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Magic and its Social Context in Contemporary Armenia: From Belief
Narratives to Family Relations

Master's Thesis

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Tartu, 2020

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Introduction

Choice of topic

My work on this material started few years ago when I was interested in the role of fortune-telling practices in the daily lives of Armenians – more than once I witnessed the practice of fortune-telling using coffee grounds, so I decided to try to understand why it is so popular that it became part of everyday life.

Everywhere – in cafés, at home and even in barber shops – people drink coffee and tell fortunes using coffee grounds. I started to do my fieldwork, focusing on fortune-telling, but suddenly new perspectives opened up for me and slightly changed the vector and I decided to focus on narratives about witchcraft. This happened mainly because, as I can judge from my fieldwork, divinatory practices are encountered not only on their own, but also as an element of magical manipulation, such as spoilage (the *porcha*) or healing practices; it turned out that fortune-telling is an element of healing practice or practices related to removing spoilage. The results of my fieldwork showed that the vast majority of informants have personal stories about witchcraft, in particular about spoilage, and so, ultimately, I focused on personal narratives about the place of magic in Armenian people's lives.

Thus, my **research question** is why do people believe in witchcraft, what place do these practices have in their lives, and how can these practices be explained within the context of contemporary Armenian society.

Novelty and relevance

When I started work on this topic I realised that there is a great deal of research on the topic of magic, but nothing in English about the Armenian experience. The only Armenian researcher who conducted fieldwork on magic in Armenia is Yulia Antonyan, to whom I refer very often (I am going to talk about her work later). I want to note that Antonyan's research on magical practices in Armenia concerns the period of the beginning of the 2000s and is written in Russian. Thus, the novelty of my work lies in the fact that it examines current magical practice, whereas Antonyan focuses on magical practice as it was in Armenia in the 1990s. In addition, I focus on the social context of practicing magic, which, according to my fieldwork materials, lies in family

relationships and in the patriarchal structure of Armenian families. In addition, this MA thesis has been written in English and is thus accessible to a wider readership. I also want to note that I am going to continue this research in future and am planning to continue my focus on the social context of magical practices in Armenia.

Data

The main source of my research is fieldwork in Armenia conducted from the 1st to 30th August 2019. I conducted interviews and participant observation in Yerevan, Gyumri and Arzakan village. I chose these locations because I had previously conducted independent fieldwork on witchcraft in contemporary Armenia. In choosing Yerevan, Gyumri and Arzakan, I was guided mainly by the research of Yulia Antonyan, who conducted her interviews in Yerevan and Gyumri. Therefore, I chose Yerevan and Gyumri, as I thought these places could be fruitful and relevant for my research as it would enable me to compare my results with Antonyan's research and study the changes that had occurred over the last twenty years. In addition, Yerevan is the capital of Armenia and Gyumri is the next largest city, which is also important in cultural terms, leading me to expect a wide variety in narratives about magic. The village Arzakan was chosen because it seemed important to get interviews not only from the cities, but also from a village. Arzakan is not very far from lake Sevan; situated in the area there are a lot of mineral water sources, giving rise to several therapeutic boarding houses. Local people work at these houses and also in Charentzavan and Hrazdan – cities near the village. Thus, I can say that Arzakan is a semi-urban place. I mean that local people work in cities, use the internet, get higher education. I expected that people living in villages had stronger belief in witchcraft and more narratives about it, and I wanted to check this assumption. (Jumping ahead for a moment, this stereotype was not confirmed.) Arzakan is the only village in which I conducted interviews, but I should note that during the time I spent there, I managed to talk with almost all the villagers. I was interested in interviewing people from Arzakan because at the same time as my fieldwork in Armenia there was a 22-25-year-old man who became a *najogh* – a sorcerer and healer. My informants told me that it was very sudden. They all knew him: “he went to school with our children, he is a very good guy, a dentist, and suddenly he started to *see*” [i.e. see the future, see people's problems and how to solve them]. I was

lucky to talk with this person and his clients, and I will talk about this in detail in the next chapter.

I made a small archive with my collected material. It looks like a folder with audio and transcripts. In each interview that I have I transcribed, I marked some significant moments, wrote key-words and added a timecode in minutes to the transcription. I conducted the interviews in Armenian and Russian. Usually I started my interviews with simple questions, such as “have you ever faced magic in your life?”, “do you know someone who can do fortune-telling?”, “have you ever visited a healer?”, “have you ever had harmful magical objects in your house?”, “has someone ever cursed you?”, “do you know someone who can do black magic or uses healing practices?” and so on. My participant observation and previous experience in Armenia – I visit Armenia every year – helped me find informants and connect with them. When I started my fieldwork I had a very general, abstract view of my topic so my questions were also very general. At the same time I think that it was a fruitful experience and I found several moments about which I didn’t think before. For example, gender specifics: as I know now, practicing magic in Armenia is very gendered in that those who ask for it are usually women. They try to solve their problems using magic, as one of my informants said; men don’t practice magic because they just don’t need it.

Sources and approaches

First of all I want to say that as my main source is fieldwork the bibliography may seem too limited.

The main source of my research is field material therefore, I decided not to include in the work all the books I read, but only those that turned out to be relevant.

Here I want to note again that I was guided mainly by the work of Yulia Antonyan. During my fieldwork in Yerevan I had a meeting with local anthropologists (Yulia Antonyan, Gayane Shagoyan and the head of the Department of Contemporary Anthropological Studies, Levon Abrahamian) at the Department of Contemporary Anthropological Studies, National Academy of Science, Yerevan. They advised me on Armenian healing practice, about which I will talk more in the second chapter.

Yulia Antonyan is the most fruitful researcher on witchcraft studies in Armenia. Her works are dedicated to magical talismans (Antonyan 2006) and neopaganism, although her most important work for me is her PhD research on magical practices in

Armenia (Antonyan 2007). In her work Antonyan has examined literature on magic practices and Armenian folklore, although her main source of information was fieldwork, for example interviews with practicing fortune tellers/healers and members of their families, as well as their clients, both regular and occasional. Antonyan divides sorcerers into two groups. Some of them are “professional”, which means that fortune-telling or healing are the main occupations of these people and they live off the money that clients pay them, even advertising their services in magazines. Secondly, Antonyan writes about “traditional” sorcerers – simple people in cities or villages who practice fortune-telling or healing. I was interested in the latter group. The most relevant term for “traditional” sorcerers is *najogh*, which translated from Armenian means “the one who can see” – for example see the future or perceive disease. It is important to add that the term is quite wide and means fortune-tellers and healers as well. Yulia Antonyan also notes that, “In the city, of course, there is a much greater variety of practice than in rural areas. Along with purely traditional practices (wax casting, ‘measuring fright’, enchanting, neutralising spoilage), and even archaic practice, today rarely now (rotation of sieves, casting of lead), there are relatively new practices such as fortune-telling using coffee grounds, fortune-telling using conventional cards, extrasensory diagnostics from photographs, fortune-telling using Tarot cards”. (Antonyan 2007: 15.)

Another author whose work guided me is Russian anthropologist Olga Khristoforova. My interest in the topic started with her monograph *Sorcerers and Victims* (2010). Olga Khristoforova conducted research on witchcraft and sorcerers among Old Believers in Russia. The material for her book came from participant observation (mainly of people’s verbal and non-verbal behaviour during communication), oral stories, personal narratives (which are always interspersed with threads of folklore), as well as beliefs, prohibitions and prescriptions (2010: 14). The book is based mainly on Khristoforova’s own field material (diaries, audio and video recordings of interviews) stored in the author’s archive. Although Khristoforova conducted her research among peasants in villages I found some common elements with my experiences in Yerevan, such as the reputation of sorcerers or ‘magical thinking’ about which Khristoforova writes, referring to Edward E. Evans-Pritchard.

Why does “Victims” appears in Olga Khristoforova’s title? She states that the discourse on witchcraft is constructed by “victims” – those who have experienced magic, or were cursed (or think they were cursed), or who asked a sorcerer for help, etc.

In other words, the “victims” of magic. As she notes, these are the people who, during interview, said that “there is an old lady in our village, she lives there and she is a witch” (Khristoforova 2010: 13).

How is this discourse constructed? The important moment here is suspicion: “Most talk of witchcraft contains stories of suspicion. The logic of suspicion is as follows: something goes wrong in a person’s life, then he or she ascribes the negative state of affairs to a social conflict. The discourse interprets rationally explainable connections between events (my stomach hurts, so I must have eaten some kind of bad food) as a change in relations between people (my stomach hurts, therefore someone has cursed me)” (Khristoforova 2010: 207). According to my fieldwork the same applies to Armenia. The reputation of sorcerers is very important. To my question, “how do you know who can practice magic?” Armenian informants answered, “because of reputation”. I will talk about this in detail in the first chapter.

In her book Olga Khristoforova makes a distinction between the terms ‘witchcraft’ and ‘sorcery’. Here Khristoforova follows Evans-Pritchard, who suggests a distinction between sorcerer and witch (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 1). Both terms imply harmful magical activity based either on innate ability (witchcraft) or on special training (sorcery). In Witchcraft Studies several terms are used, ‘magic’, ‘witchcraft’, ‘sorcery’. According to these distinctions there is a possibility to practice magic as inborn (witchcraft) or as transferred, learned (sorcery). For my research I will use ‘witchcraft’ and ‘sorcery’ as acts that cannot be performed accidentally, but rather intentionally – healing, spoilage, coffee divination.

The word ‘magic’ is an umbrella term for me because when we talk about Armenia there other terms are used that have no strict correct translations in English. As will become clear in the next chapter, when we talk about practicing magic in Armenia we mainly talk about a ‘gift from God’; suddenly a person wakes up and understands that he/she can *see*. A person who can perform fortune-telling, undo spoilage and heal is called a *najogh* (as mentioned above, “one who can see”). This person can perform both good and bad deeds. It is impossible to teach someone how to *see*, although it is possible to explain to someone how to interpret the symbols in a coffee cup. It is not necessarily a gift from God, but rather it is understood as coming because Armenians are religious people. (I will talk about this later.) The closest term for *najogh* in English is ‘psychic’, or in Russian *экстрасенс*. Healers also have their own names – *vakh*

hamoh and *mom tapoh*. (See the second chapter.) Here I want to note that for my work the terms ‘witchcraft’, ‘magic’ and ‘sorcery’ are interchangeable.

