

The Study of Territorial Epithets of St. George in the Ritual Oral Texts of the Georgians

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Abstract: This paper explores some territorial epithets of St. George attested in the religious life of South Georgia and in the ritual oral texts of eastern Georgian highlanders, in order to shed a new light on the worship of the saint. Three main types or images of St. George can be discerned: the great martyr, the warrior-saint dragon slayer, and St. George Living or *Khidr* as he is generally called in Muslim East. Using a comparative method, the paper reveals the remains of the worship of St. George *Khidr* that led to the conclusion that certain epithets represent not a mere local poetic imagination, but a conceptual system that permeates everyday life of the highlanders and are reflected not only in language, but also in ritual practices. The undertaken analysis of the local epithets in certain areas of Georgia revealed one more image of the multifaceted St. George – St. George *Khidr*, who as the generator of certain meanings, disintegrated in many “green” epithets and started to function independently in the mentioned regions.

Keywords: St. George; *Khidr*; epithet; Spring fest; green; vegetation

Résumé : L'article explore certaines épithètes territoriales de saint Georges attestées dans la vie religieuse de la Géorgie du Sud et dans les textes oraux rituels des montagnards de l'est de la Géorgie, jetant ainsi un nouvel éclairage sur le culte du saint. On peut discerner trois principales représentations de saint Georges : le grand martyr, le guerrier-saint ou tueur de dragon et saint Georges vivant ou *Khidr* comme on le surnomme généralement en Orient islamique. À l'aide d'une méthode comparative, l'article révèle la trace du culte de saint Georges *Khidr* qui a conduit à la conclusion que certaines épithètes ne représentent pas une simple imagination poétique locale, mais tout un système conceptuel qui imprègne la vie quotidienne des montagnards et qui se reflète non seulement dans la langue, mais également dans les pratiques rituelles. L'analyse des épithètes locales dans certaines régions de Géorgie a démontré une autre image de saint Georges – saint Georges *Khidr*, qui, en tant que générateur de certaines significations, s'est désintégré en de nombreuses épithètes « vertes » et a commencé à fonctionner indépendamment dans ces régions.

Mots-clés : saint Georges ; *Khidr* ; épithète ; Fête du printemps ; vert ; végétation

Introduction

St. George, as it has been noted in specialist literature, is one of the most venerated saints throughout Caucasus Georgia¹ and the most enigmatic and puzzling image for researchers. Being one of the most popular and celebrated saints of Christian and non-Christian worlds, he has been studied from *emic* and *etic* perspectives by philologists, mythologists, anthropologists, ethnolinguists, art historians and others.

The multivalent and multifaceted image of the saint has been identified, at different times, with Perseus, Horus, Tammuz and other dying and resurrecting deities, with Mithra, with heathen Moon deity, depending on the angle and perspective of investigation. Some studies have revealed prevailing solar elements in his cult drawing special attention to a new theophany and a new level of Georgian's worldview².

In Christian as well as in Muslim popular stories, legends and myths, three main images of St. George can be discerned: 1) the so called Dadianus version of St. George, the great martyr who was sentenced to death for refusing to recant his Christian faith by the Persian emperor Dadianus (in later version by the Roman Emperor Diocletian); 2) St. George the hero, warrior-saint, fighter for the faith, the dragon-slayer, the moral example of Christianity (many variations of this image are attested in Georgian and non-Georgian mythology and folklore), the patron saint of soldiers and knights; 3) St. George the Living or *Khidr* (which in Arabic literally means "the Green One") as he is called in Muslim East³.

