

**PROCEEDINGS**  
**OF THE**  
**TWENTY-SIXTH INTERNATIONAL**  
**CONGRESS OF ORIENTALISTS**

**NEW DELHI**  
**4-10th January, 1964**

**VOLUME II**



ORGANISING COMMITTEE  
XXVI INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF ORIENTALISTS  
RABINDRA BHAVAN  
FEROZESHAH ROAD, NEW DELHI

1968

— A U D A N G

M. Y. CHIKOVANI, TBILISI

THE THEME OF A YOUTH SEEKING IMMORTALITY IN ANCIENT  
FOLKLORE AND LITERATURE

Some years ago, I received from Italy, through the kind intermediary of the Georgian Academy of Sciences, a book of folk tales, recorded in the Georgian language in the 70's of the 17th century. The book comprises 12 stories from the archives of the missionary Bernardo of Naples. When getting the collection ready for the press, our attention was particularly attracted by the 9th story, describing the adventures of a youth seeking immortality. A check has proved that this theme is still widely current in the oral folklore of both Western and Eastern Georgia. The discovery of the 18th century record has enhanced interest in this theme of a philosophic nature and prompted the idea of making it the subject of a monographic study (1, pp. 309-310).

At present we are in a position to report the first findings and to formulate a number of problems relating to the interconnection of various ancient cultures (2, pp. 47-85).

The adventures of a youth seeking immortality as personified in Gilgamesh, had been elaborated, in classical form, as early as four thousand years ago, in Ancient Mesopotamia. It was the first literary work to have given artistic expression to the centuries-old problem of Life and Death.

Next in the order of comparison comes "The Wisdom of Balahvar", also with a centuries-long history, preserved in Arabic, Georgian and Greek versions, the latter being a translation of the Georgian version of Euthymius the Iberian (3, pp. XIV-XVI).

In folklore, too, the theme of the hero in quest of the land of immortality is well known. By way of illustration, we shall cite a few of the principal versions current not only in Asia but in Europe as well. These are: 1. The Japanese folk tale "Urashima Taro" (4, pp. 9-13); 2. The Georgian "A Youth Seeking Immortality" (2, N 9); 3. The Hungarian "Seeker of Immortality" (5, pp. 29-39); 4. The Italian "One Night in Paradise" (6, pp. 43-45); 5. Russian legends "Bird of Paradise" (15, pp. 66-67) and "Visiting a Dead Man" (7, pp. 132-534). Though each of these has its own artistic and compositional peculiarities, essentially they convey one and the same idea: man may live 300-800-1000 years in a beautiful utopian land without forgetting his native country. The theme figures also in some international reference indices: A-A 470, 471 (8, p. 36).

First, let us consider the Georgian folk tale recorded in the 17th century. Here is an outline of its plot: a king's only son is brought up in isolation, in a tower cut off from the rest of the world, lest he should learn of what is happening in the world. But once the boy noticed through the window of the tower a weeping crowd following somebody in procession. He asked what it was. His tutors concealed the truth from him, but the youth threatened to throw himself out of the tower and thus made them tell him everything. The youth was grieved and wondered what it was that was called Death? Was man never to resurrect and see his kin? And when he learned the truth, he rejected food and, being frightened, demanded to be taken to a place where there was no death. In vain tried the parents to make him stay. The boy succeeded in persuading several of his mates and stole away to look for the place where there was no death. They walked for a long time. The prince's companions died of the hardships and privations encountered on the way. He continued his journey alone and in some vast, desolate field came upon a stag who asked him whence he came and whither he was going. "I have run away from Death and am hiding from Death."—"Stay with me", was the stag's advice, "and for so long as it takes me to cover this vast field with my shed antlers, we both shall live!" But, since, in the end, Death would yet be certain to come, the prince proceeded on his journey. Presently, in a large grove, he met a wild boar who would live till he filled this big grove with his shed tusks.

Next, at the summit of a mountain above a deep gorge, the youth found a white hawk who had been ordained to fill the gorge with his feathers. The prince, discovering that immortality would not be granted to him there, proceeded farther on.

After an exhausting journey the youth came to a country inhabited only by women. Every girl, as soon as she was 17, bathed in a wonder-working lake, after which a daughter was born to her. The arrival of the youth produced a strong impression on everyone. He was taken before the Queen whose face was that of a girl of 15, although she had been living since the creation of the world. The Prince married this beautiful queen and spent with her 1000 years which passed as 10 seconds. But once he remembered his native country, his relatives and friends. The Queen refused to let him go for a long time, but the youth would not stay. Taking three apples, he set out for home. On his way he revisited the places where he had seen the hawk, the boar and the stag. But they were no longer alive. Back in his native country, he failed to find a single person or even the palace or the town that he had known. Everything had either changed or been destroyed by time. In the course of his endless wanderings the youth grew old. Then he ate the apples and regained his youth. He mourned his parents and returned to the land of immortality where he was welcomed with joy. His wife gave birth to a son and a daughter, and he lived in happiness ever after.

