

The affordances of Orthodox Christianity for Georgian vernacular religion.

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CESS, Pittsburgh, 27 October 2018

It has long been recognized that vernacular religious practices in Georgia and adjoining regions of the North Caucasus have been influenced by institutional Orthodoxy. What has not been undertaken, however, is a detailed investigation of precisely which features of Orthodox practice are continued in vernacular religion — and likewise which features were not transmitted. This report will draw upon over three decades of fieldwork in Georgia, with a special focus on the highland provinces of Svaneti, and Pxovi (Pshav-Xevsureti).

The choice of these two regions is motivated by their very different experiences of Orthodox Christianity and the feudal Georgian sociopolitical regime. Svaneti was Christianized in the early medieval period, and was the site of extensive church building and ecclesiastical image production during the 9th-13th centuries. The elite of Svaneti participated actively in the political and military affairs of the Georgian kingdom, and the churches were patronized by the aristocracy. Pxovi, by contrast, was almost devoid of churches until the 19th century. Although nominally subjects of the Georgian crown, the populations of Pshavi and Xevsureti remained outside the direct control of feudal overlords, and fought fiercely against those who encroached on their territory.

The vernacular religious systems which emerged in Svaneti and Pxovi, and which are still practiced to some extent to the present day, likewise differ in significant respects. The ritual practices described by ethnographers in Svaneti from the 19th century onward, and those still observed at the present day, can be characterized as manifestations of “folk Orthodoxy”, similar to vernacular practices elsewhere in Georgia. Svanetian ritual practices are centered around Orthodox church buildings (although other types of sites are also used), and appear to be in continuity with elements of the Georgian Orthodox liturgy, albeit through a long chain of transmission by uneducated practitioners, many of whom knew little if any Georgian. Continuity can also be observed in the festival calendar and the names and attributes of the supernatural figures to whom offerings are presented.

Pxovi, on the other hand, is the site of a traditional religious system often labelled as “paganism” (e.g. Charachidzé 1968). This term, whether wielded by Soviet and Western scholars, or by neo-pagan revivalists, carries a great deal of baggage, and perhaps ought to be discarded altogether. Rather than formulate a definition of “paganism”, I will deploy the term in accordance with a noticeable discontinuity between the vernacular practices of most of the nominally-Orthodox Caucasus, and 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 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.

It is important to add, however, that the distinction proposed here between “folk Orthodoxy” and “paganism” does not imply the total absence of pre-Christian elements in the vernacular practices of regions such as Svaneti. Quite the contrary: studies of Georgian religion by

Bardavelidze, Charachidzé, and myself, among others, have identified features shared by Svanetian and Pxovian vernacular religions which in all likelihood represent the vestiges of a common pre-Christian belief system. The distinctive nature of Pxovian paganism is to a significant degree the result of evolution subsequent to the arrival of Christianity in the Caucasus.

Through comparison of features of Svanetian folk Orthodoxy and Pxovian paganism, I have come to believe that the latter represents a distinctive and highly-structured religious system, which was most likely created over a long period of time by a caste of semi-hereditary religious specialists, functioning as ritual celebrants (*xervisberi*, *xucesi*) or oracles (*kadagi*). Despite its peripheral position and absence of churches, the paganism that emerged in Pxovi and adjacent regions nonetheless was informed by concepts drawn — in all likelihood indirectly — from the two power institutions of medieval lowland Georgia: feudalism and the Orthodox Church. Christian notions of purity and holiness, and feudal concepts of land tenure, hierarchy and vassalage were integrated into local beliefs and practices. It is possible — though at present I can only offer it as a tentative hypothesis — that mastery of these concepts appropriated from lowland Georgia contributed to the prestige and elite status of local “theologians”, who were to become the remote ancestors of the celebrants and oracles described by ethnographers in 19th and 20th-century Pxovi. (example: the virtuoso performance of “liturgical” texts such as the Xevsurian *k’urtxeba* (Tuite 2011), as manifestation of special skills & status)

