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ANCIENT GEORGIAN RELIGIOUS BELIEFS IN GODERDZI CHOKHELI'S WORKS

The paper focuses on the ancient Georgian religious beliefs and their reflection in Goderdzi Chokheli's literary works. The analysis embraces the concepts of the Supreme Creator, Children of God, Mother of the place, evil spirits and preachers. Based on these concepts, the paper analyzes the following literary works: „The Priest's Sin“, „The Red Wolf“, „The Abandoned Village of the Giants“, „Child of God“, „God's Children“ etc. The paper focuses on Goderdzi Chokheli's attitudes to the traditions and customs preserved in the highlands of Eastern Georgia.

KEYWORDS: ancient Georgian religious beliefs, the Creator, children of God, evil spirits, Goderdzi Chokheli.

Mythology helps identify religious beliefs, world vision and attitudes of a certain nation. Goderdzi Chokheli's literary works are full of Georgian mythology, namely, old stories and legends widespread in Eastern Georgian highlands. The writer himself was brought up in this environment and was greatly influenced by its world vision. In certain cases, the reader has the impression that the writer not only describes the legends and myths of his region, but takes pride in them. In my opinion, Goderdzi Chokheli merely wants to remind the reader of the religious beliefs and customs of his native region, because this treasure belongs to each Georgian person. All of us should remember, restore and perceive the treasure we possess. The writer notes: "It is my wish to preserve the customs of our ancestors, our shrines, marriage rituals, local knitting styles and, in fact, all that our ancestors have left to us" (Chokheli 2012, 43).

Alongside with Christianity, Georgian highlanders have preserved ancient religious beliefs. Although many things have changed, it is possible to restore and identify these beliefs to a certain extent. The paper analyzes the essence of these ancient beliefs and their reflection in Goderdzi Chokheli's works.

THE CREATOR

According to ancient Georgian belief, the world was created by a supreme deity, who laid down the rules and order. The concept of the creator is found in other Kartvelian languages (Svan „დამბადებელ ხომბა

ღერმეთ“ (God who has given birth), Megrelian „გამრჩეინალი დიდ(ი) ღორონთ“ (Great God who has given birth). This means that the idea of the Creator existed in Kartvelian tribes prior to the separation of the common, proto-Kartvelian language.

There are written sources proving the monotheism of Kartvelian tribes. In the introduction (with the title: “Georgian Rites and Customs”) to a well-known scholarly work “Description of Georgia”, Prince Vakhushti writes:

“They worshipped one Creator [...] The people were trustworthy, showed a common front to the enemy, courageously fought for their freedom and rights, and stood firm. [...] Later, they forgot their Creator and started worshipping the Sun, the Moon, the stars, objects and animals. [...] They forgot God who had created them, neglected the rites and customs, and became more savage than pagans“ (Bagrationi 1842, 6).

The quotation above speaks about the spreading of ancient oriental religious philosophy, which initially consisted in the worship of heavenly bodies and, later, turned into idolatry. In the period prior to the adoption of Christianity, the population of Kartli worshipped Fire. Yet, none of the above-mentioned religions became widespread in the highlands.

CHILDREN OF GOD

God gave birth to his children and ordered them to protect and take care of the place. According to the highlanders, God’s children are: Great Lomisa – the patron of the Ksani and Aragvi gorges; The Angel of Khada Mountain – protector of Khada; The Angel of Gzovanis Tsveri – protector of Tskhavati; The Deity of Dumatskho – the protector of Gudamakari; Pirmuze – the Protector of the Tsiklauri and Bekauri families and their kin; Bermukha Angel (Lashari Cross) – the Protector of Pshavi; Prince of Tskarostavi – the protector of the back side of Pshavi; Pirkushi (Gloomy)– the protector of Akhadi community; Kopala (Hero, Battle-Whip Holder) – Protector of the Udzilauri community; Iakhsari (Carefree) – the Protector of Kistauri community; Pirtsetskhli (Fire-Mouth) – the Protector of Tchicho community; Berbaadur (Gudani Cross) – Protector of the Samogandzuro community; Nakharela – Protector of the Chincharauli clan; Khmala (Sword-Man) -The Protector of the Likoki community; Mountain Veshagi – the Protector of the Arkhoti community; Naghvarmshvenieri – the Protector of the Kakhmati community; The Angel of Tsiraseb Tsveri – the Protector of Chokhi, and so on.

