



Echoes of the ancestors

Life, death and transition in Upper Svaneti

Having examined Georgian traditional polyphonic harmony in vibrational healing (issue 71), **Madge Bray** here explores the place of this ancient song tradition in supporting the soul's transition after death

In the crisp mountain sunshine of the mountain valley I can hear faint echoes of ancient harmonies carried on the wind, drawing us in. We must wait, says Kakha, our host, and approach in a group when more people arrive to pay their respects.

We proceed slowly with care, tiptoeing and slithering our way uphill through muddied potholes rutted with hooves of oxen and countless pig trotters. We are overtaken by families arriv-

ing en masse, women clad in black and men in grey Svan hats.

This is a Svan funeral in the Georgian High Caucasus village of Latali, one of the few singing villages left in Upper Svaneti. The deceased, Pridon Gvichiani, was once the village doctor. Facing illness himself, his family had taken him to the capital city, Tbilisi, for treatment. In accordance with tradition, his body has come home to be laid to rest.

The homestead is perched on the

edge of the hillside. A throng of men are congregated in the yard. We pause by the gate, gathering breath. As if on cue, the mourning ritual harmonies begin again. The men are singing a funeral 'Zari'; one word-sound 'Vai' repeats itself, over and over... Vai! vai!

The men are not singing in Western scales but on the outer edges of their own quintave, tuning system. The sound they make is laced with a salt and vinegar that sets the teeth on edge.

A collective encounter with grief reverberates across the mountainside. And, welling up in waves, it ebbs and flows through the nooks and crannies of the psyche, leaving something more transparent, more serene in its wake – music described by at least one accomplished, Western, music scholar, as 'The hardest song to sing'. Indeed, I am later assured, no Svan would describe this as 'singing', for its impetus lies not in music-making: this is part of worship.

UNESCO recognition

Georgian polyphony is described by UNESCO as a 'masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity'. Over generations it has served as an invisible glue, holding together the social fabric of a proud and ancient culture, destined to occupy its historically precarious position, on the cutting edge of East and West. Against often insuperable odds, the country has survived. Here today its music survives, almost intact.

Georgia is considered by some to be

the geographical cradle of polyphonic chant. Since time immemorial this pulsating, musical heartbeat has accompanied functions of village daily life from the cradle to the grave. In Svaneti, cut off for the winter months due to its remoteness, old traditions take longer to die. 'Zaer' is the Georgian word for a bell; today the bell tolls for Pridon.

Behind a small table in the yard the men stand, cap in hand. The table is laid with fish, mushroom dishes, salad vegetables and pitchers of wine; no meat or spicy food, lest the departing soul be troubled.

It is now mid-morning and the men have been singing Zari for some time. Between songs, they raise their glasses and make toasts to the soul of the departed. They need to fortify themselves. Zari takes 'big energy' – 'Didi Energia!' calls one of them, lifting his glass.

These are men from the same village as the deceased. Soon they will be joined by men from other communities who will sing their own variants. There are no young men, only elders; most young men no longer sing Zari.

Immortality of art

Sima Chamgeliani comes to find me. She takes my arm and leads me into the main living room of the house. The open coffin is festooned with dahlias at each end. Pridon's body represents the only masculine presence in the room. In neat rows around the perimeter sit more than 100 women mourners with black headscarves and shawls.

Sima bids me wait behind her at the door and approaches the coffin. She kneels before it briefly then, rising to her feet, makes the sign of the cross on her chest. She begins to wail. It is a strange, melodic wail, as a litany. Sima opens her arms wide as if to hold the safekeeping of the assembled company in her outpourings. Words tumble from her spontaneously, in strangely melodic cadences, some in Georgian language, but mostly in her native Svan.

