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On the meaning of archaic symbols in one Georgian round dance song

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Annotation:

The present article deals with one of the oldest examples of Georgian folk round dance song., fixed in Racha and Svaneti (Western Georgia, a part of historical Colchis) in the 19th century. It was performed by the villagers in the spring to celebrate the cosmic event and was dedicated to the Goddess of Wild Nature, called Shroshana.

The name of the Goddess – Shroshana, i.e. “the lily of the mountain”, points to the epiphany in a sign. The sweet scent of the flower, which is considered to be one of her emblems, places the Goddess into the odoriferous code, which points to a very special meaning of the love affairs between mortal hunters and the immortal Goddess. These stories are capable to reveal how diverse realities – Inner (culture) and Outer (nature) – might be fitted together or even integrated into a system.

Having the name of a flower has its consequences. The Goddess shares all the symbolism of flowers. Six white petals of the flower Shroshana, emanating from the center reveal the Image of the World and the Unity.

According to the aforesaid song text, the other emblem and insignia of the Goddess is a magic ring. She owes a finger ring, which represents another reflective symbol of the Unity: evergreen fir-tree at the center of the semi-precious stone of the finger ring, that shares the symbolism of the axis at the Center of the World and the circumference. The Goddess often presents the finger-ring as a sign of her love affair to the elected hunter, who after receiving the insignia of power becomes the temporal owner of the woods and the king of the wild nature. The love affair between them and the finger ring, as the material sign of their love, must be hidden and kept in secret. This is the only demand of the Goddess. In the case of hunter’s betrayal, he will be severely punished to death.

The idea of the unity and continuity is also expressed by the form of round dances (or many-storey round dances) that usually are performed around a tree, a banner, a specially constructed tower, etc. According to the local beliefs, wrong, inaccurate or non-rhythmic performance of a round dance could cause crop-failure, cattle-plague, illness and even death of people and, reverse.

The symbols manifested in the myths (the myth of the killed hunter) and rituals (round dances performed in mythologized situations) also appear in the archaeological visual data from Colchis. Here I mean the signet (or intaglio ring) in the grave of the Noble Warrior in Vani i. e. in Colchis (the 1st half of the IV c. B.C.), with the inscription of “Dedatos” on it. On the surface of the ring the Mistress of the Wild Nature is depicted, seated under the sacred tree at the center of the ring. In the right hand she holds a vial, in the left one - supposedly a branch of the same sacred tree under which she sits. The Goddess is regarded to be the patron Goddess of the Warrior called Dedatos.

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

Keywords: round-dance, signet, hunter, flower

The present article deals with one of the oldest examples of Georgian folk round dance song. The text was fixed in the 19th century in Racha and Svaneti (Western Georgia, a part of the historical Colchis). It used to be performed by the villagers in the spring to celebrate the cosmic event and was dedicated to the Patroness of the Beasts, called Shroshana. In the scientific literature

name of the goddess and it is clearly seen from the rings worn on all her fingers accentuating this idea.

In the mentioned mythological text the ring functions not as a precious subject, but as a sign and this is emphasized. The ring has a semi-precious stone on it and by means of the chain of associations, deals with the ideas of immortality and constancy. As is known from the special literature a stone and a ring, generally, simultaneously present circle and wheel, consequently, on the symbolic plane they express the ideas of Unity and movement (K.G. Jung, 1980,1999,2005). According to the play of imagination of the text, the ring is not a simple one, but there is a greensward on it. In the center of the greensward, there is a fir-tree (the evergreen fir-tree is the well-known symbol of eternity and immortality, which because of its fragrance also might be placed in the odoriferous code). So the fir tree is not a simple (ordinary) one, on the top of it (i.e. on the most sacred place) the hawk (in other versions – an eagle or some other bird) has built a nest. The nest is not usual – it is silken. There is a ruby egg (the symbol of the center of the World and a new life) in the nest. From the unusual egg (which shares the stone symbolism and consequently that of solidity and eternity) a remarkable being is to be hatched. It is not named, but quite possible that a hawk youngling is meant, which is to be of pearl (or by the other version, hatched from the pearl egg). In some other versions it might be the winged dog, called Kursha (that is having black ears).

Therefore, according to the widespread beliefs in Svaneti eagle often has a cub of a dog together with its younglings. As soon as it is hatched, the mother eagle takes it up high in the sky and throws down on the earth, for the sole purpose - not to give the opportunity to a man to breed it for his goals (E. Virsaladze,B.Abashidze,1991). This creature afterwards becomes the companion and the supporter of a hunter.

Thus there is a bird on the tree. It might be a hawk, an eagle, a falcon, a sparrow-hawk, etc. (the marker and the inhabitant of the celestial sphere). They differ from the other birds with their eye-sight (they can look at the sun straightly), with their beaks and the strength of their wings and claws, their size and speed and for that reasons they are considered to be the quickest messengers and warriors of the sky.

