

**Response to Paul Manning's Review of the Publication  
"Ethnography and Folklore of the Georgia-Chechnya  
Border: Images, Customs, Myths, and Folk Tales of the  
Peripheries," by Shorena Kurtsikidze and Vakhtang  
Chikovani, Lincom Europa, 2008, 711 pp. ISBN: 978-3-  
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In the *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 28 (1) (Spring 2010), Professor Paul Manning wrote a review on the collaborative publication named above. The main purpose of the publication was to "acquaint a wide audience with the traditional culture of Christian and Muslim highlanders who live on the border of Europe and Asia in the Central part of the Caucasus Main Mountain Range." It was prepared by the advice and support of the late Professor Alan Dundes, former Director of the Folklore Program of the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. The publication intends to aid the reader in better understanding the characteristic features of political, ethnic and cultural processes that are taking place in the geopolitically important region where Russian military forces are in constant action, moving in and out of the region, depending on ongoing political situations.<sup>1</sup>

The authors would like to point the following facts in connection with the review as some of the comments of the reviewer may create misconceptions about the materials presented in the publication.

When discussing the visual anthropology materials from the first section of the publication, Paul Manning writes as if the materials consist of the pictures taken in the Khevsureti Province only; he also mentions that the visual materials essentially repeat the photo exhibit curated by the authors at the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, and this exhibit is nothing else but a repetition of photographs from Soviet era collections. It seems that the reviewer has not paid attention to the accompanying ethnographic descriptions and titles of the photographs. Only 74 of the 158 full-page black and white photographs are taken in the European and Asian parts of the Khevsureti Province; the rest of the 84 pictures – more than half of the entire collection – have been taken during many years of the fieldwork in the neighboring provinces of Mtiuleti (36), Gudamaqari (36), Pshavi (3), and Chechnya (3). Also, only 48 pictures were exhibited at the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum during March-August 2004; the rest of the 110 pictures and their accompanying texts appeared in this publication for the

first time. The photographs – with the attached commentaries – that are presented in the publication are valuable historical documents and truly important sources to learn about traditional dwellings, fortifications, sacred buildings, and social and religious institutions of the highlanders. The information “frozen” in these pictures is easily comprehensible even for non-specialists. Many examples of folk architecture and artifacts – images of which have been included in this publication – do not exist any more. Undoubtedly this adds to a value of these materials.

The reviewer indicates that the collector of the myths – translations of which are presented in this publication for the first time – was only one scholar. However, in reality the myths have been collected by several people. The information about one of the main contributors, including his short biography, is given in the publication (pp.681-683).

As stated by the reviewer, the authors are misleading the reader by trying to portray the Pankisi crisis as a contemporary event. According to him, they needed to do this in order to place the Khevsurs (descendants of the last crusaders, according to one of the old hypotheses) and their Muslim neighbors – Chechens and Pankisi Kists (among whom Jihadists acquired certain influences) in the model of “Clashes of Civilizations” in order to add their share to the “contemporary folklore and mythology of the War on Terror.” This is not true. Nowhere did the authors intend to present the Pankisi crisis as a present-day event. The authors say clearly in the introduction of the publication – as well as in the notes – the following: “The second part of the book gives particular emphasis to the historical and ethnographic survey of Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge – ethnically and culturally closely connected with the Khevsureti Province – that few years ago was the area of activities of the Islamic extremists and militants” (p. XIII). “This section was written at the time when the Pankisi crisis became a center of international attention. It was first published in 2002 as an article in the Working Paper Series of Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies. The article is printed here without any significant changes and therefore it reflects tensions of the mentioned period in the region” (p.662).

The reviewer enthusiastically criticizes Arnold Zisserman (1824-97) – the author who considered the Khevsurs descendants of the Frankish crusaders – and was a Russian military historian and a participant of the Caucasus wars. The reviewer refers to Zisserman as a “least authoritative source” and explains the crusader hypothesis with the author’s romantic ideas. The fact is, however, that Zisserman was no bearer of simple romantic ideas. In the process of conducting its wars in the Caucasus (1819-1864), Tsarist Russia used varieties of ideological clichés, among which the idea of protecting the region’s Christian population from the Muslims was a leading one. The Caucasian Muslim highlanders responded to Russia’s such policies with the “Gazawat” – Holy War against “infidels.” In this situation it wouldn’t be accidental to declare the Georgian highlanders descendants of the crusaders – the highlanders whose homeland was the front line of disseminating Christianity in the Northern Caucasus throughout centuries.<sup>2</sup> In the

same period, when the Russian myth of the Khevsur crusaders was created, to support the “divide and govern” practice of the Tsarist colonial administration, Georgian intellectuals and writers of highland origin (Alexandre Kazbegi, 1848-93 and Vazha Pshavela, 1861-1915) for their part tried to create narratives that would help to secure the peaceful coexistence of the Christian and Muslim highlanders of the Central Caucasus.<sup>3</sup>

