

Nino ABAKELIA
Associate Professor
Ilia State University
Tbilisi, Georgia

The change of meanings of Christian terms over time and their interpretation in the popular religion of the Georgians

Abstract: The paper examines a set of religious terms attested in the popular religion of the Georgians, the meanings of which had grown obscure and incomprehensible in the course of time, which, in turn, caused different opinions and formed stereotypes among scientists.

According to the first stereotype, pagan images and personages were developed and converted into the Christian ones in accordance with the Christian ideology; the second stereotype, on the contrary, argued that Christian symbols were filled with pagan content and had been modeled according to the pagan patterns; the mentioned processes, according to some arguments, formed space for the coexistence of two religious systems and the relationship between these systems were compared with the relationship of bi-lingual systems in multi-cultural settings.

Applying ethnographic method, the paper tries: a). to identify the terms under scrutiny with their initial forms and meanings in the appropriate religious system; b). to reveal the changes when their names are twisted out of their true meaning; c). to show how one and the same unintelligible term could be perceived in different situations and what kind of connotations could be added to it; d). how a new construct is modeled, which neither with its form nor with its meaning is pagan or Christian in the strict sense of the words.

Together with the demonstration of the trajectory of the terms, the paper also tries to show the possibilities these changes might contain in themselves and how these terms might be found in the names of neo-pagan deities, one day.

Keywords: Paganism, Christianity, Neo-Paganism

The paper examines a set of religious terms attested in the popular religion of the Georgians, the meanings of which had grown obscure and incomprehensible over time, which, in turn, caused and formed different opinions and stereotypes among scientists.

The first stereotype is that pagan images and personages were developed and converted into the Christian ones in accordance with the Christian ideology; the second stereotype, on the contrary, argued that Christian symbols were filled with pagan content and had been modeled according to the pagan patterns; the mentioned processes, according to some arguments, formed space for the coexistence of the two religious systems and the relationship between these systems were compared with the relationship of bi-lingual systems in multi-cultural settings.

Among the population of Georgia, generally such terms are associated with the definite cultic rituals which actually are bound with ancestral customs, cultural memory and in consequence with the concept of identity.

Speaking about the formed stereotypes we especially have in mind scientists' viewpoints on the subject, for population might not remember the origins or meanings of those terms but they continue to observe the ancestral rituals established by tradition, which enable them to identify themselves with their culture.

We start with a set of terms found in many ritual situations in the religious life of the Georgians which are thought to be interrelated with each other.

One of such terms is a theonym *Kviria*, that is associated with a series of cultic rituals in the mountainous regions of Georgia and which became a baffling problem among the researchers.

The attested ethnographic data gathered by different scholars show that the parallel forms of this name are *Kvire*, *kvira*, *kvirae*, *kvirea*, *kvirie*. The mountainous sites of Georgia were scattered with the sanctuaries and niches built in the name of *Kviria*. Special festivals and customs were associated with him. His name was mentioned in the first place in the religious hymns,

prayers and curses (Lekiasvili, *Towards the study of deity kviria among the Georgian mountaineers* 373).

As expected the widely spread cult of *Kviria* did not remain unnoticed by researcher- ethnographers and historians. According to some interpretations he was regarded as a fertility and child birth deity (Javakhishvili, *The history of Georgian nation* 156-157). The case was further investigated, deepened and according to the other exploration *Kviria* was placed amongst the deities of ancient pagan pantheon of the eastern Georgian mountaineers and in particular, in the main triad of the deities that was represented by *morige ghmerti* (i.e. the supreme deity), *mze kali* (the sun goddess) and *kviria* (Bardavelidze, *Ancient religious beliefs and graphic art of the Georgian tribes* 23-48)¹. Some identified *Kviria* with a pagan genius i. e. the guardian spirit (Charachidzé, *Le système religieux de la Géorgie païenne* 275-334). Others emphasized the similarities between the terms *kviria*, *kerá* (hearth) and *kvery* (a sort of bread baked in ashes) (Bardavelidze, *op. cit.* 23-47).

In the ethnographic reality of the Svans (western Georgian mountaineers) special attention has been paid to the ritual song called *kviria* dedicated to the deity *kviria*, and its association with fire and domestic hearth (Maisuradze, *Historical and ethnographic aspects of Georgian traditional music* 220-221). While deciphering the musical text, its archaic architectonics has been revealed and the specific manner of performance led to the conclusion that the mentioned ritual song dedicated to *kviria* was a round dance song. Taking into consideration all above said and the archaeological evidence on the hearths, that have been attested already in the Eneolithic period and the fact that they were ritually important in the Kura-Araxes culture, conclusion has been made that the round dance song dedicated to *Kviria* originated in the ancient pagan times (*Ibid.* 221).

