

## **The political symbolism of the mid-summer festival in Pshavi (Northeast Georgian highlands), then and now.**

*Kevin Tuite, FSU-Jena & Université de Montréal*

*Although we met face to face for the first time only two years ago, Heinz Fähnrich and I had already been in contact since two decades earlier. I was then a post-doctoral researcher in Tokyo, having defended my PhD dissertation some months earlier. I received a letter from Heinz, hand-written in impeccable Georgian, inviting me to contribute to the journal *Georgica*. Since that time we corresponded regularly, always by letter and always in Georgian. Our correspondence was principally focused on the articles I submitted to *Georgica*, and on various publications by Heinz which he kindly sent me from time to time. Over the years I came to appreciate not only the phenomenal productivity of Professor Fähnrich as a linguist and translator, but also the astonishing breadth of his familiarity with almost any topic that concerned the Caucasus. One instance should suffice to demonstrate my point: In the summer of 2000, P'aat'a Buxrashvili, Romanoz Dolidze and I interviewed the Pshavian shrine priest Pilip'e Baghiauri. Some time later, P'aat'a turned the recording over to some students in Tbilisi, who produced a transcript, which I translated and annotated for submission to *Georgica*. Heinz was very pleased with the interview and offered to publish it, but pointed out some corrections to be made to the text. In particular, he wrote, the name of the legendary warrior and livestock rustler mentioned by Baghiauri, transcribed as "Gaga Turmanauli" seems wrong. Shouldn't his name be Gara? I found the proposed correction puzzling: Gaga is a fairly common highland name, but I had never heard of a Georgian named Gara. I asked P'aat'a about this, and he agreed to listen to the recording to the interview again. Sure enough, Baghiauri said Gara, not Gaga, and upon digging through my collection of Pshav-Xevsurian ethnography and folklore, I came across references to a fabled hero named Gara Turmanauli. Heinz Fähnrich, who has never been to the village where we recorded the interview, proved to possess a far deeper acquaintance with northeast Georgian clan history than we could lay claim to. In submitting this paper for the *Festschrift* in honor of Heinz's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, I feel, as I did then, a mixture of awe at my distinguished predecessor's erudition, and anxiety that he might find further errors to correct in the text that follows.*

On Friday 27 July 2001, three Georgian friends and I headed northward out of the wilting 40C heat and oppressive pollution of Tbilisi toward the mountains. The road is paved and in relatively good condition, by post-Soviet Georgian standards, until one reaches the bridge over the Aragvi River below the increasingly inefficient hydroelectric station at Zhinvali. As we knew from previous visits to the region, asphalt becomes progressively more rare, and potholes more frequent, the further one penetrates the highland districts of northeast Georgia. Once past the Zhinvali bridge, however, a surprising sight greeted us: a level road surface, its pits and fissures having been filled in by road crews just a day or two earlier. We enjoyed an uncommonly smooth ride for several miles along the right-hand bank of the Aragvi, as far as the juncture with the road leading to Chargali. Scarcely two yards past the Chargali turnoff, the left front tire of our jeep hit a monstrous pothole, immediately followed by a similar incident involving the right front tire, and so on without respite until we arrived at our habitual campsite at the entrance to

the Matura valley below Gogolaurta. The sudden appearance and equally abrupt disappearance of recent (and short-lived) road improvements was not really a surprise to us. We knew that Chargali, one of the southernmost Pshavian villages, was the venue, on the following day (28 July), of “Vazhaoba”, a state-sponsored festival founded in Soviet times in honor of the poet and writer Vazha-Pshavela. Government officials and Writers’ Union members would be transported by car and bus to what was once Vazha’s home, subsequently converted into a “house museum”, to attend speeches and poetry readings in honor of this remarkable individual from what was, 140 years ago, an undeveloped, little-known and nearly inaccessible corner of Tsarist Georgia. The compound suffix *-ob-a*, added to a proper noun, is a common means in Georgian to derive the name of a festival in honor of a sanctified person or place. Several such festivals bear the names of writers, significantly, those who are routinely referred to, even in scholarly discourse, by their first names only: Ilioba in commemoration of Ilia Ch’avch’avadze (on August 2<sup>nd</sup>, now a national holiday), Shotaoba in honor of Shota Rustaveli (in Iq’alto, site of a medieval academy where Rustaveli is believed to have studied). The origin and subsequent evolution of these festivals under the various regimes of Soviet and post-Soviet Georgia, with their different manners of appropriating and representing great names from the pre-Soviet past, is a fascinating theme to explore, but one which would take us too far off track. Suffice it to say that Vazha’s reputation could not save his son from execution as an anti-Bolshevik insurrectionist in 1924, yet forty years later he merited a house-museum and a holiday celebrated on the anniversary of his birth (14 July OS / 27 July NS, 1861), which happens to coincide with the final segment of the Pshav-Xevsur mid-summer festival variously known under the names of Seroba, Saghmurtoba and Atengena.

The ceremonial calendar of the principal communes of Pshavi and of the central shrine complex of Lasharis Jvari and Tamar-Ghele has been described in considerable detail in accounts from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century collected by S. Mak’alattia [1985], A. Ochiauri [1991] and V. Bardavelidze [1974]. Despite the numerous infrastructural changes of the Soviet period (roads, schools, electricity [in some areas]), the campaign against “harmful” beliefs and practices, and the drastic decline of the highland population,<sup>1</sup> certain annual festivals continued to be performed through the 20<sup>th</sup> century until the present day, presided by traditional celebrants (*qevisberni*), selected and trained in much the same manner as in pre-Soviet times. Most of the *qevisberni* still active are in their 60’s or older; only a handful appear to be under 50 years of age.

During the years 1996-2004, my colleagues P’aat’a Buxrashvili, Romanoz Dolidze, Berucha Nik’olaishvili and I visited Pshav-Xevsureti nearly every year in mid-summer, with the goal of observing and documenting this aspect of highland syncretic religious practice in the turbulent context of post-Soviet (and post-post-Soviet) Georgia. I will begin with an overview of the traditional politico-religious organization of Pshavi, and its symbolization in the Seroba-Atengena cycle. I will then summarize the common features of the festivals we have observed in

---

<sup>1</sup> The population of Pshavi was about 3400 in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century [Eristov 1853], and 2500 in the 1930’s [Mak’alattia 1985: 15; see also Tedoradze 1930: 192-4]. According to the administrator [*gamgebeli*] of Shuapxo-Uk’anapshavi district, which covers the territory of the traditional eleven communes, in 2000 only 60 households were registered in the district, many of whom live elsewhere most of the year.

the communities of Shuapxo, Gogolaurta and Matura. Finally, the special case of the ceremonies at Lasharis Jvari will be compared and contrasted with those of the individual communes. Deprived of the pivotal political, organizational and juridical functions they fulfilled a century ago, and lacking a local community or “parish” of their own, these shrines appear to be undergoing a reappropriation and re-symbolization by local political and cultural activists, that is in some ways comparable to the ritual uses of Vazha’s house-museum in Chargali.



MAP of the Pshavi branch of the Aragvi River and sites of the traditional communes.

