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CAN A CURSE BECOME A NAME OF A GADGET?

Abstract. This article investigates the origin of the word *šâmurti* used in modern Persian. The author claims that it is a loanword from Armenian going back to an attributive construction that was used in a specific context.

Keywords: Modern Persian; Armenian; etymology; loanword.

There are few Armenian loan words in the modern Persian language (*fârsi*). In most cases they are connected with the faith of the Armenians – Christianity – as, for instance, *xâj* “cross” (< Arm. *xac̣*), *barghandân* “carnival” (< Arm. *barekendan*) (Steingass 1892, 176, 437).

Moreover, there is also an interesting word which represents quite a different sphere. Recently I have been informed by Mr Artur Zwolski (to whom I am grateful for improving my English of this article) that the word *šâmurti*, used by a Persian writer, Abbâs Pahlavân, in his tale *Nâ-darviš* (“Not a dervish”), published in an anthology of modern Persian prose and poetry (Józefowicz-Czabak 1981, 10), was commented upon by the editor, Zofia Józefowicz-Czabak, as a (probable) loan word from Armenian. This explanation was obviously due to Ali-Akbar Dehxodâ’s great dictionary of Persian language (Dehxodâ 1962, 129):

“*šâmurti* – an Armenian word being a curse. It means a receptacle containing water with several leaks (holes) at its sides. Illusionists can adjust a *šâmurti* so that it holds the water contained or lets it flow out through the leaks (explanation of the author)” [translated from Persian by A.P.].

Šâmurti seems interesting as it was not known to F. Steingass, the author of a great Persian-English dictionary. However, its meaning is explained by Ju. A. Rubinčik (1970, 86) in his Persian-Russian dictionary: *шкатулка фокусника* (“a conjurer’s casket”). *A Dictionary of Contemporary Persian Language* by Gh. Sadri Afshar, Nasrin Hakami, Nastaran Hakami (1994, 717) explains the word, transcribed in Latin characters, as

shâmworti / shâmorti, by: *asbâb-e šo'bade-bâzi* which means: “implement(s) of a conjurer, juggling utensil(s), apparatus”.

The word in question is known (pronounced as: *šâmurti*) to Mrs Hâyede(h) Vâmbaxš and Mrs Sorayyâ Musavi, teachers of Persian at the Jagiellonian University, Cracow. They quote an expression used in spoken Persian: *šâmurti-bâzi dar-âvardan* meaning: “to dissemble, to deceive, to hide (real motives)” etc. [Polish: *mataczyć*]

The above-mentioned dictionaries do not reveal the Armenian basis of the word. The latter is obviously an attributive construction: <šan ordi> pronounced [šan vort^{hi}] which means: “a dog’s son” (*šan* being the genitive form of *šun* “dog”, the etymological equivalent of the Greek κύων).

To a person who knows Armenian the etymology of Persian *šâmurti* is quite clear, especially when the above-mentioned transcription *shâmworti* is taken into account. But how should we explain the way the curse has become the name of an illusionist’s prop? If an illusionist was Armenian he might as well curse his apparatus when it did not “function” properly by using an insult such as “dog’s son”. And the Persian-speaking audience interpreted the curse as the name of a gadget, perhaps as a joke – upon seeing the illusionist’s irritation. Compare Polish *wihajster* (“a tool the name of which I cannot remember at the moment”) < German *wie heißt er?* “what’s his name?”

AR GALI KEIKSMAS VIRSTI ĮTAISO PAVADINIMU?

Santrauka

Straipsnyje nagrinėjama dabartinės persų kalbos žodžio *šâmurti* kilmė. Teigiama, kad tai yra skolinys iš armėnų kalbos, kildintinas iš tam tikrame kontekste vartotos atributinės konstrukcijos.

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