

The population of Imereti, Mingrelia, and Guria in the first half of the nineteenth century: lifestyles and morals

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The population of Imereti, Mingrelia, and Guria in the first half of the nineteenth century: lifestyles and morals

This paper examines the lifestyles and morals of certain Georgian tribes in the Northwestern Caucasus. The focus is on tribes such as the Imeretians, Mingrelians, and Gurians. The authors draw upon a 13-volume work entitled Acta of the Caucasian Archeographic Commission, as well as a pool of materials from Russian ethnographic expeditions compiled into a work entitled The Peoples of Russia. The authors conclude by stating that adjoining areas in the western part of the former Georgian kingdom were home to three Georgian tribes, which were very much alike: the Imeretians, Mingrelians, and Gurians. These tribes formed a sort of enclave, as many of their national traditions echoed those of their neighbours. Yet each of their traditions also contained features that were exclusive to one ethnicity alone, making the population of these tribes unique in their lifestyles and customs. Having said that, the

tribes' neighbours, such as the Abkhaz, Circassians, and Khevsurs, had lifestyles and customs that were similarly typical of their specific particular ethnicities alone.

Keywords: Imeretia, Mingrelia, Guria, population, first half of the nineteenth century, traditions

Introduction

Following the Russo-Turkish War of 1768–1774, based on the Treaty of Kuchuk-Kainarji, signed in 1774 between Russia and Turkey, the latter renounced its claim to Georgia and recognised the independence of the Georgian kingdom, as well as that of Imereti, Mingrelia, and Guria. In the early nineteenth century, Imereti was a kingdom, while Mingrelia and Guria were principalities. These territories were inhabited by Mingrelians, Imeretians, and Gurians, who were part of the Kartvelian language group.

Materials and methods

The research presented here draws upon a 13-volume work entitled *Acta of the Caucasian Archaeographic Commission* (AKAK, 1866–1904) and a pool of materials from Russian ethnographic expeditions compiled into a work entitled *The Peoples of Russia*¹, as well as some archive documents from the period in question².

The study's methodological basis is grounded in the principles of historicism, research objectivity, and systemicity, which are traditional in historiography. The authors employed comparative methods to gain insight into the customs and traditions of the three tribes under consideration—the Imereti, the Mingrelia, and the Guria—by comparing them with those of neighbouring tribes in the Caucasus, such as the Abkhaz, Circassians, and Khevsurs. This method made it possible to identify common and distinctive features in the tribes' traditions.

Discussion and results

1. *Habitat and way of life*

The Imereti

In 1804, King Solomon II of Imereti entered into an allegiance with Russia. However, in 1810 he rebelled and attacked the Russian troops. He was eventually defeated and forced to flee to Turkey, and from March 1810, Imereti was regarded as a Russian province³.

Imereti is situated partly in the mountains and partly in a valley formed by the River Rioni. The rivers that flow from the mountains into the valley are fast and not navigable, and although they are rich in fish, formerly the residents did not trade in it to any great degree. The landscape is diverse: mostly rocky hills composed of clay and chernozem, a rich and fertile black soil. The valleys along the rivers are of mixed bedrock.

In the nineteenth century, houses in Imereti were heated only by a fireplace; the windows had no glass or even paper to cover them.

The area's residents were made a sufficient living from agriculture, with surplus output (which included wheat, barley, millet, and green bristlegress) taken to Poti, where they would

¹ *Narody Rossii* [The peoples of Russia]. V 8 t. T. 4. Sankt-Peterburg, 1879.

² *Statisticheskoe opisanie Zakavkazskogo kraia* [Statistical description of the Transcaucasian region]. Sost. O. Evetskii. V 2 ch. Ch. 1. SPb., 1835.

³ *Statisticheskoe opisanie Zakavkazskogo kraia* [Statistical description of the Transcaucasian region]. Sost. O. Evetskii. V 2 ch. Ch. 1. SPb., 1835, p. 155.

obtain salt, iron, and other products in exchange. Trade was mainly conducted by Armenians and Jews (most of whom who had relocated into the area from Akhaltsikhe)⁴.