¹ Georgia is a small country at the crossroads of Western Asia and Eastern Europe, the land between the Black Sea and Caspian. Georgians of the Caucasus have a Christian culture dating back over 17 centuries and a civilization reaching back to the era of Jason and the Golden Fleece (See: David M. Lang, *Lives and Legends of the Georgian Saints*. New York: Crestwood, 1976). The old Chronicles which tell the story of the Crusades refer to the Georgians or Iberians, as a Christian people "who are very warlike and valiant in battle" [...] "These men are called Georgians (*Georgiani nuncupator*) because they especially revere and worship St. George, whom they make their patron and standard-bearer in their fight with the infidels, and they honor him above all other saints" (Jacques de Vitry, *Historia orientalis*, c. 1180). See Kevin Tuite, "St. George in the Caucasus: Politics, gender, mobility", in: *Sakralität und Mobilität im Kaukasus und in Südosteuropa, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse Sitzungsberichte*, 882. Band. Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Wien, 2017, p. 21-55.

² Nino Abakelia. "Kristianuli cmindanebi dasavlur-kartul religiur rcmena-carmodgenebsi (cm. Giorgi)" [Christian saints in western Georgian religious beliefs (St. George)] *Macne (The series of History)*, n° 3, 1985, p. 145-155.

³ Grigol Peradze, "Cm. Giorgi Kartveli eris šemokmedebaši" [St. George in the creative thought of the Georgians] *Jvari Vazisa* (Newsletter of the St. Nino Georgian Orthodox

In Georgia, where St. George, together with the Mother of God, is the most highly venerated saint, all three images are attested. Discussion over the available data on the subject is beyond the scope of this study. This paper deals only with a single theme and focuses on St. George the Living or *Khidr*, this image having been less examined by ethnographers. Through a cross-cultural perspective, the paper aims to reveal the importance of this image of the saint for the religious belief systems of the Georgians, as well as for other ethnic groups living in Georgia and neighboring people. We will do an overview of the cult of St. George *Khidr* with a focus on southern and eastern mountainous Georgia. Purposely, we gathered as much as possible the available religious data which could be placed under the Living and consequently Green umbrella. We used comparative historical research method in order to assess mutual influences occurring in Christian and Muslim societies. Accordingly, the ethnographic data form the basis to create an environmental icon of the saint which offers a new insight about him.

Rural feast days of St. George

In different parts of Georgia, the feast days dedicated to St. George are celebrated at various times. For example, in western Georgia, the Autumn feast of St. George (November 23 in the Julian Calendar) is thought to be more important than the Spring feast of the saint⁴; in the southern part of Georgia, it is the Spring feast (May 6 in the Julian calendar) that is most acknowledged, appreciated and highly recognized.

While exploring folk festivals in *Samckhe – Javakheti* (i.e. in the southern region of Georgia, distinguished by its diverse ethnic groups and confessions), besides the mentioned fixed days of the saint, a heterodoxic interesting custom called *Khidriela*, also related to St. George, has been attested in the early Spring feast cycle⁵. The natives do not remember the exact meaning of the mentioned custom, but remember legends and stories

Parish), August 2, Paris, 1932, p. 16-18. See also: Zviad Gamsakhurdia. *Vepkhistqaosnis saxis metqeleba* [The language of images in "The knight in the panther's skin"], Tbilisi: Mecniereba, 1991, p. 169-206.

⁴ Nino Abakelia, "Kristianuli cmindanebi...", *op. cit.*; Nino Abakelia, "Sv. georgij. Počitanie v gruzii" [St. George Worship in Georgia], *Orthodox Encyclopedia*. Vol. 10. Moscow: Cerkovno-Naučnj' Centr, 2005, p. 676-678.

⁵ Nino Abakelia, *Records of the 1987 ethnographic expedition in Samtskhe-Javakheti*, June 15, 1987.

associated with it and the prescribed rules that had to be performed during this period.

