SACRED BREAD IN GEORGIAN CULTURAL IMAGINATION: SYMBOLIC AND RITUAL PRACTICE IN MENGRELIAN ETHNOGRAPHY AND ANCIENT GEORGIAN TEXTS

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ABSTRACT: *In different cultures, food does not serve merely as physical nourishment. There exist products designated for sacred offerings, food-related taboos, and periods of fasting—all of which indicate that food also possesses ritual, symbolic, and semiotic value. In Christian-type cultures, the sacralization of bread, grain, wine, oil, fish, and other products is grounded in biblical tradition. Georgian culture, a centuries-old phenomenon that developed within the Eastern Christian historical region, shares general Christian characteristics yet also possesses distinctive features whose identification and articulation are of particular importance.*

In all Christian cultures, the primary reason for the sacralization of bread is the mystery of the Eucharist, in which bread represents the body of Christ. The material presented in this article, concerning ritual bread and grains, is drawn from the ethnographic realities of Samegrelo. These include badidchkidi, khozokvari, shkashi nerchi, saterdobo, ***and*** *basila****.*** *The material is significant both in global and national terms; it is also valuable for the study of intercultural dialogue, as it demonstrates the local configuration and specificities of global and universal symbols.*

The article identifies types of ritual bread characteristic of the Georgian (specifically, Samegrelo) cultural context, whose names preserve traditional beliefs and conceptions about the cosmos and thus express particular worldviews. The terminology is analyzed etymologically, structurally, and, to some extent, contextually in order to reveal its social, semantic, and symbolic content, as well as to explain the motivations behind the naming of these ritual breads.

The sources used include ethnographic descriptions of Samegrelo and dictionaries of Old Georgian. Through philological analysis, parallels are drawn with Old Georgian texts—primarily with material from hagiographic literature—since this genre of sacred writing most clearly reflects medieval modes of thought, providing insights into the logic underlying archaic ritual practices.

Keywords: *badidchkidi, khozokvari, shkashi nerchi, saterdobo, basila, ritual bread, ethnography of Samegrelo, Georgian hagiography, linguistic anthropology.*

Introduction

For various civilizations, gastronomic culture extends far beyond the satisfaction of physiological needs and functions as a symbolic system through which human beings establish connections with nature, the divine, and the social world. Within this framework, **bread**, as the most essential food, is perceived as a universal symbol to which many cultures ascribe profound significance. This is especially true in the Christian tradition, where bread becomes the substance of the Eucharistic sacrifice—the body of Christ. The *„bread of essence"* (*puri arsobisá*) sought in the Lord's Prayer signifies not only material sustenance but, more importantly, the spiritual necessity without which human existence is impossible. Yet the symbolism of bread takes on diverse forms across cultures.

The western Georgian region of **Samegrelo** constitutes a kind of living archive preserving archaic elements once characteristic of the broader Georgian cultural sphere. This is also evident in its gastronomic culture. In particular, the terminology associated with bread is remarkably rich, offering an opportunity to examine how this universal theological symbol is sacralized within Georgian culture.

The study of historical gastronomy can rely on various types of sources: monastic typika, archaeological material, frescoes and miniatures, and more. Yet for understanding medieval worldviews and modes of life, **hagiographic texts** are invaluable. In hagiography, every word carries significant weight, and nothing is named casually; each designation maintains a direct relation to a higher idea. In these texts, food is frequently imbued with sacral meaning and associated with miracles or supernatural events—a tradition rooted in both the Old and New Testaments (e.g., the multiplication of loaves and fishes). Of particular interest are the names of food plants, products, and prepared dishes that appear in these works, such as: *bread*, *water*, *wild greens*, *flour*, *salt*, *oil*, *date*, *almond*, *pomegranate*, *rice* (as „the rice tree"), *meat*, *honey*, *olive*; and among prepared foods: *korkoti*, *paximadi*, *tsuenaki of pear*, *unleavened kalnabi*, and others.

