

Highland Georgian paganism — archaism or innovation?

Review of Zurab K'IK'NADZE. 1996. *kartuli mitologia, I. jvari da saq'mo*. (Georgian mythology, I. The cross and his people [*sic*].) Kutaisi: Gelati Academy of Sciences]; xii + 284 pp. + 2-page English summary.

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As the hot lamb's blood congealed on her hands, a young woman responded to the questions of a curious visitor. We were standing on the banks of the St'ekura, in the northeast Georgian province of Xevsureti, in the one part of the territory of Xaxmat'i's Jvari not off-limits to females. Not even a hundred kilometres as the crow flies from Tbilisi, we were in a part of Georgia very few Georgians, even now, ever visit; without electricity or all-season roads, it remains an eerily archaic outpost on the remote periphery of Europe. On a chilly July morning, the woman had come to Xevsureti's most sacred shrine, lamb in tow, to undergo the cleansing ritual known as *ganatvla*. She knelt before the priest (*xucesi*) as he intoned a prayer of benediction and healing, invoking St. George, his female partner Samdzimari, and a host of saints, angels and "children of God" (*xvtisšvilni*). He extracted his dagger, and slit the lamb's throat. Its blood spilled forth onto the woman's arms, coating them up to the elbow. Following the ancient principle that the good blood of a slaughtered animal drives out the bad blood of female impurity, she hoped that the sacrifice would free her of certain "impediments" (*dabr'olebebi*) in her life's course. She saw no contradiction between this ritual and the canons of the Orthodox church; both were integral parts of her Christian faith, both marked her as a Georgian and as a believer (*morc'mune*).

The remarkable religious system of the northeast Georgian (henceforth **NEG**) mountaineers, with its imbedding of Christian symbols and saints in a distinctly non-Christian matrix, has attracted the attention of ethnologists and folklorists since the mid-19th century. A number of scholars — and talented amateurs native to the region, such as the poet Vazha-Pshavela — have collected oral literature, ritual texts and ethnographic descriptions. Most of these materials predate World War II, used as a convenient dividing point between what is considered to have been an essentially intact mountain "paganism" and the congeries of beliefs and practices observed today. (According to Charachidzé, the traditional NEG religious system "a sombre toute entière voici bientôt trente ans, ne laissant derrière elle que de faibles remous vite disparus" [1968: 717]. This would now appear to be an overly gloomy assessment, one that my Xevsurian friend and her unfortunate lamb — if it could be revived and made to speak — would no doubt

vigorously dispute, but the degree of change in the beliefs and symbolic system underlying these practices remains to be investigated).

In addition to ethnographic work, a few scholars have from time to time attempted to examine NEG paganism as a system, and place it in synchronic and diachronic perspective. Early analysts such as Marr and Wesendonk, influenced by references to a Mazdean-like official religion in the classical descriptions of pre-Christian Georgia, perceived an Iranian imprint in the mountaineer pantheon and sacrificial practices (a hypothesis Marr later recanted). The historian Ivane Javaxishvili, and most notably the ethnologist Vera Bardavelidze, working within the framework of Engelsian cultural stadialism, preferred an essentially paleontological approach, attributing beliefs and symbols to various sociocultural stages, always in a set sequence: “primitive society” before “class society”, “group marriage” before “pairing”, “mother right” before “patriarchy”, and so forth. Particular attention was paid to beliefs concerning the supernaturals inhabiting the celestial and demonic realms. Bardavelidze [1954] reconstructed a NEG holy trinity comprising the supreme deity Morige Ghmerti, a solar fertility goddess named Mze-kali, and K'viria, a sort of divine prime minister who mediates between Morige Ghmerti and the host of subordinate deities known as *xvtisšvilni*. A number of these latter have special functions (making war on ogres and dragons; assuring good crops and milk-yields) or are assigned to watch over social units of different sizes (all of Xevsureti, a group of clans, a single clan, a commune of neighboring villages, “brotherhoods” of families within a village, etc.). The polytheism and shamanism, the beliefs concerning purity and pollution, the nature of the sexes, the world of the dead — to say nothing of the clan-based social organization of the NEG mountaineers themselves — were seen as unquestionably archaic, dating back to pre-Christian, and in some cases, proto-Kartvelian times. According to the scenario reconstructed by Bardavelidze and her colleagues, Orthodox Christianity, adopted as the state religion in the 4th century, percolated slowly into the uplands of northern Georgia and the adjoining provinces of the North Caucasus. The mountaineers superimposed numerous aspects of Christian symbolism — the names of saints and angels, the terminology of the divine liturgy, the ritual use of icons, bells, candles and consecrated bread — onto a fundamentally non-Christian, pre-existing belief system. The Xevsurian mountaineer who speaks of a priest (*xucesi*) drinking from a chalice (*barzimi*) and lighting candles (*santelni*) before the icon of St. George (*c'minda givargis xat'i*) is using lowland Christian jargon to describe something radically different: the “priest” is a local fellow whose vocation was communicated through a series of personal tragedies and psychological illnesses the ultimate cause of which was diagnosed by a shaman; the “chalice” contains beer, not wine; the “icon” in certain respects IS “St. George”, who is himself a powerful deity watching over hunters, warriors, and men in general. Readers unfamiliar with

