

Sacral Archaics of Ossetian *Kuvd* in the Context of the System of Ancient Techniques of Religious Ecstasy

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Exploring the issues of cosmogony in its relationship with myth and tradition, the historian of religion M. Eliade notes: “La cosmogonie est le modèle exemplaire de toute espèce de « faire » : non seulement parce que le Cosmos est l’archétype idéal à la fois de toute situation créatrice et de toute création – mais aussi parce que le Cosmos est une œuvre divine ; il est donc sanctifié dans sa structure même. Par extension, tout ce qui est parfait, « plein », harmonieux, fertile, en un mot : tout ce qui est « cosmisé », tout ce qui ressemble à un Cosmos, est sacré. Faire bien quelque chose, œuvrer, construire, créer, structurer, donner forme, in-former, former – tout ceci revient à dire qu’on amène quelque chose à l’existence, qu’on lui donne « vie », en dernière instance, qu’on la fait ressembler à l’organisme harmonieux par excellence, le Cosmos. Or, le Cosmos, pour le répéter, est l’œuvre exemplaire des Dieux, c’est leur chef-d’œuvre” (Eliade 1963: 46f.). According to one of the Indian cosmogonic myths, the Universe develops cyclically, when periods of creation interchange with periods of destruction. At the origins of these processes three gods stand: Vishnu, Brahma and Shiva, who make up the so-called Trimurti, the Hindu triad. Vishnu sleeps lying on the serpent Ananta, which symbolizes Infinity. Ananta rests in the ocean of the Unconscious. From Vishnu’s navel a lotus sprouts, which contains the awakening Brahma. When Brahma opens his eyes, the universe arises. This universe is Vishnu’s dream. Vishnu dreams of the world he knew, and Brahma creates matter and life on the basis of his visions. But this world is not perfect, and then Shiva begins to dance to destroy it and let it be reborn again. When Brahma closes his eyes to go back to sleep, everything is destroyed. We can observe similar myths of the “birth and death” of the universe in many peoples. It is quite possible that cosmogony is nothing but a model of the rebirth of the world in case of its destruction.

The cosmogonic myth of the Ossetians is inextricably linked, first of all, with the Nart epic. The system of the cosmogonic beliefs constitutes a “world model” of the culture of the bearers of the Narts’ epic tradition. Considering the cosmogony of the epic, we can speak of two spatial models: vertical and

horizontal. In short, the vertical model includes the relationship of the Narts with the celestial pantheon headed by *Xwycæwtty Xwycaw* (God of the gods), while the horizontal model is based on the relationship of the Narts with the surrounding world. According to Ossetian cosmogonic ideas, the Narts' time continuum covers the period from the epoch of primordial creation to the "break" with the celestials, the transition of the Narts from the mythical time to the historical, the destruction of all the creatures of the mythical time (*Wadmertæ, Gwymirytæ, Wæjgwytæ*) and the transformation of Chaos into Cosmos (Tskhovrebov/Gostneva 2012: 382).

In this paper we will touch upon one of the most important elements of Ossetian cosmogony, the concept of *kuvd* in the context of the system of archaic techniques for achieving religious ecstasy. What is *kuvd* and why do we single out this term, which combines seemingly completely mutually exclusive notions, in the cosmogonic context? According to the definition of the famous ethnographer V. S. Warziati, *kuvd* is a ritual feast with sacrifice, which belonged to the most important institutions of social life of the Ossetians (Warziati 2007: 153). Another meaning of this religious and cultural term is such an important concept of spiritual life of the Ossetians as prayer. The *kuvd* ceremony was led by *kuvæg*. Abaev defines the term *kuvæg* as 'worshipper' (Abaev 1958–89: 1/614), although in the present context it would be probably more appropriate to translate it as 'priest'. Our interpretation of the term is as follows: *kuvd*-prayer, being a component of the *kuvd* as a ritual feast, usually with sacrifice (Abaev, *ibid.*), is a transformed shamanic ritual, whose primary, archaic essence (idea) is preserved in its name, i. e. *kuvd*-prayer, the original purpose of which was to enter an "altered state of consciousness" for obtaining mystical or religious experience. The Narts organized a common feast (*kuvd*) in a ritual big house and for them this was an action of the highest sacredness, the most important cultic act of their social life (Dzhykkaity 2012: 375). Considering the forms of verbal contact between the *kuvæg*-priest and the worshippers as a way of teaching communication, Chochiev writes: "Ass-Alanian *kuvd*-prayer is fulfilment of the public ritual (*kubh*) of the Indo-European epoch". Further on in the text a rather consistent and interesting description of the structure of the *kuvd* follows, indicating the role of each participant of the ritual, starting with three *xistærtæ* (The Elders), who lead the ceremony of "prayer-feast", distribute the sacrificial shares, and according to the centuries-honoured ceremonial, perform the *kuvd*, that is, "the public ritual of joining the Truth" (Chochiev 2001: 57). Warziati noted that "the prayers (during the *kuvd*, A. Ch.) are a sample of verbal magic and are built according to a certain plan". And further: "The preservation of them (the texts of the *kuvd*-prayers, A. Ch.) is promoted by the long-standing opinion that the word in the sacred

