

Alessandro Norsa  
University of Verona  
norsaalessandro@yahoo.it  
ORCID: 0000-0002-8579-860X

Gubazi Varshalomidze  
gubazi.v@gmail.com

## BETWEEN BLACK KNIVES AND BLESSING PUFFS: TRADITIONAL HEALINGS IN GEORGIA

### Abstract

The magic practices that we will meet during the following pages refer to the mountain areas of Agiara (independent region of Georgia). The focus of the research consisted in investigating the magical dimension still present in the Georgian population. The interviews that are the essence of this work were carried out in a research campaign and were essentially concentrated in two very distinct realities: Batumi and the countryside of Xelvachauri which is eleven kilometres from the city. In the following pages we will analyze the complex systems of interaction between magic, society and religion. We are happy to be able to bring these revelations because until now, no in-depth studies had been made in this area regarding this issue.

**Keywords:** anthropology, magic, Georgia, blessing blow, healer

### Introductory elements

The work in Georgia is part of a larger project on traditional therapies involving 18 universities or anthropological research centers from different parts of the world under the aegis of the University of Verona. The field research work was preceded by the compilation of a questionnaire with closed and open questions on the subject of magic. The Georgian ritual taken into consideration is strongly conditioned by “magical thinking”. That is to the idea of being able to influence reality according to personal desires. Thus, magical thought becomes – as Hubert and Mauss call it – the representation of a “gigantic variation on the theme of causality”<sup>1</sup>. The focus of research on magic in Georgia rests on the modern concept of magic that has been structured over time: the term ‘magic’, in common usage, in fact has a long history and has taken on different connotations over time. Magic is a complex of practices and beliefs: the powers the magician claims to possess and the effects produced by magic are very varied, reflecting different conceptions of nature, of what is normal and of what is possible. It was of interest to us during the research campaign to investigate cults that use magic (the collective aspect of magic), magic words and the symbolic aspects of numerology that are used in prayers and spells.

The magical use of words is particularly associated with magic formulas, which can have very different structures. The idea that formulas, the result of revelation, should be fixed and immutable is widespread. Not all spells, however, are formulated in an incomprehensible language, as Bronislaw Malinowski pointed out<sup>2</sup>: they can be based on persuasive metaphors, suggestions and similes S.J. Tambiah<sup>3</sup>. Many magical techniques are based on a combination of words and actions, of metaphors or symbols and material acts. Through metaphor,

---

<sup>1</sup> HUBERT, MAUSS 1902–1903:61.

<sup>2</sup> MALINOWSKI 1922:428–463.

<sup>3</sup> TAMBIAH 1968:175–208.

desired properties or effects are evoked; then, through objects and actions, the magician transfers these properties to the designated person or object. Metaphor is based on identity or similarity, the transfer of properties of an object or material substance is based on the principle of metonymy (contiguity or contact, the part for the whole).

The distinction made between magic formula and prayer corresponds to the old distinction between magic and religion. From this perspective, the magic formula is attributed coercive power, while prayer takes the form of a request or appeal to personal forces or spirits.

In practice, however, these analytical distinctions between magic and religion, between magic formula and prayer, are difficult to establish when applied to complex behaviour, such as the treatment of illness in many societies. Rivers<sup>4</sup> pointed out this difficulty, which stems in part from the multiplicity of forms assumed by magic formulas: these can take the form of commands, declarations of intent, expressions of emotional states, assertions concerning the achievement of a result, explanations, instructions, mystifications. The words may or may not be intelligible, and there is often a combination of various forms of prayer and verbal magic.

The difficulty in distinguishing magic from religion experienced by Rivers also stemmed from the attempt to reconstruct the logic behind magical action by isolating individual elements of the situation. The efficacy of magical practices depends on the whole procedure, it does not reside only in verbal formulas or only in actions. Healing rituals and techniques often involve very elaborate procedures, combining the invocation of spirits, the use of magical formulae and the performance of certain actions.

Many healing techniques have a verbal component, consisting of magic formulas that are mumbled or whispered

---

<sup>4</sup> RIVERS 1927.

with special intonations or vocalisations; meanwhile, the healer sprays saliva, blows or breathes on the patient, or on the objects he uses. The formulas are uttered in a low, muffled voice, barely audible to the patient. Most magical techniques combine the invocation of spirits, the use of magic formulas and the performance of acts that aim to cause a certain effect. In the invocations and prayers that precede and accompany the actions, the aims of the procedure are indicated: both Malinowski<sup>5</sup> and Tambiah<sup>6</sup> emphasised the intertwining of magical formulae and practical actions that characterises it.

