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TRADITIONAL LAW AND ITS APPEARANCE IN GEORGIAN FOLK SONGS

In modern societies, central laws regulated by state organizations and authorities govern coexistence. In earlier periods and regions lacking robust state administration, local rules prevailed. One significant aspect of traditional legal systems is blood revenge, which has ancient origins, with early references in Greek mythology and Icelandic sagas (Cassar, 2023). Remarkably, parallel legal systems, including blood revenge, are present in about 30% of countries (Shepard, 2024). Blood feuds were a particularly intense tradition in the Caucasus until recently (Jalabadze, 2016). The causes of blood revenge are similar everywhere: insult, theft, fraud, kidnapping, or other violent acts. As a powerful and impactful series of events, the topic has also attracted the interest of the arts – it appears in painting and literature, as well as in music. In my paper, I examine how this tradition operated in different regions of Georgia and how it is reflected in the country's centuries-old folk music. This work focuses on the higher northern regions, with a deeper examination of Svan music. It is far from being a completed and finalized topic; rather, it should be seen as an initial, comprehensive step that raises further questions and paves the way for the future continuation of the work, extending it to the entire country.

About family-based structure in Georgia

Legal systems were more prevalent in the mountainous regions, while in the lowland areas the current authorities could relatively easily reach any location, effectively enforcing the rules and law. In mountain territories family-based organization was the main structure. About the structure of Svaneti, as recounted by Vakhtang Pilpani (Pilpani, 2024):

„In my village, we are 5 families with the same name, we were 25 earlier. We came from the same grand-grand-grandfather, Duda. So, our *samkhub*¹ has the name Dudasha. My village has several *samkhubs* – Dudasha, Guchasha and Babadisha. Together these *samkhubs* we are the village, Kashveti. Together with five other villages we are the community Lenjeri. In every village there are several *samkhubs*. When a family had to take blood revenge, and it was done, it was a big celebration for each family and village in the community. It was a rule.”

¹ *samkhub*: near relative families

In Pshavi the main ruler was the *khevisberi*². There were twelve communities, which were formed by twelve families, organization was not territorial. Each community had its own *khevisberi*, who they thought that he has come from deity. One could become a *khevisberi* through a divine dream or by being selected by other *khevisberis* based on their capabilities. These twelve *khevisberi* chose one main, who became the ‘*khevisberi of Lashari*’, the main deity of all Pshavians and the region. (Beridziashvili 2024)

These strong, family-based structures and bonds made unconditional support and trust towards each other important, and transformed punishment into a personal matter, revenge, or retribution. However, stories related to ancient law, such as robbery, murder, or blood feud, appear differently in the music of various regions. Unfortunately, it seems that in many regions, previously known songs are gradually fading into obscurity.

Lawing, blood-feud and killing in songs

Among the eastern regions, **Tusheti** is the most isolated, but the institution of blood feud was least active among the elements of traditional law (Tataraidze, 2024). So much so that in the 19th century, 17 families migrated to Tusheti from other regions to escape blood feuds (Topchishvili, 2009). Also, for *Vainakhs*³ Tusheti was one of the main territories to migrate partly because of escaping from blood feuds (Kurtsikidze & Chikovani, 2002). Conflicts were mostly compensated with material goods (Topchishvili, 2009), and blood feuds were only resorted to in cases of complete failure of negotiations. This is undoubtedly also due to the fact that in Tusheti, women had a much more significant role and greater power than in other regions, and in conflict situations, their goal was reconciliation rather than retribution (Tataraidze, 2024). These circumstances certainly explain why, so far, I have not found any song from Tusheti related to blood feuds or murders.

In **Khevsureti**, the method of conflict resolution was not only compensation, but also blood feud (Jalabadze, 2016). The compensation was often determined by placing seeds on the wound. The number of seeds that fit on the wound equated to the number of cows or oxes that needed to be paid to appease the injured party (Chincharauli, 2024). Another compensation was burning down the perpetrator’s house and possessions, provided they were aware of it in advance and could escape to safety (Kurtsikidze & Chikovani, 2002, p. 24). Several songs related to crimes have been preserved in Khevsureti, collected by Yvette Grimaud in 1967. Chincharauli mentioned that there were other songs that tell stories, but unfortunately, she does not recall them.

The song *Lekss itqvis Itirishvili* is about an abduction of a bride. Similar stories are

² *khevisberi*: it literally means: the elder of a gorge. He was the secular and ecclesiastical ruler, functioned as judge, priest and military leader. He had power and responsibility, but socially he was equal to the other members of the community – he had no big land or other privileges.

