

THE CAUCASUS FOLKLORE

OVERVIEW

Folklore deals with the customs, beliefs, traditions, legends, folktales, myths, proverbs, music, dances and songs that are practiced across the ages as part of popular and traditional knowledge of many cultures.

The Caucasus has a very rich folklore blended with the elements of other cultures and traditions - from paganism to Zoroastrianism, from Christianity to Islam, from Persian to Arab, from Byzantine to the Ottomans.

Folklore in the Caucasus is profoundly connected to the history, national heroes, traditions, beliefs and everyday life. Another aspect of the Caucasian folklore is it being either Christian or Islamic in nature.

The South Caucasian tales show strong Zoroastrian influences from Persia. In the North Caucasus, there are tales that narrate unending battles with the Russians and the heroes fighting against them. There are mythological figures that are associated with the myths of ancient Greece, ancient India, and Norse Scandinavia.

At the same time, there are also mythological figures like Prometheus that are shared by the Caucasian nations in their legends under different names. The Georgian Amirani, the Abkhazian Abrskil and the Vainakh Pkharmat were all Caucasian heroes stealing fire from the gods and giving it to humanity. Fire symbolized righteousness, wisdom, knowledge, purity and the light of God.

Ancient people in the Caucasus did not create these myths to be used by the next generations. They never worried about who would use their deities, legends and heroes in the future. They were naturally developed elements to express their feelings and everyday life as part of their cultural traits and beliefs. These myths and folklore are all preserved even today because they are an important part of the Caucasian peoples' historical past and their ancestors.

ANCIENT PERIOD

SOUTH CAUCASUS

GEORGIA: The Greek historian Xenophon's work *Anabasis*, written in the 4th century BCE, provides information about ancient Georgian folk music and dance. He mentions the battle of the proto-Georgians, the Mossynoeci, and states that the Georgians lined up and began to sing a song and the others followed singing and dancing.



Georgian folk tales contain myths, heroes, spirits, beasts and so on. For example, *devi* is portrayed as a beast who eats humans. The Greek myth of *Jason and the Argonauts* took place in the Colchis kingdom where the *Golden Fleece* was kept.

Jason and Golden Fleece

The Argonauts were heroes who accompanied the Greek hero Jason in his quest to find the Golden Fleece. Jason arrived in Colchis to find the Golden Fleece but the King of Colchis, Aeetes, asked him to accomplish seemingly impossible tasks. However, Aeetes' daughter Medea helped

him to overcome these obstacles and get the Golden Fleece. Medea married him and Jason took her away from Colchis.



ARMENIA: Armenian folklore includes legends, folk tales, folk songs, proverbs, riddles, epics, spirits and heroes. Mesopotamian, Iranian, Roman and Greek cultures all had some impact on Armenian customs, traditions, and folk beliefs. Armenian culture was strongly influenced by Zoroastrianism after the Persian conquest in Armenia in the 1st millennium BCE. For example, the supreme god of Armenia became Aramazd during the Medians. During the Hellenistic period, Aramazd became Zeus, Vahagn became Hercules and Anahit became Artemis. Ancient Armenian folklore contains many mythical monsters and spirits. For example, a water spirit, the dragon *Vishaps* is depicted as a winged snake that creates storms. The God of war, the god of thunder and lightning Vahagn fought Vishaps and defeated him.

Vahagn Vishapakagh, the dragon wrestler

AZERBAIJAN: Armenian culture and civilization played an important role in the development of the cultural history of Caucasian Albania. There are also traces of Zoroastrianism found in the Shamakha, Nakhchivan, Mingechaur, Talysh-Mugan areas.

NORTH CAUCASUS

CHECHNYA: The Vainakhs had a polytheistic religion and cults. Their religion was animistic, anthropomorphic and nature-inspired.

In the 5th century BCE, subterranean petroglyphs depicted solar signs, figurines of anthropomorphic animals, and plants used for rituals.

Questions:

1- What was the role of Zoroastrianism in the South Caucasus?

