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Anaga

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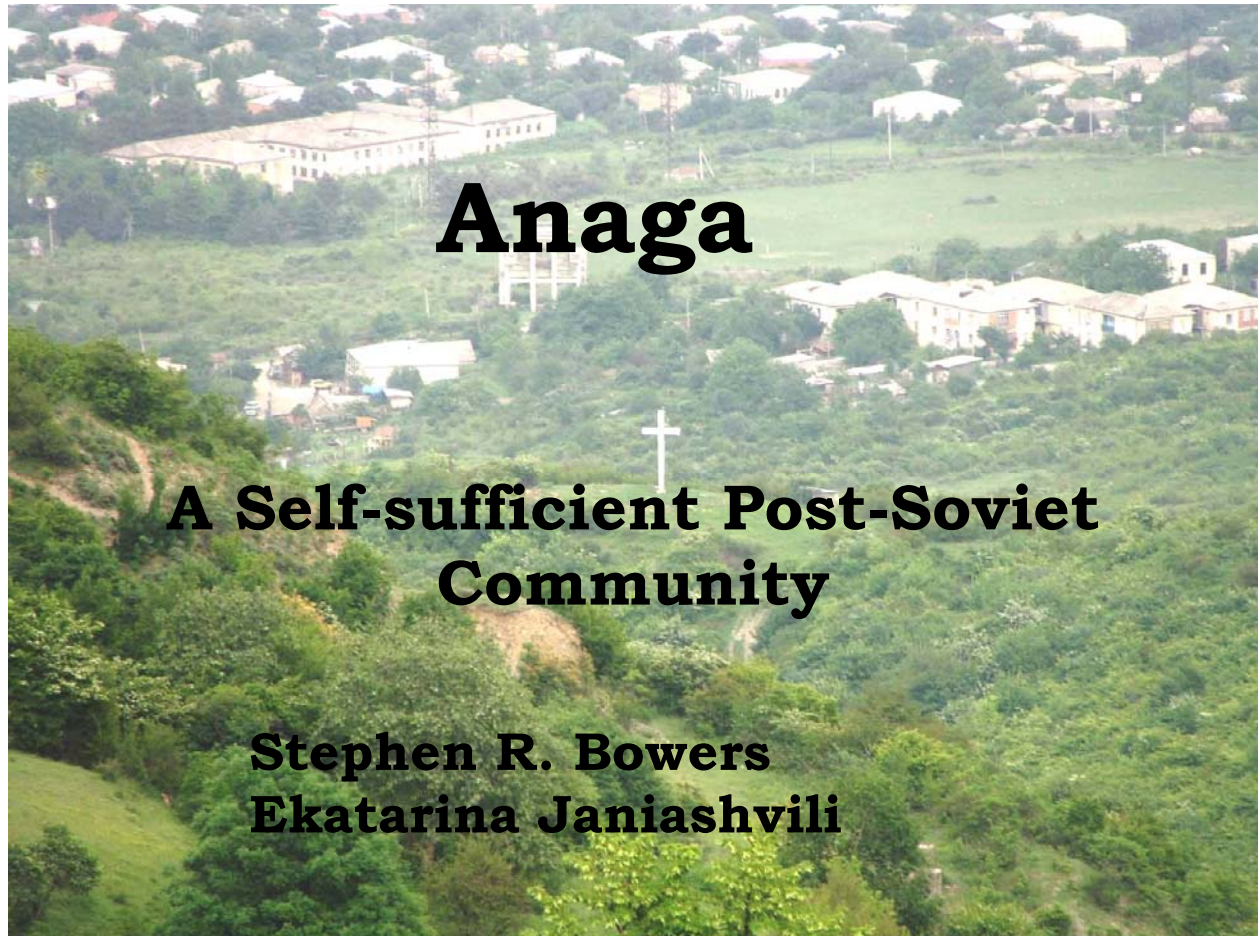
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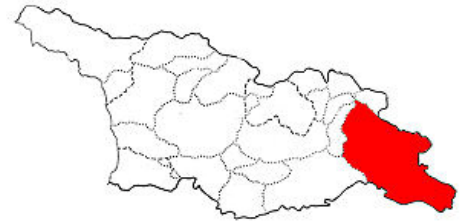
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Anaga

A Self-sufficient Post-Soviet Community

Executive Summary

Anaga is a small Christian community, home to only five hundred and sixty families, and located in the eastern Georgia province of Inner Kakheti.



