

# ՀՆԱԳԻՏՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ ԵՎ ԱԶԳԱԳՐՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ ARCHAEOLOGY AND ETHNOGRAPHY

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## SYUNIK (ARMENIA) IN THE CONTEXT OF PERSPECTIVES OF ETHNOBOTANICAL STUDIES

**Key words:** Ethnobotany, plant foraging, traditional food, folk medicine, sustainable development, ecotourism, gastrotourism.

### **Introduction**

We propose to apply a multidisciplinary and holistic study of wild plants use and plant-related practices as cultural phenomena in Syunik province of Armenia<sup>1</sup>. Thus, the gap in the study of peoples' and plants' interactions as an ecological and cultural phenomenon will be filled. There are three main reasons that make the study of ethnobotany of Syunik of prime importance: 1) comparatively strong preservation of traditions, including those related to the use of wild plants, 2) biological diversity of plants, and 3) geographical and environmental diversity. The preserved traditions will allow to document more details about certain plant-

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related practices and correlate them with the environment and particular plant species. The high biological diversity in the region means more chances to “discover” only locally known useful features of particular plants (as a staple for food, pharmaceuticals, dye, etc.). The geographical-environmental diversity and the respective diversity of the vegetation types may serve as an opportunity to compare cultural differences in the plant-related practices in different environments within one region. Finally, it is possible to work with communities living in several different ecosystems, including steppe ecosystems (e.g. Sisian); deciduous forests (e.g. Kapan); and dry subtropical environments (e.g. Meghri). Other reasons such as the well-documented history of Syunik province, its popularity as a tourist destination and the danger that the region will be affected by the mining industry and climate change make the above-mentioned interdisciplinary studies in Syunik more topical.

Increasing communication with the outer world causes changes in the local habits including the plant-related aspects of the culture. In this context the current trends of changes in the exploitation of natural vegetal resources and interlinks with increasing tourism flows should be an object of a special attention. And finally, such study may propose recommendations for the sustainable use of natural vegetal resources in Syunik. This is becoming an acute problem as nowadays there is a commercialization trend in the foraging activity for wild plants in the region.

#### ***Problem Statement and Current State of Play***

The existence and activity of rural populations are traditionally strongly dependent on the vegetal resources of the area where they live. Exploitation of the natural vegetal resources, including the gathering, preparation and the utilization of plants for nutritional, medicinal, construction, spiritual and other purposes is an essential part of human culture. In fact, the traditional cuisine, folk medicine, religious beliefs, and many other aspects of people’s material and non-material culture were conditioned by the availability of certain vegetal resources. Along with the geography and the climate, the vegetation (steppes, forests, deserts, tropics, etc.) and the plant resources (food, fuel, drugs, etc.) played a key role in the formation of civilizations and conditioned formation of certain cultures and communities in different parts of the world. On the other hand, because of the exploitation of environmental resources during the last 10,000 years, especially

after the “Neolithic Revolution,” human communities affected the vegetation around them and changed it (e.g. through deforestation, land cultivation, desertification, etc.). Thus, it is necessary to apply a holistic and multidisciplinary approach to the study of the exploitation of natural resources as a cultural phenomenon. Nowadays, although peoples’ lives are not as strongly dependent on their surrounding natural resources as in earlier times, some communities still have a tight connection to nature, particularly to the vegetal resources in their region. This is evident especially in rural communities in Armenia, such as the ones in Syunik – the region of the proposed investigation.

Syunik (or Zangezour) is situated in the south of the Republic of Armenia. The total land area of Syunik is approximately 4,500 square km (which represents 15% of the total area of Armenia, making it the second-largest province in Armenia), and it has a population of approximately 140,000 people. Syunik region (‘marz’ in Armenian) has eight administrative sub-regions (municipalities): Gorayk, Sisian, Goris, Kapan, Tegh, Kajaran, Tatev and Meghri. The landscape of the region is mountainous (the Zangezur Mountains) and mainly covered with deciduous forests. The highest elevation is about 3,900 m, and the lowest one – 380 m, which creates evident vertical and climatic zonality starting from the dry subtropical zone close to the bed of the Araxes River (in Meghri) to the alpine zone on Mount Kaputjugh and Mount Gazanasar<sup>2</sup>. The region has a well-known and comparatively well-documented ethnography and history<sup>3</sup>. Although the other aspects of folklife, culture and history of this peculiar region were thoroughly studied, the ethnobotanical (plant-related) part of the culture was left out of the research field of scholars, possibly because of the interdisciplinary approach it required.

