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THE POPULAR ASSEMBLY IN GREECE AND GEORGIA'S HIGHLANDS

It is known that Greece was the cradle of democracy as a form of rule, which reached a condition that was quite developed for that time. From today's viewpoint, this is not surprising for the leading country of Antiquity. However, scientific research has shown that elements of democracy can be found in ethnic groups at a lower level of social development, including patriarchal societies.

The popular assembly played quite an important role in the life of society in Georgia's highlands. Of course, it was not a form of governance, but it enjoyed highest possible authority and had a decisive say in resolving problems.

Since the popular assembly implied people's participation, it bore signs of democracy. Given this, I believe it is interesting to see whether there is any similarity between the so-called democracy of Georgian highlanders and Greek democracy. We intend to use the comparison to show to what extent people could participate in public life in a society far removed from principles of democracy.

The popular assembly was regarded as the supreme governing body, which consisted of Athenian citizens, who had full rights and were at least 20 years old. In Aristotle's times, men aged 18, who had served two years in the army, could also become members of the assembly and obtain the rights of a citizen. It is difficult to establish the number of the members of the popular assembly in Athens. According to scientific assessments, it could be between 20,000 and 30,000. Some people could be banned from membership in the popular assembly for various reasons like debts to the treasury, elimination from the registry of the demos, prostitution, disrespect for parents or refusal to sustain them, and so forth.

As regards Georgia's highlands – Mtianeti, Svaneti, or Khevsureti, the age of members was not defined. When the assembly of a community was to be held, one man from each household was obliged to attend it no matter what personal affairs they might have. Unlike the popular assembly in Athens, where women were barred from political life, they were allowed to attend assemblies in Svaneti. Moreover, if a woman in a family was believed to be wiser than men, she would be given preference. However, this is true only of Svan women, as the situation with Khevsur women was quite grave and there could be no talk about giving them any rights (for example, it was prohibited for Khevsur women to ride a horse. No matter how old they might have been, they had to follow on foot their men mounted on horseback¹). In mountainous Racha, it was embarrassing for women to attend a gathering of men. However, there were no restrictions in Higher and Lower Racha and even children could be allowed to attend.

The popular assembly in Athens was traditionally held in the open air on the top of the Pnyx hill. On the day of a meeting, specially appointed officials placed barriers at the foot of the hill to divide members of the assembly and the citizens, who had assembled to watch the meeting. Professor Gordeziani wrote that "today, nothing but the tribunes for orators can remind us of an arena for holding the popular assembly. At least 5,000 citizens had to assemble to secure a quorum. It is difficult to say for sure now, where thousands of the participants of meetings were placed and how."² In some cases, the popular assembly was held in the temple of Dionysius.

There was no single place for the popular assembly in Georgia's highlands. People assembled in squares of the villages. They were called *sanakhsho* in Racha, *saanjmo* or *bekhvne* in Tusheti, *sapikhvno* in Khevsureti, *saerobo* in Khevi, *jamikari* in Ajaria, and *svipi* in Svaneti. Village squares seem to have been important elements of rural life in the highlands of the Caucasus as a whole. They were called *jamaat* in Dagestan and *nykhas* in Ossetia.

Svipi was an indispensable component of every village in Svaneti. It was always situated on an elevated place in the centre of the village. The square was circular with circularly positioned stone benches. There were

¹ Khizanishvili N., *Ethnographic Writings*, Tbilisi 1940, 33 (*in Georgian*).

² Gordeziani R., *Greek Civilization*, I, Tbilisi 1988, 122 (*in Georgian*).

large rocks in the middle of *svipi* with places for the elders of the village.³ According to ethnographic materials, people gathered there to resolve all important problems. As regards problems of the whole of Svaneti, they were resolved at *lukhor/luzor* (large/community assembly). There were three locations in Svaneti, where such assemblies could be held: Lalveri, Lalkhori, and Simoni. A union of individual communities formed a valley community, which held its own assembly attended by *makhvshis* – prominent people – representing individual communities. In special cases, representatives of all communities attended the assembly.

In Khevi, leaders would assemble in a kind of building called *sabcheo* ("place for discussions") next to the Trinity Church. In Pshavi and Khevsureti, discussions were held in riverside copses or hills outside villages. Discussions seldom lasted for more than a couple of days. In Khevsureti, *sapikhvnos* were on elevations at the entries to villages (as a rule, almost all places of assembly were half-open buildings).

In Racha, there were *sanakhshos* in every neighbourhood, but villages also had a common *sanakhsho*, where people assembled from every neighbourhood. The council, where all public affairs of villages were raised and resolved, was called *soploba* (*village community*), which was a body governing communities. Some respondents said that *soploba* was previously called *eroba*, and there were places where it was called *tavqriloba*.⁴ *Soploba* was the institution that assembled in village squares and governed public life in villages.

