

University of Tartu
Faculty of Theology

Mirjam Lindpere

Pre-Christian beliefs and traditions in Georgia

Master thesis

Supervisor Dr. theol. Lea Altnurme

Tartu 2013

Contents

FOREWORD	4
INTRODUCTION	5
HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND	9
BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE RELIGIOUS HISTORY IN THE CAUCASUS.....	12
<i>Overview</i>	12
<i>Paganism</i>	12
<i>Zoroastrianism</i>	13
<i>Christianity</i>	14
<i>Islam</i>	15
<i>Today</i>	16
RESOURCES FROM ANTIQUITY	17
FINDINGS FROM STONE AGE AND BRONZE AGE	17
MYTHS	19
<i>Greek myths associated with the Caucasus</i>	19
<i>The myth of Amirani</i>	20
GEORGIAN PAGANISM AND NATURE-WORSHIP	22
COSMOLOGY	22
THE SUN AND MOON	23
THE ANCIENT HOLY TRINITY.....	24
THE GREAT MOTHER GODDESS.....	25
<i>Great Mother Nana</i>	27
FEMALE DEITIES	28
HEAVEN, WATER AND MOON CONNECTED TO MOTHER GODDESS	31
<i>Heaven</i>	31
<i>Water</i>	31
<i>Moon and bulls</i>	32
SUN, FIRE AND THE UNDERWORLD CONNECTED TO EARTH GOD	34
<i>Sun</i>	35
<i>Fire</i>	35
<i>Earth god</i>	36
<i>Underworld</i>	37
<i>Otherworld, funerals</i>	39
<i>Resurrection</i>	40
NATURE WORSHIP IN GEORGIA.....	41
<i>Trees and woods</i>	41
<i>Pre-Christian cross veneration</i>	42
<i>Food and drinks</i>	43
SEASONAL RITES AND TRADITIONS	44
SPIRITS AND DEMONS LIVING IN NATURE.....	47
<i>Semi-divine deities</i>	49
<i>White Giorgi and St George</i>	50
ZOROASTRIAN DEITIES IN GEORGIA.....	51
<i>Supreme god Armazi</i>	52
<i>Ainina, Danina and Zaden</i>	52
<i>Nino, Nana, Nane</i>	53

CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY.....	55
SAINT NINO.....	55
EARLY CHRISTIANITY	56
CONCLUSIONS.....	58
BIBLIOGRAPHY	60
RESÜMEE: EELKRISTLIKUD USKUMUSED JA TRADITSIOONID GRUUSIAS	63
FIGURES	66

Foreword

Iav-Nana, Vardo Nana, Iav Naninao
(*Georgian lullaby*)

Many of the oldest legends about historical and religious places on Earth are somehow connected to Caucasus. On the Armenian mountain (today in Turkey), on the mount Ararat was the Noah's Arch. The Garden of Eden was believed to be situated in the Southern Azerbaijan. But Georgia is believed to be the land of gods.

There is a legend about how Georgians got their land. While God gave the pieces of land to different nations, then Georgians were having *supra* (traditional feast). When they finally got to god, he had already given all the lands, but since Georgians were embracing god with songs and poems during their *supra*, god gave them the most beautiful piece of land that he had kept for himself.

In the northern mountains of Georgia Prometheus (Amirani in Georgian tradition) was chained to the rocks, for he had brought wisdom of fire to people.

Legends and traditions are still connected and living on in everyday life in the Caucasus.

During my travels in the Georgian mountains I have collected many interesting customs, traditions and beliefs that I wanted to study more carefully and therefore I started this research, to learn about the source of these beliefs and traditions.

There are many people that I owe my gratitude for keeping me inspired and motivated during my research. It was not easy to gather information about traditions dating back for 2-3 millennia or from the collective memory of today's Georgians. I thank my friend, American poet Lyn Coffin for empowering and inspiring me to start with this topic, prof Gia Jokhadze for guiding me to the first sources and to put down the first notes about this research, my teacher Mrs. Nino Jagodnishvili for introducing me the language and culture and Mrs. Signe Kruus for keeping me motivated during my research.

Introduction

Georgia is one of the oldest Christian countries in the world. After Christian Armenia, Georgia converted to Christianity in the middle of 4th century. Before Christianity it has been a land with long history and traditions, with not many written studies about its earlier religions. The monuments of the early writings about Georgia are „Conversion of Kartli” (written from 5th to 7th century), “The martyrdom of St Shushanik” (5th century) and „The Life of Kartli” (*kartlis tskhovreba*, 11th century).

The oldest traces of human habitation, dating back 1.77 million years, were found near Dmanisi, in eastern Georgia, and provided insights into the development of *homo erectus*. It means that Caucasus is not only the first settlement of Christianity but also the beginnings of human race in general.

Object of research

The main focus of this research is to make an inquiry into original Georgian beliefs, developed and spread during many centuries before world religions. The main question is to find out if there is still something left from the pre-Christian beliefs, to find the roots of some peculiar customs and traditions. Georgia is strongly and sincerely Orthodox country and from inside it is difficult to see the relations with older beliefs. I presume that today’s Christianity and pagan beliefs are strongly blended into each other and it is still possible to find the remains of the older beliefs and traditions, specially in more remote mountain areas, where Christianity was adopted only in the 12th century.

Research methods

My research is based mainly on literature sources, enriching them with evidence collected on interviews and observations during my travels in the most remote settlements in the Georgian Caucasus during 2011 – 2012.

There are little written documents about older periods than Christianity, therefore mapping out these old beliefs and finding the connections to today’s traditions has been

quite challenging. Many of the older documents have been destroyed, other documents are reconstructions. There are still many archeological data of ancient settlements and some research about them that is a valuable source of information.

Interpreting ancient symbols and reasoning the traditions is not clear. Golan (2003) explains that a methodology in this particular field of research is not developed and publications on ancient symbolism often rely on weak arguments. That causes scholars avoiding going deep into the matter, and special studies are quite rare.

As I experienced, interview is rather difficult method of research in this case, since truly Orthodox people cannot say anything about their pagan traditions, since they don't see the traces back to pre-Christian times. It is still possible to make some observations though and enriching this collected data with written documents and other earlier research.

As the result of this research there is some initial description of facts collected on fieldwork and literature on the subject. In-depth comparison would be out of the scope of this paper and left for the future studies.

Main sources of the research

Examples of the ancient religious symbols used today are mainly from the more remote areas, such as mountain villages in Svaneti, Tusheti and Khevsureti (all of them on the southern slopes of the Great Caucasus, in northern Georgia), but also from other areas in Georgia and Caucasus. Here and there I use comparisons with Ossetian, Dagestanian, Armenian and Persian religious history, since they have influenced each other's traditions a lot. Although Armenians belong to Indo-European group of peoples and language and Georgians are in unique Kartvelian group (together with Megrelians, Svans and Lazi). One of the main authors that I refer in my work is Ariel Golan, Jewish researcher, author of "Myth and Symbol" and "Prehistoric Religion". He has studied prehistoric religions and has made comparative studies in different geographical areas and in different religions, based on archeological sources. Golan is in his works sometimes too emotional in his criticism towards other authors and sources, but since he is so detailed in his comparative studies, I have relied on his works.

In my study I have compared the researches of prehistoric religions with more specialized authors that have studied especially Georgian traditions, religions and history, such as David Marshall Lang, Oliver Wardrop, Mariam Gvelesiani and others.

One important resource is the folk tales, collected by Marjory Wardrop, in the 1860-s and by Georgian national poet Vazha Pshavela (late 19th century – early 20th century), who has written his poems mostly on the basis of oral folk poetry and legends of Georgian mountain tribes. In these folk tales many stories are told about the old deities, nature spirits and how people communicated with the nature and spirits.

As Mariam Gvelesiani from Georgian National Museum explains, until recent times, very little is known about the cults and religious systems of pre-historic Georgia, archeological researches and interpretations of pre-historic cults have based on ethnographic studies, leaving aside comparisons with other disciplines or other cultures outside Georgia.

There are more written resources about Armenian, Persian ancient religions in the south of Georgia and also Dagestan, Ossetian ancient beliefs in the north. These cultures have been strongly connected though there are crucial differences nationwide. Outside of the Urartian sphere, closer to the Caucasus main range are no written materials, so most of the studies have to rely on archeology, combined with the myths and legends of Prometheus, Medea and the Argonauts.

Gvelesiani and others researchers think that local pre-Christian records did exist, perhaps using some old languages, dialects or old scripts, but these writings have been destroyed by the early Christians.

Why this topic of research?

Personal interest towards this area, its traditions, languages and folklore, especially after living there more than one year has attracted my academic attention and therefore I started to study about the religions of this area in depth.

Secondly, Estonian officials have always shown strong interest towards Caucasus, especially Georgia and the cultural and official ties are strong between the countries, so it is important to learn about the culture and therefore the results of this research may be of some interest for these officials as well.

Third reason is my personal interest towards pre-Christian religions, early Christianity and the birth or change of traditions in the collective mind, together with interest towards different old religions, diffusion of eras and religions, inter-religious communication. Ancient traditions and religious rituals and beliefs that I noted in Georgia inspired me to start with this research. I saw history combined with modern customs and I was interested how peoples' identity is connected with ethnography, geographical area and their mystical and/or religious beliefs.

Besides, as Ariel Golan has pointed out, the rites and religions of Africa, the ethnography and religions of eastern Asia and exotic islands in the Pacific are usual topics of research. Less attention has been given to the early religious concepts of the Old World's populations.

First I give brief introduction of the historical and geographical background of Georgia, and also the development of different religions in Georgia, through different ages. The development of traditions and religions are tightly connected with the history and geographical situation.

In the second part I give some insights to the archeological finds and folklore that help us in this kind of research. There are no written documents from prehistoric period that we can cite, but analysis of different archeological finds and of folklore give researchers the information about prehistoric beliefs and traditions.

In the third and the most capacious part of this research I try to describe mythology of Georgia and Caucasus, the main deities and beliefs as described by earlier authors, enriching it with examples of what is still left until today.

Last part is dedicated on conversion to Christianity and describes the early years of Christianity in Georgia.

Historical and geographical background

Georgia is situated in South Caucasus, between two mountain ranges and two seas, the Greater Caucasus in the north, Lesser Caucasus in the south. Highland geography is the prime cause of several special features of the region.

Caucasus region marks the boundary between Europe to the north and Asia to the south. The geographical situation supports keeping the traditions (see figure 1).

The Black and Caspian Sea have opened up the region to trade and invasion from both Europe and Asia. For centuries, the South Caucasus was located on the major east-west trade routes between Europe and Asia, forming the “lesser silk-road” passing through the ancient cities of Mtskheta, Uplistsikhe, Vardzia, by the river Kura.

The ethnic diversity contains of a mixture of nationalities that live within a relatively compact area. The Arabs called the Caucasus “the mountains of languages” – the North and South Caucasus together have the greatest density of distinct languages anywhere on earth. For this reason it is continuously interesting area for political, economical and cultural reasons.

Ancestors of modern Georgians inhabited southern Caucasus and northern Asia Minor since neolith (starting approx. from 10 000 BC). They are referred to as Proto-Kartvelian tribes, whose origins are still quite unclear. Proto-Kartvelians were bordered by Zykhs tribes to the north-west (those were Proto-Adygh ancestors of modern Adygh and Apsua), Proto-Nakhs (ancestors of modern Chechens and some Daghestani peoples) to the north-east, Proto-Armenians to the south-east and Aramaeic-speaking tribes to the south and south-west (De Waal, 2010).

Between 2100 and 750 BC, the area survived the invasions by the Hittites, Celts, Medes, Proto-Persians and Cimmerians. At the same period, the ethnic unity of Proto-Kartvelians broke up into several branches, among them Svan, Zan and East-Kartvelian ones.

That finally led to the formation of modern Kartvelian languages: Georgian (originating from East Kartvelian), Svan, Megrelian and Laz (the latter two originating from Zan dialects).

After the collapse of the Hittite empire in 1200 BC formed ethnic and tribal groupings which marked the beginnings of the modern Georgian and Armenian nations. Before the forming of the kingdom of Georgia, the area consisted of two countries – Kingdom of Colchis in west and Kingdom of Kartli (Iberia for ancient Greek and Romans) in east (see Figure 2). Georgians called their country Kartli after Kartlos, the mythical progenitor of the nation (Gvelesiani, 2012).

The Caucasus has its own identity. It can be the metaphor for the beginnings of civilization as well as the metaphor for wild barbarity. Anthropologists identify its customs and traditions fairly easily, and they get more marked the closer to the mountains one gets. The Caucasian nationalities share similar wedding and funeral ceremonies, and all mark the fortieth day after the death of a loved one with similar rituals. The same elaborate rituals of hospitality and toasting are found across the region, even among Muslim Azerbaijanis.

Ethnic and religious differences were always there but are much more accentuated by modern politics. A century ago, attitudes toward religion could be deeply pragmatic. The émigré historian Aytok Namitok (1937) wrote: “Common shrines revered by followers of both religions are by no means rare. The tomb of St George in the Church of Mokus-Su and the Christian shrine of Dzivar are honored by both Georgians and Armenians on the one hand and by Azerbaijani and Muslim Kurds on the other. According to a local tradition the former was built by a Christian and a Muslim shepherd. Similarly the Muslim shrine of Pir-Dovgan (Saint Dovgan) was revered as earnestly by the Armenians as by the Muslims.” (De Waal, 2010).

There is a long tradition of decentralization, which comes with the landscape. In Georgia, mountain people in Svaneti, Khevsureti or Tusheti were barely linked to central rule from Tbilisi until the modern era. They have their own special traditions, folklore and even their own way of ruling the area, including tribal laws. They have always lived their life according to the seasonal work with the cattle and flock, this has given contacts and also the borders with different other ethnic groups in the mountains. Still now the Khevsurs, Tushis and Svans hold their old animistic beliefs, since neighboring peoples are strongly Christians or Muslims.

Since the ancient times there was a belief that Caucasus is a kind of a border between different nations, ethnic groups, empires and social systems. In Greek mythology it expresses a distant edge of the world, where the gods banish the Prometheus, who brought the fire to peoples. Koran names the Caucasus as mountainous land behind which live robbers from Gog and Magog peoples that are kept away only by the giant metal wall (King, 2008). By the metal wall is possibly meant the Great Caucasus, which is rich of metals and that was known already to the ancient peoples.

