

ASCENSION DAY "VIJAG" TRADITION

Ascension Day (this year celebrated on May 8) is a very important church feast because it recalls and celebrates the final earthly event in Christ's life. It is, in a way, the fulfillment of all of Christ's earthly ministry as Saviour of the world.

The story of Christ's ascension to heaven and his sitting at the right hand of the Father is recounted only in two of the Gospels, Mark (16:19) and Luke (24:50-51). Luke also mentions the Ascension in the Acts of the Apostles. We know that the apostles returned to Jerusalem after Christ's ascension and spent their time in prayer in the Upper Room where they had eaten the last supper with Jesus. At this time they felt the need to restore the number of apostles to twelve, electing someone to replace Judas (Acts 1:24-26).

The traditional Armenian "vijag" (casting of lots) ceremony is derived from this event in the life of the young church. Casting of lots is not unique to Armenians; we know that the twelve tribes of Israel received their inheritance of land by lot (Numbers 26:55-56). Also, the order of priestly service for the tribe of Levi was determined by casting of lots.

This folk custom of "vijag" on Ascension Day reflects the Armenian peasant's close link with and love of nature. The Armenian people believed that on the eve of Ascension the skies would be illumined with unusually bright lights as the heavens opened to receive the victorious Christ into the presence of God the Father. At this time, folk culture tells us, all of created nature, the sky and the earth, mountains and valleys, rocks, trees and vegetation, and the waters would enter into a profound joy, embracing each other in a mystical language. They'd convey to each other their healing powers. People believed that anyone who watched for this fleeting moment of joyous celebration, would also understand nature's language and any of their good desires would be granted.

Folk piety also held that on the eve of Ascension, all running streams and rivers would stand still for a second, receiving a miraculous healing power. Many people would bathe themselves in rivers and streams on this night. The children, already sleeping, were bathed the next morning with heated water to which herbs and plants had been added.

The most famous of the variety of ways of casting lots is the one that is called *vijagakhagh*. This is how it was done: Wednesday morning before Ascension Thursday, young girls would go to gather flowers from seven different homes. Then towards evening they would take a pail and go to seven households or to seven fountains to fill their pails with water. This ritual, called "stealing water," forbids any talking, looking back, or placing the water pails on the ground. The flowers or herbs would be added to the pail. Each person participating in the *vijagakhagh* would place a personal belonging (*nishan*), such as a ring, bracelet, necklace, or the like, into the pail. This pail was placed out in the open at night, under the stars, so that the stars would influence the *nishans* and grant their owners their hearts' desires. Throughout the night, young girls would keep watch over the *vijag* pail, so that the young men of the neighborhood would not snatch it away. If the boys managed to do so, the girls would have to give a ransom to get the *vijag* pail back.



After church on Ascension Thursday, all the participants took the *vijag* pail and would go on a picnic, or gather in someone's backyard. One of the girls dressed up as a bride. Usually this girl would have to be the eldest daughter of a family. *Vijag* songs were sung, verses recited. After each song or verse, the bride drew out of the pail one of the *nishans*. To whomever the object belonged, that song or verse would become her *vijag* or her lot.

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