

## **Part 3: Vodka and Beer**

### **Chapter 5**

#### **Stolen Vodka and Sacred Beer**

‘Vodka is the drink of devils’

--Khevsur saying

Georgia’s northern border is formed by the high peaks of the Caucasus mountains, where there are villages higher than any in Europe. Amongst Georgians of the plains, these mountainous regions have become legendary as being places of mystery and romance, living museums, where, it is said, ancient traditions of the Georgians, since lost in the plains, have long been preserved. Or so the story goes. In reality, the mountainous villages of Khevsureti have participated fully in modern Georgian history, often fatefully.<sup>i</sup> The highland region of Khevsureti, a center of Georgian national mythology, was entirely depopulated in the 1950s at the command of Stalin, and the population entirely moved to the plains. Ironically, socialist era films that popularized the idea of these mountain regions as being places of romanticism and exoticism were themselves only made possible by this depopulation, which turned inhabited highland villages into uninhabited picturesque settings for films set in the pre-socialist period (Manning 2007b).

The story I am telling in this chapter deals mostly with the period before these events, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when the contemporary

lifestyle of the mountains was coming to be imagined by Georgian ethnographers as a still image of unchanging tradition in explicit opposition to the modernity of the plains, later becoming an officially sanctioned socialist image of the idealized national past. Many of the ethnographic accounts we have from this period are the work of indigenous ethnographers. These insider accounts give us a unique picture of the private side of indigenous life neglected by outsiders. These include local traditions of romance, called *sts'orproba*, which are constituted by the parallel circulation of both vodka and poetry. The ethnographic description of these traditions of romance, as I have argued elsewhere, adapted in novels and films, helped reimagine Khevsureti as being a place of romance and mystery rather than poverty and backwardness, a matter which I will discuss in the next chapter. In this chapter, instead, I want to discuss this indigenous form of romance before its romanticization in novels and films. I will show how the local economy of love is also an economy of poetry and of drink, constituting a minor, subaltern sphere of circulation in which the agents are girls, whose stolen vodka, love poems, and crushes forms a private sphere of circulation opposed to the indigenous public sphere mediated by beer and epic poetry in which older men represent the community as a whole.

As in the plains, in the mountains most rituals of daily life are attended by feasts accompanied by ritualized drinking. However, in the plains the ritual drink par excellence is wine (sometimes vodka), while beer is an entirely profane, everyday drink, not suitable for ritual consumption at all. In the mountains of Khevsureti, however, beer takes the pride of place as the sacred, ritual drink, and vodka is the everyday drink, though it too, has ritual contexts of consumption. Because vodka takes on its values in relationship to beer, and the respective contexts of production, circulation and

consumption of these drinks, ritual and non-ritual, to understand vodka we also need to understand beer.

Given that the Khevsurs say that “vodka is the drink of devils”, it would seem that they have a rather dim view of vodka. One might think that they consider it evil, to be avoided, much as when we speak of ‘the demon drink’, in reference to its destructive capabilities. For example, Khevsurs frequently blame vodka, in much the same way as they blame women, for the frequent fighting and dueling between young men that attends social events (Baliauri 1991: 127, for example). But Khevsurs do not shun vodka: any ritual that involves drinking (and most of them do) will involve large quantities of home brewed vodka as well as the “ritual” drink, beer. Vodka is held in high esteem, and is respected, even in spite of its “demonic” properties. As I demonstrate, the valuation of the opposition between beer and vodka reflects a rigidly dualistic cosmology in which gender oppositions are central. If beer is the drink of masculine shrine divinities (called “children of god” *khvtisshvilebi*, also called *jvari* “crosses”, *khati* “icons” or in tandem *jvar-khati*), the ritual drink used to mediate the relations between these divinities and humans, then vodka, in a sense, as the opposite of beer, must be “the drink of devils”.

Beer and vodka stand for, constitute, and mediate different kinds of social relations, different trajectories of social circulation. Beer stands for the idealized image of the community as a whole produced in rituals where beer is the primary drink, while vodka is the image of social relationships between individuals, such relations between hosts and guests, or between lovers. Beer is also the image of what one might think of an indigenous public sphere of ritual activity, one in which the men of the community take on a kind of “representative publicness”, a part of the community representing (in

“public” contexts of ritual and battle) the whole community. By contrast, vodka is associated with private relations between individuals and families within the community. Beer is an image of the social, vodka of the sociable (compare Karp 1980:84 on beer as image of the social among the Iteso).

### **Stolen vodka and stolen kisses: the economics of adolescent romance.**

But vodka is most associated with indigenous Khevsur practices of premarital romance, *sts'orproba*, a kind of premarital dalliance between young people who are ineligible to be married to one another. (The practice certainly did not survive the relocation of the Khevsurs to the plains under Stalin, so it needs to be reminded that all the accounts of it, whenever they were ultimately published, date from the 1930s at the latest.) Among the Khevsurs,

*Sts'orproba* begins this way: a woman goes with one bottle of vodka to like down with a boy, even if they don't know each other close up and only like each other from afar. First—kissing, lying in each others arms, hugging and caressing with great shyness and restraint happens, but later, when they little by little get to know one another, this hugging and kissing becomes freer (Tevdoradze 1930: 131).

Such gifts of vodka form an important motif in the poetry associated with *sts'orproba*.

The following Khevsur poem makes the role of a gift of stolen vodka clear, but is one of many of its type:

When the dark of the night has come, a woman rejoices in her heart,  
She longs to see her *dzmobili* [boyfriend], it would be hard to keep her away,  
The lad as well, full of eagerness, cannot take time to eat his meal.  
He goes and readies the bed for her, lays the sheets, fluffs up the straw,  
Heart is working its magic on heart; at the same time, he is thinking  
“Could it be, she will not come, or that something has gone awry?”  
The woman approaches, with quiet steps, she draws not a rustle from the straw.  
In her hand she carries a bottle of vodka, stolen from her home.  
(Tevdoradze 1930: 139-40; the translation is adapted from Tuite 2000: 42)

The partners of this relationship sometimes call each other *sts'orperi* (particularly if the relationship is more casual), but if the bond deepens, the term *dzmobili* “sworn brother” is used for *both* the boyfriend and the girlfriend (the term “sworn sister” *dobili*, unlike a true sworn sibling relationship, is not used in the context of this relation for the girl partner). To avoid confusing this relationship with a true sworn sibling relationship, the term *sandauri dzmobili* “desired sworn brother” is used to distinguish the romantic relationship from non-romantic sworn siblinghood that occurs with same sex partners (Baliauri 1991: 8).

The similar terminology can be confusing, so it is worth making clear how the terminology used in romantic relations differs from artificial kinship. Normally, the term *dzmobiloba* (the relationship of sworn brothers, *dzmobili*) would denote a kind of artificial kinship between young men. The feminine equivalent is *dobiloba* (the relationship between sworn sisters, *dobili*). If the sworn sibling relationship involves a boy or a girl, or if one wants to talk about both kinds of sworn siblinghood, the whole set of artificial siblinghood relations are called *dobil-dzmobiloba* “sworn sister-brotherhood” or “sworn siblinghood” (Baliauri 1991: 8-9, Ochiauri 1980: 208). Like the romantic relationship, sworn siblinghood can be an elective expression of closeness and friendship between two boys or two girls (or even a girl and a boy) who might, for example, be from different villages (Ochiauri 1980: 210-211). There are strategic uses of non-romantic sworn siblinghood as well, each of which link this friendship to the romantic “boyfriend-girlfriend” version. For example, the sworn sibling relationship can be forced upon two young men to reconcile them after a fight (Ochiauri 1980: 210-211, Baliauri 1991: 125), and whatever young men might say was the cause of the fight, jealousy and romantic

competition relating to *sts'orproba* often figures as a major (concealed) motive alongside simple drunkenness (Baliauri 1991: 126-7). In other cases, girls from different villages might become sworn siblings, or force their brothers to become sworn siblings with a particular boy in another village, in order to provide excuses for visiting that village to facilitate *sts'orproba* with that boy or another boy there (Ochiauri 1980: 210).

