

*Hunter, shaman, oracle, priest :*  
*An ethnohistorical overview of inspirational practices in highland*  
*Georgia.*

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## SOME APPROACHES TO THE DEFINITION OF SHAMANISM

1. STADIALIST (e.g. Lev Shternberg's theory of divine election [*izbrannichestvo*])
2. PROTOTYPE-BASED (cp. Eliade's shamanic prototype primarily drawn from Siberian data: ecstatic voyage to sky or underworld, mastery of fire, psychopomp)
3. CULTURALLY-SITUATED (cp. R. Hamayon's definition of shaman's role in terms of imagined alliance and gender asymmetries, contrasting it to spirit possession — Prototypical shaman adopts a masculine role, as imagined by his society, as an active seeker of women and resources outside of the community. Possession, by contrast, is a passive and stereotypically feminine stance: the possessed does not seek, but rather is sought, by the soul or spirit that seizes her)
4. POLITICALLY/HISTORICALLY/SOCIALLY-SITUATED (cp. contributions to N. Thomas & C. Humphreys 1994 *Shamanism, history, and the state*, which seek to “loos[en] the classificatory paradigms” left by Eliade, in favor of a “historical anthropology of inspirational practices”, that situates shamanism and shamans in their historical and political context)

## PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO IDENTIFY SHAMANISM IN THE CAUCASUS

1. G. Nioradze (1940) likened Abkhazian and Georgian “soul-returning” rituals to similar practices performed by Buryat shamans.
2. R. Bleichsteiner (1936) on “Reste von Schamanismus” in ethnographic descriptions from the highland provinces of northeast Georgia, in particular, those of Pshavi and Xevsureti (subsequently cited by Eliade in his monograph).
3. Tinatin Ochiauri (1954) situating Xevsur institution of oracles (*kadag*) in Shternberg’s evolutionary sequence of stages of divine election, of which Siberian shamanism represents a more primitive manifestation.
4. Drawing on descriptions by Ochiauri and others, Charachidzé (1968, 1995) defines Xevsur *kadag* as “chamane”, and interprets legendary accounts of past oracles as evidence that until recently the northeast Georgian highlanders had the practice of a “shamanic quest”, through which the practitioner received his powers.

## II. Common features of Caucasian (esp. Kartvelian) traditional religions.

### A. SUPERNATURALS AND HUMANS.

(1) Gradient hierarchy of beings according to their degree of participation in the divine principle.

(2) Wild-game patroness, taking hunter-shaman as lover in exchange for hunting success. Game pre-eaten & resuscitated to be killed by hunters.

### B. GENDER, FAMILY AND SOCIETY.

(3) The contrast, or opposition, of male-linked/divine “purity” (Geo. sic’minde) and female-linked/corporeal “impurity” (Geo. uc’mindureba); seclusion of women during bloodflow.

(4) Interconnectedness, network-building: exogamically-oriented marital preferences, fictive kinship, “believer-unbeliever” shrines; necessary complementarity of women and men.

(5) marriage and “anti-marriage” (Geo. c’ac’loba, Svan ch’æ:ch’i:lær).

(6) *Trajectories* associated with female and male divine beings, and their human counterparts.

WOMEN: “exterior of the exterior” (beyond community) to “interior of the interior” (domestic hearth)

MEN: “exterior of the interior” (public spaces) to “interior of the exterior” (exploited for benefit of community)

#### C. DEAD SOULS & FUNERARY RITES.

(7) i. soul-returning/capture

ii. exposure of deceased’s clothing: *nishan, t’alavar*

iii. funeral games (horse-racing, target shooting)

iv. souls returning to visit living, influencing events among living

#### D. RITUAL AND SACRIFICE.

(8) sacrifice as means of contact with divinities: Primarily under species of (i) animals, (ii) alcohol, (iii) bread. Also candles (and honey), and special case of lightning and smallpox victims as “sacrifice”, taken by initiative of celestial god.

NB Geo. *m-sxverp’-l* “sacrifice, victim” < Proto-Kartv. *\*sxwerp’-* “catch, encompass” — sacrifice as “seized, grasped” rather than set aside, given or consecrated as in IE languages (*sacrificium, offerre/oblato, victima*)

UNSUITABLE FOR  
SACRIFICE  
(*usurmag*).

- i. Domestic work animals
- ii. Reptiles, vermin

SUITABLE FOR SACRIFICE

*other deities*

BULL (prototype)  
sheep, poultry, pigs

*celestial deity (+/- dangerous)*

GOAT (prototype)  
ibex, deer, mountain goat  
(offered by hunters to divine  
patron of game animals)

### III. Possession and shamanism in the West Caucasus.

(1). “Possession” (as offerings taken at initiative of celestial deity) of lightning victims, in Ossetia, Abkhazia, Circassia. Lightning-strike as sign of divine election. If victim dies, s/he left outside, raised up on platform. Corpse not returned for burial in cemetery, nor was mourning permitted. Thunderstruck victims who survived were considered prophets in the service of the deity who struck them.

Cp. Buryat & Soyot Tuvan shamans “chosen” by lightning strike.

(2) The Svanetian hunter as lover of the wild-game goddess Dæl.

