

General and specific traits in the folklore and ritual life of the peoples of the Caucasus (ethnolinguistic aspect)

Rasgos generales y específicos en el folclore y la vida ritual de los pueblos del Cáucaso (aspecto etnolingüístico)

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Abstract

The article deals with the cultural connections between the speakers of Caucasian and Iranian (Ossetian) languages which reflect the flexibility of the language as well as cultural values and preferences. These connections are revealed through main rituals such as the ritual of killing old people to prevent them from a disgraceful death by age, funeral and wedding rituals, as well as ritual object and their names. The authors aim at establishing the common and unique traits in the ritual and cult life of the peoples of the Caucasus. The research proved that the life of the Caucasian peoples constituted a cultural unity. It was determined both by the internal life of the peoples and the common source of cultural and language loan, namely the multilanguage Caucasus inhabited by Iranian, Caucasian, Turkic, Arabic and Indo-European language speakers. The authors underline and analyse the resemblance of different elements of rituals and study the linguistic parallels in ritual and cult texts. The comparative -typological analysis reveals many common traits in the studied rituals, the verbal representation of which reflects to which extent the traditional values are preserved in the culture and contributes to interpretation of the semantics and symbolic of the ritual text.

Resumen

El artículo trata sobre las conexiones culturales entre los hablantes de lenguas caucásicas e iraníes (osetas) que reflejan la flexibilidad de la lengua, así como los valores y preferencias culturales. Estas conexiones se revelan a través de los principales rituales, como el ritual de matar a los ancianos para evitar que mueran en desgracia por edad, los rituales funerarios y nupciales, así como el objeto ritual y sus nombres. Los autores pretenden establecer los rasgos comunes y únicos en la vida ritual y de culto de los pueblos del Cáucaso. La investigación demostró que la vida de los pueblos caucásicos constituía una unidad cultural. Estaba determinado tanto por la vida interna de los pueblos como por la fuente común de préstamo cultural y lingüístico, a saber, el Cáucaso multilingüe habitado por hablantes de lenguas iraníes, caucásicas, turcas, árabes e indoeuropeas. Los autores subrayan y analizan el parecido de diferentes elementos de los rituales y estudian los paralelos lingüísticos en los textos rituales y de culto. El análisis tipológico-comparativo revela muchos rasgos comunes en los rituales estudiados, cuya representación verbal refleja en qué medida se conservan los valores tradicionales en la cultura y contribuye a la interpretación semántica y simbólica del texto ritual.

Ritual text, Iranian languages, Culture code, The Narts

Texto ritual, Lenguas Iraníes, Código cultural, Los Narts

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Introduction

The Caucasus is not only a bridge between East and West, but it is also a space for the dialogue of cultures. Peoples dwelling on this territory are united by common roots, historical memory, preservation of national identity, cultural values and many other things. Having a rich historical past and unique national traditions, this geographical and ethno-cultural region has played and continues to play, a huge role in the civilization space of Russia (Adjiev et al., 2018). More than once scientists have mentioned that the essentially cultural world that had developed over a thousand years was based on the general patterns of development of the oral poetic word, the processes of evolution of folklore genres, on the inter-Caucasian parallels generated by time in folklore and ritual life. The worldview, way of thinking, ideals, religious beliefs and individual spiritual potency are the most important factors in the social and cultural development of society, and are expressed primarily in the language (Grigoriev, 2013).

As it is known, the verbal folklore code, is a translator of ethnicity, ethnic culture and is considered the most ancient and stable form of information structuring of the world; it is considered to be very significant in terms of the range of linguistic methods and means. The repertoire of language units actualizing the content of folklore concepts differs: from a morpheme to a word, and to text fragments that comprise a folklore dictionary of monolexemic and a dictionary of text (Ryadchikova and Tarasenko, 2022).

Due to the ability of the language to accumulate the historical and cultural experience of the people in its semantic structure, the inter-Caucasian parallels and convergences in folklore and ritual life present an issue of particular importance for our comprehension. To accomplish this task, we decided to use a ritual text as a capacious source of national historical information, which fixes the world of a particular person, his linguo-mental models, active and passive vocabulary, the richness and flexibility of the language, as well as cultural values and preferences.

