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LITURGIC NATURE OF THE GEORGIAN TRADITIONAL FEASTS, EXULTATIONS AND FESTIVE HYMNS

There is nothing original in saying that music is an integral and indispensable part of traditional Georgian feasts. Drinking songs and entertainment together with the verbal aspects of eloquence build up a table communication system. The roots of Georgian feasts go back to the ancient beliefs and images, at the same time defining the essence of musical accompaniment. The phenomenon of Georgian repasts has attracted attention of a great number of researchers who attempted to study it from various angles. It has also become the subject of research for sociologists, writers, psychologists and others. We are not going to dwell upon a great number of mutually exclusive and curious opinions existing about the Georgian feast. We find it only expedient to mention that quite a number of existing views are formed as a result of observing the transformed, altered and distorted traditions of the modern Georgian feast, which has nothing to do with its past true nature and in a lot of cases, to put it mildly, cannot be treated seriously.

The deity, the object of worship was the centre around which the community and the social milieu was united and at the culminating moment of common worship or when offering a sacrifice they partook of the killed animal's flesh, thus taking communion. It was the most significant and integral part of the uniting power of the common cult that consolidated society. A ritual repast and eating and drinking in generally were the same acts of sacrifice as offering a sacrificial animal to God. The process of eating is identical with the sacrificing process. In the Slavonic languages, particularly in Russian the word *zhrats* (to eat) means "offering a sacrifice to God". The word priest – *zhrets* is a derivative from this word (*Calendar Customs*, 1983:168, 175).

It is common knowledge that pre-Christian sacrifice is a pre-image of Jesus Christ. In himself Jesus Christ united all kinds of sacrifices thus occupying the central place of a new kind of unity of the communion Christians or the Church; during each divine service He sacrifices Himself for their sake. His nation takes the Holy Communion of His flesh and blood at the Saviour's altar.

Such a view was widely accepted not only in the church but in the world as well thus facilitating the formation of definite traditions of the Christian peoples.

The idea that the Georgian feast has a religious foundation and is of a ritual character is expressed by different authors (Gotsiridze, 2001, 2004, 2007; Abakelia, 1997; Ivelashvili, 1995; Bandzeladze, 1999; Ioseliani, 1999, 2005; etc). But neither its provenance, nor the religious and ideological foundation it stemmed from have been studied so far. Neither has anything been found out about the features of Georgian feasts and repasts acquired after the Evangelization of Georgia. We will try to find answers to these questions.

In the Georgian language the terms denoting partaking of food and drink in general

are quite numerous. We have studied the terms indicating eating and drinking at a party and they are as follows: *trapezi* – having a meal; eating; *seroba* – supper, evening meal; *seri* – a meal in general, supper, feast, dinner; *tadzari* – a feast, an official repast, merry-making, a party; *tadzroba* – having a feast, an official repast, making merry, giving a party; *puri*, *puroba* – any meal, a party, receiving guests, a feast, a banquet; *puris chama* – any meal, eating and drinking in general; *puris rtva* – eating and drinking in general; *puris gatekhva* – to break a loaf of bread into pieces, breaking bread, meaning eating, having a meal.

It has been concluded that the terms mainly have secular and religious meaning (Orbeliani, 1991, 1993; Chubinashvili, 1961; Chubinashvili, 1984; Abuladze, 1984; Imnaishvili, 1986). One of the above-mentioned terms deserves a special note; it is *puris gatekhva* breaking bread into pieces.

In the Dictionary of Khevsuretian dialect the term *puris akhlecha* (“breaking bread”) means to begin eating” (Chincharauli, 2005: 698). In Racha a large *kada* (Georgian pastry with sweet stuffing) is called *ganatekhi* (a broken-off piece. Kobakhidze, 1987:31-32). Tedo Sakhokia explains “breaking bread” as “having a meal”. He writes, “At a Georgian feast, in olden times, the bread was not to be cut with a knife, — it was to be broken into pieces and distributed among guests. Breaking bread meant beginning to eat, by expanding its meaning it also meant making friends” (Sakhokia, 1979:505).

According to a Jewish custom, before partaking of food even the Saviour would say a prayer over the bread thanking God and only after that he would break the bread and distribute the pieces among his table-companions. He observed this rule at the Last Supper and it became associated with the Eucharist thus becoming the term denoting this sacrament (Bernas, 1967:779-780). The Eucharist was observed every day in the early days of Christianity (Skabalaovitch, 2004:92). For ancient Christians eating bread was considered to be communing with the body of the Lord. A funeral repast was called a bread-breaking feast as well. This attitude can be still observed in the Christian world outlook, as the prayer of the consecration of food the Lord’s prayer is said both by the Orthodox Christians and Christians of other denominations.