Each community had its own protector who established divine order and law. The Children of God have different origins. According to popular beliefs, some of them were initially human beings and later turned into God’s children. Others were directly sent from Heaven (and landed on Gergeti mountain). „The Children of God were initially men. They were innocent and full of grace. When they died, God transformed them into Angels and deities“ (Vazha-Pshavela 1937, 131). According to another myth, the Creator sent his children from heaven and they landed on Gergeti mountain. At that time, the country was occupied by Giants who oppressed ordinary people („Georgian Mythology“, 1992). According to A. Ochiauri, people

settled in the mountains only after God's Children had killed the Giants and Idols reigning in the highlands (Ochiauri, 1993). "Currently nobody knows the residence of God's Children. Probably, having killed the Giants, they rose to Heaven again. Maybe they are still on the Earth and reside in the same hall where the savior-baby lies in his Gold Cradle" (Chokheli 2011, 15-16).

With the introduction of Christianity, the majority of God's children were identified with Saint George. This has its reasons: God's children, Georgian deities, were warriors. St. George was also a warrior. Thus, the old faith adopted the Christian saint whom it considered closer.

According to academician Ivane Javakhishvili, the ancient deity of the Moon was also identified with St. George. Comparing the ancient author – Strabo – to a contemporary holiday, Javakhishvili concludes that „Saint George has replaced the main pagan Georgian deity – the Moon“ (Javakhishvili 1960, 50). It should be noted that Strabo describes Alban rituals of moon worshipping, whereas Ivane Javakhishvili found the remnants of this ritual in the holiday of White George still preserved in Kakheti. According to Javakhishvili, for Georgians, the Moon is of male gender. This can be proved by folk poetry:

„The shining Moon said:
I am much better than the Sun.
It sat down and wrote books;
East wind took them away.
When the Sun learnt this,
She got very angry:
"I am a sister, and he is a brother,
Why must we hate each other?!" (Javakhishvili 1960, 58).

Also compare a Megrelian verse:

"The Sun is my Mother,
The Moon is my Father,
And the myriads of stars
Are my sisters and brothers" (Javakhishvili 1960, 59).

„The Moon was the chief deity of the Assyrians and Sabians. It was called "Sin" and was considered the ruler of the world. It should be underlined that these people also regarded the Moon as a deity of male gender" (Javakhishvili 1960, 60).

According to Georgian religious belief, the Creator has an especially beloved child who has his tent in God's court. This is the ruler of the land - Kviria. Javakhishvili considers that this deity is analogous to the Greek Cronos. According to Pshav-Khevsurian belief, the Creator resides in the seventh sky, whereas Kviria is the protector of fertility. In order to prove this fact, Javakhishvili recalls the Svan tradition of Murkvamoba: „According to Oniani, on Murkvamoba day, eight rituals are performed: the first is „Adrekilai“, the second is „Meliai Tulepiai“, the third is „Kviriai“ [...] (Java-

khishvili 1960, 64). After detailed description and explanation of the tradition, Javakhishvili concludes: “Murkvamoba must be a remnant of the holiday dedicated to the deity “Kviriai” – the protector of sexual love and fertility“ (Javakhishvili 1960, 70).

As it was mentioned above, an ordinary man could become God’s child. Some of God’s children were initially humans and turned into deities later (for instance, there is a legend saying that Kopala was initially a man and later turned into a deity. When he was a child, Giants caught him and his mother. The Giants ate his mother, but let Kopala grow up. When Kopala grew up, he escaped from the castle of the Giants. God heard his prayers and gave him enormous strength to kill the Giants. According to some versions, God gave Kopala a fire-shooting whip. According to other versions, Kopala made this whip himself. Kopala killed most of the Giants. Some of them turned into spirits.

Pirkushi (Gloomy) also was a man, a Khevsurian blacksmith. Women adored him, but he preserved purity and did not love any of the women. God sent him a disease that affected his mouth. Later, he turned into God’s child.

One of Goderdzi Chokheli’s outstanding works is “God’s Child“. The birth of the main character reflects the writer’s autobiography. Zosime is born far from his village, because the village is considered sacred and giving birth is prohibited there. The child has a special gift: if he touches a candle, he flies to the sky. The parents try prevent this fact, but, during a holiday, Zosime gets lost. The boy gets hold of lit candles, gradually rises up to the sky and disappears from sight. The people gather candles and the priest says a prayer:

„Glory to God!
Glory to the name of God!
Glory and Gratitude to God

For giving us, sinful people, a deity – God’s child [...]“ (Chokheli 2013, 446-7). In some cases, a human being aspires to become God’s child, but returns to ordinary life after a failure. Chokheli’s “Resurrected Dead“ contains a myth about Gakhua Megrelauri’s relationships with God’s children. Gakhua left his body and went to a battle together with deities. When he returned, he found his body decayed. The soul did not want to return into the body, but the deities forced him to do so. Why did the deities humiliate this extraordinary person? According to L. Iarajuli, the deities decided to return Gakhua back into his body because he wanted to become a deity too soon, without having deserved it (Iarajuli, 2017).

