

Afat RUSTAMBAYOVA,  
Doctor of Philosophy in History

## ANCIENT TRADITION OF FIRE WORSHIPING IN AZERBAIJAN

The worshipping of the elements and related phenomena is characteristic of primitive religions. Relics of the cult of the sun that once existed are most clearly traced in archaeological finds from the Bronze Age (3<sup>rd</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> millennia BC) from Shamkir District of Azerbaijan,

where variations on solar symbols, including the swastika are depicted on a clay jug. The solar symbol depicted on a standard from the Garajemirli monument was used as a symbol of power. Images of celestial bodies are found on ritual pottery of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC from Mingachevir

*Artist G. Gagarin. Fire-worshippers in Baku. 1830s*





*Fire-worshipping temple “Ateshgah”*

District of Azerbaijan. **It should be noted that in ancient religions, the sun and the flame are concepts of the single whole, where the sun is the heavenly fire and the flame is a particle of it on earth. Lightning is what connects the earth with the heavenly body.** (1, p. 116)

The cult of fire is an ancient phenomenon, which is related, of course, to the difficulties faced by ancient humans while getting and preserving it. On the tops of the mountains they offered sacrifices: to the heavenly bodies (the sun and the moon) and the four elements (earth, fire, water and wind). (2, p. 131) The holding of such rituals on the mountain is not an accidental phenomenon either, because many peoples, including Turks had beliefs associated with the cult of the mountain.

Different nations, and not only in the area where Zoroastrianism was widespread, considered fire sacred since ancient times, which manifested itself in their different beliefs and cultural layers. For example, Turks believed that the “Prophet Ibrahim, who was the first to light a fire and cook food, is the ancestor of the Oguz Turks and the first Oguz khagan.” (3, p. 87)

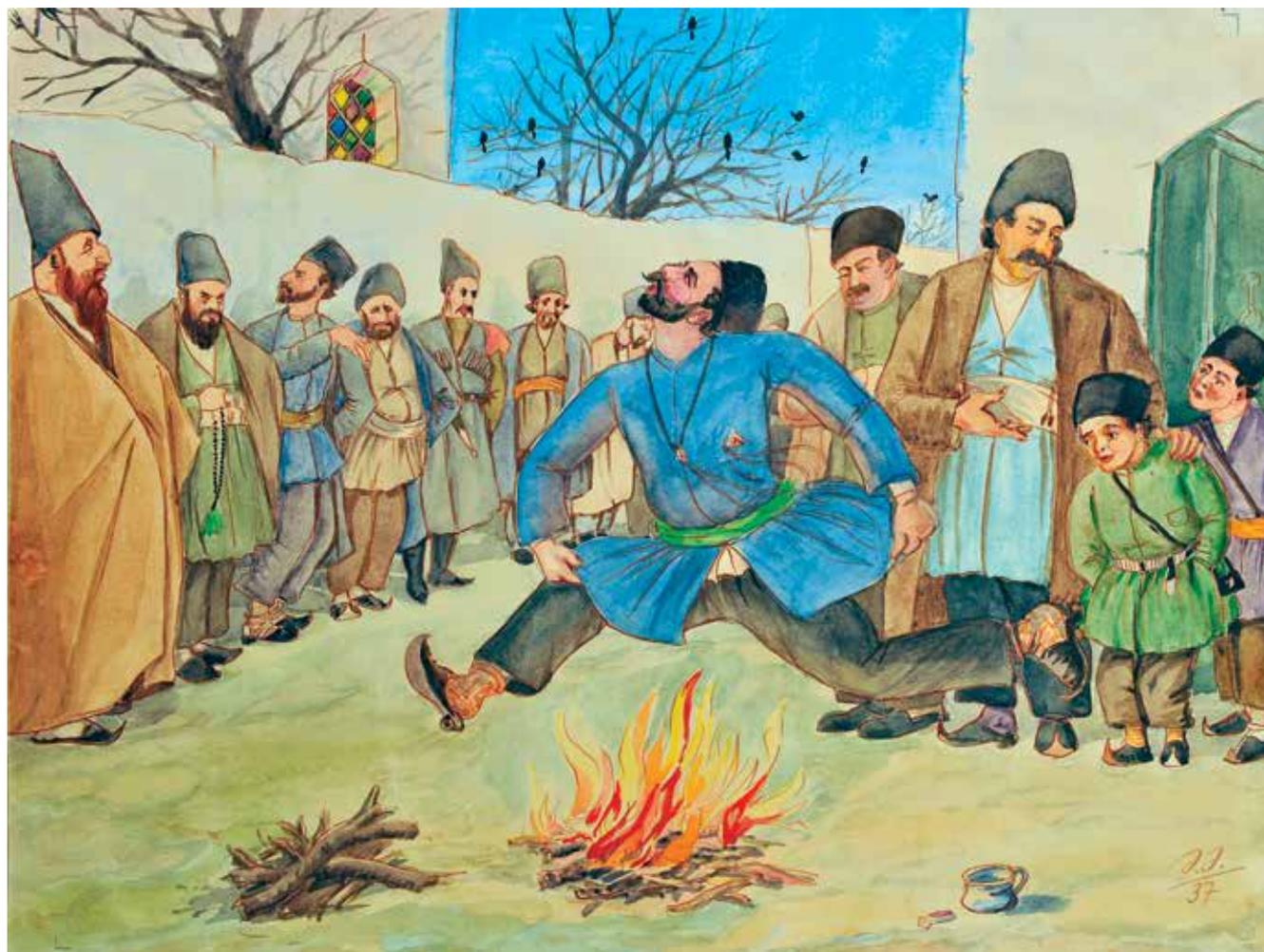
**Fire worshipping, which retained archaic features and acquired new elements, turned into Zoroastri-**

