

## **Linguistics and Culture**

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### **The Center of the Universe and its Symbolic by the Georgian Highlanders**

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*Existence of the center of the universe and its symbolic always used to have great importance in general perception of the world, and consequently it is by various models confirmed in religious thinking of the world people. Georgian ethnographic material, in which sacral nature of the center is clearly disclosed, is not an exception insofar.*

*The first example of this is tree. In Georgian ethnographic reality it represents in static (sacral tree, sacral pillar) or mobile (chichilaki, karachka, sacral flags) forms and mostly is considered as symbol of sacral Centre. In our opinion the micro cosmic model of universe, with clearly expressed sacral center represents the Georgian traditional dwelling with its construction and symbolic –religious meaning and main ritual function of central pillar in dwelling exactly is marking out sacral center. The importance of sacral Centre is proved by mythological legends and ethnographic materials concerning the establishment of shrines of mountain areas of Georgia.*

*One of the key symbols of sacral center are Holy Mountain, hearth and their directly connection with religious traditions. Symbolism of the hearth as Centre plays particular role in wedding ritual, relatively seldom, but still the function hearth appears in funeral ceremony.*

*All these give possibility to conclude the following:*

- *Symbolization of the center is quite distinguishing event for religious thinking of Georgian mountaineers and is realized in different forms in different cases;*
- *The first example of this symbol is holy mountain and tradition of building cultic structures on peaks of mountains, which is general Georgian phenomenon;*
- *Symbolism of the center of universe is clearly reflected in such traditional type of Georgian dwelling as earth dwelling house with central wooden pillar and hole for light and smoke;*
- *Symbolic of the center explains special meaning of hearth in ethnographic reality (traditions of wedding and funeral, reconciliation near the hearth);*
- *Symbolic of the center is declared in Legends concerning establishment of the shrines in mountain areas.*

Existence of the center of the universe and its symbolic always used to have great importance in general perception of the world, and consequently it is by various models confirmed in religious thinking of the world people. Georgian ethnographic material, in which sacral nature of the center is clearly disclosed, is not an exception insofar.

The first example of this is cosmic mountain as the link between earth and sky. Similar mythic and real mountains act important role in culture of many nations of the world, including Georgian culture. The mountain was often perceived as picture of the universe, model of cosmos, in which all parameters of cosmic setting is provided. In many cases it was identified with life tree, which had same or similar meaning. The example of this connection is tradition of worship of mountain existed Abkhazia, which is closely linked with worship of holy trees, growing on mountain slopes and represented sacral objects and the oak growing on the peak of mountain was the domain of supreme deity.

One of the key symbols of sacral center is tree. In Georgian ethnographic reality it represents in form of Chichilaki (Georgian traditional analog of New Year tree), sacral flags and so on. The center symbolism is distinctly noticed in one of the oldest types of Georgian dwelling – hall with central pillar. Special construction, so called crown roofing is its key detail, such system of roofing, which is proved in Georgia from the edge of old and new chronology, reached particularly high level. The roofing is based on the walls of the hall and special pillars called central pillars. Though, basically there are two such central pillars in the hall, existence of 4, 6 and even 8 such pillars is proved in ethnographic materials and historical sources too. Central pillar was cultish center of family in old Georgia, it was identified with life tree and the whole complex of belief – imaginations developed in pre Christian period was connected to it.

The central pillar was in abundance ornamented basically by the groups of figures of astral nature: rotating sun, moon, stars; and besides decorative it had ritual meaning as well. We think main ritual function of central pillar in the hall is marking out sacral center. This is proved by its location – close to hearth, which on its side is symbol of center, as well as aperture in a crown and cosmogony ornamentations of central pillar, which gives opportunity to say that Georgian hall with central pillar with its construction and symbolic – religious meaning represents micro cosmic model of universe, with clearly expressed sacral center.

The importance of sacral center is proved by mythological legends and ethnographic materials concerning the establishment of shrines of mountain areas of Georgia. all scientists working on these issues consider that according to ethnographic data the place where the shrine is located always has meaning of middle, center and is associated with sacral tree. Embodiment of this middle for Pshavi is Lashari oak tree and for Khevsureti – Khmala fir tree, from which according to the legend holy

chrisms were dripping and gathered in wine-jars buried nearby, to be distributed to shrines of whole Khevsureti. The place with chrisms source is considered as the centre of holy universe. The same example is growing of the tree in hearth, this theme is distributed in mountain part of east Georgia and covers all significant shrines of this regions. The tree growing in the hearth on the place of fire, highlights that it is the center and consequently – sacral. Potential sacral nature of hearth is quite well revealed in its function in ceremonies of wedding and in some cases of funerals.

The material related to the mentioned is recorded in materials of German and Georgian researches on Georgian mountaineers. Mostly in all cases, the focus is on hearth and fire, as on the symbols of life and fertility, but we think that one of the most important features of hearth is its cosmogony nature. This is the place where the fixed local center of universe is located and four edges of the universe are crossed symbolically; namely on this place the living space is focused. Exactly, symbolism of the centre plays particular role in one of the details related to wedding ritual, in particular during traditional wedding in Khevsureti, when the new bride is brought to the family, the groom is not at home, mostly he is hidden in neighbors' houses. Guests are looking for him, then bring him home and offer a sit next to the bride near the hearth.

