

# Between Christianity and Islam: Heathen Heritage in the Caucasus\*

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## Abstract

The paper presents a brief survey of the traditional religious practices as still, or until recent times, observed in the Caucasus. I postulate the possibility of a pan-Caucasian “mythological union” formed over centuries between all the Caucasian communities, and discuss in some detail a local “mythological union” on the example of the lightning ritual *Čoppa*.

Although the pre-monotheistic heritage, partially intertwining with the official religions, still constitutes an intimate part of the identity of some Caucasians communities, it is slowly fading in the shadow of the mainstream religions—Christianity and Islam, which have become a strong unifying factor in the post-Soviet period.

## Keywords

Religions in the Caucasus, Caucasian mythology

## THE CAUCASUS AS A SOCIO-CULTURAL SETTING

The Caucasus represents a specific geographic area with a variety of contrasting landscapes and climatic zones. The traditional economies were based on agriculture, animal husbandry, hunting and crafts. Similar patriarchal feudal systems were typical for most parts of the Caucasus. Despite some differences in economic, cultural and geographic environment, the Caucasian peoples, irrespective of the languages they speak, are characterized by many common traits in social and cultural life. In the words of Vasily Abaev (1949: 89): “One gets an impression that irrespective of a wholly impenetrable multilingualism in the Cau-

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casus, there was formed in significant features a common cultural world". As to religion, in general, it rarely played an antagonizing role in relations between the various Caucasian communities. In the cosmopolitan urban centres like Derbent, Tbilisi or Baku peoples of various ethnic backgrounds and confessions easily mixed and lived peacefully side by side.

Linguistically, the peoples of the Caucasus speak languages belonging to various families. The Abkhazian, Abaza, Circassian (i.e. Adyghe and Kabardian) and Ubykh languages belong to the western branch of the North Caucasian linguistic family, its eastern branch being Nakh-Dagestanian (including Chechen, Ingush, Bats and some thirty languages of Dagestan, such as Avar, Dargwa, Lezgi, Tabasaran, Lak, Andi, Tsez, Khvarshi, Rutul, Udi, etc.). The Georgians, Megrelians, Laz and Svans speak the languages of the Kartvelian family, unrelated to North Caucasian. The Caucasian peoples speaking Turkic languages are Azeris, Kumyks, Nogays, Karachays, Balkars and Meskhetian Turks. The Armenians, Ossetians, Kurds, Tats and Talysh speak languages belonging to the vast Indo-European linguistic family. A small Assyrian community, mainly in the Southern Caucasus, speaks a Semitic language.

From the point of view of official religious denominations, the Caucasus is divided into two main realms: that of Christianity (Georgia, Armenia, major part of Ossetia and Abkhazia) and that of Islam (the Northern Caucasus, Azerbaijan, partially Ossetia and Abkhazia). But in the shadow of these two religious mainstreams many cultures of the Caucasus preserved, to a greater or lesser extent, vestiges of older, pre-monotheistic beliefs, which are polytheistic and animistic in nature, and which can be subsumed under the term "traditional religion". The extent of the preservation of this pre-Christian and pre-Islamic heritage is different in various parts of the Caucasus: it is much stronger in Abkhazia, Ossetia and parts of Georgia, and is less visible in such monotheistic strongholds as Chechnya, Dagestan, Azerbaijan and Armenia. The vestiges of pre-monotheistic religious paradigm form an integral part of the spiritual life and cultural identity of many Caucasian communities, and in some regions the traditional religion undergoes a certain revival and even gains partial official recognition. In general, this often-overlooked spiritual heritage undoubtedly warrants special attention and investigation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The main sources for the present survey are as follows. On Abkhazian mythology: the works by Adzhindzhal (1969), Akaba (1984), Chursin (1957), Inal-ipa (1965), and results of my own field-

## MAIN OFFICIAL RELIGIONS PRACTISED IN THE CAUCASUS

*Christianity*

Christianity appeared in the Caucasus at the very beginning of our era, entering first Abkhazia, coastal Circassia, Armenia, Georgia and Caucasian Albania (i.e. modern Azerbaijan and parts of Georgia), whence it later partially spread to the Northern Caucasus. In the Middle Ages, the Georgians, with limited success, tried to spread Christianity to some of the Northern Caucasus areas adjoining Georgia, including present-day Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan, but these activities were stopped with the destruction of the mediaeval Georgian state by the Mongols in the 13th century. The missionary activities of Georgian priests in the Northern Caucasus were not very effective due, to a large extent, to linguistic problems: the liturgical language, in which the Christian creed was preached, was Georgian, unknown to the overwhelming majority of the Nakhs and the Dagestanians. Less is known about the missionary activity in the Northern Caucasus (including Dagestan) of Armenian and (Caucasian) Albanian priests.<sup>2</sup>

Orthodox	Megrelians, Svans, most Georgians, major part of Ossetians, (Vartashen and Oktomber) Udis, the Bats, Pontic and Tsalka Greeks, a part of Abkhazians, Mozdok Kabardians, a part of Assyrians
Gregorian	the majority of Armenians, Nidzh Udis, Armeno-Tats
Catholic	a small part of Armenians, a small part of Georgians, a part of Assyrians

Table 1. Christianity in the Caucasus

*Islam*

Islam was first brought to the Caucasus by the Arabs in the middle of the 7th century, mainly to southern Dagestan. By the end of the 15th century Islam established itself in Dagestan and in the period between 16th and 19th centuries it spread from Dagestan to Chechnya and Ingushetia, from the Crimea to Circassia (16th c.), from Ottoman Turkey to Circassia, Abkhazia (since the 15th c.) and parts of Georgia, and from Iran to Azerbaijan. Adherence to Islam has always been weaker in the Western Caucasus and stronger in Chechnya and especially

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research; on Circassian mythology: Jaimoukha (2001), Mizhaev (1973); on Karachay mythology: Karaketov (1995), Shamanov (1982); on Kumyk mythology: Gadzhieva (1961); on Ossetian mythology: Abaev (1949; 1958), Chibirov (2008); on Nakh mythology: Jaimoukha (2005); on Dagestanian mythology: Gadzhiev (1991), Jusupova (1988), Seferbekov (2001; 2009); on Georgian mythology: Bardavelidze (1957), Virsaladze (1976); on Svan mythology: Bardavelidze (1957); on Armenian mythology: Karapetian (1979), Petrosian (2007).

<sup>2</sup> See the recent account of the history of Christianity in Dagestan in Gasanov (2001).

in Dagestan. Used as a unifying pan-North Caucasian ideology, Islam attained its peak in the period of the Russo-Caucasian wars in the 19th century, which led to the deep Islamization of the majority of North Caucasian and Dagestani communities and at the same time to the elimination of much of the traditional beliefs and/or Christianity.

In Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan the mystical branch of Islam, Sufism, evolved into a national form of religion. As explained by the Chechen author Vakhit Akaev, “Sufi ideology easily lends itself to popular beliefs, customs and traditions. This peculiarity, enabling the incorporation into Islam of elements of popular culture related to the cult of ancestors, native land and etiquette, led to its massive dissemination among the Nakh and Dagestanis” (cited in Jaimoukha 2005: 118).

Sunni	Dagestanians, Ingush, Chechens, a (small) part of Ossetians, Abazas, Adyghe, Kabardians, Karachays, Balkarians, Nogays, Kumyks, a part of Talysh, Ajar Georgians, Laz, Meskhetians (originally southern Georgia), Muslim Armenians (Khemshils), a part of Abkhazians, Armenian and Georgian Kurds
Shia	Azeris, Azeri Kurds, Azeri Tats, most Talysh, Fereydan Georgians (in Iran)
Sufi	Ingush, Chechens, Dagestanis

Table 2. Islam in the Caucasus

### *Judaism*

Judaism is practised in the Caucasus by three small groups: Tats, or Mountain Jews (mainly in Dagestan, also in Azerbaijan and Kabarda-Balkaria), Georgian Jews (Georgia, South Ossetia) and Russian/Ashkenazi Jews (mainly in urban centres across the Caucasus). The Tats speak a south-western Iranian language, the Georgian Jews—Georgian, and Ashkenazi Jews—Russian and, probably, to some extent Yiddish. Both Mountain and Georgian Jews are attested to the Caucasus from early times (the Tats—since the 5th-6th cc.), though the exact time of their settlement there is not known.

### *Yezidism—a syncretic religion*

Yezidis (in total some 100,000) mostly live in Northern Iraq, Turkey, Syria, Yemen and Iran. In the Caucasus, they are a very small group, and live mainly in Armenia and Georgia. Speaking the Northern, Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish, most of the Yezidis claim to be a separate nation and are in fact an ethno-religious group

with a unique complex identity based on the religious belonging. Their religion rooted in Sufism, was shaped also under the influenced of Gnostic ideas, Christianity, local pagan cults, etc.<sup>3</sup>

#### *“Traditional religion”*

The terms “paganism” or “heathenry” can sometimes bear negative or pejorative connotations, reflecting the monotheistic (Christian or Islamic) attitudes. Probably, better terms are polytheism or animism. In this paper I shall mostly employ the term “traditional religion”, as often used by the respective communities themselves.

Elements of traditional religions in the Caucasus are hidden behind the mainstream confessions, and no sizable group claims to profess one or another “traditional religion” as opposed to Islam or Christianity. Nevertheless, some Caucasian communities have preserved vivid vestiges of pre-monotheistic religions and have retained the institutes of pagan priests or custodians taking care of the shrines. The traditional religions are intimately interwoven into the traditional lifestyle, customs and etiquette and are syncretic in nature, as they also include elements of Christian and (more rarely) Islamic beliefs and rites. In some cases, it is possible to speak about traditional religion forming the substrate for the official confessions.

#### *The Religious System of Abkhazia*

In this section I shall describe to some extent the system of traditional beliefs as preserved up to the present time in rural Abkhazia. Here, unlike in neighbouring Georgia or in Armenia, Christianity failed to become a dominant ideology. The reasons are both historical and political. In Georgia and Armenia the Christian creed was used as an ideological tool in the struggle against the political dominance of Zoroastrian Iran and later of Islamic Caliphate, and as such became an integral part of the ethnic identity of these nations. In contrast, the numerous invaders who tried to control Abkhazia’s territory, used to stay mainly in the coastal area, not, as a rule, penetrating deep into mainland Abkhazia, whereas the main bulk of the Abkhazians lived in the foothills and in the mountains, finding there a relatively safe shelter from any potential intruder. The other important reason was that Christian priests used to address the Abkhazians in Greek, which was unknown to them, and then (after the 10th c.) in the equally

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<sup>3</sup> Among recent publications on the Yezidi religion, see: Asatrian, Arakelova (2014).

unknown Georgian language. Neither Greeks, nor Georgians showed any interest in translating the Christian texts into the vernacular to make them comprehensible for the Abkhaz population. In the apparent absence of any literacy in the Abkhaz language, and no translations of Christian texts into Abkhaz, this rendered the ideology inaccessible for the broad masses, beyond some sections of the upper classes. Greek or Georgian sermons could leave little impression on Abkhazians, who mostly borrowed the outer, ritual side of Christianity, not bothering much about its theological contents.

Islam, which entered Abkhazia in 15th-16th centuries thanks to the hegemony of Ottoman Turkey, was installed only in sections of the population, mainly the aristocracy, who maintained close commercial and cultural ties with the Ottomans. On the other hand, it proved to become one of the important factors causing the effective decay of the previously imported Christianity. But Islam, with its strict observance of rituals and restrictions, did not appeal to the traditional mentality and lifestyle of the Abkhazians and failed, as earlier Christianity, to convert the masses to its fold. Paradoxically, by virtually eliminating Christian institutions in Abkhazia (apart from several remaining centers like Lykhny or Ilyr), Islam inadvertently caused the reinvigoration of the never really vanished paganism, which enriched itself by absorbing certain Christian saints and rites.

Characterizing the religious situation of the Abkhazian society of his time, i.e. the first part of the 19th century, the early Abkhazian ethnologist Solomon Zvanba (Zvanbaj 1855; cited from the 1955 edition) wrote: "Apart from the Princely House,<sup>4</sup> whose members profess Orthodoxy, a very small part of the population of Abkhazia are regarded as Christians and a very limited number of its inhabitants regard themselves as Muslim; the rest are all pagans... all inhabitants of Abkhazia, irrespective of their [official] creed, worship some deities and conduct heathen rituals" (p. 65). The Russian author of the beginning of the 19th century E. Vejdenbaum remarked: "The majority of the Abkhazians regard themselves as Muslims, though there is no mosque in the region and there are no priests... Equally indifferent to the questions of religion in their majority are those Abkhazians who regard themselves as Christians" (cited in Inal-IPA 1965: 587).

Probably due to this habit of integrating elements of Islam or Christianity into their overall system of beliefs, religion never divided the Abkhazians, and in

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<sup>4</sup> The princely house of the Chachbas, who ruled Abkhazia from Middle Ages until 1864, when the Principality was abolished by the Tsarist administration.

one family there peacefully co-existed both Christians and Muslims, who jointly observed also the traditional rituals. Regardless of whether they referred to themselves as Christians or Muslims, the Abkhazians in general never expressed any religious fervor, let alone fanaticism, proving to be quite indifferent to theological issues and tolerant of any religion.

However, it would be equally wrong to claim that the Abkhazians are religiousless, atheist or agnostic. The population at large is still, after decades of living in an atheistic state, deeply religious, but in a different, more covert or esoteric way. For the Abkhazians, religion is a matter of very personal, intimate communication with God, for which one does not need an intermediary, as a priest, or a special place or institution, like a church or a mosque. The mystical element is very strong in the Abkhazian religious psyche. The succession of events is seen in their cause and effect relationship, everything being in the hands of God, the ultimate supervisor and moral judge. Another very important aspect interwoven into the canvas of the religious system, apart from its mysticism, is the moral and ethical aspect, the unwritten code of traditional values and behavioural prescriptions, etiquette, called *Apswara* (“Abkhazianness”)—a proper way of being a decent and morality-ruled person on the levels of the family, of the community and of the whole nation.

