continually under surveillance during these three worshipping events held in different times. Thus the boy is watched by the uncle and witnesses for his loyalty to his promise to keep the secret. On the other hand, according to the findings obtained in our observations, it has been found that profit-based relations play a major role in holding the ceremony in three-stages on account of the feasts repeated in each stage as well as the charity given to the Sheikh, their assistants (Necip and Nakip) and the uncle.

3.1. The First Stage of Ritual

According to the three-stage practice soon after the offer is made to the person designated to be the uncle, a consultation (meşvere), the first step of the practice is held. At this stage it is decided whether or not the boy is suitable for unclehood training. Therefore, it could be considered to be the stage in which the boy is given first training and tested. Following the sacrificial ceremony the preparations for the feast is completed. The animal to be sacrificed is not to be female. In the preparations for the feast, women are in charge.

The women in charge have to be married, clean, not menstruated, not widowed, and to have completed forty days after childbirth. Later on, for collective worship men gather in the largest room which is specially made for collective worship (the namaz). During the collective worship, some of the sixteen prayers, found in the book titled “Kitab-ul Mecmu” written by Kasım et-Teberani, are made. The ritual is attended by Sheikh, his assistant (Necip and Nakip), the boy’s family, the uncle, the elderly men and the other guests invited. Ones who are not Nusayri aren’t allowed to come into the room. Here, the Sheikh seats himself in the middle and their assistants at both sides.

The ceremony begins after the Fatiha, a prayer in Koran, and some of the sixteen prayers are read. Meanwhile, incense (bahur) is burned while reading the incense prayer. It is believed that burning of incense gives the ceremony a mystical atmosphere. After the Sheikh takes a sip of grape juice from a glass (nakfi), the glass is passed round among the participants who take a sip from it. During the ceremony, Fatiha is the most read prayer. While the İlişara prayer is read, the Sheikh salutes the congregation, putting his hand on the left side of his

chest, the congregation also salutes one another and the Sheikh in the same way. While the İsselem prayer is read, the congregation salutes one another, turning their heads on the both sides. Following the collective worship the boy is summoned to the room and made to stand beside his uncle. He kisses the hands of the elderly men attending to the ceremony. Then the uncle and the candidate kiss the Sheikh’s hand by turn. The uncle and the young candidate sit opposite the Sheikh twisting their legs in the knee in sitting posture. When the Sheikh asks the candidate why he has come, he tells him that he has come in order to learn the secret and that he is mature enough to keep the secret. The Sheikh warns the candidate in advance against the possible results of revealing the secret and wants him to swear not to tell the secret. Believing the candidate to be loyal to his promise, the Sheikh gives the boy some advice with reference to being respectful to his uncle, his family and elderly men and wants him to swear to follow his advice. After the candidate swear, the Sheikh makes the candidate take a sip of the grape juice. Meanwhile the Sheikh reads a particular prayer. Then the candidate leaves the room, kissing the hands of the sheikh, the uncle and the elderly men at the ceremony. The ones attending the ritual witness this event as well. Thus, the first stage of the ritual is completed. Later on, the congregation leaves the worship room to eat Hırsi, the special dish of the religious rituals of the Nusayries, or a dish of meaty rice and the feast stage of the ritual is started. First, the men leaving the room, then, women and children have the meal.

3.2. The second Stage of the Ritual

Possession (temlik) or possession of the fourty (temlikil erbiğın), which is the second stage of the unclehood tradition is performed forty days after the first ritual. At this stage, the congregation gathers and the ritual of the first stage is repeated. The boy in mean time has been continually under surveillance of the uncle and the witnesses, his loyalty to his promises have been tested and he has been credited. The boy’s getting acceptance for the second stage is the sign of his being credited. At this stage as well, after the sacrificial ceremony and collective worship of the congregation, the candidate waiting outside is summoned to the room with the order of the Sheikh. The candidate boy kissing the elderly men’s and Sheikh’s hands seats himself beside his uncle opposite the Sheikh who will tell him about his successful performance hitherto. Next the boy is taught the three concept Ayn, Mim, Sin (AMS) which is considered to be the fundamental principle to conceive and to comprehend the Nusayriye. The Ayn here stands for “meanings” and denotes the Caliph

Ali, while Mim stands for “the name” denoting Prophet Muhammad. As to Sin stands for the word “gate” also called “bab” and denotes Selman-ı Farisi. These three conceptions existing in most of the prayers have a significance as they are the cornerstones the Nusairies belief. In this stage the Sheikh explains the candidate why he isn’t to reveal the secrets. The candidate is also swear to learn prayers (namaz) properly, to be respectful to his parents, his family, the old ones and his uncle, to avoid any adultery and theft, and not to reveal what he has been taught in any case, not to break any of his promises and not to eat meat of any female animal. On completion of the oath ceremony the Sheikh asks the candidate to take a sip of from a glass of grape juice and then the candidate kissing hands of the Sheikh and the other olds in the ceremony leaves the room. Having been accepted to the second stage and entrusted with the secrets hitherto, the candidate is acknowledged to have joined the Nusairies. At the end of the ritual the congregation leaves the collective worship to eat the dishes cooked with meat of the sacrificed animals.

