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Political and social significance of highland shrines in post-Soviet Georgia.

Summary of Proposed Research.

This project is in essence the continuation of the research on traditional Central Caucasian religion funded in 1999-2002, with a shift in orientation motivated primarily by observations made in the field at that time. The primary goal of my research during this period was the documentation and analysis of the surviving remnants of highland Caucasian paganism, a syncretic religious system comprising elements appropriated from Georgian Orthodox Christianity, but whose core principles go back much further in time. It became evident to me that study of the ongoing practice of this belief system cannot be divorced from the larger context of post-Soviet Georgia. A new generation of religious practitioners are joining the highland priests who received their formation a half-century or more ago, and young people, many of them interested in the Georgian past or motivated by the desire to affirm their identity as Georgians, are present in increasing numbers at the traditional religious festivals held in the highland Georgian provinces of Pshavi and Xevsureti each summer.

The project proposed here aims to situate Pshav and Xevsur religious practice in the diverse and turbulent political-ideological climate of today's Georgian Republic. Depopulated, impoverished, and peripheral as they might be, the highland districts of northeastern Georgia have been a potent symbolic presence in Georgian self-representations since the national revival of the latter half of the 19th century. It is in the light of these representations, as well as current discourses concerning Georgian identity, the place of Georgia vis-à-vis its neighbours and the West, the role of religion and tradition, etc., that I propose to examine the growing interest in highland shrines and festivals manifested by a surprisingly diverse set of constituencies whom I have observed gathering there in recent years: local residents, and lowlanders of Pshav ancestry, politicians and journalists, college students and folk singers, collectors (and revivers) of Georgian traditional lore, the occasional foreigner.

I wish to emphasize at the outset that this project seeks to uncover continuities with past beliefs and practices even as the investigator

and his colleagues take stock of the numerous changes undergone by Georgia as a whole, and the mountain districts in particular, in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. The historical perspective will take in not only the evolution of concepts of Georgianness as conveyed through literature, the media, education and cultural institutions since the 19th century, but, more importantly, the traditional political functions of the highland sacred sites themselves within the ideological framework of Pshav and Xevsur socio-religious organization and cosmology. In my view, the shrines are not being politicized so much as RE-politicized.

The project is of value not only as an opportunity to pursue the diachronic ethnography of one of the few continually-practiced "pagan" religious systems in Europe. In my view, detailed documentation and analysis of the appropriations of the highly-charged space of the central Pshav and Xevsur sanctuaries by diverse groups, local and "outsider" alike, and of the differing symbolic valences projected onto the mountaineers and their ancestral beliefs, will also be of interest to scholars and policy-makers studying the ideologically-conditioned deployment of images of the deep past in ethno-nationalist and identitarian movements throughout the former USSR and elsewhere.

Detailed Description of Proposed Research.

I. Objectives. From 1995 to 2001, this investigator made six field trips, totalling nearly a year and a half, to the former Soviet republic of Georgia. The primary goal of my research during this period, supported by two SSHRC grants, was the documentation and analysis of the surviving remnants of the syncretic religious system of highland Caucasia, comprising elements appropriated from Georgian Orthodox Christianity, but the core principles of which go back much further in time. (Publications resulting from the earlier phases of the project are listed in section 1 of the bibliography; additional materials can be viewed at my web page www.philologie.com). Yet these survivals of ancient belief systems are by no means isolated from the outside world. Pshavi and Xevsureti, the provinces where "paganism" is the most actively

practiced, are only a hundred kilometres or so north of Tbilisi, the Georgian capital, and can be reached by jeep within half a day. Weekly bus routes connect the more accessible Pshav and Xevsur towns with the lowlands, and there is considerable movement of people and goods in and out of the region during the summer months. The permanent highland population has been declining steadily since Tsarist times – a process accelerated by the mass deportations of Xevsurs to lowland Georgia in the 1950s – and most Georgians who identify themselves as highland peasants, including many shrine officials, now spend their winters in the lowlands.

