

On the Mortuary Rituals in Georgian Tradition

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In Georgian tradition, death and burial customs reveal mythologized relationship between the living and the deceased, between the descendants and the ancestors, the world of the living and *the nether world*. Ethnographic and archaeological data, preserved legends, cult, myth and ritual studies make it possible to conclude that old Georgians (as well as many other people) regarded death as transition from one kingdom to the other, where life was continued. The cosmic image of *the nether world* primarily preserved in Georgian language itself is measured by various dimensions: e.g. the term *saiqio* (which literally means and points to the place which is *there* and not *here*) is opposed to the world of the living with spatial aspect; or the another term *imieri* (which points to the time dimension after death is opposed to the time of the living); this latter term is interesting as far as its cosmic image refers to time and cycle and not to the space order¹. Consequently, the Georgian term of the living world (designated by the term *shina* literally – inner space) reflects static or spatial symbolism and *the nether world* – cyclic or time symbolism (the phase in the cycle). In the preserved Megrelian (one of the old Georgian languages) term *ghura* (*doghuru i.e*) which differentiates the departed from the living and literally means blood shedding, one can trace how the Georgians perceived the death.

Such identification, supposedly, reflects the critical transition of a man into death condition, which is immensely associated with the idea of blood and its circulation (comp. the opposition dead i.e. bloodshed and live (full of blood), and consequently with the cyclic symbolism).

In the burial customs, the cyclic symbolism implies the preservation of sacred space over the deceased and keeping continuous procession around him/her. The procession is moved counter clockwise direction, conceptually on the right side (i.e. in *the nether world* direction) (com. the opposition right/left are symbolized in concrete concepts that of righteous/wrong, good/evil, life/death, etc.). The cyclic symbolism is also traced in the mourning rites and the ritual horse racing on the burial day (which will be discussed below). The above brought image of the death reflects bloodshed act and might imply killing of the victim by the

¹ There are some more terms designating the Nether world e.g. *shaveti* (dark world), *mousvleli* (the land from where there is no return), *suleti* (the place of the souls), etc.

death angel. This idea is very archaic with its symbolism and connotes the death angels of the ancient world.

According to the wide spread beliefs among Georgians, at the moment of death the soul in the image of a bird (often perceived as a dove) comes out of the mouth of the deceased. According the Georgian beliefs, death, personified in the fearsome face of a bony ugly old lady is impatiently waiting for the soul at the bedside to take it away².

The beliefs about the land of the souls i.e. *the nether world* are primarily based on the dreams and the narratives of the so called *returned to life* persons (i.e. persons who had experienced the lethargic death, etc). Such persons are thought to be taken to *the nether world* by some mistake and misunderstanding and are considered to communicate (deal) with the souls of the deceased. According to their narratives *the nether world* represents beautiful gardens and green pastures, where the souls of the deceased pasture the flock of sheep or cattle, sacrificed for them. Similar beliefs are preserved in 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 of the deceased 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 Euridice).

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) objects³. The primitive pictures painted with the fingers for the

² Abakelia, 2009, 32-37.

³ Bardavelidze, 1957, 135-139.

spirits depicted how the spirits of the deceased urged on the souls of the sacrificial animals to *the netherworld*. In contrast to the invisible guests from the Nether world there are also visible embodiments of the souls in the face of mummers (mostly boys), called *berikas*, who wore sheepskins inside out and had their faces smeared with soot (thus expressing the traditional symbolism of the Nether world). They appeared at winter solstice period and in particular, on New Year's feast. The *berikas* as the incarnations of the spirits of the dead were responsible for fertility and wellbeing of the living⁴.

According to the local traditions, the realm of the living was separated from the realm of the dead by water reservoirs (or sometimes by mountains). For Georgians the cultivated space of the world of the humans, called *shina* (i.e. inner world, inner space) was placed in the centre of the world which was encircled by tricolour (white, red, black), three aquatic belts, seas (which implied the vertical and horizontal topography of the world). The supernatural beings were settled and grouped according to the appropriate colours of water (as less dangerous, more dangerous and the most dangerous creatures).

In the mortuary ritual framework of the Georgians the sacred tree with its many variants reveal special meanings and messages. In this paper I focus on a ritual object, called *kelaptari* which represents a torch on the one hand and on the other, considering its form – a tree. This 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 tree of light.

Relatives of the deceased dressed in mourning clothes riding horses and on foot moved in procession from the far villages. They carried a big *kelaptari* in front of them, which was held by the grief-stricken woman (or if it was too heavy, it was carried by several men). Passing villages, lamenting women screamed loudly so that everybody guessed that somebody had died and the procession moved towards the village of the deceased.

The survived data in different parts of Georgia describing the custom are complementary to each other and give more or less complete and clear picture of it. According to these data, a hand-made torch (which bore the tree symbolism) survived in several names and is considered to be one of the essential offerings for the dead, made by a close relative woman. A special mention must be made, that this offering according to its value was equalled 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.

In Abkhazian (one of the regions of western Georgia) beliefs, the treelike candle and sacrificial animal both were called one and the same name *ashamaka*,

⁴ Abakelia, 2008, 112-113.

which pointed to their symbolic equivalence and the treelike candle often substituted a sacrificial animal⁵.

The second variation of the name of the ritual candle which was dedicated to the deceased childless man was a-kilantar aokum. A-kilantari also was made for women, but in that case the sacrificial animal would be a cow. It is of special interest that *a-kilantari* / *kilantari* / *kelaptari* 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.

