

“Maniaques de la taxinomie”: Sacred and ritual space among the Svans of northwestern Georgia.
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1. Introduction. In the fall of 1985, within a few weeks of my arrival to begin my doctoral fieldwork, I encountered evidence that, despite nearly 70 years of Soviet rule, “backward” folk religious practices such as animal sacrifice had not disappeared in Georgia. By 1923, two years after the establishment of Soviet power, over 90% of Georgia’s 2500 Orthodox churches had been closed by the authorities (Reddaway 1975; Jones 1989). Ironically, the closing of churches and limits on the ordination of clergy might have contributed to the survival of vernacular religion, by leaving the abandoned church buildings available for use by informal ritual practitioners. Even functioning churches, such as Svet’i-cxoveli in Mcxeta and the Alaverdi Cathedral in K’axeti, drew scores of pilgrims who circumambulated the church building, leading sacrificial sheep and bulls which were subsequently slaughtered just outside the church precincts. I will use the label “folk Orthodoxy” to encompass a wide range of varieties of informal religious practices and beliefs among individuals who identify as Orthodox Christians, ranging from somewhat un-Orthodox practices, such as animal sacrifice, adjacent to institutional ceremonies (sometimes in the presence of an ordained priest), to the elaborate system to be described below.

Those forms of folk Orthodoxy which are practiced in the absence of priests are sometimes qualified as “pagan”, but I prefer to deploy this term with a more restricted, less value-laden meaning in order to underline the noticeable discontinuity between, on the one hand, the folk Orthodox spectrum, and, on the other, the distinctive religious systems of the central Caucasus (NE Georgian highlands, Ossetia, and apparently once in pre-Islamic Ingushetia and Chechnia); and also Abkhazia. Among the most visible characteristics of the two Caucasus “paganisms” are:

(i) A clear distinction in knowledge and vocation between ritual specialists, recruited from specific lineages and serving for life, and other members of the community;

(ii) Specialized cultic buildings made according to local design, which are distinct from Orthodox churches (or their ruins), and domestic architecture.¹

I will not go into any detail about Caucasus paganism here. Charachidzé (1968) book provides a useful and insightful overview of the materials collected by Georgian ethnographers in Pshavi, Khevsureti and adjacent regions up until World War II, and fieldwork continues to be done in these provinces to the present day (Tuite 2004, 2011, 2016).

The principal contrasts between folk Orthodoxy and “paganism” are shown in the following table:

¹ Archaeological excavations in eastern Georgia have revealed what appear to have been Iron-Age cultic sites, which resemble in certain respects those of northeast Georgian “paganism” (Pizchelauri 1984; Buxrashvili 2023).

Table 1.	Folk Orthodoxy	Central Caucasus “paganism”
	Continuity of ritual practice by (non-ordained) locals through imitation, “filtering”, elaboration	Distinctive religious <u>system</u> forged over time by caste of semi-hereditary religious specialists (“theologians”)
(1) Spatial organization, structure of buildings	Communal festivals centered on churches or their ruins; domestic rituals performed in home or livestock stable. More or less strict observance of gendered distinctions regarding “(im)purity” and access to spaces	Specialized building built by locals. Churches absent (or incorporated into indigenous shrine complex). Thoroughgoing organization of sacred & profane space, and the associated categories of beings, according to hierarchy of purity & incorporeality
(2) Celebrants	Local senior ♂ & ♀, sometimes semi-professional	Celebrants selected by vocation from specialized lineages; observance of taboos & purity; virtuosity, special knowledge
(3) Ritual practices & offerings	Rituals: (i) exchanges with supernaturals and the dead; (ii) propitiation of potentially harmful beings	Rituals: (i) & (ii), also (iii) initiation, (iv) purification Deprivatized, masculinized, professionalized
(4) Calendar	More or less elaborate cycle of festivals and fasts, derived from Orthodox church calendar	Simpler calendar, alternation of fasts & feasts Major feasts delimit cycle periods, no mention of Christ
(5) Cults of saints	Church dedications & iconography influencing saint cults (especially Mary, George, Archangel); nonetheless Christ & His mysteries filtered out	Saints as “children of God” (<i>x̄tišvilni</i>), organized as supernatural aristocracy (“descended from heaven”, “former mortals”) Pairing of George & female counterpart

2. Svaneti and the Svans. The toponym /*šwan/ “Svaneti” (whence G /svan/, M /šon/, S /šwan/) can be reconstructed at the ancestral Proto-Kartvelian level (Klimov 1998: 179; Fähnrich and Sarjveladze 2007: 381), which is consistent with the early separation of Svan speakers from the ancestral speech community, estimated to have taken place in the 2nd mill. BC. Two thousand years ago, Strabo and Pliny situated the *Souanoi* in the province of Colchis, in what is now western Georgia, and mentioned the extraction of gold and other metals from their territory. The initial spread of Christianity to Svaneti may have been as early as the 5th c.² Early Christianity-related loans from Greek (*[u]st’ariin* “cross”) and Mingrelian (*tanap* “Easter”, *jgir-* “good, blessed”) indicate that the new religion entered from the Black Sea coastal region to the west.

From the 9th through 12th centuries, Svaneti saw extensive construction of churches throughout the province. The latest edition of the Georgian Heritage Site list includes 105 medieval churches from Svaneti. The icons and frescoes in these edifices testify to a high level of local artisanry, and a special devotion to military saints, above all, St George. The cult of these saints — as evidenced by church dedications, icons, and name choice among elite families — began to appear in Georgia in the 6-7th centuries, and became increasingly widespread in the succeeding centuries, probably in reaction to the incursion of Persian and Arab armies in the eastern Caucasus (Iamanidze 2016; De Giorgio 2015). In Svaneti, the elites financing the construction and decoration of churches seem to have had a special fondness for representations of St George spearing a man in royal garb, as well as imagery of a distinctly chivalrous nature: scenes from

² Xvistani (2009: 76-80) dates the oldest layer of a church in Pxut’er (Eceri commune) to the 5th c. At this time, from roughly the mid-5th to the mid-6th c., Lazica and Byzantium to the west, and Persia to the east, sought to exert control over Svaneti, which exploited the situation to obtain a degree of autonomy (Braund 1992, 1994: 311-4).

the miracle of George saving a princess from a dragon (a narrative which may well have originated in Georgia; Tuite 2022), and the medieval romance of Amiran-Darejaniani.

