

THE MOTHER OF GOD AS THE PROTECTOR OF MOTHERHOOD**(ACCORDING TO ETHNOGRAPHIC MATERIALS)****ღვთიშობელი - დედაშვილობის მფარველი
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Abstract

According to ancient Georgian written sources and church traditions, Georgia is a country allotted to the Virgin Mary and is under her patronage. Based on Georgian ethnographic material and special scientific literature, the article discusses the beliefs of the Georgian people about the Mother of God (Ghvtismshobeli) as a symbol of fertility and reproduction and the protector of motherhood. In parallel with the Mother of God, in almost all parts of Georgia there is a pre-Christian female deity, the Mother of a Place (Adgilis Deda) and its various variants.

The paper presents the views of Georgian ethnographers on the syncretization of the cults of the Christian saint - the Mother of God /Ghvtismshobeli and the pre-Christian fertility goddess - the Mother of a Place (Adgilis Deda). The article discusses the relevant religious rituals performed during family or village holidays.

The Mother of a Place(Adgilis Deda) and the Mother of God (Ghvtismshobeli) are considered the patrons of the hearth and family throughout Georgia. Every village in the mountains of Eastern

Georgia had its own Adgilis Deda. At the same time, there was Ghvtsismshobeli , which was sometimes presented as a separate cult having a separate shrine, and sometimes as a combined one - Adilis Deda Ghvtsismshobeli

According to our ethnographic field materials collected in different parts of Georgia in the recent past, the rituals for granting fertility as well as healing a sick child were performed in the name of the Mother of God and are still performed today. The Mother of God is of great importance in the religious life of the Georgian people.

Keywords: The Mother of God, Georgia, protector of motherhood, tradition, fertility.

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აბსტრაქტი

ქართული წერილობითი წყაროებისა და საეკლესიო ტრადიციის თანახმად საქართველო ღვთიშობლის წილხვედრი და მის მფარველობაში მყოფი ქვეყანაა. სტატიამ, ქართულ ეთნოგრაფიულ მასალაზე და სპეციალურ სამეცნიერო ლიტერატურაზე დაყრდნობით განხილულია ქართველი ხალხის ყოფაში დაფიქსირებული რწმენა-წარმოდგენები ღვთიშობლის, როგორც ნაყოფიერებისა და გამრავლების სიმბოლოზე და დედაშვილობის მფარველ წმინდანზე. ღვთისმშობლის პარალელურად, საქართველოს თითქმის ყველა კუთხეში ფიქსირდება ქრისტიანობამდელი დედური ბუნების ღვთაება ადგილის დედა და მისი სხვადასხვა ვარიანტები.

ნაშრომში წარმოდგენილია ქართველ ეთნოგრაფთა მოსაზრებები ქრისტიანული წმინდანის – ღვთიშობლის/ დედაღვთისას და ქრისტიანობამდელი ნაყოფიერების

ქალღვთაების – ადგილის დედის კულტა სინკრეტიზაციის შესახებ, განხილულია შესაბამისი რელიგიური რიტუალები, რომელიც სრულდებოდა საოჯახო თუ სასოფლო დღესასწაულების დროს.

მთელ საქართველოში ადგილის დედა/ღვთისმშობელი კერის, ოჯახის მფარველად ითვლება. აღმოსავლეთ საქართველოს მთაში ყველა სოფელს საკუთარი ადგილის დედა ჰყავდა. პარალელურად იყო ღვთისმშობელიც, რომელიც ხან ცალკე სალოცავის, ხან კი ჰიბრიდული — „ადგილის დედა ღვთისმშობლის“ სახით იყო წარმოდგენილი.

