

Christian Motifs and Remnants in Georgian folk music

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Georgian folk religious culture may not differ much from the similar strata of other Christian nations in the sense that over time, the transformation of the dominant - ecclesiastical motifs into a folk prism manifested itself at different levels, which created the effect of polystageness.

But we dare to assume that for its historical peculiarities, linguistic-dialectal diversity and isolationist peculiarities of some regions the Georgian pantheon and religious beliefs are characterized by distinctive polysemy. Here there are many addresses with eclectic, Christian-pagan mix of content and changeable priorities. Such a picture, certainly, finds objectification in folk music as well.

It should be noted that Georgian church music layer itself, although preserved partly through oral transmission (similar to folklore, - at least for the period known to us – the 18th -19th centuries), is stylistically much more monolithic than Georgian folk music; and dialectal differences do not make any clear influence on it.

In general, it would not be surprising to say that Georgian hymns have a greater impact on Georgian song than vice versa. Though this opinion has not yet found its way into Georgian musicology.

This time the topic of our research is to mark and sort Christian motifs in Georgian folk music, basically in song. It should be noted that this issue has not been studied also systematically enough in Georgian ethnomusicology and church musicology.

We are interested not only in the musical rituals dedicated to the persons of Christian cult (God, Christ, St. George, the Virgin, Elijah, Barbara, etc.), but also all the remnants that could have had Christian content before the pagan transformation. Under “remnants” we imply both musical-verbal and behavioral-ritual reflections and associations.

We consider it important to identify priorities in terms of the belonging of Christian motifs and the mentioned remnants to various genres, also the intensity of their involvement in the ritual. We focus on Christian addresses and musical-stylistic composition.

Even though there are not so many surviving ritual examples of Georgian folk music, and there are quite a few white spots here on the genre map, the following is clearly visible: Christian names and addresses are more confirmed in the following genres and with the following advanced functions:

- Festive ritual (both hymn and round-dance) – laudatory examples
- Litany songs – laudatory and festive
- Merry-making at the party– laudatory and festive
- For the deceased – laudatory and imploring
- Entreating for weather, crops or health (Procession, blessing of labor and home rituals) – laudatory and imploring
- Songs with historical text - didactic, laudatory

It should be noted that Georgian mountain dialects are more inclined to festive musical rituals (Let's assume that simply they are more preserved there – in Svaneti, Racha, Khevi), and in lowland dialects, hymns were settled more in table tradition (in the form of church and 'feast' hymns; the examples of "Mravalzhamier" and "Ghighini"). But also quite noticeable is the share of laudatory songs performed at table in West Georgian Highlands and the examples of women's festive laudatory litany in East Georgian low'lands.

It is interesting that in Georgian labor songs, where the echo of the pagan fertility cult is clearly reflected in glossolalia ("nana", "harale", "dielo", "rera", etc.), Christian motives are quite scarce (interestingly, the vocable "nana" is also used in the appeal to the Christian cult). Besides, despite the fact that the names of Christian saints (Lazarus, Elijah, Barbara) are often mentioned in weather and health rituals and songs, these names are mostly devoid of Christian content and often reflect magical-pagan relation. In my opinion, this feature indicates two possible scenarios:

1) The appeal to the oldest and most important pagan deities of fertility remained in an inaccessible dimension for Christianity, because such everyday prayers were foreign to Christianity;

2) Christian addresses existed in labor songs, but they were activated or faded from time to time. In favor of this version we can recall the mention of St. Grigorios in labor song "Kalos khelkhvavi", Lazaros in weather song "Lazare", etc.

As for the statuses of Christian themes in Georgian folk space, the following three levels can be distinguished here:

1. Christian hymns performed outside the church, which was tolerated by the church – let's refer to this layer as **quasi-liturgical**. Such are:

- a) Liturgical hymns “Tsmindao Ghmerto” (Holy God), “Kriste Aghdga” (Christ is risen), “Dghes Saghmrtoman Madlman”(Today, by the grace of God) and Irmoses to be performed during the litany and at dinner;
- b) Festive hymns (non-liturgical with Christian content and style) – “Shen khar venakhi” (You are the vineyard), “Chven mshvidoba” (Give us peace), “Dideba chvens shekrebas” (Glory to our gathering), some examples of “Mravalzhamier” - Polychronion (“Brevalo”, “Erekles mravalzhamier”);

2. Examples of more or less Christian content, which have peculiar liturgical function, but are not performed during the church service – named **para-liturgical**. Such are:

- a) Litany-salutatory songs “Alilo” (at Christmas), “Chona” (at Easter);
- b) Hymn-like songs: “Kviria”, “Jgriag”, “Tskhav Krisdeshi”, “Dideba”. “Gergetula”;
- c) Festive round dances: “Kristes perkhuli”, “Khujish osakhapuri”, “Kirialesa”;
- d) Svan heterophonic psalmody.

