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THE HISTORICAL DYNAMICS OF THE LINGUISTIC-CULTURAL SITUATION OF THE BERIKA, THE MAIN PARTICIPANT OF THE FESTIVAL OF MASKED CHARACTERS

Nighabi is an Arabic word denoting a veil for the female's face. In Eastern Georgia the following terms denote a mask: *masckaradi*, *beriko*, *berikani*, *bereka*, *pariki*, and in Imereti, *kvakhabera*.

The original name of the participants of the festival was *beri*; its diminutive form *berika* / *berekani* / *bereka* is attested by ethnographic material. According to Svan ethnographic evidence, the principal character of the festival was called *beri* / *berol* / *qeen*. In Svan *ol* is a diminutive suffix, analogously to the *ik* suffix in the Georgian *berika*. *Ber* / *berika* / *berol*, the Christian *St. Basil* and *vasila* are of a common provenance.

In the Mtiuluri and Gudamaqruli New Year ritual, the *beri* character is linked to the common Georgian deity *boseli*, known under the name of *bosel* / *bosla*, and in Svaneti under the epithet *bomgha* / *banghu* / *bemghu*; under Christian influence, this deity became related to St Basil, on the basis of phonetic similarity.

The term *beri* entered Georgian from the Middle Persian, denoting 'aged', 'old', 'founder of a sect', while in Modern Persian a 'saint', 'priest' (M. Andronikasvili).

In the meaning of an 'old man' ('elder', 'chief'), *beri* comes from Persian, later acquiring cultic character on local ground.

Bera means: 1) an aged person, an old man, elder, chief (*berni kalakisani* 'elders of the city'); 2) a churchman, corresponding to the Greek 'monk'; 3) child, offspring; 4) a building; 5) big: the big finger (*beratiti* 'big finger', grandmother / *dideba* / *berdeda*: *Khevsur*).

The largest loaf of a male face, represented by astral signs, was called *katsa basila*, *keria bera*. It was beseeched to grant a bumper crop, increase of livestock and a peaceful year. *Keria*, baked before going out to plough, was identical with *keria-beria*.

The same function of *basila*, *beri* and *berika*, attested in the New Year ritual, points to the genetic relationship of *ber* / *bera* / *berika* and *basili* / *vasila*.

The character *beri* / *bera* / *berol* / *qeen* / *vasili* / *basili* / *berika*, as well as *nepe* / *mepe*, are the names of one and the same person. *Beri*, as well as *mepe* / *nepe*, points to his high social and religious rank he is at the top of social hierarchy, as a person possessing divine power, who governs the powers of fertility as well. It appears that the original meaning of this word did not stop at the level of a social term; it may be

considered to be a concept resulting from secondary reinterpretation.

The main character of the festival is assumed to be a deity of fertility.

This is further corroborated by the existence of a variety of his headwear. There is an internal relationship between the hat, hat-masks, and adornments and the title of 'king'. The chief character of the festival bears the title of 'king', being a sacred person, sharing with the king, with a distinguished status and enjoying corresponding rights and respect.

The term *beri / berika* and its corresponding terms carry cultic-religious and social connotation.

The chief ithyphallic character of *Berikaoba* (*qeenoba*, i.e. / *berika* is an epithet of the vegetative, chthonic and solar deity assigned for the propagation of livestock, human beings, and of crops, combining their functions.