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An Ethnographic Survey**

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**Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies
Working Paper Series**

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Spring 2002

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Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank Dr. Barbara Voytek for her continuous support and encouragement and for organizing a talk on this subject at the Institute of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies at UC Berkeley on April 10, 2002. They are especially thankful to Dr. Edward Walker, who generously gave his time to edit this paper, and also to Conor O'Dwyer for his kind assistance. Many thanks to Andrée Kirk and Stella Bourgoïn for their help. Finally, they are grateful to their colleague Dr. Leila Margoshvili of the Institute of History and Ethnology, Georgian Academy of Sciences, for her helpful suggestions.

INTRODUCTION

The Pankisi Gorge region of the Republic of Georgia has become the focus of much international attention in recent months. In early February 2002, the American chargé d'affaires in Tbilisi, Philip Remler, asserted that Islamic radicals fleeing Afghanistan were moving into the region. To help Georgian authorities reestablish control of the region, the U.S. government announced that it would send some 100-150 Special Forces advisors to Georgia to train the country's counterinsurgency troops. The announcement was met with a hue-and-cry by many pundits in Moscow, where it was taken as evidence of yet another American encroachment into Russia's traditional sphere of influence. The protests only abated after Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, stated that in his opinion the U.S. military support for Georgia was in fact "no tragedy."

About eight miles long and two and a half miles wide, the Pankisi Gorge is located just south of the Georgian-Chechen border in the Georgian district of Akhmeta. It rests along the southeastern slopes of the Caucasus Mountains, the highest mountain range in Europe, where the headwaters of the Alazani River flow down through the woody mountains and foothills of the Gorge and from there south to Georgia's Kakheti region, famous for its wines, and then on east to the Caspian Sea.¹ Today, most of the inhabitants of the Pankisi region are descendants of ethnic Chechens and Ingush (who together share the common ethnonym "Vainakh") who migrated into the region from the North Caucasus between 1830 and 1870. Called "Kists" in Georgian, they are typically bilingual in Chechen and Georgian and number approximately 5,000.

Since December 1994, when war broke out between Chechen resistance fighters and the Russian-supported central government in Chechnya, Pankisi has witnessed an influx of refugees from Chechnya. Among them were many families of the Pankisi Kists, who after the disintegration of the Soviet Union left for Chechnya. The tide of refugees

¹ D. Ukleba, *The Landscapes and Physical-Geographical Areas of the Mountain Regions of Eastern Georgia*, Tbilisi, 1974 (in Georgian).

picked up considerably after the collapse of the 1995 Russian-Chechen cease-fire agreement and the new round of violence that broke out in late 1999. Between September and December 1999, refugees began pouring into Chechnya's southern highland areas from northern parts of the republic, particularly Grozny, Urus Martan, Atchoi Martan, Sernovodsk, and Samashki. When Russian military aircraft began bombing the villages of the Itum Oale region, where the refugees were hoping to find shelter, the Chechen refugees started moving south once again, this time along the Argun Canyon where they used snow-covered cattle tracks to cross the Russian-Georgian border. They headed for the village of Shatili in Georgia's Khevsureti province, and from there they proceeded to the Pankisi Gorge. There, local Kists ended up sheltering some 85 percent of the refugees.² The inflow of refugees in 1999 and 2000 aggravated an already difficult economic and social environment in the Pankisi region. Crime worsened: drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and kidnappings became commonplace. At the same time, the missionary activities of so-called "Wahhabis"—radical Islamists with traditional ties to the official state religion of Saudi Arabia—increased significantly. By late 1999, Georgia's central government, which also suffered from a reputation for corruption, had effectively lost control of the region. Over the next several years, the Georgian ruling elite, which had splintered into conflicting clans, focused its energies on dividing up the country's resources and controlling the "lawful" distribution of Western credits.

The events of September 11, 2001 brought about a radical change of course for Georgia.³ In Pankisi, Chechen refugees began supporting Georgian partisans in the breakaway republic of Abkhazia. To prevent a heightening of tensions with the Abkhaz, Tbilisi ordered local police forces in Pankisi, who had previously been sympathetic to the

² "Interviews with Chechen Refugees in Georgia," Doctors without Borders/Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), December 1999, <http://www.amina.com/>.

³ One element of this change was that the former ambassador of Georgia to the United States, Tedo Japaridze, known in the Georgian press as "the man who knows what the U.S. wants," was appointed Secretary of the National Security Council of the Republic of Georgia.

Chechens, to make efforts to control the Chechen refugees. The police made a series of arrests, to which the local population responded with a series of kidnappings.⁴ As political tensions in the region rose, the Georgian government declared Pankisi closed to journalists. Meanwhile, relations between the Kists and ethnic Georgians and Ossets in neighboring villages were worsening, to the point where ethnic Georgians began organizing protests. A so-called “people’s army” of armed groups of ethnic Georgian villagers began to block access to the Gorge.⁵

The Russian government claims that among the Chechen refugees in Pankisi are armed groups that use the passes of the Gorge—as well as the Pshavi, Khevsureti, and Tusheti districts of Georgia—to return to Chechnya, where they carry out terrorist activities against the Russian administration and military forces. Over the past two years, Russian aircraft have gone so far as to bomb villages in East Georgia. On November 27, 2001, five Russian military helicopters bombed unpopulated areas of the Gorge near the villages of Omalo and Birkiani.⁶ The result was a further heightening of tensions between

⁴ K. Chakvetadze, “Kidnapped Policemen in Pankisi Thrown into a Cellar Full of Preserves and Compotes,” *Akhali Versia* (New Version) 9: 34 (March 4-9, 2002), (in Georgian).

⁵ Some Georgian commentators have argued that these actions were the result of efforts by Russian intelligence services to provoke a confrontation among Chechen refugees, the local host population, and other inhabitants of the region. See I. Gogorishvili, “There are Talibs in Georgia,” *Akhali Taoba* (New Generation) 44 (February 16, 2002); “Ito Canyon is Blocked,” *Sakartvelos Respublica* (Republic of Georgia) 41: 4100 (February 19, 2002); “Criminals are Leaving the Gorge,” *Sakartvelos Respublica* 65 (March 17, 2002); “There are 120 Chechen Marauders in Pankisi,” *Sakartvelos Respublica* 70 (March 23, 2002); “Pankisi is Preparing for Census,” *Sakartvelos Respublica* 85: 4144 (April 9, 2002); “The Chechen Journalist Detained in Tbilisi is Innocent,” *Akhali Taoba* 99 (April 12, 2002); “Chechen-Georgian Committee Demands the Immediate Release of Chechen Journalist,” *Akhali Taoba* 99 (April 12, 2002); M. Papunashvili and T. Gavashelishvili, “Pankisi, Where There Is Neither Bin Laden nor the Georgian Government: The Black Marijuana, so called Afghan ‘Black’ Appeared in Drug-Markets of Tbilisi,” “One of the Main Sources of Al-Qaeda Income Found its Way in Georgia Too,” *Akhali Shvidi Dghe* (New Seven Days), (April 12-18, 2002); G. Targamadze, “The Agony of Shevardnadze’s Big Family: Big Family Diminishes, Diminished Family Panics,” *Akhali Versia* 37 (March 25-31, 2002); G. Targamadze, “This is a Way Shevardnadze Fights Corruption,” *Akhali Versia* 39 (April 8-14, 2002).

⁶ “Pankisi Crisis Presented by Civil Georgia,” <http://www.civil.ge/pankisi/>.

Russia and Georgia. Russia also demanded that the Georgian government establish proper control of Pankisi and prevent separatist groups from using it as a staging ground for attacks on Russian forces and for “terrorism.” Tbilisi, however, refused to comply with the Russian demands because the Russian parliament continues to support the Abkhaz and Osset separatist movements in Georgia. Moreover, the Kists of Pankisi actively supported the Georgian fight for independence, as did their Chechen neighbors to the north. Today, when the Chechens themselves are fighting for independence, both the Georgian government and regular Georgian citizens find it extremely difficult to openly take the side of Russia against the Chechens. Finally, the newly independent Georgian military does not yet have the experience or firepower to enforce the writ of the central government in Pankisi. This is why the involvement of a neutral power, the United States, became necessary.⁷

According to the Georgian press, conditions in Pankisi have changed substantially since mid-February. The Georgian government is preparing to register all Chechen refugees in the region.⁸ Russia and Georgia have also started talks about the voluntary repatriation of the Chechen refugees to Russia.⁹ As a result, the situation in Pankisi and the surrounding region has become very tense. The recent arrest of a Pankisi man for selling drugs by the anti-narcotics trafficking unit of the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs has only further inflamed the situation. In response to the arrest, four policemen were kid-

⁷ “The Special Operation in Pankisi Together with Russia will Cause Big Problems,” *Akhali Taoba* 14 (February 16, 2002), (in Georgian); “Are USA and Russia Preparing for a Joint Operation in the Pankisi Gorge?” *Sakartvelos Respublica* 43: 4102 (February 21, 2001), (in Georgian).

⁸ “Chechens Can Get Refugee Status in Georgia,” *Sakartvelos Respublica* 44 (February 16, 2002), (in Georgian); “The New Registration Will Take Place in April,” *Sakartvelos Respublica* 65 (March 17, 2002), (in Georgian).

⁹ “Chechen Refugees Must Voluntarily Return to their Homeland,” *Sakartvelos Respublica* 37: 4096 (February 14, 2002), (in Georgian).

napped. The kidnapers demanded that the authorities release the arrested man, a powerful figure in the drug business, in exchange for the kidnapped police officers.¹⁰

To understand the changing political situation in Pankisi today, it is important to appreciate the history and ethnography of the region of the Central Caucasus of which Pankisi is a part.¹¹ The prominent 19th century Georgian ethnographer and poet, Rafiel Eristavi, who was also an elected member of the Caucasus branch of the Russian Imperial Geographic Society, wrote the following about the highlanders of the area in a letter published in 1854 in the newspaper *Kavkaz*:

For two years I have devoted my best efforts to collecting materials about Tush, Pshavs, and Khevsurs. How sinful it would have been if, after living for so long in this almost unknown land, I had not had studied their rules and customs and had not acquainted others with my studies. One can hardly find a place more diverse than the district of Tusheti, Pshavi, and Khevsureti. Here every clan, every community, has its own distinctive character, a peculiar and extraordinarily inquisitive customs. Here every village represents a completely original and different world. In the north of the district, on the mountains one can see the majestic pine trees and fragrant raspberry bushes. At the same time, near the foothills of these mountains, luxurious vineyards throw smiles at you. Northern inhabitants of this district, fighting on every step, are happy to exchange bullets with enemies, while the peaceful dwellers of the South, sitting under walnut trees with bowls of wines in their hands, are concerned only that thunder not destroy their vineyards. That is why, I repeat, it would be shameful to have had the opportunity but not acquainted myself with these people, to know something about them and not to write a word...¹²

Since Eristavi's words, other scholars have gone to great lengths to study and research the Central Caucasus.¹³

¹⁰ "The Deal with Criminals is Out of the Question," *Sakartvelos Respublica* 41: 4100 (February 19, 2002), (in Georgian).

