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**Nino Abakelia**

*Iliia Chavchavadze State University. Georgia*

## ON COSMOLOGICAL CONCEPTS AND ARCHAIC SYMBOLS IN THE GEORGIAN MYTHIC-RITUAL SYSTEM

Georgian tradition has not preserved the Enuma Elish type creation myth and therefore the main source under scrutiny is ritual as a means of expression of symbolic activity. In the cosmic dimension of the Georgians every deity had a cult place and thus a cultic/local dimension of the unfolding of his or her essence. Rituals with special offerings and sacrifices performed for particular goals were opposed to each other according to the archaic principle of time and space classification and constituted definite structures of the worldview in its vertical and horizontal dimensions.

Thus the cosmogonic scenario of the creation myth directly and explicitly was not preserved, but the Georgian word *samqaro* (which literally means the place of firmament, the universe) itself alludes to the creation amidst the waters (cf. Genesis I, 6,7) and the world unfolds in time and space.

The aspects of time and space are also expressed by the ritual formula at the beginning of Georgian tales – *iqo da ara iqo ra* – (literally, something-that-was and nothing-that-was-not). This sheer riddle ritually transfers the listener to the other level, i.e., "in the beginning"... the formula also conceals and implies the existence of the cosmogony and the creation of the world.

We have reconstructed the cosmological pattern of the Georgians on the basis of religious beliefs and rituals, and its vertical plane comprises: (i) the upper, celestial world of supreme deities (at first represented by the Sky God, who in the course of religious development was replaced by the Weather God (whose name as preserved in oral tradition, is *Zhini Antari*, i.e., "the one who is above") and who, after the spread of Christianity, was substituted by the Christian allomorphic personages of the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, St George, Elijah, and others; (ii) the underworld, which was represented at first by pre-Christian female deities, personifications of natural elements (earth and

water) which after the conversion to Christianity coexist and partially exist in the image of St Mary; and (iii) the world of the living, the societal community with its cultivated plants and domestic animals.

But the cosmology in question also implies the horizontal plane in which outer/inner spaces, non-cultivated/cultivated lands, microcosm/macrocosm, nature/culture are opposed to each other through the correlated personages. Also, the outer world was stretched on the horizontal plane, though at the same time it implied the vertical dimension, whereas the cultivated inner world of the living was perceived as surrounded from all sides (above, under and from outside) by the dangerous world of the unknown (N. Abakelia, 1991, 83-116). According to the native beliefs these worlds, these zones, were enclosed by invisible borders. Humans constantly attached to these boundaries could recognize kind, evil or neutral spirits which moved from the sacred sphere to the profane and vice versa, especially in liminal periods of the year.

In such situations, built environment and built forms, in this case house (dwelling or habitat), which to Bourdieu's definition represents a metaphor of the organized world structured by the gender principle, generally receive particular meaning and importance (cited in Lawrence & Low, 1990, 453-505). The built forms imply or reveal communicative role not among the groups or inside the groups but also between the representatives of different spheres at different levels. So on the mythological plane which unfolds, e.g., on the New Year's festival, the metaphorical and mnemonic functions of the built forms are revealed (N. Abakelia, 2009, 101-117).

As is known, the different modal levels separating one world from another are not hermetically sealed from one another, though imaginary boundaries are built between the cultivated and non-cultivated (woods, cliffs, sea, etc.) culture/nature areas. In the topography of the "inner world" the borderlines of different realms extend along farmsteads, dwellings, temples, and so on. In the "outer world" they run across the woods, cliffs, seas, lakes, rivers, mountains, etc. (C. Lévi-Strauss, 1985, 64-76). According to local beliefs, there are various passages in the imaginary and built form boundaries (holes, gates, doors, windows, chimneys, etc., which weaken their tightness) and transition from one sphere to another becomes quite possible.

Thus fenced with and limited by temporal, spatial and causal factors, the community was surrounded

by the so-called "outer sphere" which included in itself the kingdoms (worlds, realms) arranged around and on the vertical and horizontal planes (the netherworld, the upper world and on the horizontal plane all the unexplored, uncultivated and unknown places inhabited by dangerous and harmful forces (N. Abakelia, 1991; 2008; 151-167; I. Surguladze, 2003, 36-84).

The New Year is thus a liminal phenomenon (in van Gennep's and Turner's sense) from the perspective of both space and time. This is a period of the year when the thresholds of the inner and outer worlds become vulnerable and, as a result, open for the various undesirable and desirable powers and forces which can penetrate through these passages. In order to prevent such accidents from happening or to protect one against them, particular precautions were taken. The ritual performed in the spatial structure perspective on the horizontal plane is intended to adjust to a broad spectrum of attitudes between the world of the living and the world of the dead and between the past and the present. Visitations from the land of the deceased to the world of the living, or from the outer to the inner world, respectively, are well known among many peoples (the Ancient Greek, Old Germans, Balts, Caucasians, Slavs, etc.) and are associated with the cosmological symbolism of outer/inner and nature/culture, respectively. The boundaries of the inner world are constantly changing: it might be a dwelling but also a country, cultivated land, etc. The "center," consecrated through rituals, chants and prayers, was the place from where the communication with the supernatural beings (powers) was possible.

