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Author(s): Kevin Tuite

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Lightning, Sacrifice, and Possession in the Traditional Religions of the Caucasus

Kevin Tuite

Abstract. – In many communities of the West Caucasus, lightning-strike victims were regarded with particular awe, and a dance was performed around their bodies during which the name of one or another god is uttered, along with the mysterious vocable *čoppa*. Data concerning this ritual will be framed in an analysis of the representations of possession, sacrifice, and, in general, the appropriation of people or animals by divine beings in traditional Caucasian religious thought. Certain features of the religious thought of the Pshavs and Khevsurs of the northeast Georgian highlands will be compared and contrasted with those of the peoples of the West Caucasus. [*Caucasus, Pshav-Khevsureti, lightning-strike victims, sacrifice, possession*]

Kevin Tuite, Ph. D. (Chicago 1988) in Linguistics from the University of Chicago; since 1991 Prof. of Ethnolinguistics in the Department of Anthropology of the Université de Montréal. – Since 1985 linguistic and ethnographic fieldwork in the Republic of Georgia on numerous occasions. – Publications include: *Kartvelian Morphosyntax* (Munich 1998); *Ethnolinguistics and Anthropological Theory* (co-editor. Montréal: in press); *Current Trends in Caucasian, East European, and Inner Asian Linguistics* (co-editor. Amsterdam: in press) and various articles in *Journal of Indo-European Studies*, *Lingua*, *Anthropological Linguistics*, *Historiographia Linguistica* (see also References Cited).

On a crisp morning in late July 1996, the chief priest Ioseb K'oč'lišvili explained to me how the stone shrine to K'op'ala came to be built at Iremtk'alo. For those accustomed to places of worship erected by central squares or other convenient locations, the choice of this site would seem perverse, if not masochistic. The meadow known as Iremtk'alo, "the deer's threshing ground," is situated at 2225 metres altitude, atop a moun-

tain overlooking the village Shuapxo in the highland province of Pshavi in northeast Georgia. Those who attend the annual summer festival at Iremtk'alo, for the most part members of the Udzilaurta clan, must hike uphill for at least three hours from the nearest village, if they go on foot (as most did until very recently). Iremtk'alo is barren of trees, and far from the nearest spring or river. All water and firewood must be hauled up by people or pack animals. The same goes for the food, except for that which makes the ascent under its own power: dozens of sheep and several bulls, which will meet their deaths at Ioseb K'oč'lišvili's hands in the course of the day. It was on the spot where the shrine now stands, K'oč'lišvili explains, that the hero K'op'ala bested the strongest of the ogres (*devebi*) in a boulder-throwing competition. These ogres were huge, powerful, and terrifying to behold. Some were said to have nine heads. When they walked, their feet sank into the ground as though they were wading through drifted snow. The champion among the ogres picked up a massive boulder and threw it from the mountaintop. It sailed across the river below, a branch of the Aragvi, and landed on the other side. K'oč'lišvili gestured to the spot where the stone came to earth, perhaps half a kilometre downward and over a kilometre to the west of where we stood. K'op'ala picked up an even larger rock, hefted it, and thought it too light. So he took another boulder, pressed it against the first as though packing two snowballs together, and let it fly. The giant rock would have fallen short



Map: The Caucasus.

of its mark, however, had not the deity K'viria intervened. He struck the airborne rock with his whip, so that it flew further than the rock thrown by the ogre, and it landed on a fortress built by the ogres at Cixetgori. Ioseb K'oč'lišvili pointed to the site of Cixetgori, on the mountainside across the river. The day before, he prayed there and offered sacrifices. The ogres were defeated in combat by K'op'ala and his companion Iaqsar. Those that survived took refuge underground, leaving the land free for people to settle there and live peacefully. That is why K'oč'lišvili's ancestors built the shrine at Iremtk'alo, and that is why the Udzilaurta clan gathers there in midsummer each year, to offer livestock, breads, and beer at the site of K'op'ala's victory.

The reader will doubtless have concluded by now that K'op'ala, K'viria and the ogres never actually existed, at least not as described, and will perhaps have classified K'oč'lišvili's narrative as a legend, folktale, or myth. K'op'ala himself might be labelled a "hero," or perhaps – as the object of a cult – a "deity," or "god." In the pages to follow, there will be frequent mention of "gods," "deities," "divinities," and "spirits." In some cases these words translate fairly precisely the terms chosen by the priests, oracles, healers, and others, whose narratives constitute much of the empirical basis for this study. Quite often, however, writers adopting

the stance of objective observers are responsible for these designations. Charachidzé (1981b) refers to K'op'ala as a "dieu," employing the French lexeme also applied to the Supreme Deity. I know of no instance of a Georgian mountaineer utilising the closest Georgian equivalent (*ymerti*) with reference to K'op'ala; they prefer to qualify him as a "hero" (*gmiri*) or "child of God" (*xvtisšvili*). There has been, to be sure, much speculation about what these terms mean. How does a society imagine its "god" or "gods?" With what classes of beings are they in contrast? How is the concept of god employed as a tool of thought? What representations underlie, or motivate, activities such as prayer and sacrifice, which seem to be forms of communication or exchange with god(s)? To what degree can the god(s) of one society be usefully compared with those of another, especially where the communities in question participate in distinct cultural areas, or are characterized by different politico-economic orders? For the purposes of this paper, the term "god" will serve to index a mode of *speaking about* (or *to*) individuals named in texts. The texts may be classified – by outside observers, not necessarily by those who produce them – as songs, hymns, myths, ballads, and so forth. To the referents I label "gods" are attributed ways of manifesting their presence, communicating or interacting with people, or influencing the state of

affairs in the experienced world which are depicted as significantly different from those of humans. In the cases to be studied here, “gods” are ascribed such characteristics as invisibility (under ordinary circumstances) and immortality. They reside in spaces separate from those inhabited by humans, and ordinarily off limits to the latter. Speech acts in which they are attributed the role of addressee are qualitatively different from communicative acts between humans. One could say that discursive genres describing gods or addressed to them play a major role, in conjunction with ritual and the uses of space, in constituting them as a cultural category. I make no claims, though, that all members of a given social group talk about gods in the same way, to say nothing of how they might *think* about them. (Indeed, there is abundant evidence from the Caucasus that “god-related” discursive practices of men differ in significant ways from those of women; likewise the practices of ritual specialists differ from those of other members of the community.) In certain respects my usage of the terms “god” and “deity” will parallel that of the ethnographers whose works are cited throughout the paper, in that it will represent my interpretation of the phenomena being described, rather than the actual labels used by native speakers. Where the original texts contain a particular lexeme which serves to denote a unique, supreme deity (e.g., Georgian *ymerti*, which is never pluralized in ordinary usage), I will employ “God,” with an initial capital, as its English equivalent.

