

# ELDERS IN AZERBAIJAN



**T**he Azerbaijani people have stood out for centuries for a number of noble and humane practices, among which respect for parents and all elders and loyalty to filial duty attract attention. Even in ancient times there were family communities - large families that were based on close kinship and common property and were managed by elders. Elders – family and tribal leaders - were nominated from among heads of family communities. **Persons who proved their intelligence, courage and honesty gained respect, were asked for help and advice, and gradually, over time, were recognized as elders of a neighborhood, clan or tribe.** Initially, this process proceeded spontaneously and through some natural selection, but eventually elders began to be elected at meetings involving senior and seasoned members of the community.

At the time of the primitive society, elders bore a serious burden of responsibility. Elders had to know the rules of treating wild animals, the time of ripening and harvesting, all natural phenomena, effectively organize economic affairs and find everything necessary for the life of the clan. They also oversaw the manufacture of tools and food distribution. On the other hand, **with their personal example, elders played an important role in the development and establishment of standards of morality,** punished the guilty and

restored justice. Elders enjoyed unquestioned authority, their decisions had the force of law and their remarks became catchphrases.

At subsequent stages of history, the disintegration of the family community began with the processes of social stratification. To control the general affairs of a clan or tribe, councils of elders were created, which played an important role in social and economic life and the division of labor.

The institution of elders has an important role in the history of Turkic peoples, including Azerbaijanis. Elders administered their social functions through councils and courts of elders (1). Among some Oguz tribes, worshiping clan leaders whose graves were considered sacred was common.

In Azerbaijan, an elder had to have a number of personal qualities. An elder is person who follows popularly accepted standards of morality, is committed to justice and stands out for his volitional qualities. At meetings, an elder took an honorable place and headed his fellow tribesmen on difficult days. Respect for elders was reflected in oral folklore and eventually in written literature. Folk tales and epics reflect **a sense of deep respect and love for elders, which often rival love and respect for parents,** and elders act as seasoned





people, showing the right way, extending their helping hand at a difficult time and patronizing those in love.

Back in the first century AD, Strabo pointed to special reverence for elders among Caucasian Albanians - ancestors of Azerbaijanis: *"Among the Albanians, it is considered extremely honorable not only to respect their elderly parents, but also other older men and women"* (2). Moreover, in ancient Azerbaijani folk epics "Kitabi Dede Gorgud" and "Koroglu", an elder appears as the father of a clan or tribe and a wise mentor. We see the same attitude to elders in other Turkic epics - Kyrgyz "Manas", Kazakh "Koblandy-batyr", Uzbek "Alpamys" Altai "Maaday-kara" and Bashkir "Ural-batyr".

The wonderful Oguz **epic "Kitabi Dede Gorgud"** vividly expressed the attitude of the Azerbaijani people to elders. The main character of the epic – Dede Gorgud, i.e. father Gorgud appears as a wise mentor and advisor to Oguz chieftains and noblemen, relying on his rich experience and extensive knowledge of nature and relationships in contemporary society (3). With his authority as an elder, Dede Gorgud stands above all and nothing happens without his advice or participation. In joy and in sorrow he is always close to his people, takes

the most honorable place and deals with complicated cases. If people follow his advice and counsel, they live in prosperity and the power of the tribe increases, and vice versa, when the advice of the wise elder is forgotten, difficult times begin, fratricidal strife starts and motherland is invaded by the enemy. Throughout the epic, we see warriors of the tribe take up arms at the first call of elders and start fighting for their homeland.

In the old days, Oguz families had a special attitude to grandfathers and grandmothers. Azerbaijani author T. Hajiyevev wrote: *"The Oguz surrounded their parents who reached old age and parents of parents with special care. One of the most important facts in terms of history and the level of development of the state is that **the parents of the parents were under state protection. If old people in the family did not enjoy due respect, the younger parents were punished by the state**"* (4).

We see another striking example of traditional respect for elders among the Azerbaijani people in another famous **epic - "Koroglu"**. *"In Chanlibel, everything is decided on the basis of advice from Koroglu, and this is due to his status as a military leader and senior elder. Koroglu does not show in any way that he is an elder,*



but all people around treat him as an elder. He himself also listens to advice from his comrades and companions” (5). In this epic, without Koroglu or Nigar’s wishes, the marriage of any of the fighters or any other more or less important issue is unthinkable. It is this **universal respect and solidarity around the elder that creates unbreakable unity** based on mutual trust, devotion to the elder and deep respect that turns Fort Chanlibel into an impregnable fortress.

A true elder does not think only of the good of his family or tribe, he is concerned about the welfare of all people and the present and future of his native land. **An elder is not just a person with life experience, he is also loyal to his motherland, impeccably honest and decent.** It is no accident that many proverbs and sayings are connected with elders. Azerbaijanis have **never referred to a person with the high epithet “elder” just because of his gray beard if its owner is indifferent to the affairs of his nation and country, puts his own interests above all, is known to have lied and has other vices.** The result of centuries-old



institute of elders is respect for elders, giving up one’s seat on transport and not sitting down or speaking first in the presence of elders, which is common among Azerbaijanis to our days and sometimes causes surprise among foreigners.