If practice places these two relationships that are both called “sworn brotherhood” (*dzmobiloba*) into a curious functional complementarity, Khevsur myths of the origins of *sts'orproba* link them genealogically. According to the Khevsur myth, the cross-sex romantic dalliance of *dzmobiloba* grew out of functional necessity because of the constant danger of enemy attacks, which forced boys and girls to sleep in close proximity. As a result of the sexual dangers of this close physical proximity, such boys and girls, it is said, were made to swear oaths of siblinghood (Baliauri 1991: 8-9). One might see here an explanation for the curious fact that in the cross-sex relationship both the boy and the girl call each other “sworn brother”, as if the romantic possibilities of the relationship were being erased by neutralizing the opposed genders of the partners, treating the girl, as well as the boy, as “brothers”.

Both kinds of *dzmobiloba* relationship (boyfriend-girlfriend and sworn-siblinghood) share a feature other than using the same terminology in Khevsureti: Both kinds of relationship are *initiated* by drinking vodka together, and in general vodka is the fuel of both relationship types throughout.<sup>ii</sup> In the constant visiting that characterizes both relationships, a *dzmobili* (the party in motion) ‘goes with vodka’ (*araqit misvla*) when visiting another *dzmobili*, whether the *dzmobili* is actually a girl visiting her lover with a

bottle at night, secretly, or a boy visiting his sworn brother by day, openly (Ochiauri 1980: 208-211).<sup>iii</sup>

Both relationships are marked by other gift exchanges between the partners, called *sadzmobilo/sadobilo* gifts (gifts for the *dzmobili/dobili*). In both romantic and non-romantic forms of *dzmobiloba*, the person that receives this gift of vodka (*sadzmobilo* or *sadobilo* vodka) from the visitor will respond with a *sadzmobilo* gift in turn, an object which is kept to remember the other, in the case of true sworn brothers, a copper pot, a short sword, or some weapon, given openly for all to see (Ochiauri 210: 210); in the case of a *dzmobili* girlfriend, in addition to saving him bottles of vodka, she will sew and embroider gifts for him (secretly, often when she is supposed to be working). In addition, her *dzmobili* boyfriend will carve wooden objects for her own use, and give her silk scarves, silver rings, and accordions. Unlike the other series of gifts for the non-romantic version of the relationship, which are given openly, all of these boyfriend-girlfriend *sadzmobilo* gifts are given indirectly and secretly. The girl gives the boy things by the hand of an “ambassador” (the person who also arranges romantic trysts), the boy through some relative (Baliauri 1991: 64-5). This is an important difference between the two forms of *dzmobiloba*: the same sex relationship, we might say, is publicly recognized, the opposite sex relationship is secretive, furtive, and private.

The vodka is almost always “stolen”, vodka which has been furtively taken out of the world of open exchange, and hidden for private purposes. For Khevsur girls, stealing and saving vodka for the boyfriend is a sign of love, of pining, of marking time apart and expectation of time spent together in the future. As Barthes (1978) describes the Western lover’s predicament: “The lover's fatal identity is precisely: I am the one who waits”, and

if anything this is even more true of the Khevsur lover. It is also part of a relationship of reciprocity, for the just as the woman saves for the man a stolen bottle of vodka, so the man will bring the woman *sadzmobilo* gifts, as in this poem:

He brought you for your *sadzmobilo*, a three ruble music box,  
You in turn saved for him a bottle of sparkling vodka.  
(Ochiauri 1980: 125)

Such *sadzmobilo* gifts, gifts like silver rings, which are given by boys to girls and girls to boys, are kept as reminders of the relationship. The silver ring is worn publicly, but its significance is hidden. If asked, they will say the ring was a gift from a deceased relative and they keep it as a reminder. Other objects, woven or carved gifts especially, are also kept as durable reminders, in fact, carefully kept to be carried to the grave.

Keeping the gift is a sign of devotion, giving it is a test: the boy takes a ring off his finger and gives it to the girl, saying “You will keep it, you know, you won’t keep it, you know”. Sometimes a boy will test a girl in a casual dalliance by offering her or asking from her a ring, to see if she will assent. If she gives such a ring, in a context where there is no trust, he might then give it to someone else, which would be insulting to her (Baliauri 1991: 123). Sometimes a boy will test a girl by making a secret mark on the ring, so he will recognize it if she gives it, in turn, to someone else. If he sees it on another’s hand, he will become angry, and sometimes challenge the other boy by throwing a cup of vodka or beer in his face, if they are at a drinking event. The ensuing fight will be brutal, but no one will know precisely why they are fighting. This is one of the many ways that men’s dueling is secretly fueled by romance.



Sometimes they will be forcibly reconciled (somewhat ineffectively) by being forced to become sworn brothers (again, with vodka), but it will not be really resolved until the girl somehow gets the ring back from the other boy. Upon getting it back, the girl will smash the ring with a stone, wrap it in something, and send it back to the boy who gave it (Baliauri 1991: 67-9). The same scenario of a twice-given ring is possible for girls, too, but girls have fewer sanctions to ensure the return of the ring. The situation may similarly degenerate into a fist fight between the girls and threats directed at the boy, which, however, are not taken seriously by the boy (Baliauri 1991: 70).

Both boys and girls can give and receive silver rings as *sadzmobilo* gifts, but only girls steal and hide bottled vodka for boys (Baliauri 1991: 65). Vodka keeps indefinitely, and keeping vodka can be used to mark time spent waiting for a moment when it can be given. A saved up bottle of vodka can be a haunting reminder of a future event of drinking together that never materialized. In the following, a poem composed by a jilted lover, the vodka the girl saved for seven weeks will now be drunk with someone else, where they will drink toasts with that same vodka to the faithless one, until dawn. But the vodka here is poured for another girl, not a boy. Just as a ring, once given, can never be worn again by anyone else, but must be smashed with a rock, vodka saved by a girl for a boy cannot be consumed with another boy, the only way to get rid of it is to drink it with a girl (Baliauri 1991: 155 and below)

When you told me, that you lied to me, 'I will come in autumn'  
I had a bottle of vodka awaiting you.  
Seven weeks have gone by, a sliver got stuck in my throat,  
I will pour for Melania, your toast,  
We will take turns drinking, we will drink til dawn.  
(Baliauri 1991: 155)

Far from being the “drink of devils”, vodka seems much more like “the drink of lovers”.

But vodka is also a pervasive mediator and sign of relations of sociability of all kinds.

Vodka, like beer, is a pervasive drink, needed for every sort of social ritual event, and is brewed by the average family forty times a year at least:

[B]ecause without vodka, by local rule, nothing can be done, neither the cost of a funeral, nor weddings, nor reconciling enemies, neither women can become sworn sisters nor men can become sworn brothers, regard cannot be shown for relatives, nor sowing nor harvest and many other customs. Everything requires vodka, beer is required on the other hand for more heavy and serious matters, but even then vodka is also considered necessary. Khevsurs have a good opinion of vodka. (Baliauri 1991: 154)

Beer has a specialized ritual function, but still, vodka is everywhere where beer is, and everywhere it isn't too. If vodka and brewing vodka are pervasive generalized signs of sociability, vodka has a particular heightened, and somewhat opposed, significance for young women, corresponding to the heightened expression of sociability associated with romance. Bottles of vodka are the generalized currency of romance, and hence when and where vodka is being brewed, there too are young women, seeking to beg, borrow or steal special bottles of vodka:

When a family brews vodka, if they have a young woman in the household, she asks, ‘Please fill me one *mina* (bottle, lit ‘glass’)!’ and tries to ensure that they fill it with good vodka. She asks parents and brothers alike for this. Sometimes even fellow villagers will fill a bottle of vodka for a young woman, uncles and cousins will joke with her, ‘when I am suffering, then give me some to drink!’ But in reality they cannot be given back the vodka she has requested. They say this in jest. (Baliauri 1991: 154)

They will also tease her to “Have whoever you pour this vodka for say a toast to me,” knowing she will do no such thing. Since girls will always have saved up bottles of good

vodka hidden somewhere, a guest might joke with a young girl “I don’t want this vodka, pour me the saved up bottled vodka of the girls!”

