

Activities of Georgian Orthodox Missionaries in the Principality of Abkhazia (19th Century)

Giorgi Sosiashvili*, **Bezhan Khorava****, **Davit Chitanava§**

* Academy Member, National Academy of Sciences of Georgia, Tbilisi, Georgia

** Tamaz Beradze Institute of Kartvelology, University of Georgia, Tbilisi, Georgia

§ Institute of History and Ethnology, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Georgia

Abstract. This work discusses the political and religious situation in the Principality of Abkhazia in the 19th century, focusing on the missionary activities of the Georgian clergy and the results of spreading Christianity among the Abkhazians, as documented in the 1858 Church Metric Book. The causes and results of missionary activities have been analyzed. The Metric Book (kept in the Central Historical Archive of Georgia) records 201 individuals and it provides detailed information on each person's age, prior religious affiliation (Muslim or Pagan), social status, village of residence, associated church and clergy. However, in this study we provide only a brief list of individuals. The archival material, presented in this work for the first time in scientific circulation is an important source for studying ethnic, social, demographic, and religious situation as well as anthroponomy of 19th-century Abkhazia. © 2025 Bull. Natl. Acad. Sci. Georg.

Keywords: Abkhazia, church history, clergy, demography, missionary work

Introduction

The study of the history of Abkhazia remains highly relevant in modern Georgian historiography, as this region is temporarily torn away from Georgia. Since it is impossible to do this on the spot, the search for new archival materials and their introduction into scholarly circulation acquires special significance. In this regard, church registers are of special attention. Church registers, in which civil status acts were registered, were brought in Georgia after the establishment of Russian rule. In the Principality of Abkhazia, they began to keep them since the mid-19th century. They provide very interesting information on births, christenings, weddings, deaths, geographical names, churches, surnames and personal names, diseases, demographic

situation, social status and sphere of activity of local population (nobility, clergy, village headmen, police officers) in a particular parish village. A Church register comprised recordings made during a year in a single church. It was kept in every church, and later united by deanery districts or eparchies.

This work, based on Church Registers of 1858, presents the missionary activities of Georgian clergy in the Principality of Abkhazia, as well as the results of the spreading Christianity among the Abkhazians.

Materials and Methods

Documentary materials are of primary importance for studying ethno-demographic processes in Abkhazia. An example of such a source is the

Church Register of 1858, stored in the Central Historical Archive of the National Archives of Georgia, which serves as the foundation for this publication. The work employs methods of identification, selection and critical analysis of sources, as well as those of historical cognition, systemic, comprehensive and comparative research methods widely accepted in modern historiography. One of the main components of the methodological basis of the work is the principle of historicism, which makes it possible to study the issue in the dynamics of various historical events.

The work examines the political and religious situation that existed in the Principality of Abkhazia in the first half of the 19th century, as well as the missionary activities of the Georgian clergy. It analyzes the results and reasons for the missionary work and provides a complete list of names of individuals (201 persons) recorded in the Church Register of 1858, indicating the age and previous religion (Muslim or pagan) of those baptized, village, church and clergy. However, this paper includes only short list of persons. The new archival materials serve as a significant source for studying Abkhazia's ethnic, demographic and religion situation, as well as anthroponomy (surnames and personal names).

Results and Discussion

The 1858 Church Register is an invaluable source for studying the ethnic and demographic situation in the Principality of Abkhazia. According to this material, a total of 24 churches were operating in Abkhazia in 1858, and missionary work in this region was carried out by clergy and monks sent from the churches and monasteries of the Principality of Samegrelo. From the materials of 24 churches, baptismal records were documented in eight of them, and the total number of baptized individuals was 201. The 1858 church registers do not include all the villages of Abkhazia, which is due to the limited resources of the missionaries. Therefore, only those villages in which their activities took place are recorded. It should be noted

that, at that time, the Principality of Abkhazia consisted only of Bzipi, Guma and Abzhua regions and covered the territory from Gagra Gorge to the Ghalidzga River.

