

Chapter 2

Love, Khevsur Style: The Romance of the Mountains and Mountaineer Romance in Georgian Ethnography

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Plate 2.1. The village of Shatili

The most picturesque village in all of Georgia is the Khevsur village of Shatili, in the furthest part of mountainous Khevsureti, a stone's throw from Chechnya. Shatili remains one of the most recognisable symbols of Georgia, next to Mount Qazbegi (Russian: Kazbek). The population of Shatili, along with that of the rest of Khevsureti, was resettled in the plains in the early 1950s, allowing Shatili to stand for Georgia in general, since no specific Georgians actually lived there any longer. Thus, Shatili, the home of the Khevsurs, the brave and hospitable Khevsurs, came to symbolise all that is

purest and best about the Georgian past. The mountain villages, emptied of living Khevsurs, became museums of an unchanging traditional life as if frozen in a photograph. The confrontation of tradition and modernity for the Khevsurs themselves was not played out there in the mountains. Socialist modernity would not come to them in the mountains; rather, the mountain peoples would have to come to socialist modernity, down on the plains.

The emptied Shatili occasionally bubbled with life. By the early 1960s, the picturesque landscape of the empty village was used as a setting for a series of films about the lost life of the mountains (tragic *Khevsuruli Balada*, 1965; comic *Shexvedra Mtashi*, 1966, and Tengiz Abuladze's inscrutable rendering of a Vazha Pshavela poem, *Vedreba*, 1967). The mountains, and Pshavi and Khevsureti in particular, had until then already been imagined as a living museum, an outcropping of the past in the present, in contrast to the plains of Georgia. Pshav-Khevsureti is an image of the past that has been lost in the plains of Georgia: in the nineteenth century the ethnographer Khizanashvili described it as 'a photographic picture of the past, of the life of the ancestors. This picture we find only here, in Pshavi and Khevsureti' (Khizanashvili 1940: 1). Khizanashvili identifies the opposition between mountains (Pshav-Khevsureti) and plains (Kartli and especially the city of Tbilisi) with the incursion of the past into the present (tradition), and the future into the present (modernity), respectively:

Here [in the inaccessible mountains of Pshav-Khevsureti], in their homeland the Pshav-Khevsurs have preserved unchanged until today their ancient, ancestral customs, life, past traditions. In this respect the Pshav-Khevsur is more Georgian [*kartveli*] (if it can be said so), than the Kartlian [*karteli*, resident of Kartli, the central Georgian province] himself. The Kartlian lives more in the present, in the future. If he has not turned his back on the past, still, he avoids facing it. (Khizanashvili 1940: 1)

Yet there were still some Khevsurs in the mountains, somewhere. Two Georgian ethnographers, the married couple Aleksi Ochiauri and Natela Baliauri, themselves Khevsurs who had become intelligentsia and ethnographers, were spared the more famous resettlement, partly because *they had already been exiled from Khevsureti*, moving nearby to the Pshavian village of Shuapkho. In this way they escaped the blow that descended on their relatives in 1952. The couple were exiled for violation of a certain rule concerning exogamy, specifically the requirement of exogamy between members of the same village, and their exile provided the separation that transformed them into an indigenous intelligentsia and the nucleus of a circle of Khevsur and non-Khevsur ethnographers who form the core of the ethnographic tradition in Georgia.

This chapter, then, is about the romance of the mountains in Georgia, which, it could be argued, is a central Caucasian paradigm for the Georgian tradition of ethnography, since Khevsureti is the central focus of Georgian ethnography, the place in which exemplary Georgians are also exemplary Caucasian mountaineers. It is, in the first instance, about ‘real’ *mountaineer romance*, that is, Khevsur traditions, and particularly traditions of romance, *sts’orproba*, that have captured the imagination of Georgian intelligentsia. It is also about *the romance of the mountains*: the association of romance in general, a rather more denatured form of romantic associations, with the general constellation of exotic ethnographic features otherwise associated with Khevsureti and the mountains in general (some of which, of course, are in part a general inheritance from Russian romanticism (Layton 1992)). The theme of *sts’orproba* forms a central part of this more general romance of the mountains, allowing a more general romantic exoticism with regard to the mountains to be elided more specifically into love and desire. The romance of the mountains allows Khevsureti to be a paradigmatic locus for the Georgian ethnographic imagination; mountaineer romance allows Khevsureti to become a paradigmatic locus for ‘traditional’ love stories, particularly filmic ones.

Secondly, this chapter is about another Caucasian paradigm, namely, the imagined and real relationship between the indigenous intelligentsia and the ‘people’, as figured in this ‘Romance of the Khevsurs’. This relationship is often figured as featuring the same conflation of general romanticism about Khevsurs with a more concrete romantic relationship of a Georgian man (intelligentsia) with a Khevsur woman (folk). Echoing the way Russian romantics moved from ethnographic alterity (and fantasies of conquest of savage mountaineers) to romantic alterity (fantasies of sexual conquest of Circassian mountain maids) (Layton 1992), the Khevsur moves from being the prototypical object of the intelligentsia’s romantic ethnographic imagination to being the prototypical object of intelligentsia romantic desire.

Lastly, this raises a consideration of how Georgian (and generally East European) ethnography differs as a discipline from American and British anthropology in that it is not epistemically predicated on an assumption of essential alterity but on essential identity. Tamas Hofer’s classic statement of the opposition and its intellectual antecedents and consequences summed it up as ‘the study of one’s own culture vs. the study of other cultures’ (Hofer 1968: 311), views of culture ‘from the inside’ versus views of culture ‘from the outside’ (Lévi-Strauss, cited in Hofer 1968: 313). However, both disciplines shared, at least until recently, an assumption that in certain important respects the people they study are very unlike themselves, distantiated in time, not modern, ‘traditional’, ‘backwards’, ‘primitive’, ‘savage’. Just as

anthropologists assumed initially that their object of study was to be found not in cities but in villages, and hence housed their artifacts in museums of natural history, while their own artifacts (those of ‘white man in America’) go in museums of history and technology (Hofer 1968: 312), so too ethnographers assumed that their proper object of study was not the urban intelligentsia, but the rural folk (Hofer 1968: 311). Hence, ethnography rests on an asymptotic identification between ethnographer and folk, an identification within the framework of a ‘national culture’ which can never be fully achieved, because the ethnographer and the folk belong to different strata of this same national culture. In the case of Georgia, this asymptotic identification of ethnographic subject and object most closely approaches the limiting point of identity when a Khevsur emerges not only as the prototypical object of Georgian ethnography, but also as the prototypical subject, the Khevsur ethnography written by a Khevsur ethnographer.

