

Interview with *xervisberi* Pilip'e Baghiauri.
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Pilip'e Baghiauri is the *tav-xervisberi* (chief priest) of the commune of Gogolaurta, whose principal shrine is located atop Kmodis Gori, in the northeast Georgian province of Pshavi. He is one of the handful of traditional ritual specialists in the highland districts of Pshavi and Khevsureti who continue to perform the prayers and ceremonies of the syncretic religious system sometimes characterized as Georgian paganism (for descriptions of this system, see Bardavelidze 1957, 1974; Charachidzé 1968; K'ik'nadze 1996; Tuite & Bukhrashvili 1999; Tuite 1996, 2004).

The conversations translated here took place on 24-25 June 2000. The first occurred at the interviewers' campsite on the bank of the Matur-Xevi river, close to its intersection with the Aragvi, not far from Gogolaurta. The second



took place the following day atop Lasharis Gori, close to the powerful shrine of Lasharis-Jvari. The interview was conducted (in Georgian) by P'at'a Bukhrashvili (PB), Romanoz Dolidze (RD), and Kevin Tuite (KT); Tuite translated the text into English and added explanatory notes. The original recording is in the archives of the International Caucasological Research Institute (*K'avk'asiologiis saertašoriso sametsnirok'vleviti sazogadoebrivi inst'it'ut'i*), an independent, non-profit organization headquartered in Tbilisi. Further information,

and publications by the members of the institute are available at the web sites <<http://www.caucasology.com>> and <<http://www.philologie.com>>. The authors wish to express their thanks to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, for its continued support of their research on religious festivals in post-Soviet Georgia.

I. THE VOCATION OF THE XEVISBERI.

Pilip'e Baghiauri describes how he became aware of his vocation to succeed his father as xervisberi:

I was a bit arrogant in those days, and gave no thought to [the possibility that] I would become xervisberi. I paid no attention to such things. It was my father then, and when I went to the shrine (*xat'i*),¹ it was to party, and I gave it no thought. I disliked the xervisberi's duties. It is a special

¹ The expression *xat'i* (literally, "icon") is polysemous in highland Georgian usage, covering the senses of (1) a divine image, (2) a shrine or sanctuary, and (3) the supernatural being in whose honor the shrine has been constructed. The word *jvari* "cross" has a similar range of meanings, especially in Khevsureti.

matter, you are always busy — and then, fifteen years earlier, no add ten years to that, twenty-five years ago, a man called me, he was priest along with my father, his assistant, and [he said]: “I saw this dream, and, son, be careful of yourself”. I laughed. Then there were oracles (*kadagebi*)² among us, and they informed us [of this]. [I said]: “What are you saying? How could I do this [i.e. serve as priest]?” Then, I became frightened, I would become startled, I was falling out of bed. Ask my mother how many times she grabbed on to me. I was seeing apparitions. I said: I must not go insane. Now, in 1989, one of my children died, and before a year went by, I had not yet held the anniversary banquet (*c'listavi*),³ my wife followed [in death]. I was troubled. People knew what happened and they would say to me: “You made this child die, you will destroy your family”.⁴ I went to a fortune-teller, what we call a ‘reader’ [*mk'itxavi*].

KT: *Was the reader a woman or a man?*

She was a woman, she lived in Tianeti.⁵ She said to me: “Why don't you go up? Offer yourself to it [the *xat'i*] (*tavi daude*); or else worse things will happen to you”. She told me directly, like that, she did not light a candle, or anything. [She said] “I know what you are embarking upon”. She did not know me personally. Well, so it was, I offered myself to this matter, I anointed my hands and shoulder (*xel-mxari vinatle*), and now I only lack the ninth bull-sacrifice (*mozveri*).⁶ So, it was with so much distress, well, my family ... they blamed me, as though you destroyed the family. In short, I suffered enormously, I suffered. Now it has stopped. But now, if I get mixed up, or if I do not observe the rules, the norms, (*c'esi, rigi*), do what tradition demands, or if I slip up in an invocation (*moxseneba*), then I see a dream, it is either my father, or some man in white, who appears to me on such occasions.

² In earlier times, certain individuals, usually men, had the special vocation of communicating messages from supernatural beings (Mindadze 1987). On such occasions, they would go into a trance-like state and speak with the voice of the *xat'i*. Most of these oracles were also *xavisberis*, but this was not always the case. The last *kadagebi* died in the late 1980's, in Khevsureti.

³ In Georgia, as in other Orthodox Christian countries, banquets are held on the fortieth day after death (*ormoci*), and on the one-year anniversary (*c'listavi*). The former marks the departure of the soul from the earth to the afterlife, as in the Biblical account of Jesus' ascension to heaven forty days after his resurrection, and the latter banquet ends the period of official mourning.

