Yusuf Beğtaş – Guardian of Language, Cultural Bridgebuilder and Author of Inner Transformation

Valuing Our Intellectuals While They Are Still Alive

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Introduction

There is a recurring and problematic feature of our modern cultural history: we have often been better at appreciating our writers, teachers, intellectuals and community builders after their deaths than during their lifetimes. This may be described as a form of **delayed cultural recognition**. We often recognise the importance of our own thinkers only after their life's work has been completed, while during their active years we tend to approach them with greater reservation, fragmentation or criticism.

At the same time, there has sometimes been a tendency to attribute greater authority to outside researchers, writers and intellectuals than to our own. A foreign scholar writing about our people may receive greater recognition than a researcher or writer who is himself or herself part of the cultural environment being studied. This does not, of course, mean that outside scholars lack scientific or scholarly value. On the contrary, the external perspective can provide necessary distance, methodological scrutiny and new insights. Yet it also has its limitations.

Those who belong to the cultural environment being studied have access to other forms of knowledge: linguistic nuances, family and community structures, collective memories, symbols, religious references and experiences that are not always accessible through archival material or observation from the outside. **The insider and outsider perspectives should therefore not be placed in**

opposition to one another but should complement each other. A society needs both the critical perspective from outside and the experience-based understanding from within.

The problem arises when an internal perspective is automatically regarded as less credible simply because it comes from within the community. In such circumstances, a people risks developing an intellectual dependency in which others are granted interpretive authority over its own history, culture and identity.

A Possible Connection to Historical and Collective Trauma

One possible explanation for this attitude may be found in the historical experiences of persecution, mass violence, genocide, forced assimilation, displacement and prolonged marginalisation that have shaped generations of the Syriac-Assyrian people. Here, the concept of **cultural trauma** is relevant. Sociologist Jeffrey C. Alexander has shown how collective traumatic experiences can influence groups' collective identity, historical consciousness and ways of understanding themselves. Trauma, in this context, should not be understood solely as individual psychological damage, but also as a social and cultural process through which past catastrophes continue to influence how a group interprets its present and future.[1]

Research on intergenerational trauma has further shown that experiences such as genocide and collective persecution can affect later generations' perceptions of security, trust, threat and relationships with the outside world. Studies of other historically traumatised groups have identified long-term fear, mistrust and a kind of "survival orientation" as possible consequences of such experiences.[2] This does not mean that all members of a people are affected in the same way, nor would it be scientifically appropriate to reduce the behaviour of an entire society to trauma. Nevertheless, it provides a possible sociological framework for understanding why historically vulnerable groups may sometimes develop

weaker internal trust while simultaneously seeking legitimacy from external authorities.

For a people that has lived for long periods under the political, religious and cultural dominance of other states and majority populations, this can have particular consequences. When a community's own institutional infrastructure—schools, academic institutions, publishing houses, media, organisations and other knowledge environments—becomes weakened, intellectual authority may increasingly be sought outside the community itself.

This can, in turn, create a paradox: **we may be deeply concerned with what others say about us, while at the same time failing to listen sufficiently to those among us who have devoted their lives to understanding, documenting and developing our culture.**

It is therefore important that we begin to work through this historical experience by strengthening internal trust and creating a culture in which knowledge, education and intellectual work are valued while the people who produce them are still alive. Recognising our teachers, researchers, writers, linguists and cultural workers is not merely a matter of personal courtesy or politeness. It is part of a society's **cultural reproduction and institutional independence**.

Recognition during a person's lifetime can also create a positive feedback process. When intellectuals and cultural workers feel that their work is appreciated, they are given greater opportunities and motivation to continue. At the same time, younger generations gain role models who demonstrate that education, research, literature and cultural work are activities that sustain a society. In this way, recognition can contribute to **social capital, collective self-confidence and intergenerational continuity**.

It is against this background that Yusuf Beğtaş deserves particular attention. Highlighting his work while he is still active is not merely an acknowledgement

of an individual writer. It is also a way of recognising the importance of our own intellectual tradition and encouraging a culture in which our bearers of knowledge do not have to wait until after their deaths to be appreciated.

From Tur Abdin to the International Syriac Public Sphere

For several decades, Yusuf Beğtaş has emerged as an important voice within the modern Syriac (Suryoyo/Aramaic) cultural world. His work moves between literature, language, cultural philosophy, education and spiritual reflection. Through books, articles, lectures, interviews and digital platforms, he has worked to strengthen interest in the Syriac language, cultural heritage, historical consciousness and human formation.

His work is particularly significant because it combines **cultural preservation with intellectual and moral renewal**. He does not regard culture as a static inheritance that must merely be protected from change, but as something that must be understood, interpreted and developed in order to remain alive.

Karyo Hliso – A Cultural Project

A central expression of this work is the **Karyo Hliso** platform, where texts are published in Syriac, Turkish, English and Arabic. The website contains material on language, literature, history, culture, philosophy and human development. Begdas uses the platform not merely as a publishing forum but also as a kind of digital cultural archive.

