
**COLLECTIVE SYMBOLS IN PERIODS OF TRANSITION.
THE FEAST OF VARDANANTS
IN INDEPENDENT ARMENIA**

ANUSH YEGHIAZARYAN

This paper analyses the celebrations of Vardan's Day in Yerevan focusing especially on the heroic figure of Vardan and the changes of this symbol in transition period. In its main features Vardan as a symbol in Soviet times will be described by means of literature in the first part and subsequently the developments of Vardan becoming the actual symbol will be shown.

The Feast of Vardan

The Mamikonyans were a powerful, noble family who played an essential role in the political life of Armenia in Early Middle Ages. They ruled the Armenian regions of Taron, Sasun, Bagrevand and others. We learn about the influence of the family from the works of medieval Armenian historians. Yeghische and Lazar Parpeci picture the crucial battle in Avarayr field that is considered to be the most important part of the Mamikonian service for the motherland. In the 5th century on May 26th in 451 Armenians led by commander Vardan Mamikonian and supported by the church, faced the much superior Persian army in the plain of Avarayr (presently in Iran). In the battle the Armenian forces were crushed or if we follow church historians 'martyred'. However, resistance and minor incidents of rebellion continued, especially by the Mamikonyan family. Within a few years the Persians adopted a more merciful approach toward the Armenians. In 484 the head of the Mamikonian family was appointed governor of Armenia and, more significantly, the treaty of Nvarsak was signed which granted Armenians a large degree of autonomy and freedom of religion. This was considered to be a *moral victory*.¹

Vardananq – Vardan and his men - are martyrs of the Armenian Church and a church holiday, the Saint Vardan's Day, has been celebrated every year on Thursday during the 8th week before Easter holidays, the week before fast time comes.

Vardan Mamikonyan in Soviet Armenia

Vardan belongs to the most successful and long-standing Armenian symbols, with its mythical context of *moral* victory. The symbol of Vardan has been subject to changes throughout the history of the Republic of Armenia. Vardan was originally a religious figure, yet it had its place also in Soviet secular society.

After a short period of independence in 1918 to 1920 Armenia became a Soviet Republic. To understand the *religious* context of the Vardan-symbol in Armenia it should first be mentioned that similar to other religious institutions

¹ **Elishe:** History of Vardan and the Armenian War. Translation and Commentary by R. W. Thomson. Cambridge, Mass.: University Press and London, England, 1982.

the Armenian Church was severely attacked by the Communists in the 1920s and especially in the 1930s. By 1938 the church barely existed. However, in 1941 the church began to be more active again. This was in the context of the Second World War and Soviet authorities' drive to mobilize all sectors of society in support of the war effort. The Soviet authorities had realized that religious institutions could play a vital role in this respect². In this period The Armenian Church donated two tank columns the Red Army. Vardan was revitalized as well. It was allowed to preach a sermon and motivate courage and sacrifice through Vardan. Many speeches were held that compared Hitler with Haskert, the Persian King, requesting the soldiers to struggle like Vardan against the enemy.

Restrictions towards the church were eased by 1945 and henceforth the Armenian Church in Armenia operated within the limits set by the Soviet State³. After the war Vardan's Day has been celebrated in the church, but these celebrations never 'overcame' the church context. Every year there were some activities in seminaries, honorific speeches, and special meals for students etc. But it has never been a part of public life neither the celebrations nor the Vardan's Day as a holiday at all. The religious dimension was publicly not mentioned. While Vardan as a symbol was not any more connected to the church, new spaces for this symbol were found.

A special role played the *scientific studies and historiography* for the new concept of Vardan in Soviet Armenia. A large number of scientific institutions were founded and had their influential impact towards the society. The Armenian Academy of sciences was founded on 1943. It soon began to publish a number of distinguished journals. This influential journals brought together all branches of Armenian studies, systematically consolidating research on culture, ancient law and philosophy, architecture, language and history. (The best example: The Historical-Philological Journal [launched in Yerevan 1958] became a trend-setting journal for historians, linguists, philologists and for scholars in the humanities in general) From 1967 to 1984 the massive (8-volume) History of Armenian People was published by the History Institute of the National Academy of Sciences. Much earlier in 1919 Yerevan State University was founded with Armenian as the language of instruction. It has been also a major publisher of academic texts.

