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***The religious festival - common peasant celebrations of the Greeks from Trans Caucasus and Caucasus: past and present.***

***Characteristics of the ethnography of the Greek population from Caucasus and Trans Caucasus.***

The ethnographic science in Russia, as well as in other nations of the former Soviet Union, define the Greek population of Caucasus and Trans Caucasus as an ethnic community which is bound together by a common origin, a common ethnic history, a common language, common defining characteristics of culture and attitude, as well as a self-imposed ethnic name. However, in varying historical periods, the above-mentioned factors didn't hold equal value for the different local groups: in some instances emphasis was placed on one factor, whereas in another on a different one, allowing us to classify the Greeks of these areas in different ethnic groups.

Particular characteristics distinguish the descendants of the Greeks who emigrated in successive waves from inner parts of the Ottoman Empire during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and settled down in different areas of Central Georgia in the Trialeti area, later renamed Tsalka. The language spoken by this group of Greeks is an oriental Turkish dialect. Their self-imposed name, "Urum", refers to a term defining the religious identity of the Orthodox in the Ottoman Empire. Thus we have the expression "urum - millet", which translates into "the people who are agents of the Romaic, Orthodox, Greek faith", which in itself is the defining ethnic characteristic of this group of Greeks.

Other than this, however, there are other defining characteristics of the material culture, the everyday life and the economic activity that allow us to recognize the Greeks from Tsalka as a local ethnic group that taxonomically belongs to a broader ethnic area, that of the "Greeks from Pontos"<sup>1</sup>. (Иванова, 13)

The Greeks that came to this area from Asia Minor and speak a different language, which is a Greek dialect of Pontos, are placed in a separate local group. They call themselves "romeoi" - in the plural - ("romeos" for the males and "romejsa" for the females). They call the language they speak "romeika" or "romeikon". Their self-imposed name and the naming of their language, which they still consider their mother tongue, bear witness to the fact that their ancestors obviously belonged to the people of the Byzantine Empire.

The inter-ethnic names with their religious attachments stand as synonymous to the names of the aforementioned ethnic groups and display the religious identity of this ethnic group, which is the Orthodox "romeic faith". Apart from the language, there are other defining characteristics that distinguish this group from the previous one, namely those of material culture, daily life and professional occupations.

The Greeks of this group settled down in different areas of coastal Georgia, east-

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<sup>1</sup> For further details refer to: Веис Г. «Внешний быт народов с древнейших времён до наших дней» М., 1873. Т. 1, ч. 1; Пашаева Л.Б. «Порядок раздела в семье урумов в прошлом» // Кавказский Этнографический Сборник. Тбилиси, 1972; Аклаев А.Р. «Этноязыковая ситуация и особенности этнического самосознания грузинских греков (по материалам исследования в Цалкинском районе)» // Советская этнография, 1988, № 5.

ern Georgia and northern Caucasus (Волкова, 14). Of course, the aforementioned inter-ethnic groups of Greeks that display defining cultural characteristics and varying social status, “during their diverse migrations, which were often contradictory” – and contributed to the formation of their characteristic personalities in their adopted lands, wouldn’t be able to manage “without substantial cultural osmosis and mainly without the broad exchange of information” (Иванова, 11). And of course, the less this aspect is evident in their material culture, the more it is displayed in their observance of family and calendar festivities – rituals. Among these, a prominent position is held by the religious holiday festivities, which the present article is devoted to<sup>2</sup>.

***The religious beliefs of the Greeks and their reflection upon the holiday calendar. The position of the religious holidays in this cycle.***

The holiday calendar for the Greeks of the Caucasus and Trans-Caucasus, as well as for all the Christian peoples, coincides with the religious calendar. The civil calendar is in essence an agricultural calendar of the countryside. It is based on human toil, and for this reason it can be regarded as a code of practical instructions as regards agricultural activity, derivative of long-term experience (Чичеров, 16, 24). The agricultural aspect of the calendar ceremonials is evident within the process of the various activities connected with agricultural work: for the marioupolite Greeks, for instance, the procession of a plough through the village streets (particular remnant of the “first ploughing” ceremony) and the sprinkling of the house with seeds on the morning of New Years Day that stands as a guarantee of a bumper crop (Иванова, 374), or the mixing of “sanctified seeds” with those prepared for the spring sowing by the priest, for the Greeks of Kars, or the inspection of the crops during religious holidays (Янович, 93). The Greeks of Caucasus and Trans-Caucasus were particularly pious. Their religion, “Orthodoxy”, was surrounded by a ceremonial “consisting of all kinds of customs and rituals, without which no family or social incident of minor or major importance could ever begin or take place” (Греки Кавказа, 431).