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POST – CLASSICAL PERIOD

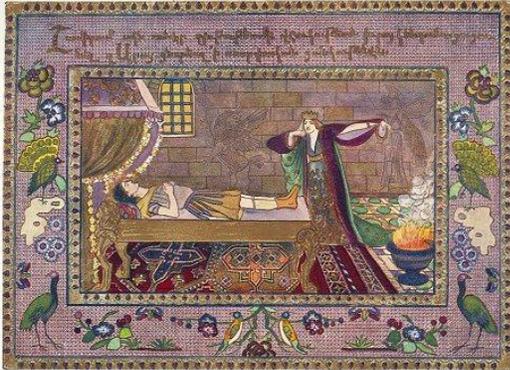
SOUTH CAUCASUS

GEORGIA: Georgian folklore contained motifs from Christian, Greek, pagan, and Persian cultures. The oldest surviving Georgian romance *Amiran-darejaniani* from the 12th century was written in Georgian folk tradition and it was based on Persian epos.

Although the Georgians were Christians, folk customs of pagan origin, like songs chanted over sick children continued in the mountainous regions. For example, the Georgians believed that the spirit *bat'onebi*, in the evening, visited houses of the sick and stayed with the bodies of the sick child.

In addition, medieval Georgians carried out a number of activities whose origins were in pagan beliefs, among them performing *perkhulis* (round dances), praising the god of weather through rituals and chants, reciting ritual chants intended to cure the sick by placating the spirits, and various other spiritual ceremonies.

Georgian folktales were first printed in the 17th century survived in songs and rituals.



ARMENIA: Armenian folklore had number of national heroes. One of them was the creator of the Armenian alphabet, *Mesrop Mashtots*. The semi-legendary *King Ara* (Ara the Handsome) who was the ruler of Armenia, captured and killed by the Assyrian Queen Semiramis who had extreme affection to Ara.

From the 5th century, the warrior *Vartan Mamikonian*, who died during his defense of the Armenians against the Persians was considered a national hero.

Gregory the Illuminator (Grigor Lusavorich) was considered a biblical hero who brought Christianity to Armenia.

The patriarch *Hayk Nahapet* was another hero who was the founder of the Armenian nation. Hayk fought against the giant mythical king Bel of Babylon and killed him.

The Armenian epic *Daredevils of Sassoun*, dating from the 8th century, was about *David of Sassoun*, a folk hero who fought against the Persian and Arab invaders.

Wandering minstrels known as *Ashughs* performed their folk songs with violins and mandolins starting in the 16th century.



AZERBAIJAN: Azerbaijani culture has a rich collection of oral folklore that includes songs, stories, *dastans* (epics) and sayings. One of these *dastans* is *Dede Qorkut* written in the 14th century. These stories reflect the pre-Islamic beliefs as well as the values of the nomadic Turkic peoples.

The folk epic legend *Koroghlu* written in the 17th century was dedicated to the struggle against Turkish enslavement. These *dastans* were composed in the form of a heroic ballads and performed by *Ashugi*. The first master Ashug in Azerbaijan folklore was *Gurbani*.

Koroghlu, Nakhchivan

NORTH CAUCASUS

CHECHNYA: The genres of Chechen folklore are mythology, heroic epics, folk tales, legends, ritual songs, *Illi* (heroic epic songs), *zhukhurgs* (performed in folk festivals and weddings) plays, incantations, *belkham* (lamentations), *tiizhar* (lamentations) and verse. In the 16th–18th centuries, the composition of *Illi* mostly depicted Chechens battling local and foreign feudal lords to maintain their independence.

Questions:

1- How are elements of ancient mythology reflected in folklores in the Caucasus?

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EARLY MODERN PERIOD

SOUTH CAUCASUS

GEORGIA: At the beginning of the 18th century, the Georgian scholar Vakhushti Bagrationi recorded information about the oral narration of fairytales, fables and poetry.

In the 18th century, David Guramishvili, the author of *The Woes of Kartli*, and the lyric poet Bessarion Gabashvili made a great contribution to the development of folk poetry. In this century, troubadour literature also evolved.