In 1810, the Principality of Abkhazia became part of the Russian Empire. The Russian government and the Prince of Abkhazia, Giorgi Sharvashidze (1810-1821), tried to spread Christianity in this region in order to strengthen their positions there. Tsarism hid its expansionist goals and colonial policy under the flag of patronage of Christianity. The spread of Christianity meant the expansion of the political influence of the Russian Empire, and this is why attention was paid to the revival of Christianity in the Principality of Abkhazia (Khorava, 2021). At the time of the establishment of the rule of the Russian Empire in the Principality of Abkhazia, there was not a single functioning church there. At this time, the archpriest of the court church of the Principality of Samegrelo, Ioane Ioseliani, restored the court church of the Principality of Abkhazia in Likhni (the Likhni Church of the Dormition of the Most Holy Theotokos) at his own expense, where he himself conducted services and appointed priests, and also baptized many Abkhazians, among whom was the family of Prince Giorgi Sharvashidze. In the same year of 1810, he raised the issue of opening a theological school in Likhni. He hoped that this action would once again illuminate Abkhazia with the light of Christianity. However, due to the difficult political situation, the government did not support this proposal (Khorava, 2007).

Since 1817, the priest Solomon Nadirov served in the Sokhumi church, preaching Christianity among Abkhazians and baptizing many of them. The Prince of Abkhazia Mikheil Sharvashidze (1823-1864) highly commended him because of his warm attitude towards Abkhazians and diligence in converting them to Christianity. In 1823-24, Solomon Nadirov baptized 62 pagan and Muslim Abkhazians in Likhni and Bichvinta (Rogava, 2002). Since 1821, in Likhni, the political centre of the Principality of

Abkhazia, the priest Ioane Kavtaradze worked fruitfully, earning the love and honor of the local population. At the beginning of the 1820s, Archimandrite of Abkhazia Ioane Ioseliani, Simon Zhordania, the prince's spiritual mentor, and priest Ioane Kavtaradze baptized about 150 Abkhazians (Khorava, 2021).

The first successes of missionary activity clearly showed that Abkhazia lacked both churches and clergy. In this situation, in 1822, the "Theological commission of Ossetia", created in the North Caucasus for the spread of Christianity (1745), expressed a desire to transfer its activities to Abkhazia as well. The Viceroy of the Caucasus, Aleksey Ermolov (1816-1827), did not share the aspirations of the "Theological commission of Ossetia" and personally its head, the Exarch of Georgia, Jona, as, in his opinion, unstable political situation in Abkhazia hindered the work of clergy there, although the Russian administration did not interfere with the missionary work of the clergy of the Samegrelo Principality in this region (Khorava, 2021).

The dire situation of Christianity in Abkhazia required the proper organization of missionary activity. Mikheil Sharvashidze understood well the importance of spreading Christianity in his principality to strengthen his power. In 1831, in his letter to the governor of Imereti, he noted that most of his subordinates were Muslims. The Circassians, who resisted the Russian government and the prince's measures, had a negative impact on them. In order to eliminate this influence of the Circassians, the prince considered it necessary to baptize the Abkhazians. At his suggestion, a separate eparchy should have been formed in Abkhazia and his relative Anton Dadiani, the Hegumen of the Tsageri monastery, should have been appointed as a bishop. He wrote, that Anton Dadiani was respected because of his origin, as well as his title and remarkable qualities. In addition, he knew his work and the local language well. He expressed hope that he would do many good deeds in Abkhazia (Bergé, 1878; Khorava, 2021).

As there were only a small number of churches and parishes in Abkhazia, the Synod did not satisfy

Mikheil Sharvashidze's request, although it considered it expedient to send clergymen from the Samegrelo eparchy to carry out missionary work in Abkhazia. The Russian government found it desirable to use Georgian clergymen, who knew this region well, for missionary activity in Abkhazia. The Synod decided to elevate the Hegumen of the Tsageri monastery, Anton Dadiani, to the rank of archimandrite and to define the baptism of unbelievers in Abkhazia as his main duty (Khorava, 2021).

