

**ELEMENTS OF BELIEFS AND CULT IN THE OATHS OF SHIRAK
(interdisciplinary study)¹**

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Abstract

Introduction: Oaths are one of the most widespread and viable formulaic sayings characteristic of the paremic genres of the folklore of the Shirak region. Being one of the most important primary types of magical and applied folklore, the oath has been widely spread in the everyday life of all the peoples of the world since ancient times and continues to exist in various spheres of life to this day. The oath was perceived as a spell word, which was feared and believed not only by Armenians, but also by all the peoples of the world, regardless of the level of their civilization. As in the case of other magical formulas (curse, blessing, good wishes, magical prayers), the genealogical community of the oath is the faith, conditioned by the magical power of the word, relying on which the swearer refers to the shrines, sacred sacraments and objects accepted at all times. The aim of the work is to analyze those beliefs and related ideas that occupy a large place in the oaths of Shirak and are related to the general worldview of the people regarding nature and social life. **Methods and materials:** In the article, using comparative-historical, typological and analytical methods, on the basis of existing printed, archival and folklore materials collected by us, various and numerous problems related to the above-mentioned formulaic sayings are presented. **Analysis:** Recording, systematization and, in particular, the study of folklore materials of each ethnographic region is considered one of the most important tasks of folklore studies. In the article, the oaths that are still actively used in Shirak, containing various elements of beliefs and worship

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inherent in this ethnographic region, were subjected to a comprehensive scientific analysis. *Results:* Magical folklore occupies a large place in the beliefs, ideas, worldview of the Shirak people and is an important historical and cultural value in terms of identifying their archaic thinking and highlighting poetic perceptions.

Key words: *oath, Shirak, belief, formulaic saying, folklore, element of nature, cult.*

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**ՀԱՎԱՏԱՆԻՔԱՅԻՆ ԵՎ ՊԱՇՏԱՍՈՒՆՔԱՅԻՆ ՏԱՐԲԵՐԸ
ՇԻՐԱԿԻ ԵՐԴՈՒՄՆԵՐՈՒՄ
(միջգիտակարգային ուսումնասիրություն)**

Լուսինե Խ. Ղոնջյան

ԳԱԱ հնագիտության և ազգագրության ինստիտուտ, Երևան, ՀՀ
Գավառի պետական համալսարան

Հասմիկ Հ. Մատիկյան

ԳԱԱ Շիրակի հայագիտական հետազոտությունների կենտրոն, Գյումրի
Շիրակի պետական համալսարան, Գյումրի, ՀՀ

Ամփոփում

Նախաբան. Շիրակի տարածաշրջանի ժողովրդական բանահյուսության ասույթաբանական ժանրերից, տարածված ու կենսունակ բանաձևային կառույցներից են երդումները: Երդումը, հնուց ի վեր հանդիսանալով հմայական-կիրառական բանահյուսության նախնական կարևոր տեսակներից, տարածված է եղել աշխարհի բոլոր ժողովուրդների կենցաղում և ցայսօր էլ շարունակում է կենցաղավարել կյանքի տարբեր բնագավառներում: Երդումն ընկալվել է իբրև հմայական խոսք, որից զգուշացել և որին հավատացել են ոչ միայն հայերը, այլև աշխարհի բոլոր ժողովուրդները՝ անկախ իրենց քաղաքակրթության աստիճանից: Ինչպես հմայական մյուս բանաձևերի (անեծք, օրհնանք, բարեմաղթություն, հմայական աղոթքներ), այնպես էլ երդման ծագումնաբանական ընդհանրությունը հավատքն է՝ խոսքի հմայական զորությամբ պայմանավորված, որի վրա հենվելով՝ երդվողը վկայակոչում է նվիրական սրբություններն ու առարկաները, որոնք բոլոր ժամանակներում էլ ընդունված են եղել ժողովրդի կողմից: Աշխատանքի նպատակն է քննել ժողովրդական այն հավատալիքներն ու դրանց հետ կապված պաշտամունքին առնչվող պատկերացումները, որոնք լայն տեղ են գրավում Շիրակի երդումներում և աղերսվում են բնության ու հասարակական կյանքի վերաբերյալ ժողովրդի ունեցած ընդհանուր աշխարհայեցողության հետ: Մեթոդներ և նյութեր. Հոդվածում պատմա-համեմատական և տիպաբանական, վերլուծական մեթոդների միջոցով, առկա տպագիր, արխիվային և մեր կողմից գրառված բանահյուսական նյութերի հիման վրա ներկայացվում են Շիրակի կարճասույթ բանաձևային վերոնշյալ կառույցին առնչվող տարբեր ու բազմազան խնդիրներ: Վերլուծություն. Հոդվածում, համակողմանի գիտական