One of the reasons why the traditional religion managed to survive amazingly well amongst the rural Abkhazians even in the conditions of the Communist state was probably the fact that the Soviets were interested in controlling the situation mainly around Christianity or Islam, fearing their competing influence on the minds and hearts of the population. As to the traditional practices, they, with very little exception, did not attract much attention of the ever-vigilant authorities, who looked at them indulgently, as the remnants of the traditional patriarchal lifestyle.

#### *The Abkhazian pantheon*

The traditional Abkhazian pantheon is characterized by a considerable sophistication: nearly all more or less important aspects of life had their own gods, goddesses or patron saints. But, above all, there is also a clear idea of a supreme god, called Antsva (*Anc<sup>o</sup>á*),<sup>5</sup> the almighty god, to whom daily prayers are addressed

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<sup>5</sup> To render the linguistic data, including the names of the deities, I use the phonetic transcription used in *Caucasology*; some explanations for non-linguists: the sign *x* = *kh* (like *ch* in Scottish *loch* ‘lake’), *c<sup>o</sup>* = *tsv*, *č<sup>o</sup>* = *chv*, *j* = *y* (as in *yoke*), *y* = Russian *ы*, *c* = *ts*, *ž* = *dzh* (as in *joke*), *č* = *ch*, *ŷ*, *γ* =

and with the mention of whose name all toasts are started (cf. the traditional initial formula of such prayers or toasts: *Wa Anc<sup>o</sup>a, wəlapxa hat!* ‘Oh Lord, give us Your mercy!’). According to traditional views, God is infinitely plural in its various aspects or spheres of responsibility. “Each natural phenomenon, as well as each clan, family or individual has its own portion of god”, wrote N. Dzhanshia (1915: 75); this phenomenon has its own term *jə-nc<sup>o</sup>a-x<sup>o</sup>ə* ‘his-god’s-part’.

Beside the Supreme God *Antsva*, the pantheon includes quite a number of high- and lower-ranking deities. The high-ranking deities were responsible for crucial aspects of traditional life: household, cattle-breeding, fertility, agriculture, hunting and warfare. Some of them are anthropomorphic and regarded either as male or female. Others have the guise of an animal, and others are rather amorphous, appearing, e.g. as thick fog. Typically, the majority of the personifications of the hunting, warfare, thunder and lightning gods, as well as the chief god of cattle were regarded as male, whereas many agricultural and household cults, and the “portions” of chief gods, were imagined as female. The following schemes give an impression of the elaborate nature of the Abkhazian pantheon.

#### Supreme God (*Anc<sup>o</sup>a*)

High-ranking deities: god of the reproduction of cattle (*Ajtar*), goddess of bees and women (*Anana-G<sup>o</sup>ənda*), god of hunting and warfare (*Ajerg<sup>j</sup>*), god of thunder and lightning (*Afə*), god of metallurgy and smithy (*Š<sup>š</sup>aš<sup>o</sup>ə*), god of hunting (*Až<sup>o</sup>ej-pš<sup>aa</sup>*), half-forgotten deity *Wašx<sup>o</sup>a*, half-forgotten great god *Awəblaa*.

Lower rank deities: goddess of harvest and fertility (*Žaž<sup>a</sup>*), goddess of milling and millstones (*Sawnaw*), goddess of weaving (*Jarəš//Jarəšq’an*), deity of cotton and flax (*K<sup>o</sup>ək<sup>o</sup>ən*), the divine smith (*Ajnar-(jə)ž<sup>j</sup>əj*), deity of hearth (*Č<sup>j</sup>ap<sup>’</sup>*).

The creator-gods: Mother-creator, goddess of fertility (*Anana-Šac<sup>o</sup>a*), God-creator (*Anc<sup>o</sup>a Šana*), the creators, who determine fate (*Ašac<sup>o</sup>a//Ač<sup>j</sup>apac<sup>o</sup>a//Ašac<sup>o</sup>a-Č<sup>j</sup>apac<sup>o</sup>a*), patron of procreation and family (*Až<sup>j</sup>ahara*), deity of marital happiness (*Ləməjrah//Nəməjrah//Šəməjrah*), deity patron of married women (*Ač<sup>j</sup>apac<sup>o</sup>a*).

Deities of animals, birds: deity of buffalos (*Mkamgarəja*), deity of goats (*Acabax<sup>j</sup>*), deity of cats (*Acx<sup>j</sup>*), patron of birds (*Až<sup>o</sup>ejpš<sup>j</sup>iaa anč<sup>j</sup>a-k<sup>’o</sup>ənč<sup>j</sup>a*), patron of quails (*Ač<sup>j</sup>arah//Ač<sup>j</sup>aj<sup>o</sup>rə*).

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gh-like sounds, *ś* = sound between *s* and *sh*, *ẓ* = sound between *z* and *zh*, *ž* = *zh* (as *s* in *usual*), *ʒ* = *dz*, *š* = *kh*-like sound, *λ* = voiceless lateral fricative similar to Welsh *ll*, *L* = voiced lateral fricative, *j* = sign for palatalization, *o* = sign for labialization, *’* = sign for glottalization.

Deities of diseases and death: deity of death, which takes souls (*Ap̄sc<sup>0</sup>aha*), patron of internal diseases and the sick (*Anapra*), patron of smallpox (*Ax<sup>j</sup>ə Zoshan*).

Lower rank deities, demons, and mythological creatures: angel (*amaalək<sup>i</sup>*), goddess of dreams and nightmares (*C<sup>0</sup>əblaq<sup>o</sup>*), incubus (*Nap<sup>k</sup>’əlc<sup>o</sup>a*), dead souls’ spirits/vampires (*Ad<sup>0</sup>nəq<sup>o</sup>a* ‘ones(s) walking in the field/outside’), devils (*Aj<sup>0</sup>staa*; *Agəzma*; *Až<sup>i</sup>nəš<sup>6</sup>*), woodgoblins (*akač<sup>o</sup>’iaa*), demons (*akaž<sup>o</sup>’k<sup>o</sup>a*), mermaid (*Žəzlan*), monster/dragon eating the sun or the moon causing the eclipse (*at<sup>o</sup>əj<sup>o</sup>*), the giants (*adawə*), the forest man (*abnawaj<sup>o</sup>ə*).

Special cults: the calling for rains (*Žəjwaw*), the rite of new-built house (*Ažar-x<sup>o</sup>ma*), the cult of the hearth-chain (*Arxəš<sup>i</sup>na*), the procreation cult (*Až<sup>i</sup>rac<sup>o</sup>ara*), the New Year ritual (*Xiač<sup>o</sup>x<sup>o</sup>ama*) (in the Bzyp region), the cult of spirits (*Ad<sup>0</sup>n-jəq<sup>o</sup>aw* ‘the ones who are outside’, referring to dead people’s spirits which abide outside the homes), deity *Targ<sup>i</sup>alaz<sup>7</sup>*, shrines of thieves, robbers and bandits (*Aj<sup>r</sup>əx-Aac-nəx*; *Č<sup>i</sup>əg<sup>o</sup>ərx-nəx*).

Witches: witch (*arəwp<sup>o</sup>’ap<sup>o</sup>*), wolf-riders/werewolves (*abga jak<sup>o</sup>t<sup>o</sup>aw* ‘the one(s) sitting on a wolf’).

Taking into account that Abkhazia is traditionally an agrarian and cattle-breeding country, it is not surprising to find here the relevant cults, the main one of which was the cult of the god of procreation, cattle and renovation, *Ajtar*, regarded as being seven-fold, i.e. consisting of seven parts or fractions, represented by deities responsible for separate branches of cattle-breeding, as well as by the harvesting goddess and two astral deities. Another seven-fold god was the smithy god *Shashwy* (cf. a typical address to this god: *Š<sup>o</sup>aš<sup>o</sup>ə ax<sup>i</sup>ahdəw, abž<sup>i</sup>nəxa!* ‘Shashwy great golden prince, seven shrines!’). The digit seven bears, of course, special significance in mythology and magic practices of many peoples of the world.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *A-ž<sup>i</sup>nə-š* – lit. ‘white (š) jinn’, i.e. originally a beneficent spirit.

<sup>7</sup> From Georgian *mtavar angeloz<sup>i</sup>* ‘chief angel/Archangel’, whence also Ossetic *Tarəngeloz*, the name of the deity and its shrine, and the Svan deity *Taringzel//Tarinzəl//Targlezər* (Abaev 1979: 232).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. especially the Indo-Iranian tradition: seven gods (*Amesha Spenta*) in Zoroastrianism, seven celestial deities *Āditya* in Rigveda, *Ardavda* ‘Seven gods’ as the old Alanian (Ossetic) name of the Crimean city of Feodosiya, and in modern Ossetic: *Avd Wacilla<sup>i</sup>ji* ‘seven Watsilla (deity of thunder)’, the mythological creature *Ævdiv* < Old Iranian *hafta-daiva* ‘seven gods’ (cf. Abaev 1990), *Avd žuary* ‘seven shrines’, deity combining the functions of seven gods, etc.

<i>Ž<sup>0</sup>abran</i>	female deity of cows (also used to designate the month of February)
<i>Ž<sup>0</sup>abran</i>	female deity of goats
<i>Ačəš<sup>0</sup>aš<sup>0</sup>ana</i>	female deity of horses
<i>Aləš<sup>0</sup>k<sup>0</sup>ant<sup>0</sup>ər</i>	deity of dogs
<i>Anapa-Naga</i>	female deity of millet and harvesting
<i>Amra</i>	Sun
<i>Amza</i>	Moon

Table 4. Seven fractions of Ajtar

Another crucially important occupation was hunting. The process of hunting was regarded as a magic act, during which the hunters were not allowed to use a usual language and had to communicate in a so-called “forest tongue” (*abna bəzš<sup>0</sup>a*), which was lexically different from the common language, lest the animals understand the intentions of the hunters (cf. Khiba 1980).

<i>Až<sup>0</sup>ejpš<sup>0</sup>iaa</i> 's mother	<i>Mč<sup>0</sup>əxan//Məč<sup>0</sup>ixan</i>
<i>Až<sup>0</sup>ejpš<sup>0</sup>iaa</i> 's son	<i>Jəwana//Dad Jəwana</i> 'John//Father John'
<i>Až<sup>0</sup>ejpš<sup>0</sup>iaa</i> 's son	<i>Pəš<sup>0</sup>q'an</i>
<i>Až<sup>0</sup>ejpš<sup>0</sup>iaa</i> 's daughters	<i>Až<sup>0</sup>ejpš<sup>0</sup>iaa rtəphac<sup>0</sup>a</i>
<i>Až<sup>0</sup>ejpš<sup>0</sup>iaa</i> 's uncle	<i>Ž<sup>0</sup>ejpš<sup>0</sup>ərg'an</i>
<i>Až<sup>0</sup>ejpš<sup>0</sup>iaa</i> 's servant	<i>Š<sup>0</sup>ək'az</i>

Table 5. The family of the hunting god *Až<sup>0</sup>ejpš<sup>0</sup>iaa*

Abkhazians also worshipped sacred groves, as well as spirits or patrons of mountains (e.g. *Aš<sup>0</sup>ixə jənc<sup>0</sup>ax<sup>0</sup>ə*, lit. «god's mountain fraction»), and of other natural objects, on whom the good luck of hunters, shepherds and travellers depended. The low-ranking gods included even the special patrons of thieves, robbers and bandits (*Ajrəx-Aac-nəx*; *Č<sup>0</sup>əg<sup>0</sup>ərx-nəx*).

<i>Aš<sup>0</sup>ixə jənc<sup>0</sup>ax<sup>0</sup>ə</i>	patron of mountains <sup>9</sup>
<i>Axra jənc<sup>0</sup>ax<sup>0</sup>ə</i>	patron of rocks
<i>Apsta jənc<sup>0</sup>ax<sup>0</sup>ə</i>	patron of gorges
<i>Abna jənc<sup>0</sup>ax<sup>0</sup>ə</i>	patron of woods
<i>Et-nəx=Aga-nəx</i>	patron of seashore
<i>Adg<sup>0</sup>əl-č<sup>0</sup>č<sup>0</sup>a/ə</i>	goddess of earth

<sup>9</sup> The 3rd person singular masculine possessive prefix *jə-* 'his' in *jə-nc<sup>0</sup>a-x<sup>0</sup>ə* 'his-god-part' may probably indicate a missing word *a-nc<sup>0</sup>a* 'god', from a fuller phrase *\*a-nc<sup>0</sup>a a-š<sup>0</sup>ixə jə-nc<sup>0</sup>a-x<sup>0</sup>ə* 'god's mountain part'.

<i>Ažə jənc<sup>0</sup>ax<sup>0</sup>ə</i>	goddess of water
<i>Žəzlan//Žəzlan-žahk<sup>0</sup>až<sup>0</sup></i> <i>//Až jətaw//Ax<sup>0</sup>ə-psha-g<sup>0</sup>ašja<sup>0</sup></i>	the Mistress of the Waters

Table 6. Deities of natural objects

The important female deity of the agrarian cult was the goddess of harvest and fertility *Žaža*, imagined as a dumpy old woman who was roaming the fields with crops: depending on her moods, she could give a blessing to the future harvest, or, on the contrary, put damnation on it. The other female agricultural deities were the spirit of millet *Anapa-Naga*, of cotton and flax *K<sup>0</sup>ək<sup>0</sup>ən*, of milling *Sawnaw*. The goddess of female handicraft and knitting was *Jarəš*. The beautiful and insidious gold-haired mermaid *Žəzlan*, with the heels of her feet turned forward, was the goddess of rivers and the seducer of lonely travellers.

