

The Shamaness of the Abkhazians

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The existence of shamans of the female sex among the Georgians has already been noticed earlier, not only by Caucasian and Russian but also by the Western scientists of religion.¹ In this paper I would like to point to the prominent position which was occupied by the shamaness among another Caucasian people, that is, the Abkhazians, located on the northwest coast of the Black Sea.

The woman who is engaged in prophecy and the concrete art of oracles as well as certain cultic observances is called in Abkhazian *acaaju*, “the questioner.” The appearance of the first *acaaju* was mythically established in the following manner: “There once lived the valiant warrior Achi Zoschan, a leader of bold horsemen. One night a storm broke over his camp, and it thundered. Now when the heavens cleared up again, Zoschan found himself no longer among his comrades; Afy, the god of thunder and lightning, had taken him up into Heaven and made him the mediator between men and gods. Nevertheless, Zoschan was mortal, and he chose his young relative Azartl as his successor, so that the people would not be without a mediator after his death. A female relative of Azartl was at this time very ill. When Afy learned of this, he called Azartl to him and promised to cure the woman if Azartl would resign his right to be mediator in favor of her. The youth agreed to this. Soon after, a great cattle plague broke out, and the new female mediator turned to the god with the entreaty to let her know the cause of the trouble. The god told her about it and instructed her as to the remedy. The herds were saved, and since this time, the prophetesses, *acaaju*, have been active. They were given to living in mutual enmity, since some of them were subject to Afy, others on the contrary to Zoschan.”²

The foremost obligation of the *acaaju* was to ascertain who had caused a specific illness in order to find out the necessary remedies. Sometimes she obtained ecstatic inspiration and cried out the name and the demands of the angered divinity. At other times she went lightly across the room or even sat on a high seat and acted as though she was carrying on a conversation with the divinity, to whom she directed questions and from whom she received answers. After a while, she made known the result. For example, the illness could have been sent by Afy on account of a neglected sacrifice. Another important god from whose wrath the people had to protect themselves was Šesšu (also Šašv or Šašvy-ach-du), the supernatural protector of the smithy or forge. As a rule, this god would grow angry over a false oath which the sick person or some one of his relatives had made in the smithy.³

The forge had among the Abkhazians, perhaps to an even greater extent than among several other Caucasian peoples, the character of a cult place. If there was no real forge in the

neighborhood, a small “symbolic” one was built in the garden or somewhere in the courtyard and used only for religious purposes.

The Abkhazian blacksmith was not only an artisan, but even more, a representative of Šesšu and the mediator between this god and human beings.⁴ He also directed the frequent performances of the oath in Šesšu’s name which were carried out with solemn ceremonies in an exactly prescribed form.⁵ It goes without saying that between the smith and the *acaaju* there was close collaboration. If it was a question of discovering the guilty party who had offended Šesšu with a false oath, the *acaaju* employed not only the methods previously mentioned but also material resources. That is, she spread out beans in front of her, and on the basis of the arrangement of these found out the name of the transgressor. If occasion arose, astrology was also taken into account, thus one more technique of divination in which she had to be skilled.⁶

The divine will being ascertained, the *acaaju* reported what kind of animals were to be brought as expiatory sacrifice. She often carried out the sacrifice herself. Beyond that, she also performed various actions of a magical sort. Thus, for example, she led some domestic animal three times around the sick person, after which it was driven away toward the forest, supposedly carrying the sickness away with it. As payment for her help, the *acaaju* received either the skins of the sacrificial animals and a part of the meat or a rather substantial sum of money.⁷

The illnesses could be caused by a whole range of other factors besides the wrath of such gods as Afy and Šesšu. These too were discovered by the *acaaju*, who at the same time recommended the appropriate procedure for each case. She did not always participate personally in the execution of the rites. Rather, she selected other women for them, who acted on the instruction of this—as one may say with reason—authoritative medicine woman and carried out her secret lore.