formula is saturated with magical power. Its pronunciation, according to the ancients, should lead to the desired result" (Warziati 2007: 166, 174).

In the modern interpretation of history as a science, there has always been an invisible conflict between "mystical" experience and scientific enquiry. The cyclical, sacred time that is characteristic of religious communities does not always fit into the scientific conception of civilized societies, which view history through the prism of linear time, that is, only as a set of dates and events arranged chronologically. However, it should be taken into account that, what we call today "shamanism" and "magic", for the ancients was something extremely important, comparable to what the modern science means for us. Science is clearly prejudiced against such concepts as "shamanism", "plants-teachers", "altered state of consciousness", and yet it is impossible to find an explanation for many phenomena in world culture, especially mythology, without resorting to such terminology.

It is from this point of view that the consistent logical chain constructed by Chochiev and Warziati seems to lack one important link. There could not be any mystical revelation from above to a priest (*kuvæg*) just like that. This state was achieved either by long diligent prayers in solitude (hermitage), abstinence, fasting, or by mass intake of some psychoactive substance that allowed the participants of the ceremony to enter an "altered state of consciousness". For example, Scythians widely used cannabis as an ecstatic agent in funeral ceremonies. Herodotus described felt-covered idols with heated stones in the centre of the hut. The priests threw hemp grains on them and received ecstasy in clouds of intoxicating smoke, in which they came into contact with spirits and souls of the dead. Herodotus (IV, 75), who did not understand the religious nature of the action wrote that the smoke made them "so happy that they howled in joy" (Eliade 1978: 336). The Germans prepared a decoction of hallucinogenic mushrooms, which they drank before battle, transforming themselves into berserks – fierce destroyers dressed in bear skins. In the Indian Rigveda and the Iranian Avesta we find mention of the cult drink Soma (Haoma) or Amrita, whose cult in both cultures bears a discernable shamanistic mark.

In the Avesta, Haoma is a multifaceted concept: it is both the god who revealed himself to the prophet Zarathustra, and the deified hallucinogenic drink that gives immortality and a transcendental state of merging with the whole world. Besides, it is the plant itself, from which the juice is squeezed to make the Haoma-drink. What kind of plant it was, is not established with certainty; G. Gordon Wasson in his work "Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality" identified the Haoma with the hallucinogenic mushroom fly agaric (Wasson 1972: 10 et passim). In other words, Haoma is a triune deity. A part

