

HASDER: Despite government opposition — and even being labelled traitors — they've fought to safeguard Turkish Cypriot culture . . . and won the battle

It's been a long, hard struggle to protect their roots

AFTER the conflict of the 1960s, culminating in the 1974 war, Cyprus saw great movements of people between the two halves of the island. New orientation was badly needed, and people began looking forward and organising their lives, there was no time to look back. As Turkey had helped the people now living in North Cyprus, many turned to that country in the belief that their culture was the same. But others, such as Kani Kanol, thought differently.

"We are not like the Turks living in Turkey, we have our own Cypriot culture and character," says Mr Kanol, sitting in the Folk Art Institute that he was instrumental in establishing near Selimiya Mosque in central Lefkosa. "Our roots have been here for centuries, entwined with the Greek Cypriot community in our villages and towns and influenced by many other cultures." In those early post-war days, a group of people got together who, proud of being Turkish Cypriot, posed the question "Where is our culture?" There was no archive of documents, books or photographs but, explains Mr Kanol, people remembered the dances of their youth, the village festivities, the musicians who played for weddings, be they Greek or Turkish Cypriot. Music and dance were common to both.

"The Folk Art Association came to life in 1977 and we started with folk dances," he recalls now. "It was high time for dancing, singing and making music again, dancing our old dances and playing our tunes after many years of enclosure. But our efforts were not well received. People, especially in the media and government, accused us of being pro-Greek, of being Greek lovers. Those dances were Greek dances, they said."

Just to oppose us, the municipalities were asked by the government to establish their own folk dance groups which would play Turkish music, dance Turkish dances. What were we to do?"

In the face of official hostility, the fledgling association was adamant for two years, but in the 1980s young people who had studied abroad came back to the island with fresh enthusiasm and took over the fight for their cultural heritage.

Kani Kanol formed a group of 15 volunteers who went out every weekend to do field research in the villages, recording what they saw and heard with music cameras, still photography and tape recorders. The villagers danced for them and they learned the dances themselves.

"There were dances for all occasions of village life, weddings, baptisms, births. Many of them you will know and may have seen, such as the Water Glass Dance, the Knife Dance, the Kerchief Dance and many more," he says. Today there are about 20

THE TRNC's Folk Arts Foundation (HASDER) is a champion in the fight to safeguard Turkish Cypriot culture — a battle that dates back to 1974 and continues to this day. HEIDI TRAUTMANN meets the foundation's president, Kani Kanol.



Kani Kanol

recorded, with the music published in one of the institute's periodicals.

"All our villagers confirmed that those were the dances and steps and that we could not deny that Greek and Turkish Cypriots had the same roots and shared many values. We cannot deny it — it's a fact."

"We copied the design of the costumes which we found in the villages and had them made, often by our mothers or relatives. Even here, the government commented, saying the black costume trousers were of Greek origin, which was not true. But we had proof to hand — a photo of then Turkish Cypriot leader Dr Küçük's father in black trousers!"

There were not only negative comments by officials and the media, but also pressure on members of the group — called the Folk Arts Foundation, or HASDER — who were

even treated as traitors, says Mr Kanol; they were denied jobs in government-controlled offices and support for their activities. They stuck to their guns, however, despite the difficulties. "We had no place for training, so we obtained the headmaster's permission to use the yard of the Maarif College. When we went on stage in the Masurizade Cinema building in Lefkosa, the audience confirmed again that, yes, those were our dances and they jumped up and gathered to perform them in the old, traditional way."

Slowly other organisations, private institutions and trade unions such as those representing teachers, began to pay attention to the efforts of HASDER, helping it to access proper stages, such as the Atatürk Cultural Centre. The then Mayor of Lefkosa, Mustafa Akinci, also helped by contributing money for them to buy material for costumes.

Just as things were starting to improve, however, came a fresh challenge. "International invitations arrived and we applied to the proper office for grants to enable us to take part, but we were refused and they sent their own governmental groups instead," says Mr Kanol. "We protested against this insult and collected 3,500 signatures on a petition, which we then presented to the government."

"After that things started to change slowly. But although opposition reduced, it did not disappear. Even the young daughter of one of the ministers revolted by telling her family she did not want to join the state folk dance group as she felt happier with us."

Things took a major turn for the better for HASDER in 1986. Mr Kanol recounts with a boyish smile. "A well-meaning Minister of Tourism gave us, after a long and exhaustive list of requests, a run in the old city [of Lefkosa] and we got all members, families and friends together to help clear the place of 15 lorry-loads of rubbish over nine months. We then renovated it with help from a builder sent by the Antiquities Department who repaired the roof. Although few thought it would ever happen, we finally had a place of our own to work in."



