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Kitaani: Georgian Ossetians

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## Kitaani: Georgian Ossetians

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In January, 2008, Georgian elections were a significant step in the resolution of the political crisis which has plagued this post-Soviet state since the collapse of the USSR in 1991. The crisis has been exacerbated by accusations of corruption, charges of human rights violations, and inter-ethnic tensions that have become tangled with the complex of Caucasus politics. Abkhazia and Ossetia, two of the ethnic hotspots noted as Gorbachev's reforms were destabilizing the Soviet Union, represented key challenges to Georgia's political maturity.

The world first learned of Ossetia in the final days of the Soviet Union when ethnicity, long the concern of ethnologists and few others, emerged as a driving force that was changing maps



throughout the region. In January, 1991, Tskhinvali, the capitol of South Ossetia, became a battle ground on which Georgian troops fought Ossetian militants determined to lead their community out of Georgia and eventually merge with North Ossetia in Russia. A military deadlock

in Tskhinvali was matched by a political deadlock when the Speaker of the South Ossetian Supreme Soviet, Torez Kulumbegov, was invited to meet with Georgian officials but was arrested immediately upon his arrival in Tbilisi.

The conflict was soon escalated by the imposition of a Georgian economic blockade against the Ossetian rebel region and a counter blockade against Georgian villages by Ossetians. Atrocities were commonplace; the number of fatalities was measured in hundreds while 80,000 refugees gathered on the Georgian-Russian frontier. In 1992, the violence increased, soon involving both Georgian and Russian personnel as well as Russian politicians who spoke out on behalf of the Ossetian rebels. When the Georgian military overthrew Georgian President Zviad



Villagers have learned to provide basic necessities for themselves.

Gamsakhurdia, there was a ceasefire in Ossetia which was enforced by a Joint Control Commission and joint Russian – Georgian – Ossetian (South and North Ossetian) military patrols. Over the next decade Ossetia seemed to be drifting further and further from Georgia and many realists in the Georgian government began to suggest that it was lost for all time. At one point, Ossetian-Georgian tensions led to accusations by the South Ossetian separatists that Georgia was responsible for interruption of their water supply and threats that they would cut off water for nearby Georgian villages. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Water dispute heightens tension between Georgia and separatist South Ossetia”, *Associated Press*, 31 May 2007.

However, by 2006, even in the wake of a South Ossetian independence referendum, there were indications that this trend did not mean the alienation of all Ossetians from Georgia. As Western powers condemned the referendum, Georgia moved to establish an alternative South Ossetian administration loyal to Tbilisi and representing a “different voice” in Ossetian society. In order to generate support for this alternative approach, Vladimir Sanakoev helped found the Salvation Union of South Ossetia.<sup>2</sup> This organization, led by critics of Eduard Kokoity, the leader of the secessionist South Ossetia regime, organized an alternative presidential election in November 2006 in which Vladimir Sanakoev was elected as head of the provisional administration of a pro-Tbilisi South Ossetian regime with its headquarters in Kurta, a small town near Tskhinvali.

The reality of the situation is best illustrated by an examination of the nature of Ossetian communities in Georgia. Only by understanding the lives of those for whom political pronouncements matter less than the availability of basic goods and services can we have an understanding of what it means to be an Ossetian in Georgia.



31 August 2007: Eka Janiashvili (left) with Zura Khetashvili (right)

In May, 2007, the authors of this paper visited eastern Georgia and, in August, Eka Janiashvili, who is the Georgian representative for the Center for Security and Science, returned to the region to visit Kitaani, an Ossetian village which is located in eastern Georgia. Kitaani is 120

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<sup>2</sup> “Signs of Status Quo Change in S.Ossetia”, *Civil Georgia* / 20, 14 November 2006.

kilometers from Kakheti near the road that leads to Chumlaki, a small town in the Gurgaani region. Most of Kitaani's inhabitants are Ossetians. Five years ago the village was home to five hundred and twenty people but now that number has declined to four hundred and thirty. Only a few of the people are Georgian. Kitaani's predominant language is Georgian but they can also speak Ossetian as well as some Russian.

Rural regions of the former USSR have all suffered from demographic pressures which force people into urban areas in search of opportunities. Kitaani's population decline has resulted in the evacuation of some houses but their owners do return for visits at least two times each year. First, they return in order to cultivate their grounds and plant crops and, second, they visit Kitaani to harvest the crops they planted earlier in the year.

The collapse of the Soviet system brought with it the disruption of local



Three of the villagers who discussed issues affecting Kitaani's future

government in many of the newly independent states. Not surprisingly, Kitaani does not have a formal political structure but has informally chosen its leadership on the basis of trust. Zura Khetashvili is Kitaani's leader and enjoys the respect and love of the villagers. When asked about his specific duties, Khetashvili explains that he is responsible for the

welfare of all the village residents. Decisions within the village are made after informal consultation with all those who have an interest that will be affected by what the leadership does. While the post-communist Caucasus region is noted for the volatility of ethnic relationships, Kitaani's Ossetians are not motivated by confrontational concerns. Their

community agenda is focused on practical matters that are relevant to their daily lives.

Like most Ossetians, the villagers understand Ossetia's identification with Tskhinvali, but looking beyond their village their hopes are for a peaceful resolution of differences associated with the Ossetian conflict. They also recognize a special kinship with nearby Ossetian villages but their allegiance is with the Georgian nation. An important expression of that allegiance is their enthusiastic support for Georgia's president, Mikheil Saakashvili. Villagers regard President Saakashvili as someone who respects the Ossetian people and is working to enhance their welfare. According to village leader Zura Khetashvili, the President has declared himself to be "super Ossetian" in response to any people who profess not to love the Ossetians.