Material and methods

While studying the folklore-ritual text, we applied an integrated, complex approach as well as the methods of interdisciplinary analysis and systematic consideration of factual material through the prism of linguistics, ethnography, archeology, folklore and history. The basic provisions (points) of the research are as follows: 1) the main features of the national mentality, worldview and perception of the world of any nation are manifested in the folklore-ritual text; 2) the rite is the most stable form of traditional culture, synthesis of all planes – verbal, actional, ethic, aesthetic, symbolic and mythological. The researchers believe that comprehension and interpretation of the established ritualism firstly, will make up for the customs and rituals, lost as a result of urbanization, industrialization, migration and globalization; and secondly, it will contribute to the restoration of the peculiarly national way of life and cultural values of the people. The significance of the re-establishment of the above mentioned provisions was noted by the outstanding Besolova et al. (2020) who stated that the language is able to serve as a historical source, since it lives for millennia, and if you can decode its facts, they acquire the value of historical documents, which can tell a lot about the past fates of the people to which this language belongs.

Results and Discussion

It is appropriate, in this regard, to refer to the idea of a connection between the history of a people and the development of its language, found in vocabulary and semantics, which is determined less by specific events or processes in the life of a people and more by internal trends, the laws of the language that have developed through centuries of its livelihood. The general nature of this connection can be defined as follows: the intensity of folk life stimulates the pace of language development (Xyako, 2020).

Ryadchikova and Tarasenko (2022) write about of the Indo-European poetic formula "unfading glory", reconstructed by A. Kun, which is represented in the Ossetian Nartiada: "In its most concise form, the formula looks like *ænusy kad / ænusy koi* / 'eternal glory', 'immortal glory'.

In all the variety of authentic Nart Sagas and their variations, this formula is most consistently represented only in one context <...> very important in social terms, due to the of unambiguous and obvious edifying moral connotations in it. It is the plot about the death of the Narts and the rejection of eternal life in the name of eternal glory that contains the main ethic idea of the entire epic (Xyako, 2020). However, this formula is also the main commandment among the three, bequeathed by *Warhag*, the forefather of the military clan of *Akhsartaggata*, before his death: *Agady bæsta mælæt æmæ ænustæm kad huyzdær u* 'Better death and eternal glory than dishonor (disgrace)'. *Ænustæm ægadæy tsæryny bæsta, iubon kadimæ amælyn huyzdær u* 'It is better to die once in glory than to live in infamy for centuries' (Besolova et al., 2020).

But this testament is the basis of the life credo of the Ossetians. This explains why the commandment occurs as a vivid manifestation of the ancient Indo-European worldview (Grigoriev, 2013) in heroic songs, oral poetry, proverbs and sayings of Ossetians. Cf. *Nom zynarg æmæ kaddzhyn u* 'Glory is dear and honourable'. *Nart kadyl mælæg uydysty* 'Narts used to die for honour'. *Khudinadzhi bæsty – mælæt!* 'Better death than dishonor'!

In addition, the following story from Nartiada is connected with this moral mandate. It runs that in the era of increased military activity at the decline of the primitive communal system, when only military prowess of a man was valued, the elderly were killed for uselessness. This archaic custom is fixed in the traditions of many peoples (Cheung, 2017). The records of Pliny, Pomponius Mela, indicating that the Scythians, not wanting to grow old, threw themselves from a cliff into the sea. Among the Sarmatians, elderly people made others kill them with their sons' swords. According to the popular explanation, the semantics of the custom of killing old people is as follows: only the souls of those who died a worthy death found their re-existence. In particular, the Alans believed that happy is the man who breathes his last in battle; and they made mockery and cruel ridicule of the elderly people and those who died from accidental diseases, considering them to be degenerates and cowards (Adjiev et al., 2018). In the Adyghe versions of the Nart Sagas it is mentioned that Narts arranged a feast to have fun, before killing elderly people, and those, doomed to death, old people, joined their feast, having fun at it as well.

