Regional and Ethnic Variations of the Christian Temple Construction  
In the North Caucasus During the 13th-14th Centuries

Victoria Pishchulina
Southern Federal University, Rostov on Don, Russia

Abstract: The features of temples building constructed on the model in the North Caucasus from the 13th to the 14th centuries were related to the formation of symbolic thinking. Contrary to the previous period, the models of temples of one of the confessional centers could not be used any longer; the multiplicity of influences was caused by a great number of models. Selection of model was directly related to the customer; in that period highland and patronymic communities acted as a customer owing to the fragmentation and lack of strong centralized states in the North Caucasus. At the same time, multiplicity of influences of Christian and Islam cultures as well as the process of actualization of traditional beliefs, associated with the increasing role of traditional patronymic communities, formed a new understanding of the church. But on the other hand, a few Christian churches, that already had been built, were turned into sacred places to that period on the territory of highlander communities. They did not correspond with new conception of temple by their planning structure and their imaginative solutions, for this reason they could not be copied, but still served as a model for newly constructed temples. The fading of tradition of copying meant the finding of a new language of self-identification by architectural means in the context of changed culture, based on the actualization of pagan foundations of worldview. There were formal replications of model features such as: mystical perception of its measure, which acquired by the time sacred meanings; imitation of some individual components of spatial organization like division into parts by arches; repetition of details of liturgy equipment in different scale and places (chancel, niches and benches). Objectively, there was a process of the division of a model into components, then of the synthesis of several visual features with their transformation and addition of elements from other cultures.

Key words: Temple construction in the North Caucasus • Christian culture • Traditional spacial culture

INTRODUCTION

In the 10th-12th centuries a widespread construction of Christian churches took place in Central Alanya (Karachay-Cherkessia and Krasnodar) and on the landed joining to the Georgian Kingdom (Dvaletia), but in the 13th-14th centuries temple building practically stops here. Thus this period is represented by a significant number of objects of the religious worship of disputable confession in the region of Sunvalley (in highland regions of actual Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia and Ingushetia). Pre-Soviet Russian investigators associated them with Christian culture [1, 2, 3]; but the scientists that have been studying these objects in the Soviet period, especially recently, with a few exceptions rejected this finding for ideological or religious reasons [4, 5, 6]. As a result we have a stable tendency to classify them as pagan objects [7, 8, 9, 10]. The present study, based on comparison of individual research of place on the spot with archeological and historiographical facts, refute this simplistic point of view and for the first time produce a systematic analysis of temple construction of this period in the context of its belonging to Christian culture.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Singularity and originality of architecture of these sacred objects was a result of complex and extended in the time process of formation of religious contaminations in worldview of the population. At the same time, the
features of rituals, noted in different periods (but mostly after the 16th century) [11,12,13,14], as well as historical events of the region, have shown that studied contaminations cannot be considered as signs of fading of once-strong Christian faith and the features of rituals cannot be interpreted as a result of gradual revision of religious rites. This complex phenomenon should be considered as an initially formed kind of Christian culture that has analogues in other traditional cultures around the world.

The life of patronymic society in the North Caucasus was based on unwritten customs, however, the main postulates of worldview of the Highlanders remained immutable; but gradually and imperceptibly for the people they were changed, accommodating itself to new conditions and influences, such as Christian religious doctrine. As a result, each patronymic lived according to their own system of customs, retaining, however, the basic features of traditional culture. On one side the Highlanders had a steady traditional worldview, corresponded to their scanty activities on limited space under communication with relatively small number of other members of the society. At the same time, a person thinking on his own was uncommon; collective consciousness prevailed over individual thinking. In these conditions, thanks to the activity of missionaries of various denominations of Christianity, the established worldview was not rejected, but supplemented. Thus more exactly Christianity was included in traditional religion. There was an interesting process of the subsequent penetration of traditional religious into Christian rites and of the creating of regional versions of Christian culture through the concretization of Christian doctrine according to real conditions of life of the Highlanders and to the peculiarities of their thinking. Similar processes were noticed later by a number of researchers; they concerned Third World countries (e.g. Oceania), where the dissemination of Christianity in tribal societies was relatively recent [15,16]. Resembling processes were noticed by V.P. Orfinsky in Christian architecture of remote places of Karelia in form of the conservation of swapping and deification of the nature (V.P. Orfinsky. “Necrocult constructions of the Russian North in the context of Christian and pagan syncretism”) [17]. At each specific locality of highland communities in Ossetia, Ingushetia and Balkaria, due to the local peculiarities of settlement development, resembling processes formed peculiar sorts of religious rites, more or less similar to Christian culture. Without strong government and permanent contacts with confessional centers, the process of Christianization went on and so-called "National Christianity" was formed on the basis of traditional culture. Gradual transformation of those national kinds of Christian culture was resulted in acquisition of Christianity, its saturation with local beliefs and rituals, that took place not only in the highlands, but also in those regions of the North Caucasus, where position of Christianity in the previous period were quite strong.

