

Ritual as a Sign and Means of Identity

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The paper aims to show how it is possible to associate the concept of identity with “ancestral customs” and “cultural memory”. With that purpose the author tries to outline a particular version of collective remembering grounded in the use of ritual resources. With that end in view, the special literature together with the field ethnographic data collected by the author during the years 1976-89 throughout Georgia had been used in the paper. Purposely, the ritual process associated with the early-Christian tradition had been described not as a stereotyped activity, but as related events located within Georgian history. It has also been shown that the mentioned custom bore the function of the ethnic and cultural identification, as foreigners and aliens infiltrated from other countries who performed the custom, in that way were adopted and integrated into the Georgian Christian culture. An emphasize has been made on the importance of the performance of the ritual which became so inseparable and immanent among the inhabitants of Georgia, that in spite of the confessional turbulences of the later periods, it persisted in the environment of a new faith. The main task of the paper was organized around the question: whether it is possible to experience the feeling of identity and wholeness within the Georgian culture throughout the centuries by means of performing an established ancestral ritual. The analysis of the ethnographic data provided the author with clues to the identity, culture and self-understanding of an age-old Georgian society.

რიტუალი, როგორც იდენტობის ნიშანი და სამუალება

ნინო აბაკელია

ილია ჭავჭავაძის სახელობის უნივერსიტეტი

სტატიის მიზანია აჩვენოს, თუ როგორ შეიძლება დაკავშირდეს იდენტობის კონცეფცია “წინაპართაგან დაწესებულ წესებთან” და “კულტურულ მეხსიერებასთან”. მიზნებიდან გამომდინარე, ავ-

ტორი ცდილობს მოხაზოს კოლექტიური მეხსიერების ერთი კერძო ვერსია, რომელიც ემყარება რიტუალური რესურსების გამოყენებას. აღნიშნული ასპექტით მხედველობაში, სტატიაში მოხმობილია საველე ეთნოგრაფიული მასალა, შეკრებილი საქართველოს სხვადასხვა კუთხეში ავტორის მიერ 1976-89 წლებში. ადრე-ქრისტიანულ ტრადიციასთან ასოცირებული რიტუალური პროცესი აღწერილია არა როგორც სტერეოტიპული აქტივობა/ქმედება, არამედ როგორც ერთმანეთთან დაკავშირებული მოვლენები, რომლებიც ლოკალიზდება საქართველოს ისტორიის ფარგლებში. სტატიაში ასევე ნაჩვენებია ხსენებული ტრადიციის ეთნიკური და კულტურული იდენტიფიკაციის ფუნქცია, რომლის მიხედვით უცხოები და სხვა ქვეყნიდან ინფილტრირებული მოსახლეობა აღნიშნული წესის შესრულებით ადაპტირდებოდა და ინტეგრირდებოდა ქართულ ქრისტიანულ კულტურაში. ემფაზის კეთდება რიტუალის შესრულების მნიშვნელობაზე, რომელიც იმდენად განუყრელი და იმანენტური გახდა საქართველოს მოსახლეობისთვის, რომ მოგვიანო პერიოდის კონფესიური აღრეულობის მიუხედავად (საქართველოს ზოგიერთ კუთხეში) შენარჩუნდა და შემორჩა ახალ კონფესიურ გარემოშიც. მთავარი ამოცანა სტატიისა ორგანიზებულ იქნა შეკითხვის გარშემო: შესაძლებელია თუ არა იდენტობისა და ერთიანობის განცდა ქართულ კულტურაში წინაპართაგან დადგენილი რიტუალის შესრულებით. ეთნოგრაფიული მასალის ანალიზი ავტორს გასაღებს აძლევს საქართველოს უძველესი მოსახლეობის იდენტობის, კულტურისა და თვით-შემეცნების შესაწავლისთვის. მთავარი ცნებები: ადრე-ქრისტიანული პრაქტიკა, კულტურული მეხსიერება, იდენტობა, აღდგომის დღესასწაული, საიდუმლო სერობა.

The concept of identity is generally associated with such terms as “ancestral customs”, “historical”, “collective and cultural memories.” As Jonathan Webber (2007) puts it: “Historical memory must define a special relationship with what belongs to one’s own experience of time” (p.74). According to Prof. Jonathan Sacks (2009. p.29) “History is information. Memory, by contrast, is part of identity” (as cited in Webber, 2007, p.76). Bellow I’ll try to outline a particular version of collective remembering grounded in the use of ritual resources, in particular, ancestor rituals.