The first section of the paper will consist primarily of the description of one such genre of discursive practice, a song traditionally performed while dancing around the body of a lightning-strike victim, in which the name of one or another god is uttered, along with the mysterious vocable *čoppa* or *cop(p)ay*. Data concerning the *čoppa* ritual will be framed in an analysis of the representations of possession, sacrifice and, in general, the appropriation of people or animals by divine beings in traditional Caucasian religious thought. We will return to K’op’ala in subsequent sections of the paper, where certain features of the religious thought of the Pshavs and Khevsurs of the northeast Georgian highlands will be compared and contrasted with those of the peoples of the West Caucasus.

1 Ethnographic Data on the Choppa Ritual

In his “History of the Caucasian Albanians,” the Armenian historian Movses Dasxuranc’i (1961)

makes passing reference to the “royal graves of the thunder-*č’op’ayk’*” as being among the idols and sacred objects burnt by the so-called Huns (*Honk’* or *Honastank’*) of the North Caucasus upon their conversion to Christianity, an event said to have taken place in the late 7th century.¹ In his notes to the English translation of this passage, Dowsett (165 f.) links the lexeme *č’op’ay* to *coppay*, the name of an Ossetic “ceremonial dance around a victim struck by lightning, a refrain sung at the burial of the same, and a rite at the time of drought,” citing the Ossetic dictionaries of Miller (1927–1934) and Abaev (1958–1989). Dowsett’s gloss refers to the description, a few pages earlier in Dasxuranc’i’s text, of some “satanically deluded errors” symptomatic of the Huns’ alleged “northern dull-witted stupidity,” among which is the belief that “if flashes of thundering fiery lightning and ethereal fire struck a man or some material object, they considered him or it to be some sort of sacrifice to a god K’u(w)ar” (Dasxuranc’i 1961: 155 f.). Dowsett’s conjecture has recently been cited by Golden (1998) in the context of a study of the religious beliefs of the medieval Qipchags. Golden points out supporting evidence from ethnographic accounts of rituals and sacrifices in honor of the lightning and fertility deity Choppa (also known as Elliri Choppa) among the Balkars and Karachays of the northwest Caucasus, modern descendants of the Qipchags.

Besides the Ossetes and Karachay-Balkars, other peoples of the West Caucasus performed, up to the beginning of the past century at least, round dances around the body of a person or animal struck by lightning, during which the vocable *čoppa* or *cop(p)ay* is repeatedly sung. Such ceremonies have been described for the Abkhazians (Akaba 1984) and Kabardians (Kantaria 1964, 1982). In the song texts, *čoppa* or its variant is juxtaposed to the words *aldar* (variants *elari*, *atlar*) and *Elia* (var. *Iliia*), of which the

1 The Caucasian “Huns” were “most probably” Turkic-speaking in the opinion of Golden (1980: 90–93, 259–261; 1992; pers. comm. 5 April 2000), although the paucity of linguistic remnants militates against any firm conclusion. According to Fedorov (1972), the state of Suvar, which flourished in northeast Daghestan to the north of Derbent, in the 6th–8th centuries, was ruled by the “Huns.” Archeological evidence indicates consolidation in Suvar between steppe Turkic and indigenous populations, a process also attested by the medieval descriptions of “Hunnic” religion. Whereas the cult of a chief deity named Tengri-khan is clearly of Turkic origin, the “tree worship” and certain funerary observances described by Dasxuranc’i are attributed by Fedorov to the Daghestanian tribes of highland Suvar (1972: 23–24).

former means “lord” or “prince” in Ossetic (Abaev 1949: 63 f.), and the latter derives from the name of the prophet Elijah, whose associations with rain and lightning in East European folklore are well known (Ivanov and Toporov 1974; Ivanov 1991). Unlike these two words, *čoppa* and its variants are an enigma. The ethnographic accounts invariably mention the semantic opacity of the name of the ritual. In this section I will examine the ethnographic data concerning the Ossetic, Kabardian, Abkhaz, and Karachay-Balkar *čoppa* rituals.

1.1 Ossetic Coppay

The traveller Stöder was in Digor Ossetia in 1781 when

a powerful thunderbolt killed a young woman. After the strike those who came upon her cried out in joy, and began to sing and dance around the dead body. All residents of the village joined in the dancing circle, showing no concern that the lightning continued to flash. Their single, simple refrain was *O, Elia, Elia! Ældari coppay*. They danced a round dance in synchrony with the words, sometimes in this, sometimes in reverse order, as one person sang out and the chorus took up the refrain. They dressed the dead girl in new clothes, laid her in the same spot and in the same position as when she was killed, and sang without interruption until night. Her parents, sisters, and husband danced, sang, and seemed as happy as if it were some festival. Grieving faces were considered a sin against Elijah. This celebration lasted 8 days. They had a youth who had been hit by lightning brought here. All those struck by lightning who survived became servants and messengers of Elijah. Even livestock that was struck by lightning was set free. The young man sang and danced in a circle, then fell and began beating himself convulsively. Between convulsions he became alert and with open eyes recounted what he had seen in the company of Elijah, and named previous lightning victims who were at Elijah’s side. Then he transmitted Elijah’s orders concerning the dead. The most significant was the command to keep a fire burning 8 days around the body and abstain from all work and industry. The dead girl was placed in a coffin set atop a platform for 8 days. On the 8th day they put her on a new oxcart, which a pair of oxen with white spots were to pull. Young people along with the relatives of the victim went in procession to neighboring villages, singing and collecting gifts of livestock and other food products. The gifts were for the victim, or the festivities, or for her relatives. The coffin was finally set on the cart, to which the oxen were harnessed, and they pulled it where they willed; the victim was to be buried at the spot where they stopped. This time the oxen stopped at

the nearest grass. Straightaway they laid out a rectangle of stones to a height of a couple feet, set the coffin on it, and placed stones around and upon it, making a mound about two meters high. Next to this heap of stones they set up a pole with the stretched skin of a goat and its head. Alongside it was a smaller pole on which they hung the best clothing of the deceased, then by the tomb they consumed together the gifts of food that they had gathered. The livestock of the victim were set free on the steppes. These animals were marked, so that if one of them approached the shepherds, it was driven away again (transl. fr. Russian version in Abaev 1958: 314 f.).

I have quoted this passage in full to introduce the reader to the ritual, and also because this text includes most of the key details for which parallels have been noted in other descriptions. Another early attestation, published by Gatiev in 1876 and translated by Dumézil (1978: 67–69), also mentions the practice of villagers gathering around the victim and singing “a nearly incomprehensible song, the coppay,” during which all known lightning-strike victims are commemorated. The villagers keep vigil for three days around the body, in hopes that Wacilla (= St. Iliia [Elijah]) will revive the victim. The body is then buried on the spot, although the close relatives remain there for another three days, to dig the victim out in case Wacilla brings him or her back to life. Should the rainstorm continue longer than expected, or another person fall victim to a thunderbolt, the body is dug up, set on a cart drawn by unguided oxen, and reburied at the spot where the oxen stop. On the anniversary of the death, the family of the deceased offers a communal feast by the burial site, called *ærvdzavdy kuvd* “banquet of the thunderstruck.” Mention is also made of two poles from which is hung the head and skin of a sacrificed goat, in the description of the ritual performed should the victim survive. The poles are planted on the spot where the bolt was believed to have touched ground, and the sacrifice is repeated at the site each year by the family. Finally, Abaev specifies that the *coppay* dance could also be performed in times of drought to cause rain (1958: 314).

