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The Methods Applied to the Exploration of the Sacred Spaces of Georgia (Narrative Discourse
Analysis of the Ethnographic Field Data)

Abstract

The present paper based on the western ideas on the category of *the sacred* or *the holy* implies generations of researchers who have been elucidating it starting from the early twentieth century. Consequently it suggests, certain readings of R.Otto E. Durkheim, M. Eliade, J. Z. Smith, R.Orsi and others. Reading these theorists one can classify their arguments (though rather roughly) into the two main general groups: those who think *the sacred* as “objective and outside self” and “wholly other” i.e. something basically and totally different manifesting itself as a reality and opposed to “natural” realities (R.Otto); as a *hierophany* i.e. something sacred that shows itself to humans in different ways (M.Eliade), as a *really real* category (R.Orsi); and those who think the *sacred* to be “things set apart and forbidden” (E. Durkheim) or a construction; or a made thing. (J.Z. Smith) and others. These two views on the sacred are termed *substantive* (as it emphasizes the substance of the supernatural or divine presence and view certain spaces as being inherently sacred due to that supernatural within them) and *situational* (sacredness is situational, or dependent upon the situation or treatment, not on a substantive indwelling of the supernatural), respectively.

The paper is arranged around the ethnographic field data gathered throughout Georgia during 1976- 2004. The mentioned ethnographic data reproduces and reflects the religious festive life of mountainous and plain Georgians and present the basic events so as to shape the perception of the events in a narrative. Sorting out the field data, the author focuses on the specific spatial imagery, where built environment, architectural forms, ritual objects, performed ritual prayer and recollections of miracle-stories were woven together into a single whole.

Using the ethnographic retrospective method, the gathered ethnographic material is identified with the early Christian practices of Georgians carried out in different worship places (in the open air sites, household buildings, churches) which were thought to be indwelled by the divine power .

But is the sacredness *substantive* as it is viewed by M. Eliade? or is it *situational* as Jonathan Z. Smith thinks it is? In other words, are the sacred places revealed or created? Is an indwelling

divinity the key feature of the sacred space? What is the motivation of a certain behavior? To my mind both positions are right and possible when viewed from *emic* and *etic* perspectives, respectively.

One more objective of the paper is to show how the specific western terms and the web of relations that they constitute correspond to the distinctions made in culturally located perspective of Georgia .

Key words: indwelled sacred places, early Christian practice, *substantive* method, *situational* method.

Introduction:

The present paper based on the western ideas on the category of *the sacred* or *the holy* implies generations of researchers who have been elucidating it starting from the early twentieth century. Consequently it suggests, certain readings of R.Otto E. Durkheim, M. Eliade, J. Z. Smith, R.Orsi and others. Reading these theorists one can classify them and their arguments (though rather roughly) into the two main general groups: those who think *the sacred* as “objective and outside self” and “wholly other” i.e. something basically and totally different manifesting itself as a reality and opposed to “natural” realities (R.Otto); as a *hierophany* i.e. something sacred that shows itself to humans in different ways (M.Eliade), as a *really real* category (R.Orsi); and those who think the *sacred* to be “things set apart and forbidden” (E. Durkheim) or a construction; or a made thing (J.Z. Smith and others).

These two views on the sacred are termed *substantive* (as it emphasizes the substance of the supernatural or divine presence and view certain spaces as being inherently sacred due to that supernatural within them) and *situational* (sacredness is situational, or dependent upon the situation or treatment, not on a substantive indwelling of the supernatural), respectively (J.H Kilde).

With all these ideas in mind, we decided to show how the specific western terms and the web of relations that they constitute correspond to the distinctions made in culturally located perspective of Georgia.

Thus the paper is arranged around the ethnographic field data gathered throughout Georgia during 1976- 2004. The mentioned ethnographic data reproduces and reflects the religious festive life of Georgians and present the basic events so as to shape the perception of the holy events in a narrative. Sorting out the field data, we focus on the specific spatial imagery, where

built environment, architectural forms, ritual objects, performed ritual prayer and recollections of miracle-stories were woven together into a single whole.

