The banner of Xaxmat'is-Jvari: Vazha-Pshavela's Xevsureti
(for Luigi Magarotto's Vazha volume)

By his choice of *nom de plume*, Luk'a Razik'ašvili foregrounded his roots in the highland Georgian province of Pshavi. Yet it is a curious fact that neither Pshavi nor its inhabitants are even mentioned in the three long poems considered to be Vazha's greatest works, namely, "Aluda Ketelauri", "Host and Guest" (*St'umar-masp'indzeli*) and "The Snake-eater" (*Gvelis-mč'ameli*).[1] The only Georgian protagonists who appear in these three works are from Xevsureti, a district to the north and west of Pshavi. In the following pages, I will examine Vazha's nonfictional as well as fictional depictions of Xevsureti and the Xevsurs, with the aim of coming to a better understanding of what they represented for the writer who, more than any other, introduced them to a national readership. I will argue that Vazha deployed his portrayals of the Xevsurs, the most peripheral and "primitive" among the eastern Georgian mountain tribes, in two distinct domains, as regards both literary genre and mode of treatment: Whereas in his nonfiction writings the author sought to formulate a practical plan of development and action for the Georgian highlanders, in his major poetic works he explored the relation between the heroic individual and society in a mythic and aesthetic mode, culminating in the irreconcilable conflict between personal moral code and social obligations portrayed in "The Snake-eater". In both domains, the Xevsurs and their way of life were of crucial significance to Vazha's endeavors as activist and poet.

I. The Xevsurs in Vazha's ethnographic and public-affairs writings. The territory encompassing the provinces of Pshavi and Xevsureti was known to medieval writers under the common name of Pxovi, and even at present it is often convenient to treat these adjacent regions and their populations as a single unit, designated by the compound *Pshav-Xevsureti*. The Pshavians and Xevsurs are subsistence farmers, drawing their livelihoods from livestock and crops adapted to difficult highland conditions. Their Georgian dialects are similar in many respects, and share certain grammatical features with the literary language of several centuries ago. Neither Pshavi nor Xevsureti was incorporated into the Georgian feudal regime, nor were medieval churches built in the same numbers as in other highland provinces, although concepts drawn from lowland feudalism and Orthodoxy provided the framework within which the traditional Pshav-Xevsurian religious system arose from the inherited pre-Christian belief system (Tuite 2004). Behind the surface similarities, however, close observers of the Pshavians and Xevsurs have noted some equally striking contrasts. To a significant extent, geography was destiny for the Georgian highlanders. Straddling the central ridge separating the North and South Caucasus, the Xevsurs have been in long-standing contact — often hostile, sometimes cooperative — with the Chechen and Ingush communities to their immediate north. The average Xevsur family of Vazha's time was desperately poor, eking out a hard-scrabble existence from a "dry, rugged land" (Vazha 1886/1956: 146). They subsisted on meager harvests of barley (if the crops survived the hail and landslides that frequently ravaged the landscape), and a few dairy cattle and other livestock. "Should a Xevsur have two or three cows and twenty sheep and goats, he is deemed rich" (1886/1956: 146). Pshavian settlements, especially those along the lower Aragvi Valley, such as Vazha's native village Chargali, were much less isolated from the

[1] It is precisely these three works which are featured in translations of Vazha's poetry for Italian (Magarotto & Scarcia 1996), French (Bouatchidzé 1989) and English (Rayfield 1981) readers. On their status as Vazha's greatest epics see also Gac'erelia (1972).

lowlands[2]. The average Pshavian family was materially far better off than its Xevsur counterpart, and many possessed large herds of sheep and winter pasturelands in the Shirak meadows near Azerbaijan (Mak'alatia 1985: 45-9). Although Pshav-Xevsureti has been described as a "theocracy" (Bardavelidze 1957: 34-36) — with supernatural overlords offering protection to their human vassals in return for sacrifices and service — the sociopolitical organization of the two provinces is by no means identical. Pshavi is divided into eleven communes (*temi*) of equal standing, each with its own divine patron (*xtisšvili* "child of God"), shrine complex, and one or more priests (*xevisberi*) who officiate at the shrine and present offerings on behalf of the community.[3] In the center of traditional Pshavian territory are the sanctuaries of Lasharis-Jvari and Tamar-Ghele, dedicated to the supernatural patrons of Pshavi as a whole, and where members of all communes gather on major feastdays. Interestingly, the lands on which these two shrines are situated do not belong to any commune: Rather like the federal capitals of Australia or the USA, Lasharis-Jvari and Tamar-Ghele are not subordinated to any of the political units of which Pshavi is constituted. By contrast to the harmonious and well-ordered system of divine governance in Pshavi, Xevsur theocracy is less egalitarian and more conflictual. According to legend, Xevsureti was first settled by three brothers. Families affiliated to the three clans these brothers allegedly founded — Arabuli, Č'inč'arauli and Gogoč'uri — make up the bulk of the Xevsur population and control the major shrines in the central part of the province, especially the powerful sanctuary of Gudanis-Jvari. Non-affiliated clans are for the most part located in peripheral valleys, such as Rošk'a-Kmost'i, Likok'i, and those parts of Xevsur territory situated north of the main chain of the Caucasus, known as "the other side" (*p'irikita*). Xevsur oral literature abounds in stories of conflicts between the founding clans and the others, often occasioned by demands made by the former for tribute. The divine patron of Gudanis-Jvari, for example, is said to have ordered through the mouth of an oracle that his vassals were to "levy a tribute on the people of Arxot'i [a community on "the other side"], take a sheep from each household". At the shrine of Xaxmat'is-Jvari, by contrast, members of the local Aludauri and Ketelauri clans pledged an alliance with their Gogoč'uri neighbors against the powerful Arabuli tribe (Mak'alatia 1935: 79-80).

Alongside the differences in wealth and sociopolitical structure, Pshavians and Xevsurs are commonly claimed to have distinctive personality traits and temperaments. In 1930, Giorgi Tedoradze, a doctor who was stationed in Pshavi during the early years of Soviet rule, published a valuable albeit idiosyncratic description of Pshavian and Xevsur culture. Tedoradze's book concludes with a chapter on the "general nature, traits and character" of the two groups, in which the author laid out an extreme and highly biased contrast between the "choleric" Xevsurs — "direct, blunt, impetuous, unwavering" (1930: 181) — and the "phlegmatic-sanguine" Pshavians,

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[2] Nonetheless, it took Vazha two days to descend to the capital from Chargali, and the passage was far more difficult and dangerous in winter (Xornauli 1987: 201).

[3] The belief is widely shared, by ethnographers as much as the highlanders themselves, that the communes were originally twelve in number. A document from 1789, however, only lists eleven, and furthermore there is little agreement as to the identity of the twelfth *temi*. In his list of the Pshavi 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 (1886/1956: 28). Others believed that Vazha's home village of Chargali, originally a satellite of Gogolaurt *temi*, was elevated to the status of twelfth commune (Mak'alatia 1985: 68; Xornauli 1987: 10).

whom he described as "professional cynics … mocking, sycophantic, traitorous …" (1930: 190).[4] This drew an impassioned response from the ethnographer Sergi Mak'alatia, who accused the doctor of a "one-sided and false" portrayal of the Pshavians in order to "settle a personal score" with certain members of the community who aroused his anger (1985: 99-100). Mak'alatia himself provided brief personality profiles of both populations in his monographic studies of each, which to some extent correspond to the social and political differences mentioned earlier. Xevsur men in his impression are "arrogant, haughty and proud", but at the same time reserved and cautious around strangers. "They do not trust people readily, but a Xevsur will follow someone he trusts to the grave and never betray him" (1935: 106). The Pshavians are portrayed in lighter colors: They are "amiable and respectful … affectionate and flirtatious ... enjoy having fun, poetic improvisation and entertainment" (1985: 99-100).[5]

