

Hasan GULIYEV
Doctor of History, professor

THE GUEST – A SACRED PERSON

What do we know about the customs of hospitality of the Azerbaijanis?

THE CUSTOMS OF HOSPITALITY HAVE DEEP HISTORICAL ROOTS AND ARE INHERENT TO ALL PEOPLES OF THE WORLD. ALONG WITH OTHER CUSTOMS, EVERY PEOPLE HAD THEIR OWN DISTINCTIVE CEREMONIES OF HOSPITALITY AND RULES FOR RECEIVING GUESTS AND VISITS FROM FRIENDS.

The ceremony of hospitality has its roots in primitive society as a custom of assignment of shelter when separated from the tribe, when in need of protection or when lost or travelling. In the time when communication between tribes was difficult every guest carried information and was worthy of respect. In the time of Homer in Greece all newcomers from other places were considered to be under the protection of Zeus (*Большая энциклопедия (Great Encyclopaedia)*

– СПб, 1902, т. VII). In some countries (Dagestan, Northern Caucasus, Syria and Arabic countries) hospitality was so holy that even if a blood enemy came to the house the host met and accompanied him in the whole canon of hospitality and at that time nothing threatened him (about the customs of hospitality of different people see: Guliyev, G. A. *Гость и гостеприимство (Guest and Hospitality)* in the journal *Elm va Hayat*, 1971, No. 4).

From ancient times the

Azerbaijanis also have very interesting and instructive customs of hospitality, which are appropriate even to the needs of today.

The first written mention we have of the hospitality of the Azerbaijani people is in the book Dada Gorgud, in which it is said 'a home which does not have guests, let it fall to ruin' (*Мудрые слова, (Wise words)* Baku, 1979).

Information about the customs of hospitality in Azerbaijan is also found in literary monuments





of the XII century. In the work *Iskandarnama* the great Nizami wrote about the excellent decoration put in place in honour of the guest, when speaking about the reception of Alexander of Macedonia at the palace of Nushaba in Barda (Nizami Ganjavi, *Iskandarnama*, Baku, 1983).

The hospitality of the Azerbaijanis is reflected also in the works by Fizuli (XVI century): 'If a guest comes to my table, I will not be ashamed, regardless of if he is a Turk, an Arab or an adherent of a different faith' (*Мудрые слова (Wise words)* Baku, 1979).

Azerbaijanis were very attentive, considerate and courteous in their treatment of guests. Sources speak of the hospitable reception of Peter I at Derbent, of the prince Dolgorukiy in Baku and Salyan, of the military

THE GERMAN SCHOLAR KEMPFER, WHO WAS IN AZERBAIJAN IN AT THE BEGINNING OF 1684, VISITED THE FIRE WORSHIPPERS' TEMPLE IN SURAKHANI AND WAS INVITED AS A GUEST OF THE INHABITANTS OF THE VILLAGE OF BINA.

governor in the cities of Shamakha and Shusha, of A. Bestuzhev in Guba, of M. Y. Lermontov in Gusar and of I. Berezin, professor of the University of Kazan, in the home of A. Bakikhanov.

The reception arranged by Abdul Khan, Beylarbey of Shamakha, in the XVI century in honour of the English missionaries Anthony Jenkinson and Alcock, who had arrived on trade business, can serve as a beautiful example of Azerbaijani hospitality. 290 dishes were served at this reception. This is what A. Jenkinson wrote: 'When lunch time approached, tablecloths were

spread out on the floor and different dishes were served; according to my reckoning there were 140. When they had been cleared away from the tablecloths others were served and 150 dishes of fruits and other festive foods were brought, so that both changes added up to 290 dishes.' (*Путешественники об Азербайджане, (Travellers about Azerbaijan)* Baku, 1961, v. 1).

The German scholar Kempfer, who was in Azerbaijan at the beginning of 1684, visited the fire worshippers' temple in Surakhani and was invited as a guest of the inhabitants of the village of Bina.

This is what he wrote about this occasion: 'At the approach of evening we availed ourselves of the hospitality of the adjacent village of Bina. Here we waited for the full cordiality of the inhabitants who received us in their dwellings with carpet covered floors: they did not allow us to spend the night in a dirty caravan-serai with the drovers' (Sisoyev, V. M. *Тюркское население Азербайджана в XVII веке (The Turkic Population of Azerbaijan in the 17th Century)* Baku, 1926).