Using the ethnographic retrospective method, the gathered ethnographic material is identified with the early Christian practices of Georgians carried out in different worship places (in the open air sites, household buildings, churches) which were thought to be indwelt by the divine power.

And yet, is the sacred *substantive* as it is viewed by M. Eliade? Or is it *situational* as Jonathan Z. Smith thinks it is? In other words, are the sacred places revealed or created? Are they objective or subjective? Is an indwelling divinity the key feature of the sacred space? What is the motivation of a certain behavior?

For the starting point of our investigation we choose subsidiary farm house, called *marani* (i.e. wine store house), incrustated with ancestral customs, for which the ethnographic context is called upon and used. But how *marani* was sacralized? For one thing, it was consecrated by a wine amphora of special-size (*set apart* from the ordinary wine vessels) dug deep on the right side of the building, which was annually filled with red wine; secondly by religious rituals performed over it and lastly by the name of the architecture of worship (to all these things we return below). Thus special architectural building of farmstead had been chosen which included both sacred (i.e. divine) and profane (human) spaces in itself, around which particular (certain) social units (i.e. kin, family, etc) were organized. Thus the case under scrutiny is represented by the object (entity) which had been retaining its sacred and profane characteristics until now (though in a modified way). The mentioned subsidiary farm house has been the focus for different trends of science (e.g. the ethnographers fixed special behavior and narratives associated with it, the linguists tried to decipher its name, and the art historians explored its form as some of them resembled the 18th c. Georgian churches, especially found in Eastern Georgia (in particular, in Kakheti).

As far as the concept of identity is associated with ancestral customs and cultural memory, we'll try to outline a particular version of collective remembering grounded in the use of ritual resources. With that end in view, the special literature with the field ethnographic data collected by us during the years 1976-89 throughout Georgia and the retrospective method of analysis had been used..

As mentioned above, the name of the chosen building is *marani* or the house of wine on the example of which one can clearly (almost visually) see how space consecrates and how inimitable, unique complexes of praying rituals are formed by means of the use of special ware, frankincense, praying gestures, tabulation, etc. which on its turn causes the experience of identity with two main consequences: belief and belonging.

Services at houses and temples:

During the first centuries of the spread of Christianity, as is well known, alongside with the services held in temples and synagogues the custom of *breaking of bread* had been established within the Christian community, in the centre of which the cult of Christ was placed.

Consequently the services of the first Christians were presented by two versions: from the one side, Christians participated in the service of Judaic Old Testament temple mass and on the other side, they broke bread, at homes (The Acts:2;46-47). Here we have the characteristic opposition between temples (i.e. the places where Judaic ritual took place) and homes, where the Christian breaking of bread took place, which on its turn was totally unacceptable for the Jews. (Compare: the oppositions temple/home ; they /we, respectfully., where the demarcation between “we” (us) and “they” (them) already exists.

Thus (In this way) until 4th century the Christian worship was performed there where the Christians could find space and safety; in private homes, underground catacombs, etc. The community was small in number. Meetings often were performed secretly, churches did not exist yet.

Marani (i.r. the wine house) as the container of secular and transcendental values:

The confirmation of early-Christian home service (attested) in Georgian tradition, to our mind might be the existence of *Marani* (wine house – compare in Palestine with Bethsaida (lit. “House of Fishing or fishers and Bethlehem (lit. the house of bread), in which the Eucharistic service might be traced (the latter, according to our investigations, is attested by different names in Georgian tradition; as *Ghvtis Seroba* (or in the abbreviated manner *Seroba*) which literally means Lord’s Last Supper (or briefly Supper), *puris gatekhva* (i.e. breaking of bread, agape (love in all its senses), *zedashe* (initial offering). I. e. *marani* is considered to be the place, where one can trace the service dedicated to the God, and where the first Christians of Georgia found the place of meeting for the sake of the Lord’s praising and for the purpose of the ritual performance.