As for Vazha-Pshavela, it is important to note that his knowledge of Xevsureti was based not only on his own extensive experience but also that of his father P'avle Razik'ašvili, who served as an Orthodox deacon in the eastern Georgian highlands for many years. A collection of sermons and speeches delivered by P'avle in Xevsureti in 1876-1877 was recently published, and it provides precious insight into the social and economic conditions the young Vazha would have observed among his Xevsur neighbors. Speaking at Xaxmat'i, Ghuli, Kmost'i and other Xevsur villages, the elder Razik'ašvili repeatedly inveighed against the ignorance and superstition that was widespread in the region, the propensity of the men for drinking and provoking fights,[6] and the ruinous expenses imposed by traditional ritual practices such as animal sacrifices and funeral banquets (Razik'ašvili 1990). Vazha's early ethnographic essays and public-affairs articles (*p'ublicist'ik'a*), several of them set in the same Xevsur villages where his father once preached, revisit many of the same topics that were earlier of concern to his father. One early article opens with the poignant image of "mountain men wrapped in rags, leading sheep or cattle to be sacrificed" at the shrine of Xaxmat'is-Jvari (1880/1956: 393). Another makes mention of the habit of Xevsur men to appear at shrine festivals in full armor (sword, shield and chain-mail), and, after consuming immoderate quantities of beer and vodka, to unsheathe their weapons at the slightest provocation (1879b/1956: 389). For P'avle Razik'ašvili, such incidents were typical of the sorts of harmful practices to be abandoned as his Xevsur parishioners learned to be good Orthodox Christians. Vazha at first placed similar emphasis on the negative aspects of the traditional Xevsur religious system: the heavy burden of animal sacrifice on a peasantry teetering at the brink of starvation, the false prophecies announced by shrine oracles (*kadagi*) to gullible

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[4] In fairness to the parties concerned, I should point out that the above-cited portrayals applied to the male segment of the population only; according to Tedoradze, Pshavian women "present considerably more positive traits" than their menfolk (1930: 191).

[5] Reading Tedoradze's and Mak'alatia's accounts through my own acquaintance with people from both communities, and allowing for distortion due to the resentment the first-named writer felt toward at least some Pshavians, I find that Tedoradze's choice of terms from the medieval four-humors personality theory is more adequate than might be supposed, at least as a thumbnail characterization of the typical Pshavian (sanguine, affable and fun-loving, with some phlegmatic traits mixed in) and Xevsur (choleric in the positive as well as negative sense of the term).

[6] My personal impression of Xevsur men, confirmed by Georgians who know them well, is that they continue to be more prone than the Pshavians to drunkenness and violence, whether directed against others or themselves. Xevsur acquaintances have described numerous occurrences of suicide, and a couple of revenge killings, in recent years, whereas I cannot recall a single case of either type in Pshavi. (On suicide among the Xevsurs see also Tedoradze 1930: 129-30, 158-9; Baliauri & Mak'alatia 1940: 52-3).

villagers (1879a/1956). Even a decade later, Vazha continued to hold the conservatism of their culture and fear of offending their patron deities responsible for the ignorance and backwardness of the Xevsurs. Here, for example, is a grim portrayal of the land and its people from an 1891 newspaper article (1891/1956: 159):

> Could there be any place as forgotten by God and man as Xevsureti? … The Xevsur's dress, food and drink, norms and customs of life, outlook on the world and heaven — in one word, everything that constitutes the "Xevsurs" and their way of life — tell you only that the Xevsur is still, if one could say it so, half savage (*naxevrad veluria*).[7]

With the passage of time Vazha's writings on Xevsur affairs revealed an increasing divergence from his father's Orthodox critique. First of all, as he became more familiar with the Xevsurs and their traditional way of life, he discovered much to admire. The Xevsurs' temperament, Vazha realized, derived in large part from their upbringing. "A father does not lay a hand on his small child, does not hit him. Rather he engages him in conversation, as though with an adult, listens to his answers and opinions, as though they were coming from a respected, experienced man" (1886b/1956: 149). Tedoradze, to mention him one last time, attributed to Xevsur men the tendency to be both "narrow egoists (*vic'ro egoist'i*) and lovers of strong leadership" (1930: 181). As described in Vazha's writings, the Xevsurs emerge as bold, proud and unshakeable in their convictions, traits expressed through their strong individualism, deep conservatism, and loyalty.

Another feature of Xevsur culture which intrigued Vazha was sword duelling (*k'eč'naoba*). Although he deplored the propensity of Xevsur men for picking fights (especially with their Pshavian neighbors; 1880/1956: 395), he was favorably impressed by the deftness with which they handled their swords and daggers. Rather like the *Mensur* fencing once common among students at German universities, *k'eč'naoba* serves as an occasion for demonstrating quickness, self-control and unflinching courage. The combatants do not seek to kill or even seriously wound their adversaries, but rather to inflict a visible scar on the face and head of their opponent, which the wounded man will proudly bear as a sign of bravery and manliness.[8] A severe wound, by contrast, is interpreted as an indication that the aggressor was incapable of mastering his weapon, and perhaps even that he used too much force due to cowardice (1910/1956).

Secondly, Vazha became persuaded that the Orthodox priesthood, at least those of its members responsible for the spiritual guidance of the Pshavs and Xevsurs, was not only failing to alleviate the poverty and marginality of the mountaineers, but in some cases contributing to it. According to Xornauli (1987: 20), many mountaineers suspected Orthodox priests of being little more than agents of Tsarist oppression. To what degree Vazha, who was after all the son of a clergyman, shared this opinion can be debated (cp. Xornauli 1987: 95-7), but on several occasions he

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[7] Vazha goes on to describe the opening of an elementary school in Barisaxo (the principal village in Xevsureti) under the auspices of the Society for the Restoration of Christianity in the Caucasus. Only a few days after the first pupils were brought to the school, the parents of three of them pulled them back out, claiming that "the shrine (*xat'i*) became angry, it did not allow us" (1891/1956: 160). One wonders if Vazha heard echoes of his own father's struggle to learn his letters in the face of his parents' obstinate opposition to "diabolic" book-learning (Vazha 1994: 490).

[8] Vazha once counted over fifty wounds on the head of a Xevsur, all left by the blades of his fellow tribesmen; hence the title of his 1910 article.

denounced the neglectfulness and opportunism of priests assigned to the churches constructed in Xevsureti by the Tsarist authorities. Many of them resided most of the year in lowland Georgia, only visiting their parishioners, according to Vazha, "at shrine festivals, when the pickings were good: the shanks and hides of sacrificed animals" (1910/1956: 167; cp. 1914/1956).[9] Rather than more churches and priests, Vazha — whose initial vocation was to be a teacher — insisted that the mountain provinces, and Xevsureti in particular, needed schools. Nearly the entire population of these regions was uneducated, and for the most part illiterate. Education was the key to entry into the modern world, and offered more hope for overcoming those traditional practices Vazha deemed genuinely harmful.[10]

Vazha's activities as voice and advocate for the Georgian highlanders culminated in his declarations of 1905, at a time when many Georgian intellectuals hoped that the empire would break up after Russia's defeat by the Japanese. According to the recollections of M. Šamanauri, Vazha played a leading role in organizing protests in Pshav-Xevsureti in March 1905, and drafted a list of demands (1906/1956; cp. Gac'erelia 1974: 27-9; Margvelašvili 1982; Xornauli 1987: 170-2).[11] The texts of the "Pshav-Xevsureti declaration" and Vazha's newspaper articles concerning the 1905 events are of particular interest for what they reveal of Vazha's vision for the future of the highland districts. He sought to build upon what he deemed the best elements of the mountaineers' traditional way of life, while at the same time calling for universal access to education in the Georgian language, local autonomy and improved roads and infrastructure. He argued that the Pshavians' and Xevsurs' traditional practices of forest use made them better guardians of natural resources than the rangers sent by the central government, and that they should once again be allowed to bear arms and resume their ancestral responsibility for securing the northern borders and keeping peace in the region. He also called for "the establishment of solidarity with all peoples of the Caucasus (1906/1956), an alliance based on common cultural traits and values that transcended differences of language or religion.