During the drought, the peasants used to organize the ritual of rain summoning called *Žəjwaw*, where figured a specially decorated doll, which they brought to the river. The doll was laid on an improvised raft, put on fire and given to the streaming water, whereas the participants were entering the water, catching and killing the frogs, turning them on their backs.

The other female deities were the female deity of dreams (*C<sup>0</sup>əblaq<sup>0</sup>*) and even the female demon of nightmare (*Nap<sup>0</sup>k<sup>0</sup>əlc<sup>0</sup>a*, lit. «(with) a hole in the palm of the hand»<sup>10</sup>), an analogue of the incubus.

The smithy (*a-ž<sup>0</sup>əjra*) and its instruments played an important role in traditional (especially family) cults. As N. Džhanashia wrote: "In the eyes of the Abkhazians the smithy occupies a higher place than the church" (cited in Adzhindžhal 1969: 235). The Abkhazians regarded the smithy god *Shashwy* as one of the most powerful gods, and some even placed him second after the supreme god *Antsva*. The blacksmith (*a-ž<sup>0</sup>əj*) was respected, but also somehow feared, being perceived as a priest of the great god *Shashwy*.

The *anykhas* (*a-nəxa* 'icon', 'shrine') have always been objects of great respect among the Abkhazians. Many publicly important events used to take place near the shrines. Thus, an accused person had an obligation to make an oath at an *anykha* in order to prove his innocence. One could use an *anykha* to put damnation or a curse on a person, or group of persons, which was always a public act.

<sup>10</sup> *Až jətaw* 'the one who is in the water', *žahk<sup>0</sup>až<sup>0</sup>* 'water princess', *Ax<sup>0</sup>ə-psha-g<sup>0</sup>ašja* 'Golden Queen Lady'.

<sup>11</sup> The same mythological creature with the hole in the palm is known among the Armenians (see below).

There is a certain hierarchy of anykhas, divided into chief (for a certain region) and junior. The chief anykhas in Abkhazia are seven and they are called accordingly *Abž'naxa* 'seven anykhas'. These are *Dədrəpš'i-naxa*, *Psh<sup>o</sup>ə-naxa*, *Jəlar-naxa*, *Laš'ik'jəndar*, *Lzaa-naxa*, *Ləx-naxa* and *Bətxa* (in neighbouring Ubykhia). The *anykha* in the village of Achandara, situated on the Dydrypsh mountain (whence its name: *Dədrəpš'i-naxa*, containing *a-dəd* 'thunder') is still revered as the chief and most important shrine of Abkhazia. Some of the anykhas are regarded as being in family relations to each other, and are thought to be visiting each other periodically, flying as fireballs. Thus, *Pshu-nykha* and *Jylyr-nykha* were regarded as brothers, *Jylyr-nykha*—the elder brother and Christian, *Pshu-nykha*—the younger brother and Muslim. The shrine of the Dydrypsh mountain was regarded as being brother and sister, the sacred grave of Inal in Pshu and the shrine *Anypš-nyx* (*anə* 'mother', *ps* 'dead', i.e. the anykha of the Assumption of God's Mother)—also as brother and sister (Chursin 1957: 27).

There were regional, communal, clan and family shrines. E.g. the shrine of the Dydrypsh mountain—*Anəps-naxa*, was worshipped in the whole of Bzyp or Western Abkhazia, *Ajlər-* or *Jəlar-naxa* was the chief shrine of the Abzhywa or the eastern region of Abkhazia, whilst *Jənal-q'əba* was revered mainly in the mountainous Abkhazia. *Lejaa-rnaxa* was respected in the community of the village of Mgudzyrkhwa, which members regard their *anykha* as a protecting deity which is invisibly present amongst them, especially when they are in the sacred grove. The family clan Ampar had as their patron saint the shrine *Etnəx-Ag(a)-nəx*, which is regarded as being connected to the sea and the prayer to it is carried out at the seashore (Chursin 1957: 25-6). The latter two shrines are usually situated in the ritual smithy (*a-ž'əjra*), where the representatives of the clan meet once a year, usually on New Year's Eve and engage in special rituals. Beside purely religious functions, these gatherings serve to strengthen the bond between the members of the clan and create a feeling of participation and common responsibility for the affairs within the clan.

The Abkhazian traditional cult does not know the institute of priests, their functions being fulfilled by the custodians of the shrines, or by old, experienced and ritually pure (i.e. sexually inactive) men or women. Each anykha used to have its own custodian (*anəxapaaj<sup>o</sup>ə*), usually belonging to a certain family, of which a chosen male representative functioned as a priest. Besides, there were several categories of augurs, who could carry out rituals resembling shamanistic (cf. Johansons 1972). For instance, *ac'aj<sup>o</sup>ə* 'the questioner' is a woman who asks

God about the reason of His wrath towards a person fallen ill; she can as well use for predicting future events beans or cards.

<i>ac'aaj<sup>0</sup>ə</i>	'the questioner' <sup>12</sup>
<i>aq<sup>0</sup>ədərpa<sup>0</sup>ə</i>	'one who makes the beans jump'
<i>amacarpa<sup>0</sup>ə</i>	'one who makes the cards jump'
<i>apšj<sup>0</sup>ə</i>	'one who looks', a man who sees the future by looking at the shoulder-blade of an animal like sheep or a rooster
<i>adərj<sup>0</sup>ə</i>	'one who knows' (a soothsayer who tells future by looking, e.g., at a person's palm or lobe of the ear)
<i>axalaj<sup>0</sup>ə</i>	'one who climbs'

Table 7. Abkhazian augurs and clairvoyants

Interestingly, during the act of prophecy, the questioner woman (*ac'aaj<sup>0</sup>ə*) was addressed to as a man rather than as a woman, which implies a ritual change of gender or transvestism, typical for shamanistic practices in many traditional cultures (V. Ardzinba, p.c.; Johansons 1972: 253).

Typically, when asked, the religious Abkhazians usually declare their adherence either to Christianity or Islam, not to traditional religion, which until recently had no special term in the language.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, significant parts of "Christians" and "Muslims" continue to venerate old shrines and practise traditional cults. The adherents of the traditional religion prefer now to call it "Abkhazian religion", and some refuse to qualify it as "pagan", citing the presence of the single almighty God—*Antsva*.

The question of to which extent the Christianity influenced Abkhazian traditional religion is not well studied, but one can surmise that the impact was rather substantial. This is attested, in particular, by the fact that the Abkhazian pantheon includes a number of deities having their origin in Christian saints. Interestingly, the major pagan shrines are situated at the sites or near the ruins of Christian churches. Thus, on the top of the Dydrypsh mountain, which is the seat of the much revered and even feared shrine *Dydrypsh-nykha*, there are ruins of a

<sup>12</sup> Cf. typologically Armenian *harc'-uk* 'sorcerer, magician', from *harc'anem* 'to ask, question, inquire'; cp. also Old English *freht* 'clairvoyance' from the same Proto-Indo-European etymon (H. Martirosyan, p.c.).

<sup>13</sup> However, there is a verb *apaara*, which means 'to perform traditional priesthood'.

Christian church (whence the second name of the shrine: *Anəps-naxa* ‘The shrine of the Assumption of God’s Mother’). It is difficult to say, however, which preceded which: the pagan shrine being associated with the Christian church, or the latter being built on the place of the old shrine.

Pagan deity	Origin/Prototype
<i>Ajtar</i> (god of cattle)	St Theodore Tyro (Greek Ἅγιος Θεόδωρος ο Τήρων) <sup>14</sup>
<i>Anan</i> // <i>Anana</i> <i>G<sup>0</sup>ənda</i> (female deity of bees; cf. <i>an</i> // <i>nan</i> ‘mother’)	St Mary, God’s Mother, associated in popular mythology with bees
<i>Ajərgj</i> (god of warfare and hunting)	St George (Gr Ἅγιος Γεώργιος) <sup>15</sup>
<i>Mkamqarəja</i> (god of buffalos) <sup>16</sup>	Archangels St Michael and St Gabriel
<i>Anapra</i> (patron of internal diseases and the sick)	St. Onuphrius (Greek Ονούφριος) <sup>17</sup>
<i>DadJəwana</i> ‘father ( <i>dad</i> ) John’	St John the Baptist <sup>18</sup>

Table 8. Abkhaz pagan deities originating from Christian saints

At present, traditional Abkhazian religion is undergoing a certain revival. Some time ago it gained official acknowledgment by the state, which equated it to the two official denominations, Christianity and Islam. In August 2012 the “Union of the Traditional Priests of Abkhazia” was formed by custodians of the seven shrines of Abkhazia (*Abžinaxa*) with the aim to be officially registered and function as a religious institution. Zaur Chichba, the custodian of the main shrine in Western Abkhazia, Dydrypsh-nykha, was elected the chief priest of Abkhazia (traditionally it is one of the Chichba family from the village of Achandara who is elected as a custodian of this important shrine). However, traditional

<sup>14</sup> The form *Ajtar*//*Ajtər* is due to haplology from *\*Aj-Təta/ər*, cf. the Ossetic deity *Tutər* from the same Greek source, but without the Greek prefixed Ἅγιος ‘saint’ (cf. Chirikba 2006: 55).

<sup>15</sup> S. Zvanba (Zvanbaj 1853, reprinted in 1955, p. 58) was probably the first to propose the derivation of the name of this deity from Greek *Georgios*, though his analysis of the Abkhaz form is not quite correct: “A, Ergi”, where *A-* was probably perceived by him as a (vocative) interjection, whereas we have here obviously Greek Ἅγιος ‘saint’ (> *Aj*); thus, *Ajərgj* < *\*Aj-Gjərgj* < *\*Aj-Gjərgji* (cf. also *Aj-* in *Aj-tar* above). Cf. a perception of the initial *a-* in *Ajərgj* as the definite article in Tuite (2004: 152).

<sup>16</sup> From Megrelian *mikam-gario* < Georgian *mikel-gabrieli* ‘(archangels) St Michael and St Gabriel’ (Bgazhba 1964: 225).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Chirikba (2006: 56).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Ossetic *Fyduani*, name of a festival and of a saint, from *Fyd-Iuane* ‘Father John’, i.e. John the Baptist, compared with its Abkhaz counterpart by V. Abaev (1949: 316).

religion remains mostly an oral tradition, not codified in the form of a book or collection of texts. Besides, the majority of the believers, even those who practice traditional rituals, often identify themselves either with Christianity or Islam.

#### *The Circassian pantheon*

In Circassia pantheistic beliefs were dominant until the early 19th century, despite the nominal adherence to (Sunni) Islam and the presence of small Orthodox Christian groups. The remnants of these beliefs are to some extent preserved in rural areas in the form of traditional rituals, and are discernible in mythological and folklore texts. The main elements of the Circassian pantheon include the supreme god *The*, the god of the soul *Pse-the*, the hunters' god *Mezə-the*, the goddess of apiculture *Merjem* (i.e. St Mary), and the smithy god *λeps*. Revered natural objects included sacred trees and groves. Small iron objects were used to protect against evil forces.

At present there is some revival of interest among Circassian intellectuals in the pre-Islamic tradition, which is seen from a number of relevant publications, but this interest so far has not taken on the same organizational character, as in Ossetia or especially in Abkhazia.

<i>The</i> 'God' // <i>Pse-the</i> 'the Soul-God' // <i>The-šx<sup>0e</sup></i> 'the Great God'	The supreme god
<i>ŠəbLe</i> (Adyghe) // <i>JeLe</i> <sup>19</sup>	god of thunder and lightning
<i>Sewəzerešj</i> (Adyghe), <i>Sozeraš</i> (Kabardian)	god of fertility, agriculture and the family hearth
<i>λeps</i>	god of metallurgy and the smithy
<i>Žə-the</i> (Adyghe <i>žə</i> 'wind')	lord of the wind
<i>Axən</i>	god of cattle, god of the sea
<i>Mezə-the</i> ('Forest-god')	god of hunting (sometimes female)
<i>A(j)məšj</i>	god of cattle <sup>20</sup>
<i>The-yeLežj</i>	god of crops and the harvest
<i>Zəjwəzhan</i> (lit. 'the one who carries the disease')	god of smallpox
<i>Awəš-gjergj</i> (< St George) (Kabardian)	god of warriors, weapons and fortitude, god of hunters
<i>Wašx<sup>0e</sup></i>	god of heavens

Table 9. Male gods of the Circassian Pantheon

<sup>19</sup> From Greek *Elias*.

<sup>20</sup> *A(j)məšj* and *The-yeLežj* are regarded as brothers (cf. Mizhaev 1973: 25).

