

# THE SPACIOTEMPORAL PATTERNS OF GEORGIAN WINTER SOLSTICE FESTIVALS

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**Abstract:** The article focuses on the rituals and ritual symbols of winter solstice festivals in Georgia, which are discussed from a spatiotemporal perspective and which, in their turn, are based on cosmological symbolism. The article aims to show how everyday life changes through ritual into a winter mythico-ritual scenario and how the surrounding built environment of a society is being mythologized. How a place of dwelling as a microcosm is opposed to macrocosm; how symbolism conveys further the dialectic of the hierophanies by transforming things or humans into something other than what they appear in the profane experience. The article investigates who are the main characters of the ritual performance. For this purpose, the selection of ritual guests and their symbolic meanings in various rituals are discussed. Also, an attempt has been made to explain what they symbolize.

While exploring the rituals from the spatiotemporal perspective, it is possible to distinguish between three kinds of ritual guests: (i) *the first-foot*, who through ritual embodies the transcendental supernatural powers, which are represented by different saints (predominantly by St Basil, in other cases by St George, and others); (ii) *Evangelical "shepherds"*; and (iii) *the spirits of the dead*, who are divided into "visible" spirits of the dead, embodied by a group of disguised mummers, and invisible ancestral spirits of the family.

All these ritual guests were unavoidable visitors at winter solstice festivals and were responsible for ensuring the wellbeing and prosperity of the family. By means of the rituals and ritual guests the society communicated with the outer world and guaranteed welfare for the forthcoming New Year.

**Key words:** *berikaoba*, casting lots, *chichilaki*, cosmological symbolism, Evangelical shepherds, first-foot, gift-giving saint, liminality, *mekvle*, the spirits of the dead, St Basil, threshold

## INTRODUCTION

The Georgian ethnographic school, which was established at the very beginning of the 20th century, has successfully gathered exhaustive and accurate ethnographic data on folk festivals throughout Georgia. As a result, series of books of descriptive nature and some special studies (cited below) were published. In these publications, scholars have explored local variants and the "local semantics" of folk festivals in which some saw predominantly archaic

roots and others paid more attention to their Christian layer. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that the article is a compromise between these two attitudes and viewpoints.

Focusing on ritual, the aim is to reconstruct the general (and not local) mythico-ritual scenario of winter solstice festivals and participants of these festivals and analyze it from spatiotemporal perspective, to reveal and explain the knowledge acquired over generations in repeated societal practice in the framework of Georgian culture. The study aims to differentiate between ambiguous and often complex, tangled rituals and trace their origins, at the same time showing how Georgians have made their choice from the existing possibilities to give the culture its particular pattern. Another goal is to show Georgian culture as it sees itself. For this purpose, the reconstructed data is given the form of a narrative which is based on the ethnographic data gathered by the author in different regions of Georgia during 1976–1989 and 2001–2008 and in targeted studies.

Like in many modern societies, in Georgia the concept of New Year is associated with the January calendar. When exploring special calendar literature it becomes evident that among different peoples and sometimes within a single ethnic population, New Year and its celebrations have been associated with different periods (and dates) in the year. The calendar of Christian Georgia underwent the changes brought along by Christian methods of time-reckoning (in different periods, Georgia has observed the August calendar, the September calendar, the March calendar, the January calendar, and others).

According to Mircea Eliade (1987: 65–93), on every New Year the time was regenerated and the cosmogony was repeated. This belief is universally disseminated. When exploring the morphology of calendar customs scholars have concluded that whenever and wherever it began, the most important thing was not the date itself but rather the experience caused by the end of a period of time and the beginning of a new period (Eliade 1987: 65–93).

All over the world, the New Year has been marked by celebrations based on a variety of customs. It must be noted at once that through these celebrations the mythological time and creation were being introduced and associated. The New Year is the period when the worldly creation starts anew through the performance of certain rituals. The concept of Creation is easily traced in many rituals, among which the best known and widespread are the extinguishing of fire and lighting it anew or the custom of burning a special log during twelve holy days, a ritual widely spread in many countries (Georgia among them).

