

# Endangered Languages of the Caucasus and Beyond

*Edited by*

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# Language and Emergent Literacy in Svaneti

*Kevin Tuite*

## 1 Introduction

The Svan-speaking communities of Upper and Lower Svaneti have for centuries been identified as – and identify themselves as – Georgians, even though Svan speech is not mutually intelligible with Georgian. Depending on whom you ask, or what sources you consult, Svan has 15,000, or 50,000, speakers, or some number in between; is endangered, or is not; is a language, or merely a dialect of Georgian; and its speakers are, or are not, a distinct ethnic group.

Svan is the outlier in the Kartvelian family, having probably separated from the common ancestor in the Bronze Age. Svan shares the basic morphosyntactic profile of Georgian – bipersonal verb, three series of tense-aspect-mood paradigms, shifting case assignment by transitive and active intransitive verbs (“split-ergativity”), a rich variety of dative-subject constructions, the grammatical category of “version” – but has very divergent vocabulary (Tuite 1997). To give an impression of how impenetrable Svan sounds to Georgians from elsewhere, here is an excerpt from a Svan folk poem with parallel Georgian translation (Shanidze & Topuria 1939: 54)

### *Svan text*

cxemæd miča ži xok’ida  
liz-ličedi č’ur xobina.  
mešjæl mare mæg wešgd laxcwir,  
sgwebin otčæš, txum, esogæn.

### *Georgian translation*

tavisi mšvild-isari auyia,  
svla-c’asvla dauc’q’ia.  
meomari k’aci q’vela uk’an  
dast’ova,  
c’in gausc’ro, tavši moekca.

### *Gloss of Svan text*

[bow.and.arrow:NOM his up he.has.  
taken  
go-leave indeed he.has.begun  
fighter man:NOM all:NOM behind he.  
left  
before he.managed, head:DAT,  
he.stood.to.them]

### *Free translation of Svan text*

‘He has taken up his bow  
and arrow,  
He has set out.  
He left all the warriors  
behind,  
He took the lead, he stood at  
their head.’

The population of Svaneti in 2006 was 22889, of which 14270 in Upper Svaneti (Mestia Municipality) and 8619 in Lower Svaneti (Lentexi Municipality). By way of comparison, the population was estimated at 15000 in 1886, 9533 of whom lived in Upper Svaneti. One recent estimate of the number of Svan speakers gives a total of 26120, 14709 of whom speak an Upper Svan dialect (Lower Bal or Upper Bal), and the remainder (11411) speak Lower Svan (Lashx, Lent'ex or Cholur dialect) (Tschantladse, Babluani & Fähnrich 2003: 12).

Accounts of the present-day situation of the Svan language diverge significantly. An article in the October 2014 issue of *National Geographic* paints a pessimistic picture: an 86-year-old from the remote village Adishi is said to be “one of the few remaining fully fluent speakers of Svan”, and a 14-year-old is quoted predicting that “the Svan language will disappear with my generation” (Larmer 2014). The latest version of *Ethnologue* (Lewis, Simons & Fennig 2015) credits Svan with 15000 speakers. Its vitality is evaluated at level 7 (shifting) on the EGIDS (*Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale*), which indicates the assessment that the language “is not being transmitted to children”. (By comparison, Mingrelian has 500K speakers & EGIDS rating 6a “vigorous”; Laz has 22K speakers & EGIDS rating 6b “threatened”). Gippert’s 2005 report on “Endangered Caucasian languages in Georgia” is more optimistic. The size of the Svan speech community is estimated at 50,000, but Gippert and his colleagues noted a high incidence of code-mixing and code-switching with Georgian.

I have had the opportunity to observe Svan usage in Upper Svaneti (mostly in the commune of Latali), Lower Svaneti (during fieldwork in 1997), and in two communities of Svans who were relocated to lowland Georgia (Axali Xaishi & Jandari/Lemshvanier). In Lower Svaneti, children were mostly spoken to in Georgian, although I encountered a handful of older women in one of the more remote villages who spoke little if any Georgian. In Latali, children speak and are spoken to in Svan, but several people expressed concern about the extent to which a full command of Svan is being passed on to the youngest generation. One friend in his mid-40s explained that, whereas he and other of his age learned Georgian only after acquiring Svan as their mother tongue, the newest speakers appear to be Georgian-dominant. Svan is still the principal language within compact ‘diaspora’ settlements of Svans, many of which are composed of people from specific villages. Here as well I took note of children speaking Svan; I also had the opportunity to observe an instance of local conflict resolution, which took place mostly in Svan, although some participants preferred to speak Georgian. On the whole, the Svan language remains prevalent where Svans live compactly in homogenous communities,

but it is rarely heard when Svans move to the cities or migrate abroad in search of work.<sup>1</sup>

