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Georgian folk customs and rituals connected with childbirth

Summary: From a Christian perspective, childbirth is one of the greatest blessings for men and women, who have been united in love through the Sacrament of Marriage. Among the Georgians, a child's birth was the most important event in the life of the family. Georgian folk customs and rituals associated with childbirth encompasses the widest range of various rites, rituals, superstitions, and omens timed to certain moments in the life of the mother and the child: pregnancy, labour, the end of the 40-day period of time after the child's birth, and so forth. Although there are multiple connections between Georgian customs and rituals associated with childbirth and various, mainly pre-Christian, religious beliefs, these customs and rituals nevertheless point to the centuries-old influence of Orthodox Christian cultural mores on this sphere of life. Research in this area enables one to glimpse the spiritual culture of the Georgian people, which is particularly evident in the ideas pertaining to the nation's worldview, as well as in its religious beliefs, in the peculiarities of family life and interpersonal relations. The article is an attempt to look into this important sphere of life of another nation and its customs. Although they may seem very exotic to us, they will certainly allow us to better understand others and enrich ourselves.

Keywords: Georgian folk customs and rituals, childbirth, Georgian folk, Georgian culture, Georgian spiritual life, family life in Georgia.

Streszczenie: Gruzińskie ludowe zwyczaje i obrzędy związane z narodzeniem dziecka

Z perspektywy chrześcijańskiej narodzenie dziecka jest jednym z największych błogosławieństw, które splywa na mężczyznę i kobietę połączonych w sakramencie małżeństwa. W Gruzji, przyjście na świat dziecka, to najbardziej znaczące wydarzenie w życiu rodzinnym. Związana z tym wydarzeniem gruzińska obrzędowość ludowa jest bardzo bogata w zwyczaje, obrzędy, przesady i symbole. Odnoszą się one do szczególnych momentów w życiu matki i dziecka: czasu brzemienności, porodu, czterdziestodniowego okresu oczyszczenia matki po urodzeniu dziecka, itp. Choć w zwyczajach i obrzędach związanych z narodzeniem dziecka można dostrzec pozostałości wierzeń pogańskich, to jednak wskazują one także na wielowiekowy znaczący wpływ na tę sferę wiary i kultury chrześcijańsko-prawosławnej. Badania w tym obszarze dają możliwość przeniknięcia w kulturę duchową Gruzinów, która w szczególny sposób objawia się w ich światopoglądzie i wierzeniach religijnych, a także przywiązaniu do życia

rodzinnego i relacjach międzyludzkich. Artykuł stanowi próbę wejrzenia w tę ważną sferę życia innego narodu i jego obyczaje. Choć mogą wydawać się one dla nas bardzo egzotyczne, to jednak z pewnością pozwolą nam lepiej zrozumieć innych i wzbogacić nas samych.

Słowa kluczowe: Gruzińskie ludowe zwyczaje i obrzędy, narodzenie dziecka, gruzińskie obyczaje, gruzińska kultura, gruzińska duchowość, życie rodzinne w Gruzji.

Introduction

There is a long historiographical tradition associated with the study of Orthodox Christianity and its role in Georgian culture. This is hardly surprising if we recall the significance of Orthodox Christianity in the life of the Georgian people, past and present. Indeed, Orthodox Christianity has played a vital role in determining Georgia's fate, which cannot be overestimated. One might say there is not a single sphere of Georgian material and spiritual culture where Orthodox influences would be impossible to trace; these spheres include education, writing, architecture, fine art, various crafts, literature, legal culture, ethics and others. The very shaping of the Georgian nation, and, later, the Georgians' capacity to preserve their statehood and ethnic identity were largely associated with the spiritual foundation provided by Orthodox Christianity¹. In the early 20th century, Georgian anthropologist Aleksandr Džvahišvili (Džavahov) wrote: "The Kartvelians were forced to fight for every day in their lives and for the right to a free existence with a sword in one hand and a cross in the other with numerous and powerful enemies"².