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traditional Georgian religion are advised to bear in mind that the terms for “icon” (*xat'i*) and “cross” (*ǰvari*) in the lexicon of Georgian Orthodoxy are curiously polysemous in mountaineer usage, denoting either the object, the shrine enclosing it, or even the deity of which it is a manifestation.

Until the appearance of K'ik'nadze's book, the most significant advance beyond the consensus view just presented was the 700-page monograph “Le système religieux de la Géorgie païenne: analyse structurale d'une civilisation”, by the Georgian-French scholar Georges Charachidzé. Following in the footsteps of his teachers Dumézil and Lévi-Strauss, Charachidzé submits the documentary evidence at his disposal (he did no fieldwork of his own) to a thoroughly structuralist, and, more importantly, synchronic analysis. Like Bardavelidze, he considers the NEG belief system to be archaic and pre-Christian, but he differs notably from her in rejecting the stadialism inherited from Morgan and Bachofen via Engels. He treats the data as the output of an internally-consistent cultural grammar, shared, with local variations, by the Pshavs, Xevsurs and their neighbors up until the beginning of this century. What Charachidzé uncovers is a rigorously binary symbolic system similar to those proposed for other cultures by Levi-Strauss, Needham, et al. On one side are men, beer, purity/holiness (*sic'mide*) and the gods; on the other are women, butter, impurity and the dead. Much of the ideological apparatus, in his analysis, is involved in overcoming the fundamental paradox a system of this type must necessarily confront: assuring the continuity of the patrilineage through union with dangerous, impure women. Paired female and male deities, and the institution of *c'ac'loba* (a.k.a. *sc'orproba*, a premarital relation between girls and boys from the same community), play a key role in transcending the contradiction.

The author of the book reviewed here, Academician Zurab K'ik'nadze [henceforth **ZK**], is professor of folklore studies at Tbilisi State University. In addition to numerous publications on Georgian oral literature and traditional religion, he is the author of a well-regarded book on Mesopotamian mythology [*švamdinaruli mitologia*, Tbilisi: Mecniereba, 1979]. *Kartuli mitologia* [henceforth **KM**] is the fruit of over a decade of rethinking the fundamental assumptions which guided research into Caucasian paganism during the late Tsarist and Soviet periods. Like Charachidzé, he rejects the stadialist framework of his predecessors, but unlike his Parisian colleague he rejects their proposed time-line as well. ZK holds that NEG paganism is a relatively recent phenomenon, going back no farther than the Middle Ages. The Xevsurians and their neighbors were in fact Christianized not long after their lowland compatriots, and kept the faith as long as they remained in regular, if infrequent, contact with the latter. The waves of Mongol, Turkish and Persian invasions which laid waste to much of lowland Georgia in the 13th

through 17th centuries left the highlands largely untouched, but cut off from the religious and cultural centers to the south. The religious beliefs and practices of the mountaineers drifted further and further away from orthodox Orthodoxy. A visitor from the lowlands in 1770 described Xevsureti as “a Christian province, which, due to our neglect and the passage of time, fell away from the faith (*sʒulzed c'amqdarni*)”, although the Xevsurians remained blissfully ignorant of the fact. The historical analysis of the ethnographic record as we know it, then, has been completely wrong-headed: Christianity is the substrate, not the superstrate, and the alien structure imposed on the elements of Orthodox cult and theology a recent by-product of isolation and illiteracy rather than a retention from the distant past. I will take up ZK's proposal and its consequences a bit further on, after a presentation of the structure of his book.