The vodka of girls is “stolen” because it is taken out of general circulation of the rest of the vodka of the household. For men, vodka is the generalized currency of hospitality and sociability: its value derives from its open-handed expenditure. At weddings, for example, the hosts must not only brew considerable quantities of beer, but they must make a massive prestation of bottled vodka; the groom (*nepe*) must personally give a bottle of vodka to each guest which they use to drink a toast to him (Makalatia 1984:171, 173). Men traveling to visit friends and relatives will always “go with vodka” (*arqit misvla*), and they also will carry “road vodka” (*sagzao araqi*) and must offer vodka to everyone they meet, even if the vodka is needed at the destination. For men not to do so is considered to be quite shameful, stingy, or “mother-minded” (*deda-chk’ua*). Apparently, open-handed generosity is a masculine virtue, contrasted with feminine stinginess (Ochiauri 1980: 7, 14-15). But girls are not stingy, because their vodka is stolen and hidden away. The stolen vodka of girls is withdrawn from general consumption and saved in small glass bottles for personal use. It no longer belongs to the generalized reciprocity, the public sphere of masculine generosity, which is directed to kin, friends and strangers alike. The stolen vodka of girls is a private gift, a gift hidden away and saved up for intimates. The road vodka carried by men is often quite weak. It is carried to protect the better vodka to be drunk at the destination, since men who are traveling must offer each person they pass on the road a drink of vodka, thus revealing a hidden masculine stinginess as well. However, gifted vodka, the begged or stolen vodka of girls, must always be the best and the strongest. The same drink takes on different

values because it has different trajectories in exchange. Men must give vodka freely to all and sundry (hence the need for weak, watery “road vodka” addressed “to whom it may concern” to protect the good vodka that has specific addressees). In contrast, girls not only save the vodka they have been given, they also save vodka stolen when and where they can from whomever they can (Baliauri 1991: 154). The jokes directed at young women draw attention to the inapplicability of principles of masculine generosity to the begged, stolen, saved up vodka of girls: the important thing is not the means by which she gets it, but that once she has it, she hides it, saves it. Vodka is at once both the medium of masculine generalized reciprocity and its feminine opposite.

The Khevsur girl saves vodka, but for whom? A girl will bring her vodka out for special guests, she will bring it out when the young people gather apart from the adults, and especially, if the girl has a *dzmobili* in the village, she brings it to him, if they meet alone. But here the practice is a little different, because unlike in the other cases, it is not consumed, or rather, the boy drinks a little, and saves the rest: “The boy will in turn take this vodka and drink it with two or three other friends, though none will ask who brought him this vodka, nor will he himself say. But he is pleased that girls save vodka for him” (Baliauri 1991: 154-5). The girl saves vodka for her specific boy, as a sign for him and him alone; the boy in turn freely distributes this vodka in a more typically masculine manner among his friends, without identifying the source, but for a boy to have vodka is usually in itself a sign of a girl’s prior gift of vodka. The individual sharing can become a general vodka redistribution, if, for example, all the village boys gather together in the village square (*pekhoni*), then by definition all the *dzmobilis* (boyfriends) of all the girls in the village will be gathered there too:

Sometimes the young men have the young women bring them bottles full of vodka even in the *pekhoni* (village gathering place). They will say ‘Well, girls, whoever has right now bottles saved up at home, bring them here, you have saved them up for your *dzmobilis*, right now we (boys) are all here, pour for us, your *dzmobilis*, too, if here you have someone.’ (Baliauri 1991: 155)

But the primary value of saved up bottles of vodka (a drink which, unlike beer, stored in glass bottles, can last in potable form indefinitely) is in fact a measure of pining, a way of constructing time as a measure of devotion in absence, because lovers are constantly separated by one thing or another (Baliauri 1991: 23). The girls steal or beg vodka which they hoard and hide for their *dzmobilis*. They can give it to whom they please, but they mostly please to give it to their *dzmobilis*. Saving the vodka is a sign of devotion: “Some girls will save up this bottle of vodka for her *dzmobili* even up to a whole year. This is a sign, that she remembers her *dzmobili* and she will save it until her waiting comes to an end” (Baliauri 1991: 155). Saving the vodka is a sign of appreciation, expressing a hope that in the future she might drink it with the boy, or she may give it to him to drink with others. Again, his possession of vodka will index publicly the private devotion of some girl, because he has no other way of acquiring it. But if her hopes are dashed, if she will not see him again, then she will save it no longer, but consume it with others. But she consumes it with girls instead: she cannot consume it with a boy because then it would no longer count as having been saved for her *dzmobili* (Baliauri 1991: 155).

Khevsur love is somewhat one-sided in expression. As we will see, girls acquire and save vodka for boys much as they compose love and praise poetry for boys. In both cases, the saving of vodka and the composition of love poetry, girls are active producers, and boys are passive consumers, in a manner that parallels the way that the girl must

come to the boy at night among the Khevsurs (Gogochuri 1974: 114). The Khevsur economy of stolen vodka, love poetry and “making out” are all of a piece. This relationship between vodka, love and poetry is simply one aspect of a broader culture of circulation (Lee and Lipuma 2002) generated by the parallel, homologous, and mutually constituting circulation of genres of linguistic text (poems), varieties of drink and other objects of value, and kinds of persons and relationships.

**Intimacy and secrecy.** The non-romantic sworn-sibling version of *dzmobiloba* is an open and publicly recognized relationship, the opposite sex romantic ‘boyfriend-girlfriend’ version is furtive and secretive. Thus, to understand local notions of intimacy is to understand local notions of publicity by opposition. I have been using the terms “public” and “private” so far as a handy translation to gloss local concepts and practices, some of which indeed seem parallel. Khevsur notions of “public” are closely tied up with a kind of ritual representation of the community as a whole by a part of that whole, in this case a meeting of the adult men of the community within a ritual context, what is called the *jari* (which means in contemporary Georgian “army”, but also means “public” in some forms (*sajaro*), a connotation which is important because the men of the community also represent the community to other communities in battle). If we wanted a working equivalent of the indigenous sense of “public”, it would be something like “witnessed by members of the *jari* in a ritual context”. True sworn brotherhood differs from the otherwise similar practices of *stsorproba* because true sworn brotherhood is constituted in a “public” ritual, a ritual performed before the *jari*. A ritual of sworn brotherhood ritual *must* be witnessed to be effective, and every aspect of the relationship,

the visits, the gifts, are all publically acknowledged. By contrast, *sts'orproba* is constituted secretly, without witnesses, and is banned from many shrine rituals entirely, and cannot even be mentioned at the representative meetings of the men, the *jari*, that takes place at these rituals. Hence, to understand these similar but opposed relations will help us construct the nearest analogy to indigenous conceptions of “public” and “private” in relation to romance, which have some spatial reference, as well.

While these boyfriend-girlfriend relationships are not completely secrete, they are generally tolerated, but largely with a blind eye from the older, married, generation, they cannot be expressed in forms or forums that Khevsurs would call “public”. In particular it is banned from those events where the *jari* is assembled, for example most shrine festivals (Makalatia 1998 [1925]: 11), and is generally not allowed at serious festivals such as funerals. In general, the relationship has a precarious existence at those events that we might want to call the indigenous equivalent of a “public event”, especially in Khevsureti, always existing at the margins of rituals and gatherings that have a public representative function.

Among the Khevsurs, one of the rules of *sts'orproba* is that the girl must go to the boy (the Khevsurs are scandalized that among the neighboring Pshavs, boys go to the girls). The arrangements for their meetings represent a highly developed indigenous form of spy game. Their tryst is arranged by a mediator (*elchi*, literally “ambassador”), generally a girl, who first asks the girl whom she would like to spend the night with (if either the girl or the boy is a stranger in town, she does not ask, she simply decides herself), and then gets consent from the boy to bring a guest (without, it appears, revealing who the girl will be), saying something veiled like “I will be your guest tonight.