The village's enthusiasm for the Saakashvili administration is matched by their support for the Provisional Administration of South Ossetia which, as noted above, was created as a result of the efforts of the Salvation Union of South Ossetia and in opposition to the pro-Russian South Ossetian regime. In 2006, Dmitri Sanakoev, the head of the Provisional Administration, came to Kitaani in order to meet with the



The old Elia tree in Kitaani

residents and discuss their needs. Sanakoev pledged his support for the village and promised to use his influence to secure the services needed by the village. Zura Khetashvili feels that, as a result of this visit, there is now a realistic hope for a better life in Kitaani and renewed optimism about their future.

As Ossetians, Kitaani's residents are well aware of the dispute between Georgia and Russia and the way in which the Ossetian community is involved in that dispute. The village's older generation, schooled in the Soviet period, has invested little thought in either anti-Russian or anti-Georgian diatribes. Their attention and hopes are focused on Russo-Georgian negotiations. They believe Georgia is both powerful and peaceful in its intentions and that compromise with Russia is possible and desirable. In contrast, the village youth see danger in Russo-Georgian talks and hope that Georgia can resolve issues about the future of Ossetia without outside involvement.

There is no functioning church in Kitaani and if someone wants to participate in a formal church setting, he must travel outside the village.



Base of Elia tree at which villagers consumed pork

Yet, faith plays an important role for the people of Kitaani. Most of the residents are Orthodox Christian but there are also Baptists and even members of a pagan cult known as the Iaghoviens. There are no Muslims in Kitaani or even in the area around the village.

While most people describe themselves as Christian, the pagan roots of Kitaani are seen in the persistence of pre-Christian traditions. The most important of the pagan traditions is their worship of a “sacred” tree which they have named Elia. The word Elia is a reference to a “god of harvest” and this tree is seen as the guarantor of bountiful harvests. Villagers believe that if they pray to Elia, the tree will protect their orange

groves from the frequent hail storms which can have devastating consequences for local harvests.

There are actually two sacred trees in Kitaani. This situation came about because the original Elia tree suffered the loss of a limb one afternoon. Upon seeing this large limb on the ground, one villager took part of that limb to his home in order to make use of it. Shortly



These orange orchards are the object of Elia's protection

afterward, his only son fell ill and died. Although bees had built a nest in the villager's section of the limb and used it for the production of honey, the family felt that they suffered because of their use of the sacred tree for non-sacred purposes. Shortly after the boy's tragic death, a group of villagers sat underneath the tree to eat a meal which included pork. There is no Georgian cultural prohibition against eating pork in sacred places but because a hail storm hit the village and devastated the village's orchards almost immediately after the meal, the villagers concluded that they had angered Elia by consuming pork at that place just as they had angered the sacred tree when they had touched part of it with an ax. Shortly afterward, a fortune teller whom they consulted advised them to select a new tree to be the village's sacred tree.

The new Elia tree is located near the old one, just fifty meters from it. The road leading to the new tree is blessed with numerous plants which boast succulent berries, a fact that supported the villagers' selection of this tree as a successor to the original sacred tree. They recognize this tree as being just as impressive and beautiful as the original one and feel that the wisdom of this choice has been affirmed by the absence of the

hail storms which have routinely devastated local harvests. Shortly after the selection of this tree, a limb fell from the tree just as one had fallen from the previous tree. Having learned their lesson, villagers refused to touch the fallen limb and left it on the ground where it landed. They have continued to care for this tree by lighting candles which they place beneath its branches. The tree serves as the focus of their prayers for plentiful harvests and prosperity.



Kitanni's new sacred tree

When villagers felt they had been successful in appeasing the anger of their sacred tree, they rejoiced in a renewed sense of security. This victory, however, did not eliminate Kitaani's difficulties and, like most people in the former USSR, residents of this remote village continue to enjoy something that is significantly less than complete happiness. Because of their geographical isolation and the normal structure of modern life, they miss their relatives who have left the village in search of opportunities. Only a few of the villagers' children, brothers, or sisters are able to return to Kitaani for visits. The breakup of the old Soviet Union means that many of them live in what may be a foreign country now and the complicated visa regulations are yet another barrier to maintaining the desired close contacts with their relatives. It is important to note that in facing these difficulties, Kitaani's Ossetians are no different from the Georgians living in that region. The problems are one of the factors which unite rather than divide the members of both ethnic groups.

While Tbilisi and Moscow are far away, villagers are aware of the controversies that swirl around the Georgian-Russian relationship and



A fallen branch from the new Elia remains untouched on the ground

the impact those controversies have on their lives. They speak of their desire for a peaceful resolution of those disputes just as they express a mundane but compelling need for better roads to link their village to the outside world. They are concerned that the village be served by

good schools and kindergartens so their children can receive an adequate education without leaving. For Kitaani's residents, cultural identity is strong and the most urgent popular requirements are not political. They

greet both friends and newcomers in the Georgian language with "Gamarjoba", a term often translated as "be victorious". This is the salutation of a people whose situation has forced them to face each day as a challenge and,



Khinkali or meat dumplings are a tradition of eastern Georgian cuisine.

in striving for victory they are not thinking in political terms. The people of Kitaani maintain the tradition of *Supra*, sometimes known simply as the *Georgian table*, as a means of social interaction with friends and family. The head of the table offers flowery, philosophical toasts to which each guest must respond in kind.

Like most Georgian people, the residents of Kitaani do not enjoy an abundance of worldly goods. Yet, they share what they have with visitors, displaying a warmth and generosity unsurpassed by any other people. Visitors can always count on receiving generous helpings of Khinkali or meat dumplings, and the welcoming smiles for which the people of eastern Georgia have long been noted.

14 February 08



For the villagers, Georgian bread is more than a necessity of life.