According to early 20<sup>th</sup> century records concerning the manifestation of religious sense, these people strictly observed “its ritual aspect, they complied with the periods of fasting and honoured the holidays... (Янович, 84-85)”. From this aspect, S. B. Mavrogenis characteristically commented: “The religious sense of the Greeks of the Kyverno was highly developed in the majority of the villages, whereas for the women it bordered on fanaticism”<sup>3</sup> (Μαυρογένης, 69). Together with the religious sense, researchers discover a tendency towards superstition that was present among the Greeks of Caucasus and Trans-Caucasus. They believed in the water spectre that usually resided near water mills, in the house spectre that existed in every home, as well as in “Satan”, who appeared in certain homes disguised as a woman. The Greeks of this area believed in witches and in “the drowned”, spectres with a human form and varying appearances. In

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<sup>2</sup> The present document was compiled with the help of a great amount of material gathered from various regions of Caucasus and Trans-Caucasus, where comprehensive Greek populations lived during the local research, material for which no separate reference is given.

<sup>3</sup> We find imperative to provide evidence relating to the issue concerned herein. This evidence concerns the Greeks of Kars, because until 1922 over 30000 Greeks lived in this area, part of whom abandoned Kars and migrated to various regions of Caucasus and Trans-Caucasus, retaining however the cultural characteristics of their daily lives (For further details refer to: *Charatsidis E. Les Grecs en Armenie et dans la province de Kars au debut du xx siecle// Les Grecs pontiques. Diaspora, identite, territoires. Sous la direction de Michel Bruneau. Paris 1998.*)

fact, they believed in various superstitions, the majority of which involved bad luck or at least unpleasant surprises (Янович, 93-94. Сивер, 149. Григорян, 131-132).

The touranophone Greeks held animistic beliefs for nature and believed in reincarnation, which rendered “stone worship” possible in their environment, leading to such extremities as deifying simple stones that carried no kind of image or note. All this paved the way for the development and proliferation of various other forms of worship: of trees, of water, of live fish (Греки Кавказа, 431). Naturally, nowadays the original magical-cum-religious sense and symbolism of these rituals has been forgotten, and they have gradually been incorporated into an intricate complex of religious holidays, which was sometimes expressed even in the architectural planning of the churches themselves. A clear example is provided by the building of the church devoted to St. Panteleimon in the village of Olianik (Tsalka, Georgia), which has a special tank for the “sanctified fish” (Греки Кавказа, 431. Αγγελίδης, 124). As for the symbolism of the church itself, it is strongly observed by the Greeks of Trans-Caucasus and especially by the touranophone Greeks. For them, the church and the religious symbols in general, were the fundamental substitutes for their loss of linguistic identity, a loss displayed in folk traditions as a mandatory retreat from Turkish authorities.

Nowadays, in the villages of Caucasus and Trans-Caucasus no longer inhabited by Greeks, one can see beautiful chapels of the Byzantine style, around which huge crowds of worshippers would gather on main Orthodox holidays. The church functioned as a symbol of social unity, a symbol of the collective traditions that shaped the environment of the Greeks for centuries. For this reason their sense of unity was strengthened, which in turn helped them to survive in conditions of multiple successive migrations. It is not by chance that when founding new settlements on their new lands of diaspora, the Greek immigrants attached particular importance to organizing the centre of their social life, and especially to the building of the church (and the school, erected most of the times nearby) and only then would the building of houses commence (Χαραυιδις, 28).

The comparative analysis of the calendar holidays honoured by the Greeks of every origin allows us to distinguish two main holiday cycles: the Christmas – New Year cycle, and the Easter cycle, the latter outweighing the former<sup>4</sup>. In the area of Kars “Lambri” (Easter) was for the Greeks truly “the holiday of holidays” and “the religious festival of religious festivals”. During the Easter holidays, for three days people were dressed in their most formal attire and paid visits to friends and family, praising the Lord and exchanging wishes for the Resurrection of Christ (Μαυρογένης, 70). In different areas, of course, during the period between Christmas and Easter a prominent position among calendar holidays was held by local holidays of the saints to whom their churches were devoted. These holidays concerned the days celebrated by the church of the respective settlement or even, in certain cases, by the chapels built in honour of a saint or historical event. In this way the main church or chapel functioned as a center of both religious and social gathering.

The “folk festivals” were of vital importance for the life of the Pontion people.