The project proposed here aims to situate Pshav and Xevsur religious practice in the diverse and turbulent political-ideological climate of today's Georgian Republic. The principal objectives are:

(I). To continue the ongoing ethnographic study – including audio and video recording, interviews and participant observation – of traditional highland religion in those areas where it is the most actively practiced. This task is rendered the more urgent by the rapid and deep-reaching changes which are affecting all segments of Georgian society in what is already the second decade after the break-up of the Soviet Union. In addition to summer fieldwork (as in previous years), the investigator intends to apportion his sabbatical time so as to undertake trips to Pshavi and Xevsureti during the winter semesters of 2005 and 2006. Numerous ceremonies – many of them insufficiently described in the ethnographic literature – for the appointment of shrine personnel, the propitiation of harmful spirits and natural forces, and the reception of the visiting souls of deceased ancestors take place during the winter months.

(II). To document and analyze the symbolic and political deployment of representations of the highland Georgians, and their ancestral beliefs and practices, in today's Georgian republic. This will involve the continuation of our longitudinal study of the attendance at Pshav and Xevsur religious ceremonies, in particular the mid-summer festival known in various localities as Seroba, Atengenoba or Saghmto. The sites of Lasharis-Jvari and its sister shrine Tamar-Ghele are especially significant in this respect, since their ancient 'extraterritoriality' (explained below) has left them open to symbolic appropriation by a wide range of constituencies with distinct identity-linked agendas. At the same time, the investigator will collect and analyze representations of the northeast Georgian highlanders – and also of the adjacent peoples of the North

Caucasus in literature, film, journalism, and the discourses of politicians and social activists.

2. Context. Although not far as the crow flies from Tbilisi and other urban centres of eastern Georgia, the mountain provinces of Pshavi and Xevsureti were never more than nominally incorporated into the feudal polities of lowland Transcaucasia. In this respect they contrast sharply with Upper and Lower Svaneti in western Georgia, which although even less accessible from the lowlands had already been brought into the orbit of western Transcaucasian political formations at the beginning of the Christian Era. Also noteworthy is the near-total absence of Christian churches in Pshavi and Xevsureti (not counting the handful of churches constructed under Tsarist administration in the 19th century), whereas over a hundred Orthodox churches and monasteries were built from the 9th to the 13th centuries in Upper Svaneti alone [Taqaishvili 1991]. The rare mentions of Pkhovi (the earlier term for the district comprising today's Pshavi and Xevsureti) in medieval chronicles characterize the population as unruly and bestial (*pirutqwt saxeta mat kacta* 'men with the faces of animals' [Kartlis Cxovreba 80: 14-15]); several documents recount brutal campaigns of pacification in the region by royal armies, accompanied by the destruction of villages and shrines. One of the most devastating attacks on the Pkhovians and their pagan neighbours was ordered by none other than Queen Tamar, the fabled sovereign who presided over Georgia's Golden Age of literature, art and regional military hegemony at the turn of the 13th century. This same Tamar is now worshipped as a divine healer, and sister of Lashara, the supernatural patron of Pshavi (named after the son and successor of the historical Tamar, Giorgi IV Lashara [1215-22]).

In recent publications [Tuite 2002, 2004a,b], I have argued that the Pshavs and Xevsurs, even though they remained largely independent of lowland political control, adopted the principal concepts, and vocabulary, of Georgian feudalism. Rather than being instantiated on the ground, however, the principles of hierarchy, interdependence between lord and vassal, land tenure, military and labour tribute, etc., were projected onto the cosmological plane, and superimposed upon beliefs inherited from the common Georgian (or possibly pan-Caucasian) religious system.

What is distinctive about the Pxovian religious system, and most notably that practiced in the eleven ancient communes of interior Pshavi (*Ukana Pshavi*), is the remarkable consistence of its expression across the domains of cosmology, ritual, gender relations, spatial organization, and socio-political ideology among others and, second, the institution of semi-heriditary ritual specialists, referred to here as priests (Pshav *qevisberi*, Xevsur *xucesi*) and oracles (*kadagi*). It is likely that these features evolved together, for reasons that I sketch out in Tuite 2004b, and which I intend to investigate further in the context of this project.