¹¹ The cultural and historical area of the Central Caucasus includes the following ethnographic provinces of the Eastern Georgian Highlands: Mtiuleti, Gudamaqai, Khevi, Khevsureti, Pshavi, Tusheti, Pankisi Gorge, and Shida Kartli (Inner Kartli or so-called South Ossetia). The northern side of this region incorporates North Ossetia, Chechnya, and Ingushetia.

¹² Rafiel Eristavi, *Folkloric and Ethnographic Letters*, ed. T. Jagondishvili, Tbilisi, 1986 (in Georgian and Russian), pp. 239-240.

¹³ A. Grigolia, *Custom and Justice in the Caucasus: The Georgian Highlanders*, University of Pennsylvania, 1936; A.I. Robakidze, *The Ways of the Development of Georgian Soviet Ethnography (1922-1982)*, Tbilisi, 1983 (in Russian). See the selected bibliography for a partial list of anthropological materials and publications related to the Central Caucasus.

This paper will present an ethnography of the various groups of the Pankisi Gorge, in particular of the Kist ethnic group. We will discuss the migration of the various ethnic groups into the region, their family and kinship structures, and their customs. Finally, we will comment on the present-day situation of the region's inhabitants.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Among the many historical-ethnographic provinces of Georgia, the mountain districts are characterized by a great diversity of traditions and customs, especially those of Pshavi, Khevsureti, and Tusheti. These traditions include a religious system peculiar to the region (a unique mixture of pre-Christian religious cults and Christianity) and a dialect that resembles the literary Georgian of the Middle Ages.¹⁴ The inhabitants of the high mountain districts, historically known as the Pkhovi, came into close contact with their northern neighbors, the Chechens and Ingush, many centuries ago. These Vainakh peoples—who were sometimes exiles from their own lands and sometimes emigrants who had left voluntarily—frequently found shelter in Georgia. The village communities of Tusheti, Pshavi, Khevsureti, and Khevi provided them with land and livelihood.

What was the nature of these migrations, and when did they start? What is the place of the Pankisi Gorge in these migrations? What was the nature of the relationship between Georgian and North Caucasian highlanders? These questions are the subject of the following section.

Historical and ethnographic materials dealing with the Kists of the Pankisi Gorge appeared in the Georgian press in the 1880s. Letters about the Kists were published in the newspapers *Iberia* (which derives from Iberia, the name of ancient East Georgia) and *Droeba* (Times) and in the journals *Moambe* (Newsteller) and *Mogzauri* (Traveller) by E.

¹⁴ *An Anthology of Georgian Folk Poetry*, trans. and ed. by Kevin Tuite, London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1994, pp. 16-20; K. Tuite, "Highland Georgian Paganism—Archaism or Innovation?" *Annual of the Society for the Study of Caucasia* 7, pp. 79-91; Georges Charachidze, *Le système religieux de la Georgie païenne*, Paris, Maspero, 1969 (in French).

Gugushvili, Zakaria Gulisashvili, Ivane Bukurauli, and Mate Albutashvili. The former was himself a Kist from Pankisi. After graduating from the Tbilisi seminary of clergy in 1893, Albutashvili worked as a priest in the Saint George Church of the village of Joqolo in Pankisi. Until 1921, he was also director of the nearby school of clergy established by the Society of the Revival of Christianity in Caucasus in 1866.¹⁵ Albutashvili knew the life of the Pankisi Kists extremely well. He was passionate about his work and made great efforts to raise their level of education. Like Georgian publicists of the second half of the 19th century who gathered around newspapers *Iberia* and *Droeba*, Albutashvili became interested in collecting folklore and ethnographic materials. He published several dozen letters in *Iberia* between 1901 and 1904, and in 1898, he wrote *A Description of the Pankisi Gorge*, a detailed historical and ethnographic survey of the region.

Albutashvili was succeeded as a school director (as well as writer and educator) by Usup Margoshvili, another Kist from Pankisi and founder of the school in the village of Duisi. Margoshvili's manuscript, "Pankisi Gorge," was unfortunately left unpublished. Later, the ethnographer Leila Margoshvili, the daughter of Usup, used both her father's and Albutashvili's writings in her own research on traditional and contemporary life among the Pankisi Kists. She researched the history of the Pankisi Kists' migration from Chechnya to the Pankisi Gorge of Georgia and studied their economic and social life, wedding and funerary traditions, customary law, dwellings and farming structures, craftsmanship, and folklore.¹⁶

¹⁵ L.U. Margoshvili, *Cultural and Ethnic Relations Between Georgia and Chechnya-Ingushetia*, Tbilisi, 1990, pp. 213-214 (in Russian).

¹⁶ See the following works by L.U. Margoshvili: "Kists of Pankisi," Dissertation Abstract, Tbilisi, 1969 (in Russian); "The Document of Settlement of Kists in Kakheti," *Studies in the History of Georgia and Caucasus*, Tbilisi, 1976 (in Georgian); "About the Question of Settling of the Vainakhs in the Territories of Georgia," *Georgian and North Caucasian Relationships*, Tbilisi, 1981 (in Georgian); "The Religious Sects Among the Kists of Pankisi," *Matsne (Messenger)* 2 (1978), (in Georgian); *The Customs, Traditions and Contemporary Life of the Kists of Pankisi*, Tbilisi, 1985 (in Georgian); *Woman's Traditional Dress in Central Caucasus*, Tbilisi, 1980 (in Georgian). There are also many works on the history, physical anthropology, economic mode of life, and culture of the Pankisi Kists. See M.V. Machabeli, "The Economic Life of State Peasants

Another source on the peoples of the region is the ninth century Georgian historian Leonti Mroveli. In his “Georgian Chronicles,” Mroveli gives us an interesting account of the Vainakh peoples (or historical Dzurduks, another name for Vainakhs) developing along the way a mythologized common origin for the peoples of Caucasus.¹⁷ Mroveli’s history begins by narrating the story of the Georgian kings from the earliest ages. According to this account, the Armenians, Georgians, Ransians and Movkanians, Hers and Leks, Megrelians, and Caucasians are all descended from a common ancestor, Targamos. Himself the son of Tarsi, who was a grandson of Japheth, a son of the Bible’s Noah, Targamos was the father of many children, eight of whom were giants who became very powerful and famous. According to the story, after the fall of the Tower of Babel and the division of humanity into different languages, Targamos settled with his family between two inaccessible mountains, Ararat and Masis. Kavkas was Targamos’s seventh son.¹⁸ Kavkas’s son Dzurduz later named this land Dzurduzeti. According to the chronicle, Dzurduz also

of Tianeti District of Tbilisi Gubernia,” *Materials for the Study of the Economic Life of State Peasants in Transcaucasia*, Vol. 9, Tiflis, 1887 (in Russian); S.K. Chkhenkeli, “About Settling of Chechens in the Pankisi Gorge,” *Materials for the Study of Georgia and Caucasus*, 3rd ed., Tbilisi, 1973 (in Russian); L. Sharashidze, “Kists, The Anthropological Accounts,” *Works of the Institute of Experimental Morphology*, Tbilisi, 1962 (in Russian); D.L. Muskhelishvili, “The Historical Geography of the Pankisi Gorge,” *Kakheti Archaeological Expedition*, Vol. 1, Tbilisi, 1969 (in Georgian); V.G. Tsiskarishvili, “Historical Documents of the Population of Akhmeta Region, Georgian State Museum,” *Moambe* (Newsteller) 29-B (1972), Tbilisi (in Georgian); V.J. Itonishvili, *The Family Life of the Highlanders of Central Caucasus*, Tbilisi, 1969 (in Georgian); V.J. Itonishvili, *The Family Life of the Peoples of Caucasus*, Tbilisi, 1977 (in Georgian); L.S. Melikishvili, “Qalim in the Wedding Ceremonies of the Kists of Pankisi,” *Caucasian Ethnographic Collection*, Vol. 4, Tbilisi, 1974 (in Russian); N.V. Javakhadze, “Ethnographic Aspects of the System and Terms of Kinship among the Kists of Pankisi,” *Caucasian Ethnographic Collection*, Vol. 7, Tbilisi, 1988 (in Russian); B.A. Shavkhelishvili, “The Terms of Kinship of the Nakh Peoples,” Dissertation abstract, Moscow, 1978 (in Russian). A bibliography of works in Georgian concerning the Caucasus can be found in the following publication: A.I. Robakidze, *The Ways of the Development of Georgian Soviet Ethnography (1922-1982)*, Tbilisi, 1983, pp. 70-90, 132-156 (in Russian). See also O. Jordania, *I. Javakhishvili Institute of Archaeology, History and Ethnography*, Academy of Sciences of Georgia, Tbilisi, 1988 (in Russian).

¹⁷ N.G. Volkova, *Ethnonyms and Tribal Names in the North Caucasus*, Moscow, 1973, pp. 136-140 (in Russian).

¹⁸ The other sons were Haos, Kartlos, Bardos, Movakan, Lek, Heros, and Egros.

led the descendants of Targamos against the Khazars, who had attacked the peoples of Lek and Kavkas.

According to historical sources, the Georgian and Dzurdzuk noblemen were also linked by blood. The Georgian king Parnavaz (3rd century BC), the first king of Kartli, married a woman from Dzurdzuketi who was descended from Kavkas. The next king of Kartli was Saurmag, son of Parnavaz. During his reign, the nobles united and decided to kill the king. Learning of the plot, Saurmag escaped to his mother's Dzurdzuketi, or present-day Chechnya and Ingushetia. There, he gathered an army and defeated his enemies. During Saurmag's reign, the Dzurdzuks multiplied so quickly that they strained the resources of their traditional lands. Therefore, Saurmag settled half of the nations of the Caucasus from Didoeti (today's Daghestan) to Egrisi-Svaneti (Egrisi is today's Samegrelo, while Svaneti is the mountainous province in Western Georgia that borders on Abkhazia)—i.e., the entire southern range of the Caucasian mountains.¹⁹

On the basis of historical sources, we can say that relations between the Dzurdzuks (Vainakhs) and Georgians were not always friendly. During the reign of King Mirvan, for example, the Dzurdzuks forgot the friendship of Parnavaz and Saurmag, and the inhabitants of Dzurdzuketi (today's Chechnya and Ingushetia) invaded Kakheti and Bazaleti of Georgia. King Mirvan, however, was too strong to be defeated. Invading Dzurdzuketi, he defeated the Dzurdzuks and blocked the pass with a stone wall that he named Darubandi. The Georgians and the Dzurdzuks fought each other on numerous other occasions as well. For instance, the Dzurdzuks often joined King Mirian (4th century AD) in his continuous battles with the Khazars. Because of the constant foreign occupations and smoldering wars, the Georgian Bagrationi dynasty kings also enlisted the Ossetts, Dzurdzuks, and Didos as allies.²⁰

¹⁹ *Rewriting Caucasian History: The Medieval Armenian Adaptation of the Georgian Chronicles: The Original Georgian Texts and the Armenian Adaptation*, Robert Thompson, trans., Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 2-6.

²⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 13-15, pp. 35-41, p. 70.

In the Middle Ages, the political and cultural influence of Georgia and the Christian religion was already widespread among the Vainakhs.²¹ Georgians of the Tusheti, Pshavi, and Khevsureti regions exercised considerable political, ethnic, and cultural influence over the Dzurduks of the Chanti-Arguni canyon, which was a border region of the Mitkho/Malkhisti and Maisti societies of Chechnya.²² Many Christian churches were constructed in this period (from the 9th to 13th centuries) in the territories of present-day Chechnya and Ingushetia. These include Tkhoba-erdy, Albi-erdy, and Targym among others.²³ Even in later periods, a large portion of the Vainakh population lived under the political rule of the Georgian monarchy.²⁴ According to the Georgian historical sources of 14th–18th centuries, the Vainakhs and other tribes of North Caucasus actively participated in Georgian-led military operations against foreign invaders and internal enemies. The economic and political interests of the Vainakhs played a role here. In exchange for their service, the Vainakhs were granted a share of the spoils.²⁵

²¹ According to the 18th century Georgian historian Theimuraz Bagrationi, the Caucasian tribes of Kists, Ghlighves, Dzurduks, and others spoke the Georgian language from “the beginning” until the appearance of Tamerlane. He also asserts that they were Christians. See Prince Teimuraz, *History of Georgia*, Tbilisi, 1848, p. 36 (in Georgian). Even in later periods, Georgian highlanders and Vainakhs understood each other’s speech.

²² In the present day, this area occupies the border of Georgia and Chechnya and is home to a part of the Pankisi Kist population. The road that runs through this canyon played an important role from the 16th to the 18th century in developing closer political ties between Georgia and Russia. See M.A. Polievktov, *The Ambassadorial Mission of the Stolnik Mishetski and the Diacon Klucharov in Kakheti in 1640-1643*, Tiflis, 1928 (in Russian). Beginning from the 18th century, the routes of diplomatic missions of Georgia and Russia changed to the River Tergi and the Dariali Gorge, a route that today is known as the Georgian Military Highway.

²³ S. Umarov, “Some Peculiarities of Ethnicization of Different Christian Cults in Chechnya and Ingushia,” *Archaeology and Questions of the Ethnic History of North Caucasus*, Grozny, 1979, pp. 125-131 (in Russian).

²⁴ One of the biggest migrations of Vainakhs to the territories of Georgia and the southern slopes of the Caucasus took place in the 13th century after the Mongol Golden Horde occupied the steppes of the North Caucasus and turned the steppes into nomad territories.

²⁵ See *Kartlis Tskhovreba* (History of Georgia), edited by S. Qaukhchishvili, Vol. 1, Tbilisi, 1955 and Vol. 2, Tbilisi, 1959 (in Georgian).

In later periods, especially in the mid 18th and early 19th centuries, a number of factors combined to force the Vainakhs to permanently leave their traditional lands to seek refuge in the Tusheti, Pshavi, Khevsureti, and Khevi regions of Georgia. First, for almost 47 years (until 1864), Russia conducted military operations to conquer the Caucasus. The economic hardship caused by the Russian campaign was one factor that forced the Vainakhs from their homeland. A second major factor was a tradition of blood feuds.²⁶ Third, the tradition of *baytalvaakkhar* was yet another reason for the migrations.²⁷ Fourth, the strict rules under Shamil and the Islamic influence forced many Vainakhs to migrate to Tusheti, Pshavi, Khevsureti, and also Pankisi.²⁸ Suffering from economic hardship and the constant invasions of Daghestani chiefs, the Vainakhs would themselves often invade the neighboring Georgian highlands. Thus, the local population of the highland regions of East Georgia lived under the constant warfare and threat.

FAMILY AND KINSHIP STRUCTURES

In Pankisi, the Kists established five village settlements: Duisi, Joqolo, Omalo, Dzibakhevi, and Shuakhalatsani.²⁹ The ethnic groups who settled in the Pankisi Gorge had

²⁶ The widespread custom and a major part of criminal justice among Caucasian highlanders was the killing (or taking the blood) of the murderer or one's blood relative, i.e., "blood for blood" revenge. The custom varied depending on social life and order.

²⁷ *Baytalvaakkhar* is the Vainakh custom according to which all members of a tribe shared pastures equally. If any member of the tribe exceeded a certain level of wealth—i.e., owned more than a certain number of cattle or sheep, etc.—the elders of the village would gather and make a decision to confiscate the excess property from the owner and distribute it among the other members of the society (L.U. Margoshvili, pp. 30-31).

²⁸ Since the societies of Vainakhs (Maisti, Melkhisti Tereloi, Khaldikharoi, Gezekhoi, Khacharoi) lived in the most remote mountainous villages, they were still the followers of their old religion—a mixture of pagan and Christian cults—and were unwilling to succumb to the new religion. They often had to leave their land in order to survive (L.U. Margoshvili, pp. 30-31).

²⁹ The villages of other ethnic groups in Pankisi Gorge include Ossets (four villages); Dumasturi, Khvemo Khalatsani, Tsinubani and Koreti, and Pshavs, or Eastern Georgian Highlanders (six villages): Zemo Khalatsani, Qvareltskali, Kutsakhta, Dedisperuli (Kakliani), Sakobiano, Bakilovani; and Tushs, also Eastern Georgian Highlanders (one village); and Birkiani. The population later moved from the villages Birkiani and Zemo Khalatsani and settled in Alvani and Akhmeta of the Kakheti region (L.U. Margoshvili, p. 55).

different settlement structures. The Kist migrants settled according to the family (kin) principle: several families with different family names but descended from the same clan (*teyp* in Kist language) would settle together in one district or neighborhood (*kup* in Kist language; *ubani* in Georgian).³⁰ For instance, the Kists in the village of Duisi started settling around the Baltagora Mountain but, because of the rapid population growth, gradually moved closer to the banks of the Alazani River.

The Kists remained faithful to their family traditions and customs, refusing to assimilate with other north Caucasian nationalities such as the Chechens and Ingush. To this day, they identify themselves as Kists, and for official purposes declare themselves of Georgian nationality. The Kists represent the majority of the population in all Kist villages of the Pankisi, with the exception of a few Georgian families who came to this area later.³¹

In the Northern Caucasus, the Chechens and to a certain extent the Ingush officially registered father's names as family names. The Kists did not follow this practice. Instead, after migrating to Georgia, the Kists started adding the suffix *shvili* (meaning "child" in Georgian), or sometimes suffix *dze* (which means "son" in Georgian), or still other times the Georgian suffix *uli* (indicating "belonging to" or "descended from") to fathers' names. In this manner, Kist family names were established.³² Kists use the word *goori*, which derives from the Georgian word *gvare* (*gori* in old Georgian), to indicate the

³⁰ Kists use the Georgian word *ubani* rather than *kup*. Traditionally, every Vainakh village or district/neighborhood was settled by the principle of *teyp* (clan or kin), but the geographical position of the Pankisi Gorge did not allow Kists to follow the traditional forms of settlement (L.U. Margoshvili, pp. 56-59).

³¹ Georgian family names in Kist villages include Duishvili (formerly Varduashvili), Tskhadadze, Kotorashvili, Mghebrishvili, Gakhutashvili, Gonashvili, Tsintsalashvili, and Bekauri.

³² Some typical names for the inhabitants of Kist villages in the Pankisi Gorge are Khangoshvili, Margoshvili, Kavtarashvili, Natsishvili, Baghakashvili, Gaugashvili, Gumashvili, Mutoshvili, Borchashvili, Achishvili, Bordzikashvili, Kushanashvili, Dakishvili, Gumashvili, Natsishvili, Muzikashvili, Tsiskarishvili, Mghebrishvili, Umarashvili, Ichoshvili, Kotorashvili, Tskhadadze, Alkhanashvili, Turkoshvili, Gornakashvili, Andalashvili, Tokhosashvili, Mukhauri, Bekauri, Gorgishvili, Tsikhesashvili, Imedashvili, Chopalashvili, Ghanishashvili, Kushtanashvili, Pkhakalashvili, Tsitsashvili, Tsintsalashvili, Pareulidze, Tsatiashvili, Sviakauri, Dingashvili, and Nasipashvili (see L.U. Margoshvili, p. 56).

continuity of the father's blood line. A Vainakh person from the north Caucasus and a Kist person from the Pankisi Gorge who are from different *goors* could belong to the same *teyp* (*teyp* literally means the surname/family/kin) if the ancestors of these *goors* came from the same village. Different *goors* of Kists—the families of blood relatives—can be incorporated in one *teyp*.³³ Since the *teyp* indicates a blood relationship, intermarriage within the *teyps* is strictly forbidden even today. Because the custom of the blood feud existed among the Kists, as among the Chechens and Ingush, it was important to have lots of men, as guardians of *goorebi* or *teyps*.³⁴

Like the Chechens, Ingush, and Georgian highlanders, the Kists had a tradition of accepting people of different descent into their *teyp* or *goor*.³⁵ Usually, this kind of acceptance or adoption was celebrated in a triumphant way. The new member of the *goor* would present a white bull to the members of the *teyp*. After this ceremony, the new member and his family were regarded as part of the *teyp*, entitled to its protection and help.

As mentioned above, the Kists in the Pankisi Gorge tried to retain the traditional form of settlement brought from Chechnya, the group settlement. It was difficult, however, to maintain this principle in the Pankisi Gorge, where settlements tend to be scattered geographically. Thus, villages became divided into *ubani* (which means residential quarters in Georgian). An *ubani* is a place where representatives of the same *teyp* live closely together. Usually, it was regarded shameful if a family's son moved to a new place of residence; therefore, sons would typically settle close to their parents, usually on the same plot of land.

³³ Different *goors* (i.e., families with different family or last names) who are connected to each other through blood relationship (i.e., are relatives to each other) can be united within one *teyp*.

