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**LINGUISTIC CONTACTS BETWEEN THE OSSETES
AND THE KARTVELIANS**

1. The earliest Ossetic-speaking settlements in Georgia date back to late mediaeval – post-Mongolian – times. There seems to be some evidence in the Kartlis cxovreba that even earlier Alan – North-Caucasian – mercenaries who had served Georgian kings were settled in Georgia when their service was finished; but these immigrants were probably soon assimilated and absorbed into the Kartvelian population.

The relatively long symbiosis of an Ossetic-speaking and a Georgian-speaking population has naturally brought in its train bilingual relations in some of the regions of Georgia. The ties between the Ossetes and the Georgian-speaking mountaineers of the East, the Pshavs, Khevsurs etc., have been particularly close, and may even date back to pre-Mongolian times. It is difficult to decide on this matter, as we know nothing, or next to nothing, about the linguistic identity of the inhabitants of the Vladikavkaz plateau in these distant times. Were they Nakh- or Alan-speaking, or both, or, in part at least, something else? There is some, e.g. toponymical, evidence that Nakh dialects formerly stretched farther to the west than they do today. In culture the East Georgian mountaineers are closely related to the Ossetes, even more closely than to their linguistic brothers of the lowlands. Regarding these matters I refer to Georges Charachidzé's book of 1968, *Le système religieux de la Géorgie païenne*.

All this raises the question of reciprocal linguistic contacts between the Georgians and the Ossetes, in particular the South Ossetes.

The South Ossetic idioms agree in all essentials with the Iron dialect of the North Caucasus. There is, however, some local variation. Besides, South Ossetic in some respects represents a somewhat more archaic stage of development than the sister idioms of North Iron. In a paper read at the Vienna Colloquium in 1984, and published in Prof. Fähnrich's journal *Georgica*, vol. XII, 1990, I tried, on the basis of some differences in the sound systems, to delimit

various layers in the local idioms of South Ossetia; this has some interest for the chronology of the Ossetic immigrations to Georgia. For a more comprehensive account I refer to Bekoev's book of 1985, *Иронский диалект осетинского языка*.

The phonetic differences between the local idioms are comparatively easy to detect. More difficult to answer is the question whether South Ossetic retains *syntactic archaisms*, and whether they, if they exist, are due to the relative isolation of the idioms and their somewhat marginal position within the Iron-speaking community, and thus indirectly to the neighbourhood of Georgian. It would be interesting to know, e.g., if the use of absolutes (or gerunds) for marking syntactic hypotaxis is less developed in the Iron idioms of the South than in those of the North; the extensive use of this syntactic practice in the dialects of the North, both Digor and Iron, it seems natural to ascribe to interference from the Turkic and North Caucasian neighbour languages, although it is rooted in Old Iranian. We would probably need a native speaker to answer this question, or at least a longer stay in both regions than I can hope for.

Olya Tedeeva (Tedeevi), of the Oriental Institute of the Georgian Academy of Sciences, has in her study of 1983 (v. the hand-out) collected some 380 Ossetic words which she explains as borrowings from Georgian. The majority, but not all, of her etymologies are based on Abaev's etymological dictionary (v. the hand-out). Most of the words are nouns, names of agricultural products and implements, food or dishes, or relate in other ways to material culture. There are some 86 plant names and botanical terms; names of plants that are particular to the Transcaucasian flora are in South Ossetic generally of Georgian origin, as far as I know. As is to be expected, the greater part of her words are only in use in South Ossetic. It is interesting to see that Georgian ხელი "hand" and ჰობი "mouth" are used (as it seems, in South Ossetic only) with an expressive connotation. Some few are found in the Digor dialect of the North only; as there is no direct contact, and has not been for ages, between the Digors and the Georgians, these borrowings are probably old.