Yet even here, where the observer and participant are one and the same, we find this insistent alterity again dividing the two. The native ethnographer seeks to separate out the two voices, to erase autobiography from ethnography, so constituting the voice of the ‘intelligentsia’ as being different from the voice of the ‘folk’, the writer and the written about. In many narratives that fall within this general scheme of the intersection of ‘mountains’ and ‘romance’, the theme of romance mediates the opposition between intelligentsia and folk, modern self and traditional alter ego. Most often it is a male who acts as narrator – he comes from the plains and either desires or consummates desire for the female figure (a Khevsur).

In the case of the ethnographer Natela Baliauri, however, the ethnographer and object of ethnography – intelligentsia and folk – are the same. But this is hidden in the biographical details, for it is nowhere apparent in the voicing that her ethnography is autobiography. The frame of the text is written using a third-person perspective typical of intelligentsia ethnography. It is precisely this identification that provides the epistemic point of view needed to provide an adequate description of Khevsur private life, and it is in the peculiarly intimate voicing of attributed quoted speech that her membership among the ‘folk’ becomes most apparent.

Khevsur romance: *sts’orproba*

The mountains of Khevsureti are not only associated with romance in the most general senses of the word, but also in a very particular form (*sts’orproba*), whose features at once hauntingly reflect and confound our own (and Georgian!) cultural expectations. Being an intimate form of relationship, it was described rather late: nineteenth-century ethnographers of Khevsureti concerned themselves primarily with the ritual and juridical

conventions of the native ‘public’ life, aside from marriage, and they largely passed over in silence the details of intimate, private life. As a result, the ethnographic record is essentially blank regarding the practice of *sts’orproba* and the related Pshavian practices of *ts’ats’loba* until the early 1920s. When it is described, *sts’orproba* is usually described as a set of ‘rules’ that constitute a recognised set of pre-marital romantic relationships that are everywhere opposed to affinal relationships of marriage (hence Tuite (2000) quite fairly characterises it as ‘anti-marriage’) and, less clearly, to ‘natural kinship’ relationships between consanguineal, coresidential siblings (Tuite 2000). *Sts’orproba* is also called *dobil-dzmobiloba* (‘sworn-sister-sworn-brotherhood’, implying a sworn siblingship between the sexes as opposed to one holding within a given sex) and *ts’ola-dgoma* (named after its chief practice of ‘lying down and getting up’; that is, spending the night together) (Baliauri 1991: 9).

Sts’orproba (which literally means something like ‘the relationship of being equal and similar’ and can be used more generally for a range of elective relationships between peers, from friends to lovers (Gogochuri 1974: 128)) is normatively possible only between consociates of a degree of relationship intermediate between coresidential siblings and the persons with whom it is possible to marry exogamously. It is possible to varying degrees within the exogamous social groupings of the village community (persons coresident within the village, the *temi*) and people who share the same surname (*gvvari*) (Baliauri 1991; Tuite 2000). The nature of the specific rules of physical comportment of ‘lying down and getting up’ vary depending on the degree of kinship distance, and hence the danger that the relationship will be confused with a purely sexual relationship (Tuite 2000). Baliauri makes clear that there is a difference within the class of relationships that go under this name, in that properly speaking, ‘spending the night together’ with someone makes them a *sts’orperi*, but does not make them a ‘sworn brother’ (the term *dzmobilili* ‘sworn brother’ is used for both men and women in this relationship). A ‘sworn brother’, in this sense, is a unique and durable relationship that is special within the class of people that are one’s *sts’orperi*. In general, one has many *sts’orperi*, but only one *dzmobilili*. The *dzmobilili* relationship as an affective relationship does not end with marriage, though the practices of ‘lying down and getting up’ may. Romance forms a special intermediate class of relationships between the sexes, standing between siblinghood and marriage (so that the term ‘brother-spouse’ and ‘sister-spouse’ are sometimes used as terms for the romantic dyad (Tuite 2000)),

consisting of liaisons that normatively begin around late puberty and last until marriage (in the late twenties).¹

Khevsur ‘romance’ (‘anti-marriage’) is at all points opposed to Khevsur ‘marriage’. Marriage is exogamous with respect to coresidential categories (*temi*, the village community) and categories of descent (*gvvari*, the community of people who share a surname); anti-marriage is ‘endogamous’ with respect to these categories. Anti-marriage begins during early adulthood (ages 16–17) and continues until marriage. The physical relationship is different; in particular, marriage is intended to be consummated with sexual relations that lead to childbirth. Sexual relations are not supposed to occur within the anti-marriage context; if they do, they must not be allowed to produce children. While both coresidential male kin and affinally related males are subject to pollution by a woman’s menstrual blood, this is not the case for anti-marriage partners (Baliauri 1991: 63; Tuite 2000: 47). Marital relations are recognised at shrine events, which constitute the ‘indigenous public sphere’, but anti-marriage relationships are sharply interdicted and must lead to avoidance during public events related to shrines (this is variable in itself since among the neighbouring Pshavians this is not the case).² Lastly, while the marital relationship is a relationship between strangers, not chosen by the partners themselves but easily ended by them, and is consequently not a powerful affective commitment, anti-marriage relationships that have progressed to the final stage are considered to be durable, lasting even into marriage, and emotionally powerful, the topic of considerable cycles of love poetry found among the Khevsurs. The affective bond between male and female *dzmobilis* is stronger than either consanguineal or affinal kinship ties, resembling the ‘sworn-brother’ relationship of the same name between men.