	Svaneti (Folk Orthodoxy)	Pxovi (“paganism”)
	Continuity of ritual practice by uneducated locals through imitation, “filtering”	Distinctive religious system forged over time by caste of semi-hereditary religious specialists (“theologians”)
(1) Spatial organization, structure of buildings	Pattern of church-centered spatial divisions replicated in domestic sphere	Thoroughgoing organization of sacred & profane space, and the associated categories of beings, according to hierarchy of purity & incorporeality
(2) celebrants	Celebrants: semi-professional <i>bap’ar</i> ; senior ♂ & ♀ (household and women’s rituals)	Celebrants selected by vocation from specialized lineages; observance of taboos & purity; virtuosity, special knowledge
(3) Ritual practices & offerings	Rituals: (i) exchange; (ii) propitiation Mainly domestic and local (groups of households). Both genders have ritual spaces	Rituals: (i) & (ii), also (iii) initiation, (iv) purification Deprivatized, masculinized, professionalized
(4) The calendar	Elaborate calendar, but overall structure similar to Pxovi	Simpler calendar Alternation of fasts & feasts Major feasts delimit cycle periods, no mention of Christ
(5) Cults of saints	Church dedications & iconography influencing folk saint cults; nonetheless Christ & His mysteries filtered out	Saints as <i>xtišvilni</i> , organized as supernatural aristocracy (“come down from heaven”, “former mortals”) Pairing of George & female counterpart

(1) Spatial organization, the structure and furnishing of buildings —

SVANETI: Vernacular sacred sites, including those within the home, mirror several aspects of church layout, including the eastward orientation of the sanctuary; the distinction between a male-only sanctuary (*t'arbez*) and female-centered preparation spaces (*lamäria, lidbäši*); and also lands surrounding or belonging to the church. **(Figs 1 & 2)**

PXOVI: Although there is little evidence of church-building in Pxovi until the missionary initiatives of the Russian Imperial period, Manning (2008) noted similarities of structure between Pxovian shrines and orthodox churches.¹ **(Fig 3)**

I would argue that, in the absence of physical models, the parallels of spatial organization are more abstract in nature. A spatial hierarchy of purity/ incorporeality — which parallels distinctions in Orthodox doctrine, but which is more elaborate and more explicitly structured than the spatial organization surrounding an Orthodox church — organizes not only the layout of the shrine complex, but of the entire community:

Pxovi	<i>k'vrivi</i> (sancta sanctorum, off-limits to all)	shrine interior (priests)	shrine vicinity (men)	common spaces	menstruation hut (women only)	childbirth hut (mother & child only)
Orthodoxy		sanctuary (clergy only)	laymen	men & women	exclusion from church during menstruation	40-day exclusion after childbirth

(2) Celebrants

SVANETI: Local ritual specialists called *bap'är* (“priests”) perform certain functions of Orthodox priests (presentation of offerings in the name of the community or individual families) without undergoing the equivalent of ordination — vocation, training, submission to purity restrictions and taboos — that would set them apart from others. They typically pray in groups of 3 or more. Senior family members perform domestic rituals, and those specific to women (around the hearth, in the side wing of churches, and at outdoor sites)². **(Figs 4 & 5)**

PXOVI: Ritual celebrants (*xervisberi, xucesi*) and oracles (*kadagi*) are recruited from particular lineages in each community, but their vocation must be confirmed by a type of spiritual combat, marked by dreams, hallucinations and sometimes personal tragedies. Pxovian celebrants acquire special knowledge, and their ritual performances (especially in Xevsureti) are marked by virtuosity (rapid recitation or chanting of memorized texts, such as the orally-transmitted *k'urtxevay*)

(3) Ritual practices & offerings

Almost all Georgian vernacular rituals involve an act of exchange. The primary types of exchange are (i) offerings, presented to supernatural patrons while petitioning for protection, health,

¹ “The Pshav-Khevsur shrine ... is very difficult to ‘see’ as being anything like a church, and yet, it can also be seen as being an Orthodox church that has been extroverted, literally turned inside out ..., yet with complex distinctions of ritual access that parallel those marked by exterior and interior walls within and outside an Orthodox church” (Manning 2008)

² In terms of taboos and avoidance of impurity, the closest to Pxovian priests/oracles are not the *bap'är* but rather Svan hunters, whose relation to Dæl parallels that between legendary Xevsur oracles and Samdzimari (sexual favors & attendant risks, in exchange for access to resources)

prosperity, fertility, etc.; and (ii) acts of propitiation oriented toward potentially harmful forces of the natural and supernatural realms (wolves, mice, demons, etc.). Propitiatory rituals take place for the most part just before or during Lent, for example, the procedure I observed in the town of Mat'ani for enticing mice to leave the house **(Fig 6)**

Similar to both offerings and propitiation are libations and presentations of food to the dead, especially on the occasion of annual banquets for the reception of the souls of deceased ancestors (*Lipānāl* in Svaneti, *Sultak'repa* in Pxovi).

