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Research paper

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## SOME ASPECTS OF LOCAL FAMILY PRAYER TRANSFORMATION IN ABKHAZIA

**Abstract.** This article examines the *Aqwabknyhra*, a local family prayer in Abkhazia centered on a copper pot with a wooden lid (*aqwab*), which is believed to have originated as a shepherd-clan ritual. Through a longitudinal study conducted from 2011 to 2023, this research traces the evolving nature of this ritual. Our findings reveal a significant transformation not only in its outward expression but, more critically, in its semantic meaning. While likely functioning as a pastoral protection rite for cattle in the 19th century, the *Aqwabknyhra* now primarily serves to unite specific kinship groups, exemplified by the Ayba family among the Abkhaz abipara. This shift highlights how religious rites contribute to the social cohesion of patronymic organizations in Abkhazia. Furthermore, the study observes a compelling process of object agency, where the *aqwab* itself has transitioned into a revered relic, functioning akin to an icon. This ritual transformation also reflects a reordering within the patriarchal-clan system, as the role of the priest is now typically assumed by the youngest son, the house owner where the *aqwab* is preserved, consistent with the prevalent minorate principles in Abkhazia. This case study vividly demonstrates how “old” traditions adapt, taking on new forms and generating new narratives in response to changing social contexts. The article also contextualizes this transformation within the broader spectrum of cattle-breeding rites historically prevalent across Abkhazia and the North Caucasus, and discusses the persistent presence of religious syncretism within Abkhazian religious practices.

**Keywords:** beliefs; Abkhazia; cult; *aqwab*; tradition; Abkhaz people; copper pot; family prayer

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## ЭТНОГРАФИЯ

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Исследовательская статья

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## НЕКОТОРЫЕ АСПЕКТЫ ТРАНСФОРМАЦИИ ЛОКАЛЬНОГО ФАМИЛЬНОГО МОЛЕНИЯ В АБХАЗИИ

*Аннотация.* Статья посвящена локальному семейному молению – Ақэабкныхра (снятие медного котелка с деревянной крышкой), предположительно некогда бывшим локальным пастушеско-родовым молением. Основным предметом исследования являются практики, связанные с медным котелком с деревянной крышкой – ақэаб. Автор вводит полевые материалы, которые были собраны в период с 2011–2023 гг. методом лонгитюдного исследования, которые позволили проследить трансформацию локального родового обряда моления. В настоящее время мы можем наблюдать не столько внешние изменения обряда моления, хотя они определённо присутствуют, но и его смысловую нагрузку. Если предположительно в XIX в. это был пастушеский обряд, целью которого было защитить и уберечь скот, то в настоящее время его ключевое значение в том, чтобы объединить определённую родственную группу, в конкретном случае абипара фамилии Айба. Абхазская Абипара – патронимическая организация, одной из социальных сущностей, которой является соблюдение религиозных обрядов. Также можно наблюдать процесс наделения предмета агентностью: ақэаб – медный котелок с деревянной крышкой – становится реликвией, становится своего рода иконой, которой молятся. Прослеживается смещение акцентов в патриархально-родовой системе, роль жреца возлагается на хозяина дома, в котором хранится ақэаб. В данном случае – это младший сын, так как в Абхазии и по сей день преимущественно сохраняются принципы минората. Трансформация данного локального обряда моления наглядно демонстрирует, как «старая» традиция приобретает иную форму и рождает новые нарративы. Также автор рассматривает скотоводческие обряды, которые были распространены в Абхазии и на Северном Кавказе. Частично рассмотрена религиозная обстановка в Абхазии, с акцентом на устойчивых признаках религиозного синкретизма.

*Ключевые слова:* верования; Абхазия; культ; ақуаб; традиции; абхазы; трансформация; медный котелок; семейное моление

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## Introduction

Abkhazia, a region where Christianity predominates among the population, exhibits notable elements of religious syncretism in its everyday religious practices. While the religious life of the Abkhaz has been studied extensively, prior research has often focused on individual components, such as traditional beliefs, Orthodox Christianity, or Islam [1, pp. 4–5]. However, a defining characteristic of contemporary Abkhaz religious beliefs is their syncretic nature. In contrast, orientalist and ethnologist A.B. Krylov argues that the religious landscape of Abkhazia reflects an autochthonous belief system devoid of syncretism, emphasizing the distinctiveness of traditional Abkhaz religion [2].