This 17th century version is not the only recorded Georgian folklore variant. There are some 20 more of this kind, taken down in the 19th and 20th centuries; 6 were recorded as recently as 1961-62 in the course of field work. Translations of the Georgian tale of the seeker of immortality have been published at different times in Russian (9), French (10), and English (11).

The same plot was incorporated as parables in the book "Wisdom of Lies" by the Georgian classic of the 17th century, Sulikhan Saba Orbeliani (12, p. 96). The principal idea of the tale is preserved in the 19th- and 20th-century records, but in distinction from the older version and in conformity with the Christian tradition the emphasis is on the vanity of the "transitory world": the hero ends his life homeless: "the people of the village carried his body and buried him out of charity" (13, p. 130).

But in the version retold by us its collective author believes that, although earth inevitably demands its own, it is still possible to attain immortality with the help of the beautiful, of beauty. The ideally beautiful personified here by a woman, who speaks of the inexorable law of life in the following way: "You seek immortality. And your heart has prompted you the truth: yes, in me and with me will you be able not to know death . . . My name is Beauty. I am happiness, I am life eternal. But it is only in me and with me that life exists . . . You shall not be able to contain immortality within you. Your body is of clay" (14). The same dialogue recurs in the East-Georgian variant: "My name is 'Beautiful', and I shall never grow old, I shall forever be as I am now, and shall never die. You would live on if you stay with me, but if it is not your desire, earth will claim you." (13, p. 129). In the above-mentioned non-Georgian traditions, no similar concept of everlasting beauty is to be found. The kingdom of females of the 17th century records, as well as the glittering "house of crystal rocks" of the recently recorded folk tales, ought to be regarded as a genuine manifestation of a people's utopian dream of a happy future life.

It is characteristic that the Georgian youth seeks immortality on earth, without turning to the world of spirits and magic or visiting the nether world and Heaven. And in this also our story differs considerably from many other folklore versions. The Japanese fisherman Urashima Taro, with the assistance of a kind tortoise, spends 700 years at the bottom of the sea, in the palace of the dragon, lord of the seas (4); the hero of an Italian tale, with the aid of his deceased friend, reaches Paradise alive and remains there 300 years (6). According to a Russian Christianized legend, a peasant boy enjoyed himself in a wonderful garden in Paradise for 300 years that were to him no more than three seconds (15, p. 16). In a Hungarian legend an important part is played by magic objects (a casket, a ring, a gold wand), and the Queen of Life and Immortality is more of a woman-warrior than a personification of sublime beauty (5).

Before passing over to the Sumero-Akkadian epics, we shall dwell briefly on the *Life of Balahvar and Iodasaph*, a highly-artistic version of which was elaborated in Georgian in the 9th-10th centuries. This story, in a manner quite its own, tells of the spread of Christianity in India, and is based on tales of the Buddha. The above mentioned twenty versions reveal a certain degree of similarity with the Georgian version known as the Balahvariani. Here are some of the similarities: (1) The antecedents of the hero are presented in two ways. In one instance, the seeker of immortality is the son of a king (the 17th century version, the legend of Rostomela published in the *Kavkaz* in 1897; a variant recorded in Kakhetia (Shilda) in 1950. Iodasaph, pondering over the problem of Life and Death, is also the son of a king. In another group of versions of more democratic nature it is the son of a widowed peasant woman who sets out in search of a country where graveyards are unknown (records made by Razikashvili, Kelenjeridze, and others). The hero of Orbeliani's

parable is of the same origin (13). Therefore, both Orbeliani's parable and the 17th-century manuscript from Italy, testify to the fact that in the 17th century there existed in Georgia versions of the plot under discussion, and that the hero's descent could be different.

