

EMPIRICAL DIMENSION OF PHILOSOPHICAL GEOGRAPHY

Giorgi Tavadze, PhD student, Assistant Prof.
Grigol Robakidze University, Georgia

Abstract

Geography explores relationships between society and the natural environment. Humans transform the natural environment, which in its turn influences and, to a certain degree, conditions society. Some geographical elements (for example place and space) exert a powerful influence on individual and collective identities, self-awareness and actions. Philosophical geography should study relations between these geographical elements and individual and collective identities and human agency. The empirical dimension of philosophical geography is the most interesting, but perhaps also the least investigated part of this discipline. In order to elucidate how the conceptual framework of philosophical geography can help the empirical research, the present article discusses the expedition which was organised by the Institute of Philosophy and Social Sciences under the auspices of Grigol Robakidze University (Tbilisi, Georgia) in Upper Khevsureti in the summer of 2012.

Keywords: Philosophical geography, sacred places and spaces, *khati*-s (shrines), place and identity

Introduction:

Geography explores relationships between society and the natural environment. Humans transform the natural environment, which in its turn influences and, to a certain degree, conditions society.²⁸⁹ Some geographical elements (for example place and space) exert a powerful influence on individual and collective identities, self-awareness and actions.²⁹⁰ Philosophical geography should study relations between these geographical elements and individual and collective identities and human agency. Because of its interdisciplinary nature, in the research process the student of philosophical geography should employ methodology of both humanities and social sciences.

The interdisciplinary nature of philosophical geography is a necessary prerequisite for future research. This interdisciplinarity is revealed in its title: philosophical geography studies those issues which are important not only to philosophy but also to human geography and social sciences in general. In spite of that, *philosophy* in *philosophical geography* appears as an adjective; it does not follow that philosophical geography is more geography than philosophy or *vice versa*. Philosophical geography is located in the space of intersection

²⁸⁹ See Richard Peet, *Modern Geographical Thought* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 1-2; Ron Johnston, *Philosophy and Human Geography. An Introduction to Contemporary Approaches* (Baltimore: Edward Arnold, 1986), p. 3; Chris Gibson, Human Geography, in: *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, Editors-in-chief: Rob Kitchin and Nigel Thrift (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2009), vol. 5, p. 218.

²⁹⁰ See for instance, Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: a study of environmental perception, attitudes, and values* (Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1974); Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976); Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience. A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Thomas F. Gieryn, A Space for Place in Sociology, *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 26 (Aug., 2000), pp. 463-496; John Urry, The Sociology of Space and Place, in: *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology*, edited by Judith R. Blau (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 3-15.

between philosophy and geography. Therefore it employs those notions which are of crucial importance to philosophy and human geography.

The conceptual framework of philosophical geography includes three levels of analysis: local, regional, and global. At the local level philosophical geography should study those relationships which exist between places/spaces and individual/collective identities. Place is understood here not as a static point in the homogenous space, but as a *process and an event*.²⁹¹ In this process places acquire new identities and lose the old ones; they are constantly redefined and reinterpreted in the ongoing interactions with humans and other places.²⁹² Thus, philosophical geography should rely on the dynamic understanding of place.

At the regional level the subject matter of philosophical geography is the relationships between regional, spatial concepts and identities. At this level philosophical geography is interested in the following questions: what aspects can be distinguished in the process(es) of formation of regional spatial concepts? What is the influence of regional spatial concepts on the identities of inhabitants of a given region? Is it possible to assert that different regional concepts reinforce different traditions of thought? From these questions it is clear that the regional level of philosophical geography should be understood in the context of intercultural philosophy.

Finally, philosophical geography at a global level should study the interconnection of geographical factors and human agency on a global scale. Climate change and the development and current state of humans' spatial consciousness are important issues to be analysed in the spatial context. The former represents a serious challenge to humanity,²⁹³ while the latter has radically transformed the humans' way of life.²⁹⁴

I consider the empirical dimension of philosophical geography as the most interesting, but perhaps also the least investigated part of this discipline. This dimension is the most interesting because philosophical geography is not limited only to theoretical formulations and building its conceptual framework. They should be the starting points for empirical research, the ultimate aim of which is to show the interconnections between local, regional, and global levels and their dynamic nature. To achieve this goal, philosophical geography at first should focus on local and regional levels. Only by researching the local is it possible to grasp its meaning in the regional and to outline the relationships between local and global. On the other hand, in the process of researching the local and regional, the global emerges, because different places are linked in the region and the interconnection of regions acquires the global scale. In addition to all this, individuals constantly move between local, regional and global levels. The research of places, mobilities and identities in the context of empirical dimension of philosophical geography becomes necessary.