վերլուծության են ենթարկվել Շիրակում մինչ օրս ակտիվ կենցաղավարող հմայական բանաձևերից երդումները, որոնք իրենց մեջ բովանդակում են ազգագրական տվյալ տարածաշրջանի բազմապիսի հավատալիքային և պաշտամունքային տարրեր: Ար-
դյունքները Հմայական բանահյուսությունը մեծ տեղ է գրավում Շիրակի ժողովրդական հավատալիքների, պատկերացումների, աշխարհընկալման բնագավառում և պատմա-մշակութային կարևոր արժեք է ներկայացնում նրանց վաղնջական մտածողության, բանաստեղծական ընկալումների բացահայտման և լուսաբանման տեսանկյունից:

Բանալի բառեր՝ երդում, Շիրակ, հավատալիք, բանաձևային կառույց, բանահյուսու-թյուն, բնության տարր, պաշտամունք:

Ինչպես հղել՝ Ղուեջյան Լ., Մատիկյան Հ. Հավատալիքային և պաշտամունքային տարրե-րը Շիրակի երդումներում (միջգիտակարգային ուսումնասիրություն) // ՀՀ ԳԱԱ ՇՀՀ կենտրոնի «Գիտական աշխատություններ»: Գյումրի, 2024: Հ. 2(27): 159-172 էջեր:

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ЭЛЕМЕНТЫ ВЕРОВАНИЙ И КУЛЬТА В КЛЯТВАХ ШИРАКА

(межнаучное исследование)

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Аннотация

Введение: Клятвы являются одним из наиболее распространенных и жизнеспособных формульных изречений, характерных для паремических жанров народного фольклора Ширакского региона. Являясь одним из важнейших первичных видов магически - прикладного фольклора, клятва с древнейших времен получила широкое распространение в быту всех народов мира и по сей день продолжает бытовать в различных сферах жизни. Клятва воспринималась как заклинательное слово, которого остерегались и в которое верили не только армяне, но и все народы мира, независимо от уровня их цивилизации. Как и в случае с другими магическими формулами (проклятие, благословение, благопожелание, магические молитвы), генеалогической общностью клятвы является вера, обусловленная магической силой слова, опираясь на которую клянувшийся ссылается на принимаемые во все времена святыни, священные таинства и предметы. Целью работы является анализ тех верований и связанных с ними представлений, которые занимают широкое место в клятвах Ширака и соотносятся с общим мировоззрением народа относительно природы и общественной жизни. **Методы и материалы:** В статье, применяя сравнительно-исторический, типологический и аналитический методы, на основе существующих печатных, архивных и собранных нами фольклорных материалов, представлены разнообразные и многочисленные проблемы, связанные с упомянутыми выше формульными изречениями. **Анализ:** В статье, всестороннему научному анализу подверглись до сих пор активно использующиеся в Шираке клятвы, содержащие в себе разнообразные элементы верований и почитаний, присущие данному эт-

нографическому региону. *Результаты:* Магический фольклор занимает большое место в верованиях, представлениях, мировоззрении ширакцев и представляет собой важную историко-культурную ценность с точки зрения выявления их архаического мышления и освещения поэтических восприятий.

Ключевые слова: клятва, Ширак, верование, формульное изречение, фольклор, элемент природы, культ.

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INTRODUCTION: Oaths have been one of the primary and significant types of magical and practical folklore since ancient times, and they are prevalent in the everyday life of all peoples worldwide and continue to exist in various spheres of life today. An oath has been perceived as a magical word that has caused fear and belief not only among Armenians but among all peoples, irrespective of their level of civilization.

Like other formulas (curses, blessings, good wishes, magical prayers), the etymological commonality of an oath is faith in the magical power of words, based on which, the person taking the oath invokes sacred objects and elements, which have always been accepted by the people.

