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The Door and Threshold in Armenian Folklore

PAUL ESSABAL

FROM THE FIFTH century B.C. to the twentieth A.D. there have been no great changes in the Armenian village housing system, at least in the more remote provinces. Underground houses like those that Xenophon saw on his way through central Armenia in 401 B.C., with entrances like the mouths of wells, were still to be found in the valley of Aracani (Murad-su) and Araxes at the beginning of our century.¹ Even a village of such houses could be seen from a distance only because of the small low chimneys, and when the village was covered with snow an army could pass without noticing its existence. Yet it was not strategy as much as their own culture and the climate of the region that led the Armenians to build these houses. Their Indo-European ancestors had sheltered themselves from long icy winters in underground shelters, and in their new homeland, which was just as cold as the old, the Armenians continued the tradition.

The fact that their houses had only two entrances, the door and the chimney, is of great significance to Armenian folklore. To haunt an Armenian home (G303.15.3) a sorceress or devil had to get through one of these entrances, and if they were blocked by magic (G303.16) the inhabitants could not be harmed.

Villages in the mountainous areas of Armenia, up to the Caucasian mountains and beyond them, were and still are built on the terrace system. It is characterized by ranges of houses climbing the slopes of a hill, each house having as a terrace the roof of a lower house. In this system three walls—or at least the backwall—of each house is the hill itself. The front wall is free and contains the door. On it and on the side walls as well there is room for windows, and often these are present, but Armenian folklore generally ignores their existence. It would not be germane to my subject to describe here more modern buildings of ancient and mediaeval Armenian cities whose ruins show outstanding architectonic capacities.²

The subterranean Armenian houses had small one-piece doors of wood, generally so low that one had to bend down on entering. The door frames

¹ P. Ter-Movsesjanz, "Das armenische Bauernhaus," *Mitteilungen der Anthropologischen Gesellschaft Wien*, XII, N.F. (1892). H. F. B. Lynch, *Armenia*, I, Fig. 153.

² Cf. J. Strzygowsky, *Die Baukunst der Armenier und Europa* (2 vols.; Vienna, 1921); Baltrušaitis, *Études sur l'art médiéval en Géorgie et en Arménie* (Paris, 1929).

were consequently very simple; the thresholds were single planks with holes in which the doors were set. In the terrace system doors were occasionally in two pieces.³

In contrast to this simplicity, Armenian church doors are reputed to have been large, with elaborate portals and rich ornamentation,⁴ possibly for folkloric as well as architectural reasons.

Doors and chimneys offered the only ways for getting into contact with the outside world and their significance is primordial in Armenian folklore. Our present study will be limited to the door and the threshold in Armenian belief and language.

The door is an important strategic point in the fight with the devils who could enter the house through it. Great care is taken in every circumstance to block this entrance to them and their associates, the sorceresses who ride on pots (D1520) through the air (D1110) and rape girls or steal food (G266) from houses. A grandmother can hinder their evil acts by going up to the roof with a spit on her back before sunset, and sketching three circles (D1385.7; D1273.1.1) around the chimney. After coming down, she should draw three more in front of the door; then she should put seven stones (D1273.1.3) in these circles, and lay some wild rose flowers near by (Cf. D1561.1.6). The stones represent the good luck of each member of the family (Dshavakhk', *AH*, I, 353).⁵ In Nor Bayazet the same precaution is taken at the vernal equinox by drawing circles on the roof (D1385.7); Armenians believe that evil spirits torment men sexually during that period (*AH*, XVII, 110). A prayer said by nightfall reads:

Our house is the Lord's house; its walls are made of iron; its columns of steel; Christ (or a saint) is guardian before the door; his sword is a lock; St. Ohan (or another saint) is at the chimney; his shield covers it. Anyone coming to the door shall go away; anyone approaching the chimney changes to iron. O Mary (i.e., Virgin Mary), what are you doing there? I have a knife with three nails: one of them is for the lying devil; the second for the wolf, and the third to chase away the evil ones (D1273.0.2) (Abeghian, *Der armenische Volksglaube*, p. 34) (D1385.13).

In the dangerous days of childbed the midwife prays that the Gospel may protect the chimney, the pluvial of the priest may cover the door, "the one represents Jesus, the other Christ, and the Seraphim and Cherubim may come down on the roof of the young mother's house" (D1273.0.2) (*AH*, I, 268). On New Year's Day the grandmother spreads ashes on the threshold with the hope that anyone who enters with bad intentions will be changed

³ Ter-Movsesjanz, *op. cit.*, pp. 144, 164.