On February 12, 1833, the Exarch of Georgia, Archbishop Moses, ordained the Hegumen Anton Dadiani as archimandrite. The Exarch appointed as his assistants the Hegumen of the Tsageri Church of the Dormition of the Most Holy Theotokos David Akhvlediani, the priest of the Martvili Church of the Dormition of the Most Holy Theotokos Simon Zhordania, and the hieromonk of the Tsageri Church Teopane Gabunia (Khorava, 2021). In the spring of 1834, Archimandrite Anton and his assistants arrived in Abkhazia and began missionary work in the political centre of the principality – Likhni. The Prince's family lived there, and his support was of great importance to the missionaries. Besides, Christianity was still preserved there, and the locals were easily christened (Rogava, 2002).

The positive results of Archimandrite Anton's missionary work soon became obvious. From March to May of 1834, 155 individuals were baptized in Likhni alone. In the Bzipi region, the missionaries were greatly assisted in baptizing the Abkhazians by the prince's mother, Tamar Dadiani. The missionaries also moved to the Abzhuia region. In 1834, 156 people were christened in Kvitouli, 93 in Tamishi, and 72 in Kindghi. In total, the missionaries christened 554 Abkhazians in the first year (Rogava, 2002). The newly baptized individuals were given a brass cross, as well as money gift (20-50 kopecks) for buying linen for a shirt (Gamakharia, 2005). The process of converting pagan and Muslim Abkhazians continued in the following years too.

From the second half of the 1830s, missionary work was hampered by a number of factors: the clergy who arrived from Samegrelo and Lechkhumi were infected with malaria, which prevented their activities; if in the first years the population of coastal strip was baptized, now it was the turn of mountainous villages. A significant part of the population living on the coast were mainly Georgians who had become Abkhazians and they were not particularly averse to returning to the religion of their ancestors. Besides, they still treated abandoned or destroyed churches there with reverence. And in the mountains lived pagan and Muslim population that had migrated from the North Caucasus, who actively opposed the missionaries. For them, the spread of Christianity was a strengthening of Russian power, which was unacceptable to them, and a break in ties with their fraternal mountaineers. They understood that the authorities wanted them to be baptized to achieve their political goals, so they fiercely resisted the process of christening. In addition, material situation of the missionaries worsened (Rogava, 2002). Despite the difficulties, the Georgian missionaries continued their activities in Abkhazia. On November 18, 1842, Archimandrite Anton was ordained Bishop of Samegrelo, but even after that he did not cease to patronize and help Georgian missionaries. In 1843, they christened 149 individuals in Abkhazia, and in 1844, another 350 individuals (Gamakharia, 2005).

At the end of the 1840s, the Russian government came to the conclusion that it was necessary to form a separate eparchy in Abkhazia. Mikheil Sharvashidze also strongly desired the formation of an episcopal see in Abkhazia and in 1849 addressed the Exarch of Georgia with a corresponding request on this matter. On April 30, 1851, by order of the Emperor, the eparchy of Abkhazia was created with the aim of restoring Orthodox Christianity. On September 8, in the Sioni Cathedral, Archimandrite Germane Gogelashvili, the confessor of Mikheil Sharvashidze, was ordained Bishop of Abkhazia (Khorava, 2021). In fact, by creating the Eparchy of

Abkhazia, the government was trying to distance the Principality of Abkhazia from the Eparchy of Samegrelo.

With the beginning of the Eastern War (1853-1856), Russia was forced to withdraw military units from Abkhazia. The missionaries also left the Principality of Abkhazia. The occupation of Abkhazia by the Ottoman Empire prevented the spread of Christianity in the region. After the end of the war, missionary activity resumed. On October 2, 1857, Bishop Germane Gogelashvili was transferred to the Imereti See, and on October 6, Archimandrite Geronti Papitashvili was ordained Bishop of Abkhazia. It was at this time that the first Abkhazian clergy appeared, among whom was a resident of the village of Likhni, priest of the Likhni church, Ioane Gegia. He had an excellent knowledge of his native Abkhaz and Georgian languages and was engaged in teaching; mention should also be made of Ioane, who after getting education at the Samegrelo Theological School, worked in the villages of Abkhazia from 1858: in Anukhva as a deacon, and in Eshera and Tkvarcheli as a priest (Gamakharia, 2005).