Before investigating oaths, it is productive to highlight the semantic field of “the oath.” An oath, in some forms, can be considered synonymous to a promise, a vow, and a verbal contract, in the sense that an oath reaches beyond the moment of speaking into the future or the past in order to make a pledge either that something has been done or that something will be done [31]. In this way the “oath” is connected with a concept of truth and falsehood. Since different cultures and languages throughout history have had different ways of dealing with truth and falsehood [30]. Oath is defined as:

a. A solemn, formal declaration or promise to fulfill a pledge, often calling on God, a god, or a sacred object as witness.

b. The words or formula of such a declaration or promise.

c. Something declared or promised.

2. An irreverent or blasphemous use of the name of God or something held sacred. (<https://www.thefreedictionary.com/oath>). According to etymological survey, the word “oath” derives from Middle English oth, from Old English að "judicial swearing, solemn appeal (to deity, sacred relics, etc.), in witness of truth or a promise," from Proto-Germanic *aithaz (source also of Old Norse eiðr, Swedish ed, Old Saxon, Old Frisian eth, Middle Dutch eet, Dutch eed, German eid, Gothic aiþs "oath"), from PIE *oi-to- "an oath" (source also of Old Irish oeth "oath"). Common to Celtic and Germanic, possibly a loan-word from one to the other, but the history is obscure and it may ultimately be non-Indo-European. In reference to careless invocations of divinity, from late Old English.

From ancient cultures to contemporary beliefs, various manifestations of the worship of words are alive, according to which words have been perceived as primordial entities and deities.

Speech has been a tool in humanity's struggle against nature in all times. As "magical words of desire" [15, pp.5-122], the aforementioned formulas are closely connected to the people's worldview, particularly to ancient beliefs. For example, in Talas², it was believed that if someone came across a snake and said the following blessing, "The snake that doesn't bite me, may it live a

² One of the villages of Kayseri in the Ankara Vilayet, where many Armenians once lived.

thousand years"[4, p.132], the snake would not bite them. This is the faith in the power of words, to which even a snake obeys, and this means that words are omnipotent. The belief in the power of one's own words lasts to this day, which is why these formulas still remain viable. Beliefs are directly connected to worship with such close ties that it is impossible to separate them, as one arises from the other. A belief is born from the worshipful attitude toward a particular phenomenon or object. Worship dictates belief in the special power and supernatural qualities of that object.

Historical Overview

The folkloric roots of Shirak are ancient and are linked to the historical trajectory of the Armenian people, thus the region stands out for its rich folklore culture. Interest in the ethnography and folklore of this region arose in the mid-19th century. Folklorist Alexander Mkhitarian had a huge role in recording folkloric and ethnographic materials, and he spent half a century collecting numerous ethnographic samples (tales, sayings, legends, curses, blessings, oaths, etc.) from Shirak, which were later published in collections like "A Crumb from Shirak's Barns"[1901] and "Songs and Games" [1900]. The role of the notable folklorist Kajberuni (Gabriel Ter-Hovhannisyan) is undeniable, whose collected folkloric and ethnographic materials (children's game songs, tongue-twisters, prayers) were later published in various volumes of the "Ethnographic Journal" [1902]. Folkloric samples of Shirak are also present in "Superstitions" [1878] collection by Yohannes Nazareants. The historical-literary works published by writers Aghavni ["Shirak", 1963, 1964] and Mkrtich Armen ["Heghnar Spring", 1936] contain valuable information about the spiritual and material life of and they are also present in the work "Alexandrapol: Ethnographic Sketches (Historical-Ethnographic Study)"[2014].