of the Scythians, whom the Persians called *Saka haumavarga* (Yamauchi 1982: 101) venerated Haoma (cf. the Ossetic name of hop, *hwymællæg*, A. Ch.). According to the Avesta, Haoma became the first priest who glorified the celestials. The solemn sacrifice of the Haoma (Avestan *haomayasna*) guaranteed immortality for the believers, as well as stability of the world order in the cosmos and society. Toporov describes the rituals associated with the Haoma as follows: “Yasna began with the sacrifice of a bull, then the Haoma was rubbed and mixed with milk. The resulting drink of immortality was dedicated to Ahuramazda. The moment of mixing the Haoma juice with milk symbolized the miraculous appearance of Zarathustra in the world. With the last clear in the world’s history to be created by the Saoshyants (saviours), the world would return to the original perfect state of universal immortality ... One of the hallucinogenic effects of Haoma was to alter (or even ‘invert’) the perception of spatio-temporal and subject-object relations. At the mythological level, this could correspond to such paradoxes as the simultaneous presence of Haoma in heaven and on earth, and especially the combination in Haoma of the hypostases of the god (in particular, Mithra, the bearer and guardian of the world law), the priest offering sacrifice to him, and the sacrifice itself (compare with the trifunctional system of the mythical Nartian society, tales of Tsartsyata, Indian *trimurti*, mythology of the Scythians, Germans, Slavs, the trinity of God in Christianity, etc., A. Ch.) ... At the same time Zarathushtra refers to Haoma and as a man” (Toporov 1988: 578f.). The god Haoma belongs to the category of the “dying and resurrecting deities”, such as Dionysus, Adonis, Osiris etc. Dumézil interpreted the image of the Nart Soslan as a solar mythical hero, a representative of the “dying-resurrecting gods” in the Scytho-Sarmatian mythology. The Avesta says that Haoma was dismembered by other deities, and from his body they prepared a divine drink of immortality, which symbolized “a salvific act of cosmic sacrifice, as a result of which universal order is established”. Zarathustra praises Haoma for being intoxicating, inspiring, giving strength of passion, capacity for defence, health, healing power, development, growth, power extending to the whole body, knowledge. Through these gifts Zarathustra overcomes “the enmity of all hostile devas and mortals, sorcerers and sorceresses, *kavi* and *karapan* rulers, and (the enmity of) false and bipedal false teachers, and (the enmity of) bipedal wolves and quadrupedal wolves” (Meletinskij 1957: 46).

With the rise of Zoroastrianism, the fire altar becomes the centre of the cult. According to Zarathustra’s doctrine, sacrifice is the basis of theological meditation. Zarathustra understood the eschatological fire in such a way that, “... nonobstant sa fonction justiciare il purifie et « spiritualise » le monde”. He also notes that “... le plus ancien zoroastrisme, si imparfaitement reflété par

les *gāthās*, semble accorder la primauté à la « sagesse », à l' « illumination » intérieure auprès du feu sacrificiel" (Eliade 1978: 329f.).

However, Eliade also states that the function of the cult of Ahuramazda was much wider: "Suivant une interprétation récente, l'officiant acquiert, par le truchement du rite (*yasna*), la condition de *maga*; c'est-à-dire qu'il jouit d'une expérience extatique qui procure l' « illumination » (*čisti*). Durant cette illumination, le prêtre-sacrificateur parvient à séparer son essence spirituelle (*mēnōk*) de sa nature corporelle (*gētik*); autrement dit, il récupère la condition de pureté et d'innocence qui précédait le « mélange » des deux essences. Or, ce « mélange » eut lieu à la suite de l'attaque d'Ahriman (on his brother Ohrmazd, A. Ch.). Par conséquent, le sacrificateur contribue à la restauration de la situation primordiale, à la « transfiguration » (*frašō-kereti*) du monde, œuvre rédemptrice inaugurée par le prêtre-exemplaire Zarathustra. On pourrait même dire que le sacrificateur participe déjà au monde transfiguré. L'état de *maga* est obtenu surtout par le sacrifice de *haoma*, « boisson d'immortalité » que le prêtre absorbe au cours de la cérémonie. Or le *haoma* est riche en *xvarenah*, fluide sacré, à la fois igné, lumineux, vivifiant et spermatique. Ahura Mazdā est par excellence le possesseur du *xvarenah*; mais cette « flamme » divine jaillit également du front de Mithra (*Yasht* X, 127) et, comme une lumière solaire, émane de la tête des souverains. Cependant, tout être humain possède son *xvarenah*, et au jour de la transfiguration, i.e. de la Rénovation finale, « la grande lumière semblant sortir du corps brillera tout le temps sur cette terre ». En absorbant rituellement le *haoma*, le sacrificateur surpasse sa condition humaine, se rapproche d'Ahura Mazdā et anticipe *in concreto* la Rénovation universelle" (Eliade 1978: 315f.).