## 2 The Emergence of Written Svan

In a celebrated and much-quoted passage from Giorgi Merčule's *Life of Grigol Xandzteli* (c. 950), Kartli, at first the name of an East-Georgian state, was redefined as “the spacious country within which the liturgy is celebrated and all prayers are performed in the Georgian language” (*kartlad priadi kweq'anay ayiracxebis, romelsa-ca šina kartulita enita žami šeiç'irvis da locvay q'oveli ayesrulebis*). This larger territory, defined by a common liturgical language, included many districts in western Transcaucasia where vernacular languages other than Georgian were in use (Tuite 2008). By the 10th century, Svaneti was a flourishing center of Georgian Orthodox church-building and icon-making. Written documents and inscriptions from medieval Svaneti are in the Georgian language only (Ingoroq'va 1941; Silogava 1986, 1988).

Little attention was paid to the local vernaculars spoken by Georgian Orthodox communities, until Prince Vaxushti Bat'onishvili's 1745 *Description of the Kingdom of Georgia*. Since none of the vernaculars was used in writing, they were classified “by ear” as either some form of Georgian, or a different language. On the basis of a handful of words which phonetically resembled their Georgian equivalents, Mingrelian was characterized by Vaxusht'i as “degraded Georgian”. Svan, however, was simply a different language, as was Abkhazian.

Mingrelians: “The great and prominent speak Georgian, although they also have their own language, like degraded Georgian” (*enit arian didni da c'arčinebulni kartuli enita, aramed akwst tvisica ena, gana c'amqdari kartulive . . .*; 783).

Svans: “They have their own language, but know Georgian as well” (*ena tvisi akwst sak'utari, gana uc'q'ian kartulica*; 788)

Abkhazians: “They have their own language, although the elites know Georgian” (*ena sak'utari tvisi akwst, aramed uc'q'ian c'arčinebulta kartuli*; 786)

<sup>1</sup> According to Richard Bærug (pers. comm.), the language situation in the provincial capital Mestia, which has become the center for a burgeoning tourist industry, differs somewhat from that of the remaining Upper Svan villages. Georgian is widely used in everyday communication, and some children seem to prefer it to Svan.

A major breakthrough was made by the explorer Johann Güldenstädt (1787), who for the first time detected the Kartvelian affiliation of Svan on the basis of crudely-transcribed word lists. This laid the groundwork for the systematic description and comparison of the languages of the Caucasus, carried out with increasing intensity in the middle and later 19th century.

The genetic affinities established by the new field of historical linguistics were incorporated into the concept of Georgian national identity which came to prominence in the latter half of the 19th century, most notably in Jakob Gogebashvili's highly-influential primers for schoolchildren. In his primary-school textbook *Bunebis k'ari* (22nd ed, 1912: 496-513, 537-547), Kartvelian-speaking Mingrelians and Svans are included in the Georgian people (*eri*), but the West-Caucasian-speaking Abkhazians and Indo-Iranian-speaking Ossetians are not.

With the exception of toponyms and personal names recorded in medieval documents from Svaneti, the words and short phrases collected by Güldenstädt and Klaproth during their expeditions to the Caucasus in the late 18th and early 19th centuries were the earliest attestations of the Svan language in the written medium. The first grammatical sketch of Svan was published by Rosen in 1847 (Cagareli 1873: 78-80). Rosen's Svan and Mingrelian examples are written in Georgian script with a few additional characters; Laz – although closely related to Mingrelian – was transcribed by Rosen in Arabic characters, as the data were collected in Ottoman territory. By the 1860's, Peter Uslar was collecting grammatical data from Svan speakers, some of which appeared posthumously in Vol. 10 of the *Sbornik materialov dlja opisanija mestnostej i plemën Kavkaza* (1890: V-LI). Although Uslar considered the Georgian alphabet particularly suited to the complex phonologies of Caucasian languages (*Otčet* 1864: 10), he devised a modified Cyrillic script, incorporating some Georgian letters.

