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Episode Number: 2.4

Episode Title: Rituals of the Singing Village - Chamgeliani Sisters

Interviewees: Ana, Madona and Eka Chamgeliani

Translator: Zoé Perret

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Intro music

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: Welcome to Voices of the Ancestors where we explore Georgian polyphonic songs

Susan Thompson: and the women who sing them.

Susan Thompson: The voices today are me Susan Thompson

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: and me Holly Taylor-Zuntz and the Chamgeliani sisters Madona, Ana and Eka from the Singing Village of Lakhushdi in Svaneti in the Upper Caucasus. The highest mountainous region. So they're real Svan women. And we'll be hearing a few other surprise voices along the way. Let's hear the sisters introduce themselves now, along with some impressions from storyteller [Dawn Ellis](#), who you'll hear more from later

Audio Montage

Dawn Ellis: I find them to be the essence between them, the essence of everything I thought would be Georgian - *Madona Chamgeliani* - for example Madona she really stands solid on the Earth and she's got these flashing black eyes and a temperament to go with it. *Ana Chamgeliani* Ana has got that tenderness about her the tender eyes but um, a very grounded musicality *Eka Chamgeliani* and then you have Eka in the kitchen who just is hospitality incarnate. *Any questions dear?*

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: We've been wanting to interview these sisters for so long because they keep coming up in conversation in our other episodes. So we heard about the Svan ritual with chickens in our episode on folk instruments and we've used music from the Singing Village album to illustrate Svan songs in several episodes now. So one of the reasons it's taken us a while to interview the sisters is because, well firstly they do come from quite a remote region. Plus getting the three of them together in one place can be a challenge and then getting you Susan and a translator there is an added challenge on top so when this opportunity came up it was really great that you grabbed it with both hands.

Susan Thompson: yeah it was, it was amazing, I mean, the [Maspindzeli choir](#) that we sing with in London - that's Holly and I sing with Maspindzeli. They had a trip into Georgia and stayed for

a whole week up in Lakhushdi um and Zoé Perret was leading this trip so it was just too good an opportunity, we had all three Chamgeliani sisters and a translator it was great.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: Yeah I think since 2019 the Chamgeliani sisters have been talking with Maspindzeli about a visit to the Singing Village and after three years and a pandemic this visit finally took place in June 2023 at the height of the spring flowers and I couldn't make it but Susan you and about 20 others did?

Susan Thompson: Yeah that's right and it was quite a few members in the choir who had never been to Georgia before so that was really exciting to be there with people for whom it was the first time.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: Yeah and I loved what Annalie said who, um she's a professional musician and she's been singing Georgian songs for years um but this was her first time in Georgia and you got to speak to her didn't you.

Susan Thompson: Yeah that's right, we'd bin there... it was literally our last evening and I just grabbed her and said, Annalie can we, can we just do a recording now about impressions of your first week in Georgia.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: So here's one of the other voices in this episode Annalie Wilson also known as [Luna Bec](#) and I hope you enjoy the very authentic Village soundscape including the horses in the background.

Annalie Wilson: It feels like, it does feel like a kind of coming home because I've, I've made a connection with these songs and I've deepened that connection with friends and in workshops and retreats and at supra's and I feel like I became acquainted with the culture long before I visited the country. So actually coming here and seeing where it's, well coming to the source yeah and then experiencing it here it does feel like a kind of completion of a circle and also just this thing of starting a song and then being able to connect with local people who can join in singing even though I've only got a few words of Georgian have very very simple sentences and which all consist of gamarjoba, გამარჯობა, rogor khar, როგორ ხარ, kargad, კარგად, didi madloba, დიდი მაღლობა, you know - but then, but then in song we're completely connected and that's in a way in a weird way something I haven't expected because I, I've known these songs and this culture just with people like me I haven't known it with Georgian people so much.

Susan Thompson: We're not the only singers with a connection to the Chamgelianis and the Singing Village of Lakhushdi.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: Yeah people come from all over the world to visit them. They set up this project in 2011 with [Madge Bray](#) and Nana Mzhavanadze who we heard from in episode 10.

Susan Thompson: That's right
Madona in Georgian

So Madona told the story of how the Singing Village came about, she said years ago there was a feast day and the only people that she saw singing and dancing were the old men.

Madona in Georgian and she realised that if the younger generation wasn't involved in the Feast she just couldn't imagine living there anymore - it felt to her like she would just - I don't know - she would just be staying in the landscape but nothing more, sort of, no depth. And she said this, this was why it was really important to her, that our group Maspindzeli came. Although she sort of laughed and said well when they were there learning they didn't have any teachers themselves. As children they just loved the songs in a natural way. They were raised in a singing environment, they would just listen to the people who are singing around them and learnt like that.

Madona in Georgian

And she feels it's now a problem that many of the families in the village have completely lost the traditional singing. So when they were thinking about the project, this village of Lakhushdi, it seemed geographically just perfect. It felt like a really good place to conserve and preserve these songs, because the village, it's a bit off the beaten track. It's not on the main road to, to Mestia which is the capital. You have to turn off the main road in the village of Latali so it's perhaps a - she felt a really good environment to preserve these Svanetian songs.