¹ The Khevsurs, importantly, do not speak of ‘love’ in these relationships, but ‘desire’ (Baliauri 1991: 155), nor is there any ethnographic evidence that these represent a ‘platonic’ relationship with no ‘carnal’ dimensions simply because the actual act of coitus is forbidden (as is frequently alleged by Georgian ethnographers, e.g. Kiknadze), nor is there ethnographic evidence that the opposition between desire and marriage is ever reconciled, as in other arranged marital systems (‘first marriage, then love’ vel sim.).

² Interestingly, divinities are themselves not understood to have engaged in the practice of marriage, but only anti-marriage. Each male shrine divinity has associated with him a number of semi-demonic female others, called *dobilis*, ‘sworn sisters’ (which may explain why *both* men *and* women in the human ‘anti-marriage’ are called *dzmobilis* ‘sworn brothers’) and the relationship between the male divinity and his female consorts is understood to be a kind of ‘anti-marriage’. However, these female shrine divinities routinely violate the rules of anti-marriage; they are highly promiscuous and their couplings with humans, divinities and each other are always understood to produce offspring like themselves (Makalatia 1984: 236–7).



Plate 2.2 Mzekala (Sopiko Chiaureli) appearing on a balcony in Shatili from the film *Khevsur Ballad* (Kartuli Pilmi 1965).

Nothing better illustrates the way that Khevsureti instantiates all that is romantic about Georgia than the film, *Khevsuruli Balada* [*Khevsur Ballad*] (1965), appropriately enough, a love story. Surely love stories could be set elsewhere in the mountains of Georgia, but for some reason the equally picturesque mountainous regions of Svaneti are appropriate for a film like *Salt for Svaneti* (1930), but not a romance.

This ethnic imagining of the antinomy between idealism and materialism, desires and needs, moral and material worlds, ballads and salt, served not only to place the romantic Khevsurs and the primitive Svans in opposition, but also recursively to divide narrative viewpoints, *epistemes*, that could be used in antinomic characterisations of the Khevsurs themselves in the nineteenth century. The first is a materialist realism that saw the

Khevsurs as being, like the Svans, exhaustively describable in terms of their material poverty:

The life of the Khevsur is such a straightened life, that a plainsdweller cannot imagine it. In the winter they bake bread on an iron plate over a fire of dry, small shrubs and manure; human warmth itself is lacking by reason of lack of firewood and fire. When you enter a house, you see terrible poverty. They wear on their bodies woolen shawls woven by their own women and til today they have not seen a cotton shirt; their bodies have never come into contact with soap and terrible filth has become rooted on their skin. They are in such a savage life and they know as little about the world, as a forest hunter.³

Opposed to this narrative approach is a romantic idealism that saw the Khevsurs as transcending their material conditions and embodying all that is best about Georgian-ness (the Khizanashvili quotation above is representative of the type). Sometimes the material stood to the ideal as cause to effect: even though Khevsurs were the pinnacle of savagery, as children of nature they were also noble and free, their antagonistic relation to the extremity of nature producing an inimitable *vazhk'atsoba* (machismo).

Is it possible that even here, in these deserted mountains, cliffs and vales, people of the Georgian tribe dwell? I said to myself: How do they preserve themselves?! They have no firewood, grain does not grow, the raising of sheep is impossible, because they do not have sufficient pasture.... Woe to such a life, as live the Khevsurs! From the very day of their birth begins a battle for life against nature: As soon as little Khevsurs stand up on their feet, their parents tether them to a post of the house with a rope, so that they don't fall off a cliff! For this reason it is not surprising, that Khevsurs were always famous in Georgia for bravery, fearlessness and selflessness in battle.⁴

The film *Khevsuruli Balada* is shot through with the interplay of this opposition between romantic idealism and realist materialist views of mountain life. The opposition becomes a structuring one, in which socialist technical modernity intervenes as a *deus ex machina* at the last minute to save the Khevsurs from their material conditions – but only much later. Ironically, of course, the film tells a story of the socialist government building roads into (a factually empty) Khevsureti in the 1960s, when the Khevsurs had already long since been relocated to the plains. At the same time, the resettlement of

³ P., “Khevsurebis Q’opa,” *Droeba* 1883 no.78, 3–4.

⁴ “Mgzavris Shenisvnebi,” *Droeba* 1880, no. 107, 1.

the Khevsurs to the plains is represented (somewhat ambivalently) as something they choose to do to escape their harsh material conditions.

The film covers three historical periods: first, contemporary socialist modernity (circa 1965); secondly, the presocialist period of unadulterated Khevsur tradition; and lastly a middle period some time in the 1920s and 1930s where the bulk of the narrative occurs, and where tradition and modernity confront one another within the context of a star-crossed romance between Imeda, a modernised Khevsur boy, who returns to Khevsureti, and a traditional Khevsur girl, Mzekala. The bulk of the film, told retrospectively by the aging hero, the artist Imeda, to a visiting Georgian doctor, is simply a tragic love story. As a boy, Imeda's father is killed in a duel, and the orphaned boy is taken to live in Tbilisi by a wandering member of the intelligentsia who is first to arrive on the scene. The boy learns to write and paint. Now an adult, a childhood friend comes to Tbilisi to introduce him to his natal village, and more importantly, to Mzekala. He falls in love with Mzekala, but runs foul of another of Mzekala's suitors, Torghva. In a duel, Imeda manages to kill Torghva. The star-crossed lovers flee on foot into the snows of the Khevsur winter, pursued by Torghva's brothers. Imeda's sworn-brother, Apareka, strives to lead the pursuers astray in the snow, but to no avail. The brothers, who are mounted, eventually track the lovers down and, while attempting to kill Imeda, kill Mzekala instead. At first blush, then, *Khevsuruli Balada* is a romance, a tale, told retrospectively, of the tragic romance of a modernised Khevsur man and a traditional Khevsur woman. At the same time, on a covert level, the operative dyad is the opposition between the intelligentsia and the people. The tragic romance between the modernised Khevsur boy and traditional Khevsur girl is also seemingly a rumination on the difficulties of indigenising local elites ('rooting', Russian *korenizatsiia*). Imeda becomes a city-dweller (*kalakeli*), and a member of the intelligentsia (a painter), but his attempt to return to the village proves tragic. Is the underlying truth simply that a member of the 'folk' can leave a village and become an urban *intelligent*, but never go home?

