

Neo Paganism In Armenia:
The Arordiner Movement

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Introduction

Armenia is considered the first nation to accept Christianity as its state religion in 301 AD. The seventy-year rule of the Soviet Union secularized the country and the practices of religious activities were prohibited. After the fall of the Soviet Union and the declaration of the independent Republic Of Armenia in 1991, the country slowly regained its national identity and religion. According to IndexMundi (Index Mundi , 2016), 98.1% are of Armenian ethnicity and 92.6% of the population is Armenian Apostolic.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, new religious movements arose in Armenia. Neopaganism is considered a new religious movement that was founded in order to re-establish the ancient pagan Armenian identity. Not much attention has been given to this group of nationalists, its leaders, ideologies and rituals. Although Armenians are vaguely familiar with their pagan history before the conversion to Christianity, the majority of the people in Armenia and in the diaspora do not know of the existence of Armenian neopagans as a newly emerged phenomenon in the society.

This paper will explore Armenian Neopaganism or the Arordineri Ukht, and have a better understanding of its structure, ideologies, foundations, beliefs, leaders, traditions, holy book and the relations with the Apostolic Church. Before getting into the specificities of the Arordineri Ukht, I will briefly elaborate on paganism in general, ancient Armenians' beliefs and the new concept of Neopaganism.

Literature review

Abrahamic religious authorities, called non-believers pagans in order to differentiate these people from the followers of the Abrahamic religions according to them the true religions (Davies, 2011). Paganism is a broad concept and contains different branches. Paganism is a polytheistic religion and worship based on nature.

Neo paganism is one of the many new religious movements that rose in the 20th century. According to *According to Modern Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Central and Eastern Europe* (Aitamurto & Simpson, 2014) there are leftist Neo pagans who are considered as western form and the right wing pagans, which is the eastern form.

According to Ghevont Alishan Armenians were nature worshipers and polytheistic. Armenians had their own pantheon gods, customs and rituals. The main worshiped god is the father god Aramazd, goddess Anahit portrayed and the mother and Mihr the son.

Sun worshiping was the most important totem worshiped by the ancient Armenians, their rituals, dances and chants were dedicated to the sun. Till date many popular sayings evolve around the sun. Many Armenian folkloric dances, shourch bars, depict the battle between the sun and the moon with left and right steps and movements as tribute to the sun. Many rituals and religious symbolism were transferred to Christianity, mainly because pagan literates became Christian priests and adjusted pagan rituals and customs to Christianity.

Armenia Neo paganism rose after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when freedom of religions was established in Armenia. Slak Kakosyan was the founder of Arordiner, the children of Ara, returned to Armenia after his exile to the states (Antonyan & Siekierski, 2014). While he was there he was familiarized with the writings and ideologies of the Armenian nationalist hero Karekin Njteh. Therefore he formed the Arordiner based on his nationalistic views and the Arian nature of the Armenians. The neopagans were well accepted by the ruling party and were registered as a new religious movement. Neopagans have their own scripture which was collected and created by Slak Kakosyan and is separated in to seven parts. For them the scripture is not godsend therefore can be modified and should be with time (Antonyan & Siekierski, 2014). Neopagans have their own rituals and places of worship; the most famous one is the temple of Garni, the only surviving pagan temple in Armenia.

The Armenian Apostolic church does not see the Arordiner as a threat, because the Arodiner do not consider them a religious entity. The church was more conserved with the other rising religious movements such as Protestantism and the spread of Jehovah's witnesses who were recruiting huge amounts of believers (Antonyan & Siekierski, 2014). The Arordiner had more of nationalistic ideology, to recover the lost identity of the ancient Armenians and protect the Armenian people and nation.

Pagans used mystical powers to attain supernatural forces from the nature and their ancestors. Those powers were used for healing purposes and to communicate with the gods. Shamanism is practiced in Armenia, where several women use their mystical powers to heal people from different sicknesses.

Research questions:

Q1: Who are the Arordiner?

Q2: how is Armenian paganism different from Armenian Neopaganism?

Research findings and analysis

Paganism:

The word pagan was created by the early Christians to describe people who followed religious rituals and beliefs other than the main world religions. Throughout history the word pagan or paganism was used in a pejorative sense, and labeled to non-Christian believers as followers of “false religions” (Davies, 2011).

The earliest forms of religions embraced the worship of the earth mother represented by female deities. The worship of ancestors was due to the belief that the dead exist and can affect the living. Animism was another form of worship, believing that every natural entity and wildlife has a spirit and soul. Shamanism was an early Stone Age religion of pre-agrarian societies. The shaman (healer) uses narcotics or trance practices to communicate with the spirits in order to be empowered and heal the living. The primary literary documentations of the near and Middle Eastern civilizations prove the existence of a structured polytheistic pantheon of gods and goddesses who controlled the heavens, nature, and life.