³ *Vainakhs*: a group of North Caucasian peoples, who used common language, the *nakh* – ethnically Chechen, Ingush and Bats people

found in various accounts: men from Dagestan arrive and abduct a woman. The woman's brothers pursue the abductors and kill them. However, the abductors' father then kills the brothers, and in some narratives, the woman as well. The song *Ghulisa kldita* tells of a wedding at *Vepkhia's* place, where a man arrived with a gun, the wedding turns into a bloodbath. The story's brutality suggests that it could be either the cause or response of a blood feud. More exact the song *Sulkhaneuri*. Sulkhan, Gogotura's son arrives in Shatili at sunrise to talk to a Kist's son. And a scream was heard after the noise of a gun. The father caught his rolling son, but could not help him, a bullet went into the son's heart. These three songs are performed with panduri accompaniment⁴. Their form and melodic progression reflect the general characteristics of the region: they are monophonic, descend in a linear fashion, each melodic line ending on the tonic note. The pitch of the notes is often uncertain, making the performance more akin to a sung recitation. The instrumental accompaniment also features simple rhythm and minimal use of chords, without melody.

In addition to the instrumental songs, the collection also includes two a cappella pieces. One of these is particularly mysterious and intriguing. The *Mtibluri* is a work song, but its references are surprising. It narrates the story of a reaper whose life ended prematurely, mentioning fate taken after mowing and bloodied scythe. The other a cappella song is a *Tirili*, which likely marks the conclusion of a long blood feud. One line provides a specific detail: 'I was thirsty, I could not drink blood anymore.'

Like Tusheti, **Pshavi** also lacks a significant number of preserved songs, but the reasons are different from Tusheti. 1) Pshavi's proximity to Kartli and greater accessibility led to earlier control by authorities, despite the strong presence of the blood feud tradition in the region (Kurtsikidze & Chikovani). 2) Stories about murders and crimes were often recounted improvisationally, usually with panduri accompaniment, such as during a *supra*. Consequently, the songs lacked stable texts and forms, and these improvisational performances were insufficient for preservation (Beridziashvili, 2024). 3) Vazha Pshavela's impact on the lyrical preservation of stories in Pshavi overshadowed the role of musical storytelling. As a result, alongside improvisational narratives, traces of these stories are also found in laments.

A *Tirili* in Grimaud's collection suggests a murder or possibly revenge. Someone killed a matchmaker who married the girl he had mediated and also mentioned a child who probably rolled into the water. Another *Tirili* was found in the IRCTP Archive, which has more concrete text. A mother laments her 24-year-old son, Nodar, who disappeared five years ago. He died innocently, having been betrayed. The attackers stealthily approached him and pushed him into the water. The lament collected by Grimaud is structured, consisting of uniformly short lines, with each line having the same melody, which follows the traditional descending pattern ending on the tonic note. In contrast, Nodar's lament is more

⁴ In *Lekss itqviv Itirishvili* even the text begins, that the singer asks the help of his panduri, he cannot sing without it.

chaotic and less organized. The length of the lines varies according to the text, with some being short and others being very long, resulting in a melody with greater fluctuations. For the longer lines, there are multiple ascents and descents before reaching the tonic note.

The most deeply rooted tradition of ancient legislation and blood feud persisted in **Svaneti**, with many elements surviving to the present day or the very recent past. Compared to the eastern mountains, Svaneti adhered more strictly to the «an eye for an eye» principle. Following a violent act, the entire community prioritized revenge, delaying all celebrations and weddings until retribution was achieved. This responsibility fell on the closest kin, but if they were unable, a friend or acquaintance would carry out the act, attributing it to the wronged party. Sometimes, perceived disproportionate retribution led to further revenge, creating a perpetual cycle. Elders mediated to end the bloodshed, requiring both parties to swear on a church icon to cease hostilities and accept compensation and resolution. (Pilpani, 2024) Thus, numerous songs narrate related stories, whether involving real individuals and events or presented as myths. However, for some of these songs, only the lyrics have survived through the centuries, while the melodies have been lost (e.g., Tambil Goshteliani). In my essay, I will focus on those songs whose melodies are still known today.

