

An Ossetian Island in Eastern Georgia

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A small Ossetian community belonging to diverse faiths has survived the tribulations of ethnic conflict. Tina Batsiashvili is making her weekly trek on foot along a road lined with vineyards towards the village of Kitaani in eastern Georgia, where she will attend her Christian group's regular meeting.

"As there's no transport here, I have to walk ten kilometres to Kitaani every Wednesday," said Batsiashvili, who goes to the village to attend Baptist Bible readings.

Meanwhile Lela, who lives in Kitaani itself and who like Batsiashvili is an ethnic Ossetian, sets aside her work and hurries to a Bible reading session, although in her case it is a meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Another Kitaani resident, Zuri Khetashvili, has something to pray for, too. He has heard a television weather forecast predicting hail over Kakheti, this region of Georgia, and he puts his faith in an ancient tree named Elia, which is a religious shrine for people in the village.

"If I go to Elia, light a candle and ask God to spare us from the hail, then not a single hailstone will fall in Kitaani, even if the rest of Kakheti is covered in it," said Khetashvili, who will pray at the tree alongside other Orthodox Christians who have retained some old pagan practices.

The small village of Kitaani, with its 100 households, has two claims to be different. It is Georgia's most multi-faith village, home to equal numbers of Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses and followers of Orthodox Christianity - with a dash of paganism thrown in.

Even more remarkably, the village's population consists entirely of ethnic Ossetians, although they hold Georgian passports. Around half of Kitaani's original inhabitants have managed to stay on here despite the conflict over South Ossetia in 1991-92 which prompted thousands of Ossetians to flee Georgia.

"All the villages surrounding it are mostly populated by Georgians," said Khetashvili. "Kitaani is the only village where 100 Ossetian families live."

Among the hundred inhabited houses stands about the same number of abandoned, derelict buildings whose owners fled during the Georgian-Ossetian conflict and have never come back.

Ethnic Ossetians have lived in the heart of Kakheti since they moved down from the mountains a century ago. "Legend has it that our forebears came here to participate in building an irrigation channel and then decided to make their homes on its banks," said Khetashvili.

He said previous generations changed their Ossetian surnames to Georgian ones, and few remember their original names.

When the South Ossetian conflict broke out after the collapse of the Soviet Union, ethnic tensions surfaced between people in Kitaani and their Georgian neighbours.

“More than 15 years have passed, but I still can’t forget what we went through at that time,” recalled Khetashvili, who was head of the village’s collective farm during the Georgian-Ossetian conflict. “We were harassed everywhere and for no reason. They said, ‘You are Ossetians and you have to leave.’”

“They suspected us of being in contact with the Ossetians of Tskhinvali [capital of South Ossetia]. But all the other Ossetians are so far from here that I don’t reckon Kitaani’s residents have ever seen any Ossetians except for each other.”

Sociologist Temuri Kakhishvili said the villagers began to adopt new faiths in the aftermath of the conflict.

“After the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, this village was left to the mercy of fate,” he said. “They just allowed everything – education, agriculture, healthcare and religion – develop any which way. That’s why there’s such a great diversity of religions in Kitaani.”

Georgians from neighbouring villages are reluctant to talk about the past.

“Those were difficult times,” said Natela Gavashelashvili from the nearby village of Chumlaki, who sells fruit on the road to Kitaani. “Everyone felt bad. That absurd war caused problems for everyone. I have never had anything against the Kitaani Ossetians; we get on with each other perfectly well.”

Khetashvili still represents his village but only within the administration of Chumlaki. Kitaani has no local government structure of its own, and day-to-day business is discussed at informal meetings held in the open air. The villagers seat themselves around a bust of a Soviet soldier, who looks such a natural part of the group that one cannot help thinking that he will join in with the conversation at any moment.

There is agitated discussion of the rising tensions between the government in Tbilisi and the de facto authorities in South Ossetia, who have been living outside Georgian jurisdiction for a decade and a half.

“The way they [the Georgian authorities] are behaving makes you think they are going to start a war,” said one of the villagers.

“You are wrong!” said another. “If that were the case, they wouldn’t be making all these efforts to support [Georgian-backed Ossetian leader Dmitry] Sanakoyev - they would just attack Tskhinvali.”

The villagers said they feel “relatively safe” under Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili, but they worried that if conflict flares up, their ethnicity will become an issue again.

“This is Misha’s tractor, but I’m driving it now,” said Koba Dzepisashvili, talking about one of the farm vehicles the Georgian president – to whom he referred by the familiar form Misha – has gifted to villages across Kakheti.

“We twice wrested the tractor from the lion’s jaws,” said Dzepisashvili, referring to attempts by local government in Gurjaani to take the vehicle away from him.

However, the villagers insisted the attempt to take away their tractor had nothing to do with their being Ossetian. “Misha’s tractor” is mainly used to plough peach orchards, which have replaced vineyards as the main source of livelihoods here.

Over time, the villagers are losing their native language.

“Georgian is the language we know best, since we speak Ossetian only at home,” said Khetashvili. “We’ve never studied in Ossetian in school. No one has ever suggested that we do so, and somehow it’s never occurred on us to demand it, and we’ve always been taught in Georgian.”

From September, the village children will have to go to school in Chumlaki, as the Kitaani school has been closed as part of a rationalisation programme by the Georgian education ministry.

Khetashvili is unhappy with the decision. “Other schools in Kakheti have been closed too, which is why I don’t think that our rights have been particularly violated,” he said. “I’m just afraid that we will have no money to pay for the school bus, and our children will have to make a journey of several kilometres on foot.

“It’s true that there are now only 20 schoolchildren in Kitaani, but there are many more of them at kindergarten. This year alone, seven children have been born in the village. Will they reopen our school when the number of pupils increases?”

At the end of the day, the village assembly noted that the threat of a hailstorm had passed, and there was general agreement that they had been spared thanks to prayers said at the Elia tree.

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