Armenian Paganism: ancient beliefs and major Gods

According to Ghevond (Alishan, 2002), Armenians were initially nature worshipers. Since they could not understand how nature functioned and were

astonished by the changing force of nature, having beautiful and majestic features at times yet ferocious and brutal at other times, the fear of nature's overwhelming powers brought about their worship.

Sun worship was the prime veneration element for the Armenians. Mihr, the son of Aramazd, was considered as the divine force of the sun, fire, fairness and equity (Barseghyan, 2015). The lion was the totem of the sun, its companion and protector. God Mihr was portrayed as a lion, and this can likewise be seen in the post-Christianization national epic "Lion Mher". The sun was the most important fetish of worship for the ancient Armenians and an inseparable particle of their history and present. Sun worshiping customs and rituals are passed to Armenians and practiced till date. According to the writings of Agathangelos, the Garni temple was dedicated to Mihr and was the only pagan temple that survived St. Gregory the Illuminator's raid and pillage of pagan monuments during the Christianization of the Armenian highlands.

Anahit, the goddess of fertility, love, motherhood, and harvest, was admired and had a major influence on the Armenian national mindset. She was the most respected and popular goddess in the Armenian pantheon (Barseghyan, 2015).

According to Alishan, Anahit's feast was celebrated on the 15th of Navasard, which is the month of August. The assumption of the holy mother of God, Mary, is celebrated on the nearest Sunday to the 15th of August (Diocese of the Armenian Church of America, 2015), the same timing as the feast of Anahit.

Aramazd is considered the first figure in the Armenian mythological trinity. Very little has been transmitted about his worship. The only information we have is that Aramazd is considered the father of all divine beings and the creator of heaven and earth.

These three gods, Aramazd, Anahit and Mihr were the prime gods of the pagan Armenians. There is a clear similarity of elements between these three divine beings and three noteworthy Christian characters: Aramazd has similar attributes of God the father, Anahit as Mary, and Mihr as Jesus.

Neo Paganism: A new Religious Movement

A new religious movement appeared in the 20th century, post World War II. Neopagan movements have various forms throughout the world, depending on their geographic, cultural, linguistic concepts. According to *Modern Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Central and Eastern Europe* (Aitamurto & Simpson, p. 2014), the western form (North America and British Isles) of Neo paganism are leftist and are shaped by 19th century romanticism and individualism. They are interested in magic and seek freedom from traditional gender and sex roles. As for the eastern form (ex-Soviet Union), they are concerned with ethnicity, nationalism and local traditions, and lean more to the right, overpowered by communism and post communism chaos. However, these two forms share common ancestors, they consider themselves as a continuation of ancient religions, and deny the Abrahamic religions. They show great concern about nature and the world through activism (Aitamurto & Simpson, 2014).

Neopaganism in Armenia: Arordineri Ukht (Order of Children of Ara)

Founder and Chief Priest Slak (Eduard) Kaksoyan

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Eduard Kakosyan returned back to Armenia after being in exile in the United States in the 1970's. While in the states he was inspired by the teachings of the Armenian national hero Karekin Njteh and his nationalistic ideologies and philosophy "Tseghakron". In 1991 Kakosyan founded the

Arordineri Ukht. After meeting with the last living fellow – soldier of Njteh and had “shaken the right hand of Njteh” (Antonyan & Siekierski, 2014), Kakosyan was ordained as a supreme pagan priest and changed his name from Eduard to Slak Kakosyan, after his tribe’s forbearer’s name.

Karekin Njteh and “Tseghakron” ideology

In the book *Pilisopayaganuh yev Kaghaparakhosaganuh Garegin Nzhteh i Desagan Jarankutyun Mej* (Sargsyan, 2011), Armen Sargsyan, writes about the life, the ideologies and philosophies of the National hero Karekin Njteh.

Karekin Der Haroutiounian, was born in the province of Nakhichevan in 1886. His father was a priest who died when Karekin was only two years old. He received his education in Nakhichevan and Tiflis. He temporarily studied law in Saint Petersburg, then he joined the military academy in Sofia with the help of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), and therefore was required to commit his work to the ARF. Njteh fought for the Armenian highlands against, the Turks, Azeris, Kurds, the Bolsheviks, and whoever was a threat to the sovereignty of Armenia. He was a fierce and courageous fighter and commander and was a source of intimidation to many. Njteh was Karekin’s penname. He was a prominent writer and his writings were a source of encouragement for the Armenian people to rebel against foreign occupation.