Orthodox tradition also plays a substantial role in the daily life of the Georgian people, including social or family rituals and festivities. Which sources could reveal the role of Christian tradition in folk culture? In the case of the early Middle Ages, these are primarily literary works, hagiographies and chronicles, including historical ones. For the more recent historical periods, such sources include notes by travellers or chroniclers who wrote about everyday life and customs, various literary sources, periodicals, documents from archives, historical studies, as well as field materials collected during ethnographic expeditions.

¹ Grzegorz Peradze, św., *Kazanie wygłoszone w Paryżu podczas pierwszej liturgii w języku gruzińskim 31 maja 1931*, [w:] *Dziela*, t. 3, red. H. Paprocki, Studium Europy Wschodniej Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2012, s. 189–190; Grzegorz Peradze, św., *Sens prawdziwego obywatelstwa*, [w:] *Dziela*, t. 3, dz. cyt., ss. 200–201.

² A. N. Džavahov, *K antropologii gruzin*, „Russkij Antropologičeckij Žurnal”, 1905 [nr] 3, s. 10.

As a general rule, family rituals in any nation are quite conservative and tend to retain numerous archaic elements for a long time to come, yet they offer clear testimony to the diverse influences experienced by folk culture over the entire course of its development. The Georgian ritual culture associated with childbirth encompasses the widest range of various rites, rituals, superstitions, and omens timed to certain moments in the life of the mother and the child: pregnancy, labour, the end of the 40. day period of time after the child's birth, and so on. Most of these rituals are associated with the oldest known beliefs and ideas. However, when seen in their totality, these rituals point at the centuries-long influence Orthodox cultural mores have exerted on this aspect of ritual culture.

Georgian rituals and childbirth

From a Christian perspective, childbirth is one of the greatest blessings for a couple united in love through the Sacrament of Marriage. Although the birth of children is not the main purpose of marriage, a family without offspring is incomplete, imperfect, because the physical and spiritual characteristics of the two opposite sexes themselves are geared toward birthing and educating the next generation. This focus is reflected in the commandment given to our forebears in Holy Scripture: "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1: 28).

According to St John Chrysostom, the family is the "minor" church, and the path that leads to church (as a physical temple) and finally to the "greater" Church: the Body of Christ. Because of this, in Georgia, as in any other Orthodox countries, barren women often sought help from Christian shrines and miraculous icons. A woman's very inability to conceive was frequently attributed to a certain saint or icon being angry with the spouses, and thus unwilling to bless them with a child. In this case, a fortune-teller told them the name of the saint and they made a pilgrimage to the church specified in order to make a sacrifice. Often, a solemn vow was made while praying to the saint to bestow a child upon the couple, such as, for instance: "O Mother, One who gave birth to God! Make it so that I bear a child, and I will offer a sacrifice (lamb, bull) in your yard." A similar case is described in the story *Is He a Man?* by Iliâ Čavčavadze, where the fortune-teller declared that their childlessness

had been caused by the wrath of an icon of the Theotokos³. Spouses who had been unable to beget any children for a long time addressed similar pleas to St. George the Victorious and to St. Barbara, which indicates their close relationship with fertility. Karpez Dondua notes that, as a sacrifice for the saints, barren women would also bring threads and shreds of cloth, which they hung on the trees near the church or next to the niche (a small building dedicated to the saint)⁴. It was not uncommon for the sacrifice to be a cradle or a model thereof, which could be seen in churches in Kartli and Kaĥeti, such as the Church of St George and the Church of the Blessed Virgin near the village of Kavtiševi (Kaspi district), the Church of St. Barbara near the village of Kordi (Gori district), the Church of Tetri Giorgi, or “White George” (Telavi district), or the Church of St. George in the village of Geri. The latter is located in Šida Kartli, which saw childless couples coming to pray from afar (from Kaĥeti and Trialeti)⁵.

Each region of Georgia had one or more shrines famous for the protection they offered in childbearing. For instance, the icon of the Theotokos known as Our Lady of Vardzia was particularly venerated⁶. On August 15 (old calendar) during the Feast of *Gvtismĥobloba*, i.e. the Dormition of the Blessed Virgin Mary, residents came to Vardzia not only from Samtše-Džavaĥeti, but from other areas. The childless prayed to Our Lady of Vardzia to grant them a child, while those who would only give birth to girls asked for a son. In Kartli and Kaĥeti, women in this case would also frequently go to pray in the Church of St. Barbara⁷.

