

# Study Guide

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## Funeral Chants from the Georgian Caucasus

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## THE FEAST-DAY OF TAMAR AND LASHARI



BY HUGO ZEMP

# Table of contents

Introduction	3
Shooting and editing strategies	3
Ethnographic Resources	4
Resources on Georgian traditional music	4

## **FUNERAL CHANTS FROM THE GEORGIAN CAUCUSUS (21 MIN)**

The Filmmaking Process	6
Editing	7
Reactions after screening	7
Resources on Svan ethnography	8
Resources on Svan vocal polyphony	8
Notes on the short films on YouTube	12

## **THE FEAST-DAY OF TAMAR AND LASHARI (70 MIN)**

Filmmaking, first cut and translation	13
Reaction in Tbilisi after viewing a first rough cut	14
Final editing	14
Resources on the ‘paganism’ of northeast Georgian mountain peoples	14
Resources on the songs of northeast Georgian mountain peoples	15
Bibliography, discography	17

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## INTRODUCTION

A change in the research themes or geographical orientations of an anthropologist or an ethnomusicologist is often the result of a piece of luck and/or an encounter. At the Fourth International Visual Anthropology Film Festival in Pärnu (Estonia) in 1990, where I presented my film *The Song of Harmonics*, the city mayor offered a round of drinks at the beginning of the festival. While most participants from Northern and Eastern Europe were having beers or hard liquor, a group of two men and two women drank wine, as I did. I approached them and asked where they were from. “Georgia” they said. “Georgia, one of the most beautiful music of the world!” I exclaimed. And I told them that I was an ethnomusicologist from Paris, that I owned three LP records (see discography [1], [2], [3]) of Georgian music, which I liked very much. Well, being lovers of good wine, we got on well, and after the daily screenings, we would go and share Georgian sausages, cheese and wine in their rooms. Finally they invited me to come and make a film in Georgia on any subject that suited me. A few months later as I was back in Paris I received the visa documents necessary for a stay in Georgia, which, in the summer 1991, still belonged to the Soviet Union although it had unilaterally declared its independence. That is how I came to make these films without being a specialist in music of the Caucasus.

I spent the last few weeks that preceded my travel to Georgia reading most of the articles on Georgian music published in a Western language (see bibliography), and listening again to the three LPs which were in my library. I remember that the publication of these discs in the seventies was quite an event for our research group at the Ethnomusicology Department of the Musée de l’Homme. Among the OCORA records, the three religious songs from Svaneti fascinated me most, and the articles I read confirmed my idea of the exceptional interest of this special polyphony, very different from the styles heard in all the other regions, and less known in Western Europe than the drone polyphony from Kakheti and the contrapuntal polyphony from Guria. My wife, who was looking for a new fieldwork after her doctoral thesis on the songs of French speaking Switzerland, also thought that Svaneti would be a rewarding new field for her. So we set off with our two daughters, then aged 7 and 3, and spent two months in Georgia.

More than twenty years before our decision to go to Georgia, I had bought a book by the Georgian-French anthropologist and linguist Georges Charachidzé (1968) on the religious system of the eastern Georgian mountains. Having then other priorities in mind, I had never read the 700 pages-thick book. But before we left, and although I did not intend to go the eastern mountains, I cast an eye through its index, and since there were many references to Svaneti where I wished to go, I put the book in my bag.

On our arrival in Tbilisi, I told the two inviting persons, Mirian Kutsishvili and Malkhaz Amashukeli from the National Museum, that we wished to go to Svaneti in Western Georgia. But Mirian said that he wanted to take us first to a ritual in the eastern mountains, where he had been doing fieldwork for many years.

After two days spent at the ritual of Tamar and Lashari in the province of Pshavi, we returned to Tbilisi and drove to Mestia, the regional capital of Upper Svaneti.

## SHOOTING AND EDITING STRATEGIES

Having received my visa just a short time before leaving for Georgia, it was not possible to get from the CNRS Audiovisual a 16 mm Éclair camera like for my previous films. However our Ethnomusicology research group in the Musée de l’Homme had just acquired two Hi-8 consumer Handycams. As I was more and more in favor of long shots with a moving camera (see on the filmmaker page the link to the article “Filming Music and looking at Music films”), I bought myself the new Steadicam Junior stabilizer. After my experiences with a 16 mm camera, I was relieved to have this lightweight equipment, which I used afterwards for all my other films. I really appreciated the hand-held stabilizer, which allowed me to get closer to the musicians without zooming. In the two films made in Georgia, I could walk along with a group of singers and film them from behind, from the side, and especially from the front while turning the camcorder backwards.

As an ethnomusicologist, I like to see and hear a musical piece

in its whole, without interruption. That is why I film it from beginning to end and, whenever possible, keep it in its integrity at the editing stage. I dislike cut-away shots taken at other moments, and I like the whole piece to show – in real time and sync sound – the relation between the musicians and the singers, between them and the other participants, and also between the performers, their audience and their environment. I also avoid voice-over narration on the music that is being played. The song texts are subtitled, as well as all the spoken sections such as prayers, interviews and casual conversations. For the first time and in order to give the necessary minimal ethnographic and musicological information, I used – in the two films on Georgian music – inter-titles set on a slightly opaque gray rectangular background, a process which allows viewers to read the comments at the same time that the scene is going on, and without any sound interruption. Later, I used the same device in all the films I shot in West Africa.