The Abkhaz, like other Caucasian ethnic groups, possess a unique and dynamic ethnocultural heritage shaped by a complex interplay of peoples, languages, and cultures [3, p. 7]. This originality is deeply rooted in Abkhazia's geographical context, which has significantly influenced the formation of its population's religious beliefs. E. Schilling provides a detailed description of Abkhazia's geographical boundaries: "The Abkhazians inhabit a mountainous region along the Black Sea coast, extending from slightly north of Gagra to the confluence of the Ingura River. The region is bordered by the Black Sea and Karachay (beyond the Caucasus Range) to the north, and by Georgia (specifically Svaneti and Mingrelia) to the east and south" [4, p. 55].

The cattle-breeding rituals of the Abkhaz, discussed below, provide essential context for comparative analysis with those of other Western and Northern Caucasian peoples. While extensive literature exists on the cattle-breeding rituals of these groups across various historical periods, this study focuses on the period from the late 19th century to the present.

Central to this analysis is the *Aqwabknyhra* ritual – referred to by participants as the "removal of the copper cauldron" – and associated practices involving the copper cauldron with a wooden lid, known as the *aqwab*. The author aims to examine the transformation of this local family ritual. Drawing on field data collected between 2011 and 2023, the research employs a longitudinal approach to synthesize existing information and supplement it with new ethnographic material. The theoretical framework is based on the works of Yu.V. Bromley and E. Taylor.

The historiography of Abkhaz economic rituals is extensive and predominantly descriptive. Key works on this topic include Ts.N. Bzhania's *From the History of the Economy of Abkhazia*, Sh.D. Inal-ipa, R.K. Chanba, and G.V. Smyr's *Agriculture and Cattle Breeding among the Abkhazians: Materials for the Historical and Ethnographic Atlas of Georgia*, Sh.D. Inal-ipa's *Abkhazians*, I.A. Adzhinjal's *From the Ethnography of Abkhazia*, G.F. Chursin's *Materials on the Ethnography of Abkhazia*, and N. Dzhnashia's *Religious Beliefs of the Abkhazians*. These studies contain rich ethnographic material, providing detailed descriptions of life-cycle rituals that offer insight into the religious practices of Caucasian peoples.

Cattle breeding played a central role in the economic life of the Abkhaz, significantly shaping their religious beliefs and folk narratives. The development of cattle breeding, along with other economic sectors in the Caucasus, was heavily influenced by the region's proximity to Western Asia, an ancient center of world civilization [5, p. 9].

## Family prayers in modern Abkhazia

Family prayers constitute a vital element of traditional Abkhaz culture. In contemporary Abkhazia, these clan-based rituals are frequently conducted at family sanctuaries. Among the most prevalent is the *Azh'ira*, or ritual forge, a prayer associated with a family member who historically was a blacksmith [6, pp. 1501–1502].

The widespread practice of blacksmithing in Abkhazia led to specialized roles within certain families, particularly in blacksmithing and jewelry-making. Notable examples include the Zhiba and Ahiba families. The

surname Zhiba derives from the Abkhaz word *azh'i* (blacksmith), reflecting the family's ancestral trade, which later became their surname. Similarly, the surname Ahiba, from *akh'i* (goldsmith), denotes a lineage of goldsmiths, while Ardzynba, from *aradzny* (silver), indicates silversmiths [7, p. 48].

The Azhira prayer remains vibrant, bolstered by the celebration of *Azhyrnykhwa*, the Abkhaz New Year, observed on the night of January 13–14. Recognized as a state holiday since 1994, this festival enhances the likelihood of the prayer's continued practice.

Religious practices within each major Abkhaz kinship group include prayers dedicated to specific clan names, such as the Ayba family. The annual prayer of the Ayba clan is held on the second Sunday of August. Men outside the Ayba family permitted to attend as invited guests. Other notable examples of family prayers practiced in contemporary Abkhazia include the *Amp'araa rnyhwara* of the Ampara clan and the *Ag-nykha* or *Dzhakhashkyar-nykha* family prayers, as documented in R.Sh. Zelnitskaya's article "Family Prayer as a Tool for Consolidating Family Unions among the Abkhazians" [6].

