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THE “SHALIANI” ICON: HISTORY AND NARRATIONS

Abstract. The paper discusses the correlation of the traditional mode of life and religious beliefs and analyses the social interactions in connection to the sacred sites and holy objects. The case of “Shaliani” displaying the evidence of importance of traditional value systems. “Shaliani“ is an icon of Kala St Kvirike Monastery, in Svaneti Georgia. The icon is considered to have a power, which is admired till nowadays. The belief is symbolically focused on the “Shaliani” icon and it is the driving force of the social life. This power is constructed through the narratives spread among the local population. The historical and ethnographic sources and data are displaying interesting facts and legends bound together and legitimasing the perceptions regarding “Shaliani”

Keywords: Georgia, Svaneti, Religion, Traditions, sacred objects.

Kala St. Kvirike Monastery is one of the most important religious centers of the mountainious region of Georgia – Svaneti. In the artilce there is discussed the traditional social aspects of this religious center and the festival of Kvirikoba. The theoretical frames of the historical ethnological research are used for analyses of the data of historical sources and the field ethnographical materials.

The St. Kvirike Monastery (Lagurka/Lagvirka) in Kala community, in upper Bali Svaneti (Mestia municipality), on the left riverbank of Enguri, is located high in the mountains. Traditionally, this mountain is also believed to be sacred and is well preserved since it is the property of the church. The mountain is covered with thick coniferous forest followed by an only road - a path to the monastery. The wood also belongs to the monastery and it is also taken care of.

“Lagurka” is the church of the middle ages, of monumental type. It was built in the X-XI centuries. The exact date of monastery fresco painting is known from the inscription of the painter of the King Tevdore in 1111, by the order of the Kala feudals (Amirmashvili 1957, 134). There is a bell tower towards the West of the
cathedral which was built by the locals in the 60s of the XX century on the base of the old and ruined tower (Chartolani 1975, 165-181). There is a so-called Ladbash - an auxiliary building near to the bell tower, with three places for rituals. Here stand copper pots of special size in which Zvaraki (sacred animals) are cooked (Chartolani 1961, 6). The monastery is surrounded by a fence. The fence has been restored. The old Senaki (living room of a clergyman) and canteen are preserved.

Kala's Lagurka was a well known religious center, a women's monastery until the end of the XVII century. Not only local religious figures were involved in the worship ceremonies at the monastery but those also from other regions of Georgia and even the representatives of royal dynasty. For example, Tekla, the daughter of the King Bagrat of Imereti Tinatin, became a nun in 1704 (Karbelashvili 1903).

The monastery owned the property: the lands not only in Kala community but in Kvemo Svaneti, in Choluri too. The wood around the monastery was also in ownership of the monastery. Many treasures are still kept at the monastery, among them is the crucifixion relic icon Shaliani, which is believed to have a special sacred power. This is a Byzantine icon, which is mentioned in various legends and stories and it possesses important social as well as religious meaning.

Historically, the time of cessation of monastery life is believed to be the end of the eighteenth century. There is a tragic story preserved regarding the invasion by Tatars, who devastated the monastery and killed the nuns. After the end of the monastery life, the local population started to look after Lagurka. The first written source mentioning the monastery is the records of the Russian statesman and numismatist I. Bartolomei. I. Bartolomei traveled to Svaneti in 1854. According to his material, the locals preserved the cathedral very well, the area was guarded by armed guards day and night and the church service was carried out by the deacons (Bartolomei 1855, 161-162). The word Deacon is not spread in Svaneti and seems to be borrowed by Bartolomei from the language of the east Georgian mountaineous region and mechanically assigned to the ritual practice of Svaneti.

