

Xevsur shrine invocations: iconicity, intertextuality and agonism

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1. Pxovi and its traditional religious system

Medieval Georgian chroniclers refer to a highland province called Pxovi (or Pxoeti), which corresponds to the territory of today's Pshavi and Xevsureti. The ancient toponym is relevant not only to historians but also to ethnologists as a means of capturing the social, cultural, economic and linguistic features common to the Xevsurs and Pshavians. Of particular interest to us here is the distinctive Pxovian religious system, elements of which may have been shared with the Chechen and Ingush communities to the immediate north before the spread of Islam into these areas in the 18th and 19th centuries. Unlike the neighboring East Georgian highland districts, Pxovi remained largely outside of the lowland feudal system. Although the Pxovians were nominally vassals of the king, they had no local aristocracy. Also conspicuously absent from Pxovi were Orthodox churches. During the Tsarist period, in the course of a campaign to (re)convert the highland tribes to Orthodoxy, several churches were constructed in Pshavi and Xevsureti, but these were later abandoned or incorporated into traditional shrine complexes.

Although neither feudalism nor Orthodoxy could be said to have implanted itself on the ground in Pxovi, both institutions influenced the belief system, sociopolitical organization and religious practice of the Pshavians and Xevsurs. In earlier work, I argued that the key notions of feudalism — hierarchy, land tenure, the patron-vassal relation — provided the structural armature for conceptualizing the relation between the supernatural and human orders, and the relationship of both to the land (Tuite 2002, 2004). Pxovian “cosmological feudalism” is almost invisible on the ground. Highland communities give the appearance of being almost entirely egalitarian, but in fact the human residents speak of themselves as the “vassals” (*qma*) of supernatural overlords called “children of God” (*gvtišvilni*), themselves subordinate to God the Director (*morige gmerti*), a remote being who never appears to men and to whom no shrine is dedicated. Many of the Pxovian *gvtišvilni* bear the name of St. George, the Christian

¹ I am delighted to be among those invited to contribute to this collection honoring my friend and colleague Jost Gippert. I hope this study of language, verbal art and music will prove a worthy birthday gift for someone who excels in all three domains.

saint whose cult enjoys exceptional popularity throughout Georgia. Also numbered among the *gvtišvilni* are *Იopala*, *Iaqsari* and *Რirkuši*, legendary heroes said to have been elevated to divine status by God for their service slaying the ogres (*devi*) who once dominated the territory of P̄xovi. The “children of God” are believed to have selected the locations, outside and often high above the inhabited areas, where the shrine complexes are found. These are referred to by the P̄xovians as *xati* or *žvari*, terms that in standard Georgian signify “icon” and “cross” respectively, but in highland use can denote the sacred object itself, the shrine in which it is housed, and even the supernatural being to whom the shrine is dedicated. Each Pshav and Xevsur commune has a shrine complex in the name of its patron divinity, which one could compare to the castle where the feudal overlord resides, as well as secondary shrines dedicated to subordinate or special-function deities.

Overseeing the shrines and officiating at ceremonies are religious specialists I will designate by the term “priest”, although the local terms for them are *xervisberi* “elder of the valley” in Pshavi, and *xuci* or *xucesi* “senior” in Xevsureti. Unlike the practice elsewhere in Georgia, where folk-religious ceremonies are entrusted either to actual Orthodox priests, heads of households or local men who have learned how to perform the rituals, P̄xovians priests are selected from specific lineages in each commune. Furthermore, they must be called personally by the *gvtišvili* believed to be the divine patron of their community. The call to service typically comes in the form of a dream, a feverish illness with hallucinations, or, in some cases, strange, unfortunate incidents that alert the candidate that he has been targeted by the shrine deity. The diagnosis is confirmed by a “reader” (*mkitxavi*) or another priest. At this point, one of the most striking episodes in the vocation narrative occurs: the candidate says no. I have interviewed about a dozen priests in Pshavi and Xevsureti; the vocation narratives of many others have been recorded by earlier generations of ethnographers. Each of these individuals has described in horrifying detail the tragedy they brought upon themselves and their families by their insistence on fighting against the patron divinity’s will rather than accepting their fate. The seventeen head of cattle that *PeᲥre GogoᲥuri* lost after being called to succeed his father as *xucesi* (see below) is an enormous loss for a highland peasant, but it pales besides the death of a child, shortly after followed by that of his wife, which one Pshavian priest blames on his stubborn and ultimately futile resistance to the shrine’s initial call to service. Once he assumes his office, a P̄xovian priest takes on a considerable burden, for which he receives little if any recompense. He must sacrifice a large number of animals — usually over several years — in order to purify himself with their blood. He must also abstain from certain foods for life, and avoid the proximity of women for several weeks before shrine

ceremonies. Furthermore, the entire responsibility for the correct performance of the rituals falls on his shoulders, in the knowledge that any error, even if unintended, could bring down the wrath of the divine patron upon himself and his community.²

At the beginning of the 20th century, Pxovi was densely settled. In the early years of Soviet rule, Maḳalatia (1935) counted over 3500 residents in Xevsureti, and 2500 in Pshavi. In the early 1950s, nearly the entire population of Xevsureti was forced by the Soviet Georgian government to leave their villages and move to communities in lowland eastern Georgia, in an arid region close to Azerbaijan. Although some families moved back to Xevsureti after the policy was reversed two decades later, most did not remain year-long, returning with their livestock to their lowland homes each winter. The 1989 census counted 652 residents of Xevsureti, less than a fifth of the number 60 years earlier. In Pshavi the number of year-round residents appears to be considerably lower, especially in the villages upriver from Shuapxo.

Despite the drastic decline in population, however, at least a dozen shrine priests are still in service in Pshavi, and as many, if not more so, in Xevsureti. While the full annual cycle of ceremonies described by ethnographers such as Sergo Maḳalatia (1935) and Aleksī Očiauri (1988) are no longer performed in most communes, the midsummer festival known to Xevsurs as *Atengenoba* and in Pshavi as *Seroba* is still an occasion for Georgians of Pxovian ancestry to return to the highlands for several days of banqueting, dancing, horse racing and other activities. In the course of the festival, offerings in the form of bread, candles, bread and sacrificial animals (sheep and bulls) are presented to the shrine by individual petitioners, and new “vassals” are placed under the patronage of the commune’s “child of god”. Presiding over these rituals is the priest who receives the offerings, announces the beginning and end of ceremonies at each sacred site (usually by ringing a bell), and pronounces the invocations which are to be analyzed in this paper.

2. Xevsur liturgical chant

At the beginning of ceremonies, and when receiving offerings and sacrificial animals, the priest pronounces an invocation naming the divine patron of the shrine and other divinities, and usually including a mention of the offering, the individual(s) who brought it, and the purpose for which it is offered. In Pšavi and almost all other highland regions, as far as I can

² T. Očiauri (1954) describes a second category of shrine official who was likewise believed to receive his vocation directly from his divine patron. The oracle (*kadagi*) periodically underwent a sort of possession by the deity, who spoke to his vassals through the oracle’s mouth. Oracles seem to have been more common in Xevsureti than in Pshavi. The last one died in the 1980s, so, regrettably, I have no first-hand experience of oracular speech.

tell, the invocations are spoken. In addition, Pšavian priests tend to deliver the invocations in a low voice, sometimes barely audible. The practice of the Xevsur *xucesi* is strikingly different. Large portions of the invocations are chanted, not spoken, including a section that is recited at an extremely rapid pace, double the ordinary speaking rate. I have encountered no examples of sung invocations or high-speed recitation in other areas of the northeast Georgian highlands.