Not only Georgia and the South Caucasus, but also the tribes and ethnic groups in the North Caucasus had much in common between them – lifestyle, dressing, religious beliefs, customs. Many different ethnic groups shared the same folk tales about the Narts – giants that inhabited the Caucasus before humans came there. Many groups in Caucasus had their own code of ethics that gave the guidelines for relationships, gender roles, behavior, and to which they still refer. As the tribes in the Georgian mountains, so the ethnic groups in Dagestan, Checheny, Ossetia and Abkhazia have hold to their traditional animistic beliefs even during Christianity and Islam.

Brief overview of the religious history in the Caucasus

Overview

Historically, Georgia has been at a crossroads of major religions and religious movements. In the pre-Christian epoch, pagan religions, Mazdaism, Judaism and elements of Greek and Roman religions existed on the territory of Georgia; eastern Georgia was more under the influence of Mazdaism while the west remained firmly under the Greek and Roman sway. Christianity was introduced and spread in the 1st – 3rd centuries and was proclaimed the state religion in the middle of 4th century.

During the Arab and Persian rules, Christianity dominated in Georgian feudal culture. Christianity destroyed the monuments of pagan Georgian art (temples, sculptures, written documents), but in the same time developed rapidly in the sphere of Christian culture and art. Georgian unique alphabet was introduced during the early years of Christianity, on the 4th century. Bible was translated into Georgian from Greek, Syrian and Hebrew (Silogava, 2007).

In the 7th century, the Arab armies introduced Islam, which shaped Georgian cultural and political life for the next 1300 years. Protestantism and Buddhism spread in the 20th century but remain limited to small groups.

Different religions in Georgia have not definitely been following each other chronologically. Often they have existed together, in the same time. In this chapter I will give a short overview of different religions in Georgia during different periods in history.

Paganism

Different studies have shown that the genesis of different mythologies lead to the Neolithic religion, which developed among the early agriculture in the Near East and Asia Minor from the 10th to 4th millennia BC (Golan, 2003). In the primitive mind, every object and every action were mythicized, they were seen in systems of some mystery connections.

In Georgia, as well as in many other ancient religions, human sacrifices were made for the mother goddess. The mother goddess was believed to be cruel, and the life and

wellbeing of humans depended on her, so it was needed to make sacrifices for her. In Uplistsikhe, one of the biggest ancient settlements in Georgia, a temple with an altar was revealed, where archeologists believe the human sacrifices were made.

Ancient people also believed in spirits that lived in stones, underground, in the woods, in the mountains and in the rivers. Everything in the nature was the result of the gods' and spirits' deeds. Old native deities were soon assimilated with Greek and Roman paganism, the cults were overtook and gods similar to the Greek and Roman pantheon.

The Vainakh people of the North Caucasus (that include modern Chechens and Ingush, who are today predominantly Muslims), have preserved in their folklore a substantial amount of information about their pre-historic pagan beliefs. Vainakh practiced their own pagan religion, which was a mixture of different cults, including animism and polytheism, familial-ancestral and agrarian and funereal cults. They worshiped trees and believed that those are the abode of invisible spirits. Vainakhs developed many rituals to serve particular trees. The pear tree held a special place in the faith of Vainakhs (Golan, 2003).

Zoroastrianism

Persians introduced Zoroastrianism to Georgia during the 3rd century.

Feudal rulers were replaced by the central authority, head of the state was also guardian of the sacred fire, the symbol of national religion (Silogava, 2007). Fire was holy in Zoroastrianism, but it did not involve sun worship. The underworld god was considered immortal, eternal – hence the ancient custom among various cultures to maintain perpetual fire in temples (Golan, 2003). Azerbaijan's ancient Zoroastrian fire-temples burned on flammable gas issuing from oil deposits underground. It is known that both Armenians and Georgians used to go there to pray at the fire temples. (See more about in chapter "Fire".)

The memory of heroes and great events were preserved in the form of epic poetry which was orally transmitted by poets. The invisible world for Zoroastrians was filled with occult powers, gods, angels (as messengers), spirits, demons and demoniac monsters of many kinds (Ananikian, 2010).

The prevalence of Mazdaism in Georgia is confirmed by the archeological evidence, which includes five silver bowls discovered at Armazi, depicting the sacrificial figure of a horse standing before the Mithraic ritual fire-altar (Lang, 1966). Archeological findings show that Zoroastrianism was predominating religion in both kingdoms – Kartli and Colchis, although in the mountains tribes had other cults, maintaining older versions of paganism.

Christianity

Christianity emerged in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire in the 1st century. Initially most of the followers were the poor and needy. In the beginning of 4th century western part of Georgia still was ruled by Roman Empire. Emperor Constantine I the Great adopted Christianity and soon after Christianity became the national religion in Roman Empire. After that Christianity was spread actively throughout the empire. During 327-332 years Georgia officially converted to Christianity.

Georgians' new faith replaced Greek and Roman pagan and Zoroastrian beliefs. As was true elsewhere, the Christian church in Georgia was crucial to the development of a written language, and most of the earliest written works were religious texts. Christianity became so popular that even Zoroastrian books were burned during the first decades of Christianity.

During the same time Persians tried to reinforce their rule in Georgia and soon tried to replace the Christian church again with fire-worshipping. The oldest Georgian literature from that time is “The martyrdom of St Shushanik” – about noble lady Shushanik who died by torture since she refused to accept Zoroastrian religion.

The Georgian and Armenian Christian Orthodox churches split and followed different creeds from the 7th century.

The Church of Western Georgia remained under the Patriarchate of Constantinople. The Eastern Georgia Church was ruled by Catholicos. The two Georgian churches were united in 11th century, by king David the Builder and Catholicos of Eastern Georgia was elected as the ruling bishop of the united church with the title of Catholicos-Patriarch. Constantinople recognized the autocephaly of the united Georgian church only in 1990.

Islam

In the second half of the 7th century, when the Arabs first invaded the Caucasus, Islam was introduced into this region. Islam transformed from a religious sect to an imperial power very fast. Iran was taken under Arab rule in 641 and soon after Georgians followed, although it didn't become popular among people. In 1236, Mongols arrived to Eastern Georgia. Thereafter, two Muslim powers, the Persian and Ottoman empires, dominated the region until the Russian Empire in the early 1800s. Eastern Georgia was under the Persian rule and Western Georgia under the Ottoman Empire. The Christian character of Armenians and Georgians did not change much. Under the Iranian Safavids, Georgian monarchs and lords converted to Islam, in rather nominal fashion, while the rest of society remained Christian.

This early Islam remained strongly among locals only in Dagestan, where some of the local leaders knew their ancestors through many centuries and where Arabic was the language of culture until recently. Traditional religious beliefs (local sanctuaries, sacred trees and waters) assimilated the Islam, creating unique kind of public Islam (King, 2008).

Both Georgians and Armenians also have long traditions of accommodation with Islam. There are good relationships between Christian countries in Caucasus and Islamic Republic of Iran. There are also both Armenian and Georgian Muslims. The Georgians of Ajaria on the Georgian Black Sea coast, which was part of the Ottoman Empire for more than two hundred years, are mostly Muslim. For several centuries, Georgian kings and aristocrats converted to Islam and served the Iranian Safavid dynasty, while the feudal lords of the Jakeli family in Meskhia were Muslims who served the Ottoman Sultans. These Georgian princes were probably Christian at home and Muslim in public (De Waal, 2010).

Today

Today 84% of the population is Georgian Orthodox. Armenian Apostolic Church has 4% of the population and Muslims are 10%. Roman Catholic and Jews are less than 1%.

Muslims are both Shias (Azeris in the southeast) and Sunnis (in the southwest).

Large minority of Armenians (about 500,000) belong to Armenian Apostolic Church.

Catholic missionaries, who were often Italians, frequently visited Georgia and Caucasus in the 17th century. At various periods there were French, Italian, German and Polish Catholics in Georgia. Today, Georgian Catholics live mostly in southern Georgia.

The first Jews appeared in Georgia 6th century BC, during escape from the Babylonian conquest. Ever since that time, Jews have lived in Georgia. In the 1970s many left for Israel, but many remained.

Two Protestant Lutheran Churches are in Tbilisi.

Example of the religious tolerance is seen in the Old Tbilisi, where in a short distance from each other are located Georgian Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic Churches, a Jewish Synagogue and a Muslim Mosque, as well as Catholic Church and Russian Orthodox Church.

Resources from antiquity

Findings from Stone Age and Bronze Age

The ancient history of the Caucasus is fairly mysterious. The region is rich of archeological findings that indicate continuous settlement since ancient times. Some of the earliest-ever skulls, dating back 1.8 million years were discovered by archeologists in Dmanisi in southern Georgia. There was a rich stone-age culture in the region around 6000 BC. All this numerous archeological records make it possible to reconstruct the deities and cults in some way, and thereby give us the clue about pre-historic religions in Georgia.

From ancient settlements in Amiranisgora we have some archeological findings, including bull figurines and female figurines from 3000 BC. Numerous clay figurines of oxen, rams, barking dogs and horses refer to various forms of animal worship, accompanied by sacrifices and other ritual observances (Lang, 1966).

Trialeti Bronze Age culture, about 2100 BC, has shown us huge burial grounds. These are the graves of chiefs and princes of rich pastoral tribes. Their cremated remains, sometimes reposing on or near a wooden oxen-drawn four-wheel cart, burial pits up to 25 feet deep, accompanied by remains of cattle and sheep, beautiful painted pottery, and ornaments and vessels of gold and silver. Each of these barrow tombs shelters one body only. The extreme rarity of weapons shows that these are tombs of chiefs of a peaceful population, people devoted to agriculture, cattle and hunting (Lang, 1966).

The Bronze Age culture in West Georgia is characterized by a large number of dolmen burial structures, of which the best known is at Esheri, between Sokhumi and Gudauta. These dolmens are usually formed from five enormous blocks of stone, 8 feet high and 12 feet long. The front block has an oval hole, usually about 18 inches in diameter. Tallgren (1934) suggests that this holes purpose is to admit fresh corpses and presumably also to permit the souls of the deceased to depart into the world to come (Lang, 1966).

Golan argues that these oval portholes of the dolmens were a symbol of the goddess, who associated both with birth and death (Golan, 2003).

An instance of Anatolian cults in Georgia is provided by a silver goblet from Trialeti, which has a pattern representing a procession of masked hierophants with a high priest enthroned between an enormous goblet-shaped vessel and a sacred tree, possibly a cedar. It may be a representation of a Hittite fertility cult, and that the high priest and its followers are preparing some magic potion of immortality (Lang, 1966).

From the Colchian culture we have bronze belt buckles from 900 BC, with animal figure in the centre. This beast is commonly shown with its head turned backwards, front legs bent, the back part of the body raised up and the stomach arched. It is argued that this beast represents a wolf-totem and is connected with the ancient beliefs of the Caucasian mountaineers. In Kazbegi were discovered significant ithyphallic figures, that are frequently discussed by archeologists and anthropologists. They may be connected with the erotic and orgiastic cults and festivals such as the *Berikoba* and *Murqvamoba* – regularly celebrated until recent times among the Pshavs, Khevsurs, Svans and other Georgian mountain tribes, and with the cult of the **fertility god Kviria** (Lang, 1966).

Ancient objects with images and designs were of cultic purpose, not for esthetic value. Ancient graphic symbols that had some kind of religious meaning, were sometimes hidden from people. For example, in old Georgian houses the ornamental patterns were located on the fireplace in such a way that sometimes they could not be seen, since it was more important to have these images face the fire (Golan, 2003).

There are many symbols of a hand in different places in Caucasus. It is considered as the **Hand of God**. Mountain Georgians as Tushis, Khevsurs and also Avars in Dagestan used to sever the right hand of enemy and to affix it to the entrance of a house. In medieval times also steles with hands were used at the borders between estates, to symbolize power, ownership. Hand image also connoted some magic (Golan, 2003).

It was not only faith in the magic power of the images that made them so significant. By using these patterns, people recorded and made themselves understandable to their contemporaries and to future generations. As a result, these symbols played the role of keeping the collective memory and were of importance for relationships between members of the society. Ancient symbols are very consistent against the background of changes in cult and ideology. The pagan symbols have survived until 19th century among

Caucasians, despite the many centuries of domination by Christianity and Islam (Golan, 2003).

Myths

Literally mythology means “storytelling”. Pagan religions are based on oral tradition, while non-pagan religions are textually recorded and could therefore be canonized (Golan, 2003).

Pagan Kartli and Colchis were centers of an active and varied religious life, in which Anatolian cults of the ancient proto-Georgian tribes merged with elements of popular creeds and with Greek and Zoroastrian Iran cosmogonies to form an original synthesis of ritual and belief, portions of which survived the introduction of Christianity and went underground into the recess of peasant consciousness (Lang, 1966).

Ancient Colchis and Kartli cults and beliefs were probably connected to those of the Hittites, Phrygians, Sumerians, Assyrians and Babylonians. K. Sikhuralidze (1972) suggests that perhaps in the distant past, there was a general culture of the Caucasus. Study of Kartvelian and Vainakh mythologies indicates this similarity implicit in the legends of the battles of titans and gods.

Greek myths associated with the Caucasus

At the end of the 3rd century BC, Alexander the Great established a vast Greco-Macedonian empire to the south of the Caucasus. Neither Kartli (Iberia in Greek), nor Colchis were incorporated into the empire of Alexander or any of the Hellenistic states. However, both ancient Georgian kingdoms were greatly influenced by ancient Greek culture.

Colchis and the Caucasian mountains were familiar to the Greeks already in the Homeric age (800 BC). The best known Greek myths associated with Georgia and the Caucasus are the legend of Prometheus, chained to Caucasus mountains by the jealous gods, and that of Jason and his band of Argonauts, their voyage in the quest of the Golden Fleece, and the tragedy of the Colchian princess Medea.

To gain the kingdom **Jason** had to find the fleece of a magical ram that once belonged to Zeus, the king of gods. Fleeces are connected with magic in many folk traditions. For the ancient Etruscans a gold colored fleece was a prophecy of future prosperity for the clan. Recent discoveries about the Hittite Empire in Bronze Age Anatolia show celebrations where fleeces were hung to renew royal power. This can offer insight into Jason's search for the fleece. The fleece represented kinship and prosperity. Also it was probably known already from these times that the Caucasus mountains were rich of gold. The mountain peoples still today filter the gold from mountain rivers with a sheep fleece.