**anism in the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC.** For example, Zoroastrians began to revere Mithra as a single god of fire and the sun, although fire and the sun were, too, personified as a deity. (4, p. 53) Pintadera stamps depicting ramified swastikas, which, according to one version, were used in public prayers by Zoroastrian priests, belong to this period of time as well. In Zoroastrian temples called “atashkadeh” (literally “House of Fire”), there was an unquenchable fire, and the ministers of the temple made sure that it did not go out. There are temples where the fire burned for many centuries.

**One of the major holidays of Zoroastrians was the spring equinox, in which all nature renewed or revived and the New Year “Novruz” came. Many rituals of this festival are also associated with fire.**

According to legend, Jem, who arrived from India, came to Azerbaijan on one of sunny days and installed his throne of gold called “Ceme Şid” (“Shining”) on the mountain (5), and the day of his ascension to the throne is linked to the day of vernal equinox. After the adoption of Islam, “Novruz” acquires a new interpretation.

Fire festivals, in this case “Novruz”, are described in the works of Persian-speaking (Ferdowsi, Khagani, Biruni, Salman Saveji and so on) and Turkish-speaking



poets (Nasimi, Fizuli and others). In the works of Nasimi, Novruz is reflected both as a holiday and as a kind of mugam. In eastern classical literature there was even a poetic form called novruziye (“novruziyə”).

Fire worshipping remains in Dervish organizations kalandariyye (“qələndərilik”). (6, pp. 198, 199) The doctrine of the well-known oriental poet, pantheist philosopher, Sufi and Sheikh Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Abdallah Bakuvi (a native of Baku) carried the influence of the cult of fire and worshiping of the sun of Zoroaster. (7, p. 155)

**The sacred power of fire during the spring festival manifested itself in a variety of complexes of beliefs and rituals left over from the past.** One of the main rituals of “Novruz” is jumping through the fire and dancing around the bonfire. To cleanse all the misfortunes of the old year, they still light a bonfire in Azerbaijan on the last Wednesday before the holiday, contributing to the process of renewal. To this end, it

is considered mandatory for every person to jump over seven fires seven times.

