

BOUNDARIES AND ETHNIC IDENTITIES THE CONCEPTION OF BOUNDARY IN A DIVERSE AREA

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Abstract

This paper will focus on Mardin, Turkey to analyse the relation between socio-cultural boundaries and ethnic identities. Boundaries which separate communities from each other have been used as an analytical tool in socio-anthropological analyses. This paper tries to find out that there is a relation between the dimensions of the boundary and the construction of ethnic identities in a diverse area. In addition to this, it examines that socio-cultural boundaries can not only make the differences between ethnic identities apparent but also they can occasionally bring different ethnic groups together under the same roof.

Keywords: *boundary, ethnic identity, culture, structure.*

JEL Classification: Y90

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of boundary in social sciences has gained a special meaning after F. Barth's contribution to the social organisation of cultural difference, ethnic identity and ethnicity. In anthropological analysis, this term refers to both territorial borders and the lines in social relations (Douglas,1966). Therefore it has social, cultural, and territorial dimensions which sometimes are aspects of a single boundary (Hastings & Wilson,1999:19).

On the purpose of analysing the dimensions of boundary, the paper will focus on Mardin which has a multi-ethnic population located in the southeast of Turkey. Even though its demographical picture has been destroyed by social and political factors since the late period of Ottoman Empire, the city still has diverse groups in both its urban and rural areas. The social structure of city centre is composed of Muslim Arabs and Kurds, Syriac Christians, Armenian Catholics and Turks. The demographical structure of rural areas is variable from place to place except the district of Midyat which shows similarities with the city centre. In this district, Muslim Arabs (Mhallemis), Muslim Kurds, Syriac Christians and the Ezidis have shared socio-cultural life. This paper will mainly focus on the relations of the first

three groups and occasionally the Ezidis who prefer to live in rural areas as a closed group.

Until a few decades, the first group of social organisation in Mardin in terms of population was Muslim Arabs who are belonged to wealthy families. But recently, Kurdish population has increased in the centre via integral migration. This development has irreversibly destroyed the demographical picture of the city, and strengthened ethnic boundaries in the city centre. Considering these points, this paper aims to discuss the network of boundaries in Mardin.

1.1 The concept of boundary in anthropological analysis

Both terms 'border and boundary' have been used in anthropological analyses to indicate the social, the cultural and the territorial dimensions of ethnic group relations. Ethnic groups, as Barth (1969) argues, are 'socially constructed, made up of individuals who strategically manipulate their cultural identity by emphasising or underplaying it according to context' (Hastings & Wilson,1999:21). With a process of inclusion and exclusion which differentiates 'us' from 'them', the members of ethnic groups mark themselves off and are marked off from other collectivities (pp. 21-22).

However, people may cross the boundaries between groups and may maintain regular relations across them, but this does not affect the durability and stability of the boundaries themselves (Hastings & Wilson,1999:21). Therefore boundaries, as Barth (1969) articulates, may be crossed without threatening their existence. In this point, it is important to indicate that ethnic boundary defines the group not the cultural stuff that it encloses (Barth,1969:15).

To analyse the boundaries in the relations of diverse groups, a few analogies have been considered such as balloon offered by Cohen (1969) which responds to changes in internal and external air pressure. Wallman (1978) also considers several analogies such as fences, the cover of teabags to describe how social boundaries are always the outcome of a two-sided process (Hastings & Wilson,1999:22). Giving these analogies, Wallman tries to point that a boundary occurs only as a reaction of one system to another. Thus it has two sides, and therefore two kinds of meaning. The first is structural or organisational. A social boundary 'marks the edge of a social system, the *interface* between that system and one of those contiguous upon it' (Wallman,1978:206). Its second meaning refers to how it marks members off from non-members and acts as the basis by which each can be identified. For Wallman, all social boundaries are characterised by an interface line between inside and outside, as well as by an identity line

between 'us' and 'them'. 'The *interface element* marks a change in what goes on. The *identity element* marks the significance given to that change and expresses the participants' relation to it' (Wallman,1978:207). Any social boundary, she argues, must be seen as a consequence of the various possible relationships between identity and interface on both sides of itself.

As it can be seen in Walman's analysis, boundary making involves both self-ascription and ascription by others. In this process, external factors are effective as well as internal structures with wider structures such as class and the state (Hastings & Wilson,1999:25). Besides, power relations should be considered in constructing categorisations among groups.

In the light of the points discussed above, the paper tries to analyse the boundaries between ethno-religious groups in the city focusing on the distinction 'urban-rural' which generally divides the people of Mardin into two categories.

2. THE NETWORK OF SOCIO-CULTURAL BOUNDARIES IN MARDIN

Socio-cultural boundaries are symbolic constructed by the people in their interactions with others from whom they wish to distinguish themselves. Therefore, they are related to social organisation. Until recently the most prominent boundary between diverse groups in Mardin is the distinction between the urban and the rural which divides people into two general categories. The first group, the urban, has some negative attitudes to the second group because of the conviction 'it gives a superiority to live in the centre of the city and to have the patterns of city culture'. Obviously, this assumption is linked to social and economical power.