In Tusheti, the locations of assembly were called *bekhvne* and *saanjmno*. The fact that *saanjmno* means "assembly" is confirmed by the term itself. In Old Georgian, *anjmnoba*, *anjamani* and *saanjmno* denoted what was to be publicly announced to people. Later, the terms *anjmnoba* and *saanjmno* became obsolete and were replaced with *Sheqra* (*gathering*).

In Athens of the 5th century BC, *prytaneis* convoked the popular assembly. If voting was necessary to resolve a problem, *prytaneis* distributed ballots. Chairman of the assembly – *epistates* – was then elected from among *prytaneis*. He was to act as chairman for only one day, as new chairmen – *epistates* – were elected at every assembly. In the times of Aristotle, the procedure for convoking and holding the assembly became more complicated. The chairman of the *boule* – *epistates* – appointed nine *proedri* for each assembly. They were selected from those members of the

³ Gujejiani R., From the History of Mentality of Mountineers, Svaneti, Tbilisi 2008, 19 (*in Georgian*).

⁴ Chikovani., *ibid*.

boule, who did not serve as *prytaneis* at that moment. Chairman of the assembly was then elected from among *proedri*, who managed the assembly, deciding how to vote on specific issues and when to end discussions. *Grammatei*, who were to read out documents, were also elected at the assembly.

As regards Svaneti, scientists have found several types of the popular assembly there. The assembly in individual villages was called *soploba* and was led by the *makhvshis* of the villages. Problems of specific villages were resolved at the assembly. However, in R. Kharadze's opinion, a village elected a *kheistau* for three years to bring in order affairs within the village and expose crimes. Depending on the size of a village, one or more *kheistau* was elected. If necessary, *kheistaus* could meet and elect a council of five people called *morual*.⁵ It was also elected for three years. In addition, there was the community assembly that united several villages and was governed by community *makhvshis*. If necessary, a community *makhvshi* would convoke the community assembly. He selected experienced, smart, and honest people and held consultations with them before drawing conclusions on specific problems and familiarized the assembly with the conclusions. The assembly, in turn, was authorized to confirm his conclusion, amend it, or disagree and violate it.

It is noteworthy that Strabo also noted that Svaneti was governed by the council of 300 people. S. Janashia and R. Kharadze think that Strabo meant the popular council and assembly created at the tribal level. In later periods, the council consisted of representatives elected by village communities for a certain period. It was called *Igtish mare* (prominent people) and led the assembly of communities. Its decisions were obligatory for fulfilment. Once in three years, all members of a community swore an oath that they would be loyal to the community and trust decisions taken by elected representatives. The latter were responsible for administering justice and resolving family disputes and other problems. The *morual* selected from among *Igtish mare* or councillors was to make appropriate decisions.

According to resident of Ienashi village Shavkhan Parjiani, son of Piri, the community assembly was held once in three years.⁶ Researchers differ on how regular the assembly met. Modern scientists think that meetings were not held regularly and that *makhvshis* did not lead them. They believe

⁵ Kharadze R., *The System of Governance in Svaneti*, MSE VI, Tbilisi 1953, 185 (*in Georgian*).

⁶ Kharadze R., *Op. cit.*, 168.

that the assembly was held when necessary and aged or experienced and smart people, including women, were tasked to lead it.

In other regions of Georgia, the popular assembly was held when necessary. Offenders were tried at the assembly led by a *khevisberi* (community head) in Pshavi.

Pekhoni (*sapikhvno* – place, where *pekhoni* was held) had no concrete head in Shatili. *Pekhoni* was the assembly of adult men, where problems of everyday life of the village were raised. Along with the resolution of disputes and problems of the community, people did public or family work in *sapikhvno* (leather working, making shoes, processing lime-tree bark for ropes, producing gunpowder, and so forth). When enemies threatened the village or the village intended to go for a campaign, they would assemble in the *sapikhvno* and produce gunpowder together. According to G. Chachalashvili, "a kind of 'military democracy' or a transitional stage to a class society was preserved in the shape of *pekhoni*."⁷

Soploba in Racha did not have leaders elected for a certain period. At the assembly, people would select a reasonable man to head it and the man would speak on behalf of everyone. A specially selected young man, who was called "caller" informed people that the assembly was to meet. In Svaneti people were summoned to the assembly with bugles and trumpets.

