

## CONTEMPORARY CHARMS AND CHARMING IN ADJARA, GEORGIA

*Jonathan Roper*

This paper documents some charms recorded by the author in Adjara, Georgia, in 2006 (mostly for children's ailments), and attempts to compare them with previously-recorded charms where appropriate. It also comments upon details of the charmers involved and their charming, as well as (briefly) on the method of filming imitations of charming in cases where real charming cannot be filmed.

**Key words:** healing charms, Georgian charms, Adjara, video-documentation, imitations of charming, methodology of documenting charms and charming

Adjara forms the southwestern-most part of Georgia. It is bordered to the south by Turkey, and on the west by the Black Sea. While the coastal towns of Batumi and Kobuleti are warm, humid and rainy, the mountain gorges of the interior are more temperate. During the summer of 2006, through the good offices of the Folklore Department of Batumi University (especially Giorgi Makharashvili) and the Folklore Department of the Shota Rustaveli Institute of Georgian Literature (especially Mary Tsiklauri), I was fortunate enough to visit two of the mountain gorges: Mareti and Machakhela. The main goal of the expedition was to record *Märchen* on video – something we did succeed in doing. We were also however able to document something of the contemporary charming practices current there especially in those areas far from any professional bio-medical aid, such as clinics. Given that there is little material available in languages other than Georgian on Georgian verbal charms (notable exceptions include Tsiklauri and Hunt (2008) and Gagulashvili (1983)), I offer the following details primarily for documentary purposes.

Adjara is a multi-confessional area. It had been a Christian area for well over a millennium, when a process of Islamicization began, following its conquest by the Ottomans in 1614. However, the loss of the area by the Ottoman Empire to the Russian Empire in 1878, and its subsequent history as part of the briefly independent Georgian state, the Soviet Union, and newly independent Georgia have reduced the influence of Islam. The coastal towns have long been predominantly Christian, and while many of the mountain-dwellers

remain Muslim, there is a currently a process of Christianization going on in the countryside: we met various families in which the grandparents were Muslim and the grandchildren Christian. The relative shallowness of Islamic influence upon the “Muslim Georgians”, as they were once known to census officials, is perhaps indicated by the fact that the drinking of wine is universal in the mountains (as indeed it is the rest of the country).

In any event, the impact of the religious history of Adjara seems to have been a less significant element upon the charm-repertoire of the area than it has elsewhere in Europe, as there is rarely any Christian or Islamic content (apocryphal or otherwise) in the words of the charms. This may related to the formal features of the charms current here: whereas in many places it is narrative charms that contain the highest degree of religious (or para-religious) material (see, for example, Roper 2005: 90–131), in general Georgian charms are direct addresses, often with reduplicative invocations and banishment formulas. Having said that, there was clearly a highly religious aspect to the material of one of the five charmers we met, who used Turkish (and even some Arabic) texts from a chapbook, *Yasin Tebarake* as part of her healing practice, which she herself described as “praying”. The booklet, which she had bought when visiting Turkey, was made up of *sura* (i.e. verses) from the Koran and the Hadith.

In a straggling village in the Machakhela gorge, we found the aforementioned Islamic folk healer, and two elderly women who both knew two charms each, against migraine and evil eye. But the data I wish to concentrate on in the rest of this report is that which we found in a village in the Mareti gorge. We were able to video-record *imitations* of charming from two women (with various younger members of their families, or colleagues, playing the patient) as well as the words of the charms. While this does not amount to footage of the charms being used in reality, such footage allows us to see the integration of the charms and the charming. Though this integration is not replicable in the form of a written article, there still may be points of interest gained from it that we can include here. It can also be noted that we were not asking the charmers to play out something that was a memory from the dim and distant past: one of the charms had been used the day before we came.

The two women in question, here referred to as A and B, were sisters-in-law. In accordance with the convention of the contrasexual transmission of charms, their father-in-law, who was not able to pass the charms on to his two sons, passed them on to his two daughters-in-law. Perhaps wishing to avoid dissension, he split his heritage, giving three charms to his elder daughter-in-law, and two to the younger.