As is known besides visiting the synagogue the first Christians got together on Sunday evenings, in some places on other days or even every day. They usually gathered at each other’s homes. (Doushen, 1912:31). The word *eklesia*, (church) meaning a meeting, is of Eucharistic character. “Lord’s repast, Eucharistic bread breaking is observed there as its completion and realization... and so”, writes Alexander Shmeman, “there is an indivisible unity of the three – the meeting, the Eucharist (liturgy), Christ’s church” (Shmeman, 2004: 163). While speaking about the spirit of the earlier church, Shmeman quotes St. Ignatius of Antioch’s words who addressed the Christians as follows: “Try to be together as often as possible” (Shmeman, 2003: 189). For the first generation Christians the Eucharist whose constituent part *agape* was, was an earthly act of the divine supper, that Jesus Christ often mentioned as a metaphor for the Father’s abode (Waybrough, 2004: 29): After a liturgy on Sundays and religious holidays it was a custom of Christians to visit

one another and share a meal and it became a tradition with us as well (bishop Nicholoz, 1997: 53; Archimandrite Makari, 1997: 71).

It is known that originally Christians' gathering had a festive character and were conducted as the Redeemer had ordained at the Last Supper. It began with the reading of the Scripture followed by the bishop's preaching, praying and feasting or having an agape. After the parish members had exchanged kisses in token of friendly love and unity, the bishop offered prayers over the best pieces of bread selected from the offerings of the congregation and also over the wine diluted with water. After that all those present received the Eucharist. Reading psalms or performing other hymns was an essential part of the service.

Feasting began with washing hands and praying. It was common knowledge that feasts (agapes) were arranged with the offerings made by the well-off members of the community and were meant to help their poor sisters and brethren and generate and maintain friendly love among Christians. Priests conducted the agapes with praying, supplicating and preaching to the congregation. It was initially like that in the church and later the custom penetrated into secular life. Though in the world laymen arranged the agapes. Excessive drinking and eating at the feast was assumed to be shameful, as on the one hand it was Lord's repast and on the other it was praying. The congregation prayed throughout the night. The prayer part of the agape ended with chanting. Almost everybody present chanted (Fouk, 1911: 59-61; *History of the Orthodox Church*, 1902: 89-90; Talberg, 2000: 102; Posnov, 1991: 205-206; Brockhaus and Efron, 1890: 129; Skabalanovich, 2004: 51-55; Bernas, 1967: 194; Bechwith, 1998:236).

Subsequently the agape was separated from liturgy, the process was completed in the 4th-5th centuries. The agape became popular, acquired a secular character, developing under the influence of the local ecclesiastic traditions (Bernas, 1967a: 149). In the 14th century observing the agape in churches was prohibited, but the canon seems to have been violated till the 7th century when the Trullan Synod prohibited it again establishing excommunication as a punishment. (Milash, 1911: 565). After the Synod's prohibition to hold agapes in churches, Christians began to observe them in their homes. They were very popular with Christians. On some saints' feasts they gave parties inviting friends, neighbours, relatives and the poor. (Archimandrite Makari, 1997:72-73). It is known that Christians had repasts on the graves of saints too. Subsequently agapae were arranged on the funeral days of the relations (Bernas, 1967a: 149). Finally agapae lost their symbolic significance and turned into usual banquets arranged on funeral days, weddings, childbirth celebrations; well-off people also held them for the poor (Milash, 1912:100). In Georgia, too, agapes at first being of a festive character, gradually turned into funeral repasts. It is noteworthy that in Kartli and Kakheti before sitting down to table, after washing their hands the guests were offered *boghlotso* (bread soaked in red wine). The bread had previously been broken on the dead person's chest and it was believed that it was sure go to the deceased. In other regions when a toast for the repose of the soul of the deceased was proposed bread was either dipped in wine or some wine was poured on the bread, which was the same as offering *boghlotso*. All the three customs in this very context symbolized the Eucharist (Gotsiridze, 2004:150; Ghambashidze, 2004: 114-116, 272); this confirms that the Christian aspect of the

mourning repast stems from the agape and Eucharist, which are the same. Observing this rule means communing the deceased with eternal life. Praying for the deceased is an indispensable and integral part of the Christian liturgy.

It was a tradition in Georgia that the agape held in the church implied not only “eating for the deceased” (Orbeliani, 1991:75), “bread, dinner” (Abuladze, 1973:12), but also meant holding a divine service in the name of the deceased. There were two kinds of agape. In one only monks took part and the other might be attended by laymen as well. It was the peasants’ duty to provide the agape with wine and food (Topuria, 1984: 68-70).