The most well-known song that recounts a story of blood feud is *Mirangula*. There are numerous recordings available in the IRCTP archives, and on the internet. Due to the widespread nature of the lyrics, several musical variations have emerged. The root of the conflict was likely related to food acquisition. In ancient Svaneti, when food was scarce, people hunted wild goats. If no wild goats were available, they would travel north to take cattle from fields, even if it belonged to others. Northerners did the same, depending on the severity of hunger in their region (Pilpani, 2024). During a northern journey, Mirangula's father was killed, but his companions identified the murderer. At the age of 15-16, Mirangula, while playing, accidentally knocked over a woman who scolded him, urging him to avenge his father's death. Mirangula then demanded his mother reveal the killer's identity, took his weapon, and went north. He killed his father's murderer but was severely wounded. At home, despite the joy over his revenge, Mirangula chose to stay in the tower to hide his condition, requesting his mother bring him food and organize a community celebration, assuring others he would arrive soon. However, when his mother brought food one Wednesday, she found him dead. The song tells of her mourning. According to Vakhtang Pilpani, the story and song likely originate from Mulakhi, with its accessible routes to the North Caucasus.

The most widespread version of the song has numerous variants. However, one recording found in the archives, though based on the most spread version, differs significantly at critical points. Thus, I distinguish three main versions. All are accompanied by *chuniri* and/or *changi*. For ease of analysis, I examine the variants using a common base tone ('A'). I use the solmization names according to relative solmization. (**appendix**)

Sozar-Tsioq (example ‘d’) tells a story of two brothers. Their family had previously resolved a blood feud through mediation. One night, during a wedding at the former hostile family’s home, Sozar and Tsioq were invited and given drinks laced with a sleeping potion. They were murdered in their sleep, and their bodies were placed on a makeshift sled, hitched to their horses, and sent home with two escorts. Seeing her dead sons from a distance, their mother, enraged, shot one of the escorts. Lacking reloading knowledge, she sought help from a neighbor, who incorrectly loaded the weapon, causing a misfire, allowing the other escort to escape. The story likely continued with further blood vengeance, hindering peace negotiations due to the disproportionate number of murders.

Musically, *Sozar-Tsioq* combines elements from versions I and III of *Mirangula*. Its melodic and harmonic structure follows version I, while its form, which includes recurring musical material, is characteristic of version III. (appendix)

The song *Bail-Betkil* (example ‘e’) recounts a legend. In Svan mythology, Dali, the goddess of hunting, lived high on the mountain. She fell in love with Betkil, a young hunter, granting him perpetual hunting success and giving him a headscarf as a token of their love in exchange for his eternal loyalty. Betkil returned to his village, while Dali remained on the mountain. Eventually, Betkil grew lonely and married a girl from Mulakhi. During a village festival, a wild goat disrupted the dancers, and Betkil chased it. The goat led him along a path that closed behind them, disappearing at a bend where Dali appeared. She confronted Betkil about his loyalty, revealing his betrayal by noting the headscarf was with his wife. Dali then placed Betkil on a rock, telling him that if he had been faithful, he would survive. Betkil fell into the abyss, proving his unfaithfulness.

Two versions of the song have been found. In the widely disseminated original version, two choruses alternate in singing a cappella, accompanied by the *perkhuli*. The other version is monophonic, accompanied by *chuniri*, and is in Shairi form, without dance. In the original version, the verses are short, consisting of 9 measures, with the second chorus beginning its verse in the ninth measure, meaning that at the end of each stanza, the choruses are «interleaved.» The nine measures are asymmetrically divided into 5+4 measures. (appendix)

The forcible abduction of women for marriage was a tradition in Svaneti until recently. If a woman with children was abducted, she was required to leave her child behind to ensure the future husband’s pure lineage, as he would not take responsibility for another’s child (Khachvani, 2024). A related story is depicted in the *Shairi Bimurzela* (example ‘f’). In this tale, Bimurzela, who had a wonderful life, fell in love with Manoli, Beka’s wife, and abducted her while Beka was away hunting. Beka pursued them to Mestia and killed Bimurzela.

The song is responsorial in structure. The closing notes also create a merging effect between the two performers. The story is advanced by the soloist, while the chorus repeats always their same text, functioning like a refrain. The song consists of two distinctly sepa-

rate sections. The first section is slower, resembling the *perkhuli* style, with a freer rhythm in the solo part and a $\frac{3}{4}$ -time pulse in the chorus. The second section is faster, more structured, and seem like a solo dance with a duple meter, while still maintaining the responsorial nature. The transition occurs as the narrative intensifies.

