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CHRISTIAN SYMBOLS IN THE ORNAMENTS OF UPPER-ACHARA
MOSLIM CULTIC EDIFICES

(MARETI VALLEY)

The presence of Christian symbols in the cultic Muslim edifices is directly related with the social and historical past of Achara; one of the oldest provinces of Georgia. Early political cataclysms of Georgia have painfully been reflected in the social psychological and religious consciousness of its people. The ornamental paintings of the Muslim architectural monuments are one of the examples of materialization of this consciousness.

The co-existence of heathen, Christian and Islamic symbols in Achara is the result of the spread of Muslim religion among the traditional and Christian beliefs.

The political suzerainty of Ottomans in the region did not for a long period pose the question of adopting the Islam in this region. However, by the end of the 19th century the process of converting to Islam of the population of Achara had almost been completed.

In spite of this fact a great part of the population of South Georgia and Acharians, among them tried to maintain Christian faith openly or secretly.

In some mosques of Achara one can find such woodcarvings as *mzeborjgali* (solar plant), *varduli* (rose petals), "sacred vessel" (cup, Jug); the tree of life etc.

National culture of constructing buildings and the folk art converted foreign ethnic and religious motifs into the native soil and gave it syncretic nature. One of the vivid examples of such art is the interior ornament in the mosque in the village of Makhalakidzebi.

The upright vine tree carting has grapes with the moon on top of it. In this particular case the appearance of the moon can be explained by the Ottoman influence, as making sacral the moon is chiefly characteristic to the Muslims living in Ottoman-Turkey. Such dual nature of mosque ornaments in Achara is quite frequent.

At first sight it might seem rather difficult to determine the aspirations of the master in the process of creation. However, it is obvious that the best samples of the Georgian woodcarvings that had cross-like diagonal arrangement made according to the traditional patterns, preserved in mosques, obtained new life in the hand of the master.

Very often quite unconsciously cultural values of Georgians passed from generations to generations often without special weight on it drained from sacred-plot contents.

The ornaments, which are preserved in the mosques of the villages of Mareti Valley, are distinguished with the variety of ornament shapes. Different wreaths twines, knots, snowy boughs arranged in circles with the lotus in the center, the latter is particularly characteristic to the Laz ornament.

Vardulis of various forms including the four-pedal ones can be traced quite often. *The Tree of Life* attracts particular attention with carvings in the forms of crosses, or with four-point stars “hidden” crosses masterly carved and masked in different variations.

Plant and Geometric style ornament reveal amazing harmony of composition and bears the form of the traditional historical makings of the Georgian art of woodcarving.

Muslim cultic edifices of the Mareti Valley, and particularly the cross-like mosque ornaments of the village of Makhalakidzebi, make it clear that people of Achara region who were surrounded by the Islamic faith under the socio-political influence of the ottoman ruling system tried to preserve Christian symbols not only on the woodcarvings but also in the ornamental carvings of Muslim edifices. By retaining these forms the people of Achara underlined the need of preserving national values that would meet their spiritual needs. It seems that long term transmission of materialized Christian Georgian values presented in the form of woodcarvings have got a subconscious nature but it is also remarkable that these samples of woodcarvings remained deeply traditional.