



Series: 2

Episode Number: 9

Episode Title: Blessing the Village - Alive Easter With Amer-Imeri

Interviewee: Amer-Imeri and Mtiebi expedition to bless Khovle in Kartli

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MUSIC : Amer-Imeri singing Aghdomasa

Magda: When you listen to children's voices I think it is the reason for happiness.

MUSIC : Amer-Imeri sing

Christe Aghda

Holly: Welcome to Voices of the Ancestors, where we explore Georgian polyphonic songs and the women who sing them. The voices today are me, Holly Taylor-Zuntz

Susan: and me, Susan Thompson and the singers of Amer-Imeri and Mtiebi ensembles. Founded by Edisher Garakanidze in the 90's, these 2 groups have been keeping folk rituals alive, on stage, in rehearsal, but most importantly, in the village, which is where we're going with them today.

Holly: Hmm And one of these rituals is called Chona, performed at Easter. It's a bit like carolling, going house to house, singing, collecting gifts of food and drink, and calling out blessings to the family.

Sounds from the village

But we were surprised to be invited to the village the Sunday after Easter, which is apparently called "Alive Easter", to celebrate the Chona ritual.

Susan: Yeah now in this episode we invite you to join us on this journey to bless the village in a uniquely Georgian way. It's a collection of live recordings, er with the sounds of village life all around us. Folk and church rituals, and lots of singing.

Holly: Oh yes and a few surprises along the way, like finding a family member and being invited to a spontaneous supra right at the end of the day!

Susan: That was amazing and also do you remember we discovered um that in this village a weather ritual song had been collected. (**Holly:** Oh yes, yes) I know. So er in the episode you're gonna hear from the teachers of these two groups - So you're gonna hear from Magda, Tiko, and Rusudan, along with a couple of the elder generation of the youth choir, so Matte and lone.

Holly: Yeah, and just to explain um, as the children in Amer-Imeri, like Matte and lone grow up, through teenagers and young adults, then they might join Mtiebi, which is the group of elder singers er, but the whole thing is a community, both groups. They do sing together and the younger ones learn from the older generations not really through, like, direct teaching, more just through osmosis and listening and experience - like going to the village and performing Chona.

Susan: Yeah and it was a real honour to be on this trip with singers who as children learnt from Edisher and his wife Nino and their son Gigi. And to see them as adults Yeah when we saw them passing on their knowledge, in the village, it was so special and I'm really glad to be able to share it with you dear listener.

Holly: Mmm me too, so our journey begins on a sunny Sunday morning in April 2025 at the side of the road. Susan and I turn up clueless and curious with our microphone to be taken on an adventure....

Susan: Yeah so clueless

Intro music

In the Car chat

Holly: ...Tamara, Tamari... Kriste aghsdga! (Christ is risen!)

Tamari: Cheshmaritad! (Indeed!)

Tamari: Cheshmaritad namdvilad anu... (Truly and indeed...)

Holly Indeed. So we say "Christ is risen," "Indeed He is risen."

Susan: Yes!

Holly: So we're in the car...

Susan: Yes.

Susan: ...on the way to a village called Khovle.

Susan: Khovle? Ah, okay.

Susan: Near Kaspi, which is about an hour outside of Tbilisi.

Holly: Okay.

Susan: And we're just hanging around by the side of the road at the moment, aren't we?

Holly: Currently, yes. So Tamari, our lovely driver, has handed us some sandwiches.

Susan: Yes.

Holly: We're waiting for a bus full of children to catch up with us. I think that's what's going on.

Susan: Oh Okay. So I took a photo of all the children just hanging around on the corner of the Blue Monastery when we set off.

Holly: So these are members of Amer-Imeri youth choir ensemble.

Susan: Yes.

Holly: And we're on the way to what I think is a traditional Easter ritual called Chona.

Susan: Yeah, but this is kind of second Easter, isn't it?

Holly: It's not Easter, it's the Sunday after Easter, which Magda, who's the leader of the ensemble, has told us is called Tsothkhalı Kviras, which means "Alive Sunday."

Susan: So it should be even more joyful than last Sunday then.