Karekin’s main concern was the assimilation of the Armenian diaspora, especially after the dispersion of the 1915 Genocide survivors, fearing the loss of the Armenian identity and their existence. Therefore he established the *Tseghakron*

movement with the help and blessing of the ARF, and the purpose was to promote national identity, and the awakening of Armenian nationalism and patriotism within Armenian communities. This movement was essential to organize the Armenian youth in the United States and to retrieve the rights of Armenians. *Tseghakron*, can be understood in two ways. First, it can mean the religion of a race or carrier of a race. *Tsegh* means race and *kron* has two connotations, one being religion and the second roots from the verb *krel*, meaning to carry (Antonyan & Siekierski,2014). The *Tseghakron* movement was renamed in 1941 as the Armenian Youth Federation (AYF) in order to avoid assumptions and connections with fascism and racism within the American society, due to its name and the connotations mentioned above.

For Karekin Njteh, the values of a nation should be protected and praised at any price. To him an individual cannot exist outside of his own national group (Antonyan & Siekierski, pp. ,2014). Armen Sargsyan has included several quotes from Njteh's writings, about his ideas of the divinity of the homeland and patriotism as religion. For him the Armenian nation is divine and above all religions. The book also marks the *Taronakan* movement, founded with the help of Njteh's close friend, Haig Asatrian in 1938. *Taronakanutyun* or *Taronism* was inspired by the Mamikonian's self-defense in the 4th century AD, which was based on preserving Christianity and the Armenian nation's protection. Although in Karekin's writings there is criticism of some of the Christian doctrines and praising of some of the ancient Armenian gods, Vahagn, Karekin writes:

“We will talk with Vahagn now,
the god of the ancient Arian Armenians. A new book will be placed in the hands of
our people, the gospel of the Arians.” (Sargsyan, 2011).

Armen Sargsyan does not accept the writings about Armenian hetanism as Njteh's rejection of the Christian religion rather the acceptance of the Armenian heathen origins and ancient beliefs describing the Armenians as courageous brave. In the beginning of the 1940's, there was widespread anti-Armenian propaganda in Nazi Germany. Armenians were considered Semitic, therefore worthy of extermination, just as the Jews. This came after Germany was allied with the Turks in 1941 to attack the USSR. Njteh was aware of the trouble this friendship would result in another genocide of the Armenians. Taking the Armenian nation's security in mind, Karekin offered his services to the Nazis, and proved the Aryan origins of the Indo European Armenians. Therefore, *Tseghakronutyun* or *Taronism* was associated with fascism.

Facing many challenges and threats throughout his life, Njteh spent a decade in prisons, and eventually died of sickness in his prison cell in 1955. His remains were buried at the slope of mount Khustup in Kapan, Armenia.

To this day, Armenians follow the ideologies and legacy of Karekin Njteh, and he is considered a national hero and martyr of the Armenian people. His writings were published after the collapse of the Soviet Union and new generations are inspired by his ideologies to preserve the Armenian identity and nation.

Ideology of the Children of Ara

Ara is the god creator in the Armenian Pantheon, considered the father of gods. Therefore, the Armenian Neopagan community is called "Arordineri Ukht", meaning the Order of Children of Ara. Vahagn is the main worshiped god, the god of war, thunder and lightning the son of Ara and Anahit. He was also acknowledged as the dragon slayer, vishapakagh, (Barseghyan, 2015).

In an interview on Armenian public TV in 2000, Slak talks about the oncoming celebrations of Vahagn's birthday and Armenian New Year on March 21st of that year. It is best to describe the ancient Armenians as heathens or Armenian *hetanos*, rather than pagans, which is a broader concept of any beliefs other than the Abrahamic beliefs. Slak explains the origins of the word *hetanos*, coming from the Greek word *ethnos*, meaning nation. He refers to *hetanos* as nationalism and not a religion. He then explains that the ancient Armenians lived according to shared values and beliefs, the shared belief of nature worship. According to Slak, every indigenous nation must have their own belief, not a borrowed one, if not then they are not considered to be a nation. He also differentiates between belief and religion. To him belief is a natural conformity and religion is an ideology. A person is born into a nation and religion is acquired later on. Religion can be changed but a person's national origins can not be changed.