The article seeks to understand the meaning of disguised elements of regeneration, of “beginning afresh” in spatiotemporal patterns of winter solstice festivals (that is, the time when the sun “shifts” or “turns” towards the spring

and light begins to increase). These festivals in Georgia cover the period lasting from December 25/January 7 to January 6/19, for twelve holy nights. This astronomical event is peculiarly reflected in the local beliefs, entailing also St Barbara's day (Dec 4/17). According to West-Georgian folk beliefs, at this time the sun leaps by three cock's (or ram's) steps and the day increases for three days, or, according to another version, on St Barbara's day the sun remains still (or static) for three days. At the same time, around Christmas, two nights are united for the purpose of helping St Mary to give birth to Jesus and the day increases by one ram's leap. According to beliefs spread in eastern Georgia, the sun sets into the nest on St Nicolas's day (Dec 19) and if it meets a lamb there it will stay there for three days, but if it is met by a coiled snake it will jump like a three-days-old lamb (Abakelia *et al.* 1991: 4–8).

### **GEORGIAN COSMOLOGICAL PATTERN – SPACE AND TIME**

Generally, the end and the beginning of a certain period of time are, in turn, associated with liminal symbolism and consequently with the symbolic organization of the space (including both the 'inner' and the 'outer' worlds, as set forth by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner) and it is directly based on the cosmological system according to which the representation of the world is being reconstructed (Abakelia 1991: 83–96).

The cosmological pattern of Georgians has been reconstructed on the basis of religious beliefs and rituals, and its vertical plane comprises of

(i) the upper, celestial world of supreme deities (at first it was represented by the sky god, which in the course of religious development was replaced by the weather god (whose name, as preserved in oral tradition, is *Zhini Antari*, 'the one who is above'), and who, after the spread of Christianity, was substituted by Christian allomorphic personages of Archangels (Michael and Gabriel), St George, St Elijah, and others;

(ii) the underworld, which was represented at first by pagan female deities, personifications of natural elements (earth and water) which after the spread of Christianity coexist and partially exist in the image of St Mary; and

(iii) the world of the living, the societal community with its cultivated plants and domestic animals.

But the cosmology in question also implies the horizontal plane in which outer/inner spaces, non-cultivated/cultivated lands, microcosm/macrocosm, nature/culture are opposed to each other through the correlated personages. Also, the

outer world was stretched on the horizontal plane, though at the same time it also implied the vertical dimension, whereas the cultivated inner world of the living was perceived as surrounded from all sides (above, under and from outside) by the dangerous world of the unknown (Abakelia 1991: 83–116). These worlds, these zones, are enclosed by invisible borders. Humans constantly attached to these boundaries can recognize kind, evil or neutral spirits which move from the sacred sphere to the profane and vice versa, especially in liminal periods of the year.

In such situations, built environment and built forms, in this case house (dwelling or habitus), which according to Bourdieu's definition represents a metaphor of the organized world structured by the gender principle, generally receive particular meaning and importance (cited in Lawrence & Low 1990: 453–505). The built forms imply or reveal communicative role not only among the groups or inside the groups but also between the representatives of different spheres at different levels. So on the mythological plane which unfolds on the New Year's festival, the metaphorical and mnemonic functions of the built forms is revealed.

As is known, the different modal levels separating one world from another are not hermetically sealed from one another, though imaginary boundaries are built between the cultivated and non-cultivated (woods, cliffs, sea, etc.) culture/nature areas. In the topography of the 'inner world', the borderlines of different realms extend along farmsteads, dwellings, temples, and so on. In the 'outer world' they run across the woods, cliffs, seas, lakes, rivers, mountains, etc. (Lévi-Strauss 1985; Lavonen 1984; Abakelia 2008). There are various passages in the imaginary and built form boundaries (holes, gates, doors, windows, chimneys, etc. which weaken their tightness) and transition from one sphere to another becomes quite possible.

Thus fenced with and limited by temporal, spatial and causal factors, a community was surrounded by the so-called 'outer sphere' which included in itself the kingdoms (worlds, realms) arranged around and on the vertical and horizontal planes (the netherworld, the upper world and on the horizontal plane all the unexplored, uncultivated and unknown places inhabited by dangerous and harmful forces (Abakelia: 1991; 2008; 151–167; Surguladze 1987:133–158).