Holly: Yeah, I guess so.

Susan: Yeah. Awesome.

Holly: I guess there's going to be maybe some eggs involved?

Susan: I've seen baskets.

Holly: Baskets involved, maybe some wine...

Susan: And I'm hoping song.

Holly: I'm going to say singing.

Susan: Yeah. See what happens.

Susan: So we've just had someone else jump in the car.

Holly: Uh-huh.

Holly: Rusudan, Kriste aghsdga!

Rusudan: Cheshmaritad, cheshmaritad! Now repeat "cheshmaritad."

Holly: Cheshmaritad.

Rusudan: Whoa!

Holly: Are you a teacher?

Rusudan: Yes.

Holly: What do you teach?

Rusudan: Oh, in our Amer-Imieri, I teach *samshoblostsodneoba*, so "know your native country."

Holly: Oh! Wow!

Rusudan: Yes. So there are history, language, ethnography, geography... a little, little. And music. The crown of it, ethnomusicology er. Theater. As Gigi called this... and Nino, mother of Edisher's wife and Gigo's mother, founded this subject.

Holly: And you were saying about the village that we're going to, Khovle?

Rusudan: Yes, Khovle. Khovle is a village, where is from, the founder of our Georgian university, the greatest scientist, historical Ivane Javakhishvili.

Susan: Ah!

Rusudan: Ivane. And our It's very historical village, ancient village.

Susan: Hmm. Well, I'm looking forward to finding out so much more.

Holly: Yeah.

Arriving in the village Khovle - The Church & House Museum

Live Music_Adgomasa Shensa

Holly: And it's not just Ivane Javakhishvili's village. Here's Tiko, one of the leaders of the choir,

Holly: Where are we?

Tiko: We are in the village of Khovle, which is the village of my grandmother. And I was here each summer in my childhood and I love very much this place, it's very near by my heart.

Voiceover

Susan: Our first stop, and the first song of the day, is at the church, right on the edge of the village - but it's locked. It seems no one knows we're coming.

Holly: Yeah everyone is gathered at the door, out of the wind, singing Adghomasa shensa, which is an Easter chant. Rusudan's leading the first 'Kriste Aghsdga -

Susan: Chesmaritad' it's a call and response, and it will be the first of many today

Susan: We escape the windy church yard and pile back into the car and drive just a few minutes before we stop again at a big house above a stonewall with railings. It seems we are here so Rusudan can introduce the children to her subject "know your native country". This is a house museum, it's where the founder of the first University in Georgia lived.

Holly: Yeah - the museum staff seem surprised to see so many children just appear out of nowhere - understandably! But they're so delighted when Amer-Imeri start singing and dancing in a circle outside the museum. To start with we're greeted by two women, and as the round dance goes on, more and more people start appearing. And by the end of the song, there's a whole crowd of adults smiling and applauding and filming!

Holly: Now we're heading into the village, following Tiko, and singing at the first gate. It seems we are starting the Chona ritual.

Susan: The first few houses we call at, there's either no answer, or confusion. loane, comes up to us and it's a bit muffled, but he explains it can take a while to find a villager who wants to take part.

Live music: Singing 'aka mshvidoba'

Susan: There's someone coming to the door

All: Agashenot!

Susan: Looking very bemused and closing it!

Tiko: Tsavedit! Tsavedit!

Holly: Let's go let's go.

Susan: yep, let's not freak people out too much

lone: The start is tough always

Susan: Yeah its okay people get going

lone: There is like er one or two stops, there will be one special one, and then start, real start.

Holly: So people have no idea that we're coming?

lone: Yeah of course, they don't know. No clue.

Holly: Yeah I think I'd be a bit freaked out if 20 school children turned up at my front door singing. But then you get someone that remembers maybe...

Holly: So, what's going on, Susan?

Susan: Well, as usual, I haven't a clue.

Holly: Oh, I have a bit of a clue.

Susan: Well, I mean, I have a bit of a clue, but I'm walking down a village street. Now, I say street, but in the middle, there's grass growing.

Holly: Yes. So, we've just been to, I'd say, four or five different houses.

Susan: Yeah, yeah.