Researchers from the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia have also engaged in the collection and study of Shirak's ethnographic and folkloric culture. They include M. Khemchyan (epic folklore), E. Khemchyan (issues around the study of folklore heritage), H. Galstyan (superstitious stories), L. Ghrezhyan (folkloric sayings), and researchers from the Shirak Center for Armenian Studies: K. Bazeyan (collection and study of ethnographic heritage), H. Harutyunyan (lyrical folklore: elegies), K. Sahakyan, R. Hovhannisyan (ritual folklore), H. Matikyan (lyrical folklore). This article aims to fill the gap in the study of Shirak's folklore, specifically in the study of sayings. Oaths, as a formula containing elements of belief and worship, requires scientific study, particularly with an interdisciplinary approach (ethnography-folklore), which allows the examination of the manifestations of folkloric thinking within the context of ethnographic material. The folkloric culture of Shirak, forming a part of the Armenian people's oral culture, has survived with the general traditions of national folklore. The folk art of Shirak reflects people's social and economic life, the centuries-old life philosophy, psychology, family and social relationships, aspirations, and sacred struggles for the good, beautiful, and perfect.

The old folk beliefs are significantly manifested in Shirak's oaths. Being forms of social consciousness, folk beliefs were the result of certain stages of social existence in different historical periods and were conditioned by various factors such as the low level of development of productive forces and their corresponding relations. In human consciousness, natural and social forces took on a supernatural, fantastic nature. Originating from ancient times, they continue to persist in the consciousness of the people to the extent that the social foundations that created and preserved them remain viable.

The Worship of Souls

One of the most characteristic ancient beliefs reflected in Shirak oaths is the worship of the soul, initially connected with primitive animism, which later took on new forms, reaching Christian religion. For example, "I swear by my soul, which you know..." or "My soul is a witness that I am not lying." Such expressions render the oath conditional, with the curse acting if the condition is violated.

In many ancient cultures, including Armenians, it was believed that a person's soul, which departs with the last breath, continues to exist independently of the body and can often visit relatives and acquaintances. Thus, the living had to appease it to avoid harm from a displeased soul. The most common way to express this idea was the custom of "feeding" the soul immediately after death. For instance, placing bread or Nshkhar (communion bread used during mass in the Armenian Church) on the chest of the deceased so that the soul could continue its existence in the "afterlife"[9,p.168]. The most accepted form of appeasing souls was the ceremony of "soul food" or "kelekh." In pre-Christian beliefs, people took care of the deceased's need for food in the afterlife by placing various foods in the grave during burial. After the adoption of Christianity, this practice was continued in the form of the "soul food" or "kelekh" ceremony. This is evident in Shirak's oath, "May this bread not be found by my soul if I don't."

Based on beliefs about the soul and the afterlife, the worship of the dead (ancestors) emerged. People considered the deceased to be superhuman and divine, worshipping their dead family members as gods [13,p.19]. This belief is vividly exemplified in Beowulf's oath by his father's soul.

People often equated the concepts of soul and conscience, not distinguishing between them, which likely led to the expression "Lose a person's property, lose a person's soul," meaning that losing something and slandering someone leads to losing one's conscience and, consequently, the right to go to heaven, essentially losing one's soul. For example, "Place your hand on your conscience and swear that you are not lying" or "Place your hand on your soul and swear by your conscience"[18, p.142].

According to popular superstition, after death, a person's soul goes to the afterlife, a distant and irrevocable journey. This idea is embodied in the curse "May you go and never return" and the oath "May I go and never return if I lie." The ultimate meaning of both the curse and the oath is the idea of death.

It should be noted that there are two main groups of traditional oaths: oaths with curses and oaths with invocations. Oath formulas structured with curses are characterized by a conditional and consequential relationship and are semantically related to conditional curses. These consist of a specific condition and situation; however, in oaths, the condition is crucial, whereas, in conditional curses, the situation is paramount [15, pp.137-139]. In conditional curses, both the condition and the curse are directed at the person being cursed ("May you live long enough to plant a needle and rest in the shade," "May you fall into a day when a dog won't take bread from your hand" etc [18, p.135]. In the case of an oath with a curse, both the condition and the curse apply to the one making the oath (e.g., "If I deviate, may I be punished, may I be ruined" [18, p.134]. etc., where the emphasized words are the conditions). This means that the curse-oath is a self-imprecation, a societal understanding of a bad wish that the person voluntarily accepts. Thus, an oath fundamentally takes on a conditional nature, where the curse applies if the condition is violated. This distinct characteristic differentiates conditional oaths from conditional curses, despite their similar external structures.

In Shirak's formulaic structure, ancient mythological images of the dog have been preserved. Examples of such oaths include: "May I be born of a dog if my words are false" and "May I have eaten a dog's milk if I am not telling the truth."