In general we can note the following features of Christian rites of the Northern Caucasus in the late Middle Ages: a religious procession moved from one object to another, praying near each of them; the participants of the ceremony brought bread (triangular pitas and etc.) and wine (arak, beer) into the temple before a divine service and they were placed in the altar part in a niche or on the altar. After the mass a priest divided and distributed bread and wine among the participants; during the liturgy, the participants hold candles that were lighted by the priest; contents of the mass were accompanied by an exclamation, that followed after the priest's words, meaning "Amen"; the priest brought out of the altar a cross-shaped pole with a piece of cloth and bells and carried it around the temple (like a gonfalon); women couldn’t enter into the temple, because it was understood as a chancel. Some of Christian holidays were preserved; the mass was always the same; many elements of Greek and Georgian languages related to Christianity were fixed in vocabulary (candle, cross, chapel, resurrection); there were also a meal after the divine service and ritual of anointing (with blood or oil). There was a coincidence of meanings in translation between Ingush gods' names and names of Christian saints: Yerda, Dyala – "God," Celia, Iilia -"Thunderer", Tusholi – "virgin-mother with a baby and a dove".

Among pagan elements of the ceremony we can notice: holding of the mass in front of a temple (a temple was understood as a chancel, forbidden space); addition of Christian liturgy by pagan rites of the worship of sacred objects (pillar-like monument, stone, wood, cave), which were a part of religious complex; offerings of bloody sacrifices of bull or ram after divine service; ritual dances near the church (Fig.1,2).

In addition to the details of ritualism, a very strong argument for Christian character of the culture of temples constructions that was formed in the North Caucasus in the 13th – 14th centuries was that the people of the region up to the 14th century and in some regions up to the 16th century, considered themselves as Christians.
It is evidenced by funeral rituals, numerous inscriptions on gravestones with Christian content on Greek, Georgian and on local languages; the Gospel that was kept in temples on Georgian and Greek; funeral placing of the deceased in a crypt in a wooden coffin on his back with arms along his trunk, head towards the East; a large number of crucifixes, discovered by archaeologists during the excavations of medieval settlements of this period and the peculiarities of spatial organization and rituals, which confirmed holding of a liturgy in these buildings in the initial period of their existence.

The analysis of territorial and landscape location and of spatial organization of these constructions was carried out in accordance with the ceremony that took place in them, their patronymic status, modular analysis and correlation of all these features in the context of traditional highlander culture. It allowed the author of this work to determine that at large all the objects of religious architecture of Sun Valley of this period were represented by religious complexes; thus three hierarchical groups of religious complexes could be highlighted: all-patronymic, patronymic and ancestral. The general principle of temples and religious complexes’ location in the mountain regions of the North Caucasus in this period corresponded to the radial-route model of space development: the most revered temple was situated in the center of each ethnic community; and there were temples and religious complexes in every community and patronymic family. The principle of ensemble became one of the leading characteristics of temple architecture of that period. The principle of hierarchy became widespread, it was especially important in connection with necessity to create a system of magic protective spaces in constant danger from moving invaders from the foothills. In the period under review, temples were no longer included in the fortification system of a settlement – they were attributed with a higher spiritual force of protection. All-patronymic complexes were located near the main patronymic settlements or in important nature places; patronymic complexes were situated near central settlements of patronymic families; and ancestral temples were built above each village. In this regard, a temple...
obtains the same symbolic meaning that a tower. Sometimes there were some burial places in an ancestral temple, but more often it became a center of the patronymic group of graves in crypts. The analysis shows, that religious complexes still included both artificial objects (Christian (temples) and Pagan (pillar monuments, cup-stones)) and objects of pagan worship of nature. All artificial objects of the complexes were built at the same time, as evidenced by the same character of masonry and decor and by archeological data.