One of the first appearances of the Uslar script was in an 1864 Svan primer intended for use in schools to be opened by the Society for the Reestablishment of Orthodox Christianity in the Caucasus [Общество восстановления православного христианства на Кавказе], which had been founded 4 years earlier (*Otčet* 1864: 11). Similar schoolbooks were prepared in Chechen, Abkhaz and Ossetic (Savenko 2010). The Svan primer, entitled *Lušnu anban* "Svan alphabet", contains spelling exercises for teaching the script to children, prayers, a catechism, and a trilingual glossary (Svan-Georgian-Russian).

At the time, the Svan peasantry was largely illiterate (Tepcov 1890: 64). Knowledge of spoken Georgian was unevenly distributed by geography and gender, reaching its peak among adult males in eastern and southern Svaneti (Nizharadze 1964: 169-172). Most women were monolingual. Nonetheless, the Cyrillic-based Svan literacy initiative was met with suspicion and

hostility, notably from Besarion Nizharadze, an Orthodox priest who had been trained under the auspices of the Society.<sup>2</sup> The distancing of written Svan from written Georgian, and the intended use of Svan as a medium for Christian instruction, however well-intentioned, was understandably perceived by Georgian intellectuals as a step toward the dissolution of both Giorgi Merchule's Georgia (defined by a shared liturgical language), and Jakob Gogebashvili's Georgia (defined by linguistic affiliation to a single "mother tongue"), in the large body of the Russian Empire.<sup>3</sup>

Svan materials published in the *Sbornik materialov dlja opisanija mestnostej i pleměn Kavkaza* from 1890-1910, including a Russian-Svan dictionary, were written in variants of the Uslar modified-Cyrillic alphabet (Gren 1890; Iv. Nizharadze 1890; G. & I. Nizharadze 1894; I. Nizharadze 1910). Beginning in 1910, a new journal appeared, *Materialy po jafetičeskomy jazykoznaniju*, directed by N. Ya. Marr, who brought in a very different policy for the presentation of texts in the non-literary Kartvelian languages. First, a modified Georgian script was adopted for Laz, Mingrelian and Svan materials. Second, these texts were not accompanied by translations. This practice was maintained throughout the Soviet period: the four-volume *Svan Prose Texts* series and *Svan Chrestomathy* contain no translations or glosses.<sup>4</sup> Some linguists have surmised off the record that Svan-Georgian (and also Mingrelian-Georgian) bilingual editions and dictionaries were not produced in order to avoid giving the impression that Svans and Mingrelians are ethnically distinct from (other) Georgians. Whether or not this was in fact a motivating factor, the new text-presentation policy had at least one significant consequence. If the preceding phase in Svan literacy could be described as an opening outward, both by making Svan-language texts available to the broader scholarly community, and providing instructional materials to the Svans in their own language, the new phase

2 Resistance increased in response to the stepped-up Russification campaign that followed the succession of Tsar Alexander III to the throne in 1881. Kiril Ianovski, director of the Caucasus Educational District (*Kavkazskij učebnyj okrug*) imposed the obligatory teaching of Russian in Georgian primary schools, and also declared that the medium of instruction in schools in Mingrelia should be Mingrelian, rather than Georgian, which was removed from the curriculum.

3 Among those reacting negatively to the Tsarist literacy initiative for Kartvelian minority languages was the writer Vazha-Pshavela, in the 1902 poem *Vin aris k'aci?*: "He sows enmity between Kartli, Imereti and Kakheti [*names of Georgian provinces*], creates special alphabets for Mingrelia and Svaneti" (*sak'utar anbans šeudgens samegrelos da svanetsa*).

4 For some reason, Svan *poetry* was an exception to this rule, as shown by the Georgian translations provided in the 1939 Shanidze-Topuria anthology, and the 12-volume Geo. Folk Poetry collection.

would appear to have turned Svan writing inward. The Svan chrestomathies published from 1910 to the end of the Soviet era are accessible only to a small circle of Kartvelologists with the necessary training to decode them without an accompanying translation, and the Svans themselves. The medium of written Svan was limited to the transcription of oral literature and ethnographic descriptions originally produced in that language, and not to be used for any of the functions already assumed by Georgian.

