Folklore and Terror in Georgia’s ‘Notorious’ Pankisi Gorge

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ABSTRACT

One of the more curious side effects of the ‘branding’ of localities in the War on Terror was the production of certain kinds of fantastic places, such that certain otherwise unremarkable places came to be diagnosed as ‘Terror bases’. This paper explores a dual apperception of this place within two ‘folkloric’ discourses. Within the discourse of Georgian folklore, Pankisi is at best peripheral, within the discourse of the Folklore of Terror, Pankisi briefly became central. Finally I show how the peripherality of Pankisi to ‘the nation’, and centrality to ‘terror’, became a resource for the Georgian State’s legitimation of its own monopoly on violence.

The Chechens indigenous to Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge, called Kists, can have a pretty dry wit about their predicament. A Kist joke in Pankisi Gorge goes: “Georgia—you know, it’s near Pankisi”. Factually, more people know where Pankisi Gorge is than know the location of the country of which it is a part, the Republic of Georgia. One empirical location, Pankisi, leads a rich and multiple imaginary life, both “indigenous” and “cosmopolitan”, as a place of terror and fear. For Georgian folklorists, Pankisi is a repository of traditional folklore threatened by Wahhabism. For the international media, it is an Al Qaida terror base, similar to the much larger Afghanistan in the world imaginary of “terror”.

Pankisi Gorge in this way has attracted different kinds of observers because of its status as being a visible microcosm of some larger, hidden whole. For global security analysts and policy wonks, Pankisi is an exceptional ‘crisis zone’, a node in the vast occult web of mystery that is called Al Qaida. For civil society analysts, Pankisi is a crisis and also an opportunity, a way of investigating ethnic accommodation and religious tolerance in a border region (Melikishvili et al. 2002). For Georgian folklorists and ethnographers, Pankisi is a second order object of study, not as valuable as studying the repositories of pure Georgian traditions next door in the mountainous valleys of Pshavi and Khesvureti, but still, a way of accessing mountain traditions in general. We are all too obedient to this familiar logic:

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to be worth studying, to be fundable by foundations like MacArthur or SSHRC, places like Pankisi must come to represent some more general predicament, often with policy consequences. To become representative, the banalities of everyday life in some small region like Pankisi must be ritually transformed into palpable microcosms of some larger macrocosm of cosmological import, whether that of international terror or of national folklore.

The global discourses which “brand” places like Pankisi have powerful local consequences. The people who live in Pankisi have the fears of a powerless ethnically marginal population; namely, that the chimerical beliefs and fears about them will lead to a Chechnya style ethnic cleansing. In such a situation, cosmopolitan narratives of terror become constitutive of local fears. No ethnography of localities like Pankisi is complete if it fails to take into account this “folklore of terror”, the “occult cosmologies” that turn this sleepy backwater into a chimerical terror base, with grim consequences for those who live there (on “Occult Cosmologies” see Sanders and West 2003). According to such cosmologies of “terror”, to understand the current situation in Pankisi, it is not enough to observe the farmers of Duisi going out to thresh hay, to see the women of Joqolo taking cattle in the drizzle of the morning to pasture. Even the sardonic barbs of the natives provoke only suspicion amongst the seasoned world wise journalists who visit the Gorge, who can see behind every shepherd an Al Qaeda operative in disguise or Chechen Guerilla. In the semi-fantastic Orientalist cosmology of terrorism, only the naïve believe in the phenomenal world of transparency and appearances, journalists, wonks and assorted intelligence experts all know that every apparently innocent phenomenon is a ticking time bomb, a threat that cannot be known by the senses alone. Such people live in a much more interesting, indeed, enchanted world, than the rest of us. I will recite to you such a journalistic fairy tale now. We might have called it “once upon a time in Pankisi”, or better, to begin the fairy tale the traditional Georgian way, “There was, and there was not, an Al Qaida base in Pankisi”, but this journalist titled his story “Shepherds in camouflage”, which begins like this:

The Pankisi Gorge is not more than 15 kilometres long. Only half of it is habitable. There five villages merge with each other along one street that starts in Duisi, the “capital” of the gorge. And on different sides of Duisi there are several more villages populated, among others, by Georgians and Ossetians. The road goes up into the mountains where the Chinese are building a hydroelectric plant in the highlands extending to Chechnya. It is next to impassable country with scattered small, gradually dying settlements like Omalo.

