

## Cult service tradition in Georgia

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### Abstract

The article deals with the cult service in Georgia, which was established in ancient era. We have not written sources, but oral folklore and ethnographic materials contain information about worshipping of divinities and some ritual actions. It seems that oldest system was worshipping of chthonic divinities and it forms the divine hierarchy in archaic religious system. So in the ritual practice of Georgians cultivation of land was the main element. It promoted the religious picture and ritual practice in Georgia.

In ancient time the sacral cults were confidential, but in the mountainous part of the Eastern Georgia the ritual is carried out publicly, but priest's pray contains sacral knowledge. So only those who are familiarized with this cult are able to understand the meaning of this text.

The question may be formulated this way: Is the Georgian cult service formed under the influence of other people's notions? Observation of the Georgian rituals and cult texts indicates that they are based on the original religious system formed during a long period. The ancestors of Georgian people must have made a long way through highly-developed original cult service.

The recording of the folklore samples of the Caucasians began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and this fact makes it difficult to establish the precise date of mythological notions. Under such circumstances it is difficult to indicate when the cult service gained the perfect form in Caucasus. It implies asking a question: When did the Caucasian images and notions of the Caucasians elaborate so much as to become the basis of the quite developed religious system?

According to some scientists separate images and scenes of the Caucasian mythology were formed under the influence of the Greek mythology. This influence can be traced in various fields of culture, since the contacts of the Caucasian and Greek world became more active from the VIII-VI B.C, when Greek colonies were established at the Black Sea coasts. But it should be taken into consideration that until that period the tribes settled in Caucasus for millenniums created highly-developed original cultures: Mtkvar-Araksi, Trialeti, Kolkhish, Maykop and other well-known archeological cultures. Writers of the antic era inform us that many elements were included into the Greek mythology from the East and Caucasus. Mythological legends prove the same. We can mention the myth of Argonauts as an example. According to the legend, Jason undergoes initiation for being sworn as a King in Kolkheti and not in Greece. It can be assumed that a developed cult service system existed in Kolkheti where coronation had a tradition. The principal task given by Ayet to Jason was to plough the Ares field, i.e. to refine the place of war and hostility so that it became fertile and life generating. That was the main function of the king, the patron of the country. In the legend about the Argonauts scholars pay particular attention to the symbolic

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importance of the golden fleece and plenty of opinions have been expressed on this issue. As a rule, the question of the Argonauts is discussed in respect with Kolkhis. The adventures of Jason and his friends take place in the realm of Ayets. The plot has no analogy in the Caucasian folklore because it is a part of Hellenic culture; it originated from Greek mythology and expresses Greek people's interests. The myth glorifies the heroism of the Hellenic boatmen; however, as the epos and mythos contain the historical elements as well, it also reflects the fragments of the Caucasian mythological and religious notions. It is not excluded that cultivation of land was one of the elements of the royal ritual in the Caucasus. Apparently, it was necessary condition to become the king. In this respect parallels can be drawn with the Hittite spring rituals which represented the incitation of a prince.

In recent years interesting works have been dedicated to the ethno-cultural relations of the Kartvelian-Hittite world. The interest of the scholars is particularly deepened by the fact that Hittite realm was founded and existed near the settlement of Kartvelian tribes. This fact gave rise to the cultural contacts of the representatives of these worlds.

Juxtaposition of the rituals described in the Hittite written sources with the Georgian folklore and ethnographic material certifies the relation of these historic neighbors and may help reconstruct some ancient mythological and religious notions of Caucasians.

The archeological data is the evidence of the fact that agriculture was used as early as in Neolith era, which later achieved more productivity. This implies formation of cosmogonic and astral notions. The relations with land had a ritualistic character undoubtedly. Such kind of work is assigned to Jason by the king of Kolkheti, Ayet. It is a well known fact the creators of culture were land cultivators which is proved by the etymology of this word (Latin word "*cultura*" is derived from a verb "*colere*", which means "to cultivate land"). The society, which cultivates land, has been firmly attached to one place and receives the main food from the land. From this period creative skills of a human being are revealed to a large extent, which is expressed in development of religious thinking. Development of land cultivation supported development of astral notions because a human being understood that the universe is unified and the land fertility depends upon the heavenly universe as well. Thus it may be considered that the system of the land gods (chthonic divinities) is one of the basic elements upon which the complex religious system was based.