Political topics are rarely a public passion in Anaga.

They are ethnic Georgians who do not harbor anti-Russian feelings.

Everybody in Anaga has Russian friends and most people speak Russian without any of the resentment common among many non-Russian ex-Soviets.

Anaga's residents support NATO membership because they feel their membership in NATO would promote Georgia's economic development.

Unlike many ex-Soviets, these people do not long for a return of the Soviet system and there is no nostalgia for that period in their history.

Anaga's residents praise President Mikhail Saakashvili as a reformer rather than as an anti-Russian figure.

Within Anaga, roads are not paved and suffer from an apparent absence of any modern engineering efforts.

The financial circumstances of Anaga's residents are modest. Their ability to satisfy so many of their own needs without outside support softens the impact of economic difficulties.

For those living in Anaga, personal relationships have greater meaning than national politics or ethnic identity.

Anaga **A Self-sufficient Post-Soviet Community**

Those who would be students of the Caucasus are immediately struck by the overwhelming geographic, ethnic, linguistic, and political diversity of this region. Georgia is no exception to this condition and represents a challenge to any outsider hoping to find some generalization that might enable him to claim even a minimal understanding of this intensely nationalistic multi-ethnic state.



In recent years, most discussions of Georgia begin and end with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These troubled regions exemplify the disruptions and trauma of post-Soviet politics and claim the attentions of most commentators on developments in the former USSR's south.

Much less is written about Georgia's eastern province, Kakheti, which is bordered in the north by a mountainous region that extends as far as the Russian Federation. Kakheti's eastern and southern neighbor is Azerbaijan and in the west it meets the Georgian province known as Kartli. Kakheti itself is divided between Inner Kakheti to the east and Outer Kakheti to the west. ¹

The collapse of the USSR in 1991 left many unresolved questions about the precise location of Georgian borders, a situation which created a problem regarding Georgia's relationship with neighboring Azerbaijan. In 2006, a dispute arose over ownership of Kakheti's medieval David-Gareja monastery complex whose construction dates back to the 6th century. Under Soviet borders, the complex was divided between Georgia and Azerbaijan, a fact that assumed great and disruptive significance with the collapse of the USSR. The location has historic as well as strategic significance for both Azerbaijan and Georgia so when a Georgian opposition parliamentarian claimed that Azerbaijan had moved its



An overview of Anaga

¹ www.georgien.bilder-album.com

border in order to encroach on the monastery, an international political furor ensued.² Kakheti had emerged into the international arena but in a disruptive fashion.

While political controversies may color our image of Kakheti, the reality of the region is far more tranquil and reflects the struggle of a people coming to terms with their lives in the post-Soviet environment. The reality of conditions in Kakheti is more clearly reflected by the pace of life in villages such as Anaga, a typical, centuries old Kakheti community located along the right bank of the Alazani River in the Signagi region of Inner Kakheti. For residents of this small village, the consistent if mundane concerns are going to work each day, cleaning their modest homes, and feeding their families. Self sufficiency is a matter of their routine and this gives them an ability to endure difficulties. While the community may look relatively primitive, they are more self reliant than residents of the more prosperous and modern Western cities.

Anaga is a small community, home to only five hundred and sixty families. Anaga's residents are Christians who worship on a regular basis in the functional church hall which was erected in recent years. In spite of the suppression of religion during the Soviet era, the community retained its Christian faith even though its practice was seldom a public affair. With the collapse of the communist system, religious devotion is no longer hidden and a Christian heritage is widely recognized as part of the culture of both Anaga and Kakheti. In fact, in Georgia today the Christian Orthodox Church is consistently cited as the most respected of all national institutions.



A worshiper lights a candle in the village church.



Anaga's ancient church

While the Christian spiritual life of Anaga has been revived it must be acknowledged that the architectural splendor of Christianity in this community has yet to be restored. One of the first things a visitor to Anaga will notice is the imposing edifice that once served the spiritual needs of these people. Now in ruins, this building is several centuries old and reflects the commanding presence of Christian Orthodoxy throughout this part of the Caucasus. Although no longer in use, even during

² Diana Petriashvili and Rovshan Ismayilov, "Georgia, Azerbaijan Debate Control of Ancient Monastery's Territory", www.eurasianet.org, 3 November 2006

the Soviet era villagers resisted efforts to have the building dismantled so the stones and lumber of the ancient structure could be used in constructing new buildings.