“Well now, shall we go farther and look for Al-Qaeda? the Chechens asked mockingly. I preferred to continue our excursion of the villages to a tramp at sunset in the local mountains where even classified army maps promised no passes. It proved a wise decision. Later, back in Tbilisi, local colleagues asked: “Did you happen to see any guerrillas?” “I think I did”, I answered.
Of course, Pankisi is not a place for light-minded storytellers to visit hoping to watch guerrillas’ manoeuvres. “No guerrillas”, reported the sturdy villagers of Duisi without batting an eyelid. “Ever been here before?” “Never”. “They haven’t come to winter here?” “No”. I gave up and undertook a frontal attack. I told them of what was going on behind the mountain ridge, about Chechen guerrillas, frankly describing the dangerous passes from Chechnya to Georgia with such convincing knowledge of small details that some of them even sank into my memory though I had never been in these parts. We had already struck up a friendship, so I was hoping that now the locals would not resist any longer and confess something, some tiny bits, even in a low voice. “Well”, they countered coolly, “that’s your job, spying, maybe, you know more than we. But we haven’t seen any guerrillas. They are not here, and have never been”.1

And so it goes on and on.... This translated version is originally from a Russian newspaper, a story with no date of posting. It remains in circulation as part of that perpetual present tense of web publics, a ‘once upon a time’ that might also be ‘right now’, a story which is constantly as fresh as the refresh button on your search engine. And the English language web sites are more than happy to parrot these savvy sources. The endless stream of cross-citation of undated web pages guarantees that the crisis in Pankisi will always be an ongoing ‘now’, whatever the actual situation on the ground. Pankisi has become one of those places that has been added permanently to the mythology of ‘terror’, “Pankisi Gorge” will likely be preceded by the adjective ‘notorious’. Even willingness of Chinese investors to build a multimillion dollar hydroelectric project in this supposed hotbed of terrorism does nothing to undermine the general sense of ongoing crisis.2 Even in 2005, after two years of relative calm in Pankisi, after the narcotics trade had been halted, after the Chechen guerrillas had departed, Al Qaida maintained a spectral presence in Pankisi. That year, the French Interior Minister Dominique de Villepin claimed that Al Qaeda cells are currently manufacturing biological agents, ‘including anthrax, ricin, and botulism toxins’ in Pankisi after being expelled from Afghanistan!3

Even as Villepin was speaking, however, the US and Georgian governments, and even the Russians, had already reclassified the ‘notorious’ Gorge from an international Al Qaida terror base to an apparent ‘victory’ in the war against terror.4 This was said to be a result of the US funded Georgian Train and Equip Program (part of Operation Enduring Freedom) which had, as one of its goals, the pacification of Pankisi (in 2002). According to post-Rose Revolution Pro-American government of Saakashvili, it would seem that there aren’t any terrorists in Pankisi, because they aren’t there any more. Score one victory for the war on terror. Now that everyone agrees that there aren’t any terrorists in Pankisi, it is best to claim that that is because there were lots of them, but there aren’t any more. But terrorists will always have been there, once upon a time, and that is all that matters, apparently.
I will admit it, part of the reason I wanted to visit Pankisi Gorge was this spy-world aura that it had attracted, perhaps some puerile desire to flout the ongoing ban for US citizens on travel there by the US state department. There were other reasons. In recent years, I have been collaborating with Georgian folklorists and ethnographers on Georgian mountain regions like Pankisi. I say, like Pankisi, but if Pankisi Gorge is ‘good to think’ in policy circles, occupying a central place in the mythological world of wonks, journalists and spies, Pankisi plays little or no role in the equally rich mythological universe of Georgian national imaginings, whose story tellers are folklorists and ethnographers. The valleys that are the mythic centre of ‘once upon a time’ Georgianness are right next door, in Pshavi and Khevsureti. The people of Pshav-Khesvureti have been studied, and continue to be studied, by generations of folklorists and ethnographers, every shrine ritual there is attended by some ethnographer or another (see, for example, Manning 2007b). These are ‘pure’ Georgian regions, but Pankisi is not one of them. The population of Pankisi is composed of a mixture of Georgians and Ossetians and Georgianized Chechens (Kists), as well as members of different religious populations, traditional and reformist versions of both Islam and Orthodoxy. ‘Hybrid’ regions like Pankisi became attractive to Georgian scholars only when Western foundations, like the MacArthur foundation funded a large multidisciplinary study by Georgian scholars of the ‘Pankisi Crisis’ in 2001, just a year before the US used the Gorge for their Georgian Train and Equip Program (Melikishvili 2002). Now that Pankisi is no longer a crisis region, the interest of Georgian scholars and journalists, not to mention foreign ones, has vanished.

