

# Violet on the Mountain

Violet on the Mountain :  
An Anthology of Georgian Folk Poetry

*Translated and Edited by Kevin Tuite*

ია მთაზედა :  
ქართული ხალხური პოეზიის  
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This book is dedicated to my mother.

გეზღჷმ ლაწუნანალ დია ესერ ლი.

– *Svanetian proverb*

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## Transliteration Systems

All of the poems contained in the anthology were transcribed in the standard Georgian alphabet, with some additional characters to accommodate the Svan and Pshav-Khevsur phonological systems. I have used two different sets of symbols to transliterate the Georgian, Svan and Mingrelian poems, terms and names that appear in the book. A so-called ‘informal transliteration,’ using familiar characters, is employed in the Introduction and Notes, and is used to render proper names. The ‘scholarly transliteration’ resembles the systems familiar to specialists in Caucasian and Amerindian languages; it is used in the transliterations of the original poems.

<i>Georgian alphabet</i>	<i>Scholarly transliteration</i>	<i>Informal transliteration</i>	<i>Georgian alphabet</i>	<i>Scholarly transliteration</i>	<i>Informal transliteration</i>
ა	a	a	ჟ	ž	zh
ბ	ā	a:	რ	r	r
ც	æ	æ	ს	s	s
ძ	b	b	თ	t'	t'
გ	g	g	უ	u	u
დ	d	d	ყ	p	p
ე	e	e	ქ	k	k
ვ	ē	e:	ყ	γ	gh
ზ	v/w	v/w	ღ	q'	q'
თ	z	z	შ	š	sh
ი	t	t	ჩ	č	ch
ო	i	i	ც	c	ts
კ	k'	k'	ძ	z	dz
ლ	l	l	წ	c'	ts'
მ	m	m	ჭ	č'	ch'
ნ	n	n	ხ	χ	kh
ყ	y	y	ჯ	q <sup>h</sup>	qh
ო	o	o	ჯ	ž	j
რ	æ	ö	ჟ	h	h
ს	p'	p'	ღ	ə	ë

## Acknowledgments

The initial impetus for this project came from Eteri Chkadua, a talented artist and very dear friend, who had been insisting for some time that folk poetry is an essential and valued part of her nation's literature. It was not without some feeling of reluctance that I began reading the chrestomathy she placed in my hands; after all, I was still prey to the belief that folklore was fine for children and ethnographers, but no match for "real" literature. The poem on the first page was "The young man and the leopard," and I was hooked.

Several Georgian specialists in the fields of ethnography, folklore studies and literary translation have provided invaluable assistance. Zurab K'ik'nadze of Tbilisi State University read an earlier version of my work, corrected numerous errors and misinterpretations, and explained the significance of symbols that had been thoroughly opaque to me. Vakht'ang Chikovani, Rusik'o Choloq'ashvili, and Sargis Tsaishvili shared their expertise with me. Vakhusht'i K'ot'et'ishvili, continuing in the tradition of his father, introduced me to the folk poetry that has been composed in recent times, up to the present day. I am greatly indebted to Eteri's father, Ambak'o Ch'k'adua, for what insights I have into the Svan language and Svan poetry.

While visiting Svanetia in the summer of 1991 I encountered the ethnomusicologists Sylvie Bolle-Zemp and Hugo Zemp, who were recording the traditional music of the Georgian mountaineers. The description of Georgian folksong and musical instruments in this book has been vastly improved thanks to their patient explanations of how, exactly, a lute differs from a mandolin, responsorial singing from antiphonal, etc., etc.

In the decade since I completed the first version of the poetry anthology in 1994, my acquaintance with traditional Georgian culture has been deepened and widened by fieldwork in Pshavi, Khevsureti, Svaneti, Rach'a and Guria. There is not enough space here to acknowledge the help of all those who generously shared their knowledge with me, and furthermore permitted an inquisitive, and all-too-often maladroit, outsider to witness the performance of Georgian oral literature in ritual and festive settings.

Thanks also go to two non-Georgians from Chicago who have read over my translations and pointed out some clunky spots that needed reworking: Paul Friedrich and Warren Leming.

Work on the first edition of this anthology was begun while I was a post-doctoral fellow at the Institute of Oriental Culture of the University of Tokyo, under the auspices of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, from February 1989 to February 1991. I wish to express my gratitude to both institutions for providing the wherewithal to realize this project. It has been a great pleasure for me to have had the opportunity to live in Japan for two years, and my as yet superficial encounter with early Japanese poetry has helped to illuminate some aspects of the folk literature of far-away Georgia.

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Violet on the Mountain:  
An Anthology of Georgian Folk Poetry

## Introduction

This is an anthology of poems composed in a very different way from the works filling most poetry volumes, and translated from a language almost unknown outside of the land where it is spoken. The seventy poems I have translated are examples of what is commonly called “folklore,” which, in the minds of some, would disqualify them from consideration as reading material by anyone outside of an anthropology department.

The Georgians themselves see matters differently. Readers esteem poems such as “The young man and the leopard” (#1) every bit as highly as the finest works produced within the tradition of “high culture.” Ballads recorded from the mouths of Khevsur peasants take their place in poetry anthologies beside the masterpieces of the Georgian classical and romantic periods, and children are taught — and made to memorize — works of folk literature as an integral part of their primary education.<sup>1</sup>

For many of you reading this book, this will be the first encounter with the culture of Transcaucasian Georgia. Only a small fraction of Georgian literature has been translated into any language other than Russian, and what little exists is difficult to obtain. To convey something of the context within which the poems in this volume were created and enjoyed, I will provide a thumbnail sketch of the Georgian people, their country, and their poetry.

### The Georgian People and Georgia

The roots of the Georgian people are deeply embedded in the soil of their native country. In the Georgian language the land is called *Sakartvelo*, “the homeland of the Kartvelians” (which is how the Georgians refer to themselves). As far as can be told, the original Sakartvelo is within the territory the Georgians inhabit to this day: the Republic of Georgia, until recently part of the Soviet Union, and neighboring parts of northeast Turkey. Despite its small size, no larger than the American state of South Carolina, the Georgian homeland has a topographic diversity equal to that of the largest nations: the lofty Caucasus mountain range, with several peaks exceeding 5000 meters; narrow gorges cut by ice-fed mountain streams; lush meadows; arid semi-deserts; and subtropical coastlands along the Black Sea.