Madona in Georgian

And then Madona acknowledge the fact that you know there are schools that are trying to preserve the songs in Mestia. But she just couldn't imagine that people from her Village would go all the way to Mestia with their children to go and learn songs. It's too far, you have a 20 minute walk down the road and then catch a marshrutka for perhaps another 15-20 minutes or walk the whole way. So for Madona it felt really necessary to have singing learning in the village.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: So what you're hearing at the moment is a bit of a different audio style than our usual Podcast episode. So this interview was recorded on the last day of the trip in the newly built singing house and the sisters were most comfortable speaking in Georgian and our friend and tour guide Zoé Perret translated in the moment and if you heard our episode with Tamar Buadze you will know that Zoé is an awesome interpreter of Georgian but we're going to try something a bit different so you're gonna hear us speaking the translations with bits of the sisters speaking in Georgian alongside singing or playing as well and some reflections and extra bits of audio as well, Susan right?.

Susan Thompson: That's right and you know Holly there was so many little snippets all the way through the week where the recording conditions just weren't great for podcasting. But I just wanted to be able to share all these little things with everybody, so I've tried to weave some of those things in - like the trip to the museum and the storytelling around the fire in the village

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: Yeah and I really liked one of the extra bits you recorded with Dawn Ellis who was another first timer in Georgia and she's a storyteller and she was speaking about the, the ballads.

Dawn Ellis: The ancestors voices of where we get all our wisdom, knowledge our imagery um just they, I think the ancestors are sort of speaking out of the land and also speaking through the

stories but particularly here, they're speaking through the ballads and I don't think I completely got, until I arrived, that they don't really have a storytelling tradition in the way that we do in sort of Celtic or a lot of other you know African a lot of African societies. Most of it's done through song and through ballad and probably always has been. But the voices of the ancestors speak through, I think, speak through the culture that they're preserving they're always talking about their grandparents, their mothers and they are very much alive still, I think they're very much alive still, but all the ballads are the voices of the ancestors and I think when we've walked in the hills and walked in the mountains I'm imagining feet that have trodden those paths before me and feet that have tilled those very steep hill fields.

Susan Thompson: When I sat with er Madona and Ana and Eka the interview started with them singing a ballad to us.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: So we hope you enjoy this episode with the Chamgeliani sisters. It's been a long time in the making - so if you do enjoy the episode please consider supporting us on Patreon or Kofi so that we can keep bringing you songs and stories from Georgia. And so now let's hear the ballad which was chosen to entertain their ancestors spirits.

Music: Ana plays chuniri, Madona & Eka sing a Svan ballad together.

Susan Thompson: Now I asked the sisters about the song that they had started with - this ballad. Tell us about the song.

Madona in Georgian

Susan Thompson: And it was curious - Madona was saying that how, the instrument that was being played it's a chuniri, and most of the songs that are sung with a chuniri are quite sad and they have a sort of minor note in them and in this particular song it's a mother telling the story um and that it's a very very long ballad and for this example they'd shortened the text.

Madona in Georgian

Susan Thompson: And then they went on to say a bit more about these very long ballads and how useful they were during one of the ritual times of the year in Svaneti called lipanali in January. It starts on the 18th of January and it's a very important holiday. Um and for for this family at this time they believe they're inviting the souls, the spirits of their family the people who've passed away, and they invite them into the home, and they invite them to take part in feasts and Madona had said that she remembers her father and her aunt singing at Lipanali and she thought perhaps they choose to sing ballads because they were so long they would keep with ancestor's spirits entertained for a good long while.

Madona in Georgian

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: And Madona remembered that when her father welcomed these spirits - their ancestors - it was a bit strange for her because she couldn't see these people to whom he was speaking and she was even a bit scared.