Do you have guests or not, if so, how many. I want them to be few in number” (Baliauri 1991: 11-12). From this the boy will understand her intent, but in turn will want to know who she intends to bring to spend the night, which the ambassador will stubbornly resist, a conversation like so (as imagined, certainly not witnessed, by the indigenous ethnographer Baliauri [see Manning 2007b]) ensues until the boy concedes (Baliauri 1991: 12):

- Taimekel [the ambassador], what in the world do you intend?
- What do I intend, man? First tell me, will you be in, or not. Or did someone tell you [what I was planning]? Don’t hide anything from me!
- Ooo I understand, I understand, Tamo, first tell me, who do you have as a guest [for me]? Is she a fellow villager (*sopleli*) or a fellow member of the community (*temuri*)?
- Who should I have as a guest? Man, it’s not your affair, who I have, first tell me, what I asked you and then I will tell you.
- I won’t tell you, Tamo, no.
- Boy, don’t hide your mind from me. Say, will you be in or not?!
- I won’t say anything until I find out, who you are talking about.

And so it goes, when the boy concedes, the ambassador will determine with precision where the boy is sleeping, who is sleeping nearby, and then they will agree on a sign (in Khevsur dialect *lishani*) to announced the arrival of the ambassador and girl, whether to imitate the voice of some animal, or throw pebbles, or whatever. All this to ensure the girl is not tragically placed by mistake with some other man (Baliauri 1991: 13). The ambassador will then return to the girl’s house, and invent some pretext to tell the girl’s parents for why the girl must spend the night at the ambassador’s house (Baliauri 1991: 13). She will take the girl to her own house, and then, when everyone there is asleep, they will slink out in turn to make for the boy’s house (Baliauri 1991: 13). Later, when the boy and the girl advance from being mere *stsorperis* to “knowing” one another (not in



the biblical sense), and eventually perhaps *dzmobilis*, they can dispense with the services of the ambassador (Baliauri 1991: 16). In general, even if the relationship is an open secret (after all, in Khevsureti the relationship must happen where the boy is sleeping, in a common room, with many many other people, hence if the boy gets too frisky, the girl need merely stand up and leave to humiliate the boy), the actual process of arranging it is rife with all manner of familiar teenage subterfuge.

Secrecy as a kind of privacy is part of a way in which this relationship is constantly denied, placed in check, refused (Tuite 2000). Separation is felt to be desirable, because it places desire in check (Kiknadze 1991) and causes desire, frustrated, to grow (Baliauri 1991: 23). Most of all, these relationships are occasional: one cannot lie with one's lover at all times, there are occasions where it is forbidden, where it is simply impossible. Lovers can never stay united, love is constantly unrequited, all winter long the lovers compose poems (Gogochuri 1974: 30-31)), for there is nothing else to do. And the occasions for performing these poems of love are often precisely those occasions when the evening ends and lovers will steal off in order to lie down together. The practice of spending the night together, "lying down and getting up", and the poetry it inspires and which describes it, are tied to many of the same occasions:

In Khevsureti not one incident would end, if at the end of it *stsorproba* was not arranged, aside from those times, when someone died and they came to mourn him. In other such minor events the young men and women would gather more for the sake and purpose of *stsorproba*.... (Ochiauri 1980: 231)

We now move to different senses of "public" and "private" that have to do with the circulation of poetic texts. Occasions for love and the contexts for performance of love poetry are more or less the same, just as are the contexts where both are forbidden. What

then are these contexts like, other than the fact that they all seem to involve drinking vodka, how does love and love poetry find its occasion?

**Publics and Poetry.** Khevsur cosmology is based on a pervasive gender dualism which manifests itself nearly everywhere. According to some myths, God and the Devil are brother and sister. The shrine divinities which represent the community are imagined as being men, and linked to each shrine are female principles, called *dobili* (“sworn sister”), who are conceived of as being semi-demonic powers allied to the masculine principle of the shrine by the same kind of relationship as a romantic version of *dzmobiloba*, with their own cult buildings and objects. Within human community itself, the same gender dualism applies, but there it is mediated both by the non-reproductive forms of sexuality of the divine world (*sts’orpoba*) as well as the reproductive sexuality of marriage and kinship. While all humans are impure, “fleshy” (*xorcieli*), men are “purer” than women. Men are by nature closer to the masculine principle of the shrine than women are (they “have a part of” the divine nature, *nats’iliani*), while women are in general “mixed” or “impure” (*mireuli*) (Tuite 1999, 2002), particularly when they are undergoing menstruation or childbirth, when they are considered to be particularly impure to the men (in fact, to all men but their *dzmobili*, who is unaffected by this impurity) and must be separated from the community in menstrual and birthing huts. Men are regarded as “servants” (*qma*) of these otherworldly “lords”, and the Khevsurs distinguish between “good servants”, heroic men who are apt to die in battle if they haven’t already, and “bad servants”, effeminate ladies’ men who are apt to be found with a woman:

The good serf will die in battle, settling scores,  
The bad one--at the doors of the stable, bedding down with women.

(Kiknadze 1997: 200; text from Shanidze 1931: 013)

This gender dualism is particularly extreme in the system of poetic genres and their contexts for performance. First of all there is the opposition in native terms between serious epic poems (*simghere* “song”) about dead heroes and lyric poems called *leks*i or *shairi* (Gogoch’uri 1974: 10), which, unlike epic “songs” can be about contemporary living people, and can involve blame as well as praise, humor as well as serious themes. Certainly poems about love, also called “boy-girl” poems, fall into the *leks*i-*shairi* class. This opposition of genres is a gendered opposition both in terms of thematic content, composition, and performance. The genre of *simghere* is exclusively part of the male repertoire, while *leks*i-*shairi* poems of love and insult form the core of the female repertoire; consequently *simghere* are associated with a masculine performance style, called, *mghera* ‘singing’, often with a kind of guitar called a *panduri*, while the other forms can be sung either in this style or in the style called *leksoba* (“reciting”) with the masculine guitar-like instrument (*panduri*) or the feminine instrument, the accordion (*garmoni*, *buzika*); lastly, the *simghere* belongs at the center of male ritual publics (*jari*), where talk of women or women themselves are equally forbidden, where the core elements of the feminine repertoire (*shairi*, love poems, accordions) are forbidden, the feminine repertoire finds its indigenous public in gatherings of young people called the *axaluxali*.

Women especially praise living men in “love poetry”, and men praise dead heroes in “heroic poetry”. But what do women find praiseworthy in their lovers? Khevsur women, in general, are attracted to men who have the properties of what Khevsurs call “good servants” (heroic, gallant, brave, attractive, self-controlled, well-dressed, and

apparently indifferent to girls). In fact, the kinds of men praised in heroic poetry and love poetry are pretty much the same “good servants”, except that in heroic poetry they are dead, and in love poetry they are not. Khevsur men who are too openly concerned with matters of love, who follow girls around like a “bad servant”, are derided as *kalachuna* (“cowardly”, “sissy”), this is why the man must not display his love openly or “go to” the girl (Baliauri 1991: 17). Men, too, in the very act of seeming indifferent to women, concerning themselves with dueling, war, and other heroic, public matters, make themselves attractive in the eyes of women. Indeed, men deliberately seek out duels (“good servant” behavior), secretly not merely because of matters of love (jealousy, betrayal), but also in order to attract a lover (“bad servant” behavior). Khevsur love seems as one sided as Khevsur love poetry, but this would seriously underestimate the role matters of romance play for men.