³ I. G. Čavčavadze, *Čelovek li on?*, [w:] *Sobranie sočinenij v 2–h tomach*, t. 1, MERANI, Tbilisi 1978, s. 162. Iliâ G. Čavčavadze (1837–1907) – prince, Georgian poet and publisher who fought for Georgia’s political independence, one of the most prominent national figures in Georgia in the early 20th century; in 1987 the Holy Synod of the Georgian Orthodox Church discussed his accomplishments and the service Iliâ Čavčavadze had done to God and his homeland, and ruled that he was to be declared a saint and named Iliâ the Righteous.

⁴ K. Dondua, *Our country Georgia*, Tbilisi 1925, s. 181 [transl. Levan Varsimašvili].

⁵ L. A. Bedukidze, *Folk furniture in the mountainous regions of eastern Georgia*, Tbilisi 1973, s. 124 [transl. Levan Varsimashvili]; S. I. Makalattia, *Mtiuleti*, Georgian Sightseeing Society, Tbilisi 1930, s. 174 [transl. Levan Varsimašvili].

⁶ The icon can be found in a unique male cave monastery dedicated to the Dormition of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Vardzia, which is situated 6 kilometers away from the Turkish border on the left bank of the Kura.

⁷ V. V. Bardavelidze, *From the history of the oldest beliefs of Georgians (idol Bargar–Bargar)*, Academy of Sciences GSSR, Tbilisi 1941.

Likewise, the Church of St. David Garedželi in Tbilisi was extremely famous⁸. The spring found near the church was believed to cure infertility. To reach the church, women usually ascended Mount Mtacminda on Thursdays throughout the entire year, often barefoot, and gave a special vow. A particularly large number of worshippers would gather there on the seventh Thursday after Easter. Having prayed, the woman would walk over to the north wall of the church and press a pebble to the stones; if the pebble remained in place, the saint was expected to fulfill the request. According to a legend about the church, one of the nuns, at the instigation of the enemies of St. David Garedželi, accused him of being the father of her unborn child. When the saint came to court, he touched the womb of the pregnant woman and asked, “Am I your father?” To this, the child replied, “No”. The people became convinced of the saint’s innocence and the nun gave birth to a rock instead of a baby. The Kvašveti Church (literally translated as “the birth of the rock”) was built on that spot. Owing to this legend, St. David was widely believed to “bless (i.e. heal) infertile females”⁹.

The conviction that a prayerful appeal to the saints was effective in the case of childlessness is reflected in the oldest Georgian hagiographic work, *Martyrdom of the Holy Queen Šušanik (The Passion of St. Šušanik)* (5th century A.D.). Šušanik, who was already venerated as a saint during her earthly life, would be approached “with abundant donations promised in advance”, and everyone, “through the prayers of the blessed Šušanik, would receive from the loving God that which they needed: the childless begat children, the sick were healed”¹⁰.

For the Orthodox Georgian people, the customs and rituals concerning the birth of children were also associated with the name of Jesus Christ. The following legend was known in Kartli: Christ once saw a woman sitting on a Golden Ottoman, who gave birth to a baby despite prolonged labour, and

⁸ St. David Garedželi (+ 604) – one of the 13 Syrian founding fathers of Georgian monasticism. He performed his ascetic fasts first on Mount Zadeni near the ancient capital of Georgia, Mcheta, then on Mount Mtacminda (now in Tbilisi); the church that stands there nowadays, Mama Davidi (Eng. Father David), was named in his honor. Later he moved to Garedža Cave.

⁹ P. I. Iosseliani, *Mount St. David in Tbilisi*, [w:] *Caucasian Calendar 1858 year*, Tbilisi 1858, s. 2–7 [transl. Levan Varsimashvili].