Armenians have deep-rooted traditions of the use of wild plants that have been documented since the Middle Ages<sup>4</sup>. The earliest known manuscripts and publications, where information about the medicinal and aromatic plants and their useful features are documented, belong to Eznik of Kolb, a fifth-century Armenian Christian writer, Mkhitar Heratsi, a twelfth-century Armenian physician, and

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<sup>2</sup> Հայաստանի ազգային ատլաս, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> e.g. Григоров 1891, Լիսիցյան 1969, Օրբելյան 1986.

<sup>4</sup> Априкян 1981; see Степанян-Гандилян (2014) for detailed literature review.

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Amirdovlat Amasiatsi, a fifteenth-century Armenian physician and writer<sup>5</sup>. In the modern times, there have been many popular and scientific articles published on the useful features of the wild plants of Armenia<sup>6</sup>. However, the information reported in many of them represents just a list of wild plants with a description of the habitat and common useful features (often taken from foreign sources and unknown to the locals), while the names of plants, their use, importance and role in the life of the local communities often vary from region to region. The information in some of those publications is often gathered from (or repeats) other publications and does not represent scientific novelty. In other cases, the studies lack either biological or ethnographical background, or sources of information and methodology, and, thus, are incomplete. The most frequent situation we have with earlier ethnobotanical publications is the following; many ethnographers have touched upon the economic, medicinal and spiritual practices, involving plants in Armenia<sup>7</sup>. However, they gathered and published information about plants ethnotaxa (just folk names) without any biological and ecological background. Similarly, there have been attempts to make ethnobotanical observations by botanists<sup>8</sup>. These publications, on the other hand, lack the necessary ethnographic and cultural bases and often represent just simple notes about the useful features of certain botanical taxa. As a result, we have incomplete pieces of information that cannot even be correlated with an acceptable degree of confidence. The main problems include, but are not limited to, the following: for the ethnographic publications, we do not know to which plants exactly the ethnographers refer, and there is no information about the impact of anthropological factors on the ecology of the plants. For the botany publications, they include practically no information about the details, regional specifics, and variations for the uses, folk names, importance, origin of

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<sup>5</sup> Ամիրդովլաթ Ամասիացի [1482] 1926, [1469] 1940, Վարդանյան 1999, Vardanian 2000; Հարությունյան 1990, etc.

<sup>6</sup> Петров 1940, Гроссгейм 1952, Золотницкая 1958, 1965, Լիսիցյան 1969, Թորոսյան 1983, Априкян 1981, Հարությունյան 1990, Vardanian 1999, Վարդանյան 2000, Rivera et al. 2011, Балоян, Балаян 2013, Ծատուրյան, Գևորգյան 2007, 2014, Bussmann 2017, etc.

<sup>7</sup> Բդոյան 1972, Լիսիցյան 1969, Аристова 1990, Հոբոսյան 2007, and many others.

<sup>8</sup> Ярошенко 1941, Ապրիկյան 1972, 1981, Թորոսյան 1983, Մելքումյան 1991, Թամանյան 1999, Ղանդիլյան, Բարսեղյան 1999, Ծատուրյան, Գևորգյան 2007, Տեր-Ոսկանյան 2007, etc.

knowledge/practice, cultural and ethnic attribution, recipes (food) and doses (remedies) and many other aspects of the plants' uses. For the last group, the situation is even worse, when it concerns the non-practical use of plants such as the spiritual importance and uses in religious and household rituals, as biologists usually focus on the biological characteristics of plants, and mostly pay little attention to their sociological characteristics or cultural uses.

Traditional ethnobotanical knowledge is at risk in Armenia, just as in the rest of the world, and is gradually fading away because of migration, urbanization, modernization, as well as competition with modern cuisine, conventional medicine, techniques and other innovations. A lot of information, regarding the ethnobotanical knowledge and traditions of the Armenians has been lost during the Soviet period because this field did not receive due scientific attention, and a considerable amount of data was not recorded or preserved. Given that in the era of modernization traditional knowledge is increasingly fading away, urgent steps ought to be taken in order to study, record and publish this information. Otherwise, in the near future researchers will have to satisfy themselves with mere guesses and suppositions or put our hopes into the imperfect hands of archaeology and archaeobotany.