3.3. The Ultimate Stage of The Ritual

The third and the last stage of the ritual namely the “rising” (tuluğ) is held nine months after the first stage. Meanwhile the uncle and the witnesses have observed to see whether the boy is capable of receiving such training or not. The boy is made know that his behaviours are being observed. During the ritual the boy is asked several questions about the knowledge given to him in the first two stages. Thus this stage is more like an exam which the boys usually succeed in. Following the ritual the Sheikh tells the candidate to leave for the uncle’s home to acquire the whole knowledge of the religion. In this stage a reserve uncle (amnu dehel) is also assigned in addition to the first uncle (amnu seyyid). Thus the training process is guaranteed against any interruption by the first uncle. The reserve uncle alongside the first uncle and the boy now stand opposite the Sheikh who will assign twelve men to witness that the candidate shall learn and keep confidential the religion. These twelve witness together with the first uncle and the reserve one encircle the boy. With their hands on the Koran put on the boys head, they read loudly some of certain 16 prayer. Meanwhile circulating a glass of grape juice, they each take a sip from the glass. Then holding their hands crosswise, they kiss each other’s hand. Then putting his hand on the Koran, the candidate is sworn forty times on the confidentiality of the secrets he has been given so far. After the swearing, the candidate and the uncle takes a sip from the glass of grape juice together with. In the end the candidate, having kissed the hands of the Sheikh, the uncle and the elderly men, leaves the ceremony.

At the end of the ritual the candidate is seen off to the uncle’s home, where he will stay until the completion of his training. Meanwhile he isn’t to see his family. However, in such cases as the boredom of the boy or his longing for his family the latter is allowed to call on him. On such occasions the uncle is presented various gifts. As long as the boy stay in the uncle’s home he doesn’t leave his room, and studies at there. The boy in this period is expected to learn how to perform an ablution before each prayer and collective worship (the namaz). Furthermore he is taught who the fourteen innocents and five orphans are and made to memorise sixteen prayers. In addition to that religious task, he is instructed on certain moral codes and social behaviours. The boy is expected to behave like an adult Nusayri. Duration of this training normally doesn’t exceed forty days; however, this period ultimately depends on the learning capacity of the boy. According to the learning capacity of the boy, prayers can be taught as short or longer. The boy is not welcomed to play out or meet visitors throughout his training period. On completion of the training period, the boy’s

family present various food and sweets to the uncle as gift and the boy returns his home as a competent Nusayri.

The boy presents to the uncle several gifts (gaydi) on religious days. The uncle is an important person just as his father for the boy throughout his life. On the other hand, The uncle is to be helpful and to support the boy on particular occasion and his hard days. Furthermore, there is an affinity and solidarity between the two families. In this connection the unclehood tradition can be compared to the baptism tradition in Christianity⁵.

Conclusion

The unclehood tradition appears to be one of the fundamentals of Nusayriye. Because unclehood tradition is not only a form of conjectural relationships but also a process of planned enculturation in which the boy acquires the cultural identity of Nusayriye.

It is an undeniable fact that the Nusayries have gone under oppression and been looked down since the beginning. Oppression led them to do their worship secretly. It resulted in their being a closed community and they have preferred to be organised in all secrecy. Moreover, their belief that the Koran has a batinite way of interpretation and that certain knowledge should be kept secret has caused this knowledge to be transferred through generations in secret. Two principle characteristics of the Nusayries the “Tev’il” and “Takiyye” are respectively related to secret knowledge itself and confidentiality of the same. As to the unclehood tradition, it is a procedure of the transfer to the Nusayri young generations while being kept secret from “others”. The unclehood tradition has a determining function in their survival as a closed community even in this age. However, in parallel with the relief and a lessening of the oppression brought by the establishment of the Republic, some changes and disintegrates in this tradition have also affected the closed, secretive community of the Nusayries.

Today, the structure of rigid and closed community to the Nusayries have undergone the disintegration through various changes originating from several economic and social factors such as the nomination of the uncle by the candidate, seeing the boy off to the uncle’s home ignoring the collective prayers (namaz), decline in the sacrificial custom, shortening the training period, participation of the young generation to this tradition more and more reluctantly and nomination as the uncle of persons other than Sheikhs.

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