Dzidlan, the Mistress of the Waters or the Water Mother, occupied a noteworthy place in the belief of the Abkhazians- In particular, the women who were delivered of a child turned to her with prayers and sacrifices.⁸ However, there were also illnesses, such as lengthy sufferings with fever, which were considered as “caused by the water” and in whose control Dzidlan could be helpful. Hence, after a consultation with the *acaaju*, certain customs were carried out which took place at the Water Mother's presumed dwelling—usually at a pure sweet water lake or a stream.

The primary role in rites of this nature was played by two women: a “blameless old woman” and a prayer woman. The old woman took, unnoticed by the patient’s household, some article belonging to him (for example, a piece of clothing) and set out for the water. There on the bank she drew herself up and spoke : “Water Mother, Mistress, if the invalid is bound by you, release him.” Thereupon she touched the water three times with the article taken along and, using alder-leaves, took a few drops of the water which she had carried home and put over the hearth. Then she ran out of the house with the words, “Just so, may your sickness also run away!” Thus, here the reciprocal effect of two actions was believed in: the patient's fever was supposed to evaporate just like the water in the leaves above the hearth and to run away in the same manner as the old woman. If the patient felt

relief afterward, a prayer woman was invited for the continuation of the ceremonies. First, a hen, a cock, and a filled loaf of unleavened bread were prepared and three candles were made. The hen and one candle were dedicated to the Water Mother; the cock and the second candle to her husband, or the Water Father. The third candle, however was dedicated to her servant, who was called the "Benefactress." The patient went with the prayer woman to the water and got down on his knees. The prayer woman then took the three candles in succession, lit them, and placed them on the shore. Each time, she prayed for the relief of the invalid—first to the Water Mother, then to the Water Father, and finally to the Maidservant or Benefactress, who was supposed to be the mediator and intercessor with her mistress and master on behalf of the patient. At the conclusion, the prayer woman rubbed her hand over the back of the patient and with this gesture she liberated him from the illness.⁹

Another ceremony advocated by the *acaaju* was connected with the widespread belief according to which serious illnesses can be caused by the Rainbow. Long-lasting yellowness of the face, general weakness of the organism, vacillation of the character, and similar maladies were attributed to the fact that the sick person had gone into the water the moment when the Rainbow drank from it. The ceremony in honor of the Rainbow was also carried out by a "blameless old woman" and a prayer woman, and here, too, neither the Water Mother nor her husband was forgotten. The women led the patient to the stream and took with them two roasted capons, two filled loaves of unleavened bread in tongue form, and other food supplies. On both banks of the stream they spread clothes, silver, and other articles, which had to be pure; then they threw a twisted yarn bridge from one bank to the other. The patient was covered with a piece of cotton; the prayer woman walked around him with a previously prepared doll in her hands and prayed for him to the Rainbow. Then she took a candle and turned, with prayers, to the Water Mother and the Water Father. Little pieces of each sort of food were consecrated and thrown into the water. The doll was set into a gourd decorated with a lit candle which the prayer woman put into the river saying "Instead of the patient, be satisfied with this." Finally, the old woman passed her hand over the back of the sick person, lifted him up, and told him to go home, however with a sharp warning not to look back.¹⁰

It is especially interesting to note that the *acaaju* was called by a masculine name during the prophecy, and that one generally spoke to her as though she were a man. The Abkhazians themselves wanted to explain this phenomenon on the basis that *acaaju* really represented a man, the mythical Zoschan.¹¹ In fact, it is here a question of a ritual change of sex, which often occurs in different parts of the world as a noteworthy accompanying phenomenon of shamanism.¹² All too frequently this phenomenon has in an unreflective manner been connected exclusively with homosexuality, hermaphroditism, or aberration. The actual state of affairs, into which we cannot thoroughly enter here, is much more complicated; and the purely physiological factors play a smaller role in it than do, for example, conceptions of bisexual divinities or the occurrence of a love relation between a religious visionary and his protecting spirit.¹³ Likewise, the ritual transformation of sex can be based on an imitative behavior generally characteristic of shamanism in which essential identity with that god or spirit who *is* being imitated is at least temporarily supposed to be brought about.¹⁴ The Abkhazian *acaaju* was neither hermaphroditic nor homosexual; her

change of sex was fictive and temporary, that is to say, limited to the execution of the prophecy, and probably also rooted in a mythically founded tradition.