**I. The traditional politico-religious organization of Pshavi.** According to a document dated 1789, “the villages of the valley of Pshavi (*pšavis qevis sopelni*) are these: Uk’ana-Pshavi, Aqadi, C’itelaurta, Qoshara, C’icho [sic], Muku, Matura, Gogolaurta, Cabaurta, Udzilaurta, Shuapxo” [Mak’alattia 1985: 69]. Each of the eleven named villages can in fact be identified as the seat of a *temi*, or commune [see map]. A *temi* normally comprises several hamlets and a number of named kin-groups of differing genealogical depth (*mama*, *sadzmo*, *gvარი*) [Bardavelidze 1974: 116], but shares one (or more) communal sanctuary [*satemo xat’i*], at which the members of the commune gather and offer sacrifices at major festivals.<sup>2</sup> Building upon the work of Bardavelidze [1960] in particular, I have argued that, even though medieval Pshavi and Xevsureti were never integrated into the feudal socio-political regime of lowland Georgia, nor fully converted to Georgian Orthodoxy, both institutions — feudalism and Christianity —

<sup>2</sup> The belief is widely shared, by ethnographers as much as the highlanders themselves, that the communes were originally twelve in number, like the tribes of Israel or Christ’s apostles. Unfortunately, there is little agreement as to the identity of the twelfth *temi*. In his list of the twelve communes, Vazha-Pshavela included the Misriani clan, which once lived near the Tamar-Ghele sanctuary, and from which the priests serving at that shrine were drawn [Vazha-Pshavela 1886/1994: 82; Bardavelidze 1974: 23]. A. Ochauri believed it was the Xevsur village Qaqabo, accessible from Matura via a mountain pass, whose representatives swore fealty at Lasharis-Jvari [Ochauri 1991: 295-6]. A third view was expressed by Mak’alattia, according to whom the comparatively recently-founded settlement of Chargali, originally a satellite of Gogolaurt *temi*, joined the original eleven as the twelfth commune [Mak’alattia 1985: 68]. Finally, some Pshavians assert that their province once comprised fifteen *temi*, not eleven or twelve. As far as I can determine, the source of this figure is the name of the patron shrine of Qoshara, *Saxutmet’o dzelis angelozi*, the obscure first word of which appears to contain the root meaning “fifteen” (*txutmet’-*).

exerted a powerful influence on the evolution of Pshav-Xevsur indigenous religion [Tuite 2002, 2004]. Previous analyses of Georgian highland religious syncretism have employed what one might call an archeological model, with sharply distinct chronological levels: either an ancient paganism overlain by the trappings of Orthodoxy [e.g. Bardavelidze 1957], or a thoroughly Christianized highland population cut off from the lowland centers of political and religious authority by a long succession of wars and invasions from the east, whereupon they drifted into an increasingly paganized folk Orthodoxy [K'ik'nadze 1996; reviewed by Tuite 1996]. I propose instead that the religious system observed by 19<sup>th</sup>-century ethnographers is the outcome of a gradual and dynamic process of political and religious transformation (or reformation), simultaneously driven by, and contributing to, the emergence of a distinct form of “theocracy” [Bardavelidze 1957: 34-36] in Pxovi, the medieval province encompassing Pshavi and Xevsureti. The primary sources of concepts and symbols in this transformative process are Orthodoxy and feudalism. The latter system provided notions of hierarchy, land tenure, labor and military obligations, and lord-vassal interdependency, yet most of this politico-economic armature remained nearly invisible. Unlike Upper and Lower Svanetia, and the neighboring districts of Mtiuleti and Tusheti, Pxovi had no resident aristocracy, nor fiefdoms in the usual sense of the word. Ritual and economic activity was informed by what I have called “imagined feudalism”. In Pxovian religious thought, rank is inversely correlated with fleshliness. At the top of the feudal pyramid is God the “director” or “creator” [*morige ymert, dambadebeli*], who never manifests himself, and to whom no shrine is dedicated. Beneath him are the various “children of God” [*xvtišvilni*], some of which were created divine, whereas others are former humans [*naqorcivlarni*] elevated by God to divine status in return for exceptional heroism” [Mak'alatia 1985: 191; Ochiauri 1991: 14, 95, 128-9, 155]. Normally invisible, the *xvtišvilni* can appear to selected mortals as doves or flaming birds. Like an earthly monarch, God granted “fiefs” to the *xvtišvilni*, comprising both the territory on which their shrines are to be built, and the local human population, which represents itself as the “vassals” or “serfs” [*q'mani*] of their supernatural “overlord” [*bat'oni*]. Functioning as intermediaries between the *xvtišvilni* and their serfs are priests [*qevisberi, qucesi*] and oracles [*kadagi, mk'adre*], which have been recruited by the communal deity, typically through dreams and visions, but within certain lineages only [Charachidzé 1968; Mindadze 1981, 1987]. Their office requires them to scrupulously maintain a high level of purity, through regular purifications (some of which employ the blood of a freshly-sacrificed ram or bull), the abstention from certain foods, and avoidance of sources of impurity, of which one of the most potent manifestations is women's blood flow from childbirth or menstruation. The priests and oracles represent their communities to the *xvtišvilni* and make known the wishes of the latter to the former. The priests assure that the complex liturgical calendar, loosely based on that of the Orthodox Church, is followed, and that the various feast-days, fasts, ceremonies and sacrifices are correctly performed [Table 1]. I am convinced that the emergence of semi-hereditary religious specialists, and the remarkably sophisticated and internally consistent structure of Pxovian traditional religion are interlinked phenomena. However it was that the appropriation and reworking of lowland political and religious concepts began, the growing complexity and thorough-going systematicity of Pxovian theology required longer apprenticeship, which favored transmission within families, and which contributed in

turn, I believe, to continued elaboration of the system and a growing gap between specialist and non-specialist religious knowledge.

**II. The political symbolism of Seroba.** As described in the late-19<sup>th</sup> & early-20<sup>th</sup> c. ethnographic materials collected by Ochiauri and Bardavelidze, the property of most Pshavian communes included vineyards in the Kakhetian lowlands near Axmet'a, allegedly granted to the Pshavian sanctuaries by the Georgian king in return for crucial military aid provided by the mountaineers in the defense of eastern Georgia against Persian invaders. Yet in the texts, local informants consistently affirm that the *xat'i* (the sanctuary and its resident divinity), rather than the human community, owned these vineyards; e.g. *Qošaris dzelis angelozs axmet'aši hkonda venaxi* “Qoshara’s Angel of the Wood had vineyards in Axmet’a”; *K’op’alas venaxi axmet'aši sam adgilas hkonda* “K’op’ala had vineyards in three places by Axmet’a” [Ochiauri 1991]. Several days before Seroba, the qevisberi, bearing the *droša* (banner) of the communal sanctuary, descended to the vineyards to collect “payment” in the form of wine (*k’uluxi*). The wine thus collected — the members of Gogolaurta commune once brought 60 horse packloads (approx 6000 kg!) of wine per year back to the highlands [Bardavelidze 1974: 123-4] — was shared out at festivals throughout the year, but the greatest quantities were imbibed at Seroba, when the men of the community and their guests are invited to drink the so-called *saq’eino* (“for the Khan”). Each drinker presents an offering to the shrine, then gets down on his hands and knees to drink from a large bowl placed on a slate slab in front of the sanctuary. The *saq’eino* is drunk in commemoration of the *p’ir-oplianni*, which, despite its undignified-sounding English translation “sweaty-faces”, refers to all those who died in battle fighting under the banner of Lasharis Jvari. It is also during Seroba that new male and female members are admitted to membership in the commune (*xat’ši gaq’vana/mibareba* “taking/entrusting to the shrine”), and in many localities competitive games, such as horse racing (*doysi*) and target-shooting (*yabaqi*), also take place.