In retrospect, many of Vazha's plans for independence would strike us as hopelessly naive. His call for "one thousand well-armed warriors to come down from Xevsureti bearing the banner of Xaxmat'is-Jvari, to meet the same number of Pshavians with the banner of Queen Tamar", and then jointly pledge to fight until freedom or death (Xornauli 1987: 171), seems more appropriate

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[9] A similar reproach was expressed in an earlier letter, written while Vazha was still a student. The portrait of a bedraggled, illiterate but proud Xevsur, driven by poverty to offer his dagger and shield, the very symbols of his manhood, as security for a loan of money or food, was juxtaposed to the spectacle of Orthodox clergymen and Armenian shopkeepers "drawn to the smell of a banquet like foxes to a cadaver", helping themselves to food offerings laid out in commemoration of the dead (1881/1956: 400). One should also recall the role played by a priest in having Vazha fired from his first school-teaching position, apparently in reaction to his pseudonymously-published letter denouncing the corruption of the legal system by local elites (1882/1956; cp. Xornauli 1987: 65-8).

[10] Vazha expressed the hope that schooling would provide Xevsur youth with a more productive use of their spare time instead of drinking and slashing each other on the head. According to his observations, when Xevsur men are idle, they drink, and when they drink they are easily provoked into acts of violence (1910/1956: 166).

[11] The spin placed by these commentators on Vazha's political engagement makes for interesting reading, in the context of the shifting ideological landscape of the 1980s: Margvelašvili 1982 portrays Vazha as a Marxist in all but name, whereas Xornauli 1987 anticipates the post-socialist emphasis on Vazha's patriotism and agitation for Georgian independence.

for epic poetry than practical political action. When revolution finally led to the end of the Russian Empire, and a brief period of independence for Georgia, Vazha was no longer alive. And when the highland Georgians did indeed take up arms against the newly-established Bolshevik regime, Vazha's oldest son was one of the first to shed his blood for Georgian freedom. On 16 February 1923, Levan Razik'ašvili was executed by the Cheka for collaboration with the rebel leader Kakuca Čoloq'ašvili.

I will conclude this first section of the paper with a summary of the characteristic of the Xevsurs highlighted in Vazha's nonfiction writings. First of all, problems of concern to all highland regions of eastern Georgia were especially pronounced in Xevsureti, due to its relative isolation, lack of roads and harsh ecosystem. Hence Vazha deployed Xevsur examples to dramatize for his lowland readership the extent of the poverty, illiteracy and backwardness that plagued mountain communities. At the same time, Vazha highlighted certain positive traits in Xevsur culture as he understood it. These traits include features also characteristic of his poetic heroes: strong development of the individual will, martial skills, self-control and courage.

II. Ethnography and "anti-ethnography" in Georgian literature. In a recent article, I formulated a preliminary typology of genres of Georgian writing in which ethnic difference played a significant function (Tuite 2007). There is, on the one hand, ethnography in the strict sense of the word, that is, writing intended to inform the reader about "exotic" societies and their ways of life. Although the first Georgian work said to be of this type, Vaxušt'i Bat'onišvili's *Description of the Kingdom of Georgia* (*Aɣc'era sameposa Sakartvelosa*), was published as early as 1745, sustained production of ethnographic descriptions by Georgian writers did not begin until a century later. In the 1840's the study of Georgian antiquities and traditional culture entered a more active phase under the auspices of Tsarist academic and administrative institutions. A university chair in Georgian philology was created at St. Petersburg University in 1845 (first held by the lexicographer Davit Čubinašvili), and M. F. Brosset undertake a ground-breaking expedition to study ancient Georgian inscriptions and manuscripts in 1847-48. Meanwhile educated Georgians were being recruited to document the traditional lore of peripheral regions of their homeland. Among the first of them was the young Rapiel Eristavi (1824-1901), later to become a major poet and important influence on Vazha-Pshavela. In 1844-46, Eristavi travelled extensively in Pshavi, Xevsureti and Tusheti, publishing his observations in a lengthy article submitted to the journal of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society (Eristov 1853). Over the following four decades Eristavi produced important ethnographic studies based on voyages to Svaneti, Mingrelia, Imereti and other regions of Georgia (Eristavi 1986). One could make a strong case that Rapiel Eristavi was the first Georgian ethnographer in the sense commonly understood in the West, in that his descriptions were based on information collected during field-trips to regions that were hitherto relatively unfamiliar to him. Most other Georgian authors of this genre during the Tsarist period could be characterized as stay-at-home ethnographers, insofar as their cultural descriptions were limited to the regions where they were born. Well-known examples include Tedo Saxok'ia's articles on Mingrelian traditional lore and Besarion Nižaradze's writings on Svanetian culture.

Whereas Georgian ethnographic writers chose subjects close to home — in any case, within Georgia or adjoining territories —distant locales and ethnicities were a commonplace of classical poetry. Šota Rustaveli's "Knight in the leopard's skin" (*Vepxist'q'aosani*), universally recognized as the cornerstone of Georgian national literature, does not feature a single Georgian protagonist.

The main characters and the events narrated in Rustaveli's poem are situated in Arabia, India and other distant lands. There is ample evidence that Oriental settings were familiar to Georgian readers from other literary works of Rustaveli's time, and that they continued to enjoy popularity in succeeding centuries. Many of these were translations from Persian sources (e.g. the *Visramiani,* translated by the 12th century; and the versified and prose versions of the *Shah-Nameh* from the 15th-18th centuries, although Firdousi's epic was known to Georgian poets much earlier), but some of the most popular poems of this type appear to be original works in Georgian (e.g. Mose Xoneli's *Amiran-darejaniani*, alongside the "Knight in the leopard's skin").[12] In contrast to the genuinely ethnographic writings mentioned above, I categorize Rustaveli's and Xoneli's epic works as "anti-ethnographies", in that the semantic loading of the foreign individuals and societies has been inverted. Rather than being descriptions of "exotic" ethnic communities as seen by a member of the readers' own society — and therefore descriptions that foreground difference — the "Knight in the leopard's skin" and similar works are akin to allegories in which non-Georgian protagonists display character traits and moral values that Georgians ascribe to themselves, such as faithfulness, courage, eloquence and so forth. The distant but familiar foreignness of Rustaveli's Arab monarchs and Indian knights renders them useful as vessels into which distilled and concentrated Georgian-derived traits and virtues can be inserted. In other words, they are fabricated by the author out of 100% Georgian ingredients, rather than intended to represent authentic Persians, Arabs, etc.

Some instances of "anti-ethnographic" literature in the tradition of Rustaveli and Xoneli were produced by authors of the generation immediately preceding Vazha-Pshavela's. In these works, however, Oriental settings known primarily from literature are replaced by the Georgian near-abroad, so to speak. One prominent example of late-19th-c. anti-ethnography is Ak'ak'i C'ereteli's allegorical poem "The Mentor" (*Gamzrdeli,* 1898). The protagonists are two Abkhazians who are linked by milk-brotherhood (*dzidzišviloba*), and their Kabardian *gamzrdeli,* who was entrusted with instilling them with the virtues of Caucasian manhood. By the time C'ereteli's poem was written, Georgian readers' knowledge concerning the North Caucasian peoples had been shaped by ethnographic descriptions in the popular press, alongside accounts of the Russian conquest of the region. The Abkhazians and Kabardians also had stratified societies similar to that of Georgia, and the history of the former nation of course has been intertwined with Georgian history for centuries. What I wish to underline is the use C'ereteli made of his protagonists, to exemplify virtues his Georgian readers would recognize as belonging to their own tradition. In the aftermath of the Caucasian Wars, the cooptation of the Georgian elite into the Tsarist colonial administration, and the adoption of Romantic notions of nationhood, Georgian intellectuals came to regard peripheral communities, especially from the highlands to the north of Georgia, as models of an idealized Caucasianness that they could set in opposition to Russian and/or European cosmopolitanism.

