

CHRISTIANITY AND FOUNDATIONS OF GEORGIAN MENTALITY

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Abstract. *The article presents the results of an interdisciplinary study of the cultural genome – Rustaveli’s poem, its connection with the Holy Scriptures and functionality as a marker of national cultural code. The research is conducted for the first time. Works by G. DUBY, P. RICKER, R. BARTES, M. FOUCAULT, N. ANTSEFEROV, Y. LOTMAN, JEFF. C. ALEXANDER and others are used as a methodological basis; we also used materials in the Rustvelological Studies (K. Kekelidze, A. Baramidze, S. Tsaishvili, N. Sulava, etc.) as well as the author’s own research.*

Keywords: *Christianity, Georgian mentality, national values, Rustaveli*

Introduction

“*I’m from the Land of Rustaveli!*” – under this slogan in the spring of 2017, Georgia celebrated the 850th anniversary of Shota Rustaveli’s poem *Vepkhistkaosani* (The Knight in the *Panther’s Skin*); it coincided with the Independence Day. According to the earlier established traditions UNESCO officially declared the Year of Rustaveli 2016 and all other countries celebrated this jubilee last year. The question is why the government of Georgia made a decision to extend jubilee events and to coincide it with the national holiday of Georgia Independence Day. What kind of relation is between the Independence of the country, Rustaveli and Christianity?

1. The Specific Features of the Hierarchies of National Values

These concepts, at first sight differing from each other, form the organic unity of basic national values fixed in historical and cultural mentality of the Georgian people, the integral nucleus, having specific significance in the system of value orientations, which is also reflected in the linguistic picture of the world. Their significance was evaluated in this form by Ilia Chavchavadze, the declared head of the national-liberation movement, canonized by the Georgian Church as the saint Ilia Righteous/Just, thinker, Georgian outstanding public man of the 19th century, classic of Georgian literature, who inspired the nation to fight for preserving the universal values of the nation, the Language, Motherland, Faith. The history of formation of this unity – is the history of our country.

Georgia adopted Christianity as the state religion in the first half of the 4th century and it gradually became the extreme eastern region of the Christian cultural area at the border of Muslim world. The history of Georgian people – is the multi-century history of bloody wars and permanent struggle for keeping a national and cultural identity at the terms of existence in dangerous closeness with powerful Muslim states of the empire type. This is namely why the notion “independence” is closely associated with not only the fight for keeping statehood, but also with Christian Doctrine, fixed in the concept of the “Church”. In martyrology you will find many Georgian names, which clearly reflects real history of interrelations with conquerors -adherents of different faith. For many centuries Georgian Church¹ played the role of a protecting mechanism for the national culture, and in the mentality of Georgian people the notions Motherland/Georgia and Church/Christianity are perceived as indissoluble unity. It was greatly contributed by the fact that even irrespective of the long period of the soviet state atheism, Georgian people have preserved till now a specific respect to the words of the Catholicos-Patriarch and of course to the words of the Holy Scripture.

According to the words of Yu. M. Lotman, “sphere of culture – is always a sphere of symbolism”², and the state symbols reflect indissoluble ties of the modern state with

- 1 The Georgian Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church is an autocephalous Eastern Orthodox Church.
- 2 Lotman Yu. M. *Besedy o russkoj kul'ture. Byt i tradicii russkogo dvor'janstva* (XVIII – nachalo XIX veka). [Lotman Yu. M. *Talks about Russian culture. Life and traditions of Russian nobility* (XVIII – beginning of XIX century)]. Sankt-Peterburg, 1998, p.7.

its cultural roots. With this view we have to emphasize the fact of adoption of a new flag of independent Georgia in 2004. It is a modern modification of the old All-Christian symbol, which acquired specific significance in the epoch of Crusade as the so-called Holy Sepulchre Cross. The central part, the so-called Holy Sign – became a symbol of Christ warriors, among which were Georgians – knights from the country of St. George. In Georgia the flags bearing 5 crosses were known from the beginning of the 6th century³. Up to the 15th century its various modifications were used actively as the flags of Georgian kings.

As to the “Language”, the symbols of this notion in the cultural-historical memory of the people are more often associated with the national alphabet, one of the oldest in the world, which since 2015 is under UNESCO’s protection (described as a “living culture of three writing systems”), together with the top work of the Georgian literature – poem by Shota Rustaveli Vepkhistkaosani (The Knight in the Panther’s Skin).