Back in Paris, the Hi-8 rushes for *The Feast-Day of Tamar and Lashari* were transferred on BETA SP for the editing on Avid. I managed to add the 1-hour-long *Funeral Chants from the Georgian Caucasus* cassette transfer on the same budget. Seven years after it was shot, the *Tamar and Lashari* film was edited by a professional editor in the Audiovisual Department of the CNRS under my daily supervision, and issued in 1998.

During my stay in Svaneti, I also filmed other events besides the funeral. Due to a tight budget, these Hi-8 cassettes could not be transferred to BETA SP. Instead, I made rough cuts on VHS, keeping the final editing for a later period. Because of various circumstances, I was not able to go back to the rushes before 2004. The original Hi-8 cassettes were definitively damaged and unusable. I copied the VHS cassette on DVCAM and made a new editing. As they are unique documents, I thought of distributing three short films on YouTube on the web catalogue page for *Funeral Chants from the Georgian Caucasus*. The small format of YouTube makes the lack in definition less disturbing.

## ETHNOGRAPHIC RESOURCES

The web site of anthropologist and linguist Kevin Tuite (see bibliography at the end of this study guide) is a mine of infor-

mation on the Caucasus in general, and the mountain peoples of Georgia in particular: there, you will find together with a bibliography, several articles consultable in PDF format, maps, slide shows, video clips, and many other links.

The two regions where I made these films are mountain areas: Svaneti in the northwest, Pshavi in the northeast of Georgia. Both regions are often labeled ‘archaic’, from an ethnographic point of view as well as from a musical one. These archaisms are generally explained by the relative isolation of the mountain dwellers from the lowland areas. Religious beliefs of both areas have been qualified as ‘pagan’; the title of Charachidzé’s book in French translates as “The Religious System of pagan Georgia”. As Kevin Tuite writes (1996a, in PDF on his web site):

‘Pagan’ religious practices and beliefs — a complex syncretism of indigenous Caucasian, Christian, Iranian and Turkic elements — have been observed up to the present day, especially in western Caucasia (among the Abkhazians and Svans), and in the mountain communities of central Caucasia (Ossetians and Pshav-Khevsurian Georgians).

## RESOURCES ON GEORGIAN TRADITIONAL MUSIC (IN GENERAL)

Georgian musicologists usually group the different music styles of the different provinces in two main categories, those of eastern and those of western regions, and across this division, in southern lowland areas and northern mountain areas (Jordania 2000). As the bibliography of this latter article shows, the great majority of studies are published in Georgian and Russian. In an earlier article, Jordania (1984) reproduced a very useful “Ethnographic map of Georgia”, indicating the borderlines of the provinces and – an original idea – characterizing with a minimum of words their dominant polyphony (reproduced here with courtesy of the author). Among the older publications in Western languages, which I consulted before and after my fieldwork in Georgia, the most valuable were the three articles by Grigol Chkhikvadze published in German (1968; republished in English in Tsurtsumia and Jordania, ed. 2010), French (1969) and English (1980). The lat-

ter is probably the best known, but also the shortest; see also its revised version (Chkhikvadze and Jordania, 2001). The French one is the most detailed.

A very useful source is also the web site of the International Research Center for Traditional Polyphony (founded in 2003) of Tbilisi State Conservatoire (see bibliography).

Just before writing the final version of this study guide, I received from Joseph Jordania the proofs of a book which will be published in 2010 in the USA, and presenting in English seventeen articles, fifteen of which written by Georgian authors (Tsurtsumia and Jordania, ed. 2010). The publication of this book is an event, since it presents for the first time main works of Georgian musicologists until now inaccessible to readers of Western languages.

Numerous CDs of Georgian music have been published since the 1990s, mostly presenting songs of different regions and styles performed by a single folk choir. The discography at the end of the study guide only mentions the first records known to me before I left for Georgia in 1991 and the two CDs of Svan songs, one [5] recorded in the field, the other [6] at a concert in Paris.