One literary work that played a significant role in this process was Ilia Č'avč'avadze's "Letters of a Traveller" (*Mgzavris c'erilebi,* 1871), a fictionalized account of a Georgian's return to his homeland from Russia. Along the way, the traveller (voiced in the 1st person) encounters a self-important and patronizing Russian officer, a caricature of the colonial *mission civilisatrice*, and his polar opposite, a mountaineer named Lelt Ghunia from the Georgian province of Xevi (to the

[12] On the Georgian origin of the *Vepxist'q'aosani* and the *Amiran-darejaniani*, see the corresponding chapters by Baramidze and Imedašvili in Baramidze, ed., 1966.

west of Xevsureti).[13] Č'avč'avadze cleverly inverted the portraits of the civilized Russian and the benighted shepherd, juxtaposing the vapid, polysyllable-laden banalities of the former to the plainly expressed but penetrating observations made by the latter. Drawing upon both Georgian ethnographic description and the paradigm of anti-ethnographic fiction, Č'avč'avadze's "Letters of a Traveller" launched an influential new genre, which one could qualify as pseudo-ethnographic: the fictional representation of the encounter in the "field" between a cosmopolitan protagonist (voiced as the narrator-ethnographer) and exoticized aborigines. The latter are now from within the author's (and intended readers') national community, but sufficiently distant from large population centers to maintain a mode of life relatively untouched by "civilization" as the colonizers understood it. Č'avč'avadze's Lelt Ghunia, like the Xevsurs visited by city-dwelling Georgians in such notable successors to the "Letters of a Traveller" as Mixeil Javaxišvili's novella "White collar" (*Tetri saq'elo,* 1926) and Grigol Robakidze's short story "Engadi" (1932), represented the authentic Georgianness which colonial (Tsarist or Soviet) modernity threatened to erase. A less-direct spin-off, which also emerged at this time, maintained the near-abroad or peripheral-Georgian setting, but with different voicing. The work represents itself as a ballad or narrative composed by a representative of the highland community. One especially influential example — especially with respect to Vazha-Pshavela — was Rapiel Eristavi's 1881 poem "A Xevsur's homeland" (*Samšoblo Xevsurisa*).[14] Its refrain, set in the octosyllabic meter typical of highland ballads, continues to be memorized by Georgian children in elementary school:

> *I would not trade these sheer cliffs for the tree of eternal life;*
> *I would not trade my homeland for another land's paradise!*

The impact that this poem had on the twenty-year-old Vazha cannot be overestimated (Xaxanov 1906: 207; Gac'erelia 1974: 6; Xornauli 1987: 73-4). Eristavi's incorporation of stylistic elements from Xevsur oral poetry "made my heart beat in a different way" (1896/1994: 229). By 1883, Vazha was using Pshavian dialect features in his own verse, and soon afterwards the first of his epic masterworks was written in a form of language unlike anything most of his readers had ever seen in a published work of poetry. The influence of Eristavi as ethnographer and poet is unmistakable, but one readily detects echoes in Vazha's epic verse from the writings of the other two major poets just mentioned. Ilia's "Letters of a Traveller", more than any other work of its time, brought the eastern mountain-dwellers onto center stage as representatives of authentic Georgianness. Akaki's Gamzrdeli reminded Georgian readers of how much they — or their ancestors — had in common with other Caucasian peoples, even those of a different faith.

III. Hero and society in Vazha's poems. Vazha-Pshavela's poetic output was diverse, and I will not attempt to encompass all of it here. My discussion will focus upon those of his larger-scale poems (in Georgian, *p'oemebi*, rather than *leksebi*) which feature a confrontation between two characters or sets of characters, one of which represents the interests of society. It is my belief

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[13] For an astute analysis of the *Mgzavris c'erilebi* and its resonances with Russian Orientalizing Romanticism and the mid-19th-century project of transforming the concept of Georgian national identity, see Manning 2004.

[14] Among more recent poetry composed in pseudo-ballad style, Gabriel Jabušanuri's monumental "Ballad of the Stone Man" (*Balada Kvak'acze,* 1953-4), inspired by the oral traditions of the Ingush (who at the time were living in exile in Central Asia), is a noteworthy example.

that these poems as a group can be conceived as a sort of "problem space" in which the author explored various facets of what he came to see as the inevitable and irreconcilable contradiction between heroic individuality and social normativity in traditional societies such as Xevsureti.

Vazha discussed the notion of the hero in an article on "The heroic ideal as represented in Pshavian poetry" (1889/1956). The ideal hero or "good vassal" (*k'ai q'ma*) is courageous, self-sacrificing, honorable, humble and direct. He prefers the rigors of combat to pleasure-seeking in the company of women. He serves the community (*temi*) and places its safety above his own, yet "the hero frequent stands up to the community" and will bluntly criticize behavior of which he disapproves. In view of the hero's value to society, "the community must tolerate" this aspect of his character, however annoying it might seem. In his own poetry, Vazha places the notion of the hero's superior level of moral awareness at the very center of his epic narratives. To the image of the hero inherited from folk tradition he adds a heightened capacity to recognize the heroism and inherent worth of others, and a firm adherence to his convictions even in the face of condemnation by the group. As we shall see, the most remarkable feature of Vazha's epic hero is his heart.

The poems to be examine in this paper were composed between 1884 and 1902, during the period of Vazha's greatest productivity as a writer (Gac'erelia 1974: 52).[15] Vazha's early poem *Amirani* (1884-5) can be taken as our starting point, since the central motif of the myth of the Caucasian Prometheus is the hero's rejection of society and social norms (Charachidzé 1986; Tuite 1998). Vazha's retelling begins with Amirani already imprisoned within the mountain. "Forgotten by men and heaven", the heroic slayer of ogres and demons weeps bitterly as his sword rusts from disuse. The author recounts the legend of Amirani's faithful dog licking his master's chains in an attempt to wear through them, but periodically the "vile blacksmiths" (*bilc'i mč'edlebi*) hammer on their anvils to restore the chain to its full thickness. What is of interest in Vazha's version is his exclusive focus on the smiths as Amirani's principal enemies. Little is said about his innumerable battles with demons, dragons and other adversaries, and no mention at all is made of the confrontation with God for which he was punished. Vazha frames the Amirani story as the opposition <u>within</u> a single society of a fettered hero in the mountains and the lowland artisans (presumably also Georgians) who made his chains, whom he will destroy if he were ever to break free. Furthermore, Amirani is portrayed as a benefactor of society, a fighter against its outside enemies, who has been betrayed by members of the very community he has so often defended. Xornauli (1987: 72), who as a rule favors autobiographical interpretations of Vazha's poems, reads "Amirani" in the light of Vazha's loss of his first teaching job, after having criticized the exploitive practices of local elites. In his opinion, Vazha himself is the enchained hero inside the mountain (having been obliged to return to Pshavi after the loss of his position), and the *bilc'i mč'edlebi* stand for the administrators, clergymen and lowland authorities with whom he was often in conflict. Whatever else might be read into it, this early poem laid the groundwork for nearly two decades of reflection on the relation between the heroic individual and the social collectivity.[16]

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[15] Vazha did not of course cease writing after the turn of the century, but in those works composed in the aftermath of the failed 1905 Revolution, one notices a turn toward politically-loaded allegory, and oftentimes expressions of bitter resignation (Gac'erelia 1974: 27-30, 76). Examples include *Bokauli* ("The Police Chief", 1906), *Mtata ertoba* ("The unity of the mountains", 1908), and *K'vnesa* ("Sigh", 1910).