Another story was told in two songs, in *Aslan Murza* (example ‘g’) and in *Aslamaza* (example ‘h’). Finding musical material for these songs is challenging and requires field research to identify any existing living versions. In the IRCTP archive, there is one recording of both songs, collected by Grigol Chkhikvadze in 1960. However, the lyrics of the song listed as “Aslan Murza” are unclear, so we must rely on Chkhikvadze’s notes. The story tells that Aslan Murza was preparing for a wedding with Darjol. However, Darjol changed her mind, began to cry, and returned to her family while Aslan Murza was away. Upon learning of her departure, Aslan Murza took his weapons and went to Darjol’s family. When he arrived, Darjol was sitting among her nine brothers, who sought to protect her. Aslan Murza killed all the brothers, but in retaliation for his actions, Darjol’s father immediately killed Aslan Murza.

The recording, which is probably Aslan Murza, Davit Niguriani plays a solo version, accompanied by *chuniri*. It refers to other songs, which he played in this form, so probably this is not the original, old version of Aslan Murza. The text of the song alternates with the instrumental verses, but the melody is same. It is interesting that it is more major than minor, however the third is unsure, slightly under pitched, but the characteristic of the song is not corresponding to the storyline. Aslamaza is also in major style, in mixolydian mode. The feature of the song is like Aslan Murza, although this is three voices performance. It has short lines, always the same recurring, the choir and the *chuniri* accompaniment alternate. The verse always ends on fifth.

Summing

As can be seen, ancient legislation and blood feuds have left a profound musical imprint on society. The frequency of these songs in various regions naturally depends on the significance and duration of traditional law in those areas. Like all genres, this one too reflects history of society, as it encapsulates the experiences and events deemed important and worthy of preservation. The initial steps of research in this field have highlighted that the folk song repertoire related to this theme was likely much more extensive. It is already promising that examples of songs related to blood feuds or murders can be found from other regions as well, indicating that further steps in this direction are warranted.

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მაგალითი 1.

Example 1.

Mirangula I.

as taught by Vakhtang Pilpani
(Lenjeri, September 2023)

I

II

De-de-sh de-desh Mi-ra-n-gu-la, voo, De-de-s i-s-gvam si-ga-r-khor-das, voo,

III

I

II

De - desh de - desh Mi - ran - gu - la, De - desh, voi De - desh,

III

I

II

De - des is - gvam si - gar - khor - das, De - desh, voi De - desh

III

მაგალითი 2.

Example 2.

Mirangula II

as taught by Beso Pirtskhelani
(Tbilisi, Febr. 2024)

Allegro

I $\text{De-de-sh de-de-sh Mi-ra-n - gu - la, voo, Voi De-desh voi, Mi - ra-n-gu - la}$

II $\text{De-de s i - s-gvam si - gar - khor-das, voo, Voi De-desh voi, Mi - ra-n-gu - la}$

III

მაგალითი 3.

Example 3.

Mirangula III.

as sang by Muzsalis Mustsavleta Gundi
(Mulakhi, 1960 - archive, collector: Grigol Chkhikvadze)

I $\text{De-de sh de-desh Mi - ra-n-gu-la, voo, De-de-s i - s-gvam si - ga-r khor-das, voo}$

II m...

III

მაგალითი 4.

Example 4.

Sozar - Cioq

as taught by Vathtang Pilpani
(Lenjeri, March 2024)

I Voo, vor - di - a - shu, voi de - de - shu voo,

II Voo, vor - di - a - shu, voi de - de - shu voo,

III Voo, vor - di - a - shu, voi de - de - shu voo,

5 So - zar Tsi - oq voi de - de - shu voo.

II So - zar Tsi - oq voi de - de - shu voo.

III So - zar Tsi - oq voi de - de - shu voo.

მაგალითი 5.

Example 5.

Bail - Betkil I

as taught by Vakhtang Pilpani
(Lenjeri, March 2024)

Two choirs alternating, with perkhuli

I At the very beginning only middle starts

II Ba - il Bet - ki - li - vo, la - ku - ci ras - me - i - vo shked - li

III Ba - il Bet - ki - li - vo, la - ku - ci ras - me - i - vo shked - li

Variant

6 Other choir starts

I Ba - il il - ba - da il - ba - i - vo ba - il

II Ba - il il - ba - da il - ba - i - vo ba - il

III Ba - il il - ba - da il - ba - i - vo ba - il

მაგალითი 6.
Example 6.

