

TEONA RUKHADZE, SANDRO NATADZE
(GEORGIA)

TRADITION IN CONTEMPORANEITY – THE RESULTS OF THE 2021 SVANETI FIELD RESEARCH

The Folklore State Center organized a musical-folkloristic expedition to Upper Svaneti in summer, 2021. For ten days the expedition team worked in the communities of Latali, Etseri, Pari, Becho, Nakra, Chuberi, Lenjeri, Mulakhi and Ushguli. In autumn the research continued in Choluri and Lentekhi – Lower Svaneti. The expedition aimed at researching the importance and function of folk music in today’s Svaneti: to document the current state of the tradition and observe the changes it has undergone over time. July-August – was not randomly selected as the time for the field expedition to Upper Svaneti. Along with recording local repertoire and collecting information about Svan music, we planned to document social events ongoing during this time. Sadly, due to bad weather, we could not attend all of them, however, we tried to make up for the loss by interviewing permanent participants of the rituals – elderly tradition bearers.

The study of Svan traditional music has a history of more than a century. As early as 1890, the letter of Vasily Teptsov – a teacher at Kutaisi city school “Svan motifs and the song about Kansav Kipiani” in the publication on Caucasian peoples: Сборник материалов для описания местностей и племен Кавказа (a Collection of materials for describing the localities and tribes of the Caucasus), is enclosed with ten musical examples of Svan folk music (CMDLTC, 1890: 69-92). In Svaneti Zakaria Paliashvili recorded songs and instrumental pieces on a phonograph in 1903. Dimitri Arakishvili is also among the first recorders of music in this region. Since the 1940s, Svan music has been the field of interest for many Georgian and foreign scholars.¹ Svaneti did not stay beyond the attention of the specialists in the related fields – ethnologists, linguists, anthropologists, art critics and researchers of oral folklore. Despite many works, traditional culture of this region still raises many questions, which testifies to its depth and inexhaustibility. In the paper we would like to share some observations on the changes in the performance of Svan polyphonic songs over the time.

Music and Ritual

During the expedition, we had the opportunity to attend the ritual celebrating the beginning of mowing season² – *Akhanakha*³ in Ushguli community. It took place in the yard of the Savior Church in the village of Chvibiani. One of the men, kneeling in front of the church, started to pray. Each prayer was followed by the group responding in unison: Amen! In the churchyard they sang Ushgu-

¹ Among the recorders of traditional Svan music are Shalva Aslanishvili, Grigol Chkhikvadze, Vladimer Akhobadze, Otar Chijavadze, Tamar Mamaladze, Yvette Grimaud, Mindia Jordania, Joseph Jordania, Edisher Garakanidze, Malkhaz Erkvanidze, Natalia Zumbadze, Nana Valishvili, Maka Khardziani, Silvia Bolle Zemp, Hugo Zemp, Nana Mzhanadze, Frank Scherbaum and others.

² Due to heavy snowfalls in the mountains, the only way for overwintering livestock are hay bales brought from meadows, accordingly, this type of activity is of particular importance for the locals. The beginning of the mowing season is also accompanied by celebrations in the mountains of East Georgia.

³ Explained as – mowing day.

li variants of *Jgrag*⁴ and *Riho*⁵. After that, they went to the meadow to symbolically mark the start of mowing with the movement of a scythe. As we were told, in recent years this day is limited only to prayer in the churchyard and a meal after the prayer. In this case, the reason for the performance of the already forgotten tradition – symbolic mowing, was the visit of the expedition team. The hosts specially performed the mentioned songs. Despite the efforts, it was difficult for them to sing properly in three voices. In the interviews, they noted that recently at various gatherings they more sing modern songs. From the old repertoire they better remember ritual songs.

Ritual songs in general and those that accompany community celebrations occupy a large place in the repertoire recorded by the expedition⁶. This is natural, given the importance of this genre in Svan folklore. The material shows that the ethnophores' memory has preserved *Jgrag* the best. We managed to record variants of this song in almost all communities (video ex. 1). For the intensity of dissemination our attention was also drawn to the prayer-amen practice. Key moment of the celebration – the prayer is usually accompanied by “Amen” of the choir, which sometimes takes the form of an exclamation, and sometimes of polyphonic singing.⁷ Locals considered it necessary to use ritual paraphernalia even when recording in a non-sacral environment. For example, in the community of Pari, the prayer was not said until *lemziri*⁸ and *zedashe*⁹ were brought to the performer (video ex. 2)¹⁰

We had an interesting case in Nakra, the hosts explained that they did not know the song, however, agreed to conversation with us. During the interview, it turned out that they really did not have much information about Svan traditional music, nor did they have practical experience of its performance. But they could sing the traditional

prayer-amen. We were offered a kind of imitation of the ritual, with *zedashe* and *lemzir*, to be held in the village church, because they wanted to show us the sights of the community. On the spot, apart from the promised prayer-amen, they suddenly started *Jgrag*. While singing, they intuitively followed each other and gradually recalled the apparently already-forgotten voice parts. However, the fact that they were able to sing the song to the end speaks volumes and points to the special importance of *Jgrag* in today's Svan society.