Azerbaijani hospitality has been given considerable literary attention in sources from the XIX century. After the annexation of Azerbaijan by Russia, Russian officials became acquainted with the local way of life and were struck by the custom of hospitality of the local population and the sources of this period therefore contain a wealth of reports about this.

So in *An Account of the Province of Guba in 1832* by F. L. Shnitnikov we read: 'Commendable sides of their character (said about the inhabitants of the Province of Guba) are strict observance of the regulations of their religion, hospitality and patronage and giving refuge from persecution (*История, география и этнография Дагестана XVII-XIX вв. (History, Geography and Ethnography of Dagestan in XVII-XIX Centuries)* Moscow, 1958).

Another author, writing about Shirvan Province, noted: 'Hospitality is holy to the Tatars (Azerbaijanis): all consider it a duty to accept guests as well as possible (ОПЗК, 1836, part IV). Similar accounts of the hospitality of the population of the Absheron in the 1840s are left by professor I. Berezin of the University of Kazan when he was in Vuzovna (Berezin, I. *Путешествие по*

Дагестану и Закавказью (Travel in Dagestan and Transcaucasia) Kazan, 1850, part 1).

The widespread hospitality of the Azerbaijanis in the first half of the XIX century received detailed mention also in works by the poet and satirist G. Zakir (Gasimbey Zakir, *Сочинения (Works)* Baku, 1964 (in Azerbaijani)). He writes: 'It is possible to save on fat and rice but do not be sparing with what you have in the welcome of guests: for lodging for the night I have a fine room and sufficient plov for guests'.

The hospitality of Mahmud Bey of Shamakha, described by the great French writer A. Dumas in the middle of the XIX century attracts attention. He wrote that the house of Mahmud Bey, to which he was invited, in its beauty differed from

Dumas and Azerbaijan) in the journal *Adabiyat va Injisanat*, 1984, 8 July).

From ethnographic data it is established that one of the characteristics of the hospitality of the Azerbaijanis is a great wealth of bedding equipment in the house. This was noted in a source already at the beginning of the XIX century. We read: 'In the houses of the wealthy it is possible to find painted multicoloured walls, carved wooden ceilings decorated with paintings. All evident wealth consists of feather beds, cushions and other silk bedding embroidered with golden flowers (*Обозрение российских владений за Кавказом (Review of Russian Possessions in Transcaucasia)*, 1836, part IV).