An important article for me when considering healing practices was *I Make My Saints Work: A Hungarian Holy Healer’s Identity Reflected in Autobiographical Stories and Folk Narratives* by Judit Kis-Halas (2012), as it intersects my own interviews, with many similar stories about healers, spoilage, etc. For example, Kis-Halas’s informant Erzsike, who combined divination and healing practices in a similar way to my Informant H; or stories about divination using melted wax or the practice of ‘catching-fear’, although I have to note that I read this paper only after my fieldwork. However I had the opportunity to compare our experiences and found many common beliefs and practices that I thought were typical to Armenia (for example removing fear as a healing practice).

The first book Antonyan and Khristoforova referred to is *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* (1976) by Edward E. Evans-Pritchard. In his work Evans-Pritchard focuses on the role of magic in the Azande tribe in Central Africa and demonstrates how the magical thinking works, and how it explains failures as magical interventions. The classic example is the story of a collapsed granary. The Azande spends a lot of time in their granaries gather and talking there. However, sometimes termites infest a tree from which the granary is made, and so the granary can collapse. Thus, we have a clear rational explanation for why granaries sometimes collapse. But the Azande have another explanation: they tend to think that this happens at a particular time and with particular people inside because of sorcery. Magic explains unfortunate events and allows people to apportion guilt for misfortunes. This concept is also called the ‘second spear concept’: “if a person is killed by an elephant, the Azande say that the elephant was the first spear, and witchcraft the second, and that together killed a man”. In *Witchcraft...* Evans-Pritchard states that witchcraft was everywhere in the lives of the Azande (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 18-19). I focus on the concept of ‘magical thinking’, as during my fieldwork I heard very similar explanations of misfortune from my informants. For example, if someone got sick or had bad luck, etc., they were advised to check if there was a curse on them. According to my fieldwork almost every Armenian person has stories about magical intervention in their lives and acquaintances who can perform fortune-telling, healing or curses. These people tend to explain misfortune by referencing curses or ill-will.

Stories about magical spoilage, as well as divination using coffee grounds, have a very important place in my life. These acts are so common that it is fair to say that every Armenian family has first-hand stories about divination, and many Armenian woman can perform coffee-reading.

Speaking about coffee-reading I would like to mention Sandra Mizumoto Posey (Posey 2000), a researcher from the United States. In her book she suggests the history of the development of the culture of drinking coffee and fortune-telling. I was interested in this because this practice is very popular and common in contemporary Armenia. The tradition of drinking coffee came to Armenia with Armenian immigrants from France at the beginning of the 20th century.

I also want to refer to Robin Briggs and his work *Witches and Neighbours: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (2002). His book is not anthropological but historical. Briggs reflects on medieval and early modern witch trials and includes an explanation of how magical discourse is constructed, why and how people were accused of magic and what role the patriarchal structure of society plays. This book became crucial for me because I was able to draw analogies between European society during the period of the witch trials and contemporary Armenian society. I've found similarities in the construction of witchcraft discourse – when someone is suspected of practicing magic and issuing curses. Of course, in contemporary Armenia there are no witch trials, but here is another crucial factor, the reputation a person has of being able to curse or heal. In Armenian society, according to my interviews, everyone knows each other and people try to keep maintain good reputations. Here Briggs stresses two very important points – rumours, and gender. Although Briggs notes that a minority of men were accused, generally the accused were women. Here is how it worked:

In medieval Europe women spent a lot of time with other women: “In both rural and urban environment women evidently passed much of their lives in the company of other women, often competing for apparently minuscule satisfaction in terms of social esteem and personal standing. Older women quite often appear as regular if unwelcome visitors of the houses of their younger neighbors (Briggs 2002: 269)”.

The time together that Briggs writes about here was the cause of conflict: “Aggression and competitiveness by women were primarily expressed in relation to other women; direct quarrels between men and women were rather less common,

outside the family itself” (Briggs 2002: 268). I will talk about this in detail in the third chapter. Here I want to note that we can see almost the same observation in Julian Goodare’s *The European Witch-Hunt* (2016), as work that is also dedicated to witch hunting in Europe and also stresses the conflicts between female relatives.

At the end of my work I focus more on family relationships. Here I want to mention two works by Svetlana Adonyeva (2016) and Anna Temkina (2010), who write about the structure of the ‘traditional’ (patriarchal) family and the role of the mother-in-law in such families. Temkina (2010) explains the relationship between a young wife and her husband’s family, which is, as we can see later, crucial in understanding the social context of the practice of magic. Adonyeva’s work (2016) is also dedicated to family relationships, which I am convinced is important when we talk about magic in Armenia. (Although Adonyeva’s work is about Russian families there are still some similarities, as she writes about the traditional peasant family, which is by its structure and lifestyle very similar to the Armenian families).

The structure of the thesis

In the structure of the work, I will indicate that the conversation about the sources and approaches is displayed in the introduction, because my main source is my fieldwork, which I focus on from the first chapter.

In the first chapter, I focus on the conditions of my fieldwork and specify what interviews I made and with whom. As will be seen later, I place these interviews in different categories. In addition, I touch upon the question of those who can be considered a sorcerer, i.e. one who can curse or heal, why and how people learn that someone knows how to conjure. I also touch on the issue of religion and how it combines with witchcraft and there will be a discussion of the importance of religion for Armenian society. Based on my observations I can say that Armenian informants often appeal to religion, Christianity and the possible connection of witchcraft and religion.

In the second chapter, I will consider the variety of witchcraft practices that were mentioned in the interviews. I include narratives about magical interference in the life of my informants, as well as my own experience of encountering magical practices. This is the longest chapter as I tried to combine different narratives in one place here. It was important for me to show the variety of magical practices.

In the third chapter, I focus on the gender aspect of witchcraft discourse. This is a logical conclusion to my work, since my research question was to understand how and why magical practices are relevant in Armenia today. This wasn't obvious in the initial stages of my work. In trying to understand the context of the popularity of magical practices in contemporary Armenia I found that the structure of Armenian society is traditional. By 'traditional' I mean that in the Armenian family there is a fairly strict division of gender roles with the man being the 'earner', and the woman responsible for the household part of life. The issue of marriage is an acute one for Armenian girls. From an early age girls are taught that they should be able to keep the house in order and establish good relations with the husband's parents, otherwise "they will not be tolerated in the house". Moreover personal stories about magic often refer to family relationships, so I decided rather than ignoring these stories it would be better to analyse them.

In the conclusion I reflect on the work done, after which there is a list of references and of informants.

In my work, you can see a large number of quotes from interviews and a relatively small number of references to literature related to witchcraft studies. This asymmetry is because, as the introduction says, the main source of my master's work is fieldwork. I did not know in advance what material would result from the fieldwork; initially I was interested in collecting and recording personal stories, but I am also interested in the context of the narratives about magic as I believe that magic does not occur against an empty background.

Chapter 1. Fieldwork material

1.1 Informants and data

I interviewed thirty people, men and women. The oldest informant was near eighty years old, the youngest twenty two. I can divide my interviewees into two main groups: group number one and group number two. The first group is made up of people who have personal stories about magical intervention in their lives, i.e. that they found some harmful magical objects at home (spoilage, *tukht u gir*) and talked about it. Here I also include sceptics who did find ‘magical’ items but don’t think that the incident is serious. Most of my male informants are sceptics. When I asked them if they found *tukht u gir* they said yes and also added, “but I don’t believe in it”. All the informants who do believe are in my first group – people with personal stories about witchcraft. This large group of people can be divided into three subgroups:

- People who faced spoilage or other harmful magic
- People who were the clients of healers (healing in Armenia is also a part of magical practice)
- People who were told about the future by fortune-tellers.

It is very important to understand that in Armenia healing practices, fortune-telling and spoilage practices are very often mixed together. It is impossible to talk about healing without talking about fortune-telling because it is a part of healing practice. Later I will talk about healing practice in detail but here I want to repeat that the first group of my informants are neither fortune-tellers nor healers, rather they are people who have personal stories about magical intervention in their lives.

The second group consists of ‘sorcerers’ (in Armenian *najogh*). They are not ‘simple’ people like those from the first group but those who perform magical practices. Some of them were taught by their relatives, some by friends, some – as with my Informant O – suddenly received a ‘gift’. (I will talk about this later.) I also spoke with an old woman who is familiar with the practice of ‘catching fear’. This healing practice is very popular in villages and is grounded on the belief that fear causes illness; often parents ask for their children’s fear to be removed. Unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to talk with spoilage-makers as nobody gave me any contacts for them,

although in interviews my informants sometimes told me whom they suspected of black magic. But there were never any direct accusations, only guesses and assumptions.

There was only one informant who did not belong to these groups: R, who is a priest in the Armenian church. I decided to talk with him because in my interviews religion appeared as a very frequent topic. Those of my informants who thought that they had been cursed told me that they tried to find help in church, while other informants who can heal and do fortune-telling use prayers and religious references, especially to the *Book of Lamentations* by Armenian monk Gregory of Narek, which includes chants and prayers. According to my interviews and observations the fact that Armenia is the first country to have accepted Christianity is very important to Armenians. They often referred to this when I asked about ways to mitigate spoilage. They also usually referred to dreams about saints, religious signs, etc. When I went to churches in Yerevan I observed that parishioners were of all ages, and were not only women as is usual in Russia, but also men. In addition, in my interviews I was told a few times about demon obsession and black magic, which is related to the Devil. So I decided to talk with the rector of Saint Gregory the Illuminator Cathedral (Informant R), whose preaching and lections on religion and on the Armenian media are currently very popular in Yerevan. I asked him about the relationship between the Armenian church and divination, magic, etc. He told me about some rituals and prayers that can help and protect one from harmful magic. I will talk about this in more detail later, in the relevant subchapter.