A couple of the more remote Pshavian communes — Zurabault and C’itelaurta — are not known to have possessed vineyards. The mid-summer festival is called Atengena (the same name as in Xevsureti) in these localities, after the Orthodox martyr St. Athenogene, whose feast is celebrated on July 16 OS (= 29th). In Zurabault temi, located at the head of the Matur-Qevi valley about five miles from the nearest road, the mid-summer festival is spread over nearly a week, during which the qevisberi, bearing the *drosha*, visits a succession of mountain-top shrines (Saq’ach’is svet’is angelozis, Arq’ovnis C’m. Giorgi, Mikelis ek’lesia), and then Mariam-C’mida, where the women’s presentation takes place. At C’itelaurta, the local *xvtišvili*, invoked under the name of K’ot’ias C’m. Giorgi (“St. George of K’ot’ia”), is believed to be the sworn brother (*modzme*) of another St. George, who presides over the neighboring commune of Uk’ana-Pshavi (*Giorgi c’q’arostauli* “George of the fountainhead”). After celebrating Atengena at Uk’ana-Pshavi, the banner-bearing tavqevisberi (chief priest) leads the people to the mountain shrine of K’ot’ias C’m. Giorgi [Bardavelidze 1974: 188-9].

The major segments of the mid-summer festival are marked by the movements of the tavqevisberi, bearing the banner. Before taking up the *drosha*, he enters the bell-tower (*sazare*)

within which, or next to which, the drosha is set, and rings the bell, whereupon all those within earshot face the bell-tower and make the sign of the cross (*p'ir-jvars ic'eren*, which for those of the older generations who lived most of their lives in the mountains, and who rarely, if ever, attended an Orthodox liturgy, typically takes the form of a zigzag or circular movement of the right hand in front of the chest). When the chief priest takes up the banner at the beginning and end of each day's festivities at the shrine, the men sing and dance the *perxuli*, a round dance which, Charachidzé argues, symbolizes the integrity and continuity of the visible and invisible members of the commune [1968: 710-713]. In fact, the *perxuli* is but one of a series of ritual gestures of circling or circumambulation, typically executed thrice in a counterclockwise (rightward) direction, which take place during Seroba. Triple counterclockwise circles are performed during the presentation ceremonies for both sexes, and at the beginning and end of the horse race. The significance of the triple circle in the context of Seroba should be interpreted, I believe, in the light of similar movements on other occasions marking an individual's entry or departure from a community or kin-group. On the occasion of her wedding, a woman circles the hearth-chain of her parents' home three times, and then does the same upon her arrival in the home of her husband's family, to symbolize her leave-taking from the household of her birth, and her transfer to that of her husband, where she will henceforth reside [Grigolia 1939: 73]. In my view the widespread Georgian practice of circling of the room where a person died three times while carrying the coffin, performed by the pallbearers before taking the body to the cemetery, has the same underlying significance, marking the departure of a newly-deceased person from his or her family in this world, to subsequently take up residence in the world of the dead souls (*suleti*).

The symbolism and terminology of Seroba is heavily political: The *qvisberi*, bearing the shrine's banner, collects tribute from lowland vineyards granted to the invisible overlord he serves by the king (in this case, a human one). The *k'uluxi* is drunk by the vassals on all fours, in a posture of submission, before the *xat'i*, in commemoration of those who gave their lives in battle in the service of the chief Pshavian shrine, Lasharis Jvari. In the communes of Zurabaulta and C'itelaurta, which did not possess vineyards, the processions of the priest and banner symbolize the imagined political relations between local *xvtišvilni*: the dependency of Matura's peripheral mountain sanctuaries (and their resident *xvtišvili*) on the central *satemo xat'i* of the Archangel, and the fraternal alliance between neighboring St. Georges in the upper corner of Pshavi.

Boys born into the commune are anointed as new vassals, with the blood of a ram or bull presented by their fathers, at the main shrine, while girls and in-marrying brides are presented (with bloodless offerings of bread, wine and coins) in a separate ceremony. In some communes, the women's and girls' *xat'ši gaq'vana* is performed at the shrine of the "Mother of God" (*yvtismšobeli*), the female auxiliary, in a sense, of the communal *xvtišvili*. In the course of the mid-summer festival, the core notions of land tenure, hierarchy, reciprocal obligations between overlord and vassals — protection and use of the land in exchange for fealty, labor, a share of the produce and military service — which the early medieval Pshavians appropriated from lowland politico-economic thought, and projected onto the cosmological plane, are made manifest and

reinforced through ritual. The frequent performance of triple counterclockwise circles and circumambulations, a gesture known in all corners of Georgia, further emphasizes the sense of belonging to a community, more precisely, a community conceived as an extended kin-group.

**III. The mid-summer festival in the Pshavian communes today.** In many important respects, the mid-summer festivities I observed in recent years resemble those described by ethnographers a century ago. Ceremonial activities and sacrifices in Udzilaurta, Kist'aurta, Gogolaurta and Zurabaulta *temebi* are still supervised by a tavqvisberi over 60 years old, the direct descendant of the previous holder of this office in each commune, assisted by one to three subordinate qevisberni. Several of these men have described to me how they received their vocations; in each case, the future priest was relatively young, in some instances still an adolescent, and the message was made manifest through dreams or visions experienced while suffering from a delirium-producing illness [Mindadze 1981; Buxrashvili, Dolidze & Tuite 2003]. A significant component of all such narratives that I have collected is the candidate's obstinate refusal to accept his vocation, until a succession of misfortunes and even deaths of loved ones broke his will. One tavqvisberi, for example, blamed the loss of several close relatives in battle during World War II to his stubborn, and ultimately futile, resistance to the *xat'i*'s call to service.

According to my colleague Romanoz Dolidze, who has done extensive amateur ethnography in Pshav-Xevsureti, the mid-summer festivals in the various Pshavian communes are held in the sequence shown in **Table 2** since the 1970's; this sequence is consistent with the dates given by Mak'alatia forty years before then.<sup>3</sup> The Orthodox feast of the apostles Peter and Paul (P'et're-P'avloba, 29 June OS = 12 July) marks the end of a fast lasting two to six weeks, during which the qevisberni prepare themselves for Seroba by purification and the avoidance of the proximity of women and other potential sources of pollution (one tavqvisberi told me that he will not ride in any bus or truck at this time, for fear that it might once have been used to transport menstruating women or pigs). Several outlying villages affiliated with the Gogolaurt commune, located near Magharosk'ari or in the upper reaches of the Xorxi Valley (Xorxis xeoba), hold their festivals on P'et're-P'avloba (Acha-kveli in Xorxis xeoba, C'verovani, Qmalaoba, Maghac'ali above Gomec'ari). On the following Sunday, Saghmurtoeba is celebrated at Kmodis Gori above the village of Gogolaurta, followed by the all-Pshavian festivals at Lasharis-Jvari (Monday) and Tamar-Ghele (Tuesday). After a rest day, the commune of Kist'aurta at Shuapxo holds its Seroba, beginning at the nearby shrine of Iaqsari, and ending with a procession to the mountain shrine of K'arat'e overlooking the village Araxija on the following Sunday [Bardavelidze 1974: 75]. Since the death of the celebrated tavqvisberi Bich'uri Badrishvili (c. 1885-1980), who presided at Iaqsari for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, members of his clan have gathered at his gravesite for a commemorative ceremony after the end of the communal festival. On this same weekend, the Xevsur communes celebrate their Atengenoba, followed by a morning service and women's blood-purification (*ganatvla*) at Xaxmat'is Jvari the following

---

<sup>3</sup> Mak'alatia [1985: 202-218] specifies that the festival at Gogolaurt took place on 17 July (NS), followed by Lasharoba on the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>. The ceremony at Cixegori, with which the Udzilaurt festival begins, took place on the 28<sup>th</sup>. Elsewhere in the text he mentions attending Seroba at Lasharis-Jvari in 1932; in that year, 17 July fell on a Sunday, and the 28<sup>th</sup> on a Thursday.

