

The Relations of Christianity and the Preceding Religion in Goderdzi Chokheli's Literary Works

Abstract: *The paper discusses the relationship between the primeval Georgian faith and Christianity in the eastern highlands of Georgia, and its reflection in the work of Goderdzi Chokheli. The writer's attitude towards religious faith and traditions of highlanders is revealed.*

Keywords: *Christianity; Primeval religion of the Georgians; Tradition; Goderdzi Chokheli.*

Mythology offers us a clear picture of beliefs, worldviews, or the attitude toward the surrounding milieu or oneself. Goderdzi Chokheli's work is saturated with Georgian mythology, and in particular with the old stories and legends spread about in the highlands of Eastern Georgia, amongst which the writer was brought up and formed his worldview. Sometimes his readers may get the impression that they are not just getting acquainted with the theme, but that there is "an attempt to impress" them; Still, I do think that Chokheli is merely trying to remind the readers of the 'traditional'. Simply because this treasure belongs to every Georgian the same as to him. We just need to recall, to restore, to recognize what we really have in our possession.

"I do not want the customs to break down in the Aragvi gorge that our forefathers have preserved to this day, these shrines, the practices of marriage and betrothal, the traditions of knitting coloured socks and rugs, and everything else that our ancestors left us" (Chokheli 2012: 43).

In the convictions of the Georgian highlanders, traces of the primeval faith are also observed that coexist along with Christianity, although it has waned, transfigured, though it is still possible to restore at some level its image. In this paper, we discuss the essence and the manifestations of this ancient religion in the oeuvre of Goderdzi Chokheli.

In the prayers of *Khevisberi* (community leader) some elements of the Christian and primordial Georgian creeds are enunciated side by side:

"God, hail Kvire first, Kvire the wanderer, the beautifier of the God's court, the one who delivers and brings good messages, the angel who sets up the tent of goodness. . [...]"

God, victorious, hail the glorious Mother of God, the Mother of God, Our Lady, and the Holy Trinity, the beautifier of the dew of the Holy Heaven, the consecrator of the bosom-breast of the Mother Earth, [...]"

God, hail hero Kopala, the patron angel of the great wealth and treasure.

God, victorious, hail Yakhsar, the reshaper of demons and idols, the Khakhmati Cross, the conqueror of the Kajeti fortress, ... ("Glorifying of the '*Jvar-Khati*' Sanctuaries" 1998: 149).

As we can see in the above quotations, invoked one after the other in the text of the prayer are Christian (Virgin Mary, Trinity / "*Saneba*") and primeval Georgian (Kviria, Kopala, Iakhsari, Khakhmati) objects of worship.

Before proceeding directly to clarify the interrelationships, it must be noted that we do not use the word "pagan" purposefully, because: "According to the New Testament, 'paganism' meant a religion foreign to Christianity, a false religion, a religion that does not lead to human salvation" (Kiknadze 1989: 125). We borrowed the term in the title ("The Primeval Religion of the Georgians") from Tina Ochiauri (Ochiauri, "From the History of the Primeval Religions of the Georgians", 1954).

Before Christianity, our country had changed several religions. For a state, faith in itself has never been a matter of creed alone. Many factors would be taken into account here, such as political orientation of the country, attitude towards neighboring states, and so on. Therefore, at some times, idolatry was practiced among us, and at other times – fire worship. Clearly, though, we too had our own beliefs and convictions about the world around us, about the God that gave birth to us, and the doers of His will (the God's children / '*Ghvtis-shvilebi*'). Today it is very difficult to restore that old religion in its original form, on the one hand, due to the caution of scholars, on the other hand, due to its sheer antiquity and multiple fragmentation and layering, but a certain picture still can be drawn.

Christianity entered the highlands slowly and with difficulty, and, obviously, had to make a number of compromises with the locally preceding religion. The old faith was deeply rooted, and the staid, conservative nature of the highlanders could not be easily reconciled with the not-so-delicately introduced novelty, the more so - introduced by a woman and, the more so, to certain extent imposed by force. In the Georgian Chronicles ("*Kartlis Tskhovreba*") we read: "Then decided the King to convert

the highlanders by sword and informed Nino and the bishop, but the Saint did not allow it; because the use of the sword is not to be ordered, but this should be done by preaching, and she would say to the King, 'I will go there to preach.' And on arrival there she preached the gospel of Christ; However, the most of them did not listen and did not tolerate this. Therefore, the King added to the levy to the existing levy of the Mtiuleti, and the King's nobleman ('*eristav*') **slightly raised his sword** and destroyed the idols of theirs. Because of this, the Pkhovels took refuge in Tusheti " ("Kartlis Tskhovreba", 1973: 93).