The main argument of the film, however, is about romance, traditional romance. Traditional social relations among the Khevsurs are presented as if characterised by extremes – love and violence are everywhere, often in tandem. In a sense, the Khevsurs are more savage, more backward, more violent, and the institution that is employed to characterise this is the duel, presented as a social curse that animates much of the narrative: Imeda's father is killed in a duel, his duelling weapons adorn Imeda's wall in Tbilisi as a reminder of his past; Imeda kills Torghva in a duel, bringing the film to a tragic end. On the other hand, social relations are characterised by great loyalty. If the duel represents the overttness of negative social relationships,

positive ones are recognised between men in the form of the ritual of sworn brotherhood (between Imeda and his friend Apareka), and between men and women in the form of openness of flirtation and romance (the highly elective character of romance is stressed). The main difference between this film and other literary accounts in which these opposing motifs occur (the duel, the sworn brother, the romance) is that romance is imagined *in the film* among the Khevsurs as being essentially *teleologically identical* with the plains, in that it has as its *goal* marriage, the formation of families and social reproduction. In reality, and in other literary and ethnographic accounts, the locally recognised form of romance is *specifically opposed* to marriage, and to a lesser extent to *sexual relations*. Here, an uneasy and often violated complementarity holds between the endogamous relations of romance and exogamous relations of marriage. In 'real' Khevsur life, romance is much closer to sworn brotherhood than to marriage: sworn brotherhood (the relation between Imeda and Apareka) and endogamous romance use the same terminology (both use the term *dzmobili* 'sworn brother') and some of the same ritual apparatus.

A story set in Khevsureti must have duels, the visitor to Khevsureti must also always have a sworn brother. But, most of all, there must be romance. Other literary representations of Khevsureti are fascinated by the particularity of form of Khevsur romance, namely the endogamous practice of elective pre-marital romance, *sts'orproba*, that is systematically opposed to exogamous marital practices. City-dweller visitors to Khevsureti in novels and stories pick up a dalliance of this sort with a local girl much as they pick up a sworn brother. In such narratives (from the 1920s and 1930s), to varying extents, the custom and its associated practices, as well as, perhaps, incomprehensibility to the average plains Georgian male, are depicted faithfully. Such narratives belong more to the bohemian Georgian literature of the twenties and thirties, but the 1960s film *Khevsuruli Balada* is much more firmly grounded in the narrative and normative expectations regarding romance of the Soviet version of Hollywood. Hence, in the film, the ethnographic specificities of Khevsur forms of romantic liaison are elided into a more 'universal' expression of romance, inasmuch as romance is understood as leading to marriage in Khevsureti, as elsewhere.

Among the actual Khevsur, romance is endogamous, marriage exogamous. In the film, by contrast, the opposition between romance and marriage is elided into a format acceptable to the norms of the plains, one where romance leads to marriage. However, the exogamy rule is retained for marriage. How then can a budding flirtation be *narrated* in film if the two partners must be, in effect, strangers? The solution is somewhat tortuous: Mzekala is the sister of Aluda's wife, and Imeda quickly learns that she is

not from Shatili, but from Arkhoti. After the death of her mother, she came to Shatili to live with her sister. Hence, since marriage is exogamous, she is a potential wife for Imeda. But, since she now lives in Shatili, she is a potential romantic partner for flirtation and romance, which can only easily be narrated if the people involved are in close proximity. Exogamy implies avoidance, distant relations with strangers, endogamy implies easy familiarity and flirtation between consociates.

One might argue that Khevsur romance has been completely denatured, that the film *Khevsuruli Balada* owes more to Hollywood and its Soviet imitators than Khevsur ethnographic realia. That is partially true: Khevsureti becomes a romantic locale perhaps because of its ethnographic reputation for romance, but the filmic version of Khevsureti replaces this ethnographically specific form of romance with a completely generic form of romantic content. However, I would argue that just as some of the fake Khevsur poetry from the film is based on actual Khevsur poetic practices and even drawn from folkloric texts, so too are traces of the custom of *sts'orproba* present in the film, emerging obliquely in one peculiar scene.

In this pivotal scene, Mzekala wanders into Imeda's room at night, ostensibly to return his flashlight. Mzekala's boldness in wandering into Imeda's room at night is matched only by the way this action reminds us of the parallel practices of *sts'orproba*, where a woman comes to a man at night. The substance of their conversation, too, touches closely on matters related to this otherwise conspicuously absent custom. Mzekala reflects that he probably has a lover in the city, which he denies. She tells him he is a liar, and reflects that the women of the city know nothing of love, though she has never been to the city, she would never go there, but still, she would like to see, from afar, at a glance, how the people of the city live and dress. In turn, Imeda takes an interest in whether Mzekala loves anyone in Shatili, perhaps Torghva, perhaps Apareka? She admits that there are many who love her, but whom she loves is a secret. He asks, more directly, if she has ever 'spent the night with Torghva'. She replies that she has never spent the night with anyone. 'Spending the night' can only be an oblique reference to *sts'orproba*, to 'lying down and getting up', though, again, here it is imagined as happening exogamously, between people who might eventually be married to one another, a premarital union tending towards marriage. He touches her, one time too many, which angers her and she gets up to leave (many of the rules of 'lying down and getting up' have to do with the specific regulations on who gets to touch who where: Mzekala freely touches Imeda, but Imeda, it seems, is not allowed to reciprocate). She wonders if he is really a Khevsur, and prepares to leave; he assures her that he is indeed a 'real Khevsur'. To reassure her he lies back, crossing his arms to show he

will not touch her, but wonders if it was some 'local custom' that brought her here. She leaves at dawn, though all they have done is talk. Thereafter, their relationship takes on the more easily recognisable dimensions of romantic flirtation; there is no more talk of 'local customs' in the film. Here, then, we find one kind of erasure – 'anti-marriage' is elided into marital courtship, leaving behind, as I have argued, only traces of itself in this strange scene.





