



## THE IDENTITY OF WOMEN IN THE SUB-CULTURE OF NOMADIC YURUKS

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### Abstract

In this article, the concept of Yuruk is studied within the framework of social differentiation in the developmental stage of societies. This concept is studied as a sub-cultural group of Turkish culture. In this qualitative research we will attempt to identify the nomadic life style and the status of women in Yuruk society.

**Key Words:** Yuruk, Turkmen, identity, nomad, nomadic, tribe, Sarıkeçili tribe.

### GÖÇEBE YÖRÜKLERDE ALT KÜLTÜR OLARAK KADIN KİMLİĞİ

#### Özet

Bu makalede yörük kavramı, toplumların gelişimsel seviyelerinde sosyal ayrımın dayanağı olarak ele alınmıştır. Söz konusu kavram, Türk kültürünün alt kültür grubunu oluşturmaktadır. Bu çalışmada göçebe yaşam tarzı ve yörük toplumlarında kadının yeri niteliksel olarak ortaya koyulmaya çalışılacaktır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Yörük, Türkmen, kimlik, göçmen, göçebe, aşiret, Sarıkeçili aşireti.

### Introduction

The Turks migrated originally from Central Asia to Anatolia between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. Most of them were sedentary communities. However, a significant portion was nomads, called Oghuz, or Turkmen, at that time. These nomads used to move between regions identified as summer pasturages and winter in order to graze their animals. Therefore, their lifestyle was substantially different from sedentary life. Even after Anatolia was brought under Ottoman rule by the end of the first quarter of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, they continued their traditional lifestyle.

During the Ottoman period the nomads were known by the names of Turkmen (Türkmen) and Yoruk (Yörük) or Yuruk (Yürük). These names were generally used to describe their way of life, rather than their ethnic origin. However, these terms were often used interchangeably. At the same time, various other words were used for the nomads, such as “Konar-göçer”, “Göçerler”, “Göçer-yörük”. The most common one among these was “Konar-göçer”. All of these words are found in Ottoman archival documents and carry only the meaning of “nomad” (Şahin 1997: 139).

### **Methodology**

The study is based on the data that are collected from the field by qualitative research techniques and are further supported by the data obtain from literature review. The field work phase of the study took place in Mersin Aydınçık and Silifke between the years 2000-2003. In this field research, data are obtained through informant observation techniques and interviews based on qualitative research techniques. In this framework, Yuruk women’s construction of their identities was investigated in their authentic nomadic environment. This study covers only a part of the information that was attained in the research.

### **The Identity of Women in the Nomadic Yuruks**

In the Turkish family, the woman and man are two complementary elements. When the superiority of one of these is discussed, the man always comes first and is the active element. As a matter of fact, although the Turkish woman is very powerful, she exalts the man by giving him priority in society and also maintains the balances within the family. The woman, if her husband is not at home, undertakes his work. In this matter, she is considered to act according to the conditions of society. That is why Turkish women became a part of social life in every period of history.

The Ottoman Period has been conceived as a period in which women were left behind in social life. However, many records and events show clearly that this is not true. In the Ottoman Era, there was a special market for women in almost every city (Bursa, Denizli, Konya etc.).

In government, Turkish women were to be in found every rank - from the highest to the lowest ranks- in accordance with honour and importance. A Turkish girl whose father was a powerful manager, if needed, could be a manager and even “sultan” in place of her father. In the same way, if possible, Turkish women were able to carry out all other duties (Baykara 2001: 155).

The character of the father was always influential within the family. The father appeared in activities outside of their tent. The mother undertook the education of children. Motherhood, although it was a tough obligation in a Turkmen family, saw women who were able to defend themselves in many situations and also the man would consult the woman with regard to some family matters. The Turkmen man was not despotic. In some situations, he would listen to his spouse because he has obligations toward her. The man who would not take care of his family or his spouse would have complaints directed to his father and mother by his woman. In such matters, he would be rebuked severely by his mother and father. If he did not listen to their words, notables of their clan and/or tribe may punish him. The worst punishment was to be expelled from society (Necef and Berdiyev 2003: 302-303).

The common problem in every nomadic and settled society was separation into parts of the family by time. This family, even if it is a group of relatives living in different homes or a small family that consists of a mother, father and child, would be candidate for the same growth and separation. It would differ according to generation and demographic level (Bates 1971: 263).

The amount of capital owned by the family is an important factor in setting up a new home. In nomadic Yuruk society, the most important way to provide the required initial capital for sufficiency and to establish new homes is to acquire a portion of the flocks of the family or to inherit a fortune. A Yuruk village could not provide the economical independence of a new home in spite of the ways mentioned above (Bates 1971: 266).

