

## Inheritance, Condolence and Funeral Procession in Nestorian Society in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

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### **Abstract**

*Funeral procession began shortly after death; the corpse was washed and buried in Nestorian society in the 19th century. Different genders and people of different social classes were treated differently during burial procession. Accordingly, when a clergyman died, his dead body was washed without his clothes being taken off. Dead bodies of women were buried in graves which were dug more deeply than those of men. When children under the age of six months died, they were buried by their mothers. When they died above the age of six, their corpses were buried by priest and others along with him. Visits of condolence started shortly after burial and finished when men shaved and women washed their hair at the end of the ninth day. As for inheritance share, sons were entitled to get more inheritance than daughters were.*

**Keywords:** Nestorian, Funeral, Condolence, Inheritance

### **1.Introduction**

While considering both History of religions in general and History of Christianity in particular, it is seen that Nestorianism represents an unusual sample of an authentic view that turned into a sect. Its establishment as a sect and its historical experiences have become an interesting research subject as a different interpretation of Christianity. There has been an increase on the number of studies related to the issue in Turkey. This should be noted as an important development because it eliminates incompleteness of studies made about the minorities who lived hundreds of years in this region. This study deals with funeral, burial and inheritance procession among Nestori community who lived on the border regions of Ottoman-Iranian States in the 19th century. But the fact that there is shortage of written resources related to the burial issue and that the present resources are not directly connected to the issue cause some questions remain unanswered.

### **2. Nestori name and a short look into their History until 19th century**

Nestori is the name given to Christians who settled down in Anatolia and northern Iran. This name was given to them since they believed and supported Constantinople's Patrick Nestor's views during the controversial religious discussions started with Ephesus Council in 431. Nestorianism, which came into existence as a sect in the first quarter of the fifth century, caused the greatest shock in the Christian world, followed by doctrines of Arius. Because after discussions of İznik Council in 325 and Constantinople Council in 381 in which the doctrines of Arius were rejected, the trinity belief was grounded and the deity of Jesus Christ was accepted officially, the discussions were inevitably focused on personality of Virgin Mary. The phrase *Theotokos* (Mother of God) was used for Mary to glorify her during discussions. A monk named Anastasius, who was a friend of Constantinople Bishop Nastoryus, alleged that that view was sacrilege during a sermon. And he recommended that the phrase *Hristokos* (*Mother of Christ*) be used. Meanwhile Nastoryus supported his view. This situation caused a new discussion that shook Christian Church and Roman Empire. Nastoryus explained his view that would later be called as *diofizit* in those remarks: "Christ has two features and two essences. Mary gave birth to a pure human who had no links with deity. After Christ was baptized at the age of 30, God's revelations were sent down to him. For this reason Mary cannot be called Theotokos, she is not mother of God. She is mother of Christ only."

Ephesus Council was held again upon the request of the emperor in 431-449. In these councils, it was agreed that Christ had the same essence of God and he was associated with God. Thus, Nastoryus' views were rejected and the view that Mary was *Thetokos* was officially accepted. However, this development paved the way for the first big separation in Antakya Church, which was kept under the control of Suryanis. Nestor supporters, who were discharged during discussions started in Church, continued their activities in Urfa. Then after they were banished into Iran by Emperor Zenon, they carried on their activities here. Contentions between Eastern Church and Western Church, struggle for hegemony were important factors in these pressures. And they wanted to dissolve Nasturi Church, giving *diofizit* view as an excuse.

However, after Babay II.who was appointed as patriarch in 498 and whose patriarchate was approved by Iranian Emperor, the new sect which would later be called Nestorianism started to complete itself as an establishment. Thus Antakya Suryani Church was divided into two: Suryani Kadim/Yakubi Church which represented *monofizit* view and Eastern Assyria/Nasturi Church which represented *diofizit* view. Even though, they were exposed to pressures in Iran, for they built their own independent churches (Nestori Church [Eastern/Assyria Church]) They made important progress on behalf of Christianity, especially in Asia and Arabia regions by building strong abbeys. <sup>i</sup> After Arabs kept Mesopotamia under their own rule, those who came to power showed respect for Nestorianism and clergymen. Caliphs were tolerant of Christians. The bishop of Nestorians Adiabene states that Muslims are not as unfair as it is thought, that they are not indifferent to Christians, that they show respect for the clergy, and that they protect their churches.<sup>ii</sup> In this era when Emevis kept Mesopotamia under their rule, Nestorians were appointed as civil servants to important government agencies. For example, Saint Jean Damascene's father Isnasyus/Sergius was the most important administrator held responsible for financial affairs in the time of Abdulmelik. <sup>iii</sup> During this period, Nestorians presented ancient Greek works to the service of Arabs by translating them. Thus, they prevented them from being lost <sup>iv</sup>. Huneyn bin Ishak was one of the Nestorians who was in the forefront of the translation effort. <sup>v</sup>

