

Georgian - Abkhazian Cultural Relations in the Second Half of XIX - at the beginning of XX centuries and Issues of National Identity

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Abstract

National culture, being the phenomenon to link the ethnic unity, plays an important role in formation of the nation. There is the synthesis of centuries-old traditions, norms, values and lifestyle in the national culture, resulting from socio-cultural development of the national unity. Confession is of utmost importance in formation of national identity, inasmuch as the religion has been and remains the integrating power of the nation during the centuries, one of the most important factors, defining the individual or collective identity. Based on analysis of a specific historical era, we have analyzed the main trends of cultural development of Abkhazian people, the socio-cultural and religious factors, defining development of Abkhazian ethnicity under the Russian colonization regime in XIX and XX centuries. In early XIX cent. That is when Russian Empire annexed Abkhazia, Abkhazian national unity was languished, and cultural identity - heterogenic. Fragmentation of cultural identity of Abkhazian people started in XVI cent. with domination of the Ottomans in the region and spread of Islamic culture. Since, cultural and religious identity of one part of the population was identified with Islam, and Christian cultural memory of another, which was associated with historical past of Georgia.

The work provides imperial national policy of Russia in Abkhazia in XIX and XX centuries, aiming at elimination of both, Islamic and Georgian historical and cultural memory in Abkhazian population, distortion thereof and formation of a new, Russian-oriented identity. The ideological machine was enacted, involved in this process, including Russian administrative officials, military and cultural figures. In 1880, due to pro-Turkish orientation, Abkhazian people were declared as “guilty” and were restricted from civil and political rights. Since 1907, Russian figures directed this vector against Georgians and launched the propaganda that Abkhazia has never been Georgia.

The Article deals with the socio-cultural and political consequences of Tsarist national policy, namely the reasons for enhancement of anti-Georgian attitude among Abkhazian society, serving as a fundament for Georgian-Abkhazian political and cultural alienation. Despite the striving, Tsarist regime failed to convert this process into armed confrontation between Georgian and Abkhazian people.

Keywords: Georgian, Abkhazian, cultural relations, XIX cent., XX cent., issues of national identity

National culture plays an important role in nation-building. It is a binding phenomenon of ethnic unity. The roots of national culture have to be looked for in the distant historical past, because the culture synthesizes the important centuries-old traditions, norms and values, lifestyles, which are results of socio-cultural development of national unity.

After the collapse of the unified Georgian monarchy in the XV century, the country broke into separate kingdoms and principalities. The Western Georgia was stricken by internal wars, which enhanced an aggressive expansionist policy of Ottoman Empire. Eventually, a political influence of Ottoman Empire increased in Abkhazia, Christianity weakened and islamisation of the Abkhazian society started. However, in XVII-XVIII centuries Georgian culture had retained its dominant position in Abkhazia and the Georgian language was the official language of Abkhazian principality. To some extent, principality maintained political ties with other Georgian principalities and kingdoms and sometimes participated in fights against Ottoman Empire.

At the beginning of the XVIII century an Abkhazian prince managed to expand the boundaries of his principality to Inguri River and attached lands were settled by the Abkhazians. In 1780 Abkhazian forces were defeated by the Megrelian prince in a decisive battle at Rhuki. This battle brought their further expansion to a halt.

In premodern society historical processes are determined by the ruling political elite. Based on above mentioned, we can firmly state that an identity of a significant part of the Abkhaz aristocracy had not undergone any major transformation; they maintained cultural and political ties with the rest of Georgia. So, the identity of one part of Abkhaz society was partially determined by the Christian doctrine and common history with Georgia. The identity of other part of the Abkhaz aristocracy was defined by Islam and loyalty to Sublime Porte.

The beginning of XIX century was marked by important events in the history of the Caucasus. In 1801, the kingdom of Kartli - Kakheti (Eastern Georgia) was annexed by Russian Empire starting a long struggle for an assertion of its hegemony in the region. The confrontation turned into an international conflict. Iran and Turkey openly joined in the struggle for hegemony in the Caucasus. Eventually, bloody and grueling Russian - Iranian and Russian - Turkish wars ended in the XIX century with the victory of Russia.

At the beginning of the XIX century Abkhazia's ruler Keleshbey Shervashidze's relationship with Turkey became extremely complicated, which led to a sharp political confrontation. Under these conditions, the head of Abkhazian state sought a political rapprochement with Russia. On 17 February, 1810 the Abkhazian principality was officially attached to the Russian Empire. The Abkhazian prince was granted limited rights over the principality.

Thus, 1810 the Russian Empire annexed main territory of Abkhazian principality, including Samurzakan region (1805). However, local residents of the mountainous part of Abkhazia - Tsebelda, Dahl and Pskhu - did not agree to join Russian Empire.

Joining to Russian Empire caused an ambiguous reaction among population of Abkhazian principality. People's protest, caused by increase in colonial exploitation and national oppression, became stronger. It was directed against Russian government. Russian authorities did everything to support its allies among ruling elite of Abkhazian society. Rebellion and unrest were cruelly suppressed in 20-40-ies of XIX. Mountainous regions of Abkhazia were finally pacified only at the beginning of the 60s of XIX. In 1864, after victory over the Northern Caucasus, Tsarist government immediately abolished Abkhazian principality and its lord was exiled into Russian province. This fact had sparked off Abkhazian population's protests, which erupted into uprising in 1866. The rebels made political demands for restoration of Abkhazian principality; they proclaimed George Shervashidze - legitimate heir of throne- as a ruler of Abkhazia. The uprising was defeated. Its members have been punished, and thousands of Abkhazians were forced to leave their homeland.

