

Arts and Humanities

Human Health and Religious Systems (According to Ethnographic Data from Kartli)

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Religion has always played a significant role in human life. The calendar year of official Christian and folk religion used to contribute to a population's healthy modes of living. Nutrition rationing, both yearly and weekly, a fast system, twice in a week and several times in a year involving eating only vegetable products, benefited the human organism. Religious calendars regulated the issues of labor and rest too.

Local religious systems used to regulate entertainment, as well as physical training for children and youth. Religious holidays were one of the best means for spiritual improvement as well as physical training and education.

Religion played a specific role in the folk system of social protection. It contributed a feeling of solidarity among the population.

Folk religious systems regulated modes of human life. They filled a man with hope and conviction in the success of his activity.

The theme of a human being became especially important in our modern era. New branches of science were added to human sciences studying human beings, their physical or psychic structure. These new disciplines study human problems across a specter of the new aspects of life and pursue the improvement of human health and life conditions. Such sciences are: medical anthropology, human ecology and others.

As it is known, religion plays a significant role in human life and in the process of socialization, it has contributed to consolidation of community. In all historical eras it regulated legal, moral and economic relations (Durkheim, 1996, pg. 258).

Georgian folk-religious systems are syncretic in character. In all historical-ethnographic regions of Georgia, including Kartli, beliefs and rituals along with the traces of Christian religion were influenced by pre-Christian religions. But the religious calendar and system of fasting are mainly Christian. Folk religious systems had a positive influence not only on human spiritual well-being but also on human physical states and health. These systems deal with for example nutrition rationing like restraining from eating meat and dairy products twice a week and several times in a year, and consuming vegetable food contributes to cleansing of the human organism. A churchman, physician by profession Konstantine Giorgadze stated that in the period of fasting, the human organism is cleaned from excess, harmful substances (Koridze T., 2011).

Religion used to regulate labor-rest issues too. Faith compelled peasants to rest at least one day in a week (Sunday). On Sundays, labor was considered as a sin. People also used to rest during religious festivals. This made a peasant who worked without rest during the whole year rest a little. Local religious systems used to regulate also the issues of entertainment as well as the physical training of children and youth. Religious holidays were one of the best means for spiritual as well as physical training and education. It was at those festivals that youth listened to sermons and became familiar with the essence of Christian religion and with the lives of their famous forefathers. Competitions for children and youth in various forms of sports, individual or in groups were mainly held during religious festivals. The most wide-spread sports were wrestling, stone (weight) lifting, later, boxing, horse racing and ball games.

In Kartli, and generally all around Georgia, after the liturgy, people used to go to the church yards... After midday, they would gather on the green field and until evening. They used to sing, play various games and enjoy themselves. It was

endless. You could see people playing ball in one place and in another place they would be wrestling. In another place, they would sing. (Mgaloblishvili, 1938, p.23). Children and youth used to get ready for festival sports competitions, songs and dance competitions, playing folk instruments, that is, they were usually occupied with sports and arts all year round.

Among the folk festivals, a particularly important one was “Berikaoba- keenoba”. It is known that this was the ancient holiday for nature awakening and resurrection and it had a form of theatrical performance (Rukhadze, 1999). It was namely at this festival that youth revealed their creative talent. Thus, for example, in Kartli, in the village Ateni this festival was organized during Pancake week. Villagers who liked dancing, singing, joking and entertainment used to gather here. About ten people would participate all staying within one family. They would leave the house carrying various instruments like drums and accordions. They would circle a village by dancing and singing and joking (Makalatia, 1957, p. 35). On this holiday, competitions in various sports were organized,

Thus religious holidays and festivals, through the rational regulation of labor and rest, by food and healthy modes of entertainment regulated the life of Georgian peasants. Rest, fasting and entertainment, reduction of sorrow, generation of hope and the revival of faith by festivals and rites, helped to signification relieve the heavy burden of life of the lower strata of Kartli’s population.

As it is known, according to Christian tradition, for 40 days after childbirth a woman had no right to visit churches and approach sacred objects. According to folk traditions, a woman had to stay in bed for this period; she was to be isolated. This rule can’t be justified with modern medicine. Today a woman leaves her bed a few days after childbirth. But if we take into consideration the life of a peasant woman in ancient Georgia with her daily heavy labor and life, a forty day bed-regime after childbirth, which was explained by a woman’s dirtiness, enabled her to rest, while her isolation during this period, more or less protected her from infection. The same can be said about some traditions involving magic-religious treatment or therapy. Among these, the incantation is the most interesting. This ritual was mostly performed by older women in Kartli and generally in Georgia. Various rules observed while casting a spell refer to the fact that the person casting the spell possessed psychotherapeutic methods that had been achieved over time through experience. She would know well which spell she had to use against specific diseases. It should be emphasized that the selection of magic-

religious therapeutic rules was made purposefully, that is, magic curing rules were used not generally but according to specific diseases; the text of the spell used against various diseases was different. At the same time, there was a difference in rituals too. Thus, e.g., the ritual against the evil eye consisted of pouring water on a person, while the ritual against a frightened “measuring of a heart” implied periodical touching the patient’s body (breast). Absolutely different were the rules for curing children suffering from infectious diseases than the “batonebi”. These rules were given in religious forms and were designed to improve the health of a patient (Mindadze N., 2013, p.243).