The study of history as well as philology discussed among other subjects the events of the 5th century and the war of independence lead by Vardan Mamikonyan. The writings of Yeghishe and Parpeci – the first written sources that tell about Vardan and the Great War – were published, translated into contemporary language and commented. Historians as well as Philologists made studies on these texts and their interpretations. Numerous articles were published in the 1950s, 60s and 70s.⁴ Many of these publications were scientifically not very important; their contribution to the scientific heritage was rather marginal. But

² See **Razmik Panossian**, *The Armenians. From Kings and Priests to Merchants and Commissars*, London, 2006, S. 351

³ *Ibid.* 0020

⁴ See **Vache Nalbandyan**, *Eghishe*, Yerevan, 1959, and others

written in enthusiastic spirit and pathetic style to some extent they served as a substitute for religious texts, replacing to some extent the function of the church.

In Soviet Armenian scientific discussion many elements of the feast were taken into consideration - the language of the text, the literary value, historical references - but not the religious aspects. The scientific dedication gave Vardan as a symbol a steady position in the public. Until nowadays the figure of Vardan remains a point for discussion in intellectual circles.

The other vehicle that turned Vardan into a topic for intellectual discussion was the *Art and Literature* in Soviet Armenia. In the years 1943-1946 the famous Armenian writer Derenik Demirchyan wrote his most notable novel "Vardananq" that was dedicated to the events of the 5th century and the battle of Avarayr. This literary interpretation of Avarayr Battle and Vardan's deeds was very popular in Soviet Armenian society, even more than the historical sources.

There are several well-known paintings dealing with the theme of the battle and portraying Vardan or an episode of the war (Eduard Isabekian, Grigor Khanjyan, Vahan Khorenyan). In 1975 a monument for Vardan Mamikonyan was raised in Yerevan. Thus Vardan got his place in the capital city of Soviet Armenia.

Hence in Soviet Armenia the Feast of Vardan was placed into the historical and literary context thereby removing and transforming prior religious elements. Accordingly the ritualization of Vardan was changed. Saint Vardan Day was completely erased from public consciousness. The only date associated with Vardan was the date of the Battle the 26th of May. Instead of religious rituals some intellectual ritualizations took place: recitation of the text, intellectual discussions, and different educational activities. Some main phrases such as 'moral victory' and 'Death understood is immortality' became very popular.

In these times the civic aspect of Vardan as a hero was central. Even the name of the hero was used in civic manner - Vardan Mamikonyan with name and surname as any other person. Once again a discrepancy to the religious aspect comes to appearance by rejecting to name the mythical figure 'Saint Vardan'. In the Soviet Union Vardan Mamikonyan was displayed as a civic hero and not as a religious martyr.

Vardan and independent Armenia

Since 1991 the Armenian Republic is politically independent. In the independent state Vardan gained some new positions additional to the known literary and historical aspects. On the street map of Yerevan in the street names in the center we see Vardan himself, as well as the historians due to whom we know about him and the artists who once interpreted his image. The actual map includes Parpetsi Street, Vardanz and Yervand Kochar all in city center. On one of the maps I also found Yeghishe Street, that now known by its old name Pushkin⁵. When we follow this old map we begin in Parpeci Street, which crosses Yeghishe Street that would lead to Vardanz. On the end of Vardanz you see the Vardan Memorial (sculptor – Yervand Kochar) and from this memorial it continues Yervand Kochar Street. Thus in independent Armenia the roads of Vardan are spread through the whole center of the capital city thereby emphasizing the monument.

⁵ <http://www.haias.net/armenien.html>

Another aspect of the countries independence is the Army and its symbolic value. The Vardan Mamikonian Medal is awarded for exceptional courage on military duty, as well as for notable services in the development of the Army and the increasing of the combat readiness of the armed forces. The Medal has been in effect since June 12, 2002⁶.

In many places outside of Yerevan places for the worshipping of Vardan appeared. One of them is the Vardan tree in Village Aknaghbjur, in Tavush region⁷.