As used in Mardin, the terms of *bajari* (urban) and *gundi* (rural) have additional implications. These terms produced by the Kurdish residents of Mardin refer to the superiority of Muslim Arabs and Syriac Christians categorising them as *bajari*. A few Kurdish families who have lived in the centre and gained the codes of Arabic culture are also accepted in this category. On the other hand, the villager groups also are non-homogeneous. In fact, they are religiously and ethnically diverse groups; Muslim Arabs and Kurds, Syriac Christians and the Ezidis share the same social category as *gundi*, villagers.

This distinction brings along another dichotomy; outside and inside, which can be seen from two perspectives. From the Mardinites' perspective, it refers to spatial boundaries which have been constructed socio-culturally between the city centre and its rural areas. The dichotomy from the perspective of people who live outside of Mardin indicates spatial boundaries between Mardin and the other cities of

Turkey. Thus, all residents of Mardin from its urban and rural areas are seen as Mardinitie which means -‘the resident of Mardin’, where there no concern toward their ethnic-religious backgrounds.

The classification of *bajari* and *gundi* can also be observed among the local people of Midyat, a district of Mardin which has been seen as a centre that has its urban culture constructed by Syriac Christians. From their perspective, Midyat has its own inner and outer boundaries. Mardin is the outsider area of Midyat for the Midyaties even if its territorial borders are officially within this city. This outlook constructs two urban groups which can be collected in the category of *bajari*, the natives of Mardin and Midyat.

The complexity of who is the insider and who is the outsider in terms of urban and rural areas blurs the social schema in Mardin. These classifications have been consolidated by the policies of the Turkish Republic after the 1920s. The struggles of Turkification on multi-ethnic areas began after the Republic was established. During the Ottoman period, the people of Mardin were categorized under the title of *jamaat*, religious community. This system was named the term of *millet*, which means nation. The term *millet* refers to religious affiliation not ethnic background (Ozcosar,2008:38). In this system, every community was autonomous and represented by its religious organization. Therefore minority groups could speak their native languages and produce their own culture but had no rights to be in the political arena.

During the early stages of the Republic, local languages other than Turkish were prohibited in the public areas of Mardin (Aydin et all,2001:378) to constitute Turkish identity which is accepted as the umbrella of all ethnic identities in Turkey. The process of Turkification has produced conflicts between state and local groups, especially Kurds as well as among local groups. At the same time, it has supported the distinction between *bajari* and *gundi* which also defines who are included and who resist to be included into the new system.

The first group to embrace the Turkish identity is Arabs who believe that they are the representatives of Turks in the area. Benefiting from the closeness of state, they took place in official positions of government in the city. The second group who sought ways having good relations with the Turkish state is Syriac Christians. Both of these two groups in the city centre embraced the Turkish identity which is revealed in their conversations with the expression of ‘we are Turks, citizens of Turkey’.

The residents in rural areas faced some problems to participate in the city lifestyle because of language barrier during the early stages of the Republic. Speaking a local language in the centre of Mardin was prohibited with the struggle and enforcement of the mayor at the time, where officials charged local people who spoke their native language (Aydin et al,2001:379). Kurds, the largest rural community in the area, preferred to become distanced from the centre and thus city culture for this reason. Many residents of Mardin who were not educated and could not speak Turkish needed a mediator group to be in the centre. Arabs in the centre quickly filled this position and used it to strengthen their power. As a result, the convictions of 'Arabs are urban' and 'Kurds are villagers' was constructed.

Syriac Christians have not had a chance to have positions in the government of the city. In fact, they have not been eager to get involved in any sort of political issues until recently. Instead, as a strategy of this group, they have had good relations with both Turks and Arabs who became powerful groups in the area after the Republic. For this group, it is very important to be in the category of *bajari*. The Syrians in the centre prefer to speak Arabic and Turkish instead of their native language, Syriac which is a dialect of Aramaic. This preference can somewhat express their will to gain power via the Arabs' status. However, Midyat's Syrians have struggled to protect their powerful social status in the centre using their own language as well as Arabic, Turkish and Kurdish.

Except for a few families, Kurds have lived in rural areas where tribes have taken control. Their resistance to speak Turkish and thus their inclusion into the Turkish identity can be discussed along with their social status. They could not share power with the Arabs in the centre even though their population has been higher than other groups. The Kurds are a group who are most likely to have been most affected by discrimination in the area in respect to the classification of *bajari-gundi*. They were quickly isolated and stayed in the periphery for a long time due to their language barrier. The strong reaction of this group in political arena nowadays can be linked to their exclusion of power relations.