⁴ Strzygowsky, *op. cit.*, I, 250, 322; II, 521.

⁵ See the abbreviations at the end of this article.

to a donkey (D132.1). She drives a nail (D1252.1.2) into the bar across the door, and makes a cross (D1766.6; G273.1; V86.1) on the door with flour. The grandfather draws one of his tools on the door (G272.7) in order to hold off the devils (AH, II, 247). On Wednesday after Ascension a blunt nail of a horseshoe is driven into the threshold, or the ploughshare is put before it for the same preventive purpose (AH, XVII, 110) (D1252.1.1).

The door where the inside and outside worlds meet is a hazardous place where devils are watching, and magic precautions are required for passing through it. The best man or the godfather drives his sword into the jamb of the door (Cf. E434.5) when the young couple leaves the church after the wedding, with the intention of preventing devils from attacking them (AH, II, 137).⁶ In Dshavakhk' he does the same on all doors that the couple have to go through (AH, I, 258). In Nakhidshevan they enter the house of their parents under the lifted sword of their godfather (AH, VII, 189). The young mother while going out the door—she is allowed to do so five or six days after childbirth—takes a spit and mumbles the name of Jesus (D1273.0.5) (AH, III, 231; XVII, 91). In Dshavakhk' she carries a spit with an onion stuck on it while walking from one room to another (D1252.1.1) (AH, I, 267-268). With the same magic equipment the midwife comes out to greet the sun, holding the baby in swaddling clothes and a loaf of bread (AH, I, 267).

The door is an ominous place because devils haunt it, and you should not greet anyone or shake hands on the threshold for fear the friendship may end with some disagreement (AH, XVII, 91). Any business settled on the doorstep is a bad business (C610) (AH, XVI, 53). In Akn the devils that live on the threshold or in the house are called *hamberdk'*. They are especially dangerous for children whom they "beat" with some disease unless the children are taken out over the threshold while saying a prayer. After a priest prays over a sick child, his mother makes a small hole in the earth near the threshold and pours some fruit juice in it to satisfy the spirits (D1766.2) there and to speed the recovery of her child (*Biwrakn* [1898] p. 380).

In case of sickness, the doors, especially the church doors, are implored for help with prayers and sacrifices. These may consist of a rooster, a lamb, or a sheep that is killed before the door of the sanctuary; in Edshmiatzin, the center of the Armenian national church, the blood of the sacrificial animal must splash on the threshold of the church (D1766.2.3). Its meat is distributed among the relatives and the poor who must eat it on the spot (AH, XXIII, 214). The milk teeth of children are buried under the threshold which is asked to give them new teeth (AH, XXV, 54). When the eyes of babies are turning with nervousness, two nails are driven into the threshold (D1252.1.2) of a house where the Gospel is kept (AH, XVII, 91).

⁶ Godfatherhood is hereditary in Armenian families, and no one is allowed to change the "traditional godfather" without offending him. The husband's godfather takes a part at the wedding.

The door brings good luck and happiness to the inhabitants (N135). The propitious moment for getting good luck is during sunset when good and bad luck are distributed; at that time the grandmother opens the door to let good luck enter (AH, VI, 362). In Dshavakhk' they open the doors of the alcove when the church bells announce the evening, with the hope that the spirit of prosperity will open his too (AH, I, 366). In important moments of ceremonies the favor of good luck and prosperity are implored by ritual acts. The bride before entering her new home stops in front of the door and people pour upon her head dry raisins, rice (T136.2), coins (symbolizing wealth and abundance), and nuts (for her fertility). After bathing before the wedding, the bride, accompanied by her girl friends, returns home and stops in front of the house door, waiting for her mother to come and drop coins and rice upon her head (AH, VII, 86). The bride must carefully step into her new home with her right foot first, in order to start her new life with good luck (AH, XXV, 53). A lucky entrance is the condition of success in every undertaking. The mother of the bride expresses the hope to the representatives of her future son-in-law who come to ask for the hand of her daughter that their entrance may be lucky.