³⁴ L.U. Margoshvili, p. 61, p. 63.

³⁵ M.B. Kandelaki, *From the Social Life of the Georgian Highlanders*, Institute of Amanatoba, Tbilisi, 1987, pp. 28-58 (in Russian).

Until the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, the tradition of the extended family still existed in Chechnya. Traditionally, the married sons lived together with their parents, though they would build separate houses nearby. These actually were not houses but rather rooms attached to their father's residence. Actual, free-standing houses were built only if the husband had two or three wives. According to Islamic *shariat*, it was very common in Chechnya to have four wives if a man could afford it. Adult sons were provided with cattle and a plot adjoining the father's house. Every member of the family worked together on the paternal land, sharing the crop, cattle, and property. Not all family structures followed the polygamy model. Another structure was that of the large, indivisible family, where several generations of blood relatives lived together. This type of family usually consisted of a father, mother, their sons, unmarried daughters, daughter-in-laws, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

The Vainakh settlement of the Pankisi Gorge came at a time when the big families were splitting into smaller ones. Still, the tradition of large, indivisible families remained common in Chechnya, Ingushetia, and among the Kists of Pankisi. Despite the fact that the Kists were settling mostly as smaller families in the Pankisi Gorge, here large families were not uncommon. It is interesting that, though the Kists are ethnic Chechens or Ingush, the structure of their families is very different from those of the Chechens and Ingush. It is extremely rare for a Kist man to have more than one wife. It is also very rare for a Kist woman to be married more than once.

In the traditional Kist family, the father was regarded as the patriarch. The wife and children had to obey his rules and show him their support. If the family became excessively large or if the father died, the elder brother would become the head of the household. He would then decide all the important questions of family life.

There was a strict division of responsibilities between the male and female members of family. The mother of the family was regarded as *tseen naan* (the landlady of the house) or *khusam naan* (mother of the house). Men usually did not interfere with her

tasks. The housewife's duties consisted of preparing meals, providing family members with clothing, cleaning the house, weeding the garden, harvesting, hoeing the maize, and taking care of the cattle and birds. She also assigned tasks to the family's children.

Kist etiquette required strict respect toward elders not only in the family but also in society. An elder's word was regarded as law. All family business was conducted after first consulting the elders. The elder of the family had his own armchair, which usually stood to the right of the hearth. According to tradition, no one but the elder had the right to sit in this chair; it was sacred. Tradition required that the men and women of the family eat separately. Children could not cry in front of their father or argue with elder members of the family. Finally, elders never punished other family members since it was considered disrespectful.

A family's guest was treated with great respect. Men, usually the eldest man of the family, would greet the guest. The guest would then be seated in the most honorable place. The guest was not simply the guest of one particular family, but of the whole village and, in some cases, the whole canyon. Even today, this tradition is strictly maintained.

The Kist system of kinship and blood relations is very similar to that of the Chechens and Ingush. The father's blood line is maintained as long as the family/kin lasts. Marriages within it are forbidden. The Kists and Ingush maintain this tradition strictly, though in Chechnya this tradition has changed under the influence of Islam. Previously, marriage to one's third cousin was forbidden; now it is welcomed. The same custom (only from the mother's side) is gradually spreading in the Pankisi Gorge, though here marriages between third and fourth generation cousins are strictly disapproved of by society. According to the old tradition, marriages between close neighbors were also forbidden, even if both persons belonged to different kin groups and had different family names.³⁶

³⁶ L.U. Margoshvili, pp. 177-180.

As among the Georgian highlanders, the custom of sworn brotherhood was strictly observed. The children of sworn brothers were regarded as real sisters and brothers. Sworn brothers (or sworn sisters) participated deeply in each other's lives, helping each other with work, weddings, and so on. Sworn brothers were even obliged to avenge the other's blood if one of them was killed.³⁷

Traditionally, the Vainakhs and highlanders of Pshavi, Tusheti, and Khevsureti married only after receiving approval from their parents—or, more precisely, from the father. The economic status of the family played an important role in these arranged marriages. According to tradition, the Kists could only marry once. If a family was childless, the man could marry another woman after receiving his first wife's and her parents' approval.

The Kists of Pankisi have several forms of marriage: *iekhna iigar*, the arranged marriage; *lechkan iakhar*, the secret departure of a young woman from her parents' home after an agreement with her groom or his middlemen; kidnapping, a practice which was earlier considered brave and praiseworthy; and betrothal in the cradle (very rare). Relatively newer forms of marriage were betrothal by touching the hand and betrothal by giving the money or gifts for the bride to her closest relatives.³⁸

WEDDING CUSTOMS

What were the marriage traditions? Among the highlanders of the Central

³⁷ The ritual of swearing into brotherhood was as follows. The older man would put a silver coin into a jar full of beer or *araq* (liquor), then the two of them would drink from the jar three times and three times they would kiss each other. The men then would swear to each other their brotherhood, swear to sacrifice their blood for each other, and wish each other victory over their enemies. This tradition was very strongly followed. East Georgian highlanders had a similar tradition, called *vertskhlis tchama*, eating the silver (Rafiel Eristavi, p. 91, and see also V. Bardavelidze, "The Institution of Modzmeoba—Adoptive Brotherhood: An Aspect of the History of the Relations between Mountain and Valley Populations in Georgia," *Kinship and Marriage in the Soviet Union*, T. Dragadze, ed., New York, 1984, pp. 173-188).

³⁸ About the marriage customs of the Vainakhs see L.U. Margoshvili, pp. 182-194; L. Melikishvili, "The Marriage Rituals of the Kists of Pankisi Gorge," *Ethnographic Collections of Caucasus*, Vol. 7, Tbilisi, 1988, pp. 55-59 (in Russian).

Caucasus, newlyweds observed a ritual of silence, which meant being silent around the husband's relatives. In the presence of these relatives, the newlyweds would not talk to each other. The bride also had to be silent with her father-in-law. The longer her silence lasted, the greater the respect she gained. Sometimes she was silent for years.³⁹ The preparations for the wedding usually started from the day of the marriage agreement between the parents of the bride and groom. The bride's family would prepare a dowry, and the groom's family would organize the wedding ceremony. The groom usually was not present at the marriage feast. He would be kept out of sight from his bride's relatives. The bride's entrance into the groom's house was occasioned by celebration. Typically, coals from the hearth would be placed in the middle of the room. The bride would then be guided around the coals three times and blessed. Men and women would be seated separately. The wedding banquet in the groom's house continued for several days. On the third or the fourth day of the wedding, the relatives of bride would be invited to join in. This was called *nauts guchvaakkhar*, or the examination of groom. After a week of wedding celebration, the newlyweds went with the close relatives of the husband to the bride's family. This was called *iot chuiuala iakhar*, or the return of the young woman to her father's family. After the feast, the husband would return to his home, and the wife would stay with her father's family for a week.⁴⁰

Today, Kist wedding ceremonies very much resemble those of the Georgians.⁴¹ Usually the toastmaster (*tamada* in Georgian) makes his toasts in Georgian.⁴² Some old

³⁹ G.A. Sergeeva, "About the Custom of Avoidance among the Peoples of Georgia," *Field Works of the Institute of Ethnography*, 1974, Moscow, 1975, p. 143 (in Russian).

⁴⁰ L.U. Margoshvili, p. 189.

⁴¹ On the wedding traditions of Georgians, see T. Dragadze, *Rural Families in Soviet Georgia*, London, 1988, pp. 99-132.

⁴² A. Holisky, "The Rules of the Supra or How to Drink in Georgian," *Annual of the Society of the Study of Caucasia*, 1989, pp. 22-39; A. Grigolia, pp. 53-56; and A. Ochiauri, *The Hospitality in Khevsureti*, Tbilisi, 1980, pp. 111-137 (in Georgian).

rituals have survived among the highlanders of Central Caucasus - for example, the ritual of going around the coals as well as the ritual in which the bride and her friends go to the river for water before entering the husband's house. After the marriage, a Kist woman changes her last name and accepts her husband's family name. In Chechnya and Ingushetia, married women take their fathers' family names as last names.

FUNERAL CUSTOMS

Burial and funeral ceremonies form another important part of the customs of the Kists. According to the old beliefs, life continued after death in an underworld presided over by the god *Eshtr*. It was necessary, therefore, for the deceased to have all the necessary things for the "underworld" life. Before the arrival of Islam, funerals were performed on the third or fourth day after death. Today, however, the Kists bury their dead on the same day, though they depart from the Muslim custom by not wearing mourning clothing.⁴³

In the past, the Kists of the village of Duisi, which now has a Muslim majority, had a tradition of bringing the mullah to the dying man. After the man's death, they would also call a Christian priest, for absolution or last rites. They feared that someone might complain that they had buried the dead without last rites. The Kists of the villages of Joqolo and Omalo never buried their dead without last rites. Even today, the burial sites of these Kist villages are divided into Muslim and Christian sections. According to tradition, only men accompanied the deceased to the burial site, singing the mourning dirge *en route*. Today, however, it is not unusual for women to accompany men to the burial site.

Several funeral practices have been changed under the influence of Georgian peasant tradition. First, as a rule, the Kists never drank alcohol during the traditional funeral repast. The traditional funeral meal consisted of bread and meat. These days,

⁴³ It must be noted that in present times there is a strong Georgian influence. Thus, Kists often wear black for a year or even more after the death of someone close.

however, separate tables are laid for local Muslim dwellers and for guests from neighboring Georgian and Osset villages. The guests' tables are laid with traditional Georgian wine, drinks and food, although Kists still do not drink wine. Second, the Kists typically did not celebrate the fortieth day of death, as is the Christian practice. They only prepared a religious meal (*saak*) every Friday evening. Under the influence of Georgian and Christian tradition, however, the Kists now celebrate the seventh and fortieth days of death, as well as an anniversary commemoration.⁴⁴

CUSTOMARY LAW

The societies of the Central Caucasian highlanders were largely defined by their customary law. In the Northern Caucasus and East Georgian highlands, this customary law was widespread up until the early 1920s.⁴⁵

The class structure of Kist society was unusual for the region. In Chechnya and Ingushetia, representatives of the wealthier class of society were united in groups of "village elders." They had more extensive rights than the lower classes, which consisted of serfs and peasants. The class structure of society comprised the following groups: *oeezd naakh* (the wealthy, equivalent to the Georgian *aznauri*, or nobleman); *eel* (equivalent to the Georgian *tavadi*, prince/duke); *kie-sag* or *misg-sag* (the poor and the serfs who usually worked for the wealthier members of society); *iisar* (the captive or prisoner, a byproduct of hostilities between certain societies of Chechnya and Ingushetia).⁴⁶ It is interesting that no such forms of social differentiation existed among the Kists of Pankisi. Instead, the population was divided into *khaldolash taruaiolash* (the wealthy), *ukier beekhash*

⁴⁴ L.U. Margoshvili, pp. 195-198; and compare A. Grigolia, pp. 42-50.

