EGYPTIAN IMAGE-SYMBOLS IN GEORGIAN LITERATURE AND ART

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Abstract. The presented study discusses the image-symbol of the tiger in Georgian literature and art. Egyptian elements have long been widely used in Georgian art, reflecting various aspects of cultural history. According to research, the image-symbol of the tiger appears in Egyptian, Greek, Sumerian, and other literary and artistic traditions. In Georgia, this symbol has held special significance since ancient times – both in pagan and Christian religious contexts. Numerous intriguing details further emphasize the existence of ancient connections between Georgians and Egyptians, connections that have found expression in Georgian culture. It is also noteworthy that the symbolic meaning of the tiger had roots in ancient Georgian beliefs and folk traditions.

Thus, Georgian epic literature abounds in parallels with monuments of world culture. Hieroglyphs, pyramids, deities, pharaohs, sarcophagi, and the scenes depicted on them once again draw us closer to the uniqueness of Egyptian civilization. All of this attests to the enduring existence of Georgian–Egyptian cultural realities.

Keywords: image-symbol, Egypt, Georgia, tiger, leopard, traditions, myths, costume

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Introduction. The interrelation and mutual influence of myth, poetry, literature, and art have long been the focus of scholarly attention. Myth has been regarded as the fertile ground from which art, poetry, and other creative forms have emerged. Artistic thought, in the earliest stages of human development, manifested itself through myth, shaped largely by religious consciousness.

The land of the pharaohs – Egypt – is filled with extraordinary narratives and symbols. The civilization of ancient Egypt left behind traces of its historical record thousands of years ago. Egyptian mythology is rich in mythologemes, with much of its history representing a blend of verifiable facts and symbolic narratives. These myths, widely used by the ancient Egyptians, share notable similarities with motifs found in Georgian art and literature.

Discussion. The world of global technology has transformed human beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes toward many issues. Today, 21st-century literary scholars maintain that it is precisely „in myth and metaphor that the purpose and function of literature are revealed“ (Widengren, G. 1965: 160, 209).

It is universally recognized that Egyptian culture constitutes one of the greatest sources of world civilization. Numerous studies reaffirm its uniqueness – its hieroglyphs, image-symbols, and overall culture are reflected throughout world literature and art. In this respect, Georgia is among the nations that have actively integrated the legacy of this ancient civilization. Truly, „Ancient Egypt is an astonishing

treasure“, a realm that guides us through the mysteries of the primordial world. The tombs and the scenes depicted within them – narrating the lives of kings, souls of the deceased, deities, and priests – remain particularly impressive.

In myths and ancient literary works, as well as in Egyptian iconography, the tiger's skin carried multifaceted symbolic meanings. Specifically, its symbolism was expressed through the garments of kings, priests, and deities. „In Siam, China, Burma, and other countries, the tiger was considered a symbol of power.“ Deities and heroes of the East – such as Tarhu, the god of weather and thunder; Bess, one of the oldest Asian heroes; Gilgamesh from Sumerian mythology; and the heroes of the Iliad and Shahnameh – are all depicted wearing tiger skins. In Pindar's Fourth Ode, Jason is referred to as a knight clad in tiger skin. In Dionysian imagery, tigers draw the god's chariot, and Dionysus himself is draped in a tiger skin.

In Indian epics, Shiva's consort Shakti is shown riding tigers – embodiments of human passions that she can either liberate or subdue. According to legend, when ancient sages created a terrifying tiger to defeat Shiva, he killed the beast and clothed himself in its skin (literaturatmcodneoba.tsu.ge).

That the tiger symbol has roots in the most ancient times is beyond dispute. The focus of the present study, however, is on the Egyptian-Georgian image-symbols. It is universally acknowledged in both Georgian and world literature that, according to Pshav-Khevsurian folklore, the tiger possesses a sacred character.