In special literature (see N. Abakelia and literature there) *marani* is generally considered to be a Georgian term and its usage is traced to the 8th and 9th century manuscripts (A.Chikobava). In the old scriptures together with *marani* was attested the usage of the term *ghvinis sakhli* i.e. the wine house (which is important). According the lexicographers (Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani, D.Cubinishvili, correspondingly) *marani* is explained as wine house or wine storage house. Some researchers comparing the written sources suggest that the term *marani* had to be originated not earlier than 4th c. and not later than 8th c. (L.Chkonia). According to the wide spread opinion, the root of the term *marani* is *mar* in which the authors of different times traced the different meanings of the root. E.g. *mar* was identified with a measuring vessel of liquids (Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani) or wood vessel, hollowed from the whole wood in which the deceased was placed and then buried.(S.Menteshashvili). According to other opinions it might be a clay vessel, which sometimes was used as a coffin. For others *mar* is the same as *sa-mar-khi* i.e. the place , where the amphora was buried (N.BerZeniShvili). Later it was associated with *mar-khva* i.e. burying –(Iv.Javakhishvili, L.Cubinishvili). It was also supposed that the term *markhva*//burial originated from *mar* which was used in everydayness until the isolation of the deceased by placing them in a special stone, clay or wood vessel (container) became a norm (S.menteshashvili, 1944). According to the archaeological data, burials of the deceased in amphorae had to be ceased by II-III cc, starting from that period the amphora was basically used for wine-making. Correspondingly, according to those authors, the locus where the wine amphorae were stored was called *marani* . It is worth mentioning that in Armenian language *marani* is considered to be wine and wine products store house. As for the term itself , it is thought to be penetrated from Syria (Acharian R. 1977).

It must be mentioned that in Georgian reality, with *marani* are attested several names: *churistavi* i.e. the head of the amphora, *olagvane* i.e. the place for amphorae, *sajvare* - the place of the Cross, etc.

But how it happened that nowadays totally de-sacralized *marani* at one time used to be the container of the transcendental values? The special researches (field or theoretical) undertaken give us the opportunity to formulate the following in the form of thesis: for one thing, *marani* is consecrated by means of three sacraments (baptism, marriage , Eucharist) out of seven. *Marani* is consecrated by placing wine ware of special size (*qvevri* i.e. wine amphora) on its right side (direction pointing to Christianity), which was filled with red wine (initial offering) and was

opened by the head of the family and used at Easter time; it was the place around which family, kin or sometimes even the village gathered and performed praying and praising ritual dedicated to the Lord.

Thus, according to our researches, starting from Early Christian time *marani* represented meeting place with the Lord, as far as it was His representational place. In order to show the conservatism and continuity of the cult, it is important to note, that above mentioned is also found in the writings of the foreign missionaries. E.g.: according to the records and accounts of the Italian missionary Archangelo Lamberti, in the villages of Samegrelo (western Georgia), where Christian churches did not exist or were destroyed wedding rituals were performed in *marani* or wine house, which was considered to be one of the holy places, worshiped like a church. But due to ethnographic data gathered in the region, it is attested (stated) that even in the case of existence of churches, it was the custom to introduce the newly wed to the holy place of *marani* and therefore the *pater familias* (the father of the family) lead them there in order (to give them blessing) to receive the grace... from the holy place and in that way to incorporate them to the new family. The place of the praying wine amphora (i.e. eastern part of *marani*)(which differed from the other wine ware in many different ways (e.g. by its size, color, with the associated narratives and visions, etc.) where it was dug deeply in the earth was consecrated and Georgians thought it to be the most holy place of all. It was not easily approached by everybody (especially the presence of children and women were strictly forbidden during the performance of the ritual, etc.). To it a lot of *hierophanies* were associated.