1.2 Kabardian Cop’ay

The Kabardian *cop’ay* ritual has been described in detail by Medea Kantaria (1964: 87–89, 1982: 208–220), a Georgian ethnographer who has done fieldwork on Kabardian agricultural practices. The ritual is directed to the traditional

thunder-lightning deity Shyble, sometimes represented in the form of a fiery serpent, who is invoked in prayers for rain, prosperity, and a good harvest. Should a person be slain by a thunderbolt, no signs of mourning were permitted; the survivors “consoled themselves with the knowledge that Shyble had brought good fortune to their family by his touch.”² They poured milk on the spot of the accident; milk was also used to put out a fire caused by lightning.³ The womenfolk performed a round dance in honor of Shyble (*Shyble wuž*) over seven days, while singing a song to this deity (*Shyble wered*) including the refrain: *cop'ai, elari, ilia* (*elari* < Ossetic *Ældar*, perhaps via Georgian; *ilia* = Elijah).⁴ The menfolk, meanwhile, sacrificed a grey goat and hung its skin on a pole, where it remained throughout the 7 days of the ceremony. All present must partake of the meat from the sacrifice. Most of Kantaria's sources could not ascribe any meaning to the vocable *cop'ay* in the refrain. Some, however, equated it with the Khantseguashe (*ħancə-gʷa:śa*) “shovel-lady,” a fetish used in rainmaking rituals. The object in question is a sort of mannequin made by affixing women's clothing to a shovel. Women brought it to the riverbank, planted it there, and splashed each other with water; the menfolk meanwhile slaughtered a goat or sheep and prayed for rain. Its efficacy could be enhanced by hanging the hearth-chain of a lightning-strike victim around its “neck”; rain could also be provoked by pouring water over the chain. In general, special powers were ascribed to objects linked to the lightning-strike victim. This was particularly the case for stones from the gravesite, “to which properties of Shyble were transferred,” especially the property of making rain. In times of drought, “they went to the victim's grave reciting prayers,” accompanied by members of the bereaved family. The gravestone was pried open and propped up with a rock “while the victim's relative prayed that the deceased would intercede with Shyble to bring rain.”

2 According to Jaimoukha (2001: 142), among the Circassians “a person struck by lightning was thought to have been ordained by an angel for benediction and a solemn ceremony was conducted in his honour.”

3 This parallels the practice, noted by ethnographers in Ossetia a century ago, of washing the legs of a lightning victim in milk, and then splashing milk on the spot where the victim was buried (Basilov and Kobychew 1976: 152).

4 Each line of the text of a Bzedukh (West Circassian) round dance to the god of lightning, translated by Colarusso (2002: 177) begins with the words “Yeli, Yeli,” almost certainly derived from Elia/Ilia. Colarusso (177) notes as well that Mount Elbruz is known to the Circassians as “Elijah's place” (*yaλá-p'a*).

1.3 Abkhazian Atlar-Chopa

In a brief report of the results of a field trip to Abkhazia, Abaev (1949: 316, 319) compared Ossetic (*Ældary*) Coppay to Abkhaz Atlar-Chopa, a similar ritual and song performed around the body of lightning-strike victims (human or animal) (Inal-Ipa 1965: 531–533). As described by Akaba (1984: 74 f.), the ceremony is accompanied by the construction of a wooden platform (*ašʷəmk'át*), on which is placed the meat of a sacrificed goat. The unfinished meat was left on the platform, and nearby a pole was erected on which the skin of the goat was hung; both meat and skin remained until they rotted away. In some variants of the ritual, songs were sung in honor of the lightning-god Afə (*af-r-ášʷa*) or Airg' (= St. George; *ayerg'-ášʷa*).⁵ In one early-19th c. description, it was the victim's body which was left atop the platform, until complete decomposition. Should the person survive, he or she was laid upon the platform, built to a height of 1 to 1.5 meters from nut-tree wood. The participants wore white and danced around the victim singing the Atlar-Chopa, without showing signs of distress.⁶ A well-fed white goat was sacrificed. It was widely believed that the survivor of a thunderbolt strike received supernatural powers, and was considered a prophet. In one account from the 1870s, cited by Akaba, the Atlar-Chopa was sung in alternation between an elderly priest and the other participants. The priest sang the words *Oy, atla čopa*, to which the chorus responded *Oy, očou-para!*. Then the elder sang *Atla čoupa Temurgvara*, to which the response was *Vosa amara!* (1984: 75). According to X. Xorosani, the original source for this description, Temurgvara was the name of a deity, “represented by the Abkhazians in the form of a white-haired old man, riding a winged horse, the thumping of whose powerful hooves produced thunder, while lightning flashed from the rider's bared sword.” The origin of the name is obscure; the description, however, fits Wacilla, the Ossetic Elijah, who likewise spreads lightning and thunder when riding his mighty steed (Kalojev 1971: 245).⁷

5 According to M. Mak'alatia (1979: 65 f.), the *ayerg'-ášʷa* was also enacted by shepherds around a bonfire during mountain rainstorms (perhaps to protect their flocks from lightning?).

6 The closely-related Abaza people likewise did not mourn lightning-strike victims (Pershits 1989: 224).

7 Another variant of the song, performed when moving an animal struck by lightning, includes the refrain *Vay et'lar! Aytar et'lar! Et'lar čophar* (Javakhishvili 1960: 122 f.). “Aytar” is the name of a sevenfold agricultural deity,