The Georgians are one of over forty ethnic groups indigenous to the Caucasus region. To the northwest is one group of autochthonous peoples — the Abkhazians, Adygheans, Abzakhs, and Kabardians — and to the northeast another group, the Daghestanians. The Armenians, who have resided in Transcaucasia for at least five millenia, border Georgia on the south, and on either side of them, to the southwest and southeast of Georgia, are Turkish-speaking peoples. In prehistoric times the Georgians were in contact with the great civilizations of old Mesopotamia, and, it appears, with the ancient Indo-Europeans, from whose language most of the tongues of Europe have derived.

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1. The same could be said of Georgian appreciation of the literatures of other nations. The anthology of English and American verse translated into Georgian by G. Nishnianidze [Tbilisi: Merani, 1982] includes fifteen folk poems (“Sam Hill,” “The Vicar of Bray,” “Oh no, John,” etc.).

## VIOLET ON THE MOUNTAIN

Over the two millenia for which we have historical records, the Georgians have seldom been left alone. The Persians to the east have been uninvited guests on numerous occasions. The Arabs conquered Tbilisi (Tiflis) in the 7th century, and the Turks began their forays into Georgia in the 11th century. The Mongol hordes led by Tamerlane devastated eastern Georgia no less than eight times in the 1380's and 1390's. For most of the period since then Georgia has been under foreign rule, for many centuries divided between the Persian and Ottoman empires. In 1784, in a desperate move to secure protection from the Turks and Persians, King Irakli II placed his kingdom under the sovereignty of the Russian throne, and so it remained until recently, save for a brief period of autonomy after the Soviet Revolution. In April 1991 the Republic of Georgia declared its independence from the USSR.

### **The Provinces of Georgia**

Traditionally, Georgia was divided into about twenty provinces, each with its characteristic climate, topography, agricultural base, customs and dialect. Distinctive character traits are assigned by popular wisdom to the inhabitants of each region (this has been a fertile source of material for Georgian anecdotes and jokes). The provinces can be grouped according to two primary features: terrain (highland vs. lowland) and situation to the east or west of the Likhi mountain range. The Likhi range is Georgia's "continental divide," and for many centuries marked the boundary between that part of Georgia under Persian domination, and the western half, which was largely incorporated into the Ottoman Empire. Here is a list of the provinces, divided according to these two features:

#### EASTERN GEORGIA

*Northeastern highlands:* Khevsureti, Pshavi, Khevi, Tusheti, Tianeti

*East-central lowlands:* Kartli, Kakheti, Trialeti

#### WESTERN GEORGIA

*Northwestern highlands:* Upper and Lower Svaneti, Racha, Lechkhumi

*Southwestern highlands:* Meskheta, Javakheti, Achara, Chaneti

*West-central lowlands:* Imereti, Mingrelia, Guria

In evaluating the assimilation of foreign influences by Georgian culture, it is important to note a certain geographical specificity to the process. While the more accessible central lowlands have served as a virtual crossroads between Orient and Occident, the inhabitants of the northern Georgian mountain districts, both east and west of the Likhi range — some of which had never yielded to a foreign army until the tsarist period — have held on to their ancient folkways and pre-Christian religious systems to a degree unparalleled in modern Europe. Until very recently, oracles (*kadagebi*) practiced their trade within a few dozen kilometers of Tbilisi; animal sacrifices and the pouring of libations, traditions reminiscent of Homeric Greece, are still commonly observed in many parts of Georgia today. In regard to folklore, and poetry in particular, these mountain provinces have yielded a wide array of motifs and genres not to be found elsewhere in Georgia.

## The Georgian Language

The South Caucasian language group (also known as *Kartvelian*) comprises the Georgian language proper with its sixteen or so dialects, and two related languages of limited distribution: Zan, spoken in the provinces of Mingrelia and Chaneti, and Svan, the language of the inhabitants of Upper and Lower Svaneti.

Georgian has been a written language since at least the 5th century, giving it a recorded history longer than that of most European languages. The earliest Georgian writings to have come down to us are ecclesiastical in nature: translations of the Bible and the works of the Church Fathers, lives of saints. The first examples of secular literature, most of it poetry, are attested in the 12th century.

One could say that the Georgian language epitomizes the nature of the culture. It has borrowed extensively from Arabic, Persian, Greek, the modern European languages and the tongues of neighboring Caucasian tribes: But these borrowings have been limited to vocabulary items. The grammatical structure of the language has not been affected in any significant way by its neighbors, at least not within the 1500 years for which Georgian has been attested in written documents. It has drawn freely from other languages, assimilated their words into its lexicon, but without in the least yielding its fundamentally Caucasian nature.

In its phonological component, the Georgian language (likewise Svan and Zan) has a healthy inventory of consonant sounds — though not nearly as many as Abkhaz and the other Northwest Caucasian languages — which can appear in clusters of five or even more without an intervening vowel. In addition to voiced (*b, d, dz, j, g, gh*) and aspirated (*p, t, ts, ch, k, qh*) consonants, Georgian has a series of glottalized obstruents, which are pronounced with a simultaneous closure and release of the vocal cords (transcribed as *p', t', ts', ch', k', q'*). For all this, the language is by no means harsh sounding — quite the contrary. One German linguist wrote that Georgian speech reminded him of “the murmur of flowing water.” A statistical analysis of sound frequencies has shown that Georgian has a higher incidence of vowels (relative to consonants) than English, nearly as high as Spanish. Still, skilled poets can heap on the consonants when a particular effect is desired, for example, the turn-of-the-century writer Vazha Pshavela describing one of his heroes as *mk'lav-mskhvili rk'inis mk'vnet'avi* “a thick-armed iron-biter” [“Gogotur da Apshina”].

The morphology of Georgian is very complicated, in particular the conjugation of the verb. There are markers in the verb to indicate the person and number of not only the subject but the object as well. The system of aspects, tenses, and moods coded in the Georgian verb is rather involved; one is reminded of classical Greek or Sanskrit.

The nonwritten dialects differ to varying degrees from the standard language. The Georgian spoken in the mountain districts of Pshavi, Khevsureti and parts of Racha bears a stronger resemblance to the literary language of eight centuries ago than to the speech of modern Tbilisi. The Zan dialect spoken in Mingrelia, and to an even greater extent the dialects of Svaneti, are incomprehensible to Georgians from other parts of the country. (Some 19th-century scholars even doubted whether Svan was related to Georgian at all). Each dialect lends its own flavor to the poetry of its region, creating a diversity of inflection, accent, and vocabulary that is truly remarkable in a country as small as Georgia.

