SVANS [K. TUITE]

ETHNONYMS. Svan: mushwæn (person), shwæn (territory); in Georgian these are svani and svaneti, respectively.

ORIENTATION. Identification. The Svans are one of the dozen or so traditionally-recognized ethnic subgroups within the Georgian (Kartvelian) nation. Their homeland (Svaneti) corresponds to the Mestia and Lentekh regions (Russ. *raion*) of the Georgian Republic, one of the former republics of the USSR.

Location. Svaneti is a territory of approximately 4200 km^2, extending from 59º40´ to 61º east longitude, 42º to 43º15´ north latitude. It is bounded on the north by Kabardo-Balkaria and Karachay-Cherkessia in the Russian Federation; on the west by Abkhazia, on the south by the Georgian provinces of Mingrelia and Lechkhumi, and on the east by the Georgian province of Racha. Up to the 15th century, northern Racha was inhabited by Svans as well. Svaneti is a rugged land of towering snow-capped mountains, thick forests and narrow gorges cut by swift glacier-fed rivers. The two main areas of Svan settlement are along the upper reaches of the Enguri and Tskhenis-ts'q'ali Rivers. These are usually referred to as Upper and Lower Svaneti respectively. Upper Svaneti is hemmed in on the north by the main range of the Caucasus mountains, with some peaks in excess of 5000 meters. A second ridge of mountains, ranging up to 4000 meters, separates Upper and Lower Svaneti. Further south, two other ridges divide Lower Svaneti from the lowlands of western Georgia. Until this century, travel into and out of Svaneti, especially Upper Svaneti, was difficult and ofttimes hazardous, because of the mountainous terrain, heavy snowfall and poor roads. During the long winter season, which lasts from October to April, the Svans were effectively cut off from the rest of Georgia. In recent decades the roads have been greatly improved, allowing nearly year-round access, and small airplanes fly a regular route between Mestia and Kutaisi, the main city of western Georgia.

Demography. The present-day inhabitants of Svaneti are, as they have been for many centuries, almost entirely Svans. Some Georgians from elsewhere in the republic and a handful of Russians live in Mestia, the largest village in Upper Svaneti, and in some parts of Lower Svaneti. The Svans identify themselves as being of Georgian nationality, and are not separately counted in the Soviet census. If one judges on the basis of language, the Svans presently number about 35000, representing about 1% of the Georgian people. Most Svans still live in Svaneti. There are also Svan villages, established about a century ago, in the neighboring parts of Abkhazia. After the tragic winter of 1986-7, during which several villages in Upper Svaneti were destroyed by avalanches, many Svans were resettled in the Marneuli region to the south of Tbilisi.

Linguistic affiliation. The Svan language is the smallest of the three languages composing the Kartvelian or South Caucasian family, one of the three groups of indigenous languages spoken in the Caucasus region. Four Svan dialects have been described. Svan, like the other members of its family, Georgian and Laz-Mingrelian, has a complex pattern of case marking and

rich verbal morphology. In terms of phonology, morphophonemics and lexicon it differs sharply from the latter languages and is believed to have diverged from the ancestral Kartvelian language some three or four millenia ago. The grammar and lexicon of the Svan language reflects long-standing contact with speakers of North Caucasian tongues. It has never been used as a written language. All Svans now speak and write Georgian, and most, especially in the younger generations, are also able to communicate in Russian. Some may know the languages of neighboring ethnic groups (Mingrelian, Balkar, etc.)