ჩვენ მიერ, ახლო წარსულში საქართველოს სხვადასხვა კუთხეში მოპოვებული ეთნოგრაფიული მასალის მიხედვითაც ღვთისმშობლის სახელზე ტარდებოდა და დღესაც ტარდება როგორც შვილიერების მინიჭების, ასევე ავადმყოფი შვილის გამოსაჯანმრთელებელი რიტუალები. ღვთისმშობელი, როგორც ოჯახის გამრავლებისა და ნაყოფიერების მიმნიჭებელი წმინდანი, ქართველთა რელიგიურ პრაქტიკაში უდიდესი დატვირთვის მატარებელია.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: ღვთისმშობელი, საქართველო, დედაშვილობის მფარველი, ტრადიცია, ნაყოფიერების მფარველი.

Introduction

The work presents folk beliefs about the Mother of God as the patron saint of fertility and reproduction. Due to the ethnographic materials recorded in different parts of Georgia– the Mother of God (Ghvtsmshobeli) is the protector of motherhood; accordingly, a number of rituals were performed to gain her protection. In parallel with the Mother of God, in almost all parts of Georgia there is a pre-Christian female deity, the Mother of a Place (Adgilis Deda) and its different variants.

Studying this issue, we relied on the Ethnographic material collected by us in different parts of Georgia and on the works of Georgian specialists who studied these problems at different times and in different parts of Georgia. As is well known, the existence of deities of feminine nature is an ancient and universal phenomenon; the article presents the views of Georgian ethnographers on the syncretization of pre-Christian and Christian deities in Georgia –Adgilis Deda (the Mother of the Place) and the Mother of God (V. Bardavelidze, S. Makalatia, T. Ochiauri, N. Jalabadze.)

Ethnologist N. Jalabadze devoted a special study to the problem of syncretization of Christian and pre-Christian cults on the example of the Mother of God and the Mother of a Place (Adgilis Deda) in the mountainous region of Eastern Georgia. According to the researcher, the pagan and Christian female deities of two different periods have the same nature (N. Jalabadze, On the Nature of the Goddesses: Adgilis Deda// Gvtismshobeli, Historical-Ethnographic Studies, 1988); in Pshavi and Khevsureti, the Mother of the Place (Adgilis Deda) and the Mother of God have almost all traits that in world mythology are necessary attributes of the feminine deities of fertility (Divine Mother, Great Goddess). In the mountainous regions of Eastern Georgia, Adgilis Deda (the Mother of Place) also

appears to be a deity of fertility (N. Jalabadze, Folk representations about Adgilis Deda Gvtismshobeli, Collect. Traditional economic and spiritual culture of the Georgian people, Tbilisi, 1987). In the prayer Adgilis Deda and Gvtismshobeli are mentioned together as a single concept- the great Adgilis Deda Gvtismshobeli (N. Jalabadze, On some rituals related to Adgilis Deda, Historical-Ethnographic Studies, 1985).

According to our ethnographic materials as well as specialist literature the Mother of a Place (Adgilis Deda) and Gvtismshobeli are considered the protectors of hearth and family throughout Georgia. The related rituals are still practiced in some parts of the country.

Our goal was to discuss the folk representations and beliefs about the Mother of God (Gvtismshobeli) in all parts of Georgia and show the changes in dynamics to the present day.

Methods

While working on this article we relied on the field ethnographic material collected during our fieldwork, using the methods of direct observation and interviewing. During the analysis of the obtained material, we were guided by comparative-historical and typological methods. We compared the data obtained in different parts of Georgia with the archival and ethnographic materials.

Discussion and results

According to Georgian written sources and church tradition, Georgia is the country allotted to the Virgin Mary. Also, according to Georgian ethnographic material, the Mother of God is one of the most popular saints in nearly all the regions of Georgia; in troubled times or in difficulty she is asked for assistance. In our presentation we endeavor to show the character of the Mother of God as the protector saint of family fertility and reproduction. The title of our paper fully reflects the faith of Georgians in the Mother of God; at all times respondents of surveys begin their story with the phrase: "The Mother of God is the saint protecting the mother and child relationship..." That is why in the first place childless families turned to the Mother of God, praying, offering sacrifices, and making vows: "If only I...have a child, then I...", "...only let my child be healthy," or "...if only my child is cured of..." It is understood that a worshipper is ready to perform every ritual that is required, in other words: to offer up prayers, make sacrifice, keep night vigils, etc.