The Semiotics of Bread in Medieval Georgia: Language, Ritual, and Social Bonding

In both Byzantine and Georgian hagiographic traditions, the shared table or *trapeza* represents an expression of spiritual unity. Saint Theodore the Studite (9th century) provides detailed descriptions of monastic dietary practices, emphasizing the communal nature of meals, the significance of fasting, and the ritualized distribution of food in the Studion monastery. Similar practices are attested in Georgian sources such as *The Martyrdom of Saint Queen Shushanik*, *The Life of Grigol of Khandzta*, and *The Lives of John and Euthymius*.

Among the many seeds gifted to humanity by God for sustenance, wheat holds a special status, as it is the source of the „bread of life." In Christian theology, bread becomes a divine signifier—a symbol of Christ himself, whose sacredness is grounded in specific scriptural passages. As the Gospel of John declares:

Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." (John 6:53).

This theological foundation gives Eucharistic bread its profound sacrality. Consequently, bread-baking in monastic contexts became a ritualized activity, closely governed by religious customs and symbolic actions.

Authors of *The Georgian Chronicles* (*Kartlis Tskhovreba*) often refer to the abundance of bread and wine as a sign of divine blessing and national prosperity, while the absence of bread signaled divine punishment.

The symbolic centrality of bread is most vividly preserved in the Georgian language itself, as evidenced by an extensive set of terms documented in historical Georgian lexicons. Examples include:

- *mep'ure* – bread-baker;
- *mep'uret'modzgvari* – overseer of bread-related duties at the royal court;
- *mep'uris-(m)te* – bread-sharer; related to the kinship term *dzudzumte* (wet nurse);
- *p'uris mte* – table companion, guest;
- *p'urad missruli* – visitor (literally, one who arrives for bread);
- *p'uris rtva* – the act of eating bread (rtva = to eat);
- *p'uris sakmari* – bakery manager;
- *p'uris mokmedi* – active bread-maker;
- *p'urad dzviri* – stingy person;
- *p'urad ukhu* – generous person;
- *p'uris damzadeba* – preparing bread; hosting a feast;
- *p'uris upali* – literally, „lord of bread," used to denote a host or toastmaster.

These terms reveal a rich symbolic universe in which bread is not only nourishment, but a mediator of social and spiritual bonds. For instance, the expression *mep'uris-(m)te*, denoting one who shares bread, closely parallels *dzudzumte*, a person with whom one shares maternal milk—suggesting that bread-sharing forges ties as strong as kinship. Similarly, *p'urad missruli* (guest) and *p'uris upali* (host) illustrate how the institution of hospitality in Georgian culture revolves around bread: the guest comes for bread; the host presides over it.

The term *mep'uret'modzgvari*—a court-appointed official responsible for bread-related matters—indicates the administrative and ceremonial importance of bread. Terms like *mep'ure*, *p'uris sakmari*, and *p'uris mokmedi* demonstrate the economic specialization surrounding bread production, which was considered a distinct craft and social role. Moreover, *p'uris damzadeba*, used synonymously with „holding a feast," underscores the ritual and festive centrality of bread. The phrase *p'uris rtva* (eating bread) highlights the performative and symbolic aspects of consumption.

The evaluative terms *p'urad dzviri* (stingy) and *p'urad ukhu* (generous) further affirm that personal character was, in part, judged according to one's attitude toward sharing bread. Generosity and hospitality were intimately linked to the cultural ethics surrounding food and feasting.

The sheer volume and specificity of bread-related vocabulary in Old Georgian demonstrates the extent to which bread was embedded in Georgian cultural and religious thought. As evidenced even in literary repetition—for example, the rhythmic use of the phrase „eating bread"

in *The Martyrdom of Saint Shushanik*—bread occupies a central role in shaping Georgian cultural identity and symbolic imagination.

Ritual Breads in Samegrelo

Since ancient times, the primary grains cultivated in the western Georgian region of Samegrelo included *ghomi* (foxtail millet, *Panicum italicum*), the Megrelian *chkhveri*, and proso millet, locally known as *chkidi* (*Milium* spp.)—all of which formed the basis of the region's ritual and everyday bread culture (Mak'alatia, p. 183). From the 17th century onward, maize (corn) was introduced into local agriculture, significantly expanding the variety of cultivated cereals.