¹⁰ Â. Curtaveli, *Mučeničestvo Šušaniki*, [w:] *Pamiatniki drevnegruzinskoj agiografičeskoj literatury*, Tbilisi, 1956, s. 24.

advised: “Go, lie down on the straw, and you will be able to give birth”. Since then, Vera Bardavelidze notes, the Georgians have had a custom of laying a woman in labour on straw¹¹.

In the event of complications during labour, it was customary to ask the priest to open the Royal Gates in the church. Similarly, any chests, cabinets, cupboards or boxes were opened in the house. If the difficulties in childbirth were attributed to a saint being angry with the family, the couple promised to visit his or her church. As a token of the vow, a silver coin was carried around the head of the woman in labour thrice and was donated as a gift to the saint afterward. Several women would enter the room where the childbirth was taking place, holding lighted candles in their hands and praying for God’s help. Prayers were also addressed to the Theotokos and the guardian angels of the family. In situations like these, the help of the Blessed Virign was considered to be especially effective, for she also “underwent the torment of childbirth”. The following custom existed in Kaĥeti: one of the women went to church and washed her right hand over an icon of the Blessed Virgin; then the water was given for the pregnant woman to drink in the hopes that the Mother of God, the Patroness of Childbirth, would come to her aid. During the forty-day period after the birth, when it was believed that mothers and their children alike could easily be harmed by “evil forces,” holy water was frequently used for protection against them (for example, to sprinkle those who entered the house after sunset). The bed of a woman who had just given birth was covered with a fishing net, which was usually blessed by a priest by sprinkling it with holy water. It was forbidden to sprinkle the woman herself with holy water within 40. days following the birth, as she was considered “unclean”.

One should note that the birth of a child was regarded by the Georgians as the most important event in a family’s life and it was considered necessary, even obligatory, to congratulate the family on the appearance of the newborn. In some areas of Georgia, such as, for example, among the Hevsur¹², when no more than a few days had passed since the birth of the child, female relatives and friends would come to the mother of the newborn, who would stay in

¹¹ V. V. Bardavelidze, *Ritual connected with childbirth in the mountainous regions of Georgia*, “Vestnik of the Museum of Georgia”, 1928 [nr 4], s. 271–272 [transl. Levan Varsimashvili].

¹² The Hevsur are a Georgian ethnographic group, the indigenous population of the mountain region of Hevsureti, on the southern slopes of the Greater Caucasus.

a special room known as the *samrevlo*¹³, and bring her a pie with a filling, or *kada*, and a scone known as a *kubati* “as the newborn’s share”¹⁴, saying: “*Kada* for the mother and *kubati* for the baby, that he may not be doomed to be left without his share”. Whoever saw the child for the first time would make a sign of the cross over them and bless them. In Mtiuleti, in this case, one was supposed to say the following: “May Saint George bless you with the sign of the cross, as I wish, as I desire. My dream to you, your troubles to me, peace be with you, may God grant you peace and sleep!”¹⁵.

Visiting a woman during this period is regarded as a responsibility for anyone who maintained a familial or friendly relationship with her family. On this occasion, it was said: “They who have not come to the *samrevlo* and did not congratulate a woman on the survival and birth of her child, have acted as an enemy, not as a friend”. Relatives were also obliged to come with congratulations to the newborn’s home and to bring presents, or *masanabavi*: a wineskin with vodka (*araki*) and a large pie filled with flour and butter (*havitsiani kada*). In addition, scones were brought for the children, one of which was intended specifically for the newborn. The people who came to congratulate the family were especially numerous if a boy was born. Such congratulations could be made throughout the year, especially if the relatives lived far away. The congratulations usually began after the woman returned from the *samrevlo*, i.e. once 40. days had passed since the birth, when a priest was invited to the house to sprinkle it with holy water, the woman and the child. Of course, a treat was arranged for those present and toasts were raised in the honor of the newborn and his parents¹⁶. However, if a long-awaited boy was born, close relatives did not wait for the woman to return, but hurried to congratulate the family as quickly as possible.

¹³ A *samrevlo* is a specialized separate building where a woman would stay for 40. days upon giving birth to a baby.