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<sup>4</sup> For further details refer to the book: «Понтийские греки» (Краснодар, 1997) τα άρθρα: *Дмитриев К.Г., Христофоориди Ф.В.* Греки села Мерчанское// Понтийские греки. Краснодар. 1997, 54. Попов А.П., Тортопиди Б.А. Греки Северского района Краснодарского края//Понтийские греки. Краснодар. 1997, 167. Колесов В.И. Материалы по истории и этнографии греков урумов.//Зонтийские греки. Краснодар.1997, 103-104. Пашаева Л.Б. Некоторые календарные праздники урумов.//Известия Академии Наук Грузинской ССР, Серия истории, археологии, этнографии и истории искусств. Тбилиси, 1977. №1. 100-112.

“They aroused great joy, commercial activity, exchange and an opportunity for bride selection” (*Μαυρογένης*, 69). People came to the festivals even from distant areas, just because they originated from the village hosting the celebrations (*Янович*, 94-95), proof of how much they respected these celebrations. Religious holidays were celebrated by all the Orthodox peoples, as well as the Russians, the Ukrainians, the Georgians, and all the other Christian peoples living in the vast expanses of Russia. For approximately three centuries, since the Greeks of Caucasus and Trans-Caucasus emigrated to Russia and other areas of the Russian Empire (later U.S.S.R.) they had been coexisting with other peoples. For this reason they also celebrated the holidays of the Russians, the Ukrainians, the Georgians, and the Armenians, something which was true mainly in the large cities, whose population was made up of many ethnic groups of varying religious beliefs<sup>5</sup>. Of course, the Greek folk festivals held a prominent position among these holidays and attracted participants from both Christian and non-Christian peoples. That might be the reason why for the Greeks “this pan-Christian ritual took on unique forms and displayed their characteristic ethnologic traditions. During the years when all the rural churches were closed, the traditions of the religious festivals were not interrupted. This celebration was in some way a characteristic element of identity for each village.” (*Иванова*, 376).

### ***The religious holiday – festival: History and present.***

How important and deeply rooted the religious festival was for the culture of the Greeks of Russia (and nowadays not only of Russia), can be understood from A.L. Bertie Delagarde’s references, according to which a hundred years after the departure of the Greeks from Crimea, “the tartaric population still remembered their religious festivities”. In his opinion, the religious festivals had always been for the Greeks “a kind of extended celebration of the holidays in honour of some church that were the most fundamental and memorable times of the year” (*Бертье – Делазард*, 40). In many Crimean villages the Tartars themselves considered the church ruins sanctified holy places, and used them as venues for their “derviza”<sup>6</sup>, which substituted the grand celebration – religious festival of the Crimean Greeks after their departure from the peninsula. To this day we still cannot tell with certainty if the “derviza” was held separately and independently of the religious festival of the Crimean Greeks before their emigration to North

<sup>5</sup> In Tbilisi, for example, in August the Orthodox and Gregorians (Armenians) honoured one of the most important religious holidays of the church calendar, the Demise of Mother Mary. As this holiday was on a different day in the various religious-dogmatic traditions, the merry-making and festive mood throughout the city persisted for many days. This was a holiday that attracted all the inhabitants of the city, irrespective of religion or nationality. (Refer to further details in the book : *Анчабадзе Ю.Д. Волкова Н.Г. Старый Тбилиси*. М. 1990. 236-238). In Achala of Armenia the Demise of Mother Mary is celebrated by the Greeks, the Armenians, as well as by other ethnic groups. (*Иоселиани П. Путевые записки. От Тифлиса до Ахталы*. Тифлис. 1850. с.26-27. Relevant material has been gathered by the writer of the present document in Achala.). It is worth noting that the religious holiday of St. George of Vitiazevo was also celebrated by the Turks of the town Kabardinka. (*Сивер А.В. Греки Геленджикского района Краснодарского края. Понтийские греки*. 1997. 141).

<sup>6</sup> In the Crimean-Tataric – Russian Dictionary by *С.М.Усеинов* the word “derviza” is explained as follows: “harvest holiday”, “folk merry-making”. Until the period of the displacement of the Tatars from Crimea after the World War II this was one of the biggest holidays of the Crimean-Tatars. Each village celebrated its own small “derviza” and all inhabitants of the region celebrated the grand one (*Усеинов С.М. Крымскотатарско-русский словарь*. Тернополь. 1994).

Azofica. Researchers speculate that the viability of the religious festival was in a way its continuation and that it took its name (derviza) from the Crimean-Tatars under the influence of Islam, whose spiritual headquarters had a strong influence over the Crimean chanato (βλ. λεπτομ. Куртиев Р. Календарные обряды крымских татар.).