In Ingushetia religious complexes included only artificial objects of worship such as temples dedicated to Seli, Dyala or Yerdà and pillar-like monument dedicated to Tusholi. It is difficult to classify religious complexes of Ossetia to all-patronymic and patronymic: they were allocated neither by their names, nor by their peculiarities of ritualism, nor by their interposition. In comparison with the temples of Ingushetia they had a special feature: they included both naturalistic paganism and artificial pre-Christian sanctuaries. There was a tendency of the "rebuilding" of Christian churches constructed previously: they were enclosed with a wall eventually cowered by the trees that later received a sacred status; nearby there were pillar sanctuaries with walls decorated with petroglyphs, handprints on plaster, horns and skulls. Both in the case of new construction and in the case of "rebuilding", public liturgy involved at first visiting of pagan objects and Christian temple, then holding of worship inside of the temple and finally completion of the ceremony with a meal made of sacrificial animal ("kuvd") nearby the temple. Similarity of location features of religious complexes of Sun Valley can be explained not only by the common origins of traditional culture, but also by the intensive contacts between inhabitants of the area by mountain trails. In the foothills of the North Caucasus, at the places of residence of Alan and Ovs (the territory occupied by the Tartars) only the patronymic principle of temple construction took place.

RESULTS

It was revealed that the strengthening of influence of different centers of Christianity and Islam in the 13th-14th centuries, at the same time that the fragmentation of patronymic groups, led to the domination of the processes of traditional ethnic identity over the processes of assimilation of monotheistic religions. As a result, during the highlighted period on the territory of the North Caucasus several types of contaminations of religious worldviews and, therefore, several regional and ethnic variations of national Christian architecture were formed in Assinovsky kettle on the territory of Ingushetia, in Alagirsky, Digorsky and Kurtatinsky gorges in Ossetia, on the territory of Balkaria and in the foothills of the North Caucasus. The most striking manifestations of religious amalgamations were fixed in the external forms of temples and in their spatial organization. The original variety of traditional temple construction was influenced even more by the character of injection of traditional culture features, but in this case, its formation was strongly defined by different religious doctrines of Christian culture in the area (Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Nestorianism) and by Islam.

There search revealed that Nestorian Christian culture that was brought by the Tartar exerted a great influence on the formation of the identity features of temple construction in the Sun Valley. It was reflected in decoration, details of ceremonial rites and spatial compositions with arectilinear termination of the apse. Comparative analysis revealed a similarity between Nestorian temples of Ephesus, Northern Mesopotamia and Central Asia. The prevalence of rectilinear termination of the apse could be determinate also by Catholic influence, by genetic connection between highl temple and dwelling house and by application of this form for sanctuaries and crypts. An important point is that there were no examples of in scribed apses, that say that there was no considerable influence of the architecture of Transcaucasia.

