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Depiction of female infanticide in Svan folklore

19th century Russian periodical literature depicts the practice of gender-selective neonaticide in Svaneti. The most common way of female infanticide was depositing burning hot ashes in the newborn's mouth. The practice carried a symbolic meaning emphasizing mouth as the first organ in digestive process. The practice led to the decline in female population in Svaneti and caused the male population to seek alternative ways, legal or not, getting married. The Paper focuses on three Svan folklore texts that are based on the practice of female neonaticide.

Key words: Neonaticide, Selective Infanticide, Folklore, Svaneti

When working on the Russian printed press of the nineteenth century I came across several observations of a Svanetian practice¹, under which newborn girls were literally left for dead. Thus, they were either kept away from the mother – leading to the infant's death of starvation – or had mouths filled with embers, hurting from the burns, the baby was

1 Due to the lack of numerical data on the incidence of female infanticide, I am unable to call it a cultural norm, nor does it look to have been a widespread rule. On the other hand, however, this nasty practice appears to have been common as late as the latter half of the nineteenth century.

unable to suckle and did not last long. The practice was noted by both Russian and Georgian scholars and travellers¹.

The authors that mentioned such neonaticidal practices in their travel notes explained the custom in several different ways. According to Ivanyukov and Kovalevski, female infanticide was widespread in the entire world. Having interviewed the locals, the authors thought the Svans' explanation significant, according to which girls were normally killed as lords had the right to give them away (Ivanyukov 1886: 5-59).

Stoyanov's account of female infanticide follows his observation of an odd pattern – while Muslim Svans were usually monogamous, Christian Svans had two or three wives. The shocked author adds this happened notwithstanding the lack of maidens due to the killings of women in infancy and that about ten of such killings had taken place in the last eight years (Stoyanov 1876: 431-472).

Eristavi also attempted to analyse the problem that was born out of frequent cases of neonaticide – deficiency of women of marriageable age in Svaneti. In his work he noted that it was not rare for male representatives of two clans to agree before their children were born to marry them (whenever the descendants were of opposite sex) and unite their forces. This would also free the baby girl of the danger of killing. This was why female infants were often engaged while still in cradle. Engagement was normally accompanied by giving the young bride a bullet. This meant that if the girl, having achieved a marriageable age, married another man, only death would settle the accounts between the engaged children's fathers (Eristavi 1897: 1-2).

Another interesting observation was made by Bakradze, who noted that Svans were fearful of the enemy and would lock the doors as soon as it got dark (Bakradze 1864: 39-57). He says this could be explained by young men being on the hunt for women suitable for marriage due to

¹ The origin of the authors seems to me significant for the following reason: very often Russian travellers proved partial when describing a tradition as they, particularly the Russian church, frequently alleged that the regions occupied by the empire had had no culture whatsoever before their arrival and the aboriginal population should have been thankful for their introduction of civilisation. Hence, the fact that it was not just Russian, but Georgian scholars as well who noted the unflattering custom, makes the information much more trustworthy.

the small number of maidens at the time. They often went to Racha, Ossetia, sometimes travelling as far as Kabardino-Balkaria to get themselves wives. Married women were not safe either as they would sometimes be abducted too. This is why raids were often organised to free abductee-wives from Svans.

Shortness of females is also ascribed to female infanticide by Marghiani, who goes on to explain the custom by extreme poverty prevalent in the province (Marghiani 2019: 69-87).

In the materials available to me, the earliest records of female neonaticide are those by Shakhovskii (1834) and Numirovich-Danchenko (1839). In the letter published in *Kafkaz* magazine, issue 44 from 1846, we read Svans were so embarrassed by the disreputable practice they denied its existence and said it was a tale made up against them. On the other hand, the author alleges in Ushguli he was explicitly told their community, unlike others in Svanetia, did not practice the custom. The locals added a baby girl was only killed if it was a fifth female child in a family which already had four healthy female maidens. Such an answer seems to show that while Svans were well aware of the problem, they deemed it wrong (at least till a fifth girl was born). Or else, why would they hide the fact or blame the practice on other communities!

It is evident that the custom of killing off newly born girls caused quite a discomfiture among Svans and already in the latter half of the nineteenth century we can see them avoiding the subject. The same applies to the Soviet scholars researching Svaneti in their studies.¹ Their interviewees attempted to justify the existence of the dreadful custom,

¹ A while ago I published a Facebook post on the subject and it got a fierce reaction from my Svan friends and acquaintances. Their response showed me they must have been unaware of the past practice, because, as I said it has been avoided for decades. I do understand their emotional feedback, as my family also hails from Svaneti. I was even dedicated a Facebook post by an ethnologist of Svan origin. He accused me of being bitter and rigorously proved the difference between sporadic cases of crime and a cultural norm. It is, no doubt, so. However, my materials show it to be 'sporadic cases' only in the 1840s and the custom, according to my sources, had been so widespread as it almost qualified as mass slaughter. If it hadn't been so, it would not have been associated with diminishing numbers of maidens in the entire province. Regrettably enough, there are no data of any census dating back to the first half of the nineteenth century, as it would no doubt prove validity of my point.

while the scholars managed to find an explanation to the phenomenon and discussed its consequences. Should the rationalisation they offer correspond to reality, this, in some form or another, should have found penetrated oral tradition as well. This is, hence, how I would formulate my study question: has female infanticide found its reflection in folklore and how? And, if the answer is yes, then how could we use folklore to explain the causes of the vicious practice?