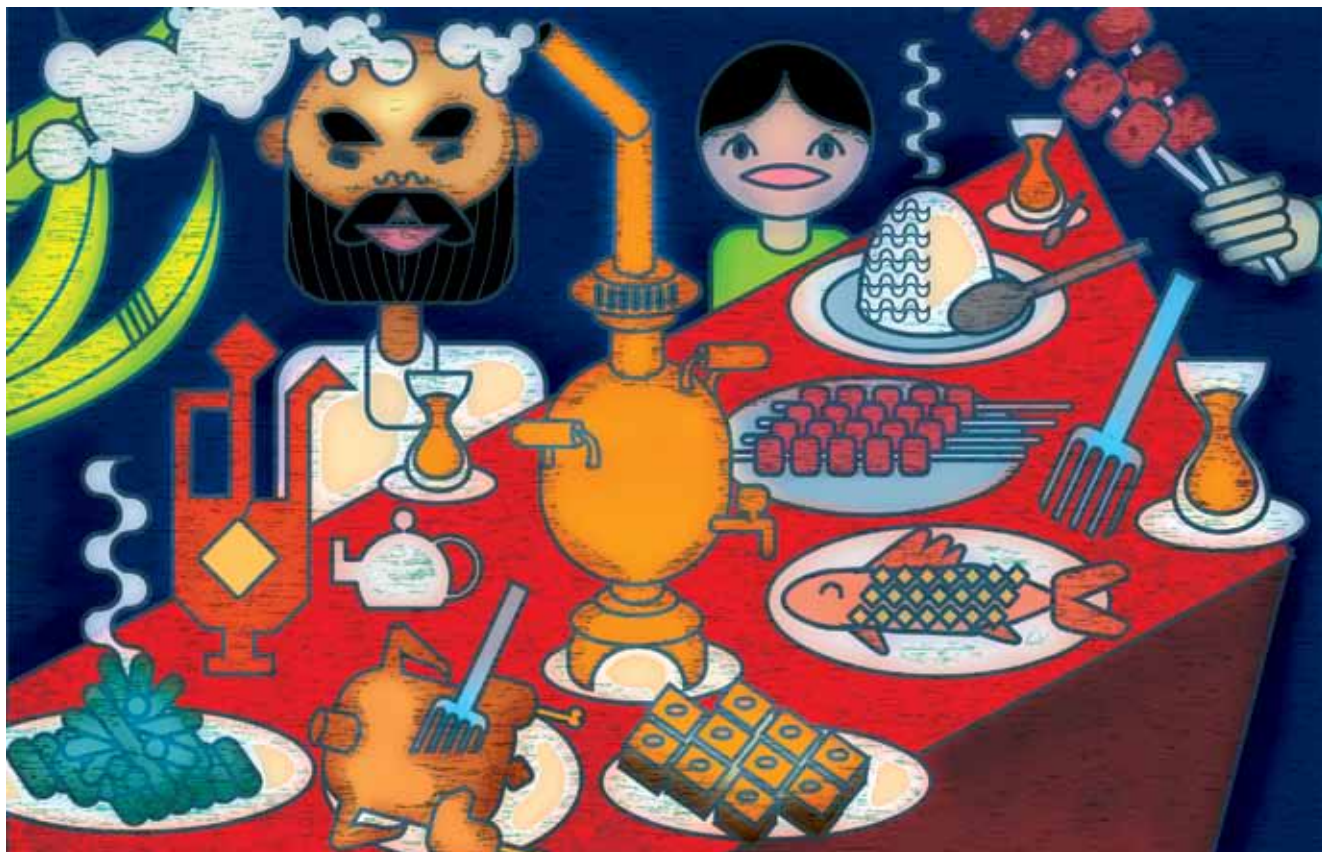
We turn to yet another source



AZERBAIJANI TRADITION – TO POUR WATER FOR GOOD LUCK AFTER FAMILY MEMBERS WHEN THEY LEAVE HOME ON A JOURNEY.

those houses which he had seen in Derbent and Tbilisi. The eastern hall of that house was so beautiful that he, in his words, could not find words to describe its beauty (Александр Дюма и Азербайджан, (Alexandre

from the beginning of the XIX century: 'The Muhammadan without fail carries every request with luxurious and cordial hospitality, when he deems this necessary' (*Живописная Россия (Vivid Russia)* part IX).



Refuges built for those lost in the mountains were arranged and set aside on the road for night travellers and are now preserved in the mountains of Azerbaijan as monuments of antiquity. This speaks about the fact that the Azerbaijanis showed hospitality not only in the home but also outside it, giving travellers shelter even at a distance from the dwellings.

In ethnographic reality the Azerbaijanis established some traditions of hospitality for meeting of dear and high ranking guests. For meetings with guests the people were gathered in a fixed place. People were divided into two groups. The elders (*aghsaqqal*) went at the head of one of them. The second group, which consisted of state workers and folk singers and musicians, went clad in national clothing. They greeted guests with

songs and entertained with sherbets and bread and salt. When the guest entered the house beautiful Guba, Karabagh and Shirvan carpets with brocaded textiles on top were spread under their feet.

As another custom a sheep was killed at the feet of the guest who then stepped over the sacrificial animal. The meat of the sheep was divided among those in need. In one of the materials from the 1850s a meeting between the inhabitants of Shusha and the military governor of Shamakha is described like this: 'Before entering the city a bull was slaughtered in front of us and its blood flowed under the feet of our horses. The meat of the slaughtered bull was taken to the mosque for distribution to the poor' (*Письма из Шамакхи (Letters from Shamakha), 1857, No. 56*).

According to information pro-

vided by the Turkish traveller A. Chelebi in the XVII century, Baku had a special official (*mekhmandar*) for meeting guests. When a guest entered a home, it was customary that a young woman with covered face removed the guest's shoes and washed his feet with warm water.