KM is subtitled *Ĵvari da saq'mo*, which I would translate “Shrine and community”. ZK organizes his book quite differently from his predecessors, in that he has hardly anything to say about the NEG pantheon (which provided the structural backbone to Charachidzé's tome, for example), preferring to focus on the relationship between the deity, whoever it might be, and the community of believers. The book is divided into the following five chapters:

1. “Foundation myths” (*daarsebis andrezebi*). ZK has paid particular attention to the *andrezebi*, myths recounting the foundation of a NEG shrine. These are fascinating documents, and ZK's presentation and discussion of them would be sufficient in itself to commend the book to a wider readership. The *andrezebi* are quite varied as to their content, but tend to have the following structure: (i) The site where the shrine is to be founded is described as already inhabited, either by a human community or by ogres (*devebi*). (ii) The deity makes known its desire to appropriate the site, often through the mediation of animals, or of people coming from far away (the lowlands or even a foreign country). Several *andrezebi* specify that the deity came up to the highlands to get away from such impure animals as pigs and frogs [KM 46-48]. (iii) The current inhabitants refuse to yield the site, and are punished — usually with extreme prejudice. (iv) The faithful construct a shrine on the chosen spot, which is typically some distance from the village, requiring in some localities a hike of several hours over precipitous terrain. The shrines themselves — and this is an important difference between NEG and most other areas of the country, including Svaneti — are simple constructions made of slate, few of which appear to have ever been used as Christian churches.

2. “The treasure of the Land of Kajis” (*kaĵavetis ganzi*). A widespread NEG myth recounts how Giorgi (St. George), accompanied by a legendary shaman, descended to the subterranean kingdom of the Kajis, a race of demonic blacksmiths with wondrous powers. He defeats the demons, lays waste to their castle, and returns bearing booty which will be used to establish the central institutions of human society: religion and marriage. Among the riches stolen from the

Kajis are the metal vessels used for brewing and drinking consecrated beer, cattle to be used for sacrifice, and the hearth chain symbolically linking the earthly community to heaven. Giorgi also brings three women back with him as his fictive sisters (*dobilni*), one of whom, Samdzimari, is elevated to the status of his divine consort and female double (“Giorgi and Samdzimari are one, one *xvtisšvili*,” says a highland informant). This material has been extensively discussed by Charachidzé [1968], so the spin ZK puts on it is instructive. In keeping with his thesis that the NEG religious system is relatively recent, he regards the myth of the deity Giorgi’s rescue of Samdzimari from the Kajis as derived from an episode in the *vita* of the Orthodox St. George, where he saves a pagan princess from a dragon and then converts her to Christianity.

3. “The community” (*saq’mo*). The longest chapter (100 pages) is given over to a detailed analysis of the internal structure of the human community living around the shrine. The term itself, *sa-q’m-o*, is derived from the root *q’m-a* “child, serf”, underlining the relation of paternalistic dependance and feudal subordination between the faithful and their local *ǰvari*. ZK discusses the relevant segmentations of the *saq’mo* into groups marked by greater or lesser degrees of purity (*sic’mide*) and therefore implication in the religious life of the community. At the bottom of the scale are the women as a group, especially those of child-bearing age. Women’s bloodflow is considered extremely polluting, and until recently they were sent to the barn or to tiny unheated huts outside of the village during menstruation and childbirth. Men are regarded as inherently purer, and it is from them, with rare exceptions, that the shrine personnel are chosen. Most of the latter only serve for limited terms, but those who enter into the most intimate contact with the *ǰvari* receive a special vocation, and serve for life. It is the priest (*xucesi*) who officiates at the solemn public rituals and sacrifices, but the true cornerstone of the NEG religious edifice is not he, but rather the *mk’adre* (medium) and *kadag* (shaman), who alone are authorized to speak in the name of the deity. While the priest is expected to maintain a high degree of purity, traditional shamans and mediums carried this restriction to the point of fanaticism; some individuals never married, and took extraordinary pains to avoid any sort of contact with women and other potential sources of pollution. (This obsession with purity may have led to the downfall of the institution of *kadag*. Xevsur and Pshav priests I spoke to during my visit of last summer stated that, as far as they know, the last mediums and shamans died, in many cases by their own hand, in the 1960’s, i.e. not long after the massive resettlement of NEG mountaineers in the Kakhetian lowlands. I sense a correlation between these two events, a subject I hope to address sometime soon).