History. Archeological, toponymic and linguistic evidence indicates that the ancestors of the Georgian people have inhabited the west-central part of the southern Caucasus region for at least 5000 years, and probably much longer. In the third millenium BC, one group of Kartvelians migrated to the northwest, reaching the east coast of the Black Sea. Place names believed to be of Svanetian origin are found in this area. Somewhat later, these ancestors of the Svans moved upland into what is now Svaneti. Axes and other artifacts dating to the early Bronze Era have been discovered in Svaneti, as well as the ruins of foundries for the production of bronze and iron. This indicates that the local population was engaged in metalworking in the 2nd and 1st millenia BC. The Greek geographer Strabo (end of 1st century BC) describes the Svans as a fierce, warlike mountain people, ruled by a king and a council of 300 elders, and capable of fielding an army of 200,000. (This figure may represent an exaggeration, or perhaps Strabo was including other Kartvelians under the designation “Svan”). By the time of the consolidation of a united Georgian kingdom in the 11th century a feudal system similar to that found elsewhere in Georgia was established in Svaneti. Most of the land belonged to the Svan nobility (wærg, pusd) or to the local Georgian Orthodox churches and monasteries. The peasants (glex) worked the land, and provided crops and other services for the landowners. Several Svan noblemen rose to powerful positions in the medieval Georgian government, and were rewarded with important titles and large holdings of land in lowland Georgia. Beginning in the mid-13th century, wave upon wave of Mongol, Persian and Turkish armies devastated the lowland parts of Georgia. Because of its remote location much of Svaneti was never invaded. For this reason, many of the finest works of Georgian artistry — icons, illuminated manuscripts and gold and silver items — were preserved in Svanetian churches during this time. The Svan villagers protected these treasures zealously (the theft of an icon was punishable by death, usually by stoning, even in recent times). A sizeable number of objets d’art of foreign origin (Persian, Syrian, Italian, German) have also found their way into Svaneti, a testament to the wide-ranging cultural and trade contacts of medieval Georgia. After the dissolution of the Georgian empire the land was segmented into several smaller kingdoms and principalities. Svaneti came under the nominal authority of the kingdom of Imeretia. From the 16th century to the beginning of the 19th, a handful of powerful Svan families came to exert dominance over all of the province except for the upland (eastern) half of Upper Svaneti, which came to be known as ‘Free Svaneti’ (tævisupæl shwæn). There were also several peasant uprisings during this period, resulting in the decline of

the feudal system in some localities. The Treaty of Georgievsk, signed in 1783, placed the kingdoms of eastern Georgia under the protection of the Russian Empire. Most of western Georgia, including Lower Svaneti, was incorporated into the empire in 1803-4. The people of Upper Svaneti, however, resisted the imposition of Russian rule for some time. The princely house of western Upper Svaneti finally capitulated in 1833, and the rest of the province in 1853-1857. During the period of Russian rule the peasantry was freed from serfdom and given small parcels of land. After the Communist Revolution of 1917 Georgia declared its independence from Russia. In 1921 the Red Army invaded Georgia and incorporated it into the Soviet Union. In recent years notable infrastructural improvements have been made in Svaneti: schools and health centers have been opened, roads upgraded, electricity introduced.

Cultural Relations. For many centuries the Svans have been in contact with the North Caucasian tribes on the other side of the mountains, and with the Ossetians to the east. These relations have often been hostile, with raiding parties from one or the other group attempting to seize the other's property. On the other hand, the Svans have engaged in trade with these tribes, and in earlier times many Svans worked for them as migrant laborers.

SETTLEMENTS. The traditional Svan settlement, especially well preserved in Upper Svaneti, is the qew or commune, comprising a group of hamlets, each inhabited by one or more clans. Within the hamlet are a few dozen homesteads, closely packed together, surrounded by farmland. In recent times the organizational structure of the Svan commune (see below) has given way to that of the modern Georgian village. There are several types of Svan homesteads. In the type believed to be most ancient, the family and livestock live under one roof in a fortress-like three-story stone structure. More often, there is a separate, adjoining defense tower (murq'wam) to which the family and cattle repair in time of attack. (Defense towers are now found primarily in eastern Upper Svaneti, with a few remnants in Lower Svaneti and northern Racha.) In many respects the traditional Svan homestead is more similar to those of other Caucasian mountain provinces (northeastern Georgia, Ossetia, Ingushia, Daghestan), than those of lowland Georgia.

ECONOMY. Subsistence and Commercial Activities. Because of the harsh climate, the primary crops have been hardy grains such as summer and winter wheat, rye, barley and oats. Seeding has traditionally been done twice a year: in March and April, after the snow has melted, and again in September-October, before the onset of the long Svanetian winter. The Svans also keep domestic farm animals (cows, pigs, goats and sheep), which are exploited for meat, cheese and wool. Beekeeping has been practiced since ancient times, and Svanetian honey has an exceptionally fine taste. Although the Svans have long employed sophisticated farming techniques to utilize the land to its full potential, the Svanetian farm has not been sufficient to feed the family. In earlier days, the Svans hunted ibexes, stags and bears to supplement their diet. (Hunting is still a popular avocation of Svans today). In the 19th century, large numbers of Svan

men earned additional income as migrant farm workers in the lowland regions of Georgia and the North Caucasus during the months when Svaneti is blanketed with snow.