The New Year is thus a liminal phenomenon (as defined by van Gennep and Turner) from the perspective of both space and time. This is a period of the year when the thresholds of the inner and outer worlds become vulnerable and, as a result, open for the various undesirable and desirable powers and forces which can penetrate through these passages. In order to prevent such

accidents from happening or to protect oneself against them, particular precautions were taken. The ritual performed in the spatial structure perspective on the horizontal plane is intended to adjust to a broad spectrum of attitudes between the visible and invisible worlds, between the world of the living and the world of the dead and between the past and the present. Visitations from the land of the deceased to the world of the living, or from the outer to the inner world, respectively, are well known among many peoples (the Ancient Greek, Old Germans, Balts, Caucasians, Slavs, etc.) and are associated with the cosmological symbolism of outer/inner and nature/culture, respectively. The boundaries of the inner world are constantly changing: it might be a dwelling but also a country, cultivated land, etc. The ‘center’, consecrated through rituals, chants and prayers, was the place from where the communication with the supernatural beings (powers) was possible.

The protective center of the cultivated area, the house, turns into the scene on which the winter solstice mythico-ritual scenario unfolds.

## **RITUALS AND VISITORS DURING THE LIMINAL PERIOD**

### **The “shepherds”**

The complex morphology of the Christmas period has been studied from different angles by many Georgian scholars (Bardavelidze 1939, 1941, 1957, Bregadze 1982, Gambashidze 2004, and others) but here the focus is on the spatiotemporal perspective of the festival. The first to appear on Christmas Eve and on Christmas morning is a ritual procession comprised of a group of young boys (sometimes the group was mixed and consisted of girls and boys, sometimes also of younger children) dressed like (in sheepskin) shepherds, who held shepherd’s staffs and walked around the village, caroling and visiting each household.

The “shepherds” and their ritual procession walked around the village and spread the great joy on the occasion of Christ’s birth and this was the most important moment of the festival. According to the Georgian tradition, those who used to spread the joy and happiness among people were called *mealiloebi* ‘participants in the procession (called *aliloze siaruli*)’. The Georgian term *allilo* is derived from a song’s name, which, in its turn, might be a corrupt folk form of hallelujah/alleluia, the praise to God. Consequently, the procession could be understood as ‘walking with alleluia’ (blessing the God). The song was called *allilo* probably because of the refrain repeated at the end of the each verse. The most widely used text about it reads as follows:

On the 25th of December,  
Christ was born in Bethlehem  
Allilo and allilo! (Alleluia! Alleluia!)  
The songbird sat on the fence,  
Singing on Christ's birth  
Allilo and allilo!  
We are not beggars,  
We serve Christ  
Allilo and allilo!  
Mother, give us some eggs  
Christ will give you full bags.  
Allilo and allilo!  
(the song continues) (Abakelia *et al.* 1991: 10–27).

When singing special odes, the participants (disguised as shepherds) ritually transcended into the sacred time when the first ritual process had taken place on the occasion of the birth of Jesus, and the great joy which accompanied the Nativity was remembered and renewed through the ritual. Often, the procession was accompanied by music and dance. Meeting and receiving the guests was the core of these rituals. This ritual has also been called 'the congratulations on the occasion of the birth of Christ'. The congratulation was expressed by a short verse cited above, the text of which is known in different variants in Georgia. The participants of the ritual congratulated each household and passed on the grace of God. The singers blessed the household and the housewife thanked them with specially prepared ritual breads, wine, eggs, sweets, coins, or whatever was available.

The origin of the ritual is believed to be the Holy Script (Lk 2: 4, 7, 8–9, 12, 13–16). As it is known, biblical texts about it are scanty, even though Luke is supposed to have had his information from the Virgin herself (Murray & Murray 2004: 376–377).

As it seems, starting from a very early date the ritual performance has been held on the Nativity of Christ by the faithful impersonating shepherds, who returning from Bethlehem glorified and praised God for all they had heard and experienced. In that way they gladdened the hearts of the people and spread the joy which had been caused by the Lord's birth. The sacred history and the ritual hide in them the roots of folk theatre which had not developed in Georgia. The ritual gift-giving was considered as paying homage to Jesus and was perceived as a particular form of thanksgiving to God, a kind of service to Lord (cf. 2 Cor 9:11–15).

### ***Mekvle, the first-foot***

The next festival to celebrate the winter solstice is and was the New Year. The first ritual guest, who was to step over the threshold of the house on New Year's day had been tested beforehand on St Barbara's Day (Dec 4/17). On that day, a person was invited to visit the house and bless the household. The special guests were invited with the aim to avoid a random "unlucky foot" stepping into the house. If the guest's "foot" was approved he would be invited to return on the New Year's Day as a first-foot.