The customs of inheritance of the nomadic Yuruks are different from the settled Yuruks. In sharing inheritance between these Yuruk societies, daughters never receive a portion of an inheritance except some trousseau. However, daughters-in-law receive gold coins from their fathers and fathers-in-law. Divorced women would never receive a portion of an inheritance; however, they would acquire some money. This money would be given on behalf of little children. If, however, they remarry, they lose this money. Sons who leave the father's tent receive nothing and have to be satisfied with the portion they receive when they set up a new home. Giving portions of flocks to sons when they set up a new home is a tradition (Bates 1971: 266, 268).

There is no feeling of a common family tree or origin amongst the Yuruks but the identity of the Yuruk is very powerful in nomadic and village life. Many Yuruk tribes, such as the Sarahmetli, Karakoyunlu, Yeniosmanlı Yuruks, carry on with their lives in a patriarchal manner. Another important feature was that the concepts of tribe and Yuruk had the same meaning for nomadic and settled Yuruks; however, they use their own concepts, like Bahşıklı Yuruks, Sarıkeçili Yuruks etc. Because there was no organization according to tribal social life as seen in Turkmen tribes, there was no common feeling of family tree or tribal consciousness. However, the loyalties of each other the Yuruks were not organized by any institutional mechanism. Someone would say, "I belong to the Sarıkeçili tribe", however, no traces of tribal organization have remained. First of all, there was no tribal chief. Nevertheless, approximately 70 years ago, according to research known as "Turkmen Tribes in South" conducted by Ali Rıza Yalman (1993), the names of tribal chiefs and settlement places of nomadic tribes had been mentioned.

From this sociological information, Garnett puts forward that Yuruks had no tradition or legends which could give information about the Yuruks' ethnic origins, the places from which they originated or their migrations to Turkey in the article "The File of Turkish Women and Folklores" (Garnett 2002: 158). She continues: "When they are asked, they say they are grandchildren of ancient settled societies who built great buildings which are now laid under productive lands." In field research which has been done since 2000, the nomadic Yuruks, when they were asked, very clearly gave information that their ancestors had come from Central Asia.

Being the last representatives of a nomadic tradition, the Saçıkara tribe settling between Antakya-Kahramanmaraş, Sarıkeçili tribe settling in Konya-Seydişehir and Beyşehir pastures and in Mersin-Silifke and Aydıncık districts- have remained.

Mehmet Gök, chief of a family from the Sarıkeçili tribe, pointing out that they are the last representatives of the Yuruk tradition in Turkey, said that his ancestors were known as Sarıkeçililer and carried on with their nomadic life styles not because it was a tradition, but because they could not find jobs. He said that "We have no lands, no

homes and no jobs. We lose our old people; our number diminishes year by year. We will be settled if government helps us” ([www.merhabagazetesi.com.tr/arsiv/2002/03/22/g21.htm](http://www.merhabagazetesi.com.tr/arsiv/2002/03/22/g21.htm)).

Additionally, Gök tells us that the nomadic life style is a part of Turkish culture but they are underestimated by others. It is observed that villagers see tribal people as a separate group and keep their relations with tribal people at a minimal level.

This point of view empowered the relations between members of the Sarıkeçili tribe. On the other hand, their concrete cultures and life styles show monotony. They knew each other well; they inform one another of changing situations and all activities. This is especially effective for adult men who spend most of their time on this and consist of the most active part of the group. They are the people who are seen in the market or in the mosque, and who would go to see this or that land. However, women are never excluded from these mutual social relationships. Changes in the composition of positions during immigration, give them opportunities to meet numerous tent residents. Many of them are relatives (Bazın 1994: 342).

Because the men of the Sarıkeçili tribe prefer to marry young girls from their own tribe, they maintain relations with local families. Due to the scarcity of the number of family coming from same ancestor and the tendency towards close marriage, the Sarıkeçili tribe prefers endogamy. Marriages within the tribe and outside the tribe mostly occur under the guise of the tradition of what may be called “kidnapping girls”. First of all, a girl is allegedly kidnapped. After this role playing, the usual procedures of marriage ceremony are followed. Yuruk men happen to prefer monogamous marriages.

During a meeting with Sinan Can from the Sarıkeçili tribe (12.03.2003); “You meet the girl while grassing goats then you date her outside somewhere silently. You go to her tent when nobody’s there. If they don’t allow us to marry, you take her. This is better than a wedding. You kidnap her. You perform a religious wedding right away. You give money – one billion liras – the most beautiful trousseau of the girl is taken.” When asked how a girl could marry a Yuruk man, the answer would be; “He has to have a good job, bake bread, and make tea. We don’t accept villagers, they don’t come to us”.

Yuruk women are shy and smiling. They usually avoid talking to guests coming to the tent. They remain silent. Mehmet Can (12.03.2003) explains that “They are ignorant because they always live in the mountains and don’t meet so many people.”

When a guest comes to the tent, even if a man is not present in the tent at that moment, the oldest women accept the guest; after that they all enter the tent and everybody welcomes the guest. They all sit in the tent. The guest and others are given food and drink.