Holly: And each time, the group gathers outside (**Susan** yeah) and someone shouts a blessing.

Susan: A blessing. It's not aggressive.

Holly: It's a blessing. And they're saying "God bless this house, God bless this family."

Susan: Yeah.

Holly: And um then the group starts to sing

Susan: Yeah and wait expectantly and slightly impatiently.

Holly: And they're singing "Chona". And even if nobody comes out...

Susan: They've found another house! Stop!

Voiceover

Susan : You can hear them shouting out in Georgian - God, build up this family. Many blessings of this day. Blessed be this house! Rejoice! This is a good family, guys, good people! Let's sing Chona for them!

Music: *Live Singing*

Voiceover during singing:

Holly: and now a small door within the iron gate is being opened and we're filing in, one at a time, all 25 of us, and for the first time, we're being welcomed into a yard. It turns out this is Tiko's childhood friend's house. Tiko is telling us her memories - *When I was little, I would run around with the children here. There were three of us. I was here all day. They would call me, "Tiko! Come here!" My house is very close to here. My aunt Nazi used to bake bread here and the most delicious cheese. We played all kinds of games and put on plays. I loved being here and I'm so happy to be back. Be blessed and be happy!*

Susan: Now what was it you were saying about what's happening here?

Holly: So we've just arrived at a house. They have shouted a blessing to try and get the attention of the host, or the person that owns the house.

Susan: Yeah.

Holly: Then they've sung a Chona song, which says "please give me an egg (Susan: yes) or two eggs."

Holly: And then the host has come out of the gate, taken the wicker basket, and now we're just waiting for her to come back to see what's going to be in the basket.

Susan: OK

Holly: But even if... and there were several houses where nobody came to the gate? But even if no one comes they still say "God bless this house," "God bless this family."

Susan: Yeah. And I would say how many are we, 25?

Holly: At least.

Susan: At least.

Holly: Mix of ages. Yes.

Susan: There's— there's been some flowers borrowed from the wayside, so there's definitely flowers in the hair— men and boys and girls, everyone.

Live Music: *Men singing kakhethian/kartlian Chona*

Holly: So one of the houses that we were at before, (**Susan** um) they put— I think they put some chocolate in the basket.

Susan: Oh, did they? I miss— I missed that. Oh, okay.

Holly: It was a sort of packet of chocolate.

Susan: Oh, that's sweet.

Holly: So I wonder what we'll collect here. Maybe wine, maybe eggs, maybe bread.

Susan: Well, judging by the gate we've just got bunches of grapes and wine bottles on it, I'm hoping, wine! But let's see how it goes.

And— and this really is somewhere they— this village didn't know they were coming today?

Holly: As far as I can tell, they didn't— yeah, this is a complete surprise. So the fact that someone's come to their gate and they've reached out their hand asking for the basket... so they must have known— oh, here she comes back!

Susan: Oh here she is Yes, yes!

Holly: Okay, so we're seeing

Susan: I'm seeing walnuts.

Holly: Walnuts, wine, fruit, apple.

Susan: Delicious!

Rusudan: [In Georgian, thanking the host and offering a blessing]

Susan: [In Georgian] Big thanks!

At Tiko's House

Music: *Live singing*

Voiceover:

Susan: Now we're coming up to an empty house with overgrown nettles in the yard and a big rusted metal gate. And *Tiko* is pulling a key out of her pocket, and we all gather round until she manages to open the gate. This is her family home.

Holly: There's so much excitement in the air and the men are singing as *Tiko* climbs the outside stairs calling the children to come, come - *modi modi*. She greets the children and puts sweets in their basket.

Susan: And everyone is calling out blessings to each other.

Holly: *Tiko's* unlocking the door now and we're flooding into the empty rooms. Wine from a fanta bottle and apples are pulled out of the baskets, and we're toasting *Tiko's* ancestral home.

Susan: Oh an *Tiko* shows us the height marks on the wall in pencil from when she and her siblings were growing up, and her plans for how it might look one day in the future..

Holly: And now the kids begin a circle dance, and there's so many of them they fill the entire room. It's a moment that's just overflowing with joy.