These prayers are characteristic of most Abkhaz kinship groups. However, this study focuses on a local prayer, specifically the *Aqwabknyhra*, which is unique in two respects: 1) it is recorded solely within one branch of the Ayba *abipara* and is not practiced elsewhere in Abkhazia, either among other families or within other related groups of the Ayba *abipara*; 2) it is geographically confined to the village of Otkhara.

This study employs the term "family" rather than "clan" to reflect the specific social structure of the Abkhaz kinship group known as *abipara*. The *abipara*, originating as a large extended family, is characterized by distinct social features: compact settlement near the ancestral home (except in urban settings), a system of rights and obligations, defined social relations, shared economic interests, and unique religious rites and customs. Structurally, the *abipara* functions as an established patronymic institution [8, p. 5]. Ritual behavior within the *abipara* is transmitted through direct participation in prayer ceremonies, grounded in practical demonstration rather than decontextualized narratives. In Abkhazia, religious beliefs and associated ritual practices are closely tied to the economic culture of the Abkhaz.

Historically, members of the same *abipara* formed herding collectives, known as *agup*, to manage cattle on summer pastures.

Members of three families within the Ayba *abipara*, tracing their lineage to a common ancestor, participated in a similar herding collective, though the number of families involved may have been greater. To mark the annual cattle drive to alpine meadows, these families performed a prayer ritual involving a sacrifice, which varied by year: in some years, a castrated goat was offered, while in others, dumplings with cheese were used, with both being permissible. This ritual, referred to by family members as *Aqwabknyhra* – the "taking off of the copper pot" (Fig. 1).

## Field materials

Since 2011, in the village of Otkhara, located in Bzyb Abkhazia – one of the seven historical regions of Abkhazia – the author has documented a local family prayer associated with a cattle-breeding cult prevalent in Abkhazia and the broader Caucasus.

According to the legend, three brothers of the Ayba-Airaa family performed the *Aqwabknyhra* ritual annually, either during the spring cattle drive to the mountains, known as *Shkhatsan* (March), or during the descent from the alpine meadows, termed *Shkhalbaan* (September), with a preference for September. The ritual is conducted modestly, involving a sacrifice followed by an invitation to neighbors to share in the sacred meal. Participation in the prayer is exclusively male. Since documentation began in 2011, the ritual has been observed annually in September, though the date occasionally shifts to October due to coinciding family celebrations or periods of mourning within the Ayba family.

The *aqwab*, a copper cauldron, is stored in the home of the eldest ancestor of the three Ayba families, sus-

pendent in the attic beneath the hearth for the entire year (Fig. 2). It is removed only once annually on the day of the *Aqwabknyhra* prayer. The cauldron remains undisturbed unless absolutely necessary. In cases where it must be removed outside the ritual context, it is wrapped in a white sheet, and a prayer for forgiveness is offered to God for disturbing it. According to an informant, the *Aqwabknyhra* was historically performed by the Vardania family from Otkhara, though this family no longer practices the ritual.

In theory, other families within the same clan could perform this prayer. The *aqwab* can be separated by creating a new cauldron and performing sacrifices at both the original and new locations. This process mirrors the separation of the *azhira* forge [9, p. 853]. However, transferring the cauldron to a family with a different surname is prohibited. The author could not determine how the *aqwab* came to be used by the Vardania family, but it is plausible that their members belonged to the same herding collective.

Preparation for the *Aqwabknyhra* prayer begins with assigning roles to the “organizers” of the ritual. The Ayba family typically selects two smaller families to share the responsibilities of preparing the festive table, with these families alternating annually. All financial costs are evenly distributed among participants to equitably share the economic burden. In addition to the sacrificial food, all other preparations are completed in advance.

A castrated goat is slaughtered before noon by two men. The animal is brought from an outbuilding to a designated area in the yard and washed prior to slaughter. The man performing the sacrifice faces the sunrise and recites a prayer beforehand. After the goat is slaughtered, a lit log producing smoke is retrieved from the outbuilding, and the animal’s neck and head are cauterized with it. The carcass is then skinned, and the meat is prepared for the *Aqwabknyhra* prayer. The remains, including the entrails, are collected, wrapped in the animal’s skin, and buried in a specific part of the yard.

Subsequently, a fire is kindled in the outbuilding, and the *aqwab* cauldron is placed over it. The meat is cut into small pieces, divided into three equal portions, and boiled in the cauldron. Dumplings with cheese are cooked in the same water, also in three stages (Fig. 3).