The terms take on a precise meaning in the context in which they are used: it is a veritable technical vocabulary for identifying the distinctive elements and actions of which magical practices, rites and therapies are composed<sup>7</sup>.

The geographical position of the Agiara is particularly interesting because, historically, it appears to have been a particularly significant place of Greek culture and the last bastion of Roman civilization in the expansion to the East. Therefore, from the anthropological point of view, it is halfway between Western and Eastern culture. The field research, preceded by the contact and recruitment of informants, was developed in the summer period (July) of the year 2018. The choice is due to the climatically favorable period for moving between the Georgian countryside before the great autumn-winter rains. The time allocated for data collection was three weeks. The aim of the work is to detect the healing traditions in the Georgian region of Adjara by interviewing traditional healers in the countryside and in the city and to learn about the current popular consideration of magical thinking that supports this kind of practices. When constructing the interview, we realised the influence on the traditional healing practices of the Muslim and

---

<sup>5</sup> MALINOWSKI 1925.

<sup>6</sup> TAMBIAH 1968:175–208.

<sup>7</sup> LEWIS 1980. For the development of the latest evolutions of the matter, see the recent specific summary work: PIZZA 2020.

Christian religions. Another salient element, besides the religious aspects, was the evaluation of the presence of the communist regime, in modifying the animist cultural dimension of the origins<sup>8</sup>. To understand the essence of the following it is useful indeed to have a brief overview of the anthropic and religious aspects of the place. The generation that was born before 1921 saw three governments pass through: the Turkish one that lasted 180 years, the communist one from 1921 until 1989, and finally the democratic phase. From a religious point of view, therefore, Georgians were Orthodox Christians before the 18<sup>th</sup> century, afterwards the Turks imposed the Muslim religion, while during Communism, any expression of religious faith was forbidden; today there is freedom of worship; in particular, the majority of the population has become Orthodox again (there is still a Muslim minority), and in the centre of Batumi there are Catholic churches and synagogues.

### **General considerations on the concept of magic in Georgia**

The philologist Ketevan Kadagidze, interviewed about the concept of magic, says that before Christianity, which arrived in Georgia before the 3<sup>rd</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> century, people had pre-Christian cults that were mixed with the rites of the Orthodox religion. These elements, which are found in the animist culture, fall under the popular magic. People who do magic in Georgia, both in the male and female meaning, say *jadokari* by *jado* (magic) *kari* (wind), their negative actions say *jadokroba* (making magic) i.e. *jado* (magic), *kroba* (doing); another word that represents the act of making magic is *mismoba* with the meaning of prayer, both in a negative and positive sense; *mismoba* is somehow close to the concept present in the word *shelotzva* proper to Orthodox prayer, in this case only in a positive meaning. The word curse, instead, is said *datskellva*. In the

---

<sup>8</sup> NORSA 2015; NORSA 2017.

region of Agiara things are complicated by the lasting three hundred years presence of the Turks and their Muslim religion which, once again, made the old animist rites intertwine with this new religion. In Agiara, which remained Islamicized for 200 years, the presence of Christian elements is quite rare, while in other parts of Georgia, it is more frequent. However, prayers often begin with an invocation to the Most Holy Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) and references to the saints is alternated with popular invocations. Continuing the contamination with the Catholic religion, Jesus Christ and Mary are often the protagonists: for example, if the prayer is addressed to the obstacle of *ojmuri* (evil spirit), the power of Christ is invoked to stop the disturbing being. Among the most common Christian references are Adam, the archangels Gabriel and Michael, St. George, St. Nicholas and the 363 feasts of St. George (to which the 363 churches in Georgian territory are dedicated). The number nine is considered an equally magical number and often returns in the formulas in particular association with natural references such as mountains and rivers or Christian references (nine angels, nine icons). In Georgia, it is believed that places very far away can be located by referring to a distance of nine mountains, hills, rivers: the number nine is considered a final term, beyond which there is nothing else known. Also the terms inside and outside, in these populations, have a particular value: for example the house is "inside" because the domestic fire, representation of the sun, created by men is inside the domestic walls. When the fire is lit, the house becomes a sacred and shared place, it is forbidden to peek beyond the doors in the darkness of the night<sup>9</sup>. At the conclusion of the invocations there are prescriptions of the actions to be performed during the rite and the elements used (black water, black snake, black whips, charcoal, black-handled knife). Black is a symbolic colour of great power to