Industrial Arts. The Svans have traditionally produced their own agricultural implements, utensils, furniture and weaponry. Wooden artifacts are usually adorned with elaborate geometrical designs, employing symbols related to Svanetian religion (solar disks, representations of people, animals and ritual dances).

Trade. The Svans are not noted as a trading people. In traditional times they did serve as a commercial link between western Georgia and the northwest Caucasian provinces, and have also provided wolf, fox and bear pelts for the bazaars of lowland Georgia.

Division of Labor. Food preparation (baking, etc.), caring for children, needlework, and the like were considered to be women's work. Tasks delegated to men included hunting, wood- and metal-working, heavy farm labor, and fighting.

Land Tenure. Regular farm land belonged to individual households, with each possessing up to ten ktseva (ktseva = the land one can plough in one day). Pastures, hayfields and some forests were common property of the clan, village or commune. If an individual desired to sell land, he had to first offer it to the members of his own clan. Only if they declined to buy it could it be sold to another party.

KINSHIP. Kinship groups. Most Svans were identified as belonging to a 'root clan' (dzirish samxub) composed of a number of families, often of remote relationship. The members of a clan usually, though not always, live in the same commune. They are further identified by their ts'æm samxub 'particular clan,' a subdivision of the above, created when brothers split up and divide the family property. The particular clan may include one or more homesteads. Descent is traced patrilineally. One is considered to be more closely bound to one's kin within the samxub than one is to anyone outside of it, even close relatives (e.g. mother's brother, in-laws). If there would otherwise be no male heir, however, a son-in-law could be adopted (gezald lǝgne) into the household and take the clan affiliation of his in-laws. Each clan has its own shrine, burial ground, and special feastdays. Marriage within the samxub, or with other relatives within 10 degrees of kinship, was forbidden.

Kinship terminology. The categories distinguished by Svan kinship terminology are not much different from those of Georgian. For example, one term (chîzhe) denotes both son- and brother-in-law, and another (telghra) both daughter- and sister-in-law; at the same time there are words specifically denoting the wife's sister's husband (mekwshel , cognate with Georgian kvisli) and husband's brother's wife. The most striking deviation from the pattern of Kartvelian kin terms is in the words denoting siblings, which index the gender of *both* parties to the relationship: udil 'sister [female ego]'; dachwir 'sister [male ego]'; muxwbe 'brother [male ego]'; jǝmil 'brother [female ego].'

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY. Marriage. Traditionally, marriage partners for Svan children were selected very early. On occasion two pregnant women would make a pact that, if one gives

birth to a girl and the other to a boy, the children will be engaged to each other. In such cases the wedding feast, signifying the transfer of the female from her parents' household to that of her in-laws, may take place while the bride and groom are still very young. The actual matrimonial rite, a simple ceremony involving a priest, would then be held 1-3 years later when the couple is of appropriate age. In practice, instances in which a young man and woman would marry against their parents' wishes have always occurred, and in modern Svaneti arranged marriages are quickly becoming a thing of the past. Though her position was not of equal status to that of her husband, the traditional Svan wife had certain rights. She could own livestock and other possessions. In the event of abuse or abandonment by her husband she had recourse to the protection of her parents' family and to the local justice system (see below). Divorce was rare in earlier times, and usually occurred for reasons of impotence or failure to produce male offspring. As though to compensate for the irrelevance of emotional bonding in the contracting of marriages, young Svans could enter into special friendships with members of the opposite sex, even if married. This custom, linturæl, which was practiced up to the beginning of this century, bears certain resemblances to the sts'orproba relationship of the northeast Georgian mountain tribes [see the article on the Khevsurians — ed. note], and also to a form of adoption practiced in some North Caucasian communities. It was marked by a ritual in which the man sprinkled salt on the woman's breast, then touched his teeth to its tip three times, saying 'You are the mother, I the son.' The couple bonded by linturæl could be as affectionate as siblings with each other, no more, though in some cases the relationship did take on a romantic aspect.