To the premature written records concerning celebratory festivities during the religious festivals of the Russian Empire Greeks we can include the letters of the Turkish Sultan Mehmet IV to the Crimean Bishop David, where in 1652 the officials of certain Crimean cities were delegated to help the Bishop gather money from the Christians for the holding of their religious rituals. Among the holidays mentioned were the “panairia” i.e. holidays in honour of the churches (Соколов, 309 - 310). References to the holiday in honour of the church in Achala devoted to the demise of Mother Mary are found in many travelers’ journals of the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Иоселиани, 26-28. Муравьёв, 300-302.).

The holiday of the church or of the city patron saint was almost universally called “panair”. In Caucasus and Trans-Caucasus there are many versions of the name for this holiday: “panair” and “aior”, “deri” and “ziarat” (Греки Кавказа, 431). In Ukraine, among the marioupolite Greeks, as well as in local dialects spoken in Crimean villages, this holiday was called “panaer”, “pangoris”, or “panyiour”, in other regions “agiou” or “agious” (from the Greek word for “saint”), or even “mega yiourti” (i.e. grand holiday). Therefore the same word “panair” for the local holiday of their church is used by both Greeks of Azofica, as well by those of Caucasus (Иванова, 376). Moreover, in the Kars region, wherever there are Greeks, either Greek-speaking or touranophones, this holiday is called “panair” (Μαυρογένης, 63-65).

The word “panair”, which appears in Modern Greek as “panygiri”, derives from the medieval “panygiron” that has the same meaning today and in turn refers to the Hellenistic “panygiron” that meant “open air market, and is a diminutive noun form that in ancient Greek appeared as “panygiris”, meaning “general assembly” (Modern Greek dictionary). The term “panygiri/panair” denotes the “holiday, a group of celebratory events, the religious holiday, the folk festival, the merry-making accompanying the cooking of food, the music, the peddlers’ stalls and noisy entertainment”.

The folk language sense, of course, connects – in many occasions of Greek populations of the area concerned – this name with the suffix name of Mother Mary – “Panagia”. Other alternative versions of the name of this festival derive from this paronymological connection: instead of “panair”, we encounter “Meiramana” or “Ti panagias” for the religious holiday of Mother Mary, in many Turkish-speaking villages of Georgia, as well as in Greek-speaking villages of Armenia (Пашаева, 110; Мкртумян, 125). Quite often and mainly in the settlements of Caucasus and Trans-Caucasus the “panair” carried the name of the saint in honour of whom a church had been built: “Ai – Yior”, “Ai Pavli”, “Ai Iliа” e.t.c (Сивер, 141; Иванова, 376 ). In many areas the name of especially important religious holidays, celebrated simultaneously and uniformly by inhabitants of many villages, was followed up by the name of the host village. In that way particularly popular religious holidays for the Greeks of Kars were the religious festivals “Panagias of Lal-Oglou”, “St. George of Chanach”, “Analipseos of Magaratzik-Azat” (Μαυρογένης, 69).

Apart from the word “panair” the Greeks of certain areas of Caucasus and Trans-Caucasus use the words of touranic origin, “yiourban” or “kourban”, meaning

“animal sacrifice”<sup>7</sup> (Сивер, 141; Иванова, 376). The comparative analysis of the available material allows us to clarify that the word “kourban” is used by Greeks everywhere. However, its use is secondary, as concerns the total procedure of the holiday festivities and denotes a component of the festival. The word “kourban” specifically refers to the practice of the sacrifice - the slaughter of an animal in the celebratory context of certain only religious holidays. This ritual was held mainly during the religious holidays of St. George, Prophet Helias and the Demise of Mother Mary (Сивер, 141; Эриксон, 213-214; Колесов, 105).

***The particularities of the religious festival and its role in the social life of the Greeks from Caucasus and Trans-Caucasus.***

The biggest religious festivals were organized by the Greeks of Caucasus and Trans-Caucasus during the days assigned for the celebration of the most important and most honoured saints of Orthodoxy: Saint Charalambos, Saint George, Apostles Peter and Paul, Prophet Helias, the Birth and Demise of Mother Mary. The faith in the power of the saint was evident not only during the holidays but also in the context of everyday life. The belief that the saint is a patron of the village and of every inhabitant individually never abandoned the devout Christians during their daily existence. This belief was strengthened by daily visits to the church and appeals to God for blessing throughout the day. It is not by chance that in the Greek environment different kinds of “panair” can be found. Apart from the familiar public celebratory rituals, we see the organization of a more personal “panair” catering for a narrower circle of relatives, friends and neighbours (Иванова, 378). The celebrations of the village with their public character extended further than the local bounds and their range covered the whole respective area. These celebrations attracted pilgrims who were named after the celebrated saint and people who represented an extended family that had promised to offer a slaughtered animal to their patron saint.