Hawk (in some other cases, firebird, eagle, falcon, raven, etc.) is considered to be a “marked” bird (“naciliani”), in the functions of which is to save and help a hero (B.Abashidze). Besides the bird in the Georgian mythology is one of the attributes of the goddess. Sometimes the goddess herself sends the supporters (hawk, winged dog, etc.) to the hunter (E.Virsaladze).

The dog, called Kursha, as well as the hawk, generally, differs from its species by an extraordinary appearance e.g. the dog is winged, hawk (or more precisely its youngling) – is of pearl. Pearl, owing to its round form has different meanings, e.g. that of perfection, immortality... (see M.Eliade, 1948). In our case it is associated with the Goddess and lunar symbolism. Due to its round form, it is a symbol of a tear among many people’s beliefs and among them in the Georgian ones. In the aforesaid text, the pearl is associated with the Hunting Goddess. The mourning connotation (the winged dog’s black color, the pearl hawk) and the motif of fate are given from the very beginning.

hence, on the top of the sacred tree, there is a mythological bird, whose feather independently from the bird can work wonders e.g. according to one of the Georgian tales St. George in order to enliven a dead person uses a black feather of the raven (B.Abashidze,1991). The analogous beliefs are also found in the Vedic tradition (e.g. according to one of the Vedic hymns, the fallen feather of the mythological bird (e.g. falcon) transforms into a tree (Rigv. IV. 27.4) (compare with a feather of the fire-bird in the Russian fairy-tales).

Almost in all traditions landscape is the symbol of condition and quality. The chain of associations clearly reveals the similarity between the finger ring and its stone. In Georgian the ring stone is called “tvali”, which also denotes an eye. Eye, on its, turn has a lot of meanings in Georgian. It denotes the sun (the sun/eye), a bead, a room of a house, a grain of a grape and a wheel. This semantic row (circle, ring, ring-stone, eye, wheel), as is known, symbolizes the World (K.G.Young, 2005, M.Eliade, 1958; R.Genon, 2000, etc.). If we consider the ring stone with a

greensward on it and an evergreen fir tree in its center by means of the sacred principle, it will reveal the opposition “fixed / unfixed” i.e. still center in contrast with activity and turbulence, like the hub of the wheel, in which the center is the unmoved principle of all movement (K.G.Young, R. Genon). Hence the construction of the symbols are based on the image of a circle and that of an axis. Here the well known double meaning of the ring is revealed: being the symbol of power it also points to the paradise condition. Consequently, in the first part of the song there is the portrait of the Cosmic Mother Goddess, the owner of the sacred place (Locus amoenus) with her attributes. It is that very rare case when the name of the goddess is pronounced. The goddess often presents the ring, the insignia of her power, to the elected hunter in the name of love. Following the text, it is found on the finger of the hunter’s wife (though it isn’t explained how she got it). Thus all the three characters of the mythological plot are there: the Goddess, the hunter and the hunter’s wife.

In the second part of the text, there is a pleading for mercy towards the goddess to breed an extraordinary supporting creature (winged cub or a pearl hawk or raven, etc.) for the hunter. The hunter’s appeal for mercy is continued by his wife, who wishes for his husband a happy hunting and a good prey.

In the third part of the text the hunter appeals to his wife to pull out some hair from the hunted deer and to spin a coat for him and from the core – the socks. If we take into account the meaning of hair in the Georgian tradition it is more concerned with luck, wealth, fertility and fecundity (I.Surguladze, 200; J.Rukhadze, 1999) and often grants a happy hunting, as well. Hair being the symbol of living power is also the symbol of plurality and, consequently, of well being, wealth, richness, fecundity and happiness.

In the fourth part of the text, the wife asks her husband to break off branches from the sacred tree, which in this part has transformed into a poplar, and grows in the sacred center (about the meaning of poplar tree see T.Jakeli, 1990; N. Abakelia 1999) and pleads him to built a house, a mill and a cattle shed from the chips. It is not difficult to understand that the house, mill and cattle-shed built from the extraordinary branch and chips must bring fecundity and good luck to the family. for that goal the hunter must reach the paradise condition, which is obtained in the center of the world. But it is not the lot of an ordinary man to reach the center of the world. It can be reached only by the elect of the goddess. The sign of election is the possession of the magic ring, which turns the hunter into a “temporal king” of the woods and opens for him an approach to the sacred center of the world, which on its turn, at the same time reveals one more aspect - that of the axis of the world. The hunter becomes the keeper of the secret how to communicate with the different spheres of the Cosmos (i.e. he can ascend and descend in different spheres of the Cosmos).