According to other scholars, the main failure or fallacy in these studies actually was that the researches never (or in rare occasions) differentiated

1. Vera Bardavelidze in her book *The ancient religious beliefs and graphical art of the Georgian tribes* worked out a general conception on the pantheon of deities in the period of destruction of tribal system among the Georgian tribes, representing a triad which was the predecessor of the seven deities which were earlier revealed in the researches of Iv. Javakhishvili. The results of Iv. Javakhishvili's studies completely corresponded to the level of that time and was relevant to the history of Georgian culture, which rested on the vague sources and fragmentary statements of the historians. Georgian society took a keen interest in the researches carried out by Iv. Javakhishvili (Surguladze, *The path of a genuine Scientist* 12-13). Nowadays these theories require a careful reconsideration.

different – earlier and later i.e. Christian and pre-Christian elements and layers in the studied cults.

As is known, when interpreting by nature syncretic cults the main and general demand is to differentiate the Christian and pre-Christian layers in order not to make invalid inferences and not to interpret new happenings and facts as the old ones.

The analyzes of the multifarious ethnographic data, epithets and nicknames, ascribed functions, festivals and rituals of the above-mentioned divinity resulted in absolutely different conclusion about the nature of the deity.

Scrutinizing the epithets *kvire-ghvtis-shvili* (*kvire* the Sun of God), *angelozt meufrose* (the head of the Angels), *xmeltmouravi* (the land governor), the leader among the suns of God (i.e. among the saints), *kvira cxoveli* (the life-giving *kvira*), the mythological beliefs in which *kviria* represents the judge and is perceived as the guard of justice scales, etc., taking into account the local belief that his special dwelling house was a Christian church or a shrine and that his main holidays were Easter, the Octave of Easter (*kviracxovloba* i.e. the day of life giving *kvira*) and Ascension a conclusion has been made that *Kviria* was Christ himself, whose worship among the mountaineers was ordinary thing and had a local coloring (Lekiashvili, *op. cit.* 373- 395).

According to the ethnographic data of Pshavi and Khevsureti (eastern mountainous Georgia) *Kviria*, *Kvira*, *Kvirae* (Greek *kvirios*) is the first and the only chosen one among the sons of God. He has all characteristics of Christ including the name itself. He is imagined seated at the right hand of God. His tent stands at the right side (hand) of *morige ghmerti* (i.e. supreme God) (comp. Acts 7:55–56; Romans 8:34; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1). That is why he is appealed in the following way: “be blessed and hallowed thy name, *kvira*, thou having the tent beside the Lord’s court”. Together with *morige ghmerti* he is a judge and is the keeper of moral righteousness (Kiknadze, *Georgian mythology* 48).

So, as a consequence of this, in the theonym *Kviria* the local name of Christ was detected. This statement resulted in the further proposition that the Christian cults and Christian beliefs were not presented by superficial elements in the belief system of the mountaineers (as was the mainstream idea or the main tendency in the special literature) but rather constituted its basic and organic components.

In this way “*Kviria* (*Kyrion* – Lord in Greek) stood apart from other supernatural beings; it has its separate, unique place in the religious

consciousness of the believers... Christ was hidden (was not accessible to view) in its Greek epithet Kyrion” (*Ibid.*).

But the above-mentioned evident identification of *Kviria* with Christ did not end further odd interpretations.

On the basis of the formal phonetical resemblance the etymology of the mentioned term was identified with the name of early Christian martyr *Kvirike* (*Cuiricus*) and its derivative folk name of the month July – *kvirikoba*. Comparing these two names, the conclusion has been made that the root *kvir* was borrowed from the festival *kvirikoba* (the day dedicated to *Kvirike* that was celebrated on commemoration of the early Christian martyrs *Cuiricos* and *Iulitta*, which in Svaneti (western mountainous Georgia) is known as *lagurka* or *laguirka* [* la-kuir(i)ka – N.A.] and consequently, it was borrowed from the name of the same saint (Chkuaseli, *Georgian customs and the ritual vocabulary of the folk celebrations* 22-27). But these two terms, actually, could not be compared to each other as they represent two different names – *Kvira* (the Lord) and *Kvirike* (the name of early Christian saint) – each with a different valuation in Christianity; they both were bound with the definite meanings and cult practices.