<i>Hance-g<sup>0</sup>ašj</i> (Adyghe; 'Shovel-Lady')	goddess of rain
<i>Psə-the</i> 'Water-God' // <i>Psəthe g<sup>0</sup>ašje</i> (Adyghe; 'Water-God Lady') // <i>Psəx<sup>0</sup>e-g<sup>0</sup>aše</i> (Kabardian; 'River-Lady')	the water goddess
<i>ġə-g<sup>0</sup>ašj</i> (Adyghe 'Sea-Lady')	goddess of the sea
<i>žəŷ-g<sup>0</sup>ašje</i> (Kabardian 'Tree-Lady')	goddess of trees
<i>Mez-g<sup>0</sup>ašj</i> (Adyghe 'Forest-Lady')	goddess of forests and trees
<i>Merise</i> // <i>Merjem</i> (< St Mary)	goddess of bees and herbs
<i>Pšəšan</i> <sup>21</sup>	goddess of small cattle, cows

Table 10. Female gods of the Circassian Pantheon

<i>Wədə</i>	(mainly) female witch
<i>mezəλ'</i>	forest man
<i>ney<sup>0</sup>əč'əc</i> (Adyghe), <i>nežy<sup>0</sup>əs'əzje</i> (Kabardian)	evil creature regarded as an ugly decrepit humpbacked old woman with iron teeth and with long breasts brushed behind her back
<i>almestə</i>	evil creature regarded as a naked woman with long hair
<i>Jənəž</i>	mythological giant
<i>bLay<sup>0</sup>e</i>	dragon (lit. 'yellow snake')

Table 11. Lower rank deities or mythological creatures

#### *The elements of the Abaza pantheon*

The small North Caucasian Abaza people are linguistically and culturally the closest kin of the Abkhazians. Islamization influenced them more profoundly than the Abkhazians, and only few vestiges of older cults can be reconstructed. Thus, among the Ashkharywa Abazas, a group especially close to the Abkhazians, there is still some memory among the old people about pluvial magic (the ritual of calling for rains); the relevant deity is called *Žəjwara* (cf. Abkhaz *Žəj-waw*); it contains the word *žə* 'water' as the first element. During the ritual, the procession would bring a decorated doll to the river, the blacksmith was pulled into the water, and then the rest of the procession also entered the river. The main characters of the traditional cult are the Supreme god (*Nč<sup>0</sup>a*), the patron of woods (*Abna-ŷ<sup>0</sup>ə* 'Forest Man'), the goddess of waters (*Až-tas* or *Až-nanə* 'Water-mother'). The cult of the smithy and smith-craft had as its patrons *faŷəmbar* ('prophet') and the white (benevolent) jinn, which inhabited each smithy. The

<sup>21</sup> Cf. the Abkhazian female deity of horses *Ačə-šjašj-ana* (*a-čə* 'horse', *ana* 'mother')

anvil was especially respected by the Abazas, sacrifices were made to it, and an oath made at the anvil was regarded as inviolable. Moreover, Abaza folklore has preserved stories about demons, about witches appearing in the guise of cats, etc.

#### *The elements of the Ubykh pantheon*

Very little is known about the traditional religion of the Ubykhs, who were deported by the Tsarist Russian administration to Turkey in their entirety in the middle of the 19th century, before elements of their traditional beliefs could have been recorded. One of the few known deities is the supreme god *Wa//Waba*. Some gods were borrowed from the neighbouring Circassians (as the smithy cult of *λeψς*), or Abkhazians (*nc<sup>o</sup>a* 'god'). Also known is the Ubykh pagan shrine *Bətxa* (revered, by some accounts, also by the Abkhazians).

#### *The Karachay traditional beliefs*

Before the spread of Islam among the Western Caucasian Turkic-speaking Karachays (mainly from the fellow-Turkic Kumyks) at the beginning of the 18th century, their religious system consisted of a mixture of traditional and Christian beliefs. The traditional pantheon, beside the Supreme God *Tejri*, is presented in the following table.

<i>Kek Tejresi</i>	Sky god
<i>Žer Tejri</i>	Earth god
<i>Suu Tejrisi</i>	Water god
<i>Suu anasi</i>	Mother of the Water
<i>Gol</i>	god of Spring
<i>Dolaj</i>	god of cattle
<i>Bajrim</i> (St Mary)	goddess of (children's) birth
<i>Erirej</i>	God of cereals
<i>Apsati</i>	God of hunting and prey
Beautiful <i>Fatima</i>	daughter of hunting god Apsaty

Table 12. Elements of the Karachay traditional pantheon

Cattle-breeding and agriculture were, as with fellow-North Caucasians, of prime importance to the Karachays, and most important rituals were connected with these sectors of the economy. During the spring festival *Elliri Čoppa*, which celebrated the coming of spring and the beginning of agricultural works, specially dressed people used to organize dramatized rituals. The Karachays also celebrated the first furrow day, the village festival *saban ojun* 'the field game' and

the ritual *guguk xorlau* ‘victory over the cuckoo’. The harvest (October) festival was called *Čoppa*, and the December ritual game, dedicated to insemination of sheep in barns, was called *Boran keldi ojun*. The worshipped natural objects included the sacred stone in the village of Uchkulan (called *Bajrum taš* ‘the Stone of Bajrym’, i.e. of St Mary) and the sacred tree to which infertile women addressed their prayers (cf. Shamanov 1982).

#### *Elements of Kumyk cults*

Kumyks, a Turkic-speaking Islamic people mainly in Dagestan (but also in some other places in the North Caucasus) have preserved some vestiges of pre-Islamic cults, such as fertility and agricultural cults. Among the latter is, for example, the spring ritual of the “burning” of the winter, during which young people played ritual games, like jumping over bonfires. The rain goddess *Zemire*<sup>22</sup> was regarded as a stout crummy woman, who was addressed during the procession for summoning rains. The forest woman *Sut-qatın* (*qatın* ‘woman’), who was believed to be roaming in the vicinity of the villages during the night-time, is also mentioned in the special song performed during this ritual. The ritual doll which figured in the ritual was made either of a shovel painted as a woman or of dough and was called *qaqij* or *určuqan*. The fertility and harvest ritual *Gudurbaj* (= South Kumyk *Güssemej*) was carried out by young men in the evening time, during which they sang ritual songs and prayed for good harvests, prosperity and happy life. The Kumyk female water deity was *Suvanasi*, lit. ‘water mother’, who was regarded as a giant and exceptionally strong woman living in rivers; she could do harm or even kill people coming down to the water. Especially feared was the giant demonic woman *Albaslı qatın* with thick loose hair and big hanging breasts, brushed back on her shoulders, a character typical for Caucasian demonology. Her male counterpart was *Temir-töš* (‘iron breast’), who was sometimes regarded as Albasly’s husband. The other demons were the malignant spirits *jinn* and *shajtans*, the demon *ilbis-shajtan*. The evil incubus *bastrıq* was believed to smother people during their sleep (Gadzhieva 1961: 322-327).

<i>Er anası</i>	Mother of the Earth
<i>Suv-anası</i>	Mother of the Water
<i>Zemire</i>	rain/water goddess

<sup>22</sup> One can note the formal resemblance of this name with the name of the Abkhaz-Abaza ritual of rain summoning called *Зəјwaw/Зəјwara*. Cf. also the Dargwa rain deity *Zaburaj* and Lak *Züvil* below.

<i>Sutqatn</i>	forest woman
<i>Gudurbaj</i> (South Kumyk <i>Güssemej</i> )	fertility and harvest deity
<i>Avrum anası</i>	female deity of illness
<i>peri</i>	benevolent jinn
<i>albaslı qatn</i>	demonic woman
<i>temir-töş</i>	demonic man
<i>ilbis-shajtan</i>	Devil
<i>Bastrıq</i>	Incubus

Table 13. Elements of Kumyk traditional religion

*The Ossetian traditional cult*

The majority of Ossetians are nominally Orthodox Christians, whilst a smaller part of them are Sunni Muslims. Ossetians have preserved vivid vestiges of their traditional cults. Many heathen deities are still well known to traditional rural Ossetians, and some of the shrines are still worshipped. According to Ossetian beliefs, each place has its own spirit-protector, “the lord of the place” (*bnati-xi-cau*), and each village has a sacred stone called *Madae Majram*, i.e. ‘Mother Mary’. There is a certain revival of the traditional heritage and its partial official recognition by the authorities, who attend popular festivals devoted to some of the shrines. The most popular of such traditional cults has become the one devoted to the sacred Grove of Khetag, and it has been made an official national festival.

<i>Avriayd</i>	god of natural forces, like clouds, rain showers and hail
<i>Don-bettir</i> (lit. ‘Water-Peter’, i.e. St Peter)	patron of waters
<i>Barduag</i>	god of thunder, fogs and clouds
<i>Wac-illa</i> (Divine Elias)	god of thunder and lightning
<i>Kar, Kæræf</i>	demons of winter and severe cold
<i>Gætæg</i>	god of rivers
<i>Galægon</i>	god of winds
<i>Buduri izæd</i>	patron of the plain
<i>Baragžın</i>	goddess of forest, forest woman
<i>Doni čızžı-tæ</i> <sup>23</sup>	mermaids, daughters of <i>Don-bettir</i>
<i>Æfcæži zuar</i>	deity of mountain gorges and passes

<sup>23</sup> -*tæ* is the Ossetian plural suffix.

<i>Wad-æxsīn(æ)</i>	goddess of winds
<i>zæd-tæ, dauži-tæ</i>	heavenly spirits, patrons of people, animals, woods, waters and winds

Table 14. Ossetian deities of natural objects and phenomena

<i>Anigol</i>	goddess of bees
<i>Æfsati</i>	god of prey and hunting
<i>Tutir</i> (< St Theodore Tyro, Greek <i>Hagios Theódōros</i> )	patron of wolves
<i>Burxorali//Borxwarali</i>	god of crops and cereals, regarded as son of <i>Xwari ældar</i> (see below)
<i>Mikalgabir-tæ</i> (< archangels Michael and Gabriel)	god of agriculture
<i>Nikkola</i> (< St Nicholas)	god of fertility
<i>Zegiman</i>	god of bread
<i>Daužiti zuar</i>	deity of fertility and harvest
<i>G<sup>o</sup>idurti kom</i>	demon of crops
<i>Karčikloj</i>	patron of foxes and hares
<i>Kæftsar</i>	master of fishes
<i>Nogbon</i>	patron of the new day of the year
<i>K<sup>o</sup>irdalægon</i>	god of smithy
<i>Was-turži//Was-Gergi</i> (< St George)	patron saint of men, war god
<i>Xwari ældar//Xwareldar</i>	deity of the harvest

Table 15. Ossetian cults of agriculture, hunting and crafts

<i>Æfsin</i>	goddess of the hearth
<i>Bndur</i>	patron of the hearth
<i>(Madæ) Majrem</i> (Mother Mayrem < St Mary)	patroness of children and marriage
<i>Naf</i>	patron of the clans
<i>Næli Azuar</i>	saint of the sun, patron of male infants
<i>Ærtxuron</i>	deity of the hearth-chain
<i>Atinæg<sup>24</sup></i>	deity of fertility
<i>Nixi zuar</i>	patron of the newly-wed

<sup>24</sup> From Greek St Athenogene, whence also Georgian *Atenagani* 'St Thomas Sunday', Ingush *Eting* 'name of a summer month' (Abaev 1958: 82), cf. also the Khevsur name of the popular festival *Atengena*.

<i>Ič'ina</i>	patron of new-born children and newly-wed girls
<i>Binatı xıcau</i>	anthropomorphic deity, protector of the home; often turns into a snake

Table 16. Ossetian deities of household and family

The Ossetian pandemonium was inhabited by quite a number of scary creatures, to name a few of them:

<i>Axæri dur</i>	stone-eater of the earth
<i>Aminon</i>	god(ess)-doorkeeper of the Land of Dead
<i>Barastur</i>	god of the Land of the Dead
<i>Odesæg</i>	Death Angel ('bereaving of the soul')
<i>Kæfqujndar</i>	Dragon
<i>Kanzargas</i>	seven-headed winged dragon
<i>Mæjxor-tæ</i>	monster eating moon during the eclipse
<i>Zaliag kalm</i>	a snake-like monster
<i>Žinqur; Kaži</i>	Devil
<i>K'ulbadæg</i>	Witch
<i>Wæju/ug</i>	demon, devil, evil giant often regarded as having one eye and seven or sometimes hundred heads
<i>Zın-tæ</i>	Jinn

Table 17. The Ossetian Pandemonium

Like in Abkhazia, the Ossetians have a concept of a deity combining the functions of seven gods (*Avd žuary* 'seven shrines').

#### *Nakh (Ingush and Chechen) traditional pantheon*

Despite the fact that Islam is exceptionally deep-rooted in Chechnya and Ingushetia, having become, according to specialists, an integral part of the national identity, this state of affairs is historically speaking relatively recent, and the strengthening of Islam in this part of the Caucasus is explained mainly by its mobilizing role in the fight against Russia, both in the second part of the 19th century, and during the conflicts in Chechnya in the post-Soviet period.

The elements of the pre-monotheistic religious system in Chechnya can be summarized as follows. The Chechens and Ingush connected the appearance of life with a gigantic white bird, from whose excrement there evolved water and various plants. Others attribute the creation of the earth to the activity of the supreme god Deela. According to popular beliefs, the Sun and the Moon are two

brothers born of different mothers, who are being chased by their demonic sister *Mož*; when she reaches them, there occurs an eclipse.

The gods Erd and Tusholi were protectors of agriculture, fertility and harvest. The protector-spirits were *taram*, while there were also quite a number of evil spirits or demons—*almaz*, *ubur*, *gamsilg*, etc. (Tokarev 1991: 604, 605) A more detailed classification of the Nakh pantheon and pandemonium can be presented in the following tables.

<i>Deela</i>	Supreme deity
<i>Seela</i>	God of thunder and lightning
<i>Maetcil</i>	God of agriculture and harvest
<i>Gal-Jerdi</i>	God of cattle and breeders
<i>Ištar-Deela</i>	Lord of life and death
<i>Moliz-Jerdi</i>	God of war and victory
one-eyed <i>Elta</i> , son of <i>Deela</i>	God of hunting
<i>Taamaš-Jerdi</i> (< St Thomas ?)	Lord of fate

Table 18. Male gods of the Nakh Pantheon

<i>Tušoli</i>	Goddess of spring and fertility
<i>Darca-Naana</i>	Blizzard-Mother
<i>Mokh-Naana</i>	Wind-Mother
<i>Seelasat</i> (lit. 'Oriole')	Patroness of virgins

Table 19. Female gods of the Nakh Pantheon

The Nakh peoples also knew male (*c'uu*) and female (*maelkh-aeznii*, lit. 'sun-maidens') pagan priests.

