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**Polyphonic Thinking: Uninterrupted Georgian Tradition**

(on the example of the chants recorded from Polikarpe Khubulava)1

**Introduction**

Orthodox Georgia is the most ancient center of polyphony in the Caucasus. In May, 2001 UNESCO proclaimed Georgian Polyphonic Singing a masterpiece of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Part of part of polyphonic culture - Georgian sacred music represents one of the oldest cultural layers of the Christendom.Georgian three-part chanting has a significant role in church life and results it’s spiritual and cultural development.

Christianity was first preached in West Georgia by the [Apostles](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apostles) Simon and Andrew in the 1st century. The conversion of Qartli (East Georgia’s region) to Christianity is credited to [St. Nino](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Nino) of [Cappadocia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cappadocia) in the 4th century, which was followed by its adoption as the state religion.

In the study of Georgian church music particularly significant are the monastic educational centers in Georgia and elsewhere. It is known, that there were about 20 Georgian Abbeys on Mt. Sinai (Palestine) in the 5th-6th centuries, here part of divine service was performed in Georgian language from the beginning of the 6th century. To the high level of Georgian musical thinking in middle Ages testifies the 7th century lectionary from Jerusalem, ancient *Iadgari* /collection of liturgical chants (Greek Tropologion, Russian  *Prazdnichnaya mineya*), neumated liturgical-hymnographic collections from the second half of the 10th century. For instance, the collection of heirmi from Alaverdi, Mikael Modrekili’s new *Iadgari* ( of the second half of the 10th century).

The Georgians’ musical thinking is polyphonic and according to specialists, the polyphonization process of the canonic melodies introduced from Byzantium must have started in Georgia in the 8th- 9th centuries at the latest. Three-part nature of Georgian song and chant is confirmed in the works of Ioane Petritsi – 11th century Georgian philosopher, Neoplatonist. From the 13th century numerous raids of foreign invaders significantly hampered the development of Georgian culture. Particularly hard were 14th -16th centuries (the Mongol, but later on the period of revival commenced. New collections of neumatic and verbal script were created at Monastery schools; these neumes show connection with the neumatic system of previous centuries. The tradition of six-part chanting was introduced in the 16th century.

The situation was aggravated after Georgia became part of Russian Empire

(1801), as according to Russian exarchs’ orders Divine Liturgy at churches was conducted in Russian language and chanting was performed in Russian manner. At the time the treasure, which the Georgians had created throughout centuries, was preserved only in the memories of distinguished and talented people. Thanks to them it was possible to transcribe Georgian chants into five-line notation system. About 8 000 chants of simple and ornamented mode from different Chant Schools (Gelati, Shemokmedi, Svetitskhoveli) have survived as manuscripts. Chant traditions were gravely harmed by the 70-year-long Communist dictatorship and atheist propaganda. Many churches and monasteries were demolished, repressed were the clergy, including the connoisseurs of chants. Fortunately, the tradition of polyphonic chanting moved to families and survived to this day.

To this testify several chants preserved in the memory of Polikarpe Khubulava – a folk singer. Many folk examples have been recorded as performed by him, but no one thought that the 90-year-old song master – director of a number of choirs in Soviet times, should have known chants as well. When working on the monograph, it turned out that Khubulava still remembered the chants, he had studied as a boy from his father (former deacon). After the disintegration of the Soviet system and declaration of Georgia’s independence the revival process of Georgian church hymns started and Georgian chant is heard at churches and monasteries, but Polikarpe Khubulava was not a chanter; this fact excludes that he may have learned the chants in recent times, besides we visited him with the purpose to record chants without letting him know in advance, at the very first attempt he performed all three parts of chants, we had a doubt that being a grand-master of improvisation he could have composed the examples at once, but all doubts vanished immediately after listening to complex, refined traditional chant.

Polikarpe Khubulava occupies particular place among today’s performers of Georgian traditional music. The singer from Odishi (Samegrelo) is indeed distinguished for personal qualities, diverse repertoire, masterly playing the *chonguri*, high performance skills and fruitful pedagogical activity.