The local term commonly used to designate shrine invocations is *xucoba* (“priesthood, priestly activity”). The *xucoba* is performed by the priest over offerings made by members of the community to their divine patron. The text of the invocation is slightly different according to the type of ritual during which it is performed. These include (1) evening and morning rituals (called *natel-bneli* “light-dark” or *žamni* “canonical hours”), where candles, beer and bread are offered to a sequence of deities; (2) individual offerings (*samsaxuri* “for the servant”, *samešvlo* “for the helper”); (3) collective offerings for the commune and its guests (*saerto samxvecro* “common [offering] for the petitioners”); (4) purificatory and healing offerings (*sanatlavi* “baptismal”). Alongside beer (or other alcoholic beverages), bread and beeswax candles, sacrificial animals (bulls and sheep) are also presented on most of these occasions.

The corpus of Xevsur *xucoba* to be analyzed here consists of published texts as well as recordings made in the field. The earliest texts were recorded at Xaxmaṭi in 1882 and 1889 (Kiknaže et al 1998: 23-4, 27); Ġuli (Važa-Pšavela 1889) and Čirdili (Šaniže 1915: 50-1). Pre-war Soviet-period texts include that transcribed by Maḳalatia (1935: 208-9); and texts from Arxoṭi, Roška, Bacaligo and Uḳan-Qadu collected by A. Očiauri in the 1930s. The author’s recordings of Xevsur liturgical chant were collected during field expeditions to Xevsureti in the summers of 1996 and 1999. During the 1996 field trip, I made audio recordings of the initial part of the invocation performed by *xucesi* Gaga Činčarauli at Ġvtismšobelis Žvari of Gudani, during the midsummer Atengena festival, 21 July 1996. The following day I had the privilege of being allowed to witness a blood-purification (*ganatvla*) ritual for women performed at Xaxmaṭis Žvari by shrine priest Vepxia Ketelauri (22 July 1996).³ During the Atengena festival at Aṭabe, 23-24 July 1999, I was able to make video recordings of four complete invocations performed by the *xucesi* Peṭre Gogočuri. As he recounted in an interview with the author, Gogočuri was born in 1944 in the village Aṭabe,

³ Unfortunately, neither of the 1996 recordings yielded a complete text. At Gudani, most of the invocation was drowned out by the ringing of the shrine’s bell, whereas much of the Qaqmat’i invocation is uninterpretable due to the background noise of a nearby stream.

where his father was serving as *xucesi*. In 1951, Peṭre and his family, along with most of the Xevsur population, were forcibly resettled in lowland villages in southeast Georgia, not far from the Azerbaijan border. As a young man, Peṭre regarded himself as neither a religious believer nor a Communist, and took no interest in the shrine rituals performed by his father. In the 1970s many Xevsurs returned to their highland villages. In 1976, Peṭre dreamt that his father, who had passed away some years earlier, and other deceased priests had chosen him as *xucesi*. Shortly afterwards, his livestock began to die off in large numbers; in a single week he lost 17 animals. Gogoṭuri sought the advice of seers (*mḱitxavi*), who told him that these events were a sign that he must go into the service of the Ḳvirae shrine at Aṭabe, as his father had before him. Without any preparation, Peṭre began officiating at the Atengena summer festival that same year, in 1976. In his words, the prayers and chants “came and came” of their own accord (*tviton movida da movida*). An elderly priest confirmed that Gogoṭuri’s *xucoba* was correctly performed, “not a single word too many nor too few”.

3. Textual structure

The textual structure of Xevsur shrine invocations is similar in certain respects to the invocations performed at shrine ceremonies in neighboring regions of Northeast Georgia (Pšavi, Tuṣeti, Mtiuleti, Gudamḳari, etc.). What is unique to Xevsur *xucoba* is the inclusion of two chanted sections: the *Dideba* (Gloria) and the rapidly intoned *Ḳurtxeba* (Blessing). The invocations I recorded in the field and the published examples from earlier times can be divided into four sections according to their textual and melodic features.

3.1 *Maqseneba* (“Remembrance”)

The initial segment of the invocation mentions the categories of offerings, the deities to whom they are offered, and the petitioner(s). The following example, the opening lines of the evening offering ritual at the Ḳvirae shrine at Aṭabe (pronounced by Peṭre Gogoṭuri, 23 July 1999), begins with the enumeration of five “cups-and-chalices” and “candles-and-offerings” — mugs filled with beer brewed for the occasion, beeswax candles and round loaves of bread — presented to a series of divinities.⁴ The first offering is dedicated to Ḳvirae, the divine patron of the Aṭabe commune, who occupies a special position in the Pšav-Xevsur pantheon. He is represented as an intermediary between God, at whose court his tent is pitched, and the

⁴ The number of offerings and named deities can go well beyond five, to ten or more. See the examples from the 1930s in Ḳiknadze et al (1998: 17-18, 29, 36, 39-40, 44, 46).

“children of God”. The second offering is presented to Ber-Baadur, the patron of Gudanis Jvari, the most powerful shrine of Xevsureti, and by extension the protector of all Xevsurs. The following two dedications are to local divinities — most villages and even many uninhabited spots are believed to have their particular “Place-Mother” — whereas the fifth offering refers to the shrine at Xaxmaṭi, dedicated to St. George and the “sworn sisters” whom, according to legend, he captured during a raid in the underworld. The importance of the Xaxmaṭi shrine goes well beyond the frontiers of Xevsureti, as indicated by its designation as a “place of worship for believers and unbelievers” (*ržulian-uržulo salocavi*), where nominally Muslim Chechens and Ingush presented offerings alongside nominally Christian Georgians.

ğytisaganamc gagimaržvebis šenis gamčenisagan dido kvirae mağlis ğytis moğarveo.
Be victorious through God, through your creator, great Kvirae, whose tent is by High God

çina çika-baržimze da santel-saçirze šen gadidas ğmertma šen gagimaržvas šen šeni gamčeni morige ğmert
gadidebs da gazrivlebs ar moğičqens ar moğizulebsac.
*With the first cup-and-chalice, candle-and-offering may God glorify you. Your creator God the Ordainer
glorifies and strengthens you; he will not hate you, nor reproach you.*

šen šen mexveçur taobit dašturebs nu maiçqen an nu maižuleb.
Do not reproach, do not hate the shrine assistants who implore you.

meore çika-baržimze sağmto bero baaduro ğubistavs svetis angelozo, šen gadidas ğmertma šen gagimaržvas.
*With the second cup-and-chalice, may God glorify you, Divine Ber-Baadur, Angel of the Column [of light] atop
Ghubi; may he give you victory.*

mesame çika-baržimze medarbaseo angelozo, šen gadidas ğmertma šen gagimaržvas.
With the third cup-and-chalice, may God glorify you, Angel of the Hall; may he give you victory.

meotxe çika-baržimze adgilis dedav, cixis meçverev angelozo šen gadidas ğmertma šen gagimaržas.
*With the fourth cup-and-chalice, may God glorify you, Place-Mother, Angel on the top of the fortress; may he
give you victory.*

mexute çika-baržimze giorgi nağvrspirisao, giorgis nazardno ržulian-uržulo salocavno, tkven gadidnat ğmertma
tkven gagimaržvas.
*With the fifth cup-and-chalice, candle-and-sacrifice may God glorify you, Giorgi Naghvrispirisa, (the ‘sworn-
sisters’) raised by Giorgi, worshipped by believers and non-believers; may he give you all victory.*

tkven tkveni gamčeni morige ğmertma gadidebst da gazrivlebst, ar moğičqenst ar moğizulebst da tkven tkven
mexveçur taobit dašturebs nu maiçqent an nu maižulebt.
*Your creator God the Ordainer glorifies and strengthens you; he will not hate you, nor reproach you; and do not
reproach, do not hate the shrine assistants who implore you.*