According to highlanders, Khogai’s Mindia also used to leave his body and, having turned into a spirit, accompanied deities in their battles.

MOTHER OF THE PLACE

In the footnote of the article “On the Nature of the Deity called “Mother of the Place“, N. Jalabadze writes: “We share the opinion that, in Pshavi

and Khevsureti, the shrines of “Mother of the Place”, “Virgin Mother of the Place” and “Holy Virgin” (rarely, shrines with slightly different names) are identical worship places“ (Jalabadze 1986, 62). „Virgin Mother of the Place” is a concept that unites old and new religions. A female deity, protector of a concrete territory, has been replaced by Virgin Mary. Mother of the Place is a second important shrine, where people pray for good crops, family welfare and propagation of cattle. According to Jalabadze, the main function of the deity was to bestow fertility. The scholar proves this assumption by the fact that the Mother of the Place appears in front of preachers and fortune-tellers in the form of a serpent, and in world mythology the serpent is an attribute of deities of fertility.

According to Khevsurians, Mother of the Place is a tall, thin woman, dressed in black, wearing a cross and jewels (A. Ochauri, 1993). Jewels are also attributes of deities of fertility. In “The Priest’s Sin”, Chokheli describes the rule of granting oneself to Mother of the Place. One of the main characters of this novel, Nadira, spends the night in a cave. He addresses Mother of the Place: „- Mother of the Place! May you be carefree and adorned among the angels. I grant myself to your mercy tonight. Protect me and help me, blessed one!” (Chokheli 2011, 481). If a highlander had to spend the night outside, he granted himself to the mercy of Mother of the Place. They believed that each place had its patron who protected guests from danger. Therefore, highlanders never caused any damage to sleeping people, even if they were their enemies. It was considered that causing harm to people who were asleep was unmanly. Besides, such action would enrage Mother of the Place and she would take revenge. According to a well-known story, in Khevsureti there is a shrine worshipped by the people of one clan. The legend says that one of their ancestors had killed a sleeping Chechen in this place, because the Chechen had stolen his cattle. After this murder, the family suffered from great misfortunes. Later, they consulted a fortune-teller who said that the sufferings were caused by the revenge of Mother of the Place, because the Chechen had asked her protection before going to sleep.

EVIL SPIRITS

According to ancient Georgian beliefs, God’s children “broke down the castles of evil spirits” and “gained victory over Giants and Idols”. This means that they fought with evil spirits and gained victory over them, while human beings accompanied and supported them in these struggles. The main religious and moral requirements were: truth, faithfulness and courage. If a person was fearful, evil spirits would overcome and enslave him. Thus, fear was considered an unforgivable sin, because fear misled human beings and made them commit sinful acts contaminating their soul. These beliefs are vividly described in Vazha-Pshavela’s poem “Bakhtrioni” in which a mother refuses to mourn over a son who has fled from the battlefield and later committed suicide because of this disgrace.

Ancient Georgian religious beliefs make no mention of the devil. Instead, there are numerous evil spirits: Ali, Kaji, Majlajuna, Tchinka, Tkash-

mafi (evil spirit of forest), Tskarishmapi (evil spirit of water), Macaceli, Mazakvali, Dev etc. All these spirits tempt ordinary people, but always fail to tempt God's Children. Sometimes they also fail to tempt ordinary men, if the latter are courageous. Within the framework of one paper, it is impossible to describe each of the evil spirits and discuss related legends. Therefore, I will just focus on those evil spirits which are mentioned in Goderdzi Chokheli's works and try to identify the connections between mythology and the author's vision.

In the novel "The Red Wolf", Goderdzi Chokheli describes the kingdom of evil – the residence of wolves - Doraiskhevi. According to scholars, the writer had implied the Soviet Empire under this abyss. The rules and regulations described in this novel precisely coincide with those of the Soviet Union. According to Georgian religious beliefs, a wolf is a symbol of evil. This must be due to the influence of Christianity. Yet, I will discuss this issue later on. I will just note that, according to old religion, ravines and abysses were considered realms of evil spirits. Therefore, highlanders are still afraid to walk in such places at night.

In the same novel, the author speaks about Ali. In Georgian mythology, Ali is a beautiful woman that tempts young men. Her feet are reversed backwards. In general, this feature is common for all evil spirits. The word „Ukughmarti“ is derived from the same root, as „Ukughma“ means backwards. In the novel, Ali falls in love with a courageous fellow named Jarji and assists him in his troubles. According to the law, the young man must swear that he will not tell anyone what he has seen. However, he reveals the secret and perishes. This is the law of the myths, and the same happens in the novel.