Besides, researchers attested a round dance chant called *Kviria-gherta* (Javakhhisvili, *op. cit.* 101-116) or *kviriola* i.e. a cultic round dance song that had been sung during incantation and invocation of appropriate weather, after fortunate hunting and some other critical occasions.

Exploring the mentioned round dance song and in search of its ancient roots the historians of music inferred that the mentioned round dance song had been originated from the pagan times (Aslanisvili, *Sketches on Georgian folk songs* 281).

Further, the chant *Kviriola* (in the folk name of which Greek *kyrie eleyson* is revealed) on the basis of its mere phonetic sounding was compared with the ritual song *guriela*; that was attested among the ethnic Georgians in Turkey in historical Tao-Klarjeti, where it was sung at the New Year’s celebration; and in the name *guriela*² a variation of the chant *kviria* has been “revealed”.

Actually celebrations of festivals were accompanied by chants in which one could often discern the term *kvira/kviria* or *Kirialesa*, *krialesa*, *kirialesa mexvamua*, *kviriola*, *kvirola*. Here again we are dealing with one

2. We have scanty ethnographic data on the subject and can just make guesses that the song is associated with Guria (the province of western Georgia) and with its special musical traditions.

more misconstrued, misinterpreted phrase such is *Kyrie eleison* (“lord have mercy” or lord have mercy upon us”) which is taking its origins from the Christian liturgical practice (from an important prayer of Christian liturgy) that was sung by the believers in different occasions (brief petitions in services)³. These brief petitions, as it seems, were separated from the service and had been inserted in everyday life of the Georgians. In this prayer the population appealed for help to *Kviria* when they felt themselves in difficult and dangerous situations (e.g. during droughts or prolonged pouring rains, or when requesting for good harvest, for fortunate hunting, etc.).

As is seen, the identifications of the above-mentioned terms were made not from within the social group (not from the emic perspective) i.e. by the believers themselves, but by scientists who were in this case outsiders i.e. their view points were obtained from the outer observers’ perspective.

The other special cult term on which the attention is paid in the paper is the paired name of Archangels Michael and Gabriel in western Georgia. Their phonetically deformed, modified and altered names differ from place to place and can be easily misunderstood and misinterpreted. In Samegrelo (western Georgia) they are called mikam-garia / mikam-gario, sa-kam-gario (the last term indicating belonging to Michael and Gabriel Archangels); in Abkhazia – *mkam-garia*, *a-kam-garia*, *s-kam-garia*. In the special literature (Ochiauri, Surguladze, *The mythology of the Caucasian-Iberian peoples* 603-607)⁴ the term *mkamgaria* (and its derivatives: *a-kamgaria*, *s-kamgaria*)

3. In Christian practice, the prayer, «Kyrie, eleison,» «Lord, have mercy» derives from several New Testament verses in particular. In Matthew 15:22; 20:30, 31. in Mark 10:46. There are other examples too, such as Luke 18:39 and Matthew 9:27, but, as is known, the phrase «Lord, have mercy» was well-enough established in the Gospel narratives to become the basis for the use of «Kyrie, eleison» as a liturgical prayer. An important difference, as is said, is that in the New Testament the expression is always personalized by an object after the exclamation, while in the Eucharistic celebration it can be seen more as a general expression of confidence in God’s love, 3:293 especially in view of the litany form in which it originated. The phrase *Kýrie, eléison* (Greek: *Κύριε, ἐλέησον*), or one of its equivalents in other languages, is one of the most oft-repeated phrases in Eastern Christianity, including the Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Churches (Dictionary of the Christian Church, edited by F.L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, Hendrickson Publishers’ edition published by arrangement with Oxford University Press. Printed in the United States of America, 2007, p. 938).

4. In T. Ochiauri’s and I. Surguladze’s generalized article on the Caucasian-Iberian Mythology in the Encyclopedia of *the Myths of the peoples of the World*, issued in 1980 by the Publishing House of “the Soviet Encyclopedia”, (Editor-in chief Tokarev S.A.) the Abkhazian data is based on the works of L.Kh. Akaba, Anshba A.A. Dzhanashia N.S. and other Abkhazian scientists cited in the paper.

encountered in Abkhasian religious beliefs is interpreted as the name of the Abkhasian pagan deity, the patron of cattle. The deity was framed in the “appropriate” mythological entourage with references to the past, ritual idioms and practices.