3. 2 *Dideba* (“Gloria”)

After completing the *Maqseneba*, the priest makes a sign of the cross and intones the *Dideba* (literally “Gloria”). The text is notably similar to invocations recorded in Pšavi, in that the initial sequence reflects the hierarchical structure of the Pxovian divine order: After an opening glorification of God, *Qvirae* — whose special status was mentioned above — is

invoked, followed by the shrine patron and/or the “children of God” (sometimes called “angels”) as a collectivity. The offering(s) and petitioner(s) are then mentioned, followed by a prayer, of variable length, asking that the offering-bringer be granted peace, safe travel, success in hunting, increase of family and livestock, a good harvest, and so forth. Some *Glorias*, especially in Pshavi, conclude with a plea for pardon should the shrine priest or member of the commune cause offense to the divinities, even if through an unintentionally-committed fault during the ritual performance. One distinctive feature of the Xevsur *Dideba* — besides the fact that it is sung rather than spoken — is the invocation of what appears to be a supernatural entity known under the epithets of “Day of Today” (*dġe dġesindeli*) and “Angel Accompanying the Sun” (*mzis mġoli angelozi*). Bardaveliġe (1957: 2-5; 1959) interpreted the frequent mention of these epithets in Xevsur *xucoba* texts, in second position directly following God, as evidence of a female solar divinity ranked between God and Kvirae in the ancient Kartvelian pantheon.⁵

Here are the opening lines of the *Dideba* as performed by Peġre Gogoġuri during the morning invocation at Aġbe, 24 July 1999. Each line begins on the upper chanting pitch, then drops a fourth (to the tonic?) at the point marked by a slanted line (/). Gogoġuri’s melodic units vary from about 21 to 33 syllables in length; those chanted by Ćinġarauli and Ketelauri in 1996 are shorter. Interestingly, the melodic units do not always follow the grammatical or thematic structure of the chanted text; pauses can occur in the middle of a phrase or even between segments of a compound word.

dideba ġmertsa madli ġmertsa / dġes dġesindelsa rġul-kristiantasa mzesad,
Glory to God, thanks to God. / To the Day of this Day, the Sun of believing Christians,

mzis mġol angelozsa dideba / gamarġveba šenda dido kvirae,
the Angel accompanying the sun, glory. / Victory to you, great Kvirae,

maġlis ġvtis moġarveo, naxsenebnġ angeložno / garigebul ġika-barġimze da santel-saġirze tkven gadidnast,
whose tent is by High God, commemorated angels, / by the ordained cup-and-chalice, candle-and-offering may God glorify you all,

ġmertma tkven gagimarġvas tkven tkveni / gamġeni morige ġmertġ gadidebs gaġrivlebst, ar mogiġġenst
may God give you all victory. Your / creator God the Ordainer glorifies and strengthens you, he will not reproach you,

ar mogizulebs tkven tkven mexveġur taobit / dašturebs nu maicġent nu maizulebt rasac,
nor will he hate you. Those who implore you, / the shrine assistants, do not reproach, do not hate them.

mġarze da gulze geġaxdan gexveġebodan / imaze gaugonidit rasa ġġalobas
With shoulder and heart, they call upon you, they implore you; / what mercy they ask of you, make it known,

⁵ The limited distribution of both epithets, and the absence of shrines specifically dedicated to either the “Day of Today” or “Angel Accompanying the Sun”, renders the status of their referents as autonomous deities doubtful. According to Bardaveliġe, these epithets either occur directly before, or even appear to take the place, the name of Kvirae, which makes me wonder if in fact they refer to him.

getq̄vebodan tkven gamčens, morige ġmerts; gamautxovidit / taobit q̄acis mexveçurni uқан magat q̄udrošig
tell it to your creator, God the Ordainer. Dismiss / these men who implore you (assistants) back to their homes

3.3 *Ḳurtxeba* (Blessing)

After concluding the *Dideba*, or sometimes a few words before the end of this segment, the priest breaks into a far more rapid chanting pace, beginning on the lower or tonic note, then rising a minor third at the point marked by a (/), then tailing downward by roughly half-step intervals back to the tonic. The initial syllables of each melodic unit are intoned at a slower rate, then the pace accelerates quickly, ending in a nearly-unintelligible blur of syllables at the end. Even native speakers have difficulty making out more than the occasional word or phrase. As was the case with the *Dideba*, the melodic units of the *Ḳurtxeba* often end in the middle of a syntactic constituent. Gogoçuri's chanting units are about 90 syllables long, and last 9-10 seconds, yielding an articulation rate up to 10 syllables/sec, a pace comparable to that of the fastest rap performers.⁶ While intoning the *Ḳurtxeba*, Gogoçuri's eyes were directed downward and half-closed, his arms were held crossed over his waist and his hands were occasionally seen to tremble. In terms of its textual content, the *Ḳurtxeba* gives the impression of a garbled potpourri of snippets from the Orthodox liturgy, the gospels and the psalms. Here is the conclusion of the *Dideba* and beginning of the *Ḳurtxeba* from the 24 July 1999 morning ritual:

tkvena gasamaržod ġvtis q̄arze sasa/xelod tkven tkven mexveçurta taobit dašturta magat tav-q̄udros
for your victory, at God's court on be/half of those who implore you, the shrine assistants, for their homes,

žalapobisa orpex-otxpexisa / kudosan-mandilosnisa našvral
household, two-footed, four-footed, / hat-wearing and scarf-wearing (male & female), for their work,

namušavlisa mešveli / [ALLEGRO] mçqalobeli mlxeneli mxoišnebeli sanamde iq̄av bačono dğes
their labor, be their helper / mercy-giver, comforter, hope-giver, for as long as you are— Lord, today

dğesa xsnilobaj o žvarsa q̄urtxeuloba q̄urtxeulšia ġmertiao upali aça marodisamde uқunisamde / šagviçq̄alen
čven țovelni sanebao

today is a non-fasting day. Blessing to the cross in the sanctuary. God is lord now and forever, for eternity / Have mercy on us all. Trinity

çmindao gvaxonen da gvaxurtxe da gulo uržuloebao gavedria suli čven ġmertsa mamasa mamao da ġmertio
 čveno romeni xar catašia da agretve kveq̄anatašia mogvešvi da mogveție / čveni p̄uri arsobilta rac upalma
 magvišana. nu šegviq̄van sabnelta.

⁶ The articulation rate of the tobacco auctioneers studied by Kuiper & Tillis (1985) ranged from 5 to 10 syllables per second. The rapper Twista earned a mention in the Guinness Book of Records with a recorded rate of 11.2 syll/sec.

Holy [Trinity], absolve us and bless us (of our) unbelieving heart. / Our soul prays to you God the Father. Our Father and God, which art in the heavens and likewise on the lands, release us and forgive us. Our bread of existence that the lord brought us, do not bring us into darkness.

3.4 Conclusion

After completing the *Ḳurtxeba*, the priest either resumes chanting as in the *Dideba* (especially the in morning and evening prayers), or switches directly to his speaking voice. In the concluding section he asks that the offering be brought to God's court, and once again mentions the petitioners:

[**chanted**] naçiri žamni šasrulebulni šen dğeni / dğeobani garıgebuli çika-barzimi dido kviraev
The offering and liturgy (are) completed for you, the days / and feastdays, the ordained cup-and-chalice, great Kviraev

mağlis ğvtis moğarveo šena samtsavrod / šen gasamaržod šen šen mexveçurta
whose tent is by High God, as your due, / for your victory. Those who implore you,

ağabes temisa soplisa qelosan / [**spoken**] qeldebulisa qel-mxriv natlulisaj iğadre aığane ğvtis ĳarze maiqmare
Atabe clan and village, the (shrine) officials, / the selected ones, those with (anointed) hand and side. Dare [to approach God], bring [offerings] to God's court, and make use of them.