Holly: Where are we?

Tiko: We are in the village of Khovle, which is the village of my grandmother. And I was here each summer in my childhood and I love very much this place. It's very near by my heart.

Holly: And this house that we've just did the Chona at, that's your family home?

Tiko: Yes, it's my family home. And in the summer, we, my mum and with the children and my father and my grandmother and grandfather too, we was here each summer, when they was er live, alive, my grandparents. They live in Tbilisi, but in the summer we usually live here. And they work sometimes from Tbilisi and at the weekends they come here, my grandfather and my father. And we wait from here when the autobus comes and after we run to receive them and they bring some bags from Tbilisi.

Holly: And now there's no one there, but you were the host today and you received "Amer Imeri"?

Tiko: Yes, and I'm very happy because I have the best, best er guests in this home.

Voiceover

Susan: I wonder what Tiko would have said Voices of the Ancestors meant to her in that moment....I didn't get the chance to ask her in her. But later, we were having a very windy supra on a hill above the village, Tiko started to share how touched she was to have us there.

Tiko: We was in Britain, in Oxford, and I can't imagine then that you will be in Khovle.

Holly: Yes you've been in our home, now we're in yours.

At The Candle House

Underscored by hoi kriste aghda

Holly: Now we're back to singing outside locked gates and hoping to be let in. Along our way through the village, we seem to adopt a local man named Malkhaz, who is just delighted by the singing and eager to show us which houses might be receptive to us.

And this next host does open the gate, and it's an elderly woman called Tinatin.

Susan: Yeah Rusudan pulled me over then and said quietly - this woman is all alone - her children have left home.

Music: Live Singing

Susan: Then Tinatin brings us all into her yard, and hands round homemade candles, cheese and wine. Someone asks who will be Tamada.

The kids sing, and Magda, tells us more about the ritual and the village.

Susan: Magda, what are your emotions?

Magda: So today is a week after Easter, so we'll celebrate like alive easter, (**Susan** I love this) we call in Georgian. So with elder we've been in different village called Rachis ubani on Easter day, a week ago. This Sunday we took our children, young generation in Kartli, it's called Khovle. Unfortunately the village is empty, most of houses are closed, I hope in summer they are coming from town, from city, from capital, and have rest and stay for er days or er weeks, they are coming for holidays but nowadays almost all houses are closed unfortunately, but a few families are here, old people. So now we visit one of villagers, our hosts name is Tinatin. Tinatin she's very kind. And she with heart give us apple. Very tasty apple. (**Susan:** She brought us candles to light) Candle she made candle by hand. She said she has two families of bees (adgomasa shensa) so they plan to have honey for future yes they hope. She give us cheese, also she made by herself. And bread also, so she's very kind. It's not rich family but very kind.

Susan: Rich in emotion

Magda; yes rich in emotions yes I hope our singing er make happy her and feel this hope and good emotions. *Singing*

When you listen children voices I think it's the reason for happiness. (**Susan:** Yes reason for happiness).

Singing

And also this Chona for our children is like a, they know a few of songs, but like er it's in practice now, in alive. It's different when you sing in stage and for families or for parents. You go to the village and you, we, singing to congratulate the holiday. Easter and they work and they learn all this in practice, in life. As with us now are some members of Mtiebi, amer-imeri older ones. So they have very big experience of course to do this all in life, but they sing together now and our children learn it in life. I think it's the best lesson.

Holly: Magda, how long have you been doing this? Going to Chona.

Magda: Our first experience was in 1996.

Holly: Wow

Magda: It was Alilo. As you know Amer-Imeri was founded in 1991. So after 5 years er Edisher took us er in Alilo, village Kakabeti. It was our first, join to this tradition and be with the first generation of Mtiebi.

Holly: Just stepping over a river there.

Magda: I mean with Edisher's friend (**Susan:** Ah OK) So we kept...we join er. Edisher took us and as we have no er idea what to do there in life so the elders show us (**Susan:** Ah OK) Of course we know some songs but how to do this um celebrate - how to - what to do - how what will be the conversation - So this elders show us and as you see our elders now showed what they had to do. (**Susan:** Yes)

Car horn!!

