

LANGUAGE, BEAUTY AND MEMORY PART III-IV

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Language, Beauty and Memory Part III


By Viken L. Attarian P. Eng. MBA, Montréal

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When I replied back to Edwina Charles congratulating her on her exquisite Chekhovian piece, I wrote to her that her short story reminded me of the main character in a wonderful adventure novel written by the great Armenian writer, Raffi. The work in question is the Memoirs of the Cross-Thief, or in Armenian,  (Pronounced - Khatchakoghi Hishadagaranuh). This is the novel that I had read as a young teenager. It is 340 pages long.

The main character in that novel is Kavor Bedros, a ruthless criminal who has no morals and will do anything for illicit financial gain, including lying, cheating, murdering, raping, falsely befriending, disguising himself, betraying his kind and so on, he is the proverbial Cross-Thief. Once again, Armenian is unique among languages to have invented this word. Why? Because Armenians felt the need to express such a concept. We had (and still do have) many khatchakoghs.

Raffi was well known as a field researcher so all his contemporaneous novels are based on actual characters. Here is how Raffi describes them in his introduction to the novel (completed in 1870). These are excerpts, the translation is mine:

"The khatchakogh can change shape like the devil. He can appear as a completely different person than he truly is. No one can compete with them in such guiling disguise. You can never see a khatchakogh in his true self and form. In different places, and depending on different circumstances, he always conceals the truth and adapts.

"The khatchakogh contains within him all the habits of a human society. He climbs and descends all societal ladders with great ease and remarkable agility. He gets in and out of all social classes with a great ability to adapt. Among the upper classes, he is a proud, vapid and articulate nobleman, with all the gloss of such a person. Among the lower classes, he is a poor, kind and uneducated peasant, with all the simplicity of such character. With the educated, he can argue with conviction and all the moral fortitude of a humanist of lofty ideals. With the mullahs, he is a fanatic, dark minded like the night. One day he is evil, the next day good., but never himself.

"The khatchakogh is very elastic and malleable. He can lean any which way. He takes the form of any mould and many forms but never keeps a truly characteristic shape. He is a true chameleon.



"He knows how to cheat and lie, how to evade and become invisible. The all-seeing eye of the lawman cannot follow his footsteps. He disappears as a demon and reappears as an angel.

"The khatchakogh looks at the universe as his personal field to harvest. He is the ultimate parasite as he knows how to extract what

he needs from the work of the community. He reaps but never sows. He does not produce and only consumes. He lives off the sweat of others. And to achieve his objective he uses all of his incomparable abilities. Where he cannot cheat his way, he is ready to shed blood.

"The khatchakogh has everything yet he owns nothing. He always tells his stories with a unique pride. He looks upon his cheatings, lies and sickly acts as deeds of great bravery.

"The khatchakogh is never satisfied with the amount of illicit wealth he accumulates. He is never satiated and his uncontrolled greed drives him to greater machinations and corruption of those around him. There have been khatchakoghs who, before the arrival of the British, had become Grand Viziers or Viceroyes of whole provinces in India.

"Khatchakoghs are also known as "old woman stranglers" (Barav kheghtogh - ) and "donkey painters" (Esh nergogh - ). As for the real origin of their name it is because many of them do not shy away from pretending to be priests and men of the cloth who thus would get into various positions of authority in a church or a monastery. Afterwards, they would steal all the golden crosses and ceremonial silverware and vanish. They also like to approach wealthy elderly widows, befriend them, gain their favor and when they become a household presence, they take the opportunity at night to strangle these unsuspecting women, steal all their wealth and then disappear. Finally, because they are very wily in their ways, they can steal someone's grey donkey, paint it black and then sell it back to the poor soul who would be totally impervious to their wickedness".

Raffi, of course, wrote his novels in the mid 19th century. He mentions that the original khatchakoghs were from very specific villages in the Salmasd region of Persia. Many elderly khatchakoghs would teach their "trade" to their offspring. He then mentions that with the Russo-Persian wars, many khatchakoghs emigrated from the region and established themselves in Yerevan.

It seems to me that the khatchakoghs are doing very well these days. They are not extinct at all and are in fact thriving.

I think I'll start a contest called "Name That Khatchakogh!".

Language, Beauty and Memory Part IV (Name That Khatchakogh)

Yeah, it is definitely a good idea to start that contest.

Here is the idea for the script of a television or web show.

"Coming right now to a web post in your home. An exciting new show the like of which you have never seen !!!!!!"

"NAME THAT KHATCHAKOGH".

