

The Formation of Nation-State and Cultural Identity: A Georgian Perspective

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Abstract

The paper discusses cultural specifics of the Georgians' mental perception in the context of formation of the modern nation-state.

The research has been conducted using the experimental psychosemantic method, based on which semantic spaces, reflecting the categorical system of meanings in the contemporary Georgians' mentality, have been built. The material for the research consisted of universal (etic) categories interpreted within the cultural system specific to the Georgians (emic means of interpretation). For this purpose, we have referred to the historical facts, linguistic and folk material, and religious aspects of the Georgian Orthodox Christianity.

The so called "Nation-State" cluster is the largest one out of several clusters revealed by the research. Its content has been interpreted based on semiotic analysis that highlights the semantic logic representing essential aspects of the Georgians' collective representations, namely, their ethnic picture of the world.

It is stated that national identity is the main idea influencing the development of the Georgian state and culture, and that the value of defending and preserving national identity is the oldest and strongest layer of the Georgian mentality. It is demonstrated that "Georgian" has always been the main criterion for evaluating all the life events and even personal self-realization has necessarily implied the element of being Georgian as its inseparable part. The research data confirm that till today the Georgians are evaluated in this context and it should be the main reason for why such concepts as "success," "achievement," "independence" and "freedom," which definitely represent personal context in the Western countries, are attributed to the wider context of nation-state in the Georgian mentality.

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Introduction

The presented experimental research on the cultural specifics of the Georgians' mental perception demonstrates the benefits of application of indigenous interpretative models for clarifying those contextual specifics, which determine activity of the representatives of a given culture, including the functioning of cognitive and evaluative processes, and play a crucial role in the formation of cultural identity. Why do we consider the study of cultural mentality as one of the best ways of tracing the formation and development of cultural identity and how can it contribute to the study of a modern nation-state building?

It is doubtless that cultural mentality represents a socio-cultural system, on which the lifestyle and activity of the members of a particular society is based. The longer the existence of a nation is, the older the layers in its mentality are. Each subsequent epoch is influenced by the preceding ones both actively and passively. Consequently, people carry and transmit collective representations with their nation's traditions, values, worldview, and cultural experience. For a country like Georgia with more than three-thousand-year history, a scholar studying the contemporary Georgians' lifestyle and perception should take into consideration the fact that the modern Georgians are direct heirs of those genetically related ethnic tribes, which are believed to inhabit the land of contemporary Georgia in III millennium B.C.

Two epochs played a decisive role in the formation of the Georgian mentality – pre-Christian and Christian. Simultaneously, establishment of a nation-state was a crucial factor along with development of the national identity and the forms of its realization. The pre-Christian epoch is the one, in which such important elements for formation of the Georgian state as the Georgian language, alphabet, polyphony in singing, etc. were developed. The Christian-Feudal epoch in the history of Georgia, which retained the specifics of the pre-Christian one, counts almost 1600 years. By both duration and cultural influence, it is the most important epoch in the history of Georgia as during it the Georgian State was finally established (IV-XI centuries). The values and the worldview in general, developed in this period, turned out to be vital for the final formation of the Georgian nation and identity, and, in our opinion, play their essential role in the building of a

new Georgian state.

Aim

Thus, the aim of the presented research is to study cultural specifics of the Georgians' mental perception in the context of formation of the modern nation-state.

Methodology

Our special emphasis is placed on the cultural context as it is considered to be the one that determines inner psychic structures, as well as cultural knowledge and interpretative processes (Cole, 1997). Accordingly, in the social scientists' opinion, mental processes should be studied in the context of the values, beliefs, historical experience, and specific constructs of a particular culture; therefore, empirical data should be interpreted using indigenous interpretative models (Ho, 1998). In order to achieve the best scientific results, the necessity of applying a complex etic-emic-etic approach is emphasized, which measures etic categories with emic means of measurement (Triandis, 1994).

