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**“AND MAY YOUR MARSHRUTKA HAVE GOOD PASSENGERS”:
PRAYERS, SONGS, AND RITUALS OF THE SVAN FEAST DAY OF GULA GABRIEL**

Preface

The present paper focuses on the celebration of the feast day of Gula Gabriel, practiced in Upper Svaneti, Georgia. Traditionally celebrated three times a year, on three Tuesdays after Easter, Gula Gabriel is the feast day of the ancient shrine of Archangel Gabriel, located in Gul (hence the name “Gula Gabriel”), in the community of Becho, near the slopes of Ushba. As with many Svan feast days, songs, and celebrations, the roots of Gula Gabriel are likely pre-Christian, and the associated practices fall into what Tserediani, Tuite, and Bukhrashvili (from here on TTB) designate as “folk’ Christianity” (2018: 49). There is little archival and contemporary material concerning this particular Svan feast-day, and we hope to partially fill the lack of data.¹ This paper aims to present a preliminary, broad picture of the historical and contemporary practices, offering some historical ethnographic context, as well as an account and brief analysis of our field observations in 2021.

The Shrine of Gula Gabriel

The church of the Archangel Gabriel in Gul, Svaneti, dates back to the XI century. The unique frescoes found inside this small shrine belong to the same period. It is worth noting the fact that in Svaneti, the spot where the church now stands has always been given great spiritual significance. Legends and tales confirm that not only this particular sacred space but shrines in general, were personified. This personification was expressed not only in their names (eg: Gulash Gabriel, Tanghil Church of the Archangel, Mkheri Church of the Archangel, Ushguli Lamaria, etc.), but was also reflected in the stories associated with them. In some of these legends, the shrines even compete with each other.² It is true that similar church-naming practices exist everywhere in Georgia, but in Svaneti, they are taken a step further: according to Svan mythology, shrines can have similar sorts of “relationships” with each other as living people. In some cases, the shrines are brothers to each other, and sometimes they fight each other. In 1935, ethnographer Evdokia Kozhevnikova recorded a legend about Gula Gabriel: “Gula Gabriel and Archangel Michael were brothers. Once, Gula Gabriel hid the head of a sacrificed sheep from his brother and kept it for himself. Archangel Michael was on to his brother, and called out to him, “Hey Gabriel! You are the one to set confused minds right. And the bad temper that so wrecks the mind will carry your name”. And so, Gula Gabriel is especially prayed to by people with epilepsy and mental illness. For this, a yoke made of birch branches is tied to the sick person and taken to the shrine.

¹ A sampling of sources on the topic of Svan mythology and rituals in general, and discourse on ‘folk’ Christianity, that are sure to be useful for future comparative study and deeper analysis includes: Charachidze (1968), Chartolani (1961), Pirtskhelani (1999), Tserediani (2005), Tuite (2004, 2006), and Mzhavanadze (2018), among a number of others.

² One example of this is the legend about the Mkheri Church of the Archangel, which won a place on Mkheri Mountain as a result of a competition with Uenash (Shrine of the Prophet Jonah) This legend was written down by 80-year-old Fyodor Tsrediani and is confirmed by archival materials.

The current key-keepers of this church are the Goshuani family, and it is thus their responsibility to host the feast-day celebrations.

Rituals and Customs

During the feast day, only men are allowed inside the church. The prayer starts in the morning, with several men (3–5) standing in the church and starting to pray harmoniously (Fig. 1) Though they start and end together, they all say different texts this type of prayer could indeed be one of the origins of chanting. After the prayer, the men exit in a procession, singing a hymn, with a bowl full of *rakhi* (local hard alcohol) in hand. They finish singing in a circle and pass the bowl around for each participant to take a ritual drink. Then round dances and games begin.