The table for the sacred meal is covered with a white tablecloth and set with dumplings with cheese, goat meat, two decanters of wine, and one decanter of *Akhyrts’aydzwa* – sour milk diluted with cold water (Fig. 4).

All male participants gather around the prayer table, where the priest, holding a peg with the heart of the sacrificial animal, recites a prayer, beseeching God to protect the family from misfortune and illness and to ensure the continuation and prosperity of the lineage. Women, children, and nephews stand at a distance. After the prayer, the priest drinks a glass of pure wine and samples the sacred food. Each family member then takes turns reciting the prayer, tasting a piece of the dumpling and sacrificial meat, and drinking a glass of pure wine. In recent years, the role of priest has been assigned to the owner of the house where the *aqwab* is kept. In the observed prayer, this role was fulfilled by the youngest son, reflecting the persistence of minorate principles in Abkhazia. Following the ritual, all household members join the meal, with neighbors and invited guests occasionally present at the festive table. From 1984 to approximately 2004, the *Aqwabknyhra* prayer was not performed due to the tragic death of a young family member, possibly compounded by the economic hardships following the 1992–1993 war.<sup>1</sup> The ritual was revived in 2004, prompted by a dream in which a deceased family member appeared to a relative, urging the resumption of the tradition. In 2024, despite the tragic death of the family member designated to serve as priest, the ritual was neither canceled nor postponed due to mourning but was held as planned, as it was his turn to lead.

### *Cattle-breeding cults*

The ritual practices associated with cattle breeding cults continue to function as conduits for transmitting cultural values and worldviews in contemporary Abkhaz society, rooted in the ethical framework of *Apsuara* [10].

1. The Patriotic War of the People of Abkhazia of 1992–1993.



In Abkhazia, cattle breeding followed an extensive transhumance system: in spring, livestock were driven to the foothills; with the onset of summer, they were moved to mountain pastures; in autumn, they were brought back to the foothills and plains; and during the autumn-winter period, they were kept in winter huts. Cattle remained on pasture year-round [11, p. 3]. The drive to mountain pastures began in late March, following the conclusion of the lambing period for small livestock.

Two distinct methods were employed to drive cattle to high-mountain pastures. Residents of the foothills, located one to two kilometers from the mountain pastures, drove their livestock without stopping. In contrast, inhabitants of the plains and coastal areas moved their cattle with extended stops along the route. In the evenings, shepherds lit fires at their camps, with a large central fire, known as *Akhymtsa*, around which the group leader and senior shepherds gathered [11, p. 49].

Abkhaz religious rites and prayers associated with cattle-breeding cults are categorized into three groups: 1) rites dedicated to deities directly patronizing cattle breeding, led by Aytar; 2) rites honoring Ayerg, the patron of mountains, cattle, and people; and 3) rites in reverence of Abna-intsahu, the “patron of the forest.”

Aytar, the deity of nature’s renewal, fertility, and cattle breeding, is central to a cycle of rituals and sacrifices collectively known as the “Aytar prayers,” which commence with *Maslenitsa*. These rituals are dedicated to Aytar and the deities comprising his divine assembly, described as “one in seven parts” [4, p. 69]. The “Sedmitsa”<sup>2</sup> include the following deities:

- Jabran – the progenitor of goats (small cattle);
- Zhwabran – the progenitor of cows (cattle);
- Alyshkyntyr – the deity of dogs;
- Amza-nykha – the goddess of the moon;
- Amra-nykha – the goddess of the sun;
- Anapa-naga – the goddess of crops and cattle;
- Achyshashan – the deity of horses [12, p. 75].

In their work *Geography of Transcaucasia: Essays on Physical Geography and Ethnography*, A.F. Leister and G.F. Chursin reference Akamgaria, a deity associated with buffaloes [13, pp. 275–276]. However, G.F. Chursin later concludes in *Materials on the Ethnography of Abkhazia* that Akamgaria is not an indigenous deity and was likely borrowed from the Mingrelians [14, p. 98].

Notably, not all deities within Aytar’s Seven are directly associated with cattle. For instance, the dog, an essential companion to shepherds, holds a significant role in cattle breeding, as reflected in its corresponding cult [15, p. 124].