Most Imeretians lived on extremely scant income, including under the last king, Solomon II. This was mainly due to poor administration, and a system where almost all squires and members of the clergy possessed imperial charters exempting them from paying tribute⁵.

According to the data on 1782, during the early reign of Solomon I, Imereti had a population of 113,000 across 18,980 households. Under Solomon II, the area's population began to decline. The region suffered a plague epidemic and famine in this period, which significantly decreased its population^{6,7}. Based on documents preserved from that period, by 1 March 1812, Imereti had lost a total of 32,750 people to famine and disease, with 7,450 people migrating to neighbouring areas, taking the epidemic with them to Mingrelia, Guria, and Abkhazia⁸. As a consequence, by 1817 the number of households in the region had declined to 12,730, and its population stood at just under 76,000. By 1835, the population had started to recover, with 100,400 residents across 15,260 households⁹.

King Solomon I was aware that the sale of captives to the Turks as slaves was exhausting his dominions. Backed by the Russian government, the king did all in his power to put an end to the harmful and shameful trade in people. Meanwhile, in Mingrelia, in the dominion of Prince Dadiani, traders continued to move captives out through Poti and Abkhazia¹⁰.

Profiting this way, which became a custom, was regarded as a good thing. The logic behind this was simple: he who kidnapped and sold more people could keep more armed subjects and thus enrich himself further^{11,12}. Requests to obtain the right to trade in women had been made by many Black Sea tribes in the Caucasus, with the Jigets, who neighboured the Abkhaz, being no exception¹³. Of all the Black Sea Circassian tribes, the Jigets were the only ones who had peaceful relations with Russia, for which they were allowed the right to travel to Mecca on foreign passports.

⁴ Akty Kavkazskoi arkheograficheskoi komissii [Acts of the Caucasian Archaeographic Commission]. V 12 t. T. 2. Tiflis, 1868, p. 407.

⁵ Akty Kavkazskoi arkheograficheskoi komissii [Acts of the Caucasian Archaeographic Commission]. V 12 t. T. 5. Tiflis, 1873, p. 474.

⁶ ERMACHKOV, I.A.; KOROLEVA, L.A.; SVECHNIKOVA, N.V.; GUT, J. The plague in the Caucasus in 1801-1815 years: Part I. In: *Bylye Gody*. 2018. 47(1), pp. 120-129.

⁷ ERMACHKOV, I.A.; KOROLEVA, L.A.; SVECHNIKOVA, N.V.; GUT, J. The plague in the Caucasus in 1801-1815 years: Part II. In: *Bylye Gody*. 2018. 48(2), pp. 558-569.

⁸ Akty Kavkazskoi arkheograficheskoi komissii [Acts of the Caucasian Archaeographic Commission]. V 12 t. T. 5. Tiflis, 1873, p. 98.

⁹ Statisticheskoe opisanie Zakavkazskogo kraja [Statistical description of the Transcaucasian region]. Sost. O. Evetskii. V 2 ch. Ch. 1. SPb., 1835, p. 156.

¹⁰ Akty Kavkazskoi arkheograficheskoi komissii [Acts of the Caucasian Archaeographic Commission]. V 12 t. T. 2. Tiflis, 1868, p. 409.

¹¹ CHERKASOV, A.A.; Ivantsov, V.G.; Šmigel', M.; Bratanovskii, S.N. Evolution of the Institution of the Slave Trade in the Caucasus in the IV–XIX centuries. In: *Bylye Gody*. 2018. Vol. 50. Is. 4: 1334-1346.

¹² ŠMIGEL', M.; CHERKASOV, A.A. The Slavery in Circassia and the United States (1850–1860-ies years): General and Special. In: *Bylye Gody*, 2016, Vol. 42, Is. 4, pp. 1182-1197.

¹³ CHERKASOV, A.A.; SHMIGEL', M.; BRATANOVSKII, S.N.; MOLCHANOVA, V.S. Jikis and Jiketi in Conditions of War and Peace (1840–1860 years). In: *Bylye Gody*, 2015, 38(4), pp. 888-893.