"Using ancient techniques developed by Armenians centuries ago, the khatchakoghs have infiltrated modern society".

"On this unique show, and on every episode, contestants will be able to name them based on clues that we shall provide. Each question has a multiple choice answer. Remember, the right answer is right there in front of you. You're not blind, say what's on your mind !!!!

"And what's the prize you ask? The winner, will get an all-expenses-paid trip to the ancient region of Salmasd in Persia (Iran), the birthplace of the original khatchakoghs and spend a night at the cemetery in each of the four principal villages to speak with the ghosts of the great founders of this movement".

"If the prize cannot be collected due to visa restrictions, we shall substitute it for a trip to Yerevan. Ghosts of the khatchakoghs will be substituted for anyone in power or anyone of the fifty oligarch families that own the country."

"If that prize cannot be collected, then a trip to almost any televangelist center would do".

"You don't understand the game? No problem, here are a few examples".

"Question 1.

"This khatchakogh collected a wealth of close to \$100 million by publicly stating that God and Jesus speak with him all the time, in fact that Jesus has appeared to him in a gigantic 900-foot form. On one TV show, he stated that unless he collects the magical amount of \$8 million God would call him back to heaven. He actually raised more than \$9 million in that campaign. He founded a "university" and an affiliated "hospital" where "research" would be carried on cures for deadly terminal diseases, the cures to be provided by administering cocktails of medical therapies combined with prayers. His son Richard went on his show and claimed that he had witnessed his father raise a child from the dead. The "university" board then complained that millions in funds were being used to build homes for him and his son in Beverly Hills, and to purchase very exclusive golf club memberships.

"This khatchakogh is a) Bishop Desmond Tutu or b) Oral Roberts.

/audience cheers : You're not blind, say what's on your mind !!!! /

Question 2

"This khatchakogh was a tag-team with his wife. He was originally a waiter in a restaurant and his wife worked in a boutique. They dropped out of Bible college and became, you guessed it, travelling evangelists. They then got into TV and created the concept of the "TV Bible variety show". At some point their faithful were sending them \$1 million a week. They also built the third largest theme park in the US, called Heritage USA."

"She was famous for always crying on TV and the running of her makeup mascara. He on the other hand, became famous for a sex scandal with Jessica Hahn, whom he tried to pay off with over \$250,000. He was also later tried for fraud, embezzlement of millions from exclusive "memberships" that they sold to the believers. He was sentenced to 45 years imprisonment. He still owes \$3 million to the IRS.

"This khatchakogh is a) Mahatma Ghandi b) Jim Bakker.

/audience cheers: You're not blind, say what's on your mind !!!! /

Question 3

"This next khatchakogh had the most popular Bible thumping program on TV. He is the first cousin of the great rock'n'roll pianist, Jerry Lee Lewis. At his peak, over 200 stations across the US would carry his show. His weakness was that he liked to spend the night in motels with prostitutes, got photographed doing so and was exposed. Yeah, pun is intended.

"He then went on the air and started crying and asked the Lord for forgiveness for his one-time sin. Four days later, the prostitute in question said that he was a regular customer. His ministry defrocked him and took away his license. Yet he insisted on going to the pulpit, claiming that if he doesn't preach millions will go to hell. Especially because they listen to Ozzy Osbourne music and should listen to gospel music he has composed. He has since started a new ministry.

"A few years later, when he was making a meagre salary of only \$350,000 a year, he got caught by a traffic cop for having sex with a prostitute in a car. When his congregation asked him for repentance, he is supposed to have said "God told me that this is none of your business".

"He has now retrenched and started a new ministry of his own, broadcasting to over 50 countries. Trying to take on the world. He

claims on his website that his biblical commentaries are actually ordained by God. A man of his calibre knows no limits.

"This khatchakogh is a) The Dalai Lama b) Jimmy Swaggart.

/audience cheers : You're not blind, say what's on your mind !!!! /

Question 4

"This khatchakogh appears as an enigma. He started his career as a philosophy teacher. Somewhere in there he achieved "enlightenment", then he called himself "the blessed saint". He preached worldly pleasures. So much so, that his houses of worship had a libertine party atmosphere of drinking, shouting, occasional violence and ensuing sex orgies. He predicted that before 2000 the world will either be destroyed by HIV/AIDS or by nuclear warfare, so they might as well enjoy a hedonistic life. His teachings included the forced laughter for three continuous hours every day for a week, and then followed by three hours continuous crying for every day for a week and to keep alternating. Supposedly to be in tune with the universe. He was only interested in rich followers. Especially those who could gift him Rolls Royces. At the time he fled the authorities in the US he owned 93, his presumed target was to have one for every day of the year.