Most interesting is the blessing given to a bride by a chief priest that is attested in the mountainous region of East Georgia: "You, Blessed Mary, Holy Mother of God, your fiefdom - men

and women - beseech you, be merciful to the daughter-in-law (the name is mentioned) [that has] come to you; make her lucky, let her never regret coming to you and imploring you in her own way. Give your fiefs a son and son's cradle, they have not deprived you of what is their custom, and don't deprive them of your mercy, you who are well beloved [*sheni chirime*] (Ochiauri, 1988).” After the chief priest, an elderly lady asks the Mother of God to give a son to the newlyweds, so that “a cradle always be rocking in her house”. This ritual is performed on the banks of the Maturela River; after the blessing, a bride used to be dipped into the river three times, she was not allowed to change her wet clothes. It is deduced from this material that water is supposed to grant her fertility and the bride should share the fertility power of water to obtain the power of reproduction (Ochiauri, 1975: 161-168).

True, the text of the recorded prayer is very different from the canonical prayer text, it is a sample of folklore, but the researchers believed that the texts in general use in the east Georgian mountainous regions are based on Christian ecclesiastic grounds, but pagan streaks are also seen, being caused by the weakness of the influence of the Georgian Christian Church and by the formation of an institute of pagan chief priests (Makhauri, 2013:195; Z.Kiknadze, 1998: 7-8).

Georgian ethnographic material connected with the ceremonies of the New Year cycle is rich with the examples of the idea of fertility connected with water as well as with the revival of nature (Makalatia, 1972. 299-306; Rukhadze, 1999.155-166). E.g., during the attested ceremonies in the east mountainous areas and in Ertso (a region and lake in south-east Georgia), a young member of the family used to bring honey and cheese mixed with dairy butter to the river's edge, put bread into the water and say: “Water, I have brought you a donation, now you let me take some good fortune.” According to Prof. T.Ochiauri, “good fortune” implies childbirth.

According to S. Makalatia, in the Racha mountains “the protector of childbirth and mothers is The Mother of God”, ...the festival of the Mother of God is held on the third Sunday after Easter. On this day, the housewife strings coloured beads on a cotton thread – they are called *sharna*-s, she also hangs up colored strips of cloth - “the veil of the Mother of God” - fixes them with a needle, and binds this *sharna* around the girls' heads, imploring the Mother of God for them to have good fortune.

After that, women go to the shrine of the Mother of God carrying these *sharnas*, some ritual cakes [*ganatekhi*], and wine; childless women ask for a child, sonless women ask for sons, and those who are pregnant ask for a happy childbirth (Makalatia, 1987: 88-89).

Generally childlessness was hard to bear for a woman. A childless woman used to go barefooted to the Church (mostly to a church of the Mother of God), went around the church, sacrificed an animal for slaughtering; sometimes she used to cut her hair and left it in the shrine together with her clothes, imploring to be heard and be given a child (Chirgadze, 1997: 79)."

Some noteworthy material is given in *The Priesthood Before Slaughtering Cattle at the Church of the Mother of God in Shatili*: "Be glorified and victorious, Queen Mother of God, the beloved angel of God, I praise you, God your Creator will not take offence or despise you for your assistance...multiply man and mankind for us...your greatness be increased. I beseech you for a son; beseech God to give us a son. For a son we ask, let him be long-lived, fortunate, and prosperous...Queen Mother of God, the beloved angel of God...help your petitioner and have mercy on him, give him a little of great things, for two-legged and four-legged creatures, for those with caps and with veil [*mandili*] (i.e. for men and women), be a helper and give us solace, protect, save and help us, have mercy (Kiknadze, 1998:63-64)."