The social position of the *acaaju* was very strong, and her opinion was counted on in all public affairs, for example, even in the hearing of witnesses in criminal procedures. There were some among them who had succeeded to fame among all the Abkhazians and to whom people from distant regions came in order to get advice. In light of their effectual patronage, many families made efforts to establish kinship with them, which was achieved most commonly through their adoption.¹⁵

The question still remains to be asked whether we are justified in the case at hand to speak of shamanism without further reservation. I would like to answer this question in the affirmative. In this I follow the useful bifurcation already advocated around sixty years ago by the Swedish researcher Jonas Stadling when he, referring to Siberian examples, made a distinction between “lesser” and “greater” shamanism. The latter involves imposing sessions, where the entire shamanistic technique,—with its dress, drum, etc.—was utilized; while the “lesser” form, although occasionally connected with ecstasy, consists of a simple prophecy and struggle against the spirits of illness.¹⁶ The efficacy of the *acaaju*, in any case, exhibits elements, such as ecstasy, communication with supernatural beings, an exceedingly powerful social position, and, last but not least, the change of sex, which constitute not only the “lesser” shamanism but to some extent its “greater” form as well.

A more difficult question concerns the problem of whether shamanism of this type among the Abkhazians—and also among several other peoples of the Caucasus—is to be considered as an autochthonous phenomenon or as a result of foreign influence. As is known, various traces of the religious traditions of the Scythians are to be found among the Caucasians. In our context, the references to the “shamanistic structure” of the Scythian beliefs about the afterlife as well as to the change of sex verifiable among them are to be emphasized.¹⁷ In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Caucasians were dominated by the Mongols. Certain transmissions from this direction as well are not to be disregarded, especially since we know that exactly at this time shamanism was the predominant form of religion of the broad social strata of the Mongols.¹⁸ Finally, the relations of the Caucasians to ancient Anatolia with its ecstatic religious practices can also be mentioned as a contributing factor. However, to portray all these probable relations remains a task for future research.

Notes

¹ See G. Charachidzé, *Le système religieux de la Géorgie païenne* (Paris, 1968), pp. 113 ff. and the literature cited there.

² Ja. S. Smirnova, “Semejnij byt i obščestvennoe položenie abchazskoj ženščiny,” *Kavkazskij etnografičeskij sbornik* 1 (Moscow, 1955) : 150.

³ Ibid.

⁴ E. Šilling, “Abchazy,” *Religioznye verovanija narodov SSSR* 2 (Moscow-Leningrad, 1931): 60 ff.

- ⁵ For a thorough treatment of this, see N. von Seidlitz, “Die Abchasen,” *Globus* 67 (Braunschweig, 1894): 74-75.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Smirnova, p. 150.
- ⁸ Ibid., p. 137.
- ⁹ Seidlitz, pp. 54 f.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 55.
- ¹¹ Smirnova, p. 150.
- ¹² See H. Baumann, *Dass doppelte Geschlecht* (Berlin, 1955), pp. 16 ff. and passim.
- ¹³ A. Johansons, “Det religiösa könsbytet,” *Svenska Dagbladet*, Stockholm, October 5, 1970.
- ¹⁴ G. Bleibtreu-Ehrenberg, “Homosexualität und Transvestition im Schamanismus,” *Anthropos* 65 (St. Augustin, 1970): 207-9.
- ¹⁵ Smirnova, p. 151.
- ¹⁶ J. Stadling, *Shamanismen i Norra Asien* (Stockholm, 1912), pp. 124 ff.
- ¹⁷ See M. Eliade, *Schamanismus und archaische Ekstasetechnik* (Stuttgart, 1957), pp. 376 ff. and the literature cited there.
- ¹⁸ See W. Heissig “Die Religionen der Mongolei,” *Die Religionen der Menschheit* 20 (Stuttgart, 1970): 307.

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