"When he fled the US he was accused of several criminal activities, including profiting from prostitution, drug abuse, tax evasion, attempted murder, poisoning of public officials, illegal wiretapping and even attempted bioterror against a peaceful population using salmonella.

"This khatchakogh is a) Pope John Paul II b) Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh

/audience cheers : You're not blind, say what's on your mind !!!! /

Question 5

"This next khatchakogh is a "bishop" who manages a "herd" of women based on a special breeding program. He used to be a tag team with his Canadian counterpart in British Columbia but they have now gone off their separate ways with the same practices. He is on the FBI 10-most-wanted list in the US and has been a fugitive for some time. He is accused of polygamy, welfare fraud, incest, statutory rape, physical, sexual and psychological abuse. The "church" he leads is a fundamentalist offshoot of the Mormons and is known as the Fundamentalist Church of Latter Day Saints, which also, by the way, owns all of the properties of its members who are not allowed to become property owners themselves.

"This khatchakogh is a) George Clooney b) Warren Jeffs.

/audience cheers : You're not blind, say what's on your mind !!!! /

Question 6

"This next khatchakogh has reached the pinnacle of "achievement". He calls himself "The second Christ", "The Savior", "The Returning Lord". He has been jailed for counterfeiting, has publicly supported Richard Nixon during the Watergate scandal, has been convicted of conspiracy and income tax fraud in the US. He considers his dead son resurrected in a young man in Zimbabwe. He is the founder of the Washington Times on which he has spent between \$1 and possibly up to \$3 billion dollars (yes billion), which he uses to spread the "word of God". And since his followers consider him and his wife the "father and mother of Heaven and Earth", he is therefore God and his paper spreads his word. He was actually crowned as such by a US Senator and in his speech he called himself the Messiah and the Returning Lord who is the Saviour of humanity.

"His followers are asked to donate all that they have to his "church". He lives in a lavish 18 acre castle in New York and his family owns castles and mansions in South Korea, England, Scotland and Germany. His children receive an allowance of \$50,000 a month and they also own an exclusive golf club in California.

"One of the major manufacturing businesses he owns in Korea is a company that produces M-16 assault rifles, anti-aircraft guns

and various other weapons.

"This khatchakogh is a) Nicolas Sarkozy b) Sun Myung Moon

/audience cheers : You're not blind, say what's on your mind !!!! /

"Ladies and Gentlemen of the audience. The ways of the khatchakogh were actually invented by Armenians, yet you may wonder why we haven't given any examples of Armenian names. Well we have a treat for you this evening.

Questions 7 and 8

"One of the next khatchakoghs became a Patriarch in Jerusalem. A talented poet and writer, unfortunately he had a weakness for women and gambling and had at least two illegitimate children, but numerous affairs. He was accused of misappropriating over \$10 million from the coffers of the St. James complex in Jerusalem, along with diverting precious historical jewelry to auction houses in Western Europe and replacing them with fake ones. He literally was a cross-thief. Such diversion included also priceless ancient manuscripts. All funds were pocketed personally.

"His accomplice of many years was also "prey" to many of the same vices and lifestyle. He was an archbishop who held the influential position of Chancellor and Manager of Properties of the Patriarchate, when his confrere was Patriarch. Talk about a greeeeeeaaaaat arrangement. The fox in charge of the chicken coop. I hear the Saturday Night Live Church Lady saying "Isn't that conveeeenient?".

"In later years, these two "partners" became sworn enemies, and it is rumoured that the likely cause of this falling out was of the "female persuasion". After the death of the Patriarch, the archbishop settled in Armenia where he donated his personal ill-acquired wealth to the establishing of the Theological Faculty of the Yerevan State University, that has produced many graduates, hopefully not followers in his footsteps (although he was the dean of the faculty for 10 years).

"Can you name these khatchakoghs? Come on, what do we say?

/audience cheers : You're not blind, say what's on your mind !!!! /

"Tune in next month when we'll bring you another exciting lineup of contestants and we attempt to answer important questions on your mind like

- Are there any extraterrestrial khatchakoghs? What about Rael?

- Is it true that members of a famous disco band of the 60s and 70s who have given us such wonderful hits like Stayin' Alive, are actually Armenian khatchakoghs in perfect disguise?

- Was the mass-murderer Jim Jones a khatchakogh or just plain crazy? Or both?"

Now all I have to do is wait for a TV corporate executive to pick this one up.

Praise the Lord.