Domestic Unit. Up to the beginning of this century the Svan mezge (household) might comprise as many as 50 people: a senior male (koræ maxwshi 'chief of the house') with his wife, younger brothers, sons, their wives and children, and sisters and daughters not yet married. The koræ maxwshi functioned as administrative head, and as chief celebrant of domestic religious rites. In Svaneti, as in the northeast Georgian mountain provinces, the genders were spatially separated within the home. The main floor of the Svanetian house was divided into four quadrants, centered around the hearth (q'welp). The koræ maxwshi and special guests had their seats in the eastern quadrant, which was also where the most important domestic rituals took place, and the other men sat in the quadrant to their right, closest to the entrance. The other two quandrants were reserved for the women and children. Menstruating women and women who had just given birth were considered to be impure and a potential source of ill luck. At such times they were not allowed in the home, and were confined in special huts (laushdwær).

Inheritance. Even after death of their parents, brothers would usually remain together: the separation of the household was considered a great tragedy. Should they decide to split up, the brothers divided the land and property equally, save for a parcel of land (one day's plowing) which was given to the eldest. Clan subdivisions (ts'æm samxub) originate in this way. Should a man die without sons, his property was inherited by his brother's or father's brother's family. Female relatives were not given any property, and the heirs were obliged to provide for them.

Should there be no males of the above degree of relationship, the estate became the property of the clan as a whole.

SOCIOPOLITICAL ORGANIZATION. Social Organization. The division of society into landowning and serf classes ended in the 19th century. In recent times most Svans continue to work as farmers, though a number of Svans have participated in Georgian academic and artistic circles.

Political Organization. The affairs of the commune were decided by a council (luzwrob, luxor) presided over by an elected headman (maxwshi); both men and women participated in the deliberations. The council decided cases of infraction of traditional law, and assessed punishment by fine, exile, or very rarely death. Other important questions, concerning agricultural affairs, relations with other communes and with North Caucasian tribes, and so forth, were discussed in council meetings. From time to time there would be meetings of the commune maxwshis from all Svaneti to decide critical questions effecting the whole province. Czarist authorities abolished the institution of maxwshi in 1869. With the imposition of Soviet rule, the luzwrob has been supplanted by the village council (Russ. sel´<skii>sovet). The jurisdiction of these councils usually corresponds to the traditional commune.

Social Control. In case of a dispute, the parties could select a committee of judge-mediators (môrew) to decide the issue. The decisions of the committee could not be appealed. Before giving testimony, the disputants were required to take an oath of honesty upon an icon. As icons were regarded by the Svans as having the power to bring misfortune to a family for many generations to come, these oaths were not taken lightly.

Conflict. All too often Svans bypassed the justice system described above and took matters into their own hands. Should a member of a clan be killed or seriously wounded — even if accidentally — or in some way humiliated by a member of another clan, the first clan was dishonored as a whole. Any male member of the clan felt entitled to exact revenge (lits'wri) upon any adult male in the offending clan. In this way blood feuds were started, which at times extended over several generations and claimed the lives of dozens of people. In addition to killing, one could exact revenge by capturing and imprisoning a member of the enemy clan and holding him for ransom. This was considered to be an extremely serious humiliation. Feuds could be halted or avoided if the offending clan paid an indemnity or blood-price (ts'or) to the other party. The ts'or for killing a man was very costly (6 parcels of prime farmland or 36 bulls); lesser compensation was exacted for cases of wounding, insult, thievery, breach of engagement to marry, etc.

