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Sh. Kh. Salakaia

RITUAL FOLKLORE OF THE ABKHAZIANS

[Obriadovyi fol'klor abkhazov]

Depending on the nature of their economies, different types of ritual poetry moved to the fore among different peoples at various times. While poetry of familial ritual is of a single type among all peoples, or at least a majority of them, insofar as its principal features are concerned, one cannot say this with respect to the poetry associated with work. Among those peoples whose principal occupation was tilling the soil, it was naturally ritual poetry having to do with the agricultural calendar that developed to the highest degree; while among those who chiefly engaged in hunting, it was hunting songs that took pride of place, and so forth.

In Abkhazian folklore, despite the fact that those who created it were from antiquity familiar with agriculture, as numerous archeological and ethnographic data show, calendrical agricultural poetry occupies an utterly insignificant place or, in any case, has not come down to our day and has gone unrecorded. The numerous rituals associated with farming and cattle raising are not, as a rule, accompanied by songs or other works of poetry created specifically for that occasion, but are confined

simply to prayers, to verbal formulae of a very general character, sometimes uttered by a priest but most often by the master, the head of the family, and addressed to the protectors of various branches of the economy.

The poetry of the hunt is quite another story. For the Abkhazians, as for many other mountain peoples of the Caucasus, hunting remained until quite recently one of the most favored occupations, while in remote antiquity it was indubitably the foundation of the entire economic activity of our forebears. This explains the fact that among the Abkhazians, as among other hunting peoples, the hunt developed a regular institution of rituals, taboos, and limitations, going as far as the creation of a special idiom, the so-called language of the forests, or hunters' language (abna byzshea). From the ethnographic point of view, the hunt among the Abkhazians has been investigated in ample detail both by prerevolutionary and Soviet scholars. (1)

In the Abkhaz pagan pantheon it is the divinity Azhveipshaa, often confused with Airg', who is protector of hunters and all game. Sh. Inal-Ipa writes of these gods: "The beliefs hold that there are two conjoined groups of gods — protectors of forests, wildlife, and the hunt. They are the Airg' (Aerg') and the Azhveipshaa, who are assigned to watch over wildlife. Living in the forests, they conduct normal family lives. The Azhveipshaa prefer marriages to virgins from the related divine Airg' clan. This is shown by the words of the song: 'An Airg' virgin is Azhveipshaa's bride' (Airg'aa rtypkha — Azheipsh'aa rtatsa). The Azhveipshaa have eternally young daughters who milk deer and elk. They sometimes have love affairs with hunters, thereby depriving the latter of the right to marry. Without the goodwill of Airg' and Azhveipshaa, no one is able to kill an animal. Moreover, they permit the killing only of those animals in their herds that they have themselves already eaten and then brought back to life." (2)

There are records of numerous variants of mythological traditions about how a hunter visits an Azhveipshaa family, which, in honor of the guest, slaughters a roe deer (or a gazelle, mountain goat, sometimes a wild boar) and then, after feasting on it,

carefully collects all the bones, covers them with a hide, and at the stroke of a miraculous wand, brings back to life the animal that has just been eaten. It then runs back into the herd. When hunting in the mountains the next day, the hunter shoots a deer he recognizes by unmistakable signs as the very deer (or mountain goat, wild boar, etc.) that had just the previous day been slaughtered in his honor, eaten, and then brought back to life by Azhveipshaa, god of the hunt.

Believing deeply in the reality of such mythological legends, hunters tried to win the good will of protectors of game by sacrifices and songs, in which they begged the gods "not to permit to get past them the game that had already been eaten by Azhveipshaa himself, and not entice him toward them that had not yet been eaten by him" (literally "not eaten, not drunk"). S. Zvanba observed in his time that the principal means of mollifying the god of the hunt was sacrifice: "In preparing for a hunt, a party of hunters from a single village or neighborhood gets together a pot and, purchasing with it a goat or sheep, chooses a place in the woods for the sacrifice. Each hunter throws incense on the embers and prays to the wood god that he allocate out of his herd what the hunter wants." (3)

Men went hunting in the mountains, usually in groups of three or four, sometimes more, and the hunt went on for several days, sometimes weeks. They built a log shelter to sleep in or spent the night in natural caves or grottoes.

Before setting out on the hunt, and particularly in the evening at the site where they spent the night in their shelter (cave or grotto), the hunters appealed to the god of the hunt with a song containing a prayer and an incantation to assure the success of the forthcoming hunt.