These legends were first discussed by Greek geographer Strabo (64 BC – 21 AD), who explained the historical and economic reality together with the geographical places and the legends.

The Argonaut story was spoken through centuries as folk legend, finally composed by Apollonius Rhodius in the 3rd century BC. This story of *Argonautica* is full of details about the tribes by the Black Sea coast, affirms the findings of archeology and the references in the Hittite, Assyrian and Urartian sources (Lang, 1966).

The myth of Amirani

Apollonius Rhodius put down yet another Caucasian myth – that of **Prometheus**, who was bound to the cliffs of Caucasus, a prey to the eagle who swooped down each evening to feast on the captive titan's liver.

Like the legend of Golden Fleece, the Prometheus myth also has its roots in pre-Homeric times and is connected with ancient mining and metallurgy. All the Caucasian peoples have their own version of the story. Some scholars think that the Prometheus legend is a product of the national traditions of the Caucasian peoples, who passed it on to Greek settlers while themselves handing it down locally through ages by the village story-tellers (Lang, 1966).

In the Georgian version the rebellious titan is named **Amirani**. He is the son of Dali, a Caucasian goddess of the hunt, and a mortal hunter. According to the Svan version, the hunter's wife learned about her husband's affair with Dali and killed her by cutting her

hair while she was asleep. At Dali's death, the hunter extracted from her womb a boy whom he called Amirani. The child had marks of his semi-divine origins with symbols of the Sun and the Moon on his shoulder-blades and a golden tooth.

Myths describe the rise of the titan Amirani, who challenges the gods, kidnapps Kamar, a symbol of divine fire, and teaches metallurgy to humans. In punishment, the gods (in some versions, Jesus Christ) chain Amirani to a cliff (or an iron pole) in the Caucasus mountains, where the titan continues to defy the gods and struggles to break the chains; an eagle ravages his liver every day, but it heals itself every night. Amirani's loyal dog Kursha licks the chain to thin it out, but every year, on Thursday or in some versions the day before Christmas, the gods send smiths to repair it. In some versions, every seven years the cave, where Amirani is chained, can be seen in the Caucasus.

Scholars agree that folk epic about Amirani must have been formed in the first Iron Age (3rd millennium BC) and later went through numerous transformations, the most important of them being mixing pagan and Christian elements after the spread of Christianity. The myth could have been assimilated by the Greek colonists or travelers and embodied in the corpus of the famous Greek mythos of Prometheus. In the Georgian literature and culture, Amirani is often used as a symbol of Georgian nation, its experience and struggle for survival (Mikaberidze; Lang, 1966).

It was still recently believed that some humans received magic gifts or had divine signs from the gods. The signs were usually made on shoulder-blades (as Amirani) and glowed with magic light, empowering their possessor. However, humans had to cover and keep them in secret since revealing them meant losing their power.

Georgian paganism and nature-worship

To the modern mind, magic rites are impractical and even absurd. But for primitive thinking they were considered essential for influencing reality. Successful hunting depended on skilful worship of wood-goddess or hunter's divinity. Primitive thinking is virtually irrational, for the primitive mind, the word is as effective as action (Golan, 2003).

Georgian folklore, myths and tales are filled with old religious ideas and beliefs. The divine characters of these tales and legends have the qualities and appearances of human beings and neither descend into the underground or ascend to heaven, they meet and speak to the sun, the moon, and the stars. Originally every tribe had their special primitive tribal deities, but they were mixed and confused after the uniting the tribal states to one Georgia (Silogava, 2007). Therefore there are some differences in the legends and in the qualities of some deities, depending where they originate from.

Cosmology

All writers agree that pagans worshiped the *elementa*. Under this term were included not only the four simple substances which by their opposition and blending caused all phenomena of the visible world, but also the stars and in general the elements of all celestial and earthly bodies (Cumont, 1956).

In ancient Georgian cosmology, the universe is sphere-shaped and consists of three vertically superposed worlds: *zeskneli* as the upper, **celestial** world of supreme deities (sky god, later named as weather god, in Christianity the Archangels, St Giorgi, St Elias and others). The lowest was *qveskneli*, the **underworld**, the world of the dead, populated first by pagan female deities, personifications of natural elements. Between them was the **earthly** world with humans, animals, plants, etc. Each of these three worlds has its own color, white for the highest, red for the middle and black for the lowest. Beyond this

universe is *gareskneli* or the world of total forgetfulness, darkness and eternity, the outerworld (Abakelia, 2008).

The earthly world has a center which divides it into two regions, anterior (*tsina samkaro*, *tsinaskneli*) and posterior (*ukana samkaro* or *ukanaskneli*). The three vertical worlds are separated by heavens, but they are connected by the Tree of Life that grows on the edge of the universe (in some versions, a tower, chain or pillar). The various lands of the earthly world are usually separated by seven or nine mountains or seas. To travel between these lands a hero must undergo a spiritual transformation and seek help of magical animals.

After the spread of Christianity, pagan cosmology combined with the Christian teachings. The *zeskneli* became heaven and home of the Trinity while *qveskneli* turned into hell and home of devil. The spiritual travel to these worlds became associated with death (Mikaberidze).

The sun and moon

It was believed that **the sun** makes its voyage between the two extreme worlds, the celestial and the subterranean. The **moon** makes the same journey as the sun but in the opposite direction and rhythm. The sun and the moon are, respectively, brother and sister. Ancient belief says that during the night the sun shines on the world of dead, going through the underworld. Armenian folklore says: “At sunset the sun is the portion of the dead. It enters the sea and passing under the earth, emerges in the morning at the other side” (Ananikian, 2010).

Greek geographer Strabo (*Geographica* II) speaks of a temple of the **sun-goddess** Leucothea and an oracle of Phrixus in the land of the Moskhi (the Samtskhe province of Georgia). The people of the eastern regions of Georgia shared with the Caucasian Albanians (in modern Azerbaijan) a cult of the sun and moon, similar to Helios and Selene in Greek mythology. According to Strabo, an important moon temple was situated near Iberia, probably in the Alazani valley. The chief priest of the **moon-goddess** was held in high honor, having charge of extensive tracts of temple lands and also of the temple slaves, many of whom were subject to religious frenzy, and uttered prophecies.

Every year a human sacrifice was offered up to the moon-goddess, the victim being pierced through the heart with the sacred lance, after which auguries were drawn from his fall and the body trampled underfoot as a means of ritual purification (Lang, 1966). The moon cult lives on in Georgia to this day, having become merged with that of St Giorgi, patron saint of Georgia, who is often revered as a lunar deity under the name of White Giorgi (see more in chapter “White Giorgi”).

The ancient holy trinity

There are findings that heaven god as well as the earth god was seen as a **trinity**. There are many signs that show the three parts. Fireplaces from the 1st millennium BC had three compartments, and male deity symbols were found next to these fireplaces (Golan, 2003). Ahura Mazda (a personification of the world’s positive principle), Mithra (an incarnation of light), and Anahit (the goddess of fertility) were supreme deities in Zoroastrianism. Pre-Christian temples had three chambers dedicated to three major gods. It was adopted by the Christians. Early medieval churches (from 8th century) in Georgia had three parallel sections, in 10th-11th century the halls were united to form a common inner space, though two lateral compartments were preserved, containing rudiments of former altars. The assumption that the Neolithic religion had a notion of three annual phases of the heaven goddess and of the earth god is based on the rudimentary evidence of annual festival rites inherited from the early farming epoch. The concept of Trinity is connected with the triple nature of the goddess (Golan, 2003).

Probably later, during early Christianity, the nature spirits, ancient deities and Christian god mixed into Georgian mythology. As the **Ghmerti** being the supreme divinity, head of the pantheon of gods, lord of the universe. According to the mythos, Ghmerti is all-powerful and created the universe. He lives on the ninth sky, where he resides on a golden throne. His daughter, the Sun, and son, the Moon, illuminate the earth while his other offspring, *khvtis-shvilni*, wander the earth, protecting humans and fighting the evil forces. Ghmerti controls the nature and animals and he determines the length and events of every human’s life. Ghmerti often was called Morige Ghmerti (“God the Director”) or Dambadebeli (“the Creator”). Following the spread of Christianity, the cult of Ghmerti

quickly merged with the identity of God the Father and the word “ghmert” is still used for God in the Christian tradition (Mikaberidze).

The Great Mother Goddess

A. Golan explains that the heaven god’s origin is from earlier times, from the Neolithic period. The worship of the Great Mother of nature, the goddess of fertility, was common to various geographic regions in prehistoric times. Archeological findings show that the most ancient cult of **Great Mother Goddess** worship has been about 5th millennium BC, in Mesopotamia, Iran, Asia Minor, Armenia and Georgia (findings from Khramis Didi Gora).

Great Mother Goddess, in ancient Middle Eastern religions, was mother goddess, the great symbol of the earth's fertility, she gave and protected all forms of life, dominated over the nature and wilderness, and she resided on high mountains. Essentially she was represented as the creative force in all nature, the mother of everything, responsible particularly for the periodic renewal of life. The later forms of her cult involved the worship of a male deity, variously considered her son, lover, or both, whose death and resurrection symbolized the regenerative powers of the earth. Many attributes of the Virgin Mary make her the Christian equivalent of the Great Mother Goddess, particularly in her great beneficence, in her double image as mother and virgin, and in her son, who is God and who dies and is resurrected (James, 1959). Medieval Georgian chants “**the mother of god, you are the Moon**” apply to the Virgin as the most remote Great Mother Goddess (Gvelesiani, 2008).

Goodison (1998) explains that the Neolithic Great Mother was a lunar goddess who gives life as the waxing moon and then takes life as the waning moon. The goddess’s lunar mythology was seen in the light and dark dimensions of her power, her horned headdress, and her dying and resurrected sun-lover (Gvelesiani, 2012).

White was the color of the Great Goddess. Prehistoric people believed that death occurred when the goddess wished it, so white was also associated with death (Golan, 2003). It is still a custom in Dagestan to lay white flag over the grave or in the place of death. White minerals were believed to be special, linked with sanctity and with death. In

the Caucasus highlands, white stones are still now placed on graves and also on the springs (see Figure 3).

Roman writer Arrian described the statue of mother goddess (he referred to it as mother goddess Rhea) at the entrance of the Phasis (modern Poti), on the Black sea coast in Colchis. The goddess' statue had a tympanum in her hands and two lions standing aside (Lordkipanidze, 2000; Lang, 1966).

On the archeological site from Dedoplist Mindori (queen's field), a huge temple was revealed, together with nine minor temples. Gagoshidze (1981) dates this sanctuary to 1st – 2nd century BC and assumes the main temple being a Kartli version of Zoroastrian fire-temple. It is supposed that the kings and queens of Kartli considered themselves as the earthly representatives of the gods worshipped in the kingdom of Kartli. Numerous skulls of stags, goats and wild bears were found from the main temple, probably sacrificed to the great mother of gods.

Near the Dedoplist Mindori temple site there is an early 10th century Christian Church that has been a venue for pagan rites connected to fertility and childbirth. As Gagoshidze explains, to have milk for their newborn babies, women rubbed oil into grape-bunch figures on the columns (Gvelesiani, 2012).

Also M. Dhalla (1938) agrees that Anahita (as the mother goddess) “gives fruitfulness to women, she purifies the seeds and wombs. She is divine giver, gives easy childbirth to females as well as right and timely milk”.

Many different archeological findings suggest evidence that the Great Mother Goddess was venerated in Georgia. The bull-headed altar in Katlanikhevi (one of the oldest settlements, near Uplistsikhe) suggests of having offered bulls to the goddesses. All of the archeological records from different ancient sites indicate to continuous chain of the worship of the Great Mother Goddess in Georgia. That is in common trends with practices in other countries (Gvelesiani, 2012).

Great Mother Nana

Great Mother Nana was principally a goddess of fertility, although the differences in her cults vary widely. The wide range of variants in the cult of mother goddess most appropriately demonstrates a process of religious assimilation.

The archeological finds of the Great Mother Nana figures have solar semantics – circular hearths, a bullock-cart wheel, discoid-shaped items, pierced cobble-stones etc.

Findings from Bronze Age and Paleolithic, in the Caucasus and the Black Sea region include some feminine figurines, holding a horn in the hand. Goddesses of classical antiquity held often a horn in the hand. It may be symbolize a ritual performed by priestesses of the goddess. The rituals were intended for ensuring good for people. Both the female image and the bull image were common elements, reflecting the beliefs of the epoch (Golan, 2003).

From the Katlanikhevi archeological site were found discoid-shaped items representing the solar cult, also a clay head of a woman sculpted in high relief that is a ritual object representing the image of the Great Mother Nana, dating from the 1st millennium BC. The head's typological-iconographic traits reveal a formal closeness with the well-known sculpture of the goddess from Sumerian city Uruk, identified with the goddess Inanna, whose name in Sumerian means “Lady in Heaven” (Gvelesiani, 2008). It has been suggested that in prehistoric times Inanna and Nana were one and the same divinity or had a common origin. Khakhutaishvili (1964) interpreted these findings as an example of the solar-cult and named the building no 1 in Katlanikhevi as a shrine of the Great Mother Nana.

Ethnographer Vera Bardavelidze conducted some studies in 1950-s, referring mainly to Pshav-Khevsur tribes (North-Eastern Georgian highlands) and advanced the concept of a triad of gods consisting of the supreme male god (Moon), Mze-Kali (Sun-Woman) and Kviria (Morning star). Some later authors (as Khakhutaishvili, 1964) identified the second-in-rank goddess Mze-Kali (Sun-Woman), with Great Mother Goddess Nana, but most of the researchers come to the conclusion, that the Great Mother Nana and sun-goddess are not the same (Gvelesiani, 2012).

There is another disruptive hint from a famous saying in Megrelian folklore (in north-west Georgia): “the sun is my mother, the moon is father, shimmering stars are my

brothers and sisters”. If the Great Mother Goddess is associated with the moon, then this saying may refer to different specific traditions in Megrelian folklore or has it changed among the oral tradition.

Different researches in wider area show that the Great Mother Goddess is associated with the moon rather than with the sun. The Great Mother’s worship is undoubtedly universal. But the solar character of the Great Mother Nana has some evidence only in Georgia, so if it will be proved by further studies, it might be a national or local character.