Also evident in the built landscape of medieval Svaneti is a highly-segmented social structure. Even the smallest villages have a multitude of churches, with an especially high density along the axis from Lat'ali (15 churches on the Heritage list), through C'virmi (6), Ieli (7), Adishi (7), to Ushguli (10). Associated with each church were families (*saq'dris-švilni*) with special privileges and access to prime burial sites (Gasviani 1991). And of course, no visitor to the northeastern part of Svaneti, once known as Free or Lordless (*ubat'ono*) Svaneti, will fail to notice the dozens of defense-towers (*murq'wam*) in each settlement.

3. Svan vernacular religion. It is now time to look at the odd expression in the title of this talk. In a 1987 study on the Indo-European trifunctional classification of deities among the Ossetians and their Alanian forebears, Charachidzé (1987) found evidence pointing to the Svans as a link in the chain of transmission from the latter to the former. Furthermore, not only did the non-Indo-European Svans appear to have understood the principles of trifunctionality, they actually extended and elaborated it (“surclassification”, in Charachidzé’s words [pg 119]), before passing it on to the Ossetians. In the glossary at the end of the book, the author defined the Svans in the following words:

Svanes : groupe caucasien du Sud, sur les pentes de l'Elbrouz. Ils ont gardé les grandes articulations de l'idéologie autochtone, plus quelques-unes prises aux voisins immigrés. Maniaques de la taxinomie, ils classent tout ce qui leur tombe sous la main ou le cerveau. Avec trois cailloux et deux concepts, ils fabriquent un système du monde (1987: 146).

On first encountering this passage 30 or more years ago, I was perplexed, all the more so after having been exposed to anecdotes circulating in Georgia about dim-witted Svans. As I got to know the Svans better — not only their traditional culture and language, but also their everyday pragmatism and curious sense of humor — the falsity of the anecdotes became increasingly apparent, but it was only recently that my work on vernacular religion convinced me that Charachidzé, who did not visit Georgia until the restoration of independence (and for all I know, never set foot in Svaneti), had picked up something about Svan mentality that had previously escaped my notice.

My sources for the portrait of Svan folk Orthodoxy to be presented here include publications by Georgian ethnographers (Chartolani 1961; Bardavelidze 1939; Tserediani 2005; among others); published collections of Svan texts; and fieldwork (primarily in the commune of Lat'ali) by my Svan colleague Nino Tserediani and myself. I also draw upon the recently rediscovered archives of Evdokia “Dina” Kozhevnikova, a Russian anthropologist who carried out fieldwork in Ipari, Latali, Mulaxi and Becho in 1927-1931 and 1946.³

I begin with an outline of the principal features of Svan vernacular religion, leaving those relating to space for the following sections.

³ A large selection of Kozhevnikova’s notebooks, photographs and drawings can be viewed on-line at the site dinakozhevnikova.ge. References to her fieldnotes are marked “DK”.

A. SUPERNATURALS. Unlike other Georgians, Svans freely use their word for “god” in the plural (*yertāl*) when naming the supernatural beings to whom their invocations and offerings are addressed (as contrasted with demons, ogres and the like). The names of the most frequent addressees are based on those of the Christian saints to whom churches were dedicated in Svaneti. Of the 105 Svanetian churches on the heritage list, 88 bear the names of either St George (*Jgərāg*), the Savior (*Macxwār*), the Archangel (*Tāringzel*, *Tārglezer*), or the Virgin Mary (*Lamāria*), and precisely these names figure the most prominently in Svan ritual texts. It is important to note that the saints are rarely called upon by their name alone. They are almost always invoked in connection with a particular church or feast-day (examples: *Jgərāg Uylašiš* [a hamlet in Eceri commune with a church to St George, believed to heal fever]; *Jgərāg Ligiergiš*, lit. “George of St George’s Day”). The bond between gods, sacred sites and feast-days is sometimes difficult to unravel. The name for the Virgin Mary, Lamaria, is in fact formally a toponym (*la-māria* “Mary’s place”, cf. *la-kun* “land of souls” < *kwin* “soul”). Alongside supernaturals with recognizably Christian names are the well-known figures of *Dāl* and *Apsāt* (the latter ultimately derived from St. Eustathius; Arzhantseva & Albegova 1999), who watch over hunters and the game they hunt; *T’exiš* (< Geo. *t’ex*- “break”) and *Qwid*, invoked for the healing of joint pain and rheumatism; and some otherwise unnamed deities who preside over particular events, such the transition from the old year to the new (*zāmi məcādi yermet* “year-changing god”; Bardavelidze 1939: 122), and Mid-Lent (*isg-lilčāla yērbet* “Mid-Lent god”).⁴

The gods are called upon to assure the longevity and prosperity of the family, the health and fertility of their livestock, and for an abundant harvest. They are also implored to heal or ward off various illnesses, pains and harmful events (bad weather, predation, etc.). Interestingly, the god invoked for protection from a given source of harm is represented as having the power to unleash it — rather like the Greek god Apollo with respect to plagues and epidemics. Wolves are referred to as “St George’s dogs”, and at the mid-winter observance known as *Xwālmob*, St George (*Jgərāg Xwālmiš*) is asked to “keep away from us the illness and causes of harm that you have released” (*isgu mepšte māzig i mawin mašuria ankabin*; DK Lat’. *Xwalmob*). It is unclear to me whether this is an extension of the Christian belief in a God who both saves and inflicts punishment, or whether it goes back to an indigenous conception of supernatural power as ambiguous, potentially harmful as well as beneficial, which the human community seeks to propitiate and influence (Tuite 2004).