The geographical position of Georgia lies between the East and the West. At the beginning of the 18th century, the oral folklore of Georgia had many genres which reflected the influence of European Christian, pagan, Byzantine, and Persian influences. In the mountainous regions of Georgia, oral folklore contained fairytales where the plot was based upon myth. Georgian fairytales always included elements of the nature-based religions of ancient times.



Sayat Nova: One of the prominent Armenian and Georgian ashughs and troubadours of this century was Sayat-Nova. He performed his songs in Georgian, Turkish, and Armenian.

ARMENIA: Armenian folklore contains fairy tales, legends, folk songs, proverbs, riddles and epics which carry elements of pre-Christian culture. In the 18th century, foreign invasions forced large segments of the society to move to other countries. For example, one of the prominent Armenian and Georgian ashughs and troubadours of this century *Sayat-Nova* lived in Georgia. He performed his songs in Georgian, Turkish, and Armenian.

AZERBAIJAN: The old ritual dances constituted the basis of various national folk dances like labor (shepherds), ceremonial (ritual, wedding), common, military, sport, round, game and others.

In the 18th century, the genre of Ashiq poetry in particular showed considerable development. Ashiq poetry was taken up by prominent poets and writers such as Khasta Qasim who was one of the famous folk poets in Azerbaijan. Qasim followed the footsteps of Dede Korkut, Gharib, Ashiq Qurbani, Ashiq Abbas Tufarqanlı and created his own poetry. Ashiq Valeh and Ashiq Dilgam also were the well-known ashiqs in Azerbaijan.

NORTH CAUCASUS

CHECHNYA:

Folk song *llli* continued to be one of the most important genres in Chechen folklore depicting the heroic acts of young men to protect their community and their land.

In the 18th century, folk dances were performed with people making a large circle, sitting and singing and challenging young dancers by making jumps and throwing each other down. Then they held hands and made a circle. Their songs were accompanied by oboes, bagpipes and flutes.

Questions:

1- How have the people of the Caucasus preserved their old customs and traditions?

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19TH CENTURY

SOUTH CAUCASUS



GEORGIA: The poet Raphael Eristavi made a great contribution to the study of Georgian ethnography and folklore. In 1873, he gathered folk songs and poems in *Glekhuri simgherebi, leksebi da andazebi* with the help of Iliia Chavchavadze, and wrote a book on Georgian proverbs and riddles.

The Composer Meliton Antonovich Balanchivadze was the founder of the first Georgian Folk Ensemble in 1882 and he also coordinated the first folk concert in Tbilisi.

The Georgian Folk Poet Ietim Gurji was one of the *ashugs* in Tbilisi. He published his poems in three languages: Georgian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani. Gurji's poems depicted the everyday life of workers, peasants, and merchants. He wrote songs and performed in Tbilisi.

There was a mass folk performance called *Keenoba*. It was a folk display of awakening nature and the agricultural worship of fertility performed every spring. In the 19th century, the *Keenoba* began to be portrayed as a struggle of the Georgian people against foreign occupants, therefore its performance was not allowed by tsarist officials.

ARMENIA: The folk epic *Daredevils of Sassoun* was about a hero who fought against the Arabs. Garegin Srvandziantz who was an Armenian philologist, folklorist, ethnographer, and ecclesiastic published *Daredevils'* first written form in 1873.

AZERBAIJAN: The mystic troubadour Ashig Alasgar was an Azerbaijani poet and folk song writer and one of the best representatives of the ashug's art in the 19th century. Ashig Peri was another Azerbaijani poet and folk singer, and the first woman performing the ashig art. Ashiq Ali and Ashiq Hussain Shamkirli were other outstanding representatives of ashig music.





The first records of Azerbaijani folklore began in 1830 and were published in the newspapers *Vedomosti*, *Tiflisskiye vedomosti*, *Novoe obazreniye*, *Kafkazskiy vestnik*, *Kafkaz*, and *SMOMPK* collections in 1870s, and then in the Azerbaijani newspaper *Ekinchi* in 1875.