Guria

In the period between the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Guria constituted a separate principality. Prior to 1810, when the ruler of Guria entered into an allegiance with Russia, the Gurians were allies with the Ottoman Empire and served not only as the Turks' guides but as their associates in frequent incursions into the dominions of Mingrelia and Imereti, and as a result of this became intimately linked with them in morals and beliefs¹⁴.

When Guria entered into allegiance with Russia, the Russian government introduced strict regulations; the population met these rules with resentment, regarding them as encroaching upon their freedom and as the primary cause of their impoverishment. The problem was that, in essence, engaging in the capture and sale of people, which was now strictly forbidden and prosecuted by the Russians, was their only source of income¹⁵.

Based on the Treaty of Adrianople (1829), Russia received only a part of Guria—an area extending up to the River Natanebi—with a male population of 17,000 (the total population of Guria in the mid-1830s was 36,700)¹⁶, while the rest of the region (Kobuleti) was left to Turkey¹⁷.

In the period 1802–1806, the Gurians, like most of the other mountain tribes, hardly ever missed an opportunity to capture peasants and their children to sell as slaves to Turkey. The princes were engaged in the same type of trade, kidnapping each other's subjects with a view to selling them into slavery¹⁸. An old tradition, capturing and selling people into slavery was a key source of income at the time.

Mingrelia

In 1801, the ruler of Mingrelia, Prince Grigol Dadiani, offered the region up to Russia for protectorship. As a result, the ruler was received into Russian allegiance, and in December of 1803 he was sworn in along with his people¹⁹.

The situation that followed in Mingrelia, while different from that in neighbouring Imereti and Guria, which became part of Russia in the period 1803–1804, would predetermine the long process of the principality's induction into Russia's political-legal space. As a consequence, Mingrelia would remain autonomous up until the 1850s²⁰.

Mingrelia was composed of two major districts. One of them, Odishi, was separated from the other, Lechkhumi, by the River Tskhenistsqali. Odishi was situated in a valley irrigated by multiple streams. In spring, most of Odishi would be covered with water from rain and

¹⁴ CHERKASOV, A.A.; IVANTSOV, V.G.; ŠMIGEL, M.; BRATANOVSKII, S.N. Evolution of the Institution of the Slave Trade in the Caucasus in the IV–XIX centuries. In: *Bylye Gody*. 2018. Vol. 50. Is. 4, p. 1339.

¹⁵ Akty Kavkazskoi arkheograficheskoi komissii [Acts of the Caucasian Archaeographic Commission]. V 12 t. T. 10. Tiflis, 1885, pp. 263–264.

¹⁶ Statisticheskoe opisanie Zakavkazskogo kraja [Statistical description of the Transcaucasian region]. Sost. O. Evetskii. V 2 ch. Ch. 1. SPb., 1835, p. 25.

¹⁷ Akty Kavkazskoi arkheograficheskoi komissii [Acts of the Caucasian Archaeographic Commission]. V 12 t. T. 10. Tiflis, 1885, p. 263.

¹⁸ Akty Kavkazskoi arkheograficheskoi komissii [Acts of the Caucasian Archaeographic Commission]. V 12 t. T. 2. Tiflis, 1868, p. 408.

¹⁹ CHERKASOV, A.A.; KOROLEVA, L.A.; BRATANOVSKII, S.N.; VALLEAU, A. The Abkhazian and Mingrelian principalities: Historical and demographic research. In: *Vestnik Sankt-Peterburgskogo Universiteta, Istorika*. 2018. 63(4), pp. 1006.

²⁰ IVANTSOV, V.G.; MAKAROV, Y.N.; ZIMOVETS, L.G.; SHEVCHENKO, N.A. The Policy of the Tsarist Authorities to Involve Mingrelia in the Political and Legal Space of the Russian Empire (1774–1857). In: *Bylye Gody*. 2018. Vol. 49. Is. 3. pp. 1019–1027.

snowmelt, and the villages would have to communicate by boat. In some places, there was so much mud that even horsemen were often unable to pass through. Near the coast of the Black Sea, the ground never dried completely, and was covered with tangled thorns.