Eka in Georgian

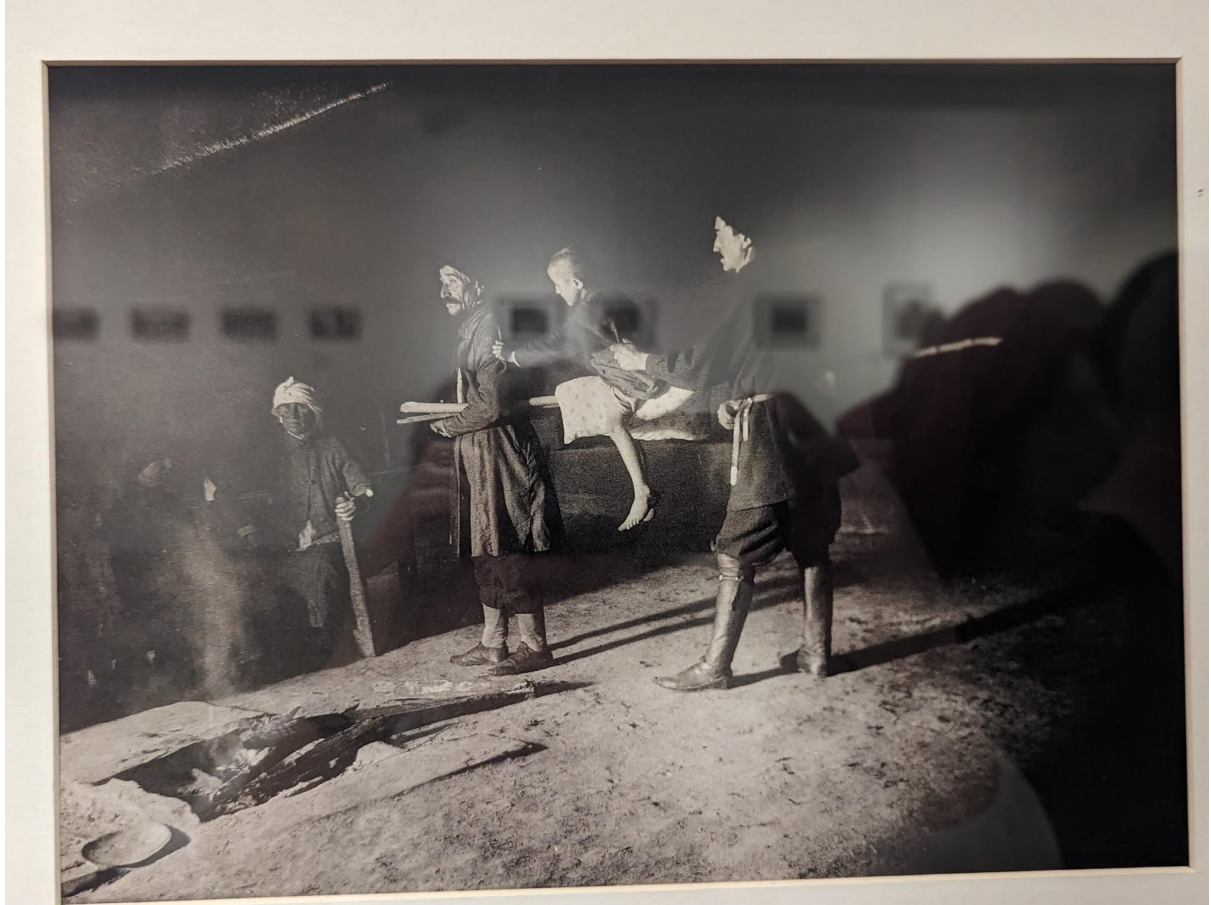
Susan Thompson: So then I wondered if it was different for Eka um because she is the oldest sister there's quite a big gap between her and Madona and the, her father would have been talking to people that she knew.