[16] On the other hand, certain poems from this period could easily be read as a criticism or settling-of-scores with Georgian elites and collaborators with the colonial administration. *Sisxlis dzieba* ("Revenge",

The opposition between hero and society (or social elite) in the above-mentioned works is static, the stances of the principal characters remaining constant from beginning to end. In the following group of poems, Vazha introduces what will become the linchpin of his greatest epics: the moment of moral choice which transforms the hero's position vis-à-vis the social group to which he belongs. The moral turning-point first appears in a poem of somewhat lesser stature than the three masterworks of Vazha's middle period. The narrative of "Gogotur and Apšina" (1887) is centered upon the physical confrontation of the two title characters, the gentle Pshavian strongman Gogotur, who had fought many battles against Georgia's enemies, and the "egoistic" Xevsur brigand Apšina (Xaxanov 1906: 362). Apšina attempts to rob Gogotur, but the latter soundly beats him. After asking Gogotur to drink a toast of brotherhood with him, Apšina returns home. The story this far may well have an autobiographical basis, as Xornauli claims (1987: 146-153), but it is the conclusion that is of particular interest. It is in the form of a triptych, comprising two scenes of domestic turmoil surrounding an image of public respectability. The night after his battle with Gogotur, Apšina is heard in angry dialogue with an unnamed interlocutor (his wife, one assumes). He orders her to gather up his armor and give it away to the first passer-by, along with his horse. He then takes to his bed, and for three months does not leave home. The next scene is set at Xaxmat'is Jvari. The Xevsur warriors gather at the shrine to present offerings to be consecrated by the *xevisberi* (priest), who turns out to be none other than Apšina. Apšina, who has become "devoted to the faith", performs his role magnanimously, invoking St. George's blessing upon the community "with a sweet voice". But the poem does not end with his eloquent prayer, but rather a four-line epilogue, describing a mournful voice heard at night, that of the former brigand lamenting his "dead manhood, the burying of myself alive".
Apšina's heart, like Amirani's, is portrayed as filled with bitterness and anger caused by the protagonist's exclusion from combat, whether due to involuntary imprisonment or the lesson administered by Gogotur's fists. At this stage in the evolution of Vazha's poetic image of the hero, the heart is a locus of pain, but not yet of empathy.

The ballad of Gogotur and Apšina was followed one year later by "Aluda Ketelauri" (1888), the first of Vazha's epic masterpieces. All three of these poems are set against the background of the secular exchange of raids, skirmishes and revenge killings between the northern Xevsurs, those of the "other side", and their Chechen and Ingush neighbors (referred collectively as Kist'is by the Georgian mountaineers). "Aluda Ketelauri" opens with a typical incident: Ingush raiders have stolen livestock belonging to the Xevsurs of Šat'ili, a village just upriver from the Chechen frontier. The title character sets out in pursuit. He catches up with them, and kills one straightaway. Mucali, the dead man's brother, returns fire, and after an exchange of shots Aluda fatally wounds Mucali. Although the two men call each other "infidel dog" (*rjuldzaɣlo*) no fewer than nine times during their gun battle, by the end each comes to recognize the other's valor and heroism. In a brief, remarkable scene, the dying Mucali offers his rifle to Aluda as a sign of respect, but Aluda, rather than stripping the slain enemy of his arms and cutting off his right hand as a trophy, "wept like a woman" and covers the body with his cloak. When the people of Šat'ili learn that Aluda refused to take the hand of the dead Ingush they reproach him, accusing him of

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1897) an epic poem set in Circassia, featuring an honorable and courageous warrior treacherously undone by a nobleman of his own tribe (Kurdovanidze 2004: 88-98), lends itself to this sort of interpretation, as does *Erek'les sizmari* ("King Erekle's dream",1902b), which contrasts the king's faithful Xevsur guards and the traitorous Georgians he sees in a dream, who stand by idly as enemies devastate his kingdom.

acting against tradition.[17] The moral distance between Aluda and his fellow Xevsurs becomes unbridgeable when Aluda demands that the *xevisberi* accept a sacrificial bull offered in commemoration of Mucali at the communal shrine festival. After the priest refuses to spill the blood of an offering for a non-Christian, Aluda takes the unprecedented step of slaying the bull himself and consecrating it to "Mucali, that unbaptized hero". The outraged *xevisberi* calls on the assembled Xevsurs to destroy Aluda's house, and drive him and his family out of the community. Aluda's womenfolk curse the people of Šat'ili, but Aluda reproves them: "God has ordained this fate for us". The poem concludes, as many of Vazha's greatest works do, with a tableau empty of human actors. Only the howling of the wind can be heard, and in the distance, a woman's bitter sobbing.

As was the case with Apšina, it is the hero's heart that impels him to reconsider the moral framework that guided his life. Apšina's change of heart caused him to abandon a predatory, anti-social way of life and rejoin his community in its most sacred function, that of *xevisberi*. Aluda's trajectory is the exact inverse of Apšina's. A model Xevsur warrior at the beginning of the poem, his moral transformation as he weeps over the body of Mucali leads him to strike out on a solitary path that sets him apart from the others of his tribe. In a remarkable anti-parallel with Apšina, Aluda assumes the role of *xevisberi* at the culmination of the poem, but in this instance it signals the protagonist's final rupture with the social group. As Vazha knew well, even a minor, unintentional infraction against ritual procedure was believed capable of bringing the patron deity's fury upon the entire community. Among the Pshavs and the Xevsurs, the only fit punishment for a crime against one's own tribe was death or expulsion (*mok'veta*).[18] At the end of the poem, Aluda, like Amirani and Apšina, has lost his status as combatant — and therefore a central component of his identity as a man — but the case of Aluda is tragic in a sense that the other two are not. Amirani is being held prisoner by his enemies, and Apšina's laying down of arms seems a just punishment for his career of banditry. Aluda's exile is due to choices he himself made, in order to show respect to a Kist'i hero that he himself had killed. His motivation is honorable, and indicative of his exceptional openness to the qualities of an outsider (and an "unbeliever" at that), but ended in an act of open revolt against the communal order when Aluda arrogated the function of *xevisberi*.

The concept of mutual respect and even friendship between Christian Georgians and Muslim Kist'is, based upon recognition of their common humanity, shared values and equivalent conceptions of heroism, hospitality and courage, received further elaboration in Vazha's next major poem, "Host and Guest" (*St'umar-masp'indzeli*, 1893). In fact, Vazha took the notion of moral equivalence between Georgians and Kist'is to an even more emphatic level than in "Aluda Ketelauri", by essentially reversing the roles of the two peoples. The setting has been shifted to

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[17] Like many of Vazha's epics, "Aluda Ketelauri" was inspired by an apparently true story. A Xevsur chased down the Kist'is who stole his horse and killed them. One of the Kist'is impressed him by his bravery, and from time to time the Xevsur would drink a toast (*šesandobari*) to commemorate his soul. Nothing is said in the story about whether or not he cut off the dead man's hand, nor of communal outrage at the Xevsur's insistence on drinking to the memory of an infidel (1915/1994: 377).

[18] With regard to this point I cannot agree with Gac'erelia (1974: 56), who maintains that Aluda was a model Xevsur (*sanimušo xevsuri*) from the beginning to the end of the poem. Vazha examines the justice of expulsion as punishment for imperiling the community in his five-act play "Expelled" (*Mok'vetili*, 1894), which is set in Pshavi and will not be discussed here.