The protective center of the cultivated area, the house, turns into the scene on which different kinds of mythic-ritual scenarios unfold.

In the complex morphology of house symbolism we will turn our attention to the ritual of "sending off the spirits," which suggests the visitation of ancestral spirits to their immediate descendants in the family during the period of winter solstice festivals. It occurred annually on the Epiphany and lasted for about a week. During this period, tables were covered for the souls in houses and the ancestral chair of the head of the kin was placed at the table; the oldest man who was the head of the family was to serve them with his head uncovered (as an expression of respect).

Of all the rituals this was the most mysterious. It was performed in absolute silence. Nobody was allowed to be present during the secret prayer in which

only the spirits of the dead ancestors and the head of the family participated. After the “prescribed time,” the “guests” had to leave their living relatives by performing a ritual. The head of the family prepared for this day a glass of wine, a piece of cooked meat and a slice of bread. Holding all these in his hands, partially bent, he “accompanied” the invisible guests and saw them off through the gate. During the walk he poured wine libation on the ground and by the time he reached the gate the glass would be empty. Then he opened the gate and placed the bread and meat on a stone nearby. After that he would hasten home without looking back (reciting traditional taboos with regard to the deceased and the netherworld). (Here might be recalled Lot’s history from the Bible, or Orpheus’s descent to the underworld in search for his wife Eurydice)

The departure was graphically depicted in the pictures drawn with primitive paint made from the blessed Epiphany water and soot by women on different (mostly wooden) objects (V. Bardavelidze, 1957, 135-139). The primitive pictures painted with the fingers for the spirits depicted how the spirits of the deceased urged on the souls of the sacrificial animals to the netherworld.

Border traversals are also revealed in various mortuary customs and rituals. In traditional culture they represent mythologized relations between the living and the dead, between descendents and their ancestors, between the world of the living and the world of the deceased. In these mythologized customs of the mortuary rituals the sacred tree has its definite place and role.

In this paper a ritual object, called *kelaptari* (i.e., artificial waxen tree), made by close relatives or nurses of the deceased and brought to the funeral after forty days, or at the annual commemorative ceremonies, is considered to be a variation of the sacred tree.

According to the local mortuary customs, relatives of the deceased dressed in mourning clothes riding horses and on foot moved in procession from the distant villages. They carried a big *kelaptari* in front of them, which was held by the grief-stricken woman. Passing through villages, the lamenting women screamed loudly so that everybody guessed that somebody had died, and the procession moved on toward the village of the deceased.

Surviving, complementary ethnographic data from different parts of Georgia reveal an artificially made waxen tree (surviving under several names) as an

essential offering for the dead, made by a close relative woman.

A special note must be made that this offering, was equal in value to a sacrificial bull. It is noteworthy that these candles could be brought together with the sacrificial bull additionally or the mourner could limit herself only with the torch.

The name of the treelike candle *aschamaka* (a variant of the name of *kelaptari*, from Abkhazia – N.A.) was related to the sacrificial animal, which also was called *aschamaka*. According to Abkhazian custom, this ritual object could substitute for a sacrificial animal itself. (Another variant of the name of the ritual candle was *akilantar aokum*) (E. Malia, 2003, 240-255.)

For us, it is of special interest that *kelaptari/kilantari/akilantari* was used in funeral competitions in which the horse or the soul of the deceased also participated. Thus after a year from death, at the ritual gathering of close friends and relatives to commemorate the deceased person, several customs used to be performed: the horse of the deceased covered with a black mourning material was tied to the house pillar; on the other hand, sacrificial bulls with the candles on their horns and tree-torches, equal in value with them, were brought on this day (both comprising the cosmological symbols and signs).

The sacrificial bulls had the lit candles on their horns, which introduces here the well-known relationship between branches and horns. The custom makes us think that candles lit on the horns of the sacrificial



Depictions of the spirits of the deceased driving forward the souls of the sacrificial animals to the netherworld (Svaneti, the village of Lakhmula, 1935. from V.V. Bardavelidze’s *Monograph: Ancient Religious beliefs and Ritual Graphic Art of the Georgian Tribes*, Tbilisi 1957).



animal and candles lit on the *kelaptari* (artificial waxen tree) are isofunctional variants and that the several threads of chestnuts hung on the necks of the bulls refer to the same idea. The bulls were untied (set free) in the yard, and people tried to tear the chestnuts from them. The bulls were sacrificed on that day and served the people for dinner. According to the local beliefs, the souls of the sacrificed animals were transferred to the netherworld.

It appears that in the mortuary and mourning rituals a deceased person was in some degree heroized, though he did not become the subject of the cult. I believe that the competitions inserted and performed in the mortuary and mourning customs serve to illustrate this idea.

There was a custom of horse racing after bewailing the sign (i.e., his/her clothes) of the dead throughout Georgia (the custom now survives only in the mountainous parts of the country) in which the relatives and close friends of the deceased could participate in honor of the departed (S. Makalatia, 2006, 350-360).

