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## **ETHICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONCEPT OF VOLUNTARY SACRIFICE IN OLD GEORGIA**

### **VOLUNTARY SACRIFICE IN ANCIENT GEORGIAN RITUALS: A SHIFT IN THOUGHT PARADIGMS**

The concept of voluntary sacrifice held a significant role in the ancient Georgian sacrificial system, as evidenced by the descriptions of numerous rituals that have been passed down through the ages. The emergence of voluntary and substitute sacrifice reflects a shift in thought paradigms, indicating a sacrificial crisis and moral challenges within the community.

The idea of voluntary sacrifice, although sometimes metaphorical, denotes a change in societal values and an evident moral crisis. This transformation is a logical outcome of the ethical-axiological conflict, reflecting a redefinition of individual roles and rights within the community.

While the term «voluntary sacrifice» might be used metaphorically, it's challenging to conceive individuals sacrificing themselves solely for the hypothetical positive outcome of a ritual. However, instances of such enthusiasts willingly acting as substitute victims are not unimaginable, as seen in other ancient societies with written cultures. These individuals might have played a crucial role during social crises, offering themselves as substitutes during paroxysms.

An example from historical Albania near Kakheti, described by Strabo in the 1st century, suggests the presence of enthusiastic victims. Strabo recounts a ritual where an inspired individual, often a slave, would voluntarily wander into the woods, knowing that they might become the sacrificial victim. This voluntary offering to the community reflects the dedication of individuals who actively participated in sacrificial practices during deep social crises.

The concept of the «meriah» institute in Khonda, India, as highlighted by Mircea Eliade, presents a similar scenario. A willing sacrifice is bought

from the community, prepared over the years, and, just before the sacrifice, is worshipped and identified with the deity. The ritual includes the acknowledgment that the sacrifice was not forced but willingly offered, attempting to navigate the moral complexities associated with human sacrifice.

The ethical crisis surrounding human sacrifice is further evident in Babylonian texts about bull sacrifice. Priests disassociate themselves from the act, claiming, «This work was done by the gods; I did not do it.» These excerpts signify the profound ethical dilemma faced by societies practicing human sacrifice.

To resolve this moral crisis, emphasis shifted to animal sacrifice, specifically those species perceived as expressing «free will.» Joseph de Maistre, an Enlightenment-era thinker, noted that animals chosen for sacrifice were often the most valuable, peaceful, innocent, and similar in instincts and habits to humans. The sheep, characterized by obedience and a degree of independence, became a suitable candidate for voluntary sacrifice.

In Georgian culture, sheep, perceived as obedient yet having an element of free will, is often chosen for sacrifice. Legends even narrate divine guidance in the use of sheep for sacred purposes, reflecting the cultural significance attached to this practice.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF VOLUNTARY SACRIFICE IN GEORGIAN CULTURE

The essence of sacrifice lies in the voluntary nature of the act. A sacrificial animal must embody obedience, as disobedience would undermine the purpose of the ritual. In the mountains of Eastern Georgia, the ritual slaughter of sacrificial cattle is referred to as «service,» emphasizing the idea that these animals serve the people (Kiknadze). The sheep, with its perceived obedience and lack of disobedience, occupies a special place among sacrificial animals (Surguladze 2003, 158).

The unique status of sheep in sacrificial practices is justified not only by their obedience but also by their willingness to be sacrificed. Georgian folklore is rich in accounts of voluntary sacrificial animals from various regions of the country. Narratives describe sacrificial animals willingly coming to feasts in Okum (Samurzhakhano), Tsachkhur Archangel Cathedral (Samegrelo), Ude (Meskheta), Khan (Imereti), Pkhotreri (Svaneti), and other locations. Similar reports have been documented throughout the Caucasus, highlighting the cultural and regional variations in sacrificial practices (Surguladze 2003, 156-158).

In these narratives, sacrificial animals are often associated with shrines, icons, or saints. One such example is the mention of «St. Miudi» of Giorgi,

who is both a prey and a worshiper in these stories (Surguladze 2003, 156). The convergence of the sacrificial act with reverence for sacred elements underscores the deep spiritual and ritualistic dimensions of Georgian sacrificial practices.