From the ritual repertoire, noteworthy is the funeral *Zari* and its practice, according to Murad

⁴ In Svaneti, this song is associated with Saint George. In scholarly literature, *Jgrag* is also considered a replacement of the pre-Christian moon deity by a Christian saint (Bardavelidze, 1953). The cult of St. George is strong throughout Georgia. The song *Jgrag* is still an essential part of Svan community celebrations.

⁵ *Riho* is the song from Ushguli and is related to local festivals. It is known that *Riho* was performed as a round dance around Lamaria Church of Ushguli (Akhobadze, 1957:12). The fact of performing *Riho* as a round dance was also confirmed by our interviewees.

⁶ Among them are: *Jgrag*, *Riho*, *Lile*, *Diadeb*, *Didebata*, *Lazghvash*, *Tskhau Krisdesh*, *Barbal Dolash*, *Kaltid*, *Eli-alrde* and others.

⁷ We recorded two- and three-part variants; sung on the syllables: *oa-oi-men*.

⁸ Ritual bread with filling. In this case, it was replaced with home-baked *khachapuri*.

⁹ Wine for offering. It was replaced by alcoholic drink.

¹⁰ In this particular case, the content of the prayer was as follows, Part I: oh, glory to you merciful Saint Giorgi! Glory to Saint Giorgi! We are grateful to you; may all who come here today have a good heart; don't devoid them of your assistance; grant them many more days like today; may there always be many who pray to you. Glory to you Saint Giorgi! Part II: We have guests here today; help us to be able to always make good *zedashe*. May you all be blessed and never lack St, Giorgi's mercy! (translated by Koba Devdariani)

Pirtskhelani, renowned singer, and an invariable participant of the ritual, “in the past, everyone wanted to sing *Zari*, because its performance was considered the greatest tribute to the deceased”. *Zari*, in variants of which both Upper and Lower Svaneti were rich, is still a part of the funeral rite. But it is mostly performed by elderly singers. The desire to learn this song and participate in the ritual is significantly reduced among young people.

Generation of Oral Tradition

Most of our interviewees were born in the 1930s and 1940s. Their childhood years coincided with the period of exceptional abundance of folk choirs in Georgia¹¹. During their school years, actually all of them sang in school ensembles. Nevertheless, their first and main musical impressions are connected with family gatherings, community celebrations, the rituals accompanying traditional mode of life. Some named their mothers, fathers or close relatives as direct teachers. To our question what they meant by a teacher and teaching, they responded: to memorize and join in singing after repeated listening: “I listened to the voice-parts and sang to myself” – noted Givi Pirtskhelani from the village of Lakhushdi. Robison Shukvani from Lenjeri community: “I learned to sing at home, naturally; I imitated what I heard. I also listened to the songs at celebrations and repeated first, second parts, and bass”. Given the laws of oral tradition, it is natural that from childhood their hearing got used to improvisation and variety of variants. The free manner of singing has been preserved in the performance of the last generation representatives of this tradition.

The field research also revealed that the memory of the locals still holds complete lyrics of the songs. It is known that several genres, which had a long duration in everyday life, were shortened for stage performance. Among them there are examples of epic-type ballads, the main function of which was to tell the plots preserved in multi-verse texts. Currently, such songs are mostly performed with incomplete lyrics, which makes their content unclear. Rarely, but still, we meet ethnophores who remember complete lyrics of songs. One such is Jani (Jano) Kvanchiani, from the village of Latali. He sings about interesting episodes of life and the history of his native Svaneti. From time to time, he slightly changes the selected melody and embellishes it with various ornaments. Thanks to his poetic talent, at times he adds his own lines to the verse, thus showing a live creative process (video ex. 3).

An important issue is the older generation’s perception of their own musical culture and attitude to this music. They recall that in their youth years, folk songs and dances accompanied all gatherings and filled people with positive emotions. The folklore of the native region is very dear to everyone, they always remember famous performers with great awe and are proud of this talent. They like interacting with people who are interested in and love folklore and worry about the declining interest in folk singing among young people.

Women in Svan Musical Tradition

Recently, a collection of *Women’s Role in UNESCO-Recognized European Traditional Singing Practices* was published as part of the cooperation between UNESCO and Tbilisi State Conserva-

¹¹ Under the Soviet rule, the increase in the number, popularization and propaganda of folk choirs had ideological reasons. They had to present the art – national in form and socialist in content and convey the spirit of the happy working masses. The repertoire of ensembles was dominated by the examples on Soviet themes, traditional songs were often performed by unconventional, unusually large and eclectic ensembles.

toire. One of the publications, authored by ethnomusicologist Nana Mzhavanadze and ethnologist Madonna Chamgeliani, touches upon the role of women in Svan traditional music (Mzhavanadze, Chamgeliani, 2022:124-150). During their work on the article, we had the opportunity to communicate with the authors and share our ideas. We fully agree with the opinion about special importance of women in Svan musical tradition.