There were different ways of entering an "altered state of consciousness". Ossetian prayer included, among other things, rhythmic subdivision of the spoken speech, precise use of rhyme and assonance, and skilful construction of phrases. The poetic form of the prayers was also of particular importance for the *kuvd* ceremony (Warziati 2007: 175). In some schools of Christian ascetics, one of the ways of "opening" the mind was the frequent and rhythmic repetition of prayers, while observing a strict fast. Orthodox monks through abstinence and constant prayers acquired abilities for healing and foresight (monk Abel, Seraphim of Sarov, etc.) acquired the experience of luminophany (vision of the bright divine light, followed by "projecting a man into a Universe different in quality, an entirely different world, transcendent and holy," Eliade 1979: 76). "Par le mystère de la Passion et de la Résurrection, le chrétien abolit le temps profane et il est intégré dans le temps sacré primordial" (Eliade 1957: 30).

Amazonian shamans still use in their practices "plant teachers" (*plantas maestros*), one of which is a powerful hallucinogenic remedy called *ayahuasca*,

a decoction, the main component of which is the aquatic liana *Banisteriopsis coapi*. Different tribes of the Amazon basin call this decoction differently, but its basic function remains unchanged: making one enter an “altered state of consciousness” in order to gain mystical experience and sacred knowledge. For example, the Machigenga tribes inhabiting the upper Madre de Dios River call the *ayahuasca* “*kama-rampi*”, which means “to die and rise again”. This name most accurately reflects the essence of the ceremony. The *ayahuasca* decoction is prepared from two ingredients – the stem of the *ayahuasca* liana and the leaves of the *shakrun* or *chakrun* tree. The tradition of the *ayahuasca* dates back several millennia. Aborigines believe that the recipe for its preparation was given to people from above. Indeed, it is not even possible to combine these two components by chance, with such a vast diversity of fauna, numbering more than eighty thousand different species. Shamans define four components of a proper ceremony. These are the *ayahuasca*, the “place of power”, the shaman, and God, although the concept of god in the context of the *ayahuasca* ceremony is, in our opinion, very blurred. Over time, experienced shamans reach such a level of mastery as to independently enter an “altered state of consciousness” during the ceremony without resorting to the *ayahuasca*. A very important role is played by shamanic songs called *ikaro*, which accompany the ceremony, and with the help of which the shaman or shamans control the whole course of the ceremony. The singing of the *ikaro* is usually accompanied by a rhythm, which the shaman produces with the help of a kind of instrument made of a bunch of dry leaves, called *chakapa*. In Siberia and North America, the function of the *chakapa* was performed by a drum. The text of the *ikaro* usually resembles a prayer, an appeal to the higher powers, the spirits of the jungle with a request to grant the participants of the ceremony both physical health and knowledge of God. The *ayahuasca* ceremony is still used by shamans in the jungle to successfully treat many mental illnesses, including drug addiction.

Another rather serious “plant of power” for the inhabitants of Amazonia is tobacco, which in the jungle is used exclusively for ritual purposes, but not as a product of constant use. In our opinion, the parallels with the Ossetian *kuvd*-prayer are self-explanatory, if we take into account that, according to Chochiev, in Ossetian society “knowledge was communicated in the form of hymns (*zar*), songs (*ǰar*), prayer recitations (*arǰaw*), prayers (*kuvd*), as well as ... prayers combined with dance (*kavd*). The Nart epic preserved them in the context of *kadaeg*” (Chochiev 2001: 57). All these elements are present in one form or another in the religious traditions of the Amazonian Indians.

The Rigveda consists of hymns that have been handed down by word of mouth through generations of priestly families. The hymn, along with

sacrifice, was considered one of the main means of influencing the deity. In a state of mystical trance Zarathustra heard the voice of Ahuramazda and contemplated his visions. Scythian priests-Enarei, effeminate servants of the cult of Aphrodite-Argympasa, were in fact shamans, and parallels with them can be found among Ossetian priests called *Зwary lægtæ* (Chibirov 2012: 97). In Ossetian religious practice there was such a notion as *kwyryszaw*, old men and women endowed with the gift of prophecy who on New Year's Eve went to a field near the Tartup sanctuary where they fell asleep. During sleep the soul of the *kwyryszaw* would leave the body and go on a journey to a magical meadow in order to steal a sheaf with a handful of bread grains for future harvests (Chibirov 2008: 378). The Ossetian musical tradition included "mythological songs-prayers", addresses to representatives of the Upper World of the Ossetian cosmogony, such as Wastyrgý, Æfsati, Alardy (Alborov/Chibirov 2012: 361). Songs played a major role in the cult of Ahuramazda, if we consider that the name of paradise, *garō.damāna*, meant literally "the house of song".