These issues are examined in detail by Zviad Gamsakhurdia in his book The Imagery of The Knight in the Panther's Skin, in which the author, among other topics, discusses this very theme. According to Gamsakhurdia, myths associated with tiger symbolism link us to ancient Asia Minor cultures and emphasize its etymology and genesis in pre-Christian, pagan belief systems. In his view, „the tiger is related to the symbolism of darkness and the new moon. The tiger's skin symbolizes royal initiation, as it is connected with birth and rebirth. Hence, the initiated adept is called 'twice-born.' On Egyptian hieroglyphs, three interwoven tiger skins denote 'birth' and are associated with the words 'conception,' 'growth,' and 'formation.'“

In ancient Egypt, there existed an initiatory ritual involving the donning of a tiger skin – a rite performed by pharaohs and priests as part of their spiritual preparation and quest for divine wisdom. A similar ritual appears in Shahnameh in the story of the mythic first king and man, Keyumars, and his followers, who became strengthened and enlightened after he clothed them in tiger skins. Later, this ritual was replaced by mulakrum a symbolic imitation – and eventually only the tiger's tail remained, worn by kings around the waist. Comparable rites existed involving the skins of other animals, depending on totemic beliefs and related to the symbolism of the animal hide (Engnell, I., Studies in Divine Kingship, London, 1987).

Among military and dervish orders, sitting upon a skin also carried initiatory significance, technically termed post-nisin in New Persian. Recall that Tariel, the hero of The Knight in the Panther's Skin, not only wore a robe made of tiger skin but also sat upon tiger-skin mats, as described: „He spread beneath him the mats of tiger skin.“

In ancient Egyptian mysteries, the king or pharaoh underwent transformation into Horus – the lord of the universe, the celestial god, and the slayer of the serpent Apophis (symbolizing darkness). He was directly addressed as Horus, and all that was expected from a divine being was attributed to him (Frankfort, H., Kingship and the Gods, London, 1969; cited in Gamsakhurdia, 1991:190–191).

Particularly noteworthy is the metamorphosis of ancient Egyptian pharaohs, which is again associated with the symbolism of the tiger. As Gamsakhurdia observes, „In mythology, the tiger is linked with the symbolism of darkness and, in one of its aspects, corresponds to the shadow of the soul, the lower instincts, or Indian 'tamas.' A similar symbol appears in Dante's 'Divine Comedy' as the tiger and in the Apocalyptic beast with the form of a tiger.“

In Hellenic mythology, the tiger (or leopard) is connected with Demeter–Persephone and Dionysus. The specific species – whether tiger, leopard, or panther – is of little consequence. For instance, in the paintings of Cleophrades, Dionysus wears a striped tiger skin, while Egyptian priests are often depicted

wearing leopard skins. The Georgian term vepkhi ("tiger") denotes both animals. What matters is the creature's nature and appearance, which serve as the foundation for its symbolic use (ibid., p. 192).

It is also significant that „in Christian literature, the tiger first appears in the Book of Revelation of John. This is evidently a leopard (Greek: πάρδαλις); in the Georgian translation by St. George the Athonite, the term 'tiger' is used, in English translations 'leopard,' in Latin panthera, and in Russian Gepard, etc. – 'And the beast which I saw was like unto a leopard' (Revelation 13:2)" (ibid., p. 192).

In Georgian literary scholarship, debate continues to this day regarding the precise identity of the animal whose skin is worn by the hero of The Knight in the Panther's Skin (Vepkhistqaosani). Some interpret the term vepkhi as „tiger," others as „leopard," and still others as „cheetah."

A particularly noteworthy contribution to this discussion is Luigi Magarotto's study „The Meaning of the Tiger in Shota Rustaveli's The Knight in the Panther's Skin*," in which the author undertakes a detailed examination of the etymological origins of the word vepkhi. According to Magarotto:

"Rustaveli uses the ancient Georgian word vepkhi (modern Georgian vepkhvi) in the sense of a leopard or cheetah – animals that, from a zoological perspective, refer to the same species (Felis pardus, now Panthera pardus)."

He further adds that the direct translation of Rustaveli's famous poem, composed around 1190, would be 'The Youth Clad in a Leopard's (Tiger's) Skin'. In all major European languages, the title is rendered as „The Man (Lord, Knight) in the Leopard's Skin." The choice between „man," „lord," or „knight" depends on the translator's aesthetic sensibility, though the overall meaning remains unchanged. What is more significant, according to Magarotto, is how the translator renders the word vepkhi – as „cheetah," „leopard," or „tiger." While all three belong to the family Felidae, the cheetah's coat is spotted, whereas the tiger's is striped. It is therefore intriguing that some translators preferred the cheetah as an equivalent and others the tiger (Magarotto, The Meaning of the Tiger in Rustaveli's The Knight in the Panther's Skin, Kartvelologi, TSU).

