in the Caucasus – that has fascinated ethnographers for over a century. The shrine officials, especially those with a lifetime vocation, were required to attain and maintain a level of "purity" – avoidance of the proximity of women at certain times of the year, abstention from certain foods, regular and costly purificatory sacrifices – that was beyond the reach of rank-and-file community members. The increasing systematization, regulation and specialization of the Pkhovian religious order, I hypothesize, made the role of a lightning god with the properties of Slavic Perunъ/Kupala, Abkhazian Afə or Ossetic Wacilla particularly problematic. Such a deity represented, in effect, those aspects of sacrifice and possession which the Pkhovian hierarchy sought to bring under its control. The Indo-European and western Caucasian storm gods struck whenever, wherever, and whomever they chose, seizing victims without waiting for the community to take the initiative of making a sacrifice. They also took the initiative in selecting their prophets, i. e., those lightning-strike victims who survived, and perhaps (as the Abkhazian data implies) individuals suffering from certain mental disorders. To conceive a divine being in such terms would imply certain limits on the human community's control over exchanges with the divine world, both in the form of sacrifice and in the form of communication through authorized spokespeople. As a consequence of the Pkhovian reform, in a sense, the gods retain the appearance of omnipotence while in fact ceding some of their authority to specialist priests and oracles drawn from particular patrilineages in the community.

The socioreligious order observed in 20th-century Pkhovi bears a certain resemblance to that of what R. Hamayon has labelled "pastoral shamanism" in a diachronic study of the religious institutions of the Buryat tribes of Siberia (Hamayon 1996). By contrast with the earlier "hunting shamanism," in which the shaman, through his status as the "son-in-law" of supernatural game-giving spirits, played an integral role in assuring the success of hunters, in pastoralist Buryat societies the shamanic function has been subordinated to a patrilineally organized ancestor-based religious order. The primary ritual specialists have come to be more like priests, responsible for making offerings of domestic-animal meat and dairy products, or have given way to the clergy of Lamaistic Buddhism. Of particular interest is the peripheralization and feminization of shamanism among the Buryats: Most shamans are now female, their sphere of activity is limited to private matters such as dealing with the troublesome wandering souls of people who died unnatural or premature deaths. In the case of the Caucasus, it should be noted that there is little evidence of an institution comparable to Buryat "hunting shamanism," although one might discern similarities between the Pkhovian ballads of the goddess Samdzimari sharing the bed of certain legendary oracles, and the Buryat belief that the shaman had a supernatural wife of animal origin (Charachidzé 1968: 142–144; Hamayon 1996). What is common to both cases is the evident marginalization of "horizontal" inspirational practices – those which are available, in principle, to any member of the society, and which are marked by trance and possession – in favor of the institution of "vertical" inspiration, based on esoteric knowledge controlled by priest-like specialists, a phenomenon which often accompanies increasing sociopolitical complexification and centralization (Hugh-Jones 1996). Although Pkhovi remained a relatively egalitarian society in most respects, the authority and prestige held by the chief priests and their oracles led some Soviet-period ethnographers to employ such terms as "aristocracy" or "theocracy" (Bardavelidze 1957: 34–36). Some of this authority, it appears, came at the expense of the peripheralization and feminization of random (or self-selected) possession in favor of quasi-hereditary oracles, accompanied by the "domestication" of a redoubtable thunderbolt-slinging storm god as K'op'ala, ogre-slayer and liberator of lost souls. One wonders – and it is a question that goes far beyond the modest bounds of this article – whether the restructuration of Pkhovian society rendered it particularly capable of resisting the increasing hegemony of political formations to the north, south, and east, or whether, on the contrary, the restructuration was itself the fruit of that spirit of resistance.

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