Both in the folklore and the literary versions the quest for immortality stems from fear of death. In the 17th-century Bernardo version it is stated unequivocally: "We are fugitives from Death and are hiding from Death" (2, N 9). Other versions, recorded in the 1890's, also speak of a flight from death (13, p. 129). It is this again that strikes Iodasaph, son of the king of Sūlābat: "No one has respite from the thought of death which does come sooner or later" (3, p. 18). It is stated in the abridged version of the "Wisdom of Balahvar": "But know this also: certain of them are carried off by death when they have just been born and others, as soon as they have grown up a little; and others yet, when they have reached manhood" (23, p. 76; 3, p. 121). Having learned that man is mortal, the folklore hero poses the question: "What is death, and is it possible to avoid it?" In folk stories we read: "Mother, everybody has a father, and why haven't I one?" Mother said: "He died, my son." "So he will never come? What is death then?" "He will never come, my son, but we shall go to him: no one shall escape death, we shall all turn to dust—die" (13, p. 128). The youth observed things and learnt that death was of universal occurrence; "Yes, it is thus",—was the answer to his query, whomever he asked. It made him sad to know that there was no place without death (13, p. 128). In the 17th-century version, too, the Prince insists on knowing "What is death?" A similar question is asked in the "Balahvariani". In the abridged version, which most scholars date by the period not later than the 11th century (3, p. XXVI), we read: "And Iodasaph said: And what is death?" The king's son, inexperienced as yet, seeks in his mind for the land of immortality: "Does no country exist where mankind is not overtaken by such affliction . . ." Here, too, however, the answer is given in the negative: "There is no such country under the heavens, O king's son, in which men could escape death" (3, p. 121).

The coincidence of such questions and answers in literary works and in folk tales can hardly be accounted for other than by reciprocal influence. But it should be borne in mind that in the earlier unabridged version of the "Balahvariani" (which preceded the shorter one), the question of the nature of death is not posed as often (cf. 3, p. 18) as in the folk tales, and in the abridged version of the "Balahvariani". The similarity of two versions of different origins becomes especially manifest when they are compared with the records of the 19th and 20th centuries. One would expect a direct influence of literary plots on the 17-century folk version, but it is not the case here. Thus, the folk tale is, in its definition of the nature of death, independent of the "Balahvariani".

In both works the child is isolated from life around him—he is put in a castle or a tower under the care of special tutors. The 17th-century story-teller conveys the king's will: "He commanded his counsellors and courtiers: 'rear him thus and see to it that this child should see no thing evil or afflicting' . . . The king's son was led away and put in a high tower . . . and they began to bring him up" (2, No. 9). King Abenes acts in much the same way: ". . . Then he commanded to build for his young son a town apart . . . He ordered his servants not to make mention in his son's presence of infirmities and death, nor of eternal life, nor of truth or sin, nor of old age or youth, nor of poverty or wealth" (3, p. 9). In both stories, the attempt to cut off the boy from the surrounding world proves to be futile; life finds its way into the castle and opens the eyes of the tale's future heroes. Our investigation shows that the "Balahvariani" was influenced rather by folklore traditions than by literary sources (16, p. 178).

Thus, there is much in common between the folk tales and the Georgian literary work. Similarity is mainly found in certain episodes while the plot as a whole is clearly different. The adventures of the immortality seekers—Rostomela and Iodasaph—are alike only when the two were children and did not know of the existence of death: as soon as they leave the castle or the tower the similarities vanish and the heroes become two different personalities. The character created by Georgian folk story-tellers and personifying the idea of the quest for the land of immortality bears no traces of any religious teaching, whereas Iodasaph of the "Balahvariani" becomes a preacher of the Christian faith. Consequently, influence of the literary work on the folk version must be ruled out. The problem assumes a different aspect. In an earlier paper on the subject, we wrote: "A detailed study of the Georgian literary version and its comparison with the folklore tradition poses this question: had not the literary work—the "Balahvariani"—been preceded by a non-literary version? This is suggested by the general style of the work, the incorporation into it of tales having literary or folklore currency, of parables, sayings and certain stories, a special analysis of which would be the

subject of a future study" (16, p. 180). In our opinion, the above comparisons justify the assumption that such a preliminary stage actually existed.

We shall now delve deeper into history, and turn to the literary work in which the idea of the search for immortality becomes clearly manifest for the first time. It is the epic of Gilgamesh, the creation of human genius remarkable not only because of its antiquity but also because of the message it carries and its poetic value. Not being versed in the language of the original, we rely, in our analysis of the plot, on the translations done by eminent Oriental scholars into Russian (17), German (18), English (22), and Georgian (19) languages. Incidentally, the new Russian and Georgian translations have won praise from specialists (20). One point must be made at the outset: we compare works different both in origin and in the time of their appearance—on the one hand, a literary work more than 4000 years old, and on the other folk tales recorded in the 17th, 19th and 20th centuries.

Is it justifiable to compare works so far apart as to their age and idiom ?