There is an interesting ritual of renewal before Novruz in villages of Aghsu District of Azerbaijan, where all members of the family and all cattle go between two bonfires. In Nakhchivan, the ritual of purification by fire has been transferred to Islam, and a person going on a pilgrimage there passed by the fire. (7, p. 155) The mysterious ceremony of purification by fire is found in other Turkic peoples such as Uzbeks. In the words of an informant: “If I was not at home for a long time, coming back, I will not enter the house until I step over the fire, going around it three times beforehand.” (8, p. 189)

Fire was a means against the evil eye, and a ritual was conducted in an everyday situation where Azerbaijanis turned a pinch of salt around the head, knocked on the back three times and pronounced aloud the names of people who were suspected of the evil eye. After that, the salt that absorbed all negative things was thrown

into the fire, and thus, all evil was destroyed. Scraps of clothing, the owner of which was suspected of the evil eye, were burnt in the fire. Fire performed the same function in the Uzbek ritual “*alas*”, but they turned the torch around the head and threw it out. (8, p. 41)

**Fire was considered as purifying, ennobling and healthy as its ashes had all the inverse properties, for example, sorrow.** The most common curse in Azerbaijan is “*Kül sənin başına*” (“ashes on your head”), a wish of grief and all kinds of misfortune. Dropping ash on the head was a sign of the irreversibility of grief. It should also be noted that in the beliefs of many nations there was belief in the reviving power of ashes. For example, Phoenix (in Azeri, “*Səməndər*”) is a symbol of eternity, because this magic bird lives for many hundreds of years, burns itself before its death and then is reborn from its ashes again.

Azerbaijan has preserved another ritual that has ancient roots of the pre-Islamic period. According to informants from the western regions of Azerbaijan (Zangilan, Gubadli; these areas are now under the occupation of the Armenian armed forces), a vow is given to fulfill

desires, and then a rite is performed – during the promised number of days, on Thursday, they burn a fire in the name of saints (revered persons) of local importance. In order to kindle the sacred fire, they make a wick soaked in oil, and when it burns, they list the names of the saints (sacred persons) in whose name this ritual is performed. The fire is carried through all corners of the house, and the remaining ashes are smeared on the foreheads of all family members. This rite clearly retains the notion that **it is precisely the hearth that is home to spirits, which is a relic of primitive religious beliefs associated with animism.**

The religious kindling of fires was transferred to funerary rites as well. According to travelers, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the deceased were accompanied by large lighted brass lamps during funeral rites in Azerbaijan. Then, every year on the day of his death, the deceased’s relatives mourned and remembered him, placing candles and lamps on his grave. (10, p. 181) According to traveler Stracey (17<sup>th</sup> century), special attendants “*chiragchikans*” lit a lot of gold and silver lamps at the graves of saints every night. (10, c. 353) This ritual has



*Bonfire in Novruz celebrations in Baku*



left traces in various rites to this day. For example, on the Novruz day in Baku and its suburbs, Azerbaijanis go to the graves of their loved ones and lit candles on the gravestones, which replaced old lights “çıraq”. Apparently, that’s why Azerbaijanis call “holy places” of the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods and Seyyid families (regarded as relatives of the Prophet Muhammad) “ocaq” (fire) or “şix”, according to researchers, this is a shortened form of the word “ışiq” (light). A similar ritual of kindling

lights on the grave is found among Uzbeks when every Thursday - a day dedicated to the cult of ancestors, they lit ritual lights in honor of their spirits. (8, p. 276).

A ritual not associated with the Islamic religion – the cleansing of the bride with fire when she moves into the groom’s house - is well-known and common in Azerbaijan (8, p.190). In Azerbaijan, the bride, before going to the groom’s house and saying goodbye to the parental home, goes round the hearth (now it is a lit lamp) three times. Torches and candles escort the bride during the whole wedding ceremony, apparently as a talisman.