## VIOLET ON THE MOUNTAIN

### National Character, Religion, and Beliefs

In view of the grim history of nearly continuous warfare and foreign occupation that fate has visited upon the Georgian people, one might wonder what imprint it has left on them as a nation. Foreigners who have dwelt in Georgia for any period of time have invariably been impressed by the Georgians' effusive hospitality (a practice they share with many West Asian peoples), boisterous and vivid personalities, and fondness for wine and feasting. The Georgian *supra* (banquet) can go on all evening into the wee hours of the morning, with each guest consuming several liters of wine. These heroic quantities of alcohol are drunk in accordance with strict rules: the participant in a *supra* must pronounce a toast — to another guest, to Georgia, to the souls of the departed, etc. — before drinking each glass, or drinking horn, of wine.<sup>2</sup> The toasts are frequently occasions for a display of eloquence, and are accompanied by song and recitations of poetry. (Many of the poems contained in this volume are intended for just such a context). If Georgian hosts appear to us to be recklessly improvident in the lavishness with which they entertain their guests, it does not seem so to them. In these celebrations of life and of their bonds to each other, they have discovered a uniquely effective way of making life bearable under the most adverse circumstances.

As evidence of what he termed the “amoral and untrammelled mind” of the Georgians (HGP, p 72), the British historian W. E. D. Allen made reference to their attitude toward (organized) religion: the rareness of fanaticism, the subordination of religion to national feeling, and so forth. If one examines Georgian folklore, however, one sees that “religion,” in a sense, is very important indeed, coloring all aspects of the intellectual culture. Many of the poems contained in this collection are hymns to be performed at festivals, or texts of a mythic nature. What we must take into account is that, although Georgia has been a nominally Orthodox Christian country since the 4th century, an indigenous pre-Christian religion was actively practiced in many parts of Georgia up to the beginning of this century and even more recently in some areas, where, with the restriction of official Georgian Orthodox activities under the Soviet regime, syncretistic Christian-pagan rites conducted by the village elders had become the sole forms of worship.<sup>3</sup>

The Georgian-French scholar G. Charachidzé has given a thorough description and analysis of Georgian “paganism” in his book *Le système religieux de la Géorgie païenne* (Paris: Maspero, 1968). I will touch on only some of the major elements of this religious system here.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>. See “The rules of the *supra* or how to drink in Georgian” by D. A. Holisky [*Annual of the Society for the Study of the Caucasus* #1, 1989].

<sup>3</sup>. Not all specialists share this view. The Georgian ethnographer Zurab K'ik'nadze, with whom I spoke in the summer of 1991, sees the paganism described here as an *innovation*, a religious system cobbled together out of Christian elements in the late middle ages, after Mongol and Persian invasions had cut off the mountains and other peripheral areas from the cultural hegemony of the orthodox Orthodox center.

<sup>4</sup>. Charachidzé's monograph remains the most complete overview of Georgian highland religion in a West-European language. For further information, and for interpretations differing from Charachidzé's structural analysis, readers can consult the works of Bardavelidze (DRV), Ochauri (ARG), K'ik'nadze (SC), Tuite (AM, LSP), among many others. Heinz Fähnrich's *Lexikon Georgische Mythologie* [Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 1999] offers a useful, easy-to-access digest of the Georgian-language ethnographic literature. The abbreviations used here and in the notes to the poems refer to the references listed at the end of the book.

**Pantheon:** The traditional Georgian religion is commonly described as polytheistic, but there is a clear distinction between the Supreme God (*Morige Ghmerti*), creator and sustainer of the universe, and all other divine beings. As a result of long contact with Christianity, many of these have taken on Christian names, so that, as was the case in some parts of Europe, the cult of a “saint” is founded upon the worship of a pagan deity. Among the principal figures in the pantheon of the Georgians are “St. George” (*Giorgi*; in Svan *Jgëræg*), the “Archangel” (Georgian *Mtavarangeloz*; Svan *Taringzel*), and a hunter deity and protector of wildlife in the high mountains (in Svaneti represented as the goddess *Dæl* or *Dali*). Important female figures include *Barbal* “St. Barbara,” a fertility deity and healer of illnesses; and *Lamaria* “St. Mary,” protector of women. *Krist’e* “Christ” presides over the world of the dead.

Two of these personages are of particular importance, especially for readers of folk poetry. *Dali*, the Svanetian hunter goddess, is a popular subject of mythological poems. She is represented as a woman of fabulous beauty, with long golden hair worn in braids. Svans believed that the success of a hunter depended on the degree of favor with which *Dali* looked upon him. Many poems tell of legendary hunters being seduced by *Dali* and then being destroyed by her out of jealousy, or because the hunter violated some taboo. Georgian scholars have devoted considerable attention to the *Dali* cult and its variants. The ethnologist *Elene Virsaladze* has advanced the provocative hypothesis that the figure of a protector-goddess of wild animals is a remnant of a yet more ancient, “matriarchal” ideological system, in which the chief deity(ies) were female, and religion celebrated the life-giving principle and harmony with nature.<sup>5</sup> With time — especially after the introduction of Christianity — the ancient beliefs were supplanted by a more aggressive, “patriarchal” ideology. Evidence for this includes the cult of a *male* hunter-deity (*Ochop’int’re*) in the northeastern provinces (believed by *Virsaladze* to be of more recent date than the *Dali* cult), and the elevation of the warrior-god *St. George* to preeminence in Georgian religion.<sup>6</sup> *St. George*, depicted as a knight on horseback slaying a dragon, is venerated in all corners of Georgia, and hundreds of churches and shrines throughout the land are consecrated in his name. Myths recount his exploits in making war against the *Kajes*, a race of demons with magical powers, and under his numerous epithets he is invoked in prayers as the chief protector of humanity.

Two apotheosized historical figures appear frequently in folk literature of a religious nature. They are *Tamar*, derived from the monarch of that name who presided over Georgia at the zenith of its power (early 13th century), and *Lasha Giorgi*, named after her son, who reigned as *George IV*. Both are represented in folklore as warrior deities, subduing the enemies of Georgia.

In the dialect of the Georgian mountaineers, notably the *Pshavians* and *Khevsurs*, deities can be referred to by the terms *jvari*, which in the classical language means “cross,” or *khat’i*, which means “icon”. Depending on context, these words can denote an actual cross or icon, the shrine in which it is kept, or the deity associated with the shrine.

