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# ETHNIC PERSPECTIVE IN EPICS: THE CASE OF HASAN BULLILER

*Ismail Bozkurt*

Owing to its strategic position, Cyprus has repeatedly changed hands between dominant powers in the Eastern Mediterranean: Egyptians, Hittites, Akkadians, Assyrians, Persians, Romans, Arabs, Italians, Ottomans and the British are but some examples.

Under Ottoman rule, in 1571 was introduced the “Millet” system in Cyprus: members of different religions were considered a single “Millet” ‘nation’ and each Millet had its own religious and educational institutions as well as civil law; the result could be considered self-government (Çevikel 1997). When Cyprus became under the British rule in 1878, the Millet system was maintained with some modifications. It was in these circumstances that the events underlying the epic of the Hasanbullis took place (Gürkan NA; İsmailoğlu NA): Turkish Cypriot brothers nicknamed Bulli hid in the mountains in 1887–1888 and 1894–1896 as they believed they were unjustly accused and sentenced. During that time they committed several crimes. Despite this, both Turkish and Greek Cypriots regarded the Hasanbulli brothers positively as people fighting against the regime. Ten to fifteen years later, two epics in Turkish and Greek, plus various publications and works of art based on the event were written (see e.g. Çapura NA; Kareklas 1938; Machlouzarides 1973; Gelen 1973; İsmailoğlu NA; İslâmoğlu 1994; Serdar 1986; Yorgancıoğlu 1980: 100–102; Sayil 1988: 18; Fedai 1993: 1–7; Gökçeoğlu 1993; Gürkan NA; Lyssarides 1995: 11; Bozkurt 1996: 59–64; 1998; Cahit 1997; Sadikoğlu 1999: 34; 2000: 34). In these works the events were treated differently: Greek Cypriots depict the Hasanbullis as bandits while the Turkish appear to be brave heroes who rose against the British rule. The current article aims to analyse and discuss differences between these two approaches.

## THE CASE OF HASANBULLIS

In May 1887, at a small village in the impoverished region of Paphos, where the Turks and Greeks live in mixed communities, a Turkish

youngster Hasan Ahmet Bulli is unjustly accused of theft. False witnesses as well as his own quickness (which lead him to be nicknamed *Bulli*, 'bird' in Greek) play a role in the accusation. Once Hasan Ahmet Bulli is convicted, he arms himself and takes to the mountains. He wanders about in the mountains for 18 months, committing murders and fighting with the police. He is caught when he is sheltering at a house during a spell of malaria. He is sentenced to death but his punishment is then converted to life imprisonment.

Six years later, in 1894, Ahmet Hasan Bulli's brothers Kaymakam and Hüseyin Ahmet Bulli take to the mountains when accused of committing a murder after one Greek Cypriot is killed in a Turkish-Greek fight over a woman. With others joining them, they form a powerful gang and continue their activities at the mountains until 1896. In the meantime, the elder brother Hasan escapes from prison to join his brothers, but he is shot dead. In 1896, one of the brothers, Hüseyin is killed at a confrontation with the police; Mehmet and other members of the gang are captured and executed by hanging.

The Hasanbullis case considerably preoccupied the British administration in Cyprus and it eventually became a matter of prestige. It is obvious that both the Turkish and the Greek in Cyprus saw Hasanbullis as people who rose against the British administration: despite the fact that the British Colonial Regime offered rewards for their capture and enacted special legislation for it, and despite the security troops pursuing them and the use of hired informers, the Hasanbullis managed to live at the mountains for a long time. Unquestionably this was possible only thanks to people who protected, hid, supported, fed, and informed them of any danger (Gökçeoğlu 1993: 52; Gürkan NA; İsmailoğlu NA).

## **THE HASANBULLIS IN GREEK AND TURKISH EPICS**

Based on the events described above, two epics emerged at the beginning of the 20th century. The author of the Greek version of the epic was a Greek Cypriot folk poet named Hristodulos Çapura, whose composition consisted of 318 verses (translated into Turkish by Burhan Mahmudoglu). However, there is no consensus as to the identity of the author of the Turkish epic: there exist different texts

which vary between 390–398 verses. Below are outlined some basic differences between the epics in their treatment of the events they are based on.

Although the Greek epic describes Hasanbullis' unlawful activities in the mountains, it still underlines how clever, fast and dynamic they were:

*Hasanbullis Hasanbullis  
They used to fly like birds  
And they used to try a different costume everyday  
They used to be dressed like a Turk one day  
And like a Greek the next day.*

Characteristically to the Greek epic, the Hasanbullis are also depicted as 'bad bandits'. The Greek version depicts the kidnapping and group raping of a Turkish woman:

*She was sleeping with her husband, when  
She was forcefully taken away, and  
Almost her poor husband was killed.*

*They have their turns over her, one by one  
Who is going to ask about her, who is she going to complain to  
Blood is gushing from her like a fountain.*

The Turkish epic also contains cases of kidnapping women, but they are mentioned as ordinary events:

*They possess Feride that day  
  
They take away and kidnap the girls from there  
They forcefully steal Pembe Mulla.*

The same kind of differences are observable in the case of the kidnapping of the daughter of a priest. The Greek epic demonstrates that kidnapping as a monstrous act:

*Three insatiable monsters suddenly entered the house  
They took her away and spent the night somewhere else  
At an isolated sheep fold, at a remote cottage  
They almost killed her, and tore her breasts.*

The Turkish epic mentions the same as an ordinary incident:

*They also took away Theora.*

During the time the Hasanbullis were in the mountains, 14 people were murdered in the area. It is not known how many of these were actually killed by Hasanbullis, but as habitual everywhere in the world, accusations were directed at a well-known individual or gang in the region. The Greek epic places the entire blame of all the 14 murders on the shoulders of Hasanbullis:

*They have slain fourteen souls until now [---]*

[---]

*They used to fight savagely and no flying bird could escape from them.*

The Turkish epic also speaks of murders committed by Hasanbullis, but justifies them:

*This is a world where you reap what you sow*

[---]

*Here you are, the informer, one from me as well*

*They say 'Hüseysin' and tell on people*

*But they also go like this*

[---]

*Dwarf Yanni fell down on the ground, in full length*

*Here you are, informer, one from me as well.*

The Hasanbullis' bravery is clearly referred to in both Greek and Turkish epics. The Greek epic:

*They used to live in partnership and side by side – with life and death.*

[---]

*They were dressed in women's attires and went down to town one day*

*It was a matter of great courage. Had they been recognised*

*While they were walking around with an umbrella?*

The Turkish epic:

*I died but I did not surrender to the British.*

[---]

*It is not possible for us to leave this  
Even if the British will destroy us*

[---]

*Death is much better for me than this outrage*

[---]

*Bullis throw themselves into the fire*

[---]

*“Sari Zeybek” says that we stroll at the mountains  
We crush the heads of that Gendarmerie*

[---]

*Sergeant Mehmet, not in tens but even if you come in  
hundreds*

*We are the offspring of Bulli*

*Either we get rid of this soul by getting shot*

*Or we shoot and withdraw from this arena.*

[---]

*Hüseyin says, I prefer to die instead of surrendering.*

The Greek epic does not refer to the Hasanbullis' case as being a reaction or uprising against the British administration but depicts the Hasanbullis as savage bandits. However, the Turkish epic does contain verses concerning this:

*I died but I did not surrender to the British*

[---]

*It is not possible for us to leave this arena*

*Even if the British destroy us*

[---]

*Let the British hang me, pity on me*

*Death is much better for me than this outrage*

There is yet another clear distinction between the two epics. The Greek epic links the fatal end of Hasanbullis to a priest's curse:

*All this is the result of the curse of the priest*

On the other hand, the Turkish epic underscores their being Muslims and links their fatal end to the mercilessness of the British:

*Do not think that we are devils  
We are pure and honest Muslims.  
[---]  
They will hang us; there is no remedy at all  
They call them British  
They have no mercy at all.*

It is interesting to note that the word ‘British’ is used on seven separate occasions in the meaning of ‘the British Administration’.

## **THE HASANBULLIS AS SEEN TODAY**

Although more than a century has passed since, the Hasanbullis case has maintained its importance and appear in many publications. The bicomunal Republic of Cyprus established in 1960 collapsed in 1963, and following inner confrontations in the aftermath of Turkey’s military intervention in 1974, the island was physically divided into two. As a result, Turkish Cypriots were relocated to North Cyprus and Greek Cypriots to South Cyprus; in 1983, Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus was established. This has not only ended the intermixed way of life for the Turkish and Greek Cypriots but also kindered communication between them. Despite this, the Hasanbullis case has remained topical on both sides. A film shot in the Greek-controlled South Cyprus represents Hasanbullis as bandits and the *Cyprus Weekly*, an English-language Greek Cypriot weekly has compared Hasanbullis to *Jesse James*, the infamous American bandit (Lyssarides 1995).

On the other hand, in northern Cyprus, inhabited by Turkish Cypriots, in April 2000, the Hasanbullis case was employed in a dance performance “Narration with Dancing of the Hasanbullis Epic: A Spark That Shined 116 Years Ago”. The introduction of the booklet about the show notes that “the Hasanbullis Epic could be a spark at the outset of the Turkish Cypriot struggle” and that “the combative spirit herein was an indicator of the Turkish Cypriot people’s struggle for freedom in the years to come” (Çağdaş).

Turkish Cypriot writers who have written on the topic express the view that Turkish Cypriots’ freedom-seeking sentiments did not reconcile psychologically with the new administration (İsmailoğlu

NA: 5), that there was a sense of uprising against the ‘British Administration’ (Gökçeoğlu 1993: 52), and that the Turkish Cypriot people regarded the Hasan Bullis as brave men who rose against the foreign colonial regime is why they remained unsympathetic and against its bans, and therefore their activities at the mountains should be interpreted in terms of the “whipping of the people’s everlasting freedom sentiments” (Sayil 1988: 18).

In conclusion, there is a 180-degree difference between the Greek perspective regarding the events as banditry and the Turkish perspective that sees the case as an uprising. Despite the fact that during the events themselves both Turkish and Greek Cypriots saw the Hasanbulli brothers as people who rose against the regime and accommodated, hid, supported and fed them, later interpretations have become radically different and have stayed that way for over a century.

## Note

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