Based on these methodological principles, the presented research was conducted using emic strategy within the framework of the experimental psychosemantic paradigm. Psychosemantics studies categorical structures of the consciousness of individuals and social groups, the system of meanings through which a subject perceives the world, others, and oneself. This system of meanings is believed to classify the world objects and events, and is studied in the context of everyday perception and practice. The psychosemantic approach acknowledges the existence of various forms of meaning in a human consciousness such as symbols, icons, communicative and ritual acts, etc., consequently, here the concept of meaning is quite broad and comprehensive.

In order to research the categorical structure of meanings, the psychosemantic approach reconstructs the system of meanings. Its main method is building semantic spaces or the unities of semantic characteristics of the meanings kept in a human memory. In order to identify these semantic characteristics, the initial procedures for ascertaining semantic similarities/dissimilarities (scaling, grouping, revealing associations, etc.) are applied and the received results are

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submitted to statistical analysis (Petrenko, 1997).

The concepts for the presented research were chosen based on the following principle: 1. Universal concepts playing classificatory role in structuring the world and represented as the binary systems such as day/night, right/left, up/down, etc.; 2. Social meanings represented as the triad systems of classification. This category was chosen from the semantic group identified on the basis of V. Turner's classification of colors, in which each group is characterized with appropriate color – white, black or red; and 3. Concepts having rigid value connotation everywhere and in all epochs: family, kinship, nation, homeland, decision-making, freedom, justice, etc.

145 concepts selected on the basis of the abovementioned principle were applied for the research, each typed on a separate card. As the applied concepts are universally important for the mankind, they are the part of the Georgians' collective representations as well. The question is what kind of relationship is among these universal concepts in the contemporary Georgians' mentality.

The research was conducted using Miller's classification method. The respondents were asked to group these concepts. Each respondent developed a principle for grouping the concepts him/herself. The received data were submitted to cluster analysis.

50 Georgian respondents participated in the research – 23 males and 27 females, aged 17-23. All of them were the students of Humanities, Social and Political Studies, and Exact and Natural Sciences. The target group of this age was selected consciously taking into consideration the fact that it represents a stage when a person gains much more independence to choose from the repertoire provided by his/her cultural context, and at the same time, one is most sensitive to the ongoing socio-cultural changes.

Results and their Interpretation

Based on the research, 15 main clusters were identified, each consisting of a number of sub-clusters. In this paper we are going to deal with one of the largest clusters in the context of the whole research data, as well as the available researches and the events from the history of Georgia.

The cluster we are going to discuss consists of several sub-clusters

historical events support this interpretation?

Let's start with a choice or decision as a means of achieving either end of the presented continuum. It should be stressed that the concept of choice or decision has become the element of the so called “nation-state” cluster and not others describing personal and individual dispositions. This cluster consists of other concepts of the same type, which will be discussed later. Concerning making a decision or choice, we will select just a few examples of making proper or improper decisions from the past, which, in the contemporary Georgians' opinion, have determined the direction of history. From the past, as an example of making a right choice for the bright future of the country, we have chosen the most famous Georgian king's David Agmashenebeli's (David the builder, XI-XII centuries) decision to strengthen the country through settling the Kivchags (the tribes neighboring Georgia) in Georgia not only for increasing the number of the population weakened by the preceding wars, but also for strengthening the Georgian army with new and experienced soldiers. This decision brought memorable victories to Georgia and till today the Georgians consider David the builder as an exemplary king.

An example of making a choice, which the Georgians regret till today, can be considered the decision by another famous king of Georgia Erekle II to sign the “Georgyevski Tractat” with Russia in 1783 and to consider the Russians as the main supporters and protectors of Georgia. Although Erekle II had a very little choice in this case and he had to refer to Russia as a Christian country in the conditions when Turkey and Persia were already dividing Georgia between themselves, the Georgians have been accusing their king for making this decision since then and they think that signing this document is the source of all the evil happening in Georgia till today.

The modern Georgians' way of thinking has been formed based on such historical facts. That is why they put a great hope even in a single decision, which may bring any positive changes in the future. Such a way of thinking determines the specificity of the Georgians' participation in the political life till today – usually the activation of the need to be involved in the political events occurs at the point when they believe that the decisions vital for the future of the country have to be made. Lots of facts from the

history of Georgia confirm this statement, for example, the events of 1977 when the population, especially the youth, gathered in front of the parliament building to protest against the amendment to the constitution, according to which the Georgian language was banned as the state language; the political events of November 2003 and November 2007 were also pushed by the need for making a proper decision to reject the principle of usurpation of governance.

