

Women's Position in Religious Life of Georgia and Its Peculiarities

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Georgia is a country where women's secular and religious activities would never be strange and unprecedented. But also this is a country where women are considered impure for ritual purposes, not allowed even to come too close to the shrines or conduct liturgy; where participation in main shrine rituals or slaughter of sacrifice was and is strictly forbidden. However, there are remarkable exceptions that are shown in the article. Women's shrines are found almost in all regions of Georgia, but according to our field works and other ethnographic data their presence is remarkably obvious in Khevi, mountainous region of East Georgia. The study of the subject brought us to a conclusion that women in Khevi might have more rights in conducting religious rituals at shrines than in other Eastern Georgia's highland regions. It may be conditioned by St. Ninos's strong connection with the region.

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Introduction

Woman's position in religious and secular life over thousands of years acquired particular character in Georgia. This is the country where cult of the Great Mother can be traced back to the Eneolithic period (Lordkipanidze, 2002 pp. 64-65), where women were governors and even sovereigns.¹ This is the country, which, according to the Christian Church tradition, is allotted to the holy Virgin Mary;² the land where a

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¹ Queen Tamar, who is called in Georgia king Tamar, is one of the famous sovereigns of Georgia. She was famous not only in Georgia but all over the Caucasus and the Near East. During her reign Georgia was flourished and strong country. There is a famous story connected with her. At the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth century Georgia was rapidly becoming stronger. It was a threat for the Turkish world. To stop this process, sultan of the biggest country of the Asia Minor-Rum-Ruknadin united Seljuq Turks against Georgia and with 40.000 (according to other chronicle 80.000) men attacked Georgians. But before, he sent humiliating and arrogant letter to Tamar naming her stupid like all women, because she decided to kill all Muslim nation beloved by God. In his letter Ruknadin promised to have mercy on those people who will come in front of his tent and worship him and deny Christianity. When the letter was brought to Tamar, Ruknadin's man told her, if you convert into Islam, Ruknadin will merry you, if not, you will become his concubine. In her letter Tamar replied, that Ruknadin trusted gold and human being, but she completely entrusted to the power and strength of almighty God, mercy of the Holy Virgin and would pray to the Holy Cross. I will send my army against you and let it be the will of God-she wrote. In 1204 (some authors date to 1205) Georgians won in Basiani battle and defeated Ruknadin and his army (Basili Ezosmodzghvari, *Life of Tamar, King of Kings*, Georgian prose, Volume III, (Tbilisi: Publishing House Sabchota Sakartvelo, 1982) pp. 161-168. Roin Metreveli, *King Tamar*, (in Georgian) (Tbilisi: Publishing House Ganatleba, 1991), pp. 183-192). Tamar is sanctified by the Church of Georgia, praised by poets and old writers and is venerated by generations. She reined in 1184-not later 1213. The date of her death and burial place is unknown. According to tradition when she died several coffins were carried into different directions for hiding her real burial place.

² Dimitri of Rostov, *Lives of Saints* (Monthly Readings), August, (in Russian), Retrieved on 21 April 2017 from: http://www.biblioteka3.ru/biblioteka/dimitr_rostov/avgust/txt34.html. Life of Kartli, Volum I, (in Georgian), (Tbilisi: Publishing House Sakhelgami, 1955), p. 38. Eniko Gabidzashvili, *Old Georgian Hagiographical Literary Monuments, IV, Synaxarion Redactions (XI-XVIII)*, (in Georgian), (Tbilisi: Publishing House Mecniereba, 1968), pp. 131-132.

woman (St. Nino) preached and converted Georgians to Christianity (M. Wordrop, & J. O. Wordrop, 1900, pp. 1-88); where, in 1919, five women from the Social Democratic Party became members of the Constituent Assembly of Georgia, one of the first in the history of parliament (Khvadagiani, 2016, pp. 177-179, 365-366, 375-377, 378-380, 415-417); where women's public activity would never be strange and unprecedented. But also this is a country where women are considered impure for ritual purposes, not allowed even to come too close to the shrines or conduct liturgy; where participation in main shrine rituals or slaughter of sacrifice was strictly forbidden. However, there are remarkable exceptions.

Two Remarkable Examples of Women's Ministry in Georgians' Folk Religion

In *Pirikita Khevsureti* (the part of Khevsureti³ located beyond the *Datvi pass*) there still exists an office of *Khatis Diasakhlisi* or hostess of shrine.