Evidences of Nana’s function and nature can be found in Georgian fairy tales and legends. It is also suggested that the most known Georgian folk song, the lullaby refrain – “*Iav-Nana, Vardo Nana, Iav Naninao*” – is connected with the cult of Nana. Nana’s cult worship elements have been preserved in nursery rituals carried out in the treatments of smallpox and measles (*Batonebi* in Georgian). Bardavelidze (1941) points out that the *Batonebi* departure ritual is connected with the astral nature of the Great Mother Nana. Her connection with the sun is evidenced by circular movement of the ritual performers around the sick person, and dancing in a ring.

Female deities

The femininity of deities is still venerated in many ways in modern Georgians’ beliefs and traditions, it is seen in the family systems as well as the connections with heaven and waters (see more in the chapter “Heaven, water and moon ...”).

Georgians have always accorded a high place to women in their community life. This fact is symbolized by the special cults dedicated to the Virgin Mary, to Saint Nino, the Apostle of Georgia, and to Queen Tamar, symbol of Georgia’s golden age (12th century). More ancient female cults refer to the veneration of the great mother goddess and others, for example the wood-goddess Dali.

Akaba (1979) tells an Abkhazian fairy-tale where a hair of the forest nymph brings wealth to those who possess it. This motif originated in the image of the nymph’s prototype, the Great Goddess, whose spouse, the lord of the underground kingdom, owned countless riches (Golan, 2003).

Hair was generally associated both with the heaven goddess (representing rain), and with the earth god (earthly vegetation) (Golan, 2003). Chechens and Georgians have folk tales about female forest spirits that have long hair, which they love to comb. Rain and deadly ring was associated with these spirits (Wardrop, 1894).

There is still some sacral-symbolic significance attached to head hair. According to Christian custom, a woman may not enter church bare-headed. Male Europeans and Caucasians, on the other hand, bare their heads as a sign of respect. The requirement of taking one's hat off while praying or entering the temple was kept to by the Caucasian highlanders also during the pagan period.

Barbale

Barbale was a female deity of fertility and harvest, her association with cattle fertility also translated into a close relationship with human progeny and health (Mikaberidze). It is possible that the Christian **St Barbara** is from the same origin. Bardavelidze (1941) studied the origin of worship of the Christian St Barbara and found some traces in the religious rituals by the Svans (a Georgian highlanders' tribe), that the pagan astral cult of the sun-goddess Barbale, associated with the Sumerian sun divinity Babar.

In Svaneti the reproduction of cattle depends greatly upon having offered bulls to sun goddess. For Svans, the earth is owned by the sun. In all other neighboring ancient cultures the bull was connected with the moon, rather that with the sun.

Barbale, also known as Babari, Babale, or Barboli, was accordingly worshipped with festivals and other honors. *Barbaroba* (day celebrated for Barbale, St Barbara) is still today one important holiday, three weeks before Christmas. During *Barbaroba lobiani* (pie with red beans) is baked in most areas of Georgia. Red color is connected to this holiday and also to St Barbara, who is considered as the protector of children.

Dali

Dali was a female goddess of nature, animals and hunting. The cult of Dali (Dæl) was particularly widespread in mountainous regions of Georgia, specially known by Svan myths. She had often zoomorphic symbols, images of stags with her.

She was believed to be of extraordinary beauty, with long, golden hair and radiant white skin. She lives high up in the mountains, usually out of the reach of humans, where she watches over the herds of wild animals under her protection. She sometimes shared animals from her flock with hunters, as long as certain conditions and taboos were respected. Hunters were not to kill more than they can carry back to the village nor could they take aim at specially marked animals believed to be a transformation of the goddess. In some myths, Dali entered in intimate relations with a hunter but the latter could not reveal the liaison at risk of being punished with death or turned into stone. Some myths tell the love story between Dali and a mortal hunter, and the mythical hero Amirani was born as their child. In Samegrelo, Dali was known as Tkashi-Mapa (Mikaberidze). Dali corresponds to Artemis in Greek mythology and to Hattian supreme god Tali. Dali was portrayed on the first coins, used for trading on the silk road, during the 500 BC (Lang, 1966).

Kamar

Amirani epic describes Kamar as the daughter of the god of nature and sky. She was famous for her beautiful appearance, which charmed Amirani, causing him to kidnap her from her heavenly home. Elements of the myth about Kamar are similar to some parts of the Greek myth about Prometheus and the heavenly fire (Mikaberidze).

Adgilis Deda

Adgilis Deda (mother of the place, region) was a female pagan deity of various area or villages, usually considered a deity of fertility. It protected travelers and guests, and cared for harvest and cattle. After the spread of Christianity, *Adgilis deda* was transformed with the cult of Holy Mother Mary and acquired special attributes. It still remains widespread in mountainous regions of eastern Georgia (Mikaberidze).

Heaven, Water and Moon connected to Mother Goddess

As mentioned above, the Great Goddess was in heaven, heavenly waters, Moon. But she was not only in heaven. She was the whole world. Her head was heaven itself, therefore a disk became a symbol of heaven, as her head. The disk was not symbol of sky, it was the goddess emblem and therefore became the symbol of divine.

Later the disk was attached to a male god.

Heaven

Jean Przyluski, in his study on the image of the **Great Goddess**, observes that, besides her other functions, the great goddess was considered the **goddess of heaven** and of **heavenly moisture** (Golan, 2003).

The heaven goddess, the Great Goddess of the prehistoric epoch is universally symbolized with ring. In the Caucasus, a ring made of a branch was a magic instrument for ensuring reproduction of livestock. 19th century Caucasus highlanders (as well as ancient Germanics) swore oaths over a ring (Golan, 2003). It is believed that also the symbolic meaning of wedding ring has the same origins.

The circle was a sacred symbol, the symbol of the goddess, and for this reason a place for divine services was often outlined with a circle. The goddess was the mistress of life and death, it was believed that people were born and died after her will. Therefore her image was important in burial ceremonies and oldest funerals are ring-shaped (Golan, 2003).

The Avars (in Dagestan, Caucasus) used to hang a ring-shaped loaf of bread round the neck of the horse winning a race. The mythicized horse image was believed to represent the spouse of the Great Goddess (Golan, 2003).

Water

The belief in sanctity of water, or rather the mythization of water, seems to have emerged in different ancient cultures as early as during the Paleolithic (Golan, 2003).

Also today, especially in Georgian mountain-villages or remote mountain areas, water springs are sacred. People bring precious mountain-stones to the springs, sometimes they

also put Christian tomb-stones on the springs, to remember the deceived with every zip you would take from the very spring.

In Georgian traditions usually the water is described as feminine element and fire masculine. But as Ananikian (2010) describes, in Armenian folklore the fire is feminine and water is masculine. Like in Georgia, same in Armenia, many rivers and springs were sacred and had some beneficent virtues. Even now there are some sacred springs with healing power, usually called “the springs of light”. These springs are now under the patronage of Christian church and people still pray to these springs and bring candles there.

Water as the element of Mother Goddess is seen in the toponyms connecting also the mother goddess and water, e.g. *Dedoplistskaro* (meaning queen’s springs), or *Tetritskaro* (white springs).

Briffault (1927) explains, that in many ancient cultures, calling for rain was the business of priestesses, and the magical operations intended to secure a supply of rain were usually performed by women. The word “rain” was a taboo in some languages. Golan (2003) explains it that the Great Goddess, the giver of rain and fertility, was at the same time believed to be the cause of death, illness and crop failure, and this led people to think that it was unwise to attract her attention unduly.

Moon and bulls

Great goddess is connected with moon. And since bull’s horns have similar shape with the moon, bulls were venerated and offered as sacrifices throughout the Caucasus and other places in ancient times.

Mircea Eliade says that as people discovered the agricultural cycle, they came to see the earth related to the moon. In Georgia and Armenia, there have been found bull shapes and bull horn shapes that might be related to the moon, from the Bronze Age. There are even later symbols of bull’s horn and cross or moon and cross together, on Christian churches from early medieval times.

Ram was considered to be a sacred animal throughout the Old world. For Caucasians, the sheep and goats were essential to the prosperity. Ram figurines were placed into graves

with the dead. Ram horns became symbolic of vegetation, this produced the mythological association between fleece and fertility. These symbols were used on Khevsuri (mountainous Georgia) traditional clothes until recently (Golan, 2003).

A lot of deer antlers are found in pagan shrines of the highland regions of Caucasus. The deer image once had certain significance in mythological notions of the inhabitants of Caucasus. Deer antlers were portrayed in patterns of carpets and embroidery. The deer image is common in ancient and early medieval Eurasian art, and deer is a popular personage of myths and legends. Deer was also an object of hunting. In an Armenian legend, a hunter wounded the sun with his arrow so that it started setting to the west (Golan, 2003).

Deer antlers are also used as ritual sacrifices in mountainous Georgian traditional sanctuaries and shrines even today. Near villages and sometimes also in the village, near the village spring, there are some ancient shrines, that people respect, bring offerings there and come to pray there. Often ram or deer horns are used as offerings for the shrine in the old mountain villages also today.

Golan explains that the custom of offering deer antlers to shrines by the Caucasian mountain-dwellers is an atavism of the ancient rite of sacrificing deer to the deity. In Svaneti (highland Georgia), pieces of ritual bread were baked in the shape of the bull's head, considered by the local people as an emblem of the "great deity" (Sikharulidze, 1972).

4th century BC Colchian coins have bull's image on reverse and Great Mother goddess in front side (Mikeladze, 1990).

Bull's horn plays also essential role on Georgian feast (supra), when the most important toasts are drunk from the bull's horn.

The bull was venerated throughout the Caucasus, and not as domestic animal, but as an incarnation of a deity. The horn became a prominent symbol of the god represented by the bull. Some Caucasian traditions point to the mythic bull as connected with both earth and water. In a Georgian fairy-tale, a bull lives both in water and in the underground (Sikharulidze, 1972).

Basques and Georgians maintained the custom of bringing bull to religious festivities. On such occasions, bull was given wine to drink, which conforms to the idea that the Black

God likes intoxicating potions (Dzidziguri, 1979). Bull-fights were known in ancient world. Contests between bulls as well as between man and bull used to be held in Georgia. It was a cultic rite, may be a kind of a contest symbolizing a mythical fight (Golan, 2003).

In a Georgian folk tale, a young stag longs for Beautiful Helen. He is at odds with **Devi** (a transformed archaic underworld god), who also is in love with her. The King Wind (another personage originated in the image of the underworld snake who, rising into the sky, produces storms) keeps the beauty behind nine locks (nine is a number associated with underworld god). Helen's mother is a witch capable of putting a person to death or bringing him back to life (similar to the heaven goddess, who was the source of life and death) (Golan, 2003).

Sun, Fire and the Underworld connected to Earth God

Two opposite deities – good and evil started to take shape in the 1st millennium BC in the ancient world.

In the Zoroastrian holy writ Avesta, Mithra appears from the east and disappears in the west, but he is not identified with the sun. Mithra is characterized as bestowing rain, ruling over waters, ensuring prosperity, and residing on a sacred mount – all features of the prehistoric underworld god, who could rise to the sky. Mithra is armed with a spear and arrows and rides chariot. The role of a fighter against evil is attributed to him, a severe god punishing the unrighteous. In the course of time, Mithra turned into a sun god. This was a manifestation of the sun veneration tendency that developed in western Asia in the 1st millennium BC (Golan, 2003).

Religious concepts of the Neolithic and of the Bronze Age differed. In the Neolithic, heaven was represented by a female deity and earth by a male deity. In the later periods this became the other way around. During the Bronze Age and later the eastern horizon was sacred: people prayed facing east, the dead were buried with their faces turned eastwards. The early farming cult was focused on the moment of sunset and on the western horizon (Golan, 2003).

In Georgian beliefs the heaven-goddess was connected with life and fertility, since the earth-god was connected with death and underworld. The earth god is mostly symbolized with fire and sun, stones and mountains, earthly waters and underworld.

Sun

A Georgian magic text says: “When the sun comes out from behind the eastern mountains and all gods assemble before the sun god, then the rays of the sun chase away the evil spirits’ sorcery” (Svanidze, 1937). Entrances of most temples and sanctuaries face the rising sun. People have always prayed towards the rising sun. This custom was adopted by the early church, so to this day the churches are built and dead are buried towards the east. West was the side of evil spirits (Ananikian, 2010).

One widely spread symbol of a sun is a rosette-decorated disc (*borjgali* in Georgia). Rosette symbols are still used on wood-carvings, on wooden houses, furniture and household vessels, also on Georgian currency (see figure 4).

In most of the Caucasian myths the **sun** is a young man and **moon** is a girl. They are seen as brother and sister, but sometimes also as passionate lovers (Ananikian, 2010).

In someway, the Georgian deity Kviria can be linked with sun. **Kviria** is a phallic deity linked with heaven, earth and water. He administers justice and is supplicated for rain. In Georgian mythology he was a hero and son of gods who served as mediator between the supreme god and humans. Kviria was invoked as protector of human society and instrument of divine justice. He is at the head of mystical wolves, who bring sickness and devastation. In some regions, he was also believed to be a deity of fertility and harvest while, in the mountains of western Georgia, Kviria was worshiped as the supreme deity. His festival *kveritskhovloba*, which involved contests, was held at the end of winter (Mikaberidze; Golan, 2003). *Kvira* means *Sunday* and *a week* in Georgian.

Fire

In Hittite tradition and in Zoroastrianism fire was holy and used in rituals, but there was no sun worship. The underworld god was considered immortal, eternal – hence the ancient custom among various cultures to maintain perpetual fire in temples. Fire is

accounted to be sacred everywhere in ancient and primitive cultures. Naturally, the worship of fire (or rather the worship of the god incarnated in fire) was connected with magical rituals and rites (Golan, 2003).

In the prehistoric myth, the sun was imaged as a part of the underground fire. As Ariel Golan (2003) explains, the base **mš*, pertaining semantically to the underworld, produced the names for the sun, such as Georgian *mze* and Semitic *šmš*. These terms reflect the idea of the sun as a part of the underground fire, personified by the sun maiden who belonged to the underworld god.