After discussing the Georgians' attitude to decision-making for the future of the country, let's consider the core of this cluster – nation-state seen as inseparable from the concepts of unity and justice. We would like to place a special emphasis on the concept of justice as historically it has been perceived as a part of the construct of state. The fact is that in Christian feudal Georgia justice was in the hands of a king as a head of the state, who appointed the judges and a feudal had no right to judge a peasant. This fact gave a peasant the opportunity to refer to the royal justice any time. Therefore, in the Georgians' understanding, justice equated to the state itself. Thus, the specificity of the Georgian justice gave relative freedom and protection to the most numerous part of the population - the peasantry. This historical experience is kept in the Georgian mentality till today and it also explains the Georgians' sensitivity to “unjust” justice that is well evidenced by the massive demonstrations in Georgia in both November 2003 and November 2007.

Concerning unity as an inseparable part of the concept of state, it has been historically vital for the Georgians constantly fighting against the Turks and the Persians, and resisting the Russians to protect their national identity, territorial borders, and independence. According to any history textbook, usually the enemies managed to defeat the Georgians by the means of a native traitor. Therefore, the importance of the nationwide unity has always been emphasized and the contemporary Georgians' everyday speech still retains such idioms as “a fortress is ruined from inside” (“tsikhe shignidan tkdeba”), which means that the nation is defeated without the unity among all the members. Because of the cultural specificity of the concept of unity, political leaders from both the government and the opposition usually refer to it in their rhetoric.

The core of the presented cluster is logically supplemented by the

data of the sub-clusters incorporated in it. It is noteworthy that a number of the concepts from these sub-clusters describe individual characteristics. In regard to this we would like to briefly deal with some typological orientations of the Georgian culture. Typologically, the Georgian culture belongs to the type of collectivist culture with a strong orientation to small social groups (Nijaradze, 2001; Shwartz, 1990; Surmanidze, 2000, 2001, 2003; Tsuladze, 2003). Interdependency/orientation to others and close emotional relations are essential aspects of psychological functioning. It is remarkable that at the personal level collectivist dispositions such as empathy to others' feelings, shame as a crucial category in interpersonal relations, and strong self-regulation coexist with such apparently individualist orientations as an over-emphasized sense of personal dignity, pride, sensitivity to personal abuse, openness to new experiences, strong orientation towards achievement, and self-respect (there is a Georgian concept of “tavmokvareoba” word in word meaning “love of oneself”; however it is usually perceived synonymous to dignity).

The abovementioned over-emphasized sensitivity to both personal and national dignity is vividly reflected in “insubordination” as the Georgians' characteristic feature. The orientation of the Georgian culture to small social groups is also revealed in the fact that the Georgians are conformists at the level of in-group interactions. At the same time, the conformist orientation is weakened outside of a social group and in such conditions resistance to the outer force becomes dominant (this specificity in the form of insubordination is described by a number of both local and foreign historical sources). At the level of individual, it is usually activated while facing injustice and disrespect. The same happens at the level of the whole nation, especially when the ethnic self is under danger, which is well illustrated by the events of the Russian-Georgian conflict in August 2008. It can be concluded that insubordination is one of the strategies for defending and preserving the national identity. Going into depth, the feature of insubordination can be an expression of “passionarity” (the term suggested by a famous Russian scholar L. Gumilev, 1990) implying a characteristic feature of the nation determined by the coincidence of geographical and historical factors.

Insubordination also has another basis in the Georgian mentality that is well evidenced by the results of our research. In order to understand

the sensitivity to personal and national dignity, we consider important to discuss the concepts of “fame” and “dignity” in the historical perspective. As a famous semiotician Y. Lotman states, the opposition “dignity-fame” historically represents a certain attribute of a certain social category in a given social context. This attribute is closely linked to the category of “valuable/invaluable” that is characterized with distance from material benefit (1997, pp. 86-87). In the medieval times, “fame” was a more valuable category ascribed to a person who had no need in material award any more. From the existing two models of fame, the first one – “Christian/Religious” is related to the category of time and is described by the dichotomy eternal/momentary, while the second one – “Feudal/Knightly” is described by the dichotomies fame/shame, famous/infamous, approval/disapproval (1997, pp. 84-100).