V.V. Bardavelidze, through analysis of ethnographic materials from Georgian tribes, demonstrated the continuity between the wolf cult and the dog cult. Among the Khevsurs, cult dogs known as *mtsevarni* were considered doubles of the Mtiul and Gudamakarian sacred *esauls*. These animals, believed to reside in pairs at specific territorial-communal sanctuaries, served as loyal assistants and enforcers of the communal deity’s will. The Khevsur *gutisshvili* with their *mtsevarni* and the Mtiul and Gudamakarian *gutisshvili* with their *esauls* were employed both to discipline community members and to provide them aid [16, p. 243].

Among the Svans, deities referred to as “wolves” were also called “dogs” or *zhegh*. V.V. Bardavelidze established that the Khevsur dogs, known as *mtsevarni*, belonged to a class of anthropomorphic spirits forming the “army” of local deities. Festivals were held in large community sanctuaries to honor this “army” and the *mtsevarni*, during which texts dedicated to community deities were recited [16, p. 244].

Historically, the Abkhaz practiced a custom of praying at the *Alyshkyntyr* sanctuary before driving herds to the mountains and upon their safe return. Offerings included sour milk, fresh cheese, and a candle, accompanied by the prayer: “Alyshkyntyr! Protect us and our cattle. Grant us the warmth of your eyes” [11, pp. 125–127].

All rituals associated with the cult of Aytar were performed in spring, beginning with a prayer to Jabran, the deity patronizing goats, known as the “mother of goats.” This prayer was preceded by the preparation of sacrificial offerings, including a large *churek* bread and either pure cheese or the first sour-milk cheese, *ashwadza*.

2. Translator’s note: obs., old Slavic – “seven days”, “week”; here – seven parts

The dough for the sacrificial *churek* was leavened using a hazelnut stick, with an elderly woman overseeing the process. On the last Sunday of Meatfare, she prepared a large quantity of liquid dough, which was placed in a clay vessel near the head of the hearth. When the leavened dough was uncovered, a rhododendron branch was dipped into it, and the walls and ceiling of the house were smeared with the dough. On the Thursday of *Maslenitsa*, the woman added flour to the leaven, kneaded the dough, and baked a sacrificial *churek* on the hearth, where rhododendron leaves were laid out. In some instances, ivy leaves were used instead of rhododendron leaves. A piece of pure cheese, cut from its center, was placed in the middle of the dough, then covered with leaves and hot coals. The woman threw part of the remaining dough toward the sea and another part toward the mountains while calling out to the goats with the sound “rreit.” This act of throwing the dough symbolized an offering to appease the patrons of the forest and mountains. Smearing the walls and ceiling of the home with dough was intended to bring happiness and prosperity to the household.

In the evening, upon the goats’ return, the eldest man in the family initiated a prayer. Standing before a table bearing cheese and *churek*, he recited: “Jabran, great part of the god Aytar, grant us the warmth of your eyes and heart. Protect our cattle from harm, ensuring they suffer no loss beyond old wool and old manure, and increase their numbers.” Following the prayer, the *churek* was cut crosswise into four pieces in two steps, then each piece was crumbled and consumed with cheese. The Jabran rite marked the beginning of the Aytar prayer cycle, performed on the first Monday of Lent, also known as *Khwazhwakya*. That evening, a prayer service honored the deities of Aitar’s Seven, excluding Zhwabran, the patron of cattle, who was venerated on the first Saturday of *Maslenitsa*.

Lenten conical flatbreads, known as *ahwazha aqwakwar*, were offered as sacrifices to the deities associated with Aytar. In contemporary practice, these flatbreads are boiled, though historically they were baked on the hearth, wrapped in rhododendron leaves (*ahwazha*). Alongside the conical flatbreads, one crescent-shaped flatbread and another round, flat one, symbolizing the sun, were prepared. A soup made from beans and fresh nettles accompanied the flatbreads. The nettles were boiled, squeezed, and the resulting soft fibrous mass was served with crushed nuts and vegetable oil as a Lenten dish. On this day, the consumption of edible plants, referred to as *itsasdzam*, was prohibited. Food for the prayer was prepared during the day, and in the evening, when all family members were gathered and the herd had returned, the prayer commenced. A narrow table was placed at the house’s entrance, displaying all sacrificial offerings. Family members gathered around, led by the eldest man, the household head, who took three flatbreads and prayed to the Almighty for “the warmth of his eyes and heart” before setting the flatbreads aside.