Plates 2.3. Mzekala (Sopiko Chiaureli) and Imeda (Tengiz Archvadze) in *Khevsur Ballad* (Kartuli Pilmi 1965).

Mountaineer romance: the story of Natela, native ethnographer

The foregoing scene seems to be some curious trace or shadow of *sts'orproba*, mangled and tortuously twisted to make it fit a marital format, which, perhaps, is why it is so confusing as a scene. But then, just how is it that we know enough about *sts'orproba* to know this is the case? After all, *sts'orproba* is a custom mentioned only obliquely by nineteenth-century travel writers. The poet-folklorist-ethnographer Vazha-Pshavela briefly describes its Pshavian cousin *ts'ats'loba*, and the nineteenth-century ethnographer Khizanishvili seems completely unaware of its existence among the Khevsurs. It is not until the 1920s and 1930s that there is an explosion of ethnographic and novelistic description of the practice (Makalatia 1998

[1925]; Tevdoradze 1930; Javakhishvili 2004 [1926]; Robakidze 1994 (originally published in the same period as the others)). Long after the mountains had already become associated with romance and romanticism in general, the specific character of mountaineer romance came to light. And, indeed, epistemically and sociologically, none of this would have been possible without the rise, at the same time, of *indigenous elites*, specifically ethnographers. I argue that all these ethnographies and depictions of this hidden aspect of Khevsur life have behind them a single figure: the native ethnographer Natela Baliauri (1896–1988), who not only wrote her own manuscript on the topic (finally published posthumously in 1991), but whose household served as hosts and consultants for many visiting ethnographers who would later write on the topic. In fact, the most noted ethnographer of the group, Sergi Makalatia, became related to Natela affinally (his brother Niko (a teacher) married her sister, Melano (an ethnographer herself)). And it was precisely Makalatia who was first to publish a full description of the practice equivalent to *sts'orproba* among the neighbouring Pshavians (Makalatia 1998 [1924]). This story 'about love' cannot be told without telling the story of the conditions of the possibility of its telling, the story of the creation of an indigenous elite. In the case of Natela Baliauri, this story is *also* a story about love.

Natela Baliauri's account of *Sts'orproba in Khevsureti* (1991) is unique because it provides an insider's perspective on a set of rituals and relations that, unlike shrine rituals and other 'public' customs of the Khevsurs, are not easily accessible to outsiders. Her ethnography provides a unique look at the inner, intimate face of the group; indeed, it is really the sort of ethnography of intimacy that could *only* have been written by an insider. And yet, for all the intimate insider 'folk' knowledge upon which this account is predicated, it is written from the detached analytic perspective of third-person objective reportage. Seldom does one find the pronoun 'I' of autobiographical voicing in the text, even in those places where, almost certainly, the account is autobiographical. The editor of this ethnography, Zurab Kiknadze, makes much of the epistemological value of the materials as both being an 'interior' view from 'within', and also, oddly, the *objectivity* (by which he presumably means the lack of distortions of prurience, romanticism and exoticism that often characterise 'outsider' views of the same customs). But this seems an odd pairing because, as an insider's view, Baliauri's account should, if anything, be *more subjective*, in the positive sense of giving us a full and rounded personal perspective on what otherwise might seem like a series of schematic rules.

In our scientific literature there does not even exist an objective, adequate description of this custom, that we might speak about its

origin and the scientific study of its social function. N. Baliauri's sketches are especially valuable in this respect, that they represent a description of *sts'orproba* 'from within', by an eye-witness and not an external observer, for whom this custom is an exotic fruit. (Kiknadze 1991: 4)

Kiknadze stresses that what makes the account so valuable is that the ethnographer is herself a Khevsur, an indigenous *intelligent*, an ethnographer and a native. What is not mentioned there, nor anywhere else in that book, however, is the particular irony of her own biographical relationship to the practices of *sts'orproba*. The striking fact is that it was her own violation (as a member of the folk) of an associated prohibition on endogamy that led her to being exiled from Khevsureti, leading ultimately to her writing (as a member of the intelligentsia) an ethnographic description of the practice. Baliauri's status as *intelligent* arose from a biographical problem, from her inability to remain a member of the folk, and the root of the problem is her own personal involvement in the very custom she is describing: as one who has violated the taboos of this custom. Here are the brief details of her life:

[N. Baliauri] was born in 1896 in Pirikit Khevsureti, in the village of Akhieli in the *Temi* of Arkhoti. At 18 years of age she married an inhabitant of the same village, Al. Ochiauri and since they broke the rule forbidding a boy and a girl from the same village marrying each other, they were forced to disappear (into exile). Thus they appeared in in the Pshavian village of Shuapkho, where they settled permanently. (T. Ochiauri 1995: 4)

So Natela Baliauri's relationship with Khevsureti was, from very early on, the relationship of an exile. Becoming an *intelligent* observer of the Khevsurs from the near-far, she also chose to write about the very custom of which she ran foul. But this account is strange, an oddly objective and detached account of the most intimate details of Khevsur life. By a kind of hypercorrection, attempting to decentre her autobiographical perspective into an authoritative narrative 'voice from nowhere', she writes an account that is even more decentred, more objective, than similar ethnographic accounts written by outsiders, yet in other ways, more intimate.

The strange mixture of voicings in the account, I believe, echoes the strange, liminal position of the author. Natela Baliauri and her husband and co-exile, Aleksi Ochiauri, both exemplify a liminal group, a hybrid between the opposed categories of 'folk' and 'intelligent', particularly typical of the discipline of ethnography, which, after all, is essentially describable as 'intelligentsia writings about the folk', unlike western ethnography, partially reflexive, because one mostly writes about *one's own folk* (Hofer 1968), and yet, in so doing, always produces and reproduces the distinction between

literate society and illiterate folk in the very act of writing about the folk. The first place to look at the contradictory locus of the native ethnographers is, then, to examine their hybrid position as authors and authorial voices within two opposed worlds of textuality, the literate world of intelligentsia writing, and the folk world of oral textuality.