Nestorians, who benefited from freedom provided by Arabs, started missionary activities in Central Asia and Turkistan. Abraham Yohannan states '*The clergymen who did not like working completely freely during the reign of Arab Caliphs, did better jobs among pagans in the unreclaimed regions of the east.*' <sup>vi</sup> Nestorians who benefited from freedom made great success in missionary activities in the 7th century in Turkistan, they found lots of followers, especially in Semerkant, Buhara, Virkent, Migri and Talas. Also they built a metropolitan in Kaşkar. <sup>vii</sup> Nestorian missionaries conveyed messages of Christianity among Tatars, Kerait, Ongur and Uygur tribes. And they played important role in converting into Christianity Mongol-Tatar tribe who lived south of China. After converting into Christianity, the leader of this tribe started to call himself Prester John. This man was continuously remembered in subsequent years as an important proof for missionary activities in Central Asia. <sup>viii</sup> Nestorians reached not only Central Asia but also they went to China and India to help Christianity be spread and they became prominent representatives. <sup>ix</sup> For this reason, it is known that churches were built in China on behalf of Christian clergymen. <sup>x</sup>

Nestorians welcomed the invasion of Islamic countries by Mongols who appeared on the stage of History in the 13th century. They took Mongolians' side in the war against Muslims under the hegemony of whom they lived hundreds of years. Since Hülagu's wife converted into Christianity and protected Christians, Mongols were very tolerant of Nestorians and treated them kindly. <sup>xi</sup> In this era Ilhans/Mongols were assigned as envoys in relations with Europeans. <sup>xii</sup> Nestorians built lots of churches and schools by getting the permission and help of one of the Mongolian rulers Abaka Han. <sup>xiii</sup> Relationships between Nestorians and Mongols had already started during their missionary activities in Central Asia before Mongols appeared on the stage of history. Lots of Mongolian princess converted into Christianity thanks to Nestorians' missionary activities. In spite of their missionary activities and efforts for persuasions, Mongolian emperors never accepted Christianity and did not completely embrace Nestorian belief. <sup>xiv</sup> For this reason Mongols did not hesitate to put pressure and treat Nestorians with brutality even if they once took their side in the war against Muslims. <sup>xv</sup>

Nestorians who narrowly escaped from Mongol's recent pressure and violent policies were a bit harmed by the invasion and destruction of the Timur army in 1398. In subsequent to Timur's reign, in order to continue their existence, they resided in the high mountainous areas of Hakkari under the hegemony of the Ottoman Empire. In addition to this development, another group of Nestorians stayed in Urmiye within the boundaries of Iran. <sup>xvi</sup> They lived in the territories of the Ottoman and Iranian States. Nestorians led a life in two different ways. Those who lived with their moslem neighbours in Hakkari-Van, Amediye, Behdinan regions which were parts of the Ottoman territory led a nomadic life. Those who lived on the productive agricultural lands in northern Iran led a settled life. <sup>xvii</sup>

### 3. Funeral Procession

Nestorians built their churches facing east because they looked east when they prayed. For this reason, when a Nestorian died, his/her face was turned east. In accordance with the same belief, patients who were at death's door were turned east and efforts were spent so that they could stay in that position. <sup>xviii</sup> Funeral and burial procession started shortly after death. <sup>xix</sup> According to Arthur John MacLean and William Henry Browne, the reason why burial procession started earlier than that of western Christians was the hot climate of countries in which they lived. But the duration of funeral procession varied, depending on it belonged to clergymen, women, men and children. The duration of funeral procession of clergymen took the longest time. <sup>xx</sup>