Of particular interest is ZK’s reconstruction of the spatio-spiritual topology of the NEG cosmos. As mentioned earlier, the sites of shrines are believed to have selected by the *xvtisšvilni* themselves. The height of sacredness is concentrated in the *k’vrivi*, the site where a deity is said to have touched down. A tower built on such a spot near the village of Matura, to give one

example, is held in such awe that even the priest cannot cross the wall encircling it. In order to sprinkle the tower with the blood of an animal sacrificed in the name of the community, the priest throws blood-soaked snowballs against its walls [KM 14; cp. Bardavelidze 1974]. These sites are said to be linked to heaven, and to other shrines, by golden chains (*šibni*) on which the angels and *xvtisšvilni* move back and forth. (The golden *šibni* are ordinarily invisible, of course, but some individuals have beheld them in visions. Among the more vivid was that experienced by the mother of the poet Vazha-Pshavela, who, sleeping on the balcony as a young girl, was awakened by a terrifying noise: “The entire sky was lit up. Two golden chains had appeared, one from Ch’iauris Gora, the other from Sxlovanis Gora¹, upon which golden children were going up and coming down, singing all the while with the purest, sweetest voices that one could imagine ...” [KM 106-107]). Radiating outward from the *k’vrivi* are spaces of lesser sacredness, to which increasingly larger groups of people have access. The inner buildings of the shrine, where consecrated beer is stored, are only accessible to the priest and his assistants. The outer precincts may be visited by men, but remain off-limits to women. At the opposite extreme is the *samrelo*, the women’s menstruation hut, which the menfolk, fearing pollution, steer well clear of.

4. “The times when it rained blood” (*sisxlis c’vimebis droebi*). NEG tradition, and especially the epic poetry sung by the mountaineers to the accompaniment of the *pandur*, draws much of its material from the real or legendary events of three times of crisis and testing (*cda*): (i) the battles between the *xvtisšvilni* and the ogres to free the land for human habitation; (ii) the resistance of the mountaineers against the armies of Zurab Eristavi, a 17th-century lowland nobleman who sought to extend his hegemony to the highlands; (iii) the 18th-century wars against Persian invaders, when NEG warriors fought under the leadership of King Erekle II. The central motif of the ballads in the Zurab cycle is the role of the sacred oak trees (*bermuxa*) standing in the precincts of the chief shrines of Pshavi and Xevsureti. All attempts to break the resistance of the mountaineers failed until a traitor revealed the secret of the trees to Zurab. Both trees were believed to be linked to heaven by invisible golden chains. Zurab was instructed to spill the blood of a cat — an unclean animal — on the *bermuxa*, which thereupon forced the deity to flee heavenward, taking his chain with him. Deprived of their divine protector, the trees were cut down, and the mountaineers were defeated in battle. (Fortunately, according to the legend, new cultic centers sprung up to replace those destroyed by Zurab, and the highlanders finally prevailed).

5. “The devoted” (*šec’irulni*). If Zurab Eristavi has been totally demonized in the collective memory of the Pshavs and Xevsurians, Erekle II seems to have undergone an apotheosis. Local legend has it that he was abandoned in the forest and suckled by a deer, a promising beginning

¹ These two mountains, atop which shrines are situated, are located to the east of the Iori River, about two miles south of Kvemo-Artani.

for a mythic hero. He was also credited with priestly and shamanic powers; on one occasion he is said to have entered the holiest inner sanctuary of Gudanis Jvari, held a private conference with the deity, and subsequently announced to the Xevsurs that the *ǰvari* wished them to join the battle for the liberation of Georgia. ZK concludes from these and other such legends that the NEG mountaineers regarded the Georgian monarchs as tantamount to *xvtisšvili*, essentially collapsing the feudal and spiritual hierarchies into one.

