

History

History and Identity of the Udi Population in Georgia

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Abstract. The study aims to examine the historical development of Zinobiani and the mechanisms for preserving its cultural identity. Located in northeastern Kakheti, Kvareli Municipality, Zinobiani was founded in 1922 by Udi settlers from Azerbaijan and remains the only Udi settlement in Georgia. Its history reflects not only local, but also broader South Caucasus processes. The research analyzes the village's historical development, particularly during the Soviet period, using archival documents, oral histories, and ethnographic observations. Special attention is given to oral histories from Zinobiani residents, which reveal customs and traditions that have survived. The study highlights cultural and social factors that enabled the Udi community to maintain its ethnic identity within Georgia's multi-ethnic environment. The methodology adopts a multidimensional approach: archival analysis reconstructs historical processes and verifies events, while recording and interpreting oral histories as well as provides insights into the community's memory and identity. Findings show that Zinobiani's history offers valuable data for understanding ethnic diversity, cultural resilience, and integration in Georgia. © 2026 *Bull. Natl. Acad. Sci. Georg.*

Keywords: Udi population, Georgia, cultural identity, ethnic history

Introduction

In Georgia, in the Kakheti region, the village of Zinobiani, located in the Kvareli Municipality, is inhabited by Udi population. The Udis are considered descendants of the Christian Orthodox population of the state of Caucasian Albania. After the loss of statehood by Caucasian Albania at the end of the early Middle Ages, the living conditions of the Udi population became quite difficult. Following the conquest of the Caucasus by the Russian Empire, their main settlements became the villages located in present-day Azerbaijan – Nij, Qishlaq, and Vartashen (today Oghuz).

Zinobiani is the only compact Udi settlement in Georgia. Its establishment and development is an important historical precedent in the process of forming the ethnic diversity present in Georgia. The members of the Udi community living in Zinobiani continue to preserve their unique traditions and identity to this day.

The materials used in this study were gathered in 2022-2023 as part of the project “Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in Kakheti – The Udis”, funded by the Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University.

This study article presents a focused analysis of the historical development of Zinobiani. It exa-

mines lesser-studied stages of the village's history, particularly during the Soviet period, using archival materials, oral histories, and ethnographic observations. The methodology combines the analysis of archival documents to reconstruct historical processes with the interpretation of oral histories, providing new insights into the memory and identity of the Udi community.

Method

This paper presents a focused analysis of the historical development of Zinobiani. It examines lesser-studied stages of the village's history, particularly during the Soviet period, using archival materials, oral histories, and ethnographic observations. The methodology combines the analysis of archival documents to reconstruct historical processes with the interpretation of oral histories, providing new insights into the memory and identity of the Udi community.

Results and Discussion

The ancestors of the Udis living in the village of Zinobiani resettled from the territory of Azerbaijan to Georgia in 1922. The reasons for their relocation are closely connected to the regional processes taking place in the South Caucasus during the second half of the 1910s.

This issue has been examined in greater depth by the young researcher Aleksandre Kavtaradze. He notes: "Between 1915 and 1920, conflict broke out between Armenian and Azerbaijani populations on the territory of Azerbaijan. This confrontation took on an especially brutal character and also affected the small Udi community living in northern Azerbaijan, most of whom at that time were concentrated mainly in the villages of Vartashen, Qishlaq and Nij" (Kavtaradze, 2023, pp. 75-76). The problems faced by the Udi population and the reasons for their resettlement to Georgia are reflected in the oral histories we recorded (Aivazashvili, 2023; Mamulashvili, 2023).

Emphasis should be given to the fact that as it turns out, some of the Udis living on the territory of present-day Azerbaijan had already attempted to resettle in Georgia during the period of the First Democratic Republic of Georgia (*Komunisti*, 1923, No. 24). The actual process of Udi resettlement to Georgia began with the decision issued by the Soviet authorities on May 29, 1921. As a result, by the end of 1922, around 200 Udi families had arrived in Georgia to settle there (*Komunisti*, 1923, No. 24).