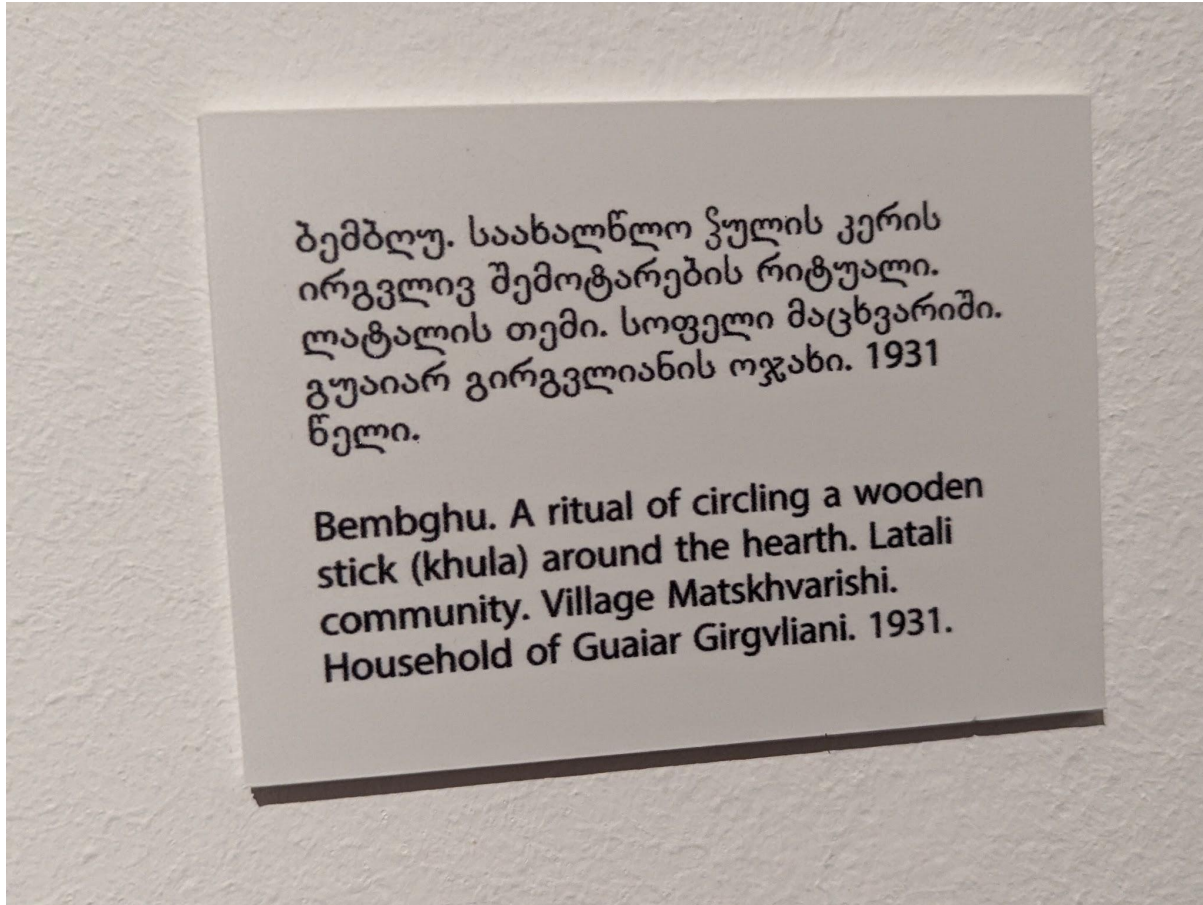
Eka in Georgian

Susan Thompson: And Eka said that she only knew her grandmother - but her memory was of really um, - the excitement of waiting every year for this holiday - the excitement of preparing for the holiday and inviting those spirits in.

Music transition

Susan Thompson: At Mestia Museum there was an exhibition to honour Dina Kozhevnikova who was working between 1905 and 1975 the exhibition was called Myth and Reality and it featured the photographs of Dina and I think Madona worked on this exhibition putting it together when she was working at the National Museum of Georgia.





And there was this photo and it was so atmospheric it was like, it was, there was a sort of earthen floor and a hearth and then two men carrying a big branch of a tree and if you can imagine sort of front and back and then riding between them was a child about, I don't know, eight years old something like that and that the label said that there was a ritual of circling a wooden stick, a khula, around the hearth um and the photo was taken in the Latali community and then Madona told us a bit more - she said what happens after the stick's been carried around the hearth in the circle is that the branch was kept until Lipanali in January and that's when it would be burnt. Now the label did give us the name of this ritual but I can't pronounce it for the life of me, b e m b g h u and of course it would be a Svanetian accent because I'm guessing it's a Svan word for a Svan ritual.

Music transition

Now you know the Svan ritual the one with the cockrell and the Changi and the chuiniri?

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: Oh you mean the catching the souls ritual that Nino Razmadze was telling us about in the previous episode.

Susan Thompson: Yeah that's the one. Well at this exhibition, the myth and reality one, there was actually a photo and it was labelled the ritual of separating soul from the body of the deceased. (Holly: Oh Wow)

სულის ამოყვანის რიტუალი. არდევან
გურჩიანის ძმა ჩანგით და მამლით
ხელში გარდაცვლილის მეუღლესა და
შვილთან ერთად. ბეჩოს თემი. სოფელი
დოლისვიფი. 1931 წელი.

Ritual of separating soul from the body of
the deceased. Ardevan Gurchiani's brother
(holding a rooster and a lyre) with wife and
a child of the deceased. Becho community.
Village Dolissvipi. 1931.



I know and Madona talked, you know that sort of prompted her to talk a bit about it and she said oh yeah, she said, you know she remembers going to the local hospital when her aunt died to go and collect the soul of her aunt.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: Wow and so did you get to hear any more about the Tbilisi hospital story.

Susan Thompson: Oh yeah, yes I did. So it turned out Madona said there was a woman in the village who who'd got a relative who had died in a Tbilisi hospital and she, it was really important to her that the soul should come back to Svaneti. So Madona got this message and was that asked if she would go and collect it with the rest of the family so I think I think it was just Ana and Madona who went. Um with a cockrell obviously, so and poor Ana got the job of carrying the cockrell, quite how that was I don't know, because apparently she's really scared of cockrell, so anyway, so I have this vision of Ana, you know, gripping the wings of a cockrell under her arm very tightly. Probably with Madona carrying the changi and I guess a chniri as well and off they go into this hospital in Tbilisi. Um and I think they're being given the ward where this person has died because that's where you have to go and collect the soul from um and as far as I could tell they weren't stopped by anybody. You know in they went and up the stairs and I think the cockrell was quite calm during this period. But when they got to where the actual ward was and they pushed open these double doors the cockrell went berserk - it was crowing - it was trying to flap - it was just you know, really going wild. Um so poor Ana, I know, and then the other people on the ward so I guess they must've been singing and playing by this stage as well because that's part of the ritual and the other people on the ward apparently were looking a bit bemused and possibly a bit scared.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: Yeah, yeah, I can understand that.

Susan Thompson: I don't think it's such a normal occurrence in Tbilisi.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: No probably a bit more unusual than in Mestia.

Susan Thompson: Quite. But, you know, Madona said you know, in Mestia the cockrell it reacts when the soul enters it but not like this. She said I don't think we were collecting one soul. She's like, I don't know how many Svanetian souls we caught.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: Oh wow they were trapped in the Tbilisi hospital waiting to be brought home.