While many kinds of Khevsur poems actually have the identity of the author (*matkvami*, the ‘speaker’ of the poem) written directly into the poem, anonymity is particularly characteristic of poetry by women, and especially love poetry. Women’s repertoires are largely confined to the poetry of mourning (the recent dead of mourning poetry, but not the heroic dead of heroic *simghere*) and the “everyday” poetry of the *leksa* and *shairi* variety. Love poetry, or rather, poetry praising the lover, is largely something limited to women, and women’s occasions of public performance of poetry is limited too to less consequential side venues like the *axaluxali* (the gathering of the young people), and not the more consequential venues like the *jari* (the gathering of the older men). Public performance of poetry (*leksoba*) was considered shameful for women, but women were free to compose poetry and recite it, but not ‘publicly’ (Gogolauri 1996:5-8). Such

poetry circulated widely but also anonymously: little is known of the authors and their addressees (Gogolauri 1996: 6, Gogochauri 1974: 94), except in those cases where a woman publicly reclaimed her poetry as she grew older. Not only the author, but the addressee, of love poetry, are concealed, the addressee frequently given a specific nickname in the poem that only the boy and girl concerned would know (Gogochuri 1974: 93). One of the most powerful motivations for women to compose anonymously is because of both the serious consequences of insulting [*saseno*] poetry as well as the love poetry of praise.

The occasions for the performance of these genres, and genres of performance associated with them, in turn serve to divide the social universe into two spheres, what we might call with caution “indigenous public” of the *jari* and “indigenous private” (or even “counterpublic”) of the *axaluxali*. The occasions appropriate for the performance of heroic poems constitutes what might be called the “indigenous public sphere”, what is called the *jari*, denoting the older members of the community, especially the men, whose opinions matter and who are collected together to discuss matters defined as being important to the community as a whole, “public” matters, you might say. The term *jari* not only includes the sense of ‘representative publicness’ (the portion of the community that represents the whole in ritual or in battle), but it can also mean the public before whom a performance occurs (as in a theatrical audience). As Gogochuri notes (1974: 49), Khevsurs are particularly fond of performing poetry (of any genre whatsoever) for their own entertainment, so much so that they have a word for such performance without a public, called *sak’utreuli* (“for oneself”, cf. modern Georgian *sak’utari* “one’s own”, *sak’utreba* “property”). The opposite mode of performance, one with a public, is called

*jarze* “Before the *jari*”. So the term *jari* in some sense means “assembly, people, public” (in modern Georgian *sajaro* means “public”). Thus any performance is classified as to whether or not the performance is “public” or “private”.

On the one hand, there are ritual events connected with the shrine, the *jari* in a more limited sense. At these events certain kinds of poetry, particularly those performed as *mghera* dealing with heroic or mythological themes, are performed. Banned from the *jari* are poems that deal with love or “girl-boy” (*sakalvazho*) poems as they are called, or, indeed, any talk about women at all (Ochiauri 2005: 37-8). The thematics of these shrine events are as masculine as the public, women do not take part in them as topic or as participant (Gogochuri 1974: 51-2). At some such rituals the “feminine” accordion (*garmoni*, ‘*buzik’a*’) is not allowed, only instruments like the *panduri* that are appropriate for *mghera*. The second sort of event is typified for Gogochuri by the wedding. If the shrine ritual is like the type of genre that predominates there, the *simghere*, then the wedding is as mixed as the *leksa*, for here the whole repertoire of folk poetry, more or less, is possible (Gogochuri 1974: 53). The third sort of event, the *axaluxali*, or gathering of young people, is really a sub-event within the others. Some extremely grave shrine events do not have an *axaluxali*, at others it exists at the suffering of the more official gathering of older people, the *jari*, but at weddings there is always one (Gogochuri 1974: 53). Regardless of the broader event type, the important thing is that as a sub-event it exists in a specific “counter-public” relationship to the “public” that is the *jari*, it is a public that is aware of its subordinate, non-representative, status (Warner 2002). Again, at the *axaluxali* all genres are possible, like the wedding, the atmosphere here is completely the opposite of the somber atmosphere of the *jari*: “The “*axaluxali*” context is

the most free and the least restrained (*shezghuduli*), because elders do not take part in it” (Gogochuri 1974: 54). Each of these events are events of drinking, though beer dominates as the drink of the *jari*, and vodka dominates as the drink of the *axaluxali*, and so too they are characterized by kinds of poetry, *simghere* sung to the *panduri* amongst the older men of the *jari*, *leksoba* sung to the accordion amongst the boys and girls in the *axaluxali*.

The *axaluxali* was the only venue where boys and girls, love poetry and drinking vodka were all found together. And one thing that love, vodka, and poetry all have in common that they can cause fights, and fights were common at the *axaluxali* (Ochiauri 1991: 162). And, indeed, much of the lower forms of poetry are designed for precisely this purpose, to incite conflict, especially among the *axaluxali*. Part of the crucial division in function then is that *simghere* poems, which only allow praise of people long dead, emphasize unity and amity as well, whereas *saseno* [insult] poems, *shairi* poems, which can only be performed at the *axaluxali*, emphasize joking or insults of living people, and are in fact *designed* to produce physical conflict. Oddly, then, events (*jari*) where women cannot participate, where the dead are praised, are also events where they talk about strife, conflict and reconciliation (movement from conflict to amity), whereas the *axaluxali*, in which women play a major role, are places where (it is imagined) discord is seeded by poetry and conflicts begin. The recitation of *saseno* poems, which are associated with the feminine repertoire, lead to conflict (Ochiauri 1980: 125):

Some would recite [*leksobdnen*] joking poems, some would recite about imprisonment, army life, and occasionally *saseno* [offensive, insulting] poems (if there were here such young men and women, who came angry with each other). A fight frequently would follow *saseno* poems. If a boy offended a girl in some way with a poem or by saying something else, young men close to her would not tolerate this and the matter could end in a fight with short swords. Out of fear of

this women frequently hid their annoyance, they would not disclose the fact to their male friends and relatives. Often such an enmity would happen, that one lineage would be incited against another lineage over women. This was very shameful. (Ochiauri 1980: 30)

The consequences, then, of *saseno* poems, were potentially quite severe. As a result, not only were such poems composed anonymously, but they are circulated out of the limelight even in the *axaluxali*, in whispered asides, like the relationships that provoke them. Such a performance mode forms a third, unofficial mode of performance opposed to both the “public” styles of performance of *mghera* and *leksoba* and the “public” contexts of the *jari* and *axaluxali*. Just as public relations of sworn brotherhood stand to secretive relations of *stsorproba*, as the open prestations of beer and vodka of men stand to the stolen and hidden vodka of girls, so the public performances of *mghera* and *leksoba*, whose author (*matkvami*) is often written into the poem, stand to the whispered anonymous asides of the *saseno* poem. The whispered circulation of insult poems would elicit more insult poems in turn:

In spite of this, boys and girls would not let it rest and would tell each other *saseno* poems *chumchumad* (quietly, on the sly). When they would say (such a poem, they would conceal their own identity (*vinaoba*) and often the poet (*melekse*) would completely hide to whom the poem was addressed and even the teller [the person relaying the poem] did not know, they too would say their own reply poem (*sapasukho lekss*) in such a way that [someone] would not know who they were talking about. *Saseno* poems said about women annoyed all the women, if they recited it in an ‘*axaluxali*’. *Saseno* poems by women also annoyed all the boys (young men), and they too would without fail reply with a *saseno* poem. (Ochiauri 1980:30)

Naturally, after a *saseno* poem is recited, they began to seek out the identity of the author (*matkvami*), and sometimes someone else, irritable for some reason, would reveal the identity and motive of the author, which could, in turn, lead to a fight with short swords.



Under such circumstances, poetry, which caused the conflict, might also ameliorate it, as someone else might then pick up the panduri and recite a poem whose purpose was to entertain and make those present forget their foul mood and wash the taste of conflict from their minds (Ochiauri 1980:31).

