

A new role for Georgian singing, or the continuation of its ancient function?

By Frank Kane and Madge Bray

What Trauma Has Destroyed, Conscious Vibration Can Rebuild

Georgians speak with pride of their success at maintaining their culture and their values despite the many invasions and other conflicts that the country has faced throughout its history.

Foreigners who come to Georgia are touched by the strong fabric of its society. They often observe that the concepts of family, community and national identity are healthy and strong, and central to the existence of the average Georgian. They compare this to a weaker sense of belonging in their own society.

As a key element of Georgian culture, which all Georgians point to with great pride, folk song seems to have played an important role throughout history in strengthening human connection in the country. This is sometimes stated very explicitly within the songs themselves [Chakrulo: "bevr jer vqopilvar am dgheshi magram ar damikvnesia" I've been in these straits many times, but I didn't moan and groan about it.].

In a 1886 article in which he expresses his impressions of hearing a concert of Georgian folk songs, Ilya Chavchavadze uses language which perhaps explains how folk song has operated in Georgia. "Here, in song and chanting," he writes, "hannonious sound supports poetry and vice versa, so that a human being might fully and completely express the motion of his soul and the beating of his hemi. More often than not, voice and word are separately incapable of evoking fi:om the depths of the human heart the large and small pearls with which it is filled, when grief and SOITOW or joy strike the diving chords of man's spirituality. In this respect, song is the same tear which appears when the heart is rung by sorrow and also when it is visited by great joy." Ilya Chavchavadze thus speaks of the capacity of song to let people express grief and sorrow.

Innovative researchers working in the field of psychology in the United States and other countries are now coming to understand how human beings and animals process traumatic experiences. Some people and animals who suffer trauma emerge strengthened while others suffer physical and psychological damage which may last a lifetime. What factors determine who will emerge healthy and who will suffer further? According to psychologist Peter Levine, among others, it is the processing of a traumatic event to completion - in the moment when it occurs or later - which keeps the human or animal healthy. In a traumatic situation an animal or human may go into "fight" or "flight" but may also involuntarily "freeze", entering a state of physical immobility, and then, through a process of shaking and vibrating, discharge the traumatic energy from the organism. An impala caught by a cheetah may go into a "freeze" or immobility response. If it manages to escape, it usually goes through a period of shaking and vibrating and then continues to live in good health. If this vibrating does not take place, the impala may become ill or even die.



An organism that has a mechanism to process trauma to completion is thus likely to be a healthier organism. In the same way, a society that has a mechanism to process traumatic events should be a healthier society than one which lacks these tools. Could it be that Georgian folk song and the rituals and practices connected to it have provided the Georgians with opportunities to release the traumas of their history and thus keep them in good health?

Singing is of course a form of vibration and its power to touch the human heart has been mentioned by poets throughout human history. In Georgia we find songs that speak directly of traumatic events and it appears that these songs are part of the "healing" process, i.e. they acknowledge the events and allow them to be processed. There is for example "Dachrilis simghera" (kldis simghera) or one of the versions of "Lale".

Lale, Ratom ar chamoiare, tsremlits bevri vghare. Lale, Ghamis t'ormet saat'amde, lampa vaparpare. Lale, Tsavida da nughar mova, is tsqeuli ghmne.

"Why didn't you come? I shed many tears. I kept the lamp burning untill midnight. (S)he left and won't come again, O that terrible night."

It is interesting that this song, which evokes abandonment and loss, became one of the emblematic songs sung by children at the Dzegvi children's home. This innovative center, founded by Gia Razmadze and others in the early 1990's near Mtskheta, took on the task of working with abandoned or orphaned children, many of whom were victims of sexual, physical or psychological abuse, while all had faced some mixture of rejection, abandonment, denial and betrayal in their lives. Speaking of the early days of Dzegvi, Gia Razmadze said that no one had any experience in working with abused children. At the outset, the method was simple: they would go walking in the woods with the children and spend the whole day singing.

A simple approach very much in keeping with Georgian values: love and appreciation of nature and human connection expressed through words and song. But underlying that simplicity, according to Gia Razmadze, lies all of the implicit and non-verbalized intelligence about how to build, maintain and repair human connection, which is indeed the real essence of what was at work at Dzegvi and in Georgia as a whole throughout its history. By introducing songs such as Lale, Gia Razmadze and his colleagues allowed the children to acknowledge and sing through their traumatic experiences.

This singing and walking could play the role of the "shaking and vibration" that psychologists speak of that is needed to process trauma and to allow for the release of nervous energy from the organism. There is however one very important difference compared with the case of the impala mentioned above: in the process of singing together we are not alone. The impala shakes itself, releases the trauma, and rejoins the herd. As human beings, we have the possibility of consciously "vibrating" together through sound and singing, and in this way we can work simultaneously on our various individual traumas and provide support to others in this process, and even address the traumatic experiences shared by a community (military attack, natural disaster, etc.).

The use of conscious vibration and Georgian singing with trauma survivors in Great Britain

The work that we have been doing in Great Britain over the past year seems to confirm the power of vibration, sound and group singing of Georgian folk songs to help process traumatic events and to release trapped nervous energy from the body.