⁴ The vocation of a *xavisberi* characteristically begins with a struggle, rather than immediate acceptance by the candidate. All Pshav and Khevsur priests that I have interviewed, and those whose selections are described in the Georgian ethnographic literature (e.g. Mindadze 1981), explicitly mention their resistance to the initial call, their unwillingness to assume the heavy responsibilities of the *xavisberi*'s office. Refusal of the vocation invariably brings the anger of the *xat'i* upon the candidate, and often upon his family as well. Some individuals fell gravely ill or suffered from mental disturbances, others lost family members to death, which they interpreted as the penalty imposed by the divinity for their obstinacy. (One elderly *xavisberi* told me that the deaths of several of his brothers at the front during World War II were occasioned by his continued refusal to heed the call to service of his commune's *xat'i*).

⁵ Tianeti is a district to the south and east of Pshavi, settled over the centuries by numerous families of highland origin.

⁶ The new *xavisberi* must promise to offer nine sacrificed bulls (*mozveri*) to the shrine. Since few highland peasant families can afford such an enormous expenditure of livestock at one time, the sacrifices take place over several years. Upon assuming his duties, he is anointed by the chief *xavisberi* with the blood of sacrifice. At Gogolaurta, where we have seen this performed, the blood comes from a ram, which is held off the ground while its throat is cut by the chief *xavisberi*. The blood is collected in a glass which also contains some wine. The chief *xavisberi* dips his finger in the blood-wine mixture, and makes cross-shaped marks on the new *xavisberi*'s chest, hands and forehead.

PB: *What do you mean by 'slip up in an invocation'?*

Well now, this word, it must come to you. It has nothing to do with learning by memorization, even though so many things are written in books, as much as you want. You must get to it [the right words] during the invocation, somehow. Well, let us say, there are many kinds of sacrifices brought up to the mountain: *gasamq'vano* (for the initiation of boys),⁷ *samešvlo* (to ask for special aid), there are a thousand different kinds. Each has its own invocation, and the main invocation, when the candle is held up to the sacrifice, this is special ... You cannot mix it up, you really must arrive at it, like a memorized poem, but in a different manner.

PB: *In other words, the invocation comes by itself?*

It comes by itself. For example, here is something that is real: Under no circumstances will a *xervisberi* pass something on to you by communicating that such a thing is somewhere, that a cup is hidden away somewhere.⁸ There is something about shrines, such that you yourself must see [the object], that [the *xat'i*] will bring you in contact with it (*migabidzgos*). In reality, may God be my witness, my father was *xervisberi*, but I had no idea that this office would be handed on to me in such a fashion. Many things happen this way ... however I may not talk about certain things.

PB: *Does everything therefore depend on intuitions? That is, does some kind of 'spiritual eye' awaken in you at the wish of the *xat'i*?*

RD: *At Uk'an-Xadu a newly-appointed *xervisberi* was unable to speak. Do you remember, how [the words] did not come to him, and he could not speak.*⁹

PB: *P'et're [Gogoch'uri] was saying to him: "Begin, begin", but the words didn't come to him.*

⁷ The presentation (*gaq'vana*) of boys at the shrine is accompanied by the offering of a bull, or sometimes the two-stage sacrifice of a ram, whose blood is used to anoint the bull, with whose blood in turn the boy is anointed (with a sign of the cross on the forehead) by the *xervisberi*. At Gogolaurta, the boys in addition are made to circumambulate a special "boys' initiation tower" (*c'ulis gasarevi k'ošk'i*) atop Kmodis Gori. After the presentation, the boys are considered "vassals" (*q'mani*) of their commune's shrine. A separate ceremony is held for the presentation of girls and in-marrying women, which does not involve a blood sacrifice. See the descriptions of these rituals at one Pshav commune in Tuite & Bukhrashvili 1999.

⁸ Some time before this, Baghauri consecrated another man as 'treasurer' (*megandzure*) of the Gogolaurta shrine complex. The treasurer is responsible for the various cups, chalices, icons, crosses and other valuables which have been offered to the *xat'i* over the centuries, most of which are perpetually hidden in undisclosed locations to protect them from theft. To our astonishment, Baghauri said that he has no intention of telling the new treasurer where these items are kept. The *xat'i* itself will tell him, in a dream, where its possessions are, should it ever be necessary to bring them out.

⁹ In the summer of 1999, during the Khevsur festival of Atengenoba, we witnessed the proclamation of a new *xucesi* (the Khevsur equivalent of *xervisberi*) at the village Uk'an-Xadu. The *xucesi* P'et're Gogoch'uri, who serves at the neighboring commune of At'abe, had dreamt that the son of the previous *xucesi* at Uk'an-Xadu was to succeed his father after a vacancy of many years. Lots were drawn from a hat in order to verify the dream, and indeed, the candidate's lot (a slice of a twig marked with a notch) was picked. The shrine's richly adorned chalice was then produced, filled with beer, and — without any opportunity to prepare himself — the new *xucesi* took it in his hands and began to pronounce an invocation. After several lines he showed signs of nervousness and began to hesitate. Gogoch'uri coached him through a few more lines, but then he gave up, declaring himself unable to continue.