PXOVI: Professionalization, deprivatization, and masculinization of ritual performances.

In addition to exchange and propitiatory rituals, Pxovian celebrants also perform initiations of new members of the shrine community: boys and girls born to community members, and in-marriage women. **(Fig 7)**

Also performed on occasion are purificatory rituals, using the blood of sacrificed animals (for example, a celebrant will sprinkle blood to purify his place of residence, and also when shrine buildings have been repaired or replaced, as took place at Lasharis-Jvari in 2000).

(4) The calendar — The Orthodox church calendar abounds in feast-days, festivals and fasts, many of which remained popular even in the absence of priests. Traces of differences between Old Eastern-Georgian (Armenian, possibly Syrian influence) vs West-Georgian (more Byzantine) calendars. The Pxovi mid-summer feast *Atengena* bears the name of St Athenogene, whose feast in the earliest East-Georgian church calendars fell on the 50th day after Pentecost, itself celebrated on the 50th day after Easter (coinciding with Armenian Vardavar, on the 14th Sunday after Easter).

Basic structure of Georgian vernacular-religious calendar:

(i) Affordances from Orthodox calendar:

Fasts and feasts — Feast-days of Xmas, Easter, Sts Peter & Paul mark the end of fasting periods
Saints' days (esp. feasts of George & Mary)

Commemorations of the dead: Meat-fare Saturday (*Xorcielis Šabati*); 2nd, 3rd 4th Sats of Lent; 2nd Tuesday after Easter; eve of Pentecost.

Ritual elements of some festivals are continued in vernacular Orthodoxy (e.g. lighting of torches in mid-winter festivals derived from Candlemas: Geo *Lamp'roba*, Sv. *Limp'āri*).

(ii) Other sources (wide-spread folk rituals):

1st visitor of New Year (Geo. *mek'vle* "trace-maker"; Sv. *māč'šxi* "footer"; cp. *first-foot* in Scotland; Greek *podariko*; Serbian *polaznik*)

Mid-summer communal festival, with bull sacrifice (usually after Feast of Sts Peter & Paul)

SVANETI: Richer feast-day calendar, including festivals in honor of certain churches, such as Kašwätob (Lenjer), Ligurk'e (K'ala), Yänob (Lat'ali).

PXOVI: Only the feasts of St George (*Giorgoba*) and Mary (*Marianoba*) are explicitly associated with their titular saints. Special functions of Xmas-New-Year cycle (transition from old to new year), Lenten rituals (propitiation), commemorations of the dead (*Sultak'repa*) and the principal Seroba/Atengena feast. Other feast-days are more or less alike in Pxovian usage, resembling Orthodox feasts in name and calendrical position only: Axvseba (Easter), Amayleba (Ascension), Giorgoba (St George), etc.

