

THE BELIEF IN THE MAGICAL POWER AND INFLUENCE OF THE WORD IN THE WORKS OF EGNATE NINOSHVILI

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Abstract. The paper examines examples of folklore collected from the short stories of Egnate Ninoshvili (1859–1894) that reflect the belief in the magical power of the word. It analyzes the motives behind their creation and the character types built upon these motives. Ninoshvili integrates authentic expressions – emergent from the collective oral discourse of the people – which have become embedded in the socio-cultural fabric of everyday life; one such example is Georgian folk incantations.

The writer masterfully employed examples of an archaic genre – folk incantations – based on the belief in the magical power of the word and its practical applications (such as folk healing). These incantations vividly express the emotions and aspirations of many and were used by the author to characterize both the portraits of the individual characters and the broader community.

The objectives of the study are to determine the influence of the belief in the magical power of words and actions on the characters, to reveal their psychological portraits, and to highlight the function of such beliefs (various forms of so-called “trials,” curses, blessings, and others) in the process of analyzing the central ideas of the stories.

Key words: incantation, society, worldview, psychological portraits.

Introduction. The literary legacy of **Egnate Ninoshvili (1859–1894)** constitutes one of the most significant sources for the study of the diverse genres of Georgian oral folk tradition. At first glance, Ninoshvili appears to have been neither a collector nor a theoretician of folklore. As Sikharulidze observes, *“Egnate Ninoshvili was, at first sight, neither a collector of folk literature nor a theorist of folklore. We possess neither a collection of folkloric materials recorded by the writer nor theoretical works devoted to folk tradition”* (Sikharulidze, 1956, p. 238). Nevertheless, it is evident that the deeper semantic layers of each of his short stories are permeated with numerous elements of Georgian oral tradition.

Incantation (*shelotsva*) is one of the most archaic genres of oral folklore, founded upon the belief in the magical power of both the spoken word and ritual action. Its origins date back to the earliest stages of human society, when people's worldview was predominantly shaped by animistic beliefs and perceptions (Shioshvili, 2022, p. 248).

It was within this cultural and religious context that the archaic folkloric genre of the incantation emerged. In the Georgian translations of the Bible, its lexical equivalent is the term *sakhvra*, denoting the act or process of performing an incantation. However, fourteenth-century Georgian manuscripts preserve both the traditional designation *shelotsva* (“incantation”) and the Christian term *lotsva* (“prayer”) (Okroshidze, 1960, p. 302).

As Zurab Kiknadze points out, prayer and incantation differ fundamentally in their function and the nature of the relationship between the speaker and the supernatural realm. Whereas prayer is addressed to a hierarchically superior being—God, an angel, or a saint—as a supplication containing a plea for divine

intervention, the purpose of an incantation is to influence the will of supernatural beings and compel them to act in the practitioner's favor. The common feature shared by prayer and incantation is the belief in the existence of a transcendent reality beyond the physical world. The practitioner of an incantation, however, perceives no hierarchical relationship with the beings to whom the incantatory text is addressed; rather, these entities are conceived as existing on the same horizontal plane as the practitioner or even on a lower one (Kiknadze, 2008, pp. 216–217).

In Egnate Ninoshvili's socially oriented short story "**Partakhi**" (*The Wasteland*), numerous examples of incantatory and magical speech occur, among which the fortune-telling episode is particularly noteworthy. The fortune tellers predict that **"He will become very fortunate through marriage"** (Ninoshvili, 1954, p. 299). Khvaramze, Jeran's mother, consults fortune tellers in an attempt to discover the destiny awaiting her son. Her daughter, Elisabed, proves no less devoted to divinatory practices:

"I visited one fortune teller and then another. Both unanimously told me: 'Fortune is already standing at your door; do not let it slip away.' The fortune teller also added: 'With the arrival of that woman, your household will prosper just as water rises during heavy rain'" (Ninoshvili, 1954, p. 303).

Following an arranged marriage, Jeran takes Liza as his wife. Their marital life soon becomes dominated by incessant domestic conflict, accompanied by mutual curses and imprecations. Elisabed addresses her mother, Khvaramze, with the following curse:

"Mother, if only you and Aunt had broken your legs before you ever found Jeran a bride!" (Ninoshvili, 1954, p. 313).