---

<sup>9</sup> Temuri Tunadze (ethnographer).

ward off or absorb misfortune. Black, on the other hand, is also the representation of the opposite, the negative and mortiferous spirit, as in the following example of the Kachetia region: "A slit opens in the black mountain, a black horse, mounted by a black knight, with a black saddle, black bridle, black eyes and black teeth too". The objects, such as the knife with a black handle and black net, have a contrasting value in terms of sympathetic magic (the like takes the like away). We find an interesting psychological aspect in these formulas: the negative entity is always named and all its potential to harm such as drinking blood, stirring bowels, gnawing bones, sucking or disturbing the brain or the terror caused by natural disasters. Resolution can be achieved through the intervention of saints, benevolent entities or protective objects listed in the formulas. Finally, the demonic being, converted, will stop his negative action and, redeemed, will convert by allying himself to the benevolent entities. Finally, through this process, the patient's catharsis is realized. In the ritual, in the phase of the crescent moon, charcoal and the black-handled knife are used: a trace of charcoal is placed in the form of a cross on the patient's forehead by the healer at the end of the ritual; the knife will be placed by the patient under the pillow during sleep. The healing process sometimes involves complex rites: for example, one of these rites involves the healer placing a strip of cloth on the ground, in which a thorn is planted, on which charcoal is placed, the cloth is taken in his hand and knotted three times. The result is a casing with a thorn at the lower end. This fetish is used in some prayers for liberation from evil or terror. Other actions, on the other hand, are bel-lows: in one of these a black handkerchief of women's clothing is placed on the ground on which a knot is made at one end and a thorn is inserted at a span from it. Tradition has it that if the thorn moves, there is a negative presence. In other rites the gesture of the healer is also important: for example in one of these the healer holds one hand on the heart and

the other on the patient's belt, or you have to drink three sips from a glass, the remaining water is poured on the head: it is believed that it comes down freeing the patient from fear<sup>10</sup>. A rite of purification, rather well known to remedy negative consequences for the bad influences of the waters encountered during the journey, consists in providing once back home. In this region, it is said that when children or a pregnant woman pass in any damp place such as marshes, ponds or even simply over a bridge, they absorb the negative energy of moisture. On their return, therefore, the other members of the family prepare burning embers which must be ritually jumped in order to restore the energy balance<sup>11</sup>.

### **Therapeutic practice of blowing**

The ritual begins with the purification of the environment followed by several sequences of prayers interspersed with puffs addressed to the patients and directed in different ways depending on the case. A first mode of prolonged puffing is moved from one shoulder to the other, another one directed to the chest (in the idea that the soul resides in the heart). If during the recitation of the prayers the woman had apnea or a change in the state of consciousness, it means that the patient would have the evil eye. If the same conditions were transmitted to other people present, it would be an indisputable diagnostic confirmation. The invocations and the possibility for women to come into contact with the divine are the central element of the exorcistic activity. In the Lanchxuti region, in the village of Shuxuti, an elderly healer worked some time ago, to whom they brought children with various problems such as the evil eye and lack of appetite. After examining the situation, the healer began the rituals with the purification of the environment by freeing and cleaning the chimney. If, during

---

<sup>10</sup> SHIOSHVILI 1994:5.

<sup>11</sup> Jemal Varshalomidze of Xelvachauri (Batumi) (born 1938). Profession: historian and ethnographer.



the operation or subsequent prayers, she had a feeling of apnea, it meant that the child was suffering from an organic problem, but it could also be a curse or, worse, it could have been the subject of a curse. If the apnoea condition had also been transmitted to other people present, it would have been an indisputable confirmation of the predictions. The treatment consisted in reciting the prayers by blowing on the patient's chest; the target of the exhalation was the heart because he believed that in that organ resided the soul. A second, prolonged breath of the elderly woman was moved from one shoulder to the other. The granddaughter, who recalls her grandmother's practices, adds that the act of blowing, and the rest of the ritual, including the prayers, recited with particular involvement, were not only an exorcistic act but also a negative invocation against the curse. During this ritual, in fact, the fundamental step to transfer the negativity to the sender was to pull a black-handled knife several times into its case. Below is the text of the prayer<sup>12</sup>:

Georgian	English
<i>Surdo estumra Datunas</i>	Cold visited Datuna (patient's
<i>stumrad</i>	name) as a guest What I of-
<i>Ra mivartvat sadilad</i>	fer for dinner Akali bakali rot-
<i>Akali bakali datvi dampali</i>	ten bear I clapped my hands and
<i>Davkari tashi da gavagde</i>	chased out the door
<i>karshi</i>	

The ethnographer Temuri Tunadze explains that, in general, and from the point of view of literature, the number of blows that are interspersed with prayers are three, because this is a sacred number; in other rites, less often, one blows even seven or nine times, never more<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Tamara Oragvelidze (born 1982), director of the Agiara Museum Association, recalls her grandmother's therapeutic practices.

<sup>13</sup> Temuri Tunadze (ethnographer).

### Interview with a country healer

Meri lost her father and husband in the Second World War; her mother-in-law was a country healer, she had several herbal medicines in her garden, so she learned the art of therapeutics. During Communism, these practices were abolished and passed off as meaningless cultural heritage, so Meri developed the idea that practicing them was something to be ashamed of. She resumed these ancient ritual actions with the birth of her granddaughter and increased her action over time: the elderly woman testifies that in the past she cured and healed many people. Meri believes that every herb in the world can have a therapeutic effect on people; the effectiveness is enhanced if prayers are recited during the administration and each one is specific to each problem: in fact, there are, for example, herbs for alopecia, for falling in love, for children.... In the latter case, the elderly healer knows three types of care for children, one of which is for rickets, the second is for developmental problems, i.e. when children do not gain weight while feeding (in the countryside this difficulty is a sign of good luck and it is said that *smindani* is “holy”).

Georgian	English
<i>Smindans vjridi Cmindans ara</i>	Holy cut no
<i>Smindans jvaredinsana</i>	Sacred Crossroads
<i>Sanam amas cevkitxavdi</i>	When I read this
<i>Tavisufali da ixos</i>	you must set him free [and set yourself free]

The term *smindani* appears quite interesting: the holy spa in Georgian culture is understood as purity, something divine that cannot be modified in its essence and therefore invoked as a protective element. The sentence is repeated five times alternating with five puffs on the child's body. A similar formula is used in the case of children with rickets.

Georgian	English
<i>Raxits vjridi Raxits ara</i>	Rachitic cut no
<i>Raxits jvaredinsana</i>	rickety crossbreeding
<i>Sanam amas cevkitxavdi</i>	When I read this
<i>Raxiti da gakres</i>	you have to disappear

It is blown once by rotating the head (with the idea of contouring the head and body of the child with a protective aura n.d.r.). Of particular interest is the verb used by the informer to say blow *sciuberuas* for the continuity of the blessing blow. About the pray, we can consider that: confusing phrases make you fall more into a trance state, sentences evocate liberation from the negative entitie., In the rite, invocative gestures are produced (for example cross). The verb “to blow” in Georgian is translated as *sulis* (soul) *sheberva* (to blow) as many of the words that begin with “sh” express a contact with the divine or spiritual word (*Shalom*: peace; *Shaman*: tungusa root *ša* (to know); *Shiripiyari*: one who is in contact with the goddess of nature; *Shinto*: 神 *Shin* which means divinity, spirit, and 道 To (in Chinese) Tao street; *Dervishi*: the one who leads from the material world to the celestial one; Shiva: “the Benevolent”, *Shamkara* “the Savior”). The sound is a carrier of peace and calm. Sound that a mother makes to calm the child. Meri says that in reciting the formulas during the ritual, she feels apnoic aspects, it is easy to tear and, once the operation is over, she feels tired and exhausted: she believes that if these symptoms are not present, the ritual cannot be successful. In the child’s growth phase, it is normal that there is a period in which the child seeks stability. Some infants, however, because they are more frail than others, find it difficult to balance: in these cases *Xertvis tavi-geo* (the perforated wooden base in which the support for the silkworm cocoons is grafted), scissors and wax is used. In order to be effective, that wax must have been brought, the evening before, to the houses