As for the Nart epic, signs of shamanism can be observed in the cycle about Wyrzymag (his transformation into a dog) and about Xamyc, whose wife turned into a frog. Afsati, the deity of wild animals in the Ossetian pantheon, could revive animals killed by hunters wrapping their bones in their skins. The Younger Edda tells of Thor's goat. When Thor, staying overnight at a certain peasant, slaughtered his goats, which were harnessed to his cart, he treated their meat to the owners. The next morning, he took Mjollnir's hammer and hallowed the remains of the goats, which immediately rose to their feet (Eliade 1968: 140). There are similar legends in other cultures and traditions. The Bible tells of a vision of Ezekiel in which the Lord commands him to gather dried human bones from the midst of a field. Subsequently, the Lord brought people back to life in Ezekiel's vision (ibid.). In ancient Egypt it was proper to preserve bones for later resurrection (Eliade, op. cit.: 140, n. 3). In the Nart epic, clear signs of shamanism are present in the cycle about Soslan and Bedukha, in the story of Soslan's journey to the land of the dead:

By that time he had reached the place of his wife Bedukha, and, lo and behold, Bedukha's body is there, but her head is not. Soslan sheds his tears and kills himself by weeping. "Why isn't my wife's head on her body?", he asks the other dead, "I came here to see her". "Her head should come here soon too", the dead told him. And, indeed, the head soon appeared there and got stuck to the body. (Khamitsaeva/Dzhikaev 2003-12: 11/519)

Reading these and some other plots of tales, one realizes that the Nart epic could not emerge but through a tradition of entering the "altered state of

consciousness". Similar plots can be found in various cultures of the world. The Greek Orpheus, a healer, musician and visionary, descends into hell for recovering the soul of his wife Eurydice. Orpheus' demise can be described as shamanic, when his head, cut off by the Bacchantes and thrown into the Hebrus River, floated and sang all the way to the island of Lesbos. Subsequently, it served as an oracle (Eliade, op. cit.: 391). A Chinese myth tells of a saint Muliän, who in a mystical vision learns that his mother is suffering in hell from starvation; he descends into hell to save her. In another myth, a man goes to the other world to find his dead wife. He finds her near a spring, but she begs him to leave because she has now become a spirit. Still, the spouses escape from the Kingdom of the Dead together (Eliade, op. cit.: 356f.). In medieval European prose, Dante Alighieri descends into hell to rescue his wife Beatrice. Soslan descends to the netherworld on his horse. Similarly, Hermóðhr in the Nordic sagas descends to Hel on Odin's horse Sleipnir in order to recover the soul of his brother Baldr. Eliade (op. cit.: 383) believes that "ce type de descente aux Enfers est nettement chamanique". In shamanic rituals and in various mythologies the horse occupies a special place. The horse – first of all a carrier of souls and a funeral animal – is used by the shaman in various situations as a means of helping to reach a state of ecstasy, so to speak "to come out of oneself", thanks to which a mystical journey is possible. In the mythology of the horse, not infernal, but rather funerary character prevails; the horse is a mythical image of Death, so it is included in the ideology and practice of ecstasy. According to Eliade, the horse takes the deceased to the otherworld; it performs the so-called level break, the transition from one world to another. The funeral horse carrying the soul facilitated trance and the ecstatic flight of the soul to forbidden lands. It was for this purpose that a horse was dedicated to the deceased in the Ossetian tradition. In the shamanic rituals of many peoples of the world, symbolic ride expressed leaving the body, the "mort mystique" of the shaman (Eliade, op. cit.: 366).