1.2 Who is considered a person who practices witchcraft?

How does the community distinguish those who are sorcerers? According to Olga Khristoforova, a significant factor is gossip (Khristoforova 2010: 79). Another is difference, such as visual triggers (for example, Khristoforova's informants noted a specific eye colour, goiter, or other external signs), or it could be that the person is a stranger who causes concern and interest. A sorcerer can also be a person with physical and/or mental disabilities, a bad temper (i.e. they are evil, greedy, unsociable), or, on the contrary, an excess of physical strength, energy, talent, sociability or influence. In summary, someone who is somehow different could be a witch or sorcerer (Khristoforova 2010: 76) and thus their reputation as a sorcerer is the result of coincidence. Briggs's (2002) says the same: "witchcraft could be invoked to explain

success, although this was much rarer in early modern Europe than in some other cultures, or more recent times. Men who boasted of doing better than their neighbors were occasionally accused of being witches, as were women who made too much butter or cheese” (Briggs 2002: 319-320). At the same time no one could be free from the opportunity to be accused of witchcraft: those who accused their neighbours could easily become suspects in turn, caught up in the same remorseless machinery of local conflict and rumour (Briggs 2002: 19).

I wanted to check this assumption in the field in Armenia because, according to my fieldwork, the aspects of reputation, wealth and rumour are relevant to Armenia too. For example when I asked my informants how they knew that a person uses magical practices my informants answered that, “we all know each other”. In addition, Yulia Antonyan (2006: 32) writes that, “It is believed that the most powerful sorcerers are other sometimes hostile religious ethnic cultures. For Armenians, these are mullahs (Islamic clergymen). As Antonyan says, “at present, since for well-known reasons there are practically no Muslims in Armenia, such representations are focused on the Yezidis” (2006: 32). I want to note that Armenia is almost a monoethnic country, at that most Armenians belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church. In addition to Armenians there are Russians (mainly Molokans, adepts of a strict religious movement from Russia) and Yezidis (Kurdish people from Middle East) – and very few Muslims in Armenia. The “well-known reason” why there are no Muslims is the Sumgait pogrom, which took place in Azerbaijan on February 27, 1988. The mass murder of ethnic Armenians in this Muslim majority country led Muslims in Armenia to fear revenge, giving rise to an exodus of Muslims from Armenia. In addition, many non-Armenians (actually, as well as Armenians) left Armenia after the collapse of the Soviet Union as life became very difficult at this time (there was no electricity, no gas, no light and no water). So, the ‘Others’ – adepts of a non-Armenian form of Christianity, or non-Armenians – are very often said to be sorcerers. I heard a narrative about *Franks* from my Informant D:

Informant D: I know that *Franks* very often practice magic, especially black magic.

A.P.: Who are the *Franks*?

Informant D: Armenians from the West. They are called *Franks* because some of them came from France. They are not Christian. I mean not Armenian

Christian. They are Catholics. They are not locals [the Armenian Apostolic Church is Christian, but separate and neither Orthodox nor Catholic].

Thus, my interviews confirm that people suspect those who differ from locals of performing magic. In addition, I was told that if a spell is written in a foreign language (for example, Arabic or old Slavic) the witchcraft will be stronger and the magical power will be greater. From my interview with Informant E:

I found a piece of paper with a spell written in old Slavic. I heard somewhere that black magic is stronger when the spell is written in a foreign language. Sometimes it is Arabic.

The same was said in the interview with Informant D, who found a piece of paper in her pillow:

I saw Arabic letters. I didn't know what was written there, I just understood that it was Arabic. Later I asked our neighbours – Armenians from the Middle East – and they said 'who is D?', I said – 'me'. They said 'well, it is written against you, a magical spell. Forget it, it doesn't matter'.

As my Informant D understood, it was spoilage against her written in Arabic. This confirms that people suspect those who differ from them of magic, and that they believe a spell written in a foreign language is stronger.

I asked my informants how people become sorcerers or fortune-tellers as I heard a few times that it was "God's gift". Here I received several answers. Speaking about those people who can curse or invoke spoilage my informants answered that they learned it from other people. This is from the interview with Informant S:

A.P.: How did they know who can teach?

S: Oh, in this case everyone knows about each other, who can do witchcraft and who cannot.

Another Informant, H – an old woman and healer from Arzakan village – told me that a young man (my Informant O), who had recently started to practice magic, didn't learn how to do it. He just woke up one day and understood that he had magical power. Later I talked with him, but before that I had already heard of him because the whole village talked about him. Everybody said that they knew this guy, he went to school with their children, etc. Today he is a dentist, but he became a sorcerer and healer very suddenly. I had to call him and agree a time because he is always very busy, and this was confirmed when I went to his house (I found it easily as all the villagers knew O and told me where he lives) and found I was third in the queue. Other people were visiting because they needed his help. Apart from me there was a man of nearly thirty years old and a young woman with her mother. A family (parents, daughter and son) arrived while I was waiting for my turn. I waited for about an hour and a half. While I was waiting I talked with the young girl who was with her mother. She told me that O is very nice, young and kind and that this was not the first time she had visited him. The separate man who was also waiting said that he was not from Arzakan but from Hrazdan¹ (had come to visit O from another city). He said that O's visitors are not only from Arzakan but also from other nearby cities.

When it was my turn I went into the house. O led the reception in the kitchen. I told him that I was a researcher collecting information about Armenian folk practices and that, as far as I knew, the whole village talked about him. He agreed to talk with me and we sat at the table. There were different items on the table: a mirror, a cup, a cross and a Bible. After that, O immediately began to speak himself, without my questions. Once he looked at me said that I didn't have to worry, I would get married, I just needed to change my style, although I didn't ask him anything about this. Here it is necessary to understand the specifics of the following: Armenian girls, including in Arzakan, generally use bright makeup, wear heels and have a beautiful haircut. I was very casual, as for me Arzakan is a village. I was dressed in a more or less sporty way, without makeup, etc. I assume that seeing me, O immediately concluded that I have problems in my personal life and appealed to me to change my style. This is an important point as in Armenia marriage is very important for women. I was asked very often "when will you get married?". After saying that my personal life would be okay if I changed my appearance, O asked my age. I said twenty nine, and that I am unmarried. O repeated

¹ City in Armenia not very far from Arzakan village.

that everything would be okay at the right time. In addition, O said a few very abstract things about my life and then explained how he could “see” it. He pointed to the mirror on his table and said that he can watch through me, at the mirror and there, in the mirror, see something that cannot see looking at me. O also uses prayer and a cross as he believes that he has a gift from God:

I can see some human problems in the mirror. For example, when I look at you like that, I may not see something, but everything can be seen in the mirror. The mirror helps me see. The cross and the Bible: the holy cross, the holy book, I read prayers with them, it helps to calm people down.

I asked how he became a *najogh*? He told me that he had a dream, the day after which he understood that he could help people.

The possibility to heal or “see” is very often seen in Armenia as a gift from God. Here I want to refer to Antonyan, who suggests a scheme of receiving the “magical gift” (Antonyan 2007: 34):

1. The person is chosen as a future healer by saints.
2. The gift is transferred (in a dream, for example) and/or the person’s life is changed (moving, having children, illness).
3. The first healing.

Antonyan also notes that it can be dangerous to refuse the gift because there can be punishment, for example illness or unfortunate events.

1.3 Religion and magic

As I said earlier, very often the magical gift is supposed to be from God, although I also heard from my informants that God doesn’t like magic, divinations and so on and that the best way to heal is through prayer. So, I was confused and interested in how magical practices that are part of everyday life can be combined with religion. An addition, it is believed that another source of strength against witchcraft is the church. I was surprised when I heard from Informant E that those who are members of the Orthodox church are strong in black magic. Here I want again to stress that the Orthodox church is different from the Armenian church – once again we see that the source of magic is something that belongs to ‘Others’. Armenians are Christians but they follow the Armenian

Christian church not the Orthodox church, members of which are Russians, Greeks and Georgians. There are few Orthodox churches in Armenia and Informant E suspected her husband's sister, who switched from the Armenian Christian Church to the Russian Orthodox Church, of black magic. In that interview I asked Informant E if the suspected person was religious and if she went to church? Informant E answered: "she sings there! She changed her faith to Orthodox [from the Armenian Apostolic church]".

As Informant E told me, this woman switched to the Orthodox church "because the Orthodox's magic is stronger". This statement supports the thesis about the potency of 'Others' – foreigners and people who belong to other religious systems, etc.

As Antonyan notes (2006: 32), "Another character, according to popular beliefs, engaged in witchcraft (both beneficial and harmful) is a Christian priest, whose connection with the other world in folklore motifs is known not only in various Christian cultures". I can support this with my interview of the same Informant E, who said that church is a huge source of "energy" and sometimes this energy can be used for bad purposes: "all evil tends to go to the church because they have a centre of power there. The energy in church is powerful, and not everyone uses it for good reasons".

In the same interview I was told about the devil and possession:

We have priests who practice exorcism. There is a familiar priest [this man is my Informant R], he told me that one woman was doing such things [black magic] and went crazy, she was almost sent to a psychiatric hospital. The husband rejected her and the children decided to go to church. The priest began to read prayers over her, but unusual prayers, those which are related to the expulsion of demons. And she made such sounds, screamed like crazy, he could hardly hold her. She became a novice; she goes to church. She was told that if she returned to this affair [witchcraft], she would become worse. She has stopped. But she's always on the edge, it just doesn't pass easily.

Later I talked with this priest. He knew Informant E and agreed to give me an interview. We met in an office in the Saint Gregory the Illuminator Cathedral, where he served. Unfortunately we did not have much time as he is a very busy person. We talked only for fifteen minutes but it was still very useful for me. On my question how the church is related to witchcraft, Informant R answered:

R: For us this is not an acceptable thing, since this is a sinful business.