The ritual which was a statute throughout generations and was strictly preserved at Easter convocation had lost its initial meaning. The ritual performed in *marani* we associate with the Christian sacramental mystic, Christian sacramental metaphor. The ritual performed over the consecrated wine vessel implied the participation of a definite group of people (definite social unit- community, kin, village, family), who offered a sacrificial animal, broke bread, prayed and made their communion, which actually was the Eucharistic feast at Easter). In this respect, according to its functions (establishing contacts between massmates, and between them and the God, as well) it reminds the *kenaculum* of the first Christians.

The bread broken between the participants is called *ganatekhi* (broken bread) (widely used in Racha and Lechkhumi (regions in western Georgia) even nowadays, and the common meal “*puris gantexva*” (i.e. “breaking of bread”), which is in full accordance with the New Testament

common meal (comp, Luke 24: 30, 35; acts: 20.7.11). According to some suppositions, the phrase “breaking of bread” directly connoted the Lord’s Last Supper (Acts 2.42) and is based on the commandment of the Saviour: (and he took the bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying:”this is my body given for you) “Do this in remembrance of me “(Luke: 22 ;19). Consequently, according to some suppositions, the phrase “breaking of bread” directly connotes the Lord’s Last Supper (Acts.2.42).

Thus, By means of performed ritual in *marani* (wine house), which had the functions of *kenakulum*, the believers related themselves with the first liturgy i.e. with the last Supper of the Lord, when a new sacrament had been established by the Saviour which by means of bread and wine, meant communion with the blood and flesh of the Christ.

Hierophanic vision reified in sacred poetry:

The mythologization of the ritual performed in the wine house can be traced in some examples of folk poetry, which according to its contents is cultic and can be explained by means of the sacred principle. They contain the knowledge, which had been accumulated, revised and codified in the people’s consciousness. The sacred wine vessel as an hierophany ascribes to it special characteristics. The hierophanic vision, which later becomes the basis of consecration of spaces is imprinted in one of the well known (in Georgian reality) examples of the cultic poetry, attested in Kartalinian and kakhertian (eastern Georgian) songs:

“In the ruby wine-house,
(Where) wine and ruby sparkle,
There grows poplar tree
It is young and its stem is branched,
The nightingale is sitting on top of it
Opening its wings for fight”.

The mythological image of the tree which was associated with the wine store-house was first analyzed and defined as one of the variants of the Tree of Life by Prof. V.Bardavelidze (1957. 78-81) .

According to our viewpoint, the condensed form of the cited verse when interpreted by the principal of the sacred on the contemporary stage of knowledge gives the following information: monotony of the spiritual landscape unfolded in the mentioned verse as if calmly emanating from icons points to the higher sphere than the everyday life of humans.

In short, in the mentioned iconic constellation the cultic wine vessel is the visible sign of the presence of the Godhead in *marani*.

The implicit sequence of its content is as following:

- a). red wine – ruby (precious stone comp. with the symbolism of apocalyptic mineralogy) – sacrifice – Christ.
- b). poplar tree - the case in point is associated with the Father’s principle, and the branch – with the Son’s.
- c). As for the nightingale – it might be a local revelation of the Holy Spirit.

The above said enables us to assume that it might be an allegorical prefiguration of The Trinity. The cited cultic (sacred) verse fills that specific cultic-ritual complex of beliefs, which used to be performed in Marani.

Thus, it can be assumed that the Christ, “the Bread of Life” itself (John 6.33) descended from the Heavens and born in Bethlehem i.e. in the “House of Bread”, with which the establishment of the new mystery of bread and wine is associated, in general, from the early period of the spread of Christianity in Georgia, had to be worshipped in the House of wine – in *marani* and this activity has become a strong traditional norm throughout centuries. *Marani*, besides being the place of wine storage is the place of break through, from where and by means of which the transcendent manifests itself.

Marani becomes the bearer of double sacrality. On the one hand, there dwells the Godhead (red wine in a special amphora), by means of which the believers recollected and related themselves with the first liturgy, established by the Lord himself, on the other hand – it represents *hierophany*.