Even if you are a new *xervisberi*, it [the *xat'i*] will teach you the prayers, the chief invocation, whom to commemorate when you light the candles. You will see something in a dream, you will understand something by intellect (*gonit*). That is how this matter is, when you are careful for fear of the *xat'i*, you are very careful out of concern for your children and grandchildren, that you do not make a mistake.¹⁰ It might be because you fear it [the *xat'i*] that you see something through memory, through intellect.

PB: *This is the fear of God.*

May He be blessed! I have seen nothing, but many things have appeared to me ... But what I know I will pass on to the next generation. What is, is, it exists in reality. We should not say, “It doesn't exist”. Do not take anything, do not remove anything; they fight mightily against that.¹¹ If you do not want to, do not bring anything there [to the *xat'i*], and do not pray. This what I know from experience.

II. TRADITIONAL BELIEFS AND PRACTICES.

KT: *If a person is struck by lightning, or falls in the river, or drowns in the sea, is any special ritual performed, such as the offering of a sacrifice, or the killing of a goat? For instance, if lightning kills a man, what happens in that case?*

In general, a sort of angel pursues each person, one that has been driven out by God, a devil (*ešmak'i*), what we call an ‘evil angel’ (*avi angelozi*). In general, it is best, when this one pursues somebody, to drive it away from the person's soul with a goat, that is, you cut off a goat's head and you throw its head with a backward movement of the hand (*xeluk'uyma*). No name is laid on this goat-kid [i.e. the sacrifice is not dedicated to anyone], nor is its meat mixed with anything.¹²

KT: *The meat cannot be eaten?*

You can eat it as such (*č'amit č'am*), but they call that ‘on the account of the fortieth’ (*ormocis angarišze*). You have to drive it [the evil angel] away before the fortieth [day after death]; the person's soul goes to paradise on the fortieth day.¹³ Until then it wanders nearby and precisely for this reason you have to drive this evil angel away from it. For this purpose a goat-kid (*cik'ani*) is necessary.

When a person is dying, he or she has a guardian (*q'arauli*). God forbend — for example, when

¹⁰ As in the case of resistance to the call to service, it is believed that the *xat'i* will exact harsh penalties for errors in ritual performance, even if unintentional, and that these penalties may fall on the family as well as the *xervisberi* himself.

¹¹ This seems to be an injunction against stealing objects from the shrine, which will incur the wrath of the *xat'i*.

¹² The conventional animal sacrifice to a Pshav or Khevsur *xat'i* is either a bull or a sheep. Domestic poultry and pigs are regarded as impure, are never sacrificed, and a *xervisberi* may not eat their meat. Goats, especially goat kids (*cik'ani*), are offered to supernatural beings of ambiguous nature, those which are capable of causing harm unless propitiated or neutralized. The class of spirits which receive goat sacrifices include the ‘evil angels’ described here, the prophet Elijah (because his lightning bolts can cause death), and the various female auxiliaries of clan or commune divinities. For more on the complementary relation between masculine divinities and ambiguous, mostly non-masculine supernaturals, see Tuite 2004.

¹³ See note 3 above.

someone is dying, don't you stand guard [i.e. keep them company], don't you remain at their side? But when there is no one — either lightning strikes them, or they fall in the water, they fall off a cliff, that is, they die alone, or as we say in Pshavi, they have 'died without anyone' (*uk'acod mamk'vdar*). In such a case it is necessary to slaughter a goat-kid at the very place where it happened [where the victim died]. You perform the deed [the sacrifice], you drive away the evil angel. They throw the goat-kid's head, and they perform the deed, they drive away this misfortune. Over there, a man fell [to his death], there where the cross is by the xat'i. It should be on this side of the river; it is not allowed close to the xat'i. This is where the goat-kid was sacrificed. That is the kind of rules we have, we mountaineers, Pshavs.

KT: *When they kill the goat-kid, do they leave it on the spot?*

No, they throw the head there.

RD: *Is it necessary to throw the head in the river?*

No, you swing it around in a circle three times, and you throw it away.¹⁴ You say [addressing the demon]: "You are separated from this affair, evil angel, remain in your place". This is how we do it. I have performed this deed.

KT: *Do you perform the ritual for someone killed by lightning?*

A single ritual is performed, when a person dies without another person nearby, that is, without a guardian. This deed liberates everything.