In many Indo-European (and not only Indo-European) traditions, the dog is associated with the kingdom of death, serving as a guide for souls in the afterlife, a guardian of souls, and a psychopomp [26, pp. 12-13]. This figure has had various manifestations in ancient and modern Armenian oral traditions [12, pp.418-432].

In Armenian, as well as Indo-Iranian and Western European traditions, the dog holds a dual mythological role. It acts as a psychopomp connected with the underworld³, leading and guarding souls, and as a resurrector⁴, licking the wounds of fallen heroes to bring them back to life, or nourishing and protecting princes⁵. The dog also provides sustenance to humans through divine means. These attributes illustrate the dog's intermediary role between heaven and earth, life and death, this world and the other world. It is both a killer and a giver of life [12, p. 430]. In mythology, the dog exists between life and death, this world and the other world, and between the physical and the spiritual. It appears alone or in pairs, black or white, representing the sun and the moon [24, p.163].

One of the bases for this conclusion, according to folklorist S. Harutyunyan, is the shared belief among Indo-Europeans, Bretons, Welsh, Irish, and Armenians that restless souls of the dead do not descend to the underworld but often remain between worlds, appearing in the form of dogs at crossroads or near cemeteries at dusk or on moonlit nights. These spectral dogs can influence or

³ In the ancient Indian funeral hymn dedicated to Yama, the ruler of the kingdom of death, there appear two four-eyed, speckled dogs as Yama's messengers. In another Vedic hymn [27, VIII, 1, 9], they are named Shyama and Shabala. These two dogs guard the path of Yama. Yama resides in the upper sky, where he feasts with the souls of the dead. Yama searches among people for those who must belong to him and leads them on the path of death to his dominion. He conducts these searches with the help of his two dogs, which are called "life snatchers."

In Iranian tradition, beliefs about dogs are preserved both in mythological contexts and in specific details related to death and burial rituals. According to the Avesta, two dogs guard the Chinvat Bridge (comparable to the Armenian Maze Bridge), over which the soul of the deceased will pass into the afterlife (Videvdat 13,9). In another account, two dogs accompany the celestial maiden who greets the souls of the righteous at the Chinvat Bridge (Videvdat 19, 30), and in the "Bundahishn" (30,1,1), it is attested that a supernatural dog is located at the Chinvat Bridge. At this bridge, evil and good spirits gather to seize the souls of the deceased. The heavenly dogs protect the souls from being captured by evil spirits. Similarly, earthly ordinary dogs protect human souls from evil spirits dwelling on earth. Thus, in Iranian mythology, there is a dual perception of dogs: heavenly dogs guarding the Chinvat Bridge and earthly dogs protecting people.

⁴ In Armenian tradition, the Aralezes (dog-like spirits) descend from the sky and revive the fallen Armenian king Ara by licking his wounds. A white dog descends from the sky to help the child Sanatruk and his nurse, who are lost in the mountains during a snowstorm. In Vedic tradition, the four-eyed dogs of Yama also descend from above to earth and guard Yama's path. Additionally, various traditions feature a young hero or prince being nurtured and protected by a dog or wolf (such as Romulus and Remus, Cyrus the Great, Artavasdes), which again aligns with the ideas of life and resurrection.

⁵ An interesting custom among Armenians is giving the first baked bread to a dog, rooted in a causal tale. According to this story, when there was no bread in the world, a dog howled at the sky out of hunger so much that a grain fell from the sky, sprouted, and eventually filled the earth with bread. This is why the first baked bread is given to the dog, as bread came into the world because of the dog's howl (Legend, 403). Similar to the role of the dog as a mediator between heaven and humans in granting immortality in African mythology [28, pp.36, 39].

frighten people⁶ [24, pp. 162-163; 1, p. 17-18; 25, p. 316 article "Gornapshtekner"]. Expressions such as "May your soul turn into a dog," "Dog's soul," and "I give your soul to the dogs" in Armenian curses reflect these dog-shaped ghost beliefs.

However, it should be noted that the mentioned formulaic structures, which include the mythological perception of the dog, still persist in the Armenian oral tradition. Nowadays, these expressions are no longer understood in their original sense. Depending on the intonation, they can be perceived as either insulting, abusive, or sometimes affectionate.