KM is a valuable and important contribution to our knowledge of the extraordinary, vanishing symbolic system of the NEG provinces. In most respects it complements, rather than contradicts, the monographs of Bardavidze and Charachidzé, especially in highlighting the importance of the foundation myths, and for providing a useful perspective on the purity-impurity opposition which is so central to the NEG religious system. Since this book is billed as the first volume of a longer series, I hope that in subsequent publications ZK will bring his formidable analytical acumen to bear on certain key matters not covered in KM. Chief among these are (i) funerary practices and beliefs concerning the world of dead souls (*suleti*), which in many respects parallels, and on other respects represents an inversion of the world of the living; and (ii) the types of social units associated with the shrines. As has been noted in the ethnographic literature, Xevsurian social structure differs in interesting respects from that of other Georgian provinces, some of which seems to be due to extensive contact with the endogamy-favoring Northeast Caucasians. Some local shrines and their patron deities are associated with “brotherhoods” (*saǰmo*) of neighboring families who belong to different clans. These families also worship at their clanic shrines, resulting in a complex interweaving of *saǰ'moebi*, reflecting both descent groups in the strict sense and residence patterns. At the ideological level, however, the whole theological and social architecture remains based on kinship alone, since the *saǰmo*, as its name indicates, creates a quasi-familial relationship (it one of several forms of fictive kin alliance in use in the Caucasus). One final word of appreciation before moving on to the next section of this review: Although as a non-native speaker I cannot pretend to the informed judgment of an educated Georgian, I wish to add that KM is one of the best-written and best-organized works in the field of Georgian social science that I have read in recent years. ZK has an elegant scholarly style, with long well-crafted sentences. The text abounds in citations from native informants, some of them quite lengthy, in the original dialect. Fortunately for those of us who did not grow up in Xevsureti, ZK generally paraphrases the essential points of each quotation in the following discussion. Important terms from NEG religious vocabulary are glossed when first introduced, and listed in the index at the back of the book.

I will indulge now in a sociohistorical thought-experiment. Let us suppose that ZK's most controversial thesis is in fact true. If the Georgian mountaineers were once Orthodox Christians who lapsed into a paganism largely created after their isolation from the lowlands in the late Middle Ages; if their Christian imagery, feudal vocabulary and deification of the Bagration dynasty go back to a time when their ancestors were more fully integrated into the social and political life of the Georgian kingdom, what does all this imply concerning the prehistory of the NEG highlands? There is much in KM that could lead the reader to the conclusion that the NEG religious system is an outlying branch of a culture centered in lowland Georgia. Many of the *andrezebi*, as was noted above, link the foundation of a mountain shrine to a deity in flight from the dangerous, impure lowlands. ZK sees a historical basis for these accounts in the practice of removing icons and other sacred valuables from lowland religious centers to the mountains during times of warfare and foreign occupation [KM 55]. Could it have been the case that the cradle of Georgian culture and speech is in the lowlands, and that they penetrated the remote mountain valleys northeast of Tbilisi in relatively recent times? Here again the evidence amassed by ZK is highly suggestive of such a scenario, and it receives support from other data. In what follows I will make a preliminary assessment of two issues which bear on the lowland-origin hypothesis: (i) evidence for prehistoric Kartvelian expansion into NEG; (ii) evidence for Common Kartvelian structural features in NEG religion.