#### *Elements of traditional cults in Dagestan*

Islam entered Dagestan as early as in the middle of the 7th century. It embraced all Dagestani communities and became the official religion in the 10th – 15th cc. (Gadzhiev 1991: 6), earlier than in any other part of the North Caucasus. Apart from Islam, in this mountainous region the other monotheistic religions—Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism—were also known and practised. Due to this factor, many elements of traditional (pre-monotheistic) religion have been lost. However, some of the traditional beliefs and rites, which often operated under a superficial Muslim guise, accompanied by Muslim prayers and terminology, did survive (e.g. the cult of the saints, of the (formerly) pagan shrines, etc.).

That is why ethnologists speak of “popular Islam” (*народный ислам*) in relation to Dagestani syncretic traditional culture.

The Dagestanis worshipped sacred mountains (e.g. Axulgo, Shalbuzdag—in Southern Dagestan and Northern Azerbaijan), sacred caves (as the cave of Diruk), as well as sacred groves, trees, stones, rivers, etc. Also revered were shrines (called *p'ir* in Southern Dagestan), often dedicated to local saints.

The Islamic-inspired demonology distinguished between good (*jinn*) and evil spirits (*šajt'an*). The spirits are believed to be able to turn into people, animals, monsters, or become invisible. Some of them are envisaged as being small in size, with the heels of their feet turned forward. The giant *Eprit*, borrowed from the Koran (< Arabic *Ifrit*), inhabits calm waters; it can change its guise and in the night-time it catches and eats people. A giant dragon-like creature called *Azhdahha* (< Persian) is believed to have one, three or seven-heads, projecting fire from its maw; it sits near water springs, protecting them from intruders and demanding in exchange for access to the water human sacrifices, mostly young women, on whom it feeds.

Witchcraft and exorcism were a common practice. The Tsez quack doctor used to make two anthropomorphic dolls (male and female) of old cloth, hang them together with bread and cheese on a twigged stick and put them in the abode of spirits called *šatanisaλ* ('village of the spirits'). In order to do harm to hateful people, it was a common practice to make a doll of cloth (as with the Avars) or of the fatty tail of a sheep (as with the Dargwas or Laks), pierce it with sharp objects (nails, needles) and hide it at the threshold of the persons(s) concerned (Gadzhiev 1991: 24, 25, 40).

Belief in the evil eye, which can make people sick or even die, is a superstition shared by many cultures in the Caucasus and beyond. Especially feared from this point of view were blond people with blue or green eyes (as with the Avars), or red-haired people with blue eyes (as with the Laks), as these features were probably associated with devils.<sup>25</sup>

In Mountainous Dagestan they believed in incubus—a creature abiding in the houses which approaches sleepers during the night and smothers them by closing their nostrils with its own nose without nostrils. By doing this, the crea-

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<sup>25</sup> This belief is shared by other Caucasian peoples as well; e.g. the Georgians were afraid of people with grey eyes (*cudi tvali* 'bad eye') (Gadzhiev 1991: 39). The Abkhazian Prometheus-like mythical hero *Abrsk'əl* fought against the vicious red-haired people with grey eyes, probably evil demons. Grey, blue or green eyes were the feature attributed to witches (*wəd*) by the Circassians.

ture can paralyze sleepers and hamper their blood circulation, releasing them only at dawn. It can be invisible, but it can also appear as an ugly fat old woman with big limp breasts and wearing rags (as with Avars and Laks), while others regarded it as a cloth ball (the Laks), a tri-cornered hat (the Avars), a buffalo (the Dargwas), a cat (the Dargwas, the Laks, the Akhvaks), a donkey or a billy-goat (the Laks). It has various names in different Dagestani languages and dialects: *Kibisxan, Ilbalxan, Kibiran, Čikabilsal, Kibils,*<sup>26</sup> *K'vibils, Sijha, Simahada* (Dargwa); *Q'ehel, Hic', Nisus, Tamiho, Rəsisə* (Avar); *Suxasulu, Suxalutu, Accalav* (Lak), *Rehe* (incubus with one nostril), *Ciccixaro* (incubus-like demon appearing as a skinny man) (Akhvakh), etc.

There is a certain ambivalence concerning the nature of the house spirits. Thus, the Laks believed that the incubus-like creature *Suxasulu* can protect food storages and the hearth (Gadzhiev 1991: 26-27, 29). The same can be said of the Tabasaran *Rux*, a creature with one nostril and one eye in the forehead, regarded by some as female. She combined features of an incubus and a boggard: it can smother people during their sleep, or can make them rich or abundant in food-stuffs (Seferbekov 2001: 141).

All Dagestani communities share the belief in a demonic woman, by some accounts with big hanging breasts, one of which is brushed over her shoulder. The Laks believed in a vampire-like creature that came out of graves and harmed people: it could smother people during their sleep, could steal an unborn infant from the womb, etc. In different Lak dialects it was called *xxurtama, q'urgalama, q'urtama, q'urt'ma, xartama*. The popular belief had it that people who during their life-time led an indecent way of life, were greedy, or exploited their relatives, after their death turned into such creatures.

The Dagestanis believed also in good holy spirits, who live in difficult to access places. They could take the guise of animals, reptiles or beautiful women, and could help people or protect cattle. The houses were believed to be inhabited by benevolent zoomorphic spirits, who protected the family and the hearth. They were called *kaž* (Avar), *q'une, tar, malč'un* ('snake') (Dargwa), *kini* (Lak), *kine* (Tsez), *šibrit'arin bit'ar* 'basement snakes' or *šavyar-bit'* 'snake Shavghar' (Tabasaran), *məkmagar* 'ceiling snake' (Rutul), *γassagesse beka* (Akhvakh), *λ'uč'alul berka* 'basement snake' (Karata) and often imagined as legged snakes with

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<sup>26</sup> Cp. Armenian *xipil-ik* (with the diminutive suffix *-ik*) 'nightmare' (the parallel was pointed out to me by H. Martirosyan).

golden horns, or sometimes as frogs or lizards. Cf. also Agul *yvadikken* 'boggard', which can be translated as 'living under the ceiling'. But the Dargwa *q'une* was imagined as a tall woman with a big bosom and long red hair, while the Tabasaran word for 'boggard', *Rux bab*, contains *bab/bav* '(grand)mother' (Seferbekov 2001: 140, 141). In some villages these creatures were regarded as kind and attractive females, whilst in others they were of an uncertain gender that could harm people. Snakes establishing a nest in the house were regarded as spirits of dead relatives.

Hunting was one of the favourite occupations of men, and there are beliefs associated with the cult of hunting. For example, Lak *avdal//ovrdal huxču* ('hunter') or Avar *budual* are sometimes imagined as a deer, which is regarded as a sacred animal; in traditional songs deer horns are likened to the sun. Such creatures as Andi *gogoči*, Lezgi *alpab*, Lak *almas xatun* (< Turkic) are believed to be able to live with the hunters (Gadzhiev 1991: 30). The Avars believed in a Forest Beauty with long loose golden hair, who wears a white dress and does harm to people, while the Dargwas believed in anthropomorphic Forest Men. Rutul *Kaškaftar* was the god-protector of woods and nature, who lived in sacred woods. It was imagined as a two-legged creature with one eye as big as a dish, with red tongue, the shining torches as ears, and with all its body iridescent. The Rutuls believed in *T'urun q'ari*—the spirit of the hills, regarded as a giant woman wearing rags, with dishevelled hair, who was able to harm people (Jusupova 1988: 157, 158, 159, 166).

The Avar demonic female character *Untul ebel* 'Mother of Illnesses' was imagined as a naked child, who could make people fall ill or, on the contrary, could heal them (Gadzhiev 1991: 22). Her Rutul counterpart *Jadlanin* was imagined as a beautiful giant woman with long loose hair, who normally wore white clothes and could either heal sick persons, or (especially if dressed in black) make healthy people fall ill (Jusupova 1988: 159-160).

The essential part of the Dagestani traditional economy has always been agriculture, hence the existence of various agricultural rituals and cults. Thus, during the festival welcoming the spring, the Avars made ritual breads in the form of a human figure, a ram, a horse, a bull, or a rooster. In Southern Dagestan, during the processions dedicated to summoning the sun, they used a ritual wooden doll (*günü*), dressed and decorated as a woman. In the ritual of sum-

moning rains there figured a specially made doll called *Dodola*;<sup>27</sup> its Nogay name is *Ändir-Šopaj*, in Dargwa—*Vassamaj*, or *k'at'a bah*, in Lak—*yaral sihu*. The Dargwas used to make female-shaped dolls called *Sutqatun* ('Slow woman'), or *Aminala k'at'a* ('Shovel of Amina'), which were used in processions during the ritual of summoning rains.

The pan-Dagestanian festival of the first plough or the first furrow is now being restored in some parts of Dagestan as a popular spring festival. Traditionally, in the first furrow festival there figured people posing as wolves or bears and using special clothes and masks. The procedure used to include such elements as ritual nakedness or even sexual intercourse in the first-made furrow, symbolizing fertility and the regeneration of the nature.<sup>28</sup>

People	Deity	Description
Avar	<i>Raλ'ul ebel</i>	Mother of the Earth
Avar, Avar, Andi, Tsez, Akhvakh Dargwa Tabasaran Lak Rutul Tsakhur Tat	<i>bečed</i> <i>c'ob</i>  <i>c'alla</i> <i>umčar</i> <i>zal</i> <i>jiniš</i> <i>gəniš</i> <i>ofirogor</i>	supreme god, god-creator
Lezgi Lak	<i>Alpan</i> <i>Vilax</i>	god of fire
Avar, Karata	<i>ladal ebel</i>	Mother of the water
Lak Tsakhur Lezgi	<i>Ass</i> <i>Arš</i> <i>γuc'ar</i>	god of thunder and lightning
Lak	<i>Idor</i>	deity of harvest
Lak	<i>Züvil</i>	deity of rain

<sup>27</sup> The Dagestanian doll *Dodola* and the ritual strikingly resemble the Balkan rituals for summoning rain, whereby girls called *Dodola* would undressed and put on leaves, flowers and herbs to perform the rainmaking ceremony. The Balkan *Dodola* is regarded as being connected with the Slavic cult of the thunder-god Perun (cf. Tokarev 1991: 391). I thank H. Martirosyan for drawing my attention to this Balkan parallel.

<sup>28</sup> Cp. a similar sexual ritual of the first furrow in Armenia (H. Martirosyan, p.c.).

Tabasaran Rutul Tsakhur Lezgi	<i>Gudil</i> <i>Gudi</i> <i>Godej</i> <i>Pešapaj</i>	
Dargwa  Avar Nogay Lak	<i>Zaburaj</i> <i>Vassamaj</i> <i>k'at'a bah</i> <i>Sutqatun</i> <i>Aminala k'at'a</i> <i>Dodola</i> <i>Ändir-šopaj</i> <i>γaral sihu</i>	female deity of rain, or the doll used in the ritual of summoning rains
Karata	<i>Mučulal ila</i> 'Mother of the wind' <i>Mučulal dada</i> 'Father of the wind'	the deity of the wind
Avar	<i>Temirhojas</i>	goddess of weavers
Lak Tsakhur Avar Khvarshi Akhvakh Karata Rutul	<i>Avdal</i>    <i>Ovr dal huxču</i> ('hunter') <i>Abdal</i> <i>Budual</i> <i>Budalla</i> <i>Budalaal</i> <i>Budal(d)i</i> <i>Xidir-Nebi</i>	hunting deity, protector of wild beasts
Akhvakh	<i>T'at'aha</i>	the lord of the forest
Avar  Khvarshi Akhvakh  Karata  Rutul  Lak	<i>Untul ebel</i> 'mother of illnesses' <i>Roqdulaj</i> <i>Leλλnas (išu)</i> 'mother of illnesses' <i>Roλ'eroλλi ila</i> 'mother of illnesses' <i>Ruλ'aril ila</i> 'mother of illnesses' <i>Jadlanin</i> <i>Zalzanagij</i> <i>Acalov</i>	goddess of diseases
Avar Dargwa Lak Tsez	<i>kaž</i> <i>q'une, tar, malč'un</i> <i>kini</i> <i>kine</i>	spirits protecting the family and the hearth

Tabasaran	<i>šavgär</i>	
Rutul	<i>benegjut</i>	
Tat	<i>tušedrašbe</i>	
	<i>numnegir</i>	
Lak	<i>Suxasulu</i>	protector of food storages and the hearth
Rutul	<i>Kaškaftar</i>	the god-protector of woods and nature
Rutul	<i>Sifi-Havalaj</i>	goddess-protector

Table 20. Elements of the Dagestani Pantheon

Khvarshi	<i>qubal</i>	demon, devil
Khvarshi	<i>Risisan</i>	goblin, house-spirit, boggard which strikes an awakening man with his paw
Avar	<i>Rox-dulaj</i>	demonic woman
	<i>Untul-ebel (ebel 'mother')</i>	
	<i>Al-bab (bab 'mother')</i>	
Khvarshi	<i>Qartaj</i>	
Karata	<i>Albastə/i,</i>	
Rutul	<i>T'urun q'ari</i>	
Lak	<i>Accalav</i>	
Akhvakh	<i>λελλise 'one who lives in the water'</i>	water demon
Akhvakh	<i>Xxatu</i>	beautiful mermaid, who seduces men
Dargwa	<i>Kibisxan, Ilbalxan, Kibiran, Čikabilsal, Kibils, K'vibils, Sijha, Simahada</i>	Incubus
	<i>Q'ehel, Hic', Nisus, Tamih, Rəsisə, Suxasulu, Suxalutu</i>	
Avar	<i>Risidobo</i>	
Karata	<i>Risidobo</i>	
Lak	<i>Accalav</i>	
Tabasaran	<i>Rux</i>	
Lak	<i>xxurttama, q'urgalama, q'urtama, q'urt'ma, xartama</i>	vampire-like creature, graveyard demon, who scares people who lead a sinful life
Lezgi	<i>malkamut</i>	
Avar	<i>q'av</i>	

Bezhta Tabasaran	<i>q'av</i> <i>Kuruzai//Kuruzan</i>	
Tabasaran	<i>kaftar-janavar</i>	werewolf <sup>29</sup>
Avar Lak Lezgi Agul Andi Tat	<i>Avliħune</i> <i>Almas-xatun</i> <i>Al-pab</i> <i>Albasti</i> <i>Gogoči</i> <i>Dedej-ol (dedej 'mother')</i>	demon stealing a foetus from the mother's womb, or doing harm to the baby
Tabasaran	<i>Jarsel</i> <i>Al</i>	demon killing a young mother after childbirth, when she is left alone in the birthing room
Tabasaran	<i>Meze</i>	demon impersonating children's skin diseases
Lak Tsakhur Tabasaran Lezgi, Rutul	<i>Kaftar-kari</i> <i>Alna-jed</i> <i>Kuš-kaftar</i> <i>Kaş-kaftar</i>	anthropomorphic evil demon

Table 21. Elements of the Dagestani Pandemonium

*Georgian traditional cults*

Despite early Christianity (from the 4th c.), the Georgians never really forgot their traditional cults, merging some of the Christian elements and characters with the earlier beliefs to produce, typically for many Caucasian traditions, an amalgam of elements of both pantheistic and monotheistic systems. Especially well preserved were traditional cults in conservative mountainous regions of Georgia, such as Tusheti, Pshavi, or Khevsureti. All deities of the East Georgian pantheon were perceived as anthropomorphic creatures with a strong propensity to metamorphosis (Bardavelidze 1957: 10).