Another way of transcending the boundaries of one's self was ritual dressing up as a woman, which is found in many traditions. Participants of such rituals are symbolically endowed with androgynous features. In this context, the myths about the androgyny of the ancestors of people in various cultures are very interesting, as well as the popularity of cosmogonies that claim that the world emerged from the cosmic Egg or was formed as a result of the disintegration of an originally unified entity that had the form of a sphere. Plato in the "Symposium" (183E–193D) describes the original human being as a bipedal being of spherical shape. From the notion of a bipedal deity as the paradigm and beginning of all existence the idea arises that all being is endowed with the qualities of both sexes. This can be confirmed by the androgynous nature

of many ancient gods. In the Nart epic there are characters with anthropomorphic masculinity and femininity, one of them being the elder of the Narts Wyrzmag (Chibirov 2012: 101), this undoubtedly emphasizes his priestly (shamanic) functions in the Narts' society. The biblical Adam, from whose rib God created Eve, was also an androgyne. Thus, according to the ancient rabbinical compendium *Bereshit-rabbah*, "Adam and Eve were made back-to-back, joined at the shoulders; then God divided them with an axe stroke, cutting them in two" (Eliade 1979: 104). The most important couple in the Indian pantheon, Shiva-Kali, is also sometimes depicted as one being. Androgynous were the Egyptian god Horus, the Scandinavian Loki and Odin, the Iranian god of infinite time Zurvan, who gave birth to the god of Light Ohrmazd and the god of Darkness Ahriman etc. A. H. Krappe, to whose observations Eliade refers, comes to the conclusion that the androgyny of the original man was a specific feature of the Indo-European tradition, and that the myth of the androgynous Adam arose under the influence of this tradition on Semitic mythology, which influenced each other from the earliest times (Krappe 1936: 321f.). Some religious festivals among the Greeks were accompanied by what was called "changing of clothes". Similar traditions were observed in India, Iran, and other Asian countries (Eliade 1979: 113). There was a much deeper meaning to this whole culture than might appear at first. "The principal function of this rite ... is, to be brief, a coming out of one's self, a transcending of one's own historically controlled situation, and a recovering of an original situation, no longer human or historical since it precedes the foundation of human society; a paradoxical situation impossible to maintain in profane time, in a historical epoch, but which it is important to reconstitute periodically in order to restore, if only for a brief moment, the initial completeness, the intact source of holiness and power" (Eliade, *ibid.*).

And yet, could the mysterious Haoma be reflected in the Nart epic and, as a consequence, in the spiritual life of the Ossetians as one of the most important elements of the *kuvd*? It is known that heroes of the Nart epic did not need priests, intermediaries between themselves and gods, and addressed the latter directly. In the Ossetian Narts' tales, the Narts did this also with the help of prayer called *kuvd rong*. The word *rong* is inextricably linked with the Nart epic, in which it appears as a favourite drink of the Narts, who are also said to be "table companions of the gods" (Abaev 1949: 348). The etymology of *rong* is of interest. According to Abaev, in the Old Iranian "Scythian" dialect, which was the ancestor of Ossetian, there was a word *frāna-*, which corresponds to Old Indian *prāṇa-* "spirit". The meaning of "spirit", as in Latin *spiritus*, was transferred to "spirits", heady drinks, and in general, to the state of intoxication (Abaev 1949: 353). A very important role in religious-magical ceremonies

of Alano-Ossetians was also played by beer (*æluton*), which had a high sacral meaning. Beer combined the fruits of the earth and the sun, and symbolized a kind of sacrifice to the glory of divine forces. “Endowed with the reflexes of a trifunctional structure, beer was a mediator in mythologically organized space, a kind of mediator between harmony and chaos, between the upper and lower cosmological spheres” (Warziati 2007: 151f.).

In this context, it is probably worth paying attention to the Ossetian name of hop, *xumællæg*. It is quite possible that in the *rong*, in its mythical and sacral nature for the Narts, as well as in the Ossetian “drink of immortality” *æluton*, we can see echoes of Haoma being a prototype of both *rong* and beer. In answer to Zarathushtra’s question as to the first man who squeezed Haoma, and the boon that befell him for his deed, the deity Haoma says the following: “Vivahvant was the first man who squeezed me for the corporeal world; that good befell him, that profit reached him, that to him a son was born, Yima the mighty [or brilliant] rich in herds, the brightest among those born, the sun-like among men. For he made, in his reign, animals and men immortal, the waters and plants not withering, so that they ate unfading food” (Salemann 1880: 175). It follows from the text that the golden age is a consequence of the appearance of the divine drink Haoma. Dzitstsojty (2017: 329) considers a similar connection between the appearance of the drink of immortality *æluton* and the golden age in the Ossetian tradition.