4. Entextualization, templates and illocutionary force

The *xucoba* has many characteristics which point to its being the product of what Bauman & Briggs call "entextualization": "the process of rendering discourse extractable, of making a stretch of linguistic production into a unit, a *text*" (1990:73). However the *xucoba* might have been initially entextualized, its textual autonomy is reinforced with every performance by its ritual framing, repeatability (the four performances by Gogoçuri which I recorded on 23-24 July 1999 are very similar, and the *Ḳurtxeba* sections are essentially identical), and performance features setting it aside from ordinary speech (the priest's posture and orientation, chanting, the extremely rapid pace of the *Ḳurtxeba*).⁷ Furthermore, there is a clear separation of roles between rank-and-file members of the commune and those authorized to perform the *xucoba*, an authorization underlined by the dramatic nature of a shrine priest's call to service, and the spontaneous manifestation of the ability to perform the text correctly.

Highly entextualized discourse is typically characterized by formal features of the text itself, as well as its mode of performance. Texts of this kind commonly manifest the regimenting

⁷ Cp. Malinowski (1935 II: 222) on the "coefficient of weirdness" setting performances of Trobriands garden magic off from ordinary speech.

effects of templates which limit, to varying extents, the range of variation from one performance to another. At one extreme are totally-entextualized utterance-types such as the Pater Noster or the American pledge of allegiance, which in principle are to be recited verbatim. Each performance nonetheless differs to some degree from any of the others, due for the most part to inevitable performance contingencies and personal indexicals (the individual performer's voice and gestures). Memory lapses and transmission flaws can bring about more significant changes, which — if not corrected — can result in textual alteration. Most literary and speech genres allow for greater variability and creativity. At one end of the scale of constraint on variation are heavily-entextualized genres such as fill-in-the-blank form letters and prayers; toward the other end are poetic frames (with fixed line lengths and rhyme schemes, but otherwise relatively few restrictions on textual content), and more loosely-structured speech genres — employee-client interactions, for example — which have fairly routinized openings and closings.

With regard to the Xevsur *xucoba*, the concepts of entextualization and genre can be applied not only to the ritual performance as a whole, but also to its principal segments. Each of the four sections described earlier has distinctive textual and performance features that set it off from the others. Furthermore, in the performances I observed, Peṭre Gogoçuri made a manual gesture in front of his chest (a folk version of the Orthodox sign of the cross) at the transition between these segments, which betokens a degree of awareness of the modular nature of the *xucoba*, as a second-order genre comprising a sequence of primary genres.⁸ What I find particularly noteworthy is the apparent relation among the generic features of each segment, the explicitness of its illocutionary function, and the poetics of its formal structure, represented as iconic templates of differing scope and linguistic level of instantiation. By the term “templates”, I denote restrictions on the arbitrary deployment of form on the syntagmatic plane, which manifest what Jakobson defined as the poetic function: the “project[ion of] the principle of equivalence ... into the axis of combination” (Jakobson 1960: 358). Some projections of equivalence operate at a local level, such as assonances and rhymes within a phrasal unit, whereas other parallelisms operate over longer sequences or even the performance of the genre as a whole.

⁸ Šaniže (1915: 50) likewise noted the execution of a sign of the cross before the *Dideba* and *Ḳurtxeba* sections of a *xucoba* performed at Čirdili in 1911.

The poetic function in Jakobson’s sense can be understood as the ordering of textual material according to a diagrammatic schema imposed on the syntagmatic plane. Diagrammatic-poetic templates can be detected in each section of the *xucoba*, albeit with interesting differences in terms of the textual range over which the projected equivalences occur. The diagram is one of the types of iconicity recognized by Peirce; the more commonly-recognized type, the image, also emerges in the form of what I will call analog intertextuality, to be discussed below with respect to the *Ḳurtxeba*. The poetics of the *xucoba* is summarized in the following table. The nature of the templates, as well as the other correlations shown in the table, will be presented in the following paragraphs.

Section	Performance	Illocution	Generic rigidity	Poetics (iconic templates)
<i>Maqseneba</i> , Conclusion	spoken (Conclusion may be partly sung)	explicit (2 nd person, optative)	standard beginning and ending; middle specific to offering-type	LARGER-SCALE PARALLELISM 1. lists 2. refrains, repetitions
<i>Dideba</i>	chanted	explicit (2 nd person, imperative & optative)	nearly verbatim, with fill-in-the-blank marking of offering type and petitioner	MID-RANGE PARALLELISM 1. homeoteleuton 2. morphological-lexical pairings
<i>Ḳurtxeba</i>	chanted rapidly, eyes closed	implicit (performance of sacred text)	verbatim	ANALOG INTERTEXTUALITY LOCALIZED PARALLELISM 1. syllabic quantity 2. phonetic parallelism

4.1 The poetics of the *Maqseneba* and *Dideba*: diagrammatic iconicity

The initial (*Maqseneba*) and final sections show the most variation, in accordance with the type of offering. Gogočuri’s *Maqseneba* can itself be subdivided into four segments: (1) an opening invocation of the shrine’s patron divinity; (2) a description of the offering(s); (3) a request that Ḳvirae not reproach the petitioners, even as God does not reproach him; (4) a request to take the offerings to God’s court. The conclusion to the *xucoba* is similar in form and content to the fourth segment of the *Maqseneba*, and is considerably abridged in the last two performances by Gogočuri in comparison to the first two.

With respect to poetics, one notes the deployment of elaborate, multi-layered diagrammatic templates in the *Maqseneba*, especially in the middle section of the evening performance of 23 July and its (nearly-exact) re-enactment the following morning. Nested within the larger structure of the list of five cups-and-chalices and the divinities to whom they were offered are the more localized parallelisms within the refrain *šen g-a-did-as ġmertma šen ga=g-i-maržv-*

as! (May God glorify you, may he give you victory).⁹ Other parallelisms as well run through this section of the *xucoba*, as can be confirmed by a close inspection of the excerpt cited in section 3 above.

The text of Gogočuri's *Dideba* varies far less from performance to performance. Except for sporadic mentions of the offering type and petitioner — and what appears to have been a memory lapse — the text is repeated verbatim.¹⁰ The *Dideba* is chanted, and even though the melodic contours do not necessarily conform to the syntactic structure of the texts, a certain rhythmicity is achieved by the relatively consistent length of the melodic units in terms of syllabic quantity and duration. At a more local level, two other poetic devices appear in the *Dideba* texts in my corpus. One of these is homeoteleuton, the repeated use of identical suffixes in segment-final position. The rich suffixal morphology of Georgian makes two- and three-syllable rhymes of this kind easy to come by, but in the *xucoba* the most extensive use of homeoteleuton is in the *Dideba*, which is punctuated by long sequences of 2nd-person imperative verb forms in *-idi(t)* as in the following excerpt from Gogočuri's performance:¹¹

mṭerze nadirze qel maumart <u>idit</u>	<i>Aid their hand against enemies, game animals.</i>
mṭers misdevdan mičivn <u>idit</u>	<i>When they pursue the enemy thither, lead them;</i>
mosdevdan gamasčivn <u>idit</u>	<i>when they pursue them hither, guide them here.</i>
šin mšvidobit šamasčivn <u>idit</u>	<i>Bring them home in peace.</i>
zapxulobay mšvidobit gadmačriv <u>idit</u>	<i>Pour out summer for them in peace.</i>
stvel rgebisa šamaučen <u>idit</u>	<i>Bring down a profitable harvest for them.</i>
qeli sakmis naoplar žvar daučeri <u>idit</u>	<i>Bless the work of their hands, their sweat,</i>
znata baraka daučoli <u>idit</u>	<i>Send them along with abundance of grain.</i>

That homeoteleuton is specific to the Xevsur *Dideba* as a genre, and not only Gogočuri's verbal style, is shown by parallel passages from elsewhere in the corpus, such as the following from a 1911 *xucoba* from Čirdili recorded by Šaniže (1915: 50):

es zapxulobaj mšvidobisa gadmaačri <u>idi</u>	<i>Pour out a summer of peace for them.</i>
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⁹ Interestingly, the phonetic parallelism cuts across the grain of the morphological structure: the first /ga/ sequence comprises the 2nd-person prefix and a version vowel, whereas the second corresponds to a perfectivizing preverb.

