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REFLECTION OF THE TRADITION OF HUNTING IN SVAN MUSICAL FOLKLORE

The institute of hunting has very long traditions in Georgia. According to historical data it seems to have been most highly developed in the mountainous regions of Georgia. Due to the rocky terrain and severe climatic conditions of the Central Caucasian mountain ranges one of the main ways local populations supported themselves must have been the meat of wild animals and wide plants. Unlike them the dwellers of the lowlands, with a comparatively mild climate and fertile soil, facilitated the development of agriculture.

This paper deals with one of the high mountainous regions of Georgia – Svaneti. Hunting here was a very productive branch of economy until the recent times. This should explain the viability and persistence of hunting traditions in this part of Georgia. Svan folklore abounds in examples of hunting epic in the form of poems, legends, songs, fairytales, sayings, puzzles, prayers and so on.

The present work is targeted at studying the branch of the hunting epic, which emerged in Svan musical folklore. Here I mean the songs, which are mainly represented as hunting songs and round dances and which, in my opinion, have not been duly studied in Georgian musicology. Here it is my aim to survey Svan hunting traditions and on the basis of the general features of the songs and round dances connected with hunting to prove how ancient Svan hunting folklore is. As the presented paper is the initial stage of future comprehensive research on this subject I will limit myself to referring to a few important problems and raise some questions.

From early times throughout the whole territory of Georgia and in Svaneti in particular hunting has always been considered “a sacred” activity, “so have the hunting sites and some animals” (Virsaladze, 1864:26). For a few days preceding hunting Svan hunter had to keep himself “pure”: he was not allowed to use obscene words, to sleep with a woman or take meat and lard with him. He was to take a loaf of ritual bread baked by his mother or wife. On the upper crust of the bread the rays of the sun were represented. A Svan hunter when approaching the first rock lit a candle and said the following prayer, “Oh, God, allow me to return home safe and sound. Confer Thy blessing on my right hand, *Dali*”. To Svans *Dali* was one of the main representatives of the Georgian pre-Christian pantheon. She was represented as a very beautiful woman, the goddess of wild animals. Before hunting the hunter would asked her for luck, and after hunting he would sacrifice to her the heart and liver of the killed animal as a token of his gratitude. Some thought that *Dali* could turn into different animals which were distinguished by a special mark (color of their skin, size of the horns etc.). If, by chance, the hunter killed such an animal, he was doomed to death. Also, according to Svan oral traditions, *Dali* was a great temptress who made a handsome hunter share her love and subsequently ordered him to satisfy her demands, which meant keeping their relations secret and to be devoted to her till the end of his life. In return the hunter enjoyed the best of luck in hunting, but if he did not keep the promise, he was doomed. It is on the basis of such legends that the Svan round dance songs *Bail Betkil*, *Betkan Kutsa* and *Betkani* were created. They narrate the love story of *Betkil*, a famous Svan hunter and the mistress of the wild animals *Dali*. *Betkil* died a tragic death because he had betrayed *Dali*.

As one old Svan hunter says, “A lucky hunter may kill more than a thousand animals in his lifetime if he keeps himself pure and never offends the owner of the wild

animals" (Nizharadze, 1886:238). Such a hunter was highly respected and was considered a hero. The Svan round dance *Lemchil* (Growing Old) is dedicated to such a hunter. It tells of the courage and skill of the hunter *Giorgi*.

According to B. Nizharadze, besides *Dali* the Svan hunter also asked St George and *Apsat* for successful hunting. M. Chikovani writes that in Svaneti the wild animals were divided into four groups: "1. wild animals of bare rocks (deer, roe, chamois and aurochs), which were protected by the Goddess *Dali*; 2. wild forest animals (bear, fox, marten, badger), protected by the forest angel" (*tskhekish agelvez*); 3. The wolf, protected by St George; 4. Birds and fishes, protected by *Apsat*" (Chikovani, 1947:62). It is clear that the hunter must have begun appealing to St George after the Conversion of Georgia into a Christian country. Georgians elevated this saint almost to the level of God and according to some legends they even made St George oppose *Dali*.¹ For instance in the Svan round dance song *Monadire Chorla* (The Hunter *Chorla*), which, according to scholars, "is a later variant of *Betkil* and *Dali's* story" (Virsaladze, 1964:118), the hunter *Chorla*, unable to suppress his greed, kills three beautiful chamois instead of one. In the Svans' minds he should have known where to stop in order not to infuriate the deity. That is why *Dali* punishes *Chorla*, though St. George, suddenly emerging in the plot, saves *Chorla* for his devotion to Christ, but against *Dali* he "calls forth thunder and lightning mixing them with landslides and torrents" (Virsaladze, 1964:119). Thus, the role of the Pagan deity is somewhat weakened in the Christian epoch, though she never loses her influence completely. This is shown by the fact that Svan hunters still believe in the existence of *Dali*.