Susan Thompson: Yeah - I think so, so, Yes. So that was the story and then I asked a bit about so what happens to the cockrell and she said well you know it goes back, went back to Svaneti and then the cockrell for 40 days people treat the cockrell as a person, because the you know like the 40 days after someone's buried so yeah

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: So how do they treat the cockrell as a person? Like does it sit at the table, do they talk to it?

Susan Thompson: I didn't get any more detail, sorry it was I think I was so stunned by this whole thing I was just like.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: I have so many questions about this.

Susan Thompson: Well me too - perhaps we'll have to go back up there with Nino Razmadze sometime (Holly: yeah) and get as much detail as possible.

Music transition

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: So I've heard of this song called Barbal Dolash - but I don't think it originally came from the Chamgeliani sisters. Did you find out about that song when you were there. Did you sing it ?

Susan Thompson: Yeah I got a little bit when I think it was Madona was explaining about that Barbal is a place and a church, that it seemed like churches in Svaneti have characters. So I kind of understood this to be like, I don't know the church in my village is a St Mary's so you know you'll celebrate St Mary's Saints day. But in Svaneti it seemed to be more than that, it was like yes the church has a Saint and it has a Saints Day and a feast day but also each church had a set of characteristics like, the obvious one might be one's very good for fertility, but things like that so it was like the Barbal is a place and it's a church and it's a almost like a 'being' a character.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: Oh wow, okay and where did they learn this song from - has it been in their family?

Susan Thompson: Yeah well it kinda, it seems to be from the area. So, so the place Barbal with this church is nearby. So that's nearby Lakhushdi which is nearby Latali so it's in that area of Svaneti and we were taught by Murad and Givi and they um both knew Barbal Dolash well I say they knew it, they knew the first part (Holly: OK) and Ana explained. Because Ana sings with [Sathanao](#) and the leader of Sathanao is [Tatiana Megrelidze](#).

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: That's a women's ensemble that sing in Tbilisi.

Susan Thompson: Yeah yeah they're based in Tbilisi yeah so they've toured in the UK and I think that was probably when I first met Ana.

Ana in Georgian

Susan Thompson: But Ana said Tatia gave her a ring one time and she said I've been, I've been looking through, you know, been researching and I found this score in this book, that seems to be Barbal Dolash. Do you want to come and have a look, you know, I'd like you to come and have a look and work together. So I think that was her .. she recognized it as being something from Svaneti um so Ana came and looked and they looked at it. And Ana said when she first saw it she really didn't find it very interesting, she wasn't, thought, didn't really, wasn't really sure about it. But she said after they'd she realised - I think at some point it dawned on

her that it was a round dance, a perkhuli, and they, she and Tatia tweaked some of the structure of it or the notes in it.

Ana in Georgian, Zoé in Georgian

Susan Thompson: And then they put it as a second part of Barbal Dolash and I think that's quite normal that you get, you know, a static part of a song and then and then it moves into a dance part of a song. I think you and I have come across that before in other, in other pieces so as a structure it seemed to, I could see why they thought that was the way to go.

Ana in Georgian

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: OK so what did the Elders in the village think when they heard the second half of the song?

Susan Thompson: Well that was just so funny because it's like you know they'd walk up the stairs as the main group would be rehearsing the second bit and the dance. And people would be going - come and join in, join in. And they are going - we don't know it, we can't do that. We can't do this dance and they'd be like pulled in and peel out again because it was new to them. But they seemed OK with it. It wasn't you know they weren't, they didn't react with sort of anger or crossness. It was a slightly bemused curiosity really.

Madona in Georgian

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: Well that's so cool how even these old tradition holders and song holders are learning new parts of songs, from, from their own region but they're coming from a book in Tbilisi.

Susan Thompson: Exactly and it was really fresh because Ana said that Sathano had only just performed it, like last week, the week before she'd come up here. So there was a point at which I asked whether she and her sisters could sing it for me and they looked at each other and went - no. Only Ana knows it. And it was a bit - it seemed to Ana that it was important to her that this, that she was able to pass it on and bring it back to Lakhushdi. (Holly: great)

Madona in Georgian

Music: Barbal Dolash (first part)

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: That was the first part of the song Barbal Dolash sung by the sisters and Levan Bitarovi. Now let's return to hear a bit more from Annalie.

Annalie Wilson: It's my first time staying with a singing family I feel very lucky that it's been such a female lead situation I think we've got this three sisters with these different qualities and it feels very powerful and um it's, it's been it's been really enriching to have different threads

from each one of them - to hear a lot from Madona about the background of the songs and what she's being doing with her revolutionary activities - which is very exciting for me and something I felt like really I connected with her about and then from Ana I feel we've got more of the sort of the the more mystical depth of the music and the way that she puts the songs across. It's been really nice for me as a woman singer to have the song that taught to me in my own pitch.