If, however, men decided to fight on matters related to women and poetry, then here, too, women played a decisive role in restraining the men. Women would run and take hold of men who intended to fight, and a man so held could not free himself from the woman who held him without great shame (Ochiauri 1980:31). Finally, if women were few, and men many, this method would not work. Here a single woman could take off her headscarf (*mandeli*) and throw it on the ground between the men. Out of respect for the headscarf and the gesture, men were expected to restrain themselves from fighting (Ochiauri 1980:32). In such cases, depending on how far the fight had gone and its relative seriousness, amity could not be restored between the combatants without some ritual gesture of reconciliation, in extreme cases, being forced to swear brotherhood by drinking ‘the oath of silver’. Drinking, which leads to poetry and fighting, can also be the means of reconciliation between fighters.

**Circulatory signs: Vodka and Beer** As I emphasized above, there are strong similarities between the “public” non-romantic relation of *dzmobiloba*, and the “private” romantic one between a boy and a girl in terms of content. What about form? The term *dzmobili* for the Khevsurs, operates in two very different spheres, and is constituted by an act of drinking in both (vodka). But the act of drinking that forms a “public” *dobil-dzmobili* sworn sibling relationship takes the form of a public ritual called the “oath of

silver” (a drink into which flakes of silver have been introduced), it must also be witnessed, and sometimes, beer is drunk, other times, any old drink will do. In addition, stronger forms of the relationship can be formed by replacing the sacred substance, silver, objects of which form the sacred wealth of the otherworldly shrine lords, which includes the men (“serfs”) of the shrine, who this divinity refers to as “silver buttons” in its divine language (Ochiauri 1954: 130-131), with the bodily substance of the participants, blood. The “boyfriend-girlfriend” form of *dzmobiloba*, by contrast, has none of these features. The only drink possible in this relationship is vodka. This brings us back to the differences between beer and vodka as diagnostic of the difference between “public” and “private” relationships.

Like the sacred silver cups from which it is drunk, beer is diagnostic of the masculine universe of ritual publicity, the *jari*. Beer is not only a part of ritual consumption, but from start to finish beer is associated with ritual. In popular “Orientalizing” accounts of the Khevsurs, the fact that beer is brewed in sacred precincts (in a special structure called the *salude* “the place for beer”, a picture of which is found in the Qazbegi advertisement in the next chapter) is magnified to the exclusion of all other buildings in the precinct and given as a further example of Khevsur paganism, the elevation of beer to an actual fetish object, the “chief god of the Khevsurs”:

The Khevsurs are, if you like, Christians.... [Khevsur] temples house the religious effects of the Khevsurs, which are like no others in the world. They consist of huge barrels and copper pails. There is nothing else in the temple whatever. In the holy barrels beer is kept, and it is prepared in the holy pails. Beer is the chief god of the Khevsurs, and the brewers are their high priests.... (Essad Bey 120-22)

This sort of deliberately distorted Orientalizing account contains some truth, shrines do indeed include among their structures a building for brewing beer, although this is not the “holy of holies”, and the main job of certain shrine attendants is in fact to brew beer. One could say that the shrine includes within it a whole economy of beer brewing, having their own fields for grain, their own threshing floors, their own supplies of yeast, their own shrine officials whose responsibility is as brewers and their own brewing equipment, and their rituals for the drinking of the beer.

Essad Bey’s account is in a sense valuable in that its exaggerating Orientalizing moment draws attention to the way that we ourselves strongly oppose technical activities of production to ritual activities (Barth 1960, Peters 1984, Asad 1988), we can also more easily imagine the sacrality or ritual qualities of drinks in their “ritual” moments of *consumption*, but production seems somehow to be opposed in our tradition to ritual activity, placing technical activities at the center of ritual architectures seeming like a kind of primitive “beer fetishism”. This is because because, as Asad points out (1988), our commonly held notion of ritual tends to oppose ritual as symbolic behavior to technical or practical behavior (indeed, in social anthropology, the fact that one could not understand the practical function of a given behavior was often the basis for claiming it to be ritual (Barth 1960, Peters 1984)). The Khevsurs, it would seem, make no such hard distinctions between technical and ritual, material production and symbolic elaborations. Both vodka and beer can be described in terms of a production process which focuses on the technical aspects, or a ritual process (or absence of one) that focuses on symbolic aspects, but in both cases the object qualities that provide the material for the symbolic

and causal potentials of the product in circulation and consumption are drawn from both dimensions.

It is true that Pshavs and Khevsurs are aware of something that might be called an autonomous technical dimension of beer and vodka production, as opposed to purely symbolic ritual elaborations. Both technical production and ritual processes involve meaningful transformations of objects, at once involving symbolic recategorization and causal transformation of object potentially meaningful qualities of material objects (what are called “qualisigns”, in general, following Peirce, meaning material properties or qualities of objects (quali-) that are potentially meaningful (-signs)). Some such qualisigns, like flavor and strength, what we could call the “technical” dimension, are felt to be distinct from what might be called the “ritual” qualisigns of objects, like “purity”, which have to do, for example, with cosmological purity of the maker, the materials, and so on. In general, however, there is no hard a priori way to define the difference between these two kinds of qualisigns, technically basic qualisigns remain qualisigns that have potentially important “symbolic” consequences for the circulation of the beer. At the same time, we should resist the idea that there is a natural technical dimension to the beer making process that determines its form, instead of talking of object properties producing a technical determination, we may speak of object properties as giving “affordances” (Pfaffenberger 1992, Hutchby 2001), qualities of objects that afford causal potentials, in much the same way that we talk of “qualisigns”, qualities of objects that afford symbolic potentials. But of all these qualitative potentialities only some will be ritually relevant. Any object is a “bundle” of qualities that are ritually or symbolically relevant and those that have no official relevance (on “bundling” see Kean 2003,

Manning and Meneley 2008). However, even qualities that are not officially relevant to the symbolic “meaning” of the object retain causal potency, for example, beer, however sacred, that has spoiled cannot be drunk for ritual purposes without causing sickness.

For beer, opposed technical and ritual dimensions of transformation give rise to different sets of qualities associated with beer. Khevsurs know, for example, that some people make better beer than other people, although in principle this is not a condition for becoming a beer-maker the way that ritual purification is, or that sometimes it comes out better, sometimes worse, or that making beer in the winter is intrinsically harder, requiring different techniques to ensure fermentation (Ochiauri 2005: 21). They also are aware that, for example, there is a technical basis for beer production distinct from the matter of purification or nature of the maker, that beer involves processes involving interactions of grain, water and yeast, and that hops, which need to be acquired from the plains (Ochiauri 2005: 83), are essential as well for good beer. That they identify this mixture of grain, yeast and hops, as a quasi-natural substrate of beer production is indicated by a little poem which attributes the invention of beer to a little bird, who brews beer accidentally in its stomach, puffs up and gets drunk. As Tinatin Ochiauri, herself a Khevsur and noted ethnographer of the Khevsurs, retold me the story in an interview:

[Khevsur] tradition ascribes the invention of beer to a bird:

...

chit'ma tkva: marcval(i) shevchame	The bird said: I ate some grain,
sve davaqole, davitver	I followed it with hops, I got drunk,
me sul pat'ara viqavi	I was a little tiny thing,
ghorisodena shevikmen	I became the size of a pig!

The bird got drunk. The Khevsurs wondered at the little drunken bird and started to brew beer themselves.

The basic technical or natural properties of beer, as opposed to the ritual ones, seem to be brought together as those that could happen “naturally” by accident in the belly of a bird. Hence, as a ritual drink, some aspects of beer production attend more to its ritual qualisigns more, others seem more directed to technical qualisigns like taste. For example, at one Khevsur ritual (Kriste) the official shrine beer-makers seem engaged in primarily technical activity, a *techne* or craft which is the probabilistic outcome of a number of factors, including equipment, hops and technique. For example, if good beer is needed, they add more hops and brew it longer,

If they are not assiduous about making good beer, then they cut down on the hops (ak’lebena), nor do they boil it down as much. They make a thin beer. It depends on the *k’odi* (wooden fermentation vat) too, in some k’odis good beer comes out, and in some not. (Ochiauri 2005: 21)

Unlike beer, vodka, which is made by women at the house (that is, is wholly impure) from almost anything (the ingredients are not pure either), can be described almost entirely as a technical process with discernable probabilistic outcomes in terms of quality. In addition, vodka is evaluated almost entirely in technical and material terms, while beer has an additional set of cosmological qualisigns and affordances that derive from ritual contexts, and most of which are have no sensuous exponents.