B. CALENDAR. The annual cycles of folk-religious festivals throughout Georgia are based on the calendar of the Orthodox Church, but as far as I know, no community observes as many feast-days as the Svans. In Lat’ali in 1930-31, Dina Kozhevnikova recorded 75 named annual observances, some of them lasting several days or even weeks, a number confirmed by N. Tserediani’s more recent fieldwork (2005; p.c.). Besides events derived from the Orthodox calendar, the Svans also observe annual rituals related to the farming cycle (e.g., *Axanaxa*, marking the beginning of plowing); the control of harmful natural forces (*Sk’arxalān*, to ward off

⁴ A remarkable text collected in Lenjeri in the 1940s (Shanidze, Kaldani & Ch’umburidze 1978, Text #23) divides the gods into two groups: the “gods believed in by Christians” (*krisdianre lanc’am yertār*), and the “gods of the Jews” (*wiryäyre yertār*), whom the Svans supposedly worshipped before the introduction of Christianity. The supernaturals assigned to the latter group have names which are not transparently derived from those of Christian saints familiar to the Svans. In other respects, the attributes of the two groups are sufficiently similar, that one can ascribe this pseudo-religious distinction to the Svan gift for “surclassification”, rather than any significant functional difference.

hail, *Xwarsob*, for protection of livestock from skin diseases); and a week-long period, beginning on Epiphany eve, during which the souls of the dead visit their living descendants (*Lipānāli*).

C. OFFERINGS. As elsewhere in Georgia, the Svans present four types of offerings: (i) bread, (ii) alcoholic beverages [usually locally-distilled vodka]; (iii) candles; (iv) sacrificed animals. It is in the first of these categories that the Svan taxinomic mania is most apparent, as evidenced by the rich variety of *lemzir* (offering breads) baked by Svan women, distinguished by shape, surface decoration, and filling (Tserediani 2005).

D. BELIEFS. The dividing-line separating Christian from pre-Christian beliefs is not always apparent, in particular with regard to notions of (im)purity (women's bloodflow and the bodies of the recently deceased), relations with the dead, exchanges with the supernatural realm, etc., which for all we know might stem from a common Near-Eastern/West-Asian substrate shared by Christianity and the indigenous religions that preceded it in the Caucasus.

4. Social & sacred spaces. I will now turn to the main topic of this paper. For reasons that will soon become obvious, the ritual spaces of the two genders will be discussed separately, beginning with those where the men preside. I have identified four sources of the spatial-organizational principles underlying Svan ritual practice, of which these are the first three:

(i). The first is the social organization of the Svan village itself, as reflected in the groups participating in a given feast-day or observance: (a) the commune as a whole; (b) a neighborhood or group of neighboring households; (c) a lineage group; (d) the individual household.

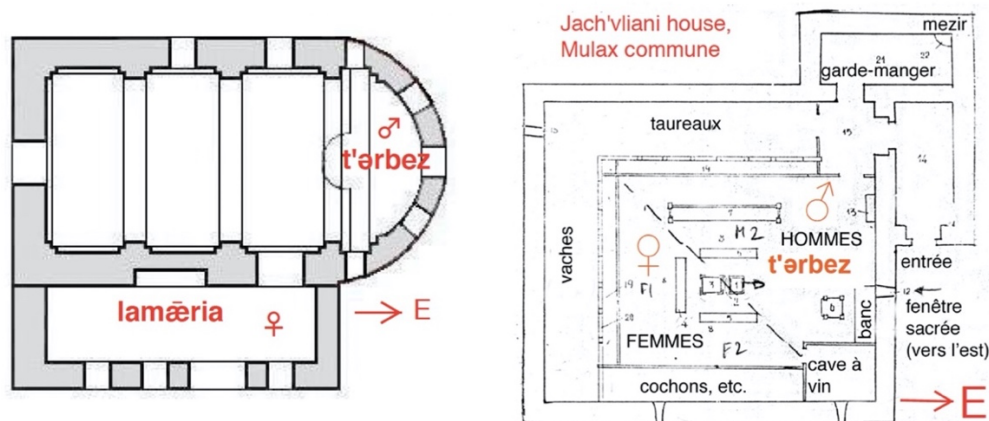
(ii). As described in detail by Chartolani (1961), work and even the interior space of the home is segmented according to gender. Some work activities are assigned exclusively to men (construction, wood-cutting, preparing meat, etc.), others to women (dairy production, baking, etc.), which implies that certain work-spaces are linked to one or the other gender group. The floor of the main room in the traditional Svan home is bisected by an invisible line, passing diagonally through the hearth, dividing domestic space into women's and men's areas (see Figure 1 below). Chartolani mapped out the floorplans of dozens of houses throughout Upper and Lower Svaneti, and worked out the principles informing the allocation of space. For example, the front of the hearth always points toward the side of the house where the entrance is. The women's space is on the opposite side. The seat of the senior man of the household (*maxwši*) faces the hearth, normally — but not always — with the younger men to his right.

(iii) The Orthodox churches of Svaneti are for the most part quite tiny. Despite their small size, they are full of information for potential transfer to folk Orthodoxy: There is of course the imagery on the inner (and sometimes outer) walls, but also the layout of the church building itself. Like all Orthodox churches, those of Svaneti have a sanctuary (*G. t'rapezi*), where the altar is placed, on the side of the church facing east. Only the priest and his assistants — all of whom are male — have access to this space. Separating the sanctuary from the nave is an iconostasis, with a curtain which is periodically closed, rendering certain segments of the divine liturgy invisible to the parishioners.