The Supreme God Ghmerti (*ymerti*) was imagined as abiding in the skies, sitting on a golden throne by the gates of the sky. Ghmerti was the supreme law-maker and maintained order both in the skies and on the earth, hence his epithet *Morige* ("On Duty"). By the 'gate(s) of God' (*yvtis k'ari*), always after sun-set, there sometimes assembled the other deities and even the evil spirits *kadzhis*, and it is there where the Supreme God would hold a court examining the arguments between the subordinate deities. Moreover, Ghmerti decided the fate of

<sup>29</sup> Cp. *kaftar* in various Dagestani languages with Arm. *k'awt'ar* 'hyena', 'witch', Azeri *kaftar*, all from Persian *kaftar* 'hyena' (H. Martirosyan, p.c.).

the yearly harvest; if angry, he could send hail on the crops or illnesses on people.

The sun-goddess Mze (also known as *Mze-kali* ‘sun-woman’, *Dye dyesindeli* ‘present day’ in Khevsurian, and *p’irimze* ‘sun-faced’ in Mtiulian) was accompanied by angels (*angelozni*//*c’mida angelozni* ‘angels’/‘holy (‘clean’) angels’). Her epithet, reflecting her main function, was ‘the shrine of the field’ (*mindvris žvari*); she could rule the clouds, and the grain harvest was largely dependent on her benevolence. If she was angry with people, she could destroy the harvest, but in a good mood she would send good weather and protect the harvest (Bardavelidze 1957: 2, 10, 15, 17-8, 31).

The other powerful god was *K’viria*. His epithets are *xmelt mouravi* ‘the ruler of the dry lands’ or *k’araviani* ‘the one having a marquee’. *Kviria* was door-keeper to *Ghmerti* and used fire to punish sinful people. He was an intermediary between *Ghmerti* and his sons (*γvtis-švili*) and served as the chief of the angels.

We have thus a triad of high ranking gods, headed by the supreme god *Ghmerti*. It is supposed that *Ghmerti* was the god of some nightly luminary and regarded as male, whereas Mze (‘sun’)—was the deity of the daily luminary and regarded as female.

The lower ranking deities included communal/local patrons and territorial-ethnic or tribal deities. Local deities could be subdivided into *žvari* (lit. ‘shrine, cross’), *xat’i* (lit. ‘image, icon’), and *γvisšvili* (< *ymrtis švili* ‘god’s son’), or *γvtis-nasaxi* ‘one created in the image of god’, *γvtisnabadebi* (< *ymrtis nabadebi* ‘born of god’). This shows that local deities were perceived as being in kin relationship to God (Bardavelidze 1957: 2, 3).

An example of a communal deity was the Pshav female deity *Tamar akim-dedupali* (Tamar, the patroness (*dedupali*) of doctors (*akimi*) and healing). More local territorial Pshav communes had eleven patron saints (*xat’i*). Still lower in rank were the deities of separate village communes, as well as family and clan communal units, with strict observance of the hierarchy between them.

The tribal deities included, for example, the pan-Pshav deity *Lašaris žvari*, the pan-Khevsurian deity *saymrto gudanis žvari*, the pan-Mokhebian deity *sameba//samebis xat’i* (lit. ‘Trinity’, ‘Trinity’s icon’, under Christian influence), and the pan-Mtiulian and Gudamaqarian deity *Lomisas xat’i* (‘Lion’s shrine’). The major deities of the Khevsurian pantheon were *K’op’ala*, his blood brothers *Šubnuri* and *Xaxmatis žvari*. The Khevsurian lower deities included *dobilni* in the guise of very small children, who accompanied sun-beams during the sun-rise and sun-

set; they attacked mainly women and children and were the cause of their illnesses.

Pshav hunters dedicated themselves to the patron spirit of the place, called “mother of this place” (Čursin 1957: 38). The Pshav and Khevsurian deity-blacksmith *P'irkuš(i)s žvari* was associated also with thunder clouds and the lightning (Bardavelidze 1957: 5, 12, 17, 23, 111).

The will of the god was made known through *meene* or *kadagi*, the custodians of tribal or communal shrines. A person called *meene* or *kadagi* used to sit down in the sanctuary (*žvari*) during the New Year's festival and make prophecy on behalf of god's sons (*γvtis-švili*) about what happened by the gates of Ghmerti, whether the community had to face hail, bad harvest or illnesses, enemy attack, bloodshed or death. The custodians of the shrines had to know sacred texts (*xucoba*, *sadidebeltaj* ‘glorification’), which were transmitted orally from one generation of custodians to the other; in these texts the gods were mentioned in strict hierarchy, starting from Ghmerti, then Mze and Kviria. The soothsayer (*xuces-meene*) was feared, as his words could be fulfilled, as believed, by god's sons (*γvtis-švilni*). After his death, the soothsayer's grave could become a shrine (Bardavelidze 1957: 4, 5, 16, 32).

The gods were assisted by spirits having the appearance of wolves (*esaul*), snakes (*gvelisperni*), hunting-dogs (*mc'evarni*), or very small children (*dobilni*); the other assistants included *laš Karni* ‘fighters’, various angels, etc. The Great Mother and goddess of fertility Nana was imagined as having fractions represented by *bat'onebi* ‘masters’, or by angels.

The pagan sanctuaries (*žvar-i*) were situated in sacred trees/groves; they represented constructions built on more or less flat surfaces and consisted of a ritual tower (*k'ošk'i*) containing niches or bays, the central room/temple (*darbazi*), a barn (*beyeli*) or a brewery (*salude*), some other apartments for the personnel serving the temple and finally ‘the gate of the shrine’ (*žvris//xat'is k'ari*). The East Georgians regarded falling meteorites as the flying *xat'i/žvari*, which move from one place to another.

The important element of the agricultural cult was the ritual of summoning rain, where there figured a cross, clothed as a woman or a bride, called in the Tush dialect *sac'vimara gugai* ‘rain doll’.

The hunting cult included such characters as the Rachan ‘Angel of the rocks’ and the ‘shepherd of the beasts’—the hunting god, sometimes identical with St George (Virsaladze 1976: 30), cf. also the Khevsurian god of hunting *Očopintre*.

East Georgian <i>Xaxmatis žvari</i>	god-patron of fertility and reproduction of humans and animals
Pshav, Khevsurian <i>P'irkuši(sžvari)</i>	deity-blacksmith
Gurian <i>Aguna</i> , Racha, Lechkhumi <i>Angura</i> <sup>30</sup>	deity-patron of wine-growing
Pshav <i>Tamar akimdedupali</i>	Tamar, the patroness of doctors and healing
<i>Bombya//Basila</i> (probably < St Basil)	phallic deity, patron of fertility, responsible for the proliferation of house animals and men, and for the harvest of cereals
<i>Elia</i>	god of thunder and lightning
<i>Nana</i>	Great Mother, goddess of fertility, who had fractions ( <i>bat'onebi</i> or angels)
<i>Kal-Babar//Barbare</i> (St Barbara)	goddess of sun
Khevsurian <i>Očopintre</i>	god of hunting
<i>angelozni//c'mida angelozni</i>	'angels//holy angels'
<i>Giorgi</i> (< St George)	pagan deity
<i>Gudani</i>	pagan deity
<i>Iaxsar</i>	pagan deity
<i>Samžimari</i> ('necklace-wearer') <sup>31</sup>	pagan goddess with golden hair

Table 22. The Georgian Pantheon

<i>kaži</i>	evil spirit
<i>devi</i>	evil mythical giant
<i>ali</i>	demonic woman
<i>K'op'ala</i>	the lord of demons
<i>Pridon</i>	Demon
<i>Muza</i>	mythological giant

Table 23. The Georgian Demons

#### *The Svan traditional cults*

Of all Kartvelian peoples the Svans, thanks no doubt to their isolated mountainous lifestyle, maximally close to, and dependent on, Nature, have preserved their

<sup>30</sup> Bardavelidze (1957: 74) associates these names with Circassian *aguna*, magical cask with the drink of the Narts and with Persian *angu:r* 'grapes'.

<sup>31</sup> Etymology by G. Charachidzé (cited in Tuite 2007: 169).

traditional religious system much better as compared to any other region of contemporary Georgia. The male triad of the Svan pantheon is the supreme god *Xoša yermet//Xoša yērbāt*, his vizier *Taringzel//Targlezer* and the moon god *Žgæræg*, patron and protector of people (especially males), augmented by the female goddess of motherhood, fertility of the land and cereals *Lamaria* (St Mary). The supreme god is regarded as the lord of the skies (*upal deceš*) and the universe (*Pusnabuāsdīš*), the great creator of the world (Bardavelidze 1957: 14, 44, 171, 172).

Each Svan village or even a quarter of a community had its own shrine. The sanctuary was looked after by its own custodian called ‘key-keeper’ (*mok’il//mek’il*), who kept the key of the shrine and its treasury. The key-keeper had a rather high status, he could replace the priest (*bap’*), and sometimes he himself was a legitimate priest.

<i>yērbet//xoša yermet//xoša yērbāt</i>	Supreme God
<i>Barbol//Barbal//Kal-Babar</i>	goddess of sun (St Barbara), also of contagious diseases and the fertility of cattle
<i>Taringzel//Tarinzel//Targlezer</i>	deity, vizier of the great god
<i>Pust/d//Pusnabuasd/Pusnabuāsdīš</i>	supreme deity of big cattle//great god
<i>Žgæræg//Molli Žgæræg</i> (< St George) <sup>32</sup>	the moon god, patron and protector of people, especially males, patron of hunters
<i>Tulepia-melia//Melia-Telepia</i>	deity of fertility
<i>Tar-Bednier</i> <sup>33</sup>	deity of sheep
<i>Lamaria</i> (St Mary)	goddess of motherhood, fertility of land and cereals, of the hearth
<i>Daal</i>	goddess of wild animals in the mountains (cf. Nakh <i>Deela</i> )
<i>Q’ur-ša</i> (‘black-ear’)	dog of the goddess of hunting
<i>Apsat</i>	patron of birds and fish
<i>Ber-šišwliš</i>	supreme god of hunting and wild animals
<i>Ali</i>	female evil forest spirit
<i>Mamberi</i>	patron of wolves

Table 24. The traditional Svan Pantheon

<sup>32</sup> From Megrelian *žgiri givargi* ‘Good St George’ (A. Shanidze’s etymology, cited in Tuite 2005: 165).

<sup>33</sup> Probably of the same origin as Abx *Ajtar*, cf. above.

The Svans had various calendar festivals, like *Lipanali*—a New Year's animistic festival of spirits of ancestors, the phallic ritual Melia-Telepia, connected with the fertility and nature cycles: the rite of *sakmisaj*, where figured a wooden phallus (Chartolani 1988: 188, 189, 190), etc.

Hunting played a crucial role in the Svan economy and was a regular occupation of males. The Svans know the Goddess of wild animals *Daal*, imagined as a beautiful naked woman with long red hair, who can adopt the guise of an animal. She was accompanied and assisted by her dog *Qursha*, born from the egg of an eagle. By cutting Daal's hair, the hunter could escape her (Virsaladze 1976: 30). The other characters of the hunting cult are the supreme god of hunting and wild animals *Ber-šišwliš*, the god of forest animals—the forest angel *cxekiš angelvez*, the patron of birds and fish *Apsat*. In prayers and ritual incantations the Svans mentioned the names of some of the gods together with the indication of the location of their abode: Daal of the rocks, Apsat of the rocks (Virsaladze 1976: 30). It is believed that the female evil forest spirit *ali* can, if content with the people, tie up the wolf's jaws, thus protecting the cattle, or, when angry with them, she can set the wolf on their cattle (Bardavelidze 1957: 47).

Typically for a hunting society, the Svans worshipped the big predator, the wolf, regarding it as a totem or a sacred animal, *Mamberi* being the patron of wolves. It was forbidden to kill the wolf, and the one who by chance happened to have killed one, had to apologize for its death, bewail it as a member of his own family and bury it (Bardavelidze 1957: 45). On the other hand, the Svans practised the ritual killing of the wolf with the subsequent procession in the village; the ritual was called *Ašangelo//Šašangelo* (cf. Georgian *samgelo* 'for the wolf, 'pertaining to wolf') (Bardavelidze 1957: 45).