In August 2014 Polikarpe Khubulava was 90. The Foundation “*Kartuli Galoba*” asked us to prepare a monograph for his jubilee. When working on the monograph the desire to find something different brought me to chant traditions of the Khubulava family. At one of our meetings the song-master told us that as a boy he studied “*Shen khar venakhi”* and “*Mertskhalo* *mshveniero*” from his father; that in the 1970s the Folklore Commission of the USSR Composers’ Union recorded folk songs from him in a combined way2. We decided to ask him perform chants in the same manner and visited him in Zugdidi equipped with the multi-channel device3. After documenting folk examples as performed by his ensembles (“Chela”, “Odoia” and ensemble of veterans) I asked Polikarpe to sing all three parts of chants himself. We recorded the examples without rehearsal at the first attempt. It was time before Easter, and so I also ask for “*Kriste aghdga*”(Christ is risen from the dead) After the first phrase he stopped and continued chanting only after completing the prayer (…trampling down death by death). Polikarpe Kubulava never was a chanter. Wasn’t it possible for the grand master of improvisation to create examples himself? Complexity, refinement of the compositions and their connection with chants dispelled this supposition.

(see audioexampls).

In the paper I will touch upon few significant issues arisen in the study of the Khubulavas’ chant traditions: one is linked with Homo Polyphonicuses’ musical consciousness (Zemtsovsky, 2002), the other with the origin of the chants preserved by them.

**Fragments from biography**

All family sang. Mother- Minadora Bigvava, her seven daughters, Polikarpe – the youngest of the family. Father-Erasti Khubulava (born. 1882), was a renowned singer-chanter and song-master. The entire village respected the musical family. Moreover some singers even avoided to sing in the Khubulavas’ presence. Batoni Polikarpe told me, that this is why the pilgrims walking door to door for Christmas *Alilo* never came to them for this same reason.

Erasti Khubulava studied at Martvili School of chant for 2 years, his teacher was Maxime Vekua from the village of Kitsia (we have no information on this person so far). As Polikarpe says Maxime could have also had professional musical education (he played the violin and gave pitch to his disciples on this instrument). As a sign of respect and love to Maxime Polikarpe scattered the sand taken from Kitsia on his father’s tomb.

Erasti thoroughly studied all three parts of many chants, but most often he sang bass. Before the establishment of Soviet Power he was a deacon at Sabendeliano St. George Church in the village of Jikhashkari /an archpriest according to Kalistrate Samushia .(Chitanava, 2010:142). He chanted together with Dzaka Pipia and Duru Bendeliani. Erasti Khubulava was friends with the coryphaei of Megrelian Song such as Dzuku Lolua and Rema Shelegia. As we know, they were the disciples of Dimitri Chalaganidze – a renowned chanter, also representative of the Martvili Chant School (Kalandadze and Urushadze, 2003:14; Jvania, 20013:10). Thus, the chants recorded from the Khubulavas can be considered as the examples of this West Georgian School. Polikarpe himself mentions that the chant variants he studied from his father are absolutely different4.

After the establishment of Soviet Power Erasti Khubulava was obliged to deconsecrate and worked as a switchman on the railway. At one point he even taught Russian at school. Later he created a 45-member choir in Jikhashkari.

Little Polikarpe grew up in musical surrounding and easily studied songs. When the members of Erasti’s ensemble liked a song they would switch on the player and the 12-13-year-old boy would listen to the recording. After listening several times he knew all three parts and even could teach them to the singers of his father’s choir. He listened to Megrelian and Gurian songs with ardour and even spent nights listening to them (Urushadze, 2007:323).

Batoni Polikarpe regretfully mentions that he studied only few chants from his father. “Erasti took the knowledge with him into the grave…. No one sings similar variants today.” Young Polikarpe liked chanting, but he was afraid to have contact with his father, as going to church was prohibited. “It was considered shameful to see us his children together with father” narrates the song-master. He recalls the facts of persecution and abuse of the clergy.

**Martvili**

Martvili (old name Chqondidi) is one of the most significant monuments of Orthodox Georgia. According to all sources here the pagans sacrificed babies to their idol. Chqoni (Megrelian for ‘oak’), Chqondidi – means ‘big oak’. The refectory table of Martvili Monastery is placed right on the bottom of the oak tree, which was chopped down by one of Christ’s Disciples- Andrew the First Called when he came to Georgia in the 1st century. The name Martvili was given to the place when Martyrs’ church was erected here in the 6th-7th centuries and a monastery complex was constructed, but the Episcopacy maintained the name Chqondidi.

