

THE IMPACT OF MIGRATION PROCESSES ON ETHNIC, RELIGIOUS, CULTURAL IDENTITY AND TRADITIONS OF SVAN ECO-MIGRANTS

The Problem of Eco-Migration in the World and in Georgia

Migration of Population implies voluntary territorial displacement associated with a change in the place of residence. People migrate mainly for political, economic and educational purposes, but natural calamities, occurring almost every day around the world are also a common cause of migration. Climate change and related natural disasters are one of the acute problems of the 21st century, with eco-migration being its most negative result. Global Commission on International Migration refers to the people, forced to leave their place of residence forever, as a result of an environmental disaster, as “eco-migrants” (Vorobiova, 2003: 35).

According to the available data, the number of people affected by natural calamities and forcibly displaced worldwide exceeds 40 million; over 35,000 families affected by natural disasters are registered in Georgia (Asanidze, 2017).¹ These figures undoubtedly testify to the seriousness of eco-migration problem, however, studies are rarely conducted to determine the state, living conditions and needs of the eco-migrants, to say nothing about their adaptation to the new environment, as well as the problems of maintaining ethnic, religious or cultural identity and traditions.

Socio-Cultural Aspects of Eco-Migration

It is a fact that ecological migrations caused by natural disasters, among other types of migrations, are the least studied in the world. Almost every day there are earthquakes, floods, landslides, avalanches, fires, which make thousands of people environmental refugees, forcing them to face and adapt with new economic, cultural, social, psychological, etc. environment. This is why the study of eco-migrations requires an interdisciplinary approach, providing a comprehensive study of political, social, legal, demographic, historical, economic, psychological, cultural aspects of the problem.

We, ethnomusicologists, can contribute to this research by studying socio-cultural aspects of the problem.

Logically, any occurrence, which accompanies migration processes can be discussed within two public groups. These are: 1. “Migrants” – displaced persons and 2. “hosts” – local population of the new residence place of the “migrants”. Certainly, both groups have their own identity, domestic and cultural traditions, values, attitudes, and main difficulty of migration is peaceful agreement between them. This problem arises immediately after the minimal material provision for migrants and manifests itself in the desire to primarily protect and preserve their ethnic or religious identity, and then their mode of life and cultural traditions.

In the paper, I will attempt to present these problems on the example of Svan eco-migrants,

¹ According to the 2017 data.

because, I think, the issues of protecting identity and cultural traditions are especially relevant in relation to Svaneti, which is characterized in the pronounced focus on the preservation of traditions as compared to other parts of Georgia.

Svan Eco-Migrants in new Environment

One of the first large-scale migrations of the population from Svaneti, due to natural disasters caused by heavy snowfalls, took place in the late 1980s. Particularly, in the winter of 1987-89, many villages in the region suffered from an avalanche, which resulted in the destruction of houses and casualties. About 16,000 people were evacuated from the disaster zone. The state planned to build several thousand houses for them, in both East and West Georgia. In some cases, the eco-migrants were distributed in already populated regions (e.g. Marneuli, Tsalka, Bolnisi, Dmanisi, Tskaltubo, Khoni, Ozurgeti, Lanchkhuti), in other places, the villages were specially built for the Svans (Sagarejo, Tetrtskaro, Gardabani) (Gotsiridze, 2011: 353).

I think it is important to consider the above, since mutual adaptation of “guests” (migrants) and “hosts” (local population) is a complex, unpredictable and often long process that affects the identity and traditions of migrants. This is why, based on the expedition material obtained in the above-mentioned regions, I conducted my research with three groups of eco-migrants: 1. the eco-migrants settled in Georgian environment; 2. the eco-migrants settled in non-Georgian environment; 3. the

eco-migrants for whom the villages were specially built.

With the consideration of time-limit, the paper presents the study results of each group for every village. The First group includes the eco-migrants from the village of Sakulia, Tskhaltubo municipality; in the second group there are the

eco-migrants from Tsalka municipality, and in the third group – the residents of the village of Didgori, Tetrtskaro municipality.