of seven different families in the vicinity; at harvest time it is necessary to observe silence: people, in fact, are aware of the sacredness of the moment and avoid uttering any words. The healer has recently replaced this ancient method with another for which she has planted fruit trees that grow rapidly, such as fig, plum, laurel and mulberry trees... A total of seven plants: in the symbolic idea that there is a similarity between the growth of the child and the speed of growth of the tree, both expressions of new life. A small piece of wax is hung from the seven trees each. In the evening, the old woman turns to each tree reciting the same words she used with the people: "Now I give you the wax, tomorrow you give it back to me without saying anything". In the morning, she collects the little pieces of wax hanging from the seven trees that will be put under the pillow while sleeping. The following day, the elderly woman goes to the countryside to collect the water from seven springs which will be put in a single container. The pieces of wax are "burnt" and a formula is recited. The healing process consists in melting the wax in a pan: the melted liquid is poured in front of the suffering person and poured into the hole of the wooden object described above and dropped into a cup where it cools down. The action is repeated five times: to bless the feet, knees, left and right shoulder and, finally, the head, each time collecting the wax and melting it again. After the fifth repeat, the wax is collected in a small bag and the child has to step on it and crush it with his feet while the old woman recites the same prayer by moving a knife with a black handle. The elderly woman claims to have recently taken care of a four-year-old child from a family who came from a mountain village far away from her, suffering from this problem in such a serious way that he is unable to walk. After having treated him with this system, the child was able to walk again and his pace was so fast that the elderly woman had difficulty in keeping up with his gait; the little wretch also had difficulties in phonation, but with prayers

and care she also solved this problem, in fact, Meri remembers with joy that her first words were "Thank you grandma". These ritual actions are repeated for each pathology of the children (rickets, frailty, instability, pavor nocturnus, sleepwalking); the formulas used, instead, change and are specific for each problem; beyond the specific problem, as usual, at the end of the prayers so that the formula can be effective and to create a protection for the patient, the elderly woman blows around the head describing a bow.

Georgian	English
<i>Ashina mashina vin shegashina,</i>	She scares me, who scares you?
<i>Datvma shegashina adamianma shegashina, katam shegashina zaghma shegashina.</i>	Are you scared of the bear or are you scared of the man?
<i>sulo da gulo dalagdes sheshinebulma gamovdes.</i>	Are you scared of the cat or are you scared of the dog?
	Does your heart and soul have to settle down? The terror will go away.

These rites (casting wax, praying and blowing) are repeated for three months at the last quarter of the old moon: the symbolic aspect below is linked to the idea that from that moment on, the moon will grow, and with this the power of the ritual increases, as the health of the child. The exorcism against the evil eye is simply blown in the child's face.

Georgian	English
<i>Alisa malisa didisa patrias,</i>	Flame flame, of the big and the small,
<i>shinisa garisa balis ferisa.</i>	from the inside and the outside,
<i>Alo alos kana mqonda,</i>	cherry wood colour,

*kanashi mori ixomoris qvesh*  
*gveli ixo.visi tvalic geca*  
*gouskdes tvalis kakali.*

I had a field of alo alo in the field  
 there was a log under the trunk  
 there was a snake whoever puts  
 the evil eye on you explodes the  
 „walnut of the eye”.

*Cavaxare nacari da pimpili*  
*mis tvalebshi*

I put ash and chilli peppers on  
 their eyes.

The same formula is also recited if a cow does not produce the usual amount of milk. In this case, the protective blow would be made all over the animal's body. After having completed the first part of the ritual, Meri prepares a second part called *Tval-cxkali* (lett. eye-water) during which a formula is recited seven times in Turkish. Each time she prays by pouring water from a glass into a larger container. In order to increase the blessing effect, burning embers are immersed in the water which will be given to the cow's owner. On his return home, the farmer extracts the coal from the container and, once it has been pulverised, sprinkles it on the animal's skin. The water, on the other hand, will be given to the beast to drink in that instant and every time it should have health problems. If the children return home terrified for having met the *ojmuri*, who live near the watercourses, the ritual of pouring the wax accompanied by the usual prayers is repeated, in addition, in these cases, a fire is lit and a ritual called *Xrcholeba* is performed: a large basin is taken and the water collected from the seven springs is put inside, in which seven burning embers of seven different trees are extinguished and a large smoke is released. Another ritual to reassure frightened children consists of taking seven splinters of wood from the jambs of different doors, four stems of grass gathered in the corners near different houses, cornmeal, all burnt on an iron tablet: the smoke that is released is inhaled by the frightened child. In the case of alopecia areata, Meri takes a needle that has never been used and circumscribes a circle where the problem

occurs by touching the skin. While the action is being carried out, the following formula should be read:

Georgian	English
<i>Siishvili xnida yanasa,</i>	Alopecia plows the field,
<i>shavi uveli xarita,</i>	with a black yoke ox,
<i>xars tabaki utydeboda siishvils</i>	the black yoke breaks and dries
<i>zidi uxmeboda.</i>	under the skin the cause of the
	disease.

Symbolically, it is as if the passing of the needle over the skin wanted to represent the plough that cuts the hair; with the breaking of the yoke, the ploughing action is interrupted and, finally, the cause of the disease falls, the hair is free to grow. Mari diagnoses the evil eye from the patient's expression, especially those who look at it by squeezing their eyes in a slit, linking this symptom to a high blood pressure disorder; the diagnosis is confirmed if at dawn the unlucky person wakes up with migraine. People who live in the countryside, says Meri, are often frightened when, wandering in the darkness of the night, they hear noises: these, in fact, are interpreted as caused by supernatural malignant beings. The memory for the dead is fulfilled, according to Muslim tradition, between the Thursday (*giuma*) evening and the dawn of Friday. According to tradition, sweets (*Xalva*) are brought to neighbours and relatives and prayers prescribed by the Koran are recited. For groin hernia problems, Meri reports the following prayer:

Georgian	English
<i>lao-tiao mjaxeo-kvaxeo geiare-</i>	lao-tiao raw and unripe walk back
<i>gameiare shen salagze dalagdi</i>	and forth put yourself in your
<i>uzrav svasavi</i>	place like the well planted

In this jubilation, the elderly woman refers directly to the hernia and gives her peremptory orders. Finally, she takes a protective breath on the sick part of the body. The spirits of the ancestors often hide in the homes of their descendants. They peek at what is happening from the ravines: if there is serenity in domestic life, they give their blessing, in opposite case, they deny it. To make the exorcism of the spirits of the dead explicit, Meri starts from the story of her neighbours. When her grandmother died, her seven-year-old grandson, who was very fond of her, went to sleep at night on her grave. As the boy began to isolate himself by playing alone, talking to imaginary friends and shutting himself more and more into an inner world, his parents thought they would take him to the *hoja* (islamic priest) to ward off evil spirits. But the boy refused to go there because the spirits who possessed him ordered him not to. Despite initial resistance, the young man was finally persuaded to meet the priest, to whom he confided that the spirits were five and female, living in his chest and of different colours. The same resistance was also shown towards Meri's treatment: if he had accepted, she would have intervened by reciting prayers for three months at the moment of the new lunation. Meri remembers having cured a child who was possessed by evil spirits. On the day of the exorcism, the spirits, in order to take revenge, came back while the old woman was sleeping and tried to strangle her, so much so that during the apnea she was about to suffocate. Meri says that it is a rather normal phenomenon that when she performs these liberating practices, the spirits hide in some hidden ravine in the house, especially in photographs of friends and relatives. Then, they move at night as in the previous case: in fact, the negative spirit that hunted the child had hidden in the photograph of his nephew who died a few years earlier and, with those likenesses, appeared to her in a dream asking her why she wanted to chase him away and, taking revenge, tried to strangle her. When these events happen, when she wakes up, she also repeats for