The common features defined the belonging of the temple construction of highlands regions in the North Caucasus (Ingushetia, Ossetia and Balkaria) to Christian culture. They are the following: orientation of the main sacral part of temple - the chancel- mainly to the east; presence of stone altars in the chancel in many temples; embellishment of window openings and portals with semicircular terminations in form of ashlar lintel or canted arches (which were imported techniques in local architecture); placing of a narrow window in the chancel of a temple on the axis; raising of floor level in the chancel; representation of the cross of Calvary on facades and on inner elements of temples; placement of niches in the chancel; presence of lancet or corbel vault that was a symbol of the Heavens in Christianity); lancet niches in pillar-form monuments; placement of underground crypts in the chancel or in the pre-chancel area, which may be due to the influence of Eastern Christian centers (Trebzonz, Chersonesus, Armenia), Catholicism, Islam and to pagan ritual of interment in crypts; presence of benches along the north, south and outside walls that can be seen as a reference on the benches for the clergy or on the benches.
of the refectory; presence of a large number of ecclesiastical objects as well as of prayer books in Georgian and Greek in the recesses of the temple. The division of temple space on the bema (chancel), naos (nave) and narthex, in the North Caucasus get another interpretation; the chancel and the places for offerings were ranged by patronymic principle: the further away from the chancel the lower status of the patronymic group. It explains the presence of niches not only in the east wall, but also in other walls- each patronymic group had their own niche.

The main features of temple construction of Ingushetia and Ossetia are: inclination of longitudinal walls inward; stretching of proportions along the length of a plan with the increasing number of segmentations of transverse walls, attached to longitudinal wall, that form a lancet arches in technique of corbel arch (only in Ingushetia); step-pyramid completion of the roof corresponded to this form made with the application of typical traditional constructions; transverse wooden beams, which served both as ties for longitudinal walls and were the object of ritual darts; variety of pillar-like monuments; walls covered with plaster, yellow on the outside and white on the inside. Some details can be found interesting, due to the influence of traditional culture and pagan rites: placement of stone shelves for candles in the walls; stone hooks for a sacrificial animal; numerous recess and niches in the walls of temple. The temples of Ingushetia and Ossetia were locked from the inside, not the outside; it may indicate the presence of a certain rituals during the mass, associated with isolations of some members inside the church. Crypts could be locked from the inside too.

Between special features of the temples of Kabardino-Balkaria we can note: device of crypts in the chancel; stone images of a ram's head to the left of the entrance (Ram was a sacred animal, a pagan symbol of the sun); Christian burials with pagan inventory; construction of family churches directly in the village; and absence of main all-patronymic temples. Beside the neighbouring territories of Ossetia and Ingushetia, here in this period the tradition to locate the temples (as a sanctuary) on the mountain peaks and passes was undeveloped.

The features of temple construction of Upper Dzhulat traced to multiplicity of influences of different cultures: traditional, Christian and Islam. Along with the peculiarities there were typical features of temple construction in the North Caucasus in this period: placement of crypts under the chancel, surname-order principle of building; small dimensions). The temples of Upper Dzhulat had clearly expressed distinctive features: semicircular apse combined by the dromos with Eastern-type mausoleum; specific eastern dome; Byzantine elements (brick masonry or masonry made with alternation of brick and white stone; sintron; barrier); burials with elements of Khazar, Sarmatian, Alanian, Bulgar, Mongol, Highlander and Eastern Christian rites.

The research has analyzed the features of temple constructions on the model and of associated with them system of modular building plans received by that period a sacred value. It revealed the use of modules preserved since the active Byzantine influence in most of buildings; hierarchy of the size of religious complex objects in accordance with the module; enhancing of object's influence on the area; reducing of object’s size associated with the introduction of rituals involved exterior religious liturgies.

The modular analysis of churches of the highlighted period showed that in the 13th - 14th centuries there were two groups of objects, according to their dimension unit, supposedly corresponding to Byzantine orgias. The module of the first group was equal to 2,1 m (~7 ft.) in Ossetia and to 3,0 m (~10 ft.) in Ossetia, Balkaria and Ingushetia. The module of the second was used in civil architecture and was equal to 1,33 m in Ossetia. As well as in the previous period, the selected module corresponded to the dimension of the most sacred part of a temple, which was the depth of the apse or the distance from the chancel to the eastern wall. * In the first case based on identified modular plans could be found in particular in valley temples. The second case, use of civil measurement for sacred objects connected both with the peculiarities of the spread of Christianity in the valley: there were no temple construction before and the lack of tradition to highlight a measure of the sacred object.

It was revealed that there were objects constructed at the same time of large, medium and small size; the objects with small dimensions (for example, of 3x1,5x1,5m) had no inner space. It indicates a hierarchy of these sacral constructions in according to their relevance and not to expiring of building skill or of the Christian faith.

