



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Ahi Women's: The first Women's Non-Governmental Organization in the World

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Abstract

When compared with its contemporaries, there have been those who interpreted Bacıyan-ı Rum (Anatolian Sisters) as an “Anatolian Women’s Organization”. This community is an exact example of non-governmental organizations in terms of its activities. Women’s social aid associations, women’s employment efforts and activities of promoting women’s status of today date back to the consciousness of Bacıyan-ı Rum [1]. This structure, which was based not on gender dominance but the human itself in the society, made great contributions to the moral development in social life and the creation of professional ethics in the business life. In this respect, the union significantly contributed to sociocultural and economic development as much as the Ahi Organization founded by men. The aim of this research article is to trace the roots of women’s first Non-Governmental organization in Turkey and tries to found its significance. In addition, this paper will try to analyze how it shapes the status of women in Turkish culture and society.

Key Words: Bacıyan-ı Rum, Non-Governmental Organization, Women’s Organization

Introduction

Bâciyân-ı Rûm is an 13th century Anatolian mystic group made up of Turkoman immigrating women. Aşık Paḥsa Zade is the first Ottoman historian to mention this group with this name. The word Bacıyan is the obsolete plural of bacı (sister) in Turkish. “Bacıyan-ı Rum” means the Anatolian Women’s Union. The word “Bacı” is widely used in many cities of Anatolia today. In this community, women called each other “Bacılar” (Sisters). Therefore, this organization became known also as “Bacıyan” (“Bacılar”) [2]. This women organization functioned fully as a non-governmental organization and tried to respond to all the requirements of social life. The organization served for aid and solidarity among the Ahi women and provided women with vocational, religious and moral education.

The place of women in the construction of Anatolian civilization is undoubtedly a privilege. In the same period in the west, while women was the symbol of “witch” and sin they realized a revolution in Anatolia and founded Bacıyan-ı Rum, the first women’s organization in the world. This organization has been instrumental in material and moral revival of Anatolia. It was the architect of a great effort in religious, economic, social and educational fields.

When Ahi Evran, the founder of the Ahi Organization (Turkish-Islamic Guild), came to Kayseri in 1205, there were Anatolian Greeks, Armenians and Christian Turks as locals. As the Muslim-Turkish population was very few, they had no power to compete with the local Anatolian Greeks and Armenians. That was exact the reason why the Ahi Organization was founded to achieve solidarity among local Muslims and endure

the competition. Ahi Evran established this organization to provide the Muslim population with occupation, ensure a commercial organization, create ethical rules, supervise and support the traders [3]. Fatma Bacı, the wife of Ahi Evran, established the Kadın Bacıyan-ı Rum at organization, the Anatolian Women’s Union.

Nevertheless, there are very few or even lost written sources about the organization due to the constant struggle against the Mongol rule and the fact that they consequently nomadized during this period. Hence, there is very limited number of sources about Bacıyan-ı Rum. As another reason, few information on women’s life, education, political and socio-cultural status can be found because the history were written rather by men during that period and historical heroes and figures were all men [4]. The history of Turkish women extending to Central Asia reflects their roots to Anatolia, and institutionalized its active role from the past by establishing the first women’s organization in the world called “Bacıyan-ı Rum” in Anatolia [5]. During the Anatolian Seljuk period, “Fakireğan” that is the woman who was called dervishes [6]. Information about Bacıyan-ı Rum is scarce in historical sources. The first sources are from Aşık Paşazade’s. Asik Paşazade, the oldest Ottoman Empire history writer, mentions Bacıya-ı Rum (Anatolian Women’s Union) which is another social group besides Ahilik organization established in Anatolia (Ahiyan-ı Rum).

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In the training given to Ahi women, there was emphasis on “own your food, your job and your husband”. Women were given trainings required for the livelihood, unity and continuity of the family and provided with high-level roles. A strong structure of society that held the foundation of family powerful and attaches importance to family was envisaged. A social structure based on family and strong in the economic field was established [6]. Women internalized their role of motherhood and also acquired a profession. This organization was practically a women's branch of the Ahi Organization. A serious religious, professional and cultural education was given to the Sisters. Therefore, they had strong family relations, neighborly relations and economic power.