The dual nature of dog worship also explains the ritual practice of burying dogs in graves [24, pp. 161-167, 12, pp. 423-425, 431] as an expression of the dog's role as both a guide for souls in the underworld and a resurrector of the dead.

According to the 12th-century Armenian legislator Mkhitar Gosh (Mkh. Gosh's "Code of Law"), medieval Armenians had forms of oath-breaking that involved holding a dog's tail or swearing while holding a bone. Cultural historians rightly interpret this as accepting the threat of an afterlife, meaning entrusting one's soul to the dog, or in other words, dying if the person is not truthful [20, p. 236, 17, p. 160]. In Shirak oaths, salt and bread are symbols of human goodness and sincerity, love, loyalty, nobility, friendship, and hospitality. In ancient cultures, including Armenian beliefs, salt, bread, grains, and flour have long been attributed magical properties. These vital goods have been considered sacred and are still used as offerings (to people, souls, spirits), means to cure diseases, tools for enchantments and divinations, and protective agents during celebrations, rituals, and daily life to bring good fortune and protect against evil forces (see a detailed study on the role and significance of salt and bread by A. Israelian in "Salt and Bread" [6]). Various nations around the world traditionally welcome guests with bread and salt. Everything associated with bread is sacred: the land, the field, the wheat, the oven, and even the objects and creatures related to bread and grain (plow, yoke, mill, ox, buffalo, etc.).

In the Shirak region, it has been forbidden to give bread to anyone early in the morning, as it is believed this will bring scarcity to the household. Bread should not be placed on one's head as it would result in a poor harvest, and cutting bread with a knife was thought to bring about high prices. If bread fell to the ground, it was kissed and returned to its place, and bread crumbs were not discarded but instead placed under a tree so that no one would step on them and birds could eat them. Spilling bread or flour was considered a sin, as it was believed that "God deprives those who do so of bread." When sifting flour, a cross was drawn over it to protect it from evil spirits [11, p. 362]. According to folk beliefs, salt is considered a purifying, sanctifying, protective, and evil-repelling substance. In certain regions of Armenia, it has been customary for salt to always remain on the table, regardless of its use for eating [6, p. 18]. Attributing supernatural qualities to salt has been common among different peoples. For example, in some Western European countries, it was believed that even witches feared salt and did not use it during their feasts. Salt's magical power was considered a curse for witches [29, p. 57].

⁶ For example, in Greek mythology, the goddess Hecate, associated with the underworld, was often depicted in the form of a black dog. She was surrounded by a pack of restless souls of the dead and roamed near cemeteries, spreading fear and terror. In Wales, there was a belief in the existence of a death spirit (Gwinn abNudd), who was accompanied by ferocious dogs on earth [24, 163]. Similarly, in Armenian tradition, the psychopomp Arnak was imagined both as a dog-like figure and as being accompanied by fierce dogs. This likely gave rise to the curse recorded in Shirak, "May the dogs of Arnak lick you," which wished death upon the cursed person, presenting a mythical image of their face being licked by Arnak's dogs, who were seen as malevolent psychopomps.

Similar to bread and flour, spilling salt was considered a sin, and those who did so were believed to be subject to harsh punishment on Judgment Day: "Whoever spills salt must gather it with their eyelashes on Judgment Day and put it back in its place" [2, p. 206]. Even today, when salt is spilled, a cross is immediately drawn over it to prevent fights, arguments, and other unpleasantness in the household. The protective power of salt and bread is manifested in rituals associated with the birth of a child. In Shirak, for instance, when a child was born, the grandmother would bathe the baby, then sprinkle salt on all parts of the body, even in the mouth (according to H. Matikyan's account). After swaddling the baby, she would place a piece of bread (lavash) over the child [22, p.113]. To protect the child from evil spirits, the people of Shirak would place bread in the baby's bosom when taking them outside at night (taken from H. Matikyan's personal archive). The idea of the protective power of salt and bread for children is common in the beliefs of various nations. For example, in northern Germany and Bohemia, bread and salt were traditionally placed in the cradle of newborns. Salt and bread metaphorically represent gratitude.