2. ‘Rustaveli’, ‘Queen Tamar’, ‘Golden Age’ – components of the cultural code

The poem was written in the 12th century in the epoch of reigning of the Queen Tamar. It was a period of strengthening of the Georgian state and this period is called the Gold Century of Georgian culture. Queen Tamar became famous in the Christian world by her piety, religious life and virtuous, charitable activity, directed towards the strengthening of Christian faith in the region. After death she was declared a saint. (She is one of the most respected and honoured saints of Georgia). For the last nine centuries everything that was connected with that epoch couldn’t avoid mythologization: as the archetype of cultural code, the Golden Century became a synonym of the country’s prosperity, and the name of legendary custodian of Christian spirituality became its symbol, which in that epoch, was identical to the notion of Georgian statehood. Thus the name of King Tamar is associated with the epoch of prosperity of Georgia: *Tamar* → *Golden Century/mighty state*.

The poem of Rustaveli is dedicated namely to this legendary ruler, Queen Tamar. The famous lines of its prologue (“*I exult our Queen Tamar /Whose praises I have uttered forth in well-chosen words*”, translated by Venera Urushadze) gradually were transformed into stable stereotype: *Rustaveli – poet to Tamar*, and the name of the poet has been long associated with the name of Tamar and the Golden Century. As a key word it consists of a chain of associations: *Rustaveli* → *Queen Tamar* → *Golden Century* → *Georgia – mighty state of the epoch of prosperity*.

Thus, acquiring conceptual significance, proper name (Rustaveli) was transformed into ethno-cultural archetype – the constant of the national spirituality, which is associated with the “Golden Century” and forms the base of the national ideal – idealized picture of the national life. It should be emphasized that since the biography of the poet is practically unknown, and we can judge about his personality and world outlook only

3 See: Bichikashvili Iosif. “O gruzinskom ictoricheskom gosudarstvennom flage I gerbe” [Bichikashvili Ioseb. “About Georgian historic state flag and emblem”]. *Gerboved* [Heraldry], vol. 3, № 29, 1998, pp. 134-142.

on the basis of a text of the poem, function of Rustaveli, as of the signified is extended; not only a concrete person (poet) may be the designatum but also his creation, work – the poem *Vepkhistkaosani*.

Thanks to its philosophical depth, vivid picturesqueness and metaphoric language, text of the poem is extremely rich in meaning strata of various depths. Multiplicity and diversity of notions/meanings contributes to the expansion of the sphere of interpretative variants to infinity and a reader easily finds in it the responses to the very pressing issues of modern time: ruler/state structures/ - people; legality (lawfulness) - rights and responsibilities of a person; economic development of the state – personal welfare; own and others – tolerance; gender equality and many other items. In the cognition of masses Rustaveli is associated with the just state structure, knightly spirit of his epoch, economic and cultural progress, that is, with the prosperity of Georgia, as the independent state.

These symbols have also found their reflection in toponymy of the capital of Georgia: the central avenue of Tbilisi, that counts 3 centuries, bears the name of Rustaveli. The other avenue is named after Queen Tamar. (Tamar the King). Rustaveli avenue starts from the Freedom Square, where 30 meter height column is erected, which is crowned with a figure of the protector of the state – St. George the Conqueror and it ends at the monument of Rustaveli. Thus, symbols of the main concepts of the system of value orientations (St. Protector of Georgia ↔ Faith/Church/Independence ↔ freedom of action/right of choice granted to a man by the Creator) and the symbol of national culture are visually connected. In semiotics of the town space of the capital of Georgia (that is of the whole country) this not very long street (approximately 1.5 kilometre) – plays the structure-forming function of the central cultural axis. Majority of cultural objects of national significance are concentrated here. Expression “Visit Card of Tbilisi” is attributed to various sights of the town, but the “Visit Card of Georgia” is Rustaveli. On touristic sites, it refers to Rustaveli avenue, but when this expression is used by Georgian people, they as a rule, mean not the avenue, and even not the poet of the 12th century, but the ideas reflected in his poem and first of all, a system of moral orientations – ideal of the national character, based on principal values of Holy Scripture and knight’s code of honour given in artistic form.

3. Rustaveli and the Bible: what does *Vepkhistkaosani* mean for Georgians?

For many centuries the poem incited respectful feelings in the nation. The best scribes of the country were occupied in transcribing and illustrating the poem; text was studied by heart, manuscript (and later the printed edition) of *Vepkhistkaosani* was considered the richest dowry for a bride. Moral guiding lines of the poem are based on the principal values of Christian Doctrine. The very first line of *Vepkhistkaosani* addresses the Old Testament – description of act of creation in the Genesis. Unfortunately in the translations conformity disappears: because of difference in linguistic pictures of the world, vocabulary in the translations of the Bible into various languages differs significantly.