Owing to their status as ousted, exiled insiders, and their location on the boundary of Pshavi and Khevsureti, the household of Natela Baliauri and Aleksii Ochiauri became the host household to generations of ethnographers, folklorists, philologists and archaeologists who worked on Pshav-Khevsureti (Kalandadze 1995). It also became the centre of a small circle of mountaineer ethnographers and linguists in the 1920s and 1930s whose numbers included the noted Georgian linguist Akaki Shanidze, as well as the ethnographers Tevdoradze and Makalatia (affinally related to Natela Baliauri). In the texts of these other linguists and ethnographers, these two and their near relations occupy a shifting hybrid position, figuring now as members of the intelligentsia, now as members of the folk, now as collaborators, now as local informants. As local informants they are sometimes represented as Pshavians (of Shuapkho, their place of exile), other times as Khevsurs (from Arkhoti, their natal village). While A. Ochiauri had led a mixed career before the revolution, being a soldier as well as a local orthodox deacon, after the revolution he and his wife entered a *rabfak* (worker's faculty) and acquired a higher education. According to all accounts, the philologist Akaki Shanidze, who played an important role in the founding of Tbilisi State University (Cherchi and Manning 2002), was pivotal in recruiting these and other mountaineers into the ranks of the intelligentsia in this period. As exiled Khevsurs in Pshavi, they were also liminal to two worlds: they were partial outsiders to the Khevsureti, which they spent the rest of their life writing about, and they were also partial outsiders to the world of the educated elite, for they were village intelligentsia, products of the *rabfak* education system. This conversion of the folk into intelligentsia paralleled Akaki Shanidze's folkloric conversion of voices of the folk into chrestomathic data, a decentering of folkloric materials from biographical indexical anchorings that paralleled the way that Akaki Shanidze's own first informants were themselves often removed from the context of their own communities.

This hybrid position as both intelligentsia and folk could lead to confusions of voice and voicing. Natela's husband, Aleksii Ochiauri, *recollected* for Shanidze the traditional poems (composed by others) he knew (as informant) and *collected* others (as colleague). However, as collector, he also included many of his own compositions, which found their way into Shanidze's folkloric collections as anonymous voices of 'the folk'. In the course of telling us the story of her parents' exile from Khevsureti, Tinatin Ochi-

auri, herself a noted Khevsur ethnographer, noted the existence of a ‘famous poem’ about their exile: a poem which confuses the normal expectations of folklore where ‘folk’ is a category opposed to individual authorship:

My mother and my father got married. My mother was 18 then, but they both lived in the same village. According to local tradition, a boy and a girl of the same village could not marry one another. The village was exogamous. That’s why they fled from Arkhoti to Pshavi. There is even a well-known poem about it:⁵

<p><i>“raqel shvil gamauvida, zeze ubanshi mtvralasa, k’as ertsac ar maigonebs, sul gonobs xatabalasa, idzeven baliaurni dilas natelas, kalasa.”</i></p>	<p>What kind of child did he have Mtvrala of the upper neighbour- hood⁶ No one is thinking anything good, They are all thinking it is a disaster, The Baliauris are seeking Their daughter, Natela in the morn- ing.</p>
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This poem is about when he [A. Ochiauri] abducted her [N. Baliauri]. This poem is folk (*xalxuria*), I think it is my father’s poem completely. ‘Upper neighbourhood’ (*Zeze ubani*) is the upper part of the village, where the Ochiauris live. This poem was published in Akaki Shanidze’s “Khevsur Poetry” which came out in 1931. (Tinatin Ochiauri, interview with author)

This poem was famous, of course, because it was ultimately printed in Shanidze’s famous chrestomathy of Khevsur folk poetry as an example of ‘folk’ (*xalxuri*) poetry. The full poem is printed under the title of ‘The abduction of a woman’, Number 402 in the Chrestomathy, (Shanidze 1931: 158–9). Here ‘folk’ poet and ‘intelligent’ collector of folk poetry are the same, a poem published anonymously as ‘folklore’ turns out to be from the hand of the collector, as Akaki Shanidze himself surmises in the notes to the poem (Shanidze 1931: 528):

This poem must have been composed by Aleksi Ochiauri: first Aleksi himself appears in the poem in the first person ... and, aside from this, Aleksi included it in the notebook where his own poems are – this poem was composed ‘at the time of the marrying of

⁵ I have restored the original version from Shanidze (1931), inasmuch as the version reported by Tinatin Ochiauri has some lacunae (reading *ka’s ertsac* for *arcertsac*, *sul gonobs* for *sugonobs*, and adding the line *idzeven baliaurni* missing from the existing transcript).

⁶ Mtvrala would be A. Ochiauri’s father.

Aleksi's wife, when he abducted a village woman [N. Baliauri] and it wasn't her wish'.

As mentioned above, this represents one response to a hybrid position, assimilation to the voice of the folk, and eliminating the individual authorial voice of the *intelligent*: one's own words become the words of no-one in particular, the collective agency of the folk. The other solution for a hybrid folk-intelligent is a kind of hypercorrection in the other direction, an absolute distancing, an objective, detached 'voice from nowhere', the authoritative voice of the *intelligent*, which characterises in the most general terms Natela Baliauri's ethnography. Both approaches involve a kind of erasure. In the case of Ochiauri, the autobiographical incident is represented directly, but the author elides his authorial identity into the anonymous mass of the folk. In the case of Baliauri, the author's identity is known, but she elides her autobiographical connection to the incidents she describes in the text. In both cases, however, traces remain.