The quality of vodka, like beer, is variable, but much more subject to chance outcomes than beer (where, as noted above, the quality of beer can be controlled by hops and boiling). Mountaineer vodka, for example, is highly variable in both strength and taste. Vodka production is much more subject to chance outcomes than beer production, “Vodka is haphazard: sometimes it comes out well, sometimes it is spoiled. No one knows why” (Gochoridze 174-5). Part of this variation can be controlled by mixing

distillations of different strengths to produce a final product. Vodka is brewed in a series of distillations (Gochoridze 174), each distillation is kept separate from each other, the final fourth distillation and after being called *shamani*. Normally the first three distillations are mixed together, the fourth, *shamani*, if it comes out well, is also mixed in, to produce a medium strength vodka in larger quantities (Gochoridze 174-5). Depending on the purpose of the vodka, mixture of varying distillations can control the resulting strength for the desired purpose (Ochiauri 1980: 6-7).

While beer shares with vodka a certain variability in terms of strength and flavor, the qualisigns of beer that have effects on social trajectories are ritual qualisigns, qualisigns with cosmological reference (for example, purity of the maker, the barley, the equipment), while the qualisigns relevant for the social trajectory of vodka are almost entirely technical (taste, strength). From the beginning to the end of the circulatory career, different kinds of beer are carefully distinguished especially with respect to their ultimate goal, and each stage of the circulation of beer has its own ritual attendants. The whole circulation process of beer is one long ritual process from production to consumption. Hence, the source of the grain used in beer is from fields that belong to the god (sacrificed to the shrine), that this grain has been threshed by the shrine officiants who make the beer on a special threshing floor that belongs to the shrine, and is stored in the shrine complex in a sacred granary to which entry is difficult, prior to it being brewed into beer in cauldrons in a special hut (*salude*), also part of the shrine complex, and finally moved to the point of consumption by special ritual attendants. All these actors, objects and places share the qualisign of “ritual purity”, they are also places associated with traditional notions of representative publicness.

Such non-palpable qualities of persons and places transferred to beer have powerful effects on the subsequent circulation of the object. Beers made in the home, for example, do not have these properties, though it may otherwise taste the same. By contrast “shrine” (*sajvaro*) beer is produced from ingredients that are produced on lands belonging to the shrine by shrine attendants, men who have achieved special degrees of ritual purity. Women are forbidden in these shrine fields because of their impurity. Shrine beer is brewed by special shrine attendants who also have achieved a degree of ritual purity greater than ordinary people. So the ingredients and the producers of shrine beer are purer than the ingredients or producers of ordinary beer, which is also produced by men, presumably borrowing equipment from the shrine. Shrine beer is designed for special communal festivals related to the shrine, whereas other beers are brewed for certain individual family rituals for example, weddings and funerals, which are nevertheless more important than those which require only vodka. Shrine beer is different from ordinary beer in that not only is it in itself purer than ordinary beer, but like shrine attendants, shrine beer itself must “avoid impurity”, specifically women who are in a state of impurity. Just as impure women must avoid spaces associated with ritual purity, so pure men and their products, sacred beer, must avoid spaces associated with ritual impurity. Even the same substance, beer, can be distinguished into two varieties, the sacred “public” beer of the shrine versus the more ordinary “private” beer of a wedding, by their possible trajectories, sacred beer can never enter impure space, while wedding beer can.

[For a woman who is in a state of impurity] the ‘cross’ [shrine divinity] forbids passing through the fields of the cross and other places considered to be pure/sacred.... At the time of a holy day they could not bring shrine [*sajvaro*] beer into the *samrelo* [menstruation hut], for the taking of a shrine offering [*jvaris*



*sadidebeli*] into an impure place was not allowed. However, they would take beer from a wedding or other such drinking occasions into a *samrelo*. This meant a great estimation of the visiting woman (Ochiauri 1980: 244-5)

Vodka, by opposition with beer, *also* takes on properties of persons and places with which it is associated, bringing beer and vodka into opposition on the basis of qualities that are not, strictly speaking, intrinsic technical properties. By virtue of the different locus of production (shrine, home), different producers (men, women), different materials (pure shrine materials versus everyday), the two drinks take on opposed social trajectories. In general, beer moves centrifugally, from the ritual center of the community towards its outer edges, from the home of the wedding or funeral host to the community, and vodka moves centripetally, from the homes toward the shrine complexes, and also circumferentially between households, persons, within and across communities.

The technical dimension of production is relevant here too. As Tinatin Ochiauri noted in an interview, beer as a technical process requires collective labor for its production, and its consumption too is also collective, beer and collective ritual are synonymous; in much the same way, the production of vodka is a matter of individual households, but the ends and social occasions to which it is put by households are as socially general (if not always collective) as the variety of materials from which it is made:

Beer is the ritual [*sak'ult'o*] drink, a holy [*ts'minda*] drink. It demands great labour-consuming work. For that reason the rules of its preparation are collective. Its use too is collective in the same way. At the time of a gather of a lot of people (*xalxianoba*), either a holiday, a wedding or a funeral, which are associated with a large number of people, then they prepare beer. They are always preparing vodka. My mother was always brewing vodka. From elderberries, crabapples,

fruit, from grain, they made vodka from everything. In the family they always needed vodka, for guests, other things. (Tinatin Ochiauri interview 2005)

By contrast, the preparation of vodka is a matter of individual households, it can be made of most anything by most anyone, and the functions to which vodka is are far more general than beer, if beer represents the social as an undifferentiated collectivity, vodka mediates it as a complex aggregate of relations between individuals. In fact, vodka is such a general drink that Khevsurs will even make their horses drink it, because drunken horses amuse them.

But the material properties of of these two drinks are not merely interesting insofar as they make possible arbitrary *difference*, differences which can be somewhat arbitrarily loaded with meanings, these material qualities have *causal consequences* for how the two beverages behave in a social universe, beyond the fact that they are meaningfully different. The very different potentially meaningful qualities (qualisigns) of beer and vodka have powerful material *causal* consequences (affordances) for their potential careers as circulatory objects.

Mountain beer is “black, thick, sweet, and ought to have a little taste of hops” (Gochoridze, 171). A Georgian friend of mine likened it to “sweetened motor oil”, when I first drank it, it gave me a pounding headache and prolonged vomiting. It doesn’t keep long, either. It will last only ten days, and that thereafter it will become sour (Gochoridze *ibid.*). One important property of beer, then, is that it doesn’t last for a very long time, and fairly large quantities of it will be needed to produce a general state of inebriation in a given population.

Unlike beer, vodka will keep indefinitely, and smaller quantities of vodka will serve more people than beer, which must be in large quantities which will not keep very long. In nearby Pankisi Gorge, for example, where vodka has completely replaced beer as the ritual drink, each mountain shrine will have a small collection of bottles of locally produced vodka that are stored there for an indefinite period awaiting the day of ritual observances. Therefore, vodka, when compared to beer, therefore has two basic properties that we will see are very important *causally* in terms of what possible trajectories it can have in social space: its high relative alcohol content gives it a high portability (hence there is “going with vodka”, “road vodka” and “visiting vodka”, but no “going with beer”, “road beer” or “visiting beer”), and being storable in small glass bottles also allows it not only high mobility in space, but also high durability: vodka is unlike beer in that it can easily travel through both space and time over long distances.