In the poem there are many allusions and referrals to the text of Holy Scripture and almost all strophes have something common. Inter-textual ties are revealed at the level of a plot. Vepkhistkaosani is a hymn to love, but if on the surface there is a history of elevated human love (mijnuroba, knightly service the lady-love) devoted Friendship, devotion to suzerain, etc., on the depth level – this is a hymn to evangelistic Holy love. Reverend Gabriel of Samtavro underlying metaphoric form of allegorical style of Rustaveli, called Vepkhistkaosani “a new song of Solomon”. Apostle Paul in the Song of Songs saw marriage of Christ and Church (Ef. 5:32). Comparison, assimilation of Vepkhistkaosani with the Song of Songs directly refers to its theological/doctrinal base.

God is everywhere. He dwells everywhere, in all His creations, therefore every living thing created by Him, according to the God’s aim/concept should be the harmonious world of Love and Good. According to Rustaveli, this world/universe *can and must* bring back the lost harmony, corresponding to the original aim of the Creator, and the poet-thinker sees the only way to attain universal good in self-perfection of every man, created “according to His image and likeness”. The Bible is the meta-text; without knowing it, it is impossible to read deep meanings of the poem and to understand specificity of Rustaveli’s world outlook. On the other hand, Vepkhistkaosani is a cultural genome: thanks to many reiterations (citations, folk versions, songs, operas, ballets, musical compositions, illustrations, sculptures, bas-reliefs et al), the poem played the basic function in the formation of national mentality. In the vivid figurative form, accessible for cognition at any level of education, the poem conveyed from generation to generation and fixed in people’s memory the basic dogmas of the Christian doctrine, as if fulfilling a function of a mediator between the Holy Scripture and nation’s memory. Creating the inter-text the poem of Rustaveli assured everybody that the route to the positive transformations of reality, first of all, implies perfection of his own person and requires high grade of responsibility of those who hold power. This concept, up to now continues to exert influence on the hierarchy of behavioural models of an individual and community/society.

4. Translation of the poem: problems of reception and the new tendencies of the 20th and 21st centuries

The poem of Rustaveli is justly considered one of the treasures of the world literature; it is translated into almost all languages of the world. Poetic language of Rustaveli is metaphoric, poly-semantic, full of new formations (the so-called Rustavelisms). Almost all words of the great poet have multiple meaning shades and some of them that are not translatable remain the wealth of only Georgian reader. Since the system of artistic-pictorial means of the poem (metaphors, epithets, hyperboles, alliteration, euphonies et al) complicates the translation of the poem into foreign languages, and inevitably leads to the loss of richness of meaning and multiple sub-texts; unfortunately in translation of the poem often namely its doctrinal/theological sense is “lost”, partially or fully. This is easily explainable: most of these translations were implemented not from the original but from the Russian version of the poem, which date from the last century, mainly from the soviet epoch.

Conveyance of the text into the other lingual medium is a complex communicational act. And since full adaptation of the original is impossible, determination of priorities and selection of translational strategies bear subjective character and depend very much on creative potential of a translator: rate of talent, level of linguistic competence and specificity of *understanding* the text of the original by them, which in this case is most important⁴. The process of understanding includes, as “historical understanding” (Martin Hajdegger⁵) and hermeneutical process of opening of meanings of the translated text, as well as, if we use the term of M. Weber “actual understanding” of an individual, orientated on his everyday experience and practical life⁶. And of course, in the soviet epoch specificity of “actual understanding” had decisive significance in the process of opening meanings of the poem: religious problematic appeared beyond the circle of translational priorities. In many cases this led not only to the loss of richness of meanings of the poem, but also to deformation of the text of the original. Correlative analysis of the translations proves that the reason of it, in most cases is insufficient competence of translators in the issues of theology and knowledge of Holy texts.

By the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century a tendency of search of new translational and publishing strategies became apparent⁷. First of all, this is a rejection of practice of translation by the use of languages-mediators and addressing directly the text of the original, which helps us to avoid double cultural adaptation and impact of several different semio-spheres.

Not less interesting are experiments in the sphere of publishing practices. The joint Russian-Georgian project of bilingual edition implemented in 2007 seems characteristic, which was accompanied by scientific comments of a professor Nestan Sulava. The edition was re-issued in 2014 in a cheaper version by the publishing house “Symposium” under the title “Vepkhistaosani (The Knight in the Panther’s Skin). Real History”. This is the only edition of the poem in Russian language equipped with scientific comments.

