

Forms of Georgian Traditional Pilgrimage and Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia of Today*

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The purpose of our paper is to show, on the example of Tbilisi, how places become sacred and the sights of pilgrimage; what are the modern and traditional forms of pilgrimage in Georgia. The study showed that the graves of the prominent people for their pure life and miraculous deeds, who lived during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods until now are the places of veneration. These people before official canonization became saints for people and as I call them, they became “folk Saints”, as the forms of their veneration are the same as canonized ones. After post-Soviet revival of religiousness in the late 1970es, one form of pilgrimage became especially popular in the Orthodox Church of Georgia. On the memorial days of Saints or just after Sunday liturgy priest and congregation visit graves of these Saints or prominent churches dedicated to them, where they pray and have small services. The study showed that this form was not traditional Georgian form of pilgrimage, but Russian one. I also argue that there might have been five forms of traditional pilgrimage in Georgia. The study was based on historical sources, published scientific works and the personal field ethnographic materials.

Keywords: ethnology, history of religion, church history, pilgrimage

Introduction

The issue of appearing of the sacred places, places of worship, in my opinion, is a form of folklorization of sanctity within the Church itself. Persons related to similar places are often attributed to the saints by people before their formal canonization. Before being actually canonized, they become the so called “Folk Saints” as I call them. Referring to the recent history of Tbilisi, we can name three persons of the kind: St. Father Gabriel Urgebadze, Father Vitally Sidorenko and “Sitting Anastasia” i.e. Anastasia Nikisheva.

St. Gabriel (Urgebadze)

Father Gabriel (secular name Goderdzi Urgebadze) has been canonized as Holy Father St. Gabriel Confessor and Fool for Christ. Father Gabriel was distinguished with his way of living and inspired respect to himself since his young years; “Slave of God” was the name given to him by aged women. Father Gabriel used to walk in his neighborhood; going from door to door he talked to people about the God. Next to his family house,

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he had built a cell, a kind of a pray house where he often secluded himself;¹ many outstanding persons, musicians, composers and others paid visits to him in his cell (Ghambashidze, 2016).

Father Gabriel had chosen one of the most difficult forms of monastic life—living as a pilgrim, as fool of God. When on May 1 of 1965, he burnt Lenin's photo publicly, he was not only severely beaten and imprisoned, but was placed in psychiatric hospital. However, thanks to joint efforts of the Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia, Ephrem II (Sidamonidze) and psychiatrist, Prof. Avlipi Zurabashvili, he was released from the hospital (Kitsmarishvili & Tarkashvili, 2014, pp. 22-25).

Today he is the subject of people's love, worship and respect not only in Georgia but outside the country as well. Numerous works written about life of Father Gabriel describe many things that have happened as he had predicted; there are stories of people in despair and people suffering from diseases he had helped. There is a well-known story among them which is related to revelation of his saintliness and incorruptibility of his remains, the story that gave start of pilgrimage tradition to his grave as to one of the places of worship: his doctor, Zurab Varazihad put away a vial with remains of blood of Father Gabriel's blood test in his desk drawer. Later when Father Gabriel had passed the doctor by chance found the vial he had forgotten completely. The blood was not coagulated. This news spread immediately among the believers and the fame of Father Gabriel as miracle-worker increased. People truly loved him and recognized him as saint well before his canonization.

Father Vitally Sidorenko

In 1928 Vitally Sidorenko, known as Father Vitally today, was born in a village of Ekaterinovka in the Krasnodar region of Russia.² Stories that have come to us tell that Father Vitally had been distinguished with his spirituality since his childhood. As the stories tell his prayers had great power even in his young years (Life of Schiarchimandrite Vitally, 2009, pp. 11, 13-15, 16-18). Once in his 7th form at school a teacher asked him to read a verse "Railway" (Nekrassov, 2016) by Nikolai Nekrassov. Instead of the words "a cruel king whose name is hunger" Vitally read "cruel king whose name is Stalin". A "political label" was pinned to him in addition to his label of a believer; he was expelled from school. Vitally had been 14 when he started his pilgrimage. At 16 he tore his passport to pieces and made his life complicated for many years to come with governmental organizations. Father Vitally was accused in vagrancy. Often he was forced to hide. In 1950es the Soviet government increased control. It was the time when Father Vitally was serving in the Glin wilderness. In 1961 the Glin Monastery was closed. He moved to Taganrog. It is noteworthy that in this town his favorite place for praying was the grave of a monk, Pavel Stozhkov. Pavel Stozhkov had been a wanderer monk who gained great love of people. In 1999 he was attributed to the saints. Pavel had spent most of his life in pilgrimage; he used to take common people, mostly women with him, who were coming to him for advices. He considered pilgrimage very important not only for the reason of worshiping saints and sacred places but to serve spiritually on the way to these places by fasting, praying and facing various difficulties. According to him, prayers of pilgrims have a special life-giving power.