Chechnia, and it is the Xevsur protagonist, Zviadauri, who is presented as a hostile intruder who has brought death to numerous Chechens in the past. The conflict between hero and society has also been transferred to the Kist'is; it is the Chechen Joq'ola who refuses to betray his principles in the face of the opposition of his neighbors, and who comes to admire the Xevsur warrior who killed his own brother.[19] While hunting in the mountains Zviadauri loses his way and strays onto Chechen territory. He encounters Joq'ola, who invites him to spend the night at his home. In the village a neighbor recognizes Zviadauri (who had concealed his identity from Joq'ola), and alerts the Chechens. They come to take away their blood enemy, but rather than yield Zviadauri, Joq'ola defends him, dagger in hand. He invokes the ancient customary law, shared by Kist'is and Georgians alike, according to which a guest is inviolable in the home of his host, who assumes absolute responsibility for his safety (Moc'erelia 1987). The description of Zviadauri's death is based on a story Vazha heard of a Xevsur captured by Kist'is, who put him to death on the grave of a slain tribesman. The intention of this act was to compel the dead Georgian's soul to serve the soul of the Kist'i in the afterlife, but the captive's refusal to show fear as the knife was brought to his throat rendered the sacrifice ineffective (1915/1994: 374-5).[20]

The dénouement of "Host and Guest" contains some of Vazha's most poignant verse. Each in their own way, Joq'ola and his wife Aɣaza are desolated by the death of their Xevsur guest, and each finds him- or herself cut off from their community. Joq'ola's way out of the impasse is through death in battle. When a group of Xevsur warriors come to reclaim their comrade's body, Joq'ola rushes them all alone, separately from the Chechen ranks. His explicit purpose is to demonstrate to his fellows that he is no traitor for having hosted Zviadauri, but this dramatic and suicidal gesture also signals his moral separation from those who failed to honor the code of hospitality. The isolation of Aɣaza is even more complete: Her husband has been killed, as was the courageous Xevsur to whom she was so strongly drawn. Even the ghosts of the Chechen dead berate her for showing respect to Zviadauri's body. Like Joq'ola, Aɣaza can only find escape through self-immolation, throwing herself from a cliff into the river. There follows a melancholy epilogue featuring the ghosts of the three dead protagonists. Joq'ola rises from the spot where he was slain in battle, and calls out to Zviadauri. Aɣaza too appears, and roasts ibex meat while the two friends speak of their exploits. A dense mist covers over the spectral banquet, and at the poem's end only the sound of the river is heard.

A certain continuity can be traced through the poems presented so far, written from the mid-1880's up to the last years of the century. Besides the central motif of the opposition between hero and society, which has been constant, we can trace an evolution in the figure of the main protagonist: from a morally static character to one who undergoes a moral awakening, and the increasing emphasis on human values that are shared across ethnic, linguistic and confessional divisions, as expressed in the sense of solidarity between Aluda and Mucali, and the admiration felt by Joq'ola and Aɣaza toward Zviadauri. It is also the case that in all of these works Vazha's heroes are paired with at least one counterpart who recognizes their value even when the

[19] In this respect, the relation that emerges between Joq'ola and Zviadauri echoes that between Mucali and Aluda, his brother's killer, although it is the Xevsur fighter, rather than the Kist'i, who is slain in "Host and Guest".

[20] The folklorist Čikovani (1961: 49-53) was unable to locate the exact variant described by Vazha, with a Xevsur protagonist, but he did find several ballads about a Georgian from Tusheti allegedly sacrificed in the same manner by Leks (Daghestanians).

members of their own society do not. The first step of Apšina's reintegration into society was his oath of friendship with Gogotur. The shunning of Aluda by his fellow Xevsurs is set in the balance against Mucali's final gesture, when he offered his prized weapon to an enemy he had come to respect. And we have just seen how masterfully Vazha foregrounded the relationship between Zviadauri and his doomed Chechen hosts in the final scene of "Host and Guest". Similar pairings of heroic figures are to be found in other works by Vazha. In "Baxt'rioni" (1892), when the Georgian army refuses to allow the girl Lela to take her bedridden father's place in their ranks, the orphan K'viria runs off to join her in what will prove to be a fatal mission to penetrate the enemy fortress. When the condemned warrior Kičir goes to his fiery death in *Sisxlis dzieba* ("Revenge", 1897), he is joined by the wife of the traitor Demur, who jumps into the bonfire after him. Even the chained and imprisoned Amirani has his faithful dog.

"The Snake-Eater" (*Gvelis-mč'ameli*, 1901) has come to be acknowledged by many as Vazha-Pshavela's crowning achievement. It is also his most difficult work, and startlingly divergent from the poems that preceded it. The title character is based on one of the strangest figures from Xevsur folklore. Xogais Mindia, from the village Amɣa in the Arxot'i Valley, near the Ingush frontier, was captured by the Daghestanian Leks and taken across the mountain to their village. There he discovered that they made a mysterious medicine from the blood of a special type of snake with lamb's wool growing on its throat.[21] Intending to kill himself, Mindia licked a drop of the snake blood, and was immediately overcome with a violent fever. Upon regaining consciousness, Mindia discovered that he could understand the languages of birds, trees and plants. He manage to escape from the Lek village, and after a Gulliveresque sojourn in the "land of cuckoos", was guided back to Amɣa. His ability to hear the speech of trees, grasses and even rocks granted him exceptional healing powers, but also obliged him to stop cutting firewood and harvesting grain. He and his family grew poor. Finally, at his wife's insistence, he chopped wood for fuel and thereby forfeited his magical linguistic gifts; at the end of the tale he died in battle, "no longer able to understand anything" (text collected by T. Očiauri in Arxot'i; Gigineišvili et al. 1961: 16-18; Čikovani, ed. 1986: 493-5).[22]

The tale of Mindia the snake-eater has no close parallels in Xevsur oral tradition, nor that of any other part of Georgia. Indeed, Mindia has far more in common with a Central Asian shaman (cp. Eliade 1968: 92-3) or a character from European folklore (Aarne 1914) than a highland Georgian herbal healer or oracle (*mk'adre*; Očiauri 1967: 97-102). Be that as it may, Vazha has transformed Xogais Mindia into his most enigmatic and solitary heroic protagonist. The heightened sensitivity Vazha's Mindia manifests to the feelings of nonhuman creatures is coupled with a paradoxical indifference to the suffering of his own species. Mindia achieves fame throughout Georgia as a warrior of unequalled prowess, piling up the enemy dead in battle without compunction. He betrays no concern for the hardship his refusal to hunt or chop firewood causes his family. When his long-suffering wife Mzia finally harangues him into acting against his new moral principles in order provide heat and game for his growing children, he curses her and them for the loss of his special bond with the natural world. In the concluding episode, Vazha brings the story full circle. Mindia, no longer invincible, is once again taken prisoner. Once again

[21] According to Mz. Mak'alatia (1977: 38), St. George of Amɣa is said to appear in the form of a "wooly (*mat'q'liani*) snake", though no mention is made of its blood conferring special powers.

[22] Vazha quoted an excerpt from another variant of the Xogais Mindi ballad in an ethnographic essay (1886b/1956: 152), and discussed his use of the Xevsur folk materials in (1915/1994: 375-6).

he attempts suicide, this time successfully, plunging his sword into his heart while his village burns in the background.

The attempts of critics to reconcile the baffling figure of a Xevsur warrior who refuses to cut wood, yet is willing to kill men in combat, with a recognizable ethical stance make for animated reading, if nothing else. Some early critics denounced the snake-eater's moral code as unrealistic and anti-social, siding with Mzia instead (Ramišvili 1961). Xaxanov (1906: 371), on the other hand, read Mindia as "a symbol of the poet, standing of heights of his godly vocation", but whose "idealism clashes with the necessities of life". Poor Mzia, by contrast, is merely a "shrewish wife, far removed from the impulses of [her husband's] poetic visions". Others saw parallels with the tale of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit, or the Faust legend (Čaganava 1990). Xornauli (1987: 124), as usual, invokes an autobiographical explanation, claiming that Mzia's character was based on Vazha's own wife, who frequently reproached him for neglecting farmwork to write poetry.

In keeping with my preference for reading each poem in the light of those that preceded it, I propose that the central moment in "The Snake-Eater" is neither the argument between Mindia and Mzia nor the combat scenes at the end, but rather a seemingly banal episode in scene IV. Gathered at the shrine of Gudanis-Jvari, the Xevsurs discuss whether Mindia's claims of special powers are true or not. Mindia, meanwhile, sits apart from the group, tears welling in his eyes. Asked what the matter is, he points to two nearby birds, explaining that one bird is telling the other of the death of her children. As the bewildered Xevsurs look on, the bereaved bird drops lifeless to the ground. The astonishing sight convinces the Xevsurs that Mindia could in fact understand the languages of nature, yet "their minds have not the strength to follow up what their hearts have sensed" (*nagrdznobsa gulita gonebit hšvelen verasa;* tr. Rayfield). I was guided to this passage by Gac'erelia's astute observation that "tears come readily" to Vazha-Pshavela's heroes (1972: 64). And so they do, precisely at the moment when they experience a change of a heart, a moral transformation.[23] Apšina wept after his defeat by Gogotur, just before swearing brotherhood with him. Aluda Ketelauri "burst into tears like a woman" (*at'irda rogorc kali*) over the body of Mucali, whom he had just slain. In "Host and Guest", Aɣaza weeps surreptitiously as her fellow villagers slit Zviadauri's throat; afterwards her husband Joq'ola, rather than reproving her, tells her she did well to mourn a man of his caliber, whatever his ethnicity. It is Mindia's tears, and not the fact that they are shed for a bird rather than a human being, that are significant here: In Vazha's poetic language, they signal Mindia's transformed nature, his passage to a different level of morality.[24] Furthermore, it is the hero's heart that guides him in this process, since it is through the heart that he recognizes a shared humanity, a kinship that is in contradiction to the norms, customs and prejudices held in his mind. The others, however, were incapable of reconciling what their hearts felt with their inherited beliefs, and so they remained closed within their habitual social frontiers.