Giving a gift is a ritual act when it is done with the intention of gaining the favor of spirits and their blessing for an undertaking. If the happiness of a young couple is asked for (T136.4), then it must be done in front of the door where the spirits of the home live. For this reason the bride in Zangezour will not enter her new home before her mother-in-law comes with a pot of butter in her hand to meet her. The bride throws some kopecks into the pot to win the friendship of the 'penates' (called *shnogh* in Van) (note transliteration list at end of article). Then she takes some of the butter with her finger and spreads it on the hair of her mother-in-law, who kisses her and invites her to come in. But the bride refuses to enter until she is given a present by the mother-in-law (AH, IV, 81; cf. Sissian, AH, II, 224). This present is called *otnap'okhēk'* ("change of steps") in the region of Daralageaz (village of Khatshik), and the father-in-law gives it. The present may be a horse, a cow, or a calf. He introduces it to his daughter-in-law by grabbing it by the ears. The attendants of the bridegroom cut a bit from the ear of the animal and then turn it loose (AH, VII, 189). Should the bride be taken to another village, she does not go to the groom's house on the first night but stays instead with a family of friends or relatives (AH, VII, 187).

Wedding presents are largely used among the Armenians for one or another specific purpose. The sacristan, for instance, shuts the church door when he sees the young couple coming; the godfather must give him the *drbatzēk'*, a present for "door opening" (AH, V, 113; I, 258; III, 221). The attendants close the door of the young couple's house and do not allow them

to go in until they have their presents (*AH*, V, 114). Other presents for this occasion are: *durnbrñelay*, a present for "holding the door" given to the farm worker of the bride's family; *durnbrñēk*, a present to the brother of the bride; *durbac*, a present to the brother of the groom for "opening the door" (*DD*, pp. 285-286).

The custom of a ritual sacrifice is preserved in Armenian wedding ceremonies (VII.7). The groom sends an ox to the bride's parents. They make it walk before their door and kill it there. A padlock is closed in its blood and not opened till the end of the wedding (*AH*, II, 137). In Zangezour on this occasion a thread is dipped in the blood of the victim and knotted with the intention of 'binding' the devils (D1282.1). After the wedding the knot is undone (*AH*, IV, 75).

The benedictions of the door, especially of the threshold, are things by which an Armenian can swear, or mention as testimony to the truth of his words. In Vaspurakan they use the expression: "The blessing (*kher barakat*, Arabic "profit" + "blessing") of your threshold knows that it is truth!"

A threshold can withhold its favor and blessings from persons it does not like. When it declines to bless the bride in her new home she becomes weak and sick; then the family thinks that "the threshold did not come upon her." If on the contrary she grows stronger the reason is because "the threshold came upon her" (*AH*, XXV, 54). Hence the generalized equivalent of our expression "to come upon," *vray gal* ("to grow thick, to recover his weight").⁷

According to Armenians in Nor Bayazet there are two classes of threshold, "the bringing and the not-bringing ones." The bringing thresholds are those that bring good luck and welfare to men and animals living in the house so that they grow healthy and strong and live for a long time. These thresholds are loved and revered by family and neighbors, and lambs are sacrificed to them (VII.7). The sacrifice is performed over the door so that the blood runs on the threshold itself (D1766.2.3).

The not-bringing thresholds may become generous and transform themselves with the help of amulets buried under them, or of thorns bound together in the shape of a star and hung on the door. If magic objects do not help, then the door is walled up and a new one is broken through (*AH*, XVII, 91; XXII, 233-234). In Tat'ew when sickness or an accident occurs in a new house or stable, it is abandoned and another one is built elsewhere (Cf. G265.4.2) (*AH*, XXII, 233).

One can gain the favor of the door or threshold by sacrifices or amulets. In Nor Bayazet the head of a dead dog is cut off and buried under the thresh-

⁷Now also used personally: *vray egay* ("I came upon = I recovered"); *vray egaw* ("he, she came upon = he, she recovered, got thick"). Compare Turkish, *üste gelmek* ("to come upon = to get thick"), Samy-Kelekian, *Dictionnaire turc-français*, p. 189.

old (V11.7) as an amulet (Cf. D1385.10) against the disease caused by devils (AH, XVII, 91). When a family has many friends it is usually said that a dog's skull is buried under their threshold (AH, XXV, 55). The threshold can also influence the character and education of the family as seen in the expression: "The threshold of that house produces this kind of person," alluding to a man with poor education (AH, XXV, 54).