When seeking the answers to the questions posed above I identified several texts in the available materials, which, in my view, speak of the consequences brought about by neonaticide and offer a validation of the custom. I ordered the texts in two groups and included the following pieces of oral tradition:

- a) The cycle of tales describing a young bachelor's quest for a bride;
- b) The epic tales describing various impending dangers;
- c) The traditions speaking of the afterlife;
- d) The cycle of tales that present girls as insatiable creatures.

Let's look at each of these groups.

a) In a tale recorded in Becho [village] three brothers seek a bride in faraway lands. Of these three only the youngest will accomplish the task; the eldest will find a tree whose one leaf suffices to feed a horse for three days; and the middle will hit upon a river, whose waters, when one puts one's finger in it, will gild the digit¹. Existence of gold in the river indicates the tale has been adapted to the local context. The magic tree shows how hard it was to secure fodder for domestic beasts in Svaneti. One more thing that distinguishes the tale is that the two eldest brothers return home empty-handed, because traditionally, in three-brother tales it is customary for all the three brothers to marry in the end.

Tales of three brothers could easily be one of the most common forms of tale in the world's folklore. In my view, such fiction must not only demonstrate the reality in which young men would seek their wives-to-be in other villages to avoid inbreeding; this also shows they strove to

¹ The tale was recorded in Becho from the words of a certain Rozan Kvitsiani. A. Gren, pp 76-160, N10/2, Сборник материалов для описания местностей и племён Кавказа. (A Collection of Materials for Description of Localities and Tribes of the Caucasus).

kidnap the maiden from as far as possible and thus make it difficult for the pursuers to locate the abductee. Such tales were particularly suitable for reflection of local lifestyle and make up a big number in the recorded tradition. In the tale of Three Brothers and Their Elderly Father, the protagonist – the hunter-brother, who goes on a quest for a bride, finds her already betrothed to another man ('a black man') and has to neutralise the rival. The princess falls in love with the hunter but she has already been engaged to the black man. The king gives the protagonist a task of feeding the guests aka the bridal party for twelve years, in which case he will marry his daughter to him. The younger brother runs out of quarry. He comes across the black man on his way and the latter gets angry as he learns the king did not keep the word and promised the maiden to the hunter. So, the black man hides the princess away and the hunter sets forth to find her. He locates her in the Kajeti land (a sort of fairy land) and brings her back home, killing the black man on the way (Nizharadze 2019: 161-241). It certainly would not be right to allege the tale to be of Svanetian origin, but it is evident that such a storyline was cut out for Svanetian way of life and led to its popularity and viability in the region.

Numerous tales relate the story of Svans abducting other men's wives. Among these is a song of Birmuzel, who kidnapped Beka's wife while the man was hunting. The husband took his revenge after he got back from the hunt. According to a story recorded from Dudaruk Tsin-deliani, there was a certain Aslamaz who, having abducted his bride from Lechkhumi province, found her missing one day, chased her to her family and was killed there (Gren 2019: 7-160).

If female neonaticide was a widespread practice, by all means the locals should have also thought if the killer was to encounter punishment in the afterlife and where the girls killed in infancy ended up after death.

Svans viewed theft, seizure of one's land, libel, murder, incest and violation of the customs of gossip as sinful behaviour. The prize for one's good deeds in the afterlife is closeness to God. If the relations of a deceased person redeem his sins, e.g. by returning the land seized, then the soul may move to the abode of the sinless. The afterlife may only be entered through one door. The sinless stand on the light side and the sinful on the dark side. The heavier a deceased soul from its owner's sins, the farther it remains from God. In the middle of the after-world, represented

by a lake of tar¹ and bright green grass, a table has been laid. Even though spirits are unable to eat, their kin must keep them supplied with offerings, which will remain unseen to the sinful. The deceased cannot share their offerings with the fellow-spirits² whose relatives have forgotten and abandoned them. But kin-spirits take care of one another. Now, who are those whose offerings do not reach them? Those who have left no male offspring in this world. Women are not allowed to give offerings to their deceased and this is how Svans will not rest until they beget a son. Until then they will remain fretful that they are to remain without food in the world of the spirits. The only solace for the sonless lies in the hope that their daughter's husband will ask his deceased kin to share their extra food with them. Nevertheless, it is their lot to always remain content with whatever charity others offer (HO 1888). Offerings were also managed to be made by poorer families using lesser resources (Kavkaz 1884: 2-3).