#### *Megrelian traditional cults*

The Megrelians, like their neighbours the Abkhazians, Svans and Western Georgians, are characterized by a natural syncretism of traditional pantheistic cults with superimposed Christianity. Some elements of their pantheon are depicted in the following table.

<i>yoronti</i>	Supreme God
<i>tkaši-mapa</i>	goddess of hunting (lit. 'the queen of the tree(s)')
<i>mesepe</i>	masters of animals
<i>galenišiši orta</i>	deity ( <i>galenišiši</i> 'of the exterior')

<i>Žažu</i>	stone woman <sup>34</sup>
<i>očo-k'oči</i>	the forest (lit. 'goat') man
<i>č'ink'a</i>	goblin

Table 25. Elements of Megrelian Pantheon

*Armenian traditional cults*

Armenians embraced Christianity quite early (4th century), and the Christian creed became the integral part of their ethnic identity, the Armenian Apostolic Church providing spiritual guidance for the whole nation. Such profound devotion to the monotheistic doctrine, which acquired the status of a pan-national ideology over the periods of struggle against Zoroastrian Iran and later numerous Muslim incursions, left little place for the remnants of the heathen past, pushed firmly into the realm of folklore, superstitions and folk beliefs, or at best acquiring the superficial attire of Christian rites.

<i>Vahagn</i>	god of thunder and lightning, warrior god, dragon-slayer <sup>35</sup>
<i>Aramazd</i>	Supreme god, god of thunder and lightning
<i>Anahit</i>	goddess, daughter/wife of Aramazd
<i>Nanē</i>	daughter of <i>Anahit</i>
<i>Mihr</i>	fire-god, Aramazd's son (< Iranian <i>Mithra</i> )
<i>Astlik</i> ('little star')	goddess of love, beauty and water, goddess of Venus, the mistress of <i>Vahagn</i>
<i>Tir//Tiwr</i>	pagan god of scribes, with some features of a sun-god (Petrosian 2007: 184)

Table 26. Elements of Armenian Pantheon

Some of the formerly pagan rites became associated with Christian festivities and are still widely celebrated—for example, the pagan festival of water, plants and fertility *Vardavar*, later associated with Christ's Transfiguration. Cf. also the popular cult of *Barekendan*, associated with Christian Shrove, the popular Festival of Flowers or the harvest cult, called *Hambarjum* and associated by the church with the Ascension of Christ.

<i>dew</i>	mythical monster
<i>ar(a)lez</i>	half-men, half dogs, spirits, who descend from the sky in order to lick the wounds of those killed in the battle, thus reviving them

<sup>34</sup> Cf. the name of the Abkhazian goddess of harvest *Žaža*.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. A. Petrosian (2007: 181).

<i>k'až(k')</i> <sup>36</sup>	demons
<i>oguz Tork'</i> (or <i>Turk'</i> ) <i>Anget(eay)</i>	mythical giants
<i>xipilik</i>	incubus with hollowed palm of the hand, who causes nightmares
<i>xoeželoz</i>	incubus, nightmare
<i>al(k')</i>	evil spirit
<i>žanavar</i>	vampire
<i>Lekion</i>	monster-fish
<i>višap</i>	ichthonic monster, resembling a winged dragon or a winged snake and associated with the cult of water; <i>višap</i> eats the sun, which causes eclipses

Table 27. Elements of the Armenian Pandemonium

The other characters of the traditional Pandemonium are devil-blacksmiths, mermaids, half-people, half-fishes, witches. The vampire-like creature *gornapštik* was imagined as a dog or a cat, which came out of grave and frightened people, sometimes turning them mad or causing their death. Those who were buried without the observance of Christian ceremony or the souls of non-Christians (Turks or Kurds) could become such creatures. The Armenians also worshipped sacred trees. As in other parts of the Caucasus, in the ritual of summoning rain they used a specially made doll called *Nurin*.

*A common Caucasian mythological system?*

It would certainly be a challenging task to investigate whether it is possible to reconstruct the contours of a pan-Caucasian pre-Christian and pre-Islamic religious system, or whether such a system ever existed. On this theme the early 20th century Russian-German Caucasologist Adolf Dirr (1915: 13) wrote: "In general, while studying the most ancient mythological concepts and beliefs of the Caucasians, one cannot but think that there was once in the Caucasus one religion, which was then changed and partially replaced by the historical religions; but it is still preserved by many Caucasian peoples in the guise of some remnants, superstitions and in folklore". The Russian Soviet ethnologist Grigorij Chursin (1957: 63) also noted that "we have some grounds to claim that the significant part of the Caucasian peoples, on both sides of the Main Chain, including here also the Kartvelians, had in the past similar religious beliefs, connected with the worship of thunder and lightning, with similar forms of the cult".

<sup>36</sup> -k' here and below in *al(k')* is a (petrified) plural suffix.

Indeed, the comparison of mythologies in various parts of the Caucasus does reveal striking parallels. As expected, we certainly observe interesting and close affinities between the traditional systems of the neighbouring communities. But even comparing the traditions of the Caucasian communities situated much farther from each other—taking, for instance, Abkhazia and Armenia—we sometimes find amazing parallels, some of which, admittedly, can be of a broader areal nature.

Comparative analysis of the mythological systems of all Caucasian communities does yield interesting results and can bring us to the necessity of postulating a largely common pre-monotheistic heritage of the Caucasian peoples, irrespective of their ethnic and linguistic affiliations. It may well be that, parallel to the postulation of the Caucasian language union or *Sprachbund* (Chirikba 2008), we have no less reason to consider the reality of a common Caucasian mythological paradigm. A pan-Caucasian (pre-Christian and pre-Islamic) mythological and cultural union, or, in other words, a Caucasian mythological area unites both close and distant parts of the Caucasus within a specific set of mythological features shared by the majority of Caucasian cultures and traditions. Though many of these features can also be found beyond the geographical limits of the Caucasus, it is their *set* or *cluster* which is *specific* to the Caucasus area and which allows us to speak of the Caucasian mythological area.

In order to substantiate the idea of a pan-Caucasian mythological system, one has to set up an inventory of the traits common to traditional systems of all the Caucasian peoples, including those speaking non-Caucasian languages (Ossetians, Armenians, Kumyks, Karachay-Balkar, Azeris, etc.), and reconstruct the main elements of such a paradigm. Many elements undoubtedly have a broader areal context, going beyond the geographical confines of the Caucasus area.

The tentative contours of such a pan-Caucasian system would include the following traits:

1. The separation of the world into three horizontally situated realms: upper/celestial (populated by gods), middle (populated by humans, animals and plants), and the lower world (or underworld, populated by demons, devils, dragons and other chthonic creatures).
2. The world tree, which connects the three worlds.
3. The presence of a Supreme god, aided by his lieutenants.
4. Sacred groves, trees, woods and mountains.
5. The Moon as a male deity and the Sun as a female deity.

6. A dragon or a demon eats the sun or the moon, thus causing eclipses. People scare the dragon by creating much noise.
7. Deities such as patrons of the sea, rivers, ravines, caves, woods, mountains.
8. The thunder-god.
9. The hunting god.
10. The cattle and procreation god.
11. The rain god, and the ritual of summoning rain using a doll brought to the river as a probable replacement of human sacrifice.
12. The smithy god and the important role of the smith.
13. The harvest and agricultural god or goddess.
14. The mermaid who seduces lonely travellers.
15. The forest man and woman (*almasty, al*).
16. The sacred animal (e.g. cow or bull) sent to people as a divine sacrifice.
17. Incubus with a hole in the palm of the hand or with one or no nostrils.
18. The house snakes as spirits protecting the home.
19. The vampire-like creatures.
20. The birth of a hero from a rock or a stone.
21. A Prometheus-like hero punished by god by chaining him in the cave or on a rock (Abkhaz *Abrsk'jal*, Circassian *Nasren-žac'je*, Georgian *Amirani*, Lak *Amir*, Ossetian *Amran*, Armenian *Mher*).

The main mechanism for the formation of the Caucasian mythological area was the dispersal of religious beliefs, cults and rituals across the areas populated by the Caucasian communities living in a similar geographical, cultural and economic environment, characterized by similar sedentary patriarchal systems and the important role of agriculture, animal husbandry, hunting and warfare. There is no doubt that convergence between the various Caucasian peoples on linguistic and mythological levels involved also such systems as folklore, customary law and behavioural patterns. This allows us to see the Caucasus area holistically, as a well-defined union of linguistic, mythological, cultural and folklore systems, which can be assumed under the common name "Caucasian civilization".

Another additional factor, which strengthened the similarities between the various Caucasian communities, was the commonality of external influences. All North Caucasian and some South Caucasian cultures share a common Islamic superstrate religious and cultural system, and the same can be said of a common Christian superstrate layer for some North Caucasian and South Caucasian cultures. It is remarkable that after the spread of the monotheistic religions, many traditional systems of the Caucasus, functioning parallel to the mainstream de-

nominations, incorporated rather harmoniously some of the elements of the new, superstrate systems.

*Local mythological systems: the case of the lightning deity Čop(p)a*

Like the Caucasian linguistic union, whereby apart from the pan-Caucasian linguistic area there exist also parallel local *Sprachbünde* (cf. Chirikba 2008: 68), we can clearly see in the Caucasus also the local mythological areas having traits common to neighbouring cultures, which form a lower-level mythological union. These local areas are:

- (a) The Western Caucasus area (Circassia, Abkhazia, North Ossetia, Karachay-Balkaria);
- (b) The Central Caucasus area (Chechnya, Ingushetia, partially North Ossetia);
- (c) The Eastern Caucasus area (Dagestan);
- (d) The Kartvelian area (Georgia, Svanetia, Megrelia, partially South Ossetia and Lazistan);
- (e) The South Caucasus area (Azerbaijan, Armenia).

As an example of a local mythological union I shall take the cult of lightning, widespread in the past in the Western Caucasus, including Circassia, Abkhazia, Karachay-Balkaria and (North) Ossetia. This is the area where the influence of either Christianity or Islam has always been weak and where the traditional beliefs have been preserved much better than in the majority of the other regions of the Caucasus. Though modern-day Ossetia *in sensu stricto* is not a part of the Western Caucasus area, historically speaking, until the Mongol invasion in the 13th century, the Ossetians used to live much more to the west, in the Western Caucasus, directly bordering on Circassians and Abkhazians.

Let us turn to the Abkhazian ritual *Atlar-č'opa*, carried out when a person was killed by lightning. The victim's body was put on a specially made high wooden platform, and a round dance was performed by people all dressed in white clothes. The dance was accompanied by the song "Atlar-č'opa", sang in two parties.<sup>37</sup> One party sang "Ajtat atlar", while the other replied by "atlar č'owpar"

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<sup>37</sup> The name of the song has variants: *A-f-r-aš<sup>0</sup>a* 'the song of Afy (the thunder-god)', or *A-nc<sup>0</sup>a-r-aš<sup>0</sup>a* 'the song of God'; note the 3rd p. plural possessive prefix *r-*: 'thunder-god/god-their-song', which indicates that gods were regarded as plural personalities. Besides the ritual consecrated to the lightning strike, this song was also used during the ritual connected with popular healing of the people sick with neurological disorders known as St-Vitus-Dance or *chorea* (an abnormal involuntary movement disorder) and called in Abkhaz *aršəšra* 'fever', lit. 'boiling'. Cf. its description in Akaba (1984: 71).

(the words *atlar* and *č'opa*, *č'owpar* have no meaning in Abkhaz). During the procedure, the people were not supposed to show any sign of grief, in order not to cause the anger of the thunder god Afy. The same ritual was performed if the man was wounded by lightning, or if an animal was killed by it (cf. Chursin 1957: 55-63). As a sacrifice, a white he-goat was slain (Akaba 1984: 74).

This ritual has obvious areal dimensions, as it reveals close parallels in the neighbouring (West) Caucasian communities.<sup>38</sup> G. Chursin noted a similar ritual reflecting the cult of the lightning and thunder as performed by the Circassians, in which the thunder god Shible and Jaliya (St Elias) were mentioned. According to him, the Kabardians used to perform the round dance *čoppa* when somebody was struck by lightning (Chursin 1957: 58, 61). As described by M. Kantaria (cited from Tuite 2004: 147), 'Should a person be slain by a thunderbolt, no signs of mourning were permitted; the survivors consoled themselves with the knowledge that [thunder-god. – V. Ch.] Shible had brought good fortune to their family by his touch'. <...> The womenfolk performed a round dance in honor of Shible over 7 days, while singing a song to this deity including the refrain: *cop'ai, elari, ilia'*.

A similar cult existed among the Turkic-speaking neighbours of the Kabardians, the Karachays and Balkars. When somebody was struck by the lightning, the people would organize a ritual procedure accompanied with a song, which included the words "*čoppa*",<sup>39</sup> or "*Elliri* (St Elias) *čoppa*" (Chursin 1957: 61). There exists a sacred grove in Karachay called *Čoppa-č'ila* '[belonging to] the performers of the dance *choppa*', which is revered by the inhabitants of the Chegem gorge. Also known are sacred stones called *čoppanu taši* 'stone of *choppa*'.<sup>40</sup> It seems that of all the Caucasian cultures it is Karachay and Balkaria where the cult of *choppa* played the most prominent role, as witnessed by its description in Karaketov (1995).

The Ossetians used to perform a very similar ritual, which included the dance around the victim struck by the lightning and the singing of the song *coppaj*. The song was sung in chorus and comprised the following words: "*O, Elia, Elia, ældari coppaj*"; *Elia* is St Elias, and *ældar* means 'lord, prince'. It was not allowed to show any sign of grief, as it would anger Elia. The victim's coffin was put on a platform and kept there for 8 days (Abaev 1958: 314).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. detailed descriptions of this West Caucasian cult in Karaketov (1995) and Tuite (2004).