The Atlar-Chopa ceremony was also performed as a cure for the mental illness known in Abkhaz as *aršōšra* “boiling,” with symptoms similar to St.-Vitus-Dance – fever, convulsions – and affecting mostly women.⁸ The sick person is treated with conciliation; in Akaba’s words “every whim and desire of the patient must be satisfied” (1984: 71). Family members, wearing brightly-colored clothing and avoiding all outward display of grief, maintain a day and night vigil at her bedside. Should there be a death in the neighborhood, no mourning is performed and the burial takes place quickly. In order to rid the patient of the illness, a ceremony is performed in the forest, in which only men participate (except for the sick person herself). The participants light wax candles in honor of the chief god Antswa (*anc’ō rc’ošizk’ anāxa*), and perform the Atlar-Chopa round dance, accompanied by the singing of that song, or the “song of Antswa” (*anc’ō-r-aš’ōa*).⁹ A platform is erected, upon which nut-tree leaves are spread. A one year-old goat is sacrificed, and its meat set on the platform, along with strips of white fabric. The patient, dressed in white, kneels before the platform while a celebrant prays to the chief god to send down health to her. The patient is escorted back to the village, whereas the other participants remain at the site, feast on the sacrificed meat, bread, and polenta (they are forbidden to drink wine, however). Any remaining food is left in the forest; under no circumstances must it be brought back to the village. In some parts of Abzhui Abkhazia, the curing ritual is performed in the church of St. George at Ilor, especially on the feastday of its patron saint (23 April, O.S.). A sheep is sacrificed in lieu of a goat; it is also believed that there should be lightning, thunder, and rain on that day. According to Inal-Ipa (1965: 532 f.), mental derangement and some other illnesses were attributed by Abkhazians

to “visits” by the lightning-god Afə to particular households. In order to know how to deal with the problem, recourse was had to a seer (*ac’aa š’ō*), usually female, who had already been visited by Afə, and in whom “a higher power was present.” In the case examined by Inal-Ipa, the seer recommended the sacrifice of a white goat. The ceremony took place on a hilltop. The meat of the goat was cooked while a hymn to the deity was sung three times, then it was set on a sort of small platform, covered with alder branches, by the legs of the patient. With the other participants in a half circle around her, the seer cried out: “Great lord Afə! Today, having slaughtered a spotless goat and done all that is possible, we serve you. And I, unworthy one, ask you to release her whom you deigned to visit.”

Akaba classifies the Atlar-Chopa with a handful of seldom-performed Abkhazian rituals which likewise took place by an *aš’ōmk’at* (platform) erected in the forest, far from the village. One of these is a ceremony performed every 3–5 years at Eastertime in honor of the supreme god Antswa (*anc’ō mēxara*). In addition to a sacrificed lamb or goat eaten on the spot, the remaining meat of which could not be brought back to the village, other livestock was released into the forest (Akaba 1967: 40 f.; 1984: 69–71).¹⁰ Only men from the local kingdom were allowed to participate. Less is known, unfortunately, about another, more secret forest ritual performed but once every 20–30 years for a supernatural being known only by the tantalizing description “the one who knows us but whom we cannot know” (*ħara ħazdərua, ħara iaħzəmdərua*).

1.4 Karachay Choppa

In the traditional religious system of the Turkic-speaking Karachays, Choppa “is the name of a fertility deity of thunder and lightning . . . Considered second to Teyri in importance, there was an annual spring holiday in his honor and sacred rocks (*čoppanı taşı*) were associated with him. It has also been suggested that the cult of Elijah became identified with him (Elliri choppa). The etymology of this term is unclear” (Golden 1998: 210 f.). The *čoppa* ritual, featuring the sacrifice of a goat, the stretching of its skin on a pole, and the performance of a round dance around stones upon which the meat was placed, was enacted

comprising the divine patrons of bovines, caprids, horses, dogs, millet, and the sun and moon (Bgazhba 1991). Abkhaz “Aytar” is probably related to the name of the Mingrelian livestock deity Zhini (= “upper, celestial”) Antar, described further on.

8 This disorder is believed to have been sent as punishment for nonobservance of the interdiction of work on certain days of the week (such nonworking days are known elsewhere in the Caucasus as well). Indeed, some Abkhaz families believe that their nonworking days (*amššar*) were the days on which an ancestor was killed by lightning (Akaba 1967: 34).

9 Like Afə, Antswa is portrayed as a maker of thunder and lightning, which he (she? they? – the gender, even the number, of this divine personage is a subject of debate among ethnologists!) uses to pursue demons (Akaba 1991).

10 Akaba adds that this ceremony “is now only performed for women afflicted with chorea” (1967: 40 f.).

on a number of occasions related to weather phenomena, agriculture, and an individual's life cycle (Karaketov 1995). It was performed around victims of lightning strike or mental illness, on the occasion of the first thunder of the year, and before beginning important agricultural tasks (harvest, threshing, etc.). The ceremony could also mark childbirth, marriage, or funerals. The deity Choppa was the second-in-command and active principle in earthly affairs, representing the distant sky god Teyri (< Tengri, the name of the Altaic sky god).

1.5 The "Choppa Complex"

To conclude this opening section, I will summarize the principal features of the "choppa complex" as presented in the accounts cited above:

(a) *Lightning strike as fortunate event.* Most variants mention that the lightning-strike victim's family regarded (or were expected to act as though they regarded) the event as fortunate, or as a sign of divine election. Mourning and displays of grief were forbidden, for fear of provoking the anger of the lightning god. White or brightly-colored clothing was to be worn, rather than the black appropriate to a funeral. Thunderstruck victims who survived were considered prophets in the service of the deity who struck them.

(b) *Platform.* Most variants also specify that a platform was erected on the spot of the accident, made of the wood of certain trees (hazel, walnut, alder) and covered with leaves and branches from the same type of tree. Inal-Ipa (1965: 547 f.) and Charachidzé (1981a) conjecture that the setting of the victim's body on a platform "évoque les pratiques funéraires que plusieurs auteurs de l'Antiquité ont décrites chez les habitants de la Colchide [= modern-day Abkhazia and Mingrelia, more or less – KT] ... D'après Apollonios de Rhodes, au III^e siècle av. J.-C., les Colques tenaient pour impie de brûler ou d'inhumer les corps des défunts masculins. Ils les enveloppaient d'une peau de boeuf non tannée et les fixaient en haut d'un arbre avec des cordes." Travellers to Abkhazia as recently as the 17th and 18th centuries noted the practice of attaching the bodies of men to the branches of trees, whereas the bodies of women were buried. (Even now, women's bodies are buried several inches deeper than men's [Benet 1974: 88].) A visitor to Circassia in the 15th century noted that victims of lightning strike were considered sacred, and their bodies were hung from trees for three days, while dances

and sacrifices were performed; similar practices were described in Abkhazia (Inal-Ipa 1965: 548; 1971: 32–34).