In the Jerusalem community the agape tradition had a special significance, the bond between the Eucharist and the agape being exceptionally strong. It should be noted that if in some churches of Jerusalem two types of agape ceremonies were observed from the very beginning, there also were some other churches in which the presence of the agape tradition is not attested in any written sources describing their history (*Study Bible*, 1987:23-24). As is known, the Georgian church is apostolic and of Jerusalem origin. Actually from the 5th to the 10th century it performed its liturgical ceremonies according to the Jerusalem typicon which logically must have resulted in the formation of the tradition of ecclesiastic life. In a certain manner it must have fused with the local culture and traditions. Besides being an active participant of the current processes in the Hellenic world and subsequently in the world ecclesiastic life Georgia always maintained strong links with the Holy Land since the early centuries of Christianity (Aleksidze, 2004: 35-39, 41). Hence, it can be assumed, that the pattern of the Jerusalem divine service that is the Eucharist with the agape must have been introduced into our church from the very beginning, which is substantiated by the nature of the traditional Georgian feasts. More than that they must have originated from the most ancient liturgy and must be a successor to the agape. As it has been mentioned above breaking bread was the name of the agape, the Eucharist and the feast.

Every kind of the traditional Georgian feast began with embellishing hands i.e. washing hands, praying i.e. consecrating the victuals, electing the tamada (toast-master), glorifying God and breaking bread.

This rule has been preserved up to this day among true Christians. Following the agape traditions, sitting at table according to the age hierarchy was strictly observed; church favoured quite manners, and polite conversation were greatly approved.

Festive banquets were mainly held in the evening, sometimes lasting throughout the night.

In keeping with the etiquette the guests of honour were the first to be seated, then came relatives and friends; wine was brought in and poured into the guests’ cups by wine-servers (Gotsiridze, 2000:154-155).

At the head or in the middle of the Georgian traditional feast table, at an honourable place the toast-master sat. The old Georgian redactions of the Gospel have preserved the Georgian equivalent of the term *tamada* / *tolumbashi* (which some scholars think to be of the Caucasian-Persian origin). They are: *puris upali* (master of the bread), *mtavari tadzrisai* (head of the banquet), *mkhnis taoba* (head of the feast, merry-

making), *tsinamdsgholi* (leader), *tsinamdsghvari* (leader) (Gotsiridze, 1999: 59-65; 2004:127; Ioseliani, 1999: 4-6).

In the past both at the ecclesiastic and secular agapes the function of the head of the feast was performed by a priest, the elder of the community (*khevisberi*, *khutsesi*, *dekanози*), the head of the family and others. Later, due to the socialization and desacralization of society a secular person became the toastmaster and still later a person distinguished for his oratory and eloquence performed the function. This way of conducting the feast penetrated into the common Caucasian culture. The toastmaster proposed *tsarsatkmeli* (a toast), which is an old Georgian term (Gotsiridze, 2004: 127; 2001:120-122). The toast was an equivalent of a prayer, an appeal for longevity; though sometimes a Georgian feast might end in misunderstanding and disorder, which was considered a great shame. The essence of the feast was mutual love, respect, blessing and consolidation within the given social unity, under the protection of the heavenly guardians and God. The Christians sitting at the festive table were sure that the invisible Lord, who at the same time was the supreme ecclesiastic figure, guided them. All the terms denoting the toastmaster clearly show that the toastmaster is the most important figure, the leader of the feast. We suggest that the terms *mtavari tadzrisai* (head of the banquet) and *puris upali* (master of the bread) also refer to the fact that the toastmaster is not only a secular person. The terms *tadzari* and *tadzroba* means a festive meal, a banquet. It also indicates a house for praying and a palace where state and judicial issues were discussed.

The term *tadsari* (a festive meal, banquet) semantically unites a banquet and a church, a house for praying; as though the head of the banquet is the leader who conducts a festive meal in the church. Mystically the head of the church is God. As regards *puris upali* (master of the bread) it must have meant the chief, leader of a festive meal. *Upali* in Georgian means God, Jesus Christ; it also denotes a master, guardian, and protector. But this word combination contains another indirect meaning, which might have emerged subconsciously and which associated *puris upali* (master of the bread) with God and bread identified with the body of Christ. Can the two ancient Georgian terms denoting *tamada* (a toastmaster) *mtavari tadzrisai* (head of the banquet) and *puris upali* (master of the bread) also mean the person who conducted the feast held as the Eucharist and the agape personifying Jesus Christ mystically, as our Lord himself is *mtavari tadzrisai* (head of the banquet) and *puris upali* (master of the bread) at the Last Supper?

The spirit of mutual love and brotherly affection is very strong at Georgian feasts, which as at agapes is often expressed by kissing. This custom that has survived up to this day often confuses people of modern mentality, both locals and foreign guests. This kiss is a token of brotherly love and wish for peace, which has stemmed from agapae and has become part of the Eucharistic liturgy (Waybrough, 2004:31). Such a kiss, in its transformed aspect, can be observed in the modern Georgian table traditions and not only there. In this country when two members of the feast drink wine with their arms interlaced crosswise (this manner of drinking is called *vakhtanguri*), it may mean brotherhood and unity in Christ. This surmise can be substantiated by the German tradition of “Brû derschaft” meaning both brotherly love and religious unity, brotherhood.