For the study, I have used interviewing and comparison methods to see the real picture through the eyes of the migrants themselves, on the one hand, and to compare the data of the three mentioned groups on the other hand.

The Problem of Preserving Traditions Among the Eco-Migrants Settled in Georgian Environment

In 1987 the Svans from about 20 villages of three communities in Lentekhi municipality (Kvemo Svaneti) (about 300 families of 15 clans) settled in the village Sakulia, Tskaltubo municipality in Imereti. The eco-migrants created “Svan district” in Sakulia and named it “New Sakulia”. When asked how the “guests” (migrants) and “hosts” (local population) got along, one interviewee answered: “Very soon after the displacement, the Svans and the Imeretians became friends and relatives... We were lucky to have settled with the Georgians, unlike those who settled with the Armenians and Azerbaijanis” (personal interview, 2022).

It can be said that it was precisely in the conditions of ethnic and religious kinship that the Svans who settled in Sakulia did not have to fight for the protection of their ethnic and religious identity, language and customs. To this day, they teach Svan language to their children, traditionally celebrate secular and church holidays, such as Khatskvejnaal, Skaldob, Lipaanal, Ligiergi, Limrie, Shob, Tanap and others. By the way, because of the activities of the Svans, through the joint efforts it became possible to restore the old, dilapidated church in Sakulia, where, after the traditional

service, the Svans are allowed to celebrate holidays according to their own rules (with the ritual of blessing of the so-called “starosta”/headman, lemezirs, slaughter sacrifice, feasting, etc.).

It is also worth noting that the eco-migrants settled in Sakulia still go to the village of Paki, Lentekhi district, where traditional festival Skaldoba is held at the Archangel Church in Skaldi (personal interview, 2021).

As for traditional music, eco-migrant Guram Kvastiani formed a children’s ensemble in the early 1990s. Its repertoire included only Svan songs, dances, and round dances. Guram Kvastiani also created an ensemble of elders in Sakulia, but he faced an interesting problem.

According to him, since almost every village in Svaneti had its own variants of songs and round dances, it was difficult for the elders who had migrated from different villages to compromise, and it took a serious effort to get everyone agree on one variant. For this very reason, the ensemble existed only a few months and broke up. The fact of breaking up is negative, but the cause is undoubtedly positive. While interviewing the Svans from Sakulia, another interesting reason was revealed, due to which, the Svans found it difficult to disseminate their traditional music in the new environment. In contrast to Svaneti, where most of the year there was winter with heavy snowfalls, when people took a break from work and gathered, danced and sang songs, in the lowlands, there was almost no snow in winter and the migrants had to work all year round to support their families, they had no more time for singing and dancing.

However, one ritual has survived in everyday life which does not need to find “spare time”. This is mourning and its accompanying keening of women. As for men’s lament – Zar, after the passing of elderly mourners, sometimes the singers of Kutaisi State Ensemble are invited to perform it. Such “devotion” to weeping and mourning indicates the widely known, unchanging attitude of the Svans to the cult of the deceased.

In 2002 Guram Kvastiani moved to Tbilisi. Due to the lack of support from the local government, the village was left without an ensemble. However, the members of the former children’s ensemble have already grown up and feel the need to continue the traditions. One of them is 24-year-old Otar Gvichiani – a student at Kutaisi school of cultural education, who has learned Svan folk music from Zurab Liparteliani, Guram Gvichiani’s student; and still sings, dances in Lentekhi municipality ensemble Lagusheda and learns to play folk instruments. Twice a week, he has to travel about 80 km from Tskaltubo to Lentekhi to attend the rehearsals! In the future, he plans to revive Svan musical traditions in Sakulia and actively involve the young generation in this process.