According to the perception of the population of Georgia, a child who suffered infectious diseases was an image of an angel. Family members used to do their best to show respect to a child, angel; a child was placed in a clean, beautifully decorated room. Music, pleasant odors, satisfaction of desires, whims, enforced silence, weeping, were directed as if for pleasing angels, but in fact these practices aimed to create a pleasant atmosphere for a child, which would have had a positive effect on his emotions: a beautifully decorated room which the child could see; calmness, enforced silence, a melodic lullaby before sleep – on hearing; forbidding making dishes in the room of a patient, lighting of hazelnut candle and its pleasant odor – for the child’s sense of smell; special food and sweets for a child – for the child’s taste. These practices helped improve the general condition of a child. It should be remarked that a mother of a child was not allowed to be involved with the family’s economic activities and she was able to constantly sit beside her child. She cared for the child and showed her love and concern (Mindadze, N., 2013, p.244).

The feeling of human warmth and love, the prevention of negative emotions, a calm environment, melodic music, pleasant odors, a pleasantly decorated room and other factors had a favorable effect on an ill person, their feelings and in most cases gave positive results.

The previously described psycho-emotional methods, which in modern medicine are attributed great significance, were used by Georgian physicians centuries ago. In medicinal manuscripts from the 15th century we can read that “joy, seeing a favorite person, good odors, hearing pleasant voices, looking at beautiful persons and, generally, beauty, had a good effect on patients” (Bagrationi, 1985, p.122).

The above stated is one more illustration of the fact that many medicinal methods which were invented by the people, the traditions of caring for an ill person, which

mainly had positive effects and in everyday life were often presented in the form of religious rites.

I would like to deal briefly with the traditions of human social protection, which were formed thanks to the Christian religion. In all eras and in all kinds of communities there were people, who were unable to care for themselves; these were physically vulnerable persons, old, ill, handicapped. Such persons need care and protection.

In ancient societies, prior to the formation of states, social protection of a man was realized through rites. After the formation of the state, given the nature of states, social protection institutions were formed. Besides, in a number of societies, folk traditions of human social protection still continue to function. Important information about old traditions of human social protection functioning in Georgia can be found in the written sources of the middle ages. Human social protection, first of all, was the duty of churches and monasteries. One of the functions of churches and monasteries was rendering help to ill and incapable persons. Places for ill persons were organized in monasteries. According to the code of monasteries, “in Georgia at each well organized monastery there should always be a nurse for ill persons” (Javakhishvili, 1984, pp. 55-56). Not only the clergy but also the whole population of Georgia lived by such moral norms, of course, with some exceptions. A national system of morality was established for centuries on the basis of Christian morals. Christian norms about sin and kindness were refracted through the prism of people’s morals and traditions, their world outlooks and these were reduced to everyday life good and evil” (Ochiauri, 1987, p.7).

In Kartli, there is evidence of very important traditions of human social protection. These traditions provided protection for the old, ill and physically handicapped persons. As the local population stated: “Freaks of nature, the ill are depressed even without it, and you must not depress him more”. Similar was the situation with respect to the mentally diseased. If a mental patient was not aggressive, people tried to engage him in social life, to give him something to do, they did their best to enable him to feel like a member of the society. Such a person was never an object of irony or laughter. On the contrary, if anybody insulted such a person, the community used to blame, reproach that person. Everyone was ready to help mentally and not only mentally diseased persons. Sometimes when the condition of a diseased person got worse, the whole village used to gather and

sacrifice a common offering at the place of worship and asked for state of an ill person to improve. Aggressive persons were isolated mostly in the places of worship and the parishioners of that place were obliged to keep and care for that person.

If we take into consideration the opinion deeply rooted today in modern psychiatry that in case of definite mental diseases, the social isolation of a mentally ill person contributes to the worsening of his state, while his engagement in social life positively affects his state, we have to think that attitude of the population of Georgia to mental patients was correct and human. Thus, folk traditions of bioethics which had already been formulated for centuries played an important positive role in human socialization and the integration of ill persons, mostly those suffering from mental illness or disability in the process of integration into society.

As a result of the above stated, we can conclude that according to the ethnographic data from Kartli, folk religious systems were used to help humans overcome life's problems; they positively affected human physical and mental state, regulating life modes and controlling morality.

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