(i) *Georgian invaders and Vainax autochthones*. According to the *andrezebi*, the land chosen by the *xvtisšvilni* for their earthly residence had first to be liberated from its ancient inhabitants. Led by the warrior deities K'op'ala and Iaqsar, the *xvtisšvilni* declared a war of conquest on the autochthonous ogres, and drove them from the land. Another raiding party led by Giorgi destroyed the hitherto impregnable fortress of the Kajis, and carried off their treasures, cattle and women. Now that the land was cleared of its hostile occupants, and the goods necessary for religion freed from the demon blacksmiths, the *saq'mo* could set up its residence in the promised land. ZK notes the numerous parallels between these myths and the ballads of warriors skirmishing with the *Kist'ebi* (Chechens and Ingush) to the immediate north, and the occasional substitution of *Kist'eti* (land of the Kist'is) for *Kaĭaveti* (land of the Kajis) in mythic texts [KM 117, 120]. ZK limits himself to the observation that “actual raids by the *saq'mo* in Kist'eti serve as a model for the battles against Kaĭaveti” [KM 85]”, but, as I have noted elsewhere [Tuite 1995] one can easily go further and interpret the stories of wars of conquest and pillage against demonic autochthones as “charter myths” similar to those some scholars have reconstructed for the early Indo-Europeans [Ivanov & Toporov 1974; Lincoln 1981]. The Indo-European myths, featuring a celestial deity who “liberates” livestock or water sources from a cave-dwelling dragon, are believed to have served as an ideological buttress to the predatory activities against (literally) demonized opponents which led to the spectacular expansion of the Indo-Europeans at

the expense of their less warlike neighbors. One wonders, then, if the ancient Georgians likewise extended their hegemony northwards and upwards from lowland Iberia, displacing or assimilating the autochthonous highlanders. Could the ogres and subterranean blacksmiths subdued by Giorgi and his swashbuckling *xvtisšvilni* be the creations of an ideological apparatus intended to justify — either at the time or after the fait accompli — a prehistoric expansion of lowland Kartvelians into what is now Pshav-Xevsureti? In a conversation with the author of this review, ZK, without expressly endorsing the hypothesis explored here, pointed to linguistic evidence of a Vainax (Chechen-Ingush-Batsbi) substrate in the NEG dialects. (See Uturgaidze [1966] for a discussion of Vainax loanwords and calques in these dialects; he also argues that the numerous NEG toponyms terminating in /-lo/, /-go/ and /-čo/ come from the same source).

I find the lowland-origin hypothesis an attractive explanation for many features of NEG religion, and one that merits further study. Like ZK himself, however, I think it prudent to refrain from a simple-minded extrapolation from myths and symbolic systems to reconstructions of prehistory. First of all, as any observant visitor can readily verify, NEG in general, and Xevsureti in particular, have been from time immemorial zones of extensive contact with the Northeast Caucasus. The Russian sociologist N. G. Volkova classified the Xevsur-Vainax frontier as one of fourteen interethnic ‘contact zones’ in the republic [Volkova 1978: 36-50]. These are areas of significant bilingualism among one or both of the neighboring groups. In the case of the Xevsur-Vainax contact zone [*xevsuro-vajnaxskaja kontaktnaja zona*], it was more often the case that Xevsurs knew the Chechen or Ingush language than the reverse: men from the villages of Mighma-Xevsureti (that part of Xevsureti extending into the North Caucasus) worked as migrant laborers in “Kist’eti”, and Xevsurs seeking to obtain horses, livestock or salt would frequent the Chechen bazaars of the Upper Argun valley not far from Shat’ili. A smaller number of Vainaxs knew Georgian, these being shepherds who regularly drove their flocks to Xevsurian pastures, and itinerant builders specializing in the construction of defense towers. Over the course of the centuries, many Chechen and Ingush families have settled in northeastern Georgia, often to flee a potentially serious loss of life in a blood-feud with a neighboring clan. For the same reason Georgians have crossed northward and settled in Vainax territory. There are Kist’i graves in the cemetery of the Xevsurian village Mutso, and visiting Kist’is participated in local religious festivals [Melikišvili 1986]. Facts such as this might go a long way toward explaining the language-contact phenomena noted by Uturgaidze, without invoking the scenario of a massive displacement of one linguistic community by another. (In general, the more one studies the historical and ethnographic literature concerning the peoples of the Caucasus, the more evident it becomes that these people were not nearly as isolated from and hostile toward each other as one might suppose in a region of rugged terrain and continual warfare. All Caucasian ethnic groups practiced some form or forms of artificial kinship — sworn brother- and sisterhood, milk

siblinghood, fictive adoption — which served to forge ties across clan and ethnic boundaries that were every bit as solid as blood relationship.)