At the top of the Pxovian cosmological hierarchy is God (*Ghmerti*), the creator (*dambadebeli*) of all that exists, including humans and the *xvtishvilni* children of God. The supreme God himself is invisible and remote, and no earthly shrine bears his name. The *xvtishvilni* were either created as deities, or were once humans whom God elevated to divine status, whereupon they became invisible. According to Pshav tradition, God, like a feudal monarch, divided the land among the *xvtishvilni* and set them in authority over the people dwelling on their territory (Ochiauri 1991: 49, 53-55, 95, 129). The *xvtishvilni* are addressed as *batonni* lords, the members of the community refer to themselves as *qmani* vassals, a terminology identical to that of medieval Georgian feudalism in the lowlands. Before the Sovietization of Georgia, the shrine territory, and a sizeable portion of the communitys farmland, pastures and forests belonged to the invisible overlord, and was worked by the human vassals collectively or in rotation, with a sizeable portion of the harvest retained by the shrine. The grain, considered sacred, was stored by a shrine official in a special granary, and used to brew beer and bake bread for communal feast-days. Like medieval knights, the men of the highland communities were expected to go to battle when the clan deity, speaking through the mouth of its oracle, called upon them to steal livestock from another district, revenge a similar raid committed against them in the past, etc. Lowland kings were also believed to have been children of God, and to have had a similar lord-vassal relation to the mountaineers. The founder of the Misriashvili clan which once served at the Pshav shrine of Tamar-Ghele was believed to have been a blacksmith in the service of the historical Queen Tamar, whose descendants in a sense continued to serve her after her apotheosis.

The contrast between male-linked/divine purity and female-linked/corporeal impurity finds expression in numerous taboos and practices of purification, and in particular through the spatial organization of the commune. The principal shrine of each Pxovian community is situated at a distance from human habitations, often on a mountaintop. Within the shrine precincts is the spot where the patron *xvtishvili* is believed to have manifested himself: this location is off-limits to all save the priests, and in some communes not even they can approach it. Radiating outward from this spot are zones of decreasing sacredness and increasing corporeality: The sacrificial area, where priests receive offerings presented by the menfolk, but which is off-limits to women; common areas open to both sexes; finally (until as late as the 1950s), the menstruation huts and childbirth cabins, where women went in times of bloodflow, and which men (especially those in the service of the shrine) dared d not approach. The communal shrine assemblages are in a sense small-scale replicas of the Lashara-Tamar complex to be described below: Each commune has a sanctuary in honour of its *xvtishvili*, which bears the name of either St. George, a divinized ogre-slaying hero, or the Archangel, and one or more shrines, often located near villages, where the *xvtishvili*'s sworn sister (variously called the Place Mother or the Mother of God) is invoked. Several priests serve the shrines of each commune, under the authority of a chief priest (*tav-qevisberi*). The latter also presides at sittings of the local council of elders.

Since 1995, this investigator and his colleagues have interviewed nearly a dozen Pshav and Xevsur priests. All without exception are sons, grandsons or nephews of priests, yet all received personal calls to service from the *xvtishvili* of their commune, in the form of dreams or visions, sometimes accompanied by psycho-somatic illness. Direct descent from the previous office-holder is not sufficient: each priest must have a vocation, confirmed by other priests or seers. Surprisingly, all those interviewed stated that they resisted the initial call, not wanting to assume the heavy responsibilities of priesthood. After an intensification of their illness or delirium, or, in several cases, the deaths of family members (interpreted as signs of the divinity's anger at their obstinacy) the candidates yielded, and underwent the special purification (with the blood of nine sacrificed bulls) required of a new priest. Once in office, the priest is expected to assure the flawless performance of invocations, sacrifices, purifications and

funerary rituals, so as not to bring down the anger of the easily-offended deities upon himself or the community as a whole.