One of the most popular religious holidays was that of St. Charalambos celebrated on the 10<sup>th</sup> (23<sup>rd</sup>) of February. Greeks from all over Tsalka and the surrounding areas of Georgia attended these celebrations. The Greeks of Tsalka regarded St. Charalambos as a patron and healer of animals and birds. The basic “responsibilities” of the saint were safeguarding cattle and mainly the bulls. According to the Greeks, that was the day when nature awoke and therefore the people had to prepare for spring farming activities. Firstly, the bulls would be taken out to the farms, as ploughing was dependent on rested and healthy bulls. However, on that particular day it was forbidden to send animals to the farms for work. This religious holiday lasted two days in the village of Karakom. The Greeks of Tsalka called the second day, 11<sup>th</sup> (24<sup>th</sup>) February, “the day of

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<sup>7</sup> We see something similar in Bulgaria. The “family-ethnic” holiday “svetets”, which literally means “saint”, is equivalent to the Greek holiday of the patron saint. It is the day of celebration of the saint who guards a whole group of families, in whose honour an animal is sacrificed (“courban”). The ritual of the slaughtering and sacrificing of the animal, known as “courban”, accompanied the celebrations of the whole settlement, known as «сборы», «соборы» i.e. “gathering, assembly, communion” Both kinds of holidays were arranged for the autumn months. The village celebrations («Сборы») were held in the second half of September, when the grapes were harvested. (Календарные обычаи и обряды в странах зарубежной Европы (XIX – начала XX в.): Летне-осенние праздники. - М., 1978. 238 -239. Колев Н. Болгарская этнография (этнология). В.Трново. 2002. 232-233 ).

the beast” (agric<sup>8</sup>). They believed that on that particular night of 11<sup>th</sup> February nature awoke. Therefore they tried to remain sleepless on that night – especially the pregnant women, because according to folk tales they ran the risk of giving birth to a baby beast (Пауаева, 102).

Saint George was particularly honoured and worshipped by the Greeks of Caucasus and Trans-Caucasus. Many churches were built in his honour in various villages of Caucasus and Trans-Caucasus. In Tsalka, for example, there were churches dedicated to St. George in the villages of Tasbas, Avranlo, Tzinis, in the city of Aexandropol of Armenia, in the village of Vitiazevo of North Caucasus etc. Virtually everywhere in Caucasus and Trans-Caucasus religious holidays were organised in honour of St. George, which the Greeks regarded as being among the most important. One of the reasons for this was that the day of this holiday was regarded as the boundary between the summer and the winter periods. Many rituals and magic procedures were devoted to the assurance of a bountiful crop and of the fertility of the livestock. As it was the day that introduced the spring-summer period it was part of “a comprehensive and sometimes broader spring cycle of magical procedures of the countryside” (Соколов, 98.). On this day, prayers were directed to St. George by individual families, as well as by whole villages, for the healing of the sick, help towards the childless families and a bountiful crop. For St. George was regarded by the Greeks as a healer. In north Caucasus (in the village of Mertsanscoe of Krasnontarski Krai) they believed that St. George provides help to the sick who on the day of his holiday brought belongings as offerings to the church that were later sold for the benefit of the church (Гололобов, Колесов 149). Moreover, the Greeks of the northern region of Krasnontarski Krai narrated various traditions, according to which the Saint had helped some crippled woman who had dreamt that she would be healed if she visited the Church of St. George in the village of Vitiazevo. Eventually she was healed after her visit to that church (Попов, Тортопиду, 169).

Between the holiday of St. George and that of the Demise of Mother Mary – greatly honoured by the Greeks - in some villages they celebrated the holidays of the Apostles Peter and Paul and that of Prophet Helias<sup>9</sup> with equivalent activities. E. B. Erickson includes in his descriptions of the everyday life of the Greeks of Tsalka that for them the importance of the aforementioned holidays was almost of equal magnitude to the importance of the holidays of Christmas and Easter (Эриксон, 1898, 213-214). S. F. Yianovits has a similar evaluation in his description of the village Vezin-Kei, where he documents that apart from the main church “there was a chapel devoted to Prophet Helias who is highly regarded by the local population” (Янович, 94-95). For the Greeks of Caucasus and Trans-Caucasus the holiday of Prophet Helias was celebrated on 2<sup>nd</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The word “agric” originates from the Turkish word “igrika”, meaning crooked or curved. “Agrika” as a holiday of the Greeks of Tsalka reminds us of the Turkish day “Hidrellez, which the Turks celebrated on 23<sup>rd</sup> April (in the old calendar). Anyone working on that day was severely punished by Hidrellez. If a pregnant woman disregarded the tradition she was likely to give birth to a crippled baby. If on the other hand the baby was born intact it was believed that some kind of birth defect would occur in the livestock (Пауаева, 102. Гордлевский В.А. Материалы для Османского календаря. М. 1968, т. 4).