The Soviet authorities allocated nearly 1,000 hectares of land, as well as a certain amount of financial resources, in a preselected area of the then Telavi District (Mazra) for the settlement of the Udis and the establishment of a new village (*Komunisti*, 1923, No. 24). The village was constructed according to a prearranged plan (*Komunisti*, 1923, No. 282).

For the resettled Udi population, approximately 4,500 square meters of land per household was allocated for personal use (Dalakishvili, 2023).

Despite the active assistance and support provided by the local authorities, the lives of the Udis – both during the resettlement period and in their first years in Georgia – were quite difficult. This situation is reflected in newspaper articles of the time (*Komunisti*, 1923, No. 24; *Komunisti*, 1923, No. 122; *Komunisti*, 1927, No. 234). In addition to newspaper articles, archival materials – including decrees issued by the Soviet authorities – also reflect the difficult living conditions of the newly resettled Udi population in the Telavi District (Mazra). The Archive of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia preserves an excerpt from the minutes of the 3 May 1922 meeting of the Presidium of the *Transcaucasian Regional Committee of the Russian Communist (Bolshevik) Party*. The 7th item on the meeting's agenda concerned the "petition of the Udi-Georgians". The petition addressed the issue of allowing the Udi population to bring their belongings from Azerbaijan. During the meeting, it was decided to

propose to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan the following: “permit the Udis, who are in the process of resettling to Georgia, to take with them all their movable property” (Ministry of Internal Affairs Archive (MIA), Fund 13, inv. 1, c. 17, p. 17). This situation is also reflected in the oral histories we recorded (Aivazashvili, 2023).

The living conditions of the Udis resettled in Georgia were initially quite difficult. This is reflected both in the newspaper articles of the time and in the oral histories we recorded: “At first they dug trenches and lived at the foot of the hill where our place of worship is... Initially, they lived in dugouts; then they built small houses, and later larger houses made of stone and adobe” (Tevdorashvili, 2023).

During this period, a “Society for the Aid of the Udis” was established to support the Udi population in Georgia. It had branches in various cities, including Telavi (*Komunisti*, 1924, No. 48).

In the oral histories of the residents of Zinobiani, the figure of Zinobi Silikashvili – the key initiator of the village’s founding – is portrayed with great warmth and appreciation. He served as the intermediary between the Udis of Vartashen who wished to resettle in Georgia and the Soviet authorities. He played a major role in the process of establishing the village of Zinobiani by the resettled Udis. For this reason, the grateful Udis named the newly built village Zinobiani in his honor (*Komunisti*, 1925, No. 193).

In 1938, Zinobi Silikashvili was arrested and executed. The village of Zinobiani was renamed *Oktomberi* (“October”) (Kakheti Regional Archive (KRA), Fund 28, inv. 1, c.43, p.20). The Archive of the Ministry of Internal Affairs preserves the execution order of Zinobi Silikashvili, dated 11 October 1938. It states: “Silikashvili Zinobi, son of Andrei, born in 1891. Georgian. Born in the village of Vartashen, Nukha District (Uyezd), Elisabethpol Governorate... to be executed. His property is to be

confiscated” (Ministry of Internal Affairs Archive (MIA), Fund 20, doc.#22).

According to archival documents preserved at the Kakheti Regional Archive of the National Archives of Georgia, the village of Zinobiani already had an executive governing body – a village council (*soplis sabtcho*) – as early as 1925 (Kakheti Regional Archive (KRA), Fund 28, inv. 1, c.79, p.1). The separate existence of the Zinobiani village council is also confirmed by other archival materials (Kakheti Regional Archive (KRA), Fund 1, inv. 1, c.10, pp.2–3; Kakheti Regional Archive (KRA), Fund 28, inv. 1, c.12, p.5).

According to archival materials preserved in the Kakheti Regional Archive, beginning in the second half of the 1920s, the population of the village of Zinobiani – later renamed *Oqtomberi* – was incorporated into a collective farm (*kolkhoz*) and agricultural artels (Kakheti Regional Archive (KRA), Fund 208, inv. 1, c.5, p.4). Some residents of the village had already established the “Zinobiani Agricultural Artel named after Lado Sukhishvili” on 26 March 1931 (Kakheti Regional Archive (KRA), Fund 35, inv. 1, c.102a, pp. 29–30).