Celebration of Vardan's Day in Yerevan

In the next part I would like to turn to the discussion of the celebration of Vardan Day in independent Armenia. The analyses of the ritual, the acting mode of symbol⁸, should help us understand the peculiarity of the symbol in transformation. The contemporary celebrations of Vardan's Day in Yerevan started in 2006. As a date for the celebration the traditional religious date was defined – the last Thursday before fasting time. In many churches in Diaspora this day has been celebrated continuously including during the Soviet era. Yet the form of festivity is not similar in Diaspora. In Yerevan a procession (khachert) takes place through the city center. The celebrations in Diaspora centers usually take place indoor in concert holes in community buildings and are arranged in different ways, with different programs and participants.

The Vardan's Day Procession will be analyzed, based on the data gathered 2008 and 2009 in Yerevan. These are photos, interviews, ethnographic documents, observations made in Yerevan during field works. This is a part of my dissertation. The materials have been analyzed with method of social hermeneutic in group interpretations. The results have been structured basing on sociological and historical research to rituals⁹, processions. A procession can be generally defined as a collective movement. The main question is what story is told through this procession, what elements are put together and how? To analyze a procession the following four parameters are important: *the space, the time, intentionality and authorship, as well as order and arrangement*¹⁰.

Space

Performing a procession means working with space, including or excluding some elements. First it should be mentioned, that the place of celebration has no direct reference to the feast: it is not on the field of the battle, not on the grave of the hero but it is on the Armenian ground. The place of celebration is Yerevan, the political capital of the independent republic. Hence not the reli-

⁶ <http://www.president.am/en/orders/10/>

⁷ See **Hranoush Kharatyan**, "Caucasian Cultural World" and the Basis of Vardan Worship, "A Collection of Essays of The 2nd. International congress on the Anthropological Study of Iran &Caucasia", Tehran 2003, p. 51 – 63, also **Konrad Siekirski**, Встреча у дерева: дуб полководца Вардана и политика символов в современной Армении. in "Tradition and Modernity in Armenian Culture", Yerevan 2010, p. 273 - 287

⁸ See **Hans-Georg Soeffner**, Zur Soziologie des Symbols und Rituals, in "Gesellschaft ohne Baldachin, Weilerswist" 2000, pp. 180-209, Thomas Luckmann "Phänomenologische Überlegungen zu Ritual und Symbol, in „Rituale , Zugänge zu einem Phänomen", Florian Uhl/ Artur R. Boelderl (Ed.) Parerga Verlag, 1999.

⁹ See **Victor Turner**, Das Ritual, Struktur und Anti-Struktur, Frankfurt am Main, 2005, Hans-Georg Soeffner „Die Ordnung der Rituale" Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main 1995

¹⁰ See **Jörg Gengnagel**, Monika Horstmann, Gerald Schwendler (Ed.), Prozessionen, Wallfahrten, Aufmärsche. Bewegungen zwischen Religion und Politik in Europa und Asien seit dem Mittelalter, Köln 2008, pp. 3 - 19

gious center of the country (Etschmiatcin) is the location of the festivity but the political one. This event employs the public space; everyone can see it and take part in it. The procession crosses the central streets of Yerevan. The route that the procession passes starts at the church “Zoravor”, which has its symbolic connection to commander Vardan (zoravor/zoravar)¹¹, and finishes at the monument of Vardan Mamikonyan. This route has no homogenous ‘historical structure’, it combines some historical periods: the church was built more than 300 years ago, the city center in the 1920s and the memorial in 1975. This includes the times of Persian and afterwards Russian domination periods, the early and late Soviet times. Beginning of the event in the church yard is a part of church policy that aims to make religious institutions more popular. The “Zoravor” Church is located in the center of the city, but in the Yerevan architecture of the 1920s of Tamaniyan it is hidden behind the buildings. One must go through the residential houses to reach it. Including this church in the route gives to the concept of the procession an element of discovery and retrospective. First of all this is challenging to the Soviet ideology, that disregarded the church and religion. Reviling the hidden churches and discussing the Tamanyans plan and thus putting it into question, is a common debate in Armenia. At the same time beginning at the church the procession goes through the streets and buildings of Soviet Yerevan and finishes by the statue of Vardan (1975 soviet as well). Religious and the civic dimensions of Vardan symbol are put together in this festivity and no state or political representations are included in the route. They don’t pass by the ministeries or government palest or the like. Going back to times before Soviet Union touches not only the religious aspect. Situating Yerevan in a bigger historical context as in the last 100 years is full of contradictions and not reflected historical issues. The history of Yerevan in Persian domination and later in Russian empire is not that fabulous. The architecture and organization as a capital are mainly a soviet phenomenon. Yet the soviet period made Yerevan to capital city and emphasized the idea of centralizing, through such measures as building an underground (only) in Yerevan etc. One more aspect of centrality is attributed to Yerevan: it is not only the center of the Armenian state, it is also considered to be a center of all Armenians, politically, as well as a territorial unit representing the piece of historical Armenian territory. Another dimension of space appears. The Armenian state does not coincide whether with historical Armenia nor with the world spread Armenians Diaspora networks. Also the organizers of the Vardan-procession base on this idea of centralization: the event is in the political center, in the center of the city and the central politicians are present.