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<sup>5</sup>. This argument is laid out in particular detail, with extensive illustrations from Georgian folklore, in *Virsaladze’s Gruzinskiy okhotnichiy mifi poeziya* [Moscow: Nauka, 1976].

<sup>6</sup>. One is reminded of the religious system of ancient Europe, as reconstructed by *Marija Gimbutas*, and its subsequent replacement by the masculine-centered ideology of the Indo-Europeans (see her *The goddesses and gods of Old Europe* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982]).

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One suspects that the different meanings are not as distinct in the conception of the mountaineers as they appear to us.

The edifices where religious ceremonies are carried out are, in most cases, Christian churches, over 10,000 of which are known to have been constructed in Georgia. In some areas, and especially in the provinces of Pshavi, Khevsureti and Tusheti, the villagers constructed shrines of stone, many of them adorned with the horns of sacrificed animals.

**Relations with the Souls of the Dead:** One of the primary functions of religious observances is to maintain contact with the souls of deceased relatives. This is accomplished through various rituals and the offering of sacrifices and libations. Especially important are funeral observances, followed by a period of mourning. In traditional times, the close relatives of the deceased would be in mourning for as long as three years. They would fast (abstain from animal products), wear mourning colors (black, or sometimes red), and the men would shave their heads and faces and let their hair grow out until the end of the mourning period. Failure to observe these restrictions was believed to have unfortunate consequences for the soul of the deceased.

The departed souls led a somewhat shadowy existence in a world similar to the one they left behind. Their well-being in the spirit world was related to their sinfulness before death, and the zeal of their surviving kin in making prayers and sacrifices on their behalf. Once a year at the festival of *Lipānal*, held in the province of Svaneti in mid-January, the souls of the deceased were believed to return to their families (HEE I 56-58). They remained in their former homes for several days and were entertained with feasts and the recitation of folktales. Also during this time, the souls met and determined the fortune of their kin for the coming year.

**Food and Drink Offerings:** Four types of offering are utilized in traditional Georgian rituals: (1) livestock (most often oxen and sheep), slaughtered in or alongside the shrine precincts; (2) various kinds of breads; (3) alcoholic beverages; (4) beeswax candles. The beverage of choice is wine, save for the highland districts where grapes cannot be grown; in those areas beer or vodka is used.

Many Georgian religious festivals are accompanied by the presentation of animals for sacrifice at the shrine, followed by a feast at which their meat is cooked and eaten. During the feast the various deities are invoked, and after each invocation the participants drink from their cups, bowls or drinking horns. According to custom, they must drink to the bottom of whatever vessel they are using. On certain feast days — this is especially common in Svaneti — the women bake loaves of flat bread, sometimes with a cheese or meat filling, which are held up during the invocations.

Offerings of food and drink are especially important in commemorations of the dead. The Georgians believed that the souls of deceased relatives are sustained by offerings made by the living. Traditionally this involved the setting out of food for the souls to “partake” of, and the pouring of wine or vodka onto the ground. This custom can be observed in remnant form in Georgia to this day: at every *supra* (banquet) a toast is proposed in memory of the deceased, after which the participants pour a small amount of wine onto a piece of bread.

**Relations between the Sexes:** Among the Caucasian mountaineers of a hundred years ago, the relationship between wife and husband was not an especially warm one — indeed, they scarcely spoke to each other, according to some accounts (SR 80-83). This may be a reflection of two conflicting characteristics of mountaineer society: it is exogamous, that is, one must marry outside of one’s clan, and at the same time, to a degree, xenophobic. The wife brought into the clan from another social group remained, in the view of society, an outsider.

As though to compensate for the emotional sterility of marriage, a relationship that Charachidzé terms “anti-marriage” came into being, evidently many centuries ago (SR 101; FY 131-140, 157-165; SKh; AM). The custom, known to the Pshavians as *ts’ats’loba*, survived almost up to World War II in the isolated mountain villages of Pshavi and Khevsureti, and a similar practice has been noted in Svaneti (AM 49-52). Charachidzé has assembled the facts that have come down to us concerning *ts’ats’loba*, and analyzed them within the context of archaic Georgian paganism (SR 96-109). I will give a short summary here.

In Pshavi, where the custom was best documented, a boy and girl entered into *ts’ats’loba* by their own volition (in contrast to marriage) and with the full knowledge and assent of the village community. They were free to spend the night together — in fact, required to on certain feast days — and caress each other affectionately. They expressed their love for each other openly, and the songs inspired by *ts’ats’loba* form a stunning contrast to the grim battle-epics and mythological poems that make up the bulk of the Pshav-Khevsur literary corpus. Several examples are included in this anthology.

At the same time, *ts’ats’loba* was governed by stern constraints. Mountaineer society regarded the young couple as, essentially, sister and brother. Should the woman become pregnant, she and her “brother” were ostracized, a punishment befitting those who had committed incest. More importantly, two people bound by *ts’ats’loba* were strictly forbidden to marry each other, just as blood siblings would be. The warm and affectionate relationship between “brother-spouse” and “sister-spouse” had to give way to the socially necessary union of marriage. This inexorable law took its toll: suicides were not uncommon among young women separated from their *ts’ats’ali* upon engagement (SR 102; see poem #59).

## Georgian Folk Poetry

The Georgians are avid producers and consumers of poetry. Poems are recited or sung in a variety of contexts, and with a variety of contents. Among the genres represented in this anthology are epics, hymns, love poems, work songs, humorous poems, lullabies, and “philosophic” poems, with observations on the nature of life and death. At this point I will launch into a somewhat lengthy discussion of the mechanics of Georgian folk poetry. Since there is next to nothing presently available on the topic in languages other than Georgian, I will go into more detail than I would have under other circumstances.

**Meter:** Georgian, like French, is a syllable-timed language, that is, the unit setting the pace of speech is the syllable. (It therefore contrasts with stress-timed languages like English or Russian, in which stresses occur at more-or-less regular intervals, regardless of

## VIOLET ON THE MOUNTAIN

the number of intervening unaccented syllables). Although Georgian words are accented, the accent is not very prominent, and does not affect the flow of speech.