We believe that the institution of killing old people had a ritual and mythological basis. A careful reading of the surviving "fragment" of the ancient rite in the cycle of sagas about *Uryzmag* reveals that not all the symbols of the ritual have been lost. This makes it possible not only to reconstruct its more ancient semantic structure, but also allows it to be considered at a typological plane. Besides it provides a basis for a symbolic reading of the ritual in the legend *Uyryzmædzhy fæstag balts* 'The Last Military Campaign of Uryzmag' from the Ossetian Nart epic, where the initiative of voluntary death comes from the aging leader of the Narts: *The Nart Uryzmag became decrepit, his strength broke, he no longer joined military campaigns. The Nart youth stopped asking him for advice, and there were also such young men who laughed at Uryzmag. And Uryzmag said: "From childhood, until my old age, I generously gave all the powers of my mind to you, and now my old head has become a burden for you, and I am of no more. Therefore, I ask you: make a large and strong chest, put me into it and throw me into the sea. You can't bury me in the cemetery of the Narts."* <...> *On the third day they made the chest, put Uryzmag there, gave him a week's supply of food, tightly closed the lid and threw the chest into the sea* (Lyausheva et al., 2016). The lexeme *chyrin* 'chest' is of the utmost interest, as in the Ossetian language it also has the meaning of 'coffin'.

It should be noted that in different variants and versions of the Nart sagas alongside the chest and the coffin, there is also a waterskin or a leather bottle, made either of the skin of the Uryzmag's horse, or the skin of the largest buffalo (bull), or the skin of a young bull, suitable for harness. It has the meaning of a container and in all cases is used in combination with the lexeme *furd* 'sea', 'big river'. A person's life, his desires and feelings are personified by the image of a *water-river* flowing into the sea, the waters of which are perceived not only as a source of life, the flow of water being associated with the passage of time, but also as a destination. Life is directed to the sea, it rushes to this mysterious infinity, and it has its source in it. The cult of water is the most sacred – water is believed to be having a saving power. The ancients mentioned the regenerating and rejuvenating effect of water.

In mythopoetic thinking, all gods living in the sea are solar symbols. To make the transition and be prepared to endure the corresponding hardships, the gods, use either a chest, or a basket with a lid, or a tree trunk or a boat – objects that symbolize mother's womb. The mythologeme "return to the sea" is equivalent to "return to mother" and means "to die in order to be born again".

It is known that a journey, the direction of which is always opposite to the apparent daytime movement of the sun, represents evolution, a transition from one state to another. It is for this reason that initiatory rites often take the form of "symbolic journeys" beginning in the darkness of the netherworld (or even in the womb). The trials that mark the stages of the journey are considered rites of purification. In mythopoetic thinking, both the chest or the coffin, and the wineskin or a leather bottle, representing containers that can be closed, are considered female symbols and are often associated with birth and with the symbol of water; for example, in many myths, newborns, placed in a basket, are thrown into the water, but, being miraculously saved, they become kings etc. According to folklore researchers, laughter also creates life: it accompanies birth and creates it. And if it is so, then laughter, when killing people, turns death into a new birth, destroys the killing. Thus, this laughter is an act of piety, turning laughter into a new birth (Foxall, 2014). According to the scientist, Sardinian laughter at the death of old people, as well as later cases of laughter at funerals among other peoples, are united by a common pattern that gives the right to consider laughter a magical means of creating life. It is believed that in the above passages from the sagas, both the horse, and the buffalo (bull), as well as the young bull were sacrificed by *Uryzmag* to the gods as a redemptive sacrifice. Expiatory ritual murders, accompanied by various kinds of humiliation of the victim such as: abuse, spitting, whiplash, etc., ensured their salvation, being cleansed of shame at the same time (Sagaeva et al., 2020).