Time

Processions are symbolic occasions that can unite and separate historical periods, make things happen simultaneously or separating in time perspective. Managing the time in procession meanings can be emphasized or ignored. Vardan holiday is not celebrated on the date of the battle. There is no direct connec-

¹¹ The name of the church is Surb Zoravor Astvatsatsin Church, which means powerful Mother of God. Yet it is associated with zoravar (commander).

tion between the day of the celebration and the day of the battle the 26th of May. There are some religious explanations that the Saint Vardan's Day was displaced from its historical date and has been always celebrated on the Thursday before fasting. The explanation of the church is that the month May is not suitable for celebrating holidays (saint's days), as it contradicts the rules of the church calendar. To keep the celebration the clericals placed it in an appropriate framework making it dependent on Easter. That was a compromise between the church Calendar and the feast. As to that times the Armenian Church was the only connecting instance for separated Armenian parts, there was no alternative conception for maintaining and systemizing the national symbolic.

However this tradition was interrupted in Soviet Armenia. The church celebration was erased from public life, but the date of the heroic battle found its place in central educational, popular and historical contexts. Choosing this date for the procession the organizers of the current festivity return to the old tradition 'overcoming' Soviet times.

Before independence the religious date didn't have any influence on the organization of work rhythm. There was a calendar with civic holidays regulating work and education periods, neither Christmas nor Easter had an influence on this calendar, surely not such holydays as Vardan day or the like. After the independence the Christmas Eve was declared a nonworking day. Since then some more days are declared nonworking due to religious reasons (merloz). Yet Vardans Day is still a usual working day. So the procession in honor of Vardan takes place on a working Thursday. The procession is held after the sermon in the church and in which time the politicians have their midday break. The time of the celebration thus emerged from the religious calendar and the calendar of the participating officials. Taking place in Yerevan the dates and historical periods of the capital city of Armenia turn out to time aspects of the procession and express a conception: It is returning to the old architectural monuments (Church completed 1694) integrating it in the existing city route and crossing the central important and well known streets with the destination of Vardan's monument. There are no stops on the way. Only on the start and the destination can be characterized through stay. Especially the stay at the destination point is an important point as the last stay can be seen in many aspects even as a separate occasion.

Coming back to the mythical time, to the time aspects that are not connected to the date of the celebration but to the time of the mythical events, we should say that the real mythical time is not the exact date of the Avarayr battle but the 5th century in general. This century had an enormous importance for the forming of national ideas as they were understood later and nowadays. The Armenian alphabet was created in the early 5th century (405/406). The perception of uniqueness of the Armenian Church is emerging from the same period of history. 451, the year of the battle, is also the year in which the Council of Chalcedon was performed and due to the controversy in certain theological discussions Armenian Church departed and further on developed itself to a separate national church.

In the procession all these crucial events are represented in some way: the Armenian script is largely represented through the demonstrated texts etc, the church is also represented through some symbols and clericals as well as through the old church as starting point. Also the Avarayr battle and Vardan are represented in the procession. The figure of Vardan is presented through a reproduction of the rider and through the monument. So we have two references to the battle: the first one is from our time, a living being, and the second one from the year 1975 and is a fixed artistic interpretation. Both are with helmet and cape and both are sitting on horses. The living figure of Vardan silently leads the procession to the monument. He has no other function.