Also reflective of the spiritual values of Anaga's people is the local cemetery. Always immaculately maintained, the cemetery provides a history of each family and is the focal point for some of the family's most



A mother tends the grave of her son,
the local artist Bondo Janiashvili

important rituals. Elsewhere in the former USSR, graveyards are routinely dotted with markers which display images of the communist era, emblems of the Soviet state or patriotic images. However, in the Anaga cemetery grave stones reflect the Christian roots of a community which has rapidly shed the vestiges of Marxism-Leninism. There are no companies or institutions to maintain the appearance of the cemetery itself or the individual graves.

This function is the exclusive responsibility of each family and the care put into the graves is an indication of familial pride and love for departed family members. Each family purchases the lots it needs in the cemetery and will typically have as many as three, four or even five plots.

Anaga lies in an area long noted for its numerous reminders of the ancient civilization of Kakheti. Although Kakheti became part of the united Georgian kingdom in the 11th century, it had existed as an independent feudal principality for three centuries before that time. Kakheti re-emerged as an independent kingdom in the 15th century and, in 1762, joined with the Kingdom of Kartli in what became known as the Eastern-Georgian Kingdom of Kartl-Kakheti. Telavi, an important city which is not too far from Anaga, was the capitol of that kingdom.³

Just over ten miles from Anaga is the town of Signagi, one of Kakheti's most popular tourist attractions and a tribute to the ingenuity of the industrious people of this region. This small town, with a population of just over 2,000, has been the beneficiary of a major renovation in which all the storefronts have been repainted and the town's once dirt roads have been paved in cobblestone in order to facilitate a look of charm and antiquity.



Anaga's church is a reminder
of the Kartl-Kakheti Kingdom

³ <http://www.georgien.bilder-album.com/home.html>

The resourceful attitudes of Anaga's residents have produced an economic environment that has sustained people in the post-Soviet years. Anaga, while remote, is nevertheless connected with other villages and the main road passing through this region, while not a major thoroughfare, is better than many of the others in Kakheti. Unlike many villages, Anaga is accessible even during the winter months when weather poses challenges to road traffic. The villages through which you travel as you approach Anaga – Vaziani, Sartichala, Patardzeuli, Ninotsminda, Sagaredjo, Tokhliauri, Manavi, Badiaruri, Chalaubani, Melaani, Bakurtsikhe, and Kardenakhi - are typical of those of Inner Kakheti and face similar challenges.



The main road entering Anaga, (*as can be seen from the picture to the left*), is reasonably well maintained. Yet, it is a rural road and twists and turns its way through the rugged terrain. One of the best things to be said of the road is that traffic is not heavy, a fact which minimizes some of the difficulties of this route.



The situation within Anaga, however, is much more difficult. Roads are not paved and wander a path which was cut with the growth of this village over the past century. (*See photo on left*) At an earlier time in history, the main destination of these trails was undoubtedly the church which once served this area. The perimeter of the road is most often marked by the presence of the wall that marks a villager's property line.



Anaga's interior roads suffer from an apparent absence of any modern engineering efforts. As a result, it is not uncommon for small streams to cross the road making them, at least for the pedestrian, almost impassible. Moreover, what are, in fact, roads might be seen as little more than open space between homes.

While most studies of the post-communist transition focus on the national affairs, elections, and sweeping economic reforms, it is in villages throughout the former USSR that one sees the most immediate impact of post-communist governance. In post-Soviet Georgia, the responsibilities of local authorities are broad and include maintaining public law and order, regulating the use of local resources, organizing waste disposal and sanitation, and preserving institutions of cultural



heritage.⁴ At the village level responsibilities are fairly modest. The administration of Anaga is in the hands of an appointed manager. The current manager is Vasil Gogolashvili who is assisted by his deputy, Shota Javaxishvili. Operating out of a modest building in the center of the village, (see picture on the left) the duties of this pair are fairly extensive and include supervision of

the village's main institutions. The most prominent of those institutions is the village school. Maintaining and heating the building is one of the most daunting tasks with regard to the village school. There is a small teaching staff which must meet the needs of both the youngest and oldest of the children. For those who wish to go beyond this level, it is necessary to plan on a move to Tbilisi. This means finding a home in what has become a fairly expensive city and, for this reason, many of the children have limited educational prospects after high school.