Purposely we tried to attest this cult in Georgian ethnographic data. According to the data gathered among the Georgians in the villages of *Andria Cminda*, *Tmogvi* and *Nichgori* (in southern Georgia), the villagers celebrated the feast of *Khidriela* before the lent, which lasted for five days, during which, according to folk beliefs, St. George had to appear in dreams. After he gave water (which symbolically means fate) to the dreamer, he would mount his horse and fly away. According to native beliefs, he gifted people with fate and fecundity. It was observed both by young girls and young boys, and generally by those who wanted their wishes to come true. Some even put books under their pillows to obtain wisdom from the sage. In the popular perception he (in some versions it was his divine horse) was a rope giver (the symbol of bonds of all sorts)⁶.

During *Khidriela*, people used to fast. Before it ended, they had to eat salty bread to see their fate in their dreams (bride or bridegroom correspondingly) or learn something⁷. In the twilight of the evening, the salty dough is handled by an innocent 3 or 4 years old child. Then it is baked and eaten. According to widespread beliefs, on Friday evening, St. George mounts on his horseback and swirls away.

The ethnographic archival data of 1941 kept in the Museum of Akhaltsikhe adds some details to the above described customs of the day. *Khidriela* is a movable feast, and every year its observance occurs on a different day. Sometimes it comes on February 1st, sometimes in the middle of the month. It lasts for five days, starting on Monday and ending on Friday, but a one day fast is also permitted. *Khidriela* is observed by those who want to get something.

If an unmarried girl is eager to learn sewing or embroidering, she has to fast for five days and eat only some bread in the morning and in the evening during the whole period. In the evening of the fifth day, she would bake salty bread, eat it and go to sleep. But before doing so, she would put scissors, colorful pieces of material, needle, thread and embroidering canvas under her pillow. During the night, she would have a revelation from angels who would teach her how to sew. If an unmarried

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

girl loved someone from her village or from another village, she would put a mirror, a comb and a flask of water under her pillow. If the beloved was seen in the dream and would offer water, it is believed that betrothal was unavoidable. The same had to be done by an unmarried boy for the beloved girl. The person seen in the dream was thought to be her or his fate. *Khidriela* was observed especially by those who were young, who wanted to get married, or who wanted to learn some craft in a short period of time⁸.

In the word – *khidriela* – one can easily trace the term *Khidr*, which remained unnoticed by Georgian ethnographers for a long time.

The multiple identities of *Khidr* (the “Green One”)

The origin of the cult of *Khidr* is rather vague. Diverse hypothesis have been proposed. In Georgian scientific literature, there is a mention that the cult of St. George has been borrowed from Christians and especially from the Georgians by the Arabs and the Persians, in whose religious consciences it had been fused with the cult of Elijah⁹.

It must be noted that such mutual influences theoretically are quite possible, as there were numerous points of contact between Muslims and Christians. Often foreign invaders did not only intrude into the holy places and lay claim to Christian sanctuaries, but they also opened doors of their own to Christians¹⁰. Consequently, Christians and Muslims often appealed for help to the saint who was known for his miracles and various powers. This often happened in the shared sanctuaries.

It is important to recollect here that the Caucasus is a:

landscape dotted with informal sacred places. [...] Some of these places have in the not so distant past at least, served as nodes of contact between groups who nominally adhere to different religions. In the highlands of Khevsureti (eastern mountainous Georgia), for example, the shrine of Khakhmatis Jvari and the ruined shrine of Anatori close to Chechnya served as meeting points between the nominally Christian and Muslim populations from both sides of the borders. They were united by mutual

⁸ Manuscript Fund in the Regional Museum of Akhaltsikhe. *Vaxtang sudadzis mier geografiuli da etnografiuli aghcera s. ghrelis. gazafxulis dghesascaulebi sopel ghrelsi* [Geographic and ethnographic descriptions of the village of Ghreli by Vakhtang Sudadze, Spring Fetivals in Ghreli, 1941] Manuscript n° 88, 1941.

⁹ Grigol Peradze, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

¹⁰ Frederick William Hasluck, “Ambiguous Sanctuaries and Bektashi Propaganda”. *The Annual of the British School at Athens*, Vol. 20, 1913/1914, p. 94-119.

respect for the place, by a joint willingness to experience the place as sacred, and by common rituals¹¹.