²⁹¹ For place as a process see Allan Pred, *Place as Historically Contingent Process: Structuration and the Time-Geography of Becoming Places*, in: *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 74, No. 2 (June, 1984), pp. 279-297. For place as an event see Edward S. Casey, *How to get from Space to Place in a fairly short stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena*, in: *Senses of Place*, edited by Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1997), p. 26 ff.; see also Martin Heidegger, *Building Dwelling Thinking*, in: Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translations and introduction by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 145-161. Here Heidegger speaks about the "gathering" nature of place: place admits and installs the fourfold. Therefore it is an event.

²⁹² The interaction between places can manifest itself as mutual *reinforcement* or *negation* (actually there can be various gradations from the full compatibility between places to the total negation and incompatibility). Mutual reinforcement between places as well as their mutual negation are realised through human agency.

²⁹³ See Anthony Giddens, *The Politics of Climate Change*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009). See also Bharat Raj Singh (ed.), *Climate Change. Realities, Impacts Over Ice Cap, Sea Level and Risks* (Rijeka: InTech, 2013); Martin Voss (Hrsg.), *Der Klimawandel. Sozialwissenschaftliche Perspektiven* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2010).

²⁹⁴ See Carl Schmitt, *Land and Sea*, translated and with a foreword by Simona Draghici (Washington DC: Plutarch Press, 1997).

In order to elucidate how the conceptual framework of philosophical geography can help the empirical research, in what follows I will consider the expedition which was organised by the Institute of Philosophy and Social Sciences under the auspices of Grigol Robakidze University (Tbilisi, Georgia) in Upper Khevsureti (a mountainous region in Northern Georgia, near the border with the Russian Federation) in the summer of 2012.²⁹⁵

The aim of expedition was to study place – identity relationships; to investigate how the specific places function; to observe the everyday dynamic of place and its inhabitants; to analyse the attitudes of natives toward sacred, historical and everyday spaces and to investigate the various place identities. The main base of the expedition was in Shatili, a small village in Upper Khevsureti (this region is called by natives “Piriqita Khevsureti”).²⁹⁶ Shatili was chosen as a main base of expedition for several reasons: 1. In Khevsureti *khati*-s²⁹⁷ or sacred shrines are of great importance. The gathering of sacred places creates sacred spaces. It is very interesting to study natives’ attitudes towards these places and spaces, as well as those influences which these places and spaces exert on natives’ individual and collective identities. There are several *khati*-s in Shatili. In addition, Shatili is famous for its towers (which were inhabited by natives until the 1950s). There are many oral stories connected with *khati*-s and towers. It can be said that Shatili is rich with sacred and historical places and spaces; 2. Shatili is the most densely populated village in Upper Khevsureti²⁹⁸; 3. The mass identity²⁹⁹ of Shatili is that of an exotic place which is full of myths and legends. It is interesting therefore to investigate how natives’ daily experience Shatili on a daily basis.

The course of the expedition can be divided into two stages. In the first stage (1st July – 31st July) I worked together with the students. The fieldwork was mainly conducted in Shatili. During the next stage (1st August – 5th September) I continued to work alone. In this stage I also visited nearby villages (Kistani, Mutso, Ardoti) and conducted in-depth interviews.

In the first week of the expedition we made the acquaintances of the natives, looked round Shatili and nearby territories and gathered firsthand information about important places (shrines, towers, the church, *Saqvabe*, *Sapekhvno* etc.). On the basis of this information, there gradually emerged the contours of sacred, historical and everyday spaces which have been playing important roles in natives’ lives.

The sacred space in Shatili consists of sacred places which natives call *khati* (“icon”) and the church. The historical space is constituted by fortresses (*qvitkirebi* or *koshkebi*) and

²⁹⁵ Head of expedition – Giorgi Tavadze. Other members of expedition were the following students of Grigol Robakidze University: Shalva Bakhsholiani (Department of Tourism), Giorgi Berelidze (Department of Journalism), Nino Mamamtavrisvili (Department of Sociology), Megi Machabeli (Department of Sociology), Salome Khachidze (Department of Sociology), Shorena Khubutia (Department of Journalism), and Levan Khutsinashvili (Department of Sociology); head of the coordinating group – Prof. Tengiz Iremadze.

²⁹⁶ “Shatili is a historic highland village in Georgia, near the border with Chechnya. It is located on the northern slope of the Greater Caucasus mountains, in the historical Georgian province of Upper Khevsureti, which is now part of the modern-day region (mkhare) of Mtskheta-Mtianeti. Located in the deep Arghuni gorge at approximately 1,400 meters, the village is actually a unique complex of medieval to early modern fortresses and fortified dwellings of stone and mortar, which functioned both as a residential area and as a fortress guarding the north-eastern outskirts of the country. The fortress consists of terraced structures dominated by flat-roofed dwellings and some 60 towers which cluster together to create a single chain of fortifications” (*Shatili*, *UNESCO World Heritage tentative list*, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5232/>, accessed 1 July 2013). Shatili is included in the UNESCO World Heritage tentative list.