Anaga village school



Wood used for heating the nursery building

Early childhood education in Anaga is conducted in two nursery schools, both of which face the challenges in terms of building maintenance, heating, and insuring that there is an adequately trained staff. As a result of educational reforms undertaken through the Georgian Ministry of Education, there has been a consistent improvement of standards in recent years for Anaga's nursery schools and its village school.

⁴ David Losaberidze, et al, "Local Government in Georgia", *Local Governments in Eastern Europe, in the Caucasus, and Central Asia*, (Central European University Press, 2003) p. 285

The final institutions supervised by the Anaga manager's office are the post office and the museum. Of the two, the museum, (*pictured at left*) named after a local artist, Sandro Axmetelis, represents the greatest challenge but is a special responsibility. Village residents take special pride in the museum and point out that it is a reminder that, while Anaga is geographically remote, it enjoys a place of prominence in Georgian cultural affairs.



Village manager Vasil Gogolashvili also faces an assortment of problems associated with Georgia's post-communist transition. One of those problems is the phenomenon of abandoned homes. The conflict areas such as Abkhazia have had the greatest experience with home abandonment but the problem is not confined to these locations.⁵ Even though Anaga is a small community, it has numerous abandoned dwellings. While the owners may return two or three times a year to check on their property, for the rest of the year local authorities are responsible for ensuring that empty buildings do not become a threat to public health and safety.



An abandoned house in Anaga

The financial circumstances of Anaga's residents are modest. Most are agricultural workers but many are pensioners who receive a monthly payment which ranges from fifty to sixty lari.⁶ Orphans, of whom there are several in Anaga, receive a comparable monthly benefit. The village does not offer many high paying jobs but teaching is one of the better careers. Teachers in the two Anaga nurseries make 200 lari while their school counterparts enjoy a salary of 250 lari.

⁵ Charles A. Kupchan. "Wilted Rose", *The New Republic*, 30 January 2006

⁶ As of 2008, a sixty lari pension would be the exchange equivalent of approximately \$45.

The villagers' modest circumstances would be much more difficult but for their ability to satisfy so many of their own needs without outside



support. While post-Soviet urbanites, like their Western urban counterparts, are dependent on manufactured products provided by stores, Anaga is a picture of self-sufficiency. A brief survey of Anaga's shopping establishments is visible evidence of the villagers' self-reliance. Anaga boasts six small retail outlets which offer a minimal selection of items that most people need. *(See pictures to the left)* While they don't offer many products, the shops are in service every day and typically open early and close very late. The shops are exactly the same as those seen in villages and towns throughout Georgia. In addition to providing basic needs, the small shops are a casual meeting place for neighborhood residents, both the elderly and the young. It is not uncommon to see young boys at the

shop practicing their soccer kicks or just visiting. The atmosphere around the shop is consistently casual and relaxed.

When the season permits and consumer needs are more demanding, there is an alternative to Anaga's half dozen community shops. This is the open air market situated near the center of the village. From day to day, it varies in size depending on which entrepreneur has something to sell. And the products being offered will also vary on the basis of what items have been brought into Anaga either from nearby communities or from the city. For the most part, this market is an outlet for larger quantities of agricultural commodities and represents an important opportunity for



Anaga's open air market

villagers to supplement the fixed incomes that they may be receiving in the form of their regular salaries or their pensions.

As a response to necessity, the people of Anaga produce most of what they eat. Most families have their own garden next to their house and devote a great deal of time and effort to making the garden productive. While the elderly may appear to be the chief gardeners in Anaga, every member of the family is part of this important effort. Production and preparation of food is a domestic responsibility and few people ever have meals in restaurants. Moreover, it is their expectation that they will purchase only those items which they cannot grow. Consequently, even though their incomes are modest, Anaga's resourceful villagers are able to enjoy nutritious meals. The deprivations faced by the urban poor of the former USSR are not a major problem for these self-sufficient people.



