

## THE FORMATION OF THE ARMENIAN AMIRA CLASS OF CONSTANTINOPLE

Khachatryan Susanna

*Armenian State Pedagogical University after Kh. Abovyan*

A new class of Armenian elite came out in Constantinople Armenian millet in the middle of the XVIII century as a result of social and economic changes which took place in the Ottoman Empire. The new elite also adopted a new name or a title - *amiras*. The problem of the elite formation was first viewed by H. G. Mrmryan, who studying the Armenian sources and finding no information about it called the problem “a Gordius’ knot”<sup>1</sup>. The reason for the mystery is the fact that the scholars were looking for its roots in the Armenian reality, while we think that the problem should be considered on the basis of social changes which took place at the time in the Ottoman Empire, since those processes, though in small, were revealed in the Armenian colony, too. Of course, the Armenians being under Muslim rule could not have the same privileges as the Muslims, but the subject of our study concerns not the whole community but its elite, who for some social economic reasons were able to get some prerogatives.

At the very beginning of the book and also in his other works H. G. Mrmryan points out that the title *amira* doesn’t appear in the manuscripts and other sources before 1750; primarily the distinguished Armenians were called *chelepi*, *khoja* or *agha*<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, the author uses the title *amira* for all rich Armenians including *chelepis*, *khojas* and *aghas*, breaking the principle of historicism that is one cannot use a term before its introduction.

Studying the primary sources and earlier researchers’ works concerning the subject, we should point out that all of them considered the problem in the context of the Armenian reality. We tried to enlarge the circle and consider the issue in comparison with the Ottoman reality.

The *ayans*’ prestige in the empire has increased in the middle of the XVIII century. The urban authorities, mainly Muslims, but also sometimes Christians who were called *chorbaji*, enlarged their sphere of influence. They also succeeded in confrontation with the metropolitan aristocracy for redistribution of the feudal rent<sup>3</sup>. Of course, when we speak about “redistribution of the feudal rent” for Armenian millet we mean only the fact that the distinguished Armenians controlled the patriarchs’ financial and other affairs. That tendency comes from the last quarter of the previous century, when we see ordinary priests (e. g. Karapet Kesaratsi, 1676-79, 1680-81, 1681-84, 1686-87, 1688-89 etc.) or even a craftsman (Sargis IV Ekmekji, 1679-1680) at the patriarch’s post. The latter first became an acting patriarch, then taking holy orders was elected to the post,

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<sup>1</sup> Mrmryan H.G., Private history of Armenian rich people, 1400-1900, Constantinople, 1909, p. 14 (in Arm.).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Meyer M., The Ottoman Empire (features of structural crisis in the XVIII century), Moscow, 1991, p. 124 (in Russian).

too<sup>4</sup>. But the amiras' rise undoubtedly means their confrontation with the metropolitan elite. That means achieving some influence in the capital and undertaking the rule over the millet from chelepis. It was a new elite, though based on old relationship.

The fact that there were also non-Muslims among the ayans is pointed out by K. Karpat. Speaking about the origin of the ayans the Turkish historian writes: "It seems that there were two sources for the rise of the ayans. First, there were the old communal leaders known as ayans or *esraf* among Muslims, and *chorbaji* among the non-Muslims, or *multezims* in Egypt.... Second, there were enterprising individuals, rising from every social stratum, including peasants and rank-and-file soldiers who achieved every social preeminence by taking advantage of the opportunities in land administration and tax collection..... Many of the ayans, however, functioned without the government's *berat* in open defiance of the established traditions of authority"<sup>5</sup>.

Indeed, when speaking about amiras we should certainly point out that they were the second group mentioned by K. Karpat, and called themselves amiras only within the millet and by traditional law, without any *berats* (certificates). It should be mentioned also that some of the ayans getting higher posts moved to the capital and took their *sarafs* with them. It means that amiras' appearing in the capital is anyway connected with the ayans' rise and took place at the same time. Settling down and becoming firmly established in the capital city they helped their compatriots in many problems<sup>6</sup>.

The ayans' stratum had another feature: in the social hierarchy it had an intermediate position between the ruling class and the people. At the one hand they had the features of the metropolitan patricians, at the other hand they were feudal elders. We can say the same about amiras: being bankers, merchants and craftsmen they paid taxes, but at the same time they tried to rule the Armenian patriarch and the colony.