¹⁴ The butter–dough pie was usually brought for the mother only if her baby was a boy. Plain barley bread was brought instead if a girl was born (S. I. Makalatia, *Hevsureti*, Georgian Sightseeing Society, Tbilisi 1940, s. 155 [transl. Levan Varsimašvili]).

¹⁵ E. D. Mačavariani, *Education a child in Mtiuleti*, “Vestnik of the Museum of Georgia”, 1957 [nr 19], s. 257 [transl. Levan Varsimashvili].

¹⁶ A. A. Očiauri. *Custom of hospitality in Hevsureti*, МЕЦНИЕРЕВА, Тбилиси 1980, s. 6–8 [transl. Levan Varsimašvili].

Children's names

A significant custom still retained to the present day, especially in the mountain regions of eastern Georgia, is that of giving a child several names: the “name of the sanctuary” (*džvaris sabeli*)¹⁷, the “baptismal name” (*natlobis sabeli*) and the “name of the soul” (*sulis sabeli*). This is an interesting example of the ways in which ancient superstitions of pagan origin could co-exist with Orthodox Christian tradition in Georgia. The “name of the sanctuary” was given to a child by their mother during the initial days following their birth. This name was believed to offer reliable protection against evil spirits. The boys were named George (Giorgi, Giorga, Torgi) or Gvtiso (Htiso, Htisa, Htisika), whereas girls were named Mariam, Mzekali (Mzekala), Samdzimari (Dzilo, Dzila, Dzilukai), or Ašekali (Ašeka). The Hevsur believed that Samdzimari, Ashekali and Mzekali were the blood-sisters of the pagan deity Khakhmatis, and were regarded as the patrons of childbearing and motherhood¹⁸. When giving her child the “name of the sanctuary”, the mother would take the infant into her arms and say: “You are named after George and shall be called George” or “You are named after Mother Mariam and shall be called Mariam”, and so forth¹⁹. The “baptismal name” (*natlobis sabeli*) was given to the child at baptism. The “name of the soul” was given to a child if the latter was restless and cried frequently. The fortune-teller (*sulis mkithavi*) would determine which of the deceased was troubling the child, demanding that he or she be called by their own name. The parents could also determine this if they saw a dream where the deceased was sitting by the cradle and rocking it. On occasion, a child who was already able to speak would name a particular deceased person on their own, which was seen as a sign that the same name had to be given to the child. Both boys and girls could receive the “name of the soul”; and, as a rule, this was exclusively the name of a deceased relative, or, in a few rare cases, that of a deceased fellow villager. A mother who was about to give her child the “name of the soul” would bake special bread (*sabelsadebi*

¹⁷ *Džvari* literally means “cross”. There is a legend according to which the first crosses in Georgia was built by St. Nino, Equal to the Apostles, on the tops of several mountains: Thoti, in the Udžarma fortress and in Mtskheta, where a pagan temple used to be. The details of these events, including miracles, are elaborated upon in the *Life of St. Nino*, in the fragment *The mounting of the three crosses*.

¹⁸ M. Baliauri, *Birth and education a child in Hevsureti (Arhots community) and related superstitions relics*, Tbilisi, s. 32 [transl. Levan Varsimašvili].

¹⁹ V. V. Bardavelidze, . *From the history of religious thinking of Georgians from Mimomhilevi*, t. 1, Academy of Sciences GSSR, Tbilisi 1949, s. 151 [transl. Levan Varsimašvili].