In the horse racing, the participation of the soul of the dead was also implied, which is revealed by the so-called "soul's horse." The riders with the "soul's horse" in front of them would go round the clothes (the sign) of the deceased from the left side (the netherworld direction) and would rush in a sudden gallop. The route was particular. The participating riders first visited the brothers of the mother of the departed (if he was a male) and then would go to the other kinfolk. If the deceased was a woman, they would visit first her father's house, then mother's brothers and after this they would go to her husband's relatives. It is noteworthy that at the commemorative feast a special toast was proposed for the so-called *mgebrevi* (literally "those who meet"), i.e., "meeting souls" after the appraisal of the deceased and his relatives' blessings. According to our investigations the horse racing is directly associated with the "threshold passing" rituals, which show that the souls of the dead were accompanied not only by the "meeting souls" (*mgebrevi*), but by the living as well. Eventually, the horse racing on the day of the funeral or on the annual commemorative celebration of the death illustrates the route of the journey of the soul in the netherworld performed in the world of the living.

The ritual form becomes leading and important. The ritual repeats the route preserved in the religious beliefs (in myths) and (the accompanying) "seeing off" the soul of the dead in that manner guaranteed the

soul of the departed in resting in peace in the netherworld, among the ancestral society of the dead.

According to the old Georgian custom certain trees were pulled up at funerals and replanted on the graves, which together with the sacrificial animals, form the religious complex: "grave-tree-sacrificial animal."

The planted tree in the tomb and sacrificed horse near to it repeats the picture of the well-known image of the axis mundi and the horse.

The sacrificed horse, which was believed to accompany and follow the deceased patron to the netherworld, could not have a divine addressee, as he, in this particular case, was the companion, psychopomp and the means of transportation and transition of the departed.

But horse symbolism is associated not only with the tree of the world (*arbor mundi*), but in a series of cases itself represents the tree of the world. A late antique Georgian bronze openwork buckle, on which a horse is "crowned" with a stag's branched horns, might serve for the visual illustration of this.

As we suggest, here the horse is identified with a tree, to which the branched horns refer. "Crowning" the horse with a stag's horns reveals double information. On the one hand, it represents the tree under which a sacrifice had to be performed; and on the other, the sacrificial animal itself. The custom of gilding animal horns (which is attested among many ancient and living peoples) or marking them in some other way must be identical to the crowning. Placing a crown on the head of a human being or an animal during the sacrifice is characteristic to many (old and new) religious systems.

The sacrificial horse or horse-tree (as it is on the bronze openwork buckle) marks the space and, in the sacred language of symbolism, represents the center and its axis, on which the transition into different spheres is possible (N. Abakelia, 2009, 31-41).

According to our research the tomb, which differed with its structure from the profane space, represented the transcendent space on which different cosmic levels and spheres met and crossed each other. As for the horse, it used to be the means of mystical transcendence in different spheres and elements. The planted tree in the tomb and the horse standing beneath it, as well as the horse with a stag's antlers on the bronze openwork buckle, are the signs of the infinite reality. A deep cosmological idea underlies this,



A horse with stag's horns as an allomorphic variation of the arbor mundi on a late antique Georgian bronze openwork buckle ( from the Metropolitan Museum of Art)

which implies the crossing of all cosmic zones, and consequently, at the same time defines and marks the "center" and the "axis" of the world, i.e., the tomb, as the cosmic space has its own center in the face of the deceased and the axis represented by the tree (or the horse with a stag's antlers) which is the isomorphic variant of the previous one.

The horse tied to the tree or the pillar by means of the ritual achieves a high semiotic significance and that is why in the symbolic language it is associated with the world tree. It is not merely connected with the arbor mundi, but even more, it itself represents the world tree. The same can be said about the bull with the gilded horns.

Thus, according to our investigations, if the sacred tree planted immediately after childbirth implied the creation of the sacred center in the world of the living, with the newborn child's fate associated with the tree's blossoming and withering, after the death of a human being it was pulled up with its roots and transplanted in the tomb (by our determination this is a center-shifting ritual), which constructs the transcendental space where different cosmic levels meet and cross each other. The transplanted tree used to be at the same time the symbol of the arbor mundi and axis mundi.

The religious complex: tomb – tree – sacrificial animal (horse, bull), or their supplementary waxen tree – kelaptari as a sign of the infinite reality re-

veals the symbolism of the "center" and the "axis of the world" as posited by Mircea Eliade. That means that the tomb as a cosmic space has its center (the deceased) and its axis (the pillar) that can be represented by the allomorphic variations (horse-tree, bull-tree, artificial waxen tree, etc.) of the sacred tree. Thus, as religious symbols the above-mentioned animals on one hand reveal themselves as "imago mundi" and on the other hand as "axis mundi" or "arbor mundi"; hence, they support the universe and practically reveal diverse realities which can be fitted together, or even integrated into the unified mythic-ritual system of the old Georgians.

All these archaic symbols imply ontology and reveal the correspondence of a mystical order between various (cosmological, anthropological, and psychical) levels of cosmic reality.

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