5. Men’s ritual spaces. On the whole, the ritual functions carried out by men echo those most prominently performed by Orthodox priests — the presentation of offerings of bread and wine to an invisible deity, and presiding at commemorations of the dead —, and most of them take place in a space paralleling the sanctuary of a church. In the pre-Soviet period, and into the first decade or so of Soviet rule (according to Kozhevnikova), ordained priests were still present in Svan villages, and vernacular rituals were performed in private households, outdoor sites, and sometimes in the churchyard. After the disappearance of priests from most communities, local men appropriated the abandoned churches as ritual sites, a situation that persists to the present day, despite the return of the clergy to Svaneti and the restoration of regular liturgies in many churches.

A. COLLECTIVE. Each Svan commune has a dozen or so annual “public” feast-days which are collective in nature, either for the entire commune or a neighborhood or a group of households. (I refer to these as “public” because the entirety of the social group in question, women and men alike, can attend). All households are expected to donate ingredients for preparing offerings (e.g. flour for baking bread, and grain for distilling vodka), and they also contribute to the purchase or feeding of a sacrificial animal (bulls being the preferred offering for large-scale communal festivals). The offerings are handed to teams of men — commonly designated as *bap’är* “priests” — who hold them up while invoking the name of the “god” to whom they are offered. The ideal number of *bap’är* is three or a multiple of 3, and the space in which they perform is referred to as a “sanctuary” (*t’ärbez* < *t’rap’ezi*).⁵ When the offering takes place in the home of the family hosting the event (typically, in rotation with other households of the neighborhood), the *t’ärbez* is the eastern wall of the main room, preferably in front of a window, sometimes designated as “prayer window” (*lämzär laqwra*).⁶

Figure 1. The “sanctuary” (*t’ärbez*) in a church and a Svanetian house



⁵ The form *t’ärbez* results from Svan phonotactic constraints on initial consonant clusters and the frequent dissimilation of ejective consonants. The unmodified loanword *t’rap’ezi* is also attested, e.g. in an Upper Bal text which mentions an icon held in a coffer *xedwäy lög t’rap’ezisga* “which stands in the sanctuary” (Shanidze, Kaldani & Ch’umburidze 1978, #209).

⁶ Pollution-related restrictions on ritual performance also apply within the corresponding social space. The application of these constraints is not always straightforward, however, and the matter requires further investigation. For example, if the body of a recently deceased person has not yet been buried within the commune of Lat’ali, communal festivals are postponed to the following week. Exceptions can be made if the body is on the opposite side of the river from where the festival is to be held. In cases where the festival cannot be postponed, the body can be temporally covered with sand, allowing the event to occur (N. Tserediani, p.c. 2023).

B. WORK-PLACE. Occasionally during the year, men will perform offerings at their places of work. The man responsible for feeding the livestock (*menēn*) offers cheese-filled breads in the hay-loft, while invoking *Jgərāg lihewc'āriš* (George of Hewc'āri, the name of the feastday) for the health and fertility of the animals. In late spring at the feastday of *Litxär* (“for wolves”), shepherds in the pastures present a cheese-bread offering to St George, in exchange for his protection of the herds from predators.

C. HOUSEHOLD. One third of the annual observances described by Kozhevnikova in Lat'ali take place within individual households, but are “public” in the sense that the entire family attends. The offerings are presented by the male household head in front of the east-facing “prayer window”. One important characteristic of many Svan domestic rituals is the exclusion of outsiders, not only in the sense of not permitting them to attend, but also through the blocking of sensory contact between outside and inside. The first offerings of the New Year are presented in the predawn hours, before a closed eastern window, and then eaten silently by the family. The same conditions occur at several other domestic feastdays, including *Jōdi hām* (“long morning”), the banquet marking the departure of the visiting souls at the end of Lipānāli. On such occasions, passers-by are discouraged from calling out to the members of the household; in case of an emergency, they are to scratch softly (*lipxk'āne*) at the door [DK Lat'. Barbläš]. The offerings are regarded as “unseeable” (*uc'wēna*), that is, they can not even be seen by outsiders, much less eaten. My hypothesis is that these restrictions on sensory access were ultimately inspired by the use of the curtain in the Orthodox church to keep key segments of the mass out of view of the laity.

In addition, many Svan households have domestic ritual spaces which are in fact located outside of the house, in the form of small parcels of land adjoining the fields, which have been consecrated to a particular god (for healing from a serious illness, for example), and withdrawn from agricultural use. These plots are known as *laxät'*, *lalcxät'*, or *ləcxät'*, participles derived from the verb root *cxat'* - “stick in”, as though the divinity had literally staked a claim to the land. An informal survey conducted by Nino Tserediani and myself in two eastern neighborhoods of Lat'ali located over two dozen *lalcxät'* plots, knowledge of their precise location being mostly limited to the immediate neighbors. In the 1930s, sacrifices were periodically offered on *lalcxät'*s, but these as well were subjected to sensory restriction: One observer noted that the sacrifices took place in the early morning or at night “so that an outsider's eye not catch sight of them” (Pircxelani 1999). In more recent times, only bloodless offerings are brought to these sites, mostly by women.

D. COMMEMORATION OF THE DEAD. Men also preside at banquets commemorating the dead, on dates when this is prescribed by the Orthodox calendar (e.g., *Sənimoxsnäb*, the eve of Pentecost), and when commemorating deceased family members (40th day and anniversary of death).

Interestingly, senior women can substitute for the male head of household at domestic rituals, when this is necessary. One Svan colleague told me that during the Soviet years, her mother presented offerings in front of the eastern window, while her husband, a member of the Communist Party who was expected to abstain from religious observances, stood silently next to her. After Georgia regained independence, he took over the performance of these rituals.