purebi, or “naming bread”) and prepare other dishes, which, according to the Hevsur, were a treat for the departed individual whose name the child was to receive. Then the woman spoke the following prayer addressed to the deceased: “May this table (i.e. table with treats) be for your good, may it be yours. Let your namesake (*mesabele*) have a good fate, a good lot in life. Let him remember and commemorate you when he is an adult. If it is proper for you to enter my house, may this table be beneficial for you.” Sometimes the child would continue to cry and be capricious after receiving the “name of the soul”. This was attributed to another deceased person laying claims to the child and demanding that he or she be named after them. It was not uncommon for the mother to have dreams where the second deceased person pushed the first aside from the cradle with a forceful gesture and said, “get out of here, this house belongs to me, you do not have any work to do here,” or pleaded, “I beg you, step aside and let me have this house; get out of here.” As a rule, such dreams were trusted and resulted in the child being given a new “name of the soul”²⁰. There was a conviction in Hevsureti that a child named after a person who had passed away acquired some of their features: the personalities, behavior and gait of the two were supposed to be alike, and the child was, in a certain sense, a “deputy” or “substitute” of his or her namesake here on earth. Therefore, the relatives of the deceased could even address the child (regardless of his or her age) as though he or she were their deceased relative²¹. The custom of naming children after deceased relatives was known to the other peoples of the Caucasus and apparently has a genetic link with ancestor worship. Giving children the “name of the soul” was commonplace in the mountainous regions of eastern Georgia (Pšavi, Hevsureti, Mtiuleti, Hevi)²².

The “struggle for a name” described above was also linked to children’s ailments. If the children in a family did not survive or a “desired” (“hoped-for”) child was taken ill, the parents resorted to the custom of *berad dakeneba* or *berad šekeneba*. A vow was given at one of the churches, often at the advice of the fortune-teller: “If only my child survived, for one year (one could say two, three etc. years) he shall be your monk, and in one (two, three, etc.) years we shall bring him to your yard in white (red) clothes, bearing sacrifices.” Throughout the promised time, the child’s hair would not be cut and they were

²⁰ *Ibidem*, s. 169–170.

²¹ *Ibidem*, s. 168–171.

²² *Ibidem*, s. 151.

dressed in clothes of the specified color; a boy was referred to as a monk (*beri*) and a girl as a nun (*moložani*). At the appointed date, a sacrifice was offered near the church; and the priest then cut the child's hair. The child was dressed in a new set of clothing and the old clothes and trimmed hair were left behind in the church. A treat was arranged in the same location for everyone present, after which the family returned home. According to popular belief, the rite caused the saint whose "monk" or "nun" the child used to be to become their patron, so that the child's life was no longer in danger.

Rituals and difficult situations in a child's daily life

Some of the customs performed when a mother had problems breast-feeding her infant were connected to Christian shrines. For example, there was a cave (preserved until the present day) in Mcheta, near the ancient church of *Džvaris sakdari*, containing a healing spring called *Džudzustskali*, literally translated as the "water of the breast", where women came to pray if they were out of breast milk. According to a folk legend, God created the spring at the request of St. Nino, Equal to the Apostles, the Enlightener of Georgia. In Kakheti, women in the same situation went to pray to St. Barbara, bringing *kada*, or fancy-dough scones, as a donation. Near the village of Kurta (Gori region) there was a Church of the Blessed Virgin where a woman had to hang some animal horns on the oak tree by the church and pray for breast milk to appear. The same miraculous properties were attributed to the Church of the Blessed Virgin near the village of Tortiza (not far from Gori). A woman had to be led to the church by her brother-in-law. She would bring some butter-dough bread, some wine in a new vessel, a cup and a broomstick; at first, the woman was supposed to sweep the church, then she would wash her breasts with the wine over the stone trough that stood by the church. The remaining wine and bread were given to someone else and the man and woman went home without glancing back. In the village of Avnevi it was customary to pray to St. George. Having come to his niche, a woman would drain some milk into the new pot she had brought with her, pray, upend the pot and leave without turning around. The Church of the Blessed Virgin in the Kavturi Gorge had a stone sculpture that depicted a woman's breasts (*džudzuhati*), by which women would light candles and pray for their milk to become more abundant.