Georgians distinguish between the so-called 'inner' and 'outer' first-foots. From the spaciotemporal perspective, the first ritual guest, called *mekvle* ('the one who leaves traces, foot prints', and corresponds to first-foot in British and especially Scottish folklore) is the most important character of the New Year's mythico-ritual scenario; he is believed to be the main mediator between the opposite worlds and is the first to congratulate the family.

Beliefs about the first-foot are also founded on the first day's magic. In Georgian tradition, a special attention has been paid to the magic of the first day; the beginning of the first day (week, month, the New Year) was particularly important, because according to widespread beliefs, a good new beginning set the right tone for the forthcoming year. Therefore, starting a year in an appropriate or required trend was of great importance. Responsibility for the happiness, fecundity, prosperity and well-being was laid upon the first-foot.

The Georgian term *mekvle* derives from the word *kvali* ('trace', 'furrow'), which denotes the person who has to leave happy traces (foot-prints) at home (Ghambashidze 2004: 88–128). The second meaning of the word ('furrow') allows another definition. This explanation of the Georgian name for the first-foot (*mekvle*) may allude to the first-foot's initial function as a sewer and ploughman who had to make ritual furrows at the festival (Bregadze 1982: 173–177).

*Mekvle* assumed the role of a benevolent and luck-bringing angel who left after him a stock of luck in the form of lucky footprints. The same idea is expressed in the New Year's congratulation formula recited by the first-foot,

I enter the house,  
Let everybody be blessed by the Lord,  
Let my footprints be like those of the angels  
(With my angel's foot,  
I share the blessings of the Lord).

Here it must be noted at once that the angel mentioned in the formula does not necessarily point to a hierarchical sky being, but simply refers to a spirit, a messenger of the Lord, or even a supernatural being who visits the humans

from the outer world. The ritual guest is represented by the personified messenger of the God, which having entered the world of the living (in this particular case, the house) becomes visible as the personified characters of St Basil, St George, or the Lord.

During this ritual performance, the perception of the outer and the surrounding worlds, which are mythologized, undergoes changes, and so do the attitudes of the humans towards the arrangement of the characters, the participants in the ritual performance. When the ritual characters are rearranged, the “actors” of the mythico-ritual scenario are divided in two groups between the two worlds (the outer and the inner) and the initial situation is reestablished. Exploring ritual in traditional cultures, Albert Baiburin (1993: 201–211) has concluded that while in everyday life the relationships among the household members unfold between each other, in a ritual it unfolds between the group and the unknown. The unknown in our case is represented by invisible, supernatural beings (which at winter solstice festivals, for example, are embodied by the first-foot).

Georgians distinguish between the ‘inner’ first-foot, who is elected among the members of the family (see below), and the ‘outer’ first-foot, who is the person specially chosen and invited to the house in order to ensure a favorable forthcoming year. If this is not done, there might arrive an unexpected guest whose foot had not been tested and who would not be safe for the family. It must be noted from the very beginning that the epithets ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ with regard to the first-foot are quite formal (and also relative), because as soon as the first-foot moves out of the inner space (that is, built form) into the outer one (according to the tradition he has to spend the night outside the house, in the sanctuary, the attic of the house, etc.), he immediately changes his status. He is opposed to the rest of the family members and turns into the one who addresses while the family members, in their turn, become the addressees. Coming as a stranger from the outer space, he embodies one of the outdoor powers and is a bringer of happiness, good luck, fortune, abundance, wellbeing, reproduction, etc. to each member of the family.

From this arise the following questions: What kind of forces does the first-foot’s character embody? What kinds of powers are manifested in the figure of a first-foot? Answers to these questions may be found in the customs preserved in Svaneti (a mountainous region in western Georgia). Here, the first-foot was chosen by casting lots on Christmas Eve. Small, thin marked sticks or bones of sacrificial animals, which corresponded to the number of the family members, were drawn as lots from a hat or sack, or some other container. These objects were marked with different signs: for example, a cross was the

sign of the Lord, and a straight line was called the St George's lot. The person who happened to draw the Lord's lot would reveal the power and will of the Lord, and the one who happened to draw St George's lot would reveal St George's power and will.