A.P.: Even fortune-telling, like, divinations are forbidden? I ask because it is very popular...

R: Yes, forbidden. The confessor works with the word of God and imposes certain tasks on a person so that this person comes to his senses, leaves the situation, is freed. And the fortune-teller even if he is good acts differently – using evil forces. A person remains under the influence of evil and cannot quit. For the church this is unacceptable. We say prayers, which helps the person to free themselves from evil forces.

Later I very carefully asked Informant R about exorcism because I still didn't know if this question was appropriate. I heard about exorcism only from Informant E and didn't know if the information that Informant R performed exorcisms, was public. Informant R told me:

Demons [*devas* in Armenian, evil spirits] influence people, this is called *devaharutyun* [demonic obsession]. I have met very few obsessed people in my whole life; the church has its own rituals in Latin – exorcism. In this case, with the help of God and prayer, the person is freed from the influence of this demon. For us, the most important thing is the presence of God in everything, and God's word.

At this exact moment my Informant R had to go, as it was time for liturgy. Informant R had already underlined several times that the church has nothing to do with witchcraft but helps to free those who are obsessed, something that happens very rarely. Informant R also underlined that there is no such concept as 'white magic' for the church. It doesn't matter if we talk about fortune-telling, healing practices or something else – all are called evil. For the church it is necessary to help a person be freed from evil forces with the help of prayer.

In this chapter I talked a lot about my fieldwork and the people with whom I conducted interviews. Now I want to go deeper and discuss the variety of magical practices mentioned in my interviews.

Chapter 2. The variety of magical practices

2.1 Healing

Initially I didn't have the aim of studying healing practices, although as it turned out healing practices are related to divination and other magical practices such as the neutralisation of curses. Very often divination is one step in healing; with the help of divination, the sorceress determines what causes the malaise. Once the cause is found you can fight the disease (and in some cases finding the cause is already healing). Such a case is the *vakhanoh*, the Armenian practice of removal of fear.

Armenians believe that the root of disease is fear and so there are a number of healing practices aimed at getting rid of it. If something scared the patient, it is necessary to find out what exactly, and thus heal the patient. Different terms are used for someone who knows how to remove fear: *vakh hanoh* – one who removes fear (*vakh* fear, *hanoh* remove); *mom tapoh* – one who pours wax (*mom* candle, *tapoh* the process of melting wax) and can find the reason for the fear from the shape of the wax. The concepts of wax pouring and ridding a person of fear (literally 'catching fright') are sometimes perceived as synonyms. *Vakh hanoh* employ different techniques and materials to remove fear (in addition to wax a sieve and thread are also used).

If the healer uses wax, the removal of fear is performed as follows: a candle is melted above the patient's head into a special container, and the shape that the melted wax takes is what scared the patient. Knowing what scared the patient is enough to heal the disease. This process is very similar to the divination practices with the wax that are common in different cultures, for example fortune-telling using melted wax is practiced in Russia. Judit Kis-Halas (2012) discusses a similar practice in Radfalva, Hungary.

According to Yulia Antonyan (2007) wax casting is perceived as a complex fortune-telling and healing ritual, in contrast to other, functionally narrower, rites. The ritual basically consists in the fact that the healer pours melted wax into a bowl of cold water, which is held above the client's head. If the person over whom the ceremony is to be performed is not present, then an item of clothing can replace the person. In the modern version of this rite a photo can replace the clothing. Fortune-telling is carried

out on the plates of wax, which are carried out on the edge of the bowl. At the beginning of the wax casting rite, prayers are also often said, although they are not necessary. I heard from Informant H – a healer from Arzakan village – that the candles to be used for this ritual should be collected in church. This is done by collecting spent wax that drips off of the candles that people light in church.

However, my informant doesn't work with wax, she works with thread, which she ties as a method of relieving fear:

A.P.: How do you work with threads? Does the colour of the thread matter?

H.: No, it's ordinary thread. If a little child takes seven-coloured threads, you name the names of seven old women (old people), the threads are tied in a cross, then you take a plate, put it on the child's chest and set fire to the thread.

A.P.: How do you understand what needs to be done?

H.: I understand that there is something on my client like a *navs* [ill-will, the evil eye] if I [the healer] start to yawn. I pray. If nothing happens, then there is no evil eye.

The ritual with a sieve is a bit different: a fortune teller holds a sieve with two fingers on a nail driven in from the side, asks a question or names in turn the names of the saints known to him or her and watches how the sieve behaves. If it turns to the right, then the answer should be considered positive, if to the left, negative. From my interview with Informant H:

A.P.: How does it work with a sieve?

H.: The sieve is being beaten. If there is fear, then the sieve spins on the finger, if not then there is no fear. During this you need to read a prayer – it helps.

According to Andrey Moroz's work (2012) who did research on magic in Russian North for healers and sorcerers it is necessary to transfer the knowledge, otherwise "the

sorcerer will die a painful dead” (Moroz 2012: 15). I was wondered if it is a believe in Armenia that healer should necessarily transfer the knowledge:

A.P.: Is it necessary to transfer healing knowledge?

H.: Of course

A.P.: why?

H.: Well, for example, now my grandson comes out and says, grandmother, my head hurts, I feel bad. I pray and everything passes. I want this knowledge stay in the family.

It is interesting because H didn't tell me how exactly she is going to transfer the knowledge. Otherwise, she answered “it is my gift and it is impossible to transfer”. Anyway, it interesting for me that motivation to transfer the knowledge is not because of she afraid of painful dead as in Russian North, but because she wants to keep the knowledge which can help in her family.

I also was in interested how H started to heal, for example did someone teach her:

A.P.: How did you begin to take off fear?

H.: I worked with a friend who complained that she had a headache. So, I prayed, laid my hands over her head and her headache passed. Since then, I began to practice.

Informant H doesn't take payment for her healing, not even fruit as is usual for fortune-tellers and healers, although she notes that when a healer works with wax it is necessary to pay in some way:

Here I want to note that practices relating to the removal of fear usually involve children. Very often if a child is sickly, the parents take him/her to a healer who tries to understand what scared the child. I also want to add a little history from my own childhood: when I was 5 years old (1995) our family moved from Armenia to Russia. The climate and rhythm of life is very different in Russia so I got sick very often. We spent every summer in Armenia, so I was taken to an old lady, a healer. I don't

remember the details as I was very small but I remember that she lived far away in the mountains. A candle was melted above my head and took the shape of dog. So, the healer prayed and told my mum that a big dog scared me, and furthermore that now we know the reason for disease I would become healthy.

2.2 Fortune-telling

Olga Khristoforova writes about fortune-telling as “modeling” events (Khristoforova 2002). By this she means that when a client is told by a fortune-teller that something will happen, the client then shapes events that happen in the future within the framework of the divination. As S. Misumoto writes, people perform coffee-divination because “they need clarity in their lives” (Posey 2000: 12). She notes that coffee divination is very popular in the East because these are patriarchal places where women can’t make decisions or influence their lives, so they try to be aware of about their future. According to Greenwood (2009: 112) divination is always about control:

Divination is an ancient and widespread means of seeking control or a way of exploring the nonmaterial world through unseen means. (---) Having practical and spiritual applications, divination gives meaning in situations of uncertainty. Divination can suggest answer to all manner of questions (---).

From my participant observation in Armenia I can also say that those who seek fortune-telling want to know about their future. I think that this practice has a good psychological effect. According to my fieldwork in Armenia the two most popular options for fortune-telling are coffee reading and fortune-telling with Tarot cards. Here I want to note that Tarot reading is more typical to ‘professional’ fortune-tellers who have diplomas in divination. I was more interested in talking with non-professionals who learned their skills from relatives or friends rather than in ‘wizard academies’, as discussed by Antonyan (2007: 5). So, I am going to talk about fortune-telling using coffee grounds because Tarot reading is a more or less universal technique. Coffee reading is somewhat typical to Armenia, taking root in the Armenian environment in the 1940s and 50s when the fashion for coffee was imported from France by repatriate Armenians. In addition, coffee reading was also transferred by Armenians from Turkey.

In Armenia coffee fortune-telling – *bajake tesnel*, ‘to watch a cup’ – is a defined ritual that must be observed and around which rules have formed. What is the process of fortune-telling using coffee? When the coffee is drunk, you need to turn the cup so that the coffee grounds flow onto the saucer. When the cup is ‘dry’ you can start divination. The hand in which the person holds the cup is important, and saying thank you to the diviner is forbidden, as giving money, although giving something else like sweets, etc. is allowable. The last rule is that only one woman per family can be a coffee reader. Here is a quote from a short interview with Informant D:

A.P.: Can you to do coffee reading?

D.: I did.

A.P.: Why aren't you doing it now?

D.: Because my son got married. His wife can also do coffee divination. In the family, only one woman should do it.

This is usually mentioned as an ability that a person has lost or forgotten. The person no longer practices it because, when a new person appears in the family who can perform coffee readings, they lose the ability to *see*.

I want to underline a very important gender component here – coffee divination practice in Armenia is more common among women than among men. Although I did no fieldwork there, I was told by a few informants from Turkey that this division is reversed and men there can also perform fortune-telling using coffee grounds

In my interview with S I was told that it is forbidden to perform divination for money because, “I have this gift without paying for it so I also can’t earn money with this”. However, it is accepted that the divinator can receive some things for the divination, like food, sweets, etc. The same Informant told me about the ‘punishment’ someone could receive for doing divination for money. Informant S moved from Armenia to Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union with her family – her husband and two daughters. Initially it was very hard for her family to find a place to live and to find work. So, when S’s husband started work, S performed a few coffee divinations for her husband’s female colleagues. It turned out that her clients said everything was true and really happened:

So I started fortune-telling to friends and relatives. Before this I did fortune-telling only for my friends in Armenia and never for money. It was the first time that I did coffee-reading for money and actually I earned a lot! My husband joked that one of my fortune-telling session was equal to his working month. So, everything was okay, but suddenly my children started to get sick. They were ill for several months. We didn't know what to do so my husband assumed that maybe it is so because I did fortune-telling. I don't know, maybe it was because I did it for money. Anyway, I quit. And even when I visit Armenia I don't do fortune-telling anymore.