(5) Cults of saints

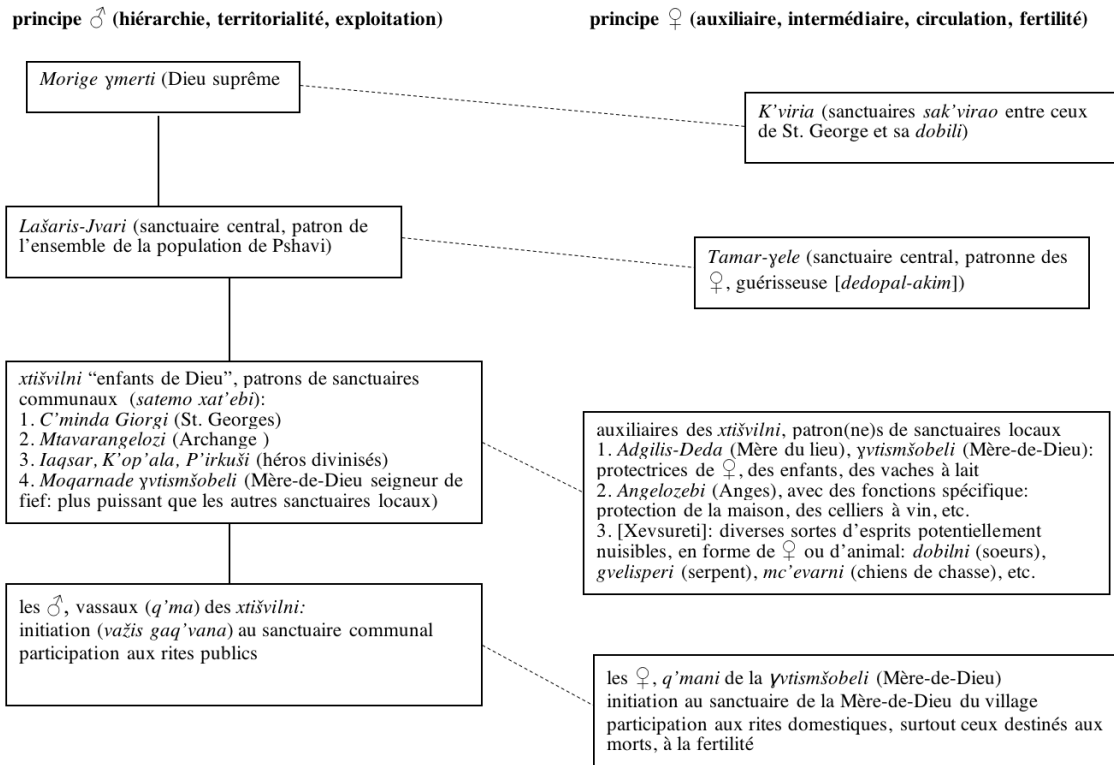
The list of Christian saints whose names appear in both folk Orthodoxy and Pxoian paganism is very short: primarily St George, the Archangel, and Mary the Mother of God. Svaneti adds *Macxwār* (the Savior), Barbara, Theodore, John the Baptist. On the other hand, and despite the inclusion in both the folk Orthodox and Pxoian calendars of feasts named for Christmas (*Krist'e*), Easter (*Axvseba*) and Ascension (*Amayleba*), the special nature of Christ and his incarnation, birth, passion and resurrection, are scarcely mentioned, if at all.

SVANETI: Orthodox churches in Georgia and the North Caucasus were elaborately decorated. Consistent with iconographic conventions, special prominence in church frescoes and icons was accorded to images of Christ and scenes from his life. More specific to the Caucasus was the evident preference of donors for frescoes and icons depicting the military saints, especially St George. Early depictions of the saint show him standing alone, whereas the dominant image in the Middle Ages shows George on horseback, spearing an adversary (often a man rather than a serpent), or freeing a princess from a dragon. **(Fig 8)** Taken together, these facts point to the special significance of a warrior saint for an aristocracy confronting the menace of Islamic armies to the east and an increasingly hostile Byzantium to the southwest.