The Vardan symbolic and the religious symbolic, both examined from the time aspect, are not dominating the procession. On the way to Vardan monument the thematic of state has the absolute symbolic domination. The references to the independent Armenian national state begin only in the 1918 until 1920, and after an interruption continue in 1991. One can see the distinct temporal discrepancy between the mythical time and the 'state time'. At this point the cooperation of the state and the church are meant to possess a potential to complete each other. The church represents the tradition, conservative attitude – through the clothes, symbols as well as the past whereas the state represents the present. The state and the church are put together: the deacon and a soldier step together, a cross and a national flag on one line. This implicated a compensatory and complementary relation.

Intentionality and Authorship

What messages are sent, what are the main ideas and concepts of this procession and who can be considered as author or authors of this event? Processions are organized events; they are based on intentions, ideas and responsible groups or persons. As in many other similar public events it is nearly impossible to find a single responsible, as different groups have responsibility for different areas. In the organization of Vardans Day the church (Ararat Diocese), municipality of Yerevan and governing Republican Party (Hanrapetakan kusakcutjun) are involved. Hence the church is mainly concerned with the concept, developing and editing the idea. The others are solving administration tasks: the issues concerning the practical realization, blocking the streets, organizing the order, assuring the participation, inviting the media etc. If we ask, what and how is told in this event, we should divide it in three parts: what is communicated by the church, what is the part of the political organizers and the third part is the public, these are mainly students and school classes. According to the structure of the procession, worked out through the church, at the beginning is Vardan on his horse, after him in cross order religious and national symbols are carried: a cross and the national flag in the first row and in the second row one more flag and a gonfalon (khachvar). The religious symbols are carried by deacons, dressed according to their position, and the national flags are carried by the soldiers. After them two or three lines of soldiers are walking, carrying some banners, also prepared in church, with texts dedicated to the day. The next four or

five lines are filled with the military orchestra, some more soldiers in lines follow them. All military members are in uniform and clearly identifiable. Afterwards come the organizers: these are, speaking about the celebration in 2008, the bishop and some (three) priests, the prime minister and to that point a candidate for presidential chair, the mayor of Yerevan, the chairman of the Central Bank of Armenia, the leader of the youth fraction of the Republican Party and some other members of government accompanying them. It is obvious that the representations are not equivalent; the state is represented much more powerfully than the church, both through the leading personalities, and through their quantity, but also through the great military participation. At the same time the contents are drawn by the church. The meanings are given by the church. Identifying the national idea with religion is an implicit motive and Vardans figure leading the procession is able to fulfill this. The procession is closed by the public: the school and university groups. They also demonstrate their banners with texts.

Order

The order makes a procession to something different as a movement through the city in everyday life. The order of the different walking groups, the groups that are involved and also their size and performance was already mentioned. But there is another dimension of order that helps us to understand more about the activity and employment of symbolic meanings. Every mentioned group of participants has its conception of order. Politicians have their way to communicate the order. It is clearly communicated through escort and bodyguards; you see school classes with teachers, closing the procession. The Army is a unit that is usually based on a very strict order. Despite of this expectation of an accurate and strict presentation, we see young uniformed people that carry some symbols and are themselves a symbol of state. Some distance from the substance is observable and yet in many aspects of the discussed event. In many respects a form is missing. If you look at this event that we call a procession, on the one hand it can be considered to be a religious procession due to its religious elements; on the other hand one can think about a parade, because of so many soldiers and the military orchestra. If you look at the banners as a communication form, you can expect a demonstration. But this is neither parade, nor demonstration, nor a pure religious activity. The concept of the event consists of many separate elements, Vardan being one of these elements yet not the central one. There is one more interesting point in respect to the order of the celebration. All the texts written on banners are constituted in a different way. Each of them has a moral imperative, is imitating a style and referring historical sources. A rich literary tradition is reflected in the texts presented on banners. Not the content of these texts is complex but the form, the style. The narrative literary tradition had its continuity through the history and in soviet times as well. That can be seen also in this celebration.