Peoples of the Caucasus worshiped the fire already long before Zoroastrianism. For Armenians it was so deeply rooted that early Christians called heathen Armenians ash-worshippers. Fire was the substance of sun and lightning, it gave heat and light. People pray by the fire just like they pray to the sun. Fire drives evil spirits away.

For Armenians the hearth worship was one aspect of fire worship, which was probably connected to the ancestors spirits (Ananikian, 2010). The hearth or fireplace of a house was everywhere in Caucasus the most sacred part of the house.

Earth god

The earth god was imagined in various appearances, those of serpent, wolf, bear, etc; people believed that he was able to transform himself at will (Golan, 2003).

In many folk tales there are serpents, wolves, bears, that are tricky, clever, but also deers, that help people out of difficulties. In the mountains the characters of the folk tales often meet *devis* that are connected to older beliefs.

Stone idols of these creatures have been found in the mountains of the South Caucasus. Because snakes live underground, embodying the souls of the dead, they know all secrets, are the source of all wisdom, and can foresee the future. Serpents are seen as mediators between dead and alive. Ancestral spirits usually appear as serpents. They possess superior wisdom, healing power, they can do good or harm. This kind of serpent-worship is known in all cultures (Eliade, 1971).

The house-serpent brings good to the house, so it must be treated kindly. Sometimes they appear in the night as strangers seeking hospitality, and it pays to be kind to them, as

otherwise they may depart in anger, leaving behind sorrow and misfortune (Ananikian, 2010). This belief can also be the beginnings of widely known Caucasian hospitality. In Christian belief they say that a guest is a gift from god, so you must be kind to them. But this figure of unexpected guest that you must treat respectfully may come already from earlier animistic beliefs.

Dragons are seen as related to serpents, but they hold more dark qualities. Dragon is usually the symbol of a storm. The biggest dragon-fight is the fight between thunder and storm, fire and water (Ananikian, 2010). As White Giorgi is seen as a personification of the great goddess, so are the dragons seen as the symbols of earth god and death. This might be also the origins of the St Giorgi, who fights the dragon with his golden thunder-shaped spear.

Underworld

Ethnologists like Emin (1864) have recorded traces of a belief in particular demons in the South Caucasus. The Armenians referred to these as *višap*, the Georgians as *vešapi*. They were pictured as a bull or a fish and often as a snake. The *vešapis* were associated with **ground waters** (lakes, springs). To them was attributed the power of producing storms and thunderstorms, they could rise to the sky and descend to the ground, or more usually, into the lake. As in parallel legends of other peoples, *vešapis* take possession of water and maidens. Human sacrifices were offered to them (Golan, 2003).

There are two bodies of water and fire, celestial and subterranean, which have unique properties and affect human lives differently. Water is both the symbol of life and the symbol of death. The reason for this association lies in the belief that the god or goddess is the cause of both life and death, by giving life and taking it away. According to primeval beliefs, the otherworld is the source of life. People believed that the dead ancestors, having passed to the otherworld, had powers to influence the life in this world (Golan, 2003).

Since the earth god (as well as the heaven goddess) knew the future, the ancients believed that water had some magic of foretelling.

Stones are still venerated as the survival of a forgotten cult of the earth god. In the mountain villages, northern Georgia, people collect more extraordinary mountain stones to their shrines and burial places.

The earth god gave fertility, so the infertile or pregnant women in the Caucasus prayed to sacred stones for a child or for safe delivery. An Ossetian epic hero Soslan was born of a stone.

Some researchers found a sacred stone in Georgia, said to be phallic in shape. It bears a cross, and for that it has been called “solar” (Rahvinashvili, 1963). Golan argues that the cross may be symbolic for the sun, but the sun is never associated with the phallus. Most probably the cross here symbolizes the earth god. The snake image on the stone may say that the object was this deity’s fetish. I see it may be different in Georgia, since the sun is thought to be male and also the Kviria (sun deity in some areas in Georgia) was portrayed phallic in shape.

Mountains are often thought to be sacred in Georgia and Caucasus. M. Eliade explains the sacred value of height is explained by the sacred value of the upper regions of air, and therefore eventually by the sacredness of the sky itself.

The pyramidal or conical shape symbolized hill, fire, phallus, or fertility in ancient times. In Tusheti, in north Georgia, the tombs were built of stones, pyramid-shape. Stepped pyramid tombs are even more frequent. A. Parrot (1949) says that the stages of the stepped pyramid represent the subdivisions of the universe – underworld, water, earth, heaven etc (Golan, 2003). The stepped pyramid or cone also looks like a mount with terraced slopes for agriculture, which is usual in mountainous regions.

Pagan cult monuments are known in Ingushia (north Caucasus) in places referred to as “red mount”. In Ossetian tales, the patron of mountains, Hohy-Dzuar, bestows rain and yield (Golan, 2003).

Georgians also pray to the mountains even today and always have a toast or two to the mountains on their traditional feast, *supra*. Mountains are honored and also afraid of. It gives life and takes lives.

Old Georgian folk tales say that *devis* live in the mountains. **Devi** was an evil giant of demonic force, one of the most popular personages of the Georgian folktales. They are

comparable to *ogres* in Western European mythos and similar with Avestan *Daeva* in Persian mythology. With horns and wicked appearance, the *devis* often had multiple heads that regenerated if severed. *Devis* lived in underworld or remote mountains, where they had treasures and kept captives.

In the folktales usually are nine brothers of *devis*. *Bakbak-Devi* was most often the strongest and most powerful of the *devis*, multi-headed and human-eating. Usually he is defeated by main characters of the Georgian myth, with various tricks or games.

Otherworld, funerals

Apollonius describes the burial customs of the Colchians (in *Argonautica*, by Apollonius Rhodius) – they never put dead men into grave, but wrapped the bodies of their men in bull's skin and hang it from a tree, well away from human habitation. The corpses of women were consigned to the ground (Lang, 1966). Gvelesiani (2012) claims this is a Mazdean tradition.

Bedis mtserlebi were deities that recorded and decided human fate. They lived in *suleti* or the world of dead souls, and constantly consulted the Book of Fates (*bedis tsigni*). They supervised every human life and notified the god of the dead (*suletis ghmerti*) when a person's lifetime was over. Special heralds (*mgrebrebi*) then were sent to take human's soul and bring it to the underworld.

For many Indo-European cultures and North-Caucasian tribes, horse had also the function to accompany the deceased to the otherworld. In many places the horses were buried together with their owners, not because it was supposed to serve its master in the afterlife, but in order to ensure transportation of the deceased to the otherworld (Golan, 2003).

It may have been different for Georgian people. Among the many animals sacrificed to the dead, the horse does not appear by the Georgian funerals. It may be connected to some religious, economic or sentimental taboos, forbidding its sacrifice at funerals (Lang, 1966).

In medieval Armenia and Georgia, memorial gravestones were sometimes sculptured like horse figures. It also symbolizes the horse that was expected to transport the deceased to the otherworld (Golan, 2003).

Still now, horses play an important role at the funerals in mountainous Georgia. In Tusheti region (just south from Dagestan), funerals are still concluded with horse races. Mountaineers on horseback riding round the hero's burial mound is as the last tribute in his honor.

Resurrection

M. Eliade formulates connection between agriculture and the world of the dead:

"Agriculture is concerned with the world of the dead at two different levels, both as a profane activity and as a cult. The former level is that only seeds and dead people get into an underground dimension. The latter level is managing the fertility, life, which is self-reproductive. That is the field of agriculture, while the dead are directly involved with the mystery of revival, with the cycle of Creation, with the endless fertility. Like a seed lying quietly in earth's lap, the dead, too, are expecting the return to life in a new form" (Eliade, 1971).

In springtime Georgians celebrated the religious-mythological idea of the resurrection of the vegetation deity. This ancient pagan festivity developed into **Easter**, the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus (Golan, 2003).

Mountain-dwelling Georgians (Pshavs, Khevsurs) considered God in heaven the god of the living, and Jesus the god of the dead. This was because Jesus replaced the pagan deity who, among his other functions, had chthonic significance (Golan, 2003). In the mind of people, the image of the Son of God connects with the traditional vegetation deity, the spirit of grain.

Easter rituals suggest that the corresponding pagan feast was dedicated not only to vegetation deity, but also to the earth god who had characteristics of the mythological underworld. Fire, water, Easter eggs are all characteristics of the earth god. But earth god and the vegetation god were different deities. The vegetation god dies in order that people could eat and live. Corn is his incarnation (Golan, 2003).

Easter celebrations today include fasting as a form of sacrifice. It is a symbol of death and resurrection, since it takes forty days between the death and resurrection of a corn that symbolizes the vegetation deity.

Nature worship in Georgia

As described above, there has always been veneration of nature and its elements – heaven and earth, fire and water, sun and moon. In this chapter I try to describe different customs in different epochs, concerning nature worship, some of them still survived.

In Tusheti, Khevsureti and Svaneti the people are generally religiously set towards the nature. Many customs come from the nature worship roots.

Mountains and woods are still concerned sacred. In the mountain villages or near the villages one can still see the old pagan altars or shrines, situated mainly on a hill or by a spring. Women are not allowed to go there, they even have to make a big round around them, if it is on the path. Sometimes there is a newer Christian church built near the shrine. Local people have high respect towards these shrines and believe that if you act improperly towards the shrine, the whole valley will be punished by the gods. Bull horns and deer antlers are brought to these shrines, as well as food and drinks on the holidays.

Trees and woods

There was a miracle-working tree to which the people attributed wondrous powers of healing. Tree worship is attested in Georgia through the cult of the **wood-goddess Dali**. Byzantine Emperor Justinian's biographers speak of **tree worship** as an official cult among the Abkhazians up to the 6th century AD (Lang, 1966).

Many trees are used in the ancient Georgian architecture and also in the medieval sacral architecture. Often they are vines, sometimes just a tree.

Sacralization and mythization of plants is common in world mythology and folklore.

James Frazer gives evidence of the worship of trees in all parts of the world, of apologies offered to trees for cutting them down, of beliefs that the trees were inhabited by the souls of the dead etc (Frazer, 1911). Legends and rites associated with the veneration of the mythic tree were common until the 19th century. Still there are some signs of sacred trees or some kind of tree veneration in Georgia, especially in more remote areas.

In Georgian folk art, the Tree of Life motif is connected with the cult of the mythic Great Mother (Chitaia, 1941). The stone and tree veneration persisted in the Caucasus until the middle of the 20th century, as a rudiment of the archaic cult of the earth god and heaven goddess (Golan, 2003).

Later, in Christian Georgia again some trees became important in the religion and legends. It is said that St Nino made the first cross out of vine tree branches, this is why it is downwards from the horizontal branch.

As D. M. Lang describes in his “Lives and legends of Georgian Saints” (1956), after Jesus’s crucifixion in Jerusalem his tunic was brought to Georgia by one of the Georgian Jews, who visited Jerusalem at that time. His already converted Christian sister Sidonia took the tunic when he arrived home and she fell dead because of her great excitement. Three centuries later king Mirian built the first wooden church on her tomb. But the workers could not cut down a tree that grew up over her tomb. Only after the night of prayers that St Nino spent there, made possible to remove the tree. However, it returned back as a pillar of fire and firmed it itself on the construction basis. Chrism flowed down from the pillar and healed sick people, so it was named life-giving-pillar (*Svetitskhoveli*) (see figure 5).

One form of the tree of life is seen in Georgian homes during the winter solstice – *chichilaki* is a hazelnut stick that is peeled like a tree and put two crosses on this tree, one on the top and one on the foot (Abakelia, 2008).

Pre-Christian cross veneration

In Georgia, where Christianity was established fifteen centuries ago, scholars consider the cross a pre-Christian cultic sign. Kuftin (1941) has found pagan ring symbols from 9th century connected to Christian cross symbols, e.g. a disk with a cross, under which there are vertical lines, apparently designating rain. The contoured cross was known in the South Caucasus in the 2nd millennium BC (Golan, 2003).

Until recently the Caucasians maintained certain peculiar customs involving veneration of the cross. The nature of these habits cannot be ascribed to Christianity’s influence. The Khevsurs wear crosses on the rings and necklaces, crosses are embroidered onto their

clothes (Anderson, 2004). The same custom was kept by the mountain-dwelling Tajiks, who never professed Christianity. In Dagestan, where Islam was adopted between 12th to 15th centuries, one can still see little children with crosses sewn on their clothing. Stone crosses were erected on early Muslim burial sites in Checheny and Ingushia. In the Caucasus, a sheep sacrificed to a deity was brought to the hearth to have a cross burned on its head before slaughter, after which the priest painted a cross sign in blood on the donor's forehead (Zisserman, 1879; Anderson, 2004).

Food and drinks

Plants and animals, as well as some food from them were associated with the earth god. In Georgia, vine has been divine and sacred for millenniums. Even North Caucasians, who normally did not drink alcoholic drinks, during cultic rites drinking was obligatory, since it was connected with the sacred plants or trees. Khevsur tribe (in Georgia) provided their dead with a bottle of vodka. Toasts to god and to ancestors are the most important toasts, affirmed with wine.

There's an important Caucasian tradition of drinking wine from horn on special occasions. Similar ritual existed probably in the Paleolithic, as seen from the archeological findings.

When Georgians communicate with their deceased ancestors, they lay the table for them, the head of the family is by the table with the spirits of ancestors, which he later sends off by pouring them wine and bread on the ground.

Animals are sacrificed to the god during important holidays (Easter, Giorgoba etc), also on family celebrations. They walk around the church three times with the animal, reading some prayers for the soul of the animal and bring it home to be sacrificed and the meat put on the table on the feast. Frazer (1911) explains it as killing a divine animal and there are special ceremonies for eating the meat in closed circle of family and closest people. Just some decades ago these sacrifices were made also in the church yards.

Anderson (2004) describes how there was a feast of Alaverdi during his travels in Caucasus on 1998, and all around the Alaverdi cathedral people were picnicking in the outskirts of cathedral. Many had tied black canopies to the trees and sat under them

eating and drinking. Sheep and chicken were slaughtered, fires put up and the meat eaten at the spot, the slaughtered bodies hang on the roadside fence.