Children becoming ill is regarded as punishment for fortune-telling for money. As Informant S told me, she shouldn't read coffee grounds for money because she received this gift from God "for free". I heard the narrative of punishment several times. Another story was told to me by S's friend, Informant M. She used to perform coffee reading a lot including for S (and even for me). Informant M performed fortune-telling for her friends; M was supposed to be able to do it very well, and everything that she said came true. I have known this person for several years. When we met for the interview the first thing that she told me was "I don't do fortune-telling anymore". Here I want to suggest a context in the form of a short biography of M. In her own words she is someone who would generate envy among women in Armenian society: she is a successful journalist who works in the mass media, teaches at the university and makes good money. Her professional life is public and prosperous. At the same time, according to M's words, she is unhappy in her personal life. She got divorce several years ago and single-handedly raising a son. M's ex-husband doesn't help her and all M's relationships were unsuccessful. After her divorce, according to her words, she never found a strong man who could be her life partner. M thought that this was because her friends envied her. She had found spoilage at her home several times so she visited a *najogh* and familiar fortune-tellers because she wanted to know what she could do better in life. But when I interviewed her she said that she had decided to quit fortune-telling for her friends:

A.P.: Can I ask you to do a fortune-telling for me?

M.: You know what? I decided not to do that anymore.

A.P.: Why? When did you decide that?

M.: Recently. I think all the misfortune that happened in my life was related to fortune-telling. You know, actually, I am a religious person.

A.P.: So maybe it was a gift from God?

M.: I used to think so. But I met one woman, I think she can *see*. We barely talked and suddenly she said that I shouldn't do fortune-telling anymore. It is the source of all my misfortunes. I decided to rely on God. I pray a lot, read a book by Gregory of Narek. It is a very strong and pure book and I think it will help me. Some parts of this book I know by heart.

In the next subchapter I will talk about envy and curses. I just want to note that actually it is typical of Armenians that when someone notices that they have too much misfortune in life, and they can find no rational cause, they tend to think that this is because they are not religious enough or have done something wrong. People need to know that there is a rational cause for their misfortunes, as Evans-Pritchard said when writing about “rational” explaining for the misfortunes of the Azandes (see the second spear concept, above).

2.3 Spoilage

Personal stories about spoilage are very common. Actually, the word spoilage is not a completely accurate translation from Armenian. In Armenian it is *tukht u gir*, from *tukht* meaning paper, and *gir* meaning letter, so literally a piece of paper with a harmful spell on it. *Tukht u gir* is performed as follows: an object, particularly a piece of paper, is taken and magical manipulations are performed over it, such as writing a spell, sometimes in Arabic or a Slavic language; the paper is then rolled up and sewn into the clothes, bedding or other personal effects of the victim. (Other objects can also be used to replace the paper, for example feathers, coloured thread, needles.) Obviously, the *tukht u gir* is usually made by a person who is in a close relationship with the victim as only someone in this position would have access to personal belongings and bedding. According to my fieldwork the most popular reason for this spoilage is a bad family relationship, for example the *tukht u gir* is mainly performed during divorce.

In practice the circumstances surrounding this form of curse are usually more complex than the outline above. As I know from the personal stories of people who found *tukht u gir* in their homes, damage is caused not only by paper but also by other materials such as fabric, thread, needles, feathers, personal items belonging to the victim, hair, blood and even human bones. A harmful item can not only be sewn into bedding or clothes, but also hidden somewhere in the victim's house, or even in a cemetery. I will talk further about this a bit later, but before that I would like to note what according to Yulia Antonyan is originally meant by *tuht u gir*. Having made the interview, I realised that the formal definition of spoilage, as considered in scientific papers, and what I had heard in interviews, is very different.

In fact, what the informants called *tukht u gir* in conversation is, according to Yulia Antonyan (2006), called “*kap*” (from the Armenian *kapel*, to bind). A *kap* is a tying process, while *gir* is a letter. A *gir* can also have a positive effect and can be made for good luck and to heal.

A *gir* is usually hidden in the victim's house (in liminal places that are actively visited by family members, for example in corners, on the threshold or under it, on the door handle) or in the yard, but more often in things close to or associated with the victim's body, such as clothes or a bed (usually in a pillow or mattress).

Unlike *gir*, the result of *kap* is always negative, whereas *gir* can be used in the manufacture of protective talismans. *Kap* are usually made from hair, pieces of fabric or thread, and are hidden in for example clothes, a pillow – that is, things closest to the victim's body, most likely associated with it – however, today these two concepts have become mixed. What in my interviews attributed by informants as *tukht u gir* (hair sewn into clothes, etc.) is actually a *kap*.

However, I must note here that the definition of these concepts is not strict. In the minds of informants the two concepts have merged and now refer to any subject – pieces of paper, thread, needles, photographs, all are *tukht u gir*. Here is a classical story about *tukht u gir* which Informant D recalled from her youth. She was married and already had a son; she lived with her husband, their son and her husband's parents. She told me the following:

I had a very difficult operation. After that I returned home. I was told to have a rest and lay down for the whole day. I returned home and realised that my mother-in-law had caused a flood at home because she did not know how to use the washing machine. So, I had to clean the apartment. I spent a half of day with my legs in the cold water, wiping the cold water from the floor. At night I had a fever, my temperature rose and I was so ill that I almost died. I clung to my downy my pillow, and suddenly felt something inside. I forced the neighbour and my husband, who were on duty at my bed, to open the pillow. Inside we found the finest batiste fabric, folded up. Inside this fabric was a piece of paper with Arabic text on it. I immediately realised that it was a *tukht u gir*. In addition, I heard how my mother-in-law in the next room was talking about me, saying “she would rather have died”. So, obviously, this *tukht u gir* was made by my mother-in-law and she wanted her daughter-in-law dead. My son heard that and burst into tears. We hid it because my husband said that if his mother knew that we found the *tukht u gir* she would make a new one.

This is a classic example of *tukht u gir* – the pillow, the batiste and the Arabic text. I understand why my informant immediately realised what it was. I heard a similar story from informant S:

Informant S: We found it. In our pillow. Granny [the mother-in-law of the informant] found it. We were in Harbert², she called to me and said: “I found it” ... And I also found another *tukht u gir* when we lived on Teryan street. She also found it in our pillow. We had one relative, I do not want to take a sin on my soul, but after her visit it happened. She spent the night in our room. They visited Yerevan, came with their father and brother, stayed in our room. And after their visit we found a blue triangle in our pillow. We unzipped the pillow, opened it, there was folded gaffer tape and paper. We opened it – there was Arabic script. Actually, I am not sure that it was Arabic, some characters similar to Arabic letters perhaps. Something was written. Here is such a strip of paper, something is written, it was folded into this blue rag in the form of a triangle. Feathers were attached to it, either a cockerel or a chicken, bird feathers. Granny found the triangle. And I found feathers, a small bundle, knitted with coloured threads. Several colours, I don’t remember what colours, but I remember that there were coloured threads. And coloured feathers. We also found them in our pillow, after a short period of time.

A.P.: So, those people whom you suspect, they did several *tukht u gir*?

Informant S.: Yes. I remember that ‘*qo hamar*’ was also written, which in Armenian means ‘for you’. But for whom specifically – it was not clear.

I said that these examples are ‘classical’ as finding *tukht u gir* in the pillow or the personal clothes is very usual. These quotations from my interviews are examples of a very common repeating narrative: someone found something suspicious in their personal possessions. Another very common feature of *tukht u gir* is that they are made to affect family members. As I understand it, this spoilage is a way to take control of other people and one’s relationship with them. The location of the *tukht u gir* can be different. My informants found harmful items in different places. For example, Informant E told me about a *tukth u gir* found in a cemetery:

² The village in Armenia.

My nephew found a photo in the cemetery. It was 40 days after my grandmother's death so he went to tidy the grave. Then he found something suspicious on a neighbouring grave. The grave was very new like someone was buried a few days ago. He found a photo of a family, an unfamiliar family, a large photo. The whole family – children, husband, wife – had their eyes scratched out. It was a photo of the whole family! Everyone's eyes were scratched out, and also there was a broken mirror, which is also a very bad sign. This means that the whole family was cursed. So my nephew burnt it. He may have saved someone. People do this very often at graves.

Here we can see several interesting moments. First, the broken mirror, which is a bad sign. Second, the place, i.e. a graveyard. It is believed that nothing should be taken from a grave. A cemetery is a place that is related to death and also can be a source of magical energy. I heard from Informants E and S that some spoilage is impossible to remove – these curses include something related with death, for example the earth from a cemetery. And the third thing is that there was a photo of the family who should be harmed by this curse. I understand why Informant E thought of this *tukht u gir* as very powerful and made to be fatal.

According to my interviews it is sometimes even possible to curse someone by accident. Here we can speak about the evil eye, envy and ill-will. Often the caster of the evil eye does not suspect that he or she is doing harm – this happens when a person is jealous of someone's happy fate. Of course this is not a *tukht u gir* by itself but an unconscious wish of evil born out of envy. Here is a fragment from an interview with Informant D about her granddaughter's friend K:

Maybe she wants to do good, but she is envious. She also wants the same guy. I think K was jealous and could do something bad, even unintentionally.