The three charms known by A, who was then 43 years old, and who in western terms would be described as a “housewife”, covered a broad spectrum of

conditions. The first of these was against “running ache”, which in practice can encompass toothache, joint-ache and “breast-ache”. The words ran as follows:

Ku, ku, kurkumelav, piragmartav, pirchagmartav, chonchorico,  
*Ku, ku, kurkumela, up-mouth, down-mouth, chonchoriko,*  
Pekhs michveneb, pekhs mogchrio, rasats michveneb mas mogchrio,  
*If you show me your feet, I shall cut your feet, whatever you show me,*  
*I will cut,*  
Agchri, dagchri, shavtarian danit,  
*I will cut you up and down with a black-handled knife*  
Gagitan, migtsem arisianis qars, niavs,  
*And give you and render you to Arsiani’s wind and breeze*  
Dzvalshi tu khar, dzvalshi gamoi,  
*If you sit in bone, come out from bone,*  
Bilshi tu khar, karshi gamoi,  
*If you sit in flesh, come out from the door,*  
Tsadi momshordi ku qaro,  
*Go, leave me, ku wind!*  
Tokh-Najakhs misi Tari ergebodes  
*Let the spade-axe suit its handle!*  
Chemi sitkhvats shen gergebodes.  
*And let my charm suit you!*

Notes:

Ku = ache (this sense however is restricted to the register of charm-language)  
Arsiani = a high mountain peak in Turkey (known as Yalnızçam in Turkish)

As with so many Georgian charms, this is a direct address. The narrative charms (which ascribe the conjuration to a powerful religious or mythological figure rather than to the charmer themselves) found through much of the rest of Europe, are not typical of the Georgian charm record. This charm begins by addressing the illness in what can be considered as two three-part invocations: “Ku, ku, kurkumelav” and “piragmartav, pirchagmartav, chonchorico”. Such tripartite invocations are common internationally – to give just one example, we can compare the Old English charm beginning “Wenne, wenne, wenchichene”. As with “Ku, ku, kurkumela”, the disease is named twice, and then in the third member of the invocation the name of the disease is compounded with other elements, making a nonce formation (or perhaps, a now-incomprehensible archaism, or at least, and more importantly, the impression of a now-incomprehensible archaism). The second three-member invocation here is of a somewhat different form, but shares the feature of close identity between its first two members.

Having addressed the ache, the charmer then threatens it. The threats to cut the disease can also be seen as forming a three-member group, each successive component growing in word-length and in magnitude of the threat (cutting feet, cutting whatever's shown, cutting up and down with a specific knife and expelling to a distant and dissipating element). Following the threat, the charm builds to a tripartite expulsion formula. The three members here also grow in strength: while the first two involve imperatives, they are couched in a conditional frame ("if you sit"), whereas the third is an unmitigated command: "Go". There is also a movement in space: the first member refers to the possible presence of the ache in the bone, the second to its possible presence in the flesh (flesh is still of the body, but less inward than bone), and the third to its future location outside the body. This high point is followed by a ratification, which closes the charm. The persistent presence of three elements in the subsections of the charm suggests that three is the *organizing number* (Roper 1998: 58–9, 61) for this charm. While the free nature of the charm up till now has been one of rhythmical prose rather than verse, the ratification snaps shut like a rhyming couplet. Indeed "gergebodes" is remarkable for rhyming with "ergebodes" in all four of its syllables. The handle alluded to in the ratification is the handle of the black-handled knife mentioned earlier in the charm. In equating it with the handle of an axe or hoe, it is being cast as an effective tool of work and cultivation. This 'black-handled knife' is not a literary conceit, the charmer makes crosses directly in front of the patient's face with a black-handled knife as the words are being said. The stipulation that the knife have a black handle is also in evidence in other genres of Georgian folklore, where it generally is attributed with having a protective force.

Charmers do not normally tell others the words of their charms in this (and many other) traditions, usually with the proviso that if they do, they will lose the power to practice them. However, when Tsiklauri explained that our interest in the charms was that of "scientists", A and B had no inhibitions in telling us the words. This raises the interesting question of how much charmers keep their knowledge secret in order to prevent the emergence of local competitors, and use the notion of potential loss of power as an acceptable explanation for this, rather than being truly fearful of losing their power.

Here, as elsewhere, the video evidence, even though it was of an imitation, supplemented the evidence of our handwritten notation of the charm text, in other words we had information about the charming as well as the charm. As the video shows, at each performance this charm was said three times over. But as well as three being the *threshold number* (Roper 2005: 56, 75–6) of the charm, the charm had to be performed three times a day over three days (a total of twenty-seven instances). The video also reveals that at the culmination of

each of the three repetitions of the charm, the charmer respectively a) spits on the face of the patient, b) taps the teeth of the patient with the black-handled knife, and c) blows on to the face of the patient. This very charm had been used the day before we came on the younger sister of the girl who served as the patient in the re-enactment. The girl, who was a relative, and about eighteen years of age, had been suffering from toothache, when at the suggestion of A, she was charmed. Within half-an-hour she reported that the toothache had disappeared.