Scholars S. Mak'alatia and Ioseb Kobalia provide comprehensive lists of cereal crops historically grown in Samegrelo, including both native and introduced varieties:

- *irkli / ipkhli – a variety of wheat*
- *chvavi / chve – rye*
- *rukhula – a type of maize grown in mountainous areas*
- *tsitsua – a type of maize grown in lowlands*
- *white maize*
- *red maize*
- *pita kobali – a traditional wheat variety with four-rowed ears*
- *irkishi – another variety of wheat*

These grains were integral not only to subsistence farming but also to a ritual system in which specific types of bread, made from particular cereals, were associated with religious festivals, fertility rites, and seasonal transitions. From these raw materials, various **ritual breads and loaves** were prepared—*kvere*—which will be discussed in detail below.

a. Badidchkidi — The name of this ritual bread is a bipartite compound consisting of *badidi* and *chkidi*. *Chkidi* / *mchadi* refers to a small flatbread baked from millet (*Mak'alatia*, p. 184). *Badidi* in Mingrelian means „an elder man, clan leader, patriarch," and corresponds semantically to the Old Georgian word *beri*, the second component of the compound *khevisberi*. A similar semantic model is found in *khutsesi* ("priest"), derived from *khuts/mkhtse/mkhtsovan* (elder).

Thus, the name of this ritual bread unites **social hierarchy** (the elder, patriarch) and **everyday food** (millet bread), and reflects broader Georgian worldview structures in which respect for elders and their authoritative role is prominently expressed.

As Sergi Mak'alatia and I. Kobalia note, *badidchkidi* was baked for the ritual of **tianoba**. Tianoba was performed during the first week of Great Lent and on Saint Theodore's Day, indicating the ritual's close connection with the Christian liturgical calendar. The bread was shaped either in the form of a human figure or made large and rectangular, pointing to **anthropomorphic** or **cosmological symbolism**. During the rite, the officiant would rotate the *badidchkidi* three times over the hearth while reciting prayers.

b. *Znakhari*

During *Thevdoroba* and *Tianoba* alongside the preparation of *badidchkidi*, seven small, round ritual loaves called *znakhari* were also baked. As part of the ritual, the head of the household would approach the hearth (*keri*), symbolically turn the large *badid mchadi* (ritual flatbread) by hand, and throw the seven *znakhari* into the fire. As the loaves ignited, he would recite the following invocation:

("Until the seven Tianoba days have passed, drive away every misfortune for seven years: until we remove the *znakhari* from the hearth, protect us from hunger and thirst.") [1]

A similar description is provided by Kobalia, who notes that *znakhari* were small, round sacrificial breads prepared for the Tianoba or *Shqvit-Tianoba* prayers. These loaves were baked together with *badidchkidi* and then cast into the fire at the hearth. The burning of these breads signified a prayerful offering—an appeal for divine protection from scarcity, hunger, and hardship:

„Until we take them out again, may God keep hunger and thirst away from us[2].“

The use of *znakhari* illustrates the deep symbolic relationship between bread, fire, and protective prayer within the Megrelian ritual imagination. The repetition of the number seven, the spatial centrality of the hearth, and the sacrificial act of burning ritual loaves all suggest a cosmologically charged rite. Moreover, the oral invocation—preserved in vernacular poetic form — further demonstrates how Christian festivals were layered upon earlier ritual structures that emphasized seasonal renewal, household well-being, and divine appeasement through offerings of grain and bread.

c. *Shkashi Nerchi*
(*shka* = middle; *shkashi* = in the middle; *nerchi* = root, foundation, or chthonic deity)

Shkashi nerchi refers to a ritual bread prepared for the invocation of *Nerchi*, a chthonic spirit or fertility deity associated with the foundation of the home. Specifically, it was the middle loaf among a group of four, symbolically representing balance and intermediation. The ritual was performed by a midwife (*bebia*) on behalf of the family, either immediately following childbirth or on the anniversary of the birth, as a form of blessing and protection for the mother and newborn.

According to Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani's 18th-century Georgian dictionary, *nerchi* carries multiple meanings: Angel of the foundation. The base or root. A deity of fertility.