The ritual processes described bellow are not stereotypical activities but related events located within Georgian history. Though it has many unique and special features still, they can provide general insights into processes of cultural memory formation.

The prominent ethnographers Niko Janashia (1960) and Solomon Zvanba (1982) had attested a very interesting ritual annually performed in Abkhazia. According to their descriptive ethnographic data, in the cattle of each Abkhazian the best cow was picked out and dedicated to St George which was specially marked by an incision on the right ear. In the wine storehouse of each Abkhazian household the biggest wine vessel (kind of amphora) was dug into the ground in the name of St George. Annually the wine vessel was filled with pure red wine and a prayer was recited over it. The ritual of sacrifice was performed in the following way: the sacrificial animal was brought to the door of the house, where the members of the family gathered and knelt facing east; with their hands crossed on breast; in deep silence they stayed motionless; the *pater familias* (the father of the family) was bare-headed. The head of the family (the ritual leader) touched the sacrificial animal on the ear and recited the following prayer: "St George of Ilori! (local sacred place-name - N.A.) I offer you the sacrificial animal likewise the ancestors. Do not leave us without your protection and give us health and longevity, protect us from every possible disaster and illness now and in the future, protect us against evil spirits and evil eyes. Don't leave us and our relatives who are absent now and those all, who we love alone without your grace!" Every member of the family replied to this with "Amen". Then the participants got on their feet and bowed their heads eastwards, though it must be mentioned that at that time they did not make the sign of cross over themselves even in the case they were baptized. The dedicated animal after that had been sacrificed and boiled in special cattle. Besides, ritual breads filled with cheese, called in Georgian khachapuri were baked and a small size waxen candle was made. After all that the head of the family (who was the chief prayer) would go to the wine storehouse to open the promised wine vessel. Boiled meat and baked khachapuri were taken to the wine storehouse and put near the praying amphora. The whole family knelt before the sacred ware facing the East. The head of the family lit the candle, fixed it to the amphora, burnt some frankincense on the live coal and when it smoked he repeated the prayer which had been recited before the sacrifice. The prayer was concluded with "Amen" that was repeated by the attendants of the ritual. After the prayer, the performer of the ritual used to cut the heart and the leaver (i.e. the most sacred parts) of the sacrificed animal and the ritual bread into small pieces and wetted them in wine and fried on the red-hot coal. After that he divided them according to the number of ritual attendants and distributed them among the prayers and poured the consecrated wine into the cup. Then everybody would stand up and bow eastwards and leave Marani i.e. the wine storehouse. They would take with them the sacrificial meat and khachapuri and

would sit at table and feast under the grace of the saint. The neighbors who had not got the custom to perform such ritual prayers were invited. To my mind it might be a later innovation, for this ritual was distinguished among others with its occult character, where outsiders were not admitted. The described custom, according to Solomon Zvanba (1982), had been performed by every true Abkhazian in spite of his faith. It is important to note that there had not been appointed a special day of the ritual (for the process of forgetting had started after the conversion of this region). But still according to the informants Easter morning was preferred. The Christians after the morning service used to partake into the ritual and as to the Muslims and pagans they could perform the rite straight in the morning. Those who could not manage to fulfill and partake into the ancestral custom could perform it in the Summer on one of the Sundays (but not in the Lenten fast). The above data can be filled with N.Janashia's (1960) information, according to which every Abkhazian had a special wine amphora kept in the name of the Lord in his wine storehouse, which was filled with excellent (preferably red) wine. The wine would not be used under any circumstances before it had not been offered in libation in the prayer ritual dedicated to the Lord. The consecrated wine ware could also be dedicated to St Mary. According to the same scholar, every habitat of Achandara (a village in Abkhazia) had a small size sacred vessel dedicated to the powerful anifsnykha (the wonder making icon of the Assumption of the Mother of God) in his wine storehouse which was used on the appointed Easter Sunday in the name of Dydriphsh (the name of the sacred mountain where the ruins of the old sanctuary had been found); for that day every habitat had a dedicated cow (azatv i.e. a sacrificial animal). Thus, according to the above cited data, prayer amphorae were dedicated to the Lord, Blessed Virgin Mary and St George. In this village the ancestral custom had been performed annually on the Easter Day, which usually ended with communal meal. Superficially the described cultural fact attested by the scholars in Abkhazia might look quite exotic but making comparison with the ethnographic data that had been gathered throughout the whole Georgia during 1974 - 1989 the things turned out to be different.

