

The Problem of Identity and the 19th-Century Georgian Theatre

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Abstract

The formation of a collective national identity takes place through cultural and creative activity. National identity is the unified system of spiritual symbols, icons, values, which have been created, refined, reproduced and placed in genetic code of a human being. But at the same time it does not interfere with human being's openness to changes. Culture appears to be a fundamental component of every nation's national identity. Creation of the professional theater was a significant event in the life of the Georgian people. The first theatrical performance was held on January 2, 1850. The theater was an acting space which was emotionally experienced by the Georgian people as a thread of historical memory connecting with the nation's past in the conditions of Imperialistic policies (XIX century Russia annexed Georgia). Theatre stood in the forefront of the struggle against colonial oppression, preached devotion to the idea of the homeland, instilled patriotic feelings in its audience and prepared it for the fight for national independence. In the XIX century Georgian theater was the path for preservation of the national identity, originality, by which Georgians continued to maintain their own national "self" and distanced themselves from the Russian imperial political, national and cultural space.

Keywords: National Identity, Georgian Theatre, Georgian language, imperialist policy, national unity

1. Introduction

The well-known journalist, novelist and essayist Amin Maalouf in his essay "Deadly Identities" writes: "In history all is being expressed in symbols: grandeur and decline, victory and defeat, happiness, prosperity, poverty, but most of all - their identity. For change to be made, it is not enough to comply with the spirit of the era.

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It is necessary also that this change on the level of symbols didn't contradict, didn't create feeling of imposition of denial of their own views in those who are pushed to change". (Maalouf, 2007).

People have a variety of collective identification, the scale and intensity of which depends on time and space. We believe that the view of the professor of Sociology at University of London, Anthony D. Smith is absolutely right that the national identity is more powerful and effective nowadays than all the other collective identities ... (Smith, 2008). It is well-known that formation of both personal and national identity takes place through a collective cultural and creative activity. National identity is the unified system of spiritual symbols, icons, values, which have been created, refined, reproduced and placed in genetic code of a human being. But at the same time it does not interfere with human being's openness to changes.

2. Objectives

Culture appears to be a fundamental component of every nation's national identity. In this article we discuss the role of the Georgian culture, in particular the role of the theater in maintaining of national identity in the reality of XIX century.

The country of a centuries-old history and culture, against its will was transformed into a province of the Russian Empire based on the manifesto of 1801. Russian rule was imposed in Georgia. Tsarism conducted a colonial policy, which relied on the words of the Russian Empress Catherine the II: "Georgian body, Russian soul". Autocephaly of Georgian Church was abolished. The Georgian church stood firm as a national guard throughout the entire history. It was a hope and a bastion for Georgians during constant enemy attacks, and that is why the conqueror waged the war against it. Tsarism destroyed Georgian traditions, persecuted the Georgian language: the language of the state proceedings was Russian, Georgian was ousted from schools. The conqueror was trying to raise youth with the loyalty towards the imperial policy, to make Georgians forget their past, and to achieve the ultimate goal by these methods. The danger of the national assimilation of Georgia was increasing daily.

The Georgian nation had not adapted to the lost statehood. In 1802, 1804, 1812, 1819-1820, 1841 there were armed rebellions but none of them were successful. In 1832 a plot was prepared.

Its purpose was to expel the invader from the country, but the conspiracy was betrayed and its leaders were exiled in various cities of the empire.

When it became clear that at that point it was not possible to achieve their goals through armed conflict, public figures and country leaders focused entirely on the cultural life. To prevent already sick politically national body becoming sick morally and ethically as well and to help Georgians to preserve their national image, originality and identity, intelligentsia set the development of the social and cultural life of Georgia as its goal. The struggle for Georgian language had begun, establishment of periodic bodies, educational institutions, museums, libraries and other cultural institutions took place. "Starting from the Annexation of Georgia until its reclaimed independence, i.e. from 1801 to 1918, for over 117 years spiritual life of the Georgian people was marked with struggle for restoration of the national sovereignty. "Culture, as it is well known, is an organic part of the nation's life; therefore, the essence of the Georgian culture of that period was a national liberation movement. This tendency was the foundation of the first half of the XIX century's Georgian culture" (Surguladze, 1991).

Establishment of the professional theater was the significant event in the life of Georgian people. Georgian theater has not emerged on empty grounds. Spectacular culture in Georgia like mysteries of religious-cult shows existed far before this event. Some of the buildings in the complex of Uplistsikhe (cave city) are considered to be antique theater buildings. Theatre existed in the XVIII century; performances were staged in the "chamber" of king's palace. The theater ceased its existence in 1795, after the Persian invasion. Live performances were held at the beginning of the XIX century, but they were not attended by majority of the society and, therefore, it had no effect on the broad masses.

In the development of the Georgian perception, and the culture the special role was played by literary circles and salons, which were the places of gathering for public figures and artists. Here, they were discussing important issues - politics, economics, education, theater, literature etc. Here reading, rating and reviewing of the works of famous authors and newbies were held. During occupation, in the conditions of Russification policies conducted by the occupant in social and spiritual life of nation, the literary circles and salons were serving as ideological centers.

The literary circle of the Georgian educator Solomon Dodashvili, and salons of Alexander Chavchavadze - the poet, public figure, and a wealthy noble, and so called Georgian Récamier -Manana Orbeliani were especially popular.

It was exactly the salon of Manana Orbeliani where the idea of establishment of Georgian theater was born. Embodiment of this idea was trusted to the public figure George Eristavi. He had to overcome many difficulties, but did not succumb to obstacles and took the task to the end together with likeminded people. The troupe's first performance was held on January 2, 1850. Theatre existed in 1850-1854 and played an important role in the ascendance of the Georgian social and intellectual life.

Since 1854, existing gap could not be filled with performances conducted episodically by fans of the stage. Permanent theater had its role and importance and the movement had begun for theater's regeneration.

From 60-70s of the XIX century a new generation emerged and began a new era in the life of the nation. They like their predecessors sought to restore the disturbed national unity, to salvage national existence and identity. They have launched a broad, multi-faceted activity, have persistently resisted to new forms of Russification, and set "Language, Fatherland, Faith" as a slogan of their struggle.

Struggle for saving of Georgian language was the most important issue for national identification and nation's consolidation. In this quest the special role was played by the theater because it was the action place which was emotionally experienced as a connection thread of historical memory. Nations cannot survive without cultural history. One of the most deeply rooted collective emotions of the people is the demand for self-identification. Creativity, artistic or literary movements, as well as sensitivity of people towards the achievement of independence (and protection), expresses a distinctive possibility of discovery, recovery or invention of "collective self" (Tsipuria, 2005).

In 1878, the Theatrical Committee was established; under its leadership a permanent troupe was created. The troupe's first performance was held on September 1, 1879. This date is considered as the date of renewal of the theater. Since then it has not ceased its existence.

The theater was almost the only place where one could hear the native Georgian language. Sensitive issues of Georgian Theatre – elevated ideology of the audience, repertoire, plays and, of course, maintaining of nationality – was a subject of a daily concern of public figures, playwrights, directors. In this regard, the drama "Homeland" is particularly remarkable, which in the II half of XIX century had a landmark significance in the struggle for national liberation and the development of the Georgian Performing Arts. In 1881, the writer and public figure David Eristavi completed transformation of the play of the French novelist Sardou. On January 20, 1882 the first performance of "Homeland" was held. Since then, it was staged in various theaters of Georgia and this event was always transformed into a celebration because the heroic past and patriotism conveyed by the play expressed the spirit of the nation, reflected its pain, evoked strong feelings in the community, and instilled faith of the future and hope of fatherland's liberation.

3. Conclusion

In the conditions of Imperialistic policies, the theater stood in the forefront of the struggle against colonial oppression, preached devotion to the idea of the homeland, instilled patriotic feelings in the audience, and determined it for the fight for national independence.

In the XIX century, Georgian theater was the path for the preservation of the national identity, originality, by which Georgians continued to maintain their own national "self" and distanced themselves from the Russian imperial political, national and cultural space.

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