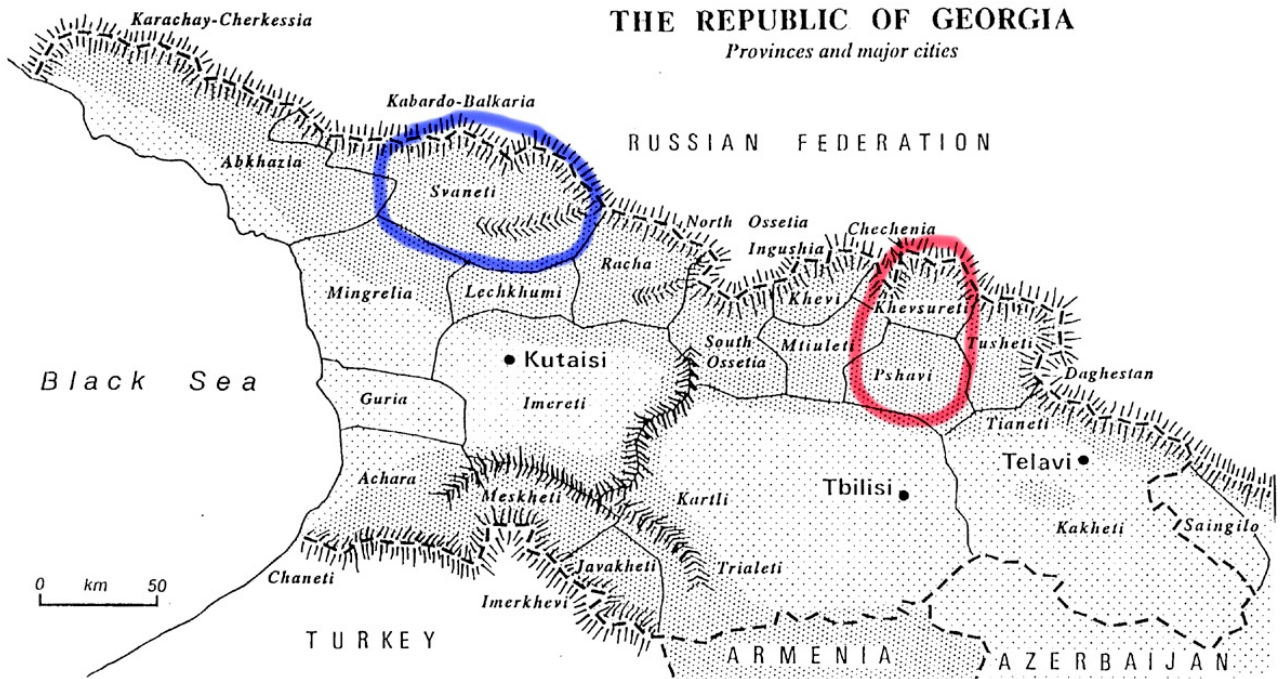
Although images of Christ were as common, if not more so, than depictions of St George, it is the latter and not the former that assumed a prominent role in the vernacular religious systems of both Pxoian and Svaneti. This curious asymmetry implies that both systems emerged from pre-Christian substrates featuring male-gendered deities onto which the name of the military saint George was readily grafted, whereas the more abstract role of Jesus Christ as Savior was, one could say, filtered out.

PXOIAN: Due to absence of churches (hence no frescoes), saints known through oral transmission, and the occasional icon offered at a shrine. Although the number of supernatural figures in Pxoian paganism who continue the names of Christian saints is less than in Svaneti, their functions within the religious system are more precisely defined. The Pxoian saints are referred to collectively as “children of God” (*xtišvilni*), imagined as a kind of supernatural aristocracy. Some of these were created divine (*cit čamosulni* “come down from heaven”); others are said to have once been human, then raised to divine status in return for exceptional heroism (*naqorcivlarni* “former mortals”). The human residents of the Pxoian communes conceive of themselves as “vassals” (*q'mani*) of their commune's patron *xtišvili*, a supernatural overlord who assures protection, health and prosperity in return for offerings and service to the shrine. Partnered with the male-gendered *xtišvilni* are female-gendered counterparts, with complementary functions (primarily linked to women, children and the domestic sphere), and separate shrines at some distance from the main sanctuary of the patron *xtišvili*.

FÉODALITÉ COSMOLOGIQUE DE PSHAVI



CONCLUSION. If nothing else, I hope to have brought some clarity to the question of Georgian “paganism”, by juxtaposing and contrasting certain of its characteristics to the “folk Orthodoxy” of Svaneti (and most other regions of Georgia). I also seek to stake out the middle ground in a debate among specialists on Georgian religion concerning the origins of Pxovian paganism: The position of most earlier specialists, according to which the Pxovian religious system represents a survival of pre-Christian paganism, was essentially inverted by Zurab K’ik’nadze (1996) and his followers. In their view, Christianity was introduced into Pxovi not long after it appeared in lowland Georgia. Successive invasions of the lowlands from the 13th century onward left Pxovi isolated from central religious and secular authorities, and local religious practice — in the absence of priests and written transmission — drifted into a vernacular system increasingly remote from its Orthodox roots. In my view, Pxovian paganism does indeed contain elements of Orthodox origin, but these represent neither a recent superficial layering on an ancestral pre-Christian system, nor an ancient heritage garbled and simplified through oral transmission, but rather components of a sophisticated religious system created over the centuries by vernacular theologians who left no written records, but whose descendants still serve at the sacred sites of Pshavi and Xevsureti.