The Svan orthography developed by Marr and his Georgian colleagues aimed at phonetic precision. In addition to the obsolete Old Georgian letters for [q] (<ჟ>) and [j] (<ი>), new characters were created to represent long vowels (marked by a macron), [æ] (written as unlauded “a”) and [ə] (<ჲ>). The linguists hesitated between “v” (<ვ>), “ü” (<ჴ>) and a special character called “u-brjgu” (<უ̇>) to represent Svan [w], before settling on the last option. Even before Marr’s new journal appeared, however, Gvedo Nak’an, a soldier from Upper Svaneti serving in what is now Turkish territory, worked out a Svan orthography of his own. Nak’an’s 1908 diary, published in the first volume of the *Svan Prose Texts* series (Shanidze & Topuria 1939: 41-48), employed only the letters available in the standard Modern Georgian alphabet. The schwa vowel is simply omitted from the spelling, and [æ] is not distinguished from [a]. Long vowels are occasionally written with double letters, but often not distinguished from short vowels. The editors of the anthology “cleaned up” Nak’an’s spelling to conform to their phonetically-precise orthographic standards for Upper Bal Svan, but his original spellings can be found in the endnotes (Shanidze & Topuria 1939: 459-462). Rather than being an approximative representation of Svan speech cobbled together by a semi-literate writer, Nak’an’s orthography is surprisingly adequate, as long as the reader understands the inner workings of the language. The presence of the schwa vowel, for example, can almost always be predicted from phonotactic constraints on consonant sequences.<sup>5</sup> The raising of [a] to [æ] is provoked by an /i/ or /e/ in the following syllable in a word’s underlying morphological structure. Georgian “v” is perfectly adequate for representing Svan [w], since [v] and [w] are nonconstrastive allophones. Long vowels, which only occur in the Upper Bal and Lashx dialects, are not predictable, but their semantic load is low. Very few pairs of words are distinguished only by vowel length.

Thus, more than a century ago, two approaches to writing Svan were independently devised: a phonetically exact but phonologically redundant system developed by and for linguists; and a phonetically imprecise but semantically

5 Schwa was also not written in the spelling of Svan place names in medieval manuscripts, e.g. <lha> for Laha, <pxt’ler> for Pxt’rer, etc. (Ingoroq’va 1941: 20, 129).

adequate system created by and for Svan speakers. These are the two options confronting the new generation of Svan writers today, as will be discussed in the final section.

### 3 Debates over Svan Language, Identity and Literacy

The 1897 Russian Imperial census included the number of individuals (pop. 15756) using Svan speech (“narechie”), which was listed in the Kartvelian language category along with Mingrelian. Svans were also counted separately, as a subgroup of Georgians, in the 1926 USSR census (pop. 13218). They were not counted in Soviet censuses from 1939 onward, nor are Svans recognized as a distinct group in the post-Soviet Georgian republic. Interestingly, the Svans were counted separately in the 2002 and 2010 Russian Federation censuses (pop. 41 in 2002, 45 in 2010), and also included in the total count of Georgians.

The issue of whether the Svans represent a distinct national or ethnic group is also tied up with the curious debate – difficult for many outsiders to understand – about the status of their speech: is Svan a “language” or a “dialect”? The proponents of the latter opinion (see, for example, Putkaradze 2002, 2003) operate with an exclusivist concept of language inherited partly from Giorgi Merchule, who defined Georgia on the basis of a shared liturgical language; and the prominent 19th-century intellectuals Chavchavadze and Gogebashvili, who attributed a single “mother tongue” (*deda ena*, also the title of Gogebashvili’s best-known school primer) to the Georgian people. A less-noticed predecessor is the Soviet definition of nationality: Each officially recognized national group had a single “native language” (*rodnyj jazyk*), which had a written form, and which was used in at least the initial years of education. Furthermore, each individual was ascribed a single native language, whether or not they had equal or greater competence in other languages.

If one accepts these presuppositions, it follows that the identification of Svan as a “language” would be tantamount to recognizing the Svans as a nationality distinct from the Georgians. By identifying Svan and Mingrelian as “dialects” – even though acknowledging that they are not mutually intelligible with Georgian – Putkaradze and others who share his views assert that they serve the same function as Georgian dialects in the accepted sense (such as Pshavian, Tushetian or Gurian); that is, as nonliterary vernaculars vis-à-vis the single literary language of the Georgian nation. As did Gogebashvili, they define Georgianness on the basis of linguistic affiliation (speakers of Kartvelian languages) rather than a shared liturgical language. As one would expect, proponents of this view frequently recall the Tsarist educational policy of the 1880s

and 1890s, and the simultaneous publication of Svan and Mingrelian texts in Cyrillic script, to justify their conviction that Russia is trying to stir up separatist sentiment among Mingrelians and Svans as part of a “divide and conquer” strategy in the South Caucasus.