⁴⁵ A. Grigolia, pp. 162-177; R. Eristavi, p. 92.

⁴⁶ Captives would be released when their relatives or patrons had paid their ransom. Otherwise they would be sold, given as presents, or used as serfs.

(middle-income) and *kie-misg beekhash* (the poor) families. Their social level was almost equal.⁴⁷

Political authority resided in the Council of Elders in the Pankisi. In later periods, however, each of the villages elected their own heads, who were called *iurt-daa* (*iurt*—village, *daa*—father). These elections took the following form. Every village would elect a group of the most knowledgeable concerning the traditions and customs, the *adati*. The wisest individual in this group would then become the head of the village, the *iurt-daa*. The functions of the *iurt-daa* included keeping order in the village, negotiating between families, in the event of disputes, choosing mediators (respected members of the community who had a knowledge of customary law), calling village meetings, distributing land to newcomers, accepting members of other families into the *teyp*, and controlling the bridges and water reservoirs.⁴⁸

Over time, the system of customary law began to break down. The Kists lacked spaces where they could regularly gather to discuss important matters and make collective decisions. Often, they would gather on the banks of the Alazani River or at the village cemetery. Under Russian rule, the traditional Kist mediating court (*kkhiel*) continued to meet secretly and make rulings, despite being banned by Russian law. Serving one's official (i.e., Russian) sentence for a crime did not release one from the claims of customary law (*adati*).

BLOOD REVENGE

The tradition of blood revenge was a frightful but essential practice among both the North Caucasian and Georgian highlanders, especially in Pshavi and Khevsureti.⁴⁹ This

⁴⁷ L.U. Margoshvili, p. 201.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 202.

⁴⁹ A. Ochiauri, *Blood Feud and Wounding in Khevsureti. Ethnographic Materials*, Tbilisi, 1953-1954 (in Georgian), Archive, Institute of History and Ethnography Georgian Academy of Sciences; R. Eristavi, pp. 91-94.

tradition was a means of self-defense. It was obligatory for family members to defend their families. They would make every effort to “take blood” for the murdered family member.

The practice of blood revenge varied slightly among different highlander groups. In Chechnya, a blood feud would arise after a killing. It could arise between brothers, fathers and sons, close relatives, or members of a family or clan, that is, between the members of the same *teyp* or between the members of different *teyps*. Against the initiator of the feud, any weapon was acceptable—knives, guns, poison, etc.

The Kists had a somewhat different custom. The question of blood revenge would not arise if the original killing was committed inside the family, clan, or even the members of the same kin/descent. These questions would be negotiated and solved within the family with the help of mediators. In blood feuds between different communities, both sides were expected to take steps towards the reconciliation. Before pursuing revenge, the victim’s side would send representatives drawn from neutral families who would officially declare the blood hostility to the other side. The suspect’s side could either accept or dispute the charge. In the case of disputation, the suspect’s side could demand that the *kkhiel* (or traditional court) discuss the matter. The Chechen *kkhiel* consisted of an even number of men, but the Kist *kkhiel* always consisted of an odd number. If the *kkhiel* found the suspect guilty, they would allow the victim’s side the right to seek blood revenge. The guilty side would then send a group of elders drawn from neutral families to request that the aggrieved side shed only the blood of the killer. Usually, the victim’s side would agree to this request, but if the killer died before revenge was taken, the blood revenge would be passed on to his closest relatives.

According to tradition, the killer had to be killed either according to the custom of blood revenge (*tsii ietsar*), or reconciliation had to be made by oath (*dui baar*). At one point, the blood revenge was replaced by a fine. The rules required that *dui* (oath) had to be taken for any committed crime. The oath was obligatory and required full payment for the blood of murdered person. To lie under oath was considered shameful and would

mean pariah status for the perjurer.⁵⁰ Sometimes, if the plaintiff's side agreed, the *kkhiel* would offer the side of the accused the opportunity for absolution through an oath sworn on the Koran. Sixty-three members from the *teyp* of the accused had to swear this oath, after which point, the aggrieved side would not pursue them any more.

Other than these variations, there was almost no difference in the customs of blood revenge between the Chechens, Ingush, and the Kists of Pankisi. The chief difference was that in Chechnya the reconciliation in exchange of payment was strictly forbidden. Only "blood for blood" type revenge would stop the hostility.⁵¹

The relatives of a murderer in Pshavi and Khevsureti avoided the relatives of a murdered man, fearing for their own lives. In Khevsureti, it was custom to burn the murderer's house and property, although the murderer's family would already have seen this coming and sought refuge elsewhere (becoming *khizani* or *amanati*). The murderer also had to make the monthly payments to the victim's family. If after paying 280 sheep or 70 cows the victim's family was satisfied with this compensation, the murderer could return to his former dwelling place. His life would still be in danger, though. He could be required to pay more fines, and even then, he could still be killed in revenge. If this happened, the family of the original victim would be required to return the fines paid to them (*saukanmomkvdro*). With this pattern of tit-for-tat revenge from both sides, blood feuds often continued for a very long time.

The custom of payment for someone's blood differed in some particulars among Kist villages in Pankisi. For example, in the village of Joqolo the fine for killing a man was 70 cows. It was 63 cows in the village of Duisi (the oath given by each man being equal

⁵⁰ In the Khevsureti and Pshavi, taking the oath was very sacred thing. If the mediators/judges had difficulty solving a matter, the oath had to be taken in a presence of witnesses, each of whom was brought from each society. The man taking the oath and all other witnesses had to observe many rituals of purities; among them, they could not eat or drink on the scheduled day of the oath. The oath would be taken in front of the sacred sanctuaries, the priests of the sanctuary, and other witnesses. S. Makalatia, *Khevsureti*, Tbilisi, 1935, pp. 83-92, pp. 97-100 (in Georgian).

⁵¹ L.U. Margoshvili, pp. 204-205.

to one cow). Payment of the fine could take three forms, by cows, by money, or by honey.⁵²

RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

According to ethnographic sources, the religious practices of the Vainakhs (Chechens and Ingush) and East Georgian highlanders were very similar to each other. The religious system of the highlanders of East Georgia—the Tush, Pshavs, and Khevsurs—is a complex admixture of pre-Christian cults and Christianity—a so-called folk religion. Some scholars characterize it as a mixture of paganism and Christianity. Before Christianity's arrival in Georgia (in 337 AD), the religion of the Georgian highlanders had been already influenced by classical cults of the Greco-Roman world. The Mazdean (Zoroastrian) religion had also influenced this region.⁵³

Surviving sacred buildings from those times—consisting mainly of sanctuaries in present-day Khevsureti, Pshavi, Tusheti, Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Ossetia—are proof that the Central Caucasian tribes once had similar religious beliefs. Moreover, mythological legends and religious ceremonies that have survived to this day show that large groups of Vainakh peoples were assimilated with the Tush, Pshavs, Khevsurs, and Mokhevians. It is clear, for example, that the territories of Pirikit⁵⁴ Khevsureti were once under dominance

⁵² Injuring someone with a dagger was payable by 10 cows; digging the eyes – 15 cows; hitting and injuring head – 7 cows; wounding with gun – 10 cows; cutting the fingers: 1 cow for the little finger, 2 cows for fourth finger, 3 cows for middle finger, 4 cows for index finger, 5 cows for the thumb. In the highlands of East Georgia, the fines administered by judges/elders were following: the fine for stealing – the stolen items multiplied by 7; the fine for injuries received from fighting, depending on the weapon – from 5 to 25 cows; fine for taking the someone's eyesight – 30 cows; fine for cutting the leg – 24 cows; fine for the right hand – 25 cows, for the left hand – 22 cows; for each tooth – 1 cow, for injuring a woman – 11 sheep (a bull equaled 7 sheep, a cow equaled 4 sheep, etc.). See R. Eristavi, p. 93; S. Makalatia, pp. 94-96.

⁵³ S. Kurtsikidze, "The Survivals of Zoroastrianism in the Traditional Life and Culture of the East-Georgian Mountaineers," Dissertation, Tbilisi, 1993 (in Georgian, summary in English).

⁵⁴ The word *pirikit* in Georgian means opposite, and in this case refers to the northern side of the Caucasian mountain range.

of the Vainakh people.⁵⁵ To this day, the Kists worship the Khevsur deities (*jvari*) and make sacrifices to the *Anatori jvari*⁵⁶ near the Khevsureti village of Shatili, which is located at the Georgian-Chechnyan border. The *Anatori jvari* was also considered sacred by Chechens in Maisti and Melkhisti. Finally, highlanders from both the northern Caucasus and Georgia participated together in religious celebrations.⁵⁷

The ruins of some pre-Christian sanctuaries still exist in the Pankisi Gorge. These sacred buildings of the Tush, Pshavs, and Khevsurs were later considered sacred by the Kists as well.⁵⁸ Although today the Kists pray in the mosque in the village of Duisi, they also pray at the sites of old, now-ruined sanctuaries. They also pray in Saint George church in the village of Joqolo and attend the religious celebration *Alaverdoba* in the Alaverdi church of Kakheti. Finally, the Kists celebrate also *Tetri Giorgoba*, or the festival of Saint George.⁵⁹

Christian missionaries played an important role in disseminating Georgian culture among the Vainakhs. Without a doubt, Christianity was one of the important factors in establishing closer links between the Vainakhs and Georgians in the 16th to 17th centuries. This was also the period in which Islam came from Daghestan and began to spread throughout Chechnya and Ingushetia, however. It is interesting to note that fanaticism about any religion seems to have been absent among the Kists. Traces of the three reli-

⁵⁵ T. Ochiauri, *Mythological Legends of the Highlands of East Georgia*, Tbilisi, 1967, pp. 16-20 (in Georgian).

⁵⁶ An *Anatori jvari* is a shrine built in the name of the deity Anatori. The shrine is located in Pirikit Khevsureti (Georgia), near the border with Chechnya.

⁵⁷ V. Bardavelidze, "The Social and Religious Monuments of the Highlands of East Georgia," *Pshavi*, Vol. 1, Tbilisi, 1974; *Khevsureti*, Vol. 2, Tbilisi, 1982; *Tusheti*, Vol. 3, Tbilisi, 1985 (in Georgian); Z. Kiknadze, *Georgian Mythology: The Cross and its People*, Kutaisi, 1996 (in Georgian).

⁵⁸ One example is the Baltagora sanctuary, which Kists called *tsuu* (Saint George church) today.