Gogochuri would make the following comment on this rather unpleasant page of our history: "The battle was quite fierce, the King's army broke Nino's admonition that 'the use of sword is not to be ordered', their pagan shrines were destroyed, which obviously could not have happened without bloodshed, while for the Pkhovels this incident caused by their faith had such an impact that they (Pshavs and Khevsurs) abandoned their homeland and resettled to Tusheti. All of this is not at all like "a slight raising of the sword", which, obviously, was conveyed by the Christian historian in a beautifying way" (Gogochuri 1986: 130).

The struggle to institute Christianity in the highlands did not end there.

Nearly eight centuries pass, and Ivan Atabag, recently made the military commander in chief, presents to Queen Tamar a plan for the incorporation of the Pkhovels. The consent follows. By Tamar's order, one part of the Eastern Georgian highlanders is brought out to fight against the other part. The royal army under the command of Atabag enters Pkhovi crossing the Caucasus ridge. "When they learned that Atabag has arrived, the kings of *Dzurdzuks* [*Kists* - NN] came with gifts, gave him an army and stood by him. And **they came from above and started fight, and ravage, and slay, and capture, and burn**. Countless Didois and Pkhovels were slaughtered. And they stayed there for three months - June, July and August" ("The Histories and Eulogies of the Sovereigns") (Georgian prose, 1982: 243). After that, new sanctuaries were established in one part of Pkhovi: the Lashari Cross, and one in the name of Queen Tamar.

Nor in the subsequent centuries did the problem of "apostasy" and disobedience of highlanders got resolved. V. Itonishvili, in his work "From the History of Georgian Christianity", has presented several noteworthy documents, presenting here one of which, we think, should not be without interest:

"Above Ananuri, in Mtiuleti, there was nothing to be given to the bishop of Tsilkani: no tithe, no offering, no levy for the priests, nor [as] was it written in old *gujars* (title documents). Now we, the most sinful and humblest of all men, Romanoz bishop of Tsilkani, have been commanded by the Eristavi of Aragvi, Zaal, to give guidance and to kindly bring them to faith. We, in our turn, did not disobey the order of the head of shepherds, who commanded us to go and prepare for preaching, and after that we went and followed in the footsteps of the forbearer high priest and came to Mtiuleti. Christianity was just rudimentary there, and there were no priests. They could not be named either Christians or the children of Epiphany, they were still like the idol worshipers; nor did they really know the Epiphany, nor were there any acts of confession at all, they did not know of fasting, other than Lent. I toiled with great difficulties: **In some cases, I relied on the power of Eristavi, others would convert voluntarily** " ("1669 Document of Agreement on Tithe and Levy from the Tsilkneli's Parish") (Itonishvili 2003: 85).

It is clear from this *gujar* of the Tsilkani bishop that not even by the 17th century had the highlanders become exemplary Christians, and the church still needed "minor assistance by the Eristavi" to enlighten them.

Vazha-Pshavela, in an article written in 1914 in response to the "Bishop Anthony's Opinion on the Faith of Pshav-Khevsurs", speaks with heartache about the attitude of the Georgian Orthodox Church towards the religious faith of the Eastern Georgia's highlanders. In 1912, Bishop Anton traveled to Pshav-Khevsureti and he described before the clerical government the inhabitants of these areas as pagans and idolaters, who prayed in their sanctuaries and sacrificed animals to their "Khvtisshvilis" (deities, literally god's children). Vazha-Pshavela does not approve of His Excellency's harshness, tries to explain in a Christian way the peculiarities of the spiritual life in the mountains, and, in turn, casts doubt on the decency of the clergy. One way or another, in this article one can once again observe the continuation of the centuries-old confrontation (Vazha-Pshavela, 1914).