Of course, these different cosmologies in which Pankisi simultaneously participates are not without consequence for the people there. Even as I began working in the Gorge with a Georgian folklorist colleague, Nugzar, we were confronted, here and there, with signs that history would not leave the sublime object of folklore undisturbed. My colleague Nugzar was really not all that interested in the contemporary history of the Gorge. For one, as a pro-western liberal, he had a profound distaste for Islam in general, and therefore preferred the nominally Christian Pshavians to the nominally Muslim Kists. Moreover, as a folklorist, his distaste for the presence of Wahhabi reformers (primarily young men and women) in the Gorge was twofold, on the one hand, evidence that Al Qaida was at work, on the other, damage was being done to the traditional forms of Islam, which, after all, were folklore and therefore inviolable. Wahhabism was change, change is bad for a folklorist. He also frequently lamented the deleterious effects of literacy on the orality, the oral transmission of texts (prior to transcription and print textualization by folklorists, of course) envisioned as the life blood of folklore. But Nugzar’s paranoia about the Wahhabis was palpable. Once, memorably, when our host got into an argument in the Kist language with his oldest son, a Wahhabi, Nugzar became distraught, absolutely convinced that he was about to be turfed out of the village for violations of some Islamic law (despite not understanding the Kist language?).

But his paranoia, too, reflected a more general trend that any disturbance in Pankisi tended to get blamed on the Kists, and, a fortiori, on the Wahhabis. As an example, in the
last couple of years a few traditional monuments in the valley, either Christian ruins or ruins that have become traditional mountain religion shrines have been blown up in the valley. As the wife of our host pointed out with irritation, ‘Of course, they just blame us Kists when anything blows up around here.’ The host’s oldest son agreed, explaining that while Wahhabis in the valley were not fond of what he called zikrs, traditional lay practices of dubious orthodoxy, their iconoclasm certainly did not extend to blowing up anyone else’s shrines. He added that it was probably one of the visitors to the valley, but also added in a bored voice that he knew that no one would ever believe them, which is why he had stopped talking to reporters. For a fact, they were right about what many non-Kists were saying: Georgian Christian churches blowing up? Almost certainly the work of Kists or other Chechens, probably Wahhabis.

But this was not the only explanation given for the mystery of the exploding shrines. An Ossetian man we met told us a different story. Yes, someone had been blowing up shrines, of course, they were looking for buried treasure, gold and silver! And why not? Since the nineteenth century mountain shrines have attached to them by reputation either mythical or real collections of treasure, gold and silver, sacrificed by worshippers to the deity. And since that time we also know other people have been trying to steal this sacrificial wealth. This explanation, the likelier of the two by far, did not resonate as much as one rooted in fanaticism and iconoclasm.