From church registers of 1858 it becomes clear that in the principality of Abkhazia, along with the Muslim population, there lived also “pagans”, that is, people who did not consider themselves to belong to any traditional religion. This fact is also confirmed by information from a member of the Caucasian Department of the Russian Geographic Society, S. Pushkarev, who was in Abkhazia in 1854, that “one part of the Abkhazians are Orthodox Christians, the other one are Muslims. They are outnumbered by those who do not recognize any religion” (Pushkarev, 1854). Moreover, according to his information, the Abkhazians were Christians and Muslims only in name, as they rarely performed religious rites (Pushkarev, 1854). This fact clearly demonstrates the religious picture of Abkhazia at that time.

The complete data from the 1858 registers for eight churches in Abkhazia are as follows:

1. Likhni Church of the Dormition of the Most Holy Theotokos

Priest of the parish of the village of Likhni Iovane son of Zakaria Gegia; deacon Tadeoz son of Nikoloz Sartania; Timote son of Markoz Sakhokia.

Village of Atara: 1). Tavadi Kvaji son of Jigva Sharvashidze. 16 y.o. Baptismal name – Grigoli (Muslim).

Village of Likhni: 2). Tagushan daughter of Chikhchibai, wife of peasant Ioane Kapanadze. Baptismal name – Mariami. 30 y. 3). Muradov Circassian. 25 y.o. Baptismal name – Mose (Muslim); 4). Tchitchin Ghurghulia, son of Tatar. 25 y.o. Baptismal name – Konstantine (Muslim); 5). Fatishi, daughter of peasant Masrinq'va Janava. 3. y.o. Baptismal name – Potine (pagan); 6). Tagvagva, daughter of peasant Mazdo Geriava. 8 y.o. Baptismal name – Mariam (pagan).

2. Kvitali and Tamushi Church of Saint Nicholas

Priest of the parish of the churches of the villages of Kvitali and Tamushi, Giorgi son of Svimon Akhlobiani; priest Dimitri son of Nikoloz Khutsiev, who is part of the retinue of the Bishop of Abkhazia; psalm-chanter Iulo son of Davit Topuria.

Village of Kvitali: 7). Khpfsinjiki son of Salmakva. 18 y.o. Baptismal name – Ioane (Muslim); 8). Seignorial serf Amida daughter of Dzuku Ashibaia. 23 y.o. Baptismal name – Elisabedi (Muslim); 9). Seignorial serf Kvati son of Gojo Jiki. 28 y.o. Baptismal name – Petre (Muslim); 10). Peasant Taba daughter of Tanshvi Khinjia. 33 y.o. Baptismal name – Nino (Muslim); 11). Peasant Gvashana daughter of Quasaj Ashua, living in Kvitali. 25 y.o. (Muslim).

Village of Tamishi: 12). Peasant Gudia son of Khutu Kartozia. Baptismal name – Aleksi. 15 y.o. (pagan); 13). Khvarasha daughter of Tikva Kartozia. 11 y.o. Baptismal name – Elisabed (pagan); 14). Seignorial peasant Gedlachi son of Kaku Danelia. 18 y.o. Baptismal name – Dimitri (pagan).

3. Shuatskali Church of the Most Holy Theotokos

Priest of the parish of the Shuatskali Church of the Saviour, Giorgi son of Markoz Gegetchkori; deacon – Isaia son of Davit Sajaia.