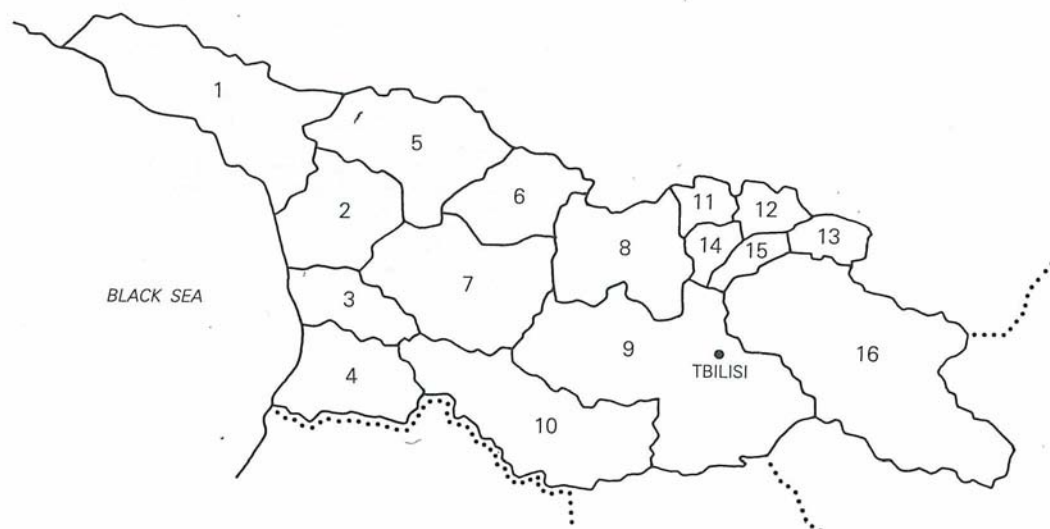


FIG. 8. Ethnographic map of Georgia.

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|---|--|
| 1. Abkhazian ASSR.  | 9. Kartli (three-part bourdon songs).  |
| 2. Megrelia (developed three-part polyphonic songs).                        | 10. Meskheta (evidence of bourdon songs).  |
| 3. Guria (the most highly developed three- and four-part polyphonic songs). | 11. Khevi (archaic two- and three-part bourdon singing).                         |
| 4. Ajarian ASSR (developed three- and four-part polyphonic songs).          | 12. Khevsureti (the most archaic songs, beginnings of two-part bourdon singing). |
| 5. Svanetia (complex three-part songs).                                     | 13. Tusheti (archaic songs, bourdon two-part).                                   |
| 6. Racha (complex three-part bourdon songs).                                | 14. Mtiuleti (archaic two- and three-part bourdon singing).                      |
| 7. Imeretia (complex three-part polyphonic songs).                          | 15. Pshavi (archaic two-part bourdon singing).                                   |
| 8. South Ossetian Autonomous Region.  | 16. Kakhetia (the most highly developed three-part bourdon songs).               |





## FUNERAL CHANTS FROM THE GEORGIAN CAUCASUS

### THE FILMMAKING PROCESS

On our arrival in Mestia, the regional capital of Upper Svaneti, we were met by administrative and cultural representatives, as well as by Islam Pilpani, the director of the well-known regional ‘Riho’ Ensemble. We then started to contact singers from different neighboring villages and that is how we heard about a funeral in the village of Lat’ali. We arrived there in the afternoon and the funeral was already going on. The courtyard was full of people. Our interpreter, Tsiuri Gabliani, introduced us to the mourning family and to the small choir singing the polyphonic funeral chants *zār* (called *zari* in Georgian) and asked for permission to film and to make sound recordings.

It seemed appropriate that, as a man, I should first spend some time with the men. My wife approached the women sitting in a half-circle around the open coffin, and made sound recordings of their lamentations and crying. There was a crowd of people between the lamenting women and the men’s choir standing behind a small table laid with food and drinks. I was reluctant to force my way through these people in order to come closer to the coffin. It was only after the women had stopped their lamentations that a narrow passage opened for the men to come nearer, one after the other, cry in front of the coffin, and then go back to where they had come from. This is how I man-

aged to film the lamenting men from behind while the women punctuated each of the few words uttered by the men with a collective shriek. After I had filmed a few men lamenting in front of the coffin, I turned back to the small choir and approached the master of the ceremony, who was made aware by one of the women that I was standing behind. He invited me to come closer to the coffin, asking people to open a passage for me. While the women started to leave for the cemetery, I heard that the men’s choir behind me was starting a new *zār*. I turned round and went back to the choir. This shot shows the spatial organization of the event. Then, when I saw that the young men started to carry the coffin, I turned again and followed the men’s choir, continuing to film without interruption, even when they stopped singing, because I was eager not to miss the beginning of the next *zār*. In fact, they performed the same *zār* from Lat’ali, the village of the deceased, several times. Earlier in the afternoon, they had also sung two *zār* from two other villages (one of which is on CD 5).

On the road leading to the cemetery, I passed the choir, and as I heard a man starting a new polyphonic funeral chant, I turned the camcorder backwards to film the first row of the singers while walking. This was made possible thanks to my hand-held stabilizer. My concern was to film the whole *zār* (about 4’50”) in its integrity.

All the women had already arrived at the cemetery and the place was full of people. There again I could not approach the mourning women and the coffin. But since I found myself with the men and was on the lookout for their polyphonic chant, I did not regret to be at a distance from the crying women, my presence being also more discreet when, the ceremony reaching its end, the coffin was covered over and lowered into the grave. While the men’s choir was performing a last *zār*, the one-hour cassette in my camcorder suddenly stopped: no tape left. Was it because of my apprehension to film a funeral, or my excitement to be able to attend the event? Whatever the reason, I had not bothered to slide extra blank cassettes into my pocket before I got off the car that drove us to the village and had left the material behind. After the burial in the cemetery, everybody went back to the house of mourning. Large tables were awaiting the party in the garden for the funeral meal, which I filmed before joining in, but the recording was

made on an other cassette which was not transferred on Beta SP when back in Paris and the pictures have since been lost.