As to merchant amiras, this part of the elite rose in towns due to the same economic power as the community leaders, the only difference was the fact that the merchants' function was to sell agricultural products and industrial materials produced by ayans<sup>7</sup>. And under the Ottoman rule there were no conditions for the development of capitalist relations. The merchants could not think of better thing than investing money in usury. As to amiras, among them were merchants who were somehow connected with the court, mainly as providers of some particular goods. For instance, Deovlet Keoche oghlu provided Huseyn Pasha (the chief navy admiral) with 5-6 hundred of a kind of cloth necessary for the royal ships and the palace at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>8</sup>. Earlier Yaghup agha Hovhannisyan and Seghbestros Manuelyan

<sup>4</sup> Perperyan H., Materials for the History of Armenians of Constantinople, Vienna, 1905, pp. 69-82 (in Arm.).

<sup>5</sup> Karpat K., The Stages of Ottoman History. In: The Ottoman State and its Place in World History, Leiden, 1974, p. 92.

<sup>6</sup> Mrmryan H.G., Old days and Armenian rich people of that period, Venice, 1901, p. 24 (in Arm.), Todorov N., The Balkan town in the XV-XIX centuries, Socio-economic and demographic development, Moscow, 1976, p. 70 (in Russian).

<sup>7</sup> Karpat K., Millets and Nationality, in: Christians and Jewish in the Ottoman Empire, In The Functioning Role of a Plural Society (ed. Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis), New York, London, p. 153.

<sup>8</sup> Poghosyan H.E., Keochean family, Venice, 1961, p. 25 (in Arm.).

(Yerevanents) provided the court with beyaz (thick cotton cloth) and were called *bazergyan bashi*. The amiras differed from their predecessor chelepis and khojas for having some post in the court. They also have higher official status. The two of the people mentioned above, though they didn't have the title of amira, had influence equal with the formers.

In the Ottoman Empire, as well as in other medieval eastern tyrannies wealth did not guarantee high social position. Only some post in the Ottoman administration gives such position<sup>9</sup>. In the same way the Armenians used the title of amira for honoring those who were considered millet chiefs and who were somehow awarded by the Ottoman government.

Another group of the amiras of Constantinople represented the craftsmen's elite, the rare personalities, who were rather skilled at their trade and managed to gain authority in the colony. The rise of this group of amiras took place at the same time as the *kyahyas'* influence rise in esnaf. They were rather powerful not only in esnaf but also in the millet<sup>10</sup>. Comparing these processes with those in Egypt we see that the *kyahyas'* and *igibashis'* influence was not only social-economic but also political<sup>11</sup>.

And finally a large group of amiras came out of commercial-usurious elite. Apart from the esnaf – member merchants, there was a group of influential Armenians, who were engaged in transit or intermediary trade and had some privileges having berats and not being esnaf members. They paid the same 3% tax as foreign merchants. There were considerable number of eastern Armenians among them but they could not be isolated from Constantinople Armenians' colonial life. In the XVII century and even later they interfered in the elections and also influenced the solution of the colony's problems<sup>12</sup>. Using their connections the luckiest of them managed to obtain the privilege to provide the Ottoman army with food and other goods as well as the exclusive right to sell particular things<sup>13</sup>. This group of merchants was formerly called khojas. *ekmekchibashis* (bread providers) and *bazergyans* (cloth providers) were among them.

There is a tendency among Armenian historians to indentify amiras with sarafs<sup>14</sup>, while it is obvious that not all bankers were called amiras. The reason for that is the abstract from D. Urquhart's work, where he spoke about sarafs, who are identified with amiras in the historiography. But D. Urquhart wrote about sarafs, particularly about

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<sup>9</sup> Meyer M., *The Ottoman Empire*, p.121-122.

<sup>10</sup> Kharatyan A., *The Armenian craftsmen and merchants of Constantinople (XV-XVIIIc.)*, *Patmabanasirakan handes*, 1998/3, p. 54 (in Arm.).

<sup>11</sup> Gibb H.A.R. & H.Bowen, *Islamic Society and the West*, v.1, Oxford, 1951, p. 294.

<sup>12</sup> Kharatyan A., *Armenian colony of Constantinople in the XV-XVII centuries*, Yerevan, 2007, p. 272 (in Arm.).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Leo, *Armenian printing. Armenians in the new history. Historical-literary overview*, vol. 1, Tiflis, 1904, p. 240 (in Arm.).

pasha's sarafs<sup>15</sup>, but not amiras. Undoubtedly, the functions of saraf amiras and pashas' sarafs did not differ much, but amiras represented the new elite, who were connected with the new Ottoman social strata and the court. Besides, the sources show that at least in the first half of the XIX century it were craftsmen amiras (the Tatyans, Palyans, Tyuzyans) and some personalities (Harutyun amira Pezchyan, Mkrdich amira Chezayirlyan) who were more influential both in the Ottoman and Armenian reality. They were also connected with manufactory development of the empire and its Europeanization.