The second of A's charm was for a common ailment affecting infants, 'Sak-matsvilo':

Bedo, bedo, bedniero, samartvilo, mshveniero,  
*Fate, fate, fateful, to be martyred, nice,*  
Auare, dauare, sagamoze gauare,  
*Go back and forth, visit in the evening.*  
Adikhar, chadikhar, sagamoze tsadikhar,  
*You're going back and forth, you're going away in the evening.*  
Achreldebi, dachreldebi, am kitkhvit shen gatkheldebi,  
*Your will become multi-coloured, by the force of the charms you will be reduced,*  
Tavi, pekhi chamogikhma, am kitkhvit Tavi mogikvda,  
*Your head and foot have dried. By this charm you are dead,*  
Samartvilo, Amin!  
*To be martyred, Amen!*

I will not go over this charm in great detail, but we can note that sound repetition is to be found within every one of its lines (**Bedo, bedo, bedniero; Auare, dauare, sagamoze gauare; Adikhar, chadikhar, sagamoze tsadikhar**, etc.) and also between lines ('sagamoze' and 'samartvilo' in lines two and three share the same number of syllables, their position as the penultimate word in the line, as well as several sounds: the initial 's', the 'a', and the 'm'). 'Samartvilo' is perhaps the charm's key word, it literally means "to be martyred", but it was explained to us as being a synonym for "sakmatsvilo", the ailment the charm is aimed at tackling. We can also note here again a link between words in the charm (in this case, the visit of the disease in the evening, and its going away in the evening) and the stipulations governing the charming (which had to take place as the sun was going down, i.e. at the onset of evening). Some might be tempted to draw a parallel here between the diminishing (the drying up, indeed) of the disease and the waning of the sun, but such an analogy is complicated by another of the stipulations governing the charming here, namely that it is best

performed during the new moon, a time of increase rather than of waning. We can also note that this is another charm that needs to be repeated three times.

A's final, and shortest, charm was intended for skin diseases generally affecting children and teens, such as acne and pimples, and ran as follows:

Chiav, chiav, tavi amoke,	<i>Worm, worm, lift your head,</i>
Dedo chiav, tavi chake.	<i>Mother worm, drop your head.</i>

Once again we have a direct address, and again we have repeated sounds, four examples of '-av' and three of 'ch-'. However, the video evidence showed us that for this procedure (as for many others), the charming begins long before the charm proper does, and continues long after it. To begin with, garlic, a scarf and a razor blade had to be hunted out. After the charm had been said, the garlic would be crushed, mixed with earth, rubbed onto the acne, and the acne was then shaved with a razor blade. This has to be done on three days, beginning on a Sunday, and then repeated on the following Monday and Tuesday. But this is not to be just any Sunday, but a Sunday when the moon is on the wane (the waning of the moon presumably to be reflected in the longed-for waning of the acne, and perhaps with the dropping of the head of the mother worm mentioned in the charm). Thus we have an interesting combination of features: the importance accorded to Sunday may be a para-Christian feature, whereas the importance accorded to the waning of the moon, comes from a belief system independent of Christianity.

B was also in contemporary western terms a "housewife", and had never worked outside of the home. She had married the younger of the two brothers, and was 32 years of age when we visited her and her sister-in-law, who lived close to each other in the same village. She had learnt two charms from her father-in-law, one against migraine, the other against evil eye, the two most common conditions now addressed by charms to judge from our fieldwork.

The first of B's charms was as follows:

Shakiki shemogchvevia,	<i>Migraine used to visit</i>
Satibisa bolosa,	<i>At the end of our field</i>
Ise chamda qvishasa,	<i>It ate sand</i>
Rogorts khari tivasa,	<i>Like an ox eats hay</i>
Gautskra tsminda giorgi,	<i>Saint George got angry with it</i>
Gaipara dilasa.	<i>And it did a bunk in the morning.</i>

Again this is an actively used charm – B had used it on her sister-in-law A the night before we arrived. It is worth noting that although this is a supposedly Islamic context, we find mention of 'tsminda giorgi', Saint George (the patron saint of Georgia), no doubt due to his national symbolic importance. Of all five

charms we recorded here, this was the closest to a narrative charm. The narrative tells how migraine was banished by Saint George, but there is not subsequent section in which this ‘epic precedent’ is applied to the current situation. This charm-type has been recorded before in Georgia, for example as evidenced in Tsiklauri and Hunt 2008: 267 (ultimately from Mosulishvili 1992: 15). The only verbal difference between these texts comes in the third line, where the migraine eats ‘iron’ (*rvina*) in the earlier version rather than ‘sand’ (*qvisha*) as in our version. Yet, as often happens, while these two charms are similar the details of the charming in each case differ widely. We often find the reverse too, that similar charming procedures accompany radically different charm texts.

In B’s practice, she would take a needle threaded with white thread, rub it firmly down the forehead of the patient (without breaking the skin of course) in a series of diagonal line pivoted round the gap between the eyebrows, and then would make diagonal crosses over that gap between the eyebrows. In the charm in Mosulishvili (1992), the charmer would, after saying the words, tie a silk handkerchief containing stinging nettle (salted, ground up, and wet with wine) to the sufferer’s forehead. We can of course see some common feature to these disparate practices in the fact that both these attempts to charm away headache involve attention to the patient’s forehead.