Most of the interviewed elderly singers named their mother as their first teacher of singing and playing the *chuniri*. In almost every community, respondents told us about women who were distinguished for one or another song, manner of singing, playing the *chuniri* or dancing in the beginning of the last century and in subsequent years. In Latali, people still remember mournful Kati Girgvliani who started a round dance, with singing and dancing at the community celebration – *Tanghiloba*; Pasiko and Matrona Pitskhelani, famous for their singing and dancing; in the village of Pari, people recalled the facts about local women – Agrapina Tsalani, Sasha and Lisa Chkhetiani performing men’s funeral *Zari*, about renowned female singer Hadu Devdariani from the same community, Irujan Chkhetiani famous for dancing on big toes – in the village of Chuberi.....the locals emphasize frequent cases of men and women singing together. It is noteworthy that in the beginning of the past century, basing on the impressions from a trip to Svaneti, Z. Paliashvili wrote: “From Mount Latbari we turned right and arrived in the village of Ushkuli. At this time, we heard a beautiful song in three voices: we looked to the right and saw a group of 10-15-year-old women coming down the mountain, and this song was coming from them. Had I not seen it with my own eyes, I would not have believed that the above song was sung by women, not men... During my entire trip I never met a high voice (soprano) in women. However, a large number of singers in Svaneti are women. Among them, I met many with a deep low voice (“contralto”), very similar to the male voice (“tenor”). This is explained by the fact that in Svaneti, men and women always sing together in choir. And since man’s voice is generally an “octave” lower than woman’s, women have their voices tuned to man’s range . . . When listening to only women’s singing on the gramophone, you won’t believe that it is women and not men singing” (Paliashvili, 1903:2). Almost four decades before Paliashvili, Bishop Gabriel (Kikodze) who was in Svaneti, namely in Ushguli, noted: amazing is complete freedom and lightness revealed by the women here. They do not at all hide from men and together with them participate in all kinds of gatherings and entertainment. In this case, women and men formed a choir and sang various songs (Kikodze, 1867:37., our translation – T. R.).

Today, joint performance of men and women has naturally been preserved, mainly in family musicking. In addition, in both Upper and Lower Svaneti there are many women distinguished in playing the *chuniri* and singing (video ex. 4). As for municipal ensembles, the tradition of mixed performance is rarely encountered.

In such cases too, women are mostly limited to participation in dances and round dances.

Conclusion

Field research of 2021 shows that the change of time and modern lifestyle have also affected Svaneti, known for its loyalty to antiquity and traditions. The tendency to diminish is observed in incomplete, fragmentarily surviving community celebration days and forgotten repertoire. Generations change, and the number of people who learn songs, dances or round dances syncretically via participation in a particular ritual, and whose thinking was in accordance with the laws of oral tradition, is gradually decreasing. This essentially changes the picture, because the number of people distinguished in creative freedom, talent for improvisation, knowledge of various variants, and

performance manner naturally acquired from their ancestors is becoming rarer. The attitude towards traditional culture is also changing, even though young people recognize the value of the folklore of their native region, most know it superficially. Another parameter, the change of which is obvious, is the arrangement and performance manner of Svan song. The tendency of young people towards temperament may be the consequence of the modern auditory environment, the change in manner – of less knowledge and practice of Svan language. The changes in arrangement and manners are especially noticeable in Lower Svaneti. Sadly, the short time allotted for research in this part of Svaneti is not enough for well-grounded conclusions. The accumulated experience has convinced us that the relation between folk music of Upper and Lower Svaneti – the differences primarily manifested in the repertoire and performance style of these two Gorges – require in-depth research.

In recent years, tourism has become a kind of incentive for performing, and in some cases for the revival of old rituals. Foreign guests who are interested in traditional life often show desire to learn Georgian polyphonic singing. This, coupled with additional funding, strengthens among the locals the feeling of pride in their own culture and the desire to preserve these traditions. Today, in different parts of Georgia, including Svaneti, there are villages and families where interested persons can learn Svan songs, master the instruments made by local masters. One clear example of this is the village of Lakhushdi, the host village of our group during the expedition, where all generations participated together in the performance of folk songs and dances (video ex. 5). Along with the determination of individuals, we think that for the stimulation of such processes, it is necessary to cooperate with the institutions with the obligation to protect the cultural heritage both in and outside Georgia. Their involvement and support are vital for the country with a heavy Soviet legacy that still struggles for its own cultural identity.

Video examples

1. Jrag. Group of singers from Becho community
2. Prayer and Amen. The prayer uttered by Devdariani. The village of Lamkheri Pari community.
3. Song of Sarvash Saaqani. Jani (Jano) Kvanchiani. Latali, the village of Kvanchianari
4. Sozar Tsioq. Anna Chamgeliani (II voice, Chuniri), Madona Chamgeliani (I voice), Eka Chamgeliani (Bass). Latali, the village of Lakhushdi
5. Dance song. Beginner Givi Pirtskhelani. rytskhelani. Latali, the village of Lakhushdi.

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