Despite great philological difficulties, such a comparison is, in our opinion, legitimate, mainly as regards the plots. This method has proved quite helpful in tackling the problem of the Caucasian counterpart of Prometheus—Amirani of the Georgians (21).

Let us see now how much can be gained from a comparison of the ancient Sumero-Akkadian epic with the folk tales recorded more recently.

1. Gilgamesh was shocked by the death of his friend. The giant king was stunned and fled away to the desert, "Shall not I die, like Enkidu ? Anguish has entered my belly. Fearing death, I flee to the desert" (17, p. 57). And in the tale from the Italian collection, too, death parted two inseparable friends. Unable to be reconciled to the loss of his friend, the survivor thinks all the time about him and even invites him, who is now in the cold grave, to his wedding (6, p. 43). The lamentation of Gilgamesh and the impulse to renounce life knowing death are presented even more vividly in the Georgian legend. The prince, having seen a funeral procession, was quick to foresee his future lot, this prompting him to seek a country where man could become immortal (2, N 9). In fear of death, Rostomela flees from the palace and his beloved mother (9). The soul of a poor peasant boy is utterly shaken by the unjustness of his father's death, and he sets out in search of a utopian country (14). In an Imeretian tale, a youth "was obsessed with death. He was haunted by fear of it, and the thought of finding a place where there would be no death to take possession of him" (2, N 7). The shadow of death seems to have equally troubled man wherever and whenever he lived.

2. The fate of the immortality-seeker had been foreordained: his ideal is not to accomplished. Everywhere the hero hears of the futility of his quest, but, undaunted, he pursues it against all odds. Defeat is predicted for the Babylonian hero by Shamash: "Gilgamesh, whither rovest thou ? The life thou pursuest thou shalt not find" (17, p. 56). Gilgamesh learns more about this from Siduri. Death and the brevity of human life are ordained by God and a mortal has no power to change anything:

"Gilgamesh, whither rovest thou ?  
The life thou pursuest thou shalt not find.  
When the gods created man,  
Death for mankind they ordained,  
Life in their own hands retained."  
(17, p. 61)

The words of the mistress of gods are reminiscent of those of the Georgian mother who tries to shield her son from retribution. "No, my beloved son", the frightened mother turned to her son, "Nowhere will you find a place like that, you will perish to no avail, and I shall die of grief" (2, N 8). Gulishvili, a story-teller with philosophic tales, puts the following words in the mouth of a sorrowful mother: "None of us can escape death, we shall all turn to dust—die" (13, p. 128). The folk hero knows beforehand that, wherever he goes, death is lying in wait, inexorable and indiscriminate. Nevertheless, the peasant's son, not unlike Gilgamesh, intrepidly continues to look for the land of wonders. Georgian folk poetry has painted a graphic picture of the "transitory world" where the thinker of keen insight sees the eternal struggle of life and death:

"What is life ? It is but a rolling stone;  
No sooner are we born than our grave is made ready for us."

Thus, Gilgamesh and his folklore counterparts are alike in realizing that to pursue their road is to go against the stream; yet they go on, toward the country beyond death's reach.

3. The legend of Gilgamesh, true to epic style, gives a detailed account of the difficult journey from the scorpion-men to the Waters of Death. And so does the folk tale: the Georgian prince's quest for the land of immortality is beset by obstacles; all his companions perish, and he wanders alone over desolate plains and forests, rocks, and gorges. In the folk tale the role of Siduri and Urshanabi is assigned to the stag, the wild boar, the crow, the white hawk, or other living beings.

4. For Gilgamesh immortality is personified by Utnapishtim who had once been an ordinary mortal but later was granted immortality. In the Georgian tradition, too, immortality is personified by a human being who appears before the king's son or the peasant lad, as a beautiful maiden who is not considered to be a deity though she lives in a wonderful tower and possesses the magic youth-bestowing apple.

5. Both Gilgamesh and his counterparts reach the land of their cherished dream and find human beings endowed with immortality. But they themselves become immortal only if they stay there renouncing their native land, their kin, and their people. Not one of the heroes agrees to such terms. Gilgamesh takes a long sleep; Rostomela and his companions lose all idea of time while they are with the beautiful maiden—hundreds of years are but seconds to them. However, return to homeland is inevitable, for love for one's country is unconquerable. In the folk tradition these motifs stand out in bolder relief than in the Sumero-Akkadian epic.