As is natural for languages of this type, Georgian verse is structured according to a fixed number of syllables per line. This appears to be a uniform condition throughout the territory where Georgian and its related languages are spoken. Other than that, the structure of Georgian verse shows considerable variation from one province to another and, since most poems are to be sung, from one style of song (or dance) to another. The three principal parameters are: (1) number of syllables to the line; (2) subdivisions within the line; (3) fixed or alternating line length. Certain combinations of these features are especially common, either throughout Georgia or in particular provinces. I will describe the more frequently-employed metric patterns here.

(A). *Octosyllabic*. By far the most commonly employed syllabic quantity is eight to the line. Lines of this length occur in poems from all provinces of Georgia. One of the oldest poems attested in Georgian literature — *Gundni igi zetsisani* (“The heavenly choirs”) by the 10th-century writer Ioane Zosime — was composed in units of eight syllables, and Rustaveli’s “Knight in the leopard’s skin” employs sixteen-syllable lines throughout: two hemistichs of eight syllables, divided by a caesura.<sup>7</sup> In a handful of poems represented in this anthology (for example, #38 “Glory to the archangel”) there appears to be no recurring rhythmic subdivision of the eight-syllable line. In the vast majority of cases there is such a subdivision. These metric patterns correspond to what medieval Georgian writers referred to as “high verse” (*maghali shairi*: lines divided evenly, 4+4) and “low verse” (*dabali shairi*: lines divided unevenly into two- and three-syllable groups).

(A<sup>1</sup>). 4+4: Folk poems with evenly subdivided eight-syllable lines are not extremely common. This pattern does predominate in certain areas, in particular Svaneti. Here is an example of Svanetian “high verse,” from the poem “Dali is giving birth on the cliff” (#3):

*Dæ-lil k'o-jas // khe-lghwa-zha-le,*  
*Khe-lghwa-zha-le // twe-tna:m k'o-jas.*  
*Ge-zal i-sgwi // kaw ja-shq'e-da,*  
*Kaw ja-shq'e-da // k'o-jas ka-men.*

[Dali on-cliff // is-giving-birth,  
Is-giving-birth // white on-cliff.  
Child your // indeed has-fallen,  
Indeed has-fallen // cliff down-from]

---

<sup>7</sup>. Shota Rustaveli [born c. 1170] was the finest poet active during the Georgian golden era of the late 12th and early 13th century, and, it is generally conceded, the greatest Georgian writer of all time. Only one of his works has come down to us: the *Vepkhist'q'aosani* (“Knight in the leopard’s skin”), an epic poem comprising nearly 1700 quatrains. Georgia at the time was an important center for intellectual contact between the Byzantine West and the Persian-Arabic East, the philosophies of which were being synthesized into a new humanism. Unlike any Western Christian writer of his time — or for a long time thereafter — Rustaveli betrays no partiality toward the doctrines of his faith: the philosophical and cosmological framework of the *Vepkhist'q'aosani* draws as much from Platonism and Islam as it does from Orthodox Christianity. Several English translations of the epic exist, of which the first, by Marjorie Wardrop, is in many ways still the best.

(A<sup>2</sup>). 3+2+3, 2+3+3, 3+3+2: The meter known as “low verse,” in which eight-syllable lines are subdivided into two three-syllable groups and one of two syllables, appears to be the predominant form. It is the meter most favored by poets of the northeast Georgian highlands, and is also frequently employed in almost all other provinces of the country. In some poems, the line has one primary division (3+5 or 5+3); the subdivision of the five-syllable group may not always occur in the same place. Here is the beginning of poem #7 “Avtandil went hunting,” as divided into feet by J. Bardavelidze [DGF I, 127]:

<i>Av-tan-dil // ga-di- // na-di-ra</i>	(3+2+3)
<i>Ke-di // ma-gha-li // t'q'i-a-ni;</i>	(2+3+3)
<i>Verts kha-ri // mo-hk'la, // verts puri,</i>	(3+2+3)
<i>ver-tsa // i-re-mi // rki-a-ni.</i>	(2+3+3)

[Avtandil // across- // hunted  
Ridge // high // forested;  
Cannot male-animal // he-killed-it // cannot female-animal,  
Cannot-also // deer // horned]

(B). *Pentasyllabic*. The anthology includes a pair of examples of five-syllable verse: “Violet on the mountain” (#54) and “Nestan-Darejan” (#6). In both cases the lines are subdivided into 2+3, and there is no end rhyme. Here are the opening lines of #6:

<i>Ne-st'an // Da-re-jan,</i>	[Nestan- // Darejan,
<i>Sad ras // ge-dzi-na?</i>	Where what // did-you-sleep?
<i>Mi-ndvris // bo-lo-sa.</i>	Meadow's // end-at.
<i>Zed ra // ge-khu-ra?</i>	On-top what // covered-you?
<i>Za-ri // za-rba-bi.</i>	Golden-thread // brocade.]

This is the same rhythmic pattern as that to which some Georgian folk dances (for example, the dance entitled “Kartuli”) are performed: *Dim-di // da-ur-i // dim-di // da-ur-i* (RFI 259). Pentasyllabic verse was also favored by the important 12th-century Georgian courtly poets Chakhrukhadze and Ioane Shavteli.

(C). *Lines of alternating length*. Several poems from the provinces of Guria and Kartli have eight-syllable lines alternating with lines of six or seven syllables. (In some instances — for example, “Samaia” and “Iavnana” — the alternating line is a sort of refrain.) These are all intended to be sung, so the pattern is set by the accompanying music. The opening lines of “I am an unmarried woman” (#46) will illustrate:

<i>Ga-sa-tkho-va-ri // ka-li var,</i>	(5+3)
<i>Ne-na // ar mi-p'i-rde-ba,</i>	(2+5)
<i>La-maz bi-ch'eb's rom // she-vkhe-dav,</i>	(5+3)
<i>Gu-li // a-mi-t'i-rde-ba.</i>	(2+5)

[Not-yet-married // woman I-am,  
Mother // not she-advises-me,  
Beautiful boys when // I-look-at-them,  
Heart // it-begins-to-cry-on-me]

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In connection with this discussion of Georgian poetics, something should be said about the methods used by the performers of these verses to fill out the correct syllabic quantity, when the words they have selected fall somewhat short of the required length. Svan poets will on occasion insert schwa syllables (/ë/) into certain words to lengthen them appropriately. In the following lines from “Dali is giving birth on the cliff,” the word *anghri* “s/he comes” is expanded by one or even two schwas to fill out the line:

*E-snaer za-grush // me-tkhwyær a-nghri,*  
*Me-tkhwyær me-psæy // a-në-ghë-ri,*  
*Me-tkhwyær me-psæyd // te kha-re-k'i,*  
*Za-grushw me-tkhwyær // ch'ur a-nghë-ri.*

[Then mountain-ridge-from // hunter he-comes,  
Hunter Mepsay // he-comes,  
Hunter Mepsay // eye he-hung-it-on-it (= looked around)  
Ridge-from hunter // indeed he-comes]

Pshavian, Khevsur, and Kakhetian poets commonly append the syllables *-a* and *-o* to the end of the line to bring it up to the required eight syllables. These endings derive from actual morphemes, but have been emptied of their original meaning. (As an extreme example, fifteen of the twenty-six lines of “At Khidistav we’ll make a pact” (#14) end with a semantically-unmotivated *o*).

