Ethnography and Folklore of the Georgia-Chechnya Border. Shorena Kurtsikidze and Vakhtang Chikovani. Munich, Germany: Lincom Europa, 2008, 711 pp. ISBN: 978-3-89586-328-8 (hard cover).

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This book consists of four extremely disparate sections. The first section, given the odd title (on the presuppositions of which there is more below) *The Last Crusaders and their Neighbors: Images from Georgia-Chechnya Borderlands* 1970–1990, consists of over 150 full page black and white photos taken from fieldwork expeditions in mountain Khevsureti with attached commentary, which no doubt accounts for the forbidding price of the volume. The second section is a previously circulated ethnographic survey of the adjacent Pankisi Gorge, which has not been updated since its prior incarnation (2002), and speaks in an ethnographic present of Pankisi in 'the present day' which is misleading about the vastly changed situation in that troubled area. The third section is essentially a translation, with notes, of a socialist era collection of Khevsur myths collected and published in the socialist period in Georgian by noted ethnographer Tinatin Ochiauri in 1967. The fourth section, a collection of translated Georgian folktales with notes, completes the volume. The resulting collection of materials runs to over 700 pages, the last two sections representing the bulk of the book in pages, and also, to my mind, the most useful parts of the book. Still, given the dearth of materials in English for this region, there is a sense in which this volume will fill a gap in a literature which to this day essentially consists of gaps.

The first section, pages 1–226, is essentially a reproduction of a photographic exhibit of fieldwork photographs from the mountainous region of Khevsureti curated by the authors in 2004. Since the 19th century this region has been romanticized first by Russian, then by Georgian writers and ethnographers, and has become essentially the prototypical object of Georgian ethnography and imaginations of Georgian tradition. The essential value of this exhibit is that it replicates and replaces the Soviet era publications with the same sort of photographs, except that the printing technology used here is far better than the often blurry and grey photographs in Soviet era collections. The attendant explanations are useful, though often highly elliptical. Given the recent work published in English on the same ethnographic subjects, it should have been possible to integrate the photographs into a more sustained explanation of the ethnographic context that makes the photographs meaningful. As it stands,

these photographs still give a lively image of customs of the Khevsurs, but the ethnographic background to those customs is still glimpsed only through a glass darkly. Here it would have been appropriate for the authors to cite the detailed exegesis of Khevsur ethnography provided by Kevin Tuite in a number of recent publications.[1]

The second section, pages 227–261, is a reproduction of a previously circulated monograph dealing with the ethnography of Georgia's Pankisi Gorge. This region, of course, flirted with a brief global celebrity status during the War on Terror in the early years of this last decade because of the turmoil there caused by an influx of Chechen refugees, rampant drug trafficking, allegations of Georgian police involvement in kidnapping for profit, and of course the rumors fanned by Russian and Western sources that the Gorge had become a base of operations for international Jihadism. This identification of this valley's troubles with global narratives of terrorism led in turn to an American-funded train and equip operation for the Georgian military whose specific objective was the pacification of this 'notorious' region; these are those same troops who later were instrumental in the colossal tragedy of the Russia-Georgia war in 2008. To put it mildly, the situation in Pankisi has changed radically since the original publication of this work (2002), and yet this work (based entirely on secondary sources) has not been revised one iota, so that the 'present day Pankisi' section is essentially the same Pankisi that briefly entered the global mythology of terror in the wake of 9/11 (a subject I have explored with respect to Pankisi in a number of places). One senses that the authors are very keen to foreground the importance of the region to international policy experts, but unfortunately, the place of the mythology of the region in the global narrative of terrorism is even more precarious than the place of its traditional mythology in the imagination of international folkloric studies. Only an extremely alert reader will catch the fact that the sources used are no later than 2002; hence this final section is at best misleading. Other than somewhat partisan treatment of ethnic politics and Wahhabism (linked in the authors' narrative to global terror, of course), the other material here is essentially a rehearsal of the folkloric and ethnographic materials of the received literature, but given the enormous gaps in the English language literature, it is in this sense valuable.