6. Women’s ritual spaces. In most varieties of Georgian folk Orthodoxy, women operate in more or less the same ritual spaces as men, with some differentiation in domestic contexts (men presiding at banquets, women performing some healing or apotropaic rituals). At the annual festival at Alaverdi, for example, women circle the church alongside the men, the women carrying bread offerings and live chickens, the men leading four-footed livestock. In northeast Georgian highland paganism, women’s roles are highly circumscribed, and nearly absent from public view. In Svaneti, however, women’s participation in vernacular religion is exceptional, both in terms of the number of observances presided by women, and the extent to which their ritual spaces are distinct — and differently organized — from those of men. My presentation of women’s spaces will follow the same sequence as in the previous section, starting with communal and collective rituals, and proceeding inward to the domestic sphere.

A. COLLECTIVE. One distinctive feature of most Svan churches are side wings on the southern side adjoining the nave, either as an integral part of the building, or an extension added on later. One term commonly used to designate these spaces is *ladbāš*, a locative noun based on the root *dbāš*- which appears in a number of words referring to women’s ritual activities,⁷ specifically the preparation and offering of ritual breads (*lemzir*) at a site outside the home.⁸ At particular times of year — for example, during the week between Christmas and New Year’s known as *Yarneysga* — the women of Lat’ali would gather in the side wing of their local church to offer *lemzir* bread and vodka. (The day chosen for this ritual depends on the patron saint of the church: St George on Saturday, the Savior on Sunday, the Archangel on Monday, and so forth). The texts of the invocations have essentially the same format as those used by men, as do the presentation gestures (offerings held up, and turned slightly counterclockwise, followed by the presenter turning herself in the same direction after finishing the prayer).⁹ Traditionally, the women would carry small portable hearths to the *ladbāš* and bake the *lemzirs* on the spot, but presently the women bring bread that has been baked at home.

Whereas the above-described rituals — known as *lidbāši* — take place in a space adjoining the church sanctuary used by the men, on other occasions, the women of a neighborhood or lineage will gather at sites on the fringes of the village, sometimes the locus of a ruined church or tower, but often marked by little more than a tree or a bush. The women bring offerings of *lemzir* bread, candles and vodka. As in the church side-wing, in past decades the women made the bread at the site on portable baking-sheets, a practice that appears to have fallen out of use. Only women and girls are present at outdoor *lidbāši* events. Men are not allowed to attend. Except for the absence of men and animal sacrifices (which only men can offer), the presentation and invocations follow the same general format as at ceremonies presided by men. In the following table are listed some of the outdoor sites in Lat’ali where women perform *lidbāši* rituals, along with the purposes for which the sites are visited:

⁷ The origin of the root *-dbāš*- is uncertain. Nizharadze (1962) related it to *didāb* “glory, praise”. Alternatively, and with less retooling of the phonetic form, *dbāš*- could stem from *dabāš* “of the fields”, that is, outside of the home.

⁸ Another name for the side wing of a church is *lamāria*. This lexeme is homophonous with the name of the Virgin Mary and churches dedicated to her, but it has been explained to me as a locative participle derived from the root *mār*- “prepare”, meaning “preparation space”.

⁹ Like the men, the women pray toward the east, whether in the *ladbāš* or outdoors (N. Tserediani, p. c. 2023)

<i>name</i>	<i>type of site</i>	<i>group</i>	<i>purpose</i>	<i>date</i>
Aləngweri Tāringzel	large rock	all Lat'ali women	health of dairy cows	Uplišiēr Monday; Həliš
Samt'āiši Lamāria	beech tree	K'wanč'ianar neighborhood	milk and cheese production	Həliš
Hārt'i Tāringzel	two small towers (near hamlet Ipx)	all of Lat'ali	safety of livestock and owners; from bad weather	
Lemkəldāši Tāringzel	bush	Laxušdi village	ear-ache	Uplišiēr
Lemta Lamāria	church ruins	Kemezša phatry (Ivečiani)	menstrual pain; bone pain	
Bāla jgərag	ruins (church?)	Gwičiani clan	successful hay-mowing	Axanaxa (start of haying)
Zāgri Tāringzel	church foundation (ruins)	Girgwliani clan (Macxwariši)	fortune & force of shrine	Uplišiēr Monday

B. WORK-PLACE. The women, like the men, perform rituals at some of their gender-specific work sites. These include a *libbāši* held at the threshing-grounds on the feast of the Dormition of Mary (*limərie*), but most of them take place inside the house, in the grain-pantry (*gwem*) and by the bread-baking slate (*k'eräy*) at the hearth. The pantry and hearth rituals are strictly off-limits to men, to the extent that they must leave the house at this time. Sensory-access restrictions similar to those at other domestic rituals apply: the offering-breads are “unseeable” by outsiders, and eaten in silence. One special feature of the hearth rituals, for which there is no parallel in men’s ritual practice, is known as “earth prayer” or “downward prayer” (*gimi / čubaw limzir*). Rather than standing, and holding the offerings upward, the women hold them close to the ground, while squatting or kneeling. (A rare photograph of *čubaw limzir* was taken by Kozhevnikova in Mulakhi about 1930, showing six women sitting or squatting around a simple stone hearth, holding small loaves of bread in their cupped hands). Lamāria is the principal addressee of downward prayers, which ask for family health and prosperity, and on some occasions, the health and productivity of dairy cows. According to N. Č'erediani (p. c., 2023), menstruating women, who are not permitted to attend any other type of ritual, can be present during the performance of “earth prayer” in the home.