During the seven decades of Soviet rule in Georgia, the practice of traditional religion was sharply curtailed, but not eradicated, in the highlands of northeast Georgia. In the 1950s, the residents of all Xevsur villages save one were forcibly relocated to lowland localities near the Azerbaijan border. The Georgian government eventually reversed its decision twenty years later, but by then many traditional practices had been definitively abandoned. In Pshavi, priests continue to perform their functions in most communes, despite the steady loss of population to the cities and lowlands. Of the eleven ancient communes of Ukana-Pshavi, eight are still inhabited, at least during the summer months, and the great mid-summer festival of Seroba is attended by both local inhabitants and lowland residents of Pshav ancestry. Since 1995, I have attended Seroba celebrations at four of the communes, some of them on more than one occasion. Most of those in attendance at these events live all or most of the year in the lowlands. The young people, and even some of their parents, betray an ignorance of ritual procedure and the limits between permitted and forbidden spaces, necessitating explicit instructions from the priests. Nonetheless, most families bring offerings of animals, bread, candles and wine, and as many as a dozen boys, girls and in-marrying brides may be presented to the shrine as new vassals in a given year. The solidarity of the group is reinforced by a number of practices, both formal and informal. The men of the commune solemnly circumambulate the shrine at the beginning and end of each days festivities. Many families spend the night at campgrounds near the shrine, and all partake of banqueting, drinking and dancing until late at night. Few outsiders have been noted on these occasions, but those that show up are greeted and incorporated into the activities.

In the heart of Ukana-Pshavi, but not situated on the territory of any of the eleven communes, are the shrine complexes of Lasharis-Jvari and Tamar-Ghele. The resident divinities bear the names of the King Giorgi IV Lashara and his mother Queen Tamar, but they are represented in Pxovian hymns and legends as a divine couple with attributes similar to those noted in the traditional pantheons of many Transcaucasian regions. Lashara, modelled after the pagan St. George, is the patron of men, especially warriors, whereas his sworn sister (*dobili*) Tamar is invoked by women for health,

livestock fertility, and dairy production. Lashara is furthermore the primus inter pares among the "children of God," and the sovereign of the Pshavs of all eleven communes, who gather at his shrine on the feast-day of Lasharoba (first Monday during Seroba, in mid-July). Within its precincts is the meeting place where the chief priests of the eleven communes would meet under the presidence of the priest of Lasharis-Jvari to discuss important matters concerning the entire valley, such as disputes with neighbouring districts, participation in lowland military campaigns, or the resolution of conflicts between communes.

One highly significant difference between the Lashara-Tamar complex and the communes is that only the latter are in the hands of local clans and lineages. Lasharis-Jvari and Tamar-Ghele have no "vassals" that are theirs alone, save two groups of atypical social identity: the small Misrianishvili clan, mentioned earlier, whose founder was a foreign (Egyptian) blacksmith belonging to Queen Tamar, and the so-called "women of the shrine" (*xatis kalebi*), bound by an oath of virginity, who herded the cattle in the possession of the sanctuary (neither of these groups is in existence any longer). The two shrines have an extraterritorial status comparable to that of the District of Columbia in the US or the Capital Territory of Australia. Their lands are not under the jurisdiction of any commune; indeed, according to legend, Tamar is believed to have forcibly expropriated the land for her shrine from the Gabidauri clan (who now live in the adjacent commune of Xoshara), and driven the local residents away. In short, authority in Pshavi was invested in priests that received scant recompense for the grave responsibilities that they assumed, and was centred in shrines situated outside of the eleven constituent communes. According to all accounts known to me, this system of governance was stable and efficient in pre-Soviet Pshavi.