A nation would understand the mutual relationship of man and natural forces of the Gods at birth. The nation becomes the belief according to the nation's mindset, living standards and its morals. Heathens and their ancestors had reciprocal relations with the Gods. They believe that energy is transmitted between each other. This transmission of energy give power to the person and therefore becomes stronger. According to the heathens, four powers control the nature. First and foremost is Ara the creator. Then comes the generative power, the mother, Goddess Anahit. The third power is the positive energy, the cosmic energy represented by God Vahagn. Lastly the fourth power is the negative energy, which is the earthly energy represented by Yahva. Since Armenians are an Arian nation, they are carriers of positive energy, which is nurtured by Vahagn. As for the Semitic nations, they are the carriers of the negative energy therefore nurtured from Yahva. He then elaborates that the

Abrahamic religions are earthly religion therefore carry negative energy. The humans are in constant struggle between the good and evil forces. According to Antonyan & Siekierski (2014), Ari is good and light, represented by Arians, the children of Ara who are considered the mortal gods and Chari, chi Ari in Armenian, the chi is negative pronoun, meaning not Ari therefore it represents evil and darkness.

The Arians homeland is the paradise land Ararat, or the Armenian highlands surrounded by the sacred mountains Masis and Aragats. Chari's territory is the desert, and they continuously endeavor to subjugate Ararat and annihilate the Arians (Antonyan & Siekierski, pp. ,2014). Armenian heathens have anti Semitic views according to the mentioned reasons above, and consider Jews worshipers of Yahva and I their opinion Jews created Christianity in order to weaken the Arians in order to move out of the desert (state of Israel) and establish themselves in Ararat (Antonyan & Siekierski, pp. ,2014).

According to Antonyan & Siekierski (2014), Neopagans in Armenia have about one hundred active followers, about several hundred who have been baptized and around one thousand sympathizers. The Arordineri Ukht gives its followers the freedom of participation, and individual ideological and spiritual obligations. This freedom mostly appealed to the intellectual mass of the Armenian society, such as teachers, scholars, artists and linguists (Antonyan & Siekierski, pp. ,2014).

The Armenian *hetanos* society is hierarchical. It is formed of a council of priests managed by an elected head of council and the supreme priest holds the highest position, which according to Antonyan & Siekierski (2014), has been vacant since Slak Kakosyan's death in 2005.

The Sacred Book of the Children of Ara: the Ukhtagirk

The *Ukhtagirk* is composed of *ukht* meaning vow and *girk* meaning book. The book of vows was initiated by Slak, and is a compilation of Karekin Njteh's ideologies, sources from Armenian historic book, such as the writing of Movses Khorenatsi, the famous Armenian epos the Daredevils of Sassoun and the bible (Antonyan & Siekierski, 2014). In the year 2000, the reregistration of religious organizations took place. The Armenian law on freedom of faith and religious organizations, required that the religious group should be based according to a historically canonized holy book. According to Antonyan & Siekierski's (2014) chapter on the *Ukhtagirk*: the sacred Source of Knowledge, the heathens have managed to persuade the responsible governmental body to make them an exception. It is also noted that the first registration was in 1992, the Arordiner had declared the *Avesta*, the holy book of Zoroastrianism and the *Rigveda* an ancient Hindu scripture as their scriptures. Therefore the *Ukhtagirk* might also have some elements borrowed from Zoroastrianism and Hinduism and not only of Armenian scriptures. Andranik Margaryan was the prime minister of Armenia from 2000 till 2007. Antonyan & Siekierski mentioned in their text that Andranik Margaryan was baptized as pagans and the Republican Party funded the printing of the *Ukhtagirk* and helped promoting it. It would be no surprise to conclude that Andranik Margaryan facilitated the exception for the reregistration of the Arordineri Ukht. After the death of Margaryan, the relationship of the Republican Party and the Arordineri Ukht has been distorted (Antonyan & Siekierski, p. 2014).

The *Ukhtagirk* is composed of seven parts: the *Astvatsashoonch*, the *Tsakumnaran*, *Avetaran*, *Dzonaran*, *Veharan*, *Patgamaran* and the *Hymnergaran*. The information

concerning the parts of the *Ukhtagirk* are based upon the research done by Antonyan & Siekierski's (2014).

The *Astvatsashoonch*, explains the origins of the Armenian language, which was conceived by Ara the creator and explains the meaning of the root *AR*, and all the words derived of that root.

The second part, the *Tsakumnaran*, covers the themes of the origins of the world, the Armenian Pantheon and the creation of the humans. These elements were drawn from biblical events, Armenian folk stories and epics.

The *Avetaran* translated as the book of testaments, presenting advices to the readers. The *Dzonaran* or the book of odes, is devoted to praise the values of Armenian Arianism. The following two chapters the *Veharan*, the book of Grandeur, and the *Patgamaran*, the book of commandments are based on Njteh's thoughts and ideologies. The *Veharan* consists of Njteh's biography and encounters with the Gods and the *Patgamaran* is Slak's reinterpretations and extensions of Njteh's ideologies and Tseghakron. The Arordiner affiliated Njteh as their prophet or God. Some Armenian writers of Njteh, such as Armen Sargsyan, reject the interpretations about Njteh's religious views and his affiliation and promotion of hetanism. There is no direct and clear statement about his religious beliefs.