The subsequent prayer was dedicated to Aytar. The worshipper took three flatbreads, turned to Aytar, and recited: “In whose hand lie seven icons, to whom seven candles are placed, be the patron of our herds, multiply them so we may milk seven loads of milk, and let them suffer no harm beyond old manure and old wool.” Each family member then offered their own words, invoking the deities of Aytar’s Seven. After setting the flatbreads aside, the household head took three new flatbreads and addressed each deity of the seven-part Aytar in turn: “Alyshkyntytyr, grant our house faithful dogs as guardians of good; Amza, part of the great Aytar, be the patron of men, grant them strength, multiply cattle and prosperity, and burn out the eyes of those who cast the evil eye and the tongues of the slanderous; Amra, warm the women and multiply the herds; Anapa-naga, great part of our god Aytar, grant us abundant corn.”

The “Aytar Prayer” concluded with youth games and fortune-telling for happiness. An esteemed elder then performed a ritual slaughter of a calf, and after the sacrificial food was prepared, offered a secondary prayer while holding the sacrificial parts [4, p. 69]. Notably, similarities exist between the Abkhaz Aytar and the Mingrelian Antari, both in the names of their patron deities and the wording of the prayers. However, unlike the Abkhaz Aitar, the Mingrelian Antari is not a seven-part deity, though the Mingrelians and “mountain” Georgians recognize the concept of the “Seven.” For instance, the supreme god of the Pshavs and Khevsurs, Morige, resides in the “seventh heaven.”

E.M. Schilling describes a festive prayer conducted before the departure to summer pastures: “The senior

shepherd of the *sarkali* herd gathers fellow shepherds and invites a priest to perform a liturgy for the herd's well-being. A ram is offered as a sacrifice to the priest, benefiting the clergy, with additional payment provided for the service. The shepherds also slaughter a ram for their own meal and consider it their duty to share food with any passersby." A similar meal is held upon their return from the summer pastures [4, p. 113].

Comparable practices are observed among the Ossetians, where cattle breeding, predominant in mountainous Ossetia as in other Caucasian regions, significantly shapes religious beliefs. In the Ossetian pantheon, two deities are prominent: Tutyr, the god of wolves, and Falvara, the patron of sheep, both revered as protectors of small livestock, particularly sheep [17, p. 158]. V.F. Miller notes: "There is a belief that Tutyr, as the shepherd of wolves, prevents them from harming people and cattle without his consent" [18, p. 405]. To appease Tutyr during the *Tutyry-tsau* ritual, the Ossetians offer a goat sacrifice in autumn and observe a fast.

Sh.D. Inal-ipa [19, p. 520] and G.F. Chursin [20, p. 189] draw parallels between the Abkhazian Aytar and the Ossetian Tutyr, noting similarities in the magical practice of "tying up the wolf's mouth." B.A. Kaloev posits that the Ossetian Tutyr corresponds to the Abkhazian Aytar, the Adyghe Mezitkha, and the Svan Mamberi [5, p. 248].

Regarding Falvara, a lamb is sacrificed in August, and a dish called *dzyka* is prepared: mashed cheese is added to boiling water and mixed with wheat or barley flour (now commonly corn). The mixture is simmered until oil separates from the cheese and flour, indicating the dish is ready. After preparing the sacrificial dish, the clan elder prays to Falvara, requesting an increase in livestock and protection from wolves [21, p. 39].

Among the peoples of Dagestan, a comparable ritual is observed in spring upon the cattle's return from winter pastures. The Dagestanis organize celebrations, preparing various dishes and sweets to welcome the herds, a practice believed to ensure a "sweet" and prosperous life [22, p. 98].

The Abkhazians practiced a ritual prayer to *Ashkha-intswakhu*, the God of the Mountains, performed by shepherds, particularly within shepherd communities known as *agup*. As all mountains and their wildlife were under the patronage of this deity, Abkhaz shepherds offered sacrifices to him each spring when driving cattle to the mountains and each autumn upon their return. Ts.N. Bzhania's *Cattle Farming in Abzhua* [23, p. 9] provides a detailed account of the life and functional roles of members within these shepherd communities. A key observation from the source is the reference to a copper cauldron and two sacrificial goats. The head of the shepherd collective was responsible for providing two goats as sacrifices in honor of *afashkhanhu*, the share of the God of the Mountains. Additionally, when guests arrived, the head of the *agup* sacrificed a goat and provided a copper cauldron, *agup rkuab*, which served as communal property for the grazing season.