⁵⁹ L.U. Margoshvili, p. 230, p. 244

gious systems are present in their traditions. Moreover, they have changed their religion three times in the space of two centuries.⁶⁰

At the time of the Kist's first significant settlement in the Pankisi Gorge, the Christian church began to intensify its missionary policy. The "Society for the Revival of Christianity in the Caucasus" was created by Russian Tsarist government in the 1850s, an organization which devoted considerable attention to the highland provinces of East Georgia and the Pankisi Gorge.⁶¹ Difficulties soon arose with the Kists—Muslim Vainakhs in the village Duisi. These Kists, who had migrated to Duisi in 1845, were forcibly christened in 1866. They were driven to the Alazani River, baptized, and given Christian names. In this manner, the population of the villages of Joqolo and Omalo also became Christian. According to the 19th century Georgian newspaper *Tsnobis Purtseli* (News Reports), the Kists of Pankisi were divided into two groups in this period. The first, consisting of 771 Orthodox Christians, considered themselves Georgian, and in fact their language, customs, and way of life were Georgian. They were educated in Georgia and conducted their church services in the Georgian language. The other group, of about 200 households, were Muslim Kists with their own mosques and mullahs—though, like the first group, they studied and worshipped in the Georgian language.⁶²

With time, Islam began to take hold in the region. One mullah, arriving from Kharajala, observed that Kists did not have their own script and tried to introduce the teaching of the Arabic language. This mullah had brought a group of children from his village with him as an example to the Kist children. The Kists did not allow their children to study Arabic, however. In 1898, one group of Duisi Muslims began building a mosque

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 230

⁶¹ *About the Activities of the Highest Establishment Society of Revival of Orthodox Christianity in Caucasus*, St. Petersburg, 1862, p. 22 (in Russian); "About the Practical Activities of the Missioners of This Society in the Highlands of East Georgia," in V. Chikovani, *Tradition and Innovation: Fighting against the Old Traditions According to the Georgian Press of the 19th Century*, Tbilisi, 1979, pp. 72-104 (in Georgian).

⁶² D. Pavliashvili, "The School Matters in Tianeti District," *Tsnobis Purtseli* 2361 (1903), p. 1.

without permission. When the local Christians opposed the new mosque, the Muslims filed a complaint with the authorities. The authorities feared that the Muslims would influence the Orthodox Kist population and for a long time refused to give permission for the mosque. Finally, the Muslim Kists of Duisi turned for help to the mullah Abdul Bakanaghli from the village Belakani of the Zakatala region of neighboring Azerbaijan. This mullah went with representatives from the village of Duisi to Tbilisi (the capital of Georgia), and finally permission to build the mosque was granted. The mosque was completed in 1902.⁶³

In the beginning of the 20th century, Islam's influence in the region grew, as did the number of its followers. The first teachers of Islam among the Kists were the three brothers Gebisha, Akhiga, and Khonga Khangoshvili. The eldest brother Gebisha had traveled to Mecca and, after coming back, began preaching to the local population. The brothers Khangoshvili also brought in a man from Chechnya named Vaata, who had been educated in Arabic language. The next mullah was Kir Mahama, and he spent almost ten years in Pankisi. In 1905, the famous mullah Tavsolta came from Chechnya to Duisi and spent three years there. In 1909, a certain preacher of Islam by the name of Is-Efendi arrived from Azerbaijan. He preached the Naqshbandi teaching and founded the Naqshbandi sect. The teachings of this sect are based on the ideas of Tariqat—or, as it is called in the Caucasus, Murudusm. This sect had become popular in Daghestan and from there spread to Chechnya, Ingushetia, and then Pankisi. The Naqshbandi sect strictly followed the norms of *shariat* such as belief in one god, praying five times a day (*namaz*), fasting, and making the pilgrimage to Mecca.⁶⁴

With the decline of Christianity, many Islamic preachers from Chechnya, Ingushetia, Daghestan, and Azerbaijan began forming different sects in Pankisi. For example, the Kist Machig Machaligashvili disseminated the teachings of the Kunta Hajji sect

⁶³ L.U. Margoshvili, pp. 231-232.

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 232, p. 235.

in 1927 after his return from Ingushetia. Also popular among the Kists were the teachings of Kunta Hajji, which originated in Chechnya. The founder of this sect was Kunta Hajji from the village Eliskhan-Iurt. He taught that God does not like war, that all believers are brothers, and that they must trust their fates to Allah.⁶⁵ The Kunta Hajji sect differed from that of the Nakshbandi in its ritual practices. In Chechnya and Ingushetia, the wealthier people were part of the Naqshbandi sect. They considered themselves Murids⁶⁶ and did not perform *ziarat* (honoring of sacred places) and *zikr* (a religious ritual in which half-un-dressed members of the sect would gather in a dark room and dance themselves into an ecstatic state). The Kists performed this ritual in their own language because they did not know Arabic. The majority of mullahs strongly opposed this teaching as heretical.⁶⁷

After the “sovietisation” of Georgia in 1921, the local Christian priest was forced to permanently leave the church of the village Joqolo in Pankisi. Though the mosque in Duisi was closed, members of the Kunta Hajji sect continued to meet every Friday in the house of one of its members. In 1969, the sect’s leaders reopened the mosque. In the late 1960s and 1970s, members of the Nakshbandi sect were still gathering on Fridays in the room where their teacher, Is-Efendi, had lived until 1920. The members of Kunta Hajji continued performing their religious rituals. Both sects still had their *tkhaamd* (head/leader) and *turakh* (deputy). Apart from these two sects, new ones were also emerging in villages Omalo, Birkiani, and Joqolo.⁶⁸

From 1996 to 2001, four new mosques were built in the Kist villages of Pankisi. The financing came from Arabia. The biggest mosque stands in the village of Duisi near

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 235.

⁶⁶ Caucasian “Muridism” is a particular form of Islam that originated in Daghestan. In the 19th century, it became the main ideology in fighting against Russian rule and colonialism in the North Caucasus. Muridism teaches asceticism, hatred of wealth and power, etc. Caucasian Murids unite around sacred places or people.

⁶⁷ L.U. Margoshvili, pp. 238-239.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 237, p. 239.

the middle school bearing the name of its founder and prominent Kist educator, Usup Margoshvili. Additionally, an Islamic college and an Arabic school were opened in Duisi. With the help of the school's director and a locally-based NGO, fifty children have been sent from Pankisi to Arabic countries to be educated. Today, there are classes in Arabic in every Kist village of the Pankisi Gorge.

This situation is rather troublesome for the older generation, the majority of whom were educated in the Georgian and Russian languages. They fear that the Kists of Pankisi will lose their distinctive ethnic character. Arabic culture is foreign to them. Consequently, the population of Pankisi is demanding the Georgian government not to grant official status to Arabic, which would make it a required subject in the region's schools. For the older generation, this danger seems very real.

Finally, a word about Wahhabism. Though unappealing to most Pankisi Kists, this strain of Islam is becoming popular among the younger generation, especially those who are unemployed. This younger generation is increasingly fascinated with the Wahhabist version of "Muslim socialism," and many admire the fight of the Chechens.

OTHER GROUPS IN THE PANKISI GORGE

We have already indicated that different ethnic groups lived in close contact in the Pankisi Gorge: the Kists, Ossets, and various Georgian highlanders (including the Tush). Like the Kists, the others also came to this region from different places at different times. Before migrating to Pankisi, all of them had experience living with other ethnicities. In the 16th century, the Tush began settling in the Alvani valley, which is located in the Akhmeta district. The king of Kakheti, Levan (1520-1574) granted the Tush these lands in exchange for their military service. In 1656, the Iranian Shah gave the conquered Kakheti province to the Khan Selim of Ganja. Khan Selim began destroying Christian churches and settling the Muslim Turkman tribes in the regions of Pankisi, Alvani, and Lopoti— the places that Georgian highlanders, the Tush among them, had used as winter pastures for the cattle and

sheep.⁶⁹ The Bakhtrioni rebellion ensued. It resulted in success.⁷⁰ The battle of Bakhtrioni became a popular theme in Georgian literature and folklore.⁷¹ Zezva Gaprindauli from Tusheti and the legendary priest Lukhumi from Pshavi, participants of the battle, became symbols of Georgian national independence. In the second half of the 19th century, which was a period of “cultural nationalism” in Georgia, writers and social activists once again revived these heroes as symbols of freedom and national independence.⁷²

After the Bakhtrioni rebellion, a sub-group of the Tush, the Tsova Tush, migrated from the mountains. They were the first to settle in the territories across the Alazani River: Pankisi, Bakhtrioni, Lopoti, Kistauri, Dumasturi, Khorbalo, Birkiani, Pichkhovani, Koreti, etc. Later, in the 19th century, they leased their lands to Georgian highlanders from the Pshavi and Khevsureti provinces as well as to Ossets of the Java society. The former had been relocated from the highlands of Inner Kartli to the plains regions and were eventually settled in the Pankisi region by the Russian administration.

The ethnic background of the population of Kakheti province in general—and of the Akhmeta district in particular—is very colorful.⁷³ Its inhabitants are descendants of

⁶⁹ Even today sheep and cattle breeding is the leading branch of the economy of highland Tusheti. Over the centuries, the Tush used the valleys of Georgia, Dagestan, Azerbaijan, and the Qarsi district of Turkey as winter pastures for thousands of flocks of sheep. Tusheti gouda cheese and high quality wool was famous and was exported to Europe and Russia. See A. Shavkhelishvili, *Tusheti*, Tbilisi, 1987, pp. 58-74 (in Georgian).

⁷⁰ A. Shavkhelishvili, p. 28, p. 56, p. 85, pp. 92-102; W.E.D. Allen, *A History of the Georgian People from the Beginning Down to the Russian Conquest in the 19th Century*, London, 1971, pp. 142-174.

⁷¹ S. Qubaneishvili, *Bakhtrioni Heroes in the Georgian Literature and Folk Narratives*, Tbilisi, 1953 (in Georgian).

⁷² David Marshal Lang, *A Modern History of Georgia*, London, 1969, pp. 94-115; Donald Rayfield, *The Literature of Georgia: A History*, Oxford, 1994, pp. 174-187, 207-218; M.I. Chikovani, *Georgian Folk Epos about Chained Amirani*, Moscow, 1966 (in Russian).

For the folklore and ethnographic activities in the period of “cultural nationalism,” see: M.I. Chikovani, *History of Georgian Folklore*, Vol. 1, Tbilisi, 1975, pp. 219-349 (in Georgian); V.M. Chikovani, pp. 14-26, 34-114; *Georgian Folk Stories and Legends*, trans. and ed. by E.B. Virsaladze, Moscow, 1973 (in Russian).