These universal regularities are reflected in the Georgian mentality through various linguistic or value categories. In relation to the construct of “nation-state,” it is important to explain the semantics of “mamulishvili” (“a child of a homeland”), which is the Georgian synonym of the word “patriot.” The phenomenon represented by this concept necessary implies the one fighting against the conquerors and for the unity of the homeland, and is generally ascribed fame. Fame is evaluated through longevity – the Georgian word for it “dgegrzeli” means having a long day that implies having a day light, accordingly, the light of the sun. Therefore, the concept of “day” (“dge”) and the word “longevity” (“dgegrzeli”) produced from it, are closely linked to the concept of “nation-state,” the fame of which was given the highest value along the centuries and still seems to remain crucial for the modern Georgians. Accordingly, night or the state contrary to it lacks this value.

The concept of “blood” in this cluster should be considered in the same context. Besides, it is impossible to explain its semantics without taking into consideration the Christian tradition, where “blood” has a purifying function and is a necessary element of the communion. In relation to the category of nation-state, the blood sacrificed for the homeland is considered to be the purifying one. Therefore, “fame” is ascribed to those devoted to the homeland, the majority of who are the ancestors fighting for the unity of the country, as well as its cultural and

educational revival¹. It is noteworthy that the expressions - “the one devoted to the homeland” and “the blood sacrificed for the homeland” - are inseparable part of the contemporary Georgians' everyday speech, nothing to say about the politicians' wording.

The concept of purity follows the same line as the Georgians directly link it to their name/reputation. Reputation, as well as the pride related to it, is equated to personal dignity in the Georgian mentality. Historically, it had a regulatory function in Georgia (like in medieval Christian Europe) and even had its own symbol in the form of a hat that was an indicator of true masculinity. This fact is still expressed in the Georgians' everyday speech by a well-known saying “I am a man and wear a hat” (“katsi var da qudi mkhuravs”), which means - I am an individual and have a dignity. As a famous Georgian scholar G. Asatiani states, without being aware of the phenomenon of caring for one's name (“sakhelis mokhvecha”) in the Georgian reality, one cannot understand the Georgian character (1982). Consequently, acknowledgement of their “pure” and spotless name/reputation by others is considered to be so important for the Georgians that they desperately try to hide all their shortcomings and demonstrate everyone their best qualities. By the way, in the period of the Soviet regime one could frequently hear a compensatory phrase reflecting the need for the national identity and independent state proclaiming to the full voice “we - the Georgians - are the best” (“rac kargebi vart, qartvelebi vart”).

In the conditions of such a socio-cultural context, the concept of “mask” can also be considered in relation to the one of “patriot” and is definitely associated with the mental perception of “artistism” as a criterion for evaluating a person. According to L. Surmanidze's experimental research, in which mental stereotypes were evaluated on the basis of the Georgian folk idioms, the stereotype of patriot, perceived as the one rejecting a passive life style and being quite active and insubordinate, is ascribed certain artistism (2003). In the Georgian scholars' (Asatiani, 1982) opinion, mental value of “artistism,” as an essential category of social perception, can be explained on the basis of the Georgian word

¹ A close link between “dignity-fame” and “patriotism” in the Georgian mentality is clearly reflected in the historical practice of upgrading common people, who were especially brave while defending their homeland and their king. Along with “dignity” and certain privileges associated to it, they were awarded “fame” - an attribute characteristic to the higher social class. This tradition was effectively practiced by the Georgian kings and gave a real chance of quite restricted upward social mobility in the medieval epoch.