C. DOMESTIC SUPERNATURALS. One of the most fascinating, and still poorly-understood, components of Svan vernacular religion are the rituals directed at supernatural beings believed to dwell in the house, and in some sense assure the well-being of the household. I will quote here the earliest description of this cult that I know of, from Besarion Nizharadze, an Orthodox priest from the village Ushguli, who published a series of articles about Svaneti in the 1880s. In his account the spirit is named *korä mezir* “mezir of the house”. The word *mezir* or *mezər* is in fact the root from which a series of terms relating to prayer and offering are derived, such as *lemzir* “offering bread”, *ämzəri* “blesses”.¹⁰ The word also appears in several toponyms, linked to sacred sites, churches or their ruins, and a mountain overlooking Becho (Chkadua 2020).

When the new harvest is brought in, before the family begins consuming it, the woman bakes one cheese-filled bread for each family member. Besides those, she bakes three small loaves, using one bowl of flour from the new harvest. No man must watch while these small breads are baked:

¹⁰ The root *mezir* appears cognate to the Georgian verb *mzer/mzir*- “watch, gaze at, spy on”. If the words are indeed related, that evokes an image of the *mezir* as “watching” the household, perhaps in the sense of guarding it.

“it is not good”. The senior woman of the household, her face turned downward, offers the loaves to the *korä mezir* In the imagination of the Svans, the *korä mezir* has something like the powers of a domestic god, which must always be present in the home; should it for some reason leave the home, that will entail the destruction and extinction of the family. Therefore they treat it with extreme delicacy. What does the woman ask of this *mezir*, with her face bent downward? This will always remain a mystery for me, although I have repeatedly asked my own mother to tell me. She always refuses with the words: “revealing this to a man will anger the *mezir*, and it will harm the family.” When the woman has finished praying downward to the *mezir*, she leaves one loaf of bread in a particular cavity in the wall. People believe that the *mezir* will eat it, although of course, this secret bread will instead be feasted on by mice. The remaining two small breads are divided up among the women and eaten without any men present (Nizharadze 1962 (1883-4): 75-6).

Some forty years later, Dina Kozhevnikova had better luck getting her informants to talk, doubtless due to her gender. She learned that the term *mezir* was only used in the upper reaches of the Inguri valley, from Lenjeri to Ushguli. It was not known to people in Lat’ali nor further downriver to the west. The *mezir* was said to appear in the form of a small animal, most commonly a mouse, but also a snake, frog or calf. In two households — one in Ushguli, the other in Mulakhi — the resident *mezir* was said to have the appearance of an ogre (*dāw*). With the puzzling exception of the calf, all of these creatures are linked to the subterranean spaces of nature, or epitomize the savage domain opposed to the domesticated spaces occupied by human society. Further work by Chartolani (1961: 199-200) confirmed most of Kozhevnikova’s observations, and added a list of alternate names for domestic supernaturals, some of them used in Lat’ali and further west: *kors merde* “being in the house”, *korä emgene yērbet* “god standing in the house”, *gimi twäl* “earth jewel”, and, interestingly, *t’arbed* // (*korä*) *t’arbez*, based on the word for “sanctuary” (see also Antelava 2017: 463-4). According to accounts recorded in Mulakhi, the women would periodically pray to the *mezir* at outdoor sites, where they would bake bread and leave the offering in a niche (*sanäy*).

What emerges from these fragmentary accounts is that, at least until the 1950s or so, Svan women left bread in holes in the wall (typically in those parts of the house, such as the granary, which men rarely if ever visited), or buried them by the hearth, or left them in enclosed niches at outdoor sites, as offerings to a domestic spirit, which on the one hand, had attributes linking it to the underground and savage realms, but on the other, could be designated as the “sanctuary of the house” (*korä t’arbez*).

To summarize, key features of the ground plan of an Orthodox church are replicated within the Svan home. The ritual activities presided by men take place in the “sanctuaries” (*t’arbez*) of both types of sites, and in the case of domestic rituals, are sometimes closed off from outsiders, as though by a curtain drawn across the iconostasis. Like priests before the altar, male *bap’är* hold their offerings upward, while invoking the name of one of the “gods”, asking for health, well-being, prosperity and protection from various types of harm, which the gods are capable of both unleashing and preventing or healing.

Women’s ritual repertoire is considerably more elaborate, indeed it appears to be the conjunction of two distinct systems. At *ladbäs* sites adjoining churches, women perform the same type of

prayers as the men, with the same invocation formulas and offering gestures. In fact, there is evidence that in certain contexts, the two genders are interchangeable. As mentioned above, senior women can perform domestic rituals before the eastern window, when the man of the house is absent or somehow hindered from assuming this role. I myself witnessed an example of a substitution in the opposite direction. At the Iän church in Lat’ali in April 2015, the policeman guarding the church was recruited to present offerings alongside the women in the church’s *ladbäš*.

The women’s earth-directed offerings have no parallel in the men’s repertoire, and take place at sites from which men are rigorously excluded. Most are within the home, in the food-storage areas or by the hearth, but in earlier times the ritual could be performed at certain outdoor places. The Mulakhi women photographed by Kozhevnikova performed *čubaw limzir* within the ruins of a church known as *Jgəran*, in the village Žamuš. Rituals addressed to the *mezir*, *korä t’ərbez* or its equivalents conclude with an actual transfer of the offering bread, which is set in a niche or hole or buried in the ground, rather than being consumed by the people in attendance. It would appear that there are two distinct anchoring points for Svan offering rituals: the eastward-facing “sanctuary”, calqued on Orthodox church design, and the earth (or its equivalent in the form of recesses in the wall; Chartolani 1961: 192), in which bread offerings are set and covered up.¹¹

In earlier work comparing the vernacular religious systems of northeastern Georgia and Svaneti, I put forward evidence of distinct “trajectories” for the two genders, as represented in social practice, ritual and mythology. The grounding principles are (1) exogamy and virilocality (women circulating between their birth clans in another community and the domestic interior of the household into which they marry); (2) male domination of public space and the “exploitable exterior” (i.e. those exterior spaces exploited for the profit of the community, through hunting, trade, livestock-raiding, etc), under the patronage of St George, whose principal function is to render “les espaces naturels à la disposition des hommes” (Charachidzé 1986: 183; cf. Bardavelidze 1953: 88).