My last day in Pankisi in July 2005 was surely the strangest day of fieldwork ever. This day, as it turned out, was the last time that Nugzar would ever visit Pankisi with me. On that day Nugzar and I hired a taxi and drove into the Kisti village of Duisi for a day of interviews. When we arrived, everyone in the town appeared to be standing outside alongside the main street. They all had concerned or angry expressions, and were looking up the road in the direction of travel. We continued driving past the town people for a bit, until we reached a point where people were blocking the road. I heard popping noises, like fireworks. Sure enough, the sound of gunfire in various calibres and various rates of delivery was waiting for us up ahead. We backed up.

Slowly we cobbled together the story, with the help of a Kisti acquaintance we encountered, Temo. According to him, the Georgian Special Forces Operation began at 4am. Two local Kisti men, at minimum, were holed up in their house on the main street, and they would not surrender. Outside, on the street, aside from the extremely pissed off locals, were about 50 assorted heavily armed Georgian Special forces, the fruit of the Georgian Train and Equip Program funded by the US in 2002. Gunfire ranged from the popping noises of pistols to the more sustained staccato of automatic and semiautomatic fire to the occasional boom of someone firing a recoiless rifle.

But Nugzar is a determined folklorist, and wanted to complete his interviews. We drove around the site of the armed misunderstanding, and on the way Temo gave us an outline of what is happening, and why: Apparently a certain local man, a Kisti, last year raped the wife of another local man, a certain Avto. Avto, distraught, in the last few days
finally came across this other man and shot him in the leg. This man went to the police and complained. Avto then holed up in a house in Duisi and refused to surrender.

Driving around by back streets along the banks of the Alazani river, we finally came to our destination, circuitously, ending up again only a few blocks from the fighting, the house of a woman whose name I didn’t catch, an older woman. She hadn’t seen Nugzar for years, so they caught up, in a spate of relative quiescence of gunfire. We arranged chairs outside in the shade and Nugzar started his battery of folkloric questions: do you remember any old rituals or stories? Can you tell me the history of last names? That sort of thing. I sat quietly, taping. Each question was punctuated by gunfire, scarcely three houses away. I was struck by their stoicism in ignoring the gunfire while recollecting obscure rituals. Perhaps it was a relief to recollect the past, when Pankisi was peaceful and happy, to help forget the present moment? A particularly sharp set of gunfire exchanges began for a couple of minutes a few blocks away, and Temo and this woman became quite agitated, complaining about how the peaceful life of Pankisi has been in general ruined by waves of outsiders, Chechen fighters, corrupt Georgian police, heroin traffickers, and now this. Nugzar makes valiant efforts to bring the conversation back to recollecting snippets of folklore: perhaps she remembers a poem, maybe a poem she heard as a child in Khevsureti or in Pankisi? But the time for folklore is over. The experience of contact with the Chechen fighters and refugees, who are otherwise closely related to the Kisti in language and in custom, has caused the Kisti to think of themselves as being something other than Chechens. But this experience at the hands of the Georgian state made the Kisti conclude that day that maybe they were not so very welcome in Georgia, either. ‘My father worked in the police for 13-14 years’, the woman declared, with the unspoken reprimand ‘and now they shoot us like criminals’.

Later, having taken leave to visit another friend in the village of Joqolo, walking along the banks of the placidly murmuring Alazani river, we looked back to see the house in which the men were holed up in explode and catch fire. Temo, an influential man in the village of Duisi, concluded that the moral of the story was that the Kisti ‘would be hunted down like dogs’.

**Conclusion: The Nation, Terror and the State**

To understand what happened that day in Duisi, we need to understand how Pankisi is positioned discursively as being simultaneously central to the discourse of the war on terror, and peripheral to the Georgian nation. We also need to reposition both these discourses of the nation and terror in relationship to each other and to the State, whose job, of course, is to defend the nation from terror. With the ‘war on terror’, Pankisi becomes both a global and a local legitimating resource for the Georgian State’s re-consolidation of State monopoly on violence (against its own citizenry), a process that begins in Pankisi in 2005,
and moves to the streets of Tbilisi in November 2007. Pankisi’s role in legitimating State violence against its own citizenry, violence which moves from peripheral publics to center stages, mirrors what should be now a familiar global role that cosmologies of terrorism, illegitimate, non-state, violence, have played in legitimating State violence, including torture, across the globe, particularly in the last decade.