Special investigations¹² have revealed that the triliteral root *khdr* was attested in the Arabic word *al-akhdar* or *al-khadra* which in turn can be traced in many Semitic languages and means something that is green or just greenness or somebody who is green. As such, it is a good illustration of death, disintegration and resurrection. That is why the scholars who saw archetypes and basic phenomena in everything, sometimes compared and likened it in mythology with Osiris, sometimes with Dionysus, Tammuz or Odin, Zoroastrian Sorush, etc. As for the motif of immortality, it fused and integrated the figures of Moses, Elijah, St. George, St. Sarkis (St. Sargis/Sarkis or St. Sergius), Alexander the Great¹³, etc.) with *Khidr*.

In special literature, *Khidr* and the Arabic *al-Khidr* are most often associated and identified with the quranic figure, God's true servant, the sage, the owner of mystic knowledge¹⁴ and from whom Moses attempts to learn about God's justice¹⁵. The evidence for such assertion is found in the quranic legend¹⁶ according to which Musa (Moses) sets out on a journey in search of the junction of the Two Seas. The guide of Moses is the "servant of God" whom he met on his way. Despite the fact that his name is not mentioned in Quran, Islamic commentators identify him with *al-Khadir/el-Khidr* (the verdant), who unexpectedly

¹¹ Florian Mülfried, "Not sharing the sacra", in: Tsypilma Darieva, Florian Mülfried, & Kevi Tuite (eds.), *Sacred places, emerging placed (Religious pluralism in the Post-Soviet Caucasus)*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2018, p. 150.

¹² Oliver Leaman (ed.), *The Qur'an: An Encyclopedia*. London and New York: Routledge. Taylor and Francis Group, 2006, p. 349; Arent Jan Wensinck, "Al-Khaḍir", in: Peri Bearman et al. (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, vol. 4, 2012, p. 902-905.

¹³ In Medieval legends, Alexander sets out in search of the Fountain of Life "in the Land of darkness" and accidentally finds it. A recension of this legend occurs in the Shah Nama, where Alexander is guided by *Khizr* who, moving with greenness, leads the way and discovers the fountain from which he drinks and becomes immortal (See: *Iskandarnamah. A Persian medieval Alexander-romance*. Translated by Mino S. Southgate. New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

¹⁴ Muhammad ibn Jarir Al-Tabari, *The history of al-Tabari. Vol. 3 The children of Israel*. Translated and annotated by William M. Brinner, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991, p. 1-3.

¹⁵ Branon M. Wheeler, *Moses in the Quran and Islamic exegesis*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 10.

¹⁶ See *Quran*, translated in Georgian by G. Lobžanidze, *Kavkasiuri saxli*, Tbilisi, 2006. Sura 18:59-81.

and accidentally found the living water/the Fountain of Life between an intermediary sphere of reality – between the material and the spiritual worlds symbolized by the “Junction of the Two Seas”, the “Extreme North” or “Extreme West”, a place where the sun hides in the water, a paradise-like place, free from death and from the passage of time – and became immortal. In the later tradition of the quest, he is associated with Alexander the Great¹⁷.

Comparison of feast celebrations in different cultures makes it possible to identify movable *Khidriela* feast with the fixed *Hidrelles* of Near Eastern religious tradition that was celebrated on St. George’s day (Julian calendar May 6). During this feast time in Turkey, people like Alevis (religious minority, the followers of Ali) make flour of roasted wheat the day before the festival for *Khidr*. They keep it somewhere in the kitchen so that they may later look for *Khidr* traces. Next morning, if they see some signs on the flour, it means that *Khidr* has brought them abundance and blessings¹⁸.