TABLE 3	INTERIOR		EXTERIOR	
	♀	♂	♂	♀
SOCIAL PRACTICE	in-marrying ♀ installed in domestic interior	♂-dominated public space in home/ community	♂-dominated exploitable exterior (trade, hunting, etc.)	exogamy: marriage with ♀ from unrelated clan
<i>Svaneti</i>	HOME		COMMUNE	
ritual space	♀ rituals at hearth, pantry addressed to <i>mezir</i> , <i>korä t’ərbez</i>	♂ rituals at east window of home	♂ rituals at public site (church <i>t’ərbez</i> , communal ritual)	♀ <i>lidbäši</i> and <i>mezir</i> rituals at outdoor sites

¹¹ Several other rituals and observances have been documented which are directed to the subterranean domain and the creatures believed to dwell there. The 1940’s Lenjeri text mentioned earlier includes a description of an offering ritual performed by women to keep worms, ants and insects from eating their crops, in which the women prayed downward toward the earth (*gims xemzirdax*), while invoking the name of Lamäria. In 1930s Lat’ali and Mulakhi, Kozhevnikova recorded a date in mid-March known as “protection of the earth’s holes” (*gimi qurwale lišidāl*), which, she was told, corresponded to the season when the ground began to thaw, allowing “worms and reptiles” (*muyül i mebü*) to return to the surface.

In symbolic terms, at least, the female trajectory is wider than that of the menfolk, ranging between the extremes of interior and exterior social space. In Svan religious practice, this is mirrored in the spaces where women exert exclusive control over ritual performance: the innermost domestic spaces, and sacred sites at the fringes of the commune.

A case could be made that the women's earth-directed *mezir* rituals are in continuity with the indigenous religious systems of the pre-Christian Svans. If so, their genius for classification and elaboration has enabled the conservation of an element of genuine Caucasus paganism that has been lost — or possibly erased — from the present-day “pagan” religion of the northeastern Georgian highlands.

7. Disruptions and continuity. The Soviet period saw two initiatives that could have seriously impacted the practice of folk Orthodoxy in Svaneti, but in both cases the Svans found ways of adapting to circumstances.

i. Anti-religion campaign. Upon the establishment of Soviet power, institutional Orthodoxy was the primary target in the campaign against religion, with over 90% of the churches closed or repurposed, and many of the clergy arrested (or worse), or compelled to renounce their vocation. Folk Orthodoxy drew far less attention from the authorities. During her time in Svaneti, near the end of its first decade under Soviet administration, Kozhevnikova noted the vitality of Svan vernacular religious practices, including those she considered backward and even harmful (such as ruinously expensive funeral banquets). Even some Communist Party members continued to participate. In the post-war period, according to interviews I conducted, the more public festivals were forbidden, but domestic rituals — such as *Lipānāli* and those taking place around Easter — continued to be observed within the household, including those with Party members.

ii. Imported wheat flour. Some years after the end of World War II, sacks of wheat flour produced elsewhere in the USSR became available in village stores in Svaneti. Until then, the *lemzir* breads offered at special occasions, in particular those which are “unseeable” by outsiders, were baked from high-quality flour called *gwiz*, which was ground from selected wheat grown on special fields called *laguz*. Despite the importance of *gwiz*-made offering breads, especially in domestic rituals, the Svans showed little hesitation in abandoning risky and labor-intensive traditional wheat production in favor of store-bought flour, from which all categories of wheat-based breads are baked, whether or not intended as offerings. The former *laguz* plots were replanted with other crops, especially potatoes, although families still remember their earlier function. Whereas in the Northeast Georgian highlands, purchased candles made of paraffin are not accepted by “pagan” shrine officials as substitutes for hand-made beeswax candles, the replacement of traditional *gwiz* with store-bought flour has not significantly affected ritual practice in Svaneti, although, as far as I know, the restrictions surrounding the storage of *gwiz* flour (in special containers, out of sight of outsiders) have not been extended to its modern substitute.

The end of Communist rule and the restoration of independence, on the other hand, opened the way to potentially more serious threats to vernacular religion in Svaneti. Even before independence, in the late 1980s, restrictions on the Georgian Orthodox Church began to be eased, and a handful of churches which had been converted to other uses (such as the *Met'xi*

and Anchis-xat'i churches in Tbilisi) were restored to their earlier function. After independence, the Georgian Orthodox Church started actively reclaiming church buildings throughout the country, and sending priests to resume regular liturgical services. In Svaneti, the new cadre of Orthodox clergymen, few of them native to the region, confronted members of the local community, who had for years used the church building and its surrounding grounds for vernacular rituals, such as the mid-winter Lamp'roba festival, in which men parade with torches to the graveyard, and burn them in bonfires.

In Lat'ali, the commune I know best, an Orthodox priest has been resident for the past fifteen years or so. He celebrates mass weekly in one of the three main churches (Taringzel, Macxwar or Ian), and has built a small meditation cabin in a wooded area near Tanyi Tāringzel, a church on a ridge near the village Laxushdi. He considers the practitioners of vernacular religion to have performed a valuable service in keeping Christianity alive when no priests were present, and seems tolerant of these practices as long as they do not interfere with Orthodox services, and stay outside of the churches that have been reopened for weekly liturgies. Perhaps the most significant impact of the return of Orthodoxy has been the renewal of Orthodox devotional practices among the Svans — the women in particular — even as they continue to participate in traditional observances. At the late-winter feastday of Litnäyi, celebrated at the above-mentioned Tanyi Tāringzel church, women lit candles and crossed themselves in front an icon of the Virgin Mary, two feet away from a team of *bap'är* who were presenting offerings of vodka, lemezir bread and the liver of a sacrificed bull.