According to Zviad Gamsakhurdia, „It is evident that the poem's title derives from the attire of one of its principal heroes – Tariel: 'He wore a robe made of tiger skin.' This robe, therefore, was of tiger hide, just like the garments of Keyumars and Rostom."

He notes a striking parallel: in a Persian manuscript preserved at the Saltykov–Shchedrin Library in Leningrad, the mythical first man and first king, Keyumars, is depicted wearing a tiger-skin robe, seated upon tiger hides by the waterside at the foot of the Tree of Life, accompanied by vassals also clad in tiger skins, one of whom wrestles a tiger. Likewise, Tariel appears similarly attired in manuscript S-5006, illustrated by two anonymous painters (Gamsakhurdia, 1991: 206–207).

The French scholar Luigi Magarotto, drawing on solid philological and iconographic arguments, concludes that vepkhi in Rustaveli's text denoted a leopard or cheetah. Yet he poses the crucial question: why did some translators equate vepkhi with the cheetah and others with the tiger? Magarotto himself provides the answer:

"One of the most accurate translations of Rustaveli's poem is by the distinguished Russian poet Konstantin Balmont (1867–1942), who rendered the title into Russian as Nosiashchii barsovu shkuru ('He Who Wears a Leopard's Skin'). In Russian, alongside the terms leopard (leopard) and cheetah (gepard), there exists the archaic word bars, which historically referred to both animals. From this derives the adjective barsovyj ('leopard's'), which Balmont employs. The term bars entered Russian no later than the 16th century from Old Turkic bārs, itself derived from the Hittite root parš-, later adopted into Iranian (pārs / fārs). This term originally denoted only the leopard or cheetah. In Turkic tradition, the veneration of large, spotted felines was considered a sacred sign, as evidenced by paintings discovered in the village of Çatalhöyük in southern Anatolia (8th–6th millennia BCE). Over time, the lexeme bārs acquired the additional meaning of 'tiger' in Turkic languages, but in Russian it retained only the sense of 'leopard' or 'cheetah.'" (Gamkrelidze, T. & Ivanov, V., Indo-European Language and Indo-Europeans: Reconstruction and Historical-Typological Study of Proto-Language and Proto-Culture, Vol. II, Tbilisi State University Press, 1984, pp. 500–507; Kartvelologi, TSU).

In modern Georgian linguistic usage, the term vepkhi is universally associated with the tiger; however, research reveals a more complex semantic history. What remains beyond dispute is that the tiger's, leopard's, or cheetah's skin has always been regarded as a divine garment imbued with profound symbolic meaning.

The Encyclopedia of Symbols likewise notes: „In the homeland of The Knight in the Panther's Skin, it is only fitting to begin an analysis of tiger symbolism with Rustaveli's imagery itself. In the poem, the 'beautiful form of the tiger' symbolizes Nestan-Darejan, while the desperate, battle-worn Tariel is clothed in the hide of this exotic creature. Here, the tiger embodies both perfect beauty and, at the same time, fierce, untamed, and indomitable nature.“ (Abzianidze, 2006: 74).

It is natural that much of the confusion surrounding this term stems from artistic depictions accompanying editions of Rustaveli's poem. As Magarotto observes: „No medieval reader would have doubted which animal Rustaveli meant by the word vepkhi, since in miniatures attached to 16th–17th century manuscripts of The Knight in the Panther's Skin, Tariel is consistently shown wearing the hide of a spotted, not striped, animal. In various printed editions of the poem, illustrations by different artists depict the unknown knight draped in a spotted feline skin. This tradition persisted at least until the appearance of illustrations by the Hungarian artist Mihály Zichy (1827–1906). However, in the 20th century, Georgian artist Sergo Kobuladze (1909–1978), when illustrating the poem, depicted the knight wearing the striped hide of a feline instead of a spotted one. Why such a radical shift? The reason is that, from at least the early 20th century, the Georgian lexeme vepkhi lost its earlier dual meaning ('leopard/tiger') and came to signify only the tiger. Thus, Kobuladze's interpretation of the animal whose skin adorns the knight reflects the linguistic perception of a 20th-century Georgian.“ (Magarotto, The Meaning of the Tiger in Rustaveli's The Knight in the Panther's Skin, Kartvelologi, TSU).