The seventh part is the *Hymnergaran*, the book of hymns, and consists of hymns and poems written by Kakosyan and his followers dedicated to Vahagn and other gods.

The *Ukhtagirk* is not considered as unchangeable; on the contrary it is open to corrections and amendments depending on the changing circumstances. Kakosyan and his precedents believe that the process of creating a sacred book is never ending.

Sacred monuments and sites

With the conversion to Christianity in 301 AD, king Trdat and St. Gregory the Illuminator have ordered to destroy all the pagan sites in the Armenian highlands. The only remaining temple from that era was the temple of Garni, which was struck by an earthquake in 1679 and was reconstructed in the mid 20th century. The Garni temple was dedicated to the ancient sun god Mihr and is now dedicated to the God Vahagn by the Arordiner. The temple of Garni is the central sanctuary for the Hetanos society in Armenia. They have been granted free access to the temple at the times of their celebrations and are also allowed to adapt the territory to their spiritual requirements as long as no remains are left in the site after the ending of the ceremonies. A water fountain was placed in the memory of Slak Kakosyan at the site.

Other sacred monuments to the Armenian heathens are considered, the Urartian fortress in Erebuni, the Shengavit settlement dating back to the bronze age. The Arordiner undertake pilgrimage in rural places, such as Mount Aragats, the highest mountain in Armenia, Mount Khustup where Karekin Njeh has encountered with the God Vahagn according to the Ukhtagirk and the resting place of Njeh, the Zorats Karer an astronomical observatory also known as the Armenian Stonehenge.

According to Antonyan and Siekierski, there have been discussions about building a new temple at the top of Mount Khustup and another in Yerevan.

Ceremonial Practices and rituals

Group rituals are a way for the Arordiner to recall their ancestral traditions and attain sources of energy that brings the neo pagans closer to divinity. Catherine Bell discusses the role of rituals not as simply religious activity but a central social activity, where the gathered experience a collective emotional state and identify

themselves with their Gods. Rituals act as a form of communications that has restrictive effect on social behavior (Bell, 2006).

In his TV interview, Kakosyan explained about the celebration of the birth of Vahagn and the New Year. On the contrary to the Christian tradition of decorating an artificial tree or a non living tree, the pagans also decorate trees but it has to be a living tree, any type of tree. Each person hangs an ornament or more commonly tie colorful handkerchiefs, a very usual scene especially on the road to the temple of Garni. By decorating the tree people ask the Gods for a wish or a request. The celebrations start at sunrise by welcoming the first spring sun, and the awakening of the positive energy after it has been overtaken by the negative energy. Kakosyan finds it unusual and strange to celebrate New Year on January the 1st, reasoning that nature can not be awake and alive in winter. That day adherents plant trees at the site, the most sacred one are the apricot trees. Some national dances are preformed and the fire is lit in honor of Vahagn's birth accompanied with hymns and prayers. After these celebrations, feasts are prepared to share food and drinks till late night. The kids in the families receive gifts for this occasion. Slak invited all Armenians to join them in celebrations of Vahagn's birth and to connect back to their national ethnic beliefs. Other important celebrations are Trendez celebrated on February the 14th of each year devoting to the earth's fertility, Zatik (easter), Hambardzum (Ascension) and Vartavar (transfiguration) is devoted to the Goddess of beauty and love Astghik . Feasts are organized to honor the birth of Mihr on December 22nd, and Navasard. All these celebrations and feasts include liturgy, lighting of sacramental torch, recitation of texts and hymns, blessing of the wine and animal sacrifice (Antonyan & Siekierski, 2014).

Armenian Heathen rites of passages

Armenian heathens have three rites of passages and are the same as in Christianity and it consists of baptisms, weddings and funerals.

The baptized convert is anointed with blessed oil made of flowers in the name of the father god Ara and the mother goddess Anahit. Then the baptized receives an *arevkhach*, the Armenian symbol of eternity, from his godfather.

Weddings are also conducted at the temple of Garni, the heathen priest bless the couple, drink the blessed wine, and exchange wedding rings and swear an oath to the father God Ara.

Funerals differ from the Armenian Christian ritual. Heathen Armenians require cremation, then the ashes are exposed to the four elements of nature. After exposing the body to the fire, that is the first element of nature, the ashes are then separated to three parts. One is buried into the earth, the second is scattered in the air over the Garni gorge and the last part is poured into the Garni river (Antonyan & Siekierski, 2014). Although there are no official crematoriums in Armenia, cremation is allowed if the deceased has indicated to be cremated in his will. The first person to be cremated in Armenia was Slak Kakosyan (Antonyan & Siekierski, 2014).