The Persian king Denhshapuh also valued the significance of salt and bread and told the priest Ghevodnian, "...having eaten salt and bread in your land, I have compassion and love for the land" [5, VIII]. In ancient times, to solidify friendship, people would seal it with salt. Before calling the Armenian king Arshak to Ctesiphon, the Persian king Shapuh sealed the salt with his boar-ring, which was a sacred oath ceremony among the Persians [21, XC].

Folk beliefs emphasized the idea of the angel or spirit of salt and bread and observed certain moral rules regarding them, such as not lying because the angels of salt and bread would blind the liar. This belief is vividly demonstrated in Shirak through expressions like "May this salt and bread blind my eyes if I lie" (L. Ghrejyan's personal collection) or "May I look at bread blind if I said that" [18, p. 141] and similar oaths. As we see, the person swearing is willing to face physical punishment if they are not truthful. In both cases, the punishment is blindness.

The spiritual nature of bread is also reflected in Shirak's folk sayings, such as "When baking bread, stay away from the oven and fire so that the bread angel does not strike you into the fire" [18, p.151], "Do not disturb while eating bread, so that the angels sitting on your shoulders do not hit you" [18, p.151], or warning those refusing to eat bread that the angels would be offended if they did not eat. "Eat bread so that the angels of bread do not get angry with you" (H. Matikyan's personal archive).

Elements and Phenomena of Nature, Celestial Bodies

The four primary elements of nature—water, fire, earth, and air—serve as symbols of life and existence. They reflect different historical stages of societal thinking and continue to persist in various forms within oral tradition and living beliefs, intertwined and reinterpreted with pagan and Christian ritual beliefs.

In Shirak, oaths include numerous remnants of fire worship, which bear witness to the essential aspects of people's age-old existence and socio-economic life, continuing to influence daily life. Fire was attributed life-giving, protective, healing, and purifying powers. It was forbidden to pour water on fire, step on it, cross over it, spit into it, or urinate on it. Women would cover their mouths while baking bread to prevent saliva from accidentally falling into the fire [8, p. 51]. In Armenian beliefs, fire and lamps symbolize life and were never extinguished as objects of worship. Preserving the hearth fire was considered a sacred duty and a symbol of family continuity. Fire was not to be extinguished by blowing or with water, as it was considered a sin. Blowing out a lamp during the day was also deemed a sin, and it was instead extinguished by creating an air current with the hand.

In the folk dialect, the words "clan," "family," and "household" are replaced by "hearth," "fireplace," "smoke," and "lamp." People do not say "our family is large," but rather "our hearth is large," "our fireplace is large," etc. The concept of family unity was connected to a common house and common fire. This is reflected in expressions like "My hearth as witness," "May God destroy the hearth of lies if I know," and "May my hearth extinguish if I go back on my word and do not fulfill it," where the swearer invokes a sacred element or sets a self-curse to emphasize their commitment.

Written sources reveal that the Hittite temple attendants followed similar rules to prevent the extinguishing of the sacred fire, as the fate of the Hattusa capital depended on keeping the fire alive. Maintaining the eternal fire was crucial to the country's well-being, and extinguishing it meant the ruin of the city. "When you preserve my word, you will keep me calm, and the fire in the hearth will remain unextinguished. If you do not maintain the hearth fire, the serpent will come and encircle the city of Hattusa" [23, p. 268].

Fire, ash, and lamps are symbols of women among Armenians, and the concept of the hearth is tied to women. The woman was responsible for lighting the fire and keeping the sacred flame burning, and her death meant the extinguishing of the household lamp. This is reflected in the Shirak proverb: "The woman is the lamp of the hearth; if the woman dies, the house is destroyed." (H. Matikyan's accounts).

In Armenian patriarchal families, the places where fire was lit, such as the tonir (oven) and the hearth (fireplace), were considered sacred. In several regions of Armenia, the tonir was equated with the church. In places where there was no church or it was occupied, wedding ceremonies for marrying couples and baptism ceremonies for newborns were conducted over the tonirs [9, pp. 116, 143]. Thus, the folk concept of the sanctity of the tonir, hearth, and lamp has found expression in everyday folk speech. To prove their innocence or loyalty, people would invoke these sacred objects: "By this tonir," "By the light of this lamp," as collected from Shirak-Yerazgavors ASahakyan's materials. Phrases like "I swear by the blessings of your hearth" are also examples of this practice.