Village of Shuatskali: 15). Peasant Seluq Karchava. 45 y.o. Baptismal name – Grigoli; 16). Their son Pasa. 16 y.o. Baptismal name – Petre; 17). Their daughter Enji. 11 y.o. Baptismal name – Noni; 18). Second daughter Selma, 7 y.o. Baptismal name – Anna; 19). Enji Karchava, brother of Seluk, 30 y.o. Baptismal name – Nikoloz; 20). Second brother Urus Karchava. 21 y.o. Baptismal name – Antoni (Muslim); 21). Patish daughter of Eshbaia, wife of peasant Urus Katsia. 27 y.o. Baptismal name – Potine (Muslim).

4. The Church of the Dormition of the Most Holy Theotokos of the Atsi Parish

Priest of the Atsi parish Mikhail son of Andria Sakhokia, deacon – Tadeoz son of Nikoloz Sarsania.

Village of Atsi: 22). Aznauri Beslan son of Svimon Aqartava. Baptismal name – Besarioni (Muslim); 23). Satqir son of Aznauri Titu Baghbaia. Baptismal name – Svimon. 3 y.o; 24). His sister Ikhishi. Baptismal name – Anna. 5 y.o; 25) Their sister Uruchkhan. Baptismal name – Sopa. 4 y.o (Muslim); 26). Aznauri Reshit Gezardava. Baptismal name – Dimitri. 13 y.o (Muslim); 27). Pati son of Giorgi Bazibaia. Baptismal name – Petre. 7 y.o.

Village of Tasrakva: 28). Marjania, daughter of peasant Arsen Mishkhua. Baptismal name – Mariami (Muslim); 29). Seignorial peasant Khakutsi son of Kamlia Siruava. Baptismal name – Ivane 4 y.o. (Muslim).

5. Atara Church of Saint George

Priest of the Atara parish Anton son of Mose Grigoria, psalm-chanter – Konstantine son of Besarion Topuria.

Village of Atara: 30). Peasant Musa son of Kvasha Tchanibaia, 60 y.o. Baptismal name – Mose; 31). His wife Tigulasa daughter of Zach. 30 y.o. Baptismal name – Salome (Muslim); 32). Bakir son

of Abrag Tchanibaia. Muslim. 11 y.o. Baptismal name – Nikoloz (Muslim); 33). Aznauri Chepaq' son of Uchana Makharia. Muslim. 12 y.o. Baptismal name – Antoni (Muslim); 34). Peasant Gedlach son of Asan Satania. Muslim. 13 y.o. (Muslim);

6. Church of the Mokvi Parish

Priest of the Mokvi parish Spiridon son of Iese Chkhikvadze, psalm-chanter – Zosime son of Davit Khelaia.

Village of Mokvi: 35). Sabed daughter of Gandel Koghonia. 18 y.o.

Village of Morkvila: 36). Serf Kvatali son of Batakva Songulia. 19 y.o. Baptismal name – Kostantine (Muslim). 37). Matsira, daughter of serf Tsa-ghva Meskhia. 15 y.o. Baptismal name – Mariami (Muslim); 38). Amida, daughter of serf Makva Akhibaia. 30 y.o. Baptismal name – Marta (Muslim).

7. Eshkiti Church of the Nativity of the Most Holy Theotokos

Priest of the parish of the village of Eshkiti Giorgi son of Stepane Tcharaia, psalm-chanter – Ioane son of Khukhia Argunia.

Village of Pokveshi: 39). Asanda daughter of Khututi Torbaia, wife of Baka son of Joghoria Sha-kaia. Baptismal name – Elisabedi. 36 y.o. (Muslim); 40). Peasant Azamat son of Batakva Jinjolia (Muslim); 41). Peasant Lapoghu son of Kita Mitagvaria. Baptismal name – Davit. 32 y.o. (Muslim);

Village of Urta: 42). Pedan, daughter of peasant Kvamati Shamugua. 31 y.o. Baptismal name – Pebronia (Muslim); 43). Tagvag, daughter of peasant Khakutsi son of Tasou Dochia. Muslim. 31 y.o. Baptismal name – Irina (Muslim); 44). Patma, daughter of peasant Khushata Pachulia. 26 y.o. Baptismal name – Potine.