We would also like to draw attention on another fact. The historians often speak about amira families and dynasties. The tradition of passing the post to a son after the father's death in the Ottoman Empire was normal in the observed period, but it was not obligatory. The same is true about the title amira. An amira's son was not always called amira. The title was given to those, who besides taking his father's place at the post also had a significant influence in colony's affairs. It is common among craftsmen amiras. And as to saraf amiras, they dealt with the concrete official being his banker and loaner, therefore his post could hardly be hereditary. Certainly, there were families who had the title for three (the Meserlyans, Tatyans, Khorasanyans) or two (the Yerkanyans, Chezairlyans, Palyans) generations, but there are also amiras, whose sons didn't have that title (e.g. Margar amira Martirosyan's son Martiros, though a very famous merchant, didn't have the title of amira)<sup>16</sup>. But two or three families can't symbolize the whole class. Thus, it would be more reasonable to speak about amira's families meaning the given amira and his ancestors who also successfully served to the Ottoman Empire. As to dynasties, we think that especially sarafs and merchants could help their relations to rise but it doesn't mean that the whole dynasty had the title.

The titles were given to celebrities by traditional law. It was just an honorable name, not hereditary one. The son got it only when after getting the high royal post, he received the same respect and recognition among Constantinople Armenians as his father. Besides, amiras' "rule" in comparison with that of chelepis and khojas was less durative because of processes taking place in the empire. And for that reason many influential amiras' sons, being also very influential, didn't have the title (Poghos pey Talyan, Sargis and Hakob pey Palyans). The reason should be looked in Tanzimat and the Western Armenians' movement for "Azgayin Sahmanadrutyun" ("National constitution").

According to H.G. Marmryan, the title of chelepi was only given to Catholic Armenians<sup>17</sup>. Developing that idea H. Ghazaryan mentions the Tyuzyans as an example and points that they were never called amiras, and some of them had the title

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<sup>15</sup> Urquhart D., Turkey and Its Resources, Municipal Organization and Free Trade; The State and Prospects of English Commerce in the East, the New Administration of Greece, Its Revenue and National Possessions, London, 1833, pp. 107-112.

<sup>16</sup> Barsumyan H., The Armenian Amira Class of Istanbul, Yerevan, 2007, p. 167-169 (in Arm.).

<sup>17</sup> Marmryan H.G., Private history, p. 25.

of bey<sup>18</sup>. It is necessary to notice that bey wasn't a title, it was given to all high ranked officials in the Ottoman Empire, not only to the Tyuzians, but also to many Apostolic Armenians. Besides, the Tyuzians were called amiras too, and studying the bibliography, we found numerous facts of calling the Catholic celebrities amiras too<sup>19</sup>.

As to the Tyuzians, we think that the title of chelepi is connected with their occupation and post. The XVII century famous Turkish historian and traveler Evliya Chelepi's father was the mint director. That title was born by famous Bedraki chelepi, who was the mint director too<sup>20</sup>. The title was obviously given to all mint directors. Besides, the mint director must have been an educated man, and we know that educated people in the empire were also called chelepis (e.g. Yeremia chelepi Keomurchyan).

Thus, coming to Istanbul and settling down there the western Armenian bourgeoisie took a new title, which was more valuable at the time. In the Armenian reality it is reflected in taking chelepi title by khojas, and later taking the new one - amira title.

We referred to A. Kechyan's, T. Azatyan's, B. Kechyan's works and to archive documents kept in Matenadaran. Earlier the study of the problem was carried out by H. Barsumyan<sup>21</sup>.

H. Chanikyan in his study "Hnutyunk Akna" refers to the colophons of manuscripts from the churches of Akn and its surrounding villages<sup>22</sup>. The only record about amira is made in the Sasantsi Testament, where Poghos amira, the son of mahtesi Aliksanos from Kamarakap is mentioned<sup>23</sup>. In the sources available to H. Barsumyan that record was made in 1758<sup>24</sup>.