Monday. The final sequence of mid-summer festivals begins two or three days later, on Wednesday evening or Thursday morning. The communes of Udzilaurt, Zurabault, Gogoch'urt, Ch'ichoelt, and the joint festival of Uk'ana-Pshavelt and C'itelaurt temebi take place over four or more days, with a rest day on Friday. These festivals include visits to several sanctuaries within each commune, including a mountain-top shrine (*samto salocavi*), and a shrine to a female divinity known as Holy Mary (Mariam-C'mida) or the Mother of God (Deda-Ghvtismshobeli), where the women's presentation ceremony is held.

The itineraries of two shrine priests during Seroba are summarized in **Table 3**. There are obvious differences between them: The Gogolaurt festival lasts one day, at the beginning of the mid-summer cycle, whereas the four-day Udzilaurt festival comes at the end. In 1999 the festivities at Gogolaurt began with a special gathering of the Baghiauri clan (of which the tavqvisberi is the head) to present offerings and the sacrifice of a ram and bull at their family shrine next to the ruined fortress Jigrault-Cixe. This ceremony only takes every ten years or so, and is intended to expiate the treacherous slaying, alleged to have occurred many generations earlier, of the Ingush artisan who built the fortress. The complex Seroba festival at Udzilaurt begins with the commemoration of a mythic stone-throwing contest between the divinized hero K'op'ala and man-eating ogres (*devebi*), who once resided at Cixetgori across the Ak'usho valley from Iremtk'alo mountain. The contest ended when K'op'ala, standing at the site of the sanctuary atop Iremtk'alo, slung a gigantic boulder across the valley to Cixetgori, where it crushed the ogres' fortress and put them to flight. For his strength and valor in defeating the *devebi*, thereby making the territory of Pshavi safe for human habitation, K'op'ala and his companions Iaqsari and P'irkushi were transformed into *xvtišvilni* by God, and each was granted a fief (*saq'mo*) in Pshavi: Udzilaurt, Kist'aurt and Goderdzault communes.

Although the Pshavian communes were dispossessed of their Axmet'a vineyards decades ago, the saq'eino is still drunk at Udzilaurt (using beer specially brewed for the occasion) and Kist'aurta (using wine contributed by commune members living in the lowlands). At Gogolaurt, the *p'iroplianni* (fallen warriors) are commemorated just before the qevisberi leads the procession back down from Kmodis Gori. The presentation of new members of both sexes still occurs at all of the communes I have visited, and the *doysi* continues to take place atop Iremtk'alo. The majority of those in attendance now live all or most of the year outside of their ancestral village. The shrine personnel are more likely to maintain their primary residence in the highlands, but many spend at least the winter months with their herds at lower altitudes. Nonetheless, those qevisberni with whom I have spoken insist on maintaining traditional norms of purity. At Kmodis Gori, I witnessed the preparation of a mixture of wine and the blood of a freshly-killed ram, which was given to Xvtiso Baiashvili, an auxiliary xevisberi of Gogolaurt commune, to sprinkle around his lowland residence, where the risk of pollution is considered to be higher than in the mountains.

The mid-summer festivals of Udzilaurt, Kist'aurt and Gogolaurt communes draw upwards of a hundred people in recent years. Even in the remote commune of Zurabault, at the head of the Matura valley about a two-hour hike from the nearest road, and with a permanent population of



three households, 70-80 people showed up at Atengena in 2001. That same summer, five bulls, one calf and 17 sheep were sacrificed at Kmodis Gori, about the same number as in 1999, and four boys and seven girls and women were presented to the shrine. Most of the new members do not live in the highlands, and in some cases the ritual of affiliation with their ancestral community is evidently undertaken at the urging of their parents or grandparents. Overall, the atmosphere on these occasions is celebratory and relatively light-hearted; for many of the lowlanders, especially the younger ones, it appears to be on the order of a camping trip and picnic in the mountains. Outsiders tend to be few, and those who appear come as guests of commune members, or through introduction to the presiding qevisberi (as was the case with us during our initial visits to Pshavi). The qevisberni watch over the proceedings in a gentle, grandfatherly way, giving the necessary instructions to lowlanders unfamiliar with the details of what to offer when and where, but never (at least not in my presence) losing their temper. One could say that they portray, in a manner that seems completely natural and unforced, the ideal mountaineer of earlier times: sincere, respectful of tradition, punctilious in fulfilling their responsibilities to the human and supernatural communities, showing no evidence of self-interest or self-importance. Their authority in the eyes of the community is reinforced by their eloquence and impressive memorized repertoire of prayers, invocations and legends, and also by their physical appearance and upright bearing, their ability to walk long distances on mountainous terrain, and drink wine, beer and home-brewed vodka by the litre without succumbing to fatigue or tipsiness. As unscientific as it may appear to say this, the vocation of qevisberi is marked by a charisma which sets them apart from other members of their communes.

**IV. The special status of Lasharis-Jvari.** If K'op'ala, Iaqsari, the Archangel and the several St. Georges were imagined as the overlords of individual communes, Lashari and his “sworn-sister” [*mode*] Tamar were thought to rule over the entire province of Pshavi and its population, who referred to themselves collectively as the vassals of Lasharis Jvari.<sup>4</sup> Lasharis-Jvari was addressed as the *qelmc'ipe* (monarch) of all Pshavians, as though he were a prince or minor king, subordinate to God the supreme ruler, but superior to the other nobles. The sanctuary complexes of Lasharis-Jvari and Tamar-Ghele, along with the minor shrines of Sak'virao and Damast'e, are places of worship and sacrifice for all Pshavians. The four all-Pshavian shrines were invoked for protection from all manner of danger to the province and its residents: enemies (Lashari), illness (Tamar under her epithet “Doctor-Queen” [*Akim-dedopali*]), famine, hail and bad weather (Sak'virao and Damast'e).

As Pshavi's central shrine, Lasharis-Jvari has a number of features and functions which set it apart from all other *xat'ebi*. Like the capital districts of Australia and the United States, Lasharis-Jvari and Tamar-Ghele are not on the territory of any individual commune, and therefore in principle stand apart from and above the clan-based divisions of Pshavi. In pre-Soviet times, the qevisberni from all eleven (or twelve) communes, bearing their banners, assembled at Lasharis-Jvari on the Sunday following Easter, for a council [*bč'eqevisberta sabč'o*] to debate matters of

---

<sup>4</sup> These supernatural siblings take their names from historical personages who were, in fact, mother and son: Queen Tamar (reigned 1184-1215) and her son and successor George IV, known as Lasha Giorgi (reigned 1215-1222).

concern to the people of Pshavi. The Seroba festival at Lasharis-Jvari (commonly called Lasharoba) was attended by people from throughout the province, who camped out in designated areas: each of the communes had its own *sajare* (open-air gathering place) on Qmel-gora close to Lasharis-Jvari. Lasharoba also drew many Georgians from neighboring districts and even Kist'ebi (the local term for Chechens, especially those living in the Pankisi Valley), who came to offer sacrifices and pray for aid from the powerful warrior-divinity Lashara and the healing Queen-doctor Tamar. Another indication of the regional influence of the Pshavian central shrine was the periodic procession of its qevisberi, banner in hand, in the Xevsur valley of Ardot'i (across a mountain ridge to the north), and as far as Gudamaq'ari to the west and Tusheti in the east, to collect "tribute" [*begara*], in the form of livestock, beer and money, for Lasharis-Jvari. [Mak'alatia 1985: 218]. Finally, individuals hoping for healing from a severe illness — either their own or their child's — would put on a yoke or chain as a sign of enslavement to the shrine [*xat'is monoba*]. One particularly dramatic manner of signaling this oath was for the "slave" to put the extremely heavy "Jalabauri chain" — a massive iron chain still to be seen at the shrine — around his or her neck, and circle the candle-tower [*sasantle k'ošk'i*] on all fours [Bardavelidze 1974: 24].

