
ARMENOLOGICAL HERITAGE



M. Abeghyan was one of the classics of Armenian philology. His fundamental studies are devoted to Armenian literature, language, lexicography and oral tradition.

The small passage from his study first published in German in 1899 (*Der armenische Volksglaube*, Leipzig; see Manuk Abeghyan, *Studies*. Vol.I, Yerevan, 1966, pp.29-32 [in Armenian]) deals with the religious beliefs of ancient Armenia.

Primary beliefs

The Iranian influence was solid also in the sphere of religious beliefs and cult. The names of some Armenian gods bear Iranian names, such as Aramazd, Anahit, Vahagn, Mihr, Tir. From Persians had passed to Armenians also some beliefs in regard to good and evil spirits, such as *hreshtak*, *dev*, *vishap*, *shahapet*, *parik*, etc.¹

In the sphere of religion also the Assyrians also had an impact. Their deities Barshamin, Nane, Astghik were borrowed by Armenians which were worshiped mainly in the south-western part of Armenia. The word *qurm* is of Syriac origin.

But that pantheon, the place of gods, is a result of comparatively later development. Primarily among Armenians, like in all patriarchal tribal societies, existed dark ideas in regard to the outer world and the nature of a man. In that primary worldview and religion we first of all find the belief of soul, a naïve understanding of a spirit who governs the body. With this is closely related animism which attributes a human psychology to all things and natural phenomena, i.e. people believe that they had soul and each one appears by its separate soul. Later, after the organization of tribal society with this belief was connected the cult of nature, deification of those forces on which well-being of the people depends. The deities of the sun, thunder and others were worshipped in the form of gifts, sacrifices, and rituals. Among them special place was given to the cult of ancestors – chieftains of the tribe, community, patriarch, one form of which was totemism, the worship of a totem (some sacred item, for example, an animal – bear, wolf, snake, or a plant, natural phenomena – wind, thunder etc., whom the worshipers regard as their ancestors and bear its name). Sometimes with the worship of a totem was connected also the cult of zoomorphic spirits and deities.

Naturally, this primary religion, like the tribal everyday life, did not cease to exist at once, some of its peculiarities continue to exist for a long time. Their traces are found not only during the feudal society, in our legends and beliefs, but were preserved and came until the XIX century and are visible even in the current folk beliefs and legends, and also in everyday life.

The relics of that ancient period in the XIX century were the size and structure of the Armenian patriarchal family, the patriarch's and also the grandmother's power over

¹ M.Abeghyan, *Der armenische Volksglaube*, Leipzig, 1899.

other members of the family, that of the grandmother – during the lifetime of the father, especially over the wives and children, kidnapping of women and their purchasing, and, finally, the blood revenge which was performed towards the killer or his relatives by the relatives of the murdered. Thus, the whole patriarchal family was responsible for the murder committed by its member. Indeed, in the remote past the peculiarities of tribal life were more strongly reflected. The patriarch or the head of the family in the II century AD, as it is seen, still experienced unlimited authority over the other members of the family. In Armenia in that period it was possible to kill the wife, children and childless brother and sister without responsibility.² In that period definitely used to exist also other murders, as it is told by Movses Khorenatsi in connection with the funeral of epic Artashes: "... many multitudes died at the death of Artashes, his beloved wives and concubines and faithful servants .. Around the tomb were willing deaths".

The relics of ancient legends and cults³ had been preserved until the late XIX century, and, indeed, until today. Like among the primitive tribes, many of rural Armenians even today believe that the spirit is a wind, breath (and that the word soul-spirit means also breath). They think that man's soul could be separated from the body and travel, "appear as a vision", and see many things. Supposedly, a special role could perform ghosts – souls of the deceased. Allegedly, they could take different visible forms – of people, animals, and birds. And that they harmed people, bring diseases, etc.

In our folk-beliefs even clearly appears a second stage of the development of ghosts, according to which the souls of the deceased turned into spirits who ruled over the nature. At that period along with the perception that the spirits and souls are the breath or wind appears the second one, that is the spirits are imagined as a light ("*lusahog*", "let the light become soul"), and the spirits as *hreghen* ("*hreghen* girl", "*hreghen* woman"). Besides that, souls and spirits are divided into two groups – luminous, kind souls, and black, evil souls, bright *hreghen* spirits and black smoke-like evil spirits. And also among us existed the old belief that after the death souls enter the underworld and face trial before the deceased which took place with every sunrise. Similarly also many other relics of ancient beliefs.

With the beliefs mentioned above is closely related the cult of the deceased which was performed during the whole year, beginning immediately after the death, aimed at the "illuminating" their souls. The souls of patriarchs-ancestors were widely worshipped. They believe that the souls of such deceased people took care of their descendants; allegedly, they were coming and walk around the house, speak to them and give advice. Like *fravashis* – ghosts among ancient Iranians, the souls of the deceased were worshiped during some of their festivals, among Armenians the worship of the deceased was performed five times yearly, during five great festivals. They believe that

² Eusebius, Praeparation evangelica, VI, 10. Par.12. Eusebius of Caesarea took that information, and that of the blood revenge from Syrian Bardatsan, the II century AD author. See G.Khalatyan, Essays of the history of Armenia, Moscow, 1910, p.327 (in Russian).

³ M.Abeghyan, Der armenische Volksglaube, Leipzig, S.8-29.

after passing five celebrations the souls return from the underworld, walk along their graves or houses, visit their descendants. So, they should perform “memory of the dead” with incense and candle. Allegedly, they remain in the world and at the third day, after performing the “memory”, they return to their place in the heaven.

And, finally, among the relics of the beliefs it is important to recall the next. Like *fravashis* of ancient Iranians, Armenians also the souls of the deceased and their cult was placed in close connection with the stars. They used to believe and until now the tellers of the “Daredevils of Sassun” believe that every man has its own star which eclipses when he appears in danger. “Bright stars which never fell belong to fair people who dwell on them”. Like *fravashis* among Iranians were identified with stars and were understood as good spirits, the Armenians also regard stars as tutelary spirits and taken as equal to tutelary angels. They even swear by the stars, like by the graves of their fathers (“On those big and small stars”, “My father’s grave is witness”), and even pray the stars: *Dzet-Pet* (big and small) stars, help and protect us, along with the angels Gabriel, Miqayel protect from troubles, evil people, evil hour.⁴

All these are remains of primitive beliefs and the worship of ancestors, indeed not completely, which originate from the ancient times as relics.

The relics of that folklore are sorcery prayers, many superstitious stories that we find in the History of Armenia of Movses Khorenatsi. These are the stories about Hayk, Ara the Handsome, Vahagn and others, and that of the *vishaps* of Vipasanq. Their study is impossible to carry without the investigation of corresponding spirits, deities or heroes.

⁴ G.Srvandztyants, *Manana*, Constantinople, 1876, p.308 (“Prayer of the old women of Van”).