In the Iranian folk religion, *Khizr* is imagined as the patron of vegetation, of crops and of abundance. According to local beliefs, he secretly visits households and blesses crops by leaving an offprint of his hand in sacrificial food. He is venerated as a calendric figure. Despite being a male saint, he is considered to be a patron of women and their fertility. He is invoked at childbirth and prayed to for progeny. Predictions are made, omens are taken and fate-opening magic is performed¹⁹. (Different attitudes towards fate-opening are clearly revealed in the ritual of *Khidriela*). Almost the same customs are attested among the Armenians and Azerbaijanians. There exists a supposition that in Caucasus the supernatural creature *Hizir* / *Hidrelez* / *Xenterlez* is also related to St. George and that his feast is celebrated on the Spring feast of St. George. He is associated with fecundity and the annual renewal of nature²⁰.

¹⁷ Patrick Franke, *Begegnung mit Khidr: Quellenstudien zum Imaginaren im Traditionellen Islam*. Beirut, 2000, p. 207-208; Anna Krasnowolska, “*kežr*”, in: *Encyclopedia Iranica*, 2009, www.iranicaonline.org (last updated: July, 15, 2009). Anna Krasnowolska, “The prophet Xezr-Elias in Iranian Popular Beliefs with some Slavic Parallels”, in: Andrzej Zaborski (ed.), *Kraków, Islami i Chrześcijaństwo* Zaborski, 1995, p. 159-176.

¹⁸ Anna Krasnowolska, “*kežr*”, *op. cit.*.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Kevin Tuite, *op. cit.*

Oya Pancaroğlu's study on *The Itinerant Dragon-Slayer in Medieval Anatolia*²¹ states that in the Spring of 1555 the Flemish ambassador Baron Ghiselin de Busbecq and those who accompanied him stopped at a dervish lodge in a village one day's journey west of the town of Amasya, where they were regaled by their hosts with the colorful story of a saint on horseback named *Chederle* whose slaying of a dragon to save a maiden was said to have taken place nearby. Baron de Busbecq reported in his letters that the dervishes held this saintly man to be identical with St. George as well as being a companion of Alexander the Great. The multiplicity of identities prompted the cynical baron to postulate that "the Turks have no idea of chronology and dates, and make a wonderful mixture and confusion of all epochs and of history"²². As Pancaroğlu stated, Busbecq remained ignorant of much else that he might have gleaned about a different kind of history during his visit to the Lodge. At that time, he had no idea that he had been gathering bit by bit, the remains of another kind of history²³.

According to Pancaroğlu, Busbecq's *Chederle* could be none other than *Hızır-Ilyas*, a saint of compound identity who had a special place in the popular belief systems of the Turks in Anatolia. That refers to the cross-cultural encounters on popular level during the settlement of the Turks in Anatolia in the 12th to the 14th centuries. Many images of the dragon-slayer are closely connected to earlier and current Byzantine Armenian and Georgian contextual models.

The images of the dragon-slayer rider, which were established before and after the Turks settled in Anatolia during medieval times, reveal the contextual adaptability of the images of the equestrian dragon-slayer and show their roles as markers of cultural integration of the country and transformation in the population. Such are the Pancaroğlu's views on the subject²⁴.

Common elements are shared by these feasts. They all concentrate around the central figure, which is represented by an immortal, spiritual creature bearing different names in different cultures. For Georgians,

²¹ Oya Pancaroğlu, "The Itinerant Dragon-Slayer: Forging Paths of Image and Identity in Medieval Anatolia", *Gesta*, Vol. 43, n° 2. The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the International Center of Medieval Art, 2004, p. 151-164.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 151.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 151-164.

he is St. George; for Armenians, he is Surb Sarkis, that is St. Sergius or Eliah; the latter is used by the Armenians of Turkey, although in Turkey he is similarly associated with St. George. Some links can also be made by the date of the feast, held on May 6th in the Julian calendar.

Not so popular among orthodox Sunni Mohammedans, *Khidr's* day is known as the 'feast of Lydda' (23 Nishan or April 23rd in the Gregorian Calendar) and is observed all over Turkey as the beginning of spring. For Shiites, he is an important figure²⁵.