Christian themes also sounded in lullabies: "From the cross the Crucified One blesses you, the wicked one can do no damage to you, Saint George shall curse him, stick a skewer into his eyes. You belong to Christ and Christ belongs

to you, you are blessed and safeguarded by the sign of the cross out of Christ's hands" (from the village of Bodbiševi, Kaĥeti). A Moĥevi lullaby enumerates the sanctuaries that will protect the child: Lomis of the twelve martyrs (*Master Aragvi*), Sameba, or the Holy Trinity (*Lord of the firmament*), Ivane Natlismtsemeli, or St. John the Baptist (Patron of Infants), St. George of Baĥtria (*Master of travellers*). The combination of pagan and Christian imagery and ideas is likewise characteristic of the numerous spells that were used to treat children for the evil eye or fright, to protect them from *uzĥmuri* spirits, and so on. A cross fashioned from the Caucasian hackberry, known in Russian as the "stone tree" (*akakis džvari*), which was seen as sacred, had to be hung above the cradle among various other amulets, and a cross was drawn in charcoal on the baby's forehead if the latter was taken out of the house after sunset. For a child struck with jaundice, a cross was made from a barberry branch. An amulet known as *avgarozi* (*angarozi*) was hung on the child's chest or sewn to their clothing. The amulet consisted of a prayer written on paper and sewn into a shred of fabric. According to data obtained in the mid-19th century, the amulet contained the text of a letter that was, according to Georgian tradition, written by Christ and addressed to Abgar, King of Edessa. The child's illness was often perceived as a sign that a saint was dissatisfied with the family and demanded something from them. Such a disease was referred to as *hatis mižezi* (literally "the cause of the icon"). Various vows were given depending on what the fortune-teller reported: to spend the night by the church (*gamisteva*), to make a sacrifice (a young bull, a lamb, a rooster, some scones or candles), not to cut the child's hair for one or more years; a "yoke" (*ugeli*) made of silver or copper wire was placed around the child's neck and a coin with a drilled hole was sewn onto their clothes on the right shoulder for a certain time, after which these objects were left in the church on a feast day. In Kakheti, at a fortune-teller's advice, a vow could be made to dedicate a child who often fell ill to the Church of the Holy Archangels (*Mtavar Angelozi*) in the village of Anaga (Kiziki). There the children would live and serve the church by sweeping the yard, collecting firewood, etc. Over this time their hair remained uncut. This custom was called *kuratad dakeneba* (from the Georgian *kurati* "an animal intended as a sacrifice to God" and *dakeneba* "to put, to place"). This custom is close that of *berad dakeneba*, different only in that boys alone could become *kurati*.

In Kartli and Kaĥeti, if a child was seriously ill, the mother often gave a solemn vow to perform a rite known as *didebase siaruli* or *didebase davla* ("going for the honouring"). The woman went around the village collecting candles

and various products (bread, cheese, eggs) from her neighbors' houses, after which she sold them and used the money to buy a sacrificial animal, sometimes along with some white clothes to take the child to church in. The sacrifice coincided with a church feast, in which case every member of the family had to come to the church. In the case of infectious diseases (smallpox, measles, whooping cough, scarlet fever, mumps), which were popularly referred to as "masters" (*batonebi*), vows were given to St. Barbara and the child was taken to church after he or she recovered. If the family's children did not survive, help was sought from the saints and the parents vowed to bring a donation or some sort or other to the church. Our Lady of Vardzia was frequently addressed with urgent pleas to save the child. In the church there were two silver cradles (*akvani*), which a woman would rock back and forth. If the *akvani* did not topple over in the process, it was believed that there was no threat of imminent death for her child.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one must to emphasize that the Georgian ceremonies connected to childbirth are extremely diverse and interesting. Although most of the customs and rituals in question are closely entwined with various, mainly pre-Christian, religious beliefs, their sum total demonstrates a significant influence on part of the Orthodox Christian tradition. In particular, this influence has affected the rites and rituals associated with the child's birth, the need to ensure their proper feeding and to safeguard their health. Importantly, the ritual culture of the childhood cycle among the Georgians is directly linked to various aspects of everyday life, both that of a separate family and the society as a whole. In addition, these rituals reflect certain characteristic features of the relations within Georgian society, such as its patriarchal and clan-based nature. This enables one to glimpse the spiritual culture of the Georgian people, the peculiarities of their worldview, their religious beliefs and some features of their social structure in the past; and history teaches that without knowing the past, we will be unable to understand either the present or the future.

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