### ***Main Aims and Objectives***

The main goals of ethnobotanical study is the investigation, documentation, preservation and popularization of the traditional knowledge, skills and experience related to the use of natural plant resources, as well as study of changes and innovations in the abovementioned spheres. As a part of the Armenian cultural heritage, traditional ethnobotanical knowledge needs protection. The protection first of all assumes at least documentation of the knowledge and the relevant practices. There are extremely few ethnobotanical studies regarding the Armenian ethnos and the people living in Armenia in general. The region of Syunik is not an exception; despite its rich traditions and potential for ethnobotanical studies, it has never been investigated.

Our preliminary studies<sup>9</sup> (2017–2021) attest that the population of Syunik uses at least several plants for nutritive and medicinal purposes that are unknown in other regions of Armenia and to the scientific community. Our aim is to record and publish these “new and unknown” useful plants and, thus, complement our

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<sup>9</sup> **Hovsepyan et al.** 2019.

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knowledge, regarding edible and medicinal plants. In the light of population growth on Earth, discovery (for science) of unknown or only locally-known edible plants is an important task for complementing the list of potential crops for the future. The same concerns the tea-plants, medicinal plants and plants with other practical uses. As our research participants often attest, those plants may heal them or prevent their health problems in a better way than it was possible to do using conventional drugs. The above-mentioned demonstrates the importance of researching and recording the biodiversity of useful local plants. The study and record of plant-related folk practices is the axial direction and goal of our investigations. Ethnographic investigation and records, that we conduct, have irreplaceable importance not only for the documentation of the remnants of traditional folk practices related to foods, folk medicine, etc., but also will help other social-cultural anthropologists to understand the current processes in the community and the origins of the present situations and processes.

As some places in Syunik are currently amongst the most popular tourist destinations in Armenia, we also study the influence of tourism on the plant-related practices in this community. Even short visits and preliminary observations confirm that the cultural traditions are fading and ethnobotanical knowledge is transforming. For example, the role of local restaurants and the folk markets (herbal markets) (e.g. near Tatev monastery) in this process is evident and we aim to pay special attention to the study of this phenomenon<sup>10</sup>.

### ***Methodology***

Taking into account the interdisciplinary nature of the ethnobotanical research, combined methodology of ethnographic, botanical and ecological methods should be implemented for the research tasks. There are widely used guidelines and international regulations in the field of ethnobiology<sup>11</sup> that may be used in the field.

The primary goal of the ethnographic methodology in the context of ethnobotanical studies is to record folk knowledge, practices and skills on the use of wild plants. It, in turn, involves the use of various tools:

❖ Literature analysis – to visualize the historical and traditional coverage of the phenomena to be explored through existing publications;

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<sup>10</sup> Hovsepyan et al. 2019.

<sup>11</sup> International Society of Ethnobiology Code of Ethics 2008, Winick et al 2016, etc.

- ❖ Qualitative research tools – in-depth interviews for the purpose of detailed and dense registration of knowledge and skills of the key experience holders;
- ❖ Use of semi-structured questionnaires – to ensure a representative coverage of the local population, regarding the use of plants.

The information recorded as a result of in-depth interviews and semi-structured questionnaires during ethnographic fieldwork may be analyzed by the method of generalization, in comparison with the information obtained as a result of the application of the botanical method.

The application of the botanical method aims to identify the used species, then record the connection of various species with folk practices, and, in general, allow the connection of the ethnographic material with specific biological species. This approach supposes the collection and identification of plant samples in parallel with and linked to the ethnographic investigation. The aim of the ecological method is to register human-plant interactions as an example of ecological relations; it may be done through field ecological observations combined with ethnographic works and further analysis.

The interviews are being transcribed and then analyzed according to the main thematic groups: foods, drinks, folk medicine, plant gathering, fuel, traditions, tourism, prospects for sustainable development, etc. The questionnaires are developed by presenting quantitative data to ensure the demographic representation of the data on the above-mentioned thematic groups.

In addition, social network platforms on the Internet are used. For example, a Facebook page was created to be used for data collection (pictures, recipes, stories, ecological calendars) and completion of the users' short surveys.