It is also interesting to notice that some of the nouns in Tedeeva's collection have in Ossetic an ending *-a*, occasionally also *-æ*, which no doubt derives from the Georgian diminutive ending *-a*, that is particularly common in the dialects of the East Georgian highlanders, where it frequently loses its diminutive or affective meaning. So, e.g., to mention just a few examples: *k'unela* "hawthorne (*Crataegus*)", standard Georgian *k'uneli* (the Ossetic vocalism *e* points to a recent borrowing; in an old loanword we expect *i*); – Iron *syxyrna*, Dig. *sixirna* "sieve", Georgian *cxrili* "idem".

We, of course, expect to find Georgian influence in the Christian vocabulary of the Ossetes. The propagation of Christianity in the North Caucasus was a part of the policy of the Georgian kings at their heyday in the Middle Ages; in Ossetic folklore church-building activities are attributed to Queen Tamar, and this is probably rooted in historical facts.

The question of the religious vocabulary of the Ossetes would carry me far beyond the limits of this paper, and I will confine myself to a few comments on a couple of Christian (or rather pagan, semi-pagan, religious) terms which have been borrowed from Georgian, but apparently not from the literary language of the Orthodox church of the lowlands, but from the neighbour dialects of the mountaineers.

But before I enter upon this subject, I shall briefly mention that there is, I believe, some evidence that the mediaeval Alan priests or missionaries made use of native pagan terms to express Christian notions. I hope that I will be able to return to this matter in a separate study.

In Ossetic the noun *zwar* (Digor *ziwaræ*) is used in the sense “cross, sanctuary, deity” (also “smallpox”). It is evidently an old adaptation of Georgian ჯვარი (Old Georgian ჯუარ-ი) “cross” (originally probably “stake or pale”, a translation of Greek σταυρός, cf. Mgr. ჯგუნ- “cross, prickle, spire”, Laz. *mzguჭ*- “idem”). In the dialects of the Khevsurs, the Pshavs and the Tuš ჯვარი is, as the Ossetic word, used both of a deity and the sanctuary where it is (or was) worshipped (v. ქართული ენის განმარტებითი ლექსიკონი, VIII, p. 1580). The early kings, in the campaigns against paganism, set up crosses in holy places instead of the idols which they destroyed. The Ossetic word as well as its meaning has apparently been borrowed from the idiom of the neighbouring mountaineers.

Another religious term that has entered Ossetic from some idiom of the highlanders is *dek'anoz*, “a priest, a minister of sacrifice attached to a *zwar*”. In literary Georgian დეკანოზი means “highpriest, Kirchenleiter und Chorführer in einem Kloster, auch Erzpriester” (to quote the translation of Tarchnišwili’s *Geschichte der kirchlichen georgischen Literatur*, 1955, p. 158). Among the highlanders (in ხევი, თუშეთი), this word is used in the sense “priest, officiating in the sanctuary of a ხატი (pagan deity), being thus synonymous with ხევის-ბერი, or ხუც(ეს)ი, used in this sense in some of the dialects. Originally the Georgian word was probably used of an assistant priest, but has replaced ხევის-ბერი, ხუც(ეს)ი in some regions. (I refer to Charachidze’s book of 1968, p. 232 ff.) The vocalism of the Ossetic word indicates a recent borrowing, later than the Iron narrowing $e > i$, $o > u$. This may be in agreement with a late semantic development of დეკანოზი in the East Georgian mountain dialects where it is found.

It is natural here to mention the Ossetic word for the monotheistic concept of “God”, Iron *xuycaw*, Digor *xucaw*. If Abaev (IES IV, p. 255) is right in connecting this word with Georgian *ბუცია*, *ბუცუბი* “old man, priest”, among the mountaineers “a priest of a pagan *ბატი*”, the original meaning would have been “Lord, Dominus”. The ending *-aw* may be due to an analogy with Iron *xicaw*, Digor *xecaw* “master, chief, the head of the family”, an old social term of Iranian origin (**xwaiθyāwa-*).

It goes without saying that the Georgian influence upon the Ossetic vocabulary has been much stronger in South Ossetia than in the North Caucasus. In daily speech casual use of Georgian words or even whole clauses or sentences, inserted in an otherwise Ossetic context, must be quite common. The following words that my Ossetic teacher shouted to her daughters who were playing in the courtyard, *კოკოქბო ærbacæwut* “girls, come in”, are no doubt quite ordinary in everyday speech.