B’s second charm was against evil eye:

Shavi tvali gaskda,	<i>Black eye split,</i>
Shavi tvali amovarda,	<i>Black eye dropped out,</i>
Davchekhe, davkepe,	<i>I cut it, I mashed it,</i>
Vali qotanshi chavkare,	<i>And threw into the clay pot,</i>
Dugs, poponobs,	<i>It is boiling, bubbling.</i>
Meris satvali,	<i>Into Mary’s overlooker’s</i>
Gulsa lakhvari,	<i>Heart: a spear!</i>
Zetsas tvali,	<i>In heaven – the eye.</i>
Gulsa lakhvari,	<i>In the heart – a spear.</i>
Tsoudga tvali,	<i>Let the eye drop out,</i>
Doudga tvali.	<i>Let the eye go blind.</i>

This charm begins with four lines recounting, in the past tense, the violence that the evil eye (in practice the source to which otherwise irremediable or unidentifiable illnesses and misfortunes are ascribed to) has undergone. There is then a shift to the present tense, where the eye that has been thrown into a clay pot and is boiling in that pot. Then the charmer commands a spear to enter the heart of the ill-wisher. ‘Mary’ here is not the Virgin Mary, but simply the name of the person playing the role of patient in this case, and Mary’s ‘overlooker’ is the person who has cast the evil eye on her. The twin sources of

evil, the eye and the heart, are then addressed once more, and the wish that a spear enters the ill-wishing heart is repeated.

We are finally left with the sense, not unusual in sets of words intended to deal with the evil eye, that the text is more curse than charm, especially when we consider the final two lines 'Let the eye drop out/ Let the eye go blind'. In fact, the last six lines form a tight unit all ending with three syllables of the form a(C(C))va[l/r]i, where a bracketed capital C stands for any optional consonant, and [l/r] means either 'l' or 'r'. Sound repetition is almost at the maximum in the final two lines which also provide us with the fourth and fifth example of the text's key word *tvali*, eye (or the fifth and sixth examples, if we count its occurrence in the compound *satvali*). It is tempting to designate these last two lines as a couplet, but Georgian researchers characterise their charms as non-metrical, being rather either in free verse or rhythmical prose (Tsiklauri, personal communication, 2010). The charm can be compared with charm text no.12 in Tsiklauri and Hunt 2008: 270, which is also intended to deal with the evil eye. While the content of these two evil-eye charms varies quite significantly, they share something in terms of general structure, as well as the 'spear into the heart' motif.

We were told this charm later in the day than the first four, and so did not manage to film it. However as regards the charming, this is yet again a charm that should be said (whispered in fact) three times over, followed at the end by three blows to the patient to 'fix' the charm. As so often with charms intended to diminish something, this charm is, B told us, most effective when the moon is on the wane.

Other researchers have touched on the beneficial, if sometimes problematic, role that the filming of charming can play (Kljaus 2002, 2004). Overall, the technique used here of filming imitations of charming is a useful one, especially if it is of charms still in active use, and done by people who will go away, rather than set themselves up as rival charmers in the neighbourhood (for possessing a charm, although not knowledge that is directly remunerative, is still an important part of the possessor's cultural capital). It is also useful in documenting a procedure which would seem to be on the decline. One sign that the practice may be in decline is the fact that despite the still-current rule of the contra-sexual transmission of charms, all of the charmers we met were female. Although our sample size cannot be described as anything other than tiny, we would nevertheless expect to find a roughly equal number of charmers of each sex in a situation where the tradition is active and its transmission has not yet begun to break down. The absence of male charmers may indicate that men are not now taking up the practice.



The range of charms that a researcher such as Mosulishvili was able to document was broad, encompassing illnesses such as head colds, scab, haemorrhages, migraines, cow diseases, lumbago, warts, hiccups, burns, hydrophobia, erysipelas, the evil eye, and nightmare. From being seen as suitable for use against such a wide range of ailments, charms have now been reduced to a limited niche – in our admittedly limited search, we found that most of the charms were for headache and evil eye (this latter set of charms is not likely to lose its popularity until such time as the folk aetiology of disease and misfortune ceases to retain the concept of the evil eye). The remainder of the charms we found were mostly for children's ailments, which may be another sign of the relative marginalisation of the practice. It may very well be that biomedical treatments (and possibly also traditional non-magical remedies) have taken over from charms in the realm of such ailments as burns, haemorrhages, head colds, etc. Given current economic and technological changes, biomedicine is only likely to expand its presence in the medical marketplace of even these mountain gorges.

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