NORTH CAUCASUS

CHECHNYA:

Baron Peter Karlovich Uslar was the first scholar of Caucasian folklore. He studied the Nart epics, folk tales, fairy tales, songs, parables, proverbs and sayings.



The Russian writer and military officer Ivan Alekseyevich Bartolomei published his Chechen and Abkhaz primer in 1866. It was written in Cyrillic and contained the first Russian translations of Chechen folklore such as proverbs, sayings, humorous stories and heroic legends.

Questions:

1- Caucasian folklore shared many legends that contain common motifs like the Prometheus myth, heroes who stole fire from gods and gave it to mortals, but appear with indigenous names as in the Georgian Amirani and the Chechen Pkharmat. What other shared motifs can be attested in the folklore of the Caucasian states?

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20TH CENTURY

SOUTH CAUCASUS



GEORGIA: The Christian and pre-Christian aspects of Georgian folklore coexist together. There are many festivals in Georgia where both aspects are intermingled. Among these are Kopaloba, the holiday celebrated in honor of Kopala, the pre-Christian deity of lightning. Kopala is depicted as a man armed with a mace and an iron bow was made especially for him by the blacksmith god *Pirkusha*.

Berikaoba festivity on a Soviet stamp (1991)

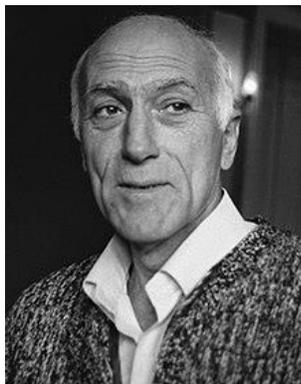
Also, Georgian folk festivals such as the pagan festivity of fertility, *Berikaoba*, a folk theatre performance with masked players, and another pagan festivity of the awakening of nature, *Keenoba*, were used in organizing revolutionary activities held in Telavi in 1905.

There are other folk festivals such as *Tbilisoba* which is celebrated as the official day of the foundation of Tbilisi, first held in 28 October 1979 when the harvest is over.

Alaverdoba is a religious and folk festivity in Kakheti and it is a harvest festival. The festival's name comes from the Alaverdi Cathedral.

Shuamtoba is another folk festival held in summer in the mountain pastures of Khulo and Shuakhevi, in the first weekend of every August which pays tribute to the region's heritage.

Elioba is also a folk festival held on 28 August, on the day of St. Elia, the master of the weather.



Chabua Amirejibi was a Soviet writer who authored the novel *Data Tutashkhia* (1973). In his novel, he portrayed a hero based on the pagan god Tutashkha in Georgian folklore.

The 20th century Georgian writer Goderdzi Chokheli combined the elements of pagan mythology and Orthodoxy in his novels *Wolf* (1988) and *Priest's Sin* (1990).

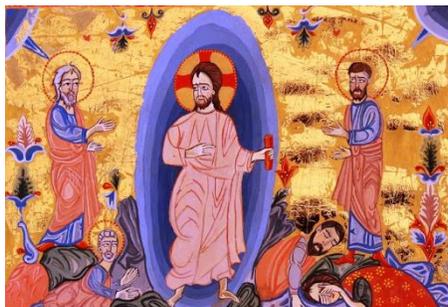
The bird *Paskunji* is a phoenix-like animal that helps and protects heroes, and heals wounds and illnesses in Georgian folk tales. There are also various kinds of witches in Georgian folk tales like the *devis deda* (the mother of the *devi*), *Ali* (a beautiful woman with blond hair living in water, forests or in huge rock caves), *rokapi* (a demonical, ugly woman), and *dedaberi* (wise, old woman).

In Georgian villages, there are rituals and dances like *Perkhulis* (round dances) glorifying the Sun.

The folk sport *Lelo burti* which is a ball festival similar to rugby still played in Georgia.