Father Vitally was greatly respected in Taganrog. He mostly lived in the houses of the members of his flock who gave shelter to him. Believers of all ages and gender were coming to the houses he was staying to pray almost all nights. In the morning believers who had jobs were leaving while the rest stayed and fulfilled different

¹ The cell mentioned is known as the church built by Father Gabriel.

² June 4 is indicated in some editions.

works of penance. Nobody was idling. During hours of rest the sisters were knitting rosaries. At the dining-table they were reading lives of saints aloud according to the monastic rules. Actually, within the walls of the houses Father Vitally was staying, a church community was formed. In the given situation, he tried to meet religious needs of believers in the houses instead of cathedrals. He did not violate ecclesiastical law doing so. In our opinion, symbiosis of the monastic and secular ways of living in a way reminding that of the early Christian communities was the way to fill in the vacuum existing in the life of believers, to meet religious needs of those who had to adapt themselves in the atheistic environment.

In the period of atheism to protect spirituality and religion, the word of God and prayers had to be performed in a secret manner that was a way of “domestication of the religion” based on the age-old experience of the Church. In the circumstances described Father Vitally united his flock for the particular purpose i.e. pilgrimage. He used to take common women on his way to sacred places as Father Pavel did. He often said that those women had been sent to him by the Virgin. The pilgrims cleaned and restored old, abandoned churches with their own hands. Pilgrimage was not safe in the Soviet period. Father Vitally tried to protect his flock from the governmental institutions but it was not easy or possible always. Often they had been regarded as a gang of criminals. Sometimes the mission and conduct of God’s fool saved them. Father Vitally was always in ecclesiastical robe; it was impossible not to notice him. In every village they went, militiamen were there waiting for them. Some of them closed eyes and let them pass, in some places Father Vitally was arrested and beaten.

Father Vitally died at the age of 65 on December 1 of 1992. He is buried in the yard of the Alexander Nevsky church in Tbilisi. He used to tell people: “When I die, come to my grave, tell me everything as if I am alive and I’ll help you” (Life of schiarchimandrite Vitally, 2009, pp. 18-19, 20-21, 29-30, 32-34, 35-38, 41-45, 47-48, 72-73, 78-79, 97-99, 181).

Since his death many miracles have happened at his grave. There are witnesses who have seen that candles put up under the rain kept on burning or candles started burning without setting fire to them. A lot of people of different age, gender and profession keep coming to his grave: university entrants, business men, people suffering from different diseases, some bring babies for blessing; prescriptions, diagnosis and different types of documents like school certificates, and put them on the grave asking Father Vitally for support. The place of his burial is one of the favorite places of Tbilisians. Father Vitally had been attributed to the Saints by people well before his canonization by the Church of Ukraine (Skhiarkhimandrit Vitali, 2014, pp. 18-19).

Sitting Anastasia

Anastasia, Ana and Vera Nikishevs lived in Nadzaladevi area in Tbilisi together with their mother and father. The Nikishevs had moved to Tbilisi from Petersburg. It was time when many workers with their families were brought to Tbilisi from Russia to build the railway. The girls were born in Tbilisi. However, there were rumors that Anastasia’s mother was Georgian. The father of the family was a railway worker. The Nikishevs received a land plot in Nadzaladevi to build a house. Anastasia was the elder daughter. She was born in 1887 (Gegia, 2015). Her mother died when she was three years old and her father married again. Anastasia was studying at the girls’ seminary. She was singing in the choir of the Church of Virgin of Iberia (the Panagaea Portaitissa) and worked as an operator in the post office, the so called House of Communication. In the palace of Vorontsov (Palace of Youth today) dance parties were regularly organized. Anastasia was participating in the balls and she met an

officer of Guards there. The young people fell in love with one another and they decided to get married. Once Anastasia returned home late from the dance party and her stepmother did not let her in. She had to spend the night in the yard. She caught cold and could not get out for some days. The Officer decided to find out what had happened to her and came to her house. The stepmother opening the door told the officer: “Anastasia has gone mad and she has been taken to the nuts house tied, so you cannot be married” (Gegia, 2015, p. 10). Having heard this, the officer shot himself in front of their gate.