Someone or a close relative of a dead person stood beside him/her, brought his/her arms together on the chest, closed eyes and stretched out legs. When a dead man's eyes were open, family members decided to call on his next of kin working in other countries to attend the funeral so that the late person did not get worried about the things he had left.<sup>xxi</sup> Meanwhile they immediately tried to make preparations for coffin and shroud.<sup>xxii</sup>

In Urmiye, sometimes coffins which were made before were purchased, and sometimes they were ordered to be made. In the mountainous areas of Hakkari, poor Nestorians could not buy coffins, so they put stone plaques as coffins in graves.<sup>xxiii</sup> When a person who died was a baby who was not baptized before, he/she was baptized immediately before burial, because Nestorians believed that without being baptized that person's soul deserved to be in hell, rather than Paradise.<sup>xxiv</sup> In accordance with this belief, those who were born out of wedlock were baptized before burial like those were born in lawful wedlock.<sup>xxv</sup> When children died under the age of 7 or 10 days, they were buried by women without holding a ceremony or baptizing. But when a child of 6 months died, he/she was regarded as a family member and buried by priest and others along with him.<sup>xxvi</sup> However, the duration of funeral procession of children took less time than that of adults.<sup>xxvii</sup>

At the home of the owner of funeral, after the dead's face was turned east, they incensed in an open clay pot right by the tiptoe of the dead person. A priest and next of kin of the late person were called on to visit home. After praying at home, the priest put a wooden cross into a bucket filled with water and assigned someone the duty of heating the water into which he put the cross. When a man died, his dead body was washed by old people or by those who were held responsible for ringing the bell of church. When a woman died, her dead body was washed by an old woman.<sup>xxviii</sup> The person held responsible for washing the corpse started washing on the right side of the body by dipping his/her forefinger into the water blessed with the cross. During this process, the one who was washing the corpse also fulfilled the responsibility of taking the cross out of the water. After taking the cross out of the water, first the right side of the body then the left side of the body was washed with soapy water. Then, an amount of water was left in the tub, the rest was poured out. After that the blessed cross was put into the tub, a candle was placed near the tub and it was covered with a lid. It was necessary for the candle to burn for three days. After the process of washing the dead body was complete, a pair of underpants and a shirt was sewed from tent canvas. They were used as a shroud to cover the dead body. His/her arms, legs and back were covered with the same piece of cloth. While covering the body with the shroud, the dead person's face was left open temporarily. The dead person was put into a coffin if the owners of the funeral were rich. If poor, the dead body was prepared for burial by placing it on a kind of stretcher made from two sticks strained by a piece of fabric.<sup>xxix</sup> All this process underwent according to the instructions in religious texts called '*Kahneita*' and '*Anneedha*.' *Kahneita* included practices about how a religious official should act during funeral procession.<sup>xxx</sup> *Anneedha* included lots of hymns and poems, depending on the gender of the dead person and his/her social class. In this sense, it is stated by English Missionaries that separate poems and practices were available for each of the patricians, metropolitan bishops, monks, priests, men, virgins, women, engaged people and children.<sup>xxxi</sup>

#### **4.Graveyard and Burial Preparations**

After dead body underwent the process of being washed, it was put into a coffin and carried over the shoulders of four people followed by a crowd consisting of men, women and young people who set out to graveyard. The cortege was led by a priest and a deacon. Women who participated in the funeral were carrying water on their shoulders for the crowd.<sup>xxxii</sup> While setting out to graveyard, the coffin or stretcher was put down and picked up from the ground three times every time it was put over the shoulders. Meanwhile a candle was lit for three days at the home of the dead person.

On the route to the graveyard they stopped and the coffin or stretcher was put down in front of the homes of the dead person's next of kin or acquaintances. Women gathered around the dead person and were sobbing. At some Nasturies' funeral, women were not allowed to cry much, mourn the loss of their relatives and wet graves. Because it was believed that in that situation the soul of the dead person would suffer in the grave. At the entrance of the graveyard, women turned back without entering and men picked up the coffin on their shoulders again. During the funeral ceremony, the coffin was covered with a special carpet. After the funeral ceremony, that carpet was washed and taken home for using it again at another funeral. Everybody did the same thing what priest was doing. When the coffin was put down near the grave, the priest took a small amount of soil, sprinkled it over the coffin and those along with him did the same thing.