Nevertheless, the Georgian loanwords that have penetrated South Ossetic and become genuine, fixed parts of the lexical stock, as a rule belong to marginal vocabulary or special technical, ideological or cultural terminology. The nouns have been borrowed with the referent. But the basic core vocabulary has not been affected by bilingual contacts with Georgian.

I have limited my comments to the lexicon, to loanwords. But Ossetic also possesses quite a number of stock phrases which seem to be loan-translations from Georgian (and probably not the opposite). I would not deny the possibility that Georgian phrasology has in certain instances affected Ossetic grammar, so that speakers of Ossetic have imitated (or tried to imitate) Georgian grammatical usages. It is thus not impossible that the occasional use of the superessive case, instead of the ablative, with the comparative to mark the standard of comparison owes something to Georgian influence: *ბაბაზე უჯრო ღიღია* “he is bigger than his father”. I quote two examples:

fælæ myl dy fæ-qæbærdær dæ

but on-me (sup.) you preverb-stronger you-are

“you became stronger than I” (Miller *Осетинские этюды*, I, 1881, p. 88, 1. 1-2; a folktale).

kæstæryl iwyldær xistær sty

on-younger (sup.) always older they-are

“everybody is older than a younger one” (Schiefner: *Ossetische Sprichwörter* 1862, Bull. de l’Acad. Imp. s. 439; a proverb).

But the examples of this usage that I have found do not point to South Ossetia; and both the texts here quoted belong to traditional language.

The bulk of the Iranian loanwords in the Kartvelian languages have no doubt been borrowed, at various times, from West Iranian languages, in part but not exclusively through the medium of Armenian. I am, of course, not going to deal with such words here; as to this matter I refer to Jost Gippert's voluminous study of 1993 (*Iranica Armeno-Iberica. Studien zu den iranischen Lehnwörtern im Armenischen und Georgischen*, 1-2). Georgian borrowings from Ossetic are not treated by Gippert.

In her book of 1966 Mzia Andronik'ašvili (v. the hand-out) has listed a number of Georgian words, mostly nouns, which she regards as borrowings from Scythian, Alanic or Ossetic. Unfortunately, she has been rather large in attributing Ossetic etymologies to Georgian words.; many of them are based on superficial phonetic similarities only. I refer here to Ak'ak'i Šaniže's review in *ძველი ქართული ენის შრომები (თბილისის უნივერსიტეტი)*, 1968. I hope that I will later be able to present a more detailed treatment of this subject, and confine these comments to one word only.

At least since Klaproth's days scholars have compared Georgian ხიდი "bridge" and Ossetic (Iron) *xid*, (Digor) *xed*, "same meaning". The Iranian origin of the Ossetic word is clear, cf. Avestan *haētu-* "dike, dam", Old Indian *setu-* "bond, fetter, bridge, dike", all derivations of the Indo-European root **seH₁-i-/sH₁-ey-* (**sēy-*, *sī-*) "to bind, connect". Klaproth (*Reise in den Kaukasus. Anhang. Kaukasische Sprachen*, p. 210) thought the Ossetic word to be borrowed from Georgian; later scholars have almost unanimously derived the Georgian word from Ossetic. This etymology is accepted by Andronik'ašvili, and repeated by Abaev in his etymological dictionary.

But this explanation can hardly be correct. In the first place, the Old Georgian form is *qidi* (v. the hand-out), with a non-glottalic velar *q-*, still retained in the dialects of the East Georgian highlanders. In this form the word is attested in the oldest Georgian texts; thus in the *Vita* of Saint Šušanik' from the 5th century. The Ossetic narrowing of *e* to *i* is a comparatively late development and peculiar to the Iron dialect, i. e. much later than the 5th century. It is difficult to see why the Georgians should have rendered the Ossetic (or Alanic) velar spirant *x* by a velar stop, instead of their own velar *x*; and the open vowel *e* by *i*. A more likely explanation was given by Givi Mač'avariani in a study of 1965 (p. 21, see the hand-out). He derives Georg. *xidi/qidi* (also Mingrelian-Lazic *xinži*, Svan *qid* "present, what is (or shall be) delivered") from the Kartvelian root **qed/qid/qd* "to go or carry across". And this is accepted by Fähnrich and Sardshweladse in their new *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der Kartwel-Sprachen* (1995), p. 565. The traditional etymology is based on fortuitous phonetic similarities of the Iron and the standard modern Georgian words.