The region's arable farming mainly incorporated crops such as corn, millet, and green bristlegrass. Harvests were quite profuse (at times yields were 40–60 times the amount planted). Grapes were grown throughout the area.

Despite this, most of the residents lived in poverty, suffering not so much from famine but from oppression by their rulers, as well as military action between the King of Imereti and Mingrelia's sovereign Prince Dadiani²¹.

The other region of Mingrelia, Lechkhumi, was situated higher up in the mountains, intersected by several valleys. The shortage of arable land curbed population growth. It was very hard to get into Lechkhumi through the mountains even on horseback²².

The Mingrelians practiced hardly any horticulture, except for grape farming. The residents contented themselves with whatever they could obtain from nature, like sweet cherry, tart cherry, pears, peaches, apricots, chestnuts, walnuts, pomegranates, and so on, all of which grew without any human input.

The forests of Lechkhumi, most of which were situated in hard-to-reach areas, were quite generous, containing oak, ash, maple, various nuts, and amply tall, thick plane trees²³.

Lechkhumi had 11 fortified castles built upon impregnable ridges. Of these, five were owned by the king of Imereti, three by Dadiani, and the rest by the other princes. The princes of Lechkhumi, in pursuit of their own gain, would alternately take sides with the king and with Dadiani, altering their oath²⁴.

Lifestyles in both Imereti and Mingrelia were quite down-to-earth. There was little difference in food variety between the nobles, the ruling princes, and the sovereign princes. However, there were differences in clothing. The princes wore silver chains from which hung a horn for gunpowder, various pouches for weapons, and a sabre²⁵.

Internally, Mingrelia was being torn apart by brigandage and plunder, which even Dadiani's relatives took part in. This weakened Dadiani's power to the point where the sovereign did not dare to punish criminals for fear that the ruling princes would turn their backs on him in wartime.

It cost the sovereigns in both Imereti and Mingrelia little to maintain their troops. In peacetime, each prince would maintain a group of armed individuals who were always prepared for war, and during campaigns they would always share their loot with the princes²⁶.

It is hard to determine the exact size of revenue in Imereti and Mingrelia. Presumably, the state's revenue was not very high. The people mainly paid tribute in the form of livestock, bread,

²¹ Akty Kavkazskoi arkheograficheskoi komissii [Acts of the Caucasian Archaeographic Commission]. V 12 t. T. 2. Tiflis, 1868, p. 408.

²² Akty Kavkazskoi arkheograficheskoi komissii [Acts of the Caucasian Archaeographic Commission]. V 12 t. T. 2. Tiflis, 1868, p. 408.

²³ Akty Kavkazskoi arkheograficheskoi komissii [Acts of the Caucasian Archaeographic Commission]. V 12 t. T. 2. Tiflis, 1868, p. 408.

²⁴ Akty Kavkazskoi arkheograficheskoi komissii [Acts of the Caucasian Archaeographic Commission]. V 12 t. T. 2. Tiflis, 1868, p. 409.

²⁵ Akty Kavkazskoi arkheograficheskoi komissii [Acts of the Caucasian Archaeographic Commission]. V 12 t. T. 2. Tiflis, 1868, p. 409.

²⁶ Akty Kavkazskoi arkheograficheskoi komissii [Acts of the Caucasian Archaeographic Commission]. V 12 t. T. 2. Tiflis, 1868, p. 409.

and wine to provide for the needs of the sovereigns and members of their court. Records show that the sovereigns would normally live off this kind of tribute in particular villages which they visited and stayed at, and that this had become a tradition²⁷.

For instance, Prince Dadiani²⁸ of Mingrelia would reside in villages next to the River Rioni during the fishing period; then would move to Odish to hunt pheasants, deer, wild goats, and boars; and every time the heat set in he would relocate higher up the mountains, to Lechkhumi²⁹.

As regards the nobles, by and large they remained relatively poor, unable to completely satisfy their need for luxury. To increase their income, they would oppress their own peasants or oppress and rob their weaker neighbours³⁰.