Religious attitude towards food is especially noticeable during fasting. Among other meat, pork is connected with specific beliefs. In Tusheti, no pork may be eaten at all, no pork may be brought to this area. It may bring bad luck to the whole village and whole Tusheti. Surprisingly, Golan (2003) has found that the word “pig” was used for “deity” by Megrelians and Svans in northern Georgia. Golan has suggested some links between pig and the underworld god, but these links are not clear. Frazer (1911) explains that pig is the common symbol of corn-spirit in the European folklore and therefore is sometimes venerated as corn-goddess or vegetation-goddess.

Pig is in the central position in the winter solstice. Georgians fixed a pig head to a pole on New Year’s Eve and pork is one of the main dishes on the New Year’s table.

Seasonal rites and traditions

The winter and summer solstices are important moments for the astronomical reasons. St George’s Days in the spring and autumn are boundaries between two halves of the year, cold and hot.

Giorgoba (the day of St Giorgi) is celebrated twice a year – 6th May and 23rd November. It is always accompanied by 4-weeks fasting and it marks the beginning and the end of the agricultural season (see the chapter “Resurrection”).

The yearly cycle goes from Giorgoba to Giorgoba in Tusheti. For Giorgoba in November, all the agricultural work has to be done. People celebrate the end of the harvest and prepare a big feast with rich table. If there is a shrine dedicated to Giorgi in the village, then men and children go there to bring offerings – food, vodka, and sometimes sacrifice sheep. They read prayers and drink from a horn. After some while women join them, they lay a tablecloth on the ground, put bread in three different places, lay meat, cheese and vodka on the tablecloth and a candle. Men and women always sit and eat separately. People eat, drink and thank the food. After some praying and blessings they return to the village, where a common celebration with music and dances start.

Only 100 years ago whole village joined these events, but now only few are left to celebrate these holidays.

The **winter solstice** rituals are widely known and practiced today. In the mountains some of the rituals were performed by men alone, without the participation of women.

Abakelia (2008) describes three kinds of ritual guests in different religious and pagan rituals: the first foot, the shepherds and the spirits of the dead. All of them were unavoidable guests on the winter solstice rituals and they ensured the prosperity and well-being of the family.

The most common Christmas ritual is the Alilo procession, during which young men and boys dress themselves like shepherds, walk around the village, sing Alilo (Halleluia) and congratulate all houses and families on the birth of Jesus. During this procession people give them food, sweets, coins. It is very old tradition, but today the procession collects the gifts for the poor.

According to Mircea Eliade (1978), every New Year the time is regenerated and cosmogony repeated. It is an end of a time period and a beginning of new period of time. On the New Year the creation of the world renews through certain rituals. These rituals symbolize the communication between visible and non-visible world, the worlds of living and of dead, between past and present (Abakelia, 2008).

Today the New Year's Eve in Georgia is rather quiet and family-centered holiday. Just after the midnight all families start expecting guests, since the first guest on the New Year brings lucky and prosperous year. If the first guest is old or sick person, it will bring misery and sickness to the family. But if the first guest is young, healthy, happy person, it brings also happiness and good health for the family. Often youngsters go from a family to family of their friends or neighbors, to bring luck to many homes. Sometimes people even send their children to the neighbor's, to bring them prosperous New Year. This first guest is called *mekvle* (first-foot or footprint) and they step in, saying:

"I enter the house,

Let everybody be blessed by the Lord,

Let my footprints be like those of the angels".

By the angel's foot they don't mean the heavenly angels, but the spirits from the otherworld. This ritual guest, *mekvle* itself is a symbol of a messenger of the god that enters the world of living (the house in this case) (Abakelia, 2008).

Berikaoba is one of the most known pagan feast, playing scenes of a fertile year. The ritual is performed by several men, symbolizing Beri, the deity of harvest, dressed as bear, boar, goat, wolf, their costumes and masks are made of skins and hides of animals. Animal skulls, tails, feathers, horns, pumpkins, ribbons and bells are used. Berikas have a procession from door to door expecting treat from the hosts. The hosts present Berikas with wine, honey, flour, meat. Berikas then pay thanks to the lord and ask for a better Berikaoba in the future (Strelkova, 2008). During Berikaoba the guests, Berikas, symbolize spirits of the ancestors, being responsible of the fertility. According to the ritual, all family members try to pick a piece of wool out of Berikas sheepskin, and hide it in the barn, stock, wine-cellar etc, to ensure the household with good luck and fecundity (Abakelia, 2008). Later the rituals of Berikaoba merged with Christmas celebrations and the above mentioned Alilo procession became out of this.

Lomisoba is a feast dating back to pre-Christian period. This festival is popular in Aragvi and Ksani gorges. There was a very important pagan god called Lomisa in the Mtiuleti area. Holy places of Lomisa were on the water dividing range between Ksani and Aragvi and in village Mleta. When Christianity entered the province, a St George's church was built on the holy mountain of Lomisa. On the Lomisoba feast (seventh week after Easter) there are still many pagan rituals, like animal scarification.

Georgian feast **Vardoba** and Armenian Vardavar come probably both from the same great pagan feast of ancient Asia Minor (Mgaloblishvili, 1999). James Russell (2004) points out that Vardavar and Vardoba is a feast of transfiguration, celebrated on the seventh Sunday after Pentecost (which is fifty days after Easter), is a holiday of waters, and remains the veneration of goddess Nana. In Armenia until recently calves born with a sign of half-moon or star on their forehead were sacrificed on Vardavar and offerings of flowers and branches were made to the Holy Mother of God.

In Tusheti (North-East Georgian mountain area) the Vardoba is still celebrated, and in this celebration both pagan and Christian traditions are practiced. People go to the forest (mostly alone), make offerings to the pagan shrines, find a quiet place, and make a sign of cross on their forehead, using forest fruits, other plants or coal of wood.

Spirits and demons living in nature

People and **demons** were on good terms, they communicated with demons and even honored them.

In this chapter are described demons, spirits and other deities of Georgian origin that live in the nature. The memory of them has been carried in folk tales and sometimes people still communicate with them.

Beri-Bera was a deity of harvest, fertility and animals, more popular in the mountains of eastern Georgia. During New Year's Eve rituals Beri is personified in a guest, a first-foot that brings luck, happiness and fortune to the family.

Mamberi was the lord of wolves, worshiped in Svaneti and other mountainous regions.

Mindort-Batoni was a deity of valleys, fields and wild flowers. Humans had to ask for his permission to explore or cultivate fields. He had a beautiful daughter, Mindort Brdzanebeli, also a deity of flowers that flew above plants and lived off their pollen.

Michpa was a deity protecting cattle and other domestic animals. It was popular in the mountains of Svaneti.

Ochopintre was a deity of wild animals, had attributes similar to Pan of the Greek mythos. Born with the legs and horns of a goat, he helps the wood-goddess Dali in herding the animals. Hunters usually made sacrifice in his name since no one could hunt the animals without his help. The fate of a person entering the forest was believed to be fully in his hands.

Paskunji was a phoenix-like animal that helped and protected heroes and humans. Living in underworld, Paskunji often warred with dragons and was summoned by burning one of his feathers. It could transport heroes to other places and heal wounds and illnesses. In some myths, paskunjis were also hostile to humans and persecuted them.

Rashi was a magical winged horse. Land-rashis were well disposed to humans and heroes and could perceive future. Sea-rashis were more hostile to humans but could take heroes to the depth of the sea while their milk was believed to cure many illnesses. Heavenly rashis were winged and fire-breathing animals, very difficult to subdue but loyal to their riders.

Tevdore was a pagan deity of agriculture and horses. The cult of Tevdore or Tedore later merged with the Christian St Tevdore, but retained some of its ancient elements. In feudal Georgia, a special festival, Tedoroba, was organized to honor him and ensure a bountiful harvest.

In Megrelian myths was **Tskarishdida**, a half-fish and half-women deity of rivers, lakes and the fish, similar to mermaids of European folklore. Tskarishdida had magic powers which she often used against the humans.

Evil spirits

Ali was an evil soul that haunted travelers, pregnant women, infants, etc. They lived in remote woods, caves or ruins. Male alis had wicked appearance and female alis (*alkali*) were beautiful and tempting.

Batonebi were evil souls that spread disease among humans. They were most often associated with mumps (*tsitela batonebi*), smallpox (*didi batonebi*), etc. When batonebi “visited”, a person became ill and the rest of family had to prepare special food and sweets, decorate trees with presents and do other arrangements to please batonebi. The term is still used in rural places for infectious diseases.

Dobilni were minor evil spirits that usually took appearance of women, children or even animals to harm humans and spread diseases. The dobilni towers are found within the complexes of most Khevsurian shrines. However, there are instances when dobilni had positive attributes, i.e. Giorgi’s sister, Samdzimari.

Kaji were evil spirits, often portrayed as a race of magic-wielding, demonic metalworkers. They lived in Kajeti and had magic powers that they used against humans. Folk tales distinguished between land kajis, who lived in the remote woods and harassed humans, and river kajis, who dwelt in rivers, streams or lakes and were more kind to humans. Female kajis were very beautiful, easily tempted men and helped heroes on their

quests. Kajis figure prominently in Shota Rustaveli's *Vepkhistkaosani* (The knight in Panther's skin, Georgian national epic from the 12th century), which describes the kajis kidnapping one of the main characters and fighting heroes at the Kajeti fortress.

Local folktale in Khevsureti and Pshavi, describes how **Giorgi** led a raiding party of *khvtis-shvilni* to Kajeti, the realm of evil kajis. After defeating the kajis, Giorgi seized their wealth and their women, including Princess Samdzimari who swore brother-sisterhood with Giorgi. Women pray at the shrine to Samdzimari for the birth of healthy children, an easy childbirth and for women's health in general. The shrines to kind *dobilni* were also invoked for the productivity and well-being of dairy cattle and the protection of travelers.

Kudiani were witches with wicked appearance, large teeth, tails and hunchbacked. Living in remote caves, kudiani could adopt any appearance and bewitch humans. The leader of kudiani, Rokapi, often summoned them to a special mountain where the witches celebrated in festivals.

Rokapi was an evil spirit and leader of the kudiani. He has similar faith, as the Amirani or Prometheus, since he was punished by the supreme god and dwelt chained to a column in the depth of the earth, where he greedily eats the hearts of humans brought to him by the kudianis. Every year, Rokapi tries to free himself of chains but fails.

Matsili were evil spirits from the underworld that haunted travelers and hunters. Folk tales often describe Kopala's quests against matsilis.

Ochokochi was a forest deity which combined human and animal features, he had a thick fur, large claws and spiky horns on its chest. Living in remote corners of the forest, Ochokochi wandered in the woods, scaring the hunters or shepherds. Ochokochi was believed to be charmed by Tkashi-Mapa, whom he constantly chased in order to copulate. However, mortal hunters protected Tkashi-Mapa from his advances.

Semi-divine deities

In the myths and folk tales there is a group of heroes, who were born to gods and had semi-divine nature. They protected humans, assured good crops and milk-yields, fought

against *devis* and *kudiani* and performed various quests. While there are dozens of these deities, the most popular of them were **Kopala, Giorgi and Amirani**.

Kopala was a deity of lightning, a mighty hero and demon killer. His cult still remains popular in the mountains of Georgia, especially in Khevsureti. Kopala is mentioned in a song: “*Glory to Kopala mighty as the sea and high as the sky*” (Svanidze, 1937).

Folk epics describe how Kopala and Iakhsari declared a war of conquest on the *devis*, who were persecuting humanity, and drove them from the land.

Kopala is armed with a mace (usual for the prehistoric great god) and an iron bow made especially for him by the blacksmith god Pirkusha. He alone has the power to defeat the most powerful and stubborn demons, who often seize a human soul. Kopala, can cure from illness and from various forms of madness.

An old Russian written document records that jumping over bon-fire is an act of offering oneself as a sacrifice to the devil-Kupalo. Apparently the Slavic deity Kupala and Georgian Kopala had been inherited from one source, and since Slavs and Georgians are quite unrelated, this source must be a very remote one (Golan, 2003).

White Giorgi and St George

One of the seven types of the White God as the heaven god, explained by Golan, is the *god of spring*. The Yarila, Yarivit, Yuriy in Slavic traditions, Gheorghi in Bulgaria, the Czech Ghirgi, Polish Jerzy, Danish Jurgen, Swedish Goran, Graeco-Byzantine Gourgos and Georgian Giorgi. Images and rites connected with these names differ in the oral tradition, but rites connected to them always occur in spring, often in autumn as well.

Giorgi (also named Aralo) was the deity of vegetation and fertility, later the St Giorgi became the patron of agriculture, as well as patron of the soldiers.

Tetri Giorgi (**White Giorgi**), popular character in Georgian mythology, was originally a warrior and a moon god. Later Tetri Giorgi diffused with St George in the Christian Georgia.

White horse was an attribute of god in some traditions. St George / St Giorgi is one of the main saints in England and in Georgia, both pictured with a white horse.

During religious holidays, also in honor of dead person in Georgian highlands, a horse race is organized. Riding a horse is as an offering to the St Giorgi. In Caucasian legend he is referred as a winged saint, sometimes he appears as a fire, often he is linked with thunder and weather. Weather gods are universally quite war-like, so is St Giorgi. Dragon-slaying in ancient mythology is usually the work of fire (Ananikian, 2010). St Giorgi is also connected with fire and mostly portrayed on a horse, slaying a dragon.

In the Georgian Orthodox Church, St. Giorgi is known as the Holy Great Martyr, Victory-Bearer and Wonderworker. According to legend he was born between 275 and 285 in Nicomedia in Asia Minor. Roman Emperor Diocletian noticed him for his bravery and enlisted him in his imperial guard, promoting him to a senior commander, Tribune. When Diocletian issued an edict to arrest all Christian soldiers in the army in 302 AD, Giorgi gave all his wealth to the poor, freed his servants, came to the emperor and openly spoke out against pagan gods, confessing himself a Christian. The emperor was unable to talk the saint into worshipping pagan gods, neither could the torture he subjected him to, and St. George was beheaded on April 23, 303 (May 6, 303, in line with the Orthodox calendar).

He is one of the most popular saints in Georgia, portrayed on icons as a young soldier in armour, riding a white horse, slaying a dragon (see figure 6) and also pictured on the national coat of arms of Georgia (figure 7).