Following the Soviet takeover of Georgia in 1922, Lasharis-Jvari was dispossessed of its lands, and the "women of the shrine" at Tamar-Ghele were sent to work on collective farms. The council of priests no longer met, and attendance dropped at Lasharoba. Some years after World War II the office of chief priest of Lashara-Tamar fell vacant. About a decade ago, a lowland Pshav who had married into the Xoshara commune announced that he had received a vocation in a dream. Since the resumption of Lasharoba, a diverse group of individuals have been observed there, on the four occasions we witnessed. Pshavs from nearby villages still make up a large

portion of the hundred or so individuals who gathered by Lasharis-Jvari, but at times they seemed outnumbered by visitors unlike those in attendance at the communal shrines. During my most recent visit, in July 2001, I noted a couple dozen college students from Tbilisi, three folk musicians seeking to record local singers, a philologist specializing in Old Georgian religious texts accompanied by a group of his students, two martial-arts instructors wearing the traditional Cossack-style men's coat (*choxa*), and the government administrators of the two Pshav electoral districts. As the priest was cutting bread offerings by the candle-altar, a solitary tourist bearing a video camera moved through the crowd until he stood just behind the priest, and continued filming until the latter noticed his presence. The tourist then left by the same path, silently filming all the while. No one spoke to him, nor attempted to find out who he was. This curious scene, inconceivable at one of the commune sanctuaries, brought home the striking lack of group feeling at Lasharis-Jvari. There was little mixing among the various groups present. No shrine presentation or circumambulations took place, because the Lashara-Tamar complex has no vassals of its own. Instead, the folklorists, students, traditionalists and politicians came to the shrine for diverse, and probably even contrastive, reasons. The shrine's extraterritorial status, one could say, left this symbolically-loaded site sufficiently open that all of these constituencies affirmed their Georgianness there together, yet separately.

One especially significant series of events merits mention: In June 2000, we were present as Erakle Gogolauri, a well-known Pshav poet and editor, presented a lamb for sacrifice at Lasharis-Jvari. The purpose of this act was to ask the divinity's protection (and avoid provoking its wrath) during restoration work at the sanctuary complex. At Gogolauri's initiative, and largely funded out of his pocket, workers began rebuilding sections of the shrine precincts that had fallen into ruins over the decades. When we attended the festival a year later, we were shown the ancient meeting-place of the chief priests, unused since pre-Soviet times, which Gogolauri's team had nearly completely restored. Similar work had also been undertaken at the other central Pshav shrine at Tamar-Ghele largely funded by one of the local government administrators, himself the grandson of a traditional priest.

III. Methodology and fieldwork. Beginning in the summer of 2004, I propose to resume fieldwork in Pshavi and Xevsureti for the purpose of documenting the practice of traditional religion in these areas, the progress of reconstruction at the central shrines, and, in particular, the on-going repoliticization of these highland sacred sites in the second decade since the end of Soviet rule. In addition to two to three months of fieldwork each summer from 2004 to 2006, I also intend to visit Georgia during the winter months of 2005 and 2006. Important ceremonies take place in the Pshav communes at this time, but of a far less public nature than the well-attended mid-summer festivals. Documentation of Pshav mid-winter and lenten observances are sketchy, and video documentation non-existent. I have said less about Xevsureti in this proposal for reasons of space, but it should be pointed out that where socio-political organization is concerned, Xevsureti shows important differences from Pshavi. In particular, there is nothing comparable to the extraterritorial status of the Lashara-Tamar sites: The central Xevsur complex of Gudanis-Jvari and Xaxmatis-Jvari the patron deities of which have attributes and functions closely similar to those of the divine couple Lashara and Tamar are situated in the heart of the territory of Xevsuretis powerful and numerous Arabuli clan, and the officials at both shrines are drawn from lineages belonging to this clan. Tsarist-period ethnographies include reports of internal tensions, and the resistance sometimes erupting into armed conflict of peripheral communities to the religious and political hegemony of the chief Xevsur lineages. In my upcoming fieldwork, therefore, I intend to compare and contrast (a) the political and social roles of sacred sites in Pshavi and Xevsureti for various constituencies of local and outsiders; (b) those of the central vs. communal shrine complexes; (c) summer vs. winter ceremonial cycles. Of course, since this region is one of the few remaining pockets of pre-Christian religion in Europe, the collection of audio, video and ethnographic materials is all the more urgent.