This state of affairs lasted up until the 1830s, when the Russian leadership introduced measures whereby arbitrary exactions from peasants were replaced with fixed tribute. In 1835, nobles in Georgia, Imereti, Guria, and other regions of Transcaucasia were declared independent from the princes³¹.

2. Customs, holidays, and superstitions

Customs

Since the earliest times, the populations of Imereti, Mingrelia, Guria, and Georgia as a whole have been committed to hospitality and looking after their guests. Before a wayfarer even pulled in, the householder would be already on his way to greet them. And if it was night-time, they would approach the guest with a torch in their hand, hurrying to take their *bashlyk* (felt caps) and *burka* (sheepskin capes). Traditions related to hospitality were also widespread both in Abkhazia and in Circassia³².

As soon as the guest alighted from the horse, servants would show them to the *saklia*, a little house for them to stay in. A few minutes later, the householder's son or other close relative would offer to wash the guest's feet. Most guests would probably decline this. Next, a table would be brought in for a repast (a *supra*), with the guest joined by the householder, who would greet and salute them³³.

The locals were hearty eaters. A *supra* (literally "tablecloth") would involve setting up a long light table, with several breads and various dishes laid out on it. Primary among these was *gomia*, a type of millet porridge. *Gomia* was cooked without salt, served hot, and was a light and pleasant addition to salted items like cheese and fish.

Abundant and diverse meals made with capons and chicken, which Mingrelia was especially famed for throughout the South Caucasus, were among the most prominent on the table. Curd pies, cheese, various fragrant herbs, *lobio* (large lentils with peppers), and corn *chureks*

²⁷ Akty Kavkazskoi arkheograficheskoi komissii [Acts of the Caucasian Archaeographic Commission]. V 12 t. T. 2. Tiflis, 1868, p. 407.

²⁸ Levan Dadiani was a lieutenant general in the Russian service.

²⁹ Akty Kavkazskoi arkheograficheskoi komissii [Acts of the Caucasian Archaeographic Commission]. V 12 t. T. 2. Tiflis, 1868, p. 409.

³⁰ Statisticheskoe opisanie Zakavkazskogo kraya [Statistical description of the Transcaucasian region]. Sost. O. Evetskii. V 2 ch. Ch. 1. SPb., 1835, p. 36.

³¹ Statisticheskoe opisanie Zakavkazskogo kraya [Statistical description of the Transcaucasian region]. Sost. O. Evetskii. V 2 ch. Ch. 1. SPb., 1835, p. 243.

³² CHERKASOV, A.A.; IVANTSOV, V.G.; SMIGEL, M.; MOLCHANOVA, V.S. The Daily Life and Morals of Circassian Society: A Historical-Comparative Investigation based on sources from the period between the Mid-16th and the First Half of the 19th centuries. In: *Brukenthal. Acta Musei*, 2015, X. 1: 73-88.

³³ Narody Rossii [The peoples of Russia]. V 8 t. T. 4. Sankt-Peterburg, 1879, p. 404.

(unleavened bread) would all be served at the table. And there was plenty of good wine – in Imereti, Mingrelia, and Guria, it was in abundance. Made from various varieties of grapes, grown in many people's gardens, it would be consumed lavishly from glasses, tumblers, azarpeshas, and mountain-goat horns, which would be drained dry in no time. In Guria, a dinner would normally be concluded with everyone's favourite – a milk porridge with cinnamon and sugar. Various fruits, such as freshly-picked grapes, quince, and pomegranates, along with nuts such as walnuts and chestnuts, would be served for dessert.

Holidays

While most of the holidays in Imeretia, Mingrelia, and Guria were organized and celebrated in a similar way to those of the Georgians, the inhabitants of those regions brought to them a distinctive nature, while some of the festivals were purely local. For instance, on New Year's Eve, a time of unbridled revelry in Guria, the locals would often arrange a tag sale and use the proceeds to have a good time during the festival. Those who were unfit to celebrate the New Year in a proper fashion were regarded as most unfortunate persons.

On New Year's Eve, households which only had a pig would slaughter it and cook it. In the evening, village residents (not including wives and children) would take to the square, staying there all night long, playing games, singing, and shooting rifles, waiting impatiently for the morning, when a special ceremony related to the exchange of felicitations would take place.

On the first day of Lent, women in Guria would make several dough balls, the size of an eye, place them on a plate surrounded by lit wax candles, and then pray to God asking him to keep those who caught smallpox unharmed. They would then throw the balls into the water. On that day, anyone who had not yet had smallpox would not comb their hair, read books, or sew, because, according to folklore, one would have as many pockmarks and spots on the body as there were teeth in a comb, letters in a book, or stitches made while sewing.

During the St Thomas Week holiday³⁴, the Imeretians would play a special ballgame, using a laced ball the size of a watermelon. It was not just an everyday, harmless sport but the subject of public respect and even superstition. On the second day of the holiday, the people would split into two groups. At the sound of a *buki* (a trumpet), a vested priest would appear with a ball on a silver tray. The ball would be thrown into the middle of the field by one of the community's honoured elders. The two sides would then rush in to try to take possession of it and get it to a designated spot. The winning side would receive honour and glory from the community and were believed to expect bounty and luck throughout the year. Of course, since everyone aspired to achieve that kind of happiness, these games tended to be tightly contested. The players would throw the ball to each other, now vanishing into the melee, now reappearing to the crowd's deafening clamour. The custom was that the ball would afterwards be cut into several pieces, which would then be given to the householders. Anyone who received a piece of the ball would expect bounty, generous harvests, and so on in the coming year. It has been suggested that Imeretian kings had created this game to encourage the people to exercise and keep fit in case they were called up for military service³⁵.

³⁴ St Thomas Week (Antipascha) is the week that follows Easter (named after St Thomas the Apostle).

³⁵ Narody Rossii [The peoples of Russia]. V 8 t. T. 4. Sankt-Peterburg, 1879, p. 405.

Etiquette

Respect for older people has been a fundamental value in Imereti, Mingrelia, and Guria. Traditionally an adult son would not sit down without permission in front of his father, or while in the company of a respected elder. Although children normally had dinner together with their parents, they would, as if the repast was attended by special guests, never talk loudly or say immodest things in front of their parents or other adults.

The elder brother in a family, especially if the father had died, would become the head of the household and enjoy the respect of not just his siblings but his mother as well, who, while yielding to his will and complying with his directives, would also be treated with respect by him and be empowered to ask him for favours. In Guria, this characteristic was so subtle that a family's younger members regarded it as their obligation to not just obey their father or brother but tend to them alongside the servants.

The family principle, founded on respect for older people, extended into society, and was reflected in the sovereign's treatment of his subjects and the peasants' treatment of their master.

In Mingrelia, there was a special custom for greeting each other. Whenever a prince or a nobleman met a peasant, the peasant would not bow to them until the former said "Hello"³⁶. There was also a special etiquette for when two equal individuals—or individuals wishing to show each other signs of courtesy and civility—met, with each trying to let the other have the honour of bowing first. When such individuals met, they would insistently ask, or even implore, each other to bow first, but civility and decorum required that each refuse that kind of honour in no less a stubborn manner. After a heated debate, which would normally last for a few minutes, the individuals would bow to each other all at once and part amicably. It was often the case that individuals who met up would argue for a while and then would just part without bowing to each other, indicating thereby that they had a decent upbringing and were equally courteous.

Superstitions

All of the three peoples had many superstitious elements mixed into their Christian beliefs. For instance, the Imeretians did not regard it as a sin if someone took a false oath, as long as it was not done in front of an icon (as per their ancient custom) but rather in front of a cross or a bible; they called this type of oath a "Russian oath"³⁷.

By resorting to the kinds of ruse described above to take a false oath, an indigene would maintain a peace of mind up until they fell sick for the first time, particularly if it happened soon after a false oath. Then, having attributed their illness to the punishment bestowed by the icon on which they had taken a false oath, they would confess to a priest about everything they had done, and afterwards return the thing they had stolen under a false oath to its owner.

The lack of clear understanding of religious principles among the locals had given rise to all kinds of superstitions, some of which were quite preposterous.

Everyone in the tribe was certain of the existence of sorcerers and witches and the latter's ability to curse people, bring about the loss of cattle, and cause other misfortunes.

The locals were most of all scared of curses, for which reason they would wear an amulet, and would not show a newborn baby to anyone for a long time³⁸.

³⁶ Ibid., 1879, p. 406.

³⁷ Ibid., 1879, p. 406.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 407.

Birth, childrearing, and death

Some of these deep-seated superstitions eventually transformed into customs. For example, when a Gurian woman was giving birth, she would be taken to a room with a bare floor on which a bed made of hay was made. Over the bed they would attach a rope where the woman could get hold of it at the very moment of delivery. They would place an icon of the Mother of God at the head of the bed. A priest would recite the gospels all the way until the baby was born, with the husband sitting in the next room. When a boy was born, everyone would rejoice and celebrate by shooting in the air, whilst if it was a girl nothing would happen. The first person to tell the father that it was a son would receive a gift. With some of the other Georgian tribes, such as the Khevsurs and Pshavs, the husband might shoot a firearm next to his pregnant wife's hut so as to induce labour through fright³⁹. Once the shooting was over, the mother would be taken to a different room (which was furnished) and covered with a net to protect her from evil spirits, and a brocade curtain hung in the room. They would place seashells under the pillows.

Prior to a successful delivery, the relatives would all be weeping. On the first night after labour began, the family would stay up all night. Once word of the baby's birth got out, everyone who knew the family would hurry to congratulate them, dressed as an animal or wearing a suit and would drink and have fun together.

In Mingrelia and Guria, they also had a custom of adopting an adult. A person who had a special respect for a certain woman could ask her to adopt them. In Guria, prior to performing the ritual, both the adopter and adoptee would fast for a few days and the adoptee would suck the breast of his adopted mother in the presence of their relatives and close friends. In Mingrelia, observing a preliminary fast was not necessary. In this region, the adopter and adoptee would invite a priest and a few witnesses. The adoptee would kneel down, the adopter would bare her breasts, and the priest would recite a special prayer over them. Then, to affirm their kinship, the adoptee would put one of her nipples in his mouth, and she would place one of her legs on his back. This type of kinship used to be held in high regard amongst the Mingrelians and Gurians, and no carnal relationships were to occur either between the participants in the ritual or between their children. Subsequent to the ritual, they would hold a feast celebrating their newly formed kinship ties⁴⁰.

However, subsequently the above custom would gradually come to be associated with what is known today as foster kinship. The locals still have a custom of having others bring up their newborn children, regardless of the estate, with the child sometimes staying with the other family for up to ten years. At the end of that period, the foster family would bring the foster child back to its biological parents and present them with a gift, while the latter would ply them with gifts several times greater in quantity. Foster kinship used to be regarded as sacred, with the foster family often preferring the foster child over their own children. In no other place would a foster brother or sister enjoy such broad rights as they did in Guria.

Conclusion

Adjoining areas in the western part of the former Georgian kingdom were home to three Georgian tribes, which were very much alike: the Imeretians, Mingrelians, and Gurians. These

³⁹ ERMACHKOV, I. A. et al. *Everyday Life and Traditions of the East Georgian Tribes in the Nineteenth Century* (Tushins, Pshavy, Khevsurs). In: *Bylye Gody*. 2019. Vol. 51. Is. 1, p. 162.

⁴⁰ *Narody Rossii*, V 8 t. T. 4., p. 407.

tribes formed a sort of enclave, as many of their national traditions echoed those of their neighbours. Yet each of their traditions also contained features that were exclusive to one ethnicity alone, making the population of these tribes unique in their lifestyles and customs. Having said that, the tribes' neighbours, such as the Abkhaz, Circassians, and Khevsurs, had lifestyles and customs that were similarly typical of their specific particular ethnicities alone.

This is testimony to the Caucasus's genuinely unique make-up, which is something that is worth exploring further.

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