The third section, titled *Myths of the Crusaders*, pages 262–310, which translates a set of folkloric texts from Khevsur mythology previously available only in Georgian, is probably the most straightforwardly useful section. Those interested in comparative mythology, folklore and area studies of the region may find that it fills yet another gap in a literature which seems, again, to consist primarily of gaps. It is followed by a fourth section, by far the

longest, *Georgian Folktales*, pages 313–655, which translates texts of a wide variety of other not specifically Khevsur Georgian folktales.

The most troubling aspect of the book is the narrative that the authors use to try to connect these disparate objects into a single narrative. As noted, the Khevsurs are the prototypical object of Georgian folklore and ethnography since the 19th century, while the neighboring Kists of the Pankisi Gorge represent an object very far from the center of this imaginary. A critical introduction discussing even in part how the Khevsurs, a tiny group dwelling on the literal margins of Georgia, became central to Georgian imaginings of the nation, and how an adjacent group, the Kists of Pankisi, related to the Chechens, became marginal in spite of the compelling similarities of their folkways, would have made this work more original. Instead, the authors reproduce what is probably the *least* plausible set of romantic ideas about the Khevsurs from what is surely the *least* authoritative source, the Russian Romantic Zisserman, who in the early 19th century, upon seeing the Khevsurs dressed in chain mail with Frankish swords, decided that they were a group of lost crusaders. While there are *countless* mythologizations of the Khevsurs, it is ironic that this book, which takes Khevsur mythology as its object, would reproduce what is surely the most marginal of all romantic mythologizations of the Khevsurs – that they are a lost group of crusaders continuing a Holy War against Islam and Paganism in the mountains of the Caucasus, and that Khevsur mythology is a 'local version of a holy war ideology' (xi). Since the Khevsurs were regarded as being scarcely better than idolaters in the 19th century, or more strictly speaking 'cairnolaters' since their 'crosses' and 'icons' usually took the form of piles of rocks, the idea that they represent self-appointed crusaders fighting to preserve their folk understanding of Christianity against pagans and Muslims since the days of the last Crusades is more than a little difficult to swallow.[2]

I found myself bemused and then alarmed by this resurrection of what we had thought to be a completely extinct tenet of the constellation of romanticized ideas about the Khevsurs which constitutes the 'Khevsur Mythology,' not in the sense of myths of the Khevsurs, but myths *about* the Khevsurs. One wonders why this particular discarded and debunked myth would become the central one linking this volume together. Certainly Soviet-era scholars, and even pre-Soviet ones, had treated this particular theory of Khevsur origins as being an example of tendentious Occidentalism, but for the authors, precisely the fact that this theory was rejected by Soviet ethnographers as an Occidentalizing narrative is taken to be evidence in its favour, yet they cite no sources (pp.658-9). But the major reason, it seems to me, that the authors have chosen to redeem this 'lost crusader' theory of Khevsur origins and make it

pervade the book is similar to the tendentiousness of the authors' description of Pankisi Gorge as a recent 'area of activities of the Islamic extremists and militants' (xiii). The solution to the enigma is simple enough: the authors likely want the book to appeal to, and fit into, the tired Orientalist dogmas of the recently popular 'Clash of Civilizations' model, so the Khevsurs and the Kists can be aligned transhistorically with Lost Crusaders and Present Day Jihadists, turning the traditional folklore and mythology of this area (which is competently presented, no doubt) into grist for the mill of the contemporary folklore and mythology of the War on Terror. I applaud the primary folkloric and ethnographic work here, but I reject the bid to somehow make this folklore 'policy relevant.'

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[1] http://www.mapageweb.umontreal.ca/tuitekj/publications.htm

[2] http://www.dangerserviceagency.org/cv.html
http://www.dangerserviceagency.org/workingpapers.html