KT: *Does one celebrate Eliaoba [the feastday of the prophet Elijah], or is there a sanctuary to Elijah in Pshavi?*¹⁵ *I heard that there is one in Khevsureti. There are quite a few in western Georgia.*

We observe Eliaoba here, we have a special xat'i to him up high [on the mountain]. But there are no longer many in Pshavi. We sacrifice a goat-kid at Eliaoba. Of course, you could also kill a lamb, or sacrifice another animal as a petition (*samxvec'ro*), but the principal sacrifice which we would kill as an offering to him is a goat-kid. It is for this reason, as has been passed down by

¹⁴ The figure of a thrice-repeated counterclockwise circular movement is of particular importance in highland Georgian religious symbolism, as it serves to mark major life-stage transitions. Newly-initiated boys perform a triple counterclockwise circumambulation of the pyramid-shaped initiation tower at Gogolaurta, led by the xevisberi. During their initiation, girls and in-marrying women turn three times in place while the xevisberi twirls a round *kada* bread over their heads, likewise three times in a counterclockwise direction. In the traditional Pshav marriage ceremony, the bride circled her hearth chain three times to take leave of her father's clan, then performed the same act upon arrival in her husband's home, to signal her entry into the latter's household. In the context of the ritual described here, the triple circle made with the goat's head apparently serves to liberate the drowning victim's soul from the demons holding it at the spot where death occurred, so that it can complete its trajectory into the 'land of souls' (*suleti*).

¹⁵ The Old Testament prophet Elijah, who called down lightning from heaven to destroy his adversaries [2 Kings 1: 9-14], and who was taken to heaven in a chariot of fire [2 Kings 2: 11-12], has taken on the attributes of a lightning and storm god in the folk religions of many regions of Europe, including the North and South Caucasus (Ivanov 1991; Tuite 2004).

our tradition, that God sent Elijah and said to him: “Take care of the people”. There is a great history about him. When he created lightning, fire and everything; just for this reason we sacrifice to him: “Keep the lightning away [from us]”, that sort of thing ...

KT: *Hail, for example, is that also sent down by Elijah?*

Elijah — is lightning, is accompanied by lightning. He struck the clouds together, suddenly he created lightning, and then people could not understand what this lightning was, and they were dying. I know this from tradition (*gadmocevit*), but whether it is a fact, I do not know. This is how we recall the story of lightning, and of hail too. There is an angel, an angel sent from God.¹⁶ In the invocation we commemorate him: “Glorious force, living K’vira” — we commemorate the shrine (*xat’i*), then honorable K’vira, that is, K’vira was the first helper to whom people made a resting place (*daesvenebina*, i.e., constructed a shrine in his honor).¹⁷ The people were all working. Then God sent his son, Jesus [to find out] “what are the people lacking?”, then this angel, K’vira — he sent this angel, [saying] “help the people”. He came down on a Saturday at midday, this is our tradition, as they recall, he [K’vira] set up a tent; that is why we say [in invocations] “O K’vira the tent-dweller” (*k’virao k’araviano*). He set up his tent at midday, called the people and said that “God has sent me, so, come here”, — at midday he [God] sent K’vira and said [to the people]: “From here to here you are free, you will have a day off from work (*ukmi*)”. He gave the people one day each week.

PB: *How does sworn brotherhood (dzmadnapicoba) take place, what sort of ritual is there? What have you heard with regard to this?*

I have not only heard about it, I myself have sworn brothers. Among us, in Pshavi, it happens like this: those who love each other, respect each other, or who meet and like each other for their manly virtues (*važk’acoba*), at that time they take a silver coin — it must be of silver,¹⁸ you should know — then they drop it into a drinking cup, then first one of them stands up, says a blessing, then takes an oath of brotherhood: “Your mother is my mother, your father [is] my father”. Sometimes the words are a bit different, but they become like true children of the same parents (*dedmamišvilebi*). “My brother is your brother ...” and so it goes. Now the cup is given to the second person, he also says a blessing. The little finger of each person is cut. The little finger (*nek’a*) is the highest finger, it is only responsible for good things. The little finger is cut, a drop of blood is dripped into the cup, three drops, little drops, and this is accompanied with a prayer. They take it [the cup] and first one drinks half, then the other. They embrace each other,

¹⁶ In Baghauri’s usage, the term ‘angel’ (*angelozi*) is essentially synonymous with *xvtisšvili* (‘child of God’), an expression used by many Pshavs and Khevsurs to denote the class of divinities subordinate to God the Creator (*dambadebeli*). Some of the ‘angels’ or ‘children of God’ — the various St. Giorgis and Archangels, and the divinized ogre-slaying heroes K’op’ala and Iaxsar — have the attributes of feudal nobility, in a sense, in that they rule over and protect the highland communes in exchange for sacrifices and services rendered by the human ‘vassals’ (*q’mani*) who dwell in their fiefdom (Bardavelidze 1957: 24-29; Tuite 2002).