His recurring reflections on language and culture demonstrate that he regards language as more than a means of communication. Language carries concepts, memories and patterns of interpretation inherited from previous generations. In an article on the semantic depth of the Syriac language, he emphasises precisely the importance of language as a carrier of historical and cultural content.[3]

Karyo Hliso thus provides an example of how digital media can be used to create new forms of cultural continuity. Older literary and linguistic heritage is

brought into a contemporary communication landscape in which texts can reach new generations and geographically dispersed communities.

The Central Ideas of His Writing

Despite the breadth of Beğtaş's work, several central themes recur throughout his writings.

The Survival of the Language

Beğtaş belongs to the cultural figures who actively work to strengthen the modern Syriac language. His writings address the importance of language for cultural identity and for the transmission of experience from one generation to the next. From his perspective, the weakening of a language is therefore not merely a linguistic problem but also a question of cultural continuity.

He has, among other things, emphasised that language and culture shape the human worldview, and that cultural and literary weakness has consequences extending far beyond language itself.[4]

Culture as Human Formation

Another central theme is the relationship between culture and human formation. Beğtaşs connects education, morality, self-knowledge and social responsibility. Culture therefore serves not only to preserve historical traditions but also to develop people's ability to live together with others.

Concepts such as responsibility, respect, awareness, humility and human dignity recur throughout his writings. This gives his understanding of culture a distinctly humanistic character: the value of a culture is measured not only by what a people has preserved from the past, but also by the kind of people and society that culture helps to shape.

Inner Transformation

The third recurring theme is human inner development. Beğtaş frequently writes about self-knowledge, humility, spiritual maturity, responsibility and moral development. This is particularly evident in his writings on Syriac mysticism, but it also appears throughout his articles on cultural philosophy.

His reflections on culture and inner transformation suggest that culture is not merely a collective marker of identity. It can also serve as a means of personal transformation. In this sense, he connects the Syriac intellectual tradition with contemporary questions concerning human responsibility, ethics and social life.

Major Works

Luscious Grain (2017)

Luscious Grain, published by Enheduanna Publishing in 2017, brings together essays and reflections addressing several of the themes that recur throughout Begdas's writing: identity, culture, history and human values.

Süryani Mistisizmi

In *Süryani Mistisizmi*, attention is directed towards the Syriac mystical tradition and its understanding of human spiritual development. The work addresses, among other subjects, self-knowledge, humility and spiritual discipline. A contemporary presentation of the book shows that it was already being used as part of Beğtaş's cultural and literary activities in 2022.[5]

Syriac Culture (2023)

In his work on Syriac culture, Beğtaş examines the historical development of Syriac civilisation and its cultural significance. In an English-language article published in 2023, he argues for the historical importance of Syriac culture in Mesopotamia and its role in intellectual and cultural contacts between different civilisations.[6]

Syriac Culture and Inner Transformation (2023)

This presentation develops one of the most characteristic features of Beğtaş's thought: the relationship between cultural heritage and personal transformation. The task of culture is not merely to preserve the past, but also to provide people with tools for self-reflection, responsibility and moral development.

A Modern Syriac Humanist

What makes Beğtaş particularly interesting from an intellectual-historical perspective is his ability to bring together several traditions. He draws inspiration from classical Syriac literature and the Christian tradition of the Christian East, while at the same time addressing contemporary questions concerning language, cultural heritage, education, human dignity and social development.

His writing should therefore not be reduced to an attempt to romanticise the past. On the contrary, it is characterised by an effort to make historical heritage relevant to the present. In this way, he can be regarded as a cultural mediator between generations: between classical Syriac literature and modern public life, between local cultural heritage and global communication, and between external cultural preservation and human inner development.

There is also a clear connection between his work and the broader question of how a small and historically vulnerable people can preserve its cultural continuity. A language survives not merely through grammars and dictionaries. It survives through people who write it, teach it, think through it and pass it on to the next generation.

In this respect, Beğtaş represents more than an individual writer. He is simultaneously a **language mediator, educator, cultural philosopher and bearer of an intellectual heritage**.

This is why it is important that his work be recognised now—not only in retrospect. If we want to break with the tradition in which our own intellectuals are discovered and celebrated only after their deaths, recognition must become part of our cultural life while these individuals are still writing, teaching, researching and contributing to society.

Appreciating a living writer does not mean that one must agree with every idea or accept every interpretation. On the contrary, genuine appreciation can coexist with critical dialogue. It is precisely by reading, discussing, questioning and further developing our own intellectual traditions that a society builds a mature public sphere.

For a people seeking to regain its cultural self-confidence, this is a central task. **We do not need less critical thinking, but more internal dialogue; not less scholarly scrutiny, but greater respect for those who devote their lives to knowledge; and not uncritical praise of our own, but a culture in which our own bearers of knowledge are given the opportunity to be heard and assessed according to the same serious standards as external authorities.**

Yusuf Beğtaş's work can therefore be understood not only as an individual body of writing but also as part of a larger process: the attempt to restore language, cultural memory, intellectual self-confidence and hope for the future.

Sources

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8. Izabela Sztompka et al., ‘Living in “survival mode”: Intergenerational transmission of trauma from the Holodomor genocide of 1932–1933 in Ukraine’, *Social Science & Medicine* 144 (2015), pp. 163–171. The study demonstrates how experiences of collective violence can have repercussions across generations, including fear and mistrust.