Since agricultural lands in Hakkari region were fertile, graveyards were made among rocky areas at a corner of village road. Each family had a parcel in this graveyard.<sup>xxxiii</sup> In Urmiye region, graveyards were usually made at a neighborhood unit outside of a village. But the graveyards are not next to churches. The

present graveyards in the yards of churches belonged to cities. Those graveyards were made on behalf of churches. Only dead bodies of metropolitan bishops from the clergy were allowed to be buried in the yards of abbey or summer chapel<sup>xxxiv</sup>

The depth of the grave dug for the dead person varied depending on gender. The graves of women were dug more deeply than those of men. They explained this situation that way: *'Mother Eve made Father Adam commit a sin, so death was created by God. Eve caused Adam to die'*. When the corpse was put down in the grave a few rafter stones were placed in the facial area of the dead person. The empty places among the stones were filled with small pebbles.<sup>xxxv</sup> After this procession, religious officials were reading hymns right by the grave and all men, especially young people filled the grave with earth and a cross was erected by the priest at the head side of the grave. In Urmiye region, a stone too was placed at the feet side of the grave, whereas in Hakkari-Tiyari, it was placed only on the head side.<sup>xxxvi</sup> The clothes of the dead person were hung on the gravestone at the head side in Urmiye region. If the next of kin of the dead person were poor, the clothes on the gravestone were taken back three days later and they were used again. A cornered room of one meter high was built over the graves of rich Nestorians. Lalayan states that an entrance place opened at a side of this room and a candle and daily incense were placed in a small cavity made in the room.<sup>xxxvii</sup> However, Arthur John MacLean and William Henry Browne gives no knowledge about whether it was a room or not although they say that this stone was built by stonemasons for placing it over the grave and that inside it was a cavity.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

After burial procession, those who attended the funeral said to the owners of the funeral *"Our condolences go to you and your family."* and in exchange for that the owners of the funeral said *'we understand and care about you, too.'*<sup>xxxix</sup> After getting out of the graveyard, those who attended the funeral went to the side of a river or a pool and prayed with priest. If there was not a river or a pool in the region where they lived, the priest and those along with him prayed right by the portable, plastic washbowl filled with water. After praying, they washed their faces with that water.<sup>xl</sup> In spite of Lalayan's view about this subject, American Missioner Grant states that the relatives of the late person had to wash not only their faces but all over their bodies as well.<sup>xli</sup> After this procession, if the late person was rich, those who attended the ceremony went to church to watch the food service. If the late person was poor, they went straight his/her home. In both situations dinner was given to those who came home of the late person for visit of condolence. After dinner, the priest wished blessing for the dinner prepared. After dinner was eaten by the late person's next of kin, everyone went directly their homes.

Three days after the dead body was buried, women went to the graveyard, taking the washbowl filled with water before to wash the corpse and the wooden cross in the water. The priest who was waiting for them in the graveyard poured the water on the grave and prayed for the late person.<sup>xlii</sup> After that, he took the cross out of the washbowl, erected it right by the grave, and broke the washbowl. After this procession, they went to church to watch wine and food sanctification service. Then a big boiler was placed in front of the door of the church and food was cooked in it. Those who were present there took a piece of meat or something like that, put it in their bread, and ate it.<sup>xliii</sup>

### 5. Burial Procession of the Clergymen

If the funeral belonged to a priest, rather than an ordinary person, the funeral procession was made in the yard of the church, and his hand was kissed by those who were present there. Only the funeral of the patriarch was taken inside the church, the coffin was carried by priest and bishops.<sup>xliv</sup> Especially dead bodies of patriarch and metropolitan bishops who were among the clergymen were washed without their clothes being taken off. Their corpses were made ready for burial after being covered with their clothes<sup>xlv</sup>. But not all over their bodies, only their feet, hands and heads were washed. However, if a religious official did not belong to clergymen, all over his body was washed by an old, respectful Nestorians.<sup>xlvi</sup> Dead bodies of Nestorians patriarchs were buried in the Church of Mar-Mariam located in Hakkari-Koçaniş in the first years, later they were buried along the border of the west wall of the Mar Şamun Church. The gravestones were made in a special way by using axes and cutters.<sup>xlvii</sup>