According to material presented by A. Ochiauri, in the Ardoti commune of Khevsureti, the chieftain used to take up the child and bring him to the flags at the baptism of the son of a family on the feast day of the Virgin Mary...(both the priest and the child were bareheaded and barefoot) and roll him into the shrine of the Mother of God. He used to take the child up three times and roll him in three times, little by little closer to the flags and say: "Our Mother of God, we implore you to take care of (the name of the child follows), take [this child] in the lap of your dress, protect, shield him in the daytime and at night..." (Ochiauri, 2005: 375).

Lamaria/Mother of God is the protector of childbirth. She was considered to separate a newborn and its mother. If the childbirth was complicated, Lamaria was asked for her benevolent help, to save the mother and child. It is to be noted that worn-out clothes and straw were spread for the woman in labour. "Childbirth in a new bed offends Lamaria (Davitiani. 1939: 46-47)."

Why is the Mother of God to give a woman a child? Because "she herself is a mother", "the Mother of God is a blessed one among all mothers", that is why she fully appreciates the labor pains of other mothers. The prayers of mothers to the Mother of God also appear in Georgian fiction: "O Mother of God, our mother, do not give offence to those who look up to you! Let us endure the pains in body and bones as your Son endured them!" (Leonidze, 1990:138-139)

That female deities are ancient and universal is confirmed by the multitude of clay figurines discovered at archaeological excavations. “During the Eneolithic period in the Caucasus, the cult of the Great Mother - the deity of fertility and savior of life – is presented by figurines” (Kikvidze, 1976:157)

The ethnography of this aspect yields important results. Georgian ethnographers presume that the Mother-Protector-of-the-Place and the Mother of God are syncretic (V. Bardavelidze; T. Ochiauri, M. Makalatia, N. Jalabadze). According to ethnologist N. Jalabadze, “Ethnographic material doubtlessly confirms the homogeneous character of the aforementioned deities of the two periods - pagan and Christian.” (Jalabadze.1988: 142) According to ethnographic material, the Mother-Protector-of-the-Place/the Mother of God are characterized in Pshavi and Khevsureti by almost all the elements that are the necessary attributes of the fertility goddesses - of the “divine mothers”, “great mothers” in mythology all over the world. In the mountainous regions of east Georgia the Mother-Protector-of-the-Place is to a certain extent also the fertility deity (Jalabadze, 1987:119).

In the mountains of east Georgia, the Mother Protector of the Place is mentioned together with the Mother of God: “O Mother of the Place, Mother of God”, “Mother of the Place, St. Mary”, or Mother of God (N.Jalabadze.1985:178). In some places the shrine is called “The Mother Protector of the Place Mother of God” (Badavelidze). In almost all the villages of east Georgia there is only one common feminine deity shrine (Bardavelidze, 1974).

There was a Mother Protector of the Place shrine in every village, in most of them both shrines co-existed, and very often one and the same shrine is of both deities and is called the Mother of God Place. The functions of both deities are absolutely identical, both protect the place, people, and livestock.

The Mother of God was considered almost everywhere in Georgia to be the protector of families, the rituals were still fulfilled not long ago in Khevsureti (N. Jalabadze) and in Svaneti (Chartolani.1981), where prayers similar to the ritual carried out at the family hearth were said in the churches of Lamaria/St. Mary. Svans ask for reproduction in people and cattle, the fertility of ploughed and sown lands.

In Svaneti, the rituals of the Mother of God and the so-called “land-prayer” (*lamzir*) were fulfilled on one and the same day, close to one another: only the married women gathered at the feast of St. Thomas Sunday (Antipascha). They baked *tabla*-s. Three big *tablas* were donated to the Mother of

God, three little ones were taken to a fixed place that was called "*Lamzir*" by Swans which means "the shrine of the land".

According to Ivane Javakhishvili, "The shrine of the land was for the deity protecting fertility and childbirth that, according to pagan beliefs, was presented as the earth, but according to Christian interpretation it is 'the Mother of God' (Javakhishvili, 1979:130-131)."

There were festivals of Christian shrines, including shrines for the Mother of God, in Georgia. Every year, on the saint's day, the head of the family (a man) lighted a candle, then uncovered the wine jar kept in the earth, and with the first wine vessel blessed the family, praised the deity, prayed for the well-being of his family, and took *tavghvino* [the wine-portion first taken from the wine jar] of the saint's festival to the shrine (Chkonia, 1988:87).