3. The examples from Christian liturgical practice, containing a musical-stylistic pattern or phraseological remnants of Christian semantics. We would refer to them as **post-Christian** or **paganized Christian** musical examples. Such are:

- a) Musical-stylistic reflection of hymn in a funeral ritual – Svan and Gurian “Zari”;

- b) Musical-stylistic reflection of hymn in table and generally merriment space – “Ghighini” (humming), “live lie” songs;
- c) Biblical motive in the songs with didactic content – “Brdzana Soloman” (Solomon said);
- d) Motives of church wedding in East Georgian wedding ritual song “Jvaris tsinasa” (lit. “Blessing with the cross” in Georgian);

Of the above remnants separate mention should be made of the influence of Christian liturgical dramaturgy on Georgian table tradition (feasting and merry-making in general), which the Georgians still consider one of their most important Identifying cultural features. The thing is that certain markers have survived to this day, in the form of the remnants. These are the echoes of Ektany, blessing, and the cycle of hymns in general. One such is the song “Chven Mshvidoba” (coming from the phrase “Glory to God, peace to us”, which originates from the famous glory to God from the angels). It is performed in the beginning of the table party like a Great Ektany - “Ektany of Peace”.

The toasts, which used to be almost always followed by chanting-singing, also create the rhythm of Ektany at the table. The necessity of toasting to the “All-holy” (“All-holy Blessed Virgin Mary) at the end of the party also indicates the dramaturgy of Ektany.

Traces of Ektany or blessing can also be observed in East Georgian laudatory examples, which were performed either solo – by the folk “clergy” (Khutsi, Dekanozi), or by a female ‘preacher’ (Kadagi - a leader who sometimes also combined the role of a medium with spirits) accompanied by bass and sometimes

top voice, when walking around the church (walking for “Dideba” - Glory, “Ghvtis karze satkmeli iavnana” - Iavnana at the gate of God). In both cases, the prayers were uttered to the God, St. George, John the Baptist, etc.

Christian motives are quite vividly preserved in Svaneti, West Georgian highlands in general. In this regard, noteworthy are ritual round-dance songs and especially hymn songs, distinguished by the dramaturgical principle of centonization similar to church hymns, and have Christian names as addresses, for instance “Jgriag” (St. George, sometimes the Holy Spirit), “Barbal” (Barbara), “Elijah”. Interestingly, songs are often accompanied by the morphemes, the content of which the Svans cannot explain today. Centonization – the principle of different alternating phrases is especially evident in the hymn to the deceased – “Zari”, today it is sung only with mourning vocables – *voi, vai*. In many cases this music-making is just an alternation of chords (concord) and the meaning of melodic links is leveled in them. It is noteworthy that in some examples of Gurian “Zari” Davit Shughliashvili observed the motive characteristic of the genre “Introit” from the Liturgy.

Paganized reflection of Christian psalmody is also “team praying” observed and recorded by Nana Mzhavanadze in Svaneti in recent years. We would call it “Svan Psalmody”. It is a joint heterophonic intoned praying in the church – on the individual, improvised text by each member of the group.

A good example of not only paganization, but also folk transformation in general is the so-called “Salkhino Sagalobeli” (“festive hymns”), which, for various reasons, have been preserved in especially noticeable quantities in Guria; these

examples are hymn-like in style, and folk (in which hymns are often recognizable) in content.

In ‘essence, such “secular hymns” can be both praise to the God and praise to a person; as well as of festive or love content, can often contain “living lies” – (“Tsotskhali tquli”) incredible fairytale plots. There also are the examples with vocables, glossolalia, often referred to as Ghighini (Humming) in Guria, Samegrelo and Imereti. It should be noted that yet in the 19th century in his article (“The Chanting, Singing and Ghighini of the Iberians”) Georgian figure Alexandre Jambakur-Orbeliani refers to *ghighini* as a genre derived from hymns.

In Guria *ghighini* and festive hymns, as well as some merry table songs, with the structure reminding of a hymn, are performed by three singers (called “trio”) and stand on the highest level of folk improvisational polyphony. We consider this fact to be somewhat an echo of the creative tendency, characteristic of “callophonic” chanting, which we refer to as “embellished chanting” (“gamshvenebuli galoba”).

Interestingly, despite rather clear stylistic differences between Georgian church hymns and folk songs, they have one important thing in common; this is ‘synchronous-contrast type of polyphony. It grows out of parallel voice-movement, which in turn is more characteristic of a hymn than of a song. Such a reality suggests, that along with drone and ostinato compositional principles voice parallelism in chanting should have been one of the dominant directions in the formation of Georgian folk polyphony.

In this regard, exemplary is, widespread in Achara, simple three-part song “Misdevs mela lomsa” (Fox runs for lion), which is characterized in total parallelism. Preservation of this artifact in the form of a remnant might be associated with the Muslim expansion in Achara for two and a half centuries,

which left hymn-like musical structures on the early stage of development. It is interesting that this song has the afore-mentioned “living lie” plot.

What could be the reason for the loss of Christian elements in Georgian ritual music? Certainly, it suffered great damage from the aggression of tsarist Russia and then Russian socialism. The former persecuted Georgian liturgical language and music, the latter – manifestations of religiosity in general. However, a similar crisis in Georgian Christian music had occurred many times before – throughout Georgian history.

And yet, it can be boldly said that, in terms of religious content, Christian motive in Georgian folk music is not only the dominant layer, but also the only clearly identified cult direction. Regardless of the fact that today many Christian remnants in this space are performed almost unknowingly.

Finally, it can be assumed that Christian music and cult themes were introduced into Georgian folk music in two ways: via the secularization of hymns and introduction of Christian verbal text in pagan ritual music. And thanks to the interaction of these two creative vectors, this diverse, though bleached, and mysterious layer has survived to this day.