**Rhyme:** The earliest recorded Georgian poems — liturgical hymns composed in the 10th and 11th centuries — made no use of end rhyme. Rhymed poems begin to appear in the Georgian literary record toward the end of the 11th century, but the use of rhyme does not become widespread until the rise of secular poetry a century later. Rhyme is also not found in Svanetian poetry, but it is almost ubiquitous in the folk poetry of every other Georgian province. These facts can be interpreted in at least two ways. According to one hypothesis, the unrhymed 10th-century hymns and Svanetian poems represent the more ancient state of Kartvelian verse. Given that Svaneti, high in the Caucasus mountains, is home to many archaic cultural and linguistic phenomena that have disappeared from other parts of the land, this argument has much to speak in its favor.

A second line of argument attributes the lack of rhyme in liturgical poetry to Byzantine Greek influence. It is the very rich rhyme schemes, with rhymes of three or even four syllables at the end of each line in a quatrain, found in the courtly poetry of the 12th and 13th centuries, that represent the “natural state” of Georgian verse. If one considers the morphological structure of the language, one can see why the use of rhyme is almost inevitable in Georgian poetry. The Georgian verb can have five or more suffixes, and the noun up to three. By setting the line-final words in parallel syntactic and semantic contexts, one can get two or three rhyming syllables for free, so to speak. For example, in the Pshavian poem “The young man and the leopard” (#1) the first rhyming pair is *k'ld=isa=n=i* “[those] of the cliff” and *ch'iukh=isa=n=i* “[those] of the steep incline.” In their bare-stem forms these words would not even come close to rhyming (*k'lde // ch'iukh*), but by adding identical case and number suffixes (*=isa=n=i*) a three-syllable rhyme is obtained. Likewise, in “Poem I will declaim you” (#15) the placing of two verbs in the second-person-singular inchoative conjunctive guarantees three rhyming syllables

(*ga=h=kveq'n=d=eb=od=e* “may you be broadcast”// *a=h=q'vav=d=eb=od=e* “may you blossom”). The lack of rhyme in Svanetian poetry can be accounted for by the converse argument: Suffixal groups are shorter in the Svan language, and morphologically more irregular, which makes rhymes much less readily available.

Georgian folk poetry also makes use of “slant rhyme.” Specifically, the resonants /n/, /r/, /l/, /v/ often occupy parallel positions in rhyming syllables. By exploiting this device, extremely long sequences of rhymes can be obtained. The poem *Perqhisa* “Round-dance” (#55), for example, has twenty-two consecutive three-syllable rhymes, many of them slant rhymes of this type (for example, *bdzania* “he-is”// *jvaria* “cross”// *salotsavia* “shrine”// *dedupalia* “queen”).

Returning to Rustaveli, we recall that one poetic device of which he was especially fond is the use of homophonous words or phrases in the rhyming portion of the line (called *majama* in Georgian — the word, and perhaps the concept, was borrowed from Persian). In one quatrain (VT 177) three lines end with the sounds *danasa*. In one it is read as a verb (*da=nas=a* “it destroyed its beauty”), in another as a noun (*dana=sa*, dative case of *dana* “knife”), and in a third as two words (*da na=sa* “and the panpipe”). Non-literate Georgian poets have also exploited *majama* in this way; here is an example from the Kartlian poem “A young man’s wish” (#29):

*T'urpa baghi da ts'alk'ot'i*  
*Ek'lita vinme she=nar=a.*  
*Rk'inis k'arebi sheaba,*  
*K'lit'e me momtses, shen ara!*

[Lovely garden and orchard  
 With-thorns someone he-planted-it-with-thistles.  
 Of-iron doors he-hemmed-it-in,  
 Key to-me he-gave-me-it to-you not]

The sound sequence *shenara* is first employed as a verb (it appears to be a nonce formation from the noun *nari* “thistle”: “he thistled [the garden] with thorny plants”), then as two separate words (*shen ara* “not you”). Another instance is in the song “Chari-rama” (#45) where the line-ending sequence *manana* is read as a proper name (*Manana* “Heather”) in line 2, and as a verb (*m=a=nan=a* “it-made-me-regret-it”) in line 4.

**Poetry and Music:** Most folk poems are intended to be sung. The traditional Georgian musical genres are as numerous as the poetic genres, and it would go far beyond the aims of this book to discuss them with any thoroughness. I will limit my discussion to a few short examples of the musical settings of Georgian poems, to give Western readers some idea of how they are performed within Georgian culture.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup>. Readers who would like a more direct experience of Georgian folk music in its full variety have a range of recordings to choose among. The Rustavi Ensemble, directed by Anzor Erkomaishvili and Pridon Sulaberidze, have been touring and recording for decades, and remain the benchmark for the groups who have come on the scene more recently. Among the latter, I recommend the Riho Ensemble from Svaneti, directed by Islam Pilpani; the female vocal group Mzetamze; and the Georgika Georgian men's choir (the two latter choirs record with Face Music). Also worth listening to is a recording of Svanetian folk music, recorded in the field by the ethnomusicologist Sylvie Bolle-Zemp (in the series “Le Chant du monde”, issued by the Musée de l'Homme).