¹⁷ K’vira or K’viria is the divine intermediary between God and the other ‘angels’ or ‘children of God’. He is said to have his tent (*k’aravi*) pitched in the court of God (*yvtis k’ari*). His name, ultimately derived from that of St. Kyriakos, is homophonous with the standard Georgian word for “Sunday” and “week” (*k’vira*), whence the just-so story crediting him with the institution of one day of rest each week.

¹⁸ In another variant of this ritual, known as the ‘eating of oath-silver’ (*pic-vercxlis č’ama*), the two men scrape a bit of metal from the blades of their daggers into the drinking vessel.

kiss each other and they become true brothers. From this time onward they are related like blood siblings. In this way I am related to them ...

PB: *What drink is used?*

Vodka (*araq'i*) or wine. It must be pure (*supta*). In Pshavi, for example, vodka is usual.

PB: *If it takes place during a shrine festival (xat'oba), can it be done with beer?*

With beer, or with wine, it is not important; the main thing is that you swear as true brothers, and that you be true [to your oath], that you observe this obligation as if it were your own brother. It is often performed by those who do not have brothers and sisters; they choose a friend, a comrade, someone who is close to them, who becomes their brother.

PB: *Can something similar happen between a woman and a man?*

Yes, it does, although much more rarely. Usually this happens as I just said, between men.

KT: *How about between people of different ethnicity, for example, between Georgians and Chechens?*

It has nothing to do with nationality, it does not matter if one is English, or American, or whatever. It could be with whomever you want, as long as it is genuine. But you must observe [its conditions]. If someone doesn't understand and doesn't know, but if you do know everything, you may take the oath and observe the rules, the rules that exist between sisters and brothers, between brothers.

III. ADMITTING NEW MEMBERS INTO THE COMMUNE.

KT: *Now I would like to know how one accepted new people into the commune (temi), families coming from other provinces or communes, who moved into your territory and requested asylum.*

That was a somewhat complicated affair. Earlier land was scarce, take Pshavi for example ... Here the people worked tiny plots of land, many people came to us here. Here, where the C'oc'k'olaurebi are, the Baghiaurebi have immigrated.¹⁹ It is still written somewhere, it is handed down in a book. Here is how it happened: For instance, if someone caused disruption in the commune, or did not get along, they would be driven out from there. This also happened in Pshavi. Those who were driven out went to another commune. This is how it was among us here, when they would come here. We Gogolaurebi, we had three people of that kind ... This was not a matter decided only by the commune. The commune received them, but took them to the xat'i; when they brought them to the xat'i, they made them swear an oath, what we call a *samani* — they either planted a stone,²⁰ or made some other kind of offering, on which their name was

¹⁹ The C'oc'k'olaurebi are the principal clan of the commune of Muko, which is adjacent to Gogolaurta. Vaxt'ang C'oc'k'olauri, the xevisberi at Muko, is one of the youngest priests now in service (he is under forty years of age, whereas Pilip'e and the others who we have met are in their sixties or seventies).

²⁰ Traditionally, solemn oaths made before the shrine were marked by the planting of large stones (*samani*) in the ground in the shrine precincts. In standard Georgian, the word *samani* denotes a boundary-marking stone.

inscribed, and then this was the custom: they set up three cups, they lit candles, and that man brought an animal for sacrifice. The *xervisberi* took the three cups and prayed: “We, the clan (*gvarebi*), the commune, accept this man. Should this person betray us”, — he poured out the cup — “thus may it be for him. If he is a brother to us, if he has our confidence, then may we acknowledge him to be a participant (*monac'ile*) in our *xat'i*, and to be the *xat'i*'s vassal (*xat'is q'ma*)”. Then the commune granted him [and his family], as a regular segment (*ganaq'ari*) of the clan, some small plots of land. This one carved off a little, that one carved off a little [i.e. each resident gave a bit of land to the new member], and they settled this man here. This was the custom.

KT: *Is marriage prohibited between women and men of the same clan or commune?*

It is not possible, that sort of thing will never happen.²¹ In earlier times, they would gather at Lasharis-Jvari, and they expelled (*mohk'vetdnen*) such people: they would not let them in their homes, nor anywhere else. Or else they had means, such as the court of justice (*sasamartlo*).

KT: *Couldn't they split the clan or commune?*

The clan would split (*iq'reboda*). For example, here in Gogolaurta, we have several segmented clans (*ganaq'ari gvarebi*), but now with different family names. For instance, there were once three brothers named Kubrashvili, the black plague killed two of them — it seems that they committed an offense before the *xat'i* or something of the sort. A fortune-teller, ‘reader’ or *xervisberi* — I don't know exactly — said [to the surviving brother]: “Leave this place!” He settled over there. Now the Kubrashvilebi are an entire village, where I live now, in Bulachauri. There was once a man called Kubria, and the clan was named after him. Then the clan was renamed, and they now have a new family name. Take Ilo, for example, he is a Jabanashvili [descended from the Jabanashvili clan], but registered (with the family name) Pxoveli, they changed his name.²² When a clan was divided, [they said]: “go ... live separately”. They would give you your portion of everything, they settled you somewhere else.