Since the 1990s Svaneti has seen a large increase in tourism, especially from outside Georgia. Many of these are drawn by the alpine scenery, medieval architecture, and traditional culture, or at least, culture as represented in tourist brochures. As in “exotic” travel destinations across the globe, visitors are treated to staged versions of visually-impressive vernacular religious festivals such as Lamp'roba (with torches, bonfires and round-dancing), or the pre-Lenten *Murq'vamoba*, in which children try to topple a tall snow tower. The growth of the tourism industry has had an especially dramatic impact on Mest'ia, the principal town of Upper Svaneti, which seen the construction of a ski resort, airport, and the conversion of many local homes into guest-houses. Young people are encouraged to learn English and other foreign languages, alongside Georgian — the national language and exclusive medium of education in local schools — whereas transmission of the unwritten Svan language to children has been neglected, leading to an alarming decline in the use of Svan among the youngest generations.

The benefits of the new economy are very unequally distributed among the Svan population. As elsewhere in Georgia, village populations are decreasing. Some out-migration from Svaneti was provoked by natural disasters (such as the tragic avalanches of 1987, which destroyed much of Mulakhi), but most emigrants are motivated by the search for employment and education. Many young men seek work at construction sites in Tbilisi, while an increasing number of young women go abroad, to find employment as caretakers for the elderly. Labor migration in Svaneti is nothing new, but in the past most of those who left to work in the lowlands returned a few months later. It seems increasingly unlikely that this will continue to be the case, at least in the near future.

The long-term consequences of tourism development, emigration and the resurgence of the Georgian Orthodox Church, to which one could add the possibility of mass displacement of Svan villages should proposed hydroelectric projects in western Svaneti go forward (Antadze & Gujaraidze 2021), do not look promising. In northeast Georgia, some traditional festivals, such as Lasharoba in Pshavi, draw visitors from outside the region, and some tourism promoters in the province of Tusheti have included “paganism” as one of the region’s attractions for exoticism-seeking foreigners. On the other hand, there is reason to doubt that the senior generation of ritual specialists (*xervisberis* and *xucesis*), who received their specialized training through oral transmission a half-century or more ago, will be followed by successors with the same depth of knowledge. There are already indications that younger ritual specialists in Xevsureti can no longer perform the *k’urtxebay*, a lengthy invocation composed of garbled Biblical and liturgical passages, chanted at a bewilderingly rapid pace (Tuite 2011).

To end on a positive note, I will point out some features of Svan vernacular religious system that appear to be sufficiently robust that they are maintained and replicated when Svans move to new localities or build new homes. Lipānāli (the late-January feast of the ancestral souls) is celebrated by Svans almost anywhere they find themselves in sufficient numbers: A young woman studying in Germany told me of hosting a banquet for the souls with a small number of fellow Svans. In newly-founded lowland villages inhabited by Svan eco-migrants displaced from zones at risk of avalanches, the newly-built churches have been adopted by the residents for the presentation of bread and vodka offerings at vernacular festivals. As for the less-visible aspects of vernacular religion, I was told that Svan families forced to leave their settlements in Abkhazian territory in 2008 dedicated new *lacxät’* plots to replace those they left behind. My colleague Medea Saghlani (2016: 415-8; p.c. 2023) informs me that Svans from Lower Svaneti who resettle in lowland settlements build stone shrines called *witin*, similar to those in their ancestral villages, with small cavities where women place offerings. This might be an indication of the persistence of the *mezir* cult among at least some segments of the Svan population.

Traditional, centrally-placed hearths with slate bread-baking sheets are only found in the oldest Svan houses. All more recent homes have iron stoves placed close to the rear wall. Nonetheless, Svans spontaneously sit by the stove in sex-segregated groups, men to one side and women to the other. Offerings that traditionally were carried around the hearth in a counterclockwise direction are now passed from one person to another in the narrow space behind the stove in order to complete the circumambulation.

There is still much work to do — and, I would add, urgent work — to assess the current state of Svan vernacular religion, and collect reminiscences from members of the older generations, especially women. To go back to Charachidzé’s wonderful characterization of the Svans, I would agree that it is a bit exaggerated to claim that they could “construct a system of the world out of three pebbles and two concepts”, but I hope to have convinced you that their ancestors cobbled together a marvellously-elaborate system of ritual space out of a few basic principles, and a bit of architectural knowledge.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS. The original version of this paper was presented at the conference “Concepts in sociocultural space: The Balkans and Caucasus in focus”, which took place in Vienna in May 2023 under the auspices of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. I would like to thank Katsaryna Ackermann and her colleagues in the Language-Culture-Cognition Laboratory for the invitation to participate in this event, and for their hospitality during my stay in Vienna. I could not have formulated the proposals presented here without the help of my friend and colleague Dr Nino Tserediani, who has unstintingly shared not only her (as-yet) unpublished notes on Svan vernacular religion, but also her family home in Lat’ali, which has been my base for fieldwork in Svaneti since 2006. Nino’s late parents Davit and Valia, and her siblings Maik’o, Leri and Levan, were also marvellous sources of information, as well as the best hosts one could hope for. Many thanks go to the Svans of Lat’ali, Adishi, and elsewhere, who allowed an outsider to observe their rituals, ask them questions, and then share their food and drink. I have also profited from discussions with Medea Saghiani and the late Chato Gujejiani. Finally I wish to acknowledge the generosity of Elene and Vova Gugushvili, the children of Dina Kozhevnikova, for granting me access to their mother’s personal papers; and Manana Xizanašvili and Guliko Kvintadze of the Georgian National Museum, who have done the invaluable service of making much of the Kozhevnikova archive available on-line.

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