Arordiner believe in the cyclic nature of humans and the world. They believe in reincarnation, and that Arian people will come back to life as the following generations of their own decedents, repeating the whole cycle every ten thousand years (Antonyan & Siekierski, 2014).

The Armenian Apostolic Church and the Children Of Ara

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenian experienced rise in new religious movements and sects. The Armenian church does not interfere in the neo

pagan movement in Armenia, the Arordiners do not consider themselves as a religious group. The protestant, Jehova's witnesses and the Mormon missionaries, who according to the church are foreign influences, threaten the Armenian Church.

On the other hand the Arordiner, criticize the role of Christianity for destroying ancient Armenian beliefs and cultures, and "replaced the indigenous values of courage, martial spirit and honor with those of humility, obedience and modesty" (Antonyan & Siekierski, 2014). According to the Arordiner, These newly acquired values have weakened the Armenians as a result; Armenians have endured hardships, massacres and migration. They also accuse the church responsible of genocide when Christianity was forced as state religion in Armenia. On the other hand Arordiner consider Christianity as a national heritage, merging old local cultural origins. Many ritual and festivities are borrowed from ancient beliefs.

The priests of the Children of Ara are not interested in politics and consider it a "dirty thing" (Antonyan & Siekierski, 2014). It is ironic that the Children of Ara are not interested in politic yet their nationalistic beliefs and their book of vows are base on Karekin Njteh.

Mystical Powers:

Child explores mystical powers and their sources, also called Mana. There are several concepts of Mana. Melanesians believe that Mana can be transported in almost anything; disembodied souls or supernatural beings have it and can transfer it. Individuals originate it but it might act through mediums such as water, a stone or a bone. Mana may be embodied as a force, a being, an action, a quality and a state. In the Polynesian concept, Mana is ascribed to chiefs, who interface with their ancestors or Gods and control natural fertility, health and economic conditions (Child, 1993).

Mystical power might be gained through a vision, or a supernatural stone might replace a spirit. This is reached through fasting for several nights on the mountains, continually running around and piling rocks, combined with diving into whirlpools haunted by spirits. Eventually the person loses consciousness and wakes up bleeding from the nose and mouth. The success is revealed in a song heard in a dream (Child, 1993).

Another method for picking up power from stones is to dive into lakes or pools. The person should be prepared for the pursuit by fasting, purification, and abstaining from sexual activity. After anointing himself with coconut extract, the person immerses and remain underwater as much as possible to achieve a latent state hoping that a mysterious stone would miraculously appear in his hands.

Other ways in which power can be transmitted is through dreams, a hybrid creature figure, visions, reincarnation and ghosts of recently deceased. Psychedelic drugs found in mushrooms or plants can play a role in gaining power too. Words likewise have mysterious power; agriculturists use chants or go into trance and dance to ensure successful crops. These rituals seemed immoral to St. Nerses Barteved the Great, he describes heathen festivals and dances as overshadowing Christian morals (Boyajian, 1962).

Armenian Christian priests appear to have utilized Mana as source of force as well. St. Hagop Patriarch of Medzpin was a spiritual healer, performed miracles and made prophecies. He failed several times to climb Mount Ararat to where Noah's ark allegedly rested. Disappointed by his failures he fell asleep or was in trance when an angel descended from heaven and gave him a piece of wood from Noah's ark.

Mesrob Mashdots retreated to a lonely cave where he lived as a hermit and deprived himself of all physical pleasures, he went for days without food or drink, when threatened with starvation he ate mountain grass and wild flowers.

He conditioned his body to withstand severe weather with minimum clothing and slept on bare earth or standing on his feet. A legend portraying the numerous failures of Mashdots for his incapability to come up with the Armenian alphabet, he wandered from cave to cave to isolate himself. For seven weeks he secluded himself, fasted and prayed singing hymns of his composition hoping for a miracle. At the end of the Lenten period the lord of the angels presented him with fourteen characters inscribed on individual tablets.

Practicing Mana was a phenomenon used by pagans, which was not accepted and labeled immoral with the emergence of Christianity, considering it evil powers. On the other hand the Christian priests have obviously passed these rituals down to Christianity. It is also possible that it was practiced by Jesus to perform miracles. According to Slater (1978), some pagans consider nudity is a “vital prerequisite” for raising power, arguing that clothing blocks the power from emanating the body.