Makvala Janiashvili tending her garden at the age of 83

For most Georgians, wine is the most common drink and is something that is generally produced by families who have access to the necessary facilities. In Anaga, production of wine at home is routine and the cultivation of grapes is seen as a basic survival skill. For Georgia, 2008 was one of the best years in history for the grape production and Anaga was no exception to this bountiful harvest. Of course, this bounty did carry a predictable negative consequence in that the price of grapes fell because of the dramatic increase in the quantity of grapes.

Grapes, however, are important for more than the production of wine. Widely recognized as the most popular sweet in Georgian cuisine, churchkhela consists of a string of ten nuts, either walnuts or hazelnuts, dipped repeatedly in a mousse made with freshly squeezed grape juice. Sometimes referred to as "Georgian Snickers", the preparation of churchkhela is very much a family tradition. This is especially



Makvala Janiashvili's grapes (at the top) and her churchkhela (below)



true each September when village children collect grapes to place in baskets throughout the house and select the best grapes for making the mousse for the churchkhela. The core of the churchkhela is a string of ten nuts. Typically, the family will cook them over an open fire in the back yard. *(See picture on the right.)* As soon as the preparation is completed, the churchkheles are placed outside to cool down or they can be stored in a refrigerator. The churchkheles do not spoil and, if family members can be restrained from eating them immediately, these special treats can be kept indefinitely.



Self-sufficiency would not be possible for Anaga without the livestock and other farm animals upon which the villagers depend for fulfilling their nutritional needs. Each morning one of the first sights to greet visitors to



Anaga is a herd of cows being taken to nearby pastures. Most of the milk and meat enjoyed by Anaga's residents come from these cows rather than from provisions brought in from elsewhere. Lambs, pigs, and horses will also be found in this village which enjoys the full benefits of post-Soviet agriculture. Through careful use of their resources, villagers have been able to feed their livestock

and insure their animals' health. Local people are best described as thrifty, self-reliant, and frugal, all qualities which are needed in order to meet the challenge of life after the collapse of the Soviet economic system.

Another important part of the village's food supply is the poultry kept by almost every family. Each spring, as you enter a home in the village, you may be greeted by the sound of chicks being nurtured until they reach the level of maturity that would make outside survival a real possibility.



Since incubators are not generally part of the local equipment for poultry production, each family relies upon its own resources.

In recent years there has been a considerable amount of attention on the prospects for development of pork production in the former Soviet Union. Multinationals such as Smithfield Foods have encouraged speculation about investment in the region.⁷ The farmers of Kakheti are not affected by such discussions. For Anaga, pork production is a matter of economic survival, nutritional necessity, and tradition. It has nothing to do with global markets and has more in common with the private initiatives that flourished along side the Soviet Union's collectivized agricultural system. In Anaga each family does what is necessary to provide food for their pigs and maintain a suitable pen for containing their livestock. There are no religious prohibitions against the consumption of pork and most meals involve the use of at least one or two pig products.



A well-maintained pig pen



Even more significant for Georgian cuisine is the making of bread. It is very rare to find commercially produced bread in the shops in Anaga. As a rule, each family makes its own bread and does so in a manner consistent with the making of bread a century ago. Just as in cooking churchkhelas, villagers use an outdoor fireplace that they have constructed for themselves. (See picture to the left.) The fire is started with wood gathered near the home and must be thoroughly kindled in order to achieve the necessary temperature. Using a precise combination of ingredients which are produced locally, the baker fashions long irregular loaves that contain no preservatives but will retain their flavor and freshness for several days. (See picture to the left.) Each family is

⁷ Fiona Boal, "Competition From East Europe and Beyond", Rabobank International, 245 Park Avenue, New York NY, 10014

able to claim some distinct feature for the bread that they cook and will always take pride in preparing bread in the same way as their ancestors did.

While the homes in Anaga have kitchens, it is important to note that much of the food preparation takes place outside. Villagers enjoy working outside and see it as an important part of the traditions of rural Kakheti. From their village, they can see the Alazani valley and the surrounding mountains that contribute to the region's beauty. This is a vista which includes orchards, vineyards, and pastures. Much of the traffic is either carts pulled by donkeys and horses or the slow moving Soviet era tractors or automobiles owned by the more fortunate villagers. As you walk through Anaga, you notice the smells of back yard cooking and the laughter of families enjoying a life that could not be altered by the brutality of seven decades of communist rule.