In fact, both of these phenomena have a much more ancient origin. Georgian scholars M. Tsereteli and T. Margvelashvili connect the plot of The Knight in the Panther's Skin (Vepkhistqaosani) with a prehistoric saga of the Japhetides, the Proto-Caucasians (the Georgio-Caucasians), which in turn derives from the culture of the pre-Japhetic matriarchal epoch and is reflected in The Epic of Gilgamesh and other myths featuring heroes „clad in lions' or panthers' skins.“ (Gamsakhurdia, 1991: 206–207).

Zviad Gamsakhurdia's view also challenges the assumption that the symbolism of the panther's (tiger's) skin originated outside the Caucasus. He specifically cites Gamkrelidze and Ivanov's opinion that „archaeological excavations in the North Caucasus confirm that the tiger was the totem of the Proto-Kartvelian tribe, that is, the Japhetides“ (Georgica, 1936, London). The same topic is addressed by T. Gamkrelidze and V. Ivanov in their book The Indo-Europeans (1985) (ibid., 207).

It is also noteworthy and symbolically significant that such attire was worn not only by kings of art and writing but also by royal priests. In particular, in Egypt, on the wall of Nefertiabet's tomb at Giza (dated to around 4500 years ago), there is a depiction of Nefertiabet, a priestess of the goddess Seshat-the divine patron of art and writing-wearing a garment made of leopard skin, just like the goddess herself. In the fresco, the priestess is shown in anticipation of the ritual that awaited her soul in the afterlife.

It is equally remarkable that, from a religious perspective, a segment of society considered mythology unacceptable for sacred literature. Yet there were ecclesiastical and public figures, such as Saint Basil the Great, who wrote: „Even pagan works of art and literature can benefit the soul, if read correctly.“ Saint Basil urges the youth to study such works, as, in his words, „they too can lead us toward virtuous life, by means of the hidden teachings they contain.“ (Rosad, 1802: 52–55).

A text of both pagan and Christian character has been preserved in Pshavi and Khevsureti – a song dedicated to Saint George, celebrating his bravery, combat, and attire:

Giorgi, do not flee,
Sorrow pursues you by hand;
Giorgi will not flee,
For on his body he wears a variegated robe.

Naturally, Zviad Gamsakhurdia's study takes into account this and similar examples when he discusses the magical significance of the panther's skin attire. Specifically, „The leopard-skin garments of Keyumars's subjects endowed them with strength and wisdom; for the ancient Egyptian initiate, it symbolized union with the divine life and signified his 'rebirth,' or initiation. Likewise, for Rama's warriors, the banner made of leopard skin symbolized their invincible might. The 19th-century French scholar A. Saint-Yves d'Alveydre notes: 'The Georgian hero clad in the panther's skin originates from the epoch of Rama, whose banner was sewn from a panther's hide.'" (Schelling F.W., Introduction à la Philosophie de la Mythologie, I–II, Paris, 1945) (Gamsakhurdia, 1991: 207).

From the above-quoted Khevsurian ritual song it becomes evident that the „variegated robe" worn by Saint George serves as the emblem of his triumph; it endows him with strength, might, and determination: George does not flee because „on his body he wears a variegated robe." It is not difficult to recognize in this „variegated robe" the multi-colored garment of the solar heroes of antiquity – often made of a panther's (leopard's) skin. (Let us also recall the biblical Joseph's „coat of many colors" and Saint Basil the Great's comparison of it with the panther's skin.)

In the iconography of Saint George, depictions of the saint in a robe are exceedingly rare; he is most often portrayed as an armored horseman. Yet among the countless Georgian images of the saint, there exist a few exceptions in which Saint George is robed and this robe resembles that made of panther's skin. When Saint George is portrayed in armor, the sleeves usually reach only to the elbows, and the armor itself seldom extends below the waist. However, in the tenth-century repoussé icon from Khirakhoni, Saint George wears a long, spotted robe – apparently made of a single piece of panther's hide – with sleeves extending to the wrists and reaching down to his boots. (See G. Chubinashvili, Georgian Goldsmithery, Tbilisi, 1959, vol. II). A similar attire is found in certain Svan icons (ibid.). Later, in the 12th–13th centuries, dragons slain by Saint George are depicted with spotted, leopard-like scales. On the relief of the southern wall of the Church of Saint George at Mtsvane-Dzala (11th c.), the saint, mounted on horseback, is shown piercing a spotted panther (not a dragon) with his spear – the creature bears two small wings but otherwise resembles no dragon. Thus, it becomes evident that in Georgian iconography the panther is a synonym of the dragon (ibid., 207).