Gula Gabriel is celebrated three times a year, on three Tuesdays after Easter. In the Svan tradition, to praise or pray to any shrine and deity, the rite is generally performed several times a year, in different ways. This is also the case with the shrine of Gula Gabriel. Each day of the week is associated with the name of a particular saint or deity: Tuesday is considered the day of Gula Gabriel. According to B. Nizharadze, the first week of Easter (aka St Thomas' Sunday) festival is known as *Uplish* or *Khosha Tanaf* and used to last for 3 weeks (Nizharadze, 1962: 62). In the Becho commune, this day is called the day of Archangel Gabriel. For Svans, Archangel Gabriel is a deity who heals spiritual diseases, and therefore, the worshipers would ask him for healing. Almost all ethnographic and historical sources indicate that giving sacred significance to individual days of the week and connecting them to the name of this or that saint or deity carries great importance. Special attention is paid to the consideration of this issue by N. Tserediani in her thesis, which describes in detail the function and meaning of each deity (saint) and the day of the week intended for them (Tserediani, 2005: 234–239) (Fig. 2).

In addition to the fact that a ritual to bless the Archangel's shrine at Gul was performed within the framework of a larger holiday cycle, the feast day of the church, as we mentioned, is celebrated three times a year. As a rule, sacrificial offerings are not slaughtered in the church or its immediate surroundings. First, a prayer is recited in the church, and a candle is put on the sacrificial animal's forehead. Then, it is quickly spun three times, while the name of the sick person is repeated. Notably, in Svaneti when someone had an epileptic seizure, they were not addressed by their first name: for example, if the epileptic's name was Giorgi, they would nonetheless shout, "Gabriel, come to your senses!" to get him to come to.

The following account of the healing aspect of Gula Gabriel was related to us in 2012 by Divo Gvichiani in Latali:

Mainly those who suffer from *maita mazig* (headaches and mental disorders) come here. Glory to Gula Gabriel! You have to walk 2 kilometers up there, and the road is very steep and bad. We had my brother last year, Tengiz, who had problems. Before you go up, you should make a yoke from the branches of a birch tree and tie it around the sick person's neck, then, on the day their guardian, will take this yoke by the hand and lead them up. This yoke should be removed and left in the "lad-bāsh" (outbuilding)³ at the entrance of the church. If the patient is not disturbed, then it [the prayer/

³ As Tserediani, Tuite, and Bukhrashvili (2018: 50) explain, "One distinctive feature of Svan ecclesiastical architecture is the inclusion of one or more rooms adjoining the church proper. One of the side wings attached to the church serves as a kind of kitchen, where, until recently, women baked the bread to be presented as offerings in the sanctuary on portable hearths".

ritual – ed.] didn't work, and they have to return again. If they do become disturbed or show some kind of craziness, then Glory to Gula Gabriel, and you have to make a sacrifice. The innards of the animal are put on the yoke [as on a spit – ed] and roasted, and that's how it helps. On that day, a lot of sacrificial animals are slaughtered, the place is full and nothing is brought back. I have not seen inside the church, they say it is nicely painted, but women are not allowed inside. Nothing bothered Tengiz anymore after that. Glory to Gula Gabriel! (Transcribed by Madona Chamgeliani)

Fieldwork Observations

When we arrived in Gul for the feast day, the prayers inside the church were already underway. We were a mixed group of Svans, Georgians from other regions, and foreigners, all with ties to the folk singing world. The road conditions on the way are rough, and the last part of the way up is particularly unfriendly for vehicles – most people simply hike up. The scenery of the Becho valley, which affords some of the best views of Ushba, is rather stunning, especially on a clear warm day, like the one when our journey took place (Fig. 3) The previous night, special offering bread (*lemzir*) was baked by the women of the Chamgeliani family (from vil. Lakhushdi), one for each of us, and, we handed the *lemzir* to the men inside the church when we arrived. Since only men were allowed inside, we (the authors of the present article) stood outside, while the male members of our group went in. As TTB note, “Among the Svans, both female and male trajectories are represented in ritual space, but the limits of women's circulation between private interior and exterior ritual sites are contained within the frontiers of the commune” (2018: 62). In our case, the female Svan members of our group prepared the *lemzir*, handed it to the praying men, and could be present in ritual spaces outside the church itself, but the animal sacrifice and church entry were off limits (Fig.4). The male members of the group, Svan or not, were permitted to enter, (since they had recording equipment, we also asked permission and arranged this in advance). Though we (the women) could not see much, we were able to hear the prayers, which went on continuously, each man seemingly speaking alone, yet somehow, all voices formed not a cacophony, but an almost harmonious sound, reverberating through the walls of the small church, and traveling, in a muted form, towards us, as we stood by the door⁴. The praying went on almost nonstop, so long as people were still coming up to the church and handing the bread to be blessed. “Khocha Pasajiræl!” (“May you have good passengers”), we heard one of the men say, referring to, evidently, a *marshrut 'ka*⁵ driver, over whose offering they were praying. The men asked for our names and said prayers for each of us as well.