(c) *Body of deceased and sacrifice left in forest.* Among the Ossetes of the late 19th century "whenever a mountaineer might die, he was buried in the clan cemetery or mausoleum; they would attempt to obtain the bodies of those who died away from their homeland or in captivity ... either through ransom or even the exchange of living persons for them, in order that they might be buried in their own cemeteries" (Kaloiev 1989: 146). A similar belief in the capital importance of burial in one's family burial ground was shared by the Caucasian peoples to the east and west of Ossetia. It is all the more striking then, that the Ossetes expressly *forbade* that the corpses of lightning-strike victims be buried in the village cemetery, for fear of offending Wacilla (Kaloiev 1971: 245). The victims' bodies were buried on the spot of their death, or at a place chosen by the deity acting through unguided oxen yoked to a cart carrying the body. This taboo on reentering the space of the village extended to beasts as well. Animals struck by lightning, if they survived, were driven away into the wilderness. This was also done to the herds belonging to a lightning-strike victim, which in addition were marked so that shepherds would not mistakenly incorporate them back into their flocks. The meat of sacrificed animals was to be eaten on the spot; any leftovers had to be left behind in the forest. In some cases it was specified that the uneaten meat was left on the wooden platform, whereas the head and skin of the sacrifice was hung from a pole planted in the ground nearby. In some variants, there is the additional "sacrifice" of livestock released into the forest. Presumably these unfortunate beasts would end up as dinner for wolves or other predators. Several ethnographic descriptions emphasize the interdiction on bringing the sacrificed meat back into the village. These practices reveal, first, the parallel treatment of the victims of a thunderbolt and the animals sacrificed subsequently; secondly, the sharp distinction between the domesticated space of the village and its immediate surroundings (fields and pastures), and those areas beyond it.¹¹

11 Charachidzé 1968; Tuite 1998, 2001; Tuite and Bukhrashvili 1999.

In some provinces of the Caucasus (notably Pkhovi in the east, Abkhazia in the west), the principal sanctuaries of clanic or tribal deities are themselves located outside the village, which some Pkhovian informants attribute to the deity's avoidance of the numerous sources of impurity in the human community (K'ik'nadze 1996, n. d.).

The victims touched by the lightning god could not be brought back into the profane space of the village because they were too “sacred” in both ancient senses of the word – consecrated to a deity, and charged with a dangerous force which puts them off-limits to humans (Benveniste 1969: 187–192).

(d) *Goat sacrifice*. In those accounts specifying the type of animal to be sacrificed, either on the occasion of a person or animal struck by a thunderbolt, or in general to appease the anger of the storm god, the preferred offering is a goat. In the context of those traditional Caucasian religious systems for which we have sufficient evidence concerning the differential use of sacrificed animals – most notably those of Abkhazia and Ossetia¹² – the goat is offered to powerful, potentially dangerous supernatural beings. While the animal chosen for sacrifice at most ceremonial occasions is a sheep, cow, or bull, goats are offered to those which are particularly prone to punitive action, or who behave in unpredictable ways. At the same time, Abkhazian and Ossetian evidence points to a degree of extension of the high symbolic value attributed to wild caprids – ibex and mountain goats – to their domestic cousins. The Ossetes sacrificed goats on such solemn occasions as the resolution of a blood feud or a ceremony atop one of their holy mountains (Basilov and Kobychhev 1976: 153 f.). The Abkhazian writer D. Gulia ascribed a veritable “goat cult” to his ancestors, noting the image of a goat on the medieval Abkhazian flag (Inal-Ipa 1965: 207), and the practice of slaughtering a goat rather than a sheep or bull when receiving an honored guest.¹³ He also specified that a castrated goat (*ašr’á*) was offered “to avoid the anger of powerful gods” (Gulia 1928: 288). Goat sacrifices, often performed far from the village, were intended to appease such redoubtable supernaturals as Š’aš’oš, god of blacksmiths, “golden Zasxan,” bringer of smallpox, the lightning-god Afó, regarded by Gulia as “the highest of all gods” (1928: 287), and the supreme deity Antswa. It is important to note that the Abkhazians of a century ago believed that “one and the same god might be good or evil in relation to a given person, depending on whether that individual accurately fulfilled his or her obligations to the god. The

only way to behave toward an angry god is sincere repentance and sacrifice” (N. S. Janashia, cited by Gulia 1928: 287). The sacrifice called for in such circumstances is a goat.

(e) *Round dance*. In the traditional cultures of the peoples of the Caucasus, as in many other regions of Eurasia, solemn occasions are marked by round dancing. The Circassian dance *udž*, performed by Kabardian women on the spot of a lightning strike, is described as an “ancient round dance with slow, solemn music,” performed on such occasions as weddings, celebrations of victory in battle, and religious ceremonies (Shu 1964). Much of the mythological poetry of highland Georgia (Pkhovi and Svaneti in particular) was sung while dancing in a circle, or while circumambulating a shrine (Charachidzé 1968: 703–712; Tuite 1994: 140–144). Major “pagan” festivals are punctuated by round dances, especially at the end of the day’s festivities, when the participants leave the shrine complex (usually situated some distance from the village), and begin to make their way homeward.¹⁴

(f) *Rainmaking*. The choppa ritual and its variants may also be performed in the hope of causing rain in times of drought, or, conversely, to ward off damage from excessive rain or hail. This implies an equation of the supernatural being causing lightning with that responsible for storms, rain, and hail, and a representation of the ritual as being intended to induce a potentially harmful deity to behave in ways helpful to the community.¹⁵

12 For reasons which become clear later, the sacrificial practices of Northeast Georgian traditional religion will not be considered at this juncture.

13 Domestic goats were by far the most numerous animals in the herds of the Abkhazians up through the 19th century (Inal-Ipa 1965: 206).

14 One well-known example from Georgian folklore where a round dance is performed in commemoration of a person’s death is in the Svan-language ballad of Betgil, traditionally sung while dancing a solemn round dance known as the *samti č’əšxəš* (Virsaladze 1976: 113 f.; Charachidzé 1986: 159–163; Tuite 2002). The ballad tells the story of Betgil, a legendary hunter, who chased a white deer or ibex into the mountains, whereupon it suddenly turned into the goddess Dæl (Dali), divine patroness of horned game animals. She accused him of violating a promise he had made to her, and caused him to fall to his death from the mountaintop. Each year the communes of Mulakh and Muzhal perform the *samti č’əšxəš* on the spot where Betgil is said to have died, in order to bring rain. It may be possible to uncover deeper connections between the Betgil cycle and the choppa complex, but that attempt will not be undertaken here.

15 The 18th-century “Description of the Kingdom of Georgia” by Vaxusht’i Bat’onishvili includes a brief account of the invocation of Wacilla (*vačil*) by the Duals, an Ossetic-speaking population dwelling in north-central Georgia: “they sacrifice a goat and eat the meat themselves, whereas they stretch the skin on a tall pole and worship Elia, that Elia not send hail upon them and give them the fruits of the earth” (1973: 638 f.). Similar ceremonies in honor of Elia, featuring a goat sacrifice and the hanging of its skin from a pole, and performed to protect crops from hail or

(g) *Illness and prophecy*. Several descriptions associate the choppa complex with the gift of prophecy, and with temporary or chronic mental derangement. On the one hand, survivors of a lightning strike are said to acquire the capacity to convey messages from the lightning god to the human community. The last fortune-teller (*dašni*) of the Ossetian village Lesgor, who died in the early 20th century, began his service after being struck by lightning no less than three times and surviving (Basilov and Kobychhev 1976: 138). Some of these messengers, such as the young man summoned to the scene of a lightning death in Stöder's account, undergo convulsions while prophesying. On the other hand, in Abkhazia and Chegem Karachaya, the choppa ritual is prescribed as a treatment for St. Vitus dance and similar disorders, marked by compulsive, uncontrolled body movements (Karaketov 1995: 45).