## EDITING

Several other funerals took place during our stay in Upper Svaneti, but I must say that I had been under a very strong emotional shock during this first experience: as a result, when later invited to go and film other such funerals, I declined the offer.

I also encountered another problem: what should I do with a single 1-hour cassette, nearly half of which was unusable because of raindrops and mist on the lens? I made a first rough cut when still in Mestia and went back to Lat'ali for a few more shots of the village, the cemetery and the church (of which I only used a still in the final cut).

As the Hi-8 cassette ran out before the end of the last *zār* at the cemetery, I substituted the missing part with the sound from a recording taken while walking to the cemetery, and put the final credits over it. This is not a very orthodox way to work for an ethnomusicologist, but since there is no improvisation in these *zār*, I preferred this to an abrupt stop of the performance. The most common way to start a documentary is an 'establishing shot' that covers the surroundings. But I thought it would be more forceful to start immediately with a beautiful polyphonic funeral chant by the men's choir. They were what I had first seen and heard when I arrived in the courtyard of the mourning family, and what I had filmed first. These three-part polyphonies were also what had attracted me to Svaneti.

## REACTIONS AFTER SCREENING

Most viewers are deeply moved, just as I was while filming and still am today when I watch the film together with other people. However a few French students felt quite shocked and asked me how I could have been so ruthless as to break into the intimacy of a mourning family. To this I answered that first, I had asked for and received permission. Next, that the master of the ceremony had invited me to come closer, asking people to let me through. And finally, that not all societies consider

funerals to be part of the privacy of a limited family circle like nowadays in the West where death is a taboo: in Svaneti (like in Africa where I recorded and filmed many funerals), a whole clan and many other people from the village and elsewhere gather for the event. During our seminar, as some students were expressing their negative feelings about my film, my colleague Bernard Lortat-Jacob remarked that, for example in Rumania, mourning families hire professional video-makers, like they do for weddings.



One vocal expression of the funeral which struck me most – and which most viewers miss if I do not draw their attention to it – is the men's individual laments. I had previously recorded women's laments in Africa and Oceania, listened to recordings of European laments and read many publications on the subject. What was new to me in Svaneti was not the fact that women were lamenting but rather their punctuating shrieks. Also, I had heard a sound recording of the men's polyphonic *zār* before I went to Georgia, and was not surprised when hearing it in the field. But I had never heard about men who not only addressed the dead and performed laments, but who also shed tears during and after their lament, wiping their tears away with a handkerchief or their fingers. Furthermore, these laments were punctuated by the shrieks of the women.

Ethnomusicologists who use films as teaching material always want more information than a film can give (a feature-length film is not a book, and a short film is not an article). Of course there is the possibility of narration, common to most TV-documentaries, but which I hate, especially if it is over

music. I could have made interviews with the mourning family and the members of the men's choir (as suggested by a reviewer), but even nineteen years after the shooting, I still think that the strong emotional impact of the film would have been destroyed by interviews. Several viewers – non-ethnomusicologists – confirmed that I was right not to film interviews. However, I understand reviewers who wish for an accompanying booklet or at least a bibliography (why not both?). Because of my tight budget, it was out of question to print a booklet for the first DVD issues of the French and of the English version, which were then cut one by one on demand. But since DER now gives the possibility to publish study guides on the web catalogue, I have taken the opportunity to write this text.

## RESOURCES ON SVAN ETHNOGRAPHY

They are very few in West-European languages. Charachidzé (1964) makes many references to the Svans in his monograph based on ethnographic studies published in Georgian, but his work focuses on the peoples of the eastern mountains. Most useful is the encyclopedic article by Kevin Tuite (1994), giving an overview of Orientation, Linguistics, History, Economy, Kinship, Sociopolitical organization, Religion and expressive culture. See also the other articles of Tuite, in particular 1999.

## RESOURCES ON SVAN VOCAL POLYPHONY

Until very recently, my sources on Svan songs have been limited to a few sentences in German (Dirr 1914) and three articles in German, French and English (Chkhikwadze 1968, 1969, 1984). In the forthcoming book *Echoes from Georgia* to be published in 2010 (Tsurtssumia and Jordania, ed.), several chapters by different authors discuss Svan polyphony, the most important and detailed is the study entirely consecrated to Svan songs by Dimitri Araqishvili, published originally in 1950 in Georgian.

He enumerates “several religious songs, hymn, and remnants of pagan culture”: among them, the funeral chant *zari* – called in Svan, *zär* – which is in the center of our film, but also *Jrag-*

*ish*, hymn to Saint George (see on the web page the video entitled *Svaneti: Saint George Festival*), and *Kwiria*, to the god of fertility (video *Svaneti: Rehearsal of the 'Riho' Ensemble*). About these ‘pre-Christian’ song hymns, Araqishvili writes (forthcoming 2010):

The voice construction in the song is multi-voiced; three-part singing in the form of a fifth or fourth-fifth trichord, or a fourth-sixth chord, or a triad, or a three-part seventh chord. This is a rule. These triads or trichords often move in parallel, so that their dissonant progressions sound consonant. This is also a rule...

