



## Lightning, Sacrifice, and Possession in the Traditional Religions of the Caucasus

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**Abstract.** – In many communities of the West Caucasus, lightning-strike victims were regarded with particular awe, and a dance was performed around their bodies during which the name of one or another god is uttered, along with the mysterious vocable *čoppa*. Data concerning this ritual will be framed in an analysis of the representations of possession, sacrifice, and, in general, the appropriation of people or animals by divine beings in traditional Caucasian religious thought. Certain features of the religious thought of the Pshavs and Khevsurs of the northeast Georgian highlands will be compared and contrasted with those of the peoples of the West Caucasus. [*Caucasus, Pshav-Khevsureti, lightning-strike victims, sacrifice, possession*]

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On a crisp morning in late July 1996, the chief priest Ioseb K'oč'lišvili explained to me how the stone shrine to K'op'ala came to be built at Iremtk'alo. For those accustomed to places of worship erected by central squares or other convenient locations, the choice of this site would seem perverse, if not masochistic. The meadow known as Iremtk'alo, "the deer's threshing ground," is situated at 2225 metres altitude, atop a moun-

tain overlooking the village Shuapxo in the highland province of Pshavi in northeast Georgia. Those who attend the annual summer festival at Iremtk'alo, for the most part members of the Udzilaurta clan, must hike uphill for at least three hours from the nearest village, if they go on foot (as most did until very recently). Iremtk'alo is barren of trees, and far from the nearest spring or river. All water and firewood must be hauled up by people or pack animals. The same goes for the food, except for that which makes the ascent under its own power: dozens of sheep and several bulls, which will meet their deaths at Ioseb K'oč'lišvili's hands in the course of the day. It was on the spot where the shrine now stands, K'oč'lišvili explains, that the hero K'op'ala bested the strongest of the ogres (*devebi*) in a boulder-throwing competition. These ogres were huge, powerful, and terrifying to behold. Some were said to have nine heads. When they walked, their feet sank into the ground as though they were wading through drifted snow. The champion among the ogres picked up a massive boulder and threw it from the mountaintop. It sailed across the river below, a branch of the Aragvi, and landed on the other side. K'oč'lišvili gestured to the spot where the stone came to earth, perhaps half a kilometre downward and over a kilometre to the west of where we stood. K'op'ala picked up an even larger rock, hefted it, and thought it too light. So he took another boulder, pressed it against the first as though packing two snowballs together, and let it fly. The giant rock would have fallen short