Sarıkeçili Yuruk women want to have beautiful children. Because of this, before binding children to the front of their bodies, they would dress the child’s head with ornamented clothes, known as “çelme çeler”. The women would apply this because they want their children to have round and beautiful heads.

On the subject of training children, Yuruk women have no time and no education for their children. Mothers would do all their work while carrying their children on their backs until they are one year old; after this age, until 3 or 4 years of age, they would tie their children to the tent and do their work. For a Yuruk woman, “a child is bathed if he/she has to be balked and fed if he/she is hungry.” As can be seen, the woman had all the responsibility.

In Yuruk tribes, the working woman is important; her place in society came first; to

listen to her words and apply her advice is obligatory. The working woman is as active, efficient, and creative as a man. Women would never run away from men, never cover up their faces, and all would produce and consume together. Ali Rıza Yalman (1993: 204), who visited Pınarbaşı pasture of the Ayaş Yuruks, who pastured on the Bolkar (Bulgar) mountains, quotes Benatlı Hasan Ağa: “In the old days, the day when we sacrificed animals, was a very big day. Men and women altogether entertained here. For about 5 to 10 years, they banned us from entertaining; they said it is a sin, it is illegal. They blackened us, they destroyed our native feelings. Now, our wives don’t dance. Since the day we stopped dancing, God cursed us; made us dull and unlucky”.

The administration of a tent belongs to the oldest woman. She is seen as the most respected person. Women in Sarıkeçili tribe are always occupied with daily tasks. On every migration day, she sets up the tent with her husband, organizes the belongings, takes care of children, takes care of guests, milks the animals, bakes bread, cooks, washes the clothes, spins wool, and weaves the tent. In addition to these, if they don’t have a young girl or boy at home, she puts the herd to pasture.

When we look at clothes, old women would wear fezzes. There are 3–4 gold or silver coins on a fez. They wear dresses and long skirts. The new generations don’t like to wear them. Young girls wear head scarves, underpants, mostly black socks, dresses and sweaters on dress. The choice of color is always red. Additionally, they prefer light yellow, blue and green. Every woman, girl or daughter of a Sarıkeçili Yuruk always wears silver jewelers. Young girls and women between 30 and 40 years of age wear silver belts. Even children always carry glass beads in blue colors which one believed to protect them against evil looks in Turkish culture.

During migration, trains of camels are pulled by new daughters-in-law or young girls. New daughters-in-law ornament themselves that day. Due to respect towards women, nobody can walk before a young daughter-in-law. Different trains are lined up and a great Yuruk migration occurs.

Sarıkeçili Yuruks are on the move the whole year. They spend 4 months in sheltered places; another 4 months are spent in pasture. The remaining months are for migrating between the sheltered places and the pasture. So, mention need be made of the daily lives of women. In sheltered places, daily life was organized according to the flocks, and family members undertook various duties. If a family member doesn’t go to buy food for themselves or the animals, he/she will put the camels to pasture. Others will take care of the goats (Özönder et al., 2005).

The time elapsed in sheltered places would give a chance to the women to weave. The wool of goat is spun on a wool spindle which is composed of two parts of a tree in which there is a hole between the parts and is twisted like a bow, and a central part. After that, the thread produced is used to twist string or for various weavings. Roof bands of tent and haircloths, sacks are also weaved. Yuruk women weave 3 different types of sack, red, black, and white. Black ones are for the wool of sheep’s and goats; red ones are used for carrying clothes and the white ones are used for keeping the food.

When we look at the daily life in pasture, migration starts at the beginning of May; the duty of milking goats and grassing them belongs to women. The goats are milked by the women at noon or in the afternoon once a day. The hygiene of the milk, separation from the cream with the help of a machine and after that making cheese, was their other duties. By using the spring wool of animals various woven products are prepared. Goats’ wool was the most common raw product. Goats’ wool, which is cut in summer,

is spun immediately and afterwards by women with the help of spindles. Most are sold at special workshops in Konya.

We can see the equality between man and woman among the Yuruk-Turkmens. To A. Vambery, equality cannot be seen only between men but also between women. The most influential thing is the love, kindness, and respect towards their families, especially towards women, says Vambery. I have witnessed that women are not equal to men within the family, however, old women, traditionally, among society are especially respected (Necef and Berdiyev 2003: 293).

### Conclusion

Due to this study, it was confirmed that nomadic life style, which is one of the remaining characteristic aspects of the Turkish culture, still continues among some tribes of Yuruks (Sarıkeçili, Saçıkara etc.) in its most natural form. It is seen that these tribes use technology very rarely, they still migrate on camels and they produce their own equipment. Therefore, this life style appears as a bridge between the past and the present as a typical instance.

To sum up, Yuruk women played a great role in carrying on with the nomadic life of the Yuruks. In field researches we have conducted so far, it can be said that the factor determining the status of women in this cultural sub-group is that they are hard-working and productive. Hard-working and productive women in Yuruk society is are very much respected.

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