KT: *Is marriage possible between different clans?*

Of course. For example, I am a vassal of the *xat'i* of Gogolaurta; this person is [the vassal] of Xoshara. If my children have no relation [to them] that could be traced through female ancestors (*deidašviloba-mamidašviloba*),²³ it is permitted, with pleasure, let them marry and celebrate a

²¹ The Georgian highlanders, like all indigenous peoples of the Caucasus — with the exception of the Daghestanians — observe strict exogamy. Marriage between individuals known to be related is prohibited, or can only be permitted if the clan to which the young couple belongs officially divides into two new lineages (in a ceremony known as *gvaris gaq'ra* ‘splitting the clan’), so that marriage becomes an exogamic one. On Pshav-Khevsur exogamy and kinship reckoning, see Tuite 2000.

²² The late Ilo Pxoveli of Chinti was a well-known local poet. The family names of the Georgian mountaineers were officially registered by the Tsarist administration in the late 19th century. Some last names were based on clan or lineage names, others on the individual's village of origin or profession. Not uncommonly, brothers were registered with different last names.

²³ With the passage of time, genealogical relation through male relatives is more easily remembered than that through female ancestors, who, in these virilocal societies, usually leave their natal village to live in that of their in-laws, and whose children assume the clan identity of their fathers.

wedding.

KT: *Who lives in the Gogolaurta commune now? Is there only that one village up there, by the shrine, where you live?*

In fact, the Gogolaurebi — at the head of the road, where Davit Gelashvili [and his family] are, they are true Gogolauris. On the other side where the Lomiashvilebi live, these have moved in, they are Mamiaurebi, and are vassals of Uk'ana-Pshavi. That is where they are from, from Uk'ana-Pshavi.²⁴

RD: *Those who live across from Muko, do they belong to Gogolauri?*

One of them is a Gogolauri, P'avle Gelashvili. The Beridzes are likewise Gogolaurebi. But the territory belongs to Muko, from across the ravine down to the river.

RD: *How far does the territory of Muko go in that direction, up toward Gogolaurta?*

There nearby, where the village is, it follows the ridge overlooking it.²⁵

RD: *As you go up to your house, it goes about that far?*

Where my house is, it passes close by, there where there is a small hill, it cuts across it, it's a very small place.

KT: *How many people are in Muko commune now?*

There is just the one family C'oc'k'olaurebi that lives here. Also one of the children split off, Vaxt'angi [the xavisberi of Muko commune] no longer lives there. There are just two families, the rest moved away.

IV. PILIP'E LIGHTS A CANDLE AND MAKES AN INVOCATION.

PB (points to the candle): *The candle must be ...*

A real one, of beeswax.²⁶

²⁴ Uk'ana-Pshavi, situated along the upper reaches of the Pshavis Aragvi, is one of the more remotely situated communes. In recent decades, many families from less-accessible villages have moved downriver to be closer to the main roads.

²⁵ The next day, Baghiauri told us that he takes a particular interest in the ancient frontiers of the Pshav communes and the parcels of land that belonged to the shrine, or that were considered off-limits to ordinary use. These traditional divisions of the territory were of course not recognized during the Soviet period.

²⁶ Four types of offerings can be presented to the xat'i: (1) sacrificial animals (bulls and sheep), (2) alcoholic beverages, (3) bread, and (4) beeswax candles, or more precisely, bee products. As Baghiauri insists in this dialogue, it is the material of which the candle is made that has significance, not the fact that it burns and emits light. At Matura in 2001, we noted that the two xavisberis in service there brought a bottle of water mixed with honey to the shrine. In response to our questions they explained that honey is an acceptable substitute for wine or vodka, because it is produced by bees, and therefore 'pure' (*supta*).

PB: *And not one from the church? It has to be one of yours?*

It must be made from beeswax. It will not accept other kinds, our *xat'i*, praised be its truth. There [i.e., in lowland Georgia], among the Orthodox priests (*samyvdeloebaši*), you can light whatever you want. They have a thousand different types of candles, some of them made from unclean ingredients (*bindzuri minarevebi*), which would not be permitted before the *xat'i*. I will not light them, you can light them if you want, and make your petition, but such candles are improper. If you were to buy one lump of beeswax (*pič'a*), it would be enough. When you go up to the *xat'i*, you can make [candles] directly from the wax.²⁷



PB: *Does it have to be made by my own hands?*

It is best if it is by your own hands. Whether or not you accept candles from there [the lowlands], according to Christian laws, is the [Orthodox] priests' affair. But among us, I am telling you the truth, I know for sure, I saw a dream that the *xat'ebi* would throw them [church candles] away, they wouldn't accept them.