Conclusion

The special changes that accepted collective symbols undergo in transition period is the central issue of this paper. Summarizing the discussion of Vardan's

Day Celebration we can make some conclusions. During the transition period the symbol underwent the following changes: The closed church celebration is replaced by an open public event and tends to involve in itself both civic and political aspects. Another change refers to the mode of celebration. We see a transition of celebration from narrative and intellectual celebration to an embodiment of feast. The efforts are aimed to establish a celebration ritual with participation of different groups and the moving through public space, with a 'living' hero and traditional elements. These attempts of a new conceptualization work on gathering all the important symbolic reserves and putting them in the framework of actual situation. The main issue that forms this framework is the young national state. The feast, the church and the literary tradition are established and old. Still they should be rearranged in this new situation. A national state has complicated structures and political borders; these are not cultural or narrative borders. The borders must be defended, that's why the participation of the army in celebration has its symbolic reason.

To speak with the words of the German sociologist Hans-Georg Soeffner, who built out the theses of Schuetz and Luckmann about symbols, thereby focusing on collective symbols, collective symbols are the reaction of society to concrete historical problems, for whose "solution" elements from the store of experience, repertoires of symbols, and the knowledge of traditions recipes (Schuetz/Luckmann) usually seem inevitable or necessary¹². "The solutions that are in symbolic actions and interpretations contain problems and contradictions just as they contain their harmonization."¹³

The symbol of Vardan Mamikonian has worked in many situations and had the answer to occurring problems. But in all its history it has never been part of the national symbolic of the state. One can say the same about the other central Armenian collective symbols such as Ararat, the Armenian letters or the Memory Day on April 24. They all have a well established structure; they refer to all Armenians, including Armenian Diaspora communities that are spread all over the world, but never particularly the Armenian State.

ԱՆՈՒՇ ԵՂԻԱԶԱՐՅԱՆ – ԿՈՒԵԿՏԻՎ ԽՈՐՀՐԴԱՆԻՉՆԵՐԸ ԱՆՑՈՒՄԱՅԻՆ շՐՋԱՆՈՒՄ. Վարդանանց տոնը անկախ Հայաստանում – Հոդվածում քննվում է հայկական առանցքային կուլտուրի խորհրդանիշներից մեկը՝ Վարդան Մամիկոնյանի հերոսական կերպարը՝ որպես հավաքականության խորհրդանիշ, որի ուսումնասիրությունը հոդվածում իրականացվել է սոցիոլոգիական տեսությունների և ազգագրական հետազոտությունների հիման վրա: Դիտարկվում են այդ խորհրդանիշի փոփոխություններն ու զարգացումը խորհրդային և անկախ Հայաստանում: Ներկայացվում են Վարդանանց օրը Երևանում ամեն տարի անցկացվող երթի առանձնահատկությունները: Տոնի բնույթը արտացոլում է խորհրդանիշի գնահատման ձևը հասարակության մեջ: Վերլուծությունը, որը կատարվել է ըստ

¹² See **Hans-Georg Soeffner**, *The Order of Rituals: the interpretation of everyday life*, New Jersey 1995, p. 114.

¹³ **Hans-Georg Soeffner**, *The Order of Rituals: the interpretation of everyday life*, New Jersey 1995, p. 114.

տոնի չորս հատկանիշների՝ տեղ, ժամանակ, հեղինակ և կարգ, թույլ է տալիս առանձնացնել միտումները և առանձնահատկությունները, որոնք բնորոշ են հավաքական խորհրդանիշներին անցման շրջանում:

АНУШ ЕГИАЗАРЯН – Коллективные символы в переходный период: праздник вартанидов независимой Армении. – В статье на основе ряда социологических теорий и этнографических работ армянских авторов рассматривается один из ключевых армянских коллективных символов – героический образ Вардана Мамиконяна. Прослеживаются изменения и развитие символа в советской и независимой Армении. Представлены результаты исследования праздничной процессии в день Вардананц, которая ежегодно проводится в Ереване. Форма празднования отражает характер действия символа в современном армянском обществе. Четырехаспектный анализ (место, время, авторство и порядок) позволил выделить тенденции и особенности, присущие использованию коллективных символов в переходный период.