This *kolkhoz*-type artel was soon dissolved. The authorities of the Georgian SSR carried out a number of measures to restore the collective farm in the village of Zinobiani (Ministry of Internal Affairs Archive (MIA), Fund 14, inv. 8, c.10, pp.2–3; Kakheti Regional Archive (KRA), Fund 1, inv. 1, c.10, pp.1–2).

In 1935, part of the population of the village of Zinobiani – 28 individuals – re-established the collective farm and named it the “Udi Collective Farm named after Boris Dzeneladze” (Kakheti Regional Archive (KRA), Fund 208, inv. 1, c.4, p. 1). By 1951, out of 144 households living in the village of Oqtomberi (Zinobiani), the majority were members of the collective farm (Kakheti Regional Archive (KRA), Fund 28, inv. 1, c. 76, p. 20).

According to archival materials, the population united in the “Udi Collective Farm named after

Boris Dzeneladze” in Oqtomberi (Zinobiani) cultivated various types of crops, including rice, corn, beans, sunflower, wheat, barley, watermelon, basil, geranium, and the Kazanlak rose. They also tended vineyards and produced large quantities of grapes, among other agricultural products. They practiced beekeeping and raised both large and small livestock (Kakheti Regional Archive (KRA), Fund 28, inv. 1, c. 70, p.15).

Archival materials and the oral histories recorded during the research process confirm that the village of Oqtomberi (Zinobiani) became economically quite prosperous in the 1930s-1940s and turned into one of the most successful villages in the Kakheti region (Dalakishvili, 2023).

From the second half of the 1920s until the late 1980s, the population earned income not only from cultivating and selling agricultural products but also from delivering silkworm cocoons. It is known that sericulture was a traditional occupation of the Udi population (*Komunisti*, 1923, No. 122).

Among the issues discussed at the meetings of the Village Council of Oqtomberi (Zinobiani), as well as at the sessions of the collective farm named after “Boris Dzeneladze”, frequent topics included the “plans for producing silkworm cocoons” and various matters related to sericulture (Kakheti Regional Archive (KRA), Fund 28, inv. 1, c.7, pp.14–15; Kakheti Regional Archive (KRA), Fund 28, inv. 1, c. 20, pp. 6,8; Kakheti Regional Archive (KRA), Fund 28, inv. 1, c. 43, p. 20).

Archival materials, the oral histories we recorded, as well as the traditional Udi houses still preserved in the village of Oqtomberi (Zinobiani) – which are roofed with high-ceilinged, tiled roofs – confirm that the population produced silkworm cocoons in large quantities. In these old houses still standing in the village, one can see the special racks, preserved here and there in the roofs, which were used for raising silkworms. It should be emphasized that the Udi population used the attic spaces in their houses for raising silkworms and producing cocoons.

In the oral histories, the villagers describe in detail what the traditional Udi houses built by the residents of the village of Oqtomberi (Zinobiani) were like and what activities the population was engaged in. According to them, the cellars of Udi houses were used to store food and also contained kvevri for wine. Silkworm cocoons were produced in the attic (Barkhudarashvili, 2023; Gogolashvili, 2023). Archival materials and oral histories confirm that the Udi population of the village of Oqtomberi (Zinobiani) was primarily engaged in agriculture. However, they also owned a large number of cattle (Kakheti Regional Archive (KRA), Fund 208, inv. 1, c.4, p.1); Kakheti Regional Archive (KRA), Fund 28, inv. 1, c.92, p.22).

The analysis of archival materials reveals that from the late 1920s onward, several agricultural-industrial type artels were operating in the village of Oqtomberi (Zinobiani). As early as the 1930s, there were artels in Zinobiani with names such as “Imedi”, “Orjonikidze”, “Chkhari”, “Kirov”, “Art-Abreshumi”, and others (Ministry of Internal Affairs Archive (MIA), Fund 14, inv. 8, c.10, p.97; Kakheti Regional Archive (KRA), Fund 28, inv. 1, c.20, pp.6,8; Kakheti Regional Archive (KRA), Fund 28, inv. 1, c.43, p.1). These artels produced bricks, roof tiles, and timber (Kakheti Regional Archive (KRA), Fund 28, inv. 1, c.20, pp.7; Kakheti Regional Archive (KRA), Fund 28, inv. 1, c.92, p. 20).