Thus the ring belongs to the goddess Shroshana and though nothing is mentioned in the text how the hunter or his wife got it, it is quite clear that the story refers to the very well known mythological plot about the killed hunter and hints about the love affair between the elected hunter and the goddess and the hunter’s wife. Possession of the ring implies the following succession of events : the election of the hunter by the goddess and presenting the hunter with a magic ring, that works wonders. The possession of this magic ring makes him a temporal king of the woods. The given ring generally is considered to be the material proof of their sexual alliance (union), but the very same ring on the finger of the hunter’s wife points to (proves) the sexual union between the husband and wife and the betrayal (G.Sharashidze, 1986, Z.Kiknadze,2005).In the above mentioned love story, the only demand of the goddess towards the hunter is to be faithful to her. In the other case the hunter will be severely punished and his fate will be changed. Therefore, the magic present brings to the hunter not only the good luck, but ill luck, as well. In these stories the hunter’s wife (or in some versions the hunter’s daughter-in- law) discovers by chance the ring and the secret love between the goddess and her husband . She takes away (or according to some versions steals, or receives as a present) the ring from her husband and consequently causes ill-fate and hostility to him. But meanwhile she asks her husband to grasp and take as much possessions as is possible from his privileged position. Sometimes she provocatively or carelessly puts the ring of the Goddess on her finger and brings to her husband misfortune. (E.Virsaladze 1964; Z.Kiknadze, 1984; G.Charachidze, 1986, N.Abakelia, 1988, I.Surguladze, 2005).

However, the hunter is the privileged person of the society, who has been given an access to the sacred center because of the kind regard of the goddess for him.

The hunter's detachment from the society and his alliance with the goddess by means of which he becomes fortunate, as is known, already refers to his extraordinary qualities and abilities for sensitiveness. Factually, owing to his exceptional capabilities the sacred world reveals itself to the hunter and through the hunter. For that reason the hunter differs from the rest of the society by the intensive religious experiences. His spiritual life, because of the hidden abilities is much more deeper and meaningful than of the other people. The meeting with the goddess transforms the hunter from the ordinary man into an extraordinary one; he becomes the elect.

Aforementioned can be summarized as follows: the analysis of the text makes it possible to suggest, that it is the only part of the great body of hunting myths, which retells us about the love affairs between the mortal hunter and immortal Goddess and, consequently, deals with the institution of election. Examination of the ritual text in far more wider context causes new informational streams that are associated to it.

The name of the goddess Shroshana, which in Georgian literally means "the lily of the mountain" points to the epiphany in a sign. The sweet scent of the flower, which is considered to be one of her emblems, places the goddess into the odoriferous code and the flower petals emanating from the core (the center) can be compared with the radiation from the center in Genon's sense and which associates it with the symbolism of the world (compare with the lotus flower in the Egyptian Creation myth or in the Hindu tradition, on which a deity is depicted, etc.).

However, several conceptually similar symbols are associated with the deity Shroshana: e.g. flower and ring (i.e. the symbols of the world, the Unity and the Self). The symbols (the ring and the flower) being the manifestation of the circle, have adopted all the mythological meanings and among them of the Self or of the very substantial aspect of the Being in Jung's sense (See K.G.Jung, 2005), which points to its absolute perfection.

The symbols met in the text are built on the images of a circle and an axis. The ring with a stone on it, as a circle, is an imagined projection and picture of the world. The evergreen fir tree (or in the other cases poplar) grows in the center of the World and also shares the symbolism of the axis of the world. (see: M.Eliade, 1958,1975). Hence the tree (the symbol of immobility and steadiness) grown up in the center of the circle (the symbol of mobility and movement), points to the opposition: fixed /volatile , unmoved principle/ movement., mobile / immobile.

In the horizontal projection, the tree, generally, is considered to be the navel of the earth, in the vertical plane - the axis of the world (R.Genon, 2000, M.Eliade, 1958, 1975).

The world structure, given on the ring, has a cosmic aspect and time and space (here and now) penetrate into reality.

The idea of the unity and continuity are also expressed by the very form of round dances (or many-storey round dances), that usually are performed around a tree, a banner, a specially constructed tower, etc. The dances are performed by a definite social units (besides hunters, there are the other villagers as well, the whole society, in fact) while the performing this round dance a cosmic event – the coming of the Spring is celebrated, and perhaps for that reason a calm, quiet description of the Center of the world is given in the text instead of a dynamic plot of the ill destined hunter. The round dances, according to K.Alaverdashvili (2001), express the idea of rotation around the sacred center . As is known, according to the local beliefs, wrong, inaccurate or non-rhythmic performance of a round dance could cause crop-failure, cattle-plague, illness and even death of people and reverse.

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