.....

[INVOCATION] May he be well, may the great Angel of St. Giorgi of Matur-Xevi grant you mercy, may the Creator of Damast'e (*damast'urma gamčenelma*)²⁸ multiply your young generation, may he always go before [you] and greet you and your children with happiness here! Let this be my prayer, may the mercy of the angels be [upon you]. Rejoice, multiply, be well and may your travels always be good and safe. Beside this I will add: Victory (*gaumarjos*) to the sanctuaries that are in our [land of] Georgia: those of Pshavi, of Khevsureti, of Mountain Tusheti. May the praise be theirs, and may they be merciful to our Georgian nation. Let there be peace in our Georgia, let there be happiness, let there be hope for our young people. What power there is that comes from God, that is sent by the angels for the aid of mortals (*xorcielta*), may it help them and assist them. May we see a united Georgia, may we see peace, may we have such a leader, that will bring matters to a peaceful resolution.²⁹



²⁷ One common sight at shrine festivals is the production of handmade candles to be offered to the *xat'i*. Lumps of beeswax are held over a fire until soft. As one man holds a taut string about three or four feet long, another spreads the softened wax over the string, rubbing it between his two hands until it covers the length of the string evenly. It is then cut into candles of about one span length (*mt'k'aveli*), the distance from the thumb to the tip of the little finger of a spread hand [see photo above at left].

²⁸ These are the two shrines at either end of the Matur-Xevi valley. The *xat'i* of the Archangel is the principal shrine of the Matura commune, located outside of a hamlet near the head of the valley. The powerful weather shrine of Damast'e or Damast'uri [see photo] overlooks the confluence of the Matur-Xevi and Aragvi rivers. It received offerings from all Pshav communes on the Sunday before Lent, and in times of drought or excessive rain.

²⁹ Almost all of the verbs used in the text of this invocation are in the pluperfect conjunctive, a verb paradigm that is rarely used in modern Georgian except in toasts, wishes and the like. Baghiauri forms the pluperfect conjunctive of

This now is the second toast: to you men and those like you in our little corner, our little Georgia. May such people grow up clever, upright and good. May they promote [the cause of] peace. May we lend each other a hand (*šegvec 'q'vas xeli*) in love, in mutual understanding. May we raise such a future generation, so that they will love each other, and not have a hostile outlook. Let there be peace, may God look down from above, the angels and the martyrs. Victory to you, may you be well!

.....

As *xavisberi* you must behave in exemplary manner, and then you must give a push to (*ubidzgo*) the future generation: so that you, son, grandson, may follow me in this way. This honor, these precepts (*darigeba*), this law (*c'esi*) — if we are to become impure (*uc'mindurebi*), how could we instruct others? We have this obligation.

V. AT LASHARIS-JVARI. *The next day the xavisberi and the interviewers went upriver to the central Pshav shrine of Lasharis-Jvari, accompanied by the writer Irak'li Gogolauri and several*



*construction workers.*³⁰ *The occasion was a very special one: Gogolauri had raised money and resources for the restoration of several ruined buildings within the precincts of Lasharis-Jvari, beginning with the rebuilding of the salude (beer-storage cabin), to be followed by work on the ancient sadarbazo (meeting-place) where the chief priests of the Pshav communes formerly met to discuss issues of importance to the highland community. Before beginning work, Irak'li Gogolauri and the men who were to participate in the project brought a lamb to Baghauri to be sacrificed to the shrine's patron*

divinity Lashara, to ask his blessing and appease him should anyone unwittingly incur his displeasure while working in the proximity of his sanctuary. Lashara, whose name derives from the 13th-century Georgian monarch Giorgi IV Lasha, the son of Queen Tamar, is the most powerful among the divine overlords of the Pshav communes. An 18th-century document mentions eleven communes, all of which were inhabited until recently, but according to local tradition there were once twelve or even fifteen groups of villages under the protection of Lashara. During the great mid-summer festival of Seroba or Saghmurtoba, members of all the Pshav communes gathered at Lasharis-Jvari on the Monday following P'et're-P'avloba, the feast of the apostles Peter and Paul (29 June O.S. = 12 July N.S.). The following day, they would visit the shrine of Tamar-Ghele, named after Queen Tamar, situated in a nearby river valley.

Our conversation took place on the slope of Lasharis Gori, overlooking the main candle-altar

relative intransitive verbs by postposing the optative of the copula, a non-standard usage characteristic of some Georgian dialects (*gv-q'ol-iq'os* "may we have him"; *h-q'var-eb-iq'os* "may they love [each other]"; cp. standard Georgian *gv-q'ol-od-es*, *h-q'var-eb-od-es*).