Map of Georgia, showing the highland provinces of Svaneti and Pxovi (Pshavi and Xevsureti)

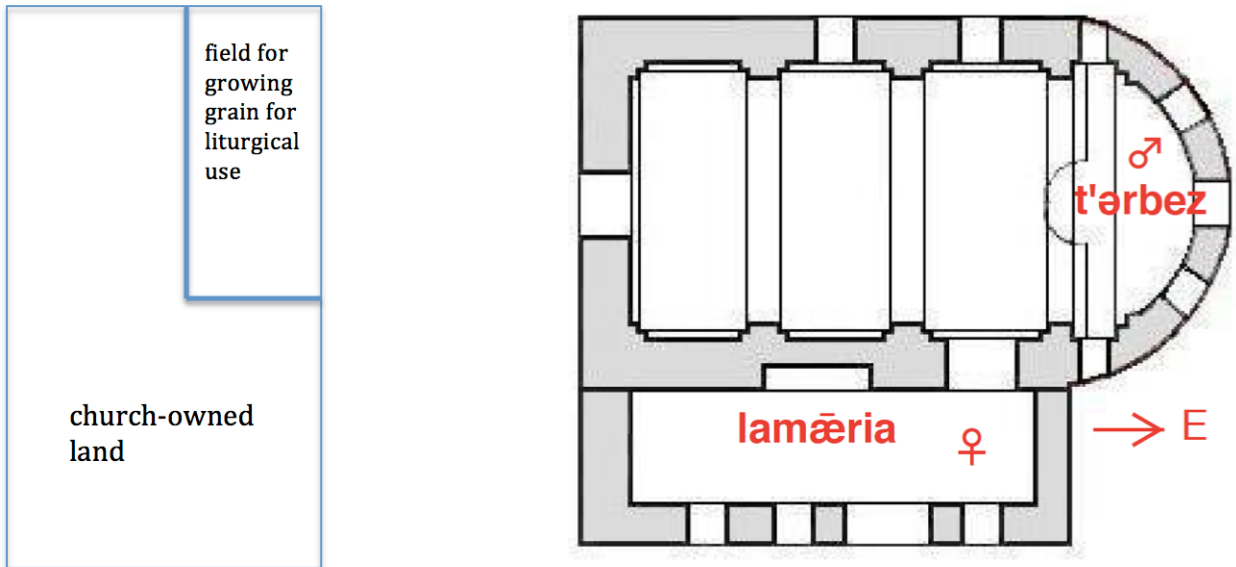


Fig 1. Church building in Svaneti and associated land.