<sup>9</sup> Equally popular religious festivals were those held in honour of Apostles Peter and Paul that were celebrated widely by the inhabitants of the village Ivanovka, and Prophet Helias in the village of Iranga, in the Tetrtskaro region of Georgia. The Greeks of this region who immigrated to Greece in the 90s, even built a church devoted to Prophet Helias in the village of New Sanda, and still maintain the tradition of celebrating the above-mentioned religious festival.

August (i.e. 20 July). Various superstitions and tales were linked to this holiday. For example, in Tsalka every Monday before the holiday was regarded as a day of hail. During those days working was forbidden, especially for the women. According to the Greeks, Prophet Helias was responsible for the rain and was obliged to irrigate the land. For this reason on the day of his holiday young ladies executed rain rituals, circulating among the village a doll made out of a broom that the villages sprayed with water (Читая, 230., Пашаева, 110).

For the Greeks of Caucasus and Trans-Caucasus the holiday of the Demise of Mother Mary, 15<sup>th</sup> (28<sup>th</sup>) August, was of great importance and respect. So great was the importance of this holiday for the Greeks that in certain regions the month of August was named in her honour “Meriamana” (Κολεσοβ, 125). In the eastern regions of Georgia and the north-eastern regions of Armenia the oldest and most popular religious festival was that of the Monastery Ahtala<sup>10</sup>, commonly known as “Mother Mary of Ahtala”. The monastery celebrated twice: at Christmas and on the day of the Demise of Mother Mary. During these holidays the monastery received Greek pilgrims from the surrounding regions of Georgia, but also pilgrims of other religions who regarded the monastery with equivalent respect, therefore, “twice a year, at Christmas and on the day of the Demise of Mother Mary, a priest arrived to conduct the mass in front of huge crowd of pilgrims of all religions” (Иоселиани, 26, 32). Until 1920, in the region of Kars the most important religious festival was that of the Demise of Mother Mary in the village of Lal-Oglu (Μαυρογένης, 69). Of equal popularity for the Greeks of Georgia was the religious holiday of the Demise of Mother Mary in the village of Varntzia<sup>11</sup> in eastern Georgia (Пашаева, 110). On that day the particularly sacred Sion Cathedral of Tbilisi celebrated and Greeks participated together with all the Orthodox in the festivities (Αντσιβαδζε, Волкова, 237). In northern Caucasus on the holiday of the Demise of Mother Mary the Greeks “organized a pilgrimage at the spring called ‘Agia Chir’, where the religious festival took place”. In the folk holiday calendar of the Greeks the important stages of the farming cycle were linked to the days of the celebration of the Demise and Birth of Mother Mary. The period between these two holidays was associated with the farming activities of gathering and storing the crops. In fact, this period coincided with the holding of rituals concerning the harvest. The concept of fertility, not only in farming but also in the lives of the people, is associated with the worship of Mother Mary. Apart from the fact that Mother Mary was regarded as a patron of the pregnant women and assistant in child birth, she was also a patron of their children<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Since the early years, Ahtala was renowned for its mineral deposits. Ahtala was also known as a castle-monastery, whose ruins can still be found a short distance away from the modern city. Since the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Greek miners lived there. (For further details refer to: (Βλ. αναλυτικότερα στο : Ελ. Κ. Χαρασιόδης. Έλληνες της Αρμενίας επαναπατρισθέντες στη Θράκη. Ο πολιτισμός διαβιώσεις όπως προβάλλεται στη διαμόρφωση των οικισμών και των κατοικιών τους στα τέλη του 19<sup>ου</sup> και τις αρχές του 20<sup>ου</sup> αι.// Θράκη. Ιστορική και λαογραφική προσέγγιση του λαϊκού πολιτισμού της. (επιμ.) Μ.Γ. Βαρβούνης. Αθήνα. 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Bartzia is a monastery in a cave (1156-1205) at the source of the Kouri River in Georgia. Several hundreds of cells have been dug out of the rock there, communicating by means of pathways. Frescos of Georgian King George 3<sup>rd</sup> and of Queen Tamara can be found in the main church ( Hakobyan T.K.H., Melik-Bakhshyan St.T., H.K.H. Barsegyan. Dictionary of toponymy of Armenia and adjacent territories. Volume 4. Yerevan. 1998.)