All of this changed with the Sovietization of the Georgian highlands. Lasharis-Jvari lost its vineyards in Kakheti, and the sworn virgins who lived like nuns near Tamar-Ghele and tended its herds of cattle were sent to work on collective farms. The council of Pshavian qevisberni no longer met, and attendance dropped at Lasharoba.<sup>5</sup> Some years later the qevisberi in office at Lasharis-Jvari died, and no successor appeared. The tavqevisberi at Kist'aurt commune, the experienced and highly respected Bich'uri Badrishvili, filled in periodically at Lasharis-Jvari and Tamar-Ghele until his death in 1980. After a vacancy of over a decade, a candidate finally stepped forward in the early 1990's: Beglar Dzebniauri, a lowland Pshavian who had married a woman from Qoshara, a village 2-3 kilometers downriver from Qmelgora, the site of Lasharis-Jvari. Dzebniauri declared that he had learned of his vocation in a dream, and some time later began officiating at both Lasharis-Jvari and Tamar-Ghele.

I attended Lasharoba in 1997, 2000 and 2001, and Gheleoba (the festival at Tamar-Ghele the following day) in 2001. The atmosphere at Lasharis-Jvari impressed me as far less jovial and festive than at the communal shrines. Several factors appear to contribute to this: The qevisberi, who looked to be in his forties, lacked the charisma of his older colleagues at Gogolaurt and Udzilaurt — to say nothing of the near-legendary Bich'uri Badrishvili — nor did he show any signs of possessing the wealth of traditional knowledge one expects a qevisberi to have. No doubt his relative youth and lack of experience are a disadvantage, as well as his having grown up outside of Pshavi. The attendance at Lasharoba in recent years is far more heterogenous, and far less unified, than at the local celebrations of Seroba. Many of those who offer sacrifices come from Qoshara or other nearby villages, and are neighbors or relatives of Dzebniauri's wife's

---

<sup>5</sup> Ten years after the Soviet takeover, in 1932, only a few worshipers, mostly Pshavians settled in Kakheti, were in attendance; five bulls and a few sheep were sacrificed, whereas earlier "sacrificial beasts by the hundreds were slaughtered at Lasharoba" [Mak'alatia 1985: 218-9].

family. In addition, some Pshavians from further away attend, including qevisberni from Chargali and Zurabault. In 2001, we encountered an excursion group of university students from Tbilisi, who took the bus as far as Shuapxo, then hiked the remaining 10 kilometres or so to the campsite at the foot of Qmelgori. On several occasions I noticed men wearing the traditional Caucasian *čoxa* — a long-sleeved knee-length overcoat with rifle-cartridge pockets sown across the chest —, which I have never seen at the commune festivals.<sup>6</sup> At the 2001 Lasharoba festival, Dzebniauri himself donned the *čoxa*, as did two martial-arts (*xridoli*) instructors from Tbilisi, who have been traveling about the highlands collecting information about traditional weapons and self-defense training.

One curious occurrence, which I noted during Lasharoba in 2000, brought home to me the lack of solidarity among the different constituencies in attendance. While Dzebniauri was lighting candles at the *sasantle-k'ošk'i*, a man, clearly not Georgian, came up the path to the shrine bearing a video camera. With one eye on the view-finder, and without speaking a word to anyone, he made his way through the crowd all the way up to where the qevisberi stood, and began filming his activities from 2-3 feet away. Dzebniauri turned and looked at him with a startled, then somewhat annoyed, expression, but said nothing. The foreigner, filming silently all the way, then worked his way back through the crowd and left by the way he had come. It is difficult to imagine a similar occurrence at one of the communal festivals. I will give one example by way of parallel: In 1996, a Canadian journalist and amateur mountain-climber found his way to the summit of Iremtk'alo the day before Seroba. Although he spoke no Georgian or Russian, people immediately greeted him and attempted to communicate in whatever bits of West European languages they had at hand. By the time we arrived a few hours later, the Canadian had already been presented to the qevisberi (Ioseb K'och'lishvili), and made to feel welcome as a guest of the commune. No such contact was attempted with the camera-wielding foreigner at Lasharoba, nor for that matter with any of the numerous outsiders, Georgian or not, who were evidently not known to the qevisberi or other locals.

In June 2000 I was informed by Romanoz Dolidze that restoration work was to be undertaken at Lasharis-Jvari. On Sunday, 26 June, we met the late Irak'li Gogolauri, a Pshavian from Magharosk'ari, who was a well-known regional poet and editor of a journal which publishes articles on the folklore and history of Pshav-Xevsureti, and poems and short stories by local writers. At his initiative, and largely with funds from his own pocket, a project was launched to restore ruined or damaged buildings on the territory of Lasharis-Jvari. He had come to Lasharis-Jvari with a lamb to be sacrificed there by Pilip'e Baghiauri, the qevisberi of Irak'li's ancestral commune. The lamb was slaughtered on the edge of a stone receptacle set in the ground to receive the blood of sacrificed animals. After Pilip'e finished his invocation of the *xvtishvilni* to bless the project, Irak'li and the construction workers drank toasts and pledged to do their work faithfully, begging the shrine not to be angry should they make any unintentional mistakes. By the time Lasharoba was held, three weeks later, the beer-storage cabin (*salude*) had been rebuilt,

---

<sup>6</sup> When officiating at the mid-summer festival, the qevisberni of the local Pshavian communes wear their best shirts, pants and jackets. I have yet to see a shrine priest wear the *čoxa* at any other site besides Lasharis-Jvari.

and was consecrated by Beglar Dzebniauri with the blood of a sacrifice. On hand for the occasion were the government administrators for the two Pshavian districts, Magharosk'ari and Shuapxo-Uk'anapshavi, one of whom is the grandson of Bich'uri Badrishvili. While attending Lasharoba we were shown pieces of an ancient cross, with an Old Georgian inscription apparently dating from no later than the 14<sup>th</sup> century, which the builders had found while working at the site.

A year later, at the 2001 Lasharoba, restoration work had progressed considerably. The two Christian churches in the central complex, one at Lasharis-Jvari and the other at Tamar-Ghele, had been furnished with new tin roofs (the second of these was paid for by another grandson of Bich'uri). Gogolauri's team had shored up the foundations of the old bell tower at Lasharis-Jvari, and was in the process of reconstructing the hall where the councils of tavqvisberni once took place. The medieval crucifix found the year before has been restored and mounted on a staff, and was displayed alongside other items of the shrine's inventory. In addition to the above, all done through the efforts of volunteers without government support, Pshavians donated a new banner to Lasharis-Jvari, in the form of a flag with the image of St George on one side, and on the other, a large cross, representing Lasharis-Jvari, surrounded by fifteen smaller crosses. These latter, I was told, symbolize the fifteen original communes of Pshavi (see footnote 2). Although commune members occasionally donate drinking vessels and other items to local shrines, and repair work is sporadically done on bell-towers and candle altars, I have heard of no large-scale undertakings comparable to those at the central shrines. Why is it, one might ask, that Gogolauri, whose ancestors — as his name indicates — belonged to Gogolaurt, and Guram Badrishvili, whose grandfather was tavqvisberi at Kist'urta, contributed to building projects at Lasharis-Jvari and Tamar-Ghele, rather than at their respective communes?