Svan song shows us how freely consonant and dissonant chords are juxtaposed. The rules developed in European music theory are incongruous with those of the natural harmony of Svan music, which has its own rules. It is as natural for a Svan to sing a dissonant trichord or seventh-chord as consonant triads or fourth-sixth chords. For him, all of these are consonant and solid, and singing in any other way would seem unnatural. This is his nature, his harmony, his combination, created by his life conditions and culture. It is essential that we pay attention to this remarkable phenomenon of musical culture.

In 1994, following our common fieldwork in 1991, Sylvie Bolle-Zemp published the first CD presenting field recordings made in Svaneti, together with an extensive bilingual booklet. She continued fieldwork in 1994 and 1995, and published the results in two articles (1997a and b). Independently from Araqishvili whose article in Georgian was not accessible to her, she found the same musical features. Thanks to Sonagram analyses, she could measure the intervals and their fluctuating intonation.

As elsewhere in Georgia, the musical system of Svaneti is modal and non-tempered. Melodic intervals, numerous and fluctuating, are narrow... (There are) neutral melodic intervals of near to  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a tone, of about  $\frac{5}{4}$  a tone and of the neutral third... Prolonged notes, more especially in the upper voices, often have a fluctuating intonation, slightly rising or falling by up to a  $\frac{1}{4}$  tone. Besides this, very marked glissandos on the larger intervals



are systematic in the performance of those songs thought to be the eldest.

The most characteristic chords on the strong beats are composed of the following intervals (counting from the bass): the fourth with the fifth, frequently at the start of a song; the fourth (sometimes augmented) with the seventh, or the fifth with the seventh; the second with the sixth. Successions of chords are often made with one or two notes in common. There are numerous consecutive fifths between the lowest and highest voices, such fifths often augmented by about  $\frac{1}{4}$  tone. A segment of a song

can finish on a “perfect” major triad, whose intervals are undergoing progressive stabilization, and while this chord plays an essential role, it does not belong to the western tonal system (1994: 36-37).

Among the songs considered to be the oldest, there is the men’s polyphonic funeral chant. Musical transcriptions are published in Belaief (1933), Dirr (1914), Jordania (1984), Bolle-Zemp (1994), Araqishvili (2010).

#### THE TRANSCRIPTIONS

The pitches on the staff notation are corrected by the numbers indicating the differences in cents (hundredths of a semitone) from the pitches of the tempered system (A = 440 Hz), the letter (t) points to a tempered pitch. These indications, as well as the accidentals, are valid for each staff and until the next change. However, because of pitch fluctuations and choir singing, the measurements have been made on an average frequency. It is also necessary to qualify these results taking into account the error margin due to the frequency measurement process of the Sona-Graph 5500. Thus, in our transcriptions, the numbers do not aim at defining pitches (an approach which would artificially impoverish the richness of this musical system), but rather at suggesting that the intervals are many and variable by nature.

In Svaneti, there is a whole range of nuances between measured and non-measured songs. The *Ribo* piece (fig. 2) is close to a measured song (with fluctuating rhythmic values and modifications of tempo though). Here, vertical dashes between the staves correspond to bar lines, while in the *žgarigis* piece (fig. 1) and in the *zār* (fig. 3 and 4), they delimit segments marked by respiration mainly.

The sonagram of figure 4 has been made with the collaboration of Trần Quang Hai, UMR 9957 of the CNRS, Département d’ethnomusicologie of the Musée de l’Homme.

Fig. 3. Beginning of the *zār* of Lat'ali (track 18).



*di-vo-de, dieli, gojia*. Another important study on Svan music is by Akhobadze (1956). Georgian ethnomusicologist Joseph Jordania kindly sent me a translation of the few paragraphs about the *zari*, with the following comment (personal communication, 29/01/2010):

Vladimer Akhobadze was the only scholar who wrote that Zari might have a few words inserted about the deceased person (among the usual for Svan Zari exclamations). As the information provided by Akhobadze is controversial on several accounts, and as neither Akhobadze, nor other Georgian ethnomusicologists had ever recorded a version of Svan Zari with inserted words, I believe Akhobadze words are an extrapolation of the information about Zari from other regions of Georgia to Svan Zari.

Bolle-Zemp's article in French is a study of the role of the voice and rhetoric in Svan funerals (1997a), and her long article in the German journal *Georgika* (1997b) is an exhaustive analysis of the *zär* of Lat'ali, the polyphonic funeral chant, which is in the center of my film. An important part of this article is about the so-called 'non-sense' syllables, which – according to her analysis and according to local informants – include the exclamation of grief *voj!* Her article demonstrates with many arguments based on phonetics, acoustics and musicology, that the whole *zär* can be analyzed as a stylization of this exclamation of grief.

How does it come that early Georgian composers and musicologists did not mention the omnipresent exclamation of grief in the 'text' of the men's polyphonic funeral chants? Is it because they did not make extensive ethnographic and linguistic investigations? Joseph Jordania proposes another explanation (personal communication 18/01/2010):

It is a well-known fact that the Svan Zari (funerary chant) consists only of the exclamation of grief *vai* and its versions (*voi*, *voio*, *vaiei*, etc). Araqishvili did not mention the text of Zari as it is obvious to him and to every Georgian that it is derived from the exclamation of grief. Everyone, starting from Araqishvili and Paliashvili to contemporary scholars, is sure that the text of Zari consists of the tragic exclamation *vai* (and its versions).