(Susan - yes) Because so often I think I tend to sort of try and imitate these male singers and because I sort of can to some degree get that sound but at a cost you know and sometimes it's good for me to to hear it in a range that I can relate to and also in a slightly different style you know it's different (Susan - yeah) so that's been really nice and but that's you know that's one part of it I think the - they are so steeped in this music. You know some of my favourite moments were being in the kitchen, and somebodies cooking, somebodies chatting - Ana picks up the chonguri and starts singing and playing and then Madona walks over to start singing and maybe Levan then arrives - and suddenly, it's so relaxed and so part of the fabric and you can feel that this is how the family has been and you're a guest in this family - that's what it feels like and that is better for me than - not better, but that's more precious to me in a way than or more an embodied experience than any workshop I've done. Because I'm just - I feel like I am living how the songs have been sung and passed down through generations and that's definitely - that's coming through them, without them even trying, but then also I feel there's this um passion in them to share it as well and then there are moments where they have really shared why that is important to them. It's very clear to me now that I'm not just coming here and like taking it, um without giving anything in return - that there is something of an exchange - which is really important to me that they are also feeling appreciative that we want to learn this music and sing it.

Susan Thompson: And my final question is going to be - the podcast is called 'Voices of the Ancestors' what does that mean to you, that phrase.

Annalie Wilson: I thought a lot about Ancestors - and in the last few years I have a practice of calling on ancestors before I do any kind of performance and I don't think of ancestors as simply people who were responsible for my dna. I think of my ancestors, and I do regularly call on people that have inspired me - or people I feel I need in the room with me so I think - I'm quite free with the idea of ancestors and I think coming here, being here, soaking up the music and learning from the Changelians and the other teachers that we have had that's that we are experiencing the voices of the ancestors and then channelling them and then re singing them. I mean we are in a way the ancestors because we are taking that in and then we are gonna be the ancestors for the next generations of people and I think yeah that's what it means to me. It's an energy, it's a resource, it's something that's available to us to tap into, if we, if we want to. I feel that the ancestors are just there - sitting there waiting for our interest. In a way that maybe that way of thinking come from my buddhist past this idea - in Tibetan buddhism you have this idea of the dralers, these energies that are just waiting for you to pay attention - and by doing this podcast you are doing exactly that - you are paying attention and so that's why it's flowing because this stuff wants to be unearthed doesn't it, (Susan: yeah) and shared. (Susan: yes)

Music transition

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: It's really heartwarming to hear Annalie's appreciation and acknowledgement of this work that Susan and I are doing on the podcast and I love the idea that yeah these ancestors and these stories and these songs are just waiting, aching to be heard and shared across the world. So it's a real privilege to do this work and if you're feeling appreciative of this podcast, if it brings something good into your life, it's really easy to support us to just keep unearthing and sharing more and more stories from Georgia so you could go to Kofi or Patreon and support us financially and we'll put the links in the show notes. One way that we want to share more stories is by getting some new equipment so that we can go to remote places and record several people at once. So yeah your money is, is going to help us unearth more stories. A really simple thing you can do is tell your friends about this podcast, share it on social media and just help us get more listeners. We are completely independent. This podcast is literally just me and Susan making this thing together so every individual donation is seen by us and felt by us and really appreciated thank you so much.

Music transition

Susan Thompson: Welcome back - now Holly when you went to Mestia Museum did you see those large stones, the ones with holes in the middle, that were kind of strung together on a piece of string?

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: No I didn't please tell me more.

Susan Thompson: Okay, well. I only know more because Madona was going around with us and was giving us a lot more background information to the exhibits - so we nicknamed these stones 'sin stones' gosh that's hard to say and she said they were worn by people so like over the shoulder and under the armpit as we understood it. I think under clothes even. They were quite big and heavy. But they had to be worn by people if they'd killed another person, but not like an intentional murder. It was only if you'd killed somebody else by accident or the other people that had to wear these stones were people who had killed a wolf. Now this bemused us a bit, but she said the wolf it's a very important animal for Svan people because there was a belief that the wolf was St George in animal form so St George the patron saint of Svaneti can become a wild dog or a wolf (Holly:No) Yeah or perhaps even a werewolf.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: No way, that's so cool. I had no idea that Svans held wolves in such sacred ways because I've heard of that in other sort of indigenous cultures but I haven't heard this story about St George becoming a werewolf that is just well that's just wild and also if you think about it the surname Chamgeliani has the word 'mgeli' მგელი in the middle which means of course wolf in Georgian.

Susan Thompson: Yeah and I think that kind of might, you know, give a clue, to the character of the family in a way.

Music transition

Susan Thompson: So there's a point in our interview when we touch on Madona and Madona's character and her - now what is it that Dawn said - her flashing eyes and her fiery spirit. While Annalie mentioned hearing a lot from Madona about the background of the songs and what she's been doing with her revolutionary activities so while we were in Lakhushdi, before the interview even. Madona had been talking around the table about how she stood up to the Orthodox Georgian church when they wanted to stop some of the ancient practices that the villagers have been taking part in at their local church. Now this isn't the church right in the centre of the village. This is the church of Tangili.

Madona in Georgian

Susan Thompson: So Tangili church stands hidden in the forest on the top of the hill high above Lakhushdi and the path the way up there. It's not marked, it goes straight up through the meadows and it then enters into the forest and Tangili is this tiny church consecrated to the archangels and inside it, it's decorated with amazing fresco's and Madona speaks a bit about those in our interview

Madona in Georgian

Susan Thompson: Yeah Madona was saying that the fresco's inside are from the 13th century but they're just the ones we can see, underneath there are other layers and they think they're probably back to the ninth century because that's the age of the building itself. And for Madona Tangili church is a very special place. There are layers and layers to why it is special to her. Every year there are two feast days. And just the very age of it - being from the ninth century is special.