The chief priest (servant of the icon) gives them one wax candle to each, tells them to get up and binds hems of their clothes and prays with chalice full of wine or beer in his hand. The wedding starts only after this. Bringing bride and groom to the hearth, giving seat or taking them around it, is characteristic to all high land areas of East Georgia and not just for them. In fact this tradition shows the trend of general Georgian tradition. We think, the hearth participates in all these rituals not only as symbol of life and fertility, but has meaning of sacral center. It is considered that hearth should give to new family not only fertility, but also peacefulness, because they will start to live not in amorphous but in arranged space, oriented from sacral center – hearth.

Relatively seldom, but still the function hearth appears in funeral ceremony. In this case this is also tradition of Khevsureti – the habit of silence. According to this tradition on the day of funeral the closest relative of the deceased person selects three other two men and one aged woman, again from the relatives, which sit next to the hearth with ritual cakes in their hands and are fully silent until presbyter comes and blesses the bread. After this they circle the bread three times around their heads, take the deceased to the room and only then they have right to break the silence and sit at the table.

In our opinion we still deal with the symbol of hearth as sacral center, which is in close connection with the next world. According to oldest impressions, anthological transformation from one form of life to another

happens namely in the center otherwise in aperture of the universe; and people sitting silent next to the hearth are symbolic witnesses of this transformation. Svanetian (mountain area of Western Georgia) reconciliation ritual also points to mentioned, which is conducted in two options in case of insulting the hearth (pouring water and extinguishing): a) the insulter takes off the clothes and only in underwear lies next to the hearth and b) creeps under the hearth. According to Svanetian information forgiving always ends with adoption of wrongdoer or his/her acceptance as family member. Existence of cosmic aperture on the place of hearth – sacral center is quite obvious here as well as ambivalent nature of nether world – this is domain of death and at the same time beginning of new life, revival of which is possible only from the center. The person lies next to the hearth or creeps under it, otherwise goes to nether world, leaves society – arranged sacral space and after forgiving starts new life again through the hearth – sacral center, and comes back to the society. Symbolic of the three circling ritual cake three times over the head) in funeral ritual shall be analyzed against three levels of the universe, mostly because important religious meaning of this number in Khevsuretian perception of world is well known. We mean three summit and three color understanding, which has so great importance for traditional society of Khevsureti, that it is reflected even in the custom of putting clothes to deceased person (according to Khevsuretian tradition three outer clothes of different colors are put on the deceased person – wine –red, black and white – colorful, which repeat traditional Georgian colors of cosmos). All these give possibility to express opinion that hearth participates as sacral center on two the most important phases of human life, basically as the symbol of wholeness of universe and bridge for going from one form of existence to another.

Ethnographic material related to growing the tree in hearth fits quite well in this context. As it is known this is the theme coming from the oldest mythos and is quite well proved in Georgian folk and ethnographic life. Such myths and oral traditions are widely spread in mountain areas of East Georgia, they are in fact identical and accompanying the history of nearly all big shrines. General scheme of myth which with some alteration applies to the history of nearly all strong shrines of Eastern highland areas is as following: the tree is growing in the hearth, the owner cuts the tree and on the third morning the coming up tree is followed by the snake, which indicates that the family shall leave the house otherwise it will be punished, because this place is designated for establishment of the shrine. Families of three brothers were sacrificed to the establishment of strong Khevsuretian shrine – Gudanis Khati (icon of Gudani), which lived on that place and did not want to live it.

Part of the scientists considers that the tree growing up in the hearth embodies deity, on the name of which the shrine should be established.

Our opinion is different and we think that the tree is not considered as deity, but as cosmogonic axis – world tree, growing of which breaks homogeneity of the space in the hearth (this possibility potentially is already determined by existence of the hearth) and sacral center of the universe is created, which means possibility of establishment of the shrine on this place. This opinion should be proved by the motive of the snake following the tree, which highlights the symbol of sacral tree – center and axis uniting three levels of the universe, the lowest level of which is nether world.

The meaning of the center of universe is clearly defined in the picture of Khevsuretian next world. According to traditional imagination of Khevsuretians the Paradise is multistory white fortified tower, which scrapes the sky. As it is known, tower, tree, column are identical phenomena and represent the variations of the center. This meaning is rather highlighted by huge poplar tree growing next to the tower, top of which reaches the sky, or in some versions it is tied up to the sky with golden chain. White color of the tower should not be occasional as well, white and blue are Lord's colors according to Khevsuretian world perception, while black, dark color expresses nether world.

All these give possibility to conclude the following:

- Symbolization of the center is quite distinguishing event for religious thinking of Georgian mountaineers and is realized in different forms in different cases;
- The first example of this symbol is holy mountain and tradition of building cultic structures on peaks of mountains, which is general Georgian phenomenon;
- Symbolism of the center of universe is clearly reflected in such traditional type of Georgian dwelling as earth dwelling house with central wooden pillar and hole for light and smoke;
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In general, it can be said that existence of sacral center was significant characteristic for archaic Georgian world picture, represented by three parts of universe and was presented by varied symbols.

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