The horse tied to the pillar of the house (which in this particular case represented the cosmological symbol and sign) consecrated the space and consequently the tree/pillar defined the vertical projection of the spatial model and integrated different cosmic realms together.

The sacrificial bulls had the lit candles on their horns, which introduces here the well-known relationship between the branches and the horns. The custom makes us think that candles lit on the horns of the sacrificial animal and candles lit on *the kelaptari* (artificial waxen tree) are iso-functional variants and 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. (In the case of a deceased woman cows were sacrificed). According to the local beliefs, the souls of the sacrificed animals were transferred to *the nether land*.

As it seems, in the mortuary and mourning rituals a deceased person in some degree is heroized, though he did not become the subject of the cult. I think 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 honour of the departed⁶. In the horse racing, the participation of the soul of the dead was also implied, which was revealed by the so called *soul's horse*. The riders with the *soul's horse* in front of them, the reins of which were held by the mother or the sister of the deceased would go round the clothes (the sign) of the deceased from the left side (the netherland direction)

⁵ Malia, 2003, 240-255.

⁶ Makalatia, 2006, 350-360.

and would rush in a sudden gallop. The route was special. The participant 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. According to the wide spread beliefs the souls of the dead when transcending from the kingdom of the living to the kingdom of the dead were met by the relative souls called *mgebrevi* (lit. *those who meat*) who accompanied them to the new place of habitation. It is noteworthy that at the commemorative feast a special toast was proposed for the so called *mgebrevi* i.e. meeting souls after the appraisal of the deceased and his relatives blessings. So that, it was not an accidental route.

According to our investigations the mentioned 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* – *mgebrni* i.e. the souls of the close relatives who meet the souls of the newly departed in the Nether land), but by the living relatives and friends, as well. Eventually, the horse racing on the day of funeral or on the annual commemorative celebration after a year from death illustrates the route of the journey of the soul in the nether world in the world of the living⁷.

The ritual form becomes leading and important. The ritual repeats the route preserved in the religious beliefs and the *seeing off* the soul of the dead in that manner guaranteed the soul of the departed settling in piece in the Netherworld, among the ancestral society of the dead.

After the horse racing, another kind of competition was held, called *kabakhi* (the exact meaning of which is not clear). For that purpose the highest tree was chosen in the yard to which a long pole was attached, the top of which was split (cut and divided in two parts) and a plate or a plank with a pouch was inserted in it as a target. This tree formally and by its contents organized the sacred space. The length of *kabakhi* was about 1-15 meters. Those who shot and threw off the target in the form of bird or pouch, would be rewarded and would receive some money or something valuable from the point of view of the villagers. After that the shooters would target the wooden bird of the *kabakhi* and the one who shot it would be given money (in the amount of 15 or 30 roubles). In the evening one of the admirable (favourite) persons of the deceased would ride the horse which was covered with a black cover (in former times the cover used to be red or blue which also were the mourning colours) and started to gallop. The other participants of the ritual chased him and tried to tear the black cover. After tearing the black cover and performing this ritual the mourning period was over.

⁷ Abakelia, 2009, 32-36.

The horse of the deceased was presented to the relative or was let free in the fields or woods.

As for the planted tree in the tomb and sacrificed horse near it (which reveals the older custom), it repeated the picture of the well-known image of the axis mundi (the axis of the world) and the horse. The sacrificed horse, which was considered to accompany and follow the deceased patron to the nether world could not have a divine addressee, as he, in this particular case, was the companion, psycho pomp 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 (events) itself represents the tree of the world. To my mind, for the visual illustration of it might serve a late antique Georgian bronze openwork buckle, on which a horse is “crowned” with stag’s branched horns.

Here the horse is identified with a tree, to which the branched horns refer. “Crowning” the horse with stag’s horns reveal 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 of animal horns (which is attested among many ancient and living peoples; e.g. at the autumn festival of St. George in Georgia, etc.) or marking it 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 centre and its axis, on which the transition into different spheres is possible.

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 (under) it, as well as the horse with stag’s antler on the bronze openwork buckle are the signs of the infinite reality. A deep cosmological idea underlies it, which implies the crossing of all cosmic zones, and consequently, at the same time defines and marks the *centre* and the *axis* of the world i.e. the tomb, as the cosmic space has its own centre 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 last one.

The horse tied to the tree or the pillar by means of the ritual achieves a high semiotic degree and that’s 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 if the sacred tree planted immediately after the childbirth implies the creation of the sacred centre in the world of the living (and to its blossoming and

withering the fate of the new born is associated) after the death of a human being it was pulled up with its roots and transplanted in the tomb, which I would call the *centre shifting ritual*, which constructs the transcendental space where different cosmic levels meet and cross each other. The transplanted tree is at the same time the symbol of the *arbor mundi* and *axis mundi*.

In the mortuary and mourning rituals we come across the other variants of *arbor mundi* and *axis mundi*, which are represented in one case with the *kelaptari* (a waxen tree), in the other – with a horse-tree or a bull-tree; In case of competition called *kabakhi* it is represented with the tree with a bird on top of it.

The religious complex tomb–tree–sacrificial animal (horse, bull), or their supplementary waxen tree – *kelaptari* is in itself the sign of the infinite reality in which a wide cosmological idea is underlined and, consequently, it reveals the symbolism of the *centre* and the *axis of the world* in the sense of Mircea Eliade⁸. That means that the tomb as a cosmic space has its centre (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 particularly 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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⁸ Eliade, 1974, 1-38.