In India, the Prophet, Saint or Deity known as *Khawaja Khizr* (*Khadir*), *Pir Badar* or *Raja Kidar* (perceived as the spirit of rivers, wells and springs) is the object of a still surviving popular cult, common to Muslims and Hindus. According to Ananda Coomaraswamy²⁶, the nature of *Khawaja Khizr* can be inferred from his iconography and also from the Indian legends. In iconography, *Khidr* is encountered both as a separate figure and paired with some saint.

In western Asian or Indian symbolic art, *al-Khizr*, clothed entirely in green, is depicted moving in the Waters of Life with a fish as his vehicle. In western Asia, Muslim or Hindu symbolic art show the Saint, *al-Khizr*, dressed in a green coat being carried on top of the water by a fish which conveys him over the river of life.

According to Coomaraswamy, in a series of 17th and 18th centuries Moghal/Mughal paintings, the scene at the well may also have been the original theme of the composition, where a prince on horseback is shown at a well, from which a lady has drawn up water. He often appears in the Persian miniatures of the Middle-Ages: they depict *Khidr* and Alexander who witness how the dried fish falling into the waters, comes to life and thus the seekers are made aware that they have found the Fountain of Life, from which they drink.

Coomaraswamy identified *al-Khadir* in a figure with nimbus, thrusting a lance into the mouth of a scaly dragon in an 11th century carving over the gateway of a caravanserai on the road between Sinjar and Mosul, and compared it with St. George. He was among the first to notice *al-Khadir's* resemblance with St. George. He also traced the

²⁵ Frederick William Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam under the Sultans*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970 [1929], p. 319-336.

²⁶ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "Khwaja Khadir and the Fountain of Life in the Tradition of Persian and Mughal Art", *Ars Islamica* 1/1, 1934, p. 173-182.

similarity in *al-Khidr's* function of the travelers' helper and this is a special aspect of the orthodox St. George.

As the literature tends to show, there is no independent Muslim or pre-Muslim element in *Khidr*. The Elias part can all be paralleled in Jewish tradition, while the George part is all Christian: only his adventure with Moses is of somewhat uncertain origin, but even that, in view of the early date of the Talmudic story, is probably descended from a Jewish ancestor²⁷.

St. George in the prayers of Georgian highlanders

In the symbolic art of Georgians, there are no images of the living (verdant) saint who moves on the surface of waters by a fish. He is found in the glorifying prayers of the eastern Georgian highlanders²⁸ in which are preserved descriptive epithets of St. George that might well be applied to *Khidr*. They do not represent local poetic imagination, but a conceptual system that permeates everyday life of the highlanders and is reflected not only in language, but also in thoughts and acts.

According to the ethnographic data on hand, the epithets related to *Khidr* are as follows: St. George the guard of *Aragvi* gorge, exterminator of *ders* (i.e. ogres) (*cqarostavelis cmina Giorgi, aragvis xebis damqure, devta gambasravi*), the traveler *khakhmati* shrine (*mgzavri khakhmatis jvari*), Mountaintop Persian Angel (*cveris sparsangeloxi*), St. George who appears over the stream of water (*cminda Giorgi niaghvrit mobrzanebuli*), the patron angel of the two waters (*ori cqlis baton-patroni*), George's shrine of righteous and non-righteous (i.e. the sanctuary of the Christians and non-Christians), the ball player angel in the stream of water (*giorgi rjulian-urjulota salocavi, naghvarši maburtali*), George of the head of spring water (*giorgi cqaros tavisia*), George of the beautiful stream (*giorgi naghvar mšvenieri*), George the ball player angel in the stream of water (*giorgi naghvarši moburtali*

²⁷ Frederic William Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam...* op. cit., p. 319- 336.