In 1860 Dimitri Bakradze visited the Kala community (Bakradze 1864), in 1875 the French traveler Bernovil visited Kala (Beridze 1949). Stoianov could not manage to travel to see the monastery although they had a great wish to do so.
However, they still left some information (Stoianov 1876, 267). The researchers Ivaniukov and Kovalevski were not allowed to enter the monastery by the population of Kala, since, according to the observations of the locals, if a foreigner cast his eye on Shaliani, it could bring quite a lot of bad luck for the village (Ivaniukov, Kovalevski 1866). The deacon Besarion Nizharadze also took great care of the monastery. In 1903 the monastery was visited by the priest Polievkstos Karbelashvili and he published quite notable material in Iveria (Karbelashvili 1903). A part of the collection of the books of the monastery and its epigraphical material was recorded as a result of the expedition by the countess Praskovia Uvarova in 1895 (Uvarova 1904). In 1910 the treasures of the monastery and its epigraphical material were described by Ekvtime Takaishvili (Takaishvili 1991). The results of these expeditions are important for the research of the Georgian culture in Svaneti till today. Later on, substantial research works were carried out by Pavle Ingorokva, Svimon Kaukhchishvili and Giorgi Chubinashvili (Report 1931-1932, 344-350). In 1972 a complex scientific expedition of the State museum of Georgia recorded about 120 icons and crosses, 196 inscriptions and 56 various types of rockery (Chartolani 1975).

After the fall of the monastery life, the parish of the monastery, the Kala community decided to take care of the monastery. The monastery was well guarded by the Kala community who made it difficult for strangers to enter the church, which can be confirmed by all the researchers and travellers. However, there took place several attempts to rob the monastery as well as one fact of robbery. It necessitated guarding the monastery well. In this respect, a hard story is described in Akaki Tsereteli works.

The immobile property of the monastery was disposed by the church to village. It used to repair the monastery, distribute the church lands among the members of the community, assign the monastery guards (Mokil), controlled the monastery wood, etc. According to the ethnographic material, the church lands were cultivated by the population of Kala and they were carrying out the celebration on 28 July (Jalabadze 1990, 12).

As for the church wood, its dense nature and preservation amazed all the scientists and travellers. The Kala population explained to Bartolomei that the wood
belongs to the church and if they cut trees in the wood, it would be followed by the rage of the God (Bartolomei 1855, 162). It was possible to use the woods of the church just for the monastery needs, for example, at the holiday when they needed wood to burn it or when using wood for repairing the church. According to the priest Polievktos Karbelashvii, “the forest is guarded, no one can touch it, it is even not allowed to take dry wood home: Although trees may be by the wind and snow and they are rotting, but the Svan still take care of them. As they say, the trees belong to the church” (Karbelashvili 1903). The Kala population is still preserving this tradition and even today the mountain slope of Lagurka is still covered by coniferous forest.

It seems that the social function of the St. Kvirike Monastery, grew with weakening of the Seta St. George monastery. It is known from the documentation preserved in Svaneti that the social and religious center of Svaneti was Sveti Mtavarmotsame, with his help and mediation, the important “Writings”, “Decrees” and “Deeds” were created. The name of Seta bishop and the social role of Setieli are closely connected to the monastery and after their weakening, probably at the end of the middle ages, the main religious and social center of the Svaneti region became St. Kvirike monastery (Ingorokva 1941). It is a fact that by the end of the nineteenth century the St. Kvirike Monastery had great influence on the whole Svaneti, including the Svaneti regions below Bali. The pages of the newspaper Iveria contain interesting information: in 1901 the inspector of the revival of the Christian community Mamineishvili, whose energetic activity resulted in opening seven schools in Svaneti, called general meeting at the house of the noble Tatarkan Dadeshkeliani. This meeting took the following decision: they established a brotherhood on behalf of St. Kvirike and Ivlite in Svaneti, according to which, poor school pupils deserve assistance and schools require benefits (Antonidze 1901). It is clear that connecting this great deity to educational institution would lead to the increase of the number of pupils as well as the number of persons who want to do charitable deeds. Of course, the reasons of the increase of the social status of Kala St. Kvirike monastery requires the additional research.