It appears to me that we are witnessing the beginning of a new phase in the history of Pshavian religion. Unlike most other Georgian provinces, such as Svaneti for example, the majority of religious practices in Pshavi and Xevsureti were performed in the presence of the community, rather than in private or within the household. Stripped of their earlier functions in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Lasharis-Jvari, and to a lesser degree Tamar-Ghele, are acquiring new functions at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup>. The lack of communes of their own, and the young, inexperienced qevisberi (himself somewhat of an outsider), have left the central shrines open to symbolic appropriation by a diverse range of groups and individuals, who display their attachment to the values projected onto Lasharoba in front of a generalized public unified by the more abstract ideologically-informed attribute of Georgianness, rather than an extended kin group of ultimately local origin.

When I attended Lasharoba in 2001, no rituals were performed which might have fostered a sense of unity among this diverse assemblage of locals, city-dwellers visiting a holy place celebrated in folklore, and various individuals seeking to display their attachment to national traditions, which the mountains are believed to conserve more faithfully than the lowland cities. Group events mentioned in descriptions of Lasharoba from earlier times, such as the drinking of the *saq'eino*, the *perquli* round-dance, and processions led by the qevisberi bearing the *droša*,

were not performed. But at least since 2008, all of these rituals have come back into practice. The likely reason for this return to past traditions is the coalescence of a constituency which attends Lasharoba every year, and which facilitated the restoration of rituals which encourage group participation (by the menfolk, at least). In the years 2000-2001, the most prominent actor at Lasharis-Jvari, besides the qevisberi himself, was Irak'li Gogolauri. In addition to organizing the repair and reconstruction work mentioned earlier, Gogolauri clearly sought to encourage some degree of respect for tradition, as he understood it, on the part of the attendees at Lasharoba. At the 2001 festival, when Dzebniauri brought out the new banner, Gogolauri announced to all within earshot that when the qevisberi takes up the banner (*droša*), “the whole congregation (*mteli mrevli*) must rise to its feet, and make the sign of the cross”. By his choice of words — *mrevli* is the term commonly used to denote the parishioners who regularly attend Mass at a Georgian Orthodox church — Gogolauri seemed to have imagined the ideal community of worshippers at Lasharis-Jvari as a congregation bound by religion as well as tradition. Had he lived longer, Irak'li Gogolauri might well have made further efforts to promote a vision of Lasharoba as he conceived it to have been in the past. Unfortunately, Gogolauri passed away not long afterwards. In the course of the following few years, a new core constituency emerged at Lasharis-Jvari, centered upon the martial-arts (*xridoli*) instructor Nuk'ri Mch'edlishvili and his disciples. Unlike Gogolauri, this is a much younger group, many of whom do not trace their ancestry to Pshavi. Their interest in the northeast Georgian highlands is based principally on the belief that ancient Georgian fighting and self-defense techniques were best preserved in this region (Xevsureti especially), as well as the representations of Pshavian and Xevsur warriors celebrated in the poetry of Vazha-Pshavela and Georgian folklore.

The *xridoli* practitioners, many of whom appear wearing traditional highland costumes, camp out overnight in the near-by village of Qoshara, and bring a sheep for sacrifice at the shrine, thus demonstrating their fealty, as it were, to the patron divinity of Lasharis-Jvari.<sup>7</sup> Although the performance of such rituals appears to invoke the political role of Lasharis-Jvari as it was in the pre-Soviet past, the interpretation imposed by present-day participants, many of them from lowland Georgia, is very different. Perhaps it was best expressed by a Christian-Democratic parliament deputy, interviewed in 2008, who stated that he had begun attending Lasharoba regularly, even though he was not of local origin. Inspired by the poetry of Vazha-Pshavela, he saw Lasharis-Jvari as a symbol of “the realization of the idea of the Georgian state”.<sup>8</sup> While it appears that Vazha himself may once have entertained the dream that the Pshavian and Xevsur warriors would join forces to help free Georgia from Tsarist rule [Tuite 2008], it is far less certain that those — and in particular the politicians — who invoke Lasharis-Jvari as a political model understand all the implications of what they seem to be wishing for: a theocratic order calqued upon medieval Georgian feudalism, mediated by a shrine clergy appointed through divine rather than popular election, and whose service is experienced as a heavy burden rather than a source of profit.

---

<sup>7</sup> They can be seen in a video by Dea Soselia recorded in 2010 (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhcANGfZxNc>).

<sup>8</sup> The interview can be seen at (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-CFPfQ2ye0>).

**V. Postscript: Georgian shrine festivals in the YouTube era.** When my colleagues and I began documenting the festivals of highland eastern Georgia in the mid-1990s, our video camera was usually the only one. But even then, other cameras — and therefore, other points of view — were appearing at the scene. In 1997 a crew from the national TV studio, accompanied by the folklorist Zurab K'ik'nadze, filmed the Udzilaurt cycle, but I do not know if their footage was ever broadcast. In 2000, the journalist Elguja Lebanidze, from the newspaper *Sakartvelos Resp'ublik'a*, attended the Gogolaurta festival at the invitation of a commune member, and wrote several articles and short stories about Pshavi. Since the turn of the millennium, and especially in the past five years or so, cameras have multiplied exponentially at shrine festivals in Georgia. One notes, first of all, the presence of the Georgian media. On a couple of occasions I had the opportunity of observing television journalists at work in the field, and then viewing the resulting broadcast. These were typically short human-interest stories inserted in the evening news, highlighting the exotic and “pagan” aspects of rural folk festivals for a Tbilisi-based television audience that had rarely if ever witnessed an animal sacrifice. In more recent years, since 2007 or so, I have the impression that Georgian TV representations of the festivals and lifestyles of Pshavi, Xevsureti and Tusheti have tended to be slanted in one of two ways. One type of reportage features idealized forms of traditional practices and crafts representative of elite conceptions of authentic Georgianness (folk singing and costumes, Xevsurian sword-play, and the like). The other ideological stream — sometimes intertwined with the first — foregrounds the Christian heritage of the highlanders, while backgrounding those practices less compatible with normative Orthodoxy. Certain individuals appear sufficiently often in the Georgian media that they could be considered spokesmen for the northeastern highlanders. These are relatively young, university-educated Georgians of highland origin who have devoted themselves to the cultivation and promotion of particular components of Pshavian and Xevsurian traditional culture (for example, the painter Shota Arabuli, who opened a museum of Xevsurian folk art and crafts in K'orsha; and the martial-arts instructor Nuk'ri Mch'edlishvili).