In *A Book of Pagan Rituals*, Slater describes healing of diseases or a sickness by using energy from the hands, also known as Reiki. While the healer emanates power through his hands, one palm seems to be warmer than the other. The warmer side has the positive energy and is placed over the area of the disease and the negative, cooler, hand on the other side, allowing to energy to follow from side to side resulting in healing. According to the book, the right hand has the positive polarity and the left has the negative polarity (Slater, 1978). This belief is also transmitted to the Christian church. The right hand is holy, blessing and crossing oneself is done with the right hand.

Being in trance and having supernatural powers is now labeled as evil force in the Armenia community. Arordiner practice their rituals to get power from the God Vahagn and restore the Armenian nations lost strength. They have rituals in holy sites such us at the site of Zorats Karer, or at the peak of mount Kustup, the resting place of Karekin Njteh, and where they believe their hero had his encounter with Vahagn. With the rituals and the animal sacrifice they anticipate to get mystic powers and energy by encountering Vahagn.

Shamanism is a practice to reach mana and supernatural healing powers, by reaching and interacting with the spirits.

Pre Christian Armenians engaged in healing and divinatory practices that involved, “pouring of lead or wax”, “turning a sieve”, “throwing beans”, and “measuring fright”. These shamanic healers were known as “*Kakhards*” (Antonyan, 2003). These mystical powers were acquired in the same way as in Mana, through falling into ecstasy or in a state of unconsciousness. According to Yulia Antonyan’s paper *Pre-Christian Healers In A Christian Society*, Antonyan visited several woman *Kakhards*, each having different healing powers using different techniques. These mystical healings are still practiced and popular in Armenia.

Conclusion

The religions and beliefs of the ancient indigenous people, paganism, revolved about the duality of nature and human beings. The ancient people were polytheist and worshiped nature as a self-recreating force. The rise of the concept of the nation by the end of the 19th century was a response to the spreading secularization of the modern world. The emergence of violence, colonization, world wars and genocides

led to the struggle for existence, bringing with it the need to preserving cultures and national identity fearing of extinction.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenia was recreating and reestablishing its own identity and nation. The Apostolic church worked to gain power by reviving the Christian doctrines and connecting Christianity as an important element of the Armenia identity. The Arordiner also seized the independence to restore the identity of the ancient Armenians before their Christianization. But as I have explored in this paper, the Neo-pagan movement differs from the ancient paganism by having nationalistic and political influence rather than a religion. Although the Arordiner are free to practice their beliefs and traditions, the majority of the society in the center are not aware of the existence of Armenian Heathens. That is due to the small amount of the adherents and the acceptance of the Apostolic Church of the group meanwhile rejection other branches of Christianity in the society. The irony here is that in the past the church destroyed the pagan belief with and annihilated its followers, and now in the present times neo paganism is not a threatening power to church therefore it is accepted. This gives space to question the actual basis for the spread of Christianity in being a spiritual enlightenment or rather a stance of attaining power and political governance of people.

The Arordiner's main concern is the awakening of the Armenian national spirit and Arian identity within the Armenian society, to regain the lost power and might of the indigenous Armenian people. The rising question here is that how will the Arordiner restore the lost faith of the Armenians, which is nature worshipping and polytheism in contradiction to the Christian doctrine of monotheism, when they consider themselves and non-religious entity. The Apostolic church and the majority

of the Armenian society have strict nationalistic views about the Armenian identity, just as the Ardodiner, the different remains in the spiritual beliefs and ideologies.

Methodology:

Literature Analysis

For this paper, historical context will be examined to elaborate and understand further meanings of religious symbolisms and practices of Neopaganism rituals and beliefs. I will mainly be using chapters from the Blackwell Companion of The Study Of Religion. I will also use Antonyan and Siekierski's chapter on Armenian neopagans. I will also base my facts from the only interview found online with Slak Kakosyan the founder of the Arordiner about Armenian Neopaganism.

Annotated Bibliography

Aitamurto, K., & Simpson, S. (2014). Modern Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Central and Eastern Europe. NY: Routledge.

This chapter explains the Neoapagan movements throughout the world that rose in the 20th century. Emphasizing similarities and differences in the western and eastern forms of Neopaganism.

Alishan, G. (2002). Hayoc Hin Havadkuh gam Hetanosagan Gronuh. Yerevan: Grigor Tatevaci CJSC.

This book gives insight on the ancient Armenian spiritual beliefs, taking into account the writings of some prominent Armenian clergy/philosopher's literature such as, Eshik of Gogh, Mkhitar Gosh, Anania of Shirak and so on. The book explains the etymology and the evolution of some Armenian words borrowed from Greek, Assyrian, and Arabic etc. The book tackles nature and animal worship of the

Armenians, the Armenian pantheon, Armenian beliefs in good and evil spirits, magic and the after life.