As the format of the paper does not allow expatiating on the subject and as several papers had been dedicated to the reconstruction of the whole ritual (Abakelia. 1999; 2000; 2000a; 2001) here I'll take liberty of presenting the received assumptions in the form of summary. These papers actually revealed Early Christian practice in Georgian reality which might fill the lacunae in the early period of Christianity itself (as far as we have insufficient and scanty information about it). The early Christian tradition of the divine worship at houses can be traced in Georgia in the custom of "braking bread" over the sa-

cred wine-vessel, dug deep into the ground on the right side (i.e. on the sacred side) of the special building for storing wine, called in Georgian - maran-i. The religious ritual performed there (which had preserved the sequence of religious activities cited above) is considered to be analogous to the Greek anaphora (i.e. the central prayer in the Eucharistic liturgy).

In the term maran-i, to my mind, can be traced the Aramaic words maran-atha (i.e. the recurring words in the Eucharistic prayer and the last words in the Bible – “come Lord to us”) which in the course of time might lose the incomprehensible -atha, and could transform into quite a local form – maran-i. In this case the name of the building implies in itself the essence and the meaning of the performed cult. The mentioned name implies the information about its bearer. (The name in such cases also comprises the predicate). The refrain of the prayer explains the meaning of the cult acts. Thus as I have assumed, since early-Christian times maran-i has been the meeting place with the Lord; it has been His representative place. Consequently the symbolism of maran-i and the concept of the Christian God are closely connected to each other. These ideas can also be traced in the mythology and sacred folk poetry associated with the wine store- house, which is cultic by its nature and can be interpreted according to the principle of sacred. They include the contents of the knowledge, which had been gathered, remade and codified in the public consciousness.

One of such well-known cultic songs attested in Eastern Georgia unfolds the following iconic picture:

“In the Ruby wine storehouse
Where wine and ruby sparkle,
There grows the poplar tree,
It is young and its stem is branched,
The nightingale sits on top of it,
Opening its wings ready to flight” (Bardavelidze. 1957. p. 80)

The mythological image of the tree which was associated with the wine store-house was first analyzed and defined as one of the variants of the Tree of Life by Prof. V.Bardavelidze (ibid. pp.78-81).

On the current level of the knowledge, the condensed form of the cited verse can be interpreted according to the principle of sacred in the following way:

Some kind of spiritual landscape which emanates from the verse and which is specifically characteristic of icons belongs to the higher spheres of the reality than the every day life of humans.

Marani safely enclosed in different cases with trees, fence or building, constitutes a sacred territory in which the divine power is present. In short,

in this iconic constellation the cultic amphorae is the visible sign of the presence of the Lord in marani. The implicit sequence of its content is following: a). Red wine – ruby (precious stone comp. with the symbolism of the Apocalyptic mineralogy) – sacrifice- Jesus. b). Poplar tree – in this concrete case is associated with the Father’s principle, and the trunk - with the Son’s. c). As for the nightingale – it might be the local revelation of the Holy Spirit. The above said gives the opportunity to the supposition that in this icon the allegorical prefiguration of the Trinity is revealed (Abakelia. 2001.pp.7-12).

Thus “the bread of God” himself, who comes down from Heaven” and who is born in Bethlehem (i.e. in the House of Bread) has been worshipped in Georgia from the early Christian period in the House of Wine – maran-i, which in the course of time has transformed into the traditional norm and still continues its life alongside the Church. Marani had both: household and cultic functions. It served as a subsidiary farm-house while there various kinds of viticulture and wine-making implements were kept. It was cultic as various religious rituals were performed over the consecrated wine vessels dug in the right part of it (e.g. at childbirth, baptizing, wedding and so forth) during the year. These facts also were attested by the 17th century Italian Missioner Archangelo Lamberti(1939), according to whose information in the villages of Samegrelo where churches were destroyed or did not exist, wedding rituals were performed in Marani i.e. in the wine storehouse, which was considered to be one of the holy places, worshipped similarly as church. But as ethnographic data attests, even then when the wedding took place in a church, after the ceremony, married couple was met by the master of the house and led to Marani to be blessed over the consecrated wine vessel on the purpose to incorporate the bride into the new family. The place of the amphora where it is dug is consecrated and is the holy of holies for Georgians. It cannot be simply approached. Women and children generally are not admitted to it. A lot of miracles are associated with it. e.g. once the lit (brightened) with candles amphora ascended from the ground and then descended back in the presence of the master and nearby angels in white attires walked to and fro.