Madona in Georgian

Susan Thompson: So Tangili Church it has it's own special liturgical chant, a sacred chant. And that would be chanted during the feast days at Tangili.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: oh yes I think it's called Diadeb I've seen a video on Facebook of the Australian group Tsinskaro learning it from Givi Pirtsklani who's an Elder in Lakhushdi and has been chanting at Tangiloba for the last 66 years.

Madona in Georgian

Susan Thompson: And during the Feast days a group of men arrive and are standing inside the church and they are singing and praying.

Madona in Georgian

Susan Thompson: And they start saying Wo Dideba and at the same time every man says some prayers, some text but different texts and then they all end at the same time in a synchronized way.

Madona in Georgian

Susan Thompson: And I love the way that Madona explained the feeling of being at this feast day in Tangili. That she felt that if you went up at the beginning and you stayed all the way through to the end. That it was like the whole form, was like the process of a song. How one is born and how it ends because it starts from the traditions from, from the place, with the text and then they were chants and then they say the Chant for the specific church for Tangili and then people come out in the yard and they do seven round dances. So they're the perkhuli round dances and everyone has to stand. The men, the women and the children.

Madona in Georgian

Susan Thompson:

Now this is when Madona the fighter comes in. So, a few years back, I think it was in around 2011. A group of Orthodox people came to the village and the villagers helped them to build wooden houses, up by Tangili church.

Madona in Georgian

Susan Thompson: Um and these were monks and they were living there and they waited, I don't know how long they were there for - months by the sounds of it. And they waited until Tangili Church feast day and as usual the villages went up there. But these monks started to shout at them, and to stop them, and to say it wasn't right what they were doing, it they should not dance and if they wanted to dance they'd better go to a nightclub and yeah it was a shock.

Madona in Georgian

Susan Thompson:

And Madona said she got, she felt very nervous. She couldn't understand how it was possible that monks who were occupying the church and breaking the rules of the Lakhushdi visitors and trying to prohibit them from performing in our own, in their own way. Um she was even saying that her sisters didn't agree with her. They were, they couldn't understand why she was trying to fight and were saying that she would not succeed.

Madona in Georgian

Susan Thompson: So what does Madona do? Well she's an ethnologist - she has a Masters and she she wrote an article in an internet journal and she didn't just write about what was happening in Tangili but about the whole process that was taking place in Svaneti and she said she was not blaming, she was just explaining and describing their own Svanetian traditions and

how Svanetian people were very religious and explaining that this was their way of worshipping - may have been a very old Christian tradition that they had preserved.

Madona in Georgian

Susan Thompson: So yeah after she wrote this article apparently the whole contingent of the patriarchy started to fight against her. So she learned that even the Patriarch, the head of the Georgian church learned about this article that she'd written and she said she'd never met the Patriarch before. But that wasn't entirely true because she said actually he's my Godfather - he baptized me in Lakhushdi church. So when all this story came out and she was being attacked in this way, she responded by saying - well I'm the Patriarch's godchild and the Patriarch welcomed me with an open heart and she was asked if there could be a meeting.

Madona in Georgian

Susan Thompson: So she wanted to go to this meeting to explain how important it was. And explain the religion in Svaneti and why it was important to Svanetians. So this was a meeting in Tbilisi, in the capital city, at the head of the Patriarchy - the head office. and she she said she went along thinking there might be, I don't know, about of four or five people maximum - but when she went into the room there were about 50 priests and she was the only woman.

Madona in Georgian

Susan Thompson: The way Madona tells the story, she explained everything and the Patriarch himself told the monks and the priests to let the people of Svaneti, do what they want and not to forbid them. And after that the monks went away from Tangili. So you see Madona really is a fighter.

Madona in Georgian

Susan Thompson: Although she says she doesn't like to fight unless it's necessary.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: So let's now hear the elders in Tangili chanting Diadeb.

Music: Diadeb (Chant)

Madona in Georgian

Susan Thompson: And I can see, can see that for Madona this fight was so necessary. The importance of Tangili church had layers and one of the layers was around her grandmother. So her grandmother in the space of one month had lost both her husband and her child and of course she was in mourning and the whole village felt great pity for her and just a few days after that tragedy it was the feast day of Tangili and her grandmother of course did not go up to the feast day in that year.

Madona in Georgian

Susan Thompson: But she realised, her grandmother realised, that there was no sound coming from normally she'd be able to hear it in the village square but this year nobody was singing because everybody in the singing was in mourning together with her because of this, this terrible tragedy.

Madona in Georgian

Susan Thompson: So her grandmother understood that she needed to go up to the church, up to Tangili, in her black clothes, and so she went up and she herself started to dance and to encourage other people to dance and Madona felt it was so important for her because if her grandmother had not done that dancing and that singing, then the tradition that she was saving in 2011 may not have even been there then. They may have started a new tradition, of, of there would always be someone in mourning and it may have continued like that and they may have lost that tradition at that point.