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(A). *Homophony*. Many folk songs consist of a single melody line, with or without instrumental accompaniment. The epic ballads of Pshavi and Khevsureti, recounting the exploits of legendary or actual warriors, are of the former type, sung to the accompaniment of the *panduri*, a three-stringed plucked instrument of the lute family. Among the poetic genres associated with a-cappella homophonic singing are the *urmuli* (sung while hauling a load in an oxcart [*uremi* ]) and the *khmit nat'irali*, a form of lamentation for the dead. An excerpt from each is given here. The text of the Kakhetian *urmuli* in Ex.1 [HGF #8] mainly consists of the nonsense syllables *aru aralo*, variants of which accompany many Georgian folk songs (for example poem #48: *Araru darejanasa*). The Khevsur lament shown in Ex.2 [from GFS] is performed responsorially: a solo mourner (typically a woman) intones a phrase, and the others respond, in this case with nonsense syllables. For more on the manner of performance of funerary songs, see the notes to poems #59-61.

(B). *Polyphony*. Georgia is almost alone in the Caucasus region in having a tradition of polyphonic folk music. Several varieties are recognized, with different degrees of harmonic complexity. The simplest type involves a single melody line accompanied by a drone bass. The song excerpted in Ex.3 is a plowing song (*gutnuri*) from eastern Georgia [HGF #13], with an extremely simple two-note bass line setting off the melismata of the solo tenor voice.

Somewhat more elaborate are three-voice songs of the type shown in Ex.4 [HGF #2], consisting of a melody line, a descant moving roughly in parallel with it, and a drone. As is common in Georgian folk singing, a single voice leads off with the first two or three bars of each segment. Ex.4 is one of several published settings of poem #17.

In some parts of Georgia, and especially in Svaneti, the basses have their own melody line instead of a sustained drone. Many Svanetian hymns and choral laments (*zari*) utilize harmonic and melodic progressions unfamiliar to Western ears. Ex.5 is taken from the archaic hymn to the sun *Lile* (see notes to poem #38), which is sung in alternation by two three-voice male choirs [HGF #4]. Note the startling leap of an augmented fourth in the upper voice that announces the entrance of the second choir.

**Poetry and Dance:** A few of the poems in this anthology are accompanied by dance as well as music. Especially noteworthy are the songs (*Betgil*, *Perqhisa*, *Samaia*) which set the rhythm for the dancing of the *perkhuli* or round dance. This dance is an important accompaniment to certain traditional religious ceremonies, and its form has special meaning. (The representation of people dancing in a ring is a frequent motif in Svanetian folk art.) Here is a description of how a song is performed during the dancing of the *mrgvali* (“round”), a round dance known in Georgian mountain communities. The dancers are divided into two choirs, each with its leader, that join to form a circle. The leader of one half-circle sings a line of text, which is repeated by his choir. Then the leader of the second choir sings the same line, usually with some variation, followed by his group. The leader of the first choir then intones a second verse, and so it proceeds, with four iterations of each line. Traditionally the tempo was kept slow, to allow the song-leader time to improvise each line [GHM 203]. A particularly elaborate round dance, the *kor-beghela*, is described in the notes to poem #57.

Round-dance songs are most commonly in triple meter. The excerpt in Ex.6, sung to the text of poem #54 (“Violet on the mountain”) accompanies a women’s round dance

[music from GFS]. An example in quadruple meter, from Guria, is shown in Ex.7 [HGF #51].

**Improvisation:** In a discussion of performance, something should be said about the role of improvisation in Georgian folk poetry. While many poems, especially the longer ones, are to a degree re-created anew at each performance on the basis of a memorized plot framework and an inventory of set phrases, special mention should be made of the practice of *shairoba* (from Arabic *shair* “verse”), also known as *k’apiaoba*, which the Georgians of the northeast highlands have maintained up to this day. This is a type of poetry contest, in which two individuals try to get the better of each other through boastful or humorous poems composed on the spot.<sup>9</sup>

Numerous examples of these poetic skirmishes have been recorded by Georgian folklorists. Here is one such encounter [GMD 96], which took place in Pshavi in 1913 between a certain Nadira Kumiashvili and Q’ruv Giorgi (“Deaf George”) Mgeliashvili, one of the most celebrated exponents of the craft of poetic improvisation. The challenges and responses are in the format most typical for *shairoba*: strict eight-syllable lines with end rhyme between even-numbered lines:

NADIRA

*Shamogwxwdi, Gogolauro,  
Ert shenats gagaqhneineb.*

[We encountered you, Gogolauran (clan name)  
Now I will plow you under, too.]

DEAF GEORGE

*Mets k’arga gagibot’it’neb,  
Peqhsats ver mamatsvleineb.*

[I will brace myself against you,  
You won’t be able to budge me.]

NADIRA

*Tsot’as gdzeli gakw nik’ap’i,  
Kvisad sam ts’agak’reineb.*

[Your chin is a little long,  
I will hit it against a rock somewhere]

DEAF GEORGE

*Ts’aval, gichivleb sudshia,  
Tsikheshi dagambeineb;  
Mag mama-p’ap’is pulebsa,  
Zed st’olze dagatwleineb.*

[I will go complain to the court (Russian *sud*),  
and get you hauled off to jail;  
That money you have from your ancestors,  
I will make you count it out on the table  
(to pay your fine).]

<sup>9</sup> For more information about Georgian poetic improvisation, including sketches of celebrated poets and collections of texts, see Ap’olon Tsanava, *Galekseba-gashaireba da pshauri k’apia* “Poetic improvisation and the Pshavian *k’apia*” (Metsniereba, 1964); Gigi Khornauli, *Pshauri k’apia* (Sabch’ota Sakartvelo, 1969); Jonda Bardavelidze & Ap’olon Tsanava, eds., *Kartuli khalkhuri p’oezia, 9: saq’opatskhovrebo leksebi* “Georgian folk poetry, vol 9: Poems of daily life” (Metsniereba, 1981).

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### **The composition of the Anthology and the Manner of Translation**

I will confess straight off that my personal preference was one of the major factors in the selection process. Aside from that I have tried to include representatives of each major genre, and from most, albeit not all, Georgian provinces.