In the village of Zinobiani, we found roof tiles preserved to this day, made by the local population, bearing inscriptions of the “Art-Abreshumi” artel. Tiles of the so-called “Marseille tile” type have also been preserved – these were produced as early as 1925 by the tile factory that existed in the village of Zinobiani (*Komunisti*, 1925, No. 193).

During the recording of oral histories, the villagers also confirmed that in the Soviet period there were several artels in the village that produced various types of agricultural products (Barkhudarashvili, 2023; Gogolashvili, 2023; Aivazashvili, 2023).

The analysis of archival materials reveals that the artels operating in the village of Oktomberi (Zinobiani) actively assisted the villagers and the community as a whole in addressing various pressing issues, such as repairing roads, renovating the village club, providing water, and other needs (Kakheti Regional Archive (KRA), Fund 28, inv. 1, c.81, p.10; Kakheti Regional Archive (KRA), Fund 28, inv. 1, c.89, p.9; Kakheti Regional Archive (KRA), Fund 28, inv. 1, c.98).

It is known that in the 1950s, the Soviet government, aiming to reduce “non-prospective” villages, carried out the consolidation of village councils and collective farms. On 16 July 1954, at the joint meeting of the Kvareli District Party Committee Bureau and the Executive Committee of the Workers’ Deputies Council of Kvareli District, the Village Council of Oktomberi was abolished and merged with the Village Council of Chikaani (Kakheti Regional Archive (KRA), Fund 35, inv. 1, c.102p, p. 1). At that time, the population of the village of Oktomberi was 611 people (Kakheti Regional Archive (KRA), Fund 35, inv. 1, c.102p, p. 3).

From 1954 onward, information about the village of Oktomberi is already gathered in the materials of the Chikaani Village Council (Kakheti Regional Archive (KRA), Fund 82, inv. 2, c.136, p.95); Kakheti Regional Archive (KRA), Fund 35, inv. 1, c.105). In the 1990s, when Georgia gained independence and began implementing reforms, the Chikaani Village Council was renamed the Chikaani Community Council. The village of Oktomberi remained incorporated within the Chikaani Community Council.

Archival documents reveal that in the 1990s, the population of the village of Oktomberi sought to separate the village from the Chikaani community and restore its former name – Zinobiani (Kakheti Regional Archive (KRA), Fund 82, inv. 2, c.127, p. 1).

In the archival materials, we found a decision of the Chikaani Community Council dated 15 Febru-

ary 2000 concerning the renaming of the village of October to Zinobiani. Although the decision expresses agreement regarding the change of the village’s name, it states a refusal to separate the village into an independent council (Kakheti Regional Archive (KRA), Fund 82, inv. 2, c.142, p. 3).

In the materials from this period, the village of Oktomberi soon begins to be referred to by its changed name – Zinobiani (Kakheti Regional Archive (KRA), Fund 82, inv. 2, c.136, p.3). However, the village officially regained the name Zinobiani only in 2010. (Kavtaradze, 2023, pp.84).

In Zinobiani, the population speaks both Georgian and Udi. It is noteworthy that Udi youth make every effort to obtain higher education – the majority of school graduates enroll in universities. The Udi language is taught at the incomplete secondary school of the village of Zinobiani; specific hours are allocated for teaching it. However, some young people do not know the Udi language. According to the residents, young people show little interest in learning the Udi language (Pachikashvili, 2023; Aivazashvili, 2023).

In the contemporary period, the Udi language is considered as an endangered language. It is spoken primarily by the Udi population living in Georgia, in the village of Zinobiani, as well as by Udis residing in Azerbaijan, particularly in the villages of Nij and Oghuz (formerly Vartashen). The Udi language is used mainly as a means of internal communication within the Udi community. Both in Georgia and in Azerbaijan, it is largely replaced by the respective state languages in official, educational, and administrative domains.