6. Gilgamesh attained his goal: he received as a present from Utnapishtim the flower that had the power of bestowing eternal youth on men. The great king of Uruk is beside himself with joy:

"Urshanabi, this plant is a plant *apart*,  
Whereby a man may regain his *life's breath*,  
I will take it to ramparted Uruk,  
Will cause / . . . / to eat the plant . . . !  
Its name shall be 'Man Becomes Young in Old Age !'  
I myself shall eat (it) and thus return the state of my youth."  
(17, p. 81)

In the Georgian tale it is not a magic plant or flower that possesses the property of bestowing youth but an apple-tree and its fruit which the beautiful maiden of the crystal tower gives the young man when he starts on his return journey. In the 17th century record we read: the youth "grew old in his endless wanderings. Cutting the apple, he ate it, and regained his youth." In the Georgian tales the apple sometimes rejuvenates, sometimes it makes men old, and at other times brings to life or cures sterility. The use of magic objects is common in the folklore of all countries.

7. And lastly, one more significant characteristic: in the Sumero-Akkadian epic the life in the Nether World has the same features which are still current, under the name of *Shaveti*, in Georgian folk poetry. The same is true also of the mother's fecundity motif, but we shall not dwell on it here, for this motif does not enter as a component into the structure of the plot of the seeker of immortality.

Thus, our study has shown that counterparts of Gilgamesh are met in folklore, and in Georgian folklore in particular, to this day. It has also been established that the theme of the seeker of immortality is common in the folklore and the literatures of both the East and the West.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> M. Chikovani, *Georgian Folklore*, Tbilisi, 1946, (in Georgian).

<sup>2</sup> M. Chikovani, First Collection of Georgian Stories (17th cent.), *Collected Papers of the Society for the Study of History, Archaeology, Ethnography and Folklore*, Tbilisi, 1963, (in Georgian).

<sup>3</sup> Balavariani, *Mudrost Balavara*, Predisl. i red. Prof. I. V. Abuladze, Tbilisi, 1962.

<sup>4</sup> "Japonskije skazki," perev. S. japonskoro V. Markovoi i B. Beiko, M., 1956.

<sup>5</sup> "Vengerskije narodnye skazki," Sost. A. Guidash, perev. s. vengerskogo A. Krasnovoj i V. Vazhdajeva, M., 1952.

<sup>6</sup> "Italjanskije skazki," obrab. Italo kalvins, M., 1953.

<sup>7</sup> "Narodnye russkije skazki Afanasjeva," M., 1940.

- <sup>8</sup> N. P. Andrejev, Ukazatel skazochnykh sjuzhetov po sisteme Aarne, 1929.
- <sup>9</sup> "Zemlja svojo vozmjot," Sbornik materialov dlja opisanija mestuostej i plemjon Kavkaza, t. 10, 1890; "Zemlja svojo vozmjot svojo." Iruzinskiye narodnyje skazki (sto skazok). Perv. N. Dolidze pod red. M. Chikovani, Tbilisi, 1954.
- <sup>10</sup> La Beaute, *Legende Georgiens*, Paris, 1900.
- <sup>11</sup> *Beauty*, London, 1932.
- <sup>12</sup> S. S. Orbeliani, *Mudrost Izhi*, Tb., 1933.
- <sup>13</sup> *Folk Tales*, taken down in Kartli by F. Razikashvili, 1909 (in Georgian).
- <sup>14</sup> "Zemnoje-zemle" (gruzinskiye skazki), gaz. Kavkaz, N 98, 1897.
- <sup>15</sup> A. N. Afanasjev, *Naroduyje russkije legendy*, 1914.
- <sup>16</sup> M. Chikovani, "Balahvariani and the Georgian Folk Tradition", *Mnatobi*, 1957, N 7, (in Georgian).
- <sup>17</sup> "Epos O Gilgameshe," Perv. sakkadskogo I. M. Djakonova, 1961.
- <sup>18</sup> P. Jensen, *Assyrisch-babylonische Mythen und Epen*, *Kielinschriftliche Bibliothek* VI. 1, Berlin, 1900.
- <sup>19</sup> *Gilgameshiani*, *The Babylonian Epic*, transl. from the Babylonian by M. Tsereteli, Constantinople, 1924; *Gilgameshi*, transl. from the Akkadian by Z. Kiknadze, 1963 (both in Georgian).
- <sup>20</sup> T. V. Gamkrelidze, Epos O Gilgameshe, Perv. I. M. Djakonova, retsenzija, "Vestnik drevnej istorii", N 1, 1963.
- <sup>21</sup> M. Chikovani, *Amirani*, gruzinskij epos, Tbilisi, 1960.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, Ed. by James B. Pritchard, Princeton, New Jersey, 1955.
- <sup>23</sup> D. M. Lang, *The Wisdom of Balahvar*, London, 1957.