¹⁰ The initial performance of the *xucoba* on the morning of 24 July was intended to be an exact repeat of the ritual of the preceding evening, in honor of the shrine assistants (*daštur*). So I was told by Peṭre Gogočuri's younger brother as I began filming the performance. In fact, there were some minor differences between the two enactments, most notably the omission of an entire sentence of 14 words in the *Dideba* of the morning ritual.

¹¹ Imperatives in *-id-* do not occur in standard modern Georgian. This stem form may be related to the permansive and “mixed conjunctive” forms attested in the medieval literary language (Saržvelaže 1984: 454). The final *-t* distinguishes the 2nd-plural from the singular.

qarisa-d' qel-mqris namašvralš žvar dauçeridi
baraka dauṭaniḍi

*Bless the work of their bulls, hands and shoulders,
Let them take away abundance.*

A second poetic device characteristic of the *Dideba* as a genre is the deployment, in the final segment, of a sequence of morphological-lexical doublets culminating in a final triplet (or even quadruplet). The doublets are pairings of semantically complementary terms marked by the same morphological and often phonetic features. Here is an example from Gogoçuri, followed by a parallel passage from a 1930s performance recorded at Ghuli by A. Oçiauri (Kiknadze et al 1998: 47):

magat tav-çudros žalapobisa, orpex-otxpexisa, kudosan-mandilosnisa, našvral-namušavlisa

for their home-&-household, two-footed-&-four-footed, hat-wearing-&-scarf-wearing (male & female), work-&-labor

mešveli mcqalobeli mlxeneli mxoišnebeli sanamde iqav [Aṭabe 1999]

for as long as you are their helper, mercy-giver, comforter, hope-giver

magit tav çudrot žalapobisad, kacisad, sakonisad, orpex-otxpexisad, kudosan-mandilosnisad, našvral-namušavlisad, bedisad bolosad, çurta msmeneltad

for their home-&-household, man, cattle, two-footed-&-four-footed, hat-wearing-&-scarf-wearing, work-&-labor, fate, end, for those who listen,

mešveli mcqalobeli cağmamdegi iqav [Çuli, 1930s]

be their helper, mercy-giver, upright-stander

4.2 The poetics of the *Ḳurtxeba*: digital and analog intertextuality

Compared to the other sections of the *xucoba*, the *Ḳurtxeba* is distinctive in a number of respects; indeed it stands out as a highly-marked, even athletic, genre of verbal performance. Accounts by Georgian linguists and ethnographers emphasize the extreme rapidity of the chanting, and the strange nature of its content, which comes across as an incoherent sequence of garbled or misremembered excerpts of Orthodox Christian materials. Asked by the young Važa-Pšavela to explain the difference between the *ḳurtxeba* and the Orthodox liturgy, which Važa's father was then attempting to revive among the Xevsurs, the *xucesi* of Ghuli told the story of the last Orthodox priest who remained in Xevsureti after the "Tatars" overran lowland Georgia many centuries earlier. When he heard the news that Georgia had been conquered by infidels, the shock drove him mad, and so he taught a mixed-up version of the liturgy to the Xevsur shrine priests (Važa-Pšavela 1889). The *Ḳurtxeba* does in fact contain textual materials traceable to the Georgian Orthodox liturgy and the Old Georgian Bible, as

well as text of unknown provenance. The *Ḳurtxeba* transcriptions in the corpus, of which the oldest date back to the 1880s, vary considerably from one another, but comparison among them reveals a common pool of citations from Orthodox sources, echoes of which turn up in most examples in the corpus. Here is the sequence of identifiable references in Gogočuri's *Ḳurtxeba*; similar orderings occur elsewhere in the corpus:

BIBLICAL AND LITURGICAL REFERENCES IN THE *ḲURTXEBA*

1. Introduction (beginning of the Orthodox canonical hours [*žamni*])
2. *Pater noster* (probably also from the *žamni*)
3. *šavčirav/šavčirat gmertsa* “I will offer / let us offer to God” (source unclear)
4. Psalm 146:8
5. Miracle of the loaves (Mt 14: 20-1)
6. Wedding at Cana (Jn 2: 1-11)
7. *dabali amaḡldeboda maḡali dabaldeboda* “Low made high, high made low” (Lk 14:11?)
8. *samni manani qarmani* (probably < Mt 14:21)
9. *baḡ(a)da* “garden”? “Baghdad”? (source unknown)¹²

Juxtaposition of these passages with their probable sources demonstrates the varying degrees to which the Xevsur versions have been modified in the course of oral transmission. As early as 1915, Šaniže brought attention to the rhythmic structure of the Xevsur “Lord’s Prayer”, which in his view had been refashioned to conform to the octosyllabic meter prevalent in highland Georgian folk poetry (Šaniže 1915: 50-51). In the version performed by Nadira Arabuli at Čirdili in 1911, elements of the Pater Noster had been reworked into seven octosyllabic lines, most of which them divided 4+4 (a line-shape called *maḡali šairi* in Georgian poetry). Gogočuri’s version, and indeed most of those attested in the corpus, is strikingly similar to Arabuli’s with regard to both wording and syllabic quantity (save for a final word or words in Gogočuri’s text which cannot be made out clearly). As illustrated in the following table, the Xevsur versions resemble each other far more closely than any of them resembles its Georgian Orthodox source. Although I have yet to carry out a thorough “ethno-stemmatics” of the *Ḳurtxeba*, at present the most likely explanations for these similarities would be the existence of a single oral Urtext from which all the attested variants derive, convergence among once more disparate *Ḳurtxeba* variants, or a combination of the two processes.

¹² One potential clue to the source of this mysterious vocable is the invocation of the “defender-protector angels of Baghdad” (*baḡdadis mcvelo-mparvelo angelozebo*) in a *Dideba* recorded at the Pšavi shrine of Iaxsar in 1986 (Ḳiḡnadze et al 1998: 120).

Orthodox version	translation	N. Arabuli (Chirdili 1911)	P. Gogočuri (Aṭabe 1999)
mamao čveno [5] romeli xar cata šina [8] čmida iḡavn saxeli šeni [9] movedin supeva šeni [8] iḡavn neba šeni [6] vitarca cata šina [7] egreca kveḡanasa zeda [9] puri čveni arsobisa [8] momec čven dḡes [4] da momiteven čven [6] tanadebni čvenni [7] vitarca čven miṭevebt [8] tanamdebta mat čventa [7] da nu šemiḡvaneb čven gansacdelsa [11] aramed miḡsnen čven borotiṣagan. [11]	Our Father <u>[and God]</u> which art in the heavens, holy be thy name. may-come thy kingdom, may-it-be thy will, as in the heavens, so upon the earth. <u>[release and pardon us]</u> Our bread of existence give us today, <u>[which the lord gave us]</u> and pardon us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass on us. And do not bring us to temptation / <u>[darkness?]</u> but deliver us from evil	mamao <u>da ḡmerto</u> čveno [8] romeni xar catašia [8] agre xoḡanatašia [8] <u>mogvišvi da mogviteve</u> [8] puri čveni arsobilta [8] <u>rac upalma mogvitana</u> [8] nu šegviḡvan gansacdelsa [8]	mamao <u>da ḡmerto</u> čveno [8] romeni xar catašia [8] agre kveḡanatašia [8] <u>mogvišvi da mogvitie</u> [8] čveni puri arsobilta [8] <u>rac upalma magvitana</u> [8] nu šegviḡvan <u>sabnelta(?)</u> [7?]