herself the prayers interspersed with the breaths she practices for her patients. Meri also uses useful amulets in her practices, she remembers, for example, that her grandmother, when the cattle were killed, had a horn cut, emptied it from the leftovers of meat and, after having cleaned it well, dried it in the sun. This amulet was hung on the door jamb for the protection of the house. To increase the protective effects, it was wrapped in a fishing net and other objects such as a horseshoe and garlic heads were placed inside. A second amulet for the protection of the house is the affixing, always on the majesty of the entrance door, of a snake tongue. This tradition, however, is more common than the northern part of the region. In the Meri area, in order to protect people, both in cases of malice and to be able to benefit the wearer in cases where a person needs more dialectical skills during a confrontation, a debate or an examination, it is more frequent to put a forked, cut tongue in the jacket pocket. Ritually, the cutting of the tongue takes place at the beginning of spring because it is believed that at that time, after the long winter rest, the snake's poison is more charged. Meri maintains that if a person has dermatological problems (dermatitis or acne), it depends on the fact that the mother saw a snake while she was expecting her child. Meri keeps a wet suit of snake in the house, always ready, in case a person has these problems: in such case, she would cut a piece of it and, after dipping it in water, she would make them take a bath three times using the same liquid.. Black amulets such as necklaces, bracelets, etc. are made of stones of the colour which in Georgian is called *gagato*, they recall the colour of coal which, from a symbolic point of view, recalls the action of absorption. Not being able to wear objects made of coal, these stones are used to absorb negativity. Saint Michael's weapons and the rosaries of Orthodox priests are made of this material because they have greater power against evil spirits Another way to protect oneself from negativity is to kill a snake and, after having extracted its tongue (which

is used for the protection of the house and the person or to be protected for an important debate), bury it. After a month, when the flesh is rotten and only the skeleton remains, it is dug up and worn around neck as if it was a necklace. It is believed that even just a shred is enough, but if it is complete the protection is greater. It is believed that a spiritual condition resides in every living being: when the spirit dies, married to another being – this also applies to trees: when they are cut down – the souls migrate to another vegetable. Regarding the *nusche* (scrolls with Islamic prayers used as amulets), Meri says that they are made by the *hoja*, sometimes they operate for good, as in the case of two young people from the village who had love problems and finally got married, while sometimes they operate, according to popular tradition, against certain unfortunate people, as in the case of two young people mentioned when the boy did not pay enough the priest who then took revenge and told him: “Damn you, you have mocked me, now I will make you cry” and, after having made a curse on him, the two separated definitively and now the woman lives in another village in the company of another man. In Muslim culture, for 52 days after a person has died, the *hoja* reads a 360-page book to help the soul get out of the body, at the same time they still make the usual sweet *halva*. The priest is offered money so that he can carry out his duties. If this process is not done, the spirit suffers, as if it were alive, from the deterioration of the body. It is important for the family that the soul of the person is honoured even if the *hoja* does not completely fulfil its tasks. Mirrors are also of controversial importance: when a person dies, they are all covered with other reflective surfaces to prevent his or her soul from leaving the house; children are forbidden to look at their reflected image and, finally, it is not good to look in the broken mirror. Children are probably forbidden to look in the mirror in order to avoid their reflected image remaining consolidated over time, especially in those cases where the reflected images were deformed: Meri says, for example,

that the head remains small. To avoid bad luck, all broken objects can no longer be used, even if they could still be used. In case a person should meet a negative or malevolent person, and not being able to make the usual scaramantic gesture of touching his testicles, he recites a sentence: *Shen ena sheni tvali sheni guli shens zurgs ukan da mere da sheubero* (Your tongue, your eyes, your heart behind your back) and then you blow. Crossing of a black cat brings bad luck, in general the cat in this culture is a negative spirit while the dog, on the contrary, is benevolent, especially in the passage of souls from life to death. To illustrate this difference, Meri remembers a story her grandmother told her: it is said that, when a person dies, their soul has to pass over a precipice inside which an eternal fire burns for the burning of tar, the passage takes place on a tight rope that acts as a bridge, dirtied and made slippery with soap made from the cat. On the contrary, to facilitate the passage, the dog licks the soap away so that the soul can fulfil its destiny.

### Conclusion

The above considerations give the idea of a rather complex relationship between magic, religion and society. The multi-ethnic and religious composition that characterized the Georgian region of Adjara between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century made it possible to merge the pre-existing religious cultural dimensions with new cultural aspects. The Turkish domination of the territory which lasted hundreds of years and the Communist repression of every religious or spiritual form was certainly not irrelevant. What we are currently facing is a rather variegated panorama of beliefs and rites that cross very ancient elements, preceding Christianity, with more recent apparatuses mainly of Orthodox and Muslim Christian origin. Ultimately, the Georgian people appear strongly conditioned by superstitions and fears of being made the object of negative (aggressive) magic. Therefore, it is common to resort to figures designated to free from spell or