But for all its detachment, in certain places Baliauri's ethnographic text is also curiously intimate, curiously close to the phenomenon. Like other such ethnographies, this ethnography abounds with the poetry that is associated with *sts'orproba*, of course, and this poetry is usually represented as being occasioned by a certain kind of situation, a certain typical generic context that this specific example of poetry is used to illustrate. Such voicing of folk texts can be found in any ethnography of the mountains. But strikingly, and unlike other ethnographies, she also creates illustrative conversations, large numbers of them, engaging in a kind of intimate ventriloquism that one seldom finds in other ethnographies from the period, where indirect discourse would be more usual. The better part of the first chapter illustrating the rules of courtship is devoted to imagined intimate dialogues, and many of the sections illustrating violations of the rules take the form of typical dialogues. These are quite intimate scenes, which could not have been witnessed or confidently reconstructed by any but those who took part in them: 'In general their conversation [between a boy and a girl] is not limited. They talk about whatever they want to. Afterwards the boy kisses the girl shyly and embraces her ...'

Again they begin talking about 'girls and boys'. Frequently they argue and defend the virtues of their own sex. They laugh. The boy will ask first, who the girl likes or who she 'knows'. The girl convinces him that she doesn't like anyone and doesn't 'know' anyone.

-- Girl, then, you. Haven't you grown up? It seems like you no longer joke. Maybe it's me who's gotten old. And who doesn't grow old having to deal with Khevsur girls!

-- How do the girls bother you?

-- What do they do except bother me?... Now, I want to question you as to who you 'know', or who you like, but my heart trembles with fear, lest you get angry with me.

-- About that question there is no need for your heart to tremble. If I 'knew' anyone, you would know that even sooner than I would, but I neither 'know' anyone nor do I like anyone. Nor is there anyone likeable, pleasing. Who in the world are you worrying yourself about!

-- Then, you seem to like no one. You like Bina too,...

-- I don't like anyone, aren't I saying that?

-- Then I am losing sleep day and night for no reason....

-- Then who do you 'know'?

-- Oh, I know many many girls,... Well, what do I know, I know many others besides, and I know you too, now.

"Who do you know"—this expression in Khevsureti is a *double entendre*. The first: it means a person you recognize by sight and by character, the second: a boy and a girl getting to know each other at the time of lying together, by lying together.

[N.B. 'know' not in the sense of carnal knowledge —P.M.] (Baliauri 1991: 14–15)

The very intimacy and adolescent banality of the conversation is what makes this ethnography, otherwise so stern and often downright prudish, so touching. There are several ways in which Natela Baliauri's ethnographic account of *sts'orproba* differs from all the others. One is the internal contradiction that Kiknadze finds praiseworthy: that is, of course, an insider's view of the folk that treats its topic with the stony-faced objectivity of an *intelligent*. I am arguing that this is a form of narrative hypercorrection by which Natela Baliauri, the intelligent *manqué*, detaches her authoritative voice from her own messy autobiographical involvement with the facts of romance as a member of the folk. And why not? After all, in all honesty, who of us would relish writing an ethnography of our adolescent traumas, crushes and errors of judgement without some shift of perspective from the self? In Baliauri's account there is no sign of narrative cross-over, the voice of the folk is never an 'I', the only trace of it is the way that (unlike other ethnographies) the narrator confidently places words in the mouths of her informants. Whole conversations, often extremely intimate ones, are fluently imagined to illustrate the proceedings, along with the more usual samples of actual quoted speech in the form of the poetry that attends other ethnographies. How strange, then, to have in front of us a text that is so very historically reflexive and autobiographical, in that it describes the very customs that defined the life course of the author, and yet this autobiographical connection is erased:

the text presents itself as decentred, non-reflexive, the autobiographical moment surviving only in traces, in intimate conversations attributed to anonymous speakers.

Conclusion: Ethnographic alibis?

Unlike many ethnographic descriptions of normative orders of custom that are presented as being unperturbed by any messy violations, rules without exceptions, Baliauri's ethnography is rife with attention to places where the rules do not apply, where violations are not merely the occasion for the application of redressive and restorative normative machinery, but are themselves the by-products of that same normative machinery. By looking at precisely the moment in the text where Baliauri's own biographical predicament caused her to leave Arkhoti for Pshavi in 1914, and her own attention to the historical circumstances surrounding it, perhaps we can discern both the historicity in this text as well as traces of the autobiographical details that have been erased.

As mentioned above, in most novelistic and ethnographic accounts Khevsur marriage is opposed to anti-marriage in rather strict normative terms. Baliauri's account differs from others in the way that it presents the relationship between marriage and anti-marriage not as being a fairly clear complementary relationship, but one that is continuously fraught with conflict (Baliauri 1991: 33–63), and indeed, an order that undergoes revolutionary changes before our very eyes (Baliauri 1991: 156–73). A closer look at these reveals that a number of insurrections occurred in the world of sexuality (that is, in the definitions of romance and marriage) at exactly the same time as Natela Baliauri was herself married in 1914.

Natela Baliauri was abducted by Aleksi Ochiauri at the age of 18, in 1914, from her village of Arkhoti in transalpine 'far' Khevsureti upon his return from military service. According to his poem on the subject, the main problem was the fact of abduction, of not asking permission of the parents (only Shanidze, interestingly, notes that 'it was not her wish', either). The other problem was the violation of exogamy rules: both were from Arkhoti, therefore, members of the same *temi* (village community) and theoretically better able to engage in romance than marriage. Baliauri's ethnography gives a quite lengthy exposition of the typical reaction to exactly this violation of marriage rules, which, it can be imagined, is at least partially simply an ethnographic retelling of the same events recorded in Ochiauri's 'folk' poem (Baliauri 1991: 36ff). There is a violation of the rules that separate romance from marriage, and a violation of the rules of marriage itself. In effect, Natela Baliauri describes her own marriage as an instance of a certain kind of violation of the rules, illustrating it with intimate but anonymous dialogue.