Just before the ceremony to inaugurate restoration work began, the chief priest of Gogolaurta pointed out to us the gathering places of the various communes at Lasharis-Jvari, and expressed the hope that the elders would once again meet to restore the old frontiers between the communes not recognized by the Soviet administration and the earlier system of land apportionment. One year after he spoke, workers had commenced rebuilding the chief-

priests council space at Lasharis-Jvari; perhaps the work is already finished by now. The potential reactivation of this highly significant political site raises a number of questions, which only fieldwork can address. If or rather, when the commune priests once again meet in council, will they come into conflict with the government? (It is important to note that Shevardnadze is unlikely to run for a third time in 2005, so a shift in relations between Tbilisi and the provinces might occur). What role will be played in the council by the priest at Lashara-Tamar, who is both much younger than the commune priests, and a lowland Pshav who did not grow up in the mountains? It should be pointed out that in general, few members of the younger generation have the profile of their parents. They are better educated, brought up in lowland villages and cities, and therefore more exposed to other ways of life. Of the two sons of the chief priest of Gogolaurta commune, for example, one lives in Germany and the other is leaving soon for the United States soon. It is likely that popular images of the mountains, such as those to be mentioned below, may come to supplant inherited practices and beliefs among the new generation of priests. Then there is the matter of gender: The current generation of priests have continued to enforce the exclusion of women in particular, those of child-bearing age from the immediate vicinity of the sanctuaries. This has rarely required coercion, since the older women, who understand the system, cooperate in assuring compliance. As more and more young women, many of them college-educated, attend the ceremonies, and as women make inroads into the elite circles of Georgian politics and other institutions, will there be increasing demands for equal access to the sacred sites of Pshavi and Xevsureti? Will the new generation of priests, better-educated and more cosmopolitan than their predecessors, show less inclination to enforce purity-related exclusions? (Or will the exclusion be maintained even as practices are modernized? When the use of childbirth huts was abolished, through the action of government authorities and the deportation of the Xevsurs, lying-in hospitals in towns at some distance from highland Xevsureti took on the function of providing a space far from the household and the shrines during this period of heightened impurity.)

Since the 1990s, Western social scientists have become increasingly interested in the territory of the former USSR, and a number of important publications have ensued. Much of this work

has focussed on ethnic conflicts, the effects on marginal socio-economic groups of the rapid transition from state socialism to law-of-the-jungle capitalism, and the struggles to establish new national or group identities in the aftermath of Soviet nationalities policy. The project proposed here will draw upon this new anthropological and sociological literature, but the research to be undertaken promises to be innovative, in view of the distinctive nature of the highland situation itself, as well as the ideological fields converging upon it from several sides..

After their release from prison, the dissident leaders Zviad Gamsaxurdia (later elected president of the newly-proclaimed Georgian Republic in 1991) and Merab Kostava visited a satellite shrine of Lasharis-Jvari in eastern Georgia, where they and their followers pledged to continue the struggle for Georgian independence. Neither of these men had family roots in Pshavi, or anywhere else in eastern Georgia, for that matter, so the choice of venue was motivated rather by the symbolic prominence of Pshav-Xevsureti in general, and Lasharis-Jvari in particular, in representations of Georgian identity, and Georgian rootedness, known to a wider public. As noted earlier, widely-read authors from the late 19th century onward have accorded a special role to the northeast Georgian mountain districts and their inhabitants, in works which contrast them to lowland Georgian cosmopolitans and their European (especially Russian) ways. Some of the authors are themselves of highland origin (notably, Vazha-Pshavela [Rayfield 1994: 207-217], and A. Qazbegi [Legacher-Baron 1993]), others include Ilia Chavchavadze, the now-canonized leader of the national revival [Itonishvili 1963; Manning 2003], the exiled nationalist G. Robakidze, and the satirical writer M. Javaxishvili [Tuite 2001]. Popular film versions have been made of many of these writings, and quite a few remained part of the literary canon throughout the Soviet period. Georgian intellectuals for over a century have been strongly oriented toward Europe (as they imagine it), but they differ markedly with regard to the position of Russia: for some Russia is the highway toward Europe, for others, it is less European, more Asian, than Georgia [cp. S. Gal, K. Verdery, among others, on the Europe-Asia symbolic axis in East European discourses of identity]. The highland Georgians (and their Chechen, Ingush and Daghestanian neighbours to the immediate north) also occupy a variable position in this symbolic field. The close ties established by Gamsaxurdia and his followers with the Dudaev regime in Chechnia, and their