According to some scholars, the Udi language belongs to the Northeast Caucasian (Nakh-Daghestanian) language family and is especially closely related to the Lezgian group of languages. The Udi language is regarded as one of the principal spoken languages of the population inhabiting the territory of Caucasian Albania, which grants it a unique position on the linguistic map of the Caucasus.

It is noteworthy that interest in the Udi language in Georgia dates back to an early period. In the early twentieth century, Georgian periodicals even discussed the issue of a possible kinship between Udis and Georgians (*Komunisti*, 1925, No. 193). Furthermore, an article published on January 22, 1927, in the newspaper *Kommunisti*, entitled “The Lost Alphabet of the Caucasian Albanians: Pavle Ingorokva’s Report on the Alphabet of the Caucasian Albanians,” is dedicated to a report by the prominent Georgian scholar Pavle Ingorokva. The article highlights the complexities of the linguistic, ethnic, and cultural history of the population of Caucasian Albania (*Komunisti*, 1927, No. 17).

The cuisine of the Udis living in Zinobiani is particularly interesting. They traditionally make extensive use of rice, and accordingly, we encounter many varieties of pilaf among the Udis. They prepare pilaf with bean, chestnut, and various other types. *Khupi* means “pilaf” in the Udi language, and therefore Udi cuisine includes *fakhlin-khupi*, *chaina-khupi*, *oshalakhupi*, *shilakhupi*, and so on (Pachikashvili, 2023; Aivazashvili, 2023).

In the course of our research, it became evident that the Udis have to some extent managed to preserve their identity. During the recording of oral histories, it was revealed that the Udis living in Zinobiani had retained wedding and funeral traditions, customs related to childbirth and child-rearing, as well as incantations, legends, and so on. For example, the Udis who were resettled in Georgia had preserved, until recently, an exceptionally beautiful traditional Udi wedding ritual (Tevdorashvili, 2023). It was found that Georgians and Udis had almost identical traditions regarding visiting graves and commemorating the souls of the deceased. The Udis refer to the tradition of visiting graves as “*Tapakoba*” (Kakulashvili, 2023; Dalakishvili, 2023).

Among the Udis, the tradition of incantations was also preserved. According to several respondents, although their parents and the older generation in general were Orthodox Christians, they

still used incantations to increase and maintain agricultural productivity. This was done during different phases of the moon: “I remember what I saw – my mother-in-law also did this. They would go up to the roof, look at the moon – it had to be a new moon – she would do something with a broom and say: “khash, khash, khash dedi, zigilaro sarke da bosh geldi” (Dalakishvili, 2023). In addition, it was found that there were several people living in the village who used to practice incantations, and people would go to them to receive blessings or ritual healing.

Like every people, the Udis had their own form of folk medicine. In Zinobiani, they remember how infertility was treated and what methods the healer (folk doctor) used.

A particularly interesting ritual was performed to identify which sacred place the Udis believed to be the cause of their hardship or illness. During this ritual, the Udis determined which holy place they needed to honor in order to set things right and return to their normal way of life.

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It is a well-known fact that, the Udis embraced Christianity in the early centuries within the state-ecclesiastical framework of Caucasian Albania. The Caucasian Albanian Church, as an independent ecclesiastical organization, was formed in the fourth century. Initially, the Albanian Church was autocephalous and possessed its own hierarchy, dioceses, and written tradition.

In the Middle Ages, as a result of socio-political cataclysms, the Albanian Church lost its autocephaly, which led to the weakening of Albanian ecclesiastical tradition and identity, as well as to processes of assimilation.

The Udis living in Georgia, particularly in Zinobiani, historically integrated into an Orthodox Christian environment. Their religious identity developed in conditions of coexistence with local ecclesiastical traditions, a process that is especially evident in the case of the village of Zinobiani.

When the Udis settled in the area, they did not find any temples. Before shrines were built in Zinobiani, the newly resettled Udis would go to pray in the St. George Church situated near the village of Akhalsopeli.