(ii) *Non-Christian elements in NEG religion*. If the NEG religious system as we know it was cobbled together in relatively recent times, one would expect that its non-Orthodox component would be either unique to the region, or resemble the beliefs of the neighboring Vainax peoples. If, on the other hand, the system were particularly archaic, then it should share its important structural features with the other Kartvelian-speaking groups. Of especial significance would be parallels with the traditional beliefs of the Svans, a group who, on the basis of linguistic evidence, separated from the ancient Kartvelian speech community as early as the 3rd millennium BCE, although their contacts with lowland Georgia seem to have been fairly extensive in the early Middle Ages. As Charachidzé points out, “les caractères communs à la civilisation des Svanes et à celle des Pshav-Xevsur sont assurés d’une haute antiquité, toute influence mutuelle étant exclue, du moins depuis le début du christianisme” [1968: 475].

An examination of Dalgat’s century-old monograph [1893] turns up a number of features which are shared with the pre-Islamic religion of the Vainaxs. A significant proportion of them are associated with funerary observances: offerings of vodka and milk products, horse-races and target-shooting. One also notes the use in ceremonies of a *droša*-like banner with bells and pieces of cloth hanging from it, and what might be interpreted as evidence for a type of spirit medium. Turning to the ethnographic dossier on the Svans, the parallels do not seem at first to be especially numerous, but a closer examination of the evidence reveals what may be much more deep-seated, fundamentally structural similarities. Some have already been proposed by Charachidzé [1968: 106, 471-490]; I will argue for an additional structural parallel here.

It was mentioned earlier that the NEG deities Giorgi and Samdzimari form a divine couple. Among the functions which are entrusted to them is that of watching over the wild spaces outside of human habitations and their immediate surroundings. Giorgi’s patronage extends to war, raiding, wood-cutting, honey-gathering; in brief, those occasions where men leave the village in search of the riches of the outside world [SRG 445; 471]. The association with the exterior, curiously enough, extends even to the “ethnicity” of the deity: The officials of the sanctuary in the Xevsurian village Somxo claim to have seen a vision of Giorgi “wearing white garments in the style of a Kist’i, with a Kist’i tunic and coat” [Charachidzé 1968: 461-465]; elsewhere he is invoked as *sp’arsangelozi* ‘Angel of Persia’ [ibid. 444]. His *dobili*, the seductive, gold-haired and jewelled princess from Kajaveti, is named after her fondness for jewelry (Samdzimari means the ‘bead-wearer’ [< Georgian *mdziv*- ‘bead, necklace’] according to Charachidzé [1968: 562-563]). Legendary male shamans are said to have received their communicative powers through the experience of nightly visits from her, disguised as a local woman. In addition to her associations with the kingdom of the Kajis, Samdzimari reigns over that part of nature where

humans never (or hardly ever) tread. One Xevsur legend describes the chance encounter between a shepherdess in search of a lost calf and the goddess Samdzimari in a distant clearing, covered by grass which has never been tread upon by humans or livestock [ibid. 472]. Giorgi, by contrast, is associated with mountains and streams and prairies, which, though part of the world of savage nature, are accessible to humans [ibid. 473-474]. Both deities are called upon by hunters and travellers [Chikovani 1972: 243], although for different reasons: Samdzimari is invoked in her capacity as guardian of the spaces outside of human society, and Giorgi as protector of men making use of those spaces. Between the two of them, they assure the safe voyage and return of those who circulate between the interior (the community) and the exterior. In Charachidzé's words, "ils administrent les rapports que le clan entretient avec les étrangers et les déplacements de ses membres hors du territoire dévolu à la société" [1968: 620].