However, she also contextualises this singular violation within a more general discussion of revolutionary changes in the marriage system itself, indicating that exceptions like hers were becoming more like a nascent ‘rule’ during the period of World War I (in which many Khevsurs, like Ochiauri and other informants of Shanidze, participated as soldiers).⁷

As Baliauri points out, it is not as if the desire to marry one’s romantic partner did not arise before this time; indeed, it was generally accepted among the youth that, occasionally, they would like to have romantic marriages rather than elective romance followed by arranged marriage to strangers. Here too one of these intimate imagined dialogues illustrates this desire:

In Khevsureti in the past a *dzmobili* boy did not marry his *dzmobili* girl, and vice versa. Their marrying was a great shame. When they betrothed a girl, it was possible that she would not like her fiancé. Then with crying and with pleading she would address her parents and brothers, ‘I don’t like him and don’t marry me to him.’ The parents’ response was like this: ‘So what, you don’t like him, he’s not a *sts’orperi* [romantic partner], that you might love. If you want pleasure and love, go marry a *sts’orperi*.’ (Baliauri 1991: 33)

Such a response would be sarcastic only in a normative environment where the mixture of these opposed categories was unimaginable. Marrying a *sts’orperi* or *dzmobili* was considered the equivalent of marrying a member of one’s own lineage (*gvari*). The definition of *garq’vniloba* (lewdness, fornication) was essentially found in this mixture (frequently attributed to Russians), those who married their *sts’orperi/dzmobili* were considered weak-willed fornicators, unable to engage in the self-control required for proper conduct of romance (Baliauri 1991: 34).

And, after all, divorce was traditionally a comparatively easily arranged affair (Baliauri 1991: 34). However, as Russian rule and the Society for the Restoration of Orthodoxy slowly managed to bring changes, with state and church regulation of marriages in Khevsureti, marriage rituals and divorce became an increasingly expensive and intractable matter (Baliauri 1991: 33). As a result, marriageable people became more inclined to find out as much as possible about their prospective spouses (Baliauri 1991: 33–4), or simply to marry people they already ‘knew’:

In the years 1914–1917 the women of cisalpine (‘near’) Khevsureti announced their opposition to coerced marriage (*dzalit gatxoveba*).

⁷ Since this chapter cannot cover all the changes in the broader social system or the marriage system that influence changes in the system of romance, I only note here that it is significant that these changes not only occurred at the same time as the Orthodox church was making marriage more intractable in Khevsureti, but at a time when many Khevsur men, like Aleksei Ochiauri, were mobilised to fight as soldiers, many never to return.

They demanded that ‘We be allowed to marry who we want and no longer ask anyone, because the Russians now marry us, which makes separation from an undesirable husband difficult.’ ... Many boys and girls gave voice to this idea. The problem was also that many girls and boys of good lineages (*gvarti*) often couldn’t marry one another, because they were *dzmobilis*... All this made them forget their shame and daringly they demanded that they be allowed to marry whoever they themselves wanted. It also brought in changes in the rules of ‘lying down and getting up’. Now it became possible for *sts’orperis* and *dzmobilis* to marry. (Baliauri 1991: 34)

The details of this attempted revolution will wait for another time, but one can see here that Natela Baliauri’s own somewhat prudish stance to this revolution is to a certain extent overcompensatory for her own position as a willing or unwilling member of the *avant garde*! At the same time, she historicises her own autobiographical predicament, perhaps affording her an alibi, showing that, in a place nearby and not too much later in time, a revolution occurred (which she seems to fully disapprove of!) in which young people in effect make her own autobiographical *exception* into *their* ethnographic *rule*. In this peculiar way, then, we owe much of what we know about mountaineer romance to a single, concrete instance of a somewhat star-crossed Khevsur romance, a violation of the rules that separated romance from marriage, leading to the creation of an indigenous elite, a married couple, the ethnographers A. Ochiauri and N. Baliauri, both of whom oddly seemed to write themselves quasi-anonymously into texts about the folk, Ochiauri including his self-justifying, almost vaunting autobiographical poem about the abduction in Shanidze’s folk poetry collection as ‘folk’ poetry, Baliauri’s objective distance to her topic traceable only in the curious ways in which she produces intimate imagined conversations between Khevsurs and discusses changes of the very system of rules which she ran foul of. Part of this ambivalent voicing, too, comes from the way in which the relationship between intelligentsia and folk is imagined as being a qualitatively distinct kind of voices, the written and the spoken (and written about) (Manning 2004). For marginal intelligentsia–folk hybrids, one of these voicings must always be erased, and yet traces of the voice under erasure always remain.

Rural intelligentsia such as Ochiauri and Baliauri, like their equivalents today, represent a series of contradictions, a kind of subaltern class within the intelligentsia, one which is worthy of our sustained attention. Appearing at the margins of an imagined monolithic and asymmetric divide between two spheres of circulation – ‘folk’ and ‘intelligentsia’, with their own kinds of texts (spoken, written), authors (anonymous, autographed), and

potential life courses, and at the same time charged with overcoming this very distinction by overseeing modernization and programs of enlightenment – this class shows all the ambivalence of any subaltern elite. Here, this ambivalent position is registered in the ambivalent voicing of their ethnographic and folkloric texts, which seek to recreate the very monolithic divide between ‘folk’ and ‘intelligentsia’ voicings that the very process of creating such indigenous elites should efface. But such marginal elites, elites of the margins of this imagined divide, do not necessarily elide this imagined difference. As Ochiauri and Baliauri before them, contemporary mountain and rural elites have complex and ambivalent relations with the state, the urban intelligentsia who are still interested in imaginaries of the ‘folk’ and not ‘civil society’, and their own communities (see Gould, this volume). As marginal intelligentsia, they still write grammars and folklore and especially poetry, as they did under socialism, sometimes published, sometimes circulated in tattered notebooks, folk *samizdats*. But this poetry is written, it is not ‘folk’, and being written by marginal intelligentsia, too, it has few publics among the urban intelligentsia. As members of the ‘folk’, they still preside over matters of community concern (for example, mediation in blood feuds), serve as religious experts (putting them in covert competition with the church), and serve as local mediators with the state. As local eminences, they are hosts, guides and brokers to the local community for the urban intelligentsia, who in turn act as their patrons (or do not, as the case may be) to outside publics. They are everywhere visible, they are everywhere writing, and yet they are nowhere to be seen in writing.

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