Martvili Monastery was a great cultural-educational centre. Many renowned bibliophiles and hymnographers worked here5. There was a krypteria, rooms for scriber monks, books were translated and original works were created. Here Giorgi Chqondideli, the tutor of Davit IV Aghmashenebeli - David the Restorer, (1073-1125), King and great reformer of Georgia, held his activities. Here they planned together unification of Georgia, construction of Gelati Monastery and Academy was also decided in Martvili. Many examples of West Georgian chant have been preserved at Gelati. But the chant from Martvili has not survived. Thus Martvili School of Chant anteceded that of Gelati; documentation of the examples from Martvili is very important.

Unfortunately, old material is not avilable, the existing data is related to the Chalaganidze family, who migrated here in from Guria the second half of the 18th century.

**On chants**

Why did the father teach *Shen khar venakhi* and *Mertskhalo mshveniero*  to Polikarpe? Why did the young man memorize these very examples? How did the chants dedicated to the Virgin and John the Baptist survive Soviet Regime? In my opinion the reason for this should be sought for in the hidden semantics of their verbal texts.

Evidently, Erasto Khubulava was well aware of their significance, but for the fear of censorship, to protect his family members and to save the examples, he purposefully concealed their essence (Let me remind you that other chanters, such as Artem Erkomaishvili, also concealed their knowledge of chants). Polikarpe and many other people born in Soviet epoch still consider these as songs dedicated to vine and the bird herald of spring. For instance, documented is the variant of the Gurian singer Parmen Khukhunaishvili, in its final part the text goes as follows: “Oh, Swallow, sweet-voiced swallow, lover of nature, herald of life, you are the beauty of the nature. Live and chirp, my playful one!”

In the materials of Kalistrate Samushia- renowned collector and researcher of oral folklore *Shen khar venakhi* is referred to as *Simghera venakhze* “Song of Vineyard” (Samushia 2001: 19). The same author mentions the example as a “chant to vineyard” (ibid p. 20). This chant is similarly interpreted in the renowned feature film “Soldier’s Father” (prod. Rezo Chkheidze, 1964).

**Polyphonic Thinking and the technique for documenting chants**

As Polikarpe says: “Erasti knew different signs for notation: dots, lines, those indicating ascending and descending sounds”. Obviously script with neums is meant here (the earliest Georgian collections with neum notations date back to the mid 10th century). Unfortunately, Erasti’s manuscripts are lost, but it is interesting, that in July, 1959 Otar Chijavadze documented “*Tsmidao ghmerto” (“Holy God”)*  from him and fellow chanters as a graphical draught (Pic. #1).

Undetermined method for documenting a georgian chant is unknown for me. Despite the fact the documented song is an example of urban style chant of later period6. I think it contains noteworthy information from the standpoint of interrelation between polyphonic thinking and documented text. The draft shows the direction of top (or middle) part melody (parallel thirds), but the final movement in bars I and III (see egsemple) does not correspond to the top voice part. I think indicated here is the movement of bass, which may also be testified by the repetition of a vowel in verbal text (I completely exclude a chance or mistake), i.e. two voice parts are united in one draft which indicates to the performer’s polyphonic thinking, inner perception of the vertical (combination of different voices during single-part performance is not a strange occurrence for Georgian singers). If my supposition is correct, we may arrive to the conclusion very important for Georgian musicology: similar principle of polyphonic thinking may be reflected in the neumatic documentation of one voice part.

Polikarpe was not able to chant according to his father’s graphical draft. “*Shen khar venakhi”* as performed by him was documented by Kalistrate Samushia as follows:

***Shein-sheinkharu-veen-aaaaaaaa-khi-aakhlad-damyvaiaaaa-vee-buuuuuuuuu-lii-noru-chei-eienu-keee-tii-li-daaanerguuuuuuuu-lii-aaalo-alo-vordo-msuurneeeeeeeee-lii-saa-mutkhiiiis-piraaaaaiaaghmo-suuuuuuuu-lii-taia-ta-vi-tvisi-mzeeeeee-khaaruu-gadmobrtsqiin-vaa-leeebuliiii*** (Samushia, 2001: 19)7.