### **Ritual tree *chichilaki***

As mentioned above, the house was attributed a particular meaning in the spatiotemporal pattern. In this respect a very interesting dialogue unfolds between the lady of the house and the ritual guest – the first-foot – in the following sequence: the chosen first-foot started his preparations on New Year's Eve. He went to the forest to fetch a twig of a hazelnut tree, the symbol of fecundity in Georgian tradition, and from this crafted the New Year's ritual tree symbol *chichilaki* (the exact meaning of which is unknown). *Chichilaki* is viewed as the Georgian variant of the tree of life (Bardavelidze 1957: 59–87). The hazelnut tree stick brought home was warmed on fire and peeled so that the shavings (flakes or strings) were left hanging and whirling on it. Two horizontal crosses were attached to the stick: one on the foot and the other on the top of it. A wicker wreath decorated with leaves of ivy, plants with small red and black berries, mistletoe branches and other evergreen plants were attached to the top of the tree and a loaf of ritual bread called *boqeli* (the exact meaning of which is unclear, though according to Nino Gambashidze (2004: 183) the name could be associated with a bull) was put over it. At the two ends of the horizontal cross, balls of dough about the size of apples were fixed. The balls were called *qvinchila* ('cockerels'). On the remaining two ends, an apple and a pomegranate were attached. Next to these "cockerels" a plucked songbird (the messenger of Lord) was hung. Feathers were left on its tail and wings, and sometimes only the tail was hung as the sign of the songbird (cf. the ostrich feather of the goddess Ma'at which as a sign often represented the goddess herself in Egyptian visual art). All these were manifestations of the upper world as well as fecundity symbols. Sometimes the tree was decorated with silver coins, colorful bands, candies and jewels. In these decorations the evergreens, blossoming hazelnut sticks, mistletoes, berries of different color, fruit with many seeds represented the symbols of fecundity. The cockerels and the bird symbolized the celestial world and kind spiritual beings. Sometimes, this sacred tree was also called Basil's/Vasil's beard.

*Chichilaki* can be also compared with the sun, if viewed from another perspective. The ritual bread on the top of it, in this particular case, represents the sun and the flakes represent the rays emanating from it. With its celestial

markers (“cockerels”, the songbird or its tail), *chichilaki* points not only to the sky but also to the sun, the source and center of light and warmth. It must be remembered that in many traditions the image of the sun is frequently associated with the tree and as Rene Genon has pointed out, it is considered the “fruit” of the tree. The fruit is detached from the tree at the beginning of the cycle and returns at the end of it. So the tree in this case is the real “station” for the sun (to illustrate this idea, Genon (2002: 356–357) presents a Chinese hieroglyph which depicts the sun set at the end of the day). There is a term, very interesting in this respect, in Georgian language – *mzebudoba* (*Mze* ‘the sun’; *bude* ‘a nest’), which precisely marks the period when the sun is believed to rest in the nest, and stands for the astronomical position of the sun which corresponds to, and literally means, the winter and summer solstice. By the folk imagination, the sun stays in the nest. The nest in itself implies the existence of a tree on which the sun has its station. This perception consists of the interconnected elements – that of the tree and the sun rested on it, which reflect the two complementary modalities.

As to the flakes (strings) of *chichilaki*, they might be seen as wavy rays (which according to the general symbolism reflect warmth), and as lightning (celestial fire) and rain, which fertilize the earth. The wavy lines, in general, also represent water (Genon 2002: 356–357) (cf. the Egyptian hieroglyph of Hapy, the deity of the Nile River, whose body is covered with wavy lines, etc. It is worth mentioning that in ancient times, the sun gods and the water gods were often depicted in wavy lines.) *Chichilaki*, which also represents the world axis, has a fiery and radiant nature. In this respect, with its connotation of the sun, *chichilaki* also represents the tree of light.

### **The historical background and contemporary ritual practice of *Basila***

The ritual tree *chichilaki* was prepared by the head of the family. It is noteworthy that the ritual anthropomorphic breads (cakes) baked by Georgian women were also known as *basilas* and the first-foot often named himself as and identified with *Basila* (who had to display supernatural powers).

The first-foot who was called *Basila* carried a wooden dish with the ritual breads *basilas*, the ritual tree called *chichilaki* or *Basila*’s beard, wine, honey, the boiled head of a sacrificial pig (see below the meaning of the word *basila*). With these ritual objects and symbols people tried to communicate with the surrounding world.

Early in the morning the first-foot carrying various fecundity symbols used to come to the house, knocked at the door, and held a dialogue with the lady of the house:

- Open the door, fortunate one! (Would you, please, open the door!)
- What are you carrying (bringing) us, fortunate one?
- Good omens for everybody. The great God's mercy, kindness, the growth of cattle, filling of barns, stocks, and pigsty; jugs filled with wine in the wine-cellar, chest filled with silver coins and all the kindness, fortune, wellbeing, and peace. Open the door, fortunate one!