²⁹⁷ Local name variations for *khati* also include *jvari* (“cross”) and *salotsavi* (“places for prayer”). *Khati*-s in Shatili are small cairns (niches) in which a bell hangs.

²⁹⁸ “The most densely populated” is a relative concept. There are only 5-7 families (approximately 20 individuals) permanently living in Shatili throughout the year. In the summer during the touristic season the number of inhabitants rises considerably. In the middle of August 2012, with the help of two informants I counted the natives. There were 16 families (approximately 56 individuals including children).

²⁹⁹ About the mass identities of places see E. Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, p. 58 ff. According to Relph, “[mass identities] are the most superficial identities of place” (ibid.).

Sapekhvno (a place where native males used to gather). *Saqvabe* (where *dasturi-s* brew beer for religious ceremonies) can be considered as a place which is located at the border of sacred and historical spaces.

Entrance to the territory of *khati* is strictly forbidden to everyone. Only at the Athengenoba feast³⁰⁰ is it permissible for men to enter “the land of icon”. Even in this case they do not have right to come near to the *khati* i.e. shrine.³⁰¹ Women are subject to greater restrictions: not only are they prohibited from entering “the land of icon”, they are also prohibited from passing nearby.³⁰² Women have special “women ways” (*sadiaco gzebi*) in Shatili. Nevertheless none of native women complained to me about this custom. It seems that they are used to it from the adolescence.

Khati-s play an important role in the life of the natives. All my interviewees acknowledged the specific role of these sacred places in Shatili. They believed that *khati-s* preserve Shatili and its inhabitants from misfortunes. Therefore one should not offend *khati-s*. This is expressed in reverence toward sacred places and spaces and in the following of traditions. “If we do not celebrate Athengenoba and if *dasturi-s* do not sacrifice animals to *khati-s*, then we will offend both *khati-s* and the people” – one native told me. Adherence to traditions and reverence for *khati-s* constitute inseparable part of the local males’ identity.³⁰³ At the feast of Athengenoba in Shatili are gathered natives and descendants of the inhabitants of Shatili who migrated from Shatili to lowland Georgia in the second half of the 20th century.³⁰⁴ This feast and these sacred places reinforce their identity in a powerful way.

The Orthodox Church is another sacred place in Shatili. The old church which was built in the 19th century during the era of Russian colonialism, was later destroyed in the Soviet era. Local priest Ochiauri was the victim of repression in the 1930s. Since then there was not a church in Shatili. In 2010 Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia, the Archbishop of Mtskheta-Tbilisi and Metropolitan bishop of Abkhazia and Bichvinta, His Holiness and Beatitude Ilia II visited Shatili. Under his blessing the construction of new church began. The building was almost finished at the time when we were conducting our fieldwork and a priest conducted the liturgy. Natives took part enthusiastically in the building process. My interviewees considered that *khati-s* and the church supplement each other. “We should attend a service, go to confession and receive communion in the church. But we should also go to *khati-s*, light the candles there and sacrifice animals” said one of my informants to me, a man in his early 60’s. The church is also an important place because here the spatial-gender segregation is abolished: women and men attend the liturgy together. In contrast with this, it is impossible for women to participate, even to observe the ritual which takes place in *khatis mitsa* (“land of icon”).

As I noted above, the *saqvabe* is located at the border of the sacred (the land of icon) and historical (fortresses) spaces. This is also true in an indirect sense: *saqvabe* is a place where beer is brewed for the Athengenoba feast. Therefore, it is a sacred place and the entrance of women is prohibited. All work in the *saqvabe* is done by men. But the *saqvabe*

³⁰⁰ The feast is related to the orthodox saint Athenogenes who was martyred in the beginning of the 4th century in Sebaste (Byzantine Empire). *Athengenoba* is a moveable feast. Its celebration begins in the second half of July and continues four days.

³⁰¹ The reason is that there is no local shrine priest (*khutsesi*) in Shatili, as was noted above. Only *khutsesi* and his subordinates (*khelosani* – the assistant of *khutsesi*, *medroshe* – “the flag bearer”, *mezare* – “the bell bearer”, *magandzuri* – “the keeper of treasure”, usually the silver jugs) have a right to approach *k’vrivi* (central point of *khati*). The restriction to come near to the *k’vrivi* applies even to abandoned *khati-s*.

³⁰² For the reason for this prohibition see Kevin Tuite, Real and Imagined Feudalism in Highland Georgia, in: *Amirani*, vol. 7 (2002), pp. 28 ff.