Studies of indigenous Caucasian ethnomedicine (Mindadze 1981) have pointed to a distinction between those illnesses caused by physical causes or injuries, and those attributed to the action of gods, spirits or demons. Among the latter are those disorders reflecting the possession of the victim by a spirit, including certain psychic illnesses and also diseases such as smallpox. There is thus a fine line between the appropriation of a human by a spirit in order to exploit the former as a mouthpiece for the latter, and the possession of that person as punishment or sacrifice. Regardless of the cause, the afflicted person – or rather the spirit residing within him or her – is treated with cautious solicitude. It was mentioned earlier that no one was to show signs of distress in the presence of a patient suffering from *arsəšra*, and that her desires were to be complied with. Young victims of smallpox, measles, and other contagious childhood diseases received similar treatment in lowland Georgia and in Ossetia, since this disease was attributed to possession by spirits (referred to in Georgian by the euphemistic *bat'onebi* "the lords").¹⁶ The children and their indwelling tormentors were entertained with songs, feasting, bright colors, and decorations, in the hope that

the "lords" would be persuaded to leave the children unharmed (Charachidzé 1987: 48–60; Tuite 1994: 131 f.; Mindadze 2000). As in the case of lightning strike, the Ossetes did not mourn for victims of smallpox, for fear of antagonizing Alardy, their smallpox god, imagined as a sky-dwelling deity who descends on a silver ladder to scatter death and disfigurement. Alardy is associated with St. John the Baptist (Oss. *Fydwan, Fyd Iwan*) (Kalojev 1971: 254 f.; Testen 1997), a figure who takes on many of the same functions as Elijah in the folk Christianity of Eastern Europe.¹⁷

Representations of smallpox in traditional Transcaucasian folk medicine manifest important parallels to those of lightning strike. According to accounts cited by Mindadze in her recent PhD thesis (2000: 230–255), the disease-bringing *bat'onebi* were created by God (*ymertis gamošobilebi*), dwell "in God's garden," and are sent down to earth at his command. Death from smallpox was considered a blessed event: the victim was thought to have been "taken by angels" (*angelozebma c'aiq'vanes*). According to one informant from the west Georgian province of Lechxumi, a child taken by the "lords" "goes to paradise, is an angel (*angelozia*), and will be with the angels." The victim's coffin is painted red and sprinkled with roses; mourning is forbidden, and women perform the "Iavnana," a lullaby-like song believed to bring pleasure to the *bat'onebi* (for the text of one of these songs, see Tuite 1994: 62–65).¹⁸

(h) *Profile of deities invoked*. When a deity is invoked in the performance of the choppa ritual, it is in most cases one of the local avatars of Elijah (Ilia, Elia, Wac-illa); other names mentioned include Abkhaz Afə and Circassian Shyble, who are likewise gods of lightning, thunder and storms. Akaba mentions similar rituals being performed in honor of the chief Abkhaz deity Antswa, as well as the shadowy "one who knows us but whom we cannot know." These are powerful deities, who assure the prosperity of the community by sending down life-giving rain, but whose thunderbolts can

excessive rain, have been described for the west Georgian provinces of Rach'a, Guria, Imereti, and Mingrelia; and also for the northeast province Khevsureti (Mak'alatia 1987: 83; Ruxadze 1999: 97–107). None of these accounts, however, mention "choppa" or its variants, either as the name of a round dance or as a vocable in a song.

¹⁶ According to the medical anthropologist Nunu Mindadze (pers. comm. 7 July 2001), in some parts of Georgia, the utterances of feverish children afflicted by the *bat'onebi* were regarded as prophetic.

¹⁷ Alardy is from Georgian *Alaverdi*, the name of an important East Georgian cathedral dedicated to John the Baptist.

¹⁸ The belief that smallpox, unlike other diseases, was sent by God, and that death from smallpox was in some respect a fortunate event, has been noted in Russia and in the folk-medical traditions of many other European countries. Of particular interest is the invocation of St. Barbara – in Georgia, Hungary, Greece, Austria, and elsewhere – to intercede with God to cure the sick child (Bleichsteiner 1954; Bardavelidze 1941b). I hope to explore the smallpox complex in greater detail in future work.

wreak death and destruction. Those struck by their bolts, however, are not so much punished as *appropriated*: those who survive enter the god's service as prophets, those who succumb are believed to be in the deity's company in the afterlife. The tree-burial practiced by the ancient Colchians and their Abkhazian descendants, as well as the setting of victims on wooden platforms, appears to have been a means of separating the victims from the earth and placing them closer to the sky, with the goal of enabling the celestial deity to appropriate their souls into his service in the afterlife.¹⁹

The Abkhaz and Rach'an (Georgian) descriptions mention the invocation of two local "St. Georges," Airg' (*a-jirg'* < **a-g'erg'* < ***a-giorgi*), and Giorgi respectively. In Mountain Rach'a, people prayed to Elia for rain in times of drought, whereas Giorgi was invoked to protect crops from hail. That is, the storm god Elia was asked to release one of the elements under his control for the benefit of the village, whereas Giorgi's function was conceived as primarily defensive: warding off a natural element already released by its patron. (Interestingly, Elia is sometimes represented by Georgians as a well-intentioned but blind spirit incapable of seeing where the hail he scatters will fall [Chikovani 1972: 255].) The contrast between Elia and Giorgi is in fact consistent with the functions of his equivalents elsewhere in traditional Georgian culture, a point to which we will return later.

(i) *The vocable čoppa/coppa(y)*. The origins of the lexeme *čoppa* and its variants remain uncertain. Several accounts specify that the meaning of this vocable was unknown to the people performing the ritual, and Abaev qualifies the Ossetic *coppay* as "of obscure origin" in his etymological dictionary. Abaev conjectures that *coppay* contains a final "vocative" *-ay*, an element he has also isolated in (*w*)*onay*, a vocable in the refrain of a women's cloth-fulling song, formed from (*w*)*on*, the name of St. John, + *-ay* (1958/II: 228). This would lead one to suppose that *copp-* represents, or represented at one time, the name or epithet of a divine being. David Testen (pers. comm., 8 May 2000) wondered if there could be some connection between *čoppa* and the Ossetic verb root *cæv-yn* "beat, strike" (Abaev 1958/I: 306 f.), which appears in the compound *ærv-dzav-d-* "struck by