Madona in Georgian

Susan Thompson: And she felt, Madona felt, that life and death are two things that come together and it was very important for that to be continuing. That even when someone is mourning the death of the person that they should still be able to sing and dance during feast days.

Madona in Georgian

Susan Thompson: Yeah apparently her grandmother, whose name was Katie, people would say if they were if someone is in mourning they were saying look at Katie - look what she has done, she started to sing and dance even though she was mourning her child and her husband so you can do the same and Madona felt that this had started a new a real tradition within the village. So the conversation and the interview became very poignant at this point because Madona said that they themselves had experienced a similar sort of situation when their mother passed away because the very next day they had a concert in Israel and it was very difficult.

Ana in Georgian

Susan Thompson: And then Ana joins the conversation and said that actually her mother, their mother had not been feeling well and she had said to them if anything changes keep going if I couldn't teach you how to behave in that situation - I don't see the point of my life and until now.

Music: Tanghili Chant Diadeb

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: So when I have seen the Chamgeliani sisters perform I've seen two sisters on stage and Madona and sometimes they're so-called adopted sister Levan Bitarovi. So I'm wondering, where was the third sister Eka?

Eka in Georgian

Susan Thompson: Well I asked her about this and basically she's busy being an educator in the kindergarten in Latali.

Eka in Georgian

Susan Thompson: oh and looking after seven cows and three bulls and many potato fields (Holly: Wow) - so she has no time to travel and perform, so she says.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: oh okay so I saw that the sisters will be performing in Belgium with Bassani and Didgori which is quite a prestigious thing. So does that mean that Eka won't be joining them?

Madona in Georgian

Susan Thompson: Ah, well Madona says Eka is coming on the European tour in November. (Holly okay) But they were teasing each other quite a lot because they were very worried that the family might die of hunger. (Holly: oh the rest of the family) Yeah of those left in Svaneti.



Photo; Eka Chamgeliani feeds wood into the cooking stove during a long power cut.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: To end this episode let's hear from the actual interview with Zoé translating - What does Voices of the Ancestors mean to each of the sisters starting with Ana.

Susan Thompson: So what does Voices of the Ancestors mean to you?

Ana in Georgian

Ana translated by Zoé: I personally don't even remember when I started to learn singing because it seems like I was raised in a singing environment. My whole life I am accompanied with singers. I'm always with them. But until now I haven't met a person who loved singing more than my father.

Ana in Georgian

Ana translated by Zoé: He was always requesting us to sing. Even if he was coming late at home every time he was like let's sing.

Ana in Georgian

Ana translated by Zoé: I was always happy to sing - and he would say - ah, you are my true child.

Ana and Eka in Georgian

Ana translated by Zoé: I was very small when my grandmother died and I still remember funerals and how people came to funerals.

Ana in Georgian

Ana translated by Zoé: So actually I do not remember, really her personality or visually how she looked. But what I remember the most is her voice.

Ana in Georgian

Ana translated by Zoé: I have never forgotten her voice - 'til here I can hear her voice in my head all the time.

Holly Taylor Zuntz: And now this is Eka

Eka in Georgian

Eka translated by Zoé: I remember at that time I was studying in the school that is a few metres away from our house. I was like in first grade. I remember because our mum was a teacher in that school and my grandmother was already ill and I remember how my mother would ask me at each break between the classes to go home and check if my grandma was OK.

Madona in Georgian

Holly Taylor Zuntz: And now Madonna

Madona in Georgian

Madona translated by Zoé: For me I didn't know my grandmother - but for me the most important person connected to singing was my father.

Madona in Georgian

Madona translated by Zoé: I was a late child. When I was raised my sisters were already students in Tbilisi so I remember a special relationship with my father.

Madona in Georgian

Madona translated by Zoé: I remember how he transmitted to me, the whole information that he had. So every evening he would tell me stories about everything - the traditions.

Madona in Georgian

Madona translated by Zoé: So my sisters of course remember my grandmother - but even tho' I did not know her - I remember better because of all the stories that my father would tell me.

Susan Thompson: Aaaah - blows kisses - thank you.

Holly Taylor Zuntz: Thank you for listening to Voices of the Ancestors with Holly Taylor Zuntz and Susan Thompson. Our guests were Ana, Madonna and Eka Chamgeliani, with Zoé Peret translating, as well as Dawn Ellis and Annalie Wilson. Thank you Gosia for the Diadeb audio. Now we're not academic ethnomusicologists, so we'll signpost you to some more thoroughly researched resources in the show notes if that's your kind of thing. And also some links to films about Svanetian folk music. And a link to the European tour in November 2023.

If you were interested to visit the Singing Village, you could go to the resources page of our website, www.voicesoftheancestors.co.uk, where you will find information about all the tours that we know of happening in Georgia. While you are on the website you could support us by visiting our donate page. And you'll also find a transcript of this episode and all our episodes. Bye for now.

Music: Makharia by Ialoni

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