### ***Expected Results and Discussion***

#### ***What Ethnobotany May Study***

We study the traditional knowledge about the foraging, preparation and use of wild plants, the economic, socio-cultural and ecological aspects of these practices, the reasons and mechanisms for their change, the emergence of innovations and new knowledge. The following aspects of the use of natural plant resources in Syunik region are our study targets:

- Gathering of plants as an economic, socio-cultural and ecological phenomenon,

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- Traditional wild plant-based dishes, spices and drinks (teas, alcoholic beverages, syrups),
- Traditions and new phenomena in local folk medicine,
- Wild plants as a source of various dyes, plants for body care and cosmetics, aesthetic and decorative importance of wild plants,
- Use of wild plants as fuel and fodder, other uses,
- Plants- and agriculture-related rituals and beliefs, sacred trees,
- New sources for pharmaceuticals,
- Future crops,
- Gastrotourism and ecotourism,
- Sustainable use of natural plant resources.

#### ***Ethnobotanical Research Plan***

We carry out the proposed research at the following main stages:

1. Collection of published and archival materials related to the topic of the project,
2. Preparation for the research,
3. Fieldwork,
4. Processing, analysis, interpretation of the published, archival as well as the ethnographic, botanical, and ecological data documented by us.
5. Preparation and implementation of publications and presentations at conferences.

*Here are the above-mentioned steps in details.*

##### ***1) Collection of references***

As far as we know, there are no complete published or archival materials related to the useful plants of Syunik. However, some information about useful plants or the use of plants in the region can be found in many scientific publications on ethnography and botany, as well as on popular print sources and on the Internet, including social networks, such as the Facebook, etc. Our team is working at libraries, archives, and on the Internet, and retrieving information on all types of wild plant uses in Syunik, which will be further processed and presented in conjunction with the results of our ongoing research. However, the sources mentioned above cannot give a complete and systematic picture of any side of the use of plants in Syunik, so we collect and document the necessary data through interdisciplinary ethnographic field research.



*2) Research preparation*

The second stage of our work was the preparation for the research. Although we had the vision of our work before the commence of our studies, it was necessary to make some structural changes, corrections, and adjustments, depending on the analysis of the data collected at the first stage of the research. In particular, it is often necessary to revise the basic research questions, in-depth interview questions, questionnaire for the preparation of the database, database structure, the selection of communities, fieldwork seasons, etc. The work described at this stage will be carried out before each fieldwork.

*3) Fieldwork*

We are conducting the fieldwork throughout the whole research period. Interdisciplinary ethnographic investigations are carried out during the fieldwork, combining ethnography with botanical and ecological research. We try to be in most of Syunik villages, but some villages, where there is almost no population or no elderly people or the residents are not locals, are bypassed. In that case, additional work in a respective amount is being done in other rural communities, where the potential for ethnobotanical research is greater. It is advisable to make the choice or preference of certain rural communities only while working in the region when we will get acquainted with the real situation right on the spot. We mainly conduct the research among the rural population, because the rural population is more involved in plant gathering and is generally more involved in plant-related activities than the people living in urban areas. We also conduct in-depth interviews for testing purposes among the population, residing in towns (at least several interviews in each town) to get information and insights into rural-urban differences and the probable consumer preferences among town residents.

During the fieldwork, the botanical-ecological observations, investigations and the collection of plant samples are carried out in parallel with the ethnographic investigations. The plant samples are taken from the storages of village people or from the plants they show us in their yards or in the field. Each plant specimen we collect gets its serial number linked to the serial number of the interview. The location, the GPS coordinates of the plant, geographical details, vegetation type and other environmental details required for further environmental analysis are also recorded. The collected herbarium material is partly transferred to the Institute of Botany of NAS RA after the fieldwork.

*4) Research Data Processing*

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Each stage of the fieldwork is followed by the processing of the ethnographic, botanical, and ecological data we received. In this phase, in-depth interviews are transcribed, and the information recorded in the questionnaires are manually imported to the database. The collected botanical material is studied, identified, and prepared to be stored in the herbarium. The identification of the herbarium material is carried out mainly through using the multi-volume work "Flora of Armenia"<sup>12</sup>, based on the morphological and anatomical features of the collected plants. The herbarium material is stored under serial numbers as documentary material so that we can return to it, check, or compare it if necessary. A general description of certain ecological communities (phytocoenosis) is given according to field observations and results of the collected plant material identifications. After being collected in the database, the obtained ethnographic, botanical, and ecological data are compared, analyzed, and a professional interpretation of the studied situations, processes and issues are given, regarding all related scientific fields.