It is interesting to notice that Svan performers say that they do not 'sing' (*likhral*) a *zär* like other polyphonic songs, but that they 'call' (*lit'uli*) a *zär*. According to some Svan people, "The *zär* is a danger signal, a call of warning, an expression of despair". "It expresses the state of a psychic shock, a feeling of terror". "Zär is pure affliction" (Bolle-Zemp 1997b: 146).





## NOTES ON THE SHORT FILMS ON YOUTUBE

(See the web page of *Funeral Chants from the Georgian Caucasus*)

### ***Svaneti: Saint George Festival in Hadishi***

Usually, at this yearly summer festival in the mountain, people sing and dance after the morning ceremonies. In 1991, the clan who was in charge of the festival organization was mourning, so that the only song performed was the hymn to *Jgrag*, Saint George. For a musical transcription and a sound recording, see CD 5, another recording can be found on CD 6.

Video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bjH-N-0Ohfc>

### ***Svaneti: A Wedding in Nakhra***

Members of the local choir and some of their friends perform the songs and round dances, *perkuli* in Georgian. *Tamar Ded-pal* is a ritual song dedicated to Queen Tamar, a most famous ruler at the end of the 12th and beginning of the 13th century, the “Golden Age” of Georgia. The song has an alternation of 6/8 and 4/4 meter. Queen Tamar has been deified by the mountain peoples of northeastern Georgia (see the film *The Feast-Day of Tamar and Lashari*).

Video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0sRlgX60xAk>

### ***Svaneti: Rehearsal of the ‘Riho’ Ensemble***

The ‘Riho’ ensemble is a well-known regional choir of Upper Svaneti, directed by Islam Pilpani, who is the only member to have had a formal musical education in the capital Tbilisi. We asked to make some sound recordings (of which three songs are published on CD 5). The director rehearsed each song so that the recordings would be perfect. I asked him for permission to film one rehearsal. This is especially interesting since it shows how the chords are composed of the three melodic lines, and how the songs are learned and rehearsed, at least by a semi-professional choir. Even though the middle voice is “leading” (*mæzexv*) or “beginning” (*mæbne*) according to the Svan terminology, the director successively rehearsed each verse first with the high voice (*mec’em*), followed by the bass (*bän*), and only then by the middle voice which usually starts

Svan songs. While in a traditional context of performance, the leading voice (median) and the high voice are sung by soloists, in a constituted choir like the ‘Riho’ ensemble, these two parts are sung by two or more singers. This ritual song, entitled *Kwiria*, is mainly composed of non-sense syllables. A different version, performed in Paris by the ‘Riho’ choir, also appears on CD 6.

Video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DP7gSsF9-u0>





## THE FEAST-DAY OF TAMAR AND LASHARI

### FILMMAKING, FIRST CUT AND TRANSLATION

We arrived early in the afternoon on the day before the ritual, at the same time as many other people who got busy putting up their tents. Miriam Kutsishvili had explained to me what was going to happen. He introduced me to the shrine priest (*xavisberi*) Shota Rigishvili, whom he had known for many years, and asked him for permission to film. Thanks to this introduction, I was able to film all the aspects of the ritual at will, but was however careful not to disturb the event. As I was my own cameraman and soundman, my presence was also less intrusive than a film team of two, three or more people. As for the non-ritual scenes, when some of the people who were picnicking and/or making music saw me with my camera, they beckoned me to come, film them, and share their food and wine.

Back to Tbilisi I had a closer look at the book by Georges Charachidzé (1968) and found a whole chapter about the rituals of Tamar and Lashari, which I had just filmed. There I found extensive descriptions and analyses of many other more or less important divinities, called “children of God”, and explanations about the functions of the different persons acting at the shrines. My interpreter from the Georgian National Museum was with us during the two months of our stay in Georgia and made a thorough phonetic transcription of all the prayers, songs and interviews I filmed. Apart from a few excursions to different villages where I filmed Svan songs, most

of my time in Svaneti was spent working on the rushes for the Tamar/Lashari film. The phonetic transcription and word-by-word translations had to be time coded with the rushes, and a literal and a more comprehensible translation with annotations had to be made. I eventually made a first rough cut, which started with our arrival at the camping site and ended with the last shots of the ritual at Lashari shrine.

Before leaving Georgia, I returned with Miriam Kutsishvili to the Tamar/Lashari shrines. At the latter shrine we saw a bus with pilgrim travelers on it although there was no scheduled religious festivity. The shrine priest who accompanied the pilgrims was very young, in his early twenties. Miriam asked him how he became *xavisberi*. He answered that when a teenager, he became mentally ill and would not recover his health unless he promised to become a shrine priest, which he did (see also in the film the interview with Shota Rigishvili). This unexpected meeting showed that a new generation was taking over from the older one. Ten years later Kevin Tuite (see below) also mentioned that the lowlands gave a new generation of shrine priests.