We present some examples of ritual hunting songs devoted to Azhveipshaa and Airg', in line-by-line translation. Here is one of the most popular songs about the protector of the hunt:

Oh, Azhveipshaa, our master,
Who illuminates the lofty cliffs with the bright sun,
May our group meet with a common joy,

May success accompany it for a thousand years
 (literally: may wild birds and animals await it).
 We beseech thee by the clear sky,
 That thou be of good will toward us,
 So that our departure in the morning and return
 at supper will be happy and successful. (4)

But hunters do not confine themselves merely to general desires in their incantations. They go on to make concrete what they had expressed at the beginning in the general form of prayer, pleading with the protector to give them:

If a bear, then one with paws as big as a cliff,
 If a boar, then with hair like a brush,
 If a roe deer, then a spirited one (or a nimble one),
 If a gazelle, then spotted,
 If a mountain goat, then an exceptional one,
 If a deer, then with branching antlers (literally:
 with fifteen or sixteen points, etc.). (5)

After a successful hunt, hunters usually express their gratitude to Azhveipshaa for his protection and pray that he will also not disregard them in the future:

Oh, all-highest Azhveipshaa, mighty master,
 What you gave our group has already been eaten,
 We pray that you give us joy with a new catch.
 For those gifts with which you endowed our group,
 We say thanks to you,
 Oh, ri-ra, oh, bringer of blessings to us! (6)

As far as songs about Airg' are concerned, they actually differ little from the song-incantation about Azhveipshaa presented above. In this case, however, reference is not to Azhveipshaa but to Airg'. That is the sum total of difference. Sometimes these divinities are mentioned together in one and the same song.

This shows again that among the Abkhazians there was no fully developed, specific and concrete concept of the god of the hunt. This divinity is presented either in the form of a deaf old man, the head of a large family, or as a black-bearded man named Azhveipshaa, or Airg', who never did acquire any specific external appearance but who emerged generally as the embodiment of awesome elemental forces.

Analogous protectors of wild game and the hunt are to be found among nearly all the neighboring peoples of the Caucasus. Among the Adyg peoples (the Adygei, Kabardinians, Circassians) we find Mazitkha; among the mountain Georgians, the Rachins and Svans, it is Apsat (but more often the goddess of the hunt, Dali); among the Osetins, Karachaevtsy, and Balkarians it is Avsat, etc. The deepest and most comprehensive study of poetry of the hunt was done among the Georgians. (7)

A song of praise to Afy, god of thunder and lightning, is still part of the folk culture of today. This song was sung when a lightning bolt struck a person or one of the household animals, and also in certain other cases. Zvanba, who first described this rite, tells us: "If one of his animals is killed by lightning, its owner assembles the entire village, regardless of sex, and builds a tower with four posts tall enough so that dogs or predatory animals cannot leap onto it. When this platform has been built, all present dance around the animal that has been killed, singing certain words, as follows. One half sings the 'Voetla' in chorus, and the other the 'Chaupar,' while the animal is raised onto the platform. It remains there as a sacrifice to scavenger birds." (8) The Abkhazians believe that without the song of Afy, no power on earth could raise the killed animal from the earth.

This ritual, also known to many other peoples of the Caucasus, had been described by a number of authors prior to the Revolution. One's attention is drawn particularly by the information provided by L. Liul'e and N. Al'bov with regard to the spread of this ritual among the Adyg peoples.

This rite is performed among the Abkhazians with even greater zeal when a human being has been struck by lightning.

In the words of G. F. Chursin, "If lightning strikes a person and he remains alive, a scaffolding of four posts hammered into the ground, with crosspieces atop them, the whole called an asheamkiat . . . is immediately set up around him. Then a fat white goat is slaughtered, and the injured person is raised, to the strains of the song to Afy (Afrashea), and placed upon the asheamkiat. Then people take each other's hands and dance a round dance around the asheamkiat and sing 'etlar-chopa.' All participants in the ritual must without exception be dressed in white. No one is supposed to weep; all are to make merry so as not to rouse the wrath of Afy. After these ceremonies the injured person is taken from the platform and borne home." (9)

If a person has been struck dead by lightning, he is also raised upon an asheamkiat to the strains of the song to Afy and only later buried. In individual cases, however, he is raised with song and dances and borne off to be buried without the building of a platform. In earlier times, Chursin asserts, in this situation as well an individual killed by lightning was first placed on an asheamkiat, and buried only later. (10)

Similar rituals of burial of persons killed by lightning were also observed among other peoples of the Caucasus. Among the Circassians death by lightning, according to Liul'e, is regarded as a blessing, and the corpse is committed to the ground at the very spot where the person was killed. Moreover, the song that has to accompany this ritual always repeats the names of Shible (the protector of lightning) and Ialia (the name $\Pi'ia$, in distorted form). (11) The Ingush and Chechen regard a person killed by lightning as blessed and bury him separately from other dead. Among them, too, mourning for an individual killed by lightning is strictly prohibited. (12) The Ossetes bury an individual so killed at the spot where the lightning struck him, also accompanying this entire ritual with a well-known song, "Tsoppai." The text of the song is as follows:

"Tsoppai," may divine blessings be on you,
"Tsoppai," may the blessing of Uatsilla be
on you,

"Tsoppai," may the benediction of the one struck
by lightning be on all.