Holly: But before you went, before Edisher restarted it - it was lost this tradition?

Magda: Yes this tradition was lost because er in soviet time and after he founded the men ensemble Mtiebi he want to 'alive' this tradition also Alilo and Chona ????? He was friends somewhere - they choose on the way, the village and they, with songs congratulate to village people, song and nowadays we have the same picture, people go out and say "what we have to do, what we have to do?" And when we say you can only give us some sweets or one glass of wine or something and er if you have nothing we can only sing and go bless you with words then go to the other family, so that times it was like the scientist say at that time - "one bird didn't bring spring" - it's like a, a sentence a known sentence "one bird don't bring spring" erti chiti gazakhpulsa ver moiqvans? If er Mtiebi will try to do this, this tradition won't be um come back to the er er nowadays.

Holly: One choir can not revive a tradition.

Magda: Yes yes like er this. I translate the sentence by word. So, but, they try to do this every year on Alilo Christmas time, on Easter time so I think after years everyone - some of them remembered this and - " Oh I remember when I was child I was going and sometimes with sing but sometimes with poet - we said only with word without singing. (**Holly:** Oh without singing) because they forget this melody

Holly: And so have any of the um - Oh there's a villager coming with candles I think - oh no it's sticks.

Magda: 'Cheshmaritad!'

Holly: Do you think by doing this you've inspired anyone to keep going?

Magda: Yes - we have some, such good er (a bit in Georgian) (**Holly:** situations) Situations yes where we were in villages and met with children and um we said that, we explain that you can do this er the same in next year - so they said yes, yes, yes we will do it - You know in this year we will be in Imereti - the village was erm Samtredia, Nabakhevi, It's one village and um you know Edisher was there in 1989 I think and he recorded there Alilo we call Nabakeuri Alilo.

Holly: Oh yes my favourite.

Magda: *Sings an example bit* - Hey hey So we visit this village this year and we met some group of um different Alilos but they sing with one voice and um urban, urban Alilo but they sing - some of them said only words - like er Alatas Balatas without song.

Mid-roll

Holly: Hello I'm jumping in to say thank you and didi madloba to our patrons. We're so grateful to you, our ko-fi and patreon supporters because well you enable us to take the time to sort of follow our noses, and find the story behind these folk songs. Your very real financial contributions make it possible for us to be in the right place at the right time, and then to put the creative work in to craft each episode.

And you know the more we make these episodes, the more we're uncovering these hidden gems and connections. For example in our last episode with Maka, she told us about the root melody or the root language of Georgian songs (sings the melody iavnana) and here we are in Khovle and Magda is saying something quite similar.

Magda: Ah every song has some different corn? Corn? (Susan: kernel) some melody the main melody.

Holly: So here Magda is talking about a song Tiko found in this village. It's not an Easter song, It's called lazar-batono - it's about the lords of weather. And this song has the same root melody or kernel as (sings) lavnana, Lazar modghar. And so Tiko heard Lali Koshadze, a woman from Khovle - singing it and Gigi recorded the Lazarbatono

and Amer-Imeri keep it alive by singing it in their repertoire. So here's the field recording of Lali Koshadze singing Lazare Batono

Music: Lazare batono

Holly: OK so all the kids are getting back in the van now. We've been to quite a few houses. Feeling quite tired, had a good walk, met a lot of people.

Susan: yeah and we seem to be finishing off with cake

Holly: That seems to be the case. We're back at the Ivane Javakhishvili museum. And we're piling into the van. What a day!

Susan: What a day, awesome

Holly: I think the highlight for mewas the first house that we were, (**Susan:** where we welcomed in) (**Susan** okay) and also just the fact that, just seeing these kids so enthusiastic. I haven't seen a single phone on them today. yeah they just entertained themselves even between the houses they're playing with flowers (time to go, time to go) they're playing games

Susan: I'm liking the interaction between the old, the old ones and the younger ones, the sort of, sometimes what one of them would start and you could hear the bass was going all over the place and somebody would step in and provide the right sort of note and it would all come together again.