The horsehide, the skins of a buffalo bull and a young bull are associated with the ideas of birth and rebirth. The number of items of skin correlates with the triple nature of man – body, soul and spirit, and the symbolism of the skins came from a ritual known as 'passing through the skin', which pharaohs and priests used to rejuvenate (Smith, 2018).

The path from birth to death goes through the earthly world visible to man. Of course, the most difficult thing is to comprehend the return path, that path from death to birth, which, from the standpoint of the guarantees of immortality, is much more significant. And then the image of a mother arises, only in the womb of which a person is protected from all the hardships of the earth with its cruel opposition: Only in the womb of the mother, these oppositions are merged and are able to give the feeling of absolute comfort and peace. Nevertheless, the mother's womb not only shelters a person, but also gives birth again, releasing him from an invisible paradise into this earthly world with its eternal oppositions (Bolatova et al., 2019), and the end of the journey expresses rebirth and overcoming death.

As we can see, the myth of birth through death is clearly seen in Nartiada. The image of a horse in the Indo-Iranian tradition has a solar nature or is identical to the Sun. The symbolic meaning of the horse is much broader in terms of its association with fire (Agni) in its various manifestations, including sacrificial fire in a ritual ceremony (Narine and Irina, 2017). The bull in the mythopoetic consciousness is a zoomorphic symbol of the moon, darkness and liquid substance – the divine drink of soma (haoma). In different versions of the legend "The Last Military Campaign (balts) of Uryzmag" we come across a symbolic combination of the images of a horse and a bull, which in cosmogonic terms is interpreted as the unity of two primordial natural elements: light and darkness, fire and water, and in ritual terms it expresses the relationship of the sacrificial fire and sacrificial libations.

Moreover, the horse and the bull are related to two opposite social groups: the horse is associated the caste of warriors, and the bull – with the figure of the priest. This fact gives us the right to assume that three functions – the forefather of the Narts, a military leader and a priest – merge in the image of *Uryzmag*.

Any ritual reproduces the mythological archetype. In the Kalevala, the invention of beer is attributed to the time of the founder of the Finnish heroes, Kaleva; and in the Avesta, the first person to make the sacred drink homa (soma) is the forefather of the nation, Yima (Ten and Gudakov, 2015). In Nartiada, the forefather of the Narts and the nation, *Uryzmag*, was the first to invent the "drink of immortality", *aluton*, a ritual flavorful drink of the Narts, made of honey.

Being a symbol of wisdom, honey is associated with rebirth or personality changes after initiation, which is comparable to purification by fire (Grigoriev, 2013). In the pagan consciousness liquid is associated with speech. This representation was a part of the conceptual system of the *Soma* cult: “*Soma* is a flowing and purifying liquid, but *Soma* is not only a liquid, it is also a poet, a singer (Cf. Osset. *don* ‘water’, but Latvian. *daina* ‘song’”) (Cheung, 2017). The invisible upper world waters produce *soma* – the drink of the gods, nectar, a necessary element of Vedic sacrifice, life juice (Cf. *Indra* took possession of *soma*; *Odin* got the hops of poetry).

Mythological thinking does not always follow the rational consciousness, it can even outpace it, and, as a rule, it does.

It has long been established that interference and mutual enrichment of languages is a two-way process. It is connected both with the contribution of one language to another (or others, and it may not be the same at all), and with its historical certainty. The influence of one language on the development of another can often change dramatically depending on specific historical conditions.

The Inter-Caucasian word stock has developed over centuries of international contacts, as the result of the mutual influence and interaction process; and it was motivated by the problem of continuity between languages and the connection between cultures. It includes foreign words, borrowed due to both cultural and historical circumstances, and political, economic, religious, and other reasons. Words of Caucasian and oriental origin with their inherent lexical, phonetic, morphological, semantic features are to be combined into lexical-thematic and lexical-semantic groups with the justification of the semantic shifts that have occurred in a particular language.

The word *payda* is used in the Ossetian language in the meanings of ‘benefit’, ‘benefit’, ‘profit’, ‘interest’ (Bolatova et al., 2019). It is often synonymous in its meanings with the Ossetian word *æftiag*.