But when studying the documents of Matenadaran we found one dated with 1753. At the time of the patriarch Hakob Nalyan the Istanbul Armenians gathered in Gum Gapu St. Astvatsatsin church to elect Archbishop Alexander as Catholicos (later Alexander II Byuzandatsi). There are 378 seals and signatures at the bottom (only seals in some cases). Among the clergy, esnaf representatives, khojas and mahtesis there is only one signature of amira - Petros amira<sup>25</sup>. It can be Petros Aleksanyan from Kamarakap. According to M. Ormanyan, he was Nalyan's supporter and the chief merchant of the grand vizier<sup>26</sup>, and also one of the most influential Armenians of Istanbul.

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<sup>18</sup> Khazaryan H., The social-economic and political situation of Western Armenians in 1800-1870, Yerevan, 1967, p. 382 (in Arm.).

<sup>19</sup> Azatyan T., Akn and the Akneans, Istanbul, 1943, p. 50 (in Arm.); Poghosyan H.E., The Family of Allahvertyans, Venice, 1957, p.68 (in Arm.); Poghosyan H.E., The Family of Pilezikchyan, "Handes Amsorea", 1962, May-August, p.291 (in Arm.).

<sup>20</sup> Ayvazovsky H. Gabriel V., The History of the Ottoman Empire, vol.II, Venice, 1841, p.384 (in Arm.).

<sup>21</sup> Barsumyan H., The Armenian Amira Class of Istanbul, p. 37-38.

<sup>22</sup> Chanikyan H., Antiquities of Akn, Tiflis, 1895, p.75-102 (in Arm.).

<sup>23</sup> Parsamyan M., A.Kechyan, Akn and the Akneans, Paris, 1952, p.83 (in Arm.).

<sup>24</sup> Barsumyan H., The Armenian Amira Class of Istanbul, p.38.

<sup>25</sup> Matenadaran, The archive of catholicosate, folder 244, doc. 336 (in Arm.).

<sup>26</sup> Ormanyan M., Azgapatum, Etchmiadzin, 2001, vol.II, col. 3463 (in Arm.).

There is also the signature of some mahtesi Seghbos. It can be Seghbestros Yerevanents, who died in February 5, 1754<sup>27</sup>. If we are right then Seghbestros Yerevanents didn't have the title of amira and Armenians of Istanbul gave him and Yaghup Hovhannisyan the title posthumously.

Anyway, this document where the title of amira is used is the earliest up to now. After that the title was used in the sources (gravestones, colophons) more frequently.

We would like to note that the words amira, chelepi or khoja were just honorary titles. Among more than 100 amiras there is none having a document giving him the title officially. It was given traditionally when the person was rather influential in the Armenian colony, which was possible only when the man had some official status in the government.

Another problem was revealed during our study. According to H.G. Mrmryan, amiras were the ancestors of Armenian noblemen<sup>28</sup>. It should be stated that the information in favor of inhabiting the new capital with noblemen by Sultan Fatih is rather poor. But even so, we think that it can't anyhow be connected with the amiras. The chelepis and the metropolitan aristocracy could rather be those noblemen's ancestors, and the amiras were those who came from rural background. We don't preclude that before the beginning of the XIX century there were people with noble origin among the amiras, especially that of rich landowners<sup>29</sup>, but later, when the number of Armenians using the title was increased, it is impossible to speak about amiras being noblemen. There are amira families, having a history of about 400 years (the Sagayans, Kelkelyans)<sup>30</sup>; genealogical trees and other written data could prove it, but it can't refer to all amiras. For example, the Allahverdyans were considered to be the Kamsarakans' ancestors<sup>31</sup>, but the later authors denied that fact, because there is no reliable document. But the scholars have solid facts about the Aprozans' origin and say that the family dates back to the XVI century<sup>32</sup>.

In our opinion, the amiras took themselves that title, because during the developed feudalism the Armenian metropolitan noblemen called themselves like that (amira *kaxaki* ["amira of the town"]). And since most of the amiras from Akn considered themselves as migrated from Ani and Vaspurakan, we can suppose that the usage of this title comes from there.

Thus, the formation of the amira class was the consequence of phenomena taking place in the Ottoman Empire of the time. It took place in the same way as in the Empire, that is a new class of metropolitan authority (ayans) rose and replaced the old elite. The processes began in the middle of the XVIII century and the first man called amira is Petros amira Aleksanyan from Akn.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., col. 3250.

<sup>28</sup> Mrmryan H.G., Private history, p.21-22.

<sup>29</sup> Khazaryan H., The social-economic and political situation of Western Armenians, p. 86.

<sup>30</sup> Mrmryan H.G., Private history, p.108.

<sup>31</sup> Bazmavep, Venice, 1908, June, p. 241-251 (in Arm.).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 1953, January., p. 8.