The fact that vodka, unlike beer, is made in several distillations permits the mixture of vodkas of different strengths. This controlled variability allows differences in vodka to be expressive of social differences (girls, for example, only steal *good* vodka). The evaluation of gifted vodka is, in general, a topic of animated conversation. The host praises the strength of the guest’s vodka, comparing it to fire, while the guest disparages their own vodka (Ochiauri 1980: 16). Vodka which is brought as a gift is first tasted, and then, if from its taste it appears that it is strong enough, its strength is displayed to others by sprinkling it on the fire or by pouring in on a blade, and lighting it. If, however, the vodka’s taste indicates that it is closer to being *shamani* (weak, watery vodka), then its nonflammability is not displayed to others, so that the person bringing it not be shamed (Ochiauri 1980: 7).

The difference in quality of vodka is an almost accidental by-product of production, but because it can be partially controlled by mixture, it can in turn be revalorized in meaningful ways in exchange. An example of this exploitation of the variable properties of vodka is the practice of visiting and bringing gifts of “visiting (*mosanaxavi*) vodka” to a family that has recently added a new member to the family. If a boy is born, the visitors will prepare more and better vodka, and a larger and wider set of relations will do so, than if a girl is born (Ochiauri 1980: 6-7). Not only did everyone try and produce more and better vodka faster than anyone else in the case of a boy, but also more people would bring vodka, not merely kin but also family friends. Following the pervasive and open Khevsur propensity towards misogyny, in the case of the birth of a girl, the scope of vodka production was smaller on all levels, matching the other dimensions in which the birth of a girl differs from the birth of a boy:

The visiting vodka for a boy had to be very good vodka, but in the visiting vodka of a girl no one was interested whether the vodka was good or not, they would say: “I’m not bringing visiting vodka for a boy, am I? Why do I want good vodka, let them give birth to a boy and then I’ll bring good vodka.” For the mother of a boy the villagers and relatives will bring cakes into the menstrual hut (*samrelo*), for the mother of a girl only someone from their own household would bring them and that only exceptionally (Ochiauri 1980: 35).

Such *planned* differences in the quality of the vodka are directly expressive of the relative rank of boys and girls within the community as desirable additions to the family. But even bad vodka has a social value. Travelers visiting friends and relatives would bring with them both good vodka and a quantity of a lower grade of vodka, closer to *shamani*. This low-grade vodka would serve as ‘road vodka’, since Khevsurs are required to give a drink of vodka to everyone they meet on the road (not doing so is considered to be very shameful), this practice can threaten the reserves of the good vodka intended for a

prestation at the destination, hence, some will bring the low grade vodka along with them on the road to “protect” their reserves of good vodka from the mouths of chance encounters (Ochiauri 1980: 7).

But such “road vodka” reminds us that vodka has another property, it keeps well and is highly portable, unlike beer. Beer is prepared and drunk within the community, while vodka (thanks to the omnipresent glass bottles) is the most mobile of all drinks. Partly this has to do with the sorts of occasions for which beer and vodka are brewed, beer is brewed only for ritual events that revolve around the community shrine, and for weddings and funerals by the hosts (and not the guests). Vodka is brewed for virtually every other occasion that involves sociability, but vodka is especially associated with parties in motion, vodka is the sort of drink one carries with one (‘going with vodka’). This is because vodka, unlike beer, is highly portable, it is the only drink that can express long distance relationships, relationships between members of different communities, while beer cannot easily be carried over distances, it expresses relations between people of the same community. Vodka is associated with people in motion, visitors, guests, community members visiting the shrine, beer is associated with the stationary party, hosts, shrine officiants. Vodka also does not spoil, it can be carried over very long distances for long periods, but beer spoils quickly, it must be drunk very soon after it is prepared.

By contrast with ‘road vodka’, everything about beer suggests stationary settled community life, centred on the shrine complex, down to the largeness containers in which it is brewed and carried around. Mountain ritual life probably has its most obvious and central material expression in the way that part of the shrine complex is given over to

brewing beer, so that beer brewing is a collective act, vodka the product of individual households. If the circulation of beer from beginning to end stressed collective membership in a *saqmo*, the group of people who regard themselves as ‘serfs’ *qmebi* of a single shrine, the circulation of vodka provided direct linkages between individual households and persons within the *saqmo* and across the boundaries of the *saqmo*. One of the many minor sacrifices that individual households brought to the shrine (in return for the beer the shrine provided), vodka also was a kind of social currency, portable, light, exchanges of vodka amount to the very stuff of sociability, without which social relationships, could not be constituted in general.

The theoretically opposed but factually overlapping circulation of beer and vodka partly recapitulates the cosmological categories of Khevsur myths (*andrezebi*). In Khevsur mythologies, the stone shrine building which carries the same name as the shrine diety (*jvari, khati*) and a stable cosmological center representing the community is created by the male shrine divinity after he destroys and marginalizes the feminine prior inhabitants, the demons (*devi*). The spatial organization of the community from the pure masculine center to the polluted feminine periphery recapitulates the basic outlines of this cosmology (Tuite 2002, Manning 2008), as does respectively centripetal and centrifugal, sacred and profane, circulations of beer and vodka. If the scarcely portable beer is the “sacred” masculine drink, it follows that highly portable vodka, associated with strangers and roads, is the feminine “drink of devils”.

But no liquid, in itself, is portable, containers of liquid are. The portability of vodka, the ability to store it for long periods, in short the entire economy of vodka for both “public” and “private” uses, including the girlish economy of love, depend on the

existence of cheap portable glass containers of high durability. The secret economy of girls, expressed in hiding glass bottles of vodka (*araqiani minai*), could not exist without the same technological innovation that made possible modern Georgian soft drinks. In this sense, the “traditional” economy of love in the mountains depends on the same technical innovations that allowed the quintessentially “modern” forms of sociability associated with soft drinks and beer in Georgia: the rise and circulation of cheap mass-produced glass bottles reaching its zenith at the turn of the century.<sup>iv</sup> Without “democratic” access to these cheap and durable containers, masculine forms of shrine related sociability depending on vodka, even road vodka and visiting vodka, would have been difficult or impossible, but certainly not the secret economy of the stolen vodka of girls that is the engine of romance. In this respect, bottled vodka resembles the feminine instrument for performances of long songs in the *axaluxali*, the *buzika* (accordion): both are instruments of “traditional” Khevsur feminine sociability made possible by modern industry. If nineteenth century ethnographers mention only relatively expensive, relatively non-portable, clay vessels and wineskins (Khizanishvili, writing in the late nineteenth century (1940: 41, 77) as means of transporting vodka, the explosion of “traditional” economies of vodka prestation in glass bottles discussed in this chapter cannot be anything other than “modern”.

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<sup>i</sup> In this chapter I will primarily be talking about the Khevsurs, though sometimes I will be talking about the Pshavs, a neighboring group who are imagined in certain important respects as being the opposites of the Khevsurs. However, following the practice of Georgians, given that these groups share more in common than separates them, compared to other Georgians, I will also sometimes talk about both groups in the aggregate as Pshav-Khevsurs.

<sup>ii</sup> The earliest accounts we have of a similar kind of romantic relationship (*ts'ats'loba*) in Pshavi, too, in the nineteenth century, define a girlfriend (*tsatsali*) as ‘sort of like a sworn sister’ ‘a pretend sworn sister’ (*vitom dobili*) differing from a true sworn sister in that she has an erotic function, and further imply that the relationship is formed ritually in an identical way in both sworn-siblinghood and romantic cases (by what is

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called ‘the oath of silver’, drinking vodka with silver flakes) (Droeba 1880, no. 102 page 3). Whether or not this is an outsider’s casual error, clearly, there was enough resemblance between the two for them to be mistaken for one another, down to the ritual of drinking vodka that creates the relations.

<sup>iii</sup> ‘Goingwith vodka’ is a kind of intimate gift when used between *dzmobilis*, the same act can occur

between enemies, too, in which case the party who ‘goes with vodka’ is, in effect, abasing themselves

before their enemy, begging forgiveness, rather than paying a hefty fine in cows.

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.ud.camcom.it/guidavini/uk/storia.htm>