RELIGION AND EXPRESSIVE CULTURE. Religious Beliefs and Practices. Svanetian religion is based upon an indigenous system, similar in many respects to those of other Caucasian tribes, which has been influenced by long and intensive contact with Mazdaism (presumably through the Ossetians) and Orthodox Christianity. The chief Svan deities are Xosha ghêrbet 'great god,' Jgəræg 'St George,' the chief protector of humanity, and Târingzel

'archangel.' Important female figures include Barbal 'St Barbara,' a fertility deity and healer of illnesses; Dæl, goddess of the hunt and protector of wildlife in the high mountains; and Lamæria 'St Mary,' protector of women. Christ (Krisde or Matsxwær 'savior') presides over the world of the dead. The Svanetian year is marked by a large number of major and minor feastdays, connected with the changing seasons, the harvest, etc. In addition there are certain days within the week and month when people are expected to abstain from work, and periodic fasts. Among the principal feastdays are those for the New Year (sheshxwæm and zomxa), the Festival of Torches (limp'ari), at which protection from diseases is sought, and the Lord's Feast (uplisher) in late spring. The gods are invoked and presented with sacrifices: slaughtered animals, various types of bread, and alcoholic beverages. It is important to note that because grapes cannot be cultivated in Upper Svaneti, vodka (haræq') is the ritual drink, and not wine as in lowland Georgia. Most ceremonies took place inside of churches or other holy places (laqwæm), or in the home. Domestic rituals centered around the hearth, the cattle-stalls, and, at least in certain localities, a large stone (lamzȣr bæch), placed in the grain storage area. Women were not allowed to enter the churches or participate in certain rituals. On the other hand, there are feastdays and observances specifically for women, which men are forbidden to attend. In particular, certain prayers directed to the hearth and to a type of domestic deity (mezir, represented as a small gold or silver animal) are reserved to women.

Arts. The Georgian Classical Period (10th-13th centuries) was also a period of intense artistic activity in Svaneti. A large number of churches were constructed (over 100 in Upper Svaneti alone), and adorned with frescoes, icons, carved wooden doors and items made of precious metals. Svan artisans were especially renowned for their skill at producing finely-detailed gold and silver icons, crosses and drinking vessels. It has been estimated that as much as a fifth of the medieval Georgian metalwork that has been preserved to the present day is of Svan origin. There was also a distinctive local school of icon and fresco painting. Svan folk literature comprises a variety of genres: epic, ritual and lyric poetry, tales, myths and fables. Most of the themes represented in Svan literature are shared with other parts of Georgia, though elements of Ossetian and North Caucasian origin (e.g. portions of the Nart sagas) also appear. Among the folk arts, special mention should be made of Svanetian music. A tradition of polyphonic a-capella singing has evolved in Svaneti, as in other parts of Georgia. One distinctive feature of the music of this province is its greater use of dissonant intervals and striking harmonic progressions. These choral songs accompany certain religious rites and festivals. Songs accompanied by the chæng (harp), or the ch'unir, a three-string viol, are also frequently heard in Svaneti.

Medicine. Medical knowledge was a jealously-guarded trade secret, handed down within certain families. The traditional Svan akim treated wounds and certain illnesses with preparations made from herbs and other natural ingredients. Many ailments, especially contagious diseases, were regarded as divinely sent, as punishment for some infraction of customary law. Sacrifices

of livestock or, in serious cases, donations of land to the local shrine were required of the party deemed to be responsible for offending a deity.

Death and Afterlife. The Svans believed that dying people could see several years into the future, and would gather at the bedside of a dying relative to ask questions. When death occurred the family and neighbors would break out into loud wailing and keening. After the burial, the close relatives of the deceased would be in mourning for as much as three years. They would fast (abstain from animal products), wear mourning colors (traditionally red), and the men would shave their heads and faces and let their hair grow out until the end of the mourning period. If a person should die away from home, his or her soul was thought to remain at the spot where death occurred. A 'soul-returner' (kunem mɔt'xe) would be summoned to locate the soul (with the aid of a rooster, which was believed to see the soul) and escort it back home. Only then could the funeral observances begin. The souls of the deceased led a somewhat shadowy existence in a world similar to the one they left behind. Their well-being in the spirit world was related to their sinfulness before death, and the zeal of their surviving kin in making prayers and sacrifices on their behalf. Once a year, at the festival of lipanæl (mid-January), the souls of the deceased were believed to return to their families. They remained in their former home for several days and were entertained with feasts and the recitation of folktales. Also during this time, the souls met and determined the fortune of their kin for the upcoming year. Because the Svans believe that the deceased retain the physical characteristics they had before death, a second lipanæl is held several days after the main one to accommodate the souls of handicapped people, who need more time to make the journey from the spirit world to the land of the living.

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