quixotic dream of a united, non-aligned Caucasian federation free of both Russian and Western hegemony, met with the scorn and later, active opposition of most segments of the Georgian elite, especially those most closely integrated into late-Soviet administration, government and academia. One sensed a return to the belief, already criticized in more or less veiled terms by Chavchavadze and Javaxishvili, that for those whose path to Europe necessarily went through Russia, the mountaineers represented the reactionary, primitive, Asian past they sought to repudiate. Opposed to this is not one, but at least two schemes of symbolic projection onto the highlanders. Since the late 1980s, the folklorist Zurab Kiknadze has been attempting to overturn the standard theory of Pshav-Xevsur traditional religion, as represented in Bardavelidze 1957, Charachidzé 1968 and other works, according to which it represents the direct survival of an ancient paganism overlain by a superficial layer of Christian symbols and terminology (see Kiknadze 1996, reviewed by Tuite 1996). Kiknadze maintains that, if anything, the reverse is true: The Georgians of the remote highland valleys adopted Orthodoxy not long after their lowland cousins, but then drifted into a pseudo-pagan, misremembered Christianity after Mongol and Persian invaders cut off all contact with the church hierarchy in the cities to the south. According to this view, the entirety of the Georgian people has been Christian (therefore, civilized and European) since no later than the 7th-8th centuries, at a time when the Slavs to the north were still worshipping trees. Rather than representing an embarrassing vestige of the remote past, the Pshavs and Xevsurs exemplify the remarkable persistence of Georgian Christianity under adverse circumstances. (Partisans of this view also tend to segregate the Pshavs and Xevsurs from the North Caucasians, one-time pagans who subsequently adopted Islam). The alternative representation of the highlanders foregrounds the vertical dimension, so to speak, while downplaying the horizontal distinction of ethnicity. Mountaineers, be they Georgian or Chechen, represent honour, bravery, self-restraint, stoicism and similar values in contrast to the venal, corrupt, effeminate Georgian or Russian intruders from the lowlands. This point of view is most dramatically expressed in the writings of Qazbegi and Robakidze, but clear echoes are present in the discourses of Gamsaxurdia and some so-called Zviadists of the present. Solidarity between (true) Georgians and North Caucasian Muslim mountaineers is not necessarily accompanied by a rejection of Europe in favour of Asia, however.

In some of Gamsaxurdia's writings, the link between Georgians, along with all indigenous Caucasians, to Europe is projected to a deep chronological level, that of the alleged linguistic and cultural unity of the Caucasians and peripheral European peoples such as the Basque the Ibero-Caucasian hypothesis still widely accepted on faith by Georgian intellectuals. (In a way, this is the counterpart of the Indo-Europeanism favoured by some figures of the French extreme-right, such as Alain de Benoist and Jean Haudry, which likewise seeks unity rooted deep in the pre-Christian past. A comparison of the two discursive fields should prove instructive). Besides investigating the above topics in 19th and 20th-century Georgian literature, I intend to explore literary and mass-media representations of the mountaineers in publications, films and journalism of the past few years, especially with respect to their deployment in discussions of Georgian identity and its (geo)-political implications.

4. Communication of results. As was the case with the previous projects, results will be communicated to colleagues in both the West and in Georgia through journal publications, conference papers, and, should I be invited to do so, interviews in the Georgian media. Images and downloadable papers based on our research are available at the following web sites: http://www.philologie.com (maintained by me in Canada), and http://www.caucasology.com (maintained by my Georgian colleagues).

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