The Svans of the northwest Georgians highlands have their own St. George, called *ǰgəɾæ:g* (< Mingrelian *ǰgiri givargi* 'good George' [Shanidze 1973]), whose principle function is, as Charachidzé puts it, "mettre les espaces naturels à la disposition des hommes" [1986: 183]. Among the duties flowing from this role is the protection of shepherds and their flocks in the alpine pastures far from the village; the protection of bees and beekeepers, who must go to the forest to capture a queen in order to colonize a hive; and, of course, assuring the success of hunters [Charachidzé 1968: 478-486]. (Significantly, the Svans refer to wolves, the predators par excellence, as "St. George's dogs" [*ǰgəɾæ:gi že yær*; Shanidze et al 1978: 90]). In addition to *ǰgəɾæ:g*, Svan hunters offer sacrifices a goddess named Dæl. In terms of her physical traits Dæl resembles a woman of extraordinary beauty, with long, golden-colored hair and radiant white skin. She dwells high up in the mountains, usually out of the reach of humans, where she watches over the herds of wild animals under her protection. She is not adverse to sharing animals from her flock with hunters, as long as certain conditions and taboos are respected. Hunters must not kill more ibex than they can carry back to the village, nor may they take aim at specially-marked animals believed to be a transformation of the goddess. If a hunter is successful, certain body parts from the slain beast must be offered to Dæl in thanksgiving. The goddess is particularly sensitive to violations of the purity of the mountains, by which is meant pollution from women's menstrual blood. A man may not go on a hunting expedition, for example, if one of the women in his household is in childbirth or having her period. The penalty for violations of the conditions imposed by Dæl range from lack of hunting success to a fatal fall from a cliff. Of particular interest are the celebrated Svan ballads, of which there are numerous variants, describing the fate of a legendary hunter who had been chosen by Dæl to be her lover. She gives him a token of their love — a bead, ring or charm [*twæl*] — and requires him to avoid all contact with human females. As long as he remains in the goddess's good graces the hunter enjoys remarkable success, never once returning home empty-handed. The moment he breaks his

promise, sleeping with either his wife or his sister-in-law, Dæl sends him falling from the mountain to his death [Virsaladze 1976; texts and commentary in Tuite 1994].

The divine couples of the exterior in the pantheons of the East and West Kartvelian mountaineers are compared in the following table. While the Christian legend of St. George, the maiden and the dragon may well have provided the name and some of the imagery associated with the pagan deities Giorgi and Samdzimari and their Svan counterparts, the symbolic opposition imposed on these personages has no precedent in Orthodox hagiography. Even such curious props as the bead necklace are shared by Samdzimari and Dæl, despite the considerable time-depth separating them. (Not discussed here are the Abxazian deities Až^oeipšaa, with his daughters, and Aerg, who in many respects parallel Samdzimari/Dæl and Giorgi/Ĵgəræ:g. This further evidence of the distinctly Caucasian origins of the divine patrons of the outside world will be examined in detail in forthcoming work).

EAST AND WEST KARTVELIAN DIVINE COUPLES OF THE EXTERIOR.

<i>region</i>	<i>goddess of game animals and the wild</i>	<i>'St. George', patron of exploiters of the exterior</i>
Xevsureti (northeast Georgia)	<i>Samdzimari</i> *assures the success or failure of hunters *wild spaces (untouched by humans) *seducer of shamans *'necklace-wearer'	<i>Giorgi 'St. George'</i> *Patron of men exploiting the riches of the outside world: hunters, woodcutters, warriors and beekeepers. *Foreign dress, origin (Vainax, Persian)
Svaneti (northwest Georgia)	<i>Dæl</i> *assures the success or failure of hunters *high mountains (untouched by humans) *seducer of hunters *gives bead or jewel as token of love	<i>Ĵgəræ:g 'good St. George'</i> *Patron of men exploiting the riches of the outside world: hunters, shepherds and beekeepers; also patron of wolves ("George's dogs")

The conclusion I wish to draw from this is that, yet once again, the complexity of the ethnographic data renders any simplistic hypothesis concerning the prehistory of the central Caucasus dead on arrival. The NEG religious system, as ZK himself acknowledges [KM ii], has a significant Common Kartvelian (and perhaps pan-Caucasian) component which reaches deep into its structural foundations. To my mind the major contribution of KM, that which made reading it such an exciting and thought-provoking experience, is that for the first time the spotlight has been turned on the creative activity of the mountaineers themselves. For too long we have regarded them as slumbering in a centuries-long intellectual stagnation, serving as little more than passive transmitters of traditions inherited from their remote ancestors. With the publication of KM we can no longer ignore one of the fundamental lessons of anthropology: transmission is an active, not a passive process, and in a multi-ethnic contact zone such as the

Caucasus, the symbolic and material inheritance of each community is continually being reexamined in the light of what the neighbors are doing and saying, as well as the innately human drive toward structural regimentation. As ZK so vividly demonstrates, the same goes for the intellectual inheritance of ethnologists.

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