Georgian words of Ossetic or Alanic origin are comparatively few and for the most part limited to special technical or marginal dialectal vocabulary. Some few words have been transmitted from the North through Ossetic or Alanic; so apparently the common Georgian word for beer *ludi* (Rač'an, Tušian *aludi*), which seems to be cognate with a widespread group of North and East European words. In Oss. *æluton* is used of a kind of fabulous or mythic drink that is supposed to allay hunger for ever (the common Ossetic word for "beer" is *bægæny*, also to all appearances a migratory word (related words are found in various languages of Central Asia). Another Georgian word for "beer" or a kind of fermented beverage is ღურსბო (found in the dictionary of Sulxan Saba Orbeliani (ed. 1966, I, p. 119), that can hardly be separated from Ossetic (Iron) *byræy* "a kind of small beer, bouza", Russian *braga* "thin beer", also, as it seems, a migratory word, ultimately perhaps of Celtic origin. But it is, of course, no surprise that the Georgians have borrowed from the North names of the less aristocratic beverages.

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EXAMPLES:

- Iron *zwar*, Digor *ziwaræ* "divinity, sanctuary; smallpox".
 Oss. *dek'anoz*; Georg. (dial.) *dek'anozi* "priest, minister of a sacrifice attached to a sanctuary".
 Georg. (dial.) *xat'i* "pagan deity". *xewis-beri*, *uxuc(es)i* "priest officiating at a pagan sanctuary".

Iron *xuycaw*, Digor *xucaw* “God”.

Iron *xicaw*, Digor *xecaw* “lord, chief of a family”

Oss. *k'unela* “hawthorne (Crataegus)”; Georg. *k'uneli* “idem”.

Iron *suxyrna*, Dig. *sixirna* “sieve”; Georg. *cxrili* “idem”.

Iron *xid*, Digor *xed* “bridge”; Georg. *xidi*, O. Georg., dial. *qidi* “idem”; Mgr.-Laz. *xinži* “idem”; Avestan *haētū-* “dike, dam”, O. Ind. *setu-* “bond, fetter, bridge, dike”.

Georg. *ludi*, (dial.) *aludi* “beer”; Oss. *æluton* “a mythical beverage”.

Iron *bægæny*, Digor *bægæni* “beer”.

Georg. *buraxi* “a kind of beer”; Oss. (Iron) *buræy* “small beer, bouza”; Russ. *braga* “thin beer”.

Oss. *rong* (**frān(a)ka-*?) “intoxicating drink made from honey”; Georg. (dial., Rač'an) *rangi* “mead”, Svan *rang*, Mgr. *rangi* “idem”.

fælæ myl dy fæ-qæbærdær dæ

but on-me (sup.) you prevb.-stronger you-are (sg.) “you became stronger than I. (MILLER, Осетинские этюды. I, 1888, p. 88, l. 1-2; a folktale).

kæstæryl iwyldær xistær sty

on-younger (sup.) always older they-are “everybody is older than a younger one” (SCHIEFNER, Ossetische Sprichwörter, Bull. de Académie Imperiale 1862, p. 439; a proverb).

Cf. Georg.: **mamaze upro didia** “he is bigger than his father”.

Sulxan Saba Orbeliani: *leksik'oni*, I, p. 119:

ბურაზი: ქერ-ფეტვთა და სხვათაგან სასმელი რამე “a drink made of barley, millet and other ingredients”.

*A paper read at the 8th Caucasian
Colloquium, Leiden, June 1996*