8. Mazikhva Church of Saint George

Priest of the Mazikhva parish Nikoloz Grigolia, psalm-chanter – Davit Grigolia.

Postscript: Commoners living in the village of Paptsova.

45). Maji Khalvasha – Matate 67 y.o.; their sons: 46) Sukun – Saba 15 y.o.; 47). Hanashv –

Andria 13 y.o.; 48). Mikhail 10 y.o.; 49). Daughter of Nishe Kukuskeria – Nino. 70 y.o.

Conclusion

The Church Register discussed in this study is a very valuable source for examining the missionary work of the Georgian clergy in Abkhazia. The register lists 21 villages in the Bzipi region: Zvandripshi, Chabalukhva (Chabalurkhva), Likhni, Ebarnukha (Ebernikha), Atsi (Aatsi), Tasrakva, Mazikhva, Paptsova; in Abzhua region: Kvitali, Tamushi (Tamishi), Shuatskali, Atara, Sadepuo (Dopuakit), Mokvi, Morkvila (Merkula), Jali, Tkhina, Eshkiti, Pokveshi, Urta, Tkvarcheli. They are combined into 8 parishes. In these 8 parishes, 201 individuals were baptized in 1858. The work provides a list of the names of the newly baptized, indicating age, previous religion (Muslim or pagan), social status (tavadi, aznauri, peasant), as well as the village, church and clergy. At a superficial glance, it is clear from the list that the surnames and personal names of residents in the Bzipi region are mostly Georgian, although Abkhazian surnames are also present, and in the Abzhua region there are more Georgian (Mingrelian) surnames. It is clearly visible that some Abkhaz surnames have not yet been formed by suffixes and still have the form of nicknames and patronymics. The study of surnames recorded in sources requires a larger amount of material, and it will be possible to say something definite only by studying them ethnolinguistically, which once again testifies to the scholarly value of the presented source.

Thus, the newly introduced archival materials represent an extremely interesting source for studying the ethnic, social, demographic, religious situation and anthroponomy of 19th-century Abkhazia.

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ისტორია

ქართველი მართლმადიდებელი მისიონერების მოღვაწეობა აფხაზეთის სამთავროში (XIX ს.)

გ. სოსიაშვილი*, ბ. ხორავა**, დ. ჭითანავა§

* აკადემიის წევრი, საქართველოს მეცნიერებათა ეროვნული აკადემია, თბილისი

** საქართველოს უნივერსიტეტი, თამაზ ბერაძის სახ. ქართველოლოგიის ინსტიტუტი, თბილისი

§ ივანე ჯავახიშვილის სახ. თბილისის სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტი, ისტორიისა და ეთნოლოგიის ინსტიტუტი, საქართველო

ნაშრომში განხილულია XIX საუკუნეში აფხაზეთის სამთავროში არსებული პოლიტიკური და სარწმუნოებრივი ვითარება, ქართველი სამღვდელოების მისიონერული საქმიანობა, აფხაზებში ქრისტიანობის გავრცელების შედეგები 1858 წლის საეკლესიო მეტრიკული წიგნის საფუძველზე; გაანალიზებულია მისიონერული საქმიანობის მიზეზები და შედეგები; შემოვლებული სახით არის წარმოდგენილი საისტორიო ცენტრალურ არქივში დაცული 1858 წლის საეკლესიო-მეტრიკულ წიგნში ფიქსირებულ პირთა სია, მათი ასაკის, ადრინდელი სარწმუნოებრივი მდგომარეობის (მაპმადიანი, წარმართი), სოციალური კუთვნილების, სოფლის, ეკლესიის და სამღვდელოების აღნიშვნით. ნაშრომში წარმოდგენილი საარქივო მასალა, რომელიც პირველად შემოდის სამეცნიერო მიმოქცევაში, მნიშვნელოვანი წყაროა აფხაზეთის ეთნიკური, სოციალური, დემოგრაფიული, რელიგიური ვითარების და ანთროპონიმიის შესასწავლად.

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