<sup>12</sup> Various legends of miracles that took place in the Ahtala Monastery still live on among the Greeks. For example, they relate the story of a young girl who was gathering forest fruit on the summit of a tall rock. She slipped and fell from a high altitude but was saved thanks to the intervention of Mother Mary herself (Иоселиани, 26-27). It is a legend that lives on to date.



Therefore it was to her that people directed their prayers during child birth or children's illnesses (*Паулаева*, 110).

In Caucasus, as well as in Trans-Caucasus, the Greeks regarded Mother Mary as a healer of every ailment. In the case of disease they didn't only direct prayers to Mother Mary, but also resorted to the magical powers of sacred material objects that were linked to her name through legends and traditions. These were, for example, stones on which some trace of Mother Mary had allegedly been carved and water springs where some icon of hers had allegedly appeared. In such places the Greeks held pilgrimages with offerings during the important holidays of the Birth and Demise of Mother Mary. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of August the Greeks of Caucasus traditionally gathered, and still do, in the environs of the village of Nebertzeevsk (Krim, Krasnodarski of the Russian Federation) near the springs whose waters the inhabitants regarded as healing. One of these springs, called "Agia Chir" - sacred hand - and also called "Tears of Mother Mary" by the locals, became the centre of certain ritual procedures.

According to the Greeks' beliefs "on the day of the Demise of Mother Mary and especially at midnight the water of this spring had healing powers". The water from that spring that was taken that night was believed to have lasting healing powers for every disease. The Greeks attributed the healing properties of that spring to its miraculous appearance<sup>13</sup> (*Понов*, 107). Moreover in Krasnodarski Krai, in the environs of the village Derbent the Greeks visited four sulfur springs on the day of the Demise of Mother Mary because they believed that the water from those springs helped eye and stomach conditions (*Понов*, *Тормониду*, 141).

The beliefs of the Greeks concerning the healing properties of the areas where the springs were located were associated with the traditions of suspending rags of Mother Mary from the "trees of illness". The Greeks believed that together with the rags that they placed on those trees they would also relieve themselves from illness. Quite often these little rags were tied on the trees by the relatives of the severely ill, as they themselves were unable to visit the locations for the holidays. As is evident from the aforementioned, the religious festival provides a clear example as to how old traditions, assuming a holy meaning, are assimilated into the Christian Canon in such a way as to coincide with the holidays of the Orthodox calendar. It is no coincidence that the climax of the celebration activities of these religious holidays was the "kourban", the ritual slaughter of the animal, a ritual that was equally prevalent in Ancient Greece. The ancient Greeks directed their prayers to the Gods and offered sacrifices of specially prepared slaughtered animals, whose meat was eventually eaten. In fact, in those days, as is the case nowadays, the animal had to be healthy and without any physical injury. The animal's head was also decorated with a red ribbon.

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<sup>13</sup> The Greeks living there associate the appearance of the spring "Agia Chir" with the deeds of the Saints. According to tradition, the spring was discovered in the location where a huge serpent wanted to devour the sleeping Mother Mary. St. George appears suddenly and saves Mother Mary. On the location of the miraculous savior of Mother Mary, there appeared a water spring. According to another version the spring appeared where Mother Mary hid Jesus Christ to save him from Herod. A third version relates that such springs appeared at locations where Mother Mary's tears dropped. They also narrate various legends and stories for the spring itself. They say, for example, that they saw an icon hovering above the spring and finally descending in the spring bed. Others say that someone built a church on the site because his daughter had been cured by the waters of the spring. (For details refer to: *Сивер А.В.* Греки Геленджикского района Краснодарского края.)

According to J.B. Ivanova, the origin of the tradition of marking the religious festival participants with the blood of the sacrificed animals or the drinking of the blood for healing purposes can be traced back to the pre-Christian ancient era (*Иванова, 379*). The bull was regarded as the best animal to be sacrificed. Even recently during the religious festival activities in honour of St. George they sacrificed bulls (*Пашиаева, 107-108*).

St. George was highly worshipped by other peoples as well, such as the Georgians, the Ossets, and mainly the Armenians who lived in close proximity to the Greeks. In the Armenian villages of Tsalka, for example, during the holiday of St. George, up to seven bulls would be slaughtered (*Бардавелидзе, 195,199; Чибиров, 46*). In the Greek speaking villages of Tetrtskaro<sup>14</sup> women from various settlements assembled and gathered money, with which they bought a lamb or a goat – and more rarely a bull – and offered it as a slaughtered animal to the church of Prophet Helias. During the holiday of St. Charalambos they offered a sheep (*Пашиаева, 102*).