There is another story in which Informant S suspected her female friend of unconsciously causing harm that transferred to my Informant through her clothes. The friend – let's call her N – and her adult daughter – let's call her X – are both unmarried. This is important here because Informant S thinks that they accidentally cursed S's

personal life, because S thinks her personal life didn't work out well. Here I want to give a long quotation, as every detail is important:

S.: N and X gave me their clothes to hand them out. I decided to keep something for myself. I put on N's blouse and went to do my driving exam. I failed, and even when I went to the exam there was a feeling that I would not pass. I arrived home and my husband caused a huge scandal with suspicions of infidelity! As if, instead of getting ready for my driving test, cheated with an instructor. The theme of marital infidelity had not been raised at all for all the 30 years of our marriage. Two days passed and he more or less calmed down. We arrived at the cottage, it seems to be quiet. It got colder. I put on another sweater from the same bag, also from N, and again the scandal – we returned to the same topic. So I changed clothes and thought that there could be no such coincidences – both times a scandal and both times a jacket from N. This is not a coincidence. N is a strong woman, but unhappy in her marriage. She divorced very early, and foolishly. Her husband went to work in Moscow and started another family – the theme of infidelity, deception. For all these years N, although a smart woman, beautiful and hard-working, could not arrange her personal life. The fact is that she was left alone, and I came to the conclusion that it [the spoilage] was performed against her, maybe even when she was married, so that her family would break up and she would not find happiness in marriage. Maybe the curse was not made on things, but on her. Perhaps this is such a strong energy that it affects everything that N touches. And the clothes are on the body, absorbing a person's sweat, absorbing an aura. At home there is a service from N, it's not scary, but the clothes are in contact with the body, apparently the energy is strong.

A.P.: But it was done long ago...

S.: There are things that remain until death, do not pass. And if a person dies, these things pass on to the children. X [daughter] had two unsuccessful relationships, she also does not have a good personal life. There is often transmission to children, and to animals, in this case the animals die.

A.P.: Who could have put a curse on N and X?

S.: Perhaps envious, evil girlfriends. Her husband was a very promising military man. He travelled a lot, went to Moscow – then everything turned around. In her turn, N married not for love, but was a naive fool, she obeyed her parents. For all her life, she did not have a successful personal life, and I believe that there is some truth in my assumption that something was done against her. Envious rivals, yes, and rather a woman did it, men have nothing to do with it, they don't do such things.

Informant S thought that if a curse is very strong it can be transferred not only to relatives (N's daughter X) but also to those who wears clothes belonging to a cursed person. I have mentioned the narrative about personal life a few times, something that is very important for Armenian women. For me the interview with S is also interesting because the two women she mentions (Informants N and X) don't believe in curses, magic or fortune-telling, although they were still marked by Informant S as women who had suffered spoilage as they were both still unmarried. As I observed above there is a tendency in Armenia for women to be sceptical while unmarried. After marriage they began to believe that it is possible for someone to curse their family. And I think that the fact that N and X are both unmarried, and at the same time don't believe in spoilage, is very significant for my Informant S, who is now more certain than before my interview with N and X. Their lack of belief in magic is what makes them vulnerable to spoilage. I also asked men if they had found a *tukht u gir*. Even if they did, they hadn't attached much importance to it. But for women, their personal lives and family happiness are very important – literally the worst thing that can happen to a woman is divorce.

Of course practicing black magic cannot be without consequences. According to my interviews, mental illness can be one of the consequences. On the one hand we already know that people believe the power to perform fortune-telling or healing comes from God, and that it is impossible to refuse the gift. On the other hand there is also punishment for those who practice witchcraft, i.e. spoilage. Briggs also writes about the punishment for practicing witchcraft: "Children and adolescents were also prime victims for one form of illness which does seem to have been quite frequently attributed to witchcraft because its nature. Dementia and other kinds of mental disturbance were readily interpreted in terms of demonic possession or obsession; it was often all too easy

to incorporate the afflicted in psychodramas leading to direct accusations.” (Briggs 2002: 80.)

I talked about this with Informant E, whose husband’s sister was suspected of black magic. This woman has a son who has mental problems and E is sure that his problems is revenge for his mother’s sorcery:

Mental disorder... He was a talented guy – an operatic voice, musical abilities, he drew very well, studied well at school. True, mother did not allow him to be punished. He was arrogant, but everyone was silent. (---) He is silent. Maybe silent for hours. It comes to him late like he is not smart. He does not work, does nothing, has never studied. At one time he was aggressive towards his mother, even beat her. I once heard his mother telling her friend that she was giving him medication with his food, probably soothing, or maybe strong psychotropic medicine. You don’t know what is on his mind, but obviously he was crazy.

2.4 Protective practices

From my previous visits I knew that there would be many stories about spoilage in Armenia. I was also interested in protective practices. Now I want to mention something that happened to me, and then I will talk about protection from spoilage.

When I came to Armenia to do my fieldwork my parents and I decided to chill out in a cottage in the mountains as the weather in Yerevan was too hot, especially for me as I just came from Moscow. We decided to have a small gathering at the cottage. It was my second day in Armenia and I was very tired. On the day after the party I got sick – I had a fever and felt very bad. I don’t know what it was, maybe acclimatisation, but I lay in bed for two days. My mother tried to heal me and gave me some medicine. At one moment she came to me with sacred oil from Jerusalem and the book by Gregory of Narek. I asked why she had given me these? She answered that she was sure I had been cursed accidentally during our party. “Our neighbour cursed you, I am sure. Maybe unconsciously. I know she had the evil eye. Maybe she didn’t want to, but it just happened”.

I mentioned Gregory of Narek several times. This Armenian monk was mentioned in my interviews several times. Gregory of Narek was born in the mid-900s.

He was an Armenian mystical and lyrical poet, a monk and a theologian. It is believed that his *Book of Lamentations*, which is full of confessions and prayers, has power over evil forces. In interview Informant M told me that this book itself is a protecting talisman against spoilage. I therefore asked Informant R about the book as he is a priest and theologian and knows better about the mystical power of this book:

Gregory of Narek in his *Book of Lamentations* touches on topics that are related to all areas of human's life. For us, Christians, book number one is the Word of God [the Bible]. When we serve, we read prayers and say the prayers of our church fathers: Grigor Tatevatsi, Hovhannes Garnezi, Nerses Schnorali, and Gregory of Narek. Yes, his book has passages that very specifically describe how to protect yourself from evil, spoilage and curses.

During my interviews I usually ask people if they are able to protect themselves from spoilage and black magic. They usually told me about the protective power of prayer and reading Gregory of Narek's book, but I was also told that the *tukht u gir* can destroy a person who uses it. I was never a witness to the making of *tukht u gir* as people usually don't want to admit they do this. People who can destroy the spoilage are called *ghrbats* – from Armenian for 'one who "opens" spoilage'. As noted by Antonyan, "In fact, the one who can set a curse and neutralise it are often the same person, acting in different cases with different intentions. Therefore, people often turn to *ghrbats* to make a *gir* on someone or to teach someone how to do this. Nevertheless, we never once heard a direct confession of causing harm from a *ghrbat*, although many of them asked about such requests from visitors". (Antonyan 2007: 33).

I already said that *tukht u gir* does not necessarily mean something bad. In the end, it is text on paper. Interestingly, apart from prayers and the help of *ghrbats*, one more protection against spoilage is talismans, which are made in exactly the same way as *tukht ug gir* – i.e. they are magical spells or prayers (usually excerpts from Gregory of Narek's book) on paper. According to Yulia Antonyan, "The written talismans in the Armenian tradition consisted of words, prayers, magical spells in Armenian or other languages. Written talismans were common in mediaeval Armenia, existing among Armenians in the early twentieth century, although at present they are extremely rare" (2007: 25).

It is true that it is very hard to find such talismans today. None of my informants had a talisman although I have seen them at the Matenadaran Museum (The Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts) and also an exhibition of magical amulets. It is a permanent exhibition where, in a special section, I found a few examples. See the photo included here. As you can see, talismans are also written on rolled paper with images of saints and quotations from Gregory of Narek's book.



Chapter 3. Gender and power

3.1 Gender and accusations of witchcraft

The gender aspect of witchcraft was noted by such scholars as Briggs (1998) and Goodare (2016). Goodare wrote about Europe during the period of the witch trials. According to him European society was quite patriarchal and power was concentrated mostly in male hands: “fathers controlled children, husbands controlled wives, priests and the entire judicial system was represented only by men”. Women were expected to obey their fathers, husbands, other male relatives and, above all, priests. The female role was to serve the family. Not men themselves but the structure of the society “shaped the way in which witch hunting occurred” (Goodare 2016: 267). As we know, Briggs also assumes that those who accuse women of witchcraft are other women. I think this moment is very important as we can talk here about aggression and competitiveness among women. Very often the reason for accusation was bad relationships and the source of conflict was the domestic side of life, in which men didn’t participate. Women shared place and time and aggression with other women. Briggs (1998: 273): “If it is correct to suggest that most informal accusations were made by women against other women, then they would only have leaked slowly across to the men who controlled the political structures of local society.” Women shared their suspicions with men, and “it was husbands who shared their wives’ suspicions (---)”. (Briggs 1998: 274). The source of conflict and accusation, according to Briggs, is the patriarchal structure of European society in those days, i.e. the suppression of women by their parents and husbands with the only opportunity to gain power over enemies being an accusation of witchcraft (Briggs 1998: 284).

Here we can talk about the “discourse of power”, as said in Briggs’s work (1998: 319). According to him, “magical practices are about taking a power over other people”. Those who use magic against someone are trying to affect them, to subordinate them to their will (Briggs 1998: 398). What does that mean? According to Briggs one could conclude that men have other tools for influence at their disposal. I have mentioned above that in patriarchal societies women very often cannot influence their futures, and in place of this want at least to know about them and prepare. And this relates not only to gender but also to social roles: the fundamental point is who can make decisions in the family and speak loudly, and who can’t. So, why did I quote this

part about Europe? The point is that the patriarchal lifestyle of Europe during its witch hunting period applies to contemporary Armenia. Armenian society is gender segregated: men work, women are housewives. Despite the fact that there are a lot of women who work, it is still women who are in charge of the family and the household. In Armenian society it is female work to keep house, raise children and obey the husband, not to mention take care of relatives, including the husband's mother and father.