To see how this happens, it is worth inspecting the ontological underpinnings, the foundational presuppositions, of the cosmology of terror. Both the terms included in the phrase ‘war on terror’ are terms denoting violence, but qualitatively different kinds of violence: war denotes a kind of legitimate state violence, terror denotes an illegitimate kind of non-state violence (for an extensive exploration of these points see Asad 2007; for an ethnographic exploration of the Russian and Caucasus reception of the term ‘terror’ see Lemon 2004). Therefore, the phrase ‘War on Terror’ attempts a massive re-legitimation of the State monopoly of violence, precisely by placing all non-state violence, and even some state violence, under the nebulous category of Terror/ism. All one really needs to know is that a term that used to legitimate armed conflicts between two possessors of a legitimate monopoly of violence (the very definition of ‘war’) can now also be used to legitimate state violence against non-state agents of all kinds, provided that ‘violence’ can be predicated of those non-state agents. Naturally, part of the legitimating strategy here depends on altering the meaning of ‘violence’, so that violence becomes an essential and defining status attribute of certain groups of people, religions, cultures, and even activities (for other groups, religions, cultures, of course, it becomes accidental and deviant). The net result is that State violence, especially when directed at groups who are defined as being essentially violent, becomes unremarkable. Pankisi, therefore, is a perfect locus for such violence: the Kisti, being Chechens, Muslims, and peripheral members of the Georgian nation, tend to attract epithets like ‘violent’. Alongside their already notable status of being in league with Al Qaeda, Pankisi becomes a perfect place for an exemplary display of legitimate state violence.

It now seems clear in retrospect that the new Georgian ‘Rose Revolution’ State used exemplary displays of violence against such peripheral ‘terrorist’ populations only as a kind of pilot experiment. The very same weekend the New Georgian Rose Revolutionary government used other units of these special forces (the product of the ‘Georgian Train and Equip Program’ of 2002 whose objective was Pankisi) to disperse a protest in front of Parliament, the so-called ‘Wrestlers’ Revolution’. The question of how to interpret this event would depend crucially on interpretation of the predicate ‘violent’. From the government and pro-government NGO stance, the protestors were intrinsically ‘violent’ (after all they were wrestlers, whose methods of self-expression do not habitually include ‘civilized dialog’) and even had suspected ‘criminal’ contacts. By contrast, for the Georgian opposition, the return of violence to the streets and parliament seemed to be a mark of a retrograde movement from the peaceful ideals of the Rose Revolution, a return to the chaos of 1991-1992. For such opposition members, this was also a movement of Georgia away from ‘European Civilization’ within an Orientalist cosmology in which violence is the opposition of civilization and is something which typifies non-European spaces. Government officials
working within the same Orientalist ontology locating civilization in Europe, and violence ‘elsewhere’, claimed that it showed that it was Georgian society, or part of it anyway, that was ‘far from Europe’. Accordingly, the government reaction using heavily armed police against the crowds was not classified as ‘force’, but rather ‘a normal method used in all civilized countries’. If violence is the opposite of European civilization, then Georgia remains far from Europe, and Pankisi further still.6

One can see, then, Georgian state violence against civilians extending its scope and legitimacy from 2005-2007 by baby steps, primarily by defining ‘violence’ as not only as an intrinsic attribute of some groups (Chechens, Muslims, wrestlers, among others), but also of certain activities, notably street protests, even those without wrestlers. The Kisti, being Chechens, Muslims, Wahhabis, what have you, are intrinsically violent, wrestlers in the streets in front of parliament breaking furniture are also intrinsically violent (by avocation, one might say), but attribution of violence to street protests requires a considerable extension of the term ‘violent’. Here Georgian state discourse echoes a discernable trend in Western discourse, for example virtually all ‘procedural’ theories of democracy, which see any kind of expression that does not fall within the proceduralism of elections and parliament, or, by extension, ‘civilized or peaceful dialog’ as being tantamount to ‘coercion’, ‘force’ or ‘violence’ (see Manning 2007a, Montag 2000, Remer, 2000).