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[23] In Gac'erelia's opinion, Vazha's tragic heroes do not intend to violate group norms, but at a critical moment "they cross over the threshold of a deep moral crisis (*ɣrma zneobnrivi k'rizisis mijnas*), a sort of catharsis, and, having been enriched by a new, hitherto unknown ethical ideal" find themselves incapable of returning to the moral position of their social group (1974, 61)

[24] Significantly, in his life's final moments, Mindia is incapable of weeping: "Tears did not rise up in his eyes, they remained pooled in his heart" (XII). Having lost the relationship with nature that he once enjoyed, Mindia's tears were locked up inside him, until the sword-thrust through his heart released them.

Compounding the tragedy of Mindia the snake-eater is his total isolation. Unlike Vazha's other heroes, he has no true comrade, no one who bonds with him on the basis of mutual recognition, even if only for a fleeting moment. Neither the other Xevsurs nor his wife understand him. No compatible individual appears from outside of his community, such as Mucali for Aluda or Zviadauri for Joq'ola. He dies in absolute solitude — or perhaps not … If we follow Vazha's compositional logic to the letter, then it is Nature herself who recognizes a kindred spirit in Mindia, just as he, and he alone, understands the speech of Nature's creatures. As was noted above, in Vazha's epic masterworks nature has the last word, after the human players have died or left the stage. The magnificent indifference of mountains, rivers and wind are abruptly juxtaposed to the tragic fates of the protagonists, as though to underline their insignificance on a cosmic scale. The concluding lines to "The Snake-Eater" likewise pan away from Mindia's suicide to the breeze soughing "with a gentle song" past the vermilion-stained blade sticking up through his corpse. Unlike the final tableaux of "Aluda Ketelauri" and "Host and Guest", however, nature is not unmoved by the spectacle of Mindia's death. Rather than mourn, on the contrary, the breeze "began to frolic over the green, whistling cheerfully, proud and free" (*laɣad, molxenit, st'venita;* tr. Rayfield). One commentator interpreted the scene of mirth and whistling as an indication that "the physical death of a hero who had already died spiritually no longer arouses sadness in the poet" (Ramišvili 1961: 142). My reading suggests quite the opposite, that Vazha intended the conclusion of the poem to represent the rejoicing of Nature at its final reconciliation with the one human being who, if only for a short while, opened his heart to its meanings. Like the Amirani of Svanetian folklore, Vazha's Mindia is a man of arms on the periphery of society, in the liminal space at the frontier of nature and culture. Amirani is an unrestrained predator, living only to fight, hunt and slaughter, while steering clear of the restraints and reciprocity imposed by the settled life of a farmer, husband and son-in-law. Mindia, on the other hand, could be conceived as an Amirani-like figure under destructive tension. The snake blood has drawn him further into the world of animals and plants than Amirani, to the point that he renounces all predation upon nature's creatures. At the same time, he remains bound within the web of social obligations incumbent upon any Xevsur man. He fights alongside his comrades, and lives in a household as father and husband. Whereas Amirani's swath of destruction is only stopped by his own hubris, when he challenges God Himself to single combat, Mindia is torn apart by the contradictory demands of nature and society.

IV. Xaxmat'is-Jvari, "shrine of believers and unbelievers". Running through almost all of the poems discussed above is a curious thread which to my knowledge has not drawn the attention of critics: the Xevsur sanctuary of Xaxmat'is-Jvari. In "Gogotur da Apšina", the defeated Apšina went into service at Xaxmat'i-Jvari as *xevisberi*. In "The Snake-eater", Mindia prayed and offered sacrifices at the same shrine (scene VIII). Less visible references occur in "Host and Guest" and "Aluda Ketelauri": The Xevsur Zviadauri is said to come from Biso, the village where Xaxmat'is-Jvari is located, and the very name of Aluda Ketelauri is a composite of the two founding kingroups of the Biso-Xaxmat'i settlement — the Aludauri and Ketelauri lineages (Gamq'relidze 1989: 17).[25] Indeed, the correlation is so consistent that Xaxmat'is-Jvari emerges

[25] The possibility that these links to Xaxmat'i are purely coincidental is diminished by the deep knowledge that Vazha had of Xevsureti in general, and of Xaxmat'i in particular, the site of the St. George church where his father often preached, and where Vazha himself frequently attended the annual mid-summer shrine ceremony (see Vazha's letters of 1879b and 1880). The coded links to Xaxmat'is-Jvari also may account for what would otherwise be atypical factual inconsistencies in the poems. The Zviadauri clan

in the texts of the major poems as a kind of *Doppelgänger* of Vazha's Xevsur heroes. According to legend, Xaxmat'is-Jvari was founded after St. George, the patron saint of warriors, led the other divine patrons (*xtisšvili*) into battle against the Kajes, a race of supernatural artisans with magical powers. St. George returned from the subterranean realm of the Kajes with enormous treasure and three Kaj princesses, whom he installed as his sworn-sisters (*dobilni*) at the sanctuary. Xaxmat'is-Jvari is also one of a handful of "believer-unbeliever shrines" (*rjulian-urjulo salocavebi*), where nominally-Muslim Kist'is could come to pray and present offerings alongside the local Xevsurs (Mak'alatia 1935: 242). As a regular visitor to Xaxmat'i, Vazha would have certainly noticed the uncommonly diverse attendance at shrine festivals, including members of ethnic communities that under most circumstances were regarded as enemies by the local Xevsurs. The shrine and St. George, its patron deity, therefore are characterized by the defining features of the heroic heart as portrayed by Vazha in his poetry: on the one hand, courage and daring in combat, and on the other, "cosmopolitanism" as Vazha believed it ought be understood, as respect for other peoples rooted in patriotic love of one's own nation (1905/1956).

Reinforcing my hypothesis concerning the link between Xaxmat'is-Jvari and the heroic protagonist is the contrasting role of Gudanis-Jvari. Located in the center of Xevsur territory, Gudanis-Jvari is regarded as the most powerful and influential sanctuary in the province. Ceremonial functions at Gudani shrine complex are the exclusive privilege of the powerful Arabuli and Č'inč'arauli clans. The peripheral clans, especially those dwelling in the northern valleys "on the other side", periodically were the object of demands and even threats from the "vassals" of Gudanis-Jvari, who expected them to submit to its authority and pay tribute. In "Aluda Ketelauri" and "The Snake-eater", Gudanis-Jvari is associated with the social group in situations where its opposition to the hero is made manifest. In the former poem (scene V), the *xevisberi* Berdia refuses Aluda's sacrificial offering for the "unbeliever" Mucali in the name of Gudanis-Jvari. In scene IV of "The Snake-Eater", the Xevsurs are gathered for the festival of Gudanis-Jvaris when they witness evidence of Mindia's special understanding of nature (the episode of the bereaved bird, described above), yet refuse to accept its implications for their habitual way of life.