*'You were the dignity of Latali village,
vai Pridon,
Medicine was your path – it followed you
from the outset.
We have lost many ancestors who went
before you – Anton and Shushana,
Akaki and Pasiko, Temurazi and
Edisher.
Your mother comes from a long tradition
of art and culture.
People of art from Latali village...
Konstantine Gvichiani may lead you in
another world, vai Pridon.
The ancestors will meet and host you in*

*another world, vai Pridon, my Vera
and Gegi, my Amirani and Gigusha.
Members of my Mehrabi choir, vai
Pridon, they will all meet you there.
Now Khemezi, our dear respected woman,
is following you to another world.
We all knew her well as another artistic
soul – we sent her art to history!
Nothing is lost, vai Pridon,
Art is immortal, vai Pridon,
You will stay forever among immortal
people my beautiful, vai Pridon!'*
[Khemezi died a day before]

Sima's mourning litany has shape and form. The souls of the departed, it is believed, will be grateful to her for keeping their presence alive in this world. Here in the room her song is interspersed with wails and sobbing from the women. There is pride and reverence here; keening has been happening since early morning.

Momentarily, I am lost in thought, remembering the words of an elderly song-master from Eastern Georgian wine country, Andro Simashvili, 'Our songs are for sweetening the soul'.

Maybe here I am learning something of what Andro had in mind. Maybe the journeying soul, in its quest for a sweetening, rests awhile and drinks from this ancient well. For, in the depths of the angst of discomfort, lie sweet, intangible glimpses of the cradle of the Divine.

Why else do these ancient harmonies exist? And why, upon feeling their universal reverberations within me, does my own soul rejoice in the uncovering of the subtle intensity of its own thirst?

Sima leaves silently, takes my hand and leads me from the room. Outside, the last Zari has been sung. The choir enters now, to escort the coffin to the burial ground. The pall-bearers begin to sing *Tsmindao Ghmerti*, a folk hymn.

'Holy God, Almighty God, Have mercy on our souls!'

In sharp relief to what has preceded, more melodic harmonies herald a new serenity. With this simple folk hymn, a gentler beauty enters the proceedings.

The rhythmic, harmony-singing procession moves slowly, round the corner of the house towards the burial ground. In a field on the edge of the hillside long lines of trestle tables are set up for the funeral 'supra', or sacred ritual meal, in which all the mourners will take part. Blankets full of bread have been heaved up the hill and village women have been preparing cooking pots over fires in the outhouse.

The supra celebration will be presided over by a Tamada, who commands respect. He is often a 'Makvshvi' or village wise man elected by consensus



Main picture: Latali men sing Zari at Pridon's funeral. **Above:** Chamgeliani family tower-fortress, a type unique to the region.

to dispense justice. Funeral supras generally contain no more than seven toasts, the first to Jesus Christ and 'Didi Ghmerti' (Almighty God).

The last of the toasts will be to the ancestors of all present at the supra. When the assembled company blesses the soul, the collective wish is that the deceased find his place in Heaven – a place where 'the rain is of milk and the snow is of cotton!'

Syncretic belief mix

In a country which has seen an enormous, post-Communist upsurge in Orthodox Christian worship, the marriage between liturgical observance and a deeply ingrained and meaningful, traditional belief system is an uneasy one.

According to Svan beliefs, the soul of the dead man will remain for a period of a year hovering between the earthly existence and the afterlife. On the journey he will be met by ancestral companions, who will accompany him onwards to his final destination. His soul will then be placed in the safekeeping of other ancestors, whose function will be to welcome him in through the gates of Heaven. Supra tables and feasting will await him there, amid joyful reunions with the souls of his departed kinfolk.

Meanwhile, on the Earth plane, according to traditional custom, food will continue to be prepared for him, when each Saturday a supra will take place by the grave. The women will continue to 'keen' there.

Up until very recently I am told, the women's mourning ritual would have been led by a woman playing a stringed, mourning instrument called a *chuniri*.



Top: The majestic Mount Ushba dominates the Latali area. **Above left:** Grandmother Kati, with musical friends, holding family *chuniri*. **Above right:** *Chuniri* player Anna Chamgeliani, with other present-day family members. **Opposite:** Ushguli village, highest in Europe, part of our itinerary.