### ***Diagram of the organizing and holding of the religious festival.***

The schedule of the celebrations in the various areas was practically the same. The church holidays were held always in spring, summer or autumn, when the main activities could be held outdoors. The celebration was held on a spring or autumn day between May and September. On that day the required procedures started early in the morning: they slaughtered the animals that would be roasted on the spits and they took out of the sheds common utensils such as large boiling pots where the meat would be cooked. In fact, in certain areas of Caucasus, they added broken wheat in the meat broth. Women played a secondary role in all these procedures. The main activities were performed by the men. The elders that had experience in the preparations for the festivities helped the younger ones with their advice so that all the chores would be performed properly. For the celebrating villagers it was very important that every year the rituals of the religious festival be performed precisely. In other words people believed that this would guarantee the well-being of the whole community.

Even today, for the Greeks of the aforementioned regions, one of the main characteristics of the religious festival is the common feasting table, which stands as a means of communication between man and God through the consumption of the sacrificed animal's meat and the unification of the whole community. The food prepared for the festival, as well as any food originating from a sacrifice cannot be taken home – it should be consumed, rationed among the people, or sent to the ill who could not attend personally. The Greeks of these regions regard as sinful the act of keeping food on the part of the festival organizers (*Иванова, 381*). At the common feasting table, all are equal, there are neither hosts nor guests, and hospitality is shared equally among all. From that moment on, all participants from other regions are assimilated into the community celebrating. In this part of the formalities we recognize one of the most ancient and established practices, that of hospitality (*Иванова, 231-238*). Competitions of strength and exhibition were an integral part of the festival. A pair of bulls, for example, were made to haul a heavy burden up a hill. However, the main competition events were wrestling and the long jump. As in the duration of other holidays, religious or not, merry-making activities were organized, swings and stalls were set up, and of course

<sup>14</sup> The villages concerned are Ivanovka, Iranga Bolsayia, Iranga Malayia and Vizirovka, which were located in the region of the city of Tetrtskaro in Georgia.

commercial activity of all kinds was held.

***In place of epilogue.***

The nature and formality of the religious festival didn't undergo any substantial change during the Soviet period. The October uprising added a new revolutionary aspect to these festivals. The first thing the Soviet government did was to attempt to revive the folk festivals through which the energy of the rebelling social classes would change from destructive to creative activities.

There is a rule in sociology, according to which the more stable the traditional societies the greater the value of the past, whereas its role in the modernized social systems is significant. From the early years of Soviet rule the "heroic aspect" of the holiday changes. Henceforth the wide masses of the rebelling workers and farmers play the primary role. There was a tendency for flashy artistic functions – gatherings, marches and mass protests for the display of manifests. The impact of the evolution of the Soviet holiday lies in a combination of traditional merry-making with a novel interpretation of its content: the public-nature folklore embodied elements from the folk carnival and the folk Russian entertainment of the vagrant pantomime with acute political and economic satire on the negative aspects of reality.

In the 1930s, the period of the so-called socialistic incentives, the pompous military, athletic and folk celebrations, the celebrations prompted by the completion of large industrial facilities of the industrialisation era had as a main aim the moral and political preparation of the Soviet peoples to confront the imminent fascist threat. In the Grand Soviet Encyclopedia we read: "The days of celebration in the USSR have by law been devoted to extraordinary events, traditional anniversaries, the honouring of workers in various fields (for example the eighth of March is International Women's Day, the first of May is Spring and Labour Day, the ninth of May is Victory Day etc.). Therefore we realize that the holiday becomes a multi-level social phenomenon, which reflects the life of each individual and society as a whole. For each person the holiday is linked to a unique celebratory condition, which arouses him to participate in the celebrations. This celebratory sense gave rise to joy, vitality and spiritual uplifting.

The Greeks of the Soviet Union, just as many other peoples of this vast country, regard these holidays as their own. On Victory Day, at least, everybody remembered some relative who never returned from the battlefield at the time of the war against German fascism. In many Democracies of the former USSR, the Greeks have been honouring lately, among other national holidays, 25<sup>th</sup> March as Independence Day from the Turkish rule, as well as 28<sup>th</sup> October as "the day of NO".

Nowadays all the countries of the former USSR are in pursuit of their own ethnic and national holiday, which is obviously imperative for the awareness of their past, but also as a factor of unification and stability. For the Greeks of Caucasus and Trans-Caucasus and generally the whole of the former Soviet Republic this holiday is the religious festival. Of the old traditional-celebratory customs the most viable prove to be the folk customs of how they celebrated during holidays, how they played, how they revel, how they spend their leisure time, how they receive their relatives, how they visit their best man, the newlyweds etc. Therefore this socio-biotic nucleus of the religious celebrations proved so enduring and viable that they haven't lost their socio-ethnic functions to this day.

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