Ahi women, like their husbands, had a job and a profession. Just like the Ahi men, they went through the steps of apprenticeship and mastership and learned a profession by practicing and observing it at the workplace. There was also religious and moral education in line with the vocational training. It was an important element of Sufi training. In this way, they both had an occupation and completed their personalities as a whole. The philosophy of Bacıyan-ı Rum is based on the principle of educating the human soul with Sufi education along with vocational and artistic education. Women who went through such an education system could develop themselves multidimensionally and find the chance to look at life from a wider perspective. Helping others, holding others superior to themselves and valuing others were their greatest virtues, which they acquired with Sufi education.

Ahi women performed crafts such as carpets, rugs, weaving, tentmaking and painting in accordance with the economy and needs of the period. They were not left alone after they had received the necessary training and professional qualifications; they were always under supervision about business ethics and the standards of the produced goods and services [1]. The organization, in this sense, functioned as the modern Chambers of Commerce. The reason why the community of Sisters performed critical tasks for a long time included their efficient organization, their usefulness in several domains, and last but not least, the fact that they had a very sound Sufi and character education.

This indicates that the Turkish-Muslim women lived their golden age and received much respect and reputation in a period like the Medieval Period which lasted a thousand years and during which humanity struggled with darkness. In fact, Bacıyan-ı Rum became so famous that it is known that Mevlana's daughter Melike Khatun joined this women's community in Konya [7].

This is not surprising given the traditions of older Turkic societies and woman's place in government. Among the Turks of old, women were powerful and had a voice as much as their husbands Khans. They had their armies, counselors and lands. In this community which came to Anatolia with incursions, women took part actively like men and shared the challenges of life with their men. This is crucial for showing the importance given to women in the Turkish-Islamic culture

in the Medieval Period. There were female warriors among the old Turkmen Alps (pioneer soldiers) as well as women doing spiritual works such as Shamanism. In the Book of Dede Korkut, which is an epic story of Oghuz Turks, it is observed that Turkish traditions and Islam reconciled very well after the acceptance of Islam by the Turks, and the role of woman, who managed her household and played active roles in wars and battles, was mentioned in most of the woman-related themes in the book. The Turkmens fled from the Mongol oppression and invasion in Central Asia and the Khorasan region with this model of woman. Otherwise, the Turks themselves are not barbarians or invaders as described in the Western history books. On the contrary, in Anatolia, they got along with the Byzantine-Greeks and Armenians who were the locals and they had very good neighborly relations [5]. Similarly, in the years of the Ottoman State's foundation, women had the same rights as men; for example they could work, ride horses, and go to war [1].

Since the nomadic Turks made their living with livestock, the profession of tannery naturally came to the forefront.

The famous founder of Ahi Organization, Ahi Evran came to Kayseri and established a leather finishing and processing workshop. This is the first leather enterprise in Kayseri. While men were innately interested in leatherwork, women opened weaving shops near or next to these tanneries for making use of the wool originating from there [1]. They produced fabrics, carpets, rugs and clothes in those workshops. Again, according to the needs of the period and with the influence of the nomadic culture, crafts such as tentmaking, felting, fabric and thread dyeing, embroidery and production of various delicate fabrics were performed. These businesses grew so much that a leather processing neighborhood, and next to it, a knitting neighborhood was established. The knitting neighborhood was entirely under the control of women. With the Mongol invasion in the 13th century, these handicrafts developed in Kayseri spread to Konya, Kırşehir, Ankara and other parts of Anatolia later and learned by women. In fact, these produced carpets and rugs were exported to Egypt, Syria and Central Asia. It is very interesting that the uniforms and hats of the Janissaries were produced by the Sisters during the first years of the Ottoman State.

Later on, during the reign of Kayqubad I, the Sultan of the Seljuk, Ahis spread throughout Anatolia and took office in state affairs. This organization was even involved in the restructuring of the Anatolian Seljuk State. Having many different activities and functions, this organization was one of the most important and interesting cultural and social events of the Anatolian Seljuks and the Medieval Period [1]. In fact, Medieval is not a short period; it covers a thousand-year period [8].

In the 13th century, women had a very prestigious position in the Anatolian Seljuk State. Like men, women could go to places of worship, baths and work in fields. They also gathered together and organized entertaining activities. They had the right to education, underwent a serious education, were able

to own property and made use of their wealth as they wished (Stakeholder, 2013). Accordingly, Bacıyan-ı Rum is the first organized women's business organization in the world and Turkish-Islamic culture [6]. In this respect, it is a remarkable structure and institution.