Besides the toasts extolling God there were toasts to the memory of ancestors, to the welfare and prosperity of motherland, the national heroes, outstanding people, the members of the feast. The feast ended with the toast to All Saints. In connection with this toast there are two opinions. According to one of them it must have been a toast to All Saints and only later it came to be associated with Mother of God (Gotsiridze, 2001: 121); according to the other contention the toast to the Holy Virgin acquired the meaning of All Saints subsequently (Abakelia, 1997: 161). As the Georgian traditional feast is of liturgical nature stemming from the Eucharist and agape, the above-mentioned toast must be connected with the personal morning prayer (matin) or the last dismissal prayer of the liturgical service (*Night prayer*, 2000: 85-86). At the end of personal prayer we say: “Our Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God by the prayers of your Mother, the Holy Virgin, the Worthy and Godly fathers and All Saints, forgive us. Amen”.

It is noteworthy that in the prayers said before every meal together with “The Lord’s Prayer” the prayer like the one mentioned above is also uttered. Thus, the Georgian feast ends with the same prayer the liturgy or a personal prayer. More than that, it is connected with the grace offered before the beginning of a feast. The religious character and liturgic provenance of the Georgian traditional feast are also emphasized by the so-called *salkhino sagaloblebi* (hymns of rejoice). Manana Shilakadze and Malkhaz Erkvanidze dedicated special works to their study. Erkvanidze aptly concludes that in ancient times chants and songs occupied the places specially meant for each of them, though they co-existed. The ethnographic material collected by Shilakadze in Guria and Racha (1971, 1974) directly indicates that people differentiated between the hymns sung in churches and those performed in the world (Shilakadze, 2001:170). According to Erkvanidze the festive chants are “intermediate phenomena between chants and songs. The melodic structure is purely ecclesiastical. Only the verbal text is changed i.e. is adapted to folk songs. In the world people used ecclesiastic tunes, changing the religious texts and not vice-versa”. If the text of the festive chant is changed and made secular its tune is always ecclesiastic. Only in a number of cases (e.g. *Movedit Da Vsvat* – Here We Are and Let Us Drink), in the author’s opinion, a definite secular influence can be noticed which must have been caused by introducing the ecclesiastic chants into the families (Erkvanidze, 2003: IX-XI, XIV). That is only the texts of the chants that penetrated into families were changed, but the melody remained the same. Despite the long atheistic period the tradition of performing chants in families made it possible to preserve them. According to ethnographic data the tradition of performing chants in families in Guria, Racha, Kartli, Zemo (Upper) Imereti lasted till the 40-60s of the 20th century (Shilakadze, 2001:164).

The toasts proposed at Georgian traditional feasts were accompanied by appropriate festive chants. For example a toast to the bride and bridegroom was followed by *Shen khar Venakhi* (Thou Art a Vineyard) by *Mravalzhamieri* (many happy returns), a toast to the best men was followed by *Shen Romelman Gangvanatle* (“Though That Illuminated Us”) and the song *Chemo Natlidedao* (“You, My Godparent”). The toast to the repose of the souls of the diseased parents was

followed by the chant *Zhamta Da Tselta* (“Of the Times and the Years”, Guria), *Sulta Matta* (“Their Souls”, Racha) and others. It is clear from the material that at wedding parties and childbirth celebrations *chrelis* and *troparia* were performed (Shilakadze, 2001:164-167). According to the well-known description by Jambakur-Orbeliani, at parties the chanters were to sing kneeling before the most distinguished person seated at the head of the table.

At parties feast chants, secular songs – *mravalzhamieri* (Many Happy Returns), wishing for a long life, were performed. After four hours of merry-making the guests grateful to one another, left (Prince Jambakur-Orbeliani, 2005: 14). Thus performing ecclesiastic chants adopted from the church with the melodies unchanged, *chrelis*, *troparia*, *heirmoses* and their vast repertoires – also the presence of feast chants belonging to quite a different genre, clearly indicate the religious semantics of the traditional Georgian feasts, which existed up to the junction of the 19th and 20th centuries and was something Georgian society was well aware of. Archpriest Razhden Khundadze writes that a wedding party and a festive feast were half a prayer. Besides, the repertoire and diversity of feast chants bear witness to the development of Georgian chanting and generally Georgian musical culture and also indicate that the church not only did not prohibit performing chants at feasts but even encouraged it, as it was very well aware of the nature of the traditional Georgian feast roots. At the same time the church avoided the reverse process. Secular songs were never allowed into the church, though the Georgian secular and the common musical thinking, language and tradition created ecclesiastic musical culture.

Translated by Liana Gabechava

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