The situation must have been similar in the Caucasus in general and particularly in Georgia, which is proved by archeological discoveries (Kikvidze, 1976, p.15).

In order to recognize the religious thinking of the ancient Caucasians study of the rituals, which luckily exist in the Eastern, mountainous Georgia may be of certain help. The religious system of the residents of this region causes dispute among scientists. We are not going to solve these questions here but one thing is clear: Christian and pagan elements are intermixed in these religious notions. The Georgian mythology does not have complete form today. It has reached until now in the form of fragments or has been dispersed in the various folklore genres and separate elements are collected from there. Certain result may be obtained by

comparing rituals and hymns of other peoples, because sacral rituals and texts are based on the same principle. The process of interaction with a deity exceeds the ethnic limits and has a universal character. Ritualistic texts are made up of mythos images and concepts, which express the level of the culture of society including cult service.

In this case concepts of culture and civilization should be marked off as contradictory phenomena. It is known that the civilization absorbs culture as the expression of spirituality. It is important that the highly developed Kolkhish culture did not grow into a civilization.

According to the authors of antic period, the sacral cults rituals were confidential. The participants were strictly prohibited to talk about this question. So the ancient writers escaped explanation and detailed description of these customs in their works. Pausanias mentions in his work "Description of Hellas" that he abstains from talking much about sacred places due to their sacredness (Pausanias, 1938).

At first sight, we find an opposite situation in the Caucasus. In the mountainous part of the Eastern Georgia, Khevsureti the ritual is carried out publicly by Khevisberi (the main pagan priest). His prayer is the symbol of sacral-esoteric knowledge. But he says it loudly and all attendants hear him. But only those who are familiarized with this cult are able to understand the secret meaning. It is a peculiar form of initiation and we must be dealing with reflection of the ancient period when traditional society had equal knowledge and jointly participated in the cult service. The majority of rituals were a text to be expressed. We are familiarized with these texts some of them being published. This religious system functions in the mountainous Georgia even today. Of course, these texts belong to a later period and do not come from the ancient times. The oral tradition and ethnographic material of the Caucasian peoples were recorded in the XIX-XX centuries. By that time, the old religious system had long been lost, and some of its fragments had acquired a grotesque shape, but the sacral religious aspect does not lose its basic elements under the influence of tradition, and they are transferred from generation to generation. So the traces of the old notions can be found even in the texts of later period.

The question may be formulated this way: Is the Caucasian cult service a secondary phenomenon. i.e. is it formed under the influence of other people's notions? Observation of the Khevsurian rituals and cult texts indicates that they are based on the original religious system formed during a long period.

Deities replace each other in the texts expressed by pagan priests: Some of them are based on the land; others do not leave the heavenly universe and help those living on the land from there. This is the revelation of understanding of the universe unification. The deity images are not fully open, they are described by a couple of epithets, but their essence and functions are known to the participants of the ritual. The texts begin by mentioning the God without any nomination. This indicates at the high level of thinking, when a human being understands the infinity and the diversity of the God. So he does not give Him a specific name. The text ends by mentioning the human being as the pastor of the mundane life, which implies that a human being occupies an important place in geocosmic hierarchy.

In the rituals of the residents of the mountainous part of the eastern Georgia (in which only men participated) the whole society used to undergo initiation process periodically (Kiknadze, 1996, p.137). Everybody is equal before the deity in this society. A child (a boy!) becomes the member of this society and participates in the cult service at a certain age. During each ritual the realization of the deity increases in his mind. He internally gets ready to execute the God's work himself in case of need. A human being has no choice in such religious system. The deity Himself chooses His servant and any member of society may become His servant.

On the whole, the conclusion is that the ancestors of Caucasian people must have made a long way through highly-developed original cult service, to have shrunk the knowledge obtained through traditions and kept it for future generations in the form of secret coded texts.

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