However, "despite all of this, religious highlander feels offended if someone casts doubt regarding his Christianity. We should recall here the place of "Kartlis Tskhovreba" where it is written that "Pkhovels are servants of the cross, and claim to be Christians" (Gogochuri 1986: 136).

Goderdzi Chokheli is also a true Christian himself, by all of his mind and worldview, but he has said, "I come from my Gudamakari" and thus cannot escape the influence of the "old faith" (who knows, maybe it is neither worthwhile in general nor worth to him personally to do so?!).

In the writer's literary work we encounter both Christianity and the primeval religion of the Georgians, but these are so merged and intertwined that it becomes difficult to separate them.

There is a story included in "Human Sorrow" titled "Man Turned into a Sanctuary Deity". The story is naïve at first glance. Mamuka, renowned for his laziness, puts on white clothes and sits at the shrine, on the top of a mountain. He claims that the deity of the sanctuary speaks through him. People fulfill without any objections the desires of the imposter. He entertains himself by their naivety: he orders them to bring beautiful stones from the floodplain to the summit, and keeps if he likes them, if not - rolls them back downhill. For the whole day he tormented Tsitsa of Kotorashvili family, all the stones brought, he would roll back. Finally, Tsitsa got furious, grabbed the hold of man turned into deity and pushed him down from the mountain top.

The passage in question is somewhat reminiscent of the oral narration from Tusheti about a 'ghvtisshvili' who looks like he has a single horn – due to a very strange and smile-evoking incident: It turns out that this *ghvtisshvili* would climb on top of the sanctuary on his name day, lean over and threaten the worshipers that had gathered to spend the night there - to drop down. Then the worshipers should have begged, - Dearest, please do not fall. Finally, one man got tired of begging and no longer did that, so the deity got angry, fell down and has just a single horn left now (Tsotsanidze, 1987).

Both the narration and the Chokheli's text show perfectly the dignified attitude of highlanders towards the Lord and his representatives on earth (i.e., towards the *ghvtisshvilis*). They never kneel on two knees in the mountains. The *Khevisbers* also shout out to God directly toward the sky, believing he will hear them.

"Pshavel, imbued by alcohol, unable to keep feet on the ground, would sometimes even joke about his "great overlord", would then free his mind imprisoned in the jail built by the Kakhetian Chachanauri ('chacha' – grape-based alcoholic beverage, common in Kakheti, '-nauri' – widespread ending of highlanders' family names) faith, and then the Pshavel starts to sing:

'Has not the Pshavels' Lashari Cross got too old?

They say got old, but has not he maybe died?" (Vazha-Pshavela 1956: 51-52).

The same attitude is observed in some other folk verses:

"The banner of the Khakhmati Cross,
Why are you shivering, what is it?
Create my sanctuary,
Where there is just a single stone.
You have one manservant,
Where there is a carriage road;
Wherever there are mountain hayfields,
There you have a bed to sleep." (Tsanava 1986: 34).

In another variant:

"Hey you, the banner of Khakhmatisjvari, why are you trembling?

Yesteryear I sacrificed two head of cattle to you, it's third and different one this year.

Wherever there is a cluster of three stones make a sanctuary for me" (Gogochuri 1986: 137).

As we can see, there is nowhere to be found any servile obsequiousness that accompany almost all religions. It seems that the Georgian highlanders inherited such unusual attitude from their old faiths. That is because according to that religious worldview, man was perceived as a comrade-in-arms of the *Ghvtisshvilis* in their fight against evil (i.e. demons and idols), and not as a slave of God. Thus, man serves *Ghvtisshvili*, but at the same time requests an account, if the latter is late with delivering succour:

"What are you doing, our Khvtishvilis, can't understand anything of yours,

All that begging, slaughtering of sacrificial animals, where would all of that go?" (Ochiauri, 1970: 162).

Or again:

"Whose name day is it today?

Of St. George.

Multiply our men, George,

If you want more namesakes.

Multiply our bread, George,

If you want granaries to be full.

Multiply our sheep, George,

if you want sacrificial rams [...]" (MGE 1938: 39).