“sautskhoo” (meaning “superb,” “extraordinary”) the root of which is the word “utskho” meaning “a stranger” and stressing the importance of a stranger's glance. Therefore, artistism can be considered as a skill of fitting different masks. If we see the concept of “mask” in this context, “a pose of the one devoted to the Georgian people” is mentally one of the most valuable masks (Bakradze, 1986). When it comes to the defense of the national identity, flexibility and craftiness are considered to be vital characteristics, confirmed by the analysis of one of the most popular Georgian folk tales “Natsarkekia” (“ash digger”). Laziness and showing off of the main character of this folk tale is just a mask concealing his actual shrewdness and craftiness. Laziness and showing off is a “mystification” aimed to hide a real face from the enemy (Bakradze, 1986). From this perspective, both mask and role are directly linked in the Georgian mentality to the preservation of national identity and the defense of state independence.

Thus, the value of defending national identity is the oldest layer of the Georgian mentality. At a particular stage in the history of Georgia, especially during the period of the constant struggles for self-preservation, national identity became the core of a personal, individual self-concept. Consequently, the consciousness of being a Georgian became the main form of expressing one's individuality, which gained the features considered valuable for a representative of the nation. Probably this is the main reason for why our respondents consider the concepts of independence and freedom not in the personal context but in relation to the state and national identity as their inseparable part. Thus, “Georgian” has become the main criterion for evaluating all the life events and even personal self-realization has necessarily implied the element of being Georgian as its undividable aspect. Till today the Georgians are evaluated in this context that is well evidenced by a widespread question – “What has he/she done for Georgia?” Historically, caring for the independence and wellbeing of the homeland has been considered the greatest goodness, and the Georgian poets and moralists of all epochs were stating that one could deserve an immortal name only by devoting oneself to the service of the country. The same pathos was apparent during the Georgian-Russian conflict in August 2008. Thus, being successful in the struggle for wellbeing and independence of the homeland has always been considered

the greatest achievement and it explains the fact why the concepts of “success” and “achievement” (like the ones of “independence” and “freedom”), which definitely represent the personal area in the Western countries, are attributed to the wider context of the nation-state in the Georgian mentality.

To illustrate the abovementioned ideas, we are presenting the specifics of defining the concepts of progress and regress in the Georgian mentality. As the whole history of Georgia was characterized with active ethnic self-preservation (in the early medieval epoch as a process of formation of the nation-state, later as a devoted struggle for defending it against the Islamic world, and in the very recent past as a fight against Russian invasion), both supporting and preventing this process were the main criteria for evaluating a Georgian. In this constant struggle between good and evil, good was considered as devotion to the homeland, fight for the national unity, promotion of freedom and progress, while evil was identified with the contrary processes (Surguladze, 1989). Thus, the concepts of progress and regress are perceived in the Georgian mentality as inseparable from the national identity - progress is linked to the concepts of unity, freedom, and independent state. Accordingly, the Georgian mentality considers those fighting for the national unity and independence as progressive and even calls them “unifiers” (“gamaertianeblebi”), while those opposing it are considered to be regressive and called “dividers” (“gamtishvelebi”).

Several concepts in the presented cluster require a special explanation. They are the cosmic categories representing cyclic dichotomies such as sun/moon and day/ night. The remains of the first pair are still kept in the Georgian language (For instance, the words standing for shining and round objects, as well as some female names, originate from the name of Goddess of the sun “barbal-barboli”) and are also reflected in the most important symbol of Georgian Christianity – St. George (“tsminda Giorgi,” after who 365 churches are named in Georgia). The Georgians consider St. George a protector of Georgia and usually pray for their country in front of his icon. In the Georgian scholars' opinion, St. George's cult substituted the pre-Christian cult of the moon and still retains a number of its attributes (Bardavelidze, 1968). The cyclic dichotomies of sun/moon and day/ night are not in this cluster by accident: The sun, day and light are

considered as the symbols of goodness in the Christian ideology. St. George's face in Georgian Christianity expresses the soldier's spirit struggling for goodness and defeating evil. The idea of St. George fighting against darkness is inseparable from the concept of “nation-state” in the Georgian mentality as historically the struggle for returning the lost state independence and defending its unity was equated to the struggle for goodness and revival of justice, as demonstrated above.