### *5) Summing up Research Data and Publication*

The work on preparation of the publications and conference presentations may begin when the fieldwork is completed at least in one community.

The ethnographic material we record as photos, audio and video is original and factual documentation in a database that is being electronically archived and will be preserved for the future generations as part of the Armenian cultural heritage.

### **Conclusions**

The last war (2020) in Artsakh and the current geo-political situation strengthen the importance of cultural studies in Syunik showing the Armenianness of this region and promoting them internationally. Meanwhile, promoting and presenting research in the humanities and social sciences outside Armenia is an acute challenge for the Armenian scientific society nowadays. We suggest that the research findings of scholars in the humanities and social sciences be also disseminated through interdisciplinary studies (such as ethnobotany) as natural sciences are more adapted to modern requirements for the publication in international periodicals. Moreover, interdisciplinary studies are often more popular, which makes them more demanded for publication in international and local periodicals meant for both professional and non-professional audiences.

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<sup>12</sup> Флора Армении, т. 1–11, 1954–2009.

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**ՍՅՈՒՆԻՔԸ ԷԹՆՈԲՈՒՍԱԲԱՆԱԿԱՆ  
ՈՒՍՈՒՄՆԱՍԻՐՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՆԵՐԻ ՀԵՌԱՆԿԱՐՆԵՐԻ  
ՀԱՄԱՏԵՔՍՈՒՄ**

ՀՈՎՍԵՓՅԱՆ Ռ.

**Ամփոփում**

***Քանայի բառեր***<sup>1</sup> էթնոբուսաբանություն, բուսահավաքչություն, ավանդական սնունդ, ժողովրդական բժշկություն, կայուն զարգացում, էկոտուրիզմ, գաստրոտուրիզմ:

Սյունիքի վայրի բույսերին առնչվող ավանդույթների և մերօրյա գործընթացների միջմասնագիտական հետազոտությունը թույլ է տալիս մանրամասն ազգագրական տեղեկություններ փաստագրել և դրանք կապել շրջակա միջավայրի ու կոնկրետ կենսաբանական տեսակների հետ: Սյունիքի աշխարհագրական-բնակլիմայական պայմանների և բուսական աշխարհի բազմազանությունը հնարավորություն է տալիս «հայտնաբերել» ու փաստագրել տարածաշրջանից դուրս և գիտական հանրությանն անհայտ օգտակար բույսեր, ինչպես նաև համեմատել շրջանի տարբեր էկոաշխարհագրական միջավայրերում բույսերին առնչվող մշակութային տարբերությունները: Ծառանում են բնական բուսական ռեսուրսների շահագործման փոփոխությունների, նաև ընթացիկ միտումների ուսումնասիրության խնդիրները՝ դրանց վրա զբոսաշրջության ազդեցության հաշվառմամբ հանդերձ: Այնուհետև կարելի է առաջարկել որոշակի գաղափարներ և ծրագրեր՝ Սյունիքում բնական բուսական պաշարների կայուն օգտագործման վերաբերյալ: Վերջինս սուր խնդիր է դառնում, քանի որ ներկայումս տարածաշրջանում որոշակիորեն զգացվում է վայրի բույսերի հավաքչության առևտրայնացման միտում:

## СЮНИК (АРМЕНИЯ) В КОНТЕКСТЕ ПЕРСПЕКТИВ ЭТНОБОТАНИЧЕСКИХ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЙ

ОВСЕПЯН Р.

### Резюме

**Ключевые слова:** этноботаника, собирательство растений, традиционная еда, народная медицина, стабильное развитие, экотуризм, гастротуризм.

Междисциплинарные исследования традиций и современных процессов, связанных с дикими растениями провинции Сюник в Армении, позволяют документировать подробные этнографические данные, связать их с окружающей средой и конкретными биологическими видами. Разнообразие географических и климатических условий и флоры Сюника дает возможность выявить и документировать полезные растения, неизвестные за пределами региона и в том числе научному сообществу, а также сравнить связанные с растениями культурные различия в разных эколого-географических средах самой провинции. Мы планируем изучить также современные тенденции в использовании природных растительных ресурсов и уделить особое внимание влиянию туризма на них. В результате исследования мы можем предложить некоторые идеи и планы по стабильному использованию природных растительных ресурсов в Сюнике. Последнее становится острой проблемой, поскольку в настоящее время в регионе наблюдается тенденция коммерциализации деятельности по добыче диких растений.