Towards the interpretation of the name of *marani*:

The existence of the open air and enclosed types of *marani* (in houses or in separate buildings) inclines us to think that possibly the name *marani* pointed not to the storage house (as it was shown above), where different implements and products of viticulture were kept, but to the addressee for whom the ritual was performed and the ritual itself in which the epiclesis i.e. the invocation of the Lord had the central place.

In the Eucharistic service the epiclesis, the invocation of the God is of the greatest importance, which makes bonds with the two spheres: cultic - which is “here” and the divine sphere - which is “there”.

The refrain of the old Eucharistic prayer formula and the last words in the Bible, comprised of Aramaic words: *maran atha* (“come Lord to us”) probably could explain the enigmatic name of the wine-house – *marani* - which in the course of time might have lost its obscure and incomprehensible *atha* (for the population became more and more detached from the initial tradition) and transformed into the local Georgianized form of *maran-i*. In this case, the name implies the meaning and the essence of the cultic activity.

In Georgia *marani* was revered not only as a church, but it often took the form of church itself. It is thought (supposed) that they as such had to be developed in eastern Georgia (in particular in Kartli and Kakheti) (P. Zaqaraia, L.Rcheulishvilio, and later L.Sumbadze). The researchers pointed to the main facade of the building and specially to the incised long cross on the three stepped pedestal. Such elements incised on the bricks were characteristic for the 18th century architectural monuments, for one can find such crosses on the small churches of the mentioned period, etc. Such wine store houses, according to the specialists must be of 200 years old, but they, as the researchers remark, are replicating the oldest local architectural traditions.

Attested parallel to church terms of worship do not seem accidental: e. g. *sajvare* literally means the place of the cross¹, *okhvameri// salocvili* - the place of prayer. The attitude of the population towards *marani* seems the same, for whom *marani* is holy as church itself. It is considered to be the place of the epiphany of the Lord and that’s why the sign of the presence of the Lord - the Cross – is incised into the brick surface of the building.

The word *marani* contains (implies) the information about its bearer (name in such cases also comprises the predicate). The refrain of the mentioned prayer explains the importance of the cultic activity. *Marani* - is the meeting place with the Lord, it is His representative place. Consequently the symbolism of *marani* and the Christian concept of the Lord are closely connected to each other.

Thus the ritual prayer in *marani* represents not only the anamnesis (remembrance) of the Last Supper, but it also implies the invocation and perpetual revival of the contact, which is associated with the experience of identity in the sacred time and space.

And yet, are the sacred places revealed or invented? Is the sacredness *substantive* as it is viewed by M. Eliade? Or is it *situational* as Jonathan Z. Smith thinks it is? In other words, are

¹ The term *jvari* in Georgian means the Cross of the Savoir and the sanctuary at the same time (i.e. the sanctuary as the container of the sacred object, which is the sign of presence of the Godhead in the place.

the sacred places revealed or created? Is an indwelling divinity the key feature of the sacred space? What is the motivation of a certain behavior? We think both approaches are valuable and possible.

Taking into consideration the above said, we can assume that

- *marani* as a sacred place, viewed from the *emic* perspective reveals indwelling divinity, which seems the key feature of the sacred and generates (provokes) motivation for a certain behavior.
- it is consecrated by means of: *a set apart* object (wine amphora) *which is forbidden and is protected by the prohibitions* (to use Durkheim's phrases).
- it is sacralized by a) special behavior (rituals performed over the sacred vessel),
- b) *hierophanic* vision reified in the sacred poetry
- c) by the called sacred named, etc.

So at first glance, in our case the sacred really reveals really real category (as Orsi would define it) but the study of the case also revealed that the importance of the case with the lapse of time diminished and by now it is almost ceased to function. Accordingly, people organized themselves and depend on themselves when behaving within specific places, so that in that respect the sacred is *situational*.

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