Therefore, most homes feature the facilities needed for preparing food outside. A simple wash basin and an appropriate and clean surface for the preparation of meals are essential components for enjoyment of the privileges of village life in Kakheti. *(See pictures on the right.)* While many other places in the former Soviet Union struggle to build a life modeled on something in Western Europe, Anaga's residents embrace a life-style that has preserved the best cultural traditions of Kakheti and recognized the importance of family and Christian faith in the 21st century. People have been living in this place for centuries and, therefore, it should not be surprising that some of their deepest values are those which can be traced back well before what we think of as the time of modern Georgia.



By some measures, Anaga's residents are relatively isolated. Certainly, the village is not on one of Georgia's main highways and is linked with the outside world primarily by mini-buses which serve Anaga's public transportation needs. Automobile ownership is becoming more common in Anaga and, as of this time, one third of the families can boast ownership of a car. They are aware of the dispute over Kakhati's medieval

David-Gareja monastery complex but they are not likely to visit the monastery with great frequency. The development of modern post-Soviet commerce is inhibited by the fact that there are no banks in Anaga and if a resident has need of the more sophisticated financial transactions, he will have to use one of the village's few cars or take a mini-bus to nearby Signagi. Most Anaga residents are employed in agriculture, enjoy only modest earnings, and have little need for banking. The only people who have good salaries are those who serve as representatives or officials of the village administration.

The villagers are aware of politics but political topics are rarely a public passion in Anaga. They know that Georgia is involved in serious disputes with neighboring Russia, but this is not something that they discuss often or with great fervor. In the same way, they know that Georgia's leadership is seeking membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Generally, Anaga's residents support NATO membership, not because they see it as protection from Russia, but because they feel their membership in NATO would promote Georgia's economic development. The village's



Anaga's residents have developed innovative approaches to overcoming transportation problems

population is composed of ethnic Georgians and the sign you see upon entering Anaga is written in Georgian and English, not Georgian and Russian as you still see in many places. They are proud of their Georgian heritage but they do not harbor anti-Russian feelings. When asked about the best days in her life, 83 year-old Makvala Janiashvili, who has spent most of her life as a Soviet citizen, says that the Rose Revolution of 2003 was one of her happiest days. For her the Rose Revolution was not an anti-Russian event but simply the final necessary step in a repudiation of the Soviet era. Unlike many ex-Soviets, these people do not long for a return of the Soviet system and there is no nostalgia for that period in their history. Looking toward the future, Anaga's residents have a great regard for President Mikhail Saakashvili because they believe his policies have given them better lives. They do not praise him as an anti-Russian figure but as a reformer. Everybody in Anaga has Russian friends and

most people speak Russian without any of the resentment common among many non-Russian ex-Soviets.

For those living in Anaga, friendship has greater meaning than national politics or ethnic identity. People are not judged by their political



Makvala Janiashvili enjoys a picnic with members of her family in May, 2008

orientations. Of greatest importance for them is the family, the rituals associated with family life, and the time spent among family members. This is a traditional society which venerates the heritage of Kakheti. Their main demand of the political system under which they live is that it should enable them to maintain a culture that is distinctively Georgian and a spiritual life that is devoutly Christian.

Many people would regard Anaga's residents as sentimental and romantic. If so, this is an accusation that most of them would not deny. They still tell the story of how the village got its name. According to the legend, a boy in the settlement that is now Anaga loved a young girl named Ana. Another young man was jealous of the boy and, out of spite and anger, he attacked the boy who, mortally wounded, slowly made his way to Ana's home. He fell at her door, barely able to speak, and when she appeared, the only words he could utter sounded like "Anaga". For this reason, legend maintains that the villagers named their settlement Anaga.

There is a romanticism about Anaga. It is reflected in a steadfast belief in their culture, their country, their families, and their community. They express this romanticism in a determination to maintain their lives in the face of adversity and in the absence of external supports demanded by so many people in modern society. They are a people who will do for themselves before asking that others come to their assistance. Yet, having little in the way of material wealth, the villagers readily offer assistance to others, not only in their community but those who are strangers.

About the Authors

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Stephen Bowers and Ekatarina Janiashvili in Georgia's Kakheti province

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