A poem recorded in Kartli encapsulates the cultural significance of voluntary sacrifice:

“This is our saint George  
That lies and rests on high hill  
Lots of **beasts** are coming there  
Chamois, deer and roe deer  
What makes to run the bears?  
Super difficult is **Fear**”. (Ibid, 156).

#### THE ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF SACRIFICE IN GEORGIAN CULTURE

In the context of Georgian sacrificial practices, the willingness of the sacrificial animal to approach the saint or deity adds a metaphysical dimension to the act, relieving the donor of moral responsibility. The process involves meticulous care, worship, hymns, and even measures to ensure the sacrificial animal does not experience fear during slaughter. Fear is reserved for the deity or saint, not for the people involved, as fear from humans would negate the voluntary nature of the sacrifice.

Walter Burkert, a prominent scholar of sacrificial systems in archaic societies, draws parallels between ancient Near Eastern, Greco-Roman practices, and those in different parts of Georgia. In these rituals, animals were adorned, prayed over, and the hope was expressed that they would participate willingly in the procession. Legends emphasize the animals offering themselves as sacrifices, serving as evidence of divine intervention (Burkert 2000, 409-410).

Burkert describes a ritual where a virgin leads a procession with a basket, and the participants draw a circle to separate the sacred from the secular. The act begins with the washing of hands, and the animal's movement is interpreted as a nod of assent to the sacrificial act. The fatal blow is delivered with lightning-like flexibility, and any caress towards the holy animal before the act is considered an irreparable violation. The emotional climax of the event is marked by the Greek custom of the sacrificial cry, drowning out the animal's death-scream (ibid., 407-408).

The best scenario is a quiet sacrifice, and obstinacy or escape of sacrificial goods are viewed as great misfortunes. Ethnographic records in Georgia describe terms like «gratefully sacrificed» or «burned of his own free will.» Raffling the animal's voluntary behavior was a common practice, and in Svaneti, vodka was used to ensure the sacrificial bull remained obedient. In ancient Rome, animals were led with slack ropes to elicit

voluntary «consent,» accompanied by music and shouting to cover their screams, a practice similar to the Middle East and Ancient Greece (Surguladze 2003, 158; Burkert 2000). These practices reflect the deep ethical considerations and intricate rituals surrounding sacrifice in Georgian culture.

## MORAL RESPONSIBILITY AND SACRIFICIAL CRISIS: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In ancient Georgian societies, the donor could be absolved of moral responsibility either if the victim was sacrificed voluntarily or if the donor performed a purification ritual. Sacrificing a victim willingly was considered the ideal scenario, but in cases where this was not possible, societies had practices of withdrawal and purification. These practices aimed to mitigate the moral consequences and were indicative of a sacrificial crisis.

An example from Roman traditions during the festival of buffoonery illustrates this concept. The person designated to perform the sacrifice would run away, and in their absence, the participants would symbolically «punish» the sacrificial tool, such as the knife. By doing so, they believed that punishing the «murderer» would appease the soul of the victim, preventing it from causing harm (Girard 2010, 155). This practice reflects an attempt to evade moral responsibility and navigate the complexities of sacrificial ethics during a crisis.

In Georgian folklore and historical accounts, valuable information is found in descriptions of St. Ilori by Archangelo Lambert and Vakhushti Batonishvili. They describe a bull that willingly came to St. George's Church every year. According to Lambert, the people of Samegrelo believed that St. George brought the bull himself, guiding it from the sea to the mountain and back three times. This ritualistic journey was seen as minimizing randomness and adding metaphysical significance to the sacrifice, legitimizing it for the benefit of the people (Lambert 2011, 160).

Lambert emphasizes a crucial aspect for our research: the perceived intentionality and guidance by a saint in bringing the sacrificial bull. This intentional act, repeated three times, adds a layer of purpose to the sacrifice, aligning it with metaphysical principles and potentially mitigating moral concerns. The intertwining of metaphysical beliefs, ritual practices, and moral considerations sheds light on the intricate dynamics surrounding sacrifice in Georgian culture.