The Udi built their shrine, the so-called Tsimeri, on the hilltop near which they had settled. The shrine referred to a niche on the hill north of the village of Zinobiani. According to the oral histories of the residents of Zinobiani, this shrine Tsimeri contained seven candle-holders. In the Udi language, the term Tsimeri denoted a sacred place or shrine associated with the offering of ritual sacrifices. Tradition holds that Tsimeri was built by the Udi population using stones brought from Vartashen and from its seven churches in the surrounding area. Near the shrine niche stood a tree, to which people tied pieces of colored thread and cloth while making wishes. In the oral histories we recorded, the narrators described in detail other rituals that were performed at this shrine.

At present, this shrine niche no longer exists, and its stones have been reused by local residents to build the walls of the St. George Church in 2009.

Today, the village of Zinobiani has an incomplete (9-year) secondary school where the Udi language is taught. In recent years, with the assistance of the European Union and the participation of the Kvareli Municipality, the infrastructure has been improved: a park and a stadium were arranged, and the building of the former club was res-

tored, where a museum, an exhibition space, and a library have been placed in a single area. At the entrance of the village stands a statue of the village's founder, Zinobi Silikashvili, which was unveiled in 2021.

Conclusion

The history of the Udi population in Zinobiani illustrates how a small ethnic community has managed to preserve its identity despite displacement, political upheavals, and changing social conditions. Founded in 1922 by Udi families resettled from present-day Azerbaijan, the village developed through difficult early years, Soviet-era collectivization, and later administrative reforms. Archival documents and oral histories reveal both the hardships the Udis faced and the strong communal structures that supported their adaptation.

Despite these challenges, the Udis maintained essential cultural elements – language, rituals, religious practices, cuisine, and communal traditions – which continue to define their identity today. Modern educational initiatives, cultural projects, and local infrastructure improvements further contribute to sustaining this heritage.

While summarizing the above-mentioned Zinobiani stands as an important example of cultural resilience in Georgia, demonstrating how ethnic minorities can preserve their distinctiveness while integrating into a broader multiethnic environment.

ისტორია

უდი მოსახლეობის ისტორია და იდენტობა საქართველოში

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ნაშრომის მიზანია სოფელ ზინობიანის ისტორიული განვითარების, კულტურული თვითმყოფადობისა და იდენტობის შენარჩუნების მექანიზმების კვლევა. კახეთის რეგიონის ჩრდილო-აღმოსავლეთ ნაწილში, ყვარლის მუნიციპალიტეტში მდებარე სოფელი ზინობიანი განსაკუთრებული მაგალითია საქართველოს ეთნიკური და კულტურული მრავალფეროვნების ისტორიაში. სოფელი დაარსა აზერბაიჯანის ტერიტორიიდან გადმოსახლებულმა უდმა მოსახლეობამ 1922 წელს. ზინობიანი წარმოადგენს საქართველოში მცხოვრები უდიების ერთადერთ დასახლებას. ნაშრომში გაანალიზებულია დღემდე, თითქმის, შეუსწავლელი სოფლის ისტორიული განვითარების თავისებურებები, განსაკუთრებით, საბჭოთა პერიოდის კონტექსტში. კვლევა ეფუძნება მრავალფეროვან წყაროებს, მათ შორის, საარქივო დოკუმენტებს, ზეპირ ისტორიებსა და ეთნოგრაფიულ დაკვირვებებს. განსაკუთრებული ყურადღება ეთმობა ზინობიანის მცხოვრებლებისგან ჩაწერილ ზეპირ ისტორიებს, სადაც ასახულია დაკარგვის საფრთხის წინაშე მყოფი, მაგრამ დღემდე შემორჩენილი მათი წეს-ჩვეულებები და ტრადიციები. კვლევის შედეგად გამოვლინდა ის კულტურული და სოციალური ფაქტორები, რომლებმაც უდიურ თემს საშუალება მისცა შეენარჩუნებინა თავისი ეთნიკური იდენტობა საქართველოს მრავალეთნიკურ გარემოში. აღსანიშნავია, რომ ზინობიანის ისტორია მნიშვნელოვან ინფორმაციას გვაწვდის საქართველოს ეთნიკური მრავალფეროვნების, ინტეგრაციისა და კულტურული მდგრადობის კვლევისათვის.

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