Another step taken. Now, after the disappointment of the early years, came the joy of having overcome the problems.

"Through our research in the South we came across a novel item that a Greek folklore group had produced a play including a Turkish Cypriot couple. That had brought them severe criticism by their media and accusations that they were Turk-lovers. It prompted us to get in touch with them and we decided to meet each other for a workshop — our first communal event.

"A great deal of bureaucratic work followed, but one day we were met by them at the only checkpoint there — the old Ledra Palace — and it was a great personal success."

Unfortunately, no further official permissions were granted, although they did meet the Greek Cypriot group

again when both were invited by the Goethe Institute to take part in a workshop at Dortmund University, together with 50 German students. For many, it seems normal for young people to meet on a multi-cultural basis, but for the HASDER members it was not. Nor did they have government support in their venture.

Nonetheless, the group was gaining much public attention and its membership was growing. In villages around Lefkosa new groups were formed under the leadership of former students, and HASDER spread like a spider's web throughout the North.

"Our first periodical, *Halkbilimi*, was published and we held the first of our annual symposia, at which we talked about our research and experiences. Also in 1986 we could accept our first invitation to an international folk dance festival," says Mr Kanol.

"Through our plays, poems and dances we started to rekindle memories of village life in the old days. I am very proud of the fact that we won numerous awards and prizes, both in Cyprus and abroad, especially for the authenticity of what we were doing."

At the same time came what Mr Kanol describes as a "real breakthrough", when with the help of the US Agency for International Development, United Nations Development Programme and United Nations Office for Project Services, "we were finally able to realise our dream of setting up our Folk Arts Institute — a further step in conserving our culture, for which we had so long tried in vain."

Despite the success, which has led to today's showcase of Turkish Cypriot arts and crafts, there remained sadness. "When we did research work in the early 1980s, we discovered the

immensely rich treasure of often neglected, half-destroyed tools in the villages and made records, including taking photographs. People often sat down and worked them for us."

"We organised an exhibition in 1983 of all that we had collected in the villages. There were so many tools, long forgotten, that we needed the help of Tuncer Başışkan, one of the archaeologists working at the Antiquities and Museums Department, to explain to the public what they had been used for."

The exhibition led HASDER with a dilemma: what to do with the old artefacts, including an old loom, once the display was over. "We applied for the use of an old building that was little used, but this was turned down. So, sadly, we had to return all the artefacts to their owners in the villages because we lacked a proper place to display them. We regretted that later . . ."

"We collected some of the old tools again when the Folk Arts Institute was established but it was very sad for us to realise that so many we had once had in our hands were gone."

Women were brought in from the villages and spent weeks and months training HASDER members in the traditional tools and handicrafts.

These young people then took over, working, producing and marketing goods, and training others while living off the income from their handicrafts.

Mr Kanol adds: "We set up workshops for all who wanted to learn, in all disciplines: wood carving, broodery, wicker work, lace and needle work and making traditional costumes."

The fruits of some of these craft workshops were seen late last year at an exhibition organised by the Anglo-

What is HASDER?

□ HASDER is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation. It was first registered as the Folk Arts Association in 1977 and as the Folk Arts Foundation on June 5, 2001. □ The Folk Arts Institute was established in 1999 with the financial support of USAID, UNDP and UNOPS.

□ A Cyprus Folklore Archive and Library, funded by USAID and UNDP through UNOPS, was established in 2002 with 5,000 books, 10,000 documents and a computer centre.

□ HASDER's Children's Club was founded in 1991, and includes folk dancing, a choir, painting and handicrafts, games and education in English, a theatre group and environmental activities.

□ The Youth Club was founded in 1987, offering music, dance workshops and bicultural work with the Greek Cypriot Youth Group.

□ HASDER runs workshops for all who want to learn about arts and crafts.

Turkish Association, at which displays of handwork by British students of HASDER showed how far the group has penetrated into society, reviving Turkish Cypriot culture in daily life.

Today, thanks to the tireless efforts of its founders, HASDER now has more than 1,000 members. "We are a democratic organisation," says Mr Kanol. "Every member, even the youngest, has a say in our round-table discussions, aims and we have solid plans for the future."

□ To learn more about HASDER, its campaign to preserve Turkish Cypriot culture and its craft workshops, visit the organisation's website at www.hasder.org.