While attempting to reveal the semantics of the cosmic categories of time presented in this cluster and to explain our logic of their incorporation here, we should refer to the idea that a person is not born with a sense of time but this concept is determined by the culture to which he/she belongs (Gurevich, 1984). In the Georgian culture as the Orthodox Christian one the category of time, along with the understanding of history, is based on the Christian ideology, in which the notions of past and future are perceived as a single continuum. Lessingian “the present born from the past is a parent of the future” is one of the most popular sayings in Georgia since a Georgian is not able to perceive the future without giving credit to the historical past and the ancestors.² Thus, past and future are inseparable in the Georgians' perception. It is not surprising that present has separated this triad and appeared in the context of everyday life, namely, in the semantic field describing in-group orientations. Although present is not free from the orientation to future (the Georgians' aspiration to the wellbeing of extended family, to steady interpersonal relations, and to social and economic progress are the indicators of the orientation to future), we would like to emphasize that past and future are accentuated in the “nation-state” cluster because the length and prosperity of the historical past determines its special significance in relation to the idea of nation-state.³

In addition, a few words about the concept of “masculinity” that separated from its binary opposition – “femininity” (incorporated in the semantic cluster of “family”) and joined the presented semantic cluster. Because of the cultural specifics, for our respondents, femininity is an

² It is active in the Georgian politics till today that is well evidenced by the fact that at his inauguration in 2004 president Mikheil Saakashvili gave his promise at the XI-XII-century Georgian king David the Builder's grave.

³ The fact that the Georgian language, polyphony in singing, and alphabet were developed in the pre-Christian epoch, as well as the fact that Georgia is one of the first Christian countries (Christianity became the state religion in 326 A.D.) is the basis of the Georgians' sense of historical dignity.

inseparable part of the notion of family - there has always been a very strong cult of woman as mother in the Georgian culture, which is well reflected in the Georgian idiomatic language. Woman as mother of family has always had a significant social function, accordingly, a considerable authority in the Georgian family.⁴ The data demonstrate that our respondents perceive family as “feminine.” Concerning “masculinity,” it is a part of the “nation-state” cluster that makes us assume that in the Georgian mentality the state is perceived as “masculine.”

If we locate the “nation-state” cluster within the context of the entire data, it is necessary to underline its close structural relationship with the semantic cluster of “religiosity” implying such concepts as “kindness,” “generosity,” “respect for those who passed away,” “holiday,” “activity,” “dignity,” etc. and definitely bearing a mark of the Orthodox Christian worldview. The majority of the Christian holidays imply special ceremonies including small feasts in order to express respect for the souls of those who passed away and to recall their deeds with a toast of wine. It seems that the semantics of “holiday” is mainly connected with the religious holidays in the Georgian mentality.

Conclusion

To summarize, the construct of national identity is the main idea influencing the development of the Georgian state and culture. The value of defending and preserving national identity is the oldest and strongest layer of the Georgian mentality. “Georgian” has always been the main criterion for evaluating all the life events and judging a person. The research data confirm that such a perception still remains active and it should be the main reason for why such concepts as “decision-making,” “choice,” “success,” “achievement,” “independence,” and “freedom,” which usually represent the personal context in the Western countries, are attributed to the wider context of the nation-state in the Georgian mentality.

⁴ In the Georgian culture the cultivation of woman as mother's social value is caused by both the Georgian Christianity that perceived a woman as the major agent for disseminating religiosity in the family and the historical conditions – because of the males' frequent absence in the conditions of continuous wars, mother was considered a potential substitute of men's functions and an equal member in a couple “carrying a yoke.” In everyday language “wife” (“tsoli”) is often substituted by the following words: “meugle” meaning a person carrying the same yoke and “dedakatsi” composed of mother (“deda”)+man (“katsi”) and meaning a woman (“qali”). This cult was also backed up by mother as child-rearer's social role, which strengthened “mother's line” in the process of raising the future generation. Simultaneously, the historical conditions made her take almost total responsibility for raising a child, consequently, incorporating the elements of “father's line” as well. Thus, despite the normative stereotype (modest and obedient), a Georgian woman has always been revealing her culturally approved dominance in a family life.

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