A certain lady, member of the community who is middle aged or older with menopause is and was chosen as a hostess of shrine (*khatis diasakhlisi*) to help male servants of sanctuary, mainly *dasturi*. Her obligation was to bake various kinds of ritual breads for service. *Dasturi* was one of the servants of shrine. His functions were to prepare everything for rituals and feasting, to cultivate the shrine lands, to help main priest of sanctuary *khutsesi* and serve shrine servants and people who come to the shrine for veneration. Today *dasturies* have almost the same functions. Their office is very much like deacon's deaconate. There are one or more *dasturies* in a shrine. One of the obligations of *dasturi* was to find, choose and bring *khatis diasakhlisi* to the shrine. If some times it was difficult to find a suitable candidate for the office, the bread for ritual services was baked by an old lady who was a family member of chief *dasturi*. In some shrines (mainly in *Arkhoti*) *dasturi* should have had an old female member of the family who could serve as *khatis diasakhlisi*. This was an obligatory requirement to choose him. In other parts of *Pirikita Khevsureti* this was not obligatory. According to the twentieth century ethnographical materials the office of *khatis diasakhlisi* was at Gudani, Arkhoti and Anatori shrines. In Anatori shrine hostess of the shrine might be a member of *dasturi* family, who only baked ritual breads and did not stay at the shrine (Ochiauri, 2005, pp. 8, 20, 209, 213, 216, 220, 224, 246; Makalattia, 1984, p. 244).

On the eve of the main festival of the village one of the *dasturies* would go to the house of shrine hostess to bring her to the shrine. At this very time the hostess had already been washed, dressed in new cloths and had baked special kinds of ritual breads. During the period of her service, mainly a year, she should not have to be in touch or speak with women in their menstrual period, who are in menstrual hut, should not walk where they walk, etc., to keep herself unpolluted.

Diasakhlisi also participated in the rituals performed before ploughing. She baked certain kind of ritual bread named *Ughelzegadasachreli* (bread for cutting on the yoke). On the one side this bread and all other ritual ones were lined in different geometrical figures with a carved piece of wood. Before starting ploughing *dasturi* would take bread, put it on the yoke, cut it with a knife in a crosswise way and pray (Ochiauri, 1988, p. 12). After this the village would start ploughing.

The problem of the servants of Georgian highland shrines always was a subject of Georgian scientists' investigation. But all of them were focused on male servants. A lot was written about, but unfortunately *khatis diasakhlisi*—hostess of shrine had never become the subject of research. The study of this issue enabled me to

³ Khevsureti is one of the mountain regions of East Georgia.

say that *khatis diasakhlisi* was a shrine servant together with male ones, but of the lowest rank. According to the ethnographical materials we possess *khatis diasakhlisi* helped male servants to perform rituals in the shrine, was chosen according to obligatory norms, in fact observed the same purity prohibitions as male servants, had a special building on the territory of the shrine where she stayed or lived and baked ritual breads one of the main offerings together with animal sacrifice and beer, was blessed together with the other men shrine servants by the supreme servant *khutsesi* when he was performing main rituals in the shrine, she, together with other male servants, shared all kinds of sacrifices. She had a certain part in them. *Khatis diasakhlisi* was busily involved in festivity preparations together with *dasturies*. Deaconate was her only obligation and nothing more. Participation in main rituals of the shrine or slaughter of sacrifice was strictly forbidden for her. This office was habitual only for some shrines in *Pirikita Khevsureti*.

In Tianeti region (East Georgian foothill), on a mountain near Zhebota village, there is a shrine of cows (*Purebis Khati*). The shrine is an old ash-tree and a very small quadrangular building. This sacred place used to be venerated for protection of cattle. People used to feast in this shrine twice a year: one of the Thursdays of June and St. George's day on November 10/23. In the 1920's there were icons of the Holy Virgin and St. George in the shrine. Offerings of this shrine were: a bull, sheep, ritual bread (*kada*) and silver coins. Servants of the cult of this shrine were women with menopause. They were chosen by the deity itself. The sign of them being chosen were snakes. They sorrowed, followed her everywhere and did not give pass. As it was unbearable the chosen woman would plead the deity with the words: ease my lot and I will serve you all my life. After this the woman became a cult servant and served the deity till the end of her life.

Men and young ladies were forbidden to come close to the shrine. People who came to celebrate feast day of this shrine were allowed to go to a certain place, not nearer. The women who were cult servants would meet people at this very place and bless their offerings. In old times there were even five women at the shrine of cows. Later old women of the village performed their duties (Bardavelidze, 1941-2003, pp. 3-5).

Women's Shrines in Khevi-East Georgian Highland Region

Women's shrines are found almost in all regions of Georgia, but their presence is remarkably obvious in Khevi, mountainous region of East Georgia.