lightning" (with assimilative voicing of the initial consonant). The etymology of *cæv-* is difficult to establish, however, not for lack of possible cognates, but rather because there appear to be too many, including a large number from outside of the Indo-European family. Numerous Turkic languages have verb roots descended from an antecedent **čap*, denoting various sorts of "noisy action" (Clauson 1972: 394; Räsänen 1969: 99), most commonly involving striking or attacking. Abaev also mentions Mongolian *čab* "beat" and Komi (Permic branch of Finno-Ugric) *čap-yny* "strike." Indo-European examples include Persian *čâpîdan* "plunder" (a loan from Turkish, according to Doerfer (1967/III: 15 f.)) and Russian *capat'* "snatch, strike." Doerfer and Clauson regard these roots as onomatopoeic in origin. Of similar phonetic form and meaning are the expressive Indic roots grouped by Turner (1966: 265, root #4863) under the lemma **cupp-/ co:pp-/ cump-* "strike," e. g., Waigali *chúp* "wound," Bengali *cop* "blow," *copâra* "slap"; note also Bengali *chop(a)* "sudden attack," *chopa-* "to snatch" (Sen 1971). These Indic lexemes are particularly close in form, including vocalism, to west Caucasian *čoppa*. The Indo-European, Altaic, and Finno-Ugric expressive roots described here have geographic rather than family-specific distribution. They are attested within and around the great central-Eurasian linguistic "spread zone" (Nichols 1992, 1997), which has been the site of the relatively rapid westward expansions of the Indo-European, Iranian, Turkic, and Mongolian language groups. In one form or another, perhaps as an epithet meaning "the striker," a reflex of the onomatopoeic Wanderwort *čap-/čop(p)-* came to be attached to the lightning god of one of the steppe peoples, even as the Indo-European root **per-(k^w)-u-* "strike" surfaced in the names of Baltic Perkunas and Slavic Perunъ. In this way, *čop(p)-* "strike" was linked to the West Caucasian lightning deity, as is still the case among the Karachays, and thence to the song and round dance performed around his victims.²⁰

20 Possibly related to *čoppa(y)* is the name of a round dance known in western Iran and Kurdistan as (Persian) *čupi* "tanec s platkami (rasprostraněn v zapadnoj chasti Irana, ispolnjaetsja mužčhinami i žensčhinami, stavšimi v krug)," (Kurdish) *čopî* "(južno-kurdscoe) tanec s pod-rygivanem" (Miller 1960: 167; Kurdoev 1960: 173). One intriguing clue is the use of the latter word in the expression *čopî čemer bestin* "gather round corpse for mourning dance" (Wahby and Edmonds 1966), which suggests a link to the performance of the *čoppa* dance around the body of a lightning-strike victim. Little more can be said concerning such a link without more detailed descriptions of these dances and their antecedent forms.

19 Whereas the bodies of men were suspended from trees in earlier times, those of women were consigned to the earth, and perhaps thereby into the possession of a chthonic god or goddess.

2 Lightning Strike, Sacrifice, and Possession. Some Comparative Evidence

As an unpredictable, dangerous, fire- and sometimes death-bringing bolt from the sky, lightning is featured in the religious thought of many peoples the world over. In some cases, however, quite similar clusters of beliefs appear to have arisen independently of the choppa complex, of which I will cite one example here. The Nuer people of the Sudan, according to the description of their religious system by Evans-Pritchard (1956: 52–62), believed that the souls of persons struck by lightning or lost in a whirlwind were “taken by God into the sky” (52) and transformed into spirits known as *colwic*. Some lightning victims came to be regarded as tutelary spirits of their father’s or husband’s lineages, and as such were called on for aid against enemies. To be slain by lightning was a sign of divine election: “When a person is killed by lightning, Nuer are resigned . . . The death is not a punishment for some fault but a mysterious act of divine will . . . In the case of a *colwic*, however, God has chosen a particular person for himself, and taken him with his own hand. Nuer say that the chosen person has entered into kinship, or friendship, with God” (54).²¹ As in the western Caucasus, the victim does not receive an ordinary burial. He or she is interred in a funeral mound with a shrine-stake in middle, on which the head, hooves, entrails, and some of the skin of a sacrificed black ox are suspended. The sacrifice is said to assure that the soul of the *colwic* remains in the sky and does not return bringing misfortune and death to the survivors.

Closer to the Caucasus – sufficiently close and sufficiently connected by pathways of cultural contact that common origin cannot be ruled out – are Greece and the Balto-Slavic region. There is evidence from ancient texts that the Greeks considered the spot where lightning struck (*ene:lúision*) as *ábaton* “not to be trodden (by profane feet)” or *ápsausta* “untouchable, sacred,” and the victim killed by a thunderbolt as “tabu, vom Gott ausgezeichnet, dem normalen Menschendasein entrückt” (Burkert 1961: 211; cp. Cook 1965: 21 f.). In other words, such a person became *hierós* – which like Latin *sacer* means both “holy” and “taboo” –, as was said of the body of Kapaneus, struck down by Zeus at the walls of Thebes

(Euripides *Suppliants*, 935).²² The hero Herakles was elevated to the status of an Olympian immortal after a thunderbolt thrown by his father Zeus onto his funeral pyre burnt away his mortal parts (Cook 1965: 23–29; Nagy 1990: 139–141). In former times Lithuanians believed that those struck by lightning from a thunderstorm heading west died as favorites of God, whereas those killed by a thunderstorm heading east died on account of their sins (Mannhardt 1936: 538, cited by Nagy 1990: 197). Among the Slavs “a person or tree struck by lightning was regarded as being filled with health-giving powers” (Gimbutas 1971: 166).

Let us consider these facts in the context of anthropological theories of sacrifice and possession. According to one of the most widely-cited definitions, proposed a century ago by the French sociologists Hubert and Mauss, sacrifice serves to establish “une communication entre le monde sacré et le monde profane par l’intermédiaire d’une victime détruite au cours d’une cérémonie” (1968: 302). Although more recent investigations of sacrifice have emphasized other aspects of the practice, such as the nature of the exchange between gods and humans, or have attempted to elucidate the meanings symbolized by the offering, the ritual, the context of performance, and so forth,²³ I will focus here on some implications of the sacrifice-as-communication view. In a study of possession cults in Africa, Zempléni (1987) noted that Hubert and Mauss’ definition could apply equally well to spirit possession. Many studies of the latter phenomenon have noted that the possessed individual is conceived as a site of contact between the supernatural and human realms, whether or not he or she serves as a spokesperson for the possessing spirit. Zempléni goes further, emphasizing, in his review of the ethnographic

21 Similarly, the neighboring Shilluk and Dinka tribes do not mourn persons killed by lightning, as their deaths are considered an honor.

22 Textual evidence indicates that in ancient Greece, as in the West Caucasus, the bodies of those killed by lightning were buried at the place of death, or left on the spot uncremated, the area being fenced off (indeed, Plutarch believed that their corpses would not decay, nor would dogs or birds touch “the bodies of those who have been struck by Zeus”) (Cook 1965: 22 f.). Some lightning victims may have subsequently been accorded the status of heroes, as implied by the inscription *Dii Katabáte:i hé:ro:i Epikrátei* (to a certain Epikrates, “vom Blitz erschlagen und deshalb heroisiert”) (Nilsson 1941: 63–65). Among the ancient Hittites, according to Haas (1994: 183 f.), “durch Blitzschlag zu sterben galt als ein besonderer, vom Wettergott herbeigeführten Tod, der heilige Scheu hervorrief.” The burials of such victims were handled by a special “Mann des Wettergottes,” who then performed a propitiatory offering of a goat (Haas 1994: 217).

