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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Secret Sex, Anonymous Desire

Review by Victor Cova

Love Stories: Language, Private Love, and Public Romance in Georgia

by Paul Manning

University of Toronto Press, 2015

Love Stories is a historical and linguistic ethnography of desire among Khevsurs in Georgia at the beginning of the 20th century, and the desire they continue to inspire at the end of the same century. It is based on ethnography written at the time by both indigenous Khevsurs as well as the Georgian intelligentsia. More specifically it focuses on a type of relationship, called *sts'orproba* or “casual lovers,” between young men and women that stood apart from kinship and materialized in sexual acts of *ts'ola-dogma*, or “lying down and getting up.” Manning focuses on the social and linguistic codification of this relation, as well as the continuing fascination it has exercised over Georgian intellectual life and popular culture ever since. As part of a collection of ethnographies written “with the undergraduate in mind,” it provides a great introduction both to linguistic anthropology and to the anthropology of sexuality. The language is clear throughout and most of the analytical concepts are well explained, without over-burdening the text with references to academic debates. Moreover, the material is presented in such a way as to grasp the reader’s attention first with descriptions of the encounter itself, before introducing historical and geographical contextualisation much later. Yet the book should also find readers beyond the undergraduate classroom because of the extraordinary material it presents and its subtle analysis by the author.

The first four chapters focus on the different stages that lead to young khevsur men and women lying down together. First, an elchi, or “ambassador,” chooses two people suitable to be a couple. The first chapter focuses on analyses and explanations of the rhetorics she would use to persuade a girl to follow her to a young man’s house, and a boy to accept lying down with a girl. For a pair to be

elligible, they must not be able to marry each other. Because Khevsur kinship is exogamous, this means they are primarily chosen among people from the same village. “Lying down and getting up” is itself highly codified, as chapter 2 explains. The lovers must lie next to each other, on their backs or, if they are more familiar with each other, on their side, the girl’s head on the boy’s arm. They might touch the arms and head but not the neck or chest, and especially not each other’s genitals. They may also kiss, but on a first encounter, would most likely talk with each other through the night. Because the encounter takes place with other people sleeping nearby, any disagreement would quickly lead to the pair being discovered and shamed. If all goes well, however, the pair would meet again regularly and become “sworn brothers.” This longer-term engagement would take the form of gifts, notably of bottles of vodka stolen by the girl from her own family and kept hidden away to be consumed with her sworn brother. The fourth chapter considers another durable outcome of such relationships: love poetry. Poems of praise or blame for a lover would circulate like the other gifts, and eventually become immortalized. It is also through these poems that the contents of such secretive encounters could be made public and codified.

The last three chapters and the conclusion describe events that changed the form of these encounters and led to their eventual disappearance, whilst simultaneously becoming an object of curiosity and fantasy for the Georgian intelligentsia. First, a new “style” of lying down appeared in the early 20th century. Young people wanted to touch each other more, going so far as lying on top of each other rather than side by side. They also increasingly wanted to marry their sworn brothers, instead of marrying out. These two moves were probably encouraged by increased interferences from the State and the Russian Orthodox Church, which made divorce much more difficult than before. Marrying a known and trusted partner would have become more appealing than an arranged marriage. Second, the development of the press led to the constitution of a national intelligentsia and the production of knowledge about “the people.” It is in that context that distorted accounts of the practice of “lying down” became part of national discourse as simultaneously an object of desire and repulsion. Two khevsur ethnographers, one of them a woman, also wrote elaborate accounts of Khevsur social life, including the practice of lying down, which form the basis of the analysis in the first three chapters. Finally, these accounts in turn formed the basis for films and novels in the second half of the 20th century, and allusions to lying down circulate even now in advertisements for beer and on internet chatrooms.

The book revolves around various forms of anonymous desire that question lyrical understandings of desire that focus on the subject and its object. Khevsur personhood for both men and women valorises self-restraint in the expression of desire. This self-restraint is justified by a belief in

the all-consuming power of desire. Originally, men and women would be so consumed by their desire for each other that they would wither away. God dispersed desire among other objects and invented the rules of lying down in order to control the power of desire. Lying down, as a “free” domain for the expression of desire, both takes it to its highest intensity but also prohibits it from ever bearing fruits. Although having “laid down” with many people makes one more desirable, modesty prohibits the naming of one's partner(s). It is crucial to show that one has many partners without ever mentioning who these partners are. Manning is particularly good at showing the forms taken by these anonymous demonstrations. In particular, he shows that both vodka and poetry are singularly adequate forms of expression and concealment of anonymous desire because of their material properties, their abilities to circulate without being marked by their origin or altered by time. He also contrasts these to other forms of anonymity that appear in the 20th century in Georgia thanks to the printing press and the development of the internet.

To conclude, *Love Stories* is a highly readable and interesting ethnography that will captivate the imagination of its readers as it has Georgian intellectuals. Accessible to undergraduates as an introduction to ethnography, it will also stimulate those interested in kinship, love poetry, socialism and post-socialism, queer anthropology and the history of anthropology.

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