The Georgian hunting epic gives an important place to a mythological dog named *Qursha*, which appears in various aspects in the hunting epic of many provinces of Georgia (Racha, Imereti, Kartli, Mtiuleti) and in the Svan hunting epic among them. As the local tradition has it, *Qursha* is a pup of an eagle brought up by a hunter. In the Svan song *Qurshao* the hunter mourns over his devoted friend whom he had lost. The Svan *Qurshao* is a round dance song bearing the features of antiquity (Virsaladze, 1964:36). A significant place in the Svan hunting epic is occupied by an ancient legend about *Amirani*, a hero fighting against evil forces for the welfare of the people. As it is well known there are different variants of this legend in almost all the provinces of Georgia. However some scholars expressed the view that the Svan version should be considered one of the most important because "the ancient character of the story is better preserved in Svaneti" (Javakhishvili, 1960:150). As popular tradition has it, *Amirani* is the son of the pagan Goddess of Hunting (*Dali*) and a common hunter. *Amirani's* mother died in childbirth, *Amirani* continued his mother's deeds (Chikovani, 1947:95). In A. Tataradze's opinion it is because of his devotion to his mother's deeds that the Svan song *Amirani's Perkhuli* is also called *Sanadiro* (a hunting song) unlike other hunting songs none of which is called *sanadiro* (hunting) (Tataradze, 1976:16). Apart from the above-mentioned song another Svan round dance song *Dala Kojas Khelghvazhale* also tells of *Amirani* and *Dali*; it has many musical and poetic versions in the folklore of this province of Georgia. I think that after A. Tataradze's comparing *Sanadiro* and *Dala Kojas Khelghvazhale* with each other we should underline the almost exact coincidence of the round dance movements, which corroborates the opinion about the hereditary links between *Dali* and *Amirani* still further. The ancient character of the round dances connected with hunting and *Amirani* is also confirmed by the study of the specimens of Georgian folk metal work created in ancient times. Here I mean the chased silver goblet from Trialeti (2nd millennium BC), the bronze girdle also from Trialeti (2nd millennium BC), and a set of bronze phallic male figures called "the Qazbegi Hoard" (7th-6th centuries BC). The first shows a ritual procession of

persons wearing animal masks around another masked figure. It is considered to be the very first representation of the round dance; on the other “the original source of Georgian choreography ‘Hunters’ Dance’ is depicted” (Iashvili, 1975:45). It is performed in the moonlight; the figures of the Qazbegi hoard represent a great variety of dancing movements and techniques. It may be said that on the one hand these pictures are an artistic representation of the hunting traditions existing in Georgia since times immemorial, on the other hand they confirm the ancient character of the emergence of hunting round dances. In M. Chikovani’s opinion the procession with the attributes of a totem animal and the person within the circle depicted on the Trialeti goblet is a ritual of a round dance created in honour of *Dali*, the Goddess of hunting. He also thinks that the set of bronze phallic figures is a material representation of the *Amiraniani* epos; as for the dance of the hunters performed in the moonlight which is depicted on the bronze girdle, M. Iashvili thinks that it is the Svan dance *Shushpari*. As it is known two dances by the name of *shushpari* were performed in Svaneti – the hunters’ dance depicting the process of working and a ritual round dance in honour of a pagan deity (Gvaramadze, 1957:7). In L. Gvaramadze’s opinion this deity is the moon which is referred to by its name: *sius* or *shush* meaning the moon, *par* meaning a round dance” (Gvaramadze, 1957:6). Thus proceeding from what has been mentioned above it may be said that Svaneti has preserved very ancient hunting and round dance traditions.

As for the characteristic features of the performance of the hunting songs and round dances it would be most logical to discuss their ancient character from this point of view. The great majority of them are circular and are performed by the dancers moving in a circle with their arms embracing one-another’s shoulders. Dancers have actually retained the outline depicted on the monuments of ancient material culture. Besides, the Svans call the system of the more ancient leg-movements *murgval chishkhs* (round leg). The circular character of the earliest hunting round dances may have originated from the specific feature of hunting (to catch the animal within a circle, to surround it); though it would not be illogical to speak about the traces of worshipping the celestial bodies. A round dance with a song is a collective activity by its character; hence it is performed in chorus.² Every Svan round dance starts with the beginner’s phrase followed by a double performance built on the principle of a dialogue, when every phrase of the first chorus is repeated by the other chorus. The repetition and dialogue characteristic of the ancient folk verse is perfectly adjusted to the performance of the two choruses on the one hand. On the other hand it somewhat hinders the development of musical thinking, though when the musical phrases are repeated the dynamics are enhanced at the expense of increasing the tempo, which very often is accompanied by hand clapping which adds fire to the dance. When speaking about round dances it is impossible to ignore the role of rhythm whose function it is to organize the music, poetic text and choreography, the components united in this syncretistic genre. Apart from that, in my opinion, we can speak about a sort of rhythmic “formulae” which most frequently occur in the Svan hunting round dances and presumably have always characterized them (e.g. e e q \ q q o r e e q \ e e q). The same is true for the *saperkhulo pekhi* (leg movements). Here, too, there are identical movements, which are very ancient and even may once have had a definite semantic meaning. I should also underline a few points which refer to the ancient character of Svan musical folklore in general, and of the hunting songs and round dances in particular. 1) frequency of meaningless syllables; 2) abundance of consonants and the practice of their vocalizing; 3) tautness; the tense manner of singing; and finally 4) a type of polyphony based on the synchronic movement of choral units.

At the end I would like to tackle the problem, which has determined my special interest in the Svan hunting round dances. In my opinion, here we deal with the coincidence of the three most important points. They are: 1) century-old traditions of the institution of hunting in Svaneti; 2) cultivating the form of round dance performance in Georgia as early as the 2nd millennium BC and 3) strict three-part singing characterizing the Svan hunting round dances. Together with all the factors mentioned above, taking into account these three points there is no doubt that the Svan round dances accompanied by three-part singing are of ancient origin.

Of course, it is impossible to thoroughly discuss many important issues addressed in this paper. The presented paper is the initial stage of a future comprehensive study on the subject.

Notes

¹ As for the "forest angel" and *Apsat*, they are not mentioned in the hunting songs known to me.

² There are also such hunting songs which are performed both in chorus and solo accompanied by the *chuniri*, a folk instrument; e.g. *Dala Kojas Khelghvazhale* and *Bail Betkil*, though the latter may have emerged later, on the basis of the chorus variants.

Translated by LIANA GABECHAVA

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