

Armenia: Pagan Games

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In a country normally associated with strong Christian identity, many are opting for the old gods.

Standing on Mount Aragats, the high priest waited until the sun set his torch on fire so that it could be carried to the pagan temple of Garni. Thus began Navasard, one of Armenia's oldest and most popular holidays, celebrated every year on August 11.

According to legend, on this day the patriarch Hayk slew the tyrant Bel and freed his family and future generations of Armenians.

The combination of athletics and ancient rituals makes Navasard reminiscent of the Olympic Games.

After the high priest clad in a red tunic faces the sun and sings a hymn to Vahagn, the festivities begin with young people singing and dancing, and playing at archery. Anyone wishing to join the pagan community is initiated in a "fire and sword" ritual, and then plants an apricot tree.

Although all this looks like time-honoured ceremony - this year is counted as the 9,588th since the birth of Vahagn, the supreme deity in the Armenian pagan pantheon - the festival is in fact a modern revival.

"We resumed celebrating ancient Armenian holidays in 1990," Slak Kakosian, the high priest of Armenia, told IWPR. "Before that, everything was banned. They sent me to the prison camps for two years for 'nationalism' in 1961, and forced me to emigrate to the United States in 1965. I only came back during the Gorbachev era."

Politically, the pagan community is affiliated with the Armenian Republican Party, whose philosophy is based on the teachings of Tsegakron, the Armenian pre-Christian religion.

But the latter-day pagans distance themselves from politics. Historian Ara Stepanian, who comes here from St Petersburg in Russia every year, said, "There's too much politics in people's lives already, and that's not good. The more people think about spiritual revival, the better their chances of survival."

He recommends that the Ukhtagir, or pagan scripture, should replace the Bible as every thinking Armenian's handbook.

"A thousand copies of the book are soon due out in print, and community members will hand them out to the people. It is not our intention to fully replace the Bible with the Ukhtagir, but Armenian people should know they did not descend from Noah, but that they lived here in the mountains of Armenia before the Flood," said Kakosian.

Armenia is commonly regarded as the world's first Christian state, following the conversion of King Tiridates in the year 301, and its religious identity has marked it out among its largely Muslim neighbours.

But pre-Christian sun-worship still lingers in the national consciousness. As well as the temple at Garni,

Armenia also has its own prehistoric Stonehenge, known as Karaundj, or Singing Stones, in the south of the country. A sprawling structure with hundreds of standing monoliths, it was built 6,000 years ago as a temple of the sun, doubling as an astronomical observatory.

In a poll recently held by the Centre for Strategic and National Studies in Yerevan, 34 per cent of Armenians said they consider themselves Christian, 24 per cent said they were atheists, and 32 per cent declared themselves to be pagans. "The slight differences in percentages of believers proves that 1,700 years of Christianity have failed to eradicate the old faith in Armenia," said political commentator Eduard Enfiajian, also a member of the pagan community.

"In Armenia, many people identify religion with the church establishment. Not us. We have nothing against Christianity, but as a social institution, it is not acceptable to us. Religion is constitutionally separated from the state, but in reality, they teach Christianity even in kindergartens, not to mention schools, universities and the armed forces. To me, this is wrong; a person should be able to choose which God he will obey."

The Armenian Apostolic Church takes an unusually relaxed view of its pagan competitors, considering its hostility to more recent evangelical groups.

"Unlike the new sects, they have nothing to do with Christianity," explained the Reverend Vagram Melikian, press spokesman for the Armenian church in Echmiadzin. "The Armenian Church has an unequivocal stance on sectarians, but we do not interfere in pagan affairs."

Some Armenians manage to combine sympathy for both the traditional Christian church and paganism.

"The pagans are custodians of the old customs," explained Alexander Amarian, head of the Help Centre for the Victims of Destructive Cults, which campaigns against other religious groups or "sects" as they are commonly called here. "The Armenian nation must remember its pre-Christian past, and Ara's Children [a pagan group] help them remember. They also support the Armenian Apostolic Church in its fight against destructive sects. A protest against sects was held recently. Freedom of worship is important, but we cannot give free rein to those sects that impinge on our national identity."

Many young people are getting involved in the pre-Christian rites.

Anait, 20, joined the pagan community 12 months ago. "I like it here. No one tells me what to do. They tell us about the Armenian history before Christianity, and give us books to read. It seems our people are returning to their ancient roots. Garni is a spiritual centre of cosmic significance. Paganism has no rigid rules or commandments," she told IWPR.

Anait, who is a medical student, wears a swastika sign around her neck. Her fellow students strongly disapprove. "For an Armenian, it is appropriate to wear a cross, not a Nazi symbol," said student Ruben. "If I had my way, I would ban all those sects and weird religions. Our church is much too tolerant of them."

"To most people, the swastika is a Nazi symbol, but that is not so," said Gagik Hairapetian, a pagan priest. "The swastika is a pagan symbol. Those young Armenians people who wear swastikas are no Nazis. Only an ignorant person identifies the swastika with Nazis."

A young army lieutenant, who asked not to be named, strongly agreed: for him the pagan ceremonies were all about Armenian patriotism. "I came to paganism quite consciously," he said. "I am convinced that this is the true Armenian faith, and that it helped us win the war [with Azerbaijan] I feel it in my bones."

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Location: Stavropol
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