Also arousing the suspicions of the Svan-as-Georgian-dialect camp are reports that translations of the Bible into Mingrelian and Svan are planned or even underway. This has drawn the attention of the Georgian Orthodox church hierarchy, which officially condemned the publication of religious texts in Kartvelian languages other than Georgian. The former Georgian ombudsman Sozar Subari drew heavy criticism – not least from the Church leadership – for having voiced support in 2005 for a projected Svan-language version of the New Testament (more on which later).

One prominent target is the European Charter of Regional and Minority Languages, which has yet to be ratified by Georgia 15 years after it joined the Council of Europe (Putkaradze, Dadiani, Sherozia 2010). The Charter obliges participating states to promote the use of regional languages in education, the justice system, public services, media and culture. As defined by Charter, however, the category of “regional or minority languages . . . does not include . . . *dialects of the official language(s) of the State*”, further reinforcing the position of those who refuse to acknowledge Svan as a language.

#### 4 Present-Day Language Practice and Emergent Svan Literacy

Even as debate continues over the status and role of the Svan language, a new manifestation of Svan literacy is emerging, which seeks to slip between the Scylla of Georgian exclusivity, and the Charybdis of standardization – which would entail the selection of one of the Svan dialects as the basis of the written language, normalization of the orthography, decisions about what is or is not “correct” Svan vocabulary and grammar, and the fixing of ground rules for the creation of new words. More significantly, none of the contributors to contemporary Svan writing gives the slightest indication that their practice is in any way incompatible with their identity as Georgians. In this concluding section, I will present three recent initiatives in Svan writing.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> This is by no means an exhaustive list. Other instances of present-day written Svan usage include blogs by local doctors on topics such as hepatitis and cancer; comments on Svan-themed videos on YouTube; and posters announcing a skiing contest in Upper Svaneti.

(i) *The Svan New Testament*

A draft of the translation is presently in circulation, but there are no plans to my knowledge to publish it. For understandable reasons, the participants in this project prefer to remain anonymous for the time being. The translation is in a variety of the Lower Bal dialect, with an orthographic style that adheres closely to the transcription norms used by Georgian Kartvelologists – notably, with respect to the representation of the schwa vowel, and the usage of “u-brjgu” <ü> to represent /w/ (which most present-day Svans write with the Georgian letter <v>).<sup>7</sup> The draft contains numerous alternative renderings (in parentheses), and occasional citations from Georgian, Russian and German versions of the New Testament. Here are two verses from the Gospel of St Matthew (chap 1: 18-19):

<mateš läxenär, mänk’viš txüim> (Matthew’s gospel, first head/chapter)

<18. i ieso krisdeš litüene amži (lasü) atxüid: miča di märiam iosebiš læq’dän lasü i mine ušxvarte liqdäld märiam čolyanüeli c’q’ilän kunxenka.>

(And Jesus Christ’s birth thus (was) happened: His mother Mary was Joseph’s betrothed and before their coming to each other, Mary has become pregnant from the Holy Spirit)

<19. i ioseb, miča č’äš (leč’šəri), mac’vdi (mare) lasü, i made xek’vad eča liušxe i ušdil ka lipšüdes laxp’ire (//ka lipšüded güi laxad).>

(And Joseph her husband (fiancé), was an upright (man), and did not want to expose her, and he intended to secretly release her (//out release-ADV heart come-to-him))

The Svan terms for “gospel” and “chapter” are calqued from Georgian *saxareba* “joyful news” and *tavi* “head, chapter”, respectively. In verse 19, the translator appears to hesitate between /la=x-p’ir-e/, employing a root borrowed from Georgian *a-p’ir-eb-s* “intends”, and the more idiomatic /gwi la=x-a-d/ “heart came to him”; and also between ascribing the role of husband or fiancé to

7 Written text is enclosed in angled brackets, with the following coding of languages and scripts: <Svan in Georgian script>; <Svan in Latin script>; <Georgian in Georgian script>; <Georgian in Latin script>. Phonological renderings are placed between /slanted bars/.