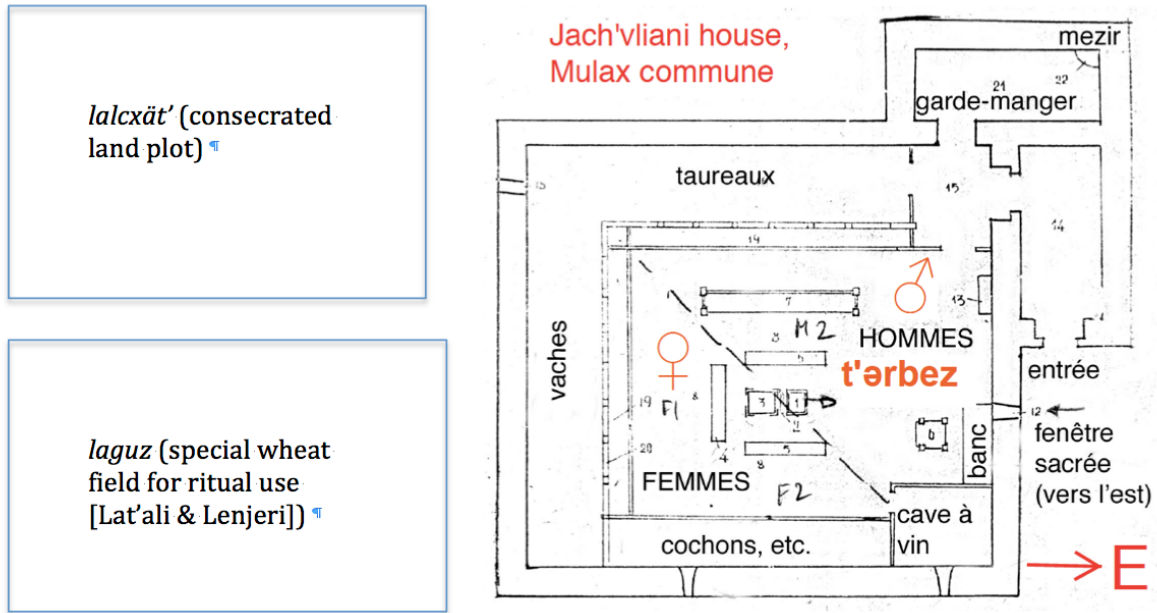


Fig. 2. Traditional Svan home and consecrated land plots [based on Chartolani 1961: 13].



Fig. 3. Xevisberi Philippe Baghiauri approaching the principal shrine atop Kmodis Gori, commune of Gogolaurta, Pshavi.



Fig. 4. Svan 'priests' (*bap'är*) presenting offerings in the sanctuary of the Tanyĭ Täringzel church (Laxušdi village, Lat'ali), February 2006. Photo by K. Tuite.



Fig. 5. Lat'ali women presenting offerings at Samt'äiši Lamäria (festival of Həliš, 7 June 2015). Photo by N. Tserediani



Fig 6. Woman performing pre-Lenten mouse-chasing ritual in Mat'ani (eastern Georgia). Photo by K. Tuite.



Fig. 7. Boys' initiation tower (*c'ulis gasarevi k'ošk'i*); Kmodis Gori, Gogolaurta commune. Photo by K. Tuite.



Fig. 8. 12th-c. icon of St George spearing the Roman emperor; Nak'ipari, Svaneti. Photo by P. Bukhrashvili

The Georgian vernacular religious calendar

date (Old Style)	Georgian Orthodox feastday	Svaneti	Pxovi
(0) year-beginning/liminal			
14.VIII Dormition eve	eve of Mariamoba	Bixob (ancient year-beginning)	
15.VIII Dormition of Mary	Midzineba/ Mariamoba	Limərie	(see below)
10.XI	Giorgoba	Ligiergi	Giorgoba
(1) NEW YEAR'S CYCLE			
25.XII	Christmas	Šob	Šoba, Krist'e(ni)
31.XII	New Year's Eve	Šešxwām	Lit'ania
1.I New Year's Day	C'inadacveta	Zumxā	C'elc'adi
6.I Epiphany	Gancxadeba / Natlisyeba	Gancxdāb, Lipanal	C'q'alk'urtxeva
(2) LENTEN CYCLE	GEORGIAN ORTHODOXY	SVANETI	PXOVI
2.II Candlemas	Mirkma/Migebeba	Lamp'rob, Limp'əri, Swimniš (< St Simon, 3 Feb)	—
2 nd Sat before Lent (commemoration of dead)	Qorcielis šabati (Micvalebulta xseneba)	Meysarāb	Xorcis šabati, Ayeba
2 nd Sunday before Lent	Qorcielis k'vira	Leywmi ayāb, Likureši	
Sunday before Lent	Q'velieris k'vira	Q'veliəri ayāb	
2 nd Sat during Lent (commemoration of dead)	Micvalebulta xseneba		Sultak'repa
(3) SUMMER CYCLE	GEORGIAN ORTHODOXY	SVANETI	PXOVI
Easter Sunday	Aydgoma ("Resurrection")	Tanāp ("Dawn")	Axvseba ("Fulfillment")
Sunday after Easter	K'viracxovloba	Uplišiēr (2-4 weeks)	K'viris-ǰvroba
40 days after Easter	Amayleba (Ascension)	Anylāb	Amayleba
eve of Pentecost (commemoration of dead)	Sulis šabati / Sultaoba (Micvalebulta xseneba)		—
50 days after Easter	Sultmopenoba (Pentecost)	Sinmoxsnāb (= Pent. eve?)	—
Sunday after Pentecost	Q'ovelta c'mindata k'vira	Həliš	—
29.VI Sts Peter & Paul	P'etre-p'avloba	P'arp'ōldāš	
50 days after Pentecost			Atengena, Seroba
15.VIII Dormition	Midzineba/ Mariamoba		Marianoba

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