Sometimes the corpse of a person killed by lightning is placed on an arba [high two-wheeled cart] to which young calves are harnessed, and they are permitted to wander where they want. The burial takes place wherever the arba stops. (13) Among the Karachai and Balkarians, when people are struck by lightning a song is also sung in which the word chappa, or choppa, is frequently repeated.

Prayer to Afy is offered in all cases in which that divinity appears in any way, visiting its awesome presence on some persons. Whatever the case, the singing of the song to Afy, the Afrashea, is absolutely compulsory.

Attempts to interpret the term "choppa" on the basis of any of the languages of the Caucasus have thus far not yielded positive results. Chursin regards this term as the designation of an ancient god of thunder and lightning common to many of the peoples of the Caucasus, who was later displaced either by the Biblical prophet Elijah (Yuatsilla) or by various local divinities — Afy among the Abkhazians, Shible among the Adygs, and so forth. (14) In the expression Atlar choupar or Etlar choupar, V. I. Abaev, while leaving the meaning of the term "choupar" open, thinks that the word "etlar" or "atlar" comes from the Ossetian aldar, "prince, sovereign, ruler," etc. (15)

In the ritual poetry of the Abkhazians, songs of the patron of smallpox, Golden Zoskhan (Akhi-Zoskhan), are of considerable interest. In treating smallpox the Abkhazians, like the Georgians, Ossetes, Adygs, and others, did not permit the use of medicines of any kind, since they believed that this could only anger Zoskhan and thus worsen the disease. Chursin writes that instead of treatment they praised Zoskhan, set out a meal for him, then gathered around the patient, made merry, played the apkhiarts, danced as though rejoicing over the arrival of another guest, sang the song of Akhi-Zoskhan, and prayed to him that he be merciful to the patient. It was believed that the house had been visited by a divinity, Golden Zoskhan. It was forbidden to

build a fire in the room where the patient lay or to carry boiled water into it.

These rules, too, were universal throughout Georgia. In such a home, during the entire period until the patient recovered completely, curse words, gross language, and even the expression of the slightest dissatisfaction, not only by members of the family but even by visitors, were forbidden. Songs in which Golden Zoskhan was praised, and sometimes also his spouse White Khaniia (Khaniia Shkuakua), were sung, and thanks were given for the fact that they had showed a sign of their attention and had made people happy by their visit. We cite a number of examples of these songs:

Golden Zoskhan, oh, thanks to thee,
 Oh, happy Ryua, oh, thanks to thee,
 Golden Zoskhan, we pray to thee about his (sick) soul.
 White Khaniia, oh, thanks to thee,
 Golden Zoskhan, oh, thanks to thee! (16)

And in another song they sing:

What worry can there be for her whom a god has
 visited,
 Forgive her (the patient) for her ignorance (lack of
 knowledge).
 Friends, pick up the song in harmony,
 Her angel, all in white,
 Passes on the words of the prophet:
 It is necessary to dress her (the sick one) all in white,
 Do not bring anything dark (mourning) close,
 Friends, pick up the song in harmony.
 We must entreat for her with a white goat,
 We must erect a beautiful platform,
 Must sing a song in harmony,
 And so make merry, dance! (17)

Or again:

Oh, Atlar-chopa, Temyr kvara,
 Blessed is he whom God has visited,
 What kind of burden can there be for those
 Whom God has visited!
 They are happy, nanyk'ara . . . ! (18)

And, finally, I should like to touch in the most general outlines on the ritual of praying for rain among the Abkhazians. It was first described by Zvanba, and then, with certain changes and additions, this ritual was described by many prerevolutionary and Soviet authors (A. Ioakimov, N. Dzhanashia, N. Dzhavakhishvili, N. Ia. Marr, I. Gartskia, G. F. Chursin, Sh. D. Inal-Ipa, and others).