As we see this recording is based on the allusion of the accurate number of vowels, and differs from other analogous examples that we have at hand on by the distribution of syllables in the horizontal. For comparison I’d like to introduce a manuscript from the materials of Georgian World War I prisoners at German camps (1917**,** Münster); this belongs to Atanase Gegelia –from the village of Salkhino (Samegrelo) (pic. #2.)8.

Presented in the chart is the first phrase from different variants of *Shen khar venakhi,*  which testifies how different is the Khubulavas’ variant:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Martvili school**  **(the Khubulavas)** | **Gelati School** | **Gelati School** | **Shemokmedi School (Dimitri Patarava)** | **Shemokmedi School (Artem Erkomaishvili)** |
| Shein-shein kharu veen-aaaaaaaa-khi | Shen khar veenaaaakhi (Erqvanidze and Veshapidze, 2003:326) | Shen khar veenaaaaaakhi (Erqvanidze, 2011:151) | Shen khar veenaaaaaakhi  Erqvanidze, 2003:12) | Shen khar veenaaaakhi  (Erqomaishvili, 2005:58) |

At this stage the the performed audio analysis aindicates to its connection with the chant tradition of Shemoknmedi School. Which can be explained by the unity of Guria-Samegrelo Eparchy and togetherness of the disciples from Martvili and Shemokmedi.

The realized experiment clearly confirms Izaly Zemtsovsky’s concept of *Homo Poliphonicus* and testifies to the viability of centuries-old local tradition.

The chants surviving in Polikarpe Khubulava’s musical consciousness testify to the viability of the centuries-old (at least two-century-old) local chant tradition. Their notation and fundamental study is in the lap of the future.

**Notes:**

1. The 2013-2014 interviews are preserved in the author’s personal archive .

Unfortunately these recordings preserved in Moscow are unknown for us. On the educational CDs published by the International centre for Georgian Folk Song Polikarpe Khubulava sings a particular voice part together with other performers.

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It is true, that Polikarpe often visited Gurians (e.g. the Erkomaishvilis), but he never chanted church hymns with them.

Ioane Minchkhi (10th c), Stepane Sananoisdze (10th c), Ioane Mtavarepiskoposi (11th c), Ioane Mesvete (11th c.), Tsminda Mghvdelmtavari Anton Tsagarel-Chqondideli (18th-19th cc), Romanoz Mesvete (19th c), Davit Chqondideli (19th c) and others.

In 19th century Russian church replaced traditional chant with such chant. It is known that Georgians could listen to the church service performed in Georgian language only on Easter day, the Communist regime completely prohibited church service. Chants were moved to families and thus they survived to this day.

“You are a vineyard /newly blossomed/Fresh, young sapling, planted in Eden/ A fragrant poplar, grown in Paradise/ May God adorn you/ no one is more worthy of praise/ you yourself are the sun, shining brilliantly”. The author of the text of *Shen khar venakhi* –the iambus for the Virgin is Demetre I (1125-1156) - the son of King David IV (David the Restorer); he composed the verse when he was a monk at David Gareji Monastery. The author of the tune is unknown. This liturgic chant is performed at matins and is also included in wedding chants.

1. “Oh, swallow beautiful /canary pure/dove gold-colored/ sweet voiced turtle dove/ desert loving/sapling of the desert/Christ’s predecessor, make me fertile for my good deeds”. St. John the Baptist Chant - 29 August-Beheading Day.

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**Audio Examples:**

The materials of the April, 2014 expedition are preserved at the archive of the state Folklore Centre of Georgia.

recorded

1. Mertskhalo, mshveniero (Oh, swallow beautiful) - high voice
2. Mertskhalo, mshveniero - middle
3. Mertskhalo, mshveniero - bass
4. Mertskhalo, mshveniero - attempt of association of voices
5. Qriste agdga (Christ is risen from the dead ) - high voice
6. Qriste agdga – middle
7. Qriste agdga – bass
8. Qriste agdga - attempt of association of voices
9. Shen khar venakhi (You are a vineyard) - high voice
10. Shen khar venakhi – middle
11. Shen khar venakhi – bass
12. Shen khar venakhi - attempt of association of voices

Perf. by Polikarpe Khubulava, 2014, April (preserved at the archive of the state Folklore Centre of Georgia).