Shairi Bimurzela

As sung by Ensemble of Mestia House of Culture (1967)
Solist: Avksenti Gvichiani

Solo

Sha - i - ra - da, Bi-mur-ze-la Mes-ti-ash

I

shai, Sha - i da re - ra vo - re - ra,

II

Only at repetitions

III

Only at repetitions

Solo

Sha - i - ra - da ba - zi Mes-tiad Gu - ri mi

I

shai, Shai da re - ra vo - re - ra

II

Only at repetitions

III

Only at repetitions

Shairi Bimurzela

As sung by Ensemble of Mestia House of Culture (1967)
Solist: Avksenti Gvichiani

Solo

Sha - i - ra - da, Bi-mur-ze-la Mes-ti-ash

I

shai, Sha - i da re - ra vo - re - ra,

II

Only at repetitions

III

Only at repetitions

Solo

Sha - i - ra - da ba - zi Mes-tiad Gu - ri mi

I

shai, Shai da re - ra vo - re - ra

II

Only at repetitions

III

Only at repetitions

მაგალითი 7.

Example 7.

Aslan Murza

As sung by Davit Niguriani in 1960



მაგალითი 8.

Example 8.

Aslamaza

As sung by Nana Lukhutashvili in 1960

Three staves of music in 4/4 time, key of D major, labeled I, II, and III. Each staff contains the same melody: D4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), F#4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), F#4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (half). Staff I is in treble clef, Staff II is in treble clef, and Staff III is in bass clef.

MIRANGULA MAIN VERSIONS			
	Vakhtang Pilpani, 2023, example ‘a’	Beso Pirtskhelani, 2024, example ‘b’	Muzsalis Mustsavleta Gundi, 1960, example ‘c’
beginning chord	1-4-5 (l-r-m)	1-4-6 (s-d-m)	1-4-6 (s-d-m / l-r-fi)
beginning tonal feeling	minor	major	mixed, alternates major and minor
musical lines end	on unisono: 1-1-1	on unisono: 1-1-1	on fifth: 1-1-5
cadence tonal feel- ing	a bit Phrygian, with the step of “d-tá-l” in top, however “tá” is a bit un- der intonated uncertain pitch.	Mixolydian. Uni- sono in “s”, ap- proached without alternated tone	Minor (Eol). l-m, ap- proached without alter- nated tone
the chord built on the greatest ‘bani’ deviation from the tonic	“má-tá-r”, but “má” and “tá” slightly over pitched. It causes uncertain 7 th between ‘bani’ and top. Between middle and top an uncertain 3 rd appears, while ‘bani’ and middle has a clear five distance. It creates a very painful, heart-wrenching effect.	r-l-r, in case of vari- ation: d-d-m. Both are clear chords without dissonance	má-t-r, dissonant, di- minished fifth between bani and middle voice, it causes painful effect
number of lines	4	4	4
musical structure of lines	A-A-B-B	A-B-A-Bv	A-A-A-A
lyrical structure of lines	A-B-Av-Bv	A-B-C-B	A-B-C-C
numbers of bars in lines	3-3-2-2, This song has a condensing effect on the second half, it appears more dynamic, and the song pulsates.	5-5-5-5; but 4+1 in “A” lines, 3+2 in “B” lines, so “B” lines give bigger stops	3-3-3, with alternating time signature, stops are the same every- where but short
parallel movement	frequent parallel move- ment of the voices	parallel motion oc- curs only between the top two voices, while the bass gen- erally moves in the opposite direction	frequent parallel move- ment of the voices

ambitus of the voices	I-5 II-5 III-4	I-6 II-5 III-5	I-5 II-5 III-4
	Sozar – Cioq (example ‘d’)	Bail – Betkil (example ‘e’)	
beginning chord	1-4-5 (I-r-m)	1-4-5 (I-r-m)	
beginning tonal feeling	minor	minor	
musical lines end	on unisono: 1-1-1	on unisono: 1-1-1	
cadence tonal feeling	a bit Phrygian, with the step of “d-tá-l” in top, however “tá” is a bit under intonated uncertain pitch.	A bit in the second musical line we can found a Phrygian effect, thus sometimes minor, sometimes major second is built on the base note	
the chord built on the greatest ‘bani’ deviation from the tonic	“má-tá-r”, but “má” and “tá” slightly over pitched. It causes uncertain 7 th between ‘bani’ and top. Between middle and top an uncertain 3 rd appears, while ‘bani’ and middle has a clear five distance. It creates a very painful, heart-wrenching effect.	r-l-m (1-5-9). This is unusually broad, and has a powerful feeling because of the double fifth	
number of lines	2	2	
musical structure of lines	A-Av	A-B	
lyrical structure of lines	A-B	A-B	
numbers of bars in lines	(1+)3-3. The sound before the first line creates a sense of preparation and anticipation	5+4	
parallel movement	frequent parallel movement of the voices	not frequent, but usually appears	
ambitus of the voices	I-5 II-5 III-4	I-5 II-6 III-5	