On November 7th 2007, these same Special Operations troops who had been trained and equipped by the US for use in the War on Terror in 2002, products of Operation Enduring Freedom directed specifically at the ‘crisis in Pankisi’, who had been used against intrinsically ‘violent’ Muslim populations of Georgia in 2005, were turned loose on thousands of peaceful protestors on the streets of Tbilisi.7 At this point, it became clear that the rose, the symbol of the ‘peaceful’ ‘velvet’ revolution of 2003, had been replaced with the iron glove. The same or similar arguments were made about the intrinsic ‘violence’ of street protests (and indeed, Saakashvili lamely claimed and continues to claim that the protests were funded by certain opposition members as part of an attempted coup de etat, a hilarious claim that was accepted without so much as a wince or a grin by the po-faced journalists interviewing him). The result is that many Western journalists, seemingly unwilling or unable to assess the directionality or agency lurking behind the anodyne epithet ‘violent’, simply characterized the protests as ‘violent’. Indeed they were ‘objectively’ violent, in that they elicited state violence, but there is a vast difference between peaceful protests that elicit state violence and protests that begin as violence. But ‘violence’ is one of the favorite words of the objective, neutral school of journalism, because it objectively describes a certain kind of unpleasantness but abstracts it away from all agency, intentionality, causation, culpability, analysis, or understanding.

But I want to argue that the new forms of State violence in Tbilisi were born and bred in Pankisi. The Georgian State reasserted its monopoly on violence at its own ‘violent’ peripheries. In 2005, in a manner that can now only be seen as prophetic, the Saakashvili regime had in one week made its points by two exemplary displays of violence, employing its ‘new’ special forces, one directed to the streets of the metropole, the other for a
peripheral public, a small, poor agrarian community of mostly Muslim Georgian-Chechens that somehow have been saddled with the job of representing the spectre of international Islamic terrorism in Georgia. Now it wasn’t Osama Bin Laden making bacterial weapons in Omalo, it was Wahhabism of the Kists themselves, that raised the spectre. According to Georgian president Saakashvili, speaking soon after taking power in 2004, a year before the incident in Duisi:

Some villages in the Pankisi region have already turned into centers of Wahabbism. It is a fact that there are Wahabbi schools there and that they are propagating Wahabbism. From childhood on, our people there -- the local Kist population -- are being poisoned with this unacceptable, hostile ideology. I want to remind the State Security Ministry that Georgia is a secular state and that every attempt at propagating Wahabbism is anti-Georgian, anti-national, and is directed against the Georgian statehood.8

Saakashvili added a final ultimatum, warning “all those who are propagating the ideas of Wahabbism in Georgia that they will face the utmost in severe actions and that they should not expect any compromise on our part.” In July 2005, the Kists got that message, loud and clear. But the broader argument, about the broadened understanding of the legitimacy of state violence, would reach the rest of Georgia only late in 2007.

Notes

2. Details about this hydro-electric project are unknown beyond that it is a Chinese investment.
3. I found this information, complete with a map showing the location of Pankisi in Georgia here: http://www.jinsa.org/articles/articles.html/function/view/categoryid/1701/documentid/2916/history/3,2360,655,1701,2916, this report citing the March 10 Eurasia Security Watch (http://www.afpc.org/esw/esw74.shtml), which in turn cites a Russian source (Mosnews.com).
4. Mark McDonald “Georgia’s notorious Pankisi Gorge appears to be free of terrorists” Posted on Wed, May. 04, 2005. (http://www.realcities.com/mld/krwashington/11563492.htm)
7. For details see the letter by Zaza Shatirishvili on my blog at www.dangerserviceagency.org.

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