But that practice seldom occurs now. Even in current times, however, for a long period after the death the immediate family abstain from song.

Each year, on 19 January at the Feast of Lipanali, the head of the family will make a journey to a church near to the grave, with vodka and specially prepared consecrated bread. There he will make a request of Jesus Christ to allow the soul to be released and return home to the bosom of the family with him.

The soul will return for a day and a night to its former place on the Earth

plane. There will be a celebration with much laughter, rejoicing and feasting. Departed souls retain a presence in this life, it is believed, and serve a crucial function in helping those left behind to lead better lives.

Guests are a gift from God. The role of the host is a central pivot and key to existence on Earth. For as a person hosts in this world, so he himself will be hosted in eternity. In essence, this is what it means to be Svan and, indeed, typifies a nobility central to the Georgian cultural identity.

Generations of music and song

Now we sit, in semi-darkness, in the bosom of Taisev Chamgeliani's family, by a roaring fire while Eka's traditional *kubdari* or meat bread sizzles gently on the stove. Eka is the eldest of the sisters and lives in the next village. Kneeling on the hearth, she stokes the fire with logs.

Then, as naturally as breathing, when Uncle Gigo sounds a note, the entire family begins to sing in three-part harmonies. Sima, Kakha and his brother, Mursa, older uncle Gigo, an elderly aunt, and young adolescent niece, Marika – a timeless blend of voices young and old.

'Kriste Adghar!', Christ is Risen and... a lullaby, *Nanila*.

Nana Mzhavanadze, my Georgian ethnomusicologist colleague, reaches across and places the small voice recorder nearer to an aged aunt, who sings an unusual, as yet possibly unrecorded variant. Nana and I are here at the invitation of Taisev and Sima's children – vital and committed young people, intent on breathing life back into their village.

Intent, too, on stewarding, conserving and sustaining what is left in a mindful way, just as their father did before them. Anna and Madona, Eka's sisters, now live mostly in Tbilisi. Madona has been working in the museum of manuscripts in Tbilisi studying and documenting her culture. Anna is a virtuoso *chuniri* player, but today she has work in Tbilisi. Her poignant *chuniri* playing is absent tonight. In this small hamlet, 11 out of the 17 families still sing.

This family *chuniri* is held in reverence. Anna's grandmother, Kati, so the story goes, was herself a fine singer and played *chuniri*. Back in the late 1930s, in Taisev's early childhood, life was overshadowed by the lingering illness of his elder sister who finally died, aged 13.

Amid much suffering she begged her mother to sing to her and so her own lullaby comfort song, *Nanila*, was created. Taisev's young mother would sing and play *chuniri* every day to comfort her dying child. Within six months of the child's death, tragedy struck again when her own husband was shot during Stalin's persecution, leaving her to struggle on alone to bring up her children. Stricken with grief, his mother continued to play *chuniri*. One day the 6-year-old Taisev could bear it no longer and destroyed the instrument.

Without recrimination – and with great love – his mother responded by asking him to help her make a replacement. They worked on it together. Now this same *chuniri*, the fruits of his childhood labours, carries a lineage, borne proudly

by his own children. And an ancestral resonance lives on in the hearts of all who hear it played. Young Taisev himself went on to become a song-master or 'master singer', touching many lives through the power of his own harmony making.

Invitation to a feast

This July it is Lakhusti's turn to host the feast of Limkheri, at the hilltop church of the Archangel, or Mkheris. As hosts or 'maspindzelebi', the Chamgelianis, together with other village families, will be preparing the supra and making the journey on foot and on horseback to the ceremonial site on the top of one of the mountain plateaus.

The whole of Latali will congregate on the mountain. They will celebrate the ancient feast ritual of Limkheri, offer prayers, with seven ancient, devotional chants, dance *perxbuli* or round dances, undertake ritual animal offerings and toast and partake of supra, as their forefathers did before them. Here in Upper Svaneti a syncretic mix of religious observance and pagan customs still remains a way of life. Taisev's younger brother, Gigo, will head up the preparations. As hosts, it is their sacred duty to invite guests.

