I want to submit an abstract for:
Conference Presentation

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Keywords
Viniculture, Assyrian wine, Southeastern Turkey

Research Question
Examining the viniculture in Assyrian community in Turkey

Methods
Field survey was conducted and face to face interviews with the wine producers and the religious figures of the region were carried out.

Results
Viniculture has been essential part of the Anatolian culture. The Assyrian wine, which is still produced by using the traditional methods at homes, has important contributions to the Anatolian culture.

Abstract
The main subject of this study is viniculture of Assyrian community living in Mardin, which is located in Southeastern Anatolian region of Turkey. Theoretical part of the study is based on the secondary resources, such as articles, thesis, newspaper articles and conference papers. Besides, field survey was conducted and face to face interviews with the wine producers and the religious figures of the region were carried out.

The history of Mardin, which is one of the oldest cities of the upper Mesopotamia, dates back to 4500 B.C. Although the exact history of viniculture is not known, recent archeological excavations found that the viticulture dates back to the Neolithic period. Grape seeds found in Çayönü, Hallan Çemi and Körtik Hill archeological sites, which date back to 9000 B.C verify this argument (1). Furthermore, various wine glasses found in the Hirbemerdon Hill shows that wine making in the region can be traced back to 4000 B.C (Chalcolithic period) (2). Bunch of grape ornaments in the buildings constructed by using traditional stonework by the Assyrian masons show the importance of grapes and wine in the Assyrian culture. Grape caves found in the Nusaybin Merdis Marin ruins dating back to the Roman period, and the bunch of grape ornaments found in the seats of the Patriarch and the Bible preacher in the Church of Virgin Mary both indicate the importance of grapes in the region (3).

Excavations in 2011 that have been conducted at Çelibaba, located 10 kilometers west of Mardin and 2 kilometers south of Zinnar Vineyard, surfaced a wine production center that was carved into the rocks and consisted of 8 layers with 104 rock tanks. This large-scale of wine production at Çelibaba leads to the conclusion that an important share of the wine produced was exported. In fact, one of the monks in Mor Gabriel Monastery stated that wine and grape juice were transferred to Mosul with two pipelines. It is estimated that the current Iraq oil pipelines were built on the same location (4).

As an ancient viniculture center, Mardin currently holds an area of 28.513 ha of vineyards. With this area, the province is the fourth in terms of vineyard area that occupy 6% of the total vineyards in Turkey (5). In 2015, 158.500 tons of grapes were produced in Mardin, which amounted to 3.4% of Turkey’s total grape production (6).
The region of Zinnar constitutes the most important vineyard in Mardin. In the central district, and in all districts particularly Midyat, Savur, Mazıdağı, and Dargeçit viniculture is a significant economic activity. Although many grapes are grown in Mardin, the grape varieties are mainly produced are Mazrorna, Şire, Beyaz Atı, Siyah Atı, Zeyti, Kerküş, Uzun Kerküş, Yuvarlak Kerküş, Taylıf, Fistiki, Hilsik, Haseni, Kırifik, Suudi, Virdani, Zeynebi, Sıirtlı, Öküzgözü, and Boğazkere. These grapes are used for producing goods such as pekmez, churchkhela or raisins. In 2009, 703 tons of wine were produced from an area of 2100 decares. Grapes for wine production are mainly cultivated in the district of Ömerli (8).

The Assyrian community, which has traditionally continued wine production and which is the main subject of this study, is a Christian community that has been living in Anatolia since the fourth century B.C. There are different opinions on the origins of the Assyrians. According to an opinion, the origin of the Assyrians can be traced back to the ancient Assyrian Empire and to other Mesopotamian people who coalesced with them.. Others believe that the Assyrians are the same community with the Aramis (9). Today, the term “Assyrian” refers to a Christian community and followers of the church, whose members are from different races (10). Historical records indicate that the Aramis first arose in Eastern Syria in the 14th century B.C. (11). Today, the Assyrians, estimated at five million members, live in the countries of Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and India (12).

Today in Turkey, Assyrians live in the city center, districts, and villages of Mardin intensively. Until the 1970s, nearly 50 thousand Assyrians primarily lived in the Southeast Anatolian region. However, due to terror and security problems, the Assyrian population in Turkey migrated. Today, there are approximately 35,000 Assyrians in Turkey with 4000 living in Southeastern Anatolia region and about 31,000 living in Istanbul (13).

The story of Assyrian viniculture started in Mesopotamia, which was the birth place of the art of vineyards and wine making. The remains of Vitis Vinifera and Sativa grape seeds found in the excavations in Mesopotamian settlement layers show that grape production has been a historical activity in Turabdin region (Midyat plateau) which is located in Northern Mesopotamia. The roots of the ancient semitic Christian Assyrian community currently living in Middle East can be traced back to the Aramis and the Assyrians have been producing wine for centuries in the region through by contributing their own experience to the soil and climatic conditions of Turabdin region, which is appropriate for viticulture (14).