Another feature of the Sisters was that they stood side by side with men within the social structure and assumed all kinds of tasks and were involved in the daily life. The Bacıyan-ı Rum Organization, like the Ahi Organization, allowed women to contribute to the economic, social and cultural areas, regardless of any gender discrimination. Since women formed this organization, it was essential that every person had a profession and showed usefulness in all fields of society because they knew about the basic requirements of social development [9]. Hence, the Sisters had abilities of battling, riding, archery, hunting and joining the wars individually. During the Mongol invasion, they served with their husbands both at the front and behind the front [10]. These women made significant contributions to the unity and solidarity of the society during the 150-year-old Anatolian occupation of the Mongols and prevented several conflicts.

Again, Ahi women resisted the Mongol invasion like a guerrilla organization at the time of war and also met the needs of the soldiers such as socks and clothes and provided other logistic support by making other war materials. They can be considered the first women warriors in this regard.

Because Ahi men often participated in wars and expeditions and these expeditions lasted for a long time, Ahi women earned the livelihood of the household when they were alone. There were special "women's bazaars" established for that purpose. No man could enter these bazaars. Vegetables, fruits, animal products and handicraft products produced by Ahi women were sold at these bazaars. Buyer-seller men and commercial products were not allowed at these bazaars [11]. With such a practice, they would prevent the deterioration of the region's economy even in the time of war [1]. Considering very long wars and expeditions during this period, it is a very valuable and protective factor. The Sisters not only were engaged in handicrafts but also had knowledge of animal care and field works and carried out such works [12].

Their work did not just include handicrafts and weaving; they performed the requirements of the daily life along with their men or on their own when their men were not with them. This women's organization took orphaned young girls under protection, trained them, provided them with occupation, educated them religiously and morally and then married them. Ahi women also took care of lonely elderly women in the community and did not leave them alone [1]. The money for all these services was met by the safe-deposit boxes established by the Sisters. The Sisters identified the orphan, the poor or the elderly and delivered aid to them personally. These aids included providing them with occupation, training them and caring for lonely elderly people. In charity activities, they addressed a single individual as a whole and provided not only emotional and social support but also economic support for them to live.

As well as hosting guests in their lodges, the Sisters also spent their properties and fortunes for the orphan and the poor, making helping others the purpose of their lives [1]. This marked the beginning of the culture of altruism within the society.

This women's organization established by the Ahi women in the middle Ages also had a function of providing job and employment. From this point of view, it is also considered the beginning of women's entrepreneurship [13]. An important feature of this organization is that it improved the phenomenon of business ethics, which is very important in the business world, and contributed to its operation. Works and products of the employed women were constantly supervised for their qualities and purposes, and this mechanism of supervision and control was continued after they had acquired the professional competences [14]. The Sisters targeted the production of solid and genuine goods. They manufactured products in accordance with commercial ethics which developed economic entrepreneurship. This indicates that they put what they learned into practice and social life [12].

More importantly, they addressed the matters of social responsibility, which we try to develop in modern societies today, very seriously [14] and made them their life principles. Ahi women, the Sisters, ensured that traditional Anatolian handicrafts such as carpet and rug are known today by teaching them to next generations [5].

They also played very important roles in the development of women's employment and for women to enter the business life [1] and initiated the historical process about this matter. Considering the general characteristics, Bacıyan-ı Rum was a women's non-governmental organization. It is the first women's non-governmental and business organization which was established about 700 years ago based on an advanced understanding that even enlightens today's practices in many respects such as occupational training, Sufi education, business ethics, women's entrepreneurship, women's employment and social responsibility and continued its existence throughout the Medieval Period.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be argued that Ahi women, or Bacıyan-ı Rum, showed great usefulness in the Middle Ages and worked in every unit of the society from family, education, Sufism to economy and even military and defense. These heroic and devoted women established the first women's organization in history and organized the civil society for the first time. Their contributions to economy and military are unique examples in history. The supported men as well as worked on the uplifting of the society. The proved women's importance, usefulness and pivotal role by support families and showing the strength and valor in every aspect of life. Despite the limitation of resources and history of Bacıyan-ı Rum in ruins we can conclude that 13th century Anatolia women's activities are quite intense compared to two or three centuries later, especially the Turkmen women who migrated to Anatolia received from Hacı Bektaş-ı Velî great services in the direction of Turkification and Islamization of Anatolia.

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