At the end of 2004 we began working with adults who are survivors of sexual abuse suffered during childhood. This involved a series of workshop organized in cooperation with the Scottish association "Survivors United" led by Helen Gille. Helen attended a workshop for the general public and was astounded by the physical and psychological changes that she felt after this experience. She decided to encourage other survivors of sexual abuse to do work with the voice and with Georgian singing.

These workshops involve exercises using consciousness vibration (for example, humming), leading up to learning and singing Georgian folk songs together. The people who attended all suffered extreme forms of sexual, physical and emotional abuse during their childhoods and many have had severe problems throughout their lives: depression, eating disorders, alcoholism, drug addiction, suicide attempts, admissions to psychiatric hospitals, etc. As a result of their childhood experiences they often fear contact with other people, both physically (through touching) and with the spoken word.

During these workshops, the participants have been able to make unexpected breakthroughs in resolving their trauma, and the words they use to describe their experiences sound very similar to the words that Georgians (including Ilya Chavchavadze) use to speak of their songs:

T. : "My first workshop was good, I actually broke through a barrier and allowed myself to cry. I wasn't ready for the singing then, but I experimented with sound and vibration. It absolutely works. My body was charged with energy that made me feel more of who I really was. I couldn't wait for the second workshop. This time, again through sound and vibrational work, I took myself further, I connected with the inner child and felt all of her pain, anguish, sadness. Then, as I continued to sound through it all, I felt great relief and then more tears, but this time tears of joy. I feel great today and look forward to the next workshop where I will be singing the beautiful Georgian songs that I've heard others singing but I was too shy to sing out loud."

Another comment expresses the physical sensations that many people discover in singing Georgian songs:

J. "I love it when I stand next to the bass singers and we sing notes that are so close they brush up against each other deep in your viscera, and feel like they are massaging your insides - reaching the deep muscles in your body that even my yoga practice can't reach ... gently bringing them out and loving them, gently letting my body know I'm not the first or last to experience these harmonies - a natural part of being human (albeit a traumatized one!)."

This is a very significant part of the singing experience for many people, and particularly survivors of sexual abuse. They feel that through vibration and singing a very strong connection is made. They feel other people's vibrations going into their bodies, but this contact is not threatening: to most people it feels very good. In this way, people who have spent much of their lives feeling alienated from and scared of other people find their way back to deep human connection which is safe and satisfying.

As another participant expresses it:

A. "I've had many highs through drinking, cocaine, speed, ecstasy, alcohol to oblivion, but I've never had a high like that! Inside my body it's like a warm glow, a light being on dim, which gets brighter and brighter when the vibration comes through. It's belonging. It's what belonging is about!"

Indeed, so much of Georgian culture seems designed to reinforce the idea of belonging and to overcome alienation. At a Georgian supra, people take to time reconnect with each other and with their deepest values, and this joy nourishes them and heals them (“gavtsotskhdli sheni nakhvita me didad gavekhareo ... “ I come to life when I see you, I feel so happy “Ghmerto nuras nu moushli, rats rom hqvades saqvarlebi” O God, don’t let us be disturbed during this time with the people we love). Georgian healing songs such as “Batonebo” do not aim to chase away the spirits that provoke illnesses but rather to embrace them and to communicate with them, just as one would with honored guests.

The past fifteen years have brought independence to Georgia but also fragmentation of its society, new social problems, and the largest immigration in all of Georgian history. In the midst of these challenges - which Georgia now shares more and more with the rest of our planet - it seems wise to keep in mind the incredible talent for social cohesion and connection that the Georgian people have and which is so loved by their foreign guests.

This seems to us the greatest gift that Georgia can offer the rest of our world. Just as the Georgians sometimes call their supra an “academy” or school of human relationships, so Georgia itself can be for the whole world - an example of how human connection is maintained through conscious vibration: through the spoken word and most importantly singing as tools to hold families, communities and the whole society together and to offer a context for the resolution of trauma which is an inevitable - but not necessarily crippling - part of human existence.

Georgian singing is already playing an important role in transforming the lives of survivors of extreme trauma in Great Britain, bringing them inner peace that many thought was unattainable. We believe that it has the potential to heal and enrich many other lives - throughout the world and of course in Georgia itself.

“Rats mtrobas daungrevia, siqvaruls ushenebia” What hatred has destroyed, love can rebuild.

The Loving Harmony Initiative began in June 2005, affiliated to a small UK charitable trust. It seeks to support those who have suffered in silence through the woundedness of others and who are now committed to finding peace within themselves, and power and clarity in their voices. The Loving Harmony Initiative is run by Frank Kane and Madge Bray and provides a range of experiences including Vibration in Human Harmony workshops together with outreach programmes.

Madge Bray has worked in the field of trauma resolution, designing and implementing innovative services for severely abused children.

Frank Kane has been exploring the power of vibration and its role in the building of human harmony since his first encounter with the Georgian folk traditions in 1983.