

# KISTINOK A CHERISHED LANGUAGE

*Posted on May 28, 2010 by Keghart*



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Vahe H. Apelian, Columbus OH, 28 May 2010 Levon Der Bedrossian, our first nationally elected president, Catholicos of All Armenians Karekin I Sarkissian, who formerly occupied the throne of Cilician Catholicosate as well, Rev. Dr. Movses Janbazian, the Executive Director of the AMAA who spearheaded establishing the Armenian Missionary Association of America in Armenia, spoke a common language they had learned from their parents, *Kistinok*. 

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If my recollection serves me well, it was the Armenian Reporter that had noted that whenever the three met, they exchanged pleasantries in that language which literally means the language of the Christians. I am inclined to believe that their knowledge of this cherished dialect fostered among them a special camaraderie and bond that transcended all other considerations. There is a unique feeling of cherished ownership knowing that you have been entrusted with an ancient Armenian dialect, or language if you will, few others speak nowadays.

Dr. Avedis Injejikian, the prominent Kessabtsi doctor, notes in his study published in the third volume of Hagop Cholakian's exhaustive study of Kessab that the Armenians of the historical Antioch, which constituted the core of the famed Armenian Cilicia, called themselves *kistini*, i.e. Christians and the language they spoke, *Kistinok*. While the native Armenians understood *Kistinok*, there are nuances in the accent and therefore to further characterize *Kistinok*, Kessabtsis, call it also *Kesbetsnok*<sup>\*</sup>, i.e. the language spoken by the *Kesbetsek*<sup>\*\*</sup>, the people of Kessab; while the people of Mussa Dagħ refer to their dialect *Sividitsnok*<sup>\*\*</sup>. Consequently, Levon Der Bedrossian and Movses Janbazian having hailed from Moussa Dagħ, Catholicos Karekin I Sarkissian, having hailed from Kessab, would have spoken in their distinct accent and yet all three would have understood each other and enjoyed the precious legacy they have been entrusted with, *Kistinok*.

Speaking of Kessab, it is not known for sure when was it that it started being inhabited by the native Armenians. Greater Kessab consists of 12 villages each having been built around a spring. It also is not known when were these springs discovered that enabled and sustained life in this mountainous enclave which not in too far distant past was exclusively inhabited by Armenians. *Kistinok* is a conversational language. Hagop Cholakian, the eminent Kessabtsi scholar, has done much of the study of the language and preservation of folk stories, songs and sayings.

My paternal grandparents, Stepan and Sarah, were the sole Genocide survivors of their families. They spoke *Kistinok* with each other not only at home but also socially with their contemporaries. In fact it was with that dialect that they welcomed my father and my paternal uncle into this world and

raised them. My mother tells me that for the first generation of the Kessabtsi boys and girls, herself included, born to parents who had survived the genocide, speaking Armenian was not the norm, rather it was the mandate. In order to enforce speaking Armenian at school, the school had devised a system called "signal", which consisted of a note card kept by a teacher supervising the students during recess. The teacher would record the name of the student caught speaking *Kistinok* instead of Armenian for an appropriate punishment at the end of the day.

With the ensuing immigration of the Kessabtsis to the "four corners of the world" and with the repatriation, the language went along and in some families the *kistinok* remained the conversational language. Children born and raised in these families in far away places often time used it as a substitute for Armenian and some became very conversant in it. However, *kistinok* is endangered as fewer and fewer people speak it. I doubt that there are nowadays Kessabtsi families whose conversational language is in *Kistinok*. It is still spoken as a social testament and I understand that in kessab the young are making an effort to use it socially to make a statement and to preserve the language.

*Kistinok*, with its varied accents is a vivid example of the rich dialects that had evolved from coastal towns of historical Cilicia, to the plains of Van and Moush, to the mountain top of Sassoun that was destroyed due to the Genocide. With the disappearance of these dialects a rich folklore that had evolved over millennia simply got wiped out as well.

*Kistinok* is still alive, but endangered. I chose to believe that as long as there are *Kesbetsek*, *Kistinok* would be spoken. For those of the readers who would like to hear it sung, please check the attached video taken from some festivity at the Kessab Educational Association Center in Los Angeles. A Moussa Daghtsi sings it and its pronunciation is as authentic as it can get. The song is the famed kessabtsi song "Garmer Festan Hegoutz eh"(Dressed in Red Dress) and is accompanied by the traditional kessab circle dance. Enjoy!

## Note

\* Phonetically close to the way Dr. Injejian uses the words.

\*\* *Kesbetsek* is the plural for Kessabtsis in *Kistinok*. In singular it would be *Kesbetsa*.