Derivational family of words: *paida kænyn* ‘use’, ‘use’; ‘benefit, benefit’; ‘promote profit’; ‘give a profit’; *paida uævyn* ‘to be useful’; ‘get revenue’; *paida dættyn* ‘benefit’, ‘be profitable’; *payadzhyn* ‘profitable’, etc. *Payda æmæzian* – *æfsymærtæ* ‘profit and loss are brothers’ (proverb); *Zæyæ paida næy, donivyld ta hadtæ fælasy* ‘there is no benefit from an avalanche, but a flood even melts logs’ (proverb).

The word was borrowed from Arabic, Persian *fida* ‘benefit’, ‘profit’ via one of the Northern Turkish languages, to which the phoneme *f* is alien – Turk. *Payda*. Like other words with the initial *p*, it entered the Ossetian language in a relatively late period, when the law of transition from *p* to *f* was no longer valid in this language (Şal buzova, 2021). The Iranian *p* changed into the Ossetian *f*, therefore the modern Ossetian *p* is a sound that does not belong to purely Ossetian consonantism. This sound is mainly found in loanwords or in the words of unknown origin. The initial *p* before the vowel and in the word *payda* ‘benefit’, ‘profit’, cf. Kurd. *paida*, Balk. *fayda*, Arab. *Fäidä* (Şal buzova, 2021). This word was assimilated into many languages: Iranian – Kurd. *paida*, Afg. *faida*, Khorezm. **faidak* (*f’ydk*); Caucasian – Avar. *pajda*, Lac. *pajda*, Lezg. *fajdu*, And. *pajda*; Nakh – Chech. *pajda*, Ingush. *payda*; Adyghe – Kab. *pajda*; Slavic – Bulg. *faida*, Serbo-Croat. *fajda*.

The antonym for the word *payda* ‘profit’ is *zian* ‘loss’ < avest. *zyāna* (or rather, Ossetian word is borrowed, otherwise we would have *zion*). The word *zian* in the meanings of ‘loss’, ‘harm’, ‘damage’ is euphemistically used in the meaning of ‘dead’, ‘dead’; whence *zianjyn* / *ziangun* ‘who suffered damage’ → ‘who lost a loved one’, which is connected with the influence of supralinguistic representations on the formation of funerary vocabulary.

The Persian word, dating back to Old Iran. *zyāna* ‘harm’ < of the root *zyā-* ‘harm’ entered into many languages, including Russian partly through the Turkish: Pers. *zīyān*, Pahl. *zyān*, Turk. *ziyan*, Arm. *zean*, Georg. *ziani*, Lezg. *ziyan*, Darg. *zen*, Avar. *ziyan*, Lak. *ziyā*, Chech. *zie(n)*, Rus. ‘flaw’. The Ossetian word cannot be considered original, as it would have been **zion*. But apparently we have the same root in *zyn* / *zin* (Foxall, 2014). Cf. Hvarsh., Inkh., Quantl. languages: *paida* ‘benefit’, ‘benefit’; Pers. *ziyān* > hvarsh., Inkh., Quantl. *ziyan* ‘harm’, ‘damage’; Khinalug language: *ziyan* ‘harm’, ‘damage’, ‘loss’.

Ziyan yima ‘It’s nothing’ ‘trivial’ (lit. no harm); *fida* ‘benefit’, ‘benefit’; *Fayda atta* ‘profitable’, ‘profitable’; *faida attonday* ‘useless’; ‘disadvantageous’; ‘profit’, ‘profit’. *Faidaly* ‘useful’, ‘profitable’; *fidasyz* ‘useless’, ‘unprofitable’; adv. ‘useless’, ‘unprofitable’. In Bezhta language it is *ziyan* ‘harm’; *ziyan boval* ‘harm’, ‘damage’; *paida* ‘benefit’, ‘benefit’.