After all the prayers were said, it was time for the libations and circle dancing. First, the men recited a prayer over the libations – a chalice full of *rakhi*. Then, still inside the church, they began to sing “Didebata” (“Glory to the Archangel”). They then came out of the church one by one, arms locked, already stepping into the dance, with the last one in the line holding the chalice – everyone would later take a sip from it (Fig.5).

The men circled the church, singing and following the round dance steps, and began to come down to a field, where tables were already set up, and the celebrations were to continue. Others, who had not been inside the church and were already drinking and feasting, joined the dance,

⁴ The usual prayer formulas include texts of d “*Didāb ajq'ād*” – “may you be blessed/may glory come your way” or “*Didābi leq'ed*” – “to whom glory comes” (See also TTB, 2018)

⁵ A *marshrut 'k'a* is a routed taxi van (usually a Sprinter or the like), which holds anywhere between 10 and 20 passengers, and travels on either regional or inner-city routes.

though few could remember the song. The men then started to sing the song “Harira,” a celebratory dancing song, which is known as “Lishldani” in Svaneti⁶ (Fig.6). Though the melody and vocal arrangement were indeed similar to the other versions of “Harira,” the text was specific to the event: “May Gula Gabriel bless us and all the people here today!”⁷ As the song progressed and clapping intensified, several of the mostly older men started dancing in the middle of the semi-circle formed by the singers.

On the hill slope to the side, several men were preparing the lamb to be sacrificed. The animal was brought up to the church, a candle was placed on its forehead, and it was spun around rapidly, three times, and then taken back to the hillside, away from the shrine. Though the locals seemed most excited about the drinking and the feasting, evidently, the presence of our group of ethnographers and ethnomusicologists, with cameras and recorders, encouraged them to sing several more songs. Not many people were able to recall the lyrics or the melodies: nearly all those who did were already elderly. They then asked the folk singers from our group to sing, and they obliged. The slaughtered lamb was already on the spit, roasting over the fire, and the drinking, feasting, and occasional singing continued for several hours.

Discussion and Brief Analysis

Based on the stories and legends of yore, as well as contemporary observational evidence, Gula Gabriel appears to be an important feast day for the Becho community. However, similarly to many traditional celebrations not only in Georgia, but all around the world, the focus has been shifting more towards feasting and drinking, and away from such folk expressions as singing and dancing – these things have been largely relegated to the stage and are generally perceived as “performance” rather than “practice”.⁸ In the case of our visit, our interlocutors shared that they did not sing much anymore, but with some prodding were willing to give it a go. At the same time, the texts of the prayers, such as wishing for good passengers, demonstrate the effort to keep these rituals relevant to present-day situations, and ask for blessings and help for and with current issues and problems. The presence of outsiders – not tourists, but researchers – also resulted in a more extensive song and dance display than the practitioners would usually attempt, though it seems that the camera was especially welcome as the participants hoped that they would perhaps make it on television.