Khvaramze responds in kind:

"Why should it have been me? Why didn't your aunt lose her eyesight and break her leg first? She, that wretched woman, should have known better. What blame rests on me?" (Ninoshvili, 1954, p. 313).

Among the curses articulated by the characters are the following:

"O God, why did You not bring an end to the day on which I was married?" (Ninoshvili, 1954, p. 296);

"May God curse it! One thought leads to another, and there is no end to them!" (Ninoshvili, 1954, p. 331);

"Why did I not lose my sight before I ever laid eyes on that person?" (Ninoshvili, 1954, p. 336);

"May mourning befall the household of my enemy! What cause have we for mourning?" (Ninoshvili, 1954, p. 317);

"May God reward you with the very same kindness that you have shown me!" (Ninoshvili, 1954, p. 297);

"O God, deprive of reason and feeling the one who has brought me to this state today!" (Ninoshvili, 1954, p. 297).

These curses are answered in equally formulaic language:

"If I am guilty, may your words come true; but if I am innocent, may the same fate befall you." (Ninoshvili, 1954, p. 297);

"May a serpent cling to your tongue if you cease uttering curses." (Ninoshvili, 1954, p. 297).

These verbal formulas are exchanged among members of the same household—namely, the daughter-in-law, the sister-in-law, and the mother-in-law—demonstrating how ritualized speech permeates even the closest familial relationships and functions as a conventional means of expressing hostility, resentment, and emotional conflict.

Unable to find a solution to their troubles, Khvaramze and her daughter Elisabed once again turn to a fortune teller. This episode vividly illustrates the spiritual and intellectual darkness that characterizes the community, where superstition perpetuates rather than alleviates suffering:

"Your daughter-in-law has brought such ill fortune into your family that from now on your household will only continue to decline." (Ninoshvili, 1954, p. 320).

The fortune teller's pronouncement reinforces the family's belief in supernatural causality, attributing their misfortunes not to social or interpersonal factors but to the supposedly malignant influence embodied in the daughter-in-law. In this way, Ninoshvili exposes the destructive consequences of superstition and demonstrates how unquestioning faith in divination deepens familial discord and intensifies human tragedy.

In an attempt to protect Elisabed from an evil spirit, the fortune teller stitched an enchanted object into a piece of cloth and handed it to Khvaramze, instructing her to tie it around Elisabed's neck. She then provided further verbal instructions concerning the ritual:

"Be especially careful on the appointed day!" (Ninoshvili, 1954, p. 323).

This ritual of incantation constitutes one of the most significant episodes in the narrative, as it portrays a reality in which human beings place their trust not in God but in an obscure magical object—an amulet—whose nature they neither understand nor genuinely experience as a source of spiritual assistance.

Through this episode, Ninoshvili seeks to demonstrate that such beliefs and practices only intensify the tragic dimension of human existence. Immersed in ignorance and superstition, individuals gradually lose their likeness to God, become alienated from genuine spiritual values, and ultimately perish. The tragedy begins with the inability of the newly married couple to establish a harmonious relationship. Their conflict is further aggravated by the incessant hostility of Jeran's sister, who becomes convinced that the bride is possessed by an evil spirit, that she prevents her from marrying, and therefore constitutes an enemy of the entire family. Within such an atmosphere of suspicion and resentment, evil readily gains a foothold. As the narrator observes, **"Jeran came to hate his wife, especially after the fortune tellers declared that she was possessed by an evil spirit"** (Ninoshvili, 1954, p. 324).

The fortune teller further exacerbates the situation by warning:

"Do not let Liza know about this; otherwise, the remedy will lose its power." (Ninoshvili, 1954, p. 323).

Under the influence of fortune tellers and practitioners of folk magic, the family is ultimately plunged into profound misfortune. None of the prophecies comes to pass, and those who placed their faith in them are left utterly disillusioned. The conclusion of the story presents a quintessential image of tragedy: Liza takes her own life; Jeran is exiled to Siberia after being accused of murdering his wife; Elisabed dies of tuberculosis; and Khvaramze loses her sanity before eventually dying herself.