## METAPHYSICAL ASSUMPTIONS AND ETHICAL DILEMMAS: SACRIFICE AND THEFT

The story of St. George being considered a «thief» for supposedly stealing a bull and bringing it to the church reflects a fascinating intersection of metaphysical beliefs, ethical considerations, and ritual practices. In this narrative, St. George's actions serve as a precedent, influencing local residents to imitate the saint's supposed theft on a specific night. Lambert notes that due to his carelessness, two horses were stolen from him, and this event is framed within the context of people imitating St. George's actions (Lambert 2011, 162-163).

Whether Lambert's horses were indeed stolen or if the story is embellished, the underlying reasoning holds significance. The author highlights the parallel between pet theft and animal sacrifice as moral categories. Both involve actions that are generally considered moral and legal violations, requiring a metaphysical justification. The act of stealing, justified by St. George's supposed example, becomes not only permissible but obligatory on that specific holiday.

This ethical dilemma is reminiscent of sacrificial practices, where the nebulous consent of the victim is sought through various rituals. Lambert's account provides insight into an early form of archaic thinking, where metaphysical assumptions sanction certain actions, absolving the individual from accountability. In this context, stolen commodities or animals, like sacrificial offerings, fall within the realm of unselfishness, exempt from conventional moral judgments.

The voluntary sacrifice itself becomes a subject of interpretation, with its behavior holding significance. Lambert describes how people interpret the bull's actions after capture, associating them with different outcomes. A bull resisting capture might be seen as a sign of an impending war, while a bull lying on its back and covered in dust could signify a bountiful harvest. The color of the bull is also interpreted, with different hues indicating various omens, from frequent deaths to positive signs (Lambert 2011, 163). These interpretations add layers of meaning to the sacrificial act, connecting it with broader metaphysical and social contexts.

## METAPHYSICAL ELEMENTS IN SACRIFICIAL RITUALS: WILLINGNESS, TREATMENT, AND CONSEQUENCES

The stories of St. George's sacrificial bull and the deer sent by St. George in the villages of Khan in Imereti and Aral in Meskheta illuminate the intricate web of metaphysical beliefs, ethical considerations, and ritual practices in sacrificial ceremonies.

In both narratives, the behavior of the sacrificial animals holds profound significance. The binary opposition of willingness/obedience/calmness versus arbitrariness/disobedience/aggression mirrors the function of the scapegoat. The willing sacrifice serves as a vessel to quench latent aggression between people, fostering harmony and peace. St. Ilori's Parish, as mentioned, emphasizes that when a metaphysical victim doesn't manifest willingness, aggression may ensue.

Furthermore, the treatment of the sacrificial animal is equally crucial. In the village of Khan, the delayed arrival of the deer leads to a rushed and angry sacrifice. This mistreatment results in the terrible destruction of the Tabeshidze family and the eternal disappearance of the deer. A similar tale from Aral underscores the consequences of killing the deer prematurely, disrupting the natural cycle of its sacrificial journey.

The beheading of the sacrificial deer is described as a necessary action, and its interruption is considered illegitimate and disrespectful to the animal's dignity. Z. Kiknadze emphasizes the metaphorical significance of the deer's rumination, an introspective process that symbolizes deep thought and contemplation. This final reflection is seen as a crucial attribute of a willing sacrifice, completing the sense of voluntariness. The sacrificial Tabeshidze's disregard for this process leads to dire consequences, including a devastating plague on his family and the disruption of the sacrificial chain.

These narratives highlight the intricate nature of sacrificial rituals, where metaphysical elements, ethical considerations, and ritual actions intertwine. The stories serve as cautionary tales, emphasizing the importance of willingness, proper treatment, and adherence to the natural cycle in sacrificial ceremonies to maintain metaphysical balance and avoid dire consequences.

As we have seen, both the institution and the end of voluntary sacrifice are linked to the sacrificial crisis. If in the first case, as we said at the beginning, we are dealing with defining the role of the individual and increasing his rights in parallel with the ethical-axiological conflict with the community, in the second case, there is clearly a process of desacralization-profanation in the wake of the development of rational-pragmatist thinking in the society. Tabeshadze, the donor, is the accelerator and finisher of this process. To feed people is more important than to «kill» a deer, therefore, the pragmatic need comes before the feeling of the sacred, existential requirements exceed the ritual-sacred. We can consider this as a kind of expression of the transition from archaic thinking to modern.



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