Up until the big wave of migration of the Assyrians in the 1970s to Istanbul and to other big cities in the world, the community continued to widely engaged in grape growing activity, especially in Midyat and Adıyaman. As an extension of their interest in grape growing, wine production was developed in the Assyrian community. However, following their migration in the 1970s, their vineyards became idle. Today, traditional winemaking is conducted by the remaining 4,000 Assyrians, who live in Mardin and Midyat and neighboring villages. Home-made wines that have been traditionally serviced to the guests still occupy an important place in Mardin and Midyat. Upon the opening of the wineries primarily with the Shiluh factory in Midyat, the Assyrian wines gained commercial importance.

Wine holds an important place in Assyrian culture. According to the Christian belief, Jesus turned water into wine and in the last supper, Jesus and the apostles drank wine and ate bread. Wine in Christian belief is a metaphor for the blood of Jesus. The Christians consume wine and bread in the memory of Jesus. During the religious ceremonies in Church, bread is blessed with wine and the people believe that they will reach to salvation when they consume this bread and wine as it is believed Jesus sacrificed himself for his followers. Within this context, Mor Gabriel (Deyr-el-Umur) and Deyrul-Zafaran Monasteries, located in Midyat, continue to produce wine in order to consume in religious ceremonies (15).

The abovementioned factory in Mardin produces Assyrian wine. Combining hundreds of years of Assyrian wine making techniques with modern techniques, the Shiluh Assyrian winery, which was opened in 2008 in Midyat and has an annual capacity of 200,000 bottles of wine, produces red wine from the grape varieties of Öküzgözü and Boğazkere (which is locally known as Hınvekome) that are grown in Elazığ, Diyarbakır and Mardin, and white wine by using Kerküş and Mazrorna grape varieties that are grown in Turabdin region. The winery has a wine tasting house and sells the products via Internet (16).

It is estimated that the Assyrian community who lives in the district of Midyat produces nearly 50,000 liters of wine annually (17). Women play the central role in home-made wine production. Our field research demonstrates that primarily the women make wine in their houses while the is in charge of selling them in shops in Midyat and Mardin. Besides, various families sell their wine via Internet. However, Ayhan Gürhan, a church officer in Midyat, stated that the number of houses producing wine declined as a consequence of the governmental policy against alcohol consumption. Nevertheless, the Assyrian Christians continue to produce wine and drink wine after dinners. They prefer wine particularly for the easy digest of the heavy Assyrian foods. Gürhan further addressed that the Armenians living in the region had also been good at wine making before they departed. However, the policies
against the minorities have led these local communities to migrate. According to Gürhan, the wine which is produced in the region is quite special. Their unique taste is related with the grape varieties that are harvested in the region and making techniques at home. However, Gürhan stresses that the winemaking is under threat due to climate change, political events, and the lack of information about winemaking among the farmers. Due to this, state support is required.

Gabriel Akyüz, archpriest of the Kirklar Church states that the winemaking is developing in Mardin in general and the Assyrians in Turabdin region have started to produce more wines than they consume as homemade wine became more commercialized. According to Akyüz, when compared to past winemaking still continues without losing its importance. Although wine is forbidden in Islam, it holds an important place for the Assyrian community. However, the excessive consumption of wine is forbidden. To illustrate, a glass of wine after the dinner is permitted whereas a bottle of wine is forbidden because of the intoxication.

Yuhanna Aktaş, the owner of the Shiluh Assyrian Winery, told that the all Assyrian farmers have at least five or six vines for making wines. According to Aktaş, wine is not a drink, rather an indispensable part of the Assyrian culture: "Wine is holy for the Christians and the equivalent of zamzam water in Islam. The language of the Assyrian wine is Syriac and its religion is Christianity. Therefore, Assyrian wine is Assyrian and is originated from the region of Mardin." Aktaş told that they faced with various problems before opening the winery and the producers were reluctant to sell their grapes since it would be used in winemaking. For Aktaş, conservative and religious attitudes of the existing government is the prime reason behind the problems whom the wine producers faced today.

According to Aktaş, the most important characteristics of Assyrian wine are its being 100 percent natural and organic. The vines in the region are nearly 200 or 300 years old. No additives are used in the winemaking. Wines are produced with thousands of years tradition, that is, the Assyrian wine is produced in the same way instructed in holy texts, such as the Quran, New Bible and the Torah. Furthermore, the Assyrian wine is currently exported to Germany and Sweden where a noticeable Assyrian population live.

Yusuf Altınısik, who has been producing wine for many years, states that the commercialization of Assyrian wine badly affects its quality.

Winemaking and viniculture have been essential parts of the Anatolian culture. In this context, the Assyrian wine, which is still produced by using the traditional methods at homes, has important contributions to the Anatolian culture. This cultural richness, wine tasting and Assyrian wine are important motivational factors for the tourists to visit Mardin. However, strict regulations on the production of alcoholic beverages, religious restrictions, conservative lifestyle, and the immigration of the Assyrian community constitute serious threats to the sustainability of the Assyrian viniculture. Consequently, all stakeholders should pay considerable attention to the sustainability of the Assyrian wine culture as this culture belongs not merely to the Assyrian Christians, but to the entire Anatolian culture as well.

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WINEMAKING: A TRADITION IN ASSYRIAN COMMUNITY IN MARDIN, TURKEY

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3 Regulations permit the Turkish citizens to produce fermented alcoholic beverages in their homes, yet with the limit of 350 liters, and without commercial purpose.
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(4) MacDonald, Joan (2012), Ibid