Ninoshvili thus employs this sequence of events to expose the destructive consequences of superstition and blind faith in magical practices. Rather than offering protection or salvation, fortune-telling and incantatory rituals become catalysts for familial disintegration, moral decline, and irreversible human tragedy.

From the perspective of oral traditions reflecting the belief in the magical power of the spoken word, Ninoshvili's socially oriented short story **"Tsolis da K'mari" (*Husband and Wife*)** is no less significant. One illustrative example reads:

"Someone cut off the hem of my wedding dress, and with it they carried away both my heart and my womanhood." (Ninoshvili, 1954, p. 456).

The widowed Tinatini attributes her childlessness to a malevolent supernatural force which, according to popular belief, secretly cut the hem of her bridal dress one night. This passage reflects the widespread folk conviction that magical interference with a person's clothing could adversely affect fertility and marital happiness.

Equally noteworthy are the story's curse formulas, which reveal important aspects of the characters' worldview:

"Do you really think I am sixty years old now? May you receive only as much happiness as you wish upon me!" (Ninoshvili, 1954, p. 489);

"Mother, if this would grieve you, may God never grant me such a fate!" (Ninoshvili, 1954, p. 460).

These utterances demonstrate the considerable authority exercised by family members, whose opinions remain decisive even in matters concerning an individual's private life. They also underscore the moral and emotional weight attached to familial relationships within the traditional social order.

The short story **"Monadire" (The Hunter)**, which addresses the problem of social inequality, is distinguished from Ninoshvili's other works by its exploration of the profound influence of superstition upon human thought and behavior. The author masterfully presents two contrasting dimensions of a single character: the genuinely religious believer and the superstitious individual.

As he prepares to depart on a hunting expedition, Bezhana T'qispireli offers the following prayer:

"O God and Saint John the Evangelist, grant me success!" (Ninoshvili, 1954, p. 396).

The invocation of Saint John the Evangelist alongside God invites closer consideration. From a Christian theological perspective, prayer directed to God alone would suffice. However, Bezhana's appeal to Saint John is motivated by his familiarity with the Gospel narrative in which John, formerly a fisherman, witnesses the miraculous abundance of fish granted through Christ's intervention. This biblical allusion explains why the hunter regards the saint as a particularly appropriate heavenly intercessor in seeking success in the hunt.

At the same time, Ninoshvili emphasizes the coexistence of authentic religious belief and popular superstition within the character's worldview:

"As a superstitious man, Bezhana attached great importance to various omens: the chirping of a finch, the ringing of one's ears, the sight of a jackal, the appearance of a hare, and similar signs, all of which he regarded as certain portents of future events." (Ninoshvili, 1954, p. 398).

Through this portrayal, Ninoshvili demonstrates how Christian faith and pre-Christian folk beliefs coexist within the consciousness of the individual. The juxtaposition of prayer and superstition illustrates the syncretic religious mentality characteristic of the traditional Georgian rural community, where ecclesiastical belief often coexists with magical thinking and the interpretation of everyday phenomena as supernatural signs.

Another superstition that deeply troubled Bezhana was the phenomenon known as **daq'albeba** ("bewitchment" or "ritual contamination"). According to Bezhana and the other local hunters, this occurred when two or more companions initially hunted together but later separated. It was believed that one of them could secretly cast a supernatural influence over the others, thereby "bewitching" a fellow hunter. A hunter who had been thus afflicted would no longer be able to hunt successfully: his bullets would fail to strike the game, or, even if they did, they would have no effect and would simply fall harmlessly to the ground. Moreover, the bewitched hunter would be unable to see the blood of wounded prey or experience other signs indicating a successful hunt. In short, until the spell was removed, his hunting would remain unsuccessful.

The ritual for removing the **q'albi** ("bewitchment") required the hunting companions to go hunting together once again. Whatever game they obtained that day had to be divided fairly so that no one felt wronged. In the evening, they would pronounce ritual blessings over one another, after which **"the spell was considered broken"** (Ninoshvili, 1954, p. 398).

This episode, which vividly illustrates the intimate relationship between human beings and the natural world as conceived in traditional folk culture, also clarifies the author's broader artistic purpose. By portraying the beliefs of a particular rural community, Ninoshvili exposes the intellectual and spiritual darkness of society as a whole. In doing so, he encourages readers to recognize these deeply rooted superstitions as obstacles to moral and cultural development, thereby contributing to the process of social transformation.

The short story "**Simona**" likewise contains numerous examples of oral expressions reflecting the belief in the magical efficacy of the spoken word. The narrative, which depicts conflicts arising from social inequality, is particularly rich in curse formulas. These verbal expressions are directed primarily against hostile neighbors and emerge either from the speaker's profound despair or from the desire to assert innocence in the face of oppression by those wielding greater social power.

One such example reads:

"May your wife and children prosper only to the same extent that I have ever stolen your grapes, your fruit, or Datika's corn!" (Ninoshvili, 1954, p. 157).

Further examples of such curse formulas include:

"O God, righteous and just, make the one who has kept my Simona from me for so long weep and suffer! And if he has caused him to suffer unjustly, let his family know no end to their affliction!" (Ninoshvili, 1954, p. 166).

"If God were to grant me his return, we would go night fishing together, and I would offer prayers at the holy shrine; otherwise, may I not live another moment without him!" (Ninoshvili, 1954, p. 176).

"Woe to the one who has deprived me of seeing him for so long! May both this world and the next be taken from him! And if my son has indeed suffered unjustly, Saint George, consume him with fire and lay waste to his dwelling!" (Ninoshvili, 1954, p. 176).

"O God, repay the one who has brought my family to this state. O Lord, demand an account from David!" (Ninoshvili, 1954, p. 187).

It is noteworthy that these curses are uttered by characters who have themselves become victims of injustice, serving as expressions of protest against the undeserved punishment inflicted upon their sons and husbands. At the same time, the underlying subtext is particularly significant. Deprived of any tangible means of resistance, these women resort to the spoken word as their only weapon. Within the worldview of this community, the curse functions not merely as an expression of emotional anguish or an act of prophylactic magic, but also as a symbolic instrument for the pursuit of justice.

Especially revealing in this regard is the statement made by Ketevan, Simona's mother. She implores God to punish the oppressor **only if** her son is indeed suffering innocently; otherwise, she refrains from invoking divine retribution. This qualification is crucial for understanding her literary characterization. It reflects not a desire for indiscriminate vengeance but a profound longing for justice, an acute awareness of social inequality, reverence for divine judgment, respect for fellow villagers, and unwavering devotion to family values.

Another meaningful detail is the relationship between the bride-to-be and her future mother-in-law. While her fiancé remains imprisoned, the young woman continues to care for his mother and maintain the household. Through this episode, Ninoshvili emphasizes that the capacity both to offer and to receive kindness is rooted in relationships founded upon mutual respect and moral equality. According to the author's broader artistic conception, overcoming egocentrism constitutes the essential prerequisite for the future moral well-being and social renewal of the community.

Conclusion. Based on the foregoing analysis, the representations of the magical power of the spoken word and ritual actions (so-called *omens*, curses, blessings, and related practices) in the literary works of Egnate Ninoshvili constitute one of the multifunctional elements shaping the narrative structure of his short stories. These archaic beliefs and perceptions serve as significant artistic devices through which the author exposes human shortcomings and reveals distorted customs and social practices. Indeed, this entire complex of beliefs, together with the rituals accompanying them, becomes the underlying cause of the misfortunes depicted in Ninoshvili's narratives. It represents a visible manifestation of the spiritual decline of the

community; at the same time, however, it also contains a glimmer of hope for the future of his characters, suggesting the possibility of moral transformation and renewal.

In Ninoshvili's works, a society immersed in magical and religious beliefs gradually loses its connection with God and becomes vulnerable to destructive forces. The analysis of the writer's short stories clearly demonstrates that this community not only accepts such beliefs but also becomes a victim of the evil forces created by its own imagination. Through his artistic representation of superstition, Ninoshvili reveals the devastating consequences of spiritual ignorance and emphasizes the necessity of overcoming irrational fears and false convictions as a path toward ethical and social advancement.

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