According to the ethnographic material, one of the deities kept at St. Kvirike monastery in Kala - Shaliani brought to the monastery special importance. Shaliani
ensured the first place for Lagurka monastery among other Svaneti churches. It turned Kala monastery into the religious and social center of Svaneti. As Ekvtime Takaishvili correctly observed, “Kala church has the same importance for Svaneti as the Delfos temple for Greece. It unites Svaneti divided into communities the way Delfos used to unite different republics of the Greeks” (Takaishvili 1991, 179). Vera Bardavelidze also believes that, as distinct from the worshiping places of local importance, Kala's “Shaliani”, the flag “Lemi” and St George icon were deities that united Svanety (Bardavelidze 1963, 144).

As it was mentioned above, Shaliani is a Byzantine creation, a relict icon. It was used for keeping Dzeli Cheshmariti - the part of the cross on which Christ was crucified (Takaishvili 1991, 186). The priest Polievktos Karbelashvili is mentioning: “the two guards of the monastery took Dzeli Cheshmariti from the chest, the icon was wrapped well in the old silk cloth and it was placed on the spread. “We are the guards of this” told us Svans politely. I do not doubt that Dzeli Cheshmariti used to be in the middle of the cross while the relics were kept in the corners in small boxes” (Karbelashvili 1903).

According to Praskovia Uvarova, the icon is dated as of the IX-XI centuries and believes it to be a piece of byzantine art (Uvarova 1904, 94-100). R. Kenia and N. Aladashvili consider “Shaliani” as the best piece among the pieces of foreign art preserved in Svaneti, they especially mention the ornaments of the icon, its embossing and precious stones (Kenia, Aladashvili 2000, 49).

Interesting legends and stories exist regarding the building of Kala St. Kvirike monastery and the Shaliani icon located in it, among them scientific and popular literature includes the version of the deacon Besarion Nizharadze. A similar legend with a little different content is depicted by Ekvtime Takaishvili and Egnate Gabliani. It should be noted that Aleksei Stoianov has mentioned the legend with a different content. Let us follow it step by step.

According to the deacon Besarion Nizharadze, Shaliani used to be inhabitant of Ifari community, village Zegani. Once the son of Shaliani found a stone in the field and threw it at the cow he was grazing. The stone pierced the cow like a bullet. Shaliani found this stone and made the blacksmith forge a scythe, using this stone
instead of metal. By that time there were Kings in Imereti. Svaneti was obliged to mow the Geguti field each year, near to Kutaisi (Imereti). Shaliani went there too and took the scythe with him. In Kutaisi Shaliani appeared before the King saying: “Your grace, if I can mow the whole fiels of Geguti which has to be mown by Svans alone - will you give me anything I wish for a present?” “Al right!” - said the King. Shaliani tied the scythe to the tail of his horse, mowed the Geguti field, the scythe was mowing on its own and by the evening the whole job was done... Shaliani asked the King to give him this crucification icon and brought it to Svaneti... The Kala society got to know that he was bringing the icon. Here one woman, encouraged by her husband, attracted Shaliani and made love to him; When her husband and community got to know this, they made Shaliani leave the icon there... and they placed the icon where it is now. The privilege Shaliani got from Svaneti was that his successors who reside in Mulakhi nowadays, and are considered Sharvashidzes, get one cow, which is to be brought to them by any Svan who wants to pray to St Kvirike (Nizharadze 1880)

According to this version of the legend, St Kvirike Monastery had already been built by the time the Saliani icon arrived, while according to Ekvtime Takaishvili material, the arrival of the icon was followed by building the St. Kvirike church: according to Svans, Shaliani was a Svan, once the king of Imereti called a hundred Svans and ordered them to mow the Geguti field... Shaliani completed mowing before the time schedule. He asked for Kala icon for payment. The king kept his promise... Shaliani went to Svaneti. The resident of Kala community killed Shaliani and got hold of the icon but they did not know where to take it so they harnessed two bulls; attached a pillar to the yoke, attached the icon to the pillar and let it go on its own... the bulls crossed Enguri, went up the hill and stopped at the top of the mountain where now St. Kvirike church is located. Svans built a monastery here and since then this is the place where Shaliani icon is kept (Takaishvili 1991, 180).