Svaneti was not a rich land. The author of a record I found says the lyrics of a certain roundelay song are impossible to understand without taking into consideration the existing context and goes on to relate a seventeenth century story of Puta Dadeshkeliani. The singer explains how Puta managed to subdue various communities. "Apparently, the graces that the Ushgulians have been endowed with exceed ten-fold those that were given to the other communities. Puta succeeded in conquering the Latalians and the Lenjerians, because delicacies occupied their minds more than resistance. Puta got the upper hand with Mestia and surroundings, because the locals would go to other villages in search for a living and when he came he found the villages half empty; he encountered no difficulty with the Tsvirmians and Iparians as these could barely stand on their feet from starvation. And the Kalias as well, as they too would go to other communes for a living. Only the Ushgulians never submitted to Puta" (Teptsov 2019: 69-92). That is to say, it was not as if the Ushguli community ate better than the others; the reason was that their life-force when born was ten times as high as that of the others.

1 The lake is spanned by a hanging bridge. Apparently, those who are not traveling heavy with sins, will be able to cross it easily; those who went to the after-world sinless will generally struggle to walk the distance; and those who have committed an especially grave sin, i.e. the ones having violated the rules of gossip, will fall off the bridge and into the tar.

2 When a deceased does deserve an offering, he will be offered a share from his kin's portions.

The song of the wretched Nuarsal sounds similar (Nizharadze 2019: 2-8). The lyrics relate how the Iparians had to add grasshoppers' legs to their flour as the latter was so little; and how Besil of Cholashi had three wives but could not afford a new hat¹.

There are many other records that make it evident how hard-up the people of Svaneti really were.

It didn't use to be so cold in Svaneti in the past – may [our] sinful ancestors forever remain in the tar! There was a married couple, who had a son and a daughter. The children grew daily and became stronger. In the end, they were so fine that their parents decided to marry them. One day the sister went to the river to wash her laundry. The parents ordered their son not to let her in unless she agreed to marry him. When the sister came back from her washing, however hard she begged to open the door, however hard she tried to make him feel sorry for her, still, the door remained locked until she gave her consent to be his wife. While the siblings were engaged in their ungodly behaviour, God capsized the tower and the entire family were buried in the ruins. Their sin was so grave that it led to the perdition of the entire land of Svaneti. They had twelve boxes with three swallows in each of them. The son opened the boxes and the birds flew out. That was when unstoppable snow started to fall. What else could befall Svaneti?!² The story ends with the words: 'Stay fearful of God and your life will be fine!'

It would be interesting to see the cases when a Svan was to be afraid of God, to uncover what exactly the behaviour was he had to avoid in order to escape punishment. We might find the answer in Svan perceptions of the next world, by looking into who was punished by God and what the penalty involved.

Svans seem to have been particularly terrified of incest. In my view, the reason for such dread must lie in neonaticide and the consequential

1 I really doubt the reality of Besil's three wives. It must either be an exaggeration or he must have got them after his elder brothers passed away and the women probably died of poor health. Otherwise, a simultaneous possession of three wives should require a separate study. On the other hand, it was normal for a widowed woman to remain in her husband's family as another brother's wife.

2 The story was recorded in Ipari village, transcribed from K. Khorgvani, CMOMIK, 1894, №18, pp 91-132, G. Nizharadze, Svanetian Texts.

lack of maidens in the region. In order to avoid inbreeding at all costs, the people started to qualify it as an especially grave sin. This is why they thought the spirits of the deceased which would end up in the tar lake after their journey to the after-world should include the incestuous and abusers of the gossiped customs.¹

d) In literally each Georgian land do we encounter a tale about a child endowed with immense appetite since it was born.² The kid grew so insatiable with time that after eating up all the poultry and cattle, it went on to devour its family. What drew my attention here is that the child is always female – a daughter or a sister.

A couple had three sons and wanted a fourth. But God ignored their prayer and gave them a daughter. The girl was, in fact, a dev and would eat cows after she was put to bed in her cradle at night. Father instructed his eldest son to stay up and catch the one who killed their cattle, but the boy fell asleep. The middle brother too. On the third night, the youngest son lay an ambush and managed to wound the dev in her arm. Suddenly they heard a baby's cry from the cradle and saw her arm was bleeding. Father turned the youngest son out. The young man acquired three dogs, mounted a steed and came back to kill his dev-sister. Meanwhile, she had already devoured the entire family and now it was the youngest brother's turn. But the brother begged her for mercy and was spared. On the next day, while the dev was out, her brother cooked some millet and beans. The gruel was so hot, the pot was steaming. His dogs, Khoarmi, Khurumi and Ghishera came to guard the pot. The dev got back and started to gobble down the food. Her brother gave her some wine too. [He had drugged the food and] The dev sank to the ground and lay sleeping. The dogs bit out her throat and her brother shot at her twice. Now