According to the local Abkhasian beliefs, *mkamgaria* lived on top of the mountain near to the village of Chkhortoli (now the occupied region of Gali), where sacrifices were made for him. At a quick and superficial view, the term looks quite exotic and linked to the pagan past. But the study of archival materials and ethnographic field data (among them collected by the author) gives the opportunity to state that the so-called Abkhasian Deity *mkamgaria* is a deformed local term of Megrelian *Mikam-Garia* (in turn originated from Georgian *mikel-gabrieli* and correspondingly, from the names of Christian Michael and Gabriel). By means of the derivational suffix “sa” – the form *sa-mkamgaria* or *sa-mikamgaria* (i.e. dedicated to Michael and Gabriel Archangels) was formed as a result; from this form the reduced form of *skamgaria* and more distorted form of quite Abkhasian sounding – *a-kamgaria* derived (Abakelia, *Some sketches on Abkhasian and Georgian Religious Terminology* 27-35). Relying on the invalid inference it claims to be derived from the historical pagan beliefs of Abkhasians, from the indigenous, ethnic religion. It attempts to establish continuity with a suitable past that adds some extra dimension to their investigations. The element of invention is particularly clear here. Its origin seems of quite late occurrence and in a broad sense invented.

Sharing E. Hobsbaum’s opinion we agree that: “...all historians, whatever else their objectives, are engaged in the process, inasmuch as they contribute, consciously or not, to the creation, dismantling and restructuring of images of the past which belong not only to the world specialist investigation but to the public sphere of man as a political being” (Hobsbaum, *The Invention of Tradition* 13).

Both discussed cases prove the general proposition of Eric Hobsbaum (*Ibid.* 1-13) according to which: “traditions” which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin. And that all invented traditions, so far as possible, use history as a legitimator of action and cement of group cohesion. Frequently it often becomes the actual symbol for struggle and as such represents an ideological and political myth. Sometimes, reconstructed cultic terms based on inaccurate sources and statements or outright fiction might step into the polytheistic religion and invent a new cult of “ancient”

religion, striving to revive “genuine” pantheons and rituals of ancient cultures, which automatically implies continuity with the past.

Nowadays such trend is associated with neo-paganism that sometimes seems to be associated more with extreme nationalism than with archetypal psychology. In the post-Soviet space it emerged in many regions as the product of 1990⁵.

Noe-pagans constructing neo-mythological texts in due form of archaic mythology live active ritual life connected with the annual cycle of holidays. Within them they attempt to structure at least some parts of social life as unchangeable and invariant.

Bearing in mind the above said, one needs to be careful and adequate while interpreting such modern constructs and their symbols with their suitably tailored ethnic religion.

Applying ethnographic method, we attempted a) to identify the terms under scrutiny with their initial forms and meanings in the appropriate religious system; b) to reveal the changes when their names are twisted out of their true meaning; c) to show how one and the same unintelligible term could be perceived in different situations and what kind of connotations could be added to it; d) how a new construct is modeled, which neither with its form nor with its meaning is pagan or Christian in the strict sense of

5. On the religious situation in general and on various forms of neo-paganism after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the post-Soviet space see: *Pelkmans, Mathijs*. “Religious Conversion and the Inadequacy of Rational Choice Theory, Book Discussion of Radford, David (2015) Religious Identity and Social Change: Explaining Christian conversion in a Muslim world, in *Central Asian Affairs*. 4 (4): Brill, 2017,407-410. *Pelkmans, Mathijs* (2015) Awkward secularity between atheism and new religiosity in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. In: Ngo, T. and Quijada, J., (eds.) *Atheist Secularism and its Discontents: A Comparative Study of Religion and Communism in Eurasia*. Global diversities. Palgrave Macmillan UK, Basingstoke, UK, 244-255,2014. *Pelkmans, Mathijs* (2015) Religious repression and religious freedom: an analysis of their contradictions in (post-)Soviet contexts. In: Sullivan, Winnifred Fallers and Shakman Hurd, Elizabeth and Mahmood, Saba and Danchin, Peter G., (eds.) *Politics of Religious Freedom*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, USA, 313-323. *The Invention of Religion. De-secularization in the Post-Soviet Context [izobretenie religii.deseekularizacyja v postsovetkom kontekste]*, St. Petersburg, 2015. *Laruelle, Marlene* “Alternative Identity, Alternative Religion? Neo-Paganism and the Aryan Myth in contemporary Russia,” *Nations and Nationalism* 14, no. 2 (2008): 283-301. Shnirelman V. (2000) Value of the past: ethnocentric historical myths, identity and ethnic policies. *Reality of ethnic myths*, Moscow, 2000. 12–33. *Conservatism in the Post-Soviet Context: Ideology, Worldview, or Moral Choice?* International conference. Uppsala Centre for Russian and Eurasian Studies, 2017.

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