While discussing the relationship between Christian and so-called 'pagan' religions, scholars have paid special attention to two literary works by G. Chokheli. The novel "Human Sorrow" includes a nested story "The Father-in-law's Justice". The author returns to the same topic discussed

there also in "The Ascent". Both stories are about the horrendous tradition of primordial times, - sacrifice of the firstborn child.

M. Tsiklauri explains the main message of the "The Ascent" as follows: "Orthodox religion is already so strongly present in him [i.e. the writer - NN] that it explains pagan customs in terms of Christian morality, and attempts to prove the latter's superiority" (Tsiklauri 2010: 113).

In our view, however, blaming the old religion for all of the sin does not seem justified. Here it is benightedness, ignorance, and blind faith (wherever this faith may be directed, we have to keep in mind that Abraham too took the knife to slay his son) that are confronted by Chokheli and not the so called 'paganism'.

The story "Snowy Funeral on the Holy Day" provides us with noteworthy material for revealing the writer's religious worldview.

The action takes place in an inaccessible village, forgotten by God and man, in which just several old men are left. They "enact the customs" (perform rituals). And now they have carved wooden mice and are noisily running them away from the village: "Come out, mouse, come out, flea! Angel, please come home." They aren't looking back, in fear that the mice may again return to their dwellings and that all their hard work would appear to have been wasted. From a mountain across the river, enormous white avalanche suddenly covered the old men in black, enfolded them in its bosom, "passed through the ravine with a cough, and settled down reaching the bottom of the Aragvi valley, cross-legged" (Chokheli 2013: 169).

L. Irajuli interprets such an ending as depicting the victory of Christianity over paganism (Irajuli, 2017). We cannot, however, believe that the author is celebrating, together with the avalanche, engulfing of the already desperate elderly men by the snow. We tend to think that he would rather stand next to the only surviving one-legged old man and stare blankly at the now fully deserted valley, as all the traditions, lifestyles, conceptions and beliefs that once made this forgotten valley so unique and beautiful, will be gone and lost along with the departure of the old men.

It is well known that biblical stories were often passed on to the people in a simplified way. For the most part, this process was facilitated by the clergy themselves in order to somehow bring the lower strata of society closer to religion. This process has led to the so-called "Vernacularization of Christianity" and gradually turning it to the domain of folklore.

In the novel "The Red Wolf" an old man tells his grandson the story of Abel and Cain, strangely simplifying it. The plot is biblical: a brother kills his brother and the first horrific crime on earth takes place, however, the attention here is drawn to the boundless humaneness of the writer who tries to show us the story from a different angle - as if Cain may have hit his brother with a stone in hot anger, though without any intention of killing him. Or how could he have had such an intention, not even aware what death was. Then: "He wanted to help him get up, lifted him, tried to straighten, but was unable to get him standing on his feet. There was nothing left that he did not try, he spared no effort, but he did not know what death was; one moment he begged, Implored to stand up, then he would start yelling..." (Chokheli 2007: 170).

One may get the impression that the writer is not telling us about the first and most heinous sin committed on earth, but about the usual, ordinary quarrel between enraged brothers, which, quite by accident, ended tragically.

Here we should mention another work by Goderdzi Chokheli, in which a story of such a seemingly unbelievable cruelty is narrated with the same light, naive attitude. The highlanders have asked the Catholicos to send them a priest – as they were unable to bury their dead without performing the appropriate ritual. In a while, the high priest inquired about the recently sent clergyman. It turned out that the latter was buried in the grave of the previously deceased person, as they had been warned not to bury any dead without a priest. This story is spread in the highlands as a humorous story, while the writer turned it into a literary text. It shows well, on the one hand, that the highlanders never got fully Christianized, and, on the other hand, the author's smiling attitude towards their 'misdemeanor'.

Old and new religions have clashed for centuries, sometimes escalating into bloodshed, but Goderdzi Chokheli sees it differently. Christian and primeval Georgian religions coexist in his works. They do not compete with each other for primacy. Some scholars, basing their argument on a number of his works, try to prove that the writer, embracing Christian convictions, fights and defeats the old, "pagan" faith. We could not find any basis for such an assertion; instead, we did not need much search to find that Goderdzi Chokheli has always been fervently compassionate towards

inhabitants of Gudamakari and the whole of Georgia's highlands, and always strived to preserve their traditions, beliefs and convictions through his literary works and films.

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