Another Biblical reference detected in most of the *Kurtxeba* texts is Psalm 146:8. Here is the verse as found in the standard Old Georgian edition of the Psalms, juxtaposed to the corresponding passages from Arabuli's and Gogočuri's *xucoba*:

[Psalm 146:8]

romel-man še=mos-n-is ca-ni ḡrubl-ita da
who-ERG clothes-3sg sky-PL cloud-INS and

gan=umzadis čwima-j kveḡana-sa,
prepares-3sg rain land-DAT

romel-man aḡmo=a-cen-is tiva-j mta-ta da mčvane samsaxurebl-adḡac-ta
who-ERG grows-3sg hay mountains-& green for-service men-DAT

“[God] who clothes the skies with clouds and prepares rain for the land; who makes hay grow on the mountains and greenery for the benefit of men.”

[Arabuli; Čirdili 1911]

romen-ma **da**=ḡ-mos-en ca-ni ḡrubl-ita, **kveḡana-ni** **mčvanil-ita,**
who-ERG clothed-2sg sky-PL cloud-INS land-PL greenery-INS

čvima **gardmo**=a-mzad-e kveḡana-ta zeda
rain across-prepared-2sg lands-DAT upon

[Gogočuri; Aṭabe 1999]

romen-ma **da**=mos-en ca-ni ḡrubl-it da **kveḡana-ni** **mčvanil-it** da
who-ERG clothed-2sg sky-PL cloud-INS-& land-PL greenery-INS and

čvima **gada**=a-mzad-e kveḡana-ze
rain across-prepared-2sg land-on

“You who clothed the skies with clouds and the lands with greenery, and prepared rain across the land.”

In addition to the nearly-identical wording in the Xevsur passages — which supports the arguments for an oral Urtext and/or convergence mentioned above — one notes the deployment of textual elements from the source in parallel morphosyntactic frames, a reworking comparable to, albeit less extensive than, the octosyllabic Pater Noster discussed previously:

Morphosyntactic framing:

[ca-**ni** ġrubl-**it(a)**-(da)] [kveqana-**ni** mčvanil-**it(a)**-(da)]

[w-NomPL x-INS-(and)] [y-NomPL z-INS-(and)]

Considerable portions of the *Ḳurtxeba* texts look as though they were stitched together from scattered scraps of the Old Georgian liturgical corpus by someone who lacked an adequate grasp of its grammatical conventions. There is also a smattering of what seem to be genuine nonsense vocables, the widespread occurrence of which make them worthy of a closer look. One such uninterpretable sequence is *sḳani sḳanale* and its variants, attested in at least nine *Ḳurtxeba* texts from as many villages. The vocables are followed by more or less coherent references to the “waters of the Jordan” and the transformation of wine:

Aṭabe 1999	Ghuli 1889 (Važa)	Čirdili 1911	Sulis xucoba, c. 1933	Arxoṭi, c. 1940	Xaxmaṭi 1980
<i>sḳani sḳanale</i> [2+3]	<i>sḳani sḳanare</i> [2+3]	<i>sḳai sḳanale</i> [2+3]	<i>sḳani sḳanale</i> [2+3]	<i>sḳana sḳanale</i> [2+3]	<i>sḳani sḳanare</i> [2+3]
čqalši ordane “in Jordan water” [2+3]	čqals iordane “to/at Jordan water” [1+4]	čqalsi vardane [2+3]	čqals iordane [1+4]	čqalši vardane [2+3]	čqals iordane [1+4]
ġvino gadacvale “you changed wine” [2+4]	čqali ġvinod gadascvale “you changed water into wine” [2+2+4]	ġvinod gadacvale “you changed it into wine” [2+4]	ġvino gadmoscvale “you changed wine” [2+4]	ġvino gadascvale “you changed wine” [2+4]	ġvino da ar <i>masale</i> “wine and not stuff (?)” [2+2+3]

Examination of the six recensions given in the table reveals, first of all, the strongly similar rhythmic and phonetic framing of the nonsense vocables and the following phrase: both consist in five syllables, with identical vowels in most of the syllables and a degree of assonance. The phrase referring to the changing of wine, or water into wine, suggests a possible source for this segment of the *Ḳurtxeba*: the miracle of the Wedding at Cana, described in John 2: 1-11. The Old Georgian gospel text might even yield the ultimate source of *sḳani sḳanale*: the phrase (*korçli iġo*) *kanas galileaajsasa* [Jn 2:1] “(there was a wedding) in Cana of Galilee”, which would have been truncated to five syllables, and — having been

shorn of its meaning and reduced to an analogically-encoded phonetic contour — taken on internal assonance and the vocalism of the following phrase.

Whatever the initial form might have been, the nonsense vocables *škani škanale* give the appearance of being the output of a sort of “hocus-pocus” transformation, that is, the refashioning of uninterpretable or misheard text to conform to lexico-imagistic and poetic templates. A second instance of what appears to have been digital-to-analog encoding of Old Georgian lexical material as nonsense words is the phrase *manani qarmani* and its variants, which appears in nearly as many *Ḳurtxeba* texts as *škani škanale*. These two vocables are preceded by the adjective *sam-ni* “three-PL” and followed later in the phrase by 3rd-plural forms of the verbs “sit” and “eat”, a syntactic context which permits segmentation of the nominative-plural suffix /-ni/ from both vocables, leaving the quasi-roots *mana-* and *qarma-*. Here are some examples from Gogočuri’s *Ḳurtxeba* and other texts from the corpus:

[Aṭabe 1999]

romeni that-NOM	sam-ni 3-PL	<u>mana-ni</u> <i>mana</i> -PL	<u>qarma-ni</u> <i>qarma</i> -PL	sxedan sit-3pl	čamen eat-3pl
magat them	arcas neither	šeergineboda be.good-3	arca nor	šeššineboda be.afraid-3	

“which three *mana q’arma* sit and eat; it would neither do them any good, nor would they be afraid”

[Važa 1889]

rom that	sam-ni 3-PL	<u>manan-ni</u> <i>manan</i> -PL	<u>qarman-ni</u> vassal-PL	isxdes sat-3pl	
ṗursa bread-DAT	<u>sčamdes</u> ate-3pl	mat them	ar not	šaerginebode be.good-3	

“which three *manan* vassals (members of shrine community) sat and ate bread; it would not do them any good”

[sulis xucoba c1933 Maḳalatia 1935:209]

romel-nic that-NOM	sam-ni 3-PL	<u>qarma-ni</u> <i>qarma</i> -PL	<u>marma-ni</u> <i>marma</i> -PL	smen da drink-3pl	čamen eat-3pl
magat them	ṭablisa-gan table-from	aras nothing	šegvergineboda be.good-3-1pl		

“which three *qarma marma* drink and eat from their table; it would do us no good”

The cooccurrence of the three underlined lexical elements within the same phrase in the *Ḳurtxeba* texts points to a possible source, in this case the Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes:

[Mt 14:21]

xolo	romelta	čames	iqvnes	mama-ni	xut atas,
but	who-ERG:PL	ate-3pl	were-3pl	father-PL	five thousand
tvinier	qrm-eb-isa	da	ded-eb-isa		
beside	child-PL-GEN	and	mother-PL-GEN		

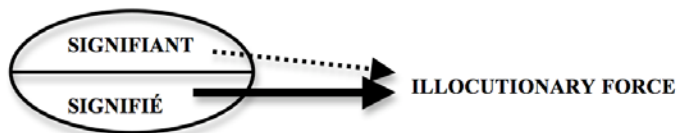
“And they that had eaten were about five thousand men, beside women and children”

Reinforcing this hypothesis is a garbled reference to the same Biblical episode several lines earlier in Gogočuri’s *Ḳurtxeba*: *upalma xutasatas dažgvna* “The Lord sated five hundred thousand”.