Some secondary interior details such as size of edging pilasters or wall thickness had no identified module value. Other metrological characteristics, such as height of doors and windows, were neither correlated with the module; it could be explained by using of standard overall dimensions for some architectural elements in highlander house building of this period.
Application of either internal or external marking for the churches with significant internal space could be connected with working methods of a building crew; while the use of only external marking for the objects with limited internal space could be explained otherwise. During that period, the general tendency was to reduce the temple’s size; it was associated with reduction of quantity of persons entitled to access into the temple. Surrounding territory was perceived as a temple and internal space - as a chancel; i.e., it indicates the process of return to the holding of religious ceremony outside the temple. In this regard, the impact of a temple on surrounding territory, its location and, therefore, its external dimensions, became more significant. Thus hierarchy of objects according to their importance revealed with the help of their dimensions could be observed in each religious complex.

The research reveals the features of constructive and decorative techniques related to intensive cultural interchange and to the generation of similar constructive and decorative techniques in all kinds of “national” temple construction based on tradition. Each temple definitely had: a stone or wooden corbel ceiling, transverse lancet arches, beams and a step-pyramid or smooth pointed roof. A number of constructive and decorative techniques were sacralized; they had their sacred symbolic meanings and had been used in other types of religious buildings such as crypts or towers. It is significant that the sacred meaning of traditional forms of Christian architecture was applied for the step-pyramid shape of protruding apses terminations, band for the terminations of apse with ancestral spiked form (not with a dome and cross). The wall paintings and frescoes reflected the synthesis of several Christian cultures and played an important role in decoration of temples in that period.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Tradition was the basis of the formation of the features of Christian culture in the region. The originality of traditional culture was defined by the community of its major components for various ethnic groups of the North Caucasus, relating to the principles of the pagan worldview and behavioral norms connected with it. In the traditional culture of the North Caucasus there were as basic origins and ideals, contributing to the formation of the identity of Christian culture, as the universals, affecting on the adequate perception of Christianity. The first group included: patronymic structure of society, way of nature use, worship of nature and accompanying predominance of naturalistic paganism. The second group included: hierarchical structure of the pantheon of gods headed by the main God-demiurge, worldview based on the principle of triform universe creation and on moral values. Bringing of Christian culture only in the form of missionary activity was favorable to its adaptation to the traditional culture. The result was that a whole number of mythological origins of worldview remained and some innovative tendencies and regional and ethnic variations of the temple construction were formed at the same time.

Variety of religious contaminations of worldview of the people of the North Caucasus played a role of ideological basis for the formation of regional and ethnic features of Christian churches’ architecture. The reasons for the formation of religious amalgamations were: remoteness from the center of Christianity; activity of missionaries of various confession; preservation of ancestral structures; complex political context; processes of ethnogenesis. The appearance of regional variants of “national” Christianity, complicated by pagan rituals that were reflected in the architectural features of churches appeared as the consequence of religious contaminations, were the followings: landscape placing, spatial organization, external architectural forms, peculiarities of structure, plastic decoration.

In the 6th – 9th centuries Christianity comes into the Black Sea region from Zichia and spreads in the foothills of the North Caucasus. In this period deep layers of the pagan worldview were not yet affected by the Christian faith, but it contributed to the amalgamation of Christianity and paganism. In the 10th – 12th centuries the share of paganism in the religion worldview was minimal; this period was especially characterized by the use of higher models of Christian architecture appeared in the North Caucasus. Almost all these features existed at that time in the churches of Eastern Christian culture.

Religious amalgamation of the 13th–14th centuries were formed on the above mentioned basis of the philosophical ideals of Christianity, traditional mythology and sometimes Islam, with domination of the processes of sharpening ethnic identity over the processes of assimilation of the universals of Christian culture.

Religious contamination of naturalistic paganism and reminiscences of Christian culture of Cossacks (in the 15th– 16th centuries) were formed in the absent of contact with centers of Christianization the basis of the preceding period with its originality of the Christian worldview, hard conditions of life, swapping and unique social structure.
REFERENCES