In the customs performed over amphora one of the main inventories is a clay vial, in which holy drink was poured and carried around (passed over) the participants of the ritual, from where they drank the wine and blessed the family. The ritual which was a statute throughout generations and was strictly preserved at Easter convocation had lost its initial meaning. And still there arises a question: what does the performed ritual reveal? Proceeding from the above said, all that has to be associated with the Christian sacramental mystic, Christian sacramental metaphor. The ritual performed over

the consecrated wine vessel implied the participation of a definite group of people (definite social unit - community, kin village, family), who offered a sacrificial animal, broke bread, prayed and made their communion., which actually was the Eucharistic Feast at Easter). Marani was considered to be the most sacred and beloved place for the performance of the ritual partaken by community, village, kin, family. In this respect, according to its functions (establishing contacts between messmates, and between them and the God, as well) it reminds the *kenacullum* of the first Christians. The clay vial, used in the ritual performed over the wine vessel could be compared with and defined as a Eucharistic symbol, the well known mythologized symbol of which is *Grail* or bowl (vial) in which according to the legend the blood of the Savoir had been gathered by Josef from Arimathaea during the Deposition from the Cross. The bread broken between the participants is called ganatekhi (broken bread) (widely used in Racha and Lechkumi (regions in the west Georgia) even nowadays), and the common meal - "puris gantexva" (i.e. "breaking of bread"), which is in full accordance with the New Testament common meal (comp. Luke 24. pp. 30, 35; Acts: 20.7, 11). According to some suppositions, the phrase "breaking of bread" directly connotes the Lord's Last Supper (Acts 2.42). Thus according to our investigations, in marani (the Wine House), which had the functions of *kenakulum*, by means of performed ritual the believers (participants) related themselves with the first liturgy i.e. with the last Supper of the Lord, when a new sacrament had been established by the Savoir which meant by means of bread and wine, communion with the blood and flash of the Christ. It must specially marked, that every Christian tradition had and has its main cult, by which it is distinguished from the other Christian traditions. For example, in Eastern Europe and in particular, in Russia to such cults belong the worship of the Lord's Grave (together with pilgrimages which accompany this cult), as for Georgia the most important cult for it was "the Last Supper of the Lord". In this paper a special accent has been made on the fact that the above described and analyzed ritual performed in the wine storehouse among other things also pointed to the ethnic belonging. The people resettled (and migrated) from foreign countries as a rule did not perform the local customs, did not observe and follow the rules and rituals. Though with some exceptions there were migrants who wanted to become full members (or at least nominal members) of the local culture and those who were persuaded to fulfill local customs because of the committed sin or some accident.

The Abkhazian ethnographic data is a vivid illustration of this thesis. According to the widespread beliefs, lies before the icon (and in particular before St George' icon) and some other kind of faults were strictly and severely punished by the saint. That's why the sinner as soon as he fell ill or met some

other kind of disaster admitted his guilt before the icon and in an effort to escape the crisis performed the so called “purifying sacrifice” or “rites of passage” over the consecrated wine vessel according to the local rules. After that he performed the ancestral custom annually together with the rest of the population. Consequently the newcomer (novice) was converted into “Abkhazian” what in fact meant to become “Georgian” while he/she (the newcomer) by means of this ritual communicated and shared with Georgian Christian tradition.

Finally it must be emphasized that in Abkhazia the trace of Christianity might be found not only in the number of old churches and monasteries, but also in the old ancestral cultic actions, which point to the early Christian ritual practice and is the main practice for Georgians. The described custom, despite the later confusion of confessions (conversion into Mohammedanism) remained the stable custom and this part of Georgia together with the other parts of it over the centuries had been constructing one whole culture or better to say the spiritual configuration of Christian culture.

And the last question is that: what sort of symbols can share identity? These ritual symbols might be the communal meal presided over the sacred wine vessel by the *Pater familias* as patron at a banquet, the ritual of breaking of bread, the cup of wine over which a blessing is spoken. And at last the whole ritual might be seen as rite of passage during which new individuals were incorporated into the new identity. Thus the above analyzed ritual expressing the central values and goals of the society might provide us with clues to the identity, culture and self-understanding of age-old Georgian society.

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