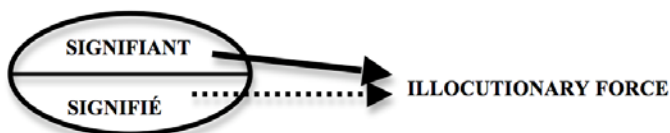
4.3 Intertextuality and illocutionary force

As mentioned above, the *Ḳurtxeba* stands apart from the other sections of the Xevsur *xucoba*. Among its distinctive features is its pronounced intertextual relation to the Orthodox liturgy and Bible. Two modes of relation have been identified, which can be characterized as lexical (or digital) and phonetic (or analog) intertextuality. In the first mode, lexical materials from the source have been appropriated and transmitted intact; more precisely, their meanings have been more or less accurately retained even when their forms have been adapted to the grammar of the Xevsur dialect (for example, the Old Georgian verb form *šemiqvaneb* (*čven*) “lead us in”, which contains an archaic 1st-exclusive object marker and a present-stem suffix not used in the modern form of this verb, has been “corrected” to *šegviqvan* in the Xevsur versions of the Pater Noster). In the second mode, analog intertextuality, the meaning of particular lexemes seems not to have been understood at the moment of initial appropriation from the Orthodox liturgy, or perhaps later in the course of oral transmission, and only the phonetic contour was passed on. Both lexically- and phonetically-transmitted materials were modified to conform to diagrammatic-poetic templates: either locally, as in the case of *sḵani sḵanale*, or at somewhat wider scale, as illustrated by the octosyllabic Lord’s Prayer. My impression from hearing the *Ḳurtxeba* performed by three different priests is that these localized poetic parallelisms are undetectable by listeners: the utterance rate is too rapid, and pauses often cut through poetically-regimented textual segments (in three of the four renderings of the Pater Noster by Gogočuri, he broke off a chanted line halfway through an octosyllabic unit). The only likely function of diagrammatic restructuring is mnemonic. The memorability of poetry has often been remarked on, but in the case of the *Ḳurtxeba*, the poetic structure would appear to be for internal use only.

Another significant characteristic that sets the *Ḳurtxeba* apart from the rest of the *xucoba* is the absence of explicit performatives, as these are understood in Austinian speech-act theory. The other three sections abound in 2nd-person verbs in the imperative or optative mood, overtly addressed to Kvirae and a host of other divinities, who are directed by the priest to be glorified, receive the offerings, and bestow various favors upon the petitioners. With respect to the components of the linguistic sign, the illocutionary force associated with performances of the *Maqseneba* and *Dideba* is carried primarily by the meanings of the utterances, their Saussurean *signifiés*, although not entirely. The utterance form (*signifiant*) also contributes to the efficacy attributed to performances of these sections of the *xucoba*: the repetition of certain phrases, the chanting of the *Dideba*. In the following diagram, the large arrow indicates that the illocutionary force of the utterance is principally derived from its meaning:¹³



The *Ḳurtxeba*, by contrast, has no explicit framing as a speech act. Verb forms of all persons, tenses and moods occur. The divine being most often mentioned in this section is *upali* “the Lord”, a Christian epithet for Jesus that appears nowhere else in the *xucoba*. (Although many Pxovian divinities bear names drawn from Orthodoxy — notably St. George, the Archangel and the Mother of God — the figure of Jesus is conspicuously absent from the highland Georgian pantheon). The absence of explicit performatives should not be taken as an indication that the *Ḳurtxeba* has little or no illocutionary force. Rather, the force inheres in the text as a whole, in much the same sense that readings from the Gospels in the liturgy are believed to have a special efficacy because of what the text is rather than what it says¹⁴.



¹³ Form contributes to the illocutionary force of ordinary performatives as well. Polite, deferential requests are almost always longer, and make use of metapragmatically less transparent linguistic forms, than baldly direct imperatives (cp. Silverstein 2003).

¹⁴ Recall that in the Catholic liturgy of earlier times, the Gospels could only be read at Mass by clergymen of a certain rank, and the laity crossed themselves and remained standing during the reading.

In other words, the *significant* makes an important contribution to the illocutionary force attributed to utterance-types such as the *Იurtxeba*. The relative importance of the two components of the sign can be somewhat equivalent (e.g. Latin liturgical texts and formulae in pre-Vatican-II Catholic practice, where the language and precise wording are crucial for the speech act to be effective, or “felicitous”, to use Austin’s expression). A more extreme case is represented by *abracadabra*-like magical formulas, which have uninterpretable phonetic shapes, and therefore no *signifié* of the conventional kind. The illocutionary force, therefore, derives almost entirely from the *signifiant* alone; indeed, formulas of this kind are sometimes believed to have efficacy even when used in ignorance of their function.

5. Melody and pitch

I measured the melodic features of the sung portions of the *xucoba*, using the Tartini 1.2 musical-analysis software.¹⁵ The performances of all three priests in my audio database were analyzed, as well as excerpts from five *Dideba* performances — two of which include portions of the following *Იurtxeba* — which are included in the sound track to the documentary film *Xevsureti* (1995), made under the direction of the visual anthropologist Mirian Xucishvili of the Georgian National Museum.¹⁶ The *xucoba* recordings were made at Xaxmaṭi (two), Likoḳi, Moḥmao and Arxoṭi, and date from the period between 1961 and 1980. Although the sound quality is not optimal, it is sufficiently good that the melodic contours and approximate pitch levels can be determined.

When chanting the *Dideba*, each of the eight priests in the sample sings the first part of each line on a stable high pitch, then drops a fourth to what might be considered the tonic. At the end of each line, the pitch rises approximately a minor third, then tails downward about a half-step. In a variant ending, used occasionally by Ketelauri, Gogoḥuri and the unnamed priest recorded in the Likoḳi Valley, the line-final note drops a 4th rather than a minor second. The first part of each line of the *Იurtxeba* is chanted on what was identified above as the “tonic” pitch. Two of the priests recorded by the National Museum attacked the first syllable of the line on the same high pitch as in the *Dideba*, then slid immediately down to the tonic. About ten to twenty syllables from the end of the line, the pitch rises a minor third, then goes down by about half-step intervals. As for vocal technique, I noted that Gogoḥuri, and

¹⁵ For more information about this program, see www.tartini.net.

¹⁶ For a description of the documentary film, see the catalog of the Museum’s film collection at http://www.museum.ge/News_Images/film/katalogi%20ganaxlebuli.pdf

occasionally Ketelauri, sang the tonic note of the *Dideba* in such a way that the lower octave could be heard. I do not have enough information to judge whether this diphonic effect was specifically intended by the singer.

As noted above, the melodic templates are almost entirely independent of the textual content. In the four performances by Peṭre Gogoṭuri, the pauses at the end of the melodic line in the *Didebaj* and *Ḳurtxeba* often did not coincide with syntactic divisions within the text, and some even occurred word-internally. Furthermore, the placement of the pauses varied from one performance to another, even when they occurred on the same day. To illustrate, here are the opening three lines of the *Didebay* from each of Gogoṭuri's four performances. The pitch drop and line end occurred at the same point in the first line, but diverged in the following lines.