Hunter as quasi-shaman — intermediary between village & pure mountaintop domain of Dæl, meeting her in liminal space. Legendary hunter (Betgil, Chorla) obtains success at the hunt by becoming the lover of the divine patroness of alpine game animals, as long as he remains faithful to her (avoiding human females) and respects her taboos.

Parallels to Central Asian & Turkic legends of deity appearing as deer.

(3) Soul returning: Svan *kunem lit'xe*, Abkhaz *apsitgara*. When a person dies away from home (esp. by drowning or avalanche), the soul is believed to remain on the spot, or even be trapped under snow or water. An experienced elder locates the soul (sometimes with the aid of a rooster), and leads it back home while playing music. Sometimes a thread or trail of wine or milk used to guide soul. Cp. Siberian shamans as psychopomps.

#### IV. THE PXOVIAN REFORMATION AND PROFESSIONALIZATION OF RELIGIOUS FUNCTIONS.

1. Cosmological feudalism: Divine hierarchy as feudal order, with rank corresponding to invisibility and inaccessibility. Clan patron deities as “children of God” (*xtishvilni*), either created divine or former humans elevated to divine status by God as recompense for valor in exterminating ogres (*devi*). Human community as “vassals” (q’mani) of invisible overlords, exchanging labor service and offerings for protection, health and prosperity.
2. Celestial deities “split” into pairings of (masculine) *xtishvili* & (non-masculine) auxiliaries: sworn-sister (*dobili*), serpent, captured ogre, enforcer (*iasauli*). The auxiliaries are potentially harmful, or even of demonic origin.
3. Priesthood as professionalization of contacts with divine world, conceived in hierarchical terms — subordination of one male (priest as vassal) to another (divine overlord) — rather than “couplehood” (shaman & game patroness, possessed and possessor). Delegitimation of spontaneous possession. Laity as a whole largely excluded from religious practice, due to “de-privatization” of formerly domestic rituals performed by head of household in West Caucasus.
4. Sacrifice as appropriation by gods replaced by sacrifice at initiative of community: reanalysis of lightning strike & role of celestial deities (K’op’ala as soul-deliverer)
5. Pxovian gender ideology — Decoupling of two aspects of female role: (i) mediation and (ii) corporeality (epitomized by menstruation and childbirth). The divine “sworn sister” Samdzimari and legendary female founders of shrines are un-sexed, and the male oracle (*kadag, mk’adre*) assumes prototypical female traits as companion and possessed mouthpiece of clan patron deity.

## The Xevsur oracle (*kadag*)

### 1. *Meene* (“linguist”): spokes(wo)man for spirit or soul.

oracle — possessed by clan patron *xtishvili*.

*mesultane* — woman made to speak by souls of the deceased

*qmit mot’irali* (“voice-mourner”) — woman who improvises lamentations for the newly deceased

### 2. *Mk’adre* (“one who dares”) or *kandara* (“perch”): close contact with *xtishvili*.

oracle — sometimes depicted with deity in form of dove sitting on his hand.

*sak’adrisi* — woman’s headscarf donated to shrine, attached to banner (*drosha*), or placed on oracle’s hand for *xtishvili* to perch on.

*k’och’is mok’ideba* — Deity “sets his heel” on person or place as sign of possession: sacred site, oracle, or mentally-ill person to be cured by contact with deity (*dak’och’va*)

### 3. Travelling companion of *xtishvili* on voyages to underworld, North Caucasus, while levying tribute on neighboring tribes, etc.

## LEGENDARY XEVSUR ORACLES VOYAGING IN THE UNDERWORLD

1. GAXUA MEGRELAURI — Oracle (mk'adre) from Xevsur village Ch'ormeshavi who accompanied St. George and the *xtishvilni* on a raid in Kajaveti (subterranean land of the Kajes, metal-working beings with magical powers). Before undertaking voyage, Gaxua underwent physical death, and his “souls” were extracted from his body. Upon return, St. George reinserted the souls into the now-putrefying body & brought Gaxua back to life. (Cp. underworld journey of Ardâ Wîrâz, and shamanic parallels)
2. XOGAIS MINDI (the prototype of Vazha-Pshavela's *Gvelismch'ameli*) — Xevsur from Arxoti valley who is taken prisoner by Kajes. He attempts suicide by drinking a few drops of snake blood, but instead acquires the ability to understand the languages of birds and plants. He escapes from the Kajes, travels through the “land of cuckoos”, then returns home. According to some accounts, Mindi became a gifted healer (plants revealed their medicinal powers to him). Cp. widespread Eurasian tales of the “tiersprachenkundige Mann” (Aarne), and shamans understanding the languages of birds and animals after eating snake flesh (Eliade 92-3).

## SHAMANISM AND POSSESSION IN THE WEST CAUCASUS AND PXOVI.

### 1. ABXAZIA, MINGRELIA, SVANETI:

Early state formations, feudalism, imposition of state religion.

Marginalization, feminization, privatization of inspirational practices.

### 2. PXOVI (Pshavi & Xevsureti):

Appropriation of concepts, symbols from lowland feudalism and Orthodox Christianity, used to restructure inherited religious system, while at the same time retaining political autonomy.

Masculinization, professionalization and de-privatization of inspirational practices.

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