Until quite recently, the authority of visual anthropologists, like that of TV reporters, was based to a considerable degree on the monopoly they enjoyed with respect to the collecting and diffusion of “authentic” images from the field. The availability of good-quality, easily portable and low-priced video recording technology has dramatically changed the situation. Some of the implications of the multiplication of points of view became apparent to me over a decade ago. For the 1999 field season, I purchased a new video camera. My friend Berucha brought the older model along when we went to Xevsureti, and on several occasions, his camera and mine were running at the same time. When I compared Berucha's footage to my own, I was struck by the differences between our representations of the “same” event: not only the perspectives afforded by the distinct physical locations of the cameras, but also what aspects of the events we chose to focus on (literally and figuratively). This experience made it clear to me that my framing of the phenomena occurring around me — and therefore my constitution of it as an “event” or as data — was not the only one possible. In the past few years, dozens of video-recording devices are on hand at the larger shrine festivals — such as Lomisoba in the province of Xevi, and Iaqsroba and Lasharoba in Pshavi — and often at least one or two capture images at clan-based festivals in peripheral villages (for example, the Pudzis-angelozi shrine in Gudamaq'ari, featured in a half-

dozen video clips despite its remote location). Furthermore, video-hosting sites (YouTube in particular) have made it possible for these amateur video recordings to reach hundreds or thousands of viewers around the world within days of their production. In some instances I can rationalize the camera operators' choices of whom and what to capture on video, but at times I am baffled or even frustrated by their selections and exclusions. My first reaction is to imagine how I would have done a better job at documenting the important segments of the events, the ones that really mattered. But perhaps I would do better to learn how to appreciate the perspectives these non-professionally made videos afford. On the whole, the impact of these new technologies on the performance, representation and symbolic appropriation of Georgian highland festivals remains to be assessed. Some of the newer shrine priests have objected to the filming of ceremonies; one wonders if the omnipresence of cameras will harden or soften this policy, or will have other effects on the staging of ritual performances. Anthropologists as well will have to come to grips with the implications of the YouTube era for our own work. Thanks to the widespread affordability of hand-held video cameras and camera-equipped mobile phones, data-gathering in the field has been democratized, and the ethnographer (and journalist) have lost their class privileges.

### **Bibliography.**

- Bardavelidze, Vera. 1957. *Drevnejšie religioznye verovanija i obrjadovoe grafičeskoe iskusstvo gruzinskix plemen*. Tbilisi: Mecniereba.
- Bardavelidze, Vera. 1960. Rapports sociaux des montagnards de la Géorgie orientale au début de l'époque esclavagiste d'après des survivances ethnographiques. *Communications de la délégation soviétique au VIe Congrès international des sciences anthropologiques et ethnologiques*: 1-16.
- Bardavelidze, Vera. 1974. *aymosavlet sakartvelos mtianetis t'radiciuli sazogadoebriv-sak'ult'o dzeglebi*. [Traditional cultic monuments of the East Georgian mountain districts], Vol I. *Pšavi*. Tbilisi: Metsniereba.
- Buxrashvili, P., Dolidze, R., & Tuite, K. 2003. Interview mit Chewisberi Pilipe Baghiauri. *Georgica* #26: 44-63.
- Charachidzé, Georges. 1968. *Le système religieux de la Géorgie païenne: analyse structurale d'une civilisation*. Paris: Maspero.
- Charachidzé, Georges. 1971. *Introduction à l'étude de la féodalité géorgienne: le Code de Georges le Brillant*. Paris: Librairie Droz.
- Eristov, R. D. 1853. O tušino-pšavo-xevsurskom okruge. *Zapiski kavkazkago otdela Imperatorskago Russkago Geografičeskago Obščestva*, Knižka 3, 73-145.
- Grigolia, Alexander. 1939. *Custom and Justice in the Caucasus: The Georgian Highlanders*. Dissertation, U. of Pennsylvania [reprinted by AMS Press, New York (1980)].
- K'andelak'i, Marine. 1987. lašaris jvari pšavelta q'opaši. [The shrine of Lasharis Jvari in Pshavian culture]. *Masalebi sakartvelos etnografiisatvis* XXIII: 181-194.
- K'ik'nadze, Zurab. 1996. *kartuli mitologia, I. jvari da saq'mo*. [Georgian mythology, I. Shrine and community]. Kutaisi: Gelati Academy of Sciences.
- K'ik'nadze, Zurab. 2011. *andrezebi. ayamosavlet sakartvelos mtianetis religiur-mitologiuri gadmocemebi*. [Shrine-foundation myths. Religious-mythological traditions of the East Georgian highlands]. Tbilisi: Ilias saxelmc'ipo universit'et'is gamomcemloba.
- Mak'alatia, Sergi. 1985. *Pshavi*. Tbilisi: Nak'aduli (reprint of 1934 edition).
- Mindadze, Nunu. 1981. rčeulebis inst'it'ut'i da psikonervuli daavadebani pšavši. [The institution of (divine) selection and psycho-nervous illnesses in Pshavi]. *Masalebi sakartvelos etnografiisatvis* XXI: 146-152.

- Mindadze, Nunu. 1987. kadagobis sak'itxisatvis ayamosavlet sakartvelos mtianetši. [The question of the institution of the *kadagi* (oracle) in the East Georgian highlands]. *Masalebi sakartvelos etnograpiisatvis* XXIII: 174-180.
- Ochiauri, Aleks. 1991. *kartuli xalxuri dyeobebi ayamosavlet sakartvelos mtianetši (pšavi)* [Folk festivals in the East Georgian highlands: Pshavi]. Tbilisi: Mecniereba.
- Ochiauri, Tinatin. 1967. *mitologiuri gadmocemebi ayamosavlet sakartvelos mtianetši*. [Mythological traditions in the East Georgian highlands]. Tbilisi: Mecniereba.
- Tedoradze, Giorgi. 1930. *Xut'i c'eli pšav-xevsuretši*. [Five years in Pshavi and Khevsureti]. T'pilisi: Sil. Tavartkiladzis gamocema.
- Tuite, K. 1994. *An anthology of Georgian folk poetry*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Tuite, K. 1996. Highland Georgian paganism — archaism or innovation? *Annual of the Society for the Study of Caucasia* #7, pp 79-91.
- Tuite, K. 1998. Representations of social space in South Caucasian and Indo-European ideology. *Cosmos* 14 #1 : 9-20.
- Tuite, K. 2000. Antimarrriage in ancient Georgian society. *Anthropological Linguistics* 42 #1: 37-60.
- Tuite, K. 2002. Feudalismus im georgischen Hochland: Wirklichkeit und Vorstellungswelt. *Georgica* #25; 130-142.
- Tuite, K. 2004. Lightning, sacrifice and possession in the Caucasus. *Anthropos* 99: 143-159 (Part I), 481-497 (Part II).
- Tuite, K. 2008. The Banner of Xaxmat'is-Jvari: Vazha-Pshavela's Xevsureti. *Der Dichter Važa-Pšavela. Fünf Essays*, Ekaterina Gamkrelidze, ed. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann; 11-38.
- Tuite, K. and P'at'a Buxrashvili. 1999. Binarität und Komplementarität in Nordostgeorgien. Die Vorstellung von Jungen und Mädchen am Iaqsari-Heiligtum. *Georgica* 22: 59-72.
- Vazha-Pshavela. 1886/1994. pšavlebi (mati sxvadasxva čveuleba, crumorc'muneba da xat'ebi). [The Pshavians (Their various customs, superstitions and shrines).]. *Txzulebani xut t'omad. t'omi V: p'ublicist'uri da etnograpiuli c'erilebi*, pp. 59-85. Tbilisi: Sabč'ota sakartvelo.



**Table 1. Pshav-Xevsur Liturgical Calender**

10.XI.

Giorgoba (St. George)

**I. NEW YEAR CYCLE (TRANSITION, INVERSION)**

25.XII.

Krist'e, Šoba (Christmas)

26.XII.

Sats'uleoba (Presentation of boys)

31.XII.

Lit'ania (New Year's Eve)

01.I

Ts'elts'adi (New Year's Day)

07.I.