Khevi was governed previously by the council that comprised elders. The council itself was led by community leaders (*bches*). The Khevi council bore signs of self-government and enjoyed a certain amount of sovereignty. In the tribal governance system, communities were led by the council of elders of the tribe. Later, the council consisted of representatives of territorial communities, who established order within the community in accordance with norms introduced by people. The representatives in the council often referred to traditions when administering justice.

As tribal governance weakened, the tribal community council ceased to exist and the popular assembly no longer elected community representatives for a certain period. In spite of such changes, residents of Khevi and Svaneti, as well as other Georgian highlanders, continued to resolve everyday problems on the basis of traditions. Correspondingly, communities continued to have their leaders, who were no longer regarded as members of the permanent council, but assembled if necessary in accordance with the demands of the community. The popular governance

⁷ Chachalashvili G., From History of the Form of Public Government in Khevsureti (*Sapikhvno* in Shatili), T. 7, Tbilisi 1955, 237.

effectively had a certain amount of sovereignty and was subordinated to the authorities only partially. Only the community could change traditions extant from the ancestors.

The popular assembly in Athens elected the council of 500 men, which was an important body directly linked to the assembly that approved all decrees. In special cases, it could act independently of the *boule*. However, the popular assembly and *boule* acted jointly. The popular assembly could not vote on issues *prytaneis* had not put on the agenda, but on the other hand, *prytaneis* were also unable to submit specific problems for discussion. The *Boule* approved a *probouleuma* – a resolution, which was to be submitted to the popular assembly. In that case, the *probouleuma* became a *psephisma*, which was to be voted on.

The annual work of the assembly was divided in 10 cycles – *prytaneas*. Every *prytanea* consisted of 36 days and four meetings of the assembly were held in each cycle, one of the four being called the supreme assembly (*κυρία ἐκκλησία*). The approval of *magisters*, food supplies, defence, and other issues were discussed at the meeting. The assembly also elected treasurers, naval architects, supervisors, people responsible for sacrifices and so forth. Some of the meetings were earmarked for the resolution concrete problems. The role of the assembly was very important. It was possible to consider all issues pertaining to war and peace, finances and justice or others. Voting was secret for the exception of the cases, when people were elected to military positions. Every citizen had the right to express his opinion, propose a draft law or revoke one if it ran against democracy.

The assembly defined the state's foreign policy, elected envoys, and discussed the results of negotiations with other states. It also made decisions on starting war and concluding a truce. The assembly was authorized to grant citizenship to foreigners and exempt citizens from taxes. The assembly also considered issues pertaining to religion and finances. There was a separate organ – *Heliiaia* – that considered legal cases.

As regards Georgia, the assembly of communities was a full-fledged lawmaking, judiciary and political body, which made final decisions on public affairs and was not accountable to anyone.

In Svaneti, the assembly of communities resolved issues affecting the whole of Svaneti: declared war, mobilized the army, appointed commander of the army, discussed conditions of a truce, levied taxes from the population and so forth. The assembly of the communities enjoyed unrestricted authority. It could evict a household from their land and order to deprive a traitor of the community of his property or execute him.

The decisions of the assembly could not be appealed against. However, the assembly did not interfere in internal affairs and every community was free to make decisions independently.

The community assembly made decision on attacking a neighbouring tribe or establishing relations with neighbours or other communities. The assembly was responsible for the payment of *tsori*⁸ and *sakhsari*.⁹ Those, who left the community for another region without the assembly's permission, were punished, because they could import diseases. In accordance with the decision of the assembly, the community provided shelter to people fleeing other communities and protected them from enemies.

The assembly was authorized to punish thieves, bribe-takers, and other offenders. It could also remove from their posts clerics (*bapis*) caught on wrongdoing. It was the function of the members of the assembly to reconcile those involved in blood feuds. They passed sentences and none of the community members dared to resist.

As regards Pshavi, the popular assembly was authorized to order capital punishment by stoning or exile. However, ordinary civil disputes were resolved in Pshavi and Khevsureti through the mediation court or persons selected by mediators.

The popular assembly had similar important functions among other Georgian highlanders. Young people could also attend its meetings, but without the right to vote. This was supposed to be a good school, where they could become familiar with traditions and moral norms. It is also noteworthy that meetings of the popular assembly were mostly held in church courtyards or close to some buildings of worship in order to raise the legitimacy of the former.

The aforementioned facts make it clear that the popular assembly had a leading role in the highlands of Georgia. Democratic principles of governance were widespread in the whole of Greece, but in Georgia, the popular assembly existed only in highlands, where the population enjoyed more freedoms than in lowlands.

⁸ *Tsori* – material fee for blood feud killing, which the whole community paid, if one of its members killed a common enemy.

⁹ *Sakhsari* – a kind of fee a community paid for a person captured when doing public work.