³⁰³ It was extremely difficult for us to obtain information from local women. In most cases they avoided speaking with us and pointed to their husbands. The information which we got from a few respondent women was consistent with the general picture.

³⁰⁴ Elderly men told me that in the Soviet era many more *Khevsurs* visited Shatili at the Athengenoba feast.

also has a more “mundane”, social function: on the first day of Athengenoba *dasturi*-s make a feast in the *saqvabe* and entertain guests with locally brewed beer and *khavitsiani*-s.³⁰⁵ Khevsurs gathered in *saqvabe* make toasts to *khati*-s and their deceased ancestors who are famous for their heroic deeds. Therefore sacred ritual and historical past merge together in *saqvabe*.

The **fortresses/towers** of Shatili (*qvitkirebi* or *koshkebi* as natives call them) create a historical space. In spite of their historic value the condition of the towers are very critical. There are cracks in the walls and the interior is badly polluted with trash (DAIPSS³⁰⁶). During the first stage of the expedition the walls of two towers collapsed (DAIPSS). Restoration work began slowly and its aim was to restore particular towers, not the whole complex. Besides, restorers ignored collapsed towers between two guesthouse-towers, near *Sapekhvno* and concentrated on the damaged tower in Qvenaubani (DAIPSS). The natives were extremely concerned about the critical condition of towers. They considered that government should act more effectively, lest the condition of towers be worsened.³⁰⁷

Sapekhvno is a part of historical space. It played a very important role in Shatili’s everyday life in previous times. The men who gathered there, were making gunpowder, shoes and other domestic tools. But it was the social function of the *sapekhvno* which was the most important. Here all the important matters of the village were discussed. Like the towers, now the *sapekhvno* is empty and natives do not gather here - even to chat - to say nothing of discussing any burning issues of the village. There were attempts to build a new *sapekhvno* in the 1980s but without success.

There are two main reasons why the old *sapekhvno* ceased to function. First (and the most dramatic) is a considerable decrease in the population due to migration to lowlands in the second half of the 20th century. Second: the old *sapekhvno* is located near the towers and the fact that the towers are not inhabited at the present times means that the location of the *sapekhvno* is inconvenient to the natives who live around the sacred and historical spaces of Shatili, forming three small, separate neighbourhoods. Besides, now they are not making gunpowder and shoes themselves. Locals want to make the *sapekhvno* functional again, but up to now they have no clear idea how to resolve this problem.

Conclusion:

The sacred and historical spaces of Shatili and their elements (*khati*-s, the church, *saqvabe*, towers, and *sapekhvno*) exert a powerful influence on the natives’ identities. All our interviewees noted that these places were of the utmost importance to them. The sacred and historical spaces of Shatili are mainly situated in the center of village. But it is not to say that the space of everyday movement and action (everyday space) lies outside of these spaces. On the contrary, those spaces interact and intersect daily with one another thanks to the movements and interactions of natives and visitors to Shatili. When a Khevsur woman makes *khavitsiani* for the Athengenoba feast in her kitchen, sacred space enters her house, penetrates everyday space and endows the whole process with exceptional importance and spirit. When Khevsur men bring home-baked *khavitsian*-s and *qada*-s in *saqvabe*, when they drink beer which *dastur*-s have brewed, they congratulate each other Athengenoba and have a pleasant chat with one another, then everyday space is felt fully within the intersection of sacred and historical spaces. And finally, when a young Khevsur girl leaves her house and

³⁰⁵ *Khavitsiani* (or *khavitsiani qada*) is a filled bread dish. The filling contains *khavitsi* which is made by mixing flour and clarified butter. *Khavitsiani*-s are an essential part of any Khevsur feast.

³⁰⁶ Digital Archive of the Institute of Philosophy and Social Sciences.

³⁰⁷ It should be noted, that conditions of other historical monuments in upper Khevsureti are also very critical. The fortress of Qachu nearby Shatili is almost destroyed. According to legend the first inhabitants of Shatili lived there. The towers in Kistani (*Abuletaurta*, *Atandilata*, *Babkiaurta*, and *Torelis Cikhe*) require restoration. The fortress of Mutso (*Mutsos Cikhe*), which still enchants travellers’ eyes collapses day by day. The towers of Ardoti and Khakhabo are badly damaged. *The lack of care exposes the fragility of places.*

goes to *Chala*, a nearby neighbourhood, she incidentally makes her way by the “women way”, thereby reaffirming and reinforcing sacred and (in this case, gendered) everyday spaces. In all these cases, spaces (sacred, historical, and everyday) are created by places. Humans interact with these places and spaces through their movements and (inter)actions. In the wake of these movements and interactions, sacred, historical and everyday spaces constantly interact and intersect one another.

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