I will be using this book as an Armenian background of the ancient history, their beliefs, gods, methods and rituals of worship, and how some elements were used and borrowed from pre-Christian times and adapted to Christianity. I will be taking into consideration some gaps that might occur since Alishan was a Mkhitarist priest and a nationalist who strongly believed that Armenians were descent of the Aryan race.

Antonian, Y. (2003). *Pre-Christian Healers in a Christian Society*. Cambridge: Cultural Survival Quarterly.

This is Study by Yulia Antonian about the practice of magic/ shamanism in Armenia. Describing different methods and ways of healing.

It is by now evident that magic is part of early beliefs. Magic has been used by ancient civilizations to exercise supernatural powers to heal people or reach to a certain goal. Christian priests have used magic even though the church had disapproved its use within the population. Most probably, mystical healers within the nation were threats to the authority of the church, that's why mystical healing was subject to punishment by the church.

Antonyan, Y., & Siekierski, K. (2013). A Neopagan Movement in Armenia: The Children of Ara. In S. S. Kaarina Aitamurto, *Modern Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Central and Eastern Europe* (pp. 266- 281). NY: Routledge.

Arordiner Ukht or the children of Ara (Ara is the God creator), a Neopagan movement, was founded after the collapse of the soviet rule in Armenia. The founder was exiled and during his stay in the U.S. he got familiarized with Garegin Nzhdeh's ideology on nationalism and Aryanism.

Arordineri Ukht accepts Christianity as part of the Armenian national heritage. They consider Christianity as a fusion of Christian and pagan cultural elements. They say that the prayers are devoted to praising sun and light, church festivals overlapping with older feasts. They also believe that the Armenian Alphabet is a compilation of pre-Christian motifs based on Aryan symbol of the swastika.

This chapter brought basic knowledge of the Neopagan movement in Armenia. In my research, I will try to elaborate on the differences between the Arordineri Ukht and the Armenian Aryan Order. This chapter also will be the basis of my interview questions to the interviewees and elaborate on the recent changes and agendas.

Barseghyan, B. (2015). Vagh Havadaliknern ou Ditsapanoutyounuh Hayastanum. Yerevan: Megnarg.

Barseghyan has studied in this book about the Armenian worship methods and traditions of the ancient people in a more modern way than Alishan incorporating non-Armenian perspective into the book.

Bell, C. (2006). Rituals. In R. A. Segal, *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of religion* (pp. 397-409). MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Catherin Bell emphasizes the importance of ritual in religion. These actions people together and condoling the society. Sacrifice is a form of ritual and acts a medium of communication between humans and divine spirits. Bodily movements, gestures and sounds are another aspect of ritual. It helps define the sacred space and react to with it.

I will use this text, to identify some rituals used by the neopagans and their importance in connecting with their gods and controlling their adherents with sense of community.

Boyajian, D. H. (1962). The Pillars of the Armenian Church, Watertown: Baikar Press.

This book is a bouquet of 21 prominent Armenian men, philosophers, historians, scientists, mathematicians, clergy and saints, who are acknowledged as soldiers for spreading Christianity. Each chapter is a biography of the person responsible of establishing Christianity and fighting paganism.

This book is a periodic account of literature and history. The history of the Armenian people is religious. Religion, literature and politics are interweaved and inseparable. The creators of literature and the shapers of thinking were the clergy since they were the literates of the society. These chapters help me understand the point of view of the church concerning efforts done to call for the repentance of the Armenians and how the non-converts were seen.

Child, A. B. (1993). Religion and Magic in the Life of Traditional Peoples. NJ: Pearson .

Child explores mystical powers and their sources also called Mana. There are several concepts of Mana. Mystical powers can be gained through various self-regulating acts. These powers are reached through hallucinations and delusions caused by consuming sedative plants and mushrooms or by severe, sometimes life threatening physical performances.

Armenian Christian priests have used Mana and mystical powers to reach specific goals, Such as Mesrob Mashdots' discovery of the Armenian Alphabet. Practicing Mana was a phenomenon used by pagans and is obviously passed down to Christianity and most probably practiced by Jesus to perform miracles.

Davies, B. O. (2011). *Paganism: A Very Short Introduction*. Ny: Oxford University Press.

History of Paganism part of early ancient belief.

I will be using several chapters of this book to analyze theology and religion Taking into consideration psychological, sociological, and economical theories.

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<https://paganmeltingpot.wordpress.com/tag/garegin-nzhdeh/>

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Vasilyan, V. (1985). *Araspelneric Minchev Byurakan*. Yerevan: Sovedagan Krogh.

Online interview with Slak Kakosyan march 2000

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dT89k_U2MC4