Of special interest are descriptions of the ritual bowls for the *kuvd*-prayer. Often the craftsmen who made the bowls put a deep esoteric meaning into their design, which testifies to the archaic nature of the sacred action, including parallels to the Bowl *Wacamongæ* described in the Nart epic (Warziati 2007: 127, 129). The sacrificial food presented for the *kuvd* as an element of ceremony, parallels to which can be traced in Zoroastrianism (sacrifice as the basis of theological meditation, A. Ch.), is also worth separate consideration.

The Ossetian *kuvd* could not be imagined without the ritual dance performed by the participants of the ceremony, in which another way of immersing oneself in the “mystical ecstasy” lies. Some researchers (e.g., Chochiev) believe that the word *kaft* ‘dance’ can belong with this series. However, Abaev considers the word *kaft* exclusively as a dance, without any ritualistic associations. According to him, the etymology of the word *kaft* goes back to the Kabardinian *qafä* ‘dance’ (Abaev 1958–89: 1/567). As a ritual dance in the context of Ossetian tradition, it is rather the ancient round dance called *simd*, usually accompanied by choral singing, that suggests itself. *Simd* was also a favourite dance of the Narts’ heroes. According to Abaev, “it began at a slow pace and, gradually accelerating, reached such a stormy force and impetuosity that weaker participants risked the integrity of their limbs in it”. Then Abaev

writes that those who perform *simd* “find God’s favour”, which indicates to a ritual significance of the *simd*. The following passage should be quoted in full: “It seems ... probable that Ossetic *sīm-* | *sem-* adjoins to Georgian *sama*, *samaja*, Arabic, Persian *samā’* ... The source of both Ossetic *sem-* and Georgian *samaja* should be considered as Arabic, Persian *samā’* ‘ritual dervish dance’, ‘saltatio’, ‘chorea’ ... In the practice of Sufi mystics, *samā’* as a combination of music (vocal, later instrumental) and all-consuming collective dancing acquired ritual significance and served as a means of bringing the participants into a state of mystical ecstasy” (Abaev 1958–89: III/108f.). It is quite possible that the magical ritual *kuvd*, an element of which is the extatic dance *simd*, is a distant echo of very important elements of Ossetian magical practice, which, most likely, were some kind of “instruction” allowing to enter an “altered state of consciousness” to obtain religious experience.

Thus, the modern Ossetian ritual feast *kuvd* can be interpreted as a reflection of an ancient mystery. From the above discussion we can conclude that its prototype together with the accompanying practices of acquiring mystical experience, such as prayer, dance and the use of psychoactive substances, provides the missing link between the space that we call real with the sacred. Over time, the sacred essence of *kuvd* has been distorted. The surviving form of the ceremony is far from the original idea. The “drink of power” (the essence of hallucinogen), which expanded the mind of the participants of the primary *kuvd*-prayer, making them enter an “altered state of consciousness”, transformed into ordinary alcohol. Warziati writes: “In the popular consciousness, alcoholic beverages in general and beer in particular were identified with the act of sacrifice. At ritually significant moments they were used to worship and communicate with supernatural forces” (Warziati 2007: 303). Describing the traditions of the modern Ossetian meals, in particular, the tripod table *fɯng* as one of the most important elements of the *kuvd*, Warziati notes that among the Ossetians “ideas and norms associated with meals practically did not cease to exist, although the tripod table itself has gone out of active use. In recent decades it has started to revive, but already as a material shell, as a sign of a certain stage of cultural history, as an ethnic and regional symbol” (Warziati 2007: 125). This situation can reasonably be projected onto the *kuvd* ceremony itself, as a shell of something more valuable and sacred, which was lost over time in previous generations of the Ossetians.

For many reasons, the present paper cannot naturally claim being a full-fledged research. In the course of the discussion far more questions arise than answers are given. In the end, the topic of the *kuvd* as a practice of achieving an “altered state of consciousness” for mystical (religious) experience, turns out to be much broader than the primary idea, because we are situated in a

continuum connecting the corporeal with the divine. In our opinion, the connection between the past and the present is not limited only to a chronological set of historical facts, there is something more important, some missing link that unites the experience of the “mystical” with the experience of science. It is a search for this link that is the focus of this paper.