Voiceover

Holly: We think we're getting in the car to go home, but then we start to drive offroad, uphill to a beauty spot at the top of the village. We stop and everyone gets out - And the kids let off some steam with football. The adults put a picnic on the table, khachapuri, lemonade and wine. And with the first toast and song a supra starts

Susan: I love that everyone is toasting after the Tamada speaks, it's not just the adults. Here's Matte with the typical supra response 'Gaumarjos', then someone is making a toast to the village, Khovle and then a toast to unity in Georgia.

Rusudan: urti ertoba

Susan: Holly there was a final toast that I've not heard before that was: May the angels be in your footsteps. So as your foot leaves the spot of the footstep and you go forward in life, may an angel be in each step. Someone: Anni? says I've never heard that!

Rusudan: Pekhi chemi qvali angelozi. Qvali - in my step

Susan: This was very beautiful. I've not come across it before. And the song that was sung was lomisa.

Rusudan: Lomisa - It's sung every new year. We say when we come to congratulate we come with this word.

Voiceover

Holly And again, we think we're heading home now.

Susan: So Holly, do you think this is the last Chona of the day?

Holly: (laughs) we said that about 3 hours ago didn't we?

Susan: We did!

Holly: Yes I've heard the words 'bolos ojakhi' so this was a special request. We inherited a tour guide from the village and he said please, please come and bless my family.

Voiceover

Holly: Remember that man Malkhaz that was helping us round the village?

Susan: Yeah

Holly: Well it turns out that he has the same surname at Matte

Susan: Merabishvili?

Holly: Yes! So they are distantly related family and they just discovered it today. (Susan How funny.) And Malkhaz was so happy that he asked us to come to his family homestead, to perform the Chona and bless his home and young family.

Susan: So we get back out of the car and we follow the mass of children into the family's yard. We're on the edge of the village, on a slope looking out over this magnificent valley of rainbow mountains and the sun is setting.

Holly: Yes I'm seeing a jug of wine, a makeshift table is being wiped down. This is a very, it's village life. There's a stone hut over here, where animals might live. (Susan :Have you seen the puppy?)

Voiceover

Susan: Oh that puppy is being so adored and obliging. He's being held by every child.

Holly: And there's baby chicks!

Susan: going weep weep weep

Holly: And the family greet us in their yard with bread and wine and meat.

Susan: I wonder how much notice did Malkhaz's wife have to get all this ready?!

Holly: Ah the spontaneity of Georgia!

Susan: Now the kids are joining hands in a circle, and beginning the round dance. The mum lifts up the little toddler like Simba, and then Malkhaz takes him, and breaks through the circle to the centre. He sits on the ground bouncing the toddler on his knees, and the toddler is looking wide eyed at every single face dancing round him in the circle. And the puppy is there too - doing exactly the same thing!

Holly: Yeah and his wife is looking on with the biggest smile on her face.

Audio of the hosts toast

გამრავლდეთ და კარგად ვიყოთ სულ ყველა.

თქვენ გენაცვალეთ სულ ყველას

Holly: This is Malkhaz saying, may every single one of you be well, every one of you are dear to me - genatsvale!

Susan: Whole group was so full of emotions, willing, giving, cherishing, excited, life-giving, the energy of teenagers who WANT to be there. And that was just the best ending to the day.

Holly: And it really was the end of the day then! Wasn't it

Susan: It was.

Outro

Susan Thompson Thank you for listening to Voices of the Ancestors with your hosts Holly Taylor-Zuntz and Susan Thompson.

Holly: Thank you to all the members of Amer-Imeri and Mtiebi ensembles, who you heard singing in this episode. A special thanks to Magda Kevlishvili for inviting us along to Chona in the village of Khovle, and Tiko Shervashidze for sharing the field recording of Lali Koshadze singing Lazar Batono.

Susan: You can read the transcript of this episode on our website www.voicesoftheancestors.co.uk. And if you've been listening to our podcast for a while, and been meaning to donate, you can easily do so by visiting the donate page of our website.

Holly: And then you'll be a supporter of the arts and help us bring songs and stories from Georgia to a global audience. Alright. Bye for now.

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