According to old Georgian beliefs, a Dev is a strong, hairy, slightly foolish giant. He usually wrestles with people and even eats them. However, if a man is brave, and if he mentions God's Child, the Dev is defeated. In general, none of the evil spirits wins over a brave man. That is why the old religion demanded people to be courageous.

Dev appears in numerous works by Chokheli. Strangely enough, this unpleasant creature arouses positive emotions in the reader. In "The Abandoned Village of the Devs", the writer describes these creatures and notes: „A Dev is not a devil. A Dev is not as cruel as the devil. A Dev is big and hairy. It can disappear like devil. Therefore, the people of Gudamakari confused Devs with devils. However, some Devs were kind, they got accustomed to certain families and even assisted them in agricultural works. The housewives put food for the Devs in the corner, and the Devs ate the food. Yet, at night, when devils, Ali and Kaji walk around, it is hard to understand why one comes across a Dev“ (Chokheli 2013, 387-8).

In a story called "God's Children", Chokheli again mentions a Dev which arouses positive emotions in the reader. The story starts with a legend: long time ago, God spent the night in a village. When He was leaving, He told the villagers: "My children! My spirit is present in all of you. But the Devil tries to take you away from me. He struggles with me in this way. So, be kind, and don't sell your soul to the Devil" (Chokheli 2016, 13). Since that day, the villagers are referred to as God's Children. The writer adds:

“Maybe this is not just one village. Maybe, in old times, the entire earth was called a village, and God was with the people. All of us are God’s children, aren’t we?” (ibid).

There was a ritual in this village: when a child was born, the parents would put the child’s umbilical cord into the pocket of some clever and generous person, and the child would take after this person. Later, things changed: all the clever and generous people were killed or exiled. Yet, the children were born in the village, and the local residents were in despair. They did not know whom their children would resemble. They counselled for a long time and decided to put the umbilical cords into Devs’ pockets.

„It is dangerous. Devs are kind-hearted, but they are angry because the village is occupied by devils. So, the Devs are scarce and appear very seldom. They are unaware of devil’s tricks and avoid meeting them. They are afraid of devils. Yes, Devs are kind-hearted, but it is dangerous to meet them. [...] They cannot distinguish men from devils, because nowadays devils appear in the form of human beings“ (Chokheli 2016, 15).

Numerous other examples can be brought, but, in my opinion, the above-mentioned is a sufficient proof of Chokheli’s attitude to evil spirits: the writer has made them generous in his stories and novels.

PREACHER

In the book “The Ancient Religion of Georgians”, T. Ochiauri describes preachers. According to the scholar, the preachers of the lowlands differed from those of the highlands. In the lowlands, preachers were people punished by God (Ochiauri, 1954), i.e. preaching was a punishment sent by God. In the highlands “preachers were intermediaries between God and people. The preachers explained to the parish what God liked and what He disliked, what he demanded from people and how people could win His favour“ (Panjikidze 1986, 53).

The main character of “The Red Wolf“, Luka, recalls a religious celebration where drunken men started to fight. In order to set them apart, one woman started preaching and threatened the men in the name of God’s children.

The highlanders trusted the preachers and asked their advice on military and other issues. According to a legend, King Erekle took advantage of the highlander’s belief and declared himself a friend of God’s children. Since this fact, whenever a matter of State importance was discussed, the King went into a shrine, stayed there for a while and, as he came out, he declared “the decision of God’s children”.

„Khevsurians still remember Erekle’s visit to Gudani. On his way, he passed Ghuli valley and rested under two oak trees. These trees are still a local relic. In Gudani, Erekle went into a shrine and said: I am a friend of Gudani Cross. Therefore, he freely went into the shrine, which was a prohibited place for ordinary people. In the shrine, Erekle started talking loudly, as if speaking to Gudani Cross. Then the King left the shrine and told the Khevsurians what Gudani Cross had advised concerning the battle. The priests immediately got hold of Gudani (cross) banner and gath-



ered all the men for the coming struggle“ (Makalatia 1984, 37).

The belief in the preachers was widespread among the highlanders for a long time.

CONCLUSION

Traces of ancient Georgian religious beliefs are still present in the highlands. Ancient beliefs were reflected in Chokheli's literary works, because the writer grew up in the highlands of Eastern Georgia, namely, in Gudamakari. The paper focused on the essence of ancient Georgian religion and its reflection in Goderdzi Chokheli's literary heritage. The paper described the concepts of the Creator, God's Children, Mother of the Place, evil spirits and preachers. In this regard, the paper has analyzed fragments from Chokheli's works: "God's Children", "The Abandoned Village of the Devs", "God's Child", "The Red Wolf", "The Priest's Sin" and others. It should be underlined that the given paper does not express any doubts regarding the writer's Christian faith. The writer was a genuine Christian. His aim was to preserve old traditions and religious beliefs of Eastern Georgian highlanders.

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