We visited Shota Rigishvili at his home in Tianeti, the neighboring town, and showed him the rough cut, which he obviously appreciated. Miriam Kutsishvili took the opportunity to take further notes for the research he was then doing. While the shrine priest confirmed that the female lead singers were *kadag*, oracles, he denied this qualification to the woman who was apparently in a trance at Tamar shrine, saying that she was mentally sick. Her words were incomprehensible, which however is not necessarily a sign of madness as these words could have been the secret language of the gods. Northeast Georgian highlanders distinguish between the possession of an initiated *kadag* by gods, and being possessed through sickness, mostly mental sickness. But even in this latter case, possession is believed to be the fact of gods, and a person meant to become *kadag* or shrine priest, chosen by a divinity, usually experiences ‘sickness trances’ in his/her earlier life (Charachidzé 1968: 118). When watching the film, we can see that the shrine priest Shota Rigishvili gets impatient with the possessed woman and can’t wait to start the ritual. When we were back to his home, I filmed him watching a women’s ritual song (*Dideba*, “Glory”): he showed his approval using words

of prayers and cross signs, and having a real dialogue with the video on the monitor screen.

## REACTION IN TBILISI AFTER VIEWING A FIRST ROUGH CUT

After our return from Svaneti to Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, I showed a first rough cut to some ethnomusicologists and ethnographers. They criticized three scenes. One was about people playing cards at their campsite. In another scene a whole line of hawkers was selling various market goods. These two scenes were not considered to belong to the ritual of Tamar and Lashari, and I was insistently asked to cut them out, which I eventually did when I saw how genuinely concerned they were. The third scene showed profane dance music played on the clarinet, accordion and drum, after the morning ritual at Tamar shrine. It was criticized for being urban, for being of Armenian or Turkish origin, and not supposed to be performed in a pure Georgian mountain ritual (about the ideological opposition of “oriental, urban” music versus “pure, national”, highly valued rural polyphonic singing, see Tsitsishvili 2007). I explained that my purpose was to film all the music that was performed during the feast-day, be it sacred or profane, traditional or modern, native or foreign. The critical voices subsided and I kept the scene. Their negative feelings concerning non-religious acts and music may be explained by the fact that they valued Georgian identity in the face of Soviet Union’s domination. The legend of Tamar, sung with the traditional *panduri* lute accompaniment, was also profane music, but it glorified the Georgian nationality. Some other people felt strongly against my project: I should not make a film about pagan rituals which would give a bad image of Georgia, a country which, as early as in the fourth century, was one of the first to convert to Christianity (after Armenia).

## FINAL EDITING

Back in Paris, I showed the rough cut to our research group of the Musée de l’Homme, inviting Georges Charachidzé who, for the first time, could watch a ritual which he had discussed and analyzed at length but had never seen, since his work was based on resources published by Georgian ethnographers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Charachidzé kindly

revised the translation, originally made by a translator not familiar with the terminology and meaning of invocations at ‘pagan’ shrines in the mountains.



The final cut was made only six years later at the Audiovisual Department of the CNRS. The choice of a chronological structure to present these two days appeared obvious from the beginning and the sequence of my visit to the shrine priest’s home at the end of my stay in Georgia served as a contextual introduction to the film.

Due to my lack of experience with a consumer video camcorder, I was not aware that the date and time data appearing on the lower part of the LCD viewer of the camcorder while I was shooting were definitely inlaid on the tape. Because of this flaw in the first cassettes, the editor and I decided to reframe all shots in the 16:9 aspect ratio.

## RESOURCES ON THE ‘PAGANISM’ OF NORTHEAST GEORGIAN MOUNTAIN PEOPLES

At the time of its publication in 1968, Georges Charachidzé’s 700-page book was the most detailed account and analysis of the Northeast Georgian highlanders, mainly of the Pshavi and Xevsureti communities, written in a Western language. More recent works are those by Kevin Tuite (see his web site and the bibliography at the end of this study guide). The ‘paganism’ of the northeastern mountain dwellers has long interested ethnographers. Tuite (2002) summarizes the different theories about its origin:

Previous analyses of Georgian highland religious syncretism have employed what one might call an archeological model, with sharply distinct chronological levels: either an ancient paganism overlain by the trappings of Orthodoxy [e.g. Bardavelidze 1957], or a thoroughly Christianized highland population cut off from the lowland centers of political and religious authority by a long succession of wars and invasions from the east, whereupon they drifted into an increasingly paganized folk Orthodoxy [K'ik'nadze 1996; reviewed by Tuite 1996]. I propose instead that the religious system observed by 19th-c. ethnographers is the outcome of a gradual and dynamic process of political and religious transformation (or reformation)..."