Ts'q'alk'urtxeva (Blessing of the Waters, Epiphany)

2<sup>nd</sup> Saturday before Lent

Ayeba, Qortsis šabati (Meat-fare Saturday)

**II. LENTEN CYCLE (APPEASEMENT, NEUTRALIZATION OF DANGEROUS FORCES)**

1<sup>st</sup> Monday of Lent

Tagv-čit't ukmi (Non-work day of mice and birds)

following Monday

Urts'q'is oršabati (Monday of sprites/fairies)

1<sup>st</sup> Saturday of Lent

Mgelt ukmi (Non-work day of wolves)

2<sup>nd</sup> Saturday of Lent

Sultak'repa (Gathering of the souls)

Šuamarxva (Mid-Lent)

following Wednesday

K'udiant dye-γame (Witches' Day and Night)

Axvseba, Aydgoma (Easter)

Tuesday after Easter

Aydgomis samšabati (Feast of the Angel of the House)

**III. SUMMER CYCLE (COMMUNITY)**

Sunday after Easter

K'virisjvroba (Feast of sanctuaries)

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Easter

Didi samγto (Great divine gestival)

40 days after Easter

Amayleba (Ascension)

mid-July

Atengenoba, Seroba, Saymurtoba (Mid-summer festival)

15.VIII.

Mariamoba (Dormition of Mary)

end of August

Nadi (Collective harvest-work)

## Table 2. Sequence of Seroba-Atengenoba festivals in Pshavi.

**P’et’re-P’avloba** (Feast of the Apostles Peter and Paul; 29.06 OS = 12.07 NS)

**Week 1. Gogolaurta**, (a) beginning on P’et’re-P’avloba at satellite communities — Xorxis xeoba (Acha-kveli, etc.) and Gomec’ari; then (b) at the shrine of Tetri Giorgi on Kmodis gori, on following Sunday.<sup>9</sup>

**Week 2. All-Pshavian shrines:** Lasharis jvari (Monday) & Tamar-Ghele (Tuesday) on the following two days, followed by a rest day on Wednesday.<sup>10</sup>

**Kist’aurta** (Iaqsroba) on Thursday through Sunday. The **Atengenoba** festivals in Xevsureti also take place at this time (Friday evening through Sunday).

**Week 3.** Rest days until Wednesday evening, followed by **multi-day celebrations**, which take place simultaneously in the remaining Pshavian communes. Many of these involve visits to several shrines, with a rest day on Friday. Horse racing (*doyi*) and the initiation rituals (*xat’ši gaq’vana*) are held on the weekend; the initiation of girls & in-marrying brides sometimes takes place at the beginning of the following week.

- (a) Thursday (beginning on Wednesday evening at some localities): rituals at peripheral shrines
- (b) Friday: rest day
- (c) Saturday: offerings at the commune’s mountain-top (*samto*) shrine, such as Iremtk’alo.
- (d) Sunday: main (*satemo*) shrine

**Mariamoba** (15.08 OS = 28.08 NS): festival at Mother of God (*moqarnade yvtismshobeli*)<sup>11</sup> shrine at Muko.

---

<sup>9</sup> According to tavqvisberi Pilip’e Baghauri, Tetri Giorgi (“White St George”) enjoys special priority among yvtishvilebi, which explains why the Gogolaurt mid-summer festival precedes Lasharoba.

<sup>10</sup> According to the norms of the Orthodox Church, no animal products are to be eaten on Wednesdays and Fridays. In Pshavi and Xevsureti, animal sacrifices are not performed on these days.

<sup>11</sup> The term *moqarnade* means “having bulls and collective harvest workers”, these being attributes of the chief shrines of the eleven Pshav clans. Bull offerings are presented at such shrines, and the lands which belong to it were worked by members of the commune as a collective. The patron yvtishvilni are almost invariably male; in order to signal the exceptional status of a female-gendered divinity, the qualifier *moqarnade* precedes her name.

**Table 3. Sequence of events at two shrine festivals**  
**GOGOLAURTA, Sunday 18.07.99 (Tavqvisberi Pilip'e Baghiauri)**

- 8h30 Tavqvisberi ascends from lower shrine to Jigrault Cixe, without *droša* (banner), accompanied only by members of Baghiauri clan; sacrifices ram and bull.
- 9h30 Returns to lower shrine, leaving the Baghiauri clan at Jigrault Cixe. Takes up *droša* and rings bell; goes up to Kmodis Gori with remaining members of community and guests.
- 10h30 Rings bell and lights candles at principal *sazare* (bell-tower) on Kmodis Gori
- 11h Rejoins the other Baghiauris at Jigrault Cixe, bearing banner this time. Rings bell at *sazare* at the site, lights candles; presides at banquet with clan members.
- 12h Returns with banner to main site on Kmodis Gori. Sacrifices sheep and bulls offered by community members.
- 15h Women's presentation to shrine (*kalebis gaq'vana*) at unmarked spot between bell-tower and women's area. Each candidate presents offerings of bread (*kada*), candles and coins. Tavqvisberi turns bread in circle three times (3x) over each woman's head.
- 16h Boys' presentation to shrine (*važebis gaq'vana*). A bull is sacrificed for each boy, and its blood used to mark a cross on the boy's forehead. They circumambulate the "Children's initiation tower" [*c'ulis gasarevi k'ošk'i*] 3x, led by the Tavqvisberi.
- 17h Prayers for women (good marriage & childbirth) at a site below the Tetri Giorgi shrine
- 17h30 Toast to *p'iroplianni* (warriors killed in battle) at main bell-tower
- 18h30 Tavqvisberi rings bell, takes up banner. Men dance *perxuli*, descend singing.
- 19h Men arrive at lower shrine singing, led by Tavqvisberi carrying banner. Men dance *perxuli* again, in front of lower bell-tower. Tavqvisberi rings bell, ending festivities.

**UDZILAUARTA, Thursday 24.07 to Sunday 27.07.97 (Tavqvisberi Ioseb K'och'lishvili)**

- TH Tavqvisberi with banner, accompanied by commune members, arrives at Cixegori, meets members of local Xevsur community (from Ak'usho). Celebrate joint feast with sacrifices and round dance (*perxuli*).
- FR Tavqvisberi with banner and knapsack containing cups and wine, etc. crosses river, climbs Muchis Mta to shrine Iremtk'alo on summit. He and community members camp out there for the night.
- SA festivities at mountain-top shrine Iremtk'alo:**
- 9h When sun appears above mountains, Tavqvisberi rings bell, gives morning invocation (*dilis rigi*). Begins sacrificing sheep & cattle offerings. People prepare food for banquets.
- 15h Men drink *saq'eino* beer, on all fours, in front of Iremtk'alo sanctuary.
- 16h30 Horse race (*doyi*): Riders circle Iremtk'alo sanctuary 3x; ride off to small shrine, which they circle 3x. Tavqvisberi rings bell to signal start of race. Winner and other riders once again circle Iremtk'alo 3x. All present toast winner with beer given him as prize.
- 18h Tavqvisberi rings bell and takes up banner; men gather and sing *perxuli* while circumambulating shrine 3x. People descend from summit, led by Tavqvisberi.
- 19h He stops at small shrine *Sak'virao* in woods; rings bell (hanging from tree), those present drink toasts. Group continues descent to campsite near communal shrine of Ber-K'op'ala.
- SU festivities at communal shrine:**
- 9h Rings bell, gives morning invocation. Begins receiving offerings & sacrificing sheep.
- 12h Takes banner, leads group of women & guests around village to Deda-Ghvtismshobeli shrine on opposite ridge. Leaves women outside shrine precincts; enters with men, rings bell, those present drink toasts. Comes back out, performs women's presentation ritual.
- 13h Returns to communal shrine. People prepare banquet.
- 17h Rings bell, signalling end of festival.