According to Egnate Gabliani, the real name of Shaliani was “Sharshkhani” and he was the ancestor of Shervashidzes. And the resident of Kala who made Sharshkhani leave the icon - was Ioseliani. Then Dadeshkelianis took the icon from Ioseliani but it was soon stolen from them... Goshteliani and Beriani returned it to
Ioseliani and then it was placed in Kala St. Kvirike Monastery and they put armed guards there. When Svans are praying before this icon, they have to pay, but Shervashidzes do not pay them. Neither do Ioselianis because they obtained this icon and took it back from Dadeshkelianis (Gabliani 1925, 116).

Such legends are spread in the Svaneti region upper than Bali. They include the following interesting facts: a) They underline that the icon comes from the old royal town - Kutaisi. b) The name of the person who brought the icon to Svaneti is Shaliani and it is connected to Shervashidze kin; c) The offence committed by the residents of Kala obtaining the icon by force is justified by the following - the biggest deity, the relic icon remains in Kala community; d) a notable mythological passage- the place is found by the bulls that were let to go on their own; e) At some moment `Shaliani~ icon is kept in the region lower Bali, with the Dadeshkelianis.

This last moment is depicted in the Svaneti region lower Bali (Becho, Tskhumari, Etseri, Chubekevi, Lakhamula), where they believe that `Shaliani~ icon used to be below Bali and the residents of Kala stole it from there. The first author confirming this is Alexi Stoianov. He used to travel to Svaneti in the beginning of the 70s of the XIX century he stayed for two months is Etseri, the residency of Tengiz Dadeshkeliani, from where he made trips to other villages of Svaneti, used to write down the folk material. According to A, Stoianov, the residents of the, Sabatono Svaneti are sure that this precious icon used to be theirs and was kept in Pkhutreri. According to the legend, each spring a mother deer would come to the church of Pkhutreti and leave her buck. Then this icon was stolen by the residents of Kala and was put in a chest and they wrapped it in chains. At first the icon used to be with some resident of Kala then it was carried to the church. Three guards are guarding it there. Otherwise the icon will be returned back to the resident of Pkhutreti~. Stoianov also has another interpretation of the issue when describing the crosses and icons of the resident of Pkhutreti: “I got interested with the icon in a leather bag which has respect among people, it is called “Motchkvil”, it is an equal brother of the well-known “Sharlani” icon, which used to be stolen from Pkhotretri to Lagvirka” (Stoianov 1876, 326).

“Motchkvil” icon (Motchkvil means glazed, glassy) remembers countess Praskovia Uvarova too (P. Uvarova believes that the icon is of XI century) and
Ekvtime Takaishvili as well (He believes the icon belongs to the XI-XII centuries) (Uvarova 1904, 181; Takaishvili 1991, 416).

According to Kiti Machabeli, several fragments of the icon have been preserved: “The sizes of the icon are 32X26. The surface of the icon was covered with marble plates among which were inscribed miniatures in the boxes covered with glass plates “ (Machabeli 1982, 106).

“Motchkvili” icon used to be the main relic of lower Bali Svaneti region. It is well-known that the Svanetian traditional life preserves such icons, which have to be mentioned, even during a shortest prayer, in which case the Motchkvili is necessarily mentioned. Motchkvili was a relic icon and to some extent resembles Shaliani (see Davitiani).