At the final text of the film I ask myself whether the Tamar/Lashari rituals will remain alive for a long time, given the increasing influence of the Orthodox Church since Georgia's independence. Kevin Tuite (2007) gives, in his work, a provisional answer. He attended these rituals at the turn of the 21st century and noticed a "new generation of shrine priest raised in lowlands; Orthodoxy not (yet) active in the region". Although many city dwellers reject the 'pagan' rituals and sanctuaries of the mountains, the then dissident leader Zviad Gamsaxurdia (originated from Western Georgia) – and who was to become the first president of independent Georgia in 1991 – went on a pilgrimage to the Lashari shrine (the one I filmed) "to take an oath, in front of "his" followers, to fight for the independence of Georgia" (Tuite 2002). This reminds us that warriors, priests and oracles would meet at Lashari shrine before fighting the enemy (Charachidzé 1968: 178).

Tuite (forthcoming, previous version in PDF on his web site) studied the texts and functions of the *Iavnana* songs of which I filmed several versions. Variants of these songs – the name of which derives from its refrain – are performed as lullabies, as healing songs for small pox and other infectious diseases, for spirit possession and in the context of collective rituals like at the Tamar shrine. As for this latter case, Tuite noticed that "whereas some of the words sung by the lead singer are stock phrases, others appear to be improvised on the spot", and that "they are sung exclusively by women, and in particular, women from lowland east Georgia". However, regarding the

women's role as song leaders in this context, it can be noticed in my film that at Lashari shrine, one of the two alternating song leaders was a man: the banner-bearer (*mk'adre*) and at the same time servant of the sanctuary (*dastur*). This seems to be an exception.



## RESOURCES ON THE SONGS OF NORTHEAST GEORGIAN MOUNTAIN PEOPLES

To my knowledge, the only published sound recording (at least available in the West) of two-part drone polyphony from the eastern mountains is a short field recording on CD 4 (track 23) of a men's ritual song from Pshavi. It is most similar in style to the men's song which I filmed at Tamar shrine before and while walking to Lashari shrine. Shota Rigishvili named this song a *perkhuli*, round dance, even though in the film the men did not dance, but stood still in a circle before leaving.

Not much information about ritual songs from Pshavi can be found in publications in a Western language. Chkhikwadze is the most pertinent when he describes in a few lines the main characteristics of Pshav songs: "the descending phrases... the alternation of two soloists against a drone bass sung by a chorus... each couplet being repeated by the other soloist almost unchanged... the drone entering often on the seventh which rises to the tonic in unison with the soloist at the cadence." (1980: 362). His transcription of an *Iavnana* song can be found in the French article (1969: 27), in the German article (1968: 174) and in this latter translated into English (2010). Belaiev includes the musical transcription of another *Iavnana* song (1933: 423).

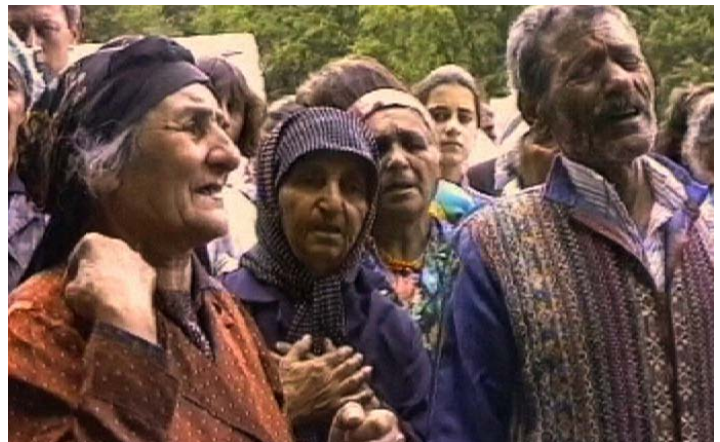


In ethnographic writings as well as in studies by Georgian musicologists, the two northeastern mountain areas of Pshavi and Khevsureti, which have in common many similar ‘archaic’ features, are frequently discussed together. The singing of a solo voice with a choral drone was considered as an early form of polyphony, from which more complex three-part polyphonies of other regions developed. Against this evolutionary theory, Jordania (2006, pp. 198-200) recently proposed an alternative point of view. With several ethnomusical, historical and linguistic arguments, and after having reminded us of the theory according to which the ‘paganism’ in Khevsureti was not a survival, but a regression from Christian orthodoxy (see the reference in Tuite 1996b, 2002), and that the Khevsurs came only in the 17th-18th centuries to the mountain area where they still live today, Jordania came to the following conclusion:

...if we look at the musical traditions of the Khevsurs from the point of view of the “secondary archaic”, it becomes possible to view the simple character of Khevsureti two-part singing not as the actual “beginnings of Georgian polyphony”, but as the result of the loss of more complex forms of polyphony.

For Jordania, even though Svan singing has been considered by earlier musicologists as “higher developed” because of its three-part chordal polyphony, it can be regarded as more archaic than the two-part drone polyphony of the northeastern mountains.

It is neither the place, nor do I have the necessary competence, to discuss further the real or supposed archaisms, but it is interesting to notice that the culture and music of the two regions where I filmed polyphonic singing – the northwestern mountains of Svaneti, and the northeastern mountains where live the Khevsurs and the Pshavs – were recently re-discussed by scholars. My film work will not bring any new material for Georgian ethnographers and ethnomusicologists, but will allow a wider audience to watch and listen to the beautiful ritual and profane music in its context.





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