As a *gundi* group, the situation of the Ezidis is predictable in Mardin's social structure. Ethnically, they are accepted as Kurds but there are also other claims on their ethnic origin (Ozcosar,2008:258-259). While other groups have been labelled as either *bajari* or *gundi*, the Ezidis have been placed in the category of the villager. There may be a number of reasons for the isolation of the Ezidis. First of all, they are a closed group who are not eager to introduce themselves to others even though they have had ongoing relations with Kurdish tribes to most

likely develop relationship for security and to seek protection. Secondly, most Ezidis are not educated due to the rules of their religious cast system which allows only one group, 'Şexs' to be educated (Lescot, 2001, p. 79). Another reason may be that they did not officially exist until the late nineteenth century (Aydin et al,2001:306). Their religious identity was not recognised until *Tanzimat*, the political reforms made during the Ottoman State in 1839, because their religion is generally accepted as a deviant sect of Islam (Aydin et al,2001:305). Even today, the classification of their religion on their identification cards is marked and symbolised with the letter 'x', unknown. The letter 'x' reveals the uncertain situation of the Ezidis in the social structure.

Ethnic boundaries have become more observable by the effects of Kurdish nationalism since the impulsion of Kurds' demands on their ethnic identity and language has affected the other groups. The reflections of this development can clearly be seen among the Syriac Christians and the Mhallemis (Arabs) in Midyat who have been searching their ethnic backgrounds and trying to establish an ethnic identity.

2.1. The Institution of Marriage as a protector of boundaries

The institution of marriage can be seen the main protector of socio-cultural boundaries supported by religious beliefs. Communities in Mardin do not approve interreligious marriages between Muslim-Christian, Muslim-Ezidi, and Christian-Ezidi while people who are coming from same religious background can marry even though there are still some barriers, such as class or ethnic background. Even today Muslim groups show reaction to Kurd-Arab marriages but social sanctions are not strong. For Muslims, Muslim-non-Muslim marriages are acceptable only when a Muslim man wants to marry a Christian or an Ezidi woman. On the other hand, non-Muslims, Syriac Christians and the Ezidis, perceive this kind of marriage as a threat to their community boundaries when a man or woman wants to marry with a non-member person. If a Syriac or an Ezidi woman marries a Muslim man, they accept 'she is dead', out of the boundaries of community. Explicitly non-Muslim groups do not want to establish blood relation with Muslim groups but they have been constructing virtual kinships with them.

2.2. Interlacing boundaries: Siblinghood and the institution of *kirve*

Milk siblinghood is a type of kinship which is constructed by women in Mardin. Giving their breast milk to a Muslim or a Christian baby whether there is a need or not, they morally establish a system of kinship where milk siblings cannot marry with one another. Even a milk sibling's biological brother or sister cannot

marry with his or her milk sibling. In addition to this, marriage between the biological siblings of milk siblings is not permitted because they are also accepted religiously and ethically as siblings. Therefore, breast milk constructs a new kind kinship among the families. This practice obviously helps the aims of communities eliminating the chance of marriage for the young Muslim and Christians by reason of that milk siblinghood explicitly provides ethical concerns among groups. In any case, breast milk brings Muslim and Christians together constructing a moral system of kinship while blood remains a factor to distinguish between them.

Another virtual kinship is constructed via the institution of *kirvelik*. This institution builds a new kinship between the person who is circumcised and *kirve*, the person who beared the expenses of circumcision and their families even though there is not blood relation between them. *Kirve* is not only a part of an acknowledgement that is economically limited, but also is the person who additionally undertakes legal and social sanctions. He becomes much closer to the person circumcised and his family than their first degree relatives, can establish a new social lifelong relationship (Kolukirik and Sarac,2010:217).

Circumcision has been a way to establish close relations between groups. There are many examples of this virtual kinship between Muslims and the Ezidis in the area. These two groups sometimes chose the *kirve* of their son from Syriac Christians even though Syrians are not following this tradition. For all groups, this institution has some social obligations like the prohibition of marriage between the person who is circumcised and the daughters of *kirve*.

Needles to say these two virtual kinships blur the socio-cultural boundaries and constitute affiliations among groups in the area. However, both of these kinships seem to have double sided function. They serve as the protector of community boundaries prohibiting marriage between people who are connected with virtual kinship. On the other hand, they strengthen the social relations between diverse groups dismissing the tensions which are created by the ethnic and religious boundaries.

3. CONCLUSION

As is seen from the case of Mardin, boundaries are regarded as stable and durable. However, people are crossing them with the help of mediator institutions like siblinghood and *kirvelik*. But marriage remains as a resisting point of the boundaries which communities do not allow their members to cross. However,

the conviction of so-called 'fixed' boundaries helps the residents to identify themselves distinguishing from others.

Boundaries are the outcome of socio-cultural factors. In fact, boundary is a reality in itself in Mardin because of the border between Syria and Turkey which separates the residents of Mardin from their relatives in Syria. Mardinites seem to be familiar with both the symbolic and territorial aspects of the concept as a result of the distinction 'urban-rural'.

Consequently, every boundary between groups in Mardin would be seen as responds to internal and external pressures created by the existence of other groups and the effects of both local and national structures. It can be said that boundaries distinguish people from each other but, at the same time, they are helping communities to construct and protect their own identity.

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