misfortune. Generally, the points of reference designated for this purpose are the respective priests for each religious creed (Muslim and Christian), but in the territory there is still a certain number of healers who practice blessings and take care of people's health. In the research campaign it was possible to see a certain difference between the magic of the city (Batumi) and that of the surrounding companions: while in the city the main references are the *hoja* (Muslim priests) and pope (Orthodox), who operate using specific exorcistic prayers of their religion or applying amulets (by contact magic), in the countryside the healers refer to a broader concept of magic using more natural elements and entering more into the specificity of discomfort with their own tools for any eventuality. In these cases, the magical aspect is strongly linked to the symbolic condition. Therapeutic strategies, in fact, provide that the treatment passes through the identification of formulas that enter the depths of the human soul through specific symbolic images, prayers that give spiritual comfort and the ingestion or application of natural elements (herbs or other substances) biochemically effective for the human body. Comparisons with traditional healers do not reveal the symbolic values of the elements used during magical practices. Healers simply report that the practices have been handed down from their ancestors and thus pass them on to future generations. In order to avoid mystifying what has been recounted with theoretical interpretations that are not proper to the relevant ethnographic reality, no further interpretations have been added except for the symbolic value of the colour black in magical practices and the use of the sound 'sh' in prayers. What really struck us, however, was the use of the symbol in the treatment of psychosomatic disorders. These are traditional methods that are part of a peasant culture that anticipates modern psychosomatic medicine by several centuries<sup>14</sup>.

---

<sup>14</sup> LOWEN 1978; PANCHERI 1983; BOTTACCIOLI 2006; AMMON 1977; FRANZ 1965; FRISCH 1976; WEISS 1943.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

AMMON 1974: G. Ammon, *Psychoanalyse und Psychosomatik*, München 1974.

BOTTACCIOLI 2006: F. Bottaccioli, *Psiconeuro – Endocrino – Immunologia*, Milano 2006.

FRANZ 1965: A. Franz, *Psychosomatic Medicine: Its Principles and Applications*, New York 1965.

FRISCH 1976: F. Frisch, *Éléments de medecine psychosomatique*, Paris 1976.

HUBERT, MAUSS 1902–1903: H. Hubert, M. Mauss, *Esquisse d'une théorie générale de la magie*, "Année sociologique" 7 (1902–1903), p. 1–146.

LEWIS 1980: G. Lewis, *Day of shining red*, "Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology" 27 (1980).

LOWEN 1978: A. Lowen, *Il linguaggio del corpo*, Milano 1978.

MALINOWSKI 1922: B. Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: an account of a native enterprise and adventure in the arcipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*, London 1922.

MALINOWSKI 1925: B. Malinowski, *Magic, science and religion*, in *Science, religion and reality*, London 1925.

NORSA 2015: A. Norsa, *Nell'antro della strega. La magia in Italia tra racconti popolari e ricerca etnografica*, Verona 2015.

NORSA 2017: A. Norsa, *Nel sabba delle streghe sotto il noce di Benevento*, Verona 2017.

PANCHERI 1983: P. Pancheri, *Stress, emozioni, malattia*, Mondadori 1983.

PIZZA 2020: G. Pizza, *Antropologia medica: saperi, pratiche e politiche del corpo*, Roma 2020.

RIVERS 1927: W. Rivers, *Medicine, magic and religion*, London 1927.

SHIOSHVILI 1994: T. Shioshvili, *Qartuli xalxuri shelocve*, 1994.

TAMBIAH 1968: S.J. Tambiah, *The magical power of words*, "Man" 111 (1968), pp. 175–208.

WEISS 1943: E. Weiss, O.S. English, *Psychosomatic, Medicine*, Philadelphia–London 1943.

### **Informants**

Avni Varshalomidze, farmer, b. 1942 (Xelvachauri–Batumi).

Donari Varshalomidze, teacher, b. 1952 (Batumi).

Eteri Verzadze, farmer, b. 1942 (Xelvachauri–Batumi).

Izo Takidze, Archeologist Archeological Museum, (Batumi).

Jemal Varshalomidze, ethnografer, b. 1938 (Xelvachauri–Batumi).

Ketevan Kadagidze, Philology Teacher, b. 1953 (Batumi).

Maxvala Kudba, housewife, b. 1953 (Batumi).

Nusret, Hoja, b. 1952 (Batumi).

Tamara Oragvelidze, Director of the Association of the Museums of Agiara, b. 1982 (Batumi).

Temuri Tunadze, ethnografer, b. 1983 (Batumi).