There is a shrine named *Natlismtsemeli* (John the Baptist), the festival of which is called Ivanoba and is celebrated on September, 11. People believed *Natlismtsemeli* (John the Baptist) was the patron of children, family and women. If a child had an infectious disease, he was asked for help. People say that one day, when a pregnant woman was attending the festival at the shrine, she gave a birth to a child. *Natlismtsemeli* was not angry with her and since then even pregnant women can go to the shrine. After this, *Natlismtsemeli* (John the Baptist) supports women in childbirth. During labour midwife used to slap the woman in childbirth with apron saying the following words: "Let *Natlismtsemeli* help you in labour". Women with periods can also attend the festival which is unimaginable for other shrines.⁴

In this region there is a shrine of *Kvireghvtisshvili* (village Pkhelshe) which is tightly connected with Antipascha and the Myrrhbearers Sunday. *Kvireghvtisshvili* is known as women's shrine and the rituals here are performed only by a woman. The priestess of *Kvireghvtisshvili* should be virgin. On Ascension women bring here ritual breads and candles and give them to the priestess—*Kal-dekanozi* who was dressed all in white. She

⁴ This information was told to me during my field work in Khevi in 1988. I think, it also might be the result of traditions decline. Nino Ghambashidze, Ethnographical expedition in Khevi (1988), notebook#2.

cut ritual breads and lighted candles, prayed and blessed each who had brought offerings. To slaughter an animal sacrifice was strictly forbidden even in this shrine which is famous for offered dalls with Jesus Christ's icon as a face. In the 1930's famous Georgian ethnographer Sergi Makalatia witnessed in this shrine a 45cm. dall with metal icon of Jesus Christ as its face. It was also adorned with necklace, buttons, earrings, rings, tiny bells, etc. Dalls were also sacrificed in the women's shrine near the village of Goristsikhe. Here sacrificed dalls were wore tiny bells.⁵

A woman who was ill, would go door to door in the village. People give her beads, fabric, money, different kinds of adornings. Later, all these were gathered, the woman who was ill would make a dall from wood and put a dress on it. The woman would offer this dall to *Kvireghvtisshvili* and ask for recovery (Makalatia, 1934, pp. 212-214).

The research in Khevi outlined two basic groups of festivals connected with women, which are popular all over the region. These are: Antipascha (next Sunday after Easter) and the Myrrhbearers Sunday (Christian women's day, the third Sunday after Easter). It must also be mentioned that there are women's shrines connected with different Saints (Holy Virgin, St. Elia) as well. Antipascha and Myrrhbearers' Sunday were often considered as one day, one festival. The day was famous for the ritual of bringing newly married young ladies to the village spring by their mothers-in-law and relatives. That very day women of the village would gather at the spring with bride and her mother-in-law and have feast. During one month after wedding the bride stayed at home and was occupied with easy labor at home (sweeping, sewing, washing, etc.). A month after the wedding the family baked different kinds of pies (*nazuki, khachapuri, kada*, etc.). Mother-in-law would invite women with the same surname as they had (it means relatives) and their daughters-in-law, who lived in the same district.⁶ They would take the bride to the village spring. The bride would take a new jar for water which she had brought in her dowry. When they would come to a spring they sat down and would feast. After blessing the bride and feasting, bride would fill everybody's vessels and her own one. After this everybody would return home. On their way home, women sang. After this ritual newly married lady became a member of women's society of the village and since then brought water for the family (Makalatia, 1934, p. 164). In Georgian this day is called *Kviradzloba/Kvirardzloba*. *Kvira* in Georgian means Sunday and *rdzali* means daughter-in-law and woman as well. So, this Georgian folk name of the festival unites church religious festival (Myrrhbearers' Sunday) and social folk tradition connected with it.

The study of the subject brought us to a conclusion that women in Khevi may have had more rights in conducting religious rituals at shrines than in other regions of Eastern Georgian highland regions. This could be because of St. Ninos's strong connection with the region.

In the fourth century St. Nino, who came to Georgia from Jerusalem, preached in Georgia, converted king Mirian (who in his kingdom announced Christianity as an official religion), his wife Nana and the natives of the kingdom of Kartli and with the help of the clergy and king Mirian founded the Church of Georgia as an institution. According to Georgian historical sources we know that Khevi region, like some other parts of Eastern Georgia, was personally converted by St. Nino (Dolidze, 1970, pp. 558-560). If we follow historical and folk traditions, later on in the fourth century the Georgians cut miracle working tree planted by St. Andrew

⁵ Vera Bardavelidze, Personal fund G1966, materials of Khevi expedition, archive of Iv. Javakhishvili Institute of History and Ethnology.