Zoroastrian deities in Georgia

Georgian deities and ancient gods are similar to those in Hittite tradition, Greek gods, Etruscan myths and Zoroastrian pantheon. Georgian royal family had close relationship with their southern neighbors and introduced similar deities to Georgian people. The Zoroastrian deities were worshipped mostly during 3rd century BC until 4th century AD. According to Saint Nino's biographer, the Georgian national gods were **Armazi** (identified with Ahura-Mazda of the Zoroastrian pantheon and Aramazd in Armenian pantheon), **Zaden, Gatzi and Gaim**.

Supreme god Armazi

Armazi was the supreme divinity of pre-Christian Georgia, the creator of heaven and earth. According to tradition, the cult of Armazi was introduced in the 3rd century BC by King Parnavaz (founder of the kingdom of Kartli), who erected a large bronze statue of a warrior of gilded copper, clad in a gold coat of mail with a gold helmet on his head and holding sword in his hand; one eye was a ruby, the other an emerald.

During the Zoroastrian stage, the whole world was the work of the supreme god Armazi, who is the creator of heaven and earth (Ananikian, 2010).

Next to Armazi stood other two smaller idols with a human face – a golden idol Gatzi on the right, and a silver idol called Gaim to the left, personifying different elements of nature. These images were worshipped by the royal court and all the common people (Lang, 1966).

The statue of Armazi existed until the spread of Christianity in the 4th century, in the ancient fortress Armazistsikhe (Armazi's fortress). Later there a Christian cross was put on the Armazi hill and a Christian church was built on the place of older pagan temple (Gvelesiani, 2012). Later Armazi was referred to as the god of moon, although as discussed by different scholars, for Georgian peoples originally the moon was female and sun male.

The origin of Armazi from the Iranian **Ahura Mazda** has been proved through a comparative study of **Aramazd**, the supreme divinity of pre-Christian Armenia, which became a bridging link between Armazi and Ahura Mazda. The functional as well as other aspects of these gods coincide with those of Armazi, in addition the phonetic closeness of the names Armazi, Aramazd and Ahura Mazda (Gvelesiani, 2008; Ananikian, 2010).

The sacred animal of Armazi was ox and oxen as well as humans were sacrificed to Armazi (Silogava, 2007).

Ainina, Danina and Zaden

Son of the king Parnavaz introduced two other deities - Ainina and Danina.

Unfortunately, except for their names, not much is known about these deities. They may

be two different versions of the same name that is from Persian mother goddess Anahita, as even earlier Ishtar or Inanna in Sumer. Anahita was originally connected to water, being a river goddess (Gvelesiani, 2012).

King Parnavaz's grandson added one more idol, god Zaden, to the Georgian pagan pantheon. This may have caused some dislike among local people, since the royal family had imported deities similar to Persian pantheon and had become "fire-worshippers" (Gvelesiani, 2012).

Zaden was one of the major deities in pagan Kartli, believed to be as powerful as Armazi. The cult disappeared after the spread of Christianity.

Nino, Nana, Nane

Different, but similar names, that are all referred as the "daughter of Armazi" (in Georgia), daughter of Aramazd" (in Armenia) and "daughter of Ahura Mazda" (in Persia). They all represent fortune and prosperity, therefore we can find parallels with the cult of the Great Mother Nana, the goddess venerated across the Near and Middle Eastern regions (see the chapter "Great Mother Nana" above).

Gvelesiani and other researchers have raised the question if this Nana is derivation of the deities Ainina and Danana.

M. Boyce (1982) and also Melikset-Bekoff (1914) suppose that Persians used the name Nana for both Anahita and Ishtar, as the name of their own divinity, since it is similar to "mother" in old Persian and Sanskrit, and therefore appropriate epithet for a protective female divinity (Gvelesiani, 2012).

A century ago bishop Kyrion (Kyrion Sadzaglishvili, 1910) studied the etymology of the name Nino and equated it with Ur-Nina, whom he refers to as the goddess of the Georgian pagan pantheon. He suggests that she is of Chaldaean origin, just as were the ancestors of the Georgians who worshipped the goddesses Ur-Nina and Ur-Bau.

Although none of other researchers have mentioned these deities (Gvelesiani, 2008).

This will lead us back to the discussion about the origins of the mother goddess in Georgia (discussed in the chapter "The great mother goddess"). Quite probably both,

Armenian goddess Nane and Georgian goddess Nana are connected with the Great Mother Goddess. And possibly St Nino is also associated with her pagan forerunner in Georgian mythology (Gvelesiani, 2012).

Even if the deities with similar names appear in wide geographical area, the cultic practices are not necessarily the same, since the power and expression of a deity is connected to the tribe and the place.

Nana is the name with the most ancient origin. Nino, Nina, Nana, Nunu and other derivations of this name are still the most popular female names in Georgia.

Conversion to Christianity

Georgia became Christian country in 327-332, when King Mirian III was converted by Saint Nino, although Western Georgia (Colchis, Lazica and Abkhazia) had already been evangelized by missionaries active in Greek colonies along the Black Sea coast.

Christianity was strengthened when Georgia adopted its own alphabet in the late fourth century, and religious texts in their own script were written. The church and the written language provided a source of continuity that kept collective identity alive through different times and centuries (De Waal, 2010).

The *Conversion of Kartli* is the earliest surviving medieval Georgian historical compendium. Written in the 7th and 9th centuries, this chronicle follows the history of Kartli, focusing particularly on Christianization of Georgians by Saint Nino early in the 4th century.

Saint Nino

Equal to the Apostles and the Enlightener of Georgia, (c. 296 – c. 338 or 340) was a woman who preached Christianity in Georgia. Later, St Nino was called as “daughter of Armazi”. King Mirian, referred to her “through God’s mighty power you’re skilled in healing, you’re the daughter of Armazi” (Life of Saint Nino, 9th century writing) (Gvelesiani, 2012).

By the legend, Nino performed miraculous healings and converted the Georgian queen, Nana, and eventually the pagan king Mirian III of Kartli, who, lost in darkness and blinded on a hunting trip, found his way only after he prayed to "Nino’s God". Mirian declared Christianity an official religion (c. 327) and Nino continued her missionary activities among Georgians until her death.

Her tomb is still shown at the Bodbe Monastery in Kakheti, eastern Georgia. St. Nino has become one of the most venerated saints of the Georgian Orthodox Church and her attribute, a grapevine cross, is a symbol of Georgian Christianity (see Figure 8).

In 334, king Mirian started to build the first Christian church in Kartli which was finally completed in 379 on the spot where the Svetitskhoveli Cathedral in Mtskheta (old capital and king's residence) is standing now.

Coptic manuscripts tell that the Svetitskhoveli Cathedral was built on an old pagan temple in the King's gardens. According to the manuscripts, Apollo's oracle resided in this temple. The description of the "king's paradise" in Georgian chronicles has much in common with description of the area of Apollo's temple in Greater Antioch. Apollo had ancient chthonic roots, Apollo was a radiant deity, personified the Sun, he was protector of muses and source of inspiration, a healer and a prophet (Bibiluri, 2008).

Early Christianity

Whereas the kings of Kartli adopted Christianity quite readily, paganism did not give up its hold on the populace without a struggle. In some cases, it simply adopted Christian coloring and went "underground", persisting in various forms in remote Caucasian areas up to the present day.

The "Life of Saint Nino" relates how King Mirian and one of his dukes preached Gospel to some mountain tribe, but they refused to be baptized. So the royal duke cast down their idols by force. The king laid heavy taxes upon those who refused to be baptized, who therefore banded together and became nomads. Some were converted on sixth century by St Abibos of Nekresi, but others remained heathen (Lang 1966).

It is said that in south-western Georgia some heathen parents put their children into a pit and stoned them to death rather than submit to their conversion to Christianity. These children are numbered among the martyrs of the Georgian Church (Lang 1966).

King Vakhtang Gorgasali secured the independent status of the Georgian national Church (during the 5th century), which from then onwards has elected its own Catholicos-Patriarch, who resides in Tbilisi. During the sixth century the Syrian fathers came to Georgia and founded monastic communities on the Egyptian and Syrian model.

The split between Armenian and Georgian Orthodox Churches from the fifth century has driven the Georgians closer to the Greek world and aligned the Armenians more with the older Christian churches of the Middle East. The Georgians opened a monastery in

Mount Athos in Greece named Iveron (“of the Iberians”), which was home to Georgian monks until the modern era (De Waal, 2010).

In the early Christianity St Nino and St Shushanik were the key figures of the church. Later other women played crucial role in the church as well. In the ancient Roman Empire during harsh pagan persecutions women in general kept the Christian communities together. Female deacons visited houses of the faithful, visited the sick and needy, and thus maintain the links that were otherwise severed due to arrests and executions of many Christians. The pagan authorities of Rome mostly left women alone – either did not suspect them providing crucial services for the Church or did not see them as a threat (Tchantouridze, 2008).

Caucasian Christianity still bears strong marks of the pagan and Zoroastrian world that preceded it. The famous Armenian “cross-stones” or *khachkars*, have a fiery Zoroastrian sun-circle beneath the cross. Most Ossetians are nominally Christian, but many still take part in the pagan ceremonies. The village of Lykhny in Abkhazia contains a medieval church as well as pre-Christian shrine (De Waal, 2010). Seasonal feasts and rites have pagan roots but are now Christian celebrations.

In some sense we may speak of the return of paganism to nature worship. This is not a regression toward a barbarous past, as a relapse to the level of primitive animism.

Religions do not fall back into infancy as they grow old. The pagans of the 4th century no longer naively considered their gods as capricious genii, disordered powers of a confused natural philosophy; they conceived them as cosmic energies whose divine interventions were regulated in a harmonious system. Faith was no longer instinctive and impulsive, for erudition and reflection had reconstructed the entire theology. In a certain sense it might be said that theology had passed from the fictitious to the metaphysical state, according to the formula of Comte. It was intimately connected with the knowledge of the day that resulted in a religious form of the cosmology of the period. The precise principles of astrology determined its conception of heaven and earth (Cumont, 1956).

Conclusions

Georgia has gone through all the main religions on the border of Europe and Asia, from paganism, through Zoroastrianism and Islam, maintaining and establishing its strong essence in Christianity. Through all these ages local people have developed a kind of religious tolerance, where all the main religions live together, acknowledging each other's deities, sacred buildings and customs.

Cappadocian, Jewish, Persian and Christian influences modified the old pagan rites and filled them with ideas of spiritual purification and eternal redemption by the baptism. But the priests did not succeed in eliminating the basis of naturism which ancient tradition had imposed upon them.

Despite strong Christian traditions, Georgians have still maintained some old pagan beliefs and customs, especially in the more remote areas, in the mountainous regions – the nature worship, praying for weather gods, making sacrifices etc. And in the same time due to strong Christian tradition these old beliefs and customs are firmly connected and assimilated into Georgian Christianity.

As Cumont (1956) discusses, can we speak of *one* pagan religion? In paganism a cult does not die violently, but after long decay. A new doctrine does not necessarily displace an older one. They may co-exist for a long time as contrary possibilities suggested by the intellect or faith, and all opinions, all practices, seem respectable to paganism. There are no radical or revolutionary transformations. The pagan beliefs of the 4th century or earlier did not have a metaphysical system or canons formulated by a council, but it spread through oral traditions.

Peasants practice their strict rites over sacred stones, springs and trees, as in the past, and continue celebrating their rustic holidays during seed-time and harvest. They keep strongly to their traditional usages. Old customs have persisted for centuries under the Christian orthodoxy without exposing it to serious risk, and while they were no longer marked in the liturgic calendars they are still mentioned occasionally in the collections of folklore.

Georgians still celebrate the beginning and end of the agricultural season, they still have strong connections with their ancestors and they believe that nature is sacred.

Georgian folklore, myths and tales are filled with old religious ideas and beliefs. In these tales the gods and mystic creatures live next to people, meet and speak to the sun, the moon, and the stars.

Originally there were different tribal deities and beliefs, but they were mixed and confused after the centralization of the tribal states to one Georgia.

It is quite a challenge to study these old pre-Christian beliefs among locals, since the religion practiced is seen as pure Christianity, nothing older. Interviewing the locals is rather difficult, for the interviewer cannot presume any pagan beliefs among the locals. Only possible method is to observe, later enrich it with some results from interviews and then compare these data with other studies about old pre-Christian beliefs and collecting additional data from folklore and folk tales.

During my research I made some travels to observe and interview the locals in the remote areas, but collected data is too small to make any further, specific conclusions. Additional research with longer period of observations among old locals in the mountain villages is definitely needed.

Also M. Gvelesiani, who has studied the Georgian pre-Christian deities, admits that this kind of research needs a multidisciplinary research and comparative analysis of cultural-religious evidence from Georgia and other places, to make any conclusions on this topic about the ancient deities, as well as their hints in Georgia today.

My conclusion is that religions develop, just like cultures, languages, science and other forms of human life. Religion being elusive concept to define itself, acts out in Georgia as Christianity deeply intervened with older beliefs. Although Christianity replaced the paganism in ancient Georgia, it adapted the local customs and strong beliefs that still live among people. So religions develop and live their life among people, religions adapt, change, spread and decrease.

Bibliography

- Abakelia, N. *The spatiotemporal patterns of Georgian winter solstice festivals*. Electronic Journal of Folklore, www.folklore.ee, 2008: 40: 101-116.
- Akaba, L. H. *U istokov religii abkhazov*. Suhumi, 1979.
- Ananikian, M. H. *Armenian Mythology*. Indo-European Publishing, 2010.
- Anderson, T. *Bread and ashes. A walk through the mountains of Georgia*. London, 2004.
- Bardavelidze, V. *ქართველთა უძველესი სარწმუნოების ისტორიიდან (From the history of the Georgians' most ancient beliefs)*. Tbilisi, 1941.
- Bardavelidze, V. V. *Po etapam razvitiia drevneishih religioznh verovanii I obriadovoe graficheskoe iskusstvo gruzinskih plemen*. Tbilisi, 1957.
- Bibiluri, T. *The Apollo temple in Didi Mtskheta "Apollo-Sun"*. Vakhtang Beridze 1st International Symposium of Georgian Culture. Georgian Art in the Context of European and Asian Cultures. June, 2008, Georgia. pp 71-75
- Briffault, R. *The mothers*. London, 1927.
- Chitaia G. S. *Motiv "dreva zhizni" v lazskom ornamente*. Tbilisi, 1941.
- Chubinashvili, G. N. *Arhitektura Kahetii*. Tbilisi, 1959.
- Cumont, F. *The oriental religions in Roman paganism*. New York, 1956.
- De Waal, T. *The Caucasus: an introduction*. Oxford, 2010.
- Dhalla, M. *History of Zoroastrianism*. Oxford, 1938.
- Dzidziguri, S. *Baski i gruzini*. Tbilisi, 1979. (In: Golan, 2003)
- Eliade, M. *A history of religious ideas*. Chicago, 1978.
- Eliade, M. *Patterns in comparative religion*. London, 1971.
- Emin, N. *Ocherk religii iazicheskikh armian*. Moscow, 1864.
- Episcop Kyrion. *Kulturnaya rol Iverii v istorii Rossii*. Tbilisi, 1910.
- Frazer, J. G. *The golden bough*. Vol 2. London 1911.