²⁸ See: Jvar-xaŭta sadideblebi [The Ritual Oral Texts (hymns) of Northeast Georgian Highland]. Edition of the texts, Introduction, Glossary and Indices by Zurab Kiknadze, Khvtiso Mamisimedishvili, Tristan Makhauri, Tbilisi, 1998; Vera Bardavelidze. *Opit sociologičeskogo izučenija xevsurskix verovanij* [On the sociological studies of the religious beliefs of the Khevsurs]. Transcaucasian Branch of the Academy of Sciences of SSSR, Tiflis, 1932, p. 3-49.

angeloži), Iakhsar²⁹ of grass, the angel of sprouts (*Iakhsar balaxis cverisa*, *nergis angeloži*), the angel living in Heracleum (*diq̌i mcxoeli angeloži*), White George of the field (*giorgi mindorisai*), George founded by the Old Oak Tree (*giorgi bermuxas daarsebuli*), etc.

Thus, according to these epithets, he tends to be strongly associated with water; he appears as a guard of water, as the patron of two waters (allusion to the quranic passage). Consequently he is the patron of the two worlds; he is the angel of greenness. In other words, this image of St. George appears to be at the same time the guardian and genius of vegetable and the Water of Life. Besides, in Georgian tradition, he is conceived as a helper in sudden need, especially of travelers. One of his epithets – *mǧavri* (i.e. traveler) – is associated with journey and protection of travelers. That is why it is logical that his figure with nimbus as a protector of travelers might be found over the gateways of caravanserais, where travelers stayed to have a rest. The image of the traveling saint and his functions as the protector of travelers correspond to that of *Khidr*.

Conclusion

As Robert Miller mentions it:

St. George is associated with “spring verdure” throughout Asia and Europe. Leaf covered Green Georges were part of Slovenian and Transylvanian folklife (comp. Zeleni Juri – N.A.). Khidr is the patron of fertility throughout the Middle East. Khizilias and its cognates are spring agricultural festivals across the former Ottoman Empire. Moreover, Khidr means “green” and El-Khader means “Green Man”. His clothing is green, etc.³⁰

On the basis of this exploration, we have assumed that *Khidr* (i.e. green) applied to St. George in Georgia represents one more epithet of the saint that reveals his new aspect of vegetation patron. While studying St. George - *Khidr* (or living and verdant) in the ethnographic life of Georgia, we tried to avoid presumptions or preconceived ideas that by being green or living the mentioned saint represents an archetypal

²⁹ According to Kevin Tuite, *Iakhsar* might be from the Ossetian or perhaps Alanic word *ahsar*, “strong”. Cited from Shorena Kurtsikidze & Vakhtang Chikovani, *Ethnography and Folklore of the Georgia-Chechnya Border – Images, Customs, Myths & Folk Tales of the Peripheries*. Munich: Lincom Europa, 2008, p. 273-283.

³⁰ Robert Miller, *Baal, St. George and Khidr: (History, Archaeology and Culture of the Levant)*. Eisenbrauns: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019, p. 84-85.

heathen deity. Investigating the customs related to *Khidriela* and the term *Khidr* that was found in it and comparing it with various epithets of St. George attested in the everyday life of eastern Georgian highlanders, we concluded that the image of the saint that accentuated his immortality and “greenness” was widely spread in the mentioned regions and functioned quite autonomously.

In Georgian realia the sub-texts associated with St. George were also traced among the eastern highlanders. The terms *Khidr* or *Khidriela* are not attested in eastern mountainous Georgia but the multifarious or multifaceted image of the living George as the generator of meanings is embodied in many epithets and functions independently in the mentioned region. Connection or identification with *Khidr* can be proved by the analysis. And once again the green color or greenness of the cult is attested by the above-mentioned epithets: *Iakhsar of grass*, the *Angel of sprouts*, etc., and all these epithets are directly linked with the motif of immortality. They all suggest that the roots of the cult should be searched not in the Heathen religions and at the bottom of the all-pervading traditional deity but in the context of Abrahamian religions.

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