Joseph. For the rendering of New Testament terminology pertaining to Jewish and pagan ritual, the translators drew upon the rich vocabulary referring to various aspects of Svan folk religious practice, which are still very much a part of everyday life in Svan villages. In the passage Matthew 23:18-19, for example, the term “offering” (*dōron*) is translated by no fewer than three Svan equivalents: /qid/ “gift”, /q’wiž/ “sacrificial animal” (especially its roasted liver), and /lemzir/ “consecrated” (used most often with reference to bread offerings). The holy breads (*toùs ártous tēs prothéseōs*) mentioned in Mark 2:26, “which only the priests were allowed to eat”, are described as /uc’onāš/ – literally, “unseeable” – a term used by Svans to denote offering breads baked from special wheat flour, which only household members are allowed to eat or even see. As equivalents for the Greek terms for “altar” (*thusiastērion, bōmos*), the translators had no Svan term readily to hand, since, in Svan ritual practice, offerings are held up by the presenters (while facing eastwards), and not placed on a table. As equivalents, the translators chose either /laqwmī/ “ritual site” (the term commonly used to designate Christian churches), or /ladbāši/, which denotes the enclosed space adjoining a church where women baked bread for use as offerings (Bardavelidze 1941: 15).

(ii) *Six Young Authors in Search of an Orthography*

My second example is a short-story competition for teen-age writers, sponsored by the Grand Ushba Hotel in Becho and its Norwegian director Richard Bærug. The first competition took place in 2013, and a second the following year. The submissions were evaluated by a jury of Svan native speakers (including the poet Erekle Saghliani, who projects an image which is simultaneous strongly Georgian and strongly Svan). Here is part of one of the announcements of the 2013 competition on Facebook, written in Georgian script with additional characters.

<lax si xi 12-xenka 18-teka ləzai (1995-2001 zäiži lətav), si ču jamiēda monac’ileob axk’əda lušnu lit’erat’urä k’onk’urste 2013 zaisga! čvatir lušnud tavisupal tema – imvaiži – žicxändads – livadži, sgvebd liziži mädei ejk’älibži si maivai žalat’. [...]. nambuäl xek’ves ləsv 4-xanka 16 gverdteka mädei 2000-xanka 8000 sit’q’va – lėkvisg. ira sačukräl. mačēne nambuälara ira ečeisga. drev: 1 mart’ 2013.>

(If you are 12 to 18 years old (born in the years 1995-2001), you can take part in the Svan literature competition for 2013! Write in Svan on any theme – whatever you would prefer – your desires, your successes or whatever you like. [...]. The story must be from 4 to 16 pages or 2000 to

8000 words. There will be gifts (prizes) for the best stories. Deadline: 1 March 2013.)

Not all comments posted on the contest's Facebook page were positive: some criticized "mistakes" in the use of Svan, or what they took to be unwarranted code-mixing (Georgian loans in the announcement are marked by underlining). Another commentator cited the passage in the Georgian constitution concerning the status of Georgian as sole official language. Other writers, however, vigorously defended the competition (most of these comments were posted in Georgian, but quite a few in Svan).<sup>8</sup>

Six young authors, aged 12 to 17, won prizes in the 2013 competition. The texts composed by the prize winners, published in an anthology (Bærug 2013), show interesting variation in orthographic style, since each author had to work out his or her own norms for writing Svan. (This could also be said of the authors of the texts accompanying the stories in the anthology, and the posters and Facebook announcements promoting the contest). The most "authoritative" models for writing Svan are the 20th-century anthologies compiled by linguists, who, as noted earlier, aimed for a fairly explicit representation of the pronunciation. Some of the young writers – especially 12-year-old Erekle and 14-year-old Mari – appear to have been influenced by the linguists' orthographic norms, including their use of apostrophes to mark vowel syncopation when a clitic is attached to the following word (e.g. <ž' eser> = /ž(i) eser/ "in QUOT"). Two writers however devised a phonologically-based orthography reminiscent of that used in the 1908 soldier's diary. 17-year-old Jemal tended not to write schwas in contexts where they were automatically inserted before resonants (/x-a-k'pən-x/ "offers" written <xak'pnx>; /daqəls/ "goat-DAT" written <daqls>), or otherwise predictable. On the other hand, schwa was usually written when it functioned as the root vowel of a word (e.g. <yən> "festival").<sup>9</sup> One writer from the Lower Bal dialect area, 17-year-old Giorgi, employed phonetically-precise spellings, but not necessary those favored by the linguists.