The Problem of Preserving Traditions among the Eco-Migrants Settled in a non-Georgian Environment

Svan eco-migrants were resettled in Tsalka municipality after the natural disasters in the village of Latali, Mestia district in 1987. Unlike the eco-migrants from Tskaltubo, they had to start a new life in the neighborhood of the Greeks, Azerbaijanis and Armenians. The differences in ethnic and religious identity created serious problems in terms of both adaptation and preservation of traditions. For example, the locals could not adapt to “sharing” the land to be cultivated, they opposed the construction of an Orthodox church by the settlers, protested the tradition of celebrating holidays in Svan manner, etc. According to the interviewees from Tsalka it took years to settle the relations, which significantly hindered introduction of Svan customs and musical traditions in the region (personal interview, 2019). However, willingly or by force, the eco-migrants still did their

way: they built an Orthodox church,² they started celebrating secular and church rituals in Svan manner, never gave up Svan manner of feasting.³ In addition, they created folk ensemble named Trialeti, which mainly performs Svan songs and round dances. Merab Gurguliani, the son of famous singer and choirmaster Maharbi Gurguliani from Latali, is also a member of the ensemble, who continues the traditions of his renowned father by popularizing Svan dances and songs.

The Problem of Tradition Preservation among the Eco-Migrants, for whom the Villages were Built

About 40 families from 8 villages in the Mestia district were resettled in Kvemo Kartli, in the now village of Didgori, Tetrtskaro municipality in 1989. The houses were built for them in an uninhabited area near the village of Orbeti. The Svans themselves gave the name to the village. This is the case when eco-migrants faced difficulties different from the groups discussed above, and had to adapt not to local population, but to difficult living conditions. According to the locals, for many years there was no running water, electricity, natural gas in the village, however, in spite of everything, they still celebrated secular and church holidays with accompanying rituals and songs, they managed to build a church and created folklore ensemble Didgori, with both young and elderly membership. My interviewee was Ivane Goshuani, director of ensemble Didgori. As he says the Svans from Didgori still follow Svan traditions, such as: Lipaanal, Limpari, Ligiergi, Limrie; they try to attend Kvirikoba and Peter and Paul celebrations in Svaneti. The deceased are still mourned over with traditional female keening and male Zari, they follow the traditions of Svan feasting, they also try to teach Svan language and Svan songs to their children. Ensemble Didgori's repertoire mainly includes Svan songs and round dances, which the Didgori members perform in both everyday life and on stage (personal interview, 2022).

In conclusion, it can be said that:

Despite the complex and lengthy process of adaptation, ethnic and religious problems, difficult living and climatic conditions different from Svaneti, the Svans have retained their identity even in new environment 30 years after their resettlement, which is proved by:

- preservation of Svan language;
- loyalty to religious belief;
- celebration of secular and church holidays in Svan manner;
- following Svan feasting traditions;
- continuation of Svan song, dance and round-dance traditions;
- full observance of the mourning rite in everyday life;
- maintenance of close ties with the native villages in Svaneti.

The study results of the data from three villages presented in the paper are more or less common for the other eco-migrant villages as well. Accordingly, we can say that the migration processes even more clearly showed firm orientation of Svan ethnographic group, aimed at protection and preservation of ethnic, religious and cultural identity and traditions.

² It is noteworthy, that Svan eco-migrants built churches named after St. George in every village, which proves special devotion of the Svans to the Saint.

³ Namely, the first three toasts are dedicated to the Great God ("Khosha Gherbet"), Archangels ("Mkem Taringzel") and St. George ("Jrag").

The Interviewees:

Guram Kvastiani, 59 years old. Resettled from the village of Mutsdi, Choluri community of Lentekhi municipality to the village of Akhali Sakulia, Tskaltubo municipality in 1987. Currently Head of Folklore Department at the Music Service of Tetrtskaro Centre of Culture and Sports.

Otar Gvichiani, 24 years old. From the village of Akhali Sakulia, Tskaltubo municipality, a student of the Kutaisi school of cultural education. A member of Lentekhi municipality ensemble Lagusheda.

Ivane Goshuani, 68 years old. Resettled from the village of Tskhumari, Mestia district to the village of Didgori, Tetrtskaro municipality. Directs local folk ensemble Didgori.

Gegi Gvichiani, 34 years old. Resettled from the village of Lakhushdi, Mestia district to Tsalka municipality in 1987. Directs local folk ensemble Trialeti.

Merab Gurguliani, 56 years old. Resettled from the village of Lakhushdi, Mestia district to Tsalka municipality in 1987. A member of Tsalka municipality folk ensemble Trialeti.

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