"The highly praised wine was poured into the wine jar that was dedicated to the Mother of God. Those who did not have old wine made new fizzy wine...the wine jar for the Mother of God was not uncovered until her feast day..." (Topuria, 1984:83).

In Mingrelia the wine jar for the women's prayers was a "*sadabado*" (for childbirth) that was separately buried in the ground not far from the family shrine (*okhvameri*). The *sadabado* ritual was carried out by the family housewife: she kept a cow, and when it calved, she sacrificed it and prayed the *sadabado*, asking God for health and a happy life for her husband and children (Makalatia, 1941:323).

We have already mentioned that the Mother of God was asked for help in all troubles and despair. Next to childlessness the greatest misfortune for a family was the illness of a child. At these times a mother turns to the Mother of God and asks her for help: in Racha – "You the Mother of God, I ask and implore you, save my child, I will present you with a candle and some *kada* (a ritual pastry - *ganatexhi*) (Burduli.1982); in Kakheti - "We prepared offerings on the feast day for the Mother of God, we promised a lamb in the woman and a child's name, lighted three candles, and prayed that my child only be healthy and I will sacrifice a ram to you" (Burduli. 1998): in Meskheta - "When I was a child my mother sacrificed a calico and some doves in my name to the Vardzia Mother of God saying, 'May he grow up and I will bring him to Vardzia in white and with some doves'" (Burduli. 1998); in Imereti, the Mother of God is the most reliable protector of a sick child: "Mother of God, hear me, do not take my child away from me, may my prayers and medicine cure it" (Burduli, 1986-1991); in Svaneti childless women prayed to Lamaria, promised a cow and silver: "Mother Lamaria,

Lamaria, help me, give me a child, Lamaria, Mother Lamaria, Mother Lamaria” (Burduli 1980-1984) , etc. Thus it is almost everywhere in Georgia.

It is well-known that “the idea of Christmas has been generally connected with fertility since the oldest times, and particularly to the life-giving abilities of the earth. Childbirth is also connected with the faith according to which all that is alive temporarily passes away only to be born in this world again. Accordingly, childbirth and death are the events of the same kind; they are perpetually co-existing and belong to one and the same cycle, the same circle; consequently death conditions and produces fertility (N.Gambashidze, 2004: 50-51).”

True, the texts of the prayers cited above differ from canonical texts, but a mother’s prayer to the Mother of God must have had a positive effect. It is well known that Orthodox prayers have a healing quality and, if correctly used, positive and rather interesting effects are achieved as a result. “Of special interest is a common prayer of cosmic female energy to the Holy Mother of God. It is fast-healing and very effective in the case of various illnesses and also in healing childless women” (Pirtskhalava, Turmanidze, Papiashvili, 1999:48).

According to some ethnographical material, what is effective is the auspicious appearance of the Mother of God in a dream before a relative of a sick child. “My nephew fell down from the first floor [of the house] and was unconscious; he was taken to the hospital. His sick and disabled mother was kept in bed and we did not tell her about the accident. She told us, ‘Why do you lie to me? The Mother of God told me: ‘I caught the child in my hands because you are so truthful, otherwise after such a fall he would not have survived (Burduli,1990).”

It is believed that the Mother of God punishes people for some evil deeds. In the 1930s atheistic propaganda worked hard in Georgia and churches were destroyed. Ethnographic material supplies numerous facts of church vandals being severely punished, and respondents tell that none of the offenders against the church treasury remained unpunished. For example, communists destroyed the Church of the Mother of God in Kvakude (a village in Imereti), and those who destroyed it and threw the cross down from the church were killed, with their wives and children dying as well (Burduli,1987-1991).

The material presented above was intended to show the great importance of the Mother of God as the holy protector of reproduction and the protector of the mother-and-child relationship in the ethnographic traditions of the Georgian people.

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