Nana and I run a small charity dedicated both to the promotion and dissemination of Georgian polyphony. We

work to sustain this ancient, musical medicine by helping it do its healing work among the country's most marginalised people within former soviet-style orphanages.

The Chamgelianis have heard of our work and now propose that we work with them to invite to the village a group of foreign guests who will live within their families for some days, to prepare for the ritual, learn the songs, round dances and folklore, help prepare the food and celebrate with them.

It is clear that the task requires a search for journeying souls – for those who will seek to journey here will come not as tourists or onlookers, but as valued guests, whose presence may be instrumental in ways not obviously apparent.

If managed carefully, the village elders propose the interest generated by this extraordinary invitation may serve to send a powerful message to its own young people, children born into a generation of 'virtual' communications. It is a message about the intrinsic value of roots and about the spirit of a shared humanity, a birthright still intact here, a message central to our global existence.

Proceeds raised, we agree, will be placed in a Community Fund. This will create opportunities, promote sustainability, aid conservation of a community heart under attack which, left unaided, watches its lifeblood ebb away.

Now, Kakha, Tamada at our supra, this evening proposes a toast:

'It is to our ancestors that we owe our existence... may their presence be with us in this noble endeavour and may God bring us guests who will come to this village in the spirit of love and friendship! To our being together here in Lakhusti!'

Hospitality remains the order of the day, every day. It will surely be an honour to be of service. ✨

History of the Chamgelianis

The Chamgeliani family has lived in Lakhusti, one of the small village hamlets which make up the Latali community, for countless generations. The family tower dates to the 12th century (see page 7).

Svaneti is a world heritage site. Its territories are majestic and naturally abundant. The skylines of its mountainous contours are laced with slowly crumbling churches, containing magnificent frescos and exquisite, quality carvings, in wood and gold. Architecturally, Svan towers, believed to have been constructed partly for defensive purposes, are unique. Here, according to legend, is the land of Colchis, Jason and the Argonauts and the Golden Fleece.

Fifteen years have passed since Sima's late husband, Taisev Chamgeliani, passed away. As village master singer and 'Lotbari', or leader of the Latali choir, he was a prominent and highly respected member of his community.

In Soviet times, the Kremlin summoned Latali men to Moscow to sing Zari at the funeral of Brezhnev. Faced with the death of the head of their own family, the Chamgelianis built a church as a shrine in his honour.

Nowadays, from his own resting place at the hub of Lakhusti village, Taisev's kindly, pensive presence, etched skilfully into his black, granite headstone, keeps watch over the daily lives of the next generation (above). He is dressed ceremonially in his traditional, Georgian, male costume, or 'chokha', with his musical instruments – *chuniri* and *changi* – by his side.



Our shared celebration

On 18 July the village will await the arrival of 23 singing guests from five countries, who will live in village families, learn about Svan culture, participate fully in the Feast of Limkheri and contribute significantly to the fragile local economy.

The village has formed its own not-for-profit union, 'Lidbashi', meaning 'Gift from God'.

Among Lidbashi's aims are the repair of a vital bridge (thus insuring against over-grazing and depletion of local woodland), the conservation of an ancient, 12th century, Svan tower, and bringing the Internet to the village. To learn more and listen to the music, visit www.brave-heartgeorgia.org.

We urgently seek further funding to enable a film-maker to accompany us to film the event and in due course to make a longer documentary to capture and record this living history. For more details, contact Lorna Simpson: svan-video@talktalk.net.

Born into a Scottish singing family, Madge Bray worked internationally in the field of child abuse. From studying the roots of fragmentation and disharmony, she recognised the importance of sound in restoring harmony and balance in human beings. In Georgian polyphony she perceives an ancient harmonisation tool of world importance and works with the Scottish charity, Ecologia Youth Trust (www.ecologia.org.uk), to help bring this music to a wider audience. Contact: sing.georgia@gmail.com.