

A Strange Sect in Saloniki

THE Man in the Street has probably never heard of the Donmeh, yet they are a very real and actual people.

The Donmeh are a sect of cryptographic Jews, descendants of the followers of the cabalistic, visionary, and mystic Shabbethai Zebi, living mostly in Saloniki, formerly belonging to the Turk, and now annexed by Greece. After the death of the would-be Messiah, in 1687, his followers in Saloniki, under the leadership of his alleged reincarnation, Jacob Zebi Querido, formed a community which, following the example set by the founder, outwardly espoused Mohammedanism. The Turkish name of the sect, "Donmeh," applied to them by the Mohammedans, signifies "apostates"; the members call themselves "Maaminim," (believers,) "Haberim," (associates,) or "Ba'ale Milhamah," (warriors.)

The religion of the Donmeh is a mixture of Judaism and Islam, with some traces of Christianity. Although in secret observing certain Jewish rites, they in no way make common cause with the Jews, whom they call infidels. They are assiduous in visiting the mosque and in fasting during Ramadhan, and at intervals they even send one of their number on the "hajj" (pilgrimage) to Mecca.

The Donmeh are divided into three socially separated groups, the Ismirlis, or direct followers of Shabbethai Zebi of

Smyrna; the Ya'-Kubis, or followers of Jacob Querido, and the Kuniosis, or followers of Othman Baba, who lived in the eighteenth century. Formerly the members of these groups did not intermarry and celibacy was preferred. In recent times, however, the endeavor is to make mixed marriages.

They consider wedlock as sacred, and have a horror of divorce and polygamy. Women occupy with them a much higher position than ordinarily among Turks, but, in obedience to the custom of the country, they wear the "yashmak," (veil.) The men have two sets of names—a religious one, which they keep secret, and a secular one for purposes of commercial intercourse. Their rabbis, besides being well versed in Holy Scriptures, are proficient in the Kabalah, and understand Judaeo-Spanish, which they regard as a holy language. Neither the Ismirlis nor the Ya'-Kubis believe in the death of their respective saints, and they are always awaiting their return.

The number of Donmeh in Saloniki is estimated at from 5,000 to 15,000. They are all well-to-do, and are known for their honesty and charity, even toward those of other creeds. They are expert "Katibs," or writers, and have been employed as such in bazaars and in inferior Government positions. Some, for instance, the Turkish Minister of Finance, Djavid Bey, attained to great eminence.

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