Ethnographers such as Mak'alatia, Kipshidze, and Abakelia note that *nerchi* rituals could only be performed in houses whose foundations were directly connected to the earth—underscoring the sacred relationship between dwelling and soil. Etymologically, the term is grounded in root

1 Mak'alatia 1941:311
2 Kobalia no. 25194

words denoting contact with the earth: in Megrelian, *na-rch-a* means „sole of the foot“ (that which touches the ground), *do-rch-afa* means „to lay upon the ground,“ and *nerchi* itself means „depth“ or „foundation.“ Based on these lexical and ritual associations, scholars have interpreted *nerchi* as a personified, deified representation of the earth itself.

The modifier *shkashi* (in the middle) is deeply symbolic. Within Christian theology, Christ is often described as the mediator between God and fallen humanity; similarly, the Church serves as an intermediary space between heaven and earth. In sacred architecture, this liminality is visually and spatially expressed in elements such as the *kankeli* (iconostasis), which marks the threshold between the nave (earthly realm) and the sanctuary (heavenly realm). In this light, the term *shkashi nerchi* may be understood not merely as a physical placement (the middle loaf), but as a theological metaphor for mediation and sacred transition—a bread positioned symbolically between worlds.

d. *Khozo / Khozokvari / Khozokoni*
(*khozo* – Megrelian; *khozokvari* or *khozokoni* – ritual stuffed bread prepared at the end of Cheesefare week)

The ritual bread known as *khozokvari* or *khozokoni* is a long-shaped loaf traditionally prepared at the close of Cheesefare Week, just before the just before the start of Lent. The preparation begins by grinding millet and mixing it with wheat flour to form a dough. Small loaves are shaped from this dough, each filled with cheese and boiled. In one of the loaves, a walnut twig or splinter is secretly inserted. The individual who receives the „spiked“ loaf is believed to be blessed with happiness and longevity in the coming year.

The cooked loaves are arranged on a *khoncha* (ritual platter), and the head of the household offers a blessing, declaring:

„Whosoever receives the spiked loaf, let them be happy and live long[1]*.“*

After this, the bread is shared among all present. The person who finds the twig inside their portion is traditionally expected to host a feast for the entire group. If that individual is poor, they symbolically take up a *khurjini* (shoulder sack) and go from house to house collecting offerings. Community members donate legumes, walnuts, millet, and other Lenten foods, from which the chosen person prepares a communal meal and offers hospitality to all.

The persistence of the term *khozo* in modern Megrelian to describe this ritual bread suggests the deep antiquity and resilience of the tradition. From a linguistic perspective, *khozo* in Megrelian appears to share a common root with the Old Georgian *khueza* or *ghvezeli* (a general term for a stuffed or filled bread). This likely points to a pan-Georgian etymological origin (*khuez-* root), reinforcing the idea that ritual breads are part of a shared cultural and linguistic heritage that predates regional diversification.

1 Mak’alatia 1941: p.322

e. *Satherdobo* Breads[1]

Satherdobo is the name given to ritual breads prepared for *Therdoba* (Megrelian name for *Thevdoroba*), a horse-blessing festival observed on the Saturday evening of the first week of Lent in Samegrelo. On this occasion, the horse's owner would bake a bread sculpture in the full form of a horse, complete with saddle, stirrups, reins, and other trappings. In addition, several smaller breads shaped like horseshoes (*chochoriki*) were baked—one for each member of the household.

That evening, the bread effigy and the smaller loaves were arranged on a *khoncha* (ritual tray), along with a full glass of wine. Candles were lit and placed around the tray. The head of the household would approach first and offer a prayer to Saint Theodore (*Thevdore*), asking for the multiplication of horses and their protection from thieves and wild animals. He would then perform a mimetic ritual: placing his hands behind his back, neighing like a horse, kicking his legs, and symbolically biting a piece from the bread horse before retreating in the same manner. All family members would repeat this act in hierarchical order. Afterward, a communal supper was held, and the horse-shaped loaves were distributed among all.

The following day, horses were blessed with incense. The candle and incense used in the ritual were then sent as offerings to the church of Saint Theodore. On *Therdoba*, the head of the family would also perform a fertility rite: he would take a walnut and samples of various crop seeds, go out into the yard, and plant them in a symbolic circular pattern—with the walnut in the center—while offering prayers for a bountiful harvest.