It seems that the reviewer falls among those who consider the “lost crusader theory of Khevsur origins” baseless (although no one tries to prove the opposite!) for one more reason: the Khevsurs are not “true” Christians. Such an attitude repeats the point of view that has become a controversial one today. According to this view, the highlanders of Georgia – including the Khevsurs and other Georgian highlanders – could be regarded as Christians only nominally. However, the fact is that after the Mongol invasions in Georgia, from the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the relations between Georgia’s mountain and lowland regions changed dramatically; for almost four centuries following the invasions, some of the highland regions continued to exist essentially in the semi-autonomous form within the feudal Georgian state. As a result, not only did the highlanders’ socio-economic system change but their religious practices underwent changes too. Ultimately, a folk version of Christianity developed in the remote highland regions. Because of the limited contacts with Georgia’s lowlands and cultural centers, in the territory of ancient Pkhovi – part of which is the Khevsureti Province – more than 100 Christian churches (5<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries) gradually disappeared.<sup>4</sup> They were replaced with lesser-sized buildings in the forms of shrines – “Holy Crosses” and “Holy Icons.” Peculiar changes took place in the liturgy and other aspects of the highlanders’ religious life. In spite of these processes, the Georgian highlanders – specifically the Khevsurs – that were immediate neighbors of the Northern Caucasian Muslim highlanders, always regarded themselves as “better” Christians compared to the lowland dwellers, as the former were faced with a major task of protecting their ancestors’ religion and the country’s northern borders. Accordingly, the material and social culture of the borderland dwellers changed also, and their religious practices acquired some military features. It should be mentioned that Soviet scholars added their share in declaring the Georgian highlanders as “pagans,” because these researchers were essentially prohibited from seriously studying any manifestations of the Christian culture; only the studies of “archaic” and “folk” institutions were allowed. Therefore researching presumably ancient layers of the traditional culture was almost an obligatory and prestigious scholarly task. After the collapse of the Soviet Union the situation gradually changed; many scholars write today about various aspects of the folk Christianity of the Georgian highlanders.<sup>5</sup>

By presenting the traditional culture and contemporary life of the Central Caucasian highlanders under one cover the authors intended to show the cultural profile of the region, about which the information is scarce for an English-speaking reader. The authors have no doubt that being acquainted with the folk culture of this region will be a unique cultural experience to the reader.

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<sup>1</sup> The first review of the publication appeared in the *Journal of Folklore Research: An International Journal of Folklore and Ethnomusicology* (<http://www.indiana.edu/~joftr/review.php?id=898>).

<sup>2</sup> M.B. Muzhukhoev, *Medieval Religious Monuments of the Central Caucasus (History of the Religious Beliefs in the 10<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries)*, Groznyy, Chechnya-Ingushetia Polygraphic Union "Book," 1989, pp. 111-146 (in Russian); Suleiman Gumashvili, Christianity and the Religious Practices of the Vainakhs, *Journal "Religion,"* no. 5-6, June-July 1999, pp. 87-92 (in Georgian).

<sup>3</sup> Kevin Tuite, [2008] *The banner of Xaxmat'is-Jvari: Vazha-Pshavela's Xevsureti*, for Luigi Magarotto's Vazha volume. ([http://www.mapageweb.umontreal.ca/tuitekj/caucasus/Tuite\\_Vazha+Xevsureti.pdf](http://www.mapageweb.umontreal.ca/tuitekj/caucasus/Tuite_Vazha+Xevsureti.pdf)).

<sup>4</sup> Kakhi Tsereteli, Christian Architecture of the Aragvi River Gorge, *The 2<sup>nd</sup> Conference on the Archaeology of the Early Christianity, Ivane Javakhishvili 120<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, Short Content of Articles*, The Archaeological Research Center of the Georgian Academy of Sciences, Tbilisi, 1996, pp. 45-47 (in Georgian); Kakhi Tsereteli, Anatori Church, *Research Papers of the Archaeological Research Center of the Georgian Academy of Sciences*, vol. no. 4, Tbilisi, 1999, pp. 78-87 (in Georgian).

<sup>5</sup> Zurab Kiknadze, *Georgian Mythology, I. The Cross and His People*, Kutaisi, Gelati Academy of Sciences, 1996 (in Georgian); Khvtiso Mamisimedashvili, Christian Roots of the "Khutsobani" Prayer Texts, *Scientific Session, 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Archaeological Expeditions in the Georgian Highlands, Short Content of Articles*, The Archaeological Research Center of the Georgian Academy of Sciences, Tbilisi, 1996 (in Georgian); Old Folk Hymns Glorifying the Shrines of Holly Crosses-Icons, Collected by Zurab Kiknadze, Ghtiso Mamisimedashvili and Tristan Makhauri., *Essays of the Department of Folklore*, vol.2, Tbilisi State University, Nekeri, 1998 (in Georgian; summary in English); Andrezes-Testaments: *Religious and Mythological Legends of the Eastern Georgian Highlands*, Compiled by Zurab Kiknadze, Ilia Chavchavadze State University Publishing, Tbilisi, 2009 (in Georgian; summary in English).