## Conclusion

Based on the foregoing analysis, it can be inferred that the family festive prayer *Aqwabknyhra* was historically performed by a shepherd collective, or *agup*, comprising relatives sharing the same surname. In the first half of the 19th century, the shepherd *agup* exhibited characteristics of communal-clan relations, evident in its functions, labor practices, and daily life. As noted, "Agup, apparently, was a form of labor cooperation among peasant cattle breeders, linked by its origins to the communal-clan system and persisting as a relic until the late 19th century" [11, p. 113]. In contemporary practice, the copper cauldron, *aqwab*, serves as a sacred object facilitating a spiritual connection with the Almighty.

Traditional beliefs in Abkhazia demonstrate resilience against the influences of Christianity and Islam, retaining their distinct characteristics. Alongside this continuity, transformations are evident in what was once a pastoral cattle-breeding rite. The extensive and transhumant nature of cattle breeding shaped Abkhaz religious rites and prayers, most notably the cycle dedicated to the deity Aytar, some of which continue to be practiced in villages during spring. Based on the analysis of the pastoral and cattle-breeding prayer rites described, the author posits that the *Aqwabknyhra* prayer was historically pastoral in nature for several reasons:

It was traditionally performed annually in spring or autumn, coinciding with the movement of cattle to



mountain pastures or back to the plains, with prayers offered to God for the preservation and increase of livestock. While the original prayer text has not been preserved, its prevailing narrative persists in the memories of older informants. Changes in economic policies and pastoral relationships have rendered the traditional *agup*, as a 19th- and 20th-century pastoral collective, obsolete. As these collectives lost relevance, the need to offer sacrifices to the God of the Mountains for livestock protection diminished. Today, *Aqwabknyhra* has evolved into a family prayer with a significantly altered purpose. Contemporary prayers address the Almighty with requests to shield the family from adversity, expressions of gratitude for blessings, and pleas for forgiveness for misdeeds, with no mention of preserving or increasing livestock.

Interviews with informants (men and women aged 60 and older) regarding the purpose of the *Aqwabknyhra* ritual revealed responses that collectively expressed a desire for unification. This general sentiment reflects the historical adaptability of social organization in pastoral life, rooted in family-based ownership that could expand or contract based on available resources [24, p. 92]. Despite the transformation of the Ayba family's local pastoral prayer, the aspiration to belong to a specific social group persists, manifesting in the preservation and accumulation of social capital. Membership in a broader community, facilitated through family ties and traditional obligations, provides a robust and stable sense of access to diverse resources. The annual prayer serves as a mechanism for reproducing social capital, fostering ongoing efforts to maintain social connections, or "sociability" [25, p. 68].

During the ritual's transformation, the *aqwab* – a copper cauldron with a wooden lid – has acquired agency, evolving into a relic akin to an icon venerated during prayers.

A shift in the patriarchal-clan system is evident: whereas the elder traditionally assumed the role of priest in conducting the prayer ritual, today the priest is the individual who safeguards the sacred object, namely the owner of the house where the ritual is performed.



Fig. 1. Aqwab – a copper pot with wooden lid. Otkhara Village, Abkhazia. Photograph by Thomas Thaitsuk, 2021

Рис. 1. «Ақэаб» — медный котелок с деревянной крышкой. Абхазия, село Отхара. Томас Тхайцук, 2021





Fig. 2. Storage of aqwab above the hearth. Otkhara Village, Abkhazia. Photograph by Tamara Aiba, 2011

Рис. 2. Хранение над очагом. Абхазия, село Отхара. Айба Тамара, 2011



Fig. 3. Preparation of dumplings. Otkhara Village, Abkhazia. Photograph by Thomas Thaitsuk, 2021

Рис. 3. Приготовление вареников. Абхазия, село Отхара. Томас Тхайцук, 2021





Fig. 4. Table with sacred food offerings. Otkhara Village, Abkhazia. Photograph by Thomas Thaitsuk, 2021

Рис. 4. Стол с сакральной пищей. Абхазия, село Отхара. Томас Тхайцук, 2021



Fig. 5. Cooking meat. Otkhara Village, Abkhazia. Photograph by Thomas Thaitsuk, 2021

Рис. 5. Приготовление мяса. Абхазия, село Отхара. Томас Тхайцук, 2021

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