Guests were divided into a few categories in Azerbaijan: high status persons, foreigners, relatives, fellow-villagers or town-dwellers, women, those who visit each other as guests, etc.. It is necessary to note that every village-dweller had friends in the nearest and remotest villages. A custom was that at a certain time once a year they visited each other for 3-5 days after the end of the work in the field. Thus, according to the informer Najaf kishi (from the village of Dara Chichi in Guba Province), at the end of the XIX century his grandfather had a friend (at

that time a friend was known as a *gonag*) in the mountain village of Chumi, to whom he went as a guest either in autumn or spring, when the fruit harvest was finished. At the time the family returned from the gardens. The head of the household brought fresh and dried fruits with him as presents. After having visited for 3-4 days he returned home with gifts (woollen artefacts, butter, meat and cheese).

Evidence for other forms of hospitality exists. After the end of the fruit and grape harvest rural people invited guests - relatives and neighbours, and displayed their gathered harvest, shared experiences, asked advice and exchanged news. After this the table was laid with victuals. This custom was called *Bostan pozma* among the gardeners of Ordubad. Here, in contrast to in other regions, invited guests did not reveal secrets of cultivating new types of fruit and vegetables. Every kitchen-gardener familiarised guests with new types of watermelons and melons. At the end of the meeting guests were served kebab on the lawn and were given gifts of watermelon or a new type of melon.

It was a custom in Azerbaijan that guests did not leave the house without a present. In their turn guests also brought gifts. For example, in the area where they had kitchen-gardens guests put dried fruits, apples and other food-stuffs in their bags. In regions where they produced wool guests received stockings, gloves, belts or other wares.

It is very interesting that in the Guba-Khachmaz zone, and also in the Ismayilli Region, guests received dried pears threaded on string with shelled nuts (*risa*), boiled pear or mulberry juice and apple jam. Those

engaged in cattle-raising gave cheese, butter and other milk products.

There was a certain custom for receiving and entertaining guests. It was believed that guests needed to be served the best dishes – kebab and plovs of different types. They were served different seasonings, greens and non-alcoholic drinks. As a custom, before lunch a young person with a jug and basin went around the guests and poured water into their hands, then gave them a towel. Before lunch those who wished were given coffee and *kalyan*, then tea with lemon and various types of jam. The serving of dishes took place in a certain order: each type of dish was served in turn and to serve all the dishes at the same time was considered indecent.

As in the past, so also today, there is a custom in Azerbaijan by which guests in turn invited relatives and neighbours of the head of the household to them. In the past, if the head of the household for some reason was absent from the home when a guest arrived the wife or an elder of the house received him.

In the evening relatives and neighbours of the host usually gathered around the guest to talk over the course of 3-4 hours. Due to the lack of means of mass information guests were considered carriers of news and every one of his pieces of news aroused great interest.

Guests sleeping over lay in a special room (incidentally, almost every home in Azerbaijan had a special room – the reception room). In a few zones a special area was created for guests, called the *balakhana*, which was located at the gate on the second floor, so that the guest could go up directly without meeting members of the host's family. A

prayer mat was hung on the wall in the guest room for the guest to be able to carry out the namaz prayers. The existence of the *balakhana* and a large amount of bedding additionally testifies to the wide spread of hospitality among the Azerbaijanis. In relation to this follows yet another question. In the past every family paid attention to cleanliness and decoration of the room for guests in accordance with their capabilities. The ceilings of these rooms were decorated with painting, the walls and floors were covered with carpets, costly weapons and expensive and decorative tableware were placed on the shelves. V. Tatiashvili reported that the room for guests (speaking about the village of Khinalig) is the best part of the Caucasian home, not only because this room is spread with rugs and carpets and cleaned but also because the family does not live in it and only use it to listen to the talk of outsiders (i.e. guests) (Tatiashvili, B. *Страна Кемш (The Country of Kesh) in the journal Бакинский рабочий, 1927, 3 December*). Yet another piece of evidence for the hospitality of the Azerbaijanis can be found in an example of oral folk creation, in which this custom is reflected. Proverbs, in which a wealth of material can be found relating to hospitality, follow. For example, 'the table of a hospitable person is not impoverished', 'a guest brings abundance', 'Let me be sacrificed for the guest and the road which brought him', 'a home without guests is a mill without water' and 'a guest comes by himself but the host sees him off' etc. (*Поговорку, (Sayings) Baku, 1981*).