⁷³ A. Shavkhelishvili, p. 28, p. 56, p. 85.

ethnic Georgians, Jews, Armenians, Vainakhs, Ossets, Daghestanis, Azeris, Greeks, and Russians, among others. Extensive intermarriage and intensive economic and cultural relations influenced the ethnic identity of the regions' non-Georgian groups. Today, the native language of most of the population is Georgian. They have Georgian last names and consider themselves Georgians, in spite of the fact that many are aware of their ancestors' non-Georgian origin. A minority of the population is bilingual⁷⁴ and bicultural, living in mono-ethnic villages of the region. The Kists and Ossets are good examples.

Historically, the Georgian highlander societies of the Khevsureti, Pshavi, and Tusheti were autonomous from the Georgian kings.⁷⁵ These societies were regarded as borderland-dwellers and were not included in the administrative-territorial divisions of feudal Georgia. In these official administrative units, local princes (vassals to the king) governed and the general population lived in serfdom. The situation of the borderland-dwellers was entirely different.

These inhabitants of the southern slopes of Caucasian mountain range were under the direct protection of the Georgian kings. They were free of any taxes. The major duties of these societies were protecting Georgia's northern borders from invasion and participating in the military operations of the Georgian king.⁷⁶ In return they had administrative and

⁷⁴ Georgian is the second language.

⁷⁵ On Khevsureti, see John Baddeley, *The Rugged Flanks of the Caucasus*, Vol. 1, Oxford University, London, 1940, pp. 232-248; Peter Nasmyth, *Georgia in the Mountain of Poetry*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1998, pp. 223-244; N. Dubrovin, *The History of War and Russian Domination in the Caucasus*, Vol. 1, St. Petersburg, 1871, pp. 280-318 (in Russian).

⁷⁶ K. Chkhatarashvili, *Studies in the History of Military Affairs in Feudal Georgia*, Tbilisi, 1979 (in Georgian); G. Anchabadze, "The 'Zegli Eristavta' as a Historical Source for the History of Military Affairs in the Highlands of Kartli," *Study of Georgian Historical Sources*, Vol. 7, 1987, pp. 79-89 (in Georgian). In the 17th and 18th centuries, in order to protect its southern borders, the Russian administration organized settlements of Cossacks in the region of the Tergi River. The population of Pshavi, Khevsureti, and Tusheti played a similar role on the southern slopes of the Caucasian mountain range. Amazingly, one 19th century traveler compared the Khevsurs to the old inhabitants of Zaporozhie (i.e., the ancestors of the Cossacks). See Grafina Uvarova, "Caucasus," *Traveler's Notes*, Vol. 3, Moscow, 1904, pp. 232-233 (in Russian). Many Khevsurs and Tush today work as the northern border patrol in the Georgian military.

religious autonomy. They regarded themselves as serfs of the local *khati* (deities). Every village, canyon, or district had its own group of *jvarioni* (crusaders in Georgian), elected by the community and led by the *khevisberi* or *dekanosi* (priests). Their major reliquary was the sacred *drosha-jvari* (flag-cross), which in case of need would guide the free society of warriors during battle.⁷⁷

The population of these regions was never large, not more than 2,300 to 4,500 inhabitants in any one district. Despite their small numbers, these village communities were important northern shields for Georgia throughout its history. The highlanders considered the Georgian king a *modzme* or “comrade” of local deities.⁷⁸ In return for their military service, the Georgian king granted the highlanders land in the lowlands of Kakheti province. In some ways, then, these highland societies, which were organized around local religious sanctuaries, resembled the feudal structures of medieval Europe.

The sanctuary’s deities (*khati*) and the sacred flag (*drosha* or *bovraqi*) played an important role in the life of each highlander. All initiation ceremonies—whether of separation from the society or incorporation into it—was carried out under the authority of the flag.⁷⁹ “The Good Serf of the Son of God,” or *kai qma* in Georgian,⁸⁰ was awarded during religious festivities. Some of these “Good Serfs” would become local hero cult objects

⁷⁷ A. Grigolia, pp. 19-53.

⁷⁸ V. Bardavelidze, *The Institute of Modzmeoba* (in Georgian). For the notion of the supernatural origin of Georgian kings’ dynasty, see M. Lortkipanidze, “The Legend about the Origin of Bagrationi Kings,” *Essays in the History of the Peoples of Caucasus*, Tbilisi, 1966, pp. 144-149 (in Georgian).

⁷⁹ Ethnographic and genealogical studies show that in the 16th to the 19th centuries many Chechen and Ingush migrants became members of the societies of Eastern Georgian highlanders. Afterwards they migrated to the plains regions and fully assimilated with the Georgian population. See T. Ochiauri, *Mythological Legends*; A. Shavkhelishvili, *Tusheti*, pp. 25-27; N.G. Volkova, pp. 160-170; U. Desheriev, *The Batsb Language*, Moscow, 1951 (in Russian); U.D. Anchabadze and N. G. Volkova, *The Ethnic History of Caucasus, 16th-19th Centuries*, Moscow, 1993, pp. 71-73, 134 (in Russian); R.A. Topchishvili, *Highlanders’ Migration in the East Georgia, 17th-20th Centuries*, Tbilisi, 1982 (in Georgian).

⁸⁰ This title was only given to the most exceptional warriors.

after death. Community members would perform rituals called *sakargqmo tasit dalotsva* in their memory. They would hold sacred silver bowls (named after the hero) full of sacred beer and recite the prayers in his name on behalf of his ancestral village and descendants.⁸¹

The highlanders of Eastern Georgia were even called “the last crusaders” because of the rituals described above. One 19th century Russian ethnographer even believed the Khevsurs to be the descendants of an army of crusaders who had found refuge in the Caucasus mountains. As a proof for his theory, he argued that in this region one could find a large quantity of western European weapons, that the Khevsurs cut their hair like crusaders, and that they wore clothing adorned with crosses.⁸² This theory, of course, cannot withstand academic criticism, but the fact is that over the centuries the dwellers of this region did truly play the role of the “local crusaders army.” They also had very advanced level military training and traditions.

The correlation of forces was not the same at all times. Thus, the different ethnic groups inhabiting the border regions had to develop institutions to coexist with each other. One of these institutions was the “yoke-bound brotherhood,” a “patron-serf” relationship sometimes called “Khevsur feudalism.” According to this institution, more populated and powerful villages were responsible for the protection of villages inhabited by other ethnic groups. These had to pay back their “patron” with two sheep or two rifle bullets per family per year. Depending on the circumstances, Khevsurs and Kists could be either patrons or serfs. This type of “yoke-bound brotherhood” existed between societies of Khevsurs of Shatili village and their neighbors, the Chechens of Jarego.⁸³ Though they had different

⁸¹ V. Chikovani, *The Institute of Kai Qma (Good Knights) and the Khati-Shrines in Central Caucasus - Khevsureti and Chechnya*, Archive, Institute of History and Ethnography, Georgian Academy of Sciences, Tbilisi, 1982, pp. 22-35, 57-64 (in Georgian).

⁸² A.L. Zisserman, *Twenty Five Years in Caucasus (1842-1862)*, Part 1, St. Petersburg, 1879, p. 258 (in Russian).

⁸³ V. Chikovani, *The Institute of Kai Qma*, pp. 7-11, 35-64.

beliefs and customs, these neighbors visited each other's shrines, so that Christians and Muslims participated together in local celebrations.

Thus, it can be said that the societies of the Georgian highlanders living on the northern and southern slopes of Caucasus mountain range acted as a type of ethnic and cultural "filter," through which other North Caucasian peoples, looking for a better life, migrated to the territory of Georgia in the course of history. Over the centuries, these migrants represented the ethnic and human resources of the Georgian state. In those parts of the Caucasian mountain range where this "filter" broke down, the main ideology of those migrating to the South Caucasus was the idea of "two motherlands," which was later replaced with the idea of "unification."

The Georgian highlanders' system of self-government proved to be a rather effective way of localizing border conflicts and other disagreements with Georgia's northern neighbors. The highlander societies were usually successful in solving such disputes without outside help.

THE PRESENT DAY

The present-day inhabitants of the Pankisi Gorge face some major social and political problems. There is consensus that the government needs to do more to combat criminality, including bringing interior ministry forces to bear on the problem. Recently, there was a series of kidnappings in the Pankisi Gorge, though the local population avows that they were committed by criminals from different regions of Georgia who are hiding in the Gorge. Currently there are 15 detainees in a local "prison," among them locals and refugees caught on charges of stealing cattle, committing robberies, and using and selling drugs. So far, the government has avoided directly involving the internal forces since it fears such action may provide Russia and local criminal clans the opportunity to provoke ethnic conflict in the region.

Another important issue was the creation of a traditional Muslim (*shariat*) court in the village of Duisi, which provoked considerable controversy. For the majority of population, this court seemed very strange and unwelcome. As reported in the *Black Sea Press* in January 2002, the decision to establish the court was made in order to combat criminality in the Gorge. *Shariat* courts are now quite common in Chechnya, but this is the first time one has been introduced in the Pankisi region of Georgia. A *Qadi*, or Muslim holy man, executes the functions of judge. He and his assistants periodically meet in the mosque of Duisi to investigate criminal activity. This *shariat* court has the right to make arrests, to order beatings, and to impose the death penalty. It can also impose other punishments.

Before the disintegration of the Soviet Union, interethnic relations in this region were quite stable. Later, conflicts in Georgia and the Caucasus⁸⁴ influenced the situation of the local population in the Pankisi Gorge and the Akhmeta district as a whole. Relationships between the Ossets and Georgians and between the Kists and Ossets became tense. They are still tense today. The Osset inhabitants are sympathetic to the Chechen refugees, whom they see as protecting them against oppression by the Kists. The Ossets feel pressured by the Kists and have been leaving their villages in the Pankisi Gorge to resettle in Northern Ossetia. Because they often cannot sell their properties, they leave behind cultivated lands and houses built over many generations. Kists and Chechen refugees have settled in these abandoned houses. In this manner, the Osset villages of Dumasturi, Kvemo Khalatsani, and Tsinubani were vacated from 1998 to 2002. Currently, the dwellers of the village Koreti are also preparing to leave. According to one local dweller there is no other

⁸⁴ S. Chervonnaya, "Conflict in the Caucasus," *Georgia, Abkhazia and the Russian Shadow*, London, 1994; R.G. Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, Indiana University Press, 1994, see chapter "The Georgian Road to Independence," pp. 317-337; "The Emergence of Political Society in Georgia," *Transcaucasia, Nationalism and Social Change: Essays in the History of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia*, ed. R.G. Suny, University of Michigan, 1999, pp. 109-142. For the influence of Caucasian conflicts on scientific activities and relations of cultural anthropologists of Georgia and Russia, see *Sovetskaia Etnografia* 2 (1991), pp. 153-155 (in Russian); and *Etnograficheskoe Obozrenie* 6 (1993), p. 133 (in Russian).

choice: Kist criminals took her son's car. Then one night, criminals armed with automatic guns terrorized the family. Not finding any money, they took the family cow.⁸⁵

Because of the crisis of criminality in Pankisi, not only Ossets but Georgians and Kists themselves feel unsafe. The ubiquity of firearms add tension even to ordinary discussions. In the last few years, there have been several clashes between rival criminal groups, who tend to be organized ethnically. Consequently, the Georgian population of remote villages in the Gorge have started moving to the other parts of the Akhmeta district. In the current year, the Pshavs left the village of Zemo Khalatsani and sold their houses to Kists. The Kists are now the only inhabitants of villages on the left bank of the Alazani River.