Paida gachcho sukIo ‘useless person’; ‘weakling’ (literally, a useless person). *Paydayab* ‘useful’, ‘profitable’. *Payda gachchoi mizo* ‘bad land’ (literally, soil without benefit) (Narine and Irina, 2017). In remote Uzbekistan, in Shavat and some other places, there was a belief that genies turn into a duck or a hare. When persecuted, a person is lured by a hare to a “bad place”, and there he inflicts *ziyon* on him. On the basis of the common life and mutual cultural influences, not only "single ways of language-thinking" were developed, but also similar rituals, customs, in our case, via the Turkic languages of the Kypchak group (Lyausheva et al., 2016).

In Ossetian mourning rituals, for the *zazhæssæn* ‘carrying a yew’ ceremony, which coincides in time with the Orthodox Palm Sunday, Ossetians prepared and dedicated the ritual tree *zazbælas* (lit. yew-tree) to those who died at a young age, and to deceased women, regardless of age. The yew is similar in sacrality to the willow, it was understood by the Ossetians as a talisman, endowed with the ability to exorcise evil spirits, fertilize the earth, etc. (Smith, 2018). People hung fruit, sweets, socks, cigarettes on *zazbalas*, like on a New Year tree – everything that could be hung up. A peculiar substitute for the ritual tree *zazbalas* was the attribute of funeral and memorial rites (iron.) *ælæm*/ (digor.) *ilæn*, which was prepared only for men, mostly the elderly ones.

ælæm / *ilæn* is ‘a ritual object associated with the funeral feast celebrated on the *komakhsæn* holiday (Shrovetide)’. Its name is borrowed from Arabic by both Ossetian and other languages; cf.: Arab. *alam*, Pers. *alam*, Turk. *alem* ‘sign’, ‘banner’, Gerg. *alami* ‘banner’, ‘flag’, ‘badge’ (Cheung, 2017). In the “Etymological Dictionary of the Russian Language” compiled by M. Fasmer, *alam* is defined as ‘decoration on a dress’, more often in the 14th century; Kypch., Turk. *alam*, Tat., Krim.-Tat., Azerb. *aläm* ‘small banner’, ‘flag’ (Şalbuzova, 2021; Castillo Lozano, 2022).

There are various (local) descriptions of this ritual object in the sources. *ælæm* is something like a cross or a banner made of crossed poles, with threads on which gingerbread, fruits, walnuts and sweets are strung. The deceased’s relatives take *ilæn* on a sledge to his grave and take beer and araka with them. Before that, the horsemen taking part in the races had already gathered at their graves (Narine and Irina, 2017). *Læm* is collected by relatives or half-sisters of the deceased, his daughters... Sweets, walnuts, hazelnuts, apples... weighing approximately 1–2 pounds, are attached together on a strong thick thread to a light wooden stick (Adjiev et al., 2018). As it follows from the previous quotes, the ritual cultural signs *ælæm* ‘ritual object’ and *zazbælas* ‘spruce’, ‘yew’ are semantically identical in their functionality.

An identical ritual object exists in the wedding rituals of the Balkars and Karachays in the rite of the *kyoz berk* ‘walnut hat’, in which a walnut stick is used: “A walnut hat (*kyoz berk*) was made of thick felt and attached to a stick. Nuts, sweets, ribbons, coins, handkerchiefs were sewn onto the hat. They said that the more items are attached to the hat, the happier and more fertile the newlyweds will be. <...> A walnut hat was given to the most dexterous rider so that he could keep it, take it to the bride’s house and hand it to her mother. Before leaving for the bride, the guys and girls performed the circle dance “*Koz berk*” around the walnut hat (Ten and Gudakov, 2015).

The shaft for the ritual object *Kelinni bayragy* “the banner of the bride” was also made of walnut: The shaft for the banner was made made of a walnut tree, attached a large scarf to it and decorated with handkerchiefs and ribbons of different colors, each of which had its own meaning, an excellent expert in national rituals and a well-known choreographer (Bolatova et al., 2019).