The Abkhazians participated in the Russian - Turkish war of 1877-1878 on the side of Turkey. After victory over the Turks, Tsarism declared Abkhazians as guilty people and forced them to immigrate to Turkey. Deserted region was intensely resettled by colonists from other regions of empire.

This is a general historical background of Abkhazia in the XIX century and at the same time base for developing Abkhazians' cultural identity.

Until 1864 Georgian language remained as an official language of the principality, but it was methodically and purposefully supplanted by Russian language backed by Russian Caucasus administration after abolition of Abkhazian principality. Even in these conditions, the Abkhazian aristocracy took an active part in social and cultural life of Georgia. Particular part of Abkhazian aristocracy acted like a loyal stronghold of Georgian throne, being patriots of Georgian Kingdom. A good example of this is a life and activities of George Mikhail Shervashidze - the first Abkhazian writer. His works created in the Georgian language are still popular. Drama of G. M. Shervashidze "George III", devoted to the Georgian king, father of Queen Tamar (1184 -1213), is recognized as one of the best dramas in Georgian literature. G.M. Shervashidze is famous as a talented theater critic and essayist. G.M. Shervashidze is highly respected by both Abkhaz and Georgian people. Among the distinguished sons of Abkhazia we should name David Chkhotua, who made a significant contribution to the journalism history, journalism and Georgian culture. David Chkhotua did a great service in understanding philosophy of heroes of Shota Rustaveli's poem "The Knight in the Panther's Skin".

A special place in the development of Abkhazian education system belongs to Georgian educator Konstantin Machavariani, whose name is associated with founder of the Abkhazian literature Dimitri Gulia. Being a teacher at mountainous school, K. Matchavariani noticed teenage prodigy Dimitri Gulia. In 1892 they published together a new Abkhazian primer. This tutorial played an important role in shaping the cultural identity of the Abkhaz people.

Significant contributions to formation of Abkhazians' cultural identity were made by Georgian educators and public figures Nico Janashia and Peter Charaya. Nico Janashia played a major role in the study of Abkhazian ethnography. His works are considered exemplary. Peter Charaya successfully worked not only on the problems of Georgian studies, but also on the problems of Abkhazian studies.

Thus, on the basis of this brief information we can conclude that during the second half of the XIX century, in a very difficult period of Tsarist aggressive Russification policy and colonial education, when even names "Georgia" and "Abkhazia" were forbidden, Georgian and Abkhaz public figures jointly built up Abkhazian culture, thereby contributing to the development of Abkhaz ethnic identity and at the same time common Georgian culture.

In Georgia Tsarism held policy of disintegrating common Georgian national consciousness by introducing alphabets for ethnic Georgians, Svans and Megrelians. These alphabets were based on the Cyrillic. At the same time Georgian culture was set against nascent Abkhazian culture by Russians. Georgian language was banned in Abkhazian schools. It was also extremely limited in the public worship. The Tsarist government sought for weakening Georgia national-liberation movement, which aimed at reviving Georgian statehood within its historical borders and restoration of autocephalous Georgian Apostolic Orthodox Church. However, the Tsarist government was not able to stop this process.

At the beginning of XX century Russia was involved in a political and socio-economic crisis, which has deepened during the first Russian revolution of 1905. The revolution highlighted, obviously, an acute need for a radical modernization of the country. In 1905 Russian Empire introduced representative system, which gave a positive impetus to the growth of nationalism and national identity of the oppressed peoples.

The formation of Abkhazians' ethnic identity took place during this new stage, which was caused by removal of guilt from Abkhaz people and rebuilding their political and civil rights. This process objectively promoted further development of cultural identity of Abkhaz people. The Georgian intellectuals and representatives of Georgian national liberation-movement actively participated in this process. For example, a famous educator and social activist I. Gogebashvili together with the others strongly advocated for Abkhazian language, Abkhazian literature, conducting public worship in Abkhaz language, etc. The joint collaboration of Georgian and Abkhaz public figures supported strengthening of Abkhazians' ethnic identity, the development of Georgian and Abkhaz cultures.

In order to maintain control over Abkhazia, Russian regional administration did not disdain for ethnic confrontation methods. Tsarism and its followers were persuading Abkhazians, that Georgians never lived in Abkhazia before, the Georgians conquered and occupied their homeland. Similar ideas were widely propagated by the ideologists of a "united and indivisible Russia". An extreme anti-Georgian sentiment was incited by little book of L. Voronov "Abkhazia - not Georgia", published in Moscow in 1907. Inventing new myths, symbols and statements about Abkhazians' history, language and culture, etc., had main purpose to shape a false Abkhazian identity, to break off Abkhazian people from common Georgian cultural space and to create Georgians' enemy image in the heads of the Abkhazians. All attempts of imperial state officials artificially provoke Georgian-Abkhazian ethno- political conflict had failed.

In this connection P. Sytin's project is arousing interest. Sytin was military attaché of the Soviet diplomatic mission in the Democratic Republic of Georgia. In April 1921, after forceful sovietisation of Georgia in February of the same year, Sytin prepared project to separate Abkhazia and Megrelia from Georgia and to integrate them directly into Soviet Russia. According to Sytin Bolshevik Russia's public interest strongly demanded Georgia's disintegration into other ethnic autonomous territories, etc. The Russian Federation leadership policy against Georgia in 1992-2008 had much in common with the anti-Georgian project of Sytin.