Only after the first-foot had repeated the blessing thrice, the door would be opened. The first-foot who stepped into the house with his right foot first (the symbol guaranteeing success in any kind of activity) blessed the house and members of the household with the above formula and once again assured the residents that he was the one (of the holy beings) to bring ill or good omens with the following words, "I am entering the house. Let my footprints be the traces of the Angel!" This holy being was usually represented by *Basila*. Though the authors who have endeavored to interpret the term have agreed that the name *Basila* refers to St Basil the Great, Bishop of Caesarea, whose feast day falls on January 1st, they have been inclined to associate him with the reconstructed pagan fertility deity, known under various names (e.g., *Beri*, *Bombgha* / *Bambghu* / *Boseli* / *Bosla*; see Bardavelidze 1957; Rukhadze 1999; Bregadze 1982; Ghambashidze 2004). The comparison of ritual objects and symbols of day vividly show that they have more common traits and shared symbolism in Christianity (though overgrown in the course of time by popular beliefs) than they have in paganism. The saint was particularly worshipped in the Eastern Orthodox Church. (St Basil was believed to be one of the gift-giving saints, who was particularly popular in Eastern Christianity.) In the light of these facts it is worth remembering that Greeks also have the ritual loaf called *Vasilopita*, or 'Basil's bread' with a coin baked inside. Before cutting, the cake is spun around to invoke the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Then it is cut by the head of the household: the first piece is cut for Christ, the second for St Basil and then for each member of the household. Whoever received the coin was considered blessed and would receive good luck in the coming year. The custom of serving *Vasilopita* originates in the 4th century and is associated with Bishop St Basil the Great, who distributed money to the poor. There also existed a belief of St Basil's herb which was connected with the saint and his feast day. This herb was believed to have both healing and protective powers (cf. the Georgian vegetative symbol of *chichilaki*).

### Young mummers – *berikas*, *berikaoba*

There were also other visitors, called *berikas*, on the New Year's feast. *Berikas* were represented by a group of young mummers, mostly boys, who wore sheepskins inside out and their faces were smeared with soot. The group walked around the village in a procession and visited each family on the occasion of the New Year. When the mummary was over they were treated with bread, eggs, sweets, money, etc. In return, the *berikas* mummers would bless the family. If they were not treated properly they would curse the family and that, according to the local beliefs, could be an ill omen for the family. This is the reason why everybody tried to treat them kindly. The participants of the ritual called *berikaoba* initially appeared at the beginning of a new agrarian season and, as Nelli Bregadze has noted, its main rituals must have merged into a whole agrarian spring festival dedicated to the cult of a dying and resurrecting vegetative deity. The celebration of the New Year according to the Julian calendar caused the rituals of this originally spring festival to be doubled in January (Bregadze 1982: 247).

A semantic analysis of the terms connected with mummary and mummers during *berikaoba* and used in historico-ethnographic materials clarified some interesting questions pertaining to the history of agrarian life. As Bregadze has tried to show, *beri-*, the name of the central figure of the *berikaoba*, is an epithet of a deity, and was used to signify its earthly representative who was to perform the main rites of the festival, including ritual plowing. This circumstance, according to Bregadze, was reflected in the name of the abovementioned first-foot on New Year's Day – *mekvle* (Bregadze 1982: 247). It is also interesting that according to some ethnographic data recorded in Imereti province (West Georgia), when blessing the house the *berikas* also addressed St Basil saying: "We entered your yard bringing St Basil's blessings to you!" The ritual mask is an important attribute of the *berikaoba* procession. On the New Year as well as in spring, the participants of *berikaoba* wore black masks, blackened their faces with soot or smeared each other with mud (Rukhadze 1999: 213). The customs of presenting the face in black (wearing a black mask, drawing lines on the face with charcoal, covering the face in soot or smearing it with mud) are connected with the constant revival of nature, fertility and propagation.

Like other visiting guests, the *berikas* embodied the spirits of the dead and were responsible for fertility, especially if taken into account their clothing and disguised faces and a special ritual. According to this ritual every member of

the household tried to pluck out some wool from their sheepskin and hide it in the barn, pigsty, stock, wine-cellar, etc. in order to fill the farm buildings with fecundity.