The bride is the person for whom the friendship of the threshold has the greatest significance. To gain it a lamb is sacrificed under the feet of the young couple before they enter the house (AH, VII, 89) (V11.7). In Vaspurakan the sacrifice is a hen, the head of which is cut off on the threshold itself. A cross is drawn on the door with its blood (V86.1) (AH, XXV, 53). Sometimes the sacrifice is a tray put on the threshold where the bride breaks it with her feet (Cf. T135.15) upon entering the house (AH, XXV, 53; XVII, 91; IV, 81). In Nor Nakhidshevan the bride and groom each try to break it first, and whichever succeeds will be the head of the household (AH, VII, 92). The threshold is the place where the afterbirth (AH, XVII, 91) and the baby's umbilical cord (AH, IV, 7) are buried as sacrifices or amulets (T582).

The blessings and the friendship of the threshold can be lost when the sweepings are thrown out or the tablecloth is shaken outdoors at night. As a precaution against the possible danger of losing this friendship something must be held back when lending or selling anything from the house (AH, I, 360).

The foregoing has illustrated the significance of the door and threshold in the fight against devils and in seeking family welfare and prosperity. In the Armenian vocabulary the latter factor is dominant.

Armenian *durn* "door," with *-n* suffix is preferred in the classical language. This suffix is the ending of an acc. sing. + *dhurn*. The more ancient form *durk*, nom. pl. t., and its *casus obliqui*, mean "outside door of the house."⁸ The adaptation of *durn* to Greek and Syriac acceptations in the Armenian translated literature makes the study of the semantic development of this word difficult. Meillet observes in *MSL*, XIII, 14, after comparing the biblical passages in which it occurs, "Le singulier *durn* est frequent et désigne 'la porte' avec les nuances possibles, tandis que *drunk* semble ne s'appliquer qu'à des grandes portes (Gr. *pylai*); ce doit être une innovation de l'arménien." Ancient IE languages use pl. t. as in Armenian *durk*. The use of ModA *dur* to indicate "church, sanctuary, convent" must be considered an innovation.

We note among the many derivatives of *durn*:

⁸ Aydenian, *Armenian Grammar* (Vienna, 1885), p. 141. Adverb and ModA proposition *durs* ("outside"), acc. pl., Meillet, *Esquisse*, p. 89. Cf. Brugmann, I, 139, II. *Vide* the compilation of IE forms in WP, I, 870.

Draci ("neighbor") (*dur-* + ethnic suffix *-aci*). ModA also *dur u draci* ("door and neighbor"), abstract and collective, formed on the Persian pattern.

Dranik ("palace boy, court boy, door keeper"), AA.

Andranik ("first born"). Dumézil, *BSLP*, XLI (1940), 69, postulates as the original meaning "coproprietor of the door" (i.e., "with the father of the family"), supposing that the prefix *an-* is derived from IE *sem-*. Observe, however, that only the first-born son had this function, while *andranik* is used for both sexes and for animals, too, as well as in the compounds such as *andrankacin* ("*andranik*" + "*born*") where the meaning "coproprietor" seems improbable. The emphasis is placed on "the first one." The prefix *an-* should rather be compared to the prefix in *an-ari* ("giant") (Eznik and others): *ari* ("strong"); *an-dorr* ("quiet"): *doyl* ("loose"). Hence *an-dranik* ("he who precedes, or opens the door = uterus"): *dranik* ("door keeper"). *Durn* is used in the sense of "uterus" in the Armenian church songs in connection with the Virgin Mary; cf., "closed door through which nobody but Israel's God went in";⁹ "Heavenly bride and sealed door."¹⁰ Opening the door is a magic act of good omen in Armenian folklore, and an *andranig* is a good sign that many other children will follow. Children are vital to every Armenian, and childlessness is considered to be the worst possible evil that can befall a person. It is not good either, if the offspring consists merely of girls. In both cases the bride is held responsible, and her situation in the family becomes unbearable if she cannot give birth to a son. On the other hand, when the first-born is a boy, his birth is celebrated as a festive event. Therefore *andranik* as a proper ModA name is masculine, a form of linguistic magic. We note that this word has disappeared in many ModA dialects and has been replaced by *ardshinek* ("first born"), from *aradshin* ("first").

Drand ("lintel"), (*dur* + *and*) Sanskrit *athah* (WP, I, 59, WH, 52, Meillet, *Esquisse*, p. 44); *drandk'*, *drandik'*, pl. (Meillet, *MSL*, XVII, 14).¹¹ *And-* has later developed the meaning "field" (*ED*, I, 307). In ModA it forms neologisms: *andevor* ("inhabitants of the house: wife").