8 Responding to previous comments criticizing the quality of the Svan used in the competition announcement, one user posted the following sarcastic remark in Svan: <si xochaamd atdawy lushnud i echqaango axgaxcad qa; konkurs> (You have such a good command of Svan, so announce your own competition).

9 It is worth noting that Sopho and Jemal – the two authors who favored phonological spellings – are the grandchildren of Goguca Xergiani, now 80 years old, who was one of the pioneers of the newest phase of Svan writing. She is the author of a 2-volume collection of Svan-language poetry and prose, "Maxvshi Baba"; vol 1, 1999; vol 2, 2004.

To represent the schwa vowel, Giorgi chose the Georgian letter “o” with an umlaut sign, implying that he pronounced schwa with a degree of lip-rounding (<löxins> = /ləxin-s/ “good times-DAT”; <daqöl> = /daqəl/ “goat”).<sup>10</sup>

The orthographic styles of the six prize-winners can be summarized by comparing three parameters: (1) representation of schwa, (2) representation of the glide [j], (3) use of apostrophes to signal vowel loss at the point of word liaison:

	(-1) underspecified	(0) middle ground	(+1) precise
schwa [ə]	[ə] usually omitted: Sopho, Jemal	[ə] written: Mari, Salome, Erekle	[ə] = <ö>: Giorgi
yod [j]	[j] = <i> Sopho, Jemal	[j] = <y> most times Mari, Giorgi, Erekle	[j] = <y> always Salome
liaison with vowel syncope	no apostrophes: Sopho, Jemal, Giorgi	apostrophes after ž(i): Mari	apostrophes always: Salome, Erekle

### (iii) *Intimate Literacy: Svan-Language Facebook Chat*

As has been frequently noted, phone text-messaging and the social media have contributed to the emergence of new genres of writing, as well as an intensification of written communication among many users. One seemingly paradoxical feature of new-media communication is that it favors both the use of widely-spread languages (English, in particular) and in-group-oriented linguistic innovations (such as the rapidly-changing corpus of abbreviations, neologisms and cybercultural references inventoried on such sites as “Know Your Meme” and “Urban Dictionary”). In terms of the contrastive directions of sociolinguistic evolution described by Thurston (1987), social-media communication is simultaneously exotero- and esotero-genic: oriented toward openness and exclusion. Of the social media which have emerged in the new millennium, I have focussed my attention on Facebook (FB). Users of Tumblr, Reddit, 4Chan and the like generally identify themselves by pseudonyms, rarely if ever

10 This vowel was described by the phonetician S. Zhghent'i (1949: 65-66) as a “delabialized /u/” ([u] or [ɤ]), which is how it sounds to me. One wonders if some Svan speakers are manifesting the same trend toward rounded schwa as has occurred in some varieties of European French.

meet face to face, and form thematically-centered discussion groups. Most FB users, on the other hand, display their real names, and cluster into mini-communities largely comprising individuals who are also acquainted with each other off-line.

In Facebook communities comprising a Svan-speaker and his/her “friends”, or Svaneti-based discussion groups and their members, the proportion of Svan language use relative to Georgian varies considerably.<sup>11</sup> Some communities appear to avoid Svan altogether, whereas in others Svan expressions and interventions occur in almost every discussion. These electronically-mediated exchanges among acquaintances could be characterized as a form of intimate literacy. Like more traditional manifestations of intimate literacy, such as diaries and personal letters, Svan-language FB chat tends toward in-group-oriented opacity (from the standpoint of outsiders), spontaneity, code-switching, playfulness, and laxity with respect to norms for written communication. FB Svan orthography, whether in Georgian, Latin (or occasionally Russian) characters, resembles the system used by the soldier Nak’an in 1908: limited to the letters in the standard alphabet, but fairly adequate in phonological terms. Unlike its predecessors, though, Svan intimate literacy on Facebook is multiparticipant, evolves in realtime, and is not dependant on the production of relatively durable artifacts such as letters or books. The frontier between private and public communication is more porous, since outsiders can “listen in” on the discussions on many FB pages – one is reminded of the simultaneously closed and open nature of cellphone conversations in public spaces. Here are two examples of recent Svan Facebook communication (personal names have been anonymized):

(a). The first example is a posting headed <talibani mulaxeli q’opila, icodit?> (The Taliban is from Mulakh, didn’t you know?), accompanied by a photograph of a man holding a gun. This elicited a sequence of joking comments in both Georgian and Svan, including a Russian adjective as well. Some participants switched codes within a single intervention.