³⁰ The late Irak'li Gogolauri of Magharos-k'ari was highly-regarded author, especially of poems for children.

and sacrifice grounds of the Lasharis-Jvari complex. Some of the men are holding lumps of beeswax with their knives over the fire, to soften it for making candles. Pilip'e Baghauri points to the various spots on the hillside where the communes used to gather on feastdays.

Each commune that came here sat in its own area (*sajare*). Here is where the Gogolaurebi dug out their area. The Gogolaurebi used to say that at the shrine festival (*xat'oba*), their banner (*droša*) was the first to arrive at Lasharis-Jvari, and the Gogolaurebi represented the largest portion (*c'ili*, i.e. were the most numerous). Gara Turmanauli was one of ours, and they built him the dwelling closest to the *xat'i*.³¹ At gatherings each commune has its place, and each one knows where its place is. They have dug out, levelled off their places, just for them. Everyone comes to Lasharoba, and they gather there. Here in the middle was the beer-storage cabin (*salude*). The Gogolaurebi must have been the smartest, because they set up their place closest to the *salude*.

When the Turmanaulebi came, history does not recall. No one remembers when the Gogolaurta came, that is, they are the *unjni*, the aboriginal ones, among us. The word *unjni* means 'old'.³² The *unjni q'mani* (original vassals of the *xat'i*) are to be distinguished from the *q'urum q'mani*. The *q'urum q'mani* are those who immigrated, who entered by oath. They are called 'entered-by-oath *q'urum* vassals' (*šemopicult q'urum q'mani*). These are secondary; those who are primary, they are called *unjni q'mani*. It is a big difference.³³

There was one *xervisberi*, but as judge (*mosamartle*) there would be just one from among the fifteen communes, who would be a *xervisberi*, who could decide matters of justice. He was considered the elder. So that there would be no mistakes in anything. For instance, Gara Turmanauli was a Gogolauri, he was a *xervisberi*, he was the most intelligent, and here (at Lasharis-Jvari) he officiated. Then there was a man from Axadi,³⁴ and so on. The primary *xervisberi*, who performed, took care of matters, was chosen by him [Lasharis-Jvari], the *xat'i* himself chose him. He was the cleverest in the commune, the most worthy, the most honorable. Then the court of justice (*sasamartlo*) took place, when they expelled people from here. They call it expulsion (*mok'veta*) when they exclude someone, be it a woman or a man. Here the court of justice was held, it sat here, matters were settled. And here was the meeting-hall (*darbazi*), where they arrived at decisions, the council of the communes (*temta sabč'o*) — we are finally going to rebuild the meeting-hall.

Come here, I will tell you something. You know Lela Buc'ashvili. She had dedicated a five-year-old bull as an offering (*mozveri*). The woman led it here. Like it or not, she had seen a dream, her children came to her, [saying]: "You must sacrifice it", so she tells me. "I saw you in the dream" [she says], it [the dream] came once, twice, three times. We came down, Ioseb [K'och'lishvili, the *xervisberi* of Udzilaurt commune] and the others were drinking and didn't accompany the woman. I brought Davit Gelashvili and some others and we came here. They said, "let's

³¹ Gara Turmanauli was a legendary shrine priest, reputed to have been a great warrior and livestock raider. Several legends about Gara are reprinted in K'ik'nadze (2011: 402-412).

³² In medieval Georgian *unji* means 'treasure', as in the derived form *sa-unj-e* 'treasure trove'.

³³ Bardavelidze (1957: 35) deemed the *unjni q'mani* tantamount to an incipient 'aristocracy', as they were the group from which most community leaders were drawn.

³⁴ The commune of Axadi, now uninhabited, was located further upstream along the opposite bank of the Aragvi

slaughter it down here [on the riverbank], we won't be able to get this one up there" [presumably the beast seemed too heavy to walk up the narrow path to the summit of Lasharis Gori, where the shrine is]. I told them, "What do you mean we can't lead it up there, that is the custom!" [They said], "then bring the candles and we'll light them down here". This bull was resisting, we were 9 or 10 men, it's bellowing, the whole unfortunate business. We arrived there, I lit the candle, I put my hand on it, I went in front, it came up here. When we got up here, [they said], "we won't be able to overturn it onto its side".³⁵ We stood up and tied it up with a thick rope. As I touched the dagger to it, it broke [the rope] and got away, the rope was frayed. I fell back, then I went back to the bull. It followed me, then it knelt down, on its own, right here, where the blood is to go down.³⁶ This is where it must be sacrificed, for the offering of blood, the sacrifice is to be killed by this spot. People witnessed it.

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³⁵ Before the bull's throat is cut, it is forced to lay on its side. This is usually done by running a rope around its front, then hind legs, and then pulling until the beast keels over.

³⁶ Animals sacrificed at Lasharis-Jvari are slaughtered next to a shallow rectangular pit, into which their blood is made to flow.