Often the wise word of an elder is the key to resolving complex and messy problems and helps the young to curb their emotions and act soberly and thoughtfully. Caught in a difficult situation, many turn to an elder for advice and even send him as a petitioner and even an envoy. Owing to their influence, elders end blood feuds and settle old conflicts and quarrels, following the adage “wash away blood with water not blood”. Since time immemorial the saying “the word of an elder is the law of God” has been common among Azerbaijanis. An elder never spoke in vain, never gave false promises, his every word was well-thought out, and if he promised something, he kept his word to the end.

It is worth pointing out that in the holy book of Islam, the Koran, respect for elders is also evaluated as a virtuous act. From time immemorial, Azerbaijani families have stood up and respectfully welcomed an elder when he comes in and sat only when the elder takes an honorable place and invites those present to take a seat. During the meal, no one touched the food before the elder. Even now many families do not leave the table until the head of family finishes the meal and prays. A guest is first welcomed by the elder who greets him and shows attention. **Azerbaijani believe that those who do not respect their parents and elders do not recognize the will of God.** According to an ancient custom, in the presence of elders, it is customary not to speak, but to listen, extract lessons from what you hear, act accordingly and follow the instructions of the elders. Where respect for elders is lost, prosperity is impossible and the doors are wide open for troubles and misfortunes.

As you can see from examples of folklore, the youth has always attached particular importance to what elders think about them and sought to gain their respect. The young have emphasized their respect for elders in all possible ways, learned their opinion on all significant issues and acted accordingly even if sometimes it was not very pleasing. A decisive role in creating a family and choosing the husband and wife was played by the word of an elder, and elders took it upon themselves to act as matchmakers between young families. An elder acted as a guarantor of the strength of the new union and the happiness of the young family. According to an

ancient custom, weddings were chaired by elders.

We should note that the fundamental norms of respect for elders manifested themselves and, according to ethnographic materials, still remain in many places in relations between young parents and their children. In the presence of the parents, father-in-law, mother-in-law and older brother-in-law, it is not customary to take the kids into your arms, speak to them and call them by name (6). A young mother did not take children into her arms, did not feed them and did not even care for a sick child in the presence of senior family members. Before the birth of their first child, daughters-in-law hid their faces from their father-in-law and mother-in-law with a special handkerchief – *yashmag*, did not eat and did not walk barefoot in the presence of their father-in-law and older brother-in-law, avoided directly talking to them and spoke to younger ones in hushed tones, and in some regions of Azerbaijan, the young couple did not look at each other in such a situation. The same signs of respect were also shown to all seniors and elders of the village (7). In the first days of marriage, the daughter-in-law tried to be seen by her father-in-law and older men of the family as little as possible.

Azerbaijanis have long referred to particularly respected individuals who help others with advice as “elders of the people” (*el ağsaqqalı*). In particular, this high epithet was applied to outstanding ashugs Ali, Alasgar, Shamshir and others, who were always given a place of honor at folk festivals and celebrations and were perceived as miracle-workers who healed the sick, predicted disasters, communicated with the other world, and as wise people who were aware of the mysteries of the universe (8).



One of the most remarkable figures in the history of Azerbaijan – **well-known oilman and philanthropist of the late 19<sup>th</sup> - early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Haji Zeynalabdin Tagiyev, who made a great contribution to public education and the rise of culture, was awarded the epithet “father of the people” during his lifetime.** This epithet may be called the highest degree of the elder’s status that has existed among Azerbaijanis since time immemorial. And now the legend about Tagiyev, his noble deeds and devotion to his people lives in the grateful memory of his compatriots.

Throughout history, the wise word of an elder, his advice and guidance helped Azerbaijanis in difficult situations, whether in everyday family life or in popular affairs. And today respect for elders retains an important place in the system of the moral values of the Azerbaijani people. ✨

*Paintings by Jamaladdin Darbandi*

#### References

1. Намазов Е. Институт «Аксакалства» (к постановке проблемы) // Известия АН Азербайджанской ССР. Серия истории, философии и права. Б., 1985, №4.
2. Латышев В.В. Известия древних писателей греческих и латинских о Скифии и Кавказе, т. 1. СПб, 1890, с. 143.
3. Seyidov M. Azərbaycan xalqının soykökünü düşünərəkən. B., 1989, s. 158.
4. Hacıyev T. “Dədə Qorqud”da oğuz ailəsi. // Altay dünyası (beynəlxalq jurnal), № 5/6, B., 1999.
5. İslam Sadiq. Koroğlu kim olub. B., 1998, s. 75.
6. Qədizadə H.Q. Ailə və məişətlə bağlı adətlər, inamlar, etnogenetik əlaqələr. B., 2004.
7. Qədizadə H.Q., s. 122.
8. Seyidov M., s. 183; E.Namazov., s. 74.