23 Cp. Valeri (1985: 70 f.) on sacrifice as “symbolic action.”

data, the suppression of the possessed's human personality in favor of that of the spirit, which dwells within the victim's body, makes her physically and/or mentally ill, feeds off her blood and flesh, even rides her like a horse (1987: 285). The victims become "des êtres sacrificiels 'mis à mort' répétitivement par leur invisible 'époux' ou 'cavalier' auquel elles sont irrévocablement liées"; the possessed person's trances, induced periodically during religious ceremonies "sont des *oblations rituelles et réitérées de sa personne* au dieu auquel il a été voué" (312; italics in original). Without in any way denying the validity of Zempléni's conclusions, I would like to point out another characteristic shared by sacrifice and possession, which seems particularly useful for the Caucasian materials examined here. It is well known that many descriptions of sacrifice represent it as a *division* of the victim into two portions, one of which is appropriated by the god(s), the other of which remains in the possession of the human participants. Some such accounts, such as the Hesiodic myth of the institution of sacrifice by Prometheus, specify the division of the visible parts of the offering between the two parties; that part given to the gods may be burnt, spilt (e. g., blood), or left uneaten. In some cultures, such as that of the Nuers, it is primarily the invisible portion of the sacrifice, the animal's life, which is believed to be taken by the god, whereas the carcass remains for the use of the sacrificers (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 214). Cultures also differ concerning the imagined role of the two parties in the act of division. In Hesiod's account, the inaugural partition of the victim is made before the gods take their part; in traditional Hawaiian sacrifice, by contrast, the god is thought to "devour" and incorporate the entire offering, then return a portion to the sacrificers (Valeri 1985: 71). In at least some folk theories of possession, I argue here, the possessed is likewise divided into two portions, one of which is appropriated – temporarily or permanently – by the spirit, whereas the rest is considered to be still in the "ownership" of the person involved. This appropriation can take the form of exploiting the possessed as a mouthpiece, or as mental or physical illness. Some of the African cases discussed by Zempléni describe the indwelling spirit as a sort of parasite, consuming the victim's flesh and blood from within. In a Wolof ceremony described by the same author, a possessed woman holds a goat or cow against her body, with the intention of inducing the spirit to quit her body and enter that of the animal, which is subsequently killed. One victim is substituted for another;

furthermore, the animal victim is killed, yielding it (or a portion of it) definitively to the spirit.

It is my belief that the Caucasian ethnographic materials presented above yield evidence of a conception of sacrifice, possession, and lightning death as fundamentally the same order of phenomenon, that is, the total or partial appropriation of an animal or person by a supernatural being, which may use the former for his or her purposes. Consider first the numerous parallels in the conception of the lightning victim and that of a sacrificed animal. In one of the oldest sources quoted above, Moses Dasxuranc'i attributed to the Huns the belief that if lightning "struck a man or some material object, they considered him or it to be some sort of sacrifice to a god K'u(w)ar" (1961: 155 f.). In the modern variants of the choppa ceremony as well, the victim's body and that of the animal slaughtered in the ritual are treated in similar fashion. Both may be placed upon the platform, and both must be left behind after the participants return home: the uneaten goat meat is left to rot or be eaten by birds, the victim's body is buried on the spot or at a location chosen at random. By no means may the meat be brought back to the village, or the victim's corpse be buried in the village cemetery. In other words, both the remains of the victim slain by lightning and the uneaten portions of the animal slaughtered by the participants in the ritual were regarded as having been appropriated by the lightning god. As in ancient Greece, the fact of having been appropriated by a powerful and potentially dangerous deity rendered the victims *âpsausta* "untouchable, sacred," off limits to the human community. It should also be mentioned that the Hunnic and modern choppa ceremonies were performed for livestock and objects, as well as people, hit by lightning, implying that it was the act of appropriation of the victim by the god which was the criterial factor: it was as though the god took the initiative of seizing an offering, rather than waiting for the community to perform a sacrifice in his honor.

The final piece of evidence to be considered in this section is chronologically the earliest. In a passage cited by Charachidzé (1981b: 455) as proof that possession was known in some areas of the Caucasus 2000 years ago, the Greek geographer Strabo (*Geography* XI, 4, 7) describes the religious practices at one of the chief sanctuaries of the Caucasian Albanians (*Albanoi*, dwelling in what is now Azerbaijan) as follows:

As for gods, they adore the Sun, Zeus, and Selene (= the moon), most of all, the moon. Its sanctuary is

located near Iberia [= a kingdom in eastern Georgia – KT]. The officiating priest is most revered after the king. He has authority over the sacred territory, which, like that of the king, is large and well-populated, and also over the servants of the temple, of whom many go into trances and prophecy (*kai tō:n hierodoulo:n, hō:n enthousiō:si polloi kai prophe:teúousin*). If one of these, in a state of powerful possession, wanders alone in the forest (*epi pléon katáskhetos genómenos planátai katà tās húlas mónos*), the priest captures him, binds him with a sacred chain, and feeds him generously throughout the year. Then he leads him to the sacrifice celebrated in honor of the goddess (*eis tē:n thusían tē:s theou*), where, having anointed him with perfumes, he sacrifices him along with the other victims. The sacrifice takes place as follows: bearing the sacred lance which custom reserves only for human sacrifices, a person comes out of the crowd, advances toward the victim and strikes him in the side through to the heart, not without having learned how beforehand. When the victim falls, they make predictions by the manner in which he falls, which they announce publicly. Then the body is transported to a place where all come to step on it with their feet, which serves as a rite of purification.

There is much about this passage which remains a puzzle for scholars of Caucasian ethnohistory, nor is it clear how literally the description is to be interpreted. Of interest to us here are four elements which can be compared to the choppa complex: (1) possession attributed to a celestial deity – here, the goddess of the moon; (2) the possessed going into a trance and prophesying; (3) the possessed wandering in the forest (i. e., outside of the domesticated space of the village); (4) the victim finally being put to death as a sacrifice to the same deity responsible for the possession. Although lightning does not play a role, and the victim is killed by a fellow human and not by an act of God, the parallels are sufficiently close to merit consideration. In particular, the possessed prophet is equated with a sacrificial victim in the most concrete manner imaginable. The sacrifice (or appropriation) takes place stepwise, however. At first the goddess takes partial possession of the victim, making him her prophet. Then she draws him into the forest, away from human society, and therefore even further into her possession. Finally, the priest who acts in her service captures the possessed person, fattens him up and then brings him to be sacrificed, completing the process. It is as though the two possible outcomes of a lightning strike – death of the victim, or election as prophet of the lightning god – are here represented as two stages in a process affecting the same victim.

(To be continued)

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