Not less significant are the Georgian projects aimed at reducing the distance between the text of the poem and Holy Scripture, which was created in the mentality of readers in the years of Soviet rule. Thus, among the jubilee mottoes of 2017 you could hear: “ვეფხისტყაოსანი სახარება სიყვარულისა” – “Vepkhistaosani - Gospel of Love”, or “ვეფხისტყაოსანი! სიმბოლო ქრისტესი” – “Vepkhistaosani! The Symbol of Christ!”. In the first case – it is the title of the version staged by the circle of history and area study of the House of Youth functioning at the Municipality of Kaspi region and in the second case it is a title of a project, revealing the connection of the text of the poem with the Christian doctrine. Within the frames of this project a series of

4 See: Rikjor Pol'. *Konflikt interpretacij. Očerki o germenевtike*, per. s fr. I.S.Vdovina [Paul Ricker. Conflict of interpretations. Hermeneutics essays, I. S. Vdovin translation from French]. Moskva: Kanon-Press, 1995.

5 See: Hajdegger Martin. *Bytie i vremja*. [Martin Hajdegger. Existence and time] online: http://www.gumer.info/bogoslov_Buks/Philos/Haid_BtVr/

6 See: Veber Maks. *Protestantskaja etika i duh kapitalizma* [Max Veber. Protestant ethics and spirit of capitalism]. Moskva: Progress, 1990.

7 See: Modebadze Irine. *Georgian-Russian Translation of the 21st Century: Priorities and Innovations of Crosscultural Dialogue*. SOCIALINIŲ MOKSLŲ STUDIJOS / SOCIETAL STUDIES/ Vol 8, No 2 (2016), PP.198-208.

forums were convened and video-materials were created, vividly explaining the Biblical base of symbols, metaphors and allusions of the poem, as well as the connection of figurativeness of some episodes with traditional icons of old Orthodox cathedrals.

Video-clip with citations by St. Basil the Great turned out especially popular which was presented on some portals, inclusive YouTube, oriented for youth. The clip explained meaning of symbols significant for the poem from the position of Christian doctrine (many visits, enthusiastic comments) and the site “Christian essence of Vepkhistkaosani”, offering citations from the poem and comments, extractions from the work of Zv. Gamsakhurdia “Figurativeness of Vepkhistkaosani” (<http://www.georoyal.ge/?MTID=5&TID=46&id=354>).

Among the jubilee events we should emphasize the project of creation of a new manuscript of the poem – “Let’s scribe Vepkhistkaosani”. Within the frames of the project a book model with clean pages was prepared. For many months it travelled in all regions of Georgia and every person desiring to compete in calligraphy had the possibility to write one line in the book. The idea turned out extremely popular, and the manuscript created in the 21st century might be called righteously a result of all-nation creativity.

Conclusions

1. Geopolitical and historical reality contributed to formation of stable association of the notion “Christianity/Church” with the problem of keeping the national and cultural identity – the major components of the notion “state independence”, in the mass mentality of the Georgian nation.
2. Mythologization of the Golden Century leads to transformation of proper names (Queen Tamar and Rustaveli) into dominating ethno-cultural archetypes, reflecting and fixing the basic properties of ethnos as cultural unity and making significant impact on the ideal of Georgian national character.
3. Vepkhistkaosani is a cultural genome and simultaneously a mediator between the Holy Scripture and the people: the poem was conveyed from generation to generation and fixed in the memory of people the moral norms of Christian doctrine in the artistic form. The poem created by Rustaveli and inter-text assured each man, that the path to the positive transformations of the reality, first of all, implies perfection of one’s own self and requires high rates of responsibility from those who rule the country
4. In the translations of the poem into foreign languages, as a rule, namely its theological meaning is lost fully or partially. By the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century a tendency of search of new translation-al and publishing strategies became apparent which were directed towards keeping the richness of the meaning of the poem in other language medium. This is rejection of practice of translation by the use of languages-mediators and experiments in the sphere of publishing practices. No less significant are the projects involving the application of digital technology aimed at reducing of distance between the text of the poem and the Holy Scripture.

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KIRIKŠČIONYBĖ IR KARTVELŲ MENTALITETO PAGRINDAI

Irine Modebadze, Sakartvelas

Santrauka. *Pateikiamas straipsnis - tai tarpdisciplininis kultūrinio genomo tyrimas. Analizuojami Rustavelio poema, jos sąsajos su šventaisiais raštais ir jos funkcinis išskirtinumas tautinio kultūrinio kodo apibrėžtyje. Toks tyrimas atliekamas pirma kartą, jo metodologiniu pamatu pasitarnavo G. DUBY, P. RICKER, R. BARTES, M. FOUCAULT, N. ANTSIFEROV, Y. LOTMAN, JEFF. C. ALEXANDER darbai. Tyrimui imti duomenys iš "Rustvelologinių studijų" (K. Kekelidze, A. Baramidze, S. Tsaishvili, N. Sulava, etc.) bei autorės atlikti savarankiški tyrimai.*

Reikšminiai žodžiai: krikščionybė, kartvelų mentalitetas, nacionalinės vertynės, Rustavelis.

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