AB: <o---s xoša xaĵeš> :) (He really resembles O-)

EF: <namet’ani didi p’at’ivi xom araa talibanistvis> ☺ (That is not excessive respect for the Taliban)

11 My sample – which includes groups based in Lower as well as Upper Svaneti – is of course biased toward people I know personally, or friends of friends.

CD: <o---s deesa, xadu k---alšaal isgiiidraal> ☺ (Not O-, rather he looks a lot like the K- family) [*reference to AB's relatives*]

EF: <k'rasni mlax xo iq'o da axla taliban... t'ašiii> :))) (There was [R: red] Mulakh and a now a Taliban... Applause :))))). [*This refers to a previous posting where the expression "Red Mulakh" appeared, albeit entirely in Svan.*]

CD: <čven "švania txvim" vart, is k'i ara, ra kvia> ...:))) (We are "the head of Svaneti", this is not, what's it called...)

EF: <uoiiii uoiiii dedee> ☺

GH: <mulaxši tu mest'iaši imaleba> (Is he hiding in Mulakh or Mestia?) [*Mulakh and Mestia are neighboring communes in Upper Svaneti.*]

IJ: )))))))

(b). A prayer for one's brothers. The following text, also in Georgian script, was posted by KL in early February 2014, at the time of the mid-winter torch festival (*Limp'æri*). At this time, Svan men carry lit torches to their neighborhood church, one for each male in the family, and pray for the peace and well-being of the community's menfolk.

<he yerbet, jgurags didab, atpišir mušvan mulump'ari, žaxirian limačd merde, atasd atgen ladi xedvai korxanka lamp'ar kačes eči lizge lirde. xoca paq' esag mušvan mara čiesgi nensga, atasdu amgenenad, atasu aŭhienax, mišgu laxvbas, L, K, D, Z, X, G, G...>

(O God, glory to St George, increase the numbers of Svan torch-bearers, renowned elders. Raise up by thousands those who go out from their houses today with torches, [increase] their lives and being. Set a good hat upon all the Svan men among them, raise them up a thousandfold, may you be numbered in thousands, my brothers [*there follows a list of names*])

The posting was followed by two responses, one in Svan and one in Georgian:

MN: <yerbetu jamz ri> (May God bless you)

OP: <dzma xar, --. genacvale šen ..> (You are a brother, K--. You are dear to me.)

KL's orthography ignores the distinction between long and short vowels, and that between [æ] and [a]. He represents schwa with the Georgian letter "u" (e.g. <jgurags> = /jgərāgs/ "St-George-DAT"). MN, however, leaves a space in the middle of the word <jamz ri> where schwa appears (/jamzəri/ "blesses you").

## 5 Conclusion

As much as it might go against the ambitions of both those who proclaim Georgian as the sole literary language for those who identify as Georgians, and those who aspose the creation of a standardized Svan for use in education, publication and administration, the young authors and Facebook-users seem to have found a third way. Through their efforts, and those of many of their contemporaries, a new Svan literacy is emerging which coexists with literacy in Georgian and other languages (formerly Russian, and now increasingly English). The new literacy has so far sidestepped the fraught issue of standardization, which would favor one variety of Svan to the detriment of the others.<sup>12</sup> Svan writing has assumed many of the same functions as Svan orality, as an intimate register signalling identity, belonging and closeness. It is developing as a medium for humor, prayer and the reinforcing of attachment. If there is a message in this for us concerned outsiders – including those lowlanders who believe they know better what the Svans need than do the Svan themselves – it may well be that we should stand aside and let the young people decide what forms and functions Svan literacy should assume. We should do what we can to provide encouragement and resources, but above all we must not stand in their way.

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12 Standardization is also not strictly necessary in the case of Svan, since the dialects are largely intelligible with each other. The principal differences concern vowel length (which as mentioned has little semantic load), umlaut, sycupe and some aspects of morphology. Selection of the Upper Bal dialect spoken in Mestia – the economic and administrative center of Upper Svaneti – as the basis for a standard language would oblige speakers of the Lower Bal and Lentekh dialects to learn to write long vowels which do not exist in their vernaculars.

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