ARMENIA: There are festivals that were associated with pagan tradition such as the *Vardavar*, a festivity where people throw water on each other. It is held on July 8. The *Vardavar* has connection with a legend in which the goddess *Astghik* spreads love in all Armenia by sprinkling rose water and the god *Vahagn* defends love fighting Evil.

The other festival which has pagan origins is *Trndez*, a feast of purification celebrated on February 13. In this festivity newly married couples are blessed, and a fire is lit for the newly married couple and other members of the community to jump over.



Vardavar (Transfiguration) is also a pagan holiday, celebrated in July. This pagan festival is linked to the ancient goddess of water *Astghik*. During this festivity people throw water on each other.

The Feast of Hampartzoom is one of the feasts celebrated by the Armenian Church forty days after the Resurrection of Jesus.

On February 26, there is a pagan festival dedicated to the god of fire, *Mihr*. On this day a newlywed young man brings bushes and pile them in the yard of the church. In the evening, the priest sets fire to the pile. All the residents of the village dance around the fire, and the young men jump over it.

Ashugi (wandering poets and singers) perform folk songs and poems with violins and mandolins. They write their own verses to sing during the festivals and in markets.

Many epics played a central role in the folklore of Armenia. In Armenian folklore David Sassoun is the most popular hero fighting against the Arabs. In 1902, the Armenian writer Hovhannes Tumanyan wrote a folk epic using the heroic poem of David of Sassoun.

Many pagan beliefs have survived in Armenia. For example, *Tsovinar* is still considered a thunder goddess. The Armenians, like the sun-worshipping Persians, prayed toward the rising sun in the east. This is a custom adopted by the church. Therefore, the Armenian churches are built toward the east, since the Armenians believed that the west was the home of evil spirits.

The Armenians are still afraid of the evil effects of the moon on children and to protect the children they performed rituals in the moonlight.

AZERBAIJAN:

In the first half of the 20th century, the Soviets hampered the progressive development of Azerbaijani folklore and forced folklorists to bring Azerbaijani folklore in line with Soviet-socialist ideology. In 1920, the Institute of Folklore was established within the Organization of Investigation and Study of Azerbaijan, and became active in 1994 under the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences (ANAS). Eynali Sultanov, Mahmudbey Mahmudbeyov, Firudin bey Kocherli, Hanafi Zeynalli and Salman Mumtaz are a few of the distinguished folklorists researching and collecting samples of oral folklore and publishing them.

Even during the Soviet period, traditional *ashiqs* continued to exist in Soviet Azerbaijan's national folklore. The *ashiqs* performed their poems with a stringed instrument, the *kobuz*. With the continuation of this tradition folk tales such as *Köroğlu* and the *Book of Dede Korkut* were preserved. Among the *ashiqs* of the 20th century, the most popular ones were *Ashiq Hussein Bozalqanlı*, *Ashiq Mirza*, *Ashiq Islam*, *Ashiq Shamshir*, *Ashiq Kamandar*, *Mikail Azaflı* and *Akbar Jafarov*.

NORTH CAUCASUS

CHECHNYA: In the 20th century, the Chechen folk epics of the *Narts* maintained archaic motifs and the *Nakh* legends depict the *Narts* as warlike bandits who fought against good local heroes. Chechen folklore also popularized the folk figure *Mullah Nasreddin*.

In Chechen folklore the *Abrek* was a warrior struggling for a cause he believed in. One of the most popular *abreks* of the 20th century was *Zelimkhan Gushmazuko*. He was a hero fighting for freedom against foreign domination. *Zelimkhan* was killed in 1913 during his resistance against the Russians.



The last Chechen *Abrek* was *Khasukhi Magomadov* who avoided being deported in 1944 by escaping to the mountains, and starting a guerrilla war against the Soviet armies stationed in Chechnya until he was caught in 1979.

The Chechen heroic *Ilili* continued to survive as one of the most important genres reflecting true friendship, courage, morals, modesty and so forth. In the 20th century, *Illesh* depicted the struggle against the Russian occupation and tyranny over the Chechens.

Questions:

1- Which myths and customs from early Caucasian culture have survived into the 20th century?

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