### **Ritual sending off the spirits**

The *berikas* appear to be the general and “visible” representations of unrecognizable ancestral visitors for the whole community. Another ritual, called *lipanali* or *sulebis gadabrdzaneba* ‘sending off the spirits’, suggests that individual spirits also used to visit their immediate descendants in the family. It occurred annually on the Epiphany and lasted for about a week. During this period, tables were covered for the *berikas* in houses or in special farm constructions and the ancestral chair of the head of the kin was placed at the table; the oldest man who was the head of the family was to serve them with his head uncovered (as an expression of respect).

Of all the rituals this was the most mysterious. It was performed in absolute silence. Nobody was allowed to be present during the secret prayer in which only the spirits of the dead ancestors and the head of the family participated. The rest of the family was allowed to join the meal only after the ritual prayer was over. After the “prescribed time”, the guests had to leave their living relatives by performing a ritual. The head of the family prepared for this day a glass of wine, a piece of cooked meat and a slice of bread. Holding all these in his hands, partially bent, he “accompanied” the invisible guests and saw them off through the gate repeating all the way the words: “This way, please!” During the walk he poured wine libation on the ground and by the time he reached the gate the glass would be empty. Then he opened the gate and placed the bread and meat on a stone nearby. Then he would haste home without looking back (reciting traditional taboos with regard to the deceased). Here it might be appropriate to recall Lot’s history from the Bible, or Orpheus’s descent to the underworld in search of his wife Eurydice).

The departure of souls was graphically depicted in the pictures drawn with primitive paint made from the blessed Epiphany water and soot by women on different (mostly wooden) objects (Bardavidze 1957: 135–139). The primitive pictures painted for the spirits with fingers depicted how the spirits of the deceased urged on the souls of the sacrificial animals to the Netherworld. Thus the spirits of the dead were sent off, the necessary order was established and the society was ready to restart its everyday life.

## CONCLUSION

In the light of what has been said above, it concludes that at winter solstice festivals which are considered the beginning of the New Year in modern Georgia, the most important aspects were how the New Year began and the different rites of passage that were performed. During this period of liminality, the cultural space became vulnerable and special precautions were taken. Both time and space were mythologized by the hierophanies (as in Eliade, marking the sacred as manifested in different things) which influenced the behavior of the members of the society.

In the consecrated microcosm (or, in this case, the lived space/built environment) it was important who was the first to step over the threshold. As a result, the idea of the first-foot became predominant in these rituals. The first-foot or the first persons to congratulate a household on the occasion differ considerably in terms of corporality (some of them are visible, whereas some are invisible) and function: for example, at Christmas a group of young boys dressed in sheepskin served as personifications of Evangelical shepherds who spread the joy in the community on the occasion of the Nativity of Christ. In the course of time, the initial meaning of the ritual had been forgotten and sometimes it had even merged with another recurring ritual which expressed quite a different (pre-Christian) idea (cf. the above described and analyzed agrarian festival *berikaoba*).

The next visitor to arrive was the first-foot of the New Year, chosen by casting lots among members of the household. The first-foot used to choose a number of things: animals (e.g., a bull was led around the hearth in the house), plants (the hazelnut tree used in the construction of the tree of life, evergreens, etc.), gestures, baked ritual breads, etc. and turned them into hierophanies. The first-foot himself manifested the sacred and the powers of the figure of the gift-giving image of St Basil, the saint of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Carrying the symbols of abundance, prosperity and well-being, the first-foot entered the house and blessed it. The society tried to double its guarantees for the forthcoming year and invited an additional first-foot, chosen and tested beforehand at the festival of St Barbara.

The last visitors to come to the household were the group of the spirits of the dead. They appear in two forms: in visible form and in invisible form. The visible guests were represented by a group of young people, wearing masks and dressed in animal skins. They represented ancestral souls who were to bring fecundity and fertility to the community. The invisible guests were the

ancestral souls of the family who had the same functions as the “visible” ones: they had to ensure the welfare of the family. The immediate ancestral spirits were treated in a special way, and specific animals were sacrificed to them. The souls of the sacrificial animals were believed to be chased away (or urged on) by the ancestral spirits to the pastures of the netherworld. By means of these sacrifices, the souls were pleased, satisfied and calmed.

All the possible guarantees in life were therefore received from external ritual visitors. In the ways mentioned above, life was completely reconstituted, everything began afresh and the community was ready to start a new year with new hopes and goals.

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*Nino Abakelia*

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