Of the heroes Vazha placed under the patronage of Xaxmat'is-Jvari, one is exiled, one is slain, and one commits suicide. Only the bandit-turned-*xevisberi* Apšina is alive at the conclusion of the poem in which he appears, albeit embittered by his forced retirement from fighting. Did Mindia's impassioned prayers at Xaxmat'is-Jvari go unanswered? Within the ethical laboratory constituted by Vazha's epic poetry, the truly heroic individual will always stand more or less apart from the others of his community. The faithfulness to the principles of courage and self-sacrifice that are the fundamental characteristics of the heroic personality has as its inalienable counterpart the capacity to recognize and honor the same qualities in others, no matter what their religious or ethnic identity might be. Hence the paradox of Vazha's heroes, who are always ready to lay down their lives for their communities, yet whose personal moral codes are irreconcilable with the parochial norms upheld by its rank-and-file members. By situating his ethical laboratory in the borderlands where Xevsurs and Kist'is regularly meet as enemies, and occasionally as guests and hosts, Vazha brings this paradox into sharp focus, but leaves it unresolved.

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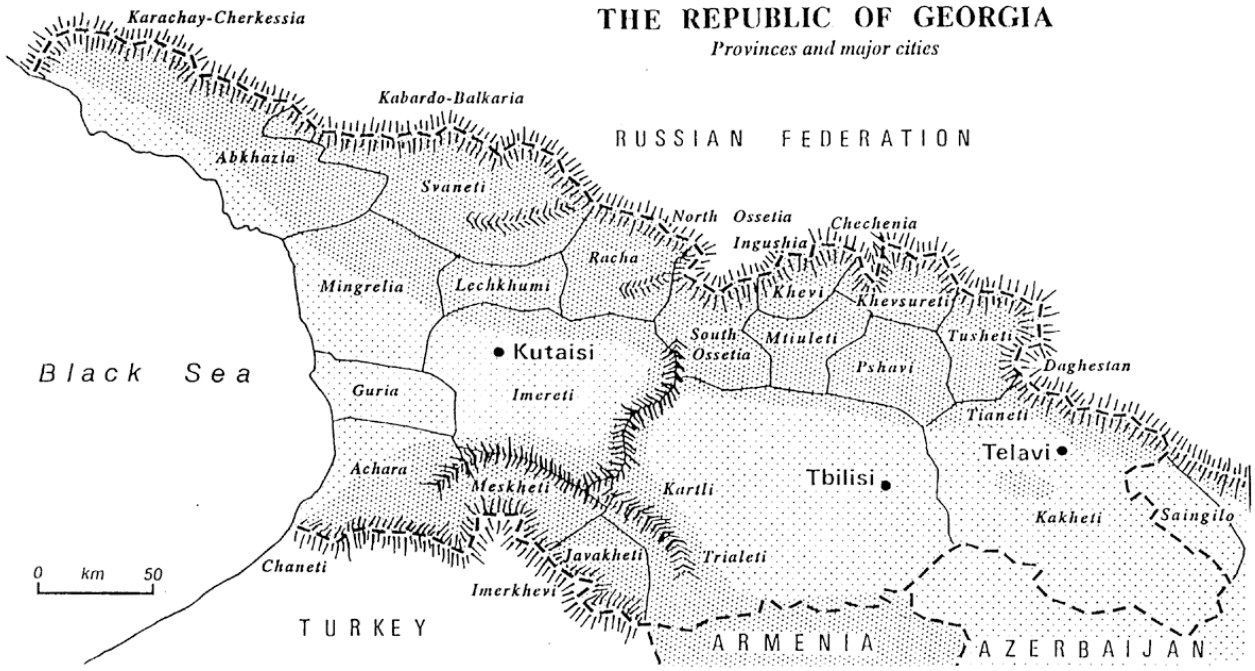
comes from the Ardot'i Valley, which adjoins Chechnia, and not Biso. Conversely, a person named Aluda Ketelauri would be expected to live in Biso, not Šat'ili. It is likewise unusual for a Xevsur from the remote village of Blo, which is where Apšina is said to live, to serve at Xaxmat'is-Jvari.

After "The Snake-Eater" was published at the beginning of the new century, Vazha abandoned the epic-tragic formula that he had been refining and elaborating since the mid-1880's. "The Snake-Eater" was followed a year later by "Dzaɣlik'a Ximik'auri" (1902a), a shorter epic poem with an almost comic dénouement.[26] In this poem, for the first and only time, Vazha treats his reader to a happy resolution to the collision between the heroic individual and society (here represented by the Georgian king), even happier than that of "Gogotur and Apšina". The warrior's pride is recognized and assuaged, and he is reintegrated into the ranks of the army. The contrast to the darkly pessimistic ballad of Mindia is so extreme that the reader might well wonder if this poem was intended as irony rather than comedy. "Dzaɣlik'a Ximik'auri" might also be indicative of a shift of direction in Vazha's activity as writer, as he returned to a more pragmatic engagement with issues confronting the Pshavs and Xevsurs. In May 1903, charges were brought against Vazha for aggressive resistance to attempts by government rangers to impose restrictions on the Pshavian villagers' use of forest resources (Xornauli 1987: 144-6, 184). Shortly afterwards, Vazha involved himself in political agitation among his fellow mountaineers in the wake of the 1905 Revolution.

I end this paper not so much with a conclusion in the usual sense as with a question, one to which we may never know the definitive answer. In Vazha's quixotic scenario of a generalized mobilization of the Georgian mountain tribes, the Xevsurs were to march down to Orc'q'ali, the juncture of the Xevsur and Pshav branches of the Aragvi River, led by the banner of Xaxmat'is-Jvari. Could it be that Vazha came to regard this banner no longer as a symbol of the tragic contradiction between the heroic will and communal norms, but as a sign of Caucasian unity under which the Georgians, the Kist'is and all other peoples of the Caucasus would fight for their freedom?

[26] In a scene reminiscent of the *Iliad*, the Xevsur warrior Dzaɣlik'a Ximik'auri refuses to join the Georgian army in combat against the Persian invaders. Earlier King Erek'le had asked him for his sword, which he admired, and Dzaɣlik'a had no choice but to yield it to his sovereign. Although he received the king's sword in exchange, he felt profoundly pained by the loss of the possession he prized more than any other, as well as the insult of being publicly asked to give up "the symbol of his manhood, his heroism" (Gogoč'uri 1971: 287). The Xevsurs finally persuade him to accompany them to the battlefield. The king goes through the ranks, inspecting the weapons of his soldiers. When he comes to Dzaɣlik'a, he discovers that his most valued warrior is carrying a wooden sword in his scabbard. Erek'le quickly understands the meaning of Dzaɣlik'a's gesture, and calls for his sword to be returned to him. The next day, Dzaɣlik'a distinguishes himself in combat and receives rich gifts from the king in recompense.



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St'umar-masp'indzeli ("Host and Guest", 1893)
Sisxlis dzieba ("Vengeance", 1897)
Gvelis-mč'ameli ("The Snake-eater", 1901)
Dzaɣlik'a Ximik'auri (1902a)
Erek'les sizmari ("King Erekle's dream",1902b)

Ib. Ethnographic and public-affairs writings

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C'erili Xevsuretidam. Sopeli Xaxmat'i ("Letter from Xevsureti: The village Xaxmat'i", 1879b/1956: 387-90)
Sopeli Xaxmat'i ("The village Xaxmat'i", 1880/1956: 393-6)
Xma mtidam ("Voice from the mountains", 1881/1956: 397-400)
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Xevsurebi ("The Xevsurs", 1886b/1956: 145-152)
Pšavlebis dzveli samartali da saojaxo c'esebi ("The Pshavians' traditional laws and domestic norms", 1888/1956: 59-64)
Gmiris ideali pšaur p'oeziis gamoxat'ulebit ("The heroic ideal as represented in Pshavian poetry", 1889/1956: 65-70)
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Pro domo sua (1896/1994: 228-231)
Tianuri pelet'oni. ("Tianeti feuilleton", (1902/1956: 260-4)
K'osmop'olit'izmi da p'at'riot'izmi ("Cosmopolitanism and patriotism", 1905/1956: 280-2)
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