In cultural-historical analysis, *Therdoba* has been linked to the archetype of the *holy rider* (*ts'minda mkhedari*)—a figure prevalent throughout Georgian and European typologies. As scholar Revaz Siradze notes, the Georgian cult of knighthood, with roots in *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* and *Amiran-Darejaniani*, reflects both a social institution and an ethno-psychological ideal. The *holy rider* is the sacred counterpart of the secular knight, exemplified by figures ranging from David the Builder to medieval martyrs and saints. Siradze suggests that the title *ts'minda mkhedari* ("holy rider") may rightfully apply not only to Saint George or Constantine Kakhi, but also to Grigol of Khandzta, Abo of Tbilisi, Saint Nino, and Saint Shushanik—each of whom exhibited spiritual heroism in service of the Christian faith.

The archetypal source of this figure is found in Byzantine hagiography—particularly in *The Life of Saint George*, which describes his martyrdom under Emperor Diocletian (284–305). Iconographic representations show the saint as a youthful warrior on a white horse, wearing chainmail, wielding a sword and shield, and piercing a serpent (or, in some cases, Emperor Diocletian himself) with his spear. As Siradze writes, „the icon does not express triumphant joy, but liturgical exaltation".[2]

Alongside Saint George, Saint Theodore Tiron (*Thevdore*) is among the most revered holy horsemen in Georgian culture. Martyred between 305–313 CE, he is commemorated throughout the Georgian ecclesiastical calendar. The *Jerusalem Lectionary* (7th c.) mentions him five times—on March 10, June 2, July 2, August 8, and most notably, on the first Saturday of Lent.

1 Mak'alatia 1941: p.310
2 Siradze 2000:22.

In Jerusalem, a Georgian monastery was located near the monastic complex dedicated to Saint Theodore, where a Georgian inscription was discovered by Virgilio Corbo:

„By the help of Christ and the intercession of Saint Theodore...“

Although ethnographer S. Mak'alatia refers to *Therdoba* as a horse-blessing festival, it is evident that the veneration of *holy horsemen* (*ts'minda mkhedrebi*) was widespread across all of Georgia—binding together Christian hagiographic ideals, agricultural rites, and ancient martial symbolism into a syncretic and enduring cultural form.

V. Basila // Obasile — A sacred offering bread dedicated to St. Basil, made from cornmeal or wheat flour, shaped like a thick flatbread tapering at the ends, sometimes crafted in the form of a human figure and placed on the ritual calendar. **Basila Takhua —** The ritual breaking of the Basila bread (flatbread or thick bread), part of the New Year's rite. On the first afternoon of the New Year, the bread was placed over the Basila hearth; the head of the household and his wife would stand on either side and break the bread, reciting:

„The cornfield is full, the wine house is full“.

If the man broke the larger piece, it was said that the wine would be more abundant; if the woman, the corn harvest would be plentiful.

The Western New Year's *chichilaki* (Christmas tree) is a solar eidetic symbol adorned with spiraling shapes resembling the Basila's „bjake“ — the tip of Basil's bread (referring to St. Basil, whose feast day is celebrated on January 14th).

The symbolism of grains and wheat is universal across cultures, as seeds represent the potential for new life and hidden possibilities, and are associated with abundance and renewal. This symbolism is evident from pre-Christian times but was reinterpreted during the Christian era when bread became equated with the body of Christ. This explains the rich variety of ritual breads and their numerous names, which upon linguistic and cultural analysis reflect the same mentality as observed in ecclesiastical prose and Christian tradition.

The present study, through analysis of literary, lexical, and ethnological materials, demonstrates that ritual breads in Samegrelo embody not only culinary and dietary traditions but also profound religious and symbolic thinking. Linguistic and ethnological analysis of the terminology reveals that bread in Georgian culture is simultaneously perceived as a sacred social medium — a material substance transformed into an ideal essence. Bread serves as a symbol of self-identity, moral order, and socio-religious regulation. Its significance transcends mere nutritional and culinary practices, expressing deep cosmological and existential worldviews.

This research also exemplifies how local culture encodes universal symbolic phenomena, articulating them through diverse linguistic and ritual frameworks.

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