The current word for "threshold" is *seamk'*, pl. t. in classical Armenian. It is monosyllabic in *ea shem* and *shemk'*, and *wa sem*. The Kurdish *shimik* ("threshold") is a diminutive borrowed from Armenian (*ED*, VI, 162-163). There is no etymology for *seamk'*.

The folkloric factor concerning "door" is expressed in a formal prohibition: "The Armenians in Vaspurakan do not use the words *gocē'* or *p'akē'*,

⁹ *Armenian Horarium* (Vienna, 1879), p. 475, 498, 598.

¹⁰ *Pundsh me Caghkanc*, Venice, 1896, p. 49.

¹¹ ModA literature uses *barawor* ("lintel," Middle Iranian) instead of Ancient Iranian *drand*.

(both: "close! shut!") in the sense of shutting the door, but prefer *shinē* (literally: "build!"), because the shutting of a door is equivalent to the destruction of the home. They also avoid using the verbs *gocel* or *p'akel* (both: "to close") for church doors; they say instead *khatshuac* ("crucified, i.e., barred with cross"), meaning "closed." Though *p'akel* is taboo, *an-p'akel*, with the same meaning, is not, and it is used in the same province for door closing (*AH*, XXIII, 195) because *an-* sounds like a privative suffix (but its meaning shows it is not, cf. *ari* : *an-ari*). The choice of the verb *shinel* ("to build") for "to close" must have some connection with magic. Its stem *shēn* "built, prospering" has been borrowed from middle Iranian, and is used in the wish: *shēn mnas* ("be happy, wealthy, prosperous!").

The taboo on ancient Armenian words for "closing" in connection with the door explains, too, the use of many synonymous expressions that we find in ModA dialects such as *het anel* (lit. "to make back"), *cackel*, (lit. "to cover") (Am. p. 395), *kakhel* (lit. "to hang"), *dnel* (lit. "to put, to lay") (already found in the ancient literature for "to close"), and *khatshnel* (lit. "to crucify, to make a cross")¹² (*Biwrakn* [1899], p. 655). *DD* explains this last expression by the "cross-shaped" bar or lock used in Armenian houses. "Lock" is called locally *khatshnish* ("sign of the cross"). The choice of this sacred word is connected with the idea of drawing crosses on doors as protection against devils.

Finally we observe that *goc* and *p'ak* (both: "closed"), are the attributes used with *bakht* ("luck") for saying that "one has no luck." *Bakhts goc ē* means "I have no luck" (lit. "my luck is closed"). "I wish to close your door with a black stone" is a terrible curse in Armenian.

ABBREVIATIONS

AA—Ancient Armenian.

ModA—Modern Armenian.

EA—Eastern Armenian dialect.

WA—Western Armenian dialect.

AH—*Azgagrakan Handes* ("Ethnological Review") (24 vols.; Tiflis).

Am—Amatuni, *Hayoc Bar u Ban* ("Armenian Words and Sentences") (Vagharshapat, 1912).

Biwrakn—Armenian newspaper published in Istanbul.

BSLP—*Bulletin de la Société Linguistique de Paris* (Paris).

DD—Atsharian, *Dictionary of Armenian Dialects* (Tiflis, 1913).

ED—Atsharian, *Armenian Etymological Dictionary* (6 vols. and supplement; Erivan, 1926-1936).

¹² Armenian *khatsh* means "cross."

MSL—*Mélanges de la Société Linguistique* (Paris, 1868 et seq.).

WP—Walde-Pokorny, *Vergleichendes Wörterbuch der idg. Sprachen* (3 vols.; Berlin, 1928).

TRANSLITERATIONS

C for tz, c for thz, Meillet, *Esquisse d'une grammaire comparée de l'arménien classique* (Vienna, 1938), p. 14. Also, c for c with diacritic point beneath, and r for r with diacritic point above.

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INDEX OF AMERICAN FOLK LEGENDS

The newly created Center for the Study of Comparative Folklore and Mythology at the University of California at Los Angeles has announced the preparation of a standard index of American folk legends, under the direction of Wayland D. Hand. In addition to treating the predominant Anglo-American stocks of legendry, the staff of the Center will also index foreign stocks that have lived on in the new homeland. The Center will be grateful for bibliographical references to deposits of local legends of all kinds, and also saints legends, particularly such as may be found in ephemeral publications and other fugitive sources.