- Gagoshidze, I. *Iz istorii Gruzino-Iranekikh vzaimootnoshenii* (khram II-I vv. do n.e. Dedoplis Mindori). Kavkaz i Srednaia Azia v drevnosti i srednevekovie. Moskva, 1981, pp 102-114.
- Golan, D. *Prehistoric religion. Mythology. Symbolism*. Jerusalem, 2003.
- Goodison, L., Morris, Ch. *Ancient Goddesses. The myths and the evidence*. Wisconsin, 1998.
- Gvelesiani, M. *Pagan cults of pre-Christian Georgia (Ainina/Danina, Zaden)*. National Council for Eurasian and East European Research (NCEEER), 2012.
www.nceeer.org/Programs/Carnegie/Reports/Pagan_Cults_of_Pre-Christian_Georgia.doc
- Gvelesiani, M. *Toward interpretation of the anthropomorphic figure from Katlanikhevi*. Vakhtang Beridze 1st international symposium of Georgian culture. Georgian art in the context of European and Asian cultures. Conference abstracts, pp 64-70. Georgia, June 2008.
- James, E. O. *The cult of the Mother Goddess*. London, 1959.
- Khakhutaishvili, D. *Uplistsikhe I*. Tbilisi, 1964.
- King, C. *The ghost of freedom: a history of Caucasus*. Oxford, 2008.
- Kuftin, B. A. *Arheologicheskie raskopki v Trialeti*. Tbilisi 1941.
- Lang, D. M. *Lives and legends of Georgian Saints*. London, 1956.
- Lang, D. M. *The Georgians*. London, 1966.
- Lordkipanidze, O. *Phasis. The river and city in Colchis*. Geographica Historica 15. Stuttgart, 2000.
- Melikset-Bekoff, L. *K voprosu o nastoyaschem imeni prosvetitelnicy Gruzii*. Tbilisi, 1914. (In: Gvelesiani, 2012)
- Mgaloblishvili, T. *On one of the most ancient feast in Georgia and Armenia ("Vardoba", "Vardavar")*. The Armenians in Jerusalem and the Holy Land. Conference abstracts. Jerusalem, 1999 (In: Gvelesiani, 2012)
- Mikaberidze, A. *Georgian mythology*. <http://rustaveli.tripod.com/mythology.html> (4.04.2013)
- Mikeladze, T. *K arheologii Kolkhidy*. Tbilisi, 1990 (In: Gvelesiani, 2012)
- Namitok, A. *The Caucasus. Caucasian review*. Munich, 1937.
- Parrot, A. *Ziggurats et tour de Babel*. Paris, 1949.

- Przyluski, J. *La Grande Deesse*. Paris, 1950.
- Rahvinashvili, N. *Kultovyi kamen "gyune" (solnechnyi)*. Vestnik GMG. Tbilisi, 1963.
- Russell, J. *Armenian and Iranian studies*. Cambridge, 2004.
- Sikharulidze, A. N. *K voprosu o znachenii izobrazheniabika na trialetskih vishapah*. K.E.S., 1972.
- Silogava, V., Shengelia, K. *History of Georgia*. Tbilisi, 2007
- Strabo. *Geographica* II, ii, parag 17 (In: Lang, 1966)
- Strelkova, R. *Georgia's pagan carnivals cherish fertility*. Georgia Today, 4. April, 2008.
- Svanidze, A. S. *Nazvania drevnevostochnih bogov v gruzinskih pesniah*. VDI, 1937.
- Tallgren, A. M. *Sur les monuments megalithiques du Caucase occidental*. Eurasia Septentrionalis Antiqua, IX, 1934.
- Tchantouridze, L. *Saint Shushanik of Georgia. Women in early Georgian church*. The Canadian Journal of Orthodox Christianity. Volume III, No 2, Summer 2008.
- The golden fleece. Georgian, Armenian and Azerbaijanian magic tales*. Ed: R. Bobrova. Moscow, 1971.
- Toumanoff, C. *Studies in Christian Caucasian history*. Georgetown, 1963.
- Wardrop, M. *Georgian folk tales*. London, 2009 (Originally published in 1894)
- Wardrop, M. *Life of Saint Nino*. Gorgias Press, 2006.
- White, G. E. *Survivals of primitive religion among the people of Asia Minor*. Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute, volume XXXIX, pp. 146-166. London, 1907.
- Zisserman, A. L. *25 let na Kavkaze*. St Petersburg, 1879.

Resüme:

Eelkristlikud uskumused ja traditsioonid Gruusias

Gruusia asub Euroopa ja Aasia piirimail ning käinud läbi kõik peamised religioonid, paganlusest zoroastrismi ja islami kaudu, säilitades väga tugevad sidemed kristlusega. Läbi kõigi nende aegade on inimesed saavutanud erilise religioosse tolerantsuse, kus kõik peamised religioonid elavad kõrvuti, austades üksteise pühakodasid ja pühakuid. Vaatamata tugevale kristlikule identiteedile on grusiinid (nagu ka muud Kaukaasia rahvad) siiski säilitanud mõned vanad paganlikud uskumused ja kombed, eriti just eraldatud mägipiirkondades – loodusekummardamine, palvetamine loodusjumalate poole, ohverduste toomine jne. Samal ajal on need vanad uskumused ja traditsioonid tugevalt seotud ja kohandunud Gruusia õigeusk. Varasemate paganlike kommete püsimine on seda huvitavam, kuna Gruusia võttis kristluse vastu juba 4. sajandi esimeses pooles ning on sellest ajast saati olnud peamiselt kristlik riik.

Käesoleva uurimustöö eesmärgiks oli uurida, kas ja mis on säilinud tänapäeva tugevalt ortodoksses riigis neist varasematest, 2-3-tuhande aasta vanustest religioosetest uskumustest ja traditsioonidest. Minu hüpotees on, et need on tugevalt segunenud ning varasema religiooni säilmeid võib leida just eelkõige mägipiirkonnas, kuhu ka kristlus tundub hiljem, alles 12. sajandil jõudis. Püüdsin oma uurimistöös kirjeldada neid praegusi kombeid, millel võivad olla paganlikud juured ning leida sellekohaseid allikaid teistest uurimustest, sh arheoloogilistest uurimustest. Kohati kasutan võrdlevaid kirjeldusi ka Armeenia ning teiste naaberriikide ja -rahvaste (eriti Põhja-Kaukasuse hõimude) religioosetest traditsioonidest, kuna nende usundiline ajalugu on olnud väga sarnane, samade pöördeliste aegade ja samade stabiilsete perioodidega. Inspireerivaks said muistsed traditsioonid ja religioossed rituaalid tänapäeva Gruusias, ajalugu ja tänapäev üheskoos. Inimeste identiteediküsimused, müstika, etnograafia, poliitika, geograafia – kõige selle seos religiooni ning religioonide arenguga.

Uurimismeetodina kasutasin kirjalike allikate analüüsi ja tegin kokkuvõtteid erinevatest sellekohastest uuringutest. Lisaks täiendasin kirjanduse analüüsi ka oma välitöö käigus kogutud materjalidega Gruusia mägipiirkondades, põhiliselt Tusheti ja Khevsureti piirkondades, kus vaatlesin kohalike kombeid ning püüdsin vaatlustulemusi täiendada intervjuudega.

Vaatamata peaaegu 2000 aasta pikkusele kristlikule traditsioonile on säilinud nii mõnedki paganlikud kombed, seda eriti just mägiipiirkondades, mis oma traditsioone tugevamalt alles hoiavad. Inimesed teevad ikka oma riitusi kivide, allikate või puude juures, tähistavad külvi- ja lõikusaega, hoiavad tihedaid sidemeid oma esivanematega, peavad loodust pühaks paigaks, teevad ohverdusi jumalatele ning peavad kinni teatud tabudest. Vanad kombed ja tähtpäevad kantakse edasi rahvasuus ja folklooris. Hõimujumalad ja – traditsioonid on aga riiklusega seoses segunenud ning päritolu pole enam väga lihtsalt selgitatav.

Töö esimeses osas on lühike ülevaade Gruusia ajaloolisest taustast ning Gruusia religioosest ajaloost, alates paganlusest, edasi zoroastrism, kristlus ja islam. Teises osas toon välja põhilisi arheoloogilisi allikaid, millele religiooniajaloolased Gruusia paganlikke sümboleid uurides viidanud on. Toon välja ka allikaid folkloorist, mida kogutud ja mis rahvasuus senini edasi elavad, samuti seosed naaberrahvaste folklooriga. Kolmandas ja kõige mahukamas osas kirjeldan Gruusia mütoloogiat, peamisi jumalusi ning eelkristlikke uskumusi, rikastades neid näidetega praegustest kommetest ning uskumustest. Neljandas osas toon lühiülevaate kristluse jõudmisest Gruusia aladele ning kristluse algusaegadest Gruusias.

Uurimistöö on koostatud inglise keeles, kuna selle vastu on huvi näidanud ka mõned Gruusia etnoloogid ning religiooniteadlased. Inglisekeelsena võib sellel olla ka suurem väärtus järgmiste uurijate jaoks, kes selle keerulise piirkonna religiooniajalugu ja/või praegusi traditsioone uurivad.

Uurimise keerukus ilmnis kirjalike allikate vähesuses ning ka intervjuu kui meetodi väheses kasutatavuses selles kontekstis. Õigeusklikus riigis elavad inimesed ei pea oma traditsioone paganlikeks ning intervjuu teel selle kohta andmeid koguda on peaaegu

võimatu. Vaatluse teel on võimalik hüpoteese püstitada ja nende kohta varasematest uurimustest andmeid koguda ning arheoloogiliste andmetega võrrelda. Iseasi, kas neist saab laiemaid järeldusi teha. See kuulub edasise uurimise objektiks. Sama on soovitanud ka teised autorid, kes arheoloogia põhjal eelkristlikke sümboleid uurinud, et laiemate järeldusteni jõudmiseks tuleks teha põhjalikke interdistsiplinaarseid uurimusi.

Figures



Figure 1. Georgia and its geographical situation today.



Figure 2. Pre-Christian Georgia consisted mainly of two kingdoms – Colchis and Kartli (known as Iberia for the ancient Greek and Romans).



Figure 3. Graveyard in Khevsureti. Pyramidal tombs decorated with white stones.

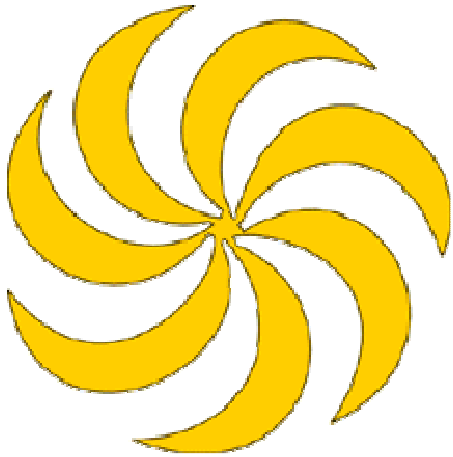


Figure 4. *Borjgali* - an ancient Georgian symbol of the Sun and is related to the Mesopotamian and Sumerian symbols of the eternity and the Sun.



Figure 5. "The Glory of Georgia", one of the most adorned icon allegorizing the Georgian Orthodox Church and the legends surrounding it. Symbolizes the pillar of life (*Svetitskhoveli*).

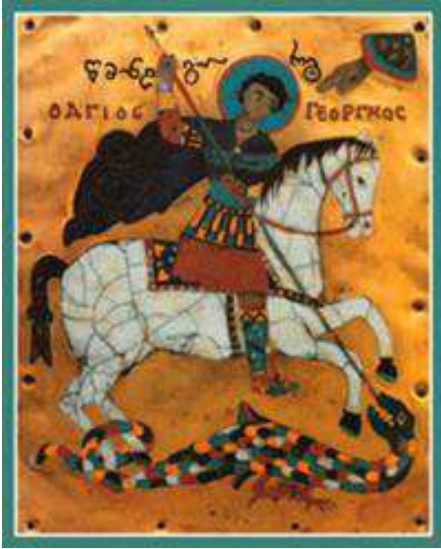


Figure 6. St Giorgi on an icon. Usually portrayed on a white horse, with a sword.



Figure 7. The national coat of arms of Georgia with St Giorgi's image on it.



Figure 8. Saint Nino with her scroll and grapevine cross

Lihlitsents lõputöö reprodutseerimiseks ja lõputöö üldsusele kättesaadavaks tegemiseks

Mina, **Mirjam Lindpere** (sünnikuupäev: 01.juuli.1980)

1. annan Tartu Ülikoolile tasuta loa (lihlitsentsi) enda loodud teose „**Pre-Christian beliefs and traditions in Georgia**“ mille juhendaja on **Lea Altnurme**,
 - 1.1.reprodutseerimiseks säilitamise ja üldsusele kättesaadavaks tegemise eesmärgil, sealhulgas digitaalarhiivi DSpace-is lisamise eesmärgil kuni autoriõiguse kehtivuse tähtaja lõppemiseni;
 - 1.2.üldsusele kättesaadavaks tegemiseks Tartu Ülikooli veebikeskkonna kaudu, sealhulgas digitaalarhiivi DSpace'i kaudu kuni autoriõiguse kehtivuse tähtaja lõppemiseni.
2. olen teadlik, et punktis 1 nimetatud õigused jäävad alles ka autorile.
3. kinnitan, et lihlitsentsi andmisega ei rikuta teiste isikute intellektuaalomandi ega isikuandmete kaitse seadusest tulenevaid õigusi.

Tartus, 7. mai 2013

Mirjam Lindpere