In its genesis, as Inal-Ipa justly holds, this ritual is apparently associated with the agricultural cult and is a vestige of human sacrifice performed to save a harvest from drought. (19)

According to Zvanba, during droughts village girls in their holiday best would assemble not far from a stream. Some of them went to the stream and built a raft of branches, placing dry straw on it. Others dressed up a doll in the shape of a woman, using a large wooden shovel to represent her. Then they covered a donkey with a white sheet, seated the doll on it, and proceeded to the place where they had built the raft, singing the following song:

Give us water, give us water,
 Rain water, a red marguerite,
 The son of the sovereign is thirsty,
 A little water, a little water!

When they arrived at the stream, they took the doll from the donkey, seated it on the raft, set fire to the straw that had been cast on it, and pushed the flaming raft into the current, while the donkey was made to bathe in the same stream. Today the doll is usually carried by hand to the river by girls and then thrown into the water. The song itself, "Dziuau," has now become solely a children's song.

The ritual song for calling for rain is found in various versions among the Abkhazians. One of them says that thirst overcomes a crown prince and Dziuau is begged for water for him. In another variant, instead of the crown prince it is the queen for whom water is begged, and sometimes she herself is sold for water, apparently to the patron of the watery element.

Other rites of comparatively late origin were also performed to summon rain, such as, for example, prayer by a village, atsunykхва, when a sacrifice was offered to the supreme god Antsva, "to win rain from him." Women were not permitted to take part in the atsunykхва prayer, while the Dziuau rite was for women alone. (20) This ritual was not accompanied by any special songs.

The rite of prayer for rain is known among many peoples. Among the Adyg nationalities this ritual bears the designation Khantse-guasha or Khanser-guasha, "the shovel princess" ("the shovel mistress"). In time of drought the Georgians carry a doll named "Lazare," the Armenians one called "Choli" or "Nurin." Among all peoples these rituals were accompanied by songs whose basic content was prayer for rain.

Notes

1) See, for example, S. T. Zvanba, Etnograficheskie etudy, edited and with an introduction by G. A. Dzhidzariia, Sukhumi, 1955; N. S. Dzhnashvili, (1) "Religioznye verovaniia abkhazov," Khristianskii vostok, Vol. IV, No. 1, Petrograd, 1915, pp. 72-112; (2) "Abkhazskii kul't i byt," Khristianskii vostok, Vol. V, No. 3, Petrograd, 1917, pp. 157-208; N. Ia. Marr, "O religioznykh verovaniiakh abkhazov," Khristianskii vostok, Vol. IV, No. 1, Petrograd, 1915; D. I. Gulia, Bozhestvo okhoty i okhotnichii iazyk u abkhazov, Sukhumi, 1926; G. F. Chursin, Materialy po etnografii Abkhazii, Sukhumi, 1957; Sh. D. Inal-Ipa, Abkhazy (Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki), Sukhumi, 1965.

2) Sh. D. Inal-Ipa, Abkhazy, pp. 517-18.

3) S. T. Zvanba, Etnograficheskie etudy, pp. 72-73.

4) B. V. Shinkuba comp., Abkhazskaia narodnaia poeziia,

Sukhumi, 1959, p. 290 (in Abkhazian). Here and below the translations from the Abkhazian are by the author of the present article.

5) Ibid., p. 291.

6) Ibid.

7) See, for example, E. B. Virsaladze, (1) "Gruzinskii okhotnichii epos," author's abstract of dissertation for the doctoral degree, Tbilisi, 1963; (2) Gruzinskii okhotnichii epos (tsikl pogibshogo okhotnika), Tbilisi, 1964 (in Georgian).

8) S. Zvanba, "O religioznykh verovaniakh abkhazov," the newspaper Kavkaz, No. 81, 1855.

9) G. F. Chursin, Materialy po etnografii Abkhazii, p. 57.

10) Ibid., pp. 58-59.

11) L. Liul'e, Cherkessiia (istoriko-etnograficheskie stat'i), Krasnodar, 1927.

12) Ch. Akhriev, "Ingushevskie prazdniki," in Sbornik svedenii o kavkazskikh gortsakh, Issue 5, Tiflis, 1871.

13) Vs. Miller, Osetinskie etyudy, Part II, Moscow, 1882, p. 241.

14) G. F. Chursin, Materialy po etnografii Abkhazii, p. 60.

15) V. I. Abaev, Istoriko-etnograficheskii slovar' osetinskogo iazyka, Vol. I, Moscow and Leningrad, 1958, pp. 314-16.

16) Abkhazskaia narodnaia poeziia, p. 286.

17) Ibid., p. 296.

18) Ibid., p. 287.

19) Sh. D. Inal-Ipa, Abkhazy, p. 525.

20) Ibid., p. 125.