**The hearth in Azerbaijan is actually associated with housing, inheritance, prosperity and fertility. The attitude to the family hearth was like the attitude to the heritage, so it was considered important to maintain it.** The code of law of the Sassanid era says: “If I placed my family under his care, I thus handed over the fire.” (11, p. 138)

Not only the family hearth, but even the place where it was located were revered in Azerbaijan as centers of tribal and family worship. The place of honor for the head of the family in the house was at the head of the hearth “ocaq başı”. There was an idea that it is precisely the hearth that is home to the spirits of ancestors. On Thursdays, the wife of the owner of the house, preparing food and throwing a pinch of salt into the dinner or tea, kept saying: “Gözü, kölnü bu ocaqda olanların eşqinə” (“In the name of those whose eyes and spirit are on this hearth”).



In Azerbaijan, it is considered a bad sign if the fire goes out. It was not recommended to extinguish the fire in the family hearth with anything, and it had to go out itself. There was a belief associated with it that the family will die. They swore and cursed by the hearth. For example, in Azerbaijan, the expression "Ocağın sönsün" ("May the hearth in your house go out") was regarded as a death wish for the whole family. In Uzbekistan, the expression "Suv kuyılqan ucak" ("hearth, filled with water") means a deserted house (10, p.191).

According to legend, supernatural beings "hal" or "alarvad" could be scared away not only with iron objects, but also with fire during respective ceremonies and rituals (12, p.122).

**The sacred power of fire, smoke and ashes can be traced in the ritual of burning the rue, when the sacred plant itself burns and emits smoke that destroys all negative power.** After the ritual, the ashes should not be disposed of. They are wrapped in a clean cloth and buried, as the rue "ispan", according to popular belief, is "one of the holy creatures" (13, p. 97). In Azerbaijan, this plant is called "üzərlük", apparently derived from the word "nəzər" (literally "Evil eye"). The National Museum of History of Azerbaijan keeps various ritual vessels from the early 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC for kindling herbs, which suggests that the plant was revered, perhaps, before Zoroastrianism. In Azerbaijan it is still used to fumigate premises, people and pets, protecting them against the evil eye. In Uzbekistan, it is used to clean the room after the removal of a dead body (10, p. 140).

So, ritual and religious activities associated with the worship of fire are found in many nations. On the vast territory that includes Azerbaijan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Eastern Turkey (Anatolia), Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, there are traces of various rituals that have nothing to do with the Islamic religion. These religious beliefs and practices have kept the memory of the first steps of the human perception of the world. And ancient methods of fire worshiping are handed down from generation to generation.

By studying the rites of kindred peoples, one can detect interesting analogies related to holy places "pir", which also have an ancient pre-Islamic history, since the fire worshipers called their sanctuaries "pireyi". For Azerbaijanis, the prophet Khizir is also associated with fire: "Xızır, Xızır, Xız gəlir, var dərəcədən od gəlir..."

In conclusion, we can state the survivability of rituals associated with fire in Azerbaijan - "Land of Fire". ❀



*The sacred fire in the Martyrs' Alley symbolizes freedom and territorial integrity of Azerbaijan*

#### References

1. Календарные обычаи и обряды народов Восточной Азии, М., 1976
2. Геродот, т.1, М., 1885.
3. Yaşar Kalafat. Doğu Anadolu' da Eski Türk İnançlarının İzleri, Ankara, 2006
4. Мэри Бойс. Зороастрийцы. Верования и обычаи, М.,1987
5. Saadet Karakose. Eski Turk Edebijatinda Neyrûz ye Neyrûzia, Jigiii Unsuriara Genei Bir Bakic
6. Снесарев Г.П. Традиции мужских союзов в его позднейшем варианте у народов Средней Азии. Материалы Хорезмской экспедиции, вып.7, М.,1963.
7. Смирнов.К.Н. Материалы по истории и этнографии Нахичеванского края, Тифлис, 1934, Баку, Озан, 1999.
8. Снесарев Г.П. Реликты домульманских верований и обрядов у узбеков Хорезма, Москва, 1969.
10. Путешественники об Азербайджане, т. I, Баку, 1961
11. Касумова. С. Ю. Азербайджан в III-VII в.в., Баку, 1993
12. Шахбазов Т. Доисламские верования в Азербайджане, Баку, 2008
13. Иностранцев К.А. Сасанидские этюды, СПб., 1911.