On the basis of the diverse comparative analysis, Kiti Matchabeli believes that “Motchkvili” belongs to the monumental art of north Italy and Germany that includes decorative ornamental miniatures. The researcher also thinks, that Ianashi cross and the cross standing on the Ushguli Murkmeri St. Barbare church are the unique monuments (Machabeli 1982, 97-109). It should also be mentioned that according to the legend, the Murkmeri cross was also taken from the Svaneti lower Bali region, in particular, from the Doli St. Barbare church (Gujejiani 2002, 238-257), which leads us to the thought that all of these crosses and icon have one and the same origin, they should belong to some famous Byzantine or Italian school and they were probably originally placed in the churches in Svaneti.

Another long legend also tells us the story about the “Shaliani”, named “Kashletiani” Svaneti’s squad –“Svimra” visited Kashletiani who was living in Etseri, Tasleri, who was hosting the guests for two nights, but became absolutely impoverished by the third night. Kashteliani, who became poor, got angry and decided to take revenge on Etseri. By that time Etseri was enjoying the grace of God. Bulls used to come to Pkhotreti church each spring on Tuesdays of the Easter Week. Kashletiani waited for the bull in an ambush and killed them. He poured the bulls’ blood on sacred Sabiashi place. Then he covered the water (Sgim) that the Etseri residents used to enjoy with a waterwheel and let it flow. Then late at night he stole the precious icon from the Pkhotreti church. Of course, Kashletiani could no longer
stay in Etseri and he went to the upper valley. He stayed at one family there in Kala. The residents of Kala took the icon from Kashletiani and they donated it to their church. Since the Etserians would inevitably try to take the icon back, they placed guards at the church. N. Pakeliani, who is 102 years old tells that this was the “Shaliani” icon (Svan Texts 1957).

The archaival material by Ali Davitiani is nearly of the same content. It is important to note that the scholars wrote that they apply an epithet to Shaliani icon – “Khosha tskhovel Khat”, which means “the Great Holy Icon” (Davitiani).

The lower Svan legend also tells us a story of the “Shaliani”. Lagurka’s church near Makashi represents one of the strongest sacred centers. According to the legend, Kala's Lagurka icon was stolen from this church and it was tied with chains (Abakelia 1991, 121).

As we can see, legends regarding the “Shaliani” exist in all parts of Svaneti.

Vakhushti Batonishvili is also mentioning that Etseri is in the South of Lechkhumi. There is one church there called Sueti, the place where they keep not just Sueti’s holy treasures and jewellery, brought by the King Vakhtang Gorgasali from India, made of red rubies, but also icons and crosses made of gold and silver and embellished with stones, they are precious, big and small, they are much respectes, and a better icon is tied with a golden chain, and Svans believe, that if they untie the chains, it will destroy all the icons and crosses here... If anyone with the sins goes in, the icons will pardon him and set him free (Batonishvili 1973, 787-788). Can we really connect Vakhushti Batonishvili’s note to any of Etseri churches? In this respect, Egnate Gabliani mentions that there is geographic inaccuracy in Vakhushti Batonishvili’s description since Etseri is mentioned to the south of Lechkhumi instead of the north-east (Gabliani 1925, 28). Besides, Seti church was located in Seti (part of Mestia), Setis Mtavarmotsame was Svaneti religious center and it also possessed some civil authority as well. Since Etseri is mentioned in the historical sources, including Kartlis Tskhovreba and it is referred to as one of the most important places, it is natural that Vakhushti Batonishvili also had information regarding Etseri. He tells us of one fact where action is taking place exactly in Etseri. It is natural that Vakhushti Batonishvili also had information regarding Etseri. The
historical sources and legends confirm that Etseri represented the residence of Vardanidzes, and later on the residence of Gelovanis. There were also sitting the “varg”-s of lower Bali Svaneti (varg is a noble in Svaneti (Janashia 1959, 135), Ruchegianis and Dadeshkelianis. It is possible that one of the nobles took Svaneti’s most sacred icon “Shaliani”, and kept it near to his residence in Pkhotreti church, from where, as the legend tells the icon was stolen by Kashletiani (Batonishvili 1973, 261).