⁶ Very often in Georgian villages families with same second name, who were relatives, lived together in a certain district of the village.

and maid crosses out of it. One of them and the most distinguished cross was erected on the very place where now stands Jvari (the Cross) Monastery in Mtskheta, where St. Andrew planted the tree and erected a cross (Natroev, 1900, p. 122). King Mirian, who was converted by St. Nino destroyed all idols in his Kingdom of Kartli and erected crosses instead. St. Nino continued her missionary activity in the mountain regions of Kartli (Life of Kartli, 1955, pp. 125-126). Tradition tells us that she erected a cross on mount Gergeti (Khevi), where now there is the Trinity church (N. ski., 1905, p. 2). According to the chronicles we know that the mentioned Trinity church was a place where the cross of St. Nino used to be hidden from invaders (Bagrationi, 1973, p. 357). It must also be mentioned that we know very few old icons or frescos of St. Nino and one among them is the Trinity church (Okropiridze, 2013, p. 108). There also are few churches and even less shrines dedicated to her. One of her shrines is in Khevi (Rusishvili, 2004, p. 446; Itonishvili, 2015, p. 209). Besides, according to the Georgian written historical sources and old church calendar, St. Nino was connected with Myrrhbearers.⁷ The Georgians also believe she is a patroness of virgins, women who feed their newly born babies, and of marriage. On the slope of the mount Golgotha, near the church of Cross in Mtskheta, there is *Dzudzus Tskaro* (spring of breast). People believe that if mothers drink water from the spring, they will have milk for their babies. Many drink this water to be married (Ghambashidze, 2011, p. 197). According to the historical chronicles St. Nino was young and virgin herself. May this have a kind of connection with *Kal-dekanozi*-virgin priestess of *Kvireghvtisshvili* shrine in Khevi that is unusual for East Georgia highland is a question.

Conclusion

Though women's public activity was not strange or unprecedented in Georgia, women are considered impure for ritual purposes and in fact, in my opinion menstruation was the basic reason for it. Due to this, they are not allowed even to come too close to the shrines; even when they do not have menstruation participation in chief shrine rituals or slaughter of sacrifice is strictly forbidden. As generally in Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Armenian Apostolic Churches, Orthodox, Catholic and Armenian women in Georgia are not allowed to conduct liturgy or be priestesses either.

According to the data I possess, women are mostly involved in preparation (cooking meal or baking) for the religious festivals or rituals, they can participate, pray during rituals, attend the so-called women's shrines. However, there are remarkable exceptions in folk religion. For example *khatis diasakhlisi*—hostess of shrine in Pirikita Khvsureti. Deaconate (preparation of the ritual breads for annual festivals in the shrine) was her only obligation and nothing more. But, the study of this issue allowed me to say that *khatis diasakhlisi* was a certain office. She was a shrine servant together with male ones, but of the lowest rank. Participation in main rituals of shrine or slaughter of sacrifice was strictly forbidden for her. In this case age is important for choosing suitable candidate for shrine hostess. This is the age when woman is free from menstruation and thus she becomes equal to man and is pure (Shepard Kraemer, 1992, p. 115). It enables her to be a shrine servant together with men.

As servants of cult we may also consider women at the Shrine of Cows, where women do not serve with men but conduct rituals and pray for both, women and men. In this case we have a bit different picture. Here

⁷ The third Sunday according to the Orthodox Church calendar, as it is today, was Myrrhbearers Sunday. Previous day, Saturday, in old Georgian Church calendar was dedicated to St. Nino. Korneli Kekelidze, Essays, V, The Calendar of Ioane Kartveli (the tenth century), (in Georgian), (Tbilisi: Publishing House of the Academy of Sciences of Georgia, 1957, p. 248). St. Nino was trained in Jerusalem as the teacher of Christianity and before leaving to Georgia she was specially blessed by her uncle, patriarch of Jerusalem for preaching Christianity in "northern" country, Georgia, where tunic of Christ was. According to tradition it is still in Georgia.

women are chosen by deity itself and usually against their own will. Unfortunately, we do not possess richer ethnographic material about this shrine that does not allow us to say more about it.

The study of the subject also allows us to conclude that women in Khevi might have had more rights in conducting religious rituals at shrines than in other regions of Eastern Georgia highland regions.⁸ Here there is a shrine where not only women can easily attend festivals despite of their age, but even pregnant ones, that is unprecedented in other shrines. Here we have a shrine where even a virgin, unmarried young lady could have been a priestess (of course without sloughering of the sacrifices). In my opinion women in Khevi might have more rights in conducting religious rituals because of St. Nino's strong connection with the region.

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⁸ According to the data we possess.