I/II/III/IV. dideba ḡmertsā madli ḡmertsā / dḡes dḡesindelsa rḡul-kristiantasa mzesad,
Glory to God, thanks to God. / To the Day of This Day, the Sun of believing Christians,

I. mzis mḡol angelozsa dideba / gamarḡveba tkvenda,
the Angel accompanying the sun, glory. / Victory to you-all,

II. mzis mḡol angelozsa dideba / gamarḡveba ḡenda dido ḡvirae,
the Angel accompanying the sun, glory. / Victory to you (sing.), great Kviraē

III. mzis mḡol angelozsa dideba / gamarḡveba ḡenda dido
the Angel accompanying the sun, glory. / Victory to you (sing.), great

IV. mzis mḡol angelozsa dideba / gamarḡveba ḡenda dido ḡvirae, maḡlis ḡvtis
the Angel accompanying the sun, glory. / Victory to you (sing.), great Kviraē, High God's

I. naxsenebnḡ angelozno garigebul / ḡika-barḡimze da santel-saḡirze tkven gadidnast,
commemorated angels, by the ordained / cup-&-chalice, candle-&-sacrifice may God glorify you-all

II. maḡlis ḡvtis moḡarveo, naxsenebnḡ angelozno / garigebul ḡika-barḡimze da santel-saḡirze tkven gadidnast,
whose tent is by High God, commemorated angels, / by the ordained cup-and-chalice, candle-and-offering may God glorify you-all,

III. ḡvirae, maḡlis ḡvtis moḡarveo, moxsenebul / sameḡvlo-samsaxurze ḡen gadidas,
Kviraē, whose tent is by High God, by the commemorative / servant-offering may God glorify you,

IV. moḡarveo, moxsenebul sameḡvlo-/samsaxurze ḡen gadidas, ḡmertma ḡen gagimarḡvas
tent-dweller, by the commemorative servant-/offering may God glorify you, give you victory

Perhaps the most remarkable similarity shared by Gogoṭuri, Ḳinḡarauli and Ketelauri, and the five priests heard in Xucishvili's documentary film, is their near-coincidence in absolute pitch

as well as melody. The starting pitch of the *Dideba* for all eight performers was within a whole step above or below the A below middle C (220 Hz). Here are the chanting melodies for the three priests I recorded in the field, as accurately as they can be represented in standard Western musical notation (the key signatures represent my impression of where the tonic would be situated):¹⁷

Gudani,
Chincharauli

Qaqmati 1996, Ketelauri

Atabe 1999, Gogoch'uri: didebay

Atabe 1999, Gogoch'uri: k'urtxebay

Since priests almost never chant together, this remarkable coincidence demands an explanation. It might well be the case the remarkable ability for rote memorization required of shrine priest also extends to absolute pitch, in the sense that the son or nephew of a priest, listening to the *xucoba* of the person he will one day be called to succeed, would mentally record a veridical impression of the performance that includes approximate pitch levels. On one occasion, however, I had the privilege of witnessing the confirmation of the vocation of a Xevsur shrine priest. The priest in service at a neighboring shrine had dreamt that the time had come for the son of the previous priest, who had died some time earlier, to assume his father role. The message in the dream was then confirmed by the drawing of lots. Without much time to collect himself, the new priest, who seemed very reluctant, was handed a chalice filled with beer and called upon to begin the *xucoba*. When he began to falter, the experienced priest from the nearby village coached him by calling out the initial words of each line, and accompanying him in the performance. Perhaps some Xevsur priests acquired their chanting pitch in this manner.

¹⁷ Assuming that the playback of the field recordings on the soundtrack did not distort the pitch too drastically, the starting tones for the *Dideba* are a slightly sharp B3 (Likok̄i), B♭3 (Moçmao), a sharp A3 (Xaxmaṭi I), a flat G♯3 (Xaxmaṭi II), and a sharp G3 (Arxoṭi)

6. Agonism and the vocation of the shrine priest

In recent work I have begun exploring the significance of agonism in Georgian culture (Tuite 2005, 2009). Agonistic display is competitive, but is constrained by strict conformity to culturally-prescribed ground rules. The agonist's primary goal is to gain honor and the respect of the other participants. Foreign visitors to Georgia have commented extensively about what I term "positive agonism", the competitive display of strength, skill, or quantity — the last-named variety manifesting itself as lavish amounts of food laid before guests, excessive generosity, long-winded banquet toasts, and the consumption of inhuman quantities of wine. Less often remarked upon, but of equal if not greater importance for understanding the Georgian ethos, is "negative agonism", the display of restraint, self-control, and endurance. In the context of Georgian banqueting, this is the reverse side of the coin of excessive drinking: the banqueter must consume as much wine, or even more, than the others at the table, but without getting drunk or showing signs of impaired speech or singing ability.

Among the Xevsurs, however, negative agonism was elevated to the status of a cult. A man showed self-mastery (*tavšekaveba*) by risking death in battle without outward signs of fear. A woman demonstrated the same virtue by bearing the agony of a difficult childbirth without crying out.¹⁸ Both sexes were expected to bear unflinchingly the excruciating pain of traditional surgical interventions (including trepanation, which was performed — without anesthesia — as recently as the 1940's). Furthermore, young Xevsur men and women regularly submitted to explicit testing of self-mastery in special contexts. Young men, for example, frequently fought duels with each other using swords and small shields. The goal, however, was not to kill or gravely wound the opponent, but rather to control one's sword strokes so as to cut him lightly on the face or hand. Perhaps the most extraordinary test of one's *tavšekaveba* was the premarital relationship known as *şorproba*, a special, emotionally intense friendship between a young woman and man, which was practiced among the Xevsurs up to the beginning of the Soviet period. The couple was permitted, and indeed encouraged, to spend the night together, laying side by side and caressing each other. But any physical consummation of the relationship was strictly forbidden, nor were they allowed to marry each other when they came of age (Baliauri 1991; Tuite 2000, 2008).

¹⁸ According to a Xevsur proverb, "a man is tested by the sword, and a woman by the childbirth hut". Aside from ethnographic accounts and the writings of Važa-Pšavela and Tedoraže (1930), my analysis of negative agonism draws upon interviews with the ethnographer Tinatin Očiauri (July 2001) and her brother Giorgi (March 2005). One of the key words in highland descriptions of self-mastery is *cda*, a polysemic verb encompassing the senses of "test, attempt, experiment", and also "wait for sb/sthg"

Seen against this cultural background, the vocation of the Xevsur shrine priest can be described as a call to exemplify the ideals of agonism in both its positive and negative forms. On the positive side, the display of skill and quantity, there is the verbal art of the *xucoba*, culminating in the virtuoso performance of the 10-syllable/second *Ḳurtxeba*, as well as the large body of specialized ritual knowledge that he is expected to master. His capacity for restraint and self-mastery is regularly put to the test as well. A shrine priest is expected to maintain an exceptionally high degree of purity, which compels him to abstain from certain foods (pork, poultry and eggs, among others), bathe regularly in icy rivers (even in winter), and avoid the proximity of women for weeks at a time before major shrine festivals. But undoubtedly the greatest, indeed ultimate, agonistic display occurs at the very beginning of the priest's career, at the moment he receives his initial call to service. Rather than meekly accept a vocation that has been the lot of his lineage for countless generations, he refuses, and sets his will in opposition to that of the divinities themselves. Like Amirani, the mythic hero chained within a mountain for having dared challenge the strength of the lord of the universe, the young Xevsur knows that his arm is too short to box with God, and that he, and quite likely his family as well, will pay dearly for his obstinacy. It is this seemingly hopeless and pointless struggle of wills, even before he begins to perform his duties as a priest, that, more than anything else, will mark him as worthy to intercede between the worlds of men and gods.

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