Despite the fact that there are also male stories about witchcraft, it is still obvious that witchcraft is predominantly a female practice. If we understand witchcraft as a way to talk about problems in relationships, about power and aggression, then we can understand why this is. In the male-dominated environment another language is adopted for expressing and resolving conflict, allowing wider opportunities to openly show hostility. Although it is still possible to find men among sorcerers, "men have other things to do". Here I can also add that my male informants told me something like, "oh, we don't believe in witchcraft", although men also had stories about witchcraft, for example some had found *tukht u gir* or had other stories about magical intervention in their lives.

3.2 The mother-in-law

It is important to note that the average Armenian family is not only parents and children, it also includes grandparents, especially the mother-in-law. To my question, why does the young family not live separately, one informant replied that "this is not accepted". But it is accepted that a woman is entirely responsible for domestic life. I have to note that in Armenian families women also spend a lot of time together, as was said by Briggs about European communities, and this especially applies to the mother-in-law. Traditionally, in Armenian families the mother-in-law is a very powerful figure. There are two crucial reasons for this, first due to her age, and second because she is mother of the head of the family. Just as was said about Europe during the witch trials period, in Armenian families women also have to obey their parents, husbands and brothers as well. The Armenian woman is taught to be submissive from childhood. She is in charge of the household, family atmosphere (i.e. maintaining good relationships),

raising children and nursing parents in their old age. But when a wife becomes mother of a son, the future head of a new family, her status in the family is different as she can now maintain power. Mother is a sacred figure with many duties who very often cannot manage her life by herself when she is only a wife. But once she has mother-in-law status she becomes respected and sometimes more powerful than the son. According to my observations, mothers-in-law are very often not satisfied with their son's choice of wife. Here I have to note another important factor, the importance of the child's gender. In Armenian society sons are preferable because when a daughter grows she will leave the family. In contrast a son stays with his mother and brings a wife who should serve her. In some villages in Armenia the answer on the question "how many children do you have?" depends on male children, girls are not counted. Of course in big cities the situation is different, although here the practice of selective abortion is a factor. I have not heard stories of couple opting for abortion because they were expecting a boy but wanted a girl, although I know of many stories of the opposite. This forces me to assume that boys are preferable to girls. So, the mother stays with her son and wants the best, the most beautiful and, preferably, silent wife for her son. As was said in my interviews very often, "my mother-in-law didn't want me to be her son's wife. She wanted another girl". Informant D had a very difficult relationship with her mother-in-law: "my mother-in-law wanted another girl to be her son's wife. She told me that 'my eye is on a village girl', even many years later. She hated me". Informant D was abused by her mother-in-law when she was pregnant. Her husband went to work and my Informant stayed at home with her mother-in-law who "locked the refrigerator and didn't feed me".

Using harmful magical practices against a daughter-in-law is a way to take control of a son's family and retain the power that could be threatened by a young wife. The situation is even more complicated because the mother-in-law becomes a second mother for her daughter-in-law. Traditionally, in Armenia a newly-wed daughter not only lives with her mother-in-law but also has to call her mother. This is because the young wife must leave her own family and become part of a new one and solve all her problems within a framework of new rules and new people. She no longer deals with her father, but with her husband, not her mother but her mother-in-law.

The mother-in-law is the only person in the family (and sometimes the only person) who can attest that the fiancée is 'clean'. Here I talk about the Red Apple

tradition and refer to Anna Temkina's work (2010) dedicated to the premarital virginity of women. The research was carried out by Temkina in 2010 in Yerevan, according to which this tradition is still active. The ritual is as follows: after the wedding night the young wife must prove that she was a virgin by showing her mother-in-law the bedsheet with signs of blood. After this the mother-in-law goes to the wife's parents to thank them for her son's wife's purity. According to the tradition she takes them a red apple. Based on Temkina's research this tradition is so important and still so common that sometimes young fiancées opt for surgery to recover their virginity.

With this example I wanted to illustrate the importance of the mother-in-law. The first step in a young wife's relationship with her mother-in-law is to prove that her husband has made a good choice, that she is a pure and good wife. The second – the birth of a child, allows the mother-in-law to be responsible for teaching and transferring knowledge about motherhood and being part of the new family. The birth of the child is a very important moment in the mother-in-law daughter-in-law relationship, like a kind of initiation.

Adonyeva (2016) writes about Russian peasant families – but I think it is also relevant here – that with luck, the young daughter-in-law will be under the auspices of a more experienced mother-in-law: “the youngest woman can only obey the older woman, turn to her for help and believe that over time she will gain ‘wisdom’. The young woman is under the auspices of the elder” (Adonyeva 2016: 197).

Yulia Antonyan also writes that “the sexual sphere of the family is one of the most common and vulnerable to damage”. Since attackers are most often (actually or suspected) close people or relatives it is likely that such actions are mediated by supernatural forces as a mechanism for identifying family problems and relationships (Antonyan 2007: 56). Antonyan supposes that “that the more conventions in the family structure, the more traditional the family relations are, the more likely is the appeal to witchcraft and, accordingly, to the help of those who are able to create it” (2007: 63). That means that in Armenian society it is accepted not to show that you have problems in your family, so, all conflicts are hidden deep and are solved with supernatural forces.

The problem of relationships, especially with the mother-in-law, occurs very frequently in my interviews. Moreover, this is very often given as the reason for magical intervention. As was said about magical thinking in the first chapter, my informants tend to explain misfortune as the result of magical intervention. So, a lot of

female informants suspect their mother-in-law of witchcraft, especially if we are talking about spoilage of a family relationship, divorce or a mother-in-law not agreeing with her son's choice of fiancée. Informant E told me about a when she was cursed by her mother-in law with a touch. She was very young and it was her first marriage:

E.: I go to the bathroom, turn on the shower. Then I hear that my mother-in-law has returned home. When I returned to the bathroom I slipped, almost fell. Suddenly she comes into the bathroom and says 'I decided to help you', and starts to rub my back by her hand, without even the washcloth. I was confused, even my mum didn't bathe me! I cringed ... She came straight to the bathroom and started to touch me, without asking. Then she said 'okay, finish it', and left.

A.P.: Did she whisper something?

E.: No, she only touched my back. Well, I got divorced from my husband. He cheated on me. Later my mother went to Charentsavan³, to her friend. And one woman came to her friend and performed a coffee divination for my mother. She said to my mum, 'your daughter divorced her husband but actually there is someone who influenced this. It's a woman and she 'smeared' on your daughter's back so that they would part. She smeared on her back'. And we really separated.

3.3 Witchcraft and female relatives

Sometimes there are some difficulties in a relationship between a wife and some other of the husband's female relatives. Informant E told me another story about spoilage by touch. It was carried out years later by her second husband's aunt:

After Nelly [the Informant's youngest daughter] I became pregnant again. The child would have a year of difference with Nelly so we decided to keep the baby. The pregnancy was so easy, with Nelly it was harder for me. So, the story is – I'm standing in their bathroom (at the husband's house), washing over the basin, his aunt comes in – his mother's sister – she comes in, runs her hand over my

³ A small town in Armenia.

back. 'I heard that you are expecting a baby'. The very next day, at night, I felt bad. Prior to this, no pain, no nausea. And here it was not clear what it was, but the foetus had decomposed. They didn't want to take me to the doctor, I almost died. Is this a coincidence? The second time on the back! That night I felt sick, I lost a child. They did not let me call the doctor. His mother – and she is a doctor – said 'you are fine'! Grant [the Informant's second husband] also says that it's just such vagaries. The hospital said I urgently needed to have the infection removed. Can such a strong infection come in one day?

Here we can see a narrative in which the husband's aunt has the desire to dissolve the informant's marriage, to make her unsuccessful, to quarrel. Informant E also has a similar story about her second husband's sister, who, as my informant thinks, is also trying to influence my informant's youngest daughter, to argue that her daughter does not communicate with the informant.

During the interview E she told me that she suspects her of witchcraft because her husband's sister want to ruin E's family. I asked her if this woman can do black magic by herself or does she ask someone to do it?

"I think she can do it by herself. She stayed with us during the full moon and said that the strongest *tukht u gir* are made during that time. We didn't talk about it at all. She is a dark person".

Informant E said that immediately afterwards her relationship with her husband become worse and worse, "as if someone changed him":

Grant has changed a lot; nothing remains of the former Grant. He seemed to be stupefied. He doesn't have that with health either. He is stupid, disconnected.

But Nelly [E's youngest daughter] is the number one problem.

Nelly is 'problem number one' because she is E's daughter and E thinks that her husband's sister is trying to make Nelly leave E:

It is seemed as if someone erased my youngest daughter's memory. I mean what she was like when she was a little girl and what she is like now – these are different people. It is very hard with her, Nelly is very difficult. It seems like a

moment has passed, then you look, she again becomes kind of ... it happens, she is bold, some kind of distraction comes. Then her memory seemed to be erased, she does not remember things from her childhood. There are some things that are impossible to forget but she doesn't remember it! I don't know, she was smarter! We read something together, discussed it. She drew very well. There was a completely different child, now you do not know what to expect from her. She has matured, something about this her aunt began to understand, and still she is withdrawn. Tied to herself.

The above stories tell us about how relatives of the husband try to do harm. But sometimes the spoilage can happen in one family with victim's relatives – for example, Informant E has another story in which participated her own grandmother:

E: This often happened with our house. For 16 years, my mother gave me a golden little key. Then I forgot about it and kept it somewhere. Mum was sweeping – and the house is old, the floor is made of planks, and from somewhere, either under the floor or from somewhere, something folded flew out. It was paper. Mum opened it and there was my key, so she thought that something had been done on me. There was my key, and needles bound together with coloured thread. And when the paper was unfolded, the writing was in old Russian, it was not clear, only "God" was written. Mum went [to someone who can neutralise *tukht u gir*] and was told that it meant I would never have a wedding. The plot was for me to stay in this house. And so it turns out that I am returning to this house, and I really did not have a wedding. I got married without weddings. I mean that my grandmother did it. Only she came once a year. She is from Stavropol. She arrived somehow, with some kind of grandmother. They were shopping around here, they didn't even look after their son. And they left. Afterwards we discovered this; we thought, 'so who else could do it'? In Old Slavonic, like a magical spell. And this is my key. While we were away, apparently she took it.