It was a great shock to 18 years old Anastasia and she fell down paralyzed. Since then she was sitting in the yard. That was the start of her spiritual labor. For 50 years she had been sitting in the middle of the yard and only last 15 years she spent under the roof of a wooden covered shed in the entrance to the yard thanks to efforts of others (Gegia, 2015, p. 10). She had been sitting bent on her heels. Her legs, particularly her calves, had been in-grown to her thighs. Anastasia wore a long, black, thin gown covering her completely and a hat she had knitted herself. Socks on her feet had no soles. Despite cold, her hands were hot. Her hair remained black until her death; they had never turned white. Many people, clergymen and secular people used to come to her. She had a gift of prevision and gave advices to people.

After the WWII many people coming to her were asking about their lost relatives during the war. If Anastasia was handing a handful of earth to them, it was clear the person was not alive. If she was giving some fruit, there was a hope the lost person could be alive. According to many people, apples she was giving to visitors had healing power. Anastasia’s apples are now well known. She usually treated visitors and pilgrims with apples and later that gave the start of the tradition of bringing apples to her grave.

Once a year on January 19, the day of Epiphany, Anastasia usually took a bath with holy water brought for her from a church for this purpose. Women helping her in the yard were holding bed-sheets around her. Her body kept warmth during the bath in the cold period of time. People took the water after her bath in bottles to water their own yards. Approximately in 1949-1950es Martha Jakeli, mother of Lavrenti Beria came to her accompanied by three guards. Martha was known for her deep faith. Nobody knows what was their conversation about as Martha spoke to her face to face, keeping the guards at distance. It is known that Secretary of the Central Committee of Georgia in 1953-1972, Vasili Mzhavanadze was visiting Anastasia from time to time as well.

On June 7 of 1970 Anastasia died. But the miracles have not stopped since her death (Ghambashidze, 2016; Gegia, 2015, pp. 10, 11-13, 15-18, 20, 29, 35).

In 1970es along with revival of Church life the pilgrimage tradition started in Georgia anew and it has become very popular. Apart of that, tradition of procession had been revived which turned into a wide scale procession in 2000 Christmas Procession (Alilo in Georgian). The renewed Christmas procession is a variation of the old Georgian Christmas, European Epiphany and procession traditions. It is noteworthy that originally in Kartli tradition of Alilo had been never performed. Unlike the pilgrimage to sacred places, during pilgrimage and Alilo tradition people walk to the sacred places. During pilgrimage pilgrims use different vehicles to get their destination, where they serve public prayers, pray together and share meals.

Georgian Traditional Forms of Pilgrimage

According to verbal or written sources there is no evidence that believers travelled as pilgrims to the sacred places organized. As a rule, people in Georgia used to go and still do so to the places of worship on special days

and on religious feasts. These feasts have been centers uniting families, communities, public, in general. People used to come from different regions and locations to the places of worship of their ancestors, which mostly were located on top of the mountains.

The Georgian tradition reflected in different historical sources keep names of individual pilgrims who had visited Holy Land, rarely to distinguished prayer places in Georgia such as, David of Gareja Laura and desert (Kldiashvili, 2001). As for the Russian tradition of pilgrimage, which, in my opinion, was brought by the Russians to Georgia, it has been restored in Georgian since 1970es. The same can be referred to the tradition of walking icons to families and different churches. Both formes became quite organic for Georgia. As it was aforementioned, Father Pavel and Father Vitally and their flock walked kilometers never being scared of the powers in their decidedness to go to the places of worship. The holy fathers took common women with them mostly. In the sixteenth century St. Maxim Greek wrote: “Russia is a pilgrim woman in black sitting or walking and thinking of her way; feeling that time has come to think of her future” (Naletova, 2010, p. 244). The institute of wanderers i.e. pilgrims was formed in Russia in the eighteenth century. The government of the Tsar’s Russia did not oppress them. On the contrary, the government protected them in a way (Naletova, 2010, p. 244). The situation did change dramatically in Soviet time.

I think group pilgrimage of a clergyman and his flock to the sacred places, prayers conducted beyond the walls of churches (I do not mean domestic and personal rituals and preyers) are part of the Russian tradition, not that of Georgian. Russian fathers living in Georgia had introduced this tradition in Georgia. However, Georgian Church and its flock undertook this tradition easily and naturally, especially in 1970es.

In my opinion, in the Soviet time, along with the lesser number of acting churches, objects of cult and rituals related to the folk religion made it possible to maintain and support the faith among people more or less.

As it is known, church services and church way of living had been shaken seriously and great was the damage done. As Tamar Dragadze says, Christianity was domesticated;³ to make it clear many rituals had been moved to houses from the churches. The study has revealed that in a number of cases even liturgy was conducted in families after certain rituals of sacralization. Example of it was Father Vitally who had suffered from the powers and during certain period of time he had to hide.

In the soviet time, even graves of common people were places to conduct church rituals mostly on the Easter, on the fortieth day of a person’s death or anniversary of the person’s death.