According to the traditions of Nestorians, after burying the dead body, the late person had to be honored on the third, ninth, thirtieth day and on the date of death every year. In accordance with the belief in Christianity, people gathered every year for the remembrance of those who became martyr.<sup>xlviii</sup>

### 6. Visits of Condolence

Funeral procession kept going on the ninth day of death. Everyone went to church and graveyard on that day again. Then the owner of the funeral gave dinner to those who paid visit of condolence. On the same day after

dinner, everyone except for his/her godmother or godfather took some clothes of the late person. The godfather gave presents to those who were devastated over the death and called on barbers to shave those who were mourning. While this procession was carried out by godfather, the godmother warmed water to wash the hair of women who were mourning.<sup>xlix</sup> Justin Perkins states that contrary to those who lived in Hakkari, the next of kin of the late person began to shave themselves three days after the death.<sup>1</sup>

If family members of the late person were poor, Nestorians took coffee their home. If family members of the late person were rich, those who paid visits of condolence were offered coffee. Guests were offered some tea, wine and a kind of beer called *arak* that Nestorians drank. Families offered such things by taking their economic conditions into consideration. Those who paid visits of condolence expressed their deepest sympathies for them who lost their beloved one. The tea that Nestorians offered had to contain too much sugar and be given in small glasses. Those who drank it had to say “*to your health*” and while they were drinking it, the owner of the house had to say ‘*I hope you will enjoy it.*’ Then the guests drank narghile and tobacco pipes given to them.<sup>li</sup> After visits of condolence were paid, women who lived in the region of Urmiye, sometimes went to graveyard and cleaned around the graves.<sup>lii</sup> One year after the funeral procession was completed, rich Nestorians made people gather in church again for dirge and had 5-10 sheep or 1-2 bulls slaughtered in order to offer meals to the whole villagers.<sup>liii</sup>

### **7. Inheritance**

After death, inheritance issues were solved in Nestorians society according to the traditions and customs of countries in which they resided. In Nestorians society that lived in Iran, inheritance was shared among children, widow, and widower in accordance with Iranian laws. Among independent tribes that lived under the hegemony of the Ottoman state, inheritance law was mostly regulated in accordance with traditions of Nestorians. Accordingly, a widower got a proportion between two-thirds and one-fifth of the inheritance, depending on he had children or not. But a widow got a proportion of one-third or one-tenth of the inheritance, depending on she had children or not. An inheritor son got two times more of the inheritance than a daughter inheritor did. If the late couple had no children, their inheritor was their mother and father. If the late person had no child and mother and father, his/her brothers and sisters became inheritors. If there were not brothers and sisters, their grandfathers became their inheritors. If they had not grandfathers, their uncles and aunts became their inheritors.<sup>liv</sup> When we look into the inheritance law in Nestorians society, we can see that there is great resemblance between Nestorians and their moslem neighbours. As a matter of fact, basic principles of Islamic inheritance law are few and simple. The son gets the inheritance of his parents twice more than his sister does. Then a part of property is given to people who have legal right to claim it due to the dead's will.<sup>lv</sup>

### **8. Conclusion**

Nestorians attached great importance to burial procession in the 19th century. Shortly after death, a priest and relatives were called on to visit home for burial procession. The one who washed the dead body varied according to the gender and social class of the late person. If the funeral belonged to a man, the dead body was washed by an old man. If the funeral belonged to a woman, the dead body was washed by an old woman, starting from the right side of the corpse. When a clergyman passed away, his head, feet and hands were washed, rather than all over his body. Women were not allowed to enter graveyard during burial procession. Priests played an important role in burial procession and they were held responsible for it. Those who paid visits of condolence to the owners of funeral were given meals. Tea, wine and coffee were offered to them if the financial situation of the owners of funeral was poor. Mourning and visits of condolence ended when men shaved and women washed their hair. Although the inheritance law in Nestorians society varied depending on the countries in which they resided, women were entitled to get less inheritance than men were.

## NOTES

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