It is also essential to note that within the realm of Georgian oral tradition there emerged a magnificent poetic work, The Ballad of the Tiger and the Youth, where attention is drawn not only to symbolism but also to the nobility and grandeur of the Georgian woman. This poem holds a profound place in Georgian folklore: a mother, mourning her slain and torn son, laments both her child and the tiger that killed him, expressing sympathy toward the tiger's mother as well.

"Who said that one grows without a mother?
Perhaps the tiger's mother, too,
Weeps day and night as I do.
I shall go and meet her,
Offer my condolences for her sorrow.
She will tell me her story,
And I shall tell her mine –
She, too, must bear the guilt
Of her son, slain without mercy."
(https://www.aura.ge)

Within the treasury of Georgian folk creativity, we can clearly discern a particular reverence toward the „divine" or „honored" animal – a distinctive attitude of respect that is evident in the verses of this poem. According to Amiran Arabuli, „The power of The Ballad of the Tiger and the Youth is amplified by the fact that the mother of the youth expresses compassion not toward a human being, but toward a beast. This, indeed, represents a far more exalted manifestation of humanism."

Incidentally, in Khevsureti there exists a ballad with a similar plot (as is well known, folk poetry reaches its highest artistic expression in the mountains). There once lived a man named Mgela, son of Kurau (whether real or legendary, it is not known). One day, while walking near his village along the cliffs, he came upon a sleeping tiger. Having a sword with him, he could easily have killed it – but he refrained and instead shouted: „Wake up!“ The tiger awoke, and the two fought hand-to-hand. Fighting a sleeping beast would have been unworthy of a brave man… An unwritten chivalric code demanded that a hero scrupulously observe certain rules and norms, and any violation of these rules entailed punishment. In The Ballad of the Tiger and the Youth, man and animal are equals – both embodying and expressing courage and heroic spirit.

Ultimately, what is the purpose of works of such content, and of artistic literature in general? The scholar responds: „Georgian literature and folk creativity represent for us that which we must cling to – in order to cultivate within our souls the most beautiful plant of goodness and virtue. Without them, our already desolate existence would resemble a desert.“ (https://karibche.ge/qristianuli-ckhovreba/qristianuli-khelovneba/745-iqneba)

It is also noteworthy that throughout the 20th century, Georgian poets and writers repeatedly returned to the symbolism of the tiger. Of particular interest are Giorgi Leonidze's poem „The Tiger,“ published in the journal Mecnebne Niamorebi; Galaktion Tabidze's poem „If the Tiger Were Enraged“; and his „Poem of the Tiger“ (1926). Also remarkable is the work of the Symbolist poet Valerian Gaprindashvili, „Tigers Breakfasting at the Zoo“ (1928), among others.

Thus, in Georgian consciousness to this day, the tiger's symbolism is interpreted as representing strength, ferocity, wrath, beauty, and swiftness – qualities that emerge both in the animal's physical nature and its divine essence.

Conclusion. Accordingly, the study of the imagery in The Knight in the Panther's Skin requires drawing typological parallels with examples from ancient mythology, classical poetry, and medieval literature. It is necessary to elucidate the specific nature of mythopoetic thought, mythological imagery, and then its relation to the fairy tale, folk poetry, and artistic literature – as discussed in the works of German scholars such as Herder, Jacob Grimm, Creuzer, and Wundt, as well as numerous modern researchers.

According to these scholars, the plot-compositional structure, characters, and poetic images of The Knight in the Panther's Skin demand a detailed functional analysis from the standpoint of mythological poetics in order to correctly discern the author's intention and the poem's true underlying meaning. (Gamsakhurdia, 1991: 13) Therefore, modern research proceeds from the understanding that myth contains a hidden meaning -one that exists beyond its fantastic forms and representations. Indeed, the aim of contemporary scholarly analysis is to grasp and reveal this inner significance, though even today's reality still cannot fully penetrate every stage of humanity's cultural existence.

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