There were outstanding clergymen and lay persons in the Soviet time that despite oppression, threat of imprisonment had been living according to the rules of church, and became known for their spirituality and miracles. People and the Church have attributed them to the Saints. This phenomenon is a form of popularization of sanctity within the Church itself. Persons related to similar places are often attributed to the Saints by people before their formal canonization. They become as I call them “Folk Saints” before being actually canonized.

On the post-Soviet territory graves of similar persons have turned into sacred places, places of worship for pilgrimage that started when they were alive and continued after their death. This phenomenon has been supported by the way of their living, martyrdom for Christianity and miracles happening after their demise.

³ Tamara Dragadze, *The Domestication of Religion Under Soviet Communism*, in *Socialism. Ideals, Ideologies, and Local Practices* (ASA Monographs 31), ed. Hann C.M., (London: Routledge, 1993), 150. In “Domestication of religion” Dragadze means not only domestication of cult, but religious power as well.

Speaking about the Georgian tradition of pilgrimage I hereby outline 5 forms:

- (1) Pilgrimage of individuals to the Holy Land and certain sacred places.
- (2) Celebration of folk religious or church festivals.

Here I want to outline one special example of pilgrimage within the frames of Georgian folk festival. The name of the holiday, Pirimze Pudzis Angelozi—Akhooba, its cycle and the ritual attached to this cycle obviously show the migration story of the people who venerates this shrine. The families of the Tsiklauries and the Bekauries who lived in Khevsureti village of Ukanakho took a part of their shrine Pudzis Angelozi and brought it in village Chokhi when they migrated in Gudamakari. After these families settled, in the meantime, one part of the local Gudamakarian families left Gudamakari and moved to the plain regions of the country. One part of the local families joined the Tsiklauries and the Bekauries and thus, Pirimze Pudzis Angelozi—Akhooba became the main festival of this region. The ritual of the Pirimze Pudzis Angelozi festival had preserved the history of its origin and migration story of its congregation. Once in every year, at a certain date this story is performed in a ritual. Congregation passes the same way which was passed by their ancestors, but now they go back to the village of their previous settlement, from Gudamakari to Khevsureti. But this “pass” has deeply ritual character. In this ritual, like in a myth, history of the society, history of its establishment is preserved and reactivated. This real quite difficult and dangerous geographical rout through ritual journey is filled with mythical, sacred geography and the ritual is performed in a way of pilgrimage. In my opinion, it is a certain form of pilgrimage (Ghambashidze & Alaverdashvili, 2018, pp. 349-350). As for the Georgian tradition of pilgrimage I outlined 5 forms: (1) Pilgrimage of individuals to the Holy Land and certain sacred places. (2) Celebration of folk religious or church festivals. (3) Going to clergymen or lay persons, who during their life time were leading pure way of life, praying along with them and getting support from them. (4) Going to the graves of similar persons after their demise for similar purposes. (5) A kind of pilgrimage (which cannot be considered an officially excepted form of pilgrimage of course), that I call “pilgrimage of spirits”, when according to the folk understanding or imagination, spirits come from the other world to their families to celebrate feasts. However, this kind of “pilgrimage” is practised in other peoples religious tradition as well.

In my opinion, that sacred places appear when a human being (in a certain form) is in touch with supernatural. This is a kind of theophany. Pilgrimage to such places is a means to meet supernatural, to have direct contact with this phenomenon and this has always been an alive and contemporary process.

Conclusion

In the Soviet time there were some reasons to maintain and support the faith among people more or less: the folk religion along with few acting churches; graves of common people where rituals were conducted; outstanding clergymen and lay persons who became known for their spirituality, miracles and who were attributed by people and the Church to the Saints even before their formal canonization. They become as I call them “Folk Saints” before being actually canonized. In the post-Soviet period graves and flets or houses of similar persons have turned into sacred places, places of worship for pilgrimage that started when they were alive and continued after their death.

I also think, the pilgrimage of a clergyman and his flock to the sacred places, prayers conducted beyond the walls of churches are part of the Russian tradition, introduced by Russian fathers living in Georgia. However, it

easily and naturally became beloved by the Georgian Church and its flock, especially in 1970es.

As for the Georgian tradition of pilgrimage I outlined 5 forms: (1) Pilgrimage of individuals to the Holy Land and certain sacred places. (2) Celebration of folk religious or church festivals. (3) Going to clergymen or lay persons, who during their life time were leading pure way of life, praying along with them and getting support from them. (4) Going to the graves of similar persons after their demise for similar purposes. (5) A kind of pilgrimage (which cannot be considered an officially excepted form of pilgrimage of course), that I call “pilgrimage of spirits”, when according to the folk understanding or imagination, spirits come from the other world to their families to celebrate feasts.

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