In some ways, we could say that many of the Svan festivals and feast days continue to exist, essentially, by inertia, while some (such as Lipanaal or Lamproba) gain relative prominence due to not only more extensive study but also foreign interest and then, in some cases also turn into reenactments (Kaganova, 2021: 103) or “spectacle for tourists,” as described in TTB (2018: 63). The resurgence of the Orthodox Church, following Georgia’s independence, as well as the investment of money into Svaneti’s development as a tourist attraction, both have an influence on the ritual proceedings and preservation thereof. The above-mentioned authors also make note of this, especially

⁶ For the discussions of semantic and asemantic texts in Svan songs, see Mzhavanadze and Chamgeliani (2016, 2018)

⁷ გაბრელ ხუაი ლადი ლადაღსუ გუაჰი, ნაი ამჩუ მერდე მარეს [gabrel khuai ladi ladaghsu gwähi, nai amchu merde maares]

⁸ Not to say that the two are mutually exclusive: what is implied here is that they have become so, and the performance practice is often frozen and preserved as performance only, as it exits the realm of practice and enters the realm of staged display.

with respect to the passing of control over shrines. As they put it, “the local ritual practitioners – who in 1991 exercised unquestioned control over the proceedings – found themselves twenty-four years later quite literally shoved aside by swarms of tourists, while Orthodox priests celebrated Mass inside the church” (2018: 63).⁹

The feast day of Gula Gabriel remains one of the festivals that continues to be in local practitioners’ control, with no tourist or official involvement. This of course comes with its own positives and issues: on the one hand, a community transmission of ritual practices is organic, yet, on the other hand, this does result in such developments as the omission or forgetting of the hymns and songs that used to be integral to the rituals. At the same time, the discourses of heritage and preservation that loom large over Svaneti and its status with the UNESCO Heritage Program (Applis, 2020), also play into the potential future handling and developments of such celebrations as Gula Gabriel.¹⁰ It seems that one way or another, something will inevitably be lost. It is only a matter of who decides what it should be.

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⁹ See Tserediani, Tuite, Bukhrashvili (2018:63) for the full account of the situation. I (MD) also provide a discussion of similar phenomena in my doctoral dissertation: see Kaganova (2021: 97–159).

¹⁰ We simply lack space in this paper to go deep into the discussion of heritage regimes and cultural preservation tactics with due diligence. Perhaps, as we expand on this topic, we will be able to include a deeper exploration of these problematics. For relevant context and extant discourse, see, among others: Bendix, Eggert, and Peselmann (2012); Bithell (2014) – this work specifically discusses Georgian music revival; Coombe and Weiss (2015) Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1995, 2004); Meskel (2018); Timothy and Boyd (2006); Tsitsishvili (2009) – which addresses Georgian polyphony and the UNESCO heritage program; etc.

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სურათი 1. შესაწირი ბატკნის კურთხევა. 11 მაისი, 2021. ფოტო ლეო დეკრისტოფოროსი.

Figure 1. Blessing of the sacrificial lamb. May 11, 2021. Photo by Leo Decristoforo



სურათი 2. ლემზირის ლოცვა და კურთხევა. 11 მაისი, 2021. ფოტო ლეო დეკრისტოფოროსი.

Figure 2. Prayer and blessing of lemszir. May 11, 2021. Photo by Leo Decristoforo.



სურათი 3. გულის გაბრიელის სამლოცველოს ხედი და გზა.
Figure 3. View on the way to the shrine of Gula Gabriel



სურათი 4. ლემზირი და რახი სამლოცველოში. 11 მაისი, 2021. ფოტო ლეო დეკრისტოფოროსი.
Figure 4. Lemzir and rakhi inside the shrine. May 11, 2021. Photo by Leo Decristoforo.



სურათი 5. პროცესია ტოვებს ეკლესიას და მღერის „დიდებათას“. 11 მაისი, 2021. ფოტო ლეო დეკრისტოფოროსი.

Figure 5. The procession exiting the church, singing “Didebata”. May 11, 2021. Photo by Leo Decristoforo.



სურათი 6. ფერხული სამლოცველოს ქვემოთ. 11 მაისი, 2021. ფოტო ლეო დეკრისტოფოროსი.

Figure 6. Round Dancing in the field below the shrine. May 11, 2021. Photo by Leo Decristoforo.