A.P.: When you found this, was it accompanied by bad events in life?

E.: It feels like everything was done so that I should not have a family. And in spite of everything I created my own family. But still, something unsuccessful is coming. Some kind of rock.

E's eldest daughter: Well, it seems to me that the spoilage can't act one hundred percent. Only in the cemetery they do, fatally, then yes. And so fate brings it all the same, in other ways ... it may not be easy, or everything goes bad – there was no wedding, but you got married.

A.P.: Maybe because the *tukht u gir* was found?

E's eldest daughter: Yes, maybe.

A.P.: Why did grandmother do this?

E.: Grandmother did it because she didn't want me to have my own family, she wanted me to look after my father.

I want to note that using witchcraft, or belief in it, does not depend on the level of education or whether the informant lives in a village or city (I did my fieldwork in cities and also in a village), but usually depends on gender (more women than men) and family status (the victims of sorcery are usually young married women). I heard many times from my female informants, "I didn't believe in magic when I was younger but started when I got married". This is explainable through Briggs comment that, "Women had every reason to be nervous about the risks to themselves and their babies, against which they sought to mobilise help and protection". (2002: 76). A woman starts to feel worried about her family because of the new responsibility that marriage will entail. Khristoforova notes the same when she says that, "women begin to believe in witchcraft 'for real' after creating their own families and, in particular, after having children. Creating her own family changes a woman's status, widens the sphere of her responsibility and, consequently, anxiety increases" (2010: 91).

In this chapter I wrote a lot about mothers-in-law but I think here we should talk more about power. Personal experience stories can be interpreted as symbolic representations of power struggles and tension between women of different generations in close relationships: between young wives who feel vulnerable because of their weaker position in the family, and mothers-in-law whose authority is endangered by the presence of competitors. Perhaps mothers-in-law sometimes try to hurt their daughters-

in-law because they also feel vulnerable and powerless? Most likely mothers-in-law use *tukht u gir* precisely because they feel that power can be taken away by other woman who are younger and more fertile.

Conclusion

It is interesting that narratives about magic generally relate to negative outcomes such as spoilage, curses and ill-will. People in Armenia tend to talk about the *tukht u gir* that they have found and to blame envy neighbours for them. At the same time magic is not only spoilage – it is also healing practices including prayer and help from God. It is interesting that fortune-telling is not very often part of the narratives that I heard during my research, as people don't tend to relate it to magic. Maybe this is because fortune-telling is such a part of everyday life that no one talks about it as about magic. Generally they talked about *tukht u gir* spoilage when I asked them about magical interference in their lives. In other cases they mention healing but usually add that it is something related to medicine.

Here is an observation which I made during my fieldwork, confirming the words of Khristoforova when she said that “witchcraft discourse is formed by the words of the victims of witchcraft”. Many of my informants talked about magical interference in their lives from the perspective of the victim of spoilage. Maybe ‘victim’ is not the correct word here. For Khristoforova's research it was appropriate as she focused mainly on cursing and spoilage in her book. The Armenian context is more complicated. My Armenian informants are not victims but rather they occupied a passive position: someone found a harmful object in their house, someone was taken to a healer in childhood, i.e. the informants themselves were never actors in witchcraft practices, rather the contrary, they always took a passive position. No one told me if he/she performed spoilage on someone else, or thought about it. They are those over whom witchcraft was committed, not those who initiated it. The assumption expressed to me at one of the conferences where I made a report, consisting in the fact that being a victim of witchcraft is socially approved in Armenia, is quite fair. Earlier I quoted from an interview with Informant D, who is an elderly woman in her 80s. She spoke about what happened to her when she was a young daughter-in-law. Now D is a mother-in-law herself, although she answers questions about witchcraft by drawing on her experiences as a victim. When I asked if she was the one who was trying to influence the family life of her son and to separate him from his wife, she replied “no”.

Based on the interviews that I recorded, I conclude that witchcraft is a part of the life of Armenians precisely because of the structure of Armenian society, which I tend to call traditional, specifically, patriarchal; Armenian community is a male community. All important decisions are made by the head of the family, who is the father. The man in the house is the main character, the ‘earner’, while the wife must obey and serve her husband/father/brother. Often, she cannot make major decisions. Against this background, witchcraft and divinatory practices are considered purely female. I must note that sometimes when I conducted an interview and asked my female informants about whether they knew how to perform fortune-telling, they answered in a whisper so that their husbands would not hear. I can’t say exactly why this is so, and maybe I can focus on it in future research in Armenia. I think that magic is mostly related with women, but I don’t understand now why they should try to hide the fact that, for example, they know how to do fortune-telling. I am also not sure if female informants would whisper if I asked them about healing.

The title of my thesis is “Magic and its Social Context in Contemporary Armenia: From Belief Narratives to Family Relations”. This is exactly the path I followed after collecting the field material: personal stories about magical interference in the lives of my informants led me to the conclusion that the key to understanding the wide use of witchcraft lies in family relationships and conflicts. I tried to suggest the same path in my work, ending it with a chapter on gender and power.

In my thesis I have not referenced all the interviews that I collected over a month in Armenia; in addition, as is obvious, most of the examples given here were from interviews with women. The list of informants that follows the bibliography contains only those informants whose interviews were mentioned in this work. The majority of interviews with men showed that they are generally sceptical. They did not contain narratives about witchcraft that interested me, although it is important not to underestimate the importance of scepticism. In this case, it seems that if men have anything to say about witchcraft (for example if someone from the family found a malicious item in bedding or was taken to a healer in childhood), they do not attach any importance to this.

According to my interviews, use of and belief in magic does not depend on the level of education. Among my informants were people with higher education, such as Informants S, E, N, and M, as well as people without higher education, such as

Informant H. It also doesn't matter if the informant lives in a village or city. It is a common stereotype that magic is "granny's fairy-tales from villages". However, taking narratives about magic seriously depends more on gender and family status, for example the victims of sorcery are usually young married women who only began to worry about witchcraft once they were married. Maybe this is so because, according to my participant observation, women in Armenia are told from childhood that the most important thing for a girl is to get married. I think that a crucial thing here is the meaning that family life is the most important thing for women in Armenia. When a woman becomes a wife and mother she has then has to worry about being a good wife and get along with her husband's relatives and her new mother-in-law. Ultimately, she is responsible for the children in the family as she is more engaged in bringing up and educating the children than the father. Adding to this the new wife might also have to be wary of someone's ill-will or envy, perhaps leading to spoilage that could destroy the fragile peace in the family, which she has worked so hard to construct. The interviews I collected tend me to think that the structure of Armenian society is very important and can explain why women are generally more involved in practicing magic than men.

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List of mentioned informants

Informant D (female, app. 80 years old). Gyumri, Armenia

Informant E (female, app. 60 years old) Yerevan, Armenia

Informant H (female, app. 65 years old) Arzakan, Armenia

Informant M (female, app. 55-60 years old) Yerevan, Armenia

Informant O (male, app. 22-24 years old) Arzakan, Armenia

Informant S (female, app. 55-60 years old). Yerevan, Armenia; Moscow, Russia

Informant R (male, app. 45 years old) Yerevan, Armenia

Resume (in Estonian)

Maagia ja selle sotsiaalne kontekst tänapäeva Armeenias:
usundilistest juttudest perekondlike suheteni

Selle magistritöö aluseks on aines, mille kogusin Armeenias intervjuude ja osaleva vaatluse käigus. Välitööd toimusid 1.–30. augustil 2020. aastal Jerevanis, Gjumris ning Arzakani külas. Jerevan on Armeenia pealinn, Gjumri suuruselt teine linn ja oluline kultuurikeskus; Arzakani valisin selle mõttega, et saada peale linnakeskkonnas levinud uskumuste teadmisi ka külaühiskonna rahvausundi kohta. Oletasin, et nõiduseusk on rohkem levinud maal, aga see eelarvamus ei leidnud kinnitust. Intervjuudest selgus, et nõiduseusk ei sõltu haridustasemest, vanusest ega elukohast. Küll on jutud maagiast tugevalt seotud sugupoole ja perekondliku positsiooniga: nõiduse ohvrid on enamasti noored abielunaised.

Minu magistritöö pealkiri kirjeldab üldjoontes tunnetuslikku teekonda, mille läbisin materjali kogudes: jutud isiklikest nõidusekogemustest viisid mu järelduseni, et võti nende mõistmiseks on perekondlikes suhetes ja konfliktides. Mu uurimus kajastab sama teekonda ja lõpeb peatükiga sugupooltest ja võimusuhetest.

Tehtud intervjuud annavad tunnistust sellest, et nõidus on tihedalt seotud Armeenia ühiskondliku korraldusega, mis on „traditsiooniline“, patriarhaalne ja meestekeskne. Kõik olulised otsused teeb isa kui perekonna pea. Mees on perekonnas kõige olulisem, sest ta teenib raha; naine peab kuulama oma abikaasa, isa või venna sõna ja jääb sageli olulistest otsustest kõrvale. Sel taustal peetakse nõidust ja ennustamispraktikaid naiste valdkonnaks. Mu osalev vaatlus kinnitab, et Armeenias selgitatakse tüdrukutele juba lapsepõlves, et nende jaoks on kõige olulisem samm abiellumine. Naiseks ja emaks saamine nõuab pingutusi, sest ei piisa sellest, et olla oma mehele hea abielunaine; lisaks tuleb luua head suhted ämma ning abikaasa perekonnaga. Niisamuti vastutab naine lapse üleskasvatamise eest, sest kahtlemata on tema panus kasvatusse suurem kui lapse isal. See kõik annab põhjust mitmeteks muredeks, pealegi võib kellegi pahatahtlikkus või kadedus hävitada hapra perekondliku rahu, mille ülesehitamiseks on naine palju vaeva näinud. Tehtud intervjuudest selgus, et põhjused,

miks naised on maagiliste praktikatega tugevamini seotud kui mehed, peituvad Armeenia ühiskonna struktuuris.

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