Several mythological passages in connection with Shaliani should also be mentioned, for example, it is described that before Shaiani was placed in Pkhutreti church, the place and the total village was enjoying Gods grace, which was evident since in spring bulls would come to the church on the Easter Tuesday and they would leave their calf there. The topic of searching the place for keeping Shaliani should also be noted: "The bulls find the sacred [place on their own]. I. Surguladze who studied the sacrifice in Georgian mythology and rituals, concluded: “the beliefs regarding animals intended for sacrifice who go to the place on their own, are spread around the whole Caucasus. The stories regarding the choice of the place to build cathedrals tell us that the bull or a calf of harnessed bulls walking on their own will lead to the place, after which the equivalent - the animal is driven to the holy place by God’s will. Such animals who come to the place on their own, are sacrificed there and in such a way a ritual is formed that repeats every time (Surguladze 2001, 241-242). When the information in the written sources are lacking, the ethnographic data are playing a decisive role in restoring the real picture of a historical fact.

There is an opinion in Georgian historiography that Shaliani icon is connected with Abkhaz kings Shavlianis. The Georgian scientists share the idea that there are parallels between Shaiani and the kings of Abkhazia, Shavlianis. Geronti Gasviani, Teimuraz Mibchuani and others agree with this idea. Geronti Gasviani believes that in the second half of the IX century the kings of Abkhazia were the representatives of Svans, Shavlianis (Gasviani 1991, 89-90). Teimuraz Mibchuani also connects the surname of Savlianis with the initiator of the upheaval that took place in the 60s of the IX century in the kingdom - Ioane Shavliani, who the researcher believes to be the representative of the already existing Abkhazian dynasty. After Ioane Shavliani
his son, Adarnase came to the throne. Shavlianis were Svans by origin. These Svans used to live in the village Ivari in Upper Svaneti. According to the legend, the icon under the Shavliani name (Shaliani) was brought by some Shavliani from Kutaisi, the royal city. The Svan Sharvashidzes had privileged rights to use Shavliani icon which shows us their genetic relation to the latter Shavlianis (Mibchuani 1996, 7).

The icon is carefully kept and it still has the biggest religious and social function till today. Shaliani can be touched only two times a year: on Easter Saturday and on the 28th (15th) of July on Kvirikoba (ligurke) festival. Only the distinguished persons, so called Mokiles can touch the icon. Mokiles are chosen by the whole Kala community amd they take care of the monastery until the next Easter..

As we have mentioned, Lagurka had great influence on the social life of Svaneti. All the researchers, stories and narrators are stating that no important political decision could be made without making an oath on Shaliani icon. And as we know, the important decision was preceded by convening a meeting uniting the whole Svaneti (Lukhori) (Nijaradze 1962, 85-88).

The decisions made at the meetings were approved by the oath made at St. Kvirike monastery. One of the famous meetings took place in 1875, before the uprising in upper Svaneti. Lagurka and Shaliani icon played an important role in the customary law. The most important cases were decided at Lagurka. An oath was made at the monastery on in special cases on “Shaliani” icon.

Thus, it is clear that the traditional Svan way of life is based on religious belief. In this case, this belief is symbolically focused on the “Shaliani” icon and it is the driving force of the social life that manages it, the icon depicting crucification. the so-called “Shaliani” which is intended for keeping a part of the greatest christian relic “Dzeli Cheshmariti” is the most important part of the traditional life of Svaneti. Along with the religious value, the icon also has a social value. Lagurka, where the Shaliani icon is kept, is the main religious center of Svaneti. The oath made before this icon plays a decisive role in the application of customary law. The legends in connection with the bulls are also notableble from the point of view of history and diversity. Today the faith in “Shaliani” is still active. The various rituals connected to it clearly reflect the mode of traditional life of Svaneti and brings us an
opportunity to restore the common Georgian traditional religious and social structures.

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