Confrontations between different ethnic groups have taken the form of competition for space. On one side, there are those villages inhabited by the Vainakhs (the Kists and Chechen refugees). On the other side, there are the villages inhabited by Georgians. Despite the difficult political and economic situation of the country, the Vainakh part of the population in Pankisi is undergoing a kind of renaissance. Their Georgian neighbors, on the other hand, claim they have been forgotten by their government and even by God.⁸⁶ Today, the Vainakhs of Pankisi are the center of attention, with both the Georgian government and international organizations providing aid to the refugees.⁸⁷ Emblematic of the Vainakh renaissance are the newly-built Muslim mosques and minarets that now dominate the Gorge.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ *Akhali Shvidi Dghe* (New Seven Day), April 12-18, 2002 (in Georgian).

⁸⁶ The socially and economically disadvantaged part of the population of Georgia cannot afford even simple religious services. At the same time, for the elite of Georgian police and members of administrative organs, it became very prestigious to provide personal funds to build churches. There are never-ending jokes about this subject. For example, he who takes the biggest bribes and commits the biggest sins builds the biggest church; he who takes smaller bribes and has lesser sins builds a smaller church. Many people of older and middle-age generations still remember the period of 1960s-1980s when young policemen (former militia) and KGB agents (today's church-builders) treated their pals with beatings for visiting the churches during celebrations.

⁸⁷ Refugees sell part of the humanitarian aid in the markets of Duisi and Akhmeta.

⁸⁸ There is a lot of information in the local mass media about the problems of the Pankisi Gorge. Humanitarian and scientific organizations are frequent guests of Vainakhs. The scientific accounts

The Vainakh population of Pankisi have close contacts with the armed forces functioning in Chechnya, and they have amassed large quantities of firearms.⁸⁹ Criminals are the primary beneficiaries of this situation. Under the influence of Wahhabi propaganda, the traditional value system, which was always characterized by religious tolerance, is changing.⁹⁰ Given these trends, the region's Christians, Georgians, and Ossets are increasingly vulnerable.

The older generation of Vainakh are concerned that the younger generation are losing their traditional values. They also fear that the spread of Arabic culture, especially Wahhabism, threatens not only their ethnic identity but also their relations with neighboring ethnic and religious groups. Even relations with Muslim neighbors like the Azeris and Daghestanis are threatened because Wahhabis consider them as much infidels as Christians. Wahhabi propaganda also impacts the young generation's attitude towards the United States. According to representatives of the older generation, some young people blame the

and studies about the problems of the Kist population of the Gorge are being published. The dancing group of the Kist youth does performances in Western Europe and the countries of the Near East, etc.

⁸⁹ The political changes that followed the September 11, 2001 attack also altered political terminology. If the Chechen rebels were formerly called independence fighters, today the same people are called terrorists and criminals. From these changes arise particularly controversial feelings at the local level, including in the Pankisi Gorge where part of the population still supports old terms while the other part demands that the government employ the new terms and that it take steps to assert political control of the region.

⁹⁰ On the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural-historical relations among Caucasian peoples, see R. W. Thompson, pp. 2-7; K. Kekelidze, "Classification and Geographical Locations of Peoples in Old Georgian Literature," *Studies*, Vol. 1, Tbilisi, 1956 (in Georgian); I. Javakhishvili, *The Primordial System and Relationship of Georgian and Caucasian Languages*, Vol. 1-2, Tbilisi, 1937 (in Georgian); I. Javakhishvili, *Historical and Ethnological Problems of Georgia, the Caucasus and Near East*, Tbilisi, 1950 (in Georgian); G. Melikishvili, *Questions About the Ancient Inhabitants of Georgia, the Caucasus, and Near East*, Tbilisi, 1965 (in Georgian); A. Robakidze, pp. 7-11, 72-90 (in Russian); A. Robakidze, "The Subjects of Caucasian Studies in Georgian Ethnography," *Caucasian Ethnographic Collections*, Vol. 4, Tbilisi, 1972 (in Russian); A. Chikobava, *The History of the Study of the Iberian-Caucasian Languages*, Tbilisi, 1966 (in Georgian); G. Qorashvili, "Questions of Ethnic Identity According to Leonti Mroveli's Historical Chronicles," *Studies*, Vol. 1, Tbilisi, 1995; R. Z. Betrozov, *The Adygeans: Emergence and Development of an Ethnos*, Nalchik, 1998 (in Russian); V.A Avksentiev, *The North Caucasus in the Ethnic Picture of the World*, Stavropol, 1998 (in Russian).

U.S. for its financial and political support of a local government seen as corrupt and dominated by the former communist elite.

It seems that the non-Kist population of Pankisi must turn to Georgian and Osset mafia organizations for protection. Needless to say, rivalry between different ethnic mafias will only worsen the already tense situation in the Gorge. Usually these groups have influential allies and protectors in the criminal world of Tbilisi, Vladikavkaz, and Groznyy who are themselves closely tied to different political circles and branches of the state.⁹¹ None of this should be surprising. These are relationships that were shaped over many decades and have withstood the test of time. Since the 1960s, a semi-official system of economic administration has evolved in the former Soviet Union. The directors of the official, planned economy were communist party workers. The illegal shadow economy was guided by so-called *sakmosnebi* (Georgian slang), *deltsi*, and *tsekhaviki* (Russian slang). Whatever their names, these shadow bosses would usually hire professional criminals—*shavebi* (“blacks”), *kanonieri kurdebi* (“lawful thieves”), *zveli bitchebi* (top/prime guys)—to administer their various, very lucrative operations. Usually, these professional criminals collaborated closely with the local communist nomenclature and the administrative organs, the police and KGB.

Trust in the government and in official institutions is extremely low among the population of the Gorge. This is one important factor in the popularity of both international humanitarian and Islamic missionary organizations in the region. It has also fueled the revitalization of old ethnic and religious traditions. The Kists’ endeavors to revive the

⁹¹ On the close connections between the Caucasian criminal world and local governing elites, see J. Gould, *Vodka, Tears, and Lenin’s Angel: My Adventures in the Wild and Woolly Former Soviet Union*, New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1997; A.W. Knight, *Spies Without Cloaks: The KGB’s Successors*, Ranston University Press, 1996; and S. Handelman, *Comrade Criminal: Russia’s New Mafiya*, Yale University Press, 1997. According to G. Targamadze, a member of the Georgian parliament’s anticorruption council, the Pankisi “island” was artificially created by Russian and Chechen drug-business bosses. He also claimed that the Russian magnate Boris Berezovsky and his assistant, a Georgian businessman named Patarkatsishvili, were involved in the region [*Akhali Versia* 37 (March 25-31, 2002)]. Patarkatsishvili has had close relations with the former director of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Kakha Targamadze.

council of elders, the annual pilgrimage of Georgians to their ancestors' sacred shrines,⁹² the creation of "people's armies"⁹³ to defend villages are all part of this rediscovery of tradition.

CONCLUSION

The traditional mode of life of the Central Caucasus highlands described above affects the contemporary situation in this region. It is desirable that the specialists involved in solving the crisis of the Pankisi Gorge consider the specificity of ethnic and cultural profile of the region as a whole.

In the broader scope, what is occurring in the Pankisi Gorge is not so very extraordinary. It is simply another local version of the ethnic politics now common in this region. Different sides, using different means of control, try to direct this politics to their ends. At the same time, however, the Pankisi Gorge is an important case because, with all its major elements (ethnic, religious, demographic, linguistic, etc.), it represents a microcosm of the region, a "mini-Caucasus." The fate of this latent ethnic conflict may say a lot about the future of the whole Caucasus region.

Many empires (Greek and Roman, Persian, Arabic, Byzantine, Mongolian, Ottoman, and Soviet) have left their marks on the ethnic cultures of the Caucasus. Today, as

⁹² The ancient tradition of pilgrimage still exists among the Georgian highlanders. See V. Chikovani, *Tradition and Innovation*, pp. 81-85 (in Georgian). The traditions of pilgrimage are also addressed in the ethnographic film, *The Tree of Life of Georgia*, directed by Z. Inashvili, screenplay by V. Chikovani, Documentary Film Studios of Georgian State Television, 1991 (in Georgian).

⁹³ The population of the Akhmeta district villages—Maghraani, Argokhi, and Pichkhovani—were so disturbed by the activities of the Pankisi criminals that they created a so-called "people's army," or Kakheti militia group. On July 18, 2001 the "peoples' army" blocked the entrance to the Pankisi Gorge for two weeks. These local villages are inhabited by Georgians and Georgians of Osset origin. A Tush, Luka Ramazashvili, was elected leader of this armed formation. Many members of the "people's army" were veterans of the Soviet war in Afghanistan, which created even more tension between them and the Muslim population of the Pankisi Gorge. Soon after the public of the Akhmeta district intervened in the process, the "people's army" stopped functioning and members of the army returned to their families.

the Russian military forces near the last stage of their withdrawal from the Transcaucasus, the region's inhabitants are searching for new ethnic and political identities. How future history plays out will depend largely on what kind of leadership emerges. The older generations are hoping for a geopolitical miracle, that "magic helpers" will appear in this tiny, beautiful Gorge, where the Kists of Pankisi— those peaceful relatives of the rebel Chechens—continue to live. The majority of Kists are hopeful for a future not dominated by criminal structures and warlords of jihad under the shadow of high-rise minarets.

News Update:

On July 29 and 30, 2002 three military helicopters from the Russian Federation bombed the areas north of the Pankisi Gorge: pastures of the Girevi village (Akhmeta region) and the adjacent territories of the Nakerela Mountain.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ *Sakartvelos Respublika* 184 (July 31, 2002), (in Georgian).

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Slides showing the area of the Central Caucasus can be viewed in the Anthropology section of the following website: <http://webdisk.berkeley.edu/~shorena/>.