Atmospheric phenomena have found their echoes in the oaths of the Shirak region, some of which are linked to the ancient mythical conceptions and beliefs people had about nature. For instance, thunderstorms and lightning have left deep and indelible impressions on people's poetic imagination since ancient times. In one of the folk beliefs of Shirak related to thunder and lightning, it is said: "As soon as the cloud begins to roar and thunder and lightning strikes, the old man St. Sbon crosses his face and says, 'May the lightning strike the wicked.' He believes that lightning is not just a natural phenomenon but a punishment ordained by God to eradicate the wicked from the world." This concept is reflected in oaths such as "May I be struck by God's lightning if I am lying," or "May God's fire and flame fall upon me if I..." Here, ancient beliefs have acquired a Christian tint, with lightning and fire linked to celestial phenomena. These oaths likely reflect an ancient belief where lightning is the sword of a stormy hero striking down evil spirits [1, p. 74].

In the folk oath structures of Shirak, a substantial group of oaths is dedicated to the sky and celestial bodies. These oaths preserve traces of ancient mythological and religious conceptions. Among the celestial bodies, the sun often appears in these oaths and it symbolizes warmth, light, and creative energy in almost all cultures. It was forbidden to urinate facing the church or the sun to avoid punishment [18, p.150]. In folk belief, the sun is always perceived as a symbol of life and vitality, and swearing by one's or a relative's sun is still widely practiced in the daily life of the people of Shirak. For example, "By my beloved's sun," "May my beloved die" [3,

FFIV 2627-2629], "By my sun," "May I not see my sun if I know," "By the sun of my children, I don't know" (according to S. Harutyunyan's account), "By the green sun of my only child" [18, p.140], "May the sun of my Karo die if I know anything" [18, p.140], and so on. The traditional symbol of life and survival associated with the sun has continued to persist among the common folk into the 20th century. The clear remnant of sun worship is manifested in rituals related to newborns. As in other Armenian regions, in Shirak, the grandmother, after swaddling the newborn, would take the child outside and, facing east (toward the sun), cross the child's face seven times while saying a prayer [22, p. 113]. In the prayer, the grandmother would address the sun as a god, asking for life and sustenance for the newborn. "The sun is viewed as the giver of life and sustenance, and the newborn as a representative of the new generation of the life-giving sun, under whose protection the older generation must shelter and survive, whose sun (= life) gradually weakens with age" [13, p.321].

Surviving remnants of sun worship among Armenians include orienting the head towards the east when burying the dead, facing east when praying, placing the altar and holy table on the eastern side of churches, etc.

"May the good day be known, which indeed it knows," "May I be blind if I lie to the poor prayer house" [18, p.142], are oaths that reflect ancient beliefs about the day, especially dawn.⁷ In popular belief, day and dawn embody goodness, as each dawn, according to mythological thinking, is perceived as the beginning of a new day, a new life, a new creation of the universe after the darkness of night.

Mythological concepts of the dual-part (heaven and earth) and later triple-part (heaven, earth, underworld) structure of the universe or world, formed among Armenians since ancient times, are also preserved in Shirak's folk oaths; for example, "Sky, earth," (according to S. Harutyunyan's account), "Sky, earth bear witness" [18, p.141], "Sky, earth, sea, land (= ground), if I know" (according to S. Harutyunyan's account), etc. In several regions of Armenia, the words for heaven and god are synonymous, a fact that, according to mythological belief, indicates the identification of the supreme heavenly being with his abode, the sky, especially since in popular thinking, the sky was also perceived as god, as in the oath "God, heaven, earth, sea, land" [18, p.141].

CONCLUSION: The folk beliefs and notions reflected in the oaths of Shirak are the result of the historical typological development of primordial worldviews. These notions, representing different stages of societal thought, have continued to exist at various levels and degrees, sometimes pushed back and semi-forgotten, encapsulated merely in various oral tradition formulas, and sometimes widely alive in beliefs intertwined and reinterpreted with new religious understandings. The folk oaths reflect the true picture of the ideological struggle occurring within the people's environment, where the faith in the magical power of the word, which gives ideological meaning and importance to the oath, is crucial.

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