<sup>39</sup> Some Karachays pronounce the word as *šoppa* (Karaketov 1995: 119, 150).

<sup>40</sup> Cf. <http://karachays.com/index/0-265>.

It is probable that, due to a much better attestation of the cult of the thunder- and lightning god *čoppa(j)* among the Karachays and Balkars, the *čop(p)a//čop(p)aj* ritual reflects an old Bulgarian or Qypchak/Bulgarian thunder or rain deity, which through the intermediary of Hazars/Huns and/or Karachay-Balkars spread in the Western Caucasus among the Ossetians, Abkhazians and partially the Kabardians. Yet the word *čoppa(j)* does not seem to have any obvious Turkic etymology.

One of the possible connections is seen by some in the Iranian languages (cf. Kurdish *čōpī, čūpī* ‘mass dance, in which participants are dancing hand in hand, forming a circle or a semi-circle’,<sup>41</sup> *čōpīčamar bastin* ‘to form a circle around the dead body in order to perform a funeral dance’, and with a metathesis: *čamar-čōpī* ‘a funeral round dance performed together by men and women around the deceased’s body’ (Tsabolov 2001: 244)). R. Tsabolov further connects the Kurdish word with Baluchi *čāp* ‘dance’, Persian *čūpī* ‘round dance with kerchiefs, performed by men and women in the western part of Iran’, Luri *čupī* ‘local Luri dance’, Bakhtiari *čūpī* ‘mourning ritual round dance’, Laki *čūpī* ‘mourning melody’. He tentatively mentions here also Sanskrit *cópati* ‘(it) moves’.

Apart from the Western Caucasus, the term *čop(p)a* is attested in Nogay *Āndir-Šopaj*, designating the doll used in the ritual of summoning rains. Note in this connection that besides being used in the ritual devoted to the lightning’s victim, the Ossetian word *coppaj* was also used in the song performed during the ritual of summoning rains in the times of drought (cf. Chursin 1957: 61). The Karachays too addressed the prayer for rain to the deity *Čoppa*. Nogay *Šopaj* is regarded as being connected with the West Caucasian name of the god *Čoppa*, whereas the part *Āndir* is unclear; Jarlykapov (1998: 44) suggests that it may somehow be related to the name of *Indra*, the Indian God of War, Storms, and Rainfall.<sup>42</sup>

M. Karaketov points out that outside the Caucasus a ritual for summoning rain called *čupke-kiju* (translated as ‘the pouring water on Chupke’) is known among a branch of the Volga Tatars known as *Kryashens* (Russian *кряшены*, i.e. ‘Baptized’). Also, a similar ritual *čup-botkası* was known among the other group of Orthodox Christian Tatars called *Nagajbak*, or *Nağajbäk* (Karaketov 1995: 102),

<sup>41</sup> The resemblance of the Caucasian *čop(p)a* with the name of the Kurdish round dance *čopi* was noticed by me in 1976; it was also noted in Tuite (2004: 152) and in Tsabolov (2001: 244). Cf. tentative etymologies of *čop(p)a* in Tuite (*ibid.*).

<sup>42</sup> But cf. probably Karachay *indur* ‘threshing floor’ (?).

who live now in the Urals and are regarded as descendants of either a Nogay-Qypchak tribe, or of Kazan Tatars.

The Old Armenian text of “The History of the Country Aluank” (i.e. Caucasian Albania), attributed (in its main part) to the author of the middle of the 8th c. Movses Kalankatuatsi (or Dasxurantsi), contains a word which can be connected with the term under discussion. While referring to the baptizing of the Turkic-speaking Huns (or Khazars ?), living in the North Caucasus, by Albanian bishop Israyel, the author mentions the heathen “thunderous roar of the graveyard *čopa*” (cf. Kalankatuatsi 1984: 131), which had to be demolished. The English translation of this passage made by C. Dowsett reads somewhat differently: “the so-called royal graves of the thunder *č’op’ayk’*” (cit. from Kalankatuatsi 1984: 213). Note also the more recent R. Bedrosian’s translation: “the graves of the thunder-*ch’op’ayk’*”<sup>43</sup>

In the Armenian original, the word is used in the form of the plural genitive (*č’op’ayicd*), which, according to Sh. Smbatian (cf. his comment on p. 213 in Kalankatuatsi 1984), presupposes the singular *č’op’ay*. The Armenian commentators of this passage, including Smbatian (*ibid.*), explain the word *č’op’ay* as referring either to a horse skull, or to the head, skin and bones of a horse given as sacrifice to sacred trees.

In the beliefs of the Karachays, probably the close linguistic relatives of the Huns, we can see an obvious parallel to the connection of Hun *čopay* with the sacred grove/graveyard in Kalankatuatsi’s account. One may compare the description of the Karachay ritual *čoppa* performed around the sacred pine-tree *žangız-terek*. During the dance around the tree, the participants asked it to send down to them a rich harvest, the rainy spring, the sunny summer and warm autumn. The ritual was accompanied by the leading of a goat kid around the sacred tree. At the end of the ritual the priest slew the goat and it was prepared and eaten by all the participants. Its head and skin were hanged at the tree and left there.<sup>44</sup>

Among the Karachays the ritual song *choppa* was performed also around a mad person (Karaketov 1995: 45); cf. the association of the Abkhazian dance/song *č’opa* with mental illness *chorea*. The Ossetians, in their turn, associated this term with compulsive movements (Abaev 1958: 315). In Abkhazia, in case of

<sup>43</sup> <http://rbedrosian.com/md14.htm#42>.

<sup>44</sup> <http://karachays.com/index/0-265>.

a mental illness, they invited the augur (*ac'aaj'ə*), who would confirm that the family was visited by the “great lord Afy” and give recommendation on the cure. Then they performed a ritual devoted to Afy, which consisted in prayers, the slaying of a white he-goat, its eating by the members of the procedure, the singing of “the Gods’ song’ (*Anc<sup>o</sup>a ras<sup>o</sup>a*), the raising of a pole with the skin of the slain goat attached to it, and the sacred round dance, with people jumping and circling to the left and to the right (Inal-İpa 1965: 532-533). The attaching of the goat skin to the raised pole is similar to its hanging on the tree by the Karachays and to the horse skins given to sacred trees by the Huns.

Another enigmatic mythological term contained in the book by Kalankatua-tsi, which can have relevance to the topic under discussion, is the heathen god of thunder and lightning *Kuar*, worshipped by the Huns. This is the relevant passage from the “History”: “if flashes of thundering fiery lightning and ethereal fire struck a man or some material object, they considered him or it to be some sort of sacrifice to a god *K'u(w)ar*” (Dasxuranc'i 1961: 155-156). There is no consensus among the commentators on this passage as to the etymology of the name *Ku(w)ar*. P. Golden (2007: 131, fn 38) suggests that it is either a corruption of Iranian *xwar* ‘sun’, or Turkic *\*köġer* < *kök* ‘sky’, *er* ‘man’.

A striking isogloss to this Hun thunder-god is the enigmatic phrase *Temər-q<sup>o</sup>ara* used in the Abkhaz ritual song “*Atlar č'opa*”<sup>45</sup> mentioned above: “*Atlar č'opa Temər-q<sup>o</sup>ara*”. The first part of the compound is obviously Turkic *temir* ‘iron’, to yield ‘the iron Quara’, the name of the metal being probably used as epithet. It is quite tempting to connect Hun *Ku(w)ar* with Abkhaz *Quara*, as it is being used in the ritual song where the term *č'opa* is also used, which parallels Hun *č'opay*. The 19th century author in the newspaper “Kavkaz” (1873, no. 150) gives valuable information about the meaning of this now forgotten word: “The word *Temurgvara* [*Temər-q<sup>o</sup>ara* - V.Ch.] is the name of the deity imagined as a venerable white-haired old man, riding a winged horse, which by the thumping of its powerful hooves produces thunder, while the bare curved sword flashes with lightning. The Abkhaz thunderer is constantly after the evil spirit, unceasingly flying from one object to another in the guise of a fly, and if it happens to

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<sup>45</sup> The forms of this term differ in various isolects as to the absence or presence of glottalization, as well as some other phonetic features: *č'op'a*, *č'opa*, *č'owpa*, *at'lar-č'owpa*, *at'lar-č'opa*, *atlar-č'opa*, *ot'lar-č'op'a*, *etlar č'owpar*; the *-r* in *č'owpar* is probably due to the alliteration with *at'lar*. The part *at'lar*||*atlar* is plausibly explained by V. Abaev (1958: 316) as Ossetic *aldar* ‘lord, prince’ (cf. the phrase *aldary coppaj* ‘the Lord Coppaj’).

sit on a man, then the curved sword of Temurgvara will not spare him too, though involuntarily. The one struck by lightning, as a victim of the deity, if he dies, is regarded as being blessed; otherwise he is brought to consciousness in the following way". And then follows the ritual described above (Aguazhba, Achugba 2005: 74-75).

Though the lexical counterpart of Hun *Kuar*, Abkhaz *Temər Q<sup>o</sup>ara* does not seem to be attested in Ossetic, it can tentatively be seen in the Karachay deity of thunder *Qauar-xan//Kürüju//Krüu//Kürüu-xan* (*xan* 'lord'), whose name is used in the ritual song addressed to the deity of wind *Gorij*.<sup>46</sup> The deity is asked by the power of Choppa not to make thunder, to stop lightning from flashing, and to drive away the Old Woman-Drought (Karaketov 1995: 96). In Dagestan the Lak supreme god *Kuara* (Seferbekov 2009: 34) can also have the same origin. N. Dzhidalaev (1970) suggested the connection of Lak *Kuara* with the Georgian deity of harvest *K'viria* and the Urartian deity *Kvera*. Yet, the comparison of all these theonyms is so far only hypothetical.

Interestingly, my mother (born in 1939 in the village of Zwandrypsh of the Gudauta region of Abkhazia) remembers the song performed during the ritual around a lightning-struck person with somewhat different words: *ót'lar č'óp'a, ssir t'ap'ánč'ja* 'Otlar<sup>47</sup> Chopa, the wonderful gun'<sup>48</sup>. She indicated that the gun could be a metaphor for the lightning. I so far was unable to find these same words in any folklore texts at my disposal, whether published or unpublished, but they may well represent the remains of the original song in which (the god?) *Quara* also figured. For a semantic parallel to the metaphoric depiction of lightning as a weapon compare the Abkhaz expression *Š'aš<sup>o</sup>ə r-x<sup>o</sup>əmp'al* 'the arrow of [smithy-god] Shashwy', which, according to Ardzinba (1988: 277), implies a lightning. Cp. also Nogay *jasın ok* (*ok* 'arrow') 'lightning as a fiery arrow of the celestial deity', *ajındırık* < \**ajındır ok*, interpreted by Jarlykapov (1998: 45) as 'arrow of Indra'.

<sup>46</sup> Another hypothesis is that the part *Temər* in *Temər Q<sup>o</sup>ara* could be an Abkhaz misperception of Karachay/Turkic *tejrı/tengri* 'god', i.e. 'God Quara' (?).

<sup>47</sup> The form with the initial *o* (*ót'lar*) is probably due to the contraction of the vocative interjection *wa/o* with *at'lar*, i.e. *wa/o, at'lar*.

<sup>48</sup> The preposing of the adjective in the phrase *ssir t'ap'ánč'ja* is not typical for normal Abkhaz speech (as noted to me also by A. Ankva; postposed order is the norm: *a-t'ap'ánč'ja ssir*), but this may reflect either an (alternative) older word-order, or a deviation from normal speech permitted in the style of magic folk-poetry.

## CONCLUSION

As we have seen from the (of necessity) limited material presented above, all Caucasian peoples have preserved elements of pre-monotheistic religious practices. The extent of the preservation of the pre-monotheistic systems varies from strong (Abkhazians, Ossetians, less so Circassians, Svans, Megrelians and Mountainous Georgians groups) to moderate (Chechens, Dagestanis) or minimal (Azeris, Armenians). The attitude of modern “official” religious communities to this pagan heritage is also very different. Whereas many Abkhazians, Circassians and Ossetians are proud of their ancient traditions and take measures to maintain and sometimes (as in Abkhazia and Ossetia) even revive some of them, in other Caucasian communities there prevails a stronger adherence to monotheistic religions and in general a negative (or at best indifferent) attitude to the heathen past.

Despite differences in the extent of the preservation and of the attitudes, one can say that elements of pre-monotheistic heritage do indeed form an intimate part of the identity of many Caucasian communities, partially intertwining with the official religions and with the native ethical systems, like *Apswara* (i.e. the Abkhazianness) in Abkhazia, or *Adâye âabze//Adâÿaye* (‘the Circassian Law’// ‘Circassianness’) in Circassia. As the Jordanian Circassian author Amjad Jaimoukha (2001: 137) writes in his excellent book “The Circassians”: “From the cradle to the grave, the Circassian native creed—intertwined with the code of conduct Adige Xabze—dictated the way an individual behaved, formed their system of values and certainly influenced the way they conceived the world. Religion and customs and traditions were the dual formers of the Circassian outlook on life and they meshed perfectly together. Rejecting one of these intimately associated components would have entailed forsaking the other and ultimately compromising the essence of Circassianism”.

Although certain elements of the traditional systems are still maintained by some Caucasian communities, the post-Soviet period is witnessing a powerful revival of interest in monotheistic religions, which seek to fill the vacuum created by the collapse of the Communist ideology. In the condition of the multi-ethnic and multilingual Caucasus, Christianity—as in Armenia and in Georgia, and especially Islam—as in the Northern Caucasus and Dagestan, are perceived as unifying and mobilizing factors, and in the majority of cases they leave no place for traditional beliefs, which will undoubtedly continue to fade and slowly vanish in the shadow of the mainstream religions. The awareness of this factor,

of course, necessitates a better study and better understanding of this ancient cultural lore.

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