The mentioned passages prove the originality and peculiar form of the mythopoetic worldview of the ancestors of the Ossetians, Balkars and Karachays, the pagan symbolism of objects, cult actions, rituals and the reflection of this symbolism in the language.

The stick and the pole in the cultures of nomads, as well as the pillar of the settled ones, symbolized the axis of the universe, being a material symbol of the axis "valley - mountain". Both the stick and the pole were considered attributes of the solar creative deity, ensuring the fertilization of the earth by the sun's rays and the reproduction of the human race. These are phallic symbols of strength and male power (Sagaeva et al., 2020).

The walnut tree was a symbol of the creator of the universe; a deity who bestowed fertility, longevity, protected from evil spirits, misfortunes, and diseases. Nuts represented the habitat of the souls of ancestors, and personified fertility, abundance, earthly joys and desires.

Different peoples used certain types of trees in various rites and rituals. For example, in Karachay, scientists recorded stories about *the sacred tree of Dzhangyz-terek* – pine, lit. ‘the only tree’.

In Ossetian funeral rituals, trees occupy a higher level of symbolization than other vegetation, because they contain the main idea of the ritual action. The used trees *naz*, *zaz*, defined in the dictionaries of the Ossetian language as ‘yew’, ‘pine’, are a sign of mourning, a symbol of immortality, the personification of funeral and sorrow.

When interpreting a tree as a cultural sign, defined by contexts, on the basis of which we single out features relevant for interpretation, “customs of placing certain objects on a tree in order to remove them from this, earthly, world and “send” to the next world” are ancient and universal. All this is irrelevant for language semantics, i.e., semantics of the word *tree*.

In the cultural definition of a tree, it is important to note such semantic elements as the meaning of the vertical connecting the earthly and the upper, heavenly, world; growth and fertility; metaphorical correlation with a person...; the meaning of the tree as a sacred or demonic locus, etc. (Besolova et al., 2020).

The tree was one of the most powerful symbols of fertility and the embodiment of vital energy. A branch burdened with fruits symbolizes the life-giving might of Nature, the continuity of life and an indissoluble relationship with nature. Symbolism is manifested by the combination of plant elements with ropes, ribbons or other signs of connection or connection; it reflects the dual meaning of life and death (Foxall, 2014; Romandini, 2022).

Illustrative folklore and ethnographic material made it possible to reveal such semantic elements of the cultural definition of *the zazbaelas* tree as follows: a) the meaning of a symbol linking the real and other worlds; b) a metaphor for the road; c) a symbol of the connection of generations; d) a symbol of eternal memory; e) a symbol of the cult of the dead; f) a symbol of the incarnation of the soul of the deceased.

As the examples above show, magical mentality manifests itself in the evolution of meanings that fully reflect the customs, beliefs and ways of ancient thinking.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research confirmed once again that the cultural ties between the speakers of the Caucasian and Iranian (Ossetian) languages, even in the absence of areal contacts, constituted a cultural unity in the past. It was due both to the internal life of the Caucasian peoples and to the fact that the historical multilingual Caucasus with the presence of speakers of Iranian, Caucasian, Turkic, Arabic and Indo-European languages was a powerful source of borrowing.

All the loanwords were acquired by the Ossetian language due to a number of historical circumstances: the era of Iranian conquests, the activities of the Iranian shahs, their campaigns in the Caucasus; heritage of the Tatar-Mongols; stay of the Arabs; features of the Scythian-Sarmatian-Alanian world; intensive political, economic and other ties, and many others.

Both the Christianization and Islamization of Ossetia have never been a complete and abrupt break with the ‘pagan’ past. This transition is interpreted as a process of adaptation of new concepts and names to the old content.

The folklore, ritual and cult life of the peoples of the Caucasus contains archaic elements of spiritual culture that reflect the religious beliefs, the most ancient layers of world perception and worldview of all multi-ethnic and multilingual people who lived and live in the macro-region. Their close historical and cultural communication led to linguistic and contact ritual-folklore relationships and mutual influences, which remained for centuries evidence of the history of peoples, preserved in the contact layers of languages at different times.

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