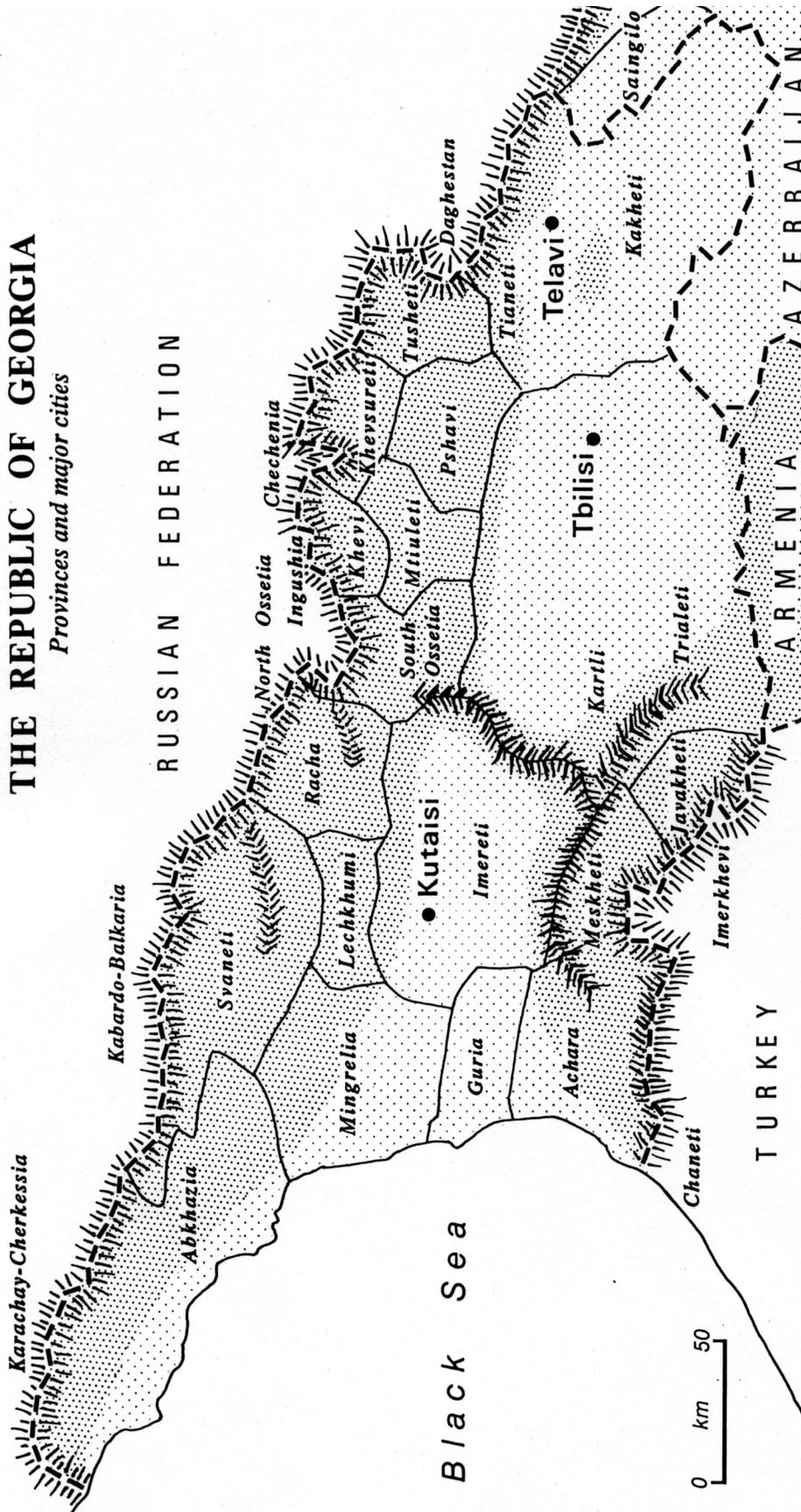
Of the various types of poem, the most conspicuously underrepresented is the Pshav-Khevsur warrior epic. These are versified accounts of the exploits of past heroes, who proved their valor in feats of arms against the tribesmen of Chechen-Ingusheti and Daghestan. The innumerable skirmishes, cattle raids, and revenge attacks between the nominally-Christian Georgians and the nominally-Moslem North Caucasians have provided material for an extensive corpus of epics. Unfortunately, the texts are often highly elliptical and impossible to interpret without the background knowledge of clan history that could be presupposed of the intended audience for these ballads.

On the other hand, love poetry, in particular poems connected with the practice of *ts'ats'loba*, are somewhat overrepresented, for which the translator's sensibilities are solely to blame.

A word about the manner of translation: I have selected what I feel is the closest equivalent to Georgian syllabic meter that comfortably conforms to the stress-timed nature of English speech. In most translations the number of stresses (i.e. poetic feet) per line is kept constant. I have avoided end rhyme, despite its presence in most of the poems selected, so as not to place excessive constraints upon the translation process. As I intend this book to be of interest to folklorists as well as the general reading public, I have attempted to stick closely to the meaning of the originals. My policy has resulted in some thoroughly non-idiomatic English poems, but it is my hope that the readers will find the closer contact with the flavor of Georgian folk poetry a sufficient compensation.

# THE REPUBLIC OF GEORGIA

Provinces and major cities



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Example 1: Urmuli (Ox-cart song) [HGF 18]

A- ru a-ra-ló a- ra- lo- da. aru aralo a- ralo ...

Example 2: Khevsurian khmit nat'irali (Lamentation) [GFS]

SOLO MOURNERS

Hey tkweni ch'iri- me, mat'iralnoy! Iha- hi hia hya!  
(hey you my dears, mourners)

Example 3: Gutnuri (ploughing song) [HGF 113]

SOLO

A- ra- li ha-ru a- ra- lo-  
Oh-

A- ra- li- a- ra- li a- ru a- ra-

lo- A- ra-li ha- ru a- ru

ՕՏ ժՈՏ ՆԵՐՏ

Example 4: Iavnana (Lullaby) [HGF 12]

SOLO

I-av-na-na, var-do  
var-do  
Oh-

na-na, I-av-na-ni-na-o.  
na-na, I-av-na-ni-na-o.  
Oh- oh.

Example 5: Lile (Svanetian hymn) [HGF 14]

Choir I

Di-de-bi di-de-bi-o targe-ya-zersi day,  
(glory, glory, to the Arch-angel)

+ Choir II

oy di o ho! Li-le, Oh di-o-i Li-le day  
oy di o! Li-le, Oh di-o-i Li-le day ...

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Example 6: Ia mtazeda (Violet on the mountain) [GFS]

I- a mta-ze- da- o, tov-li- an-ze- da- o.  
(violet on the mountain, on the snowy [mountain].)

I- a davte- se- o, vardi mosula-o.  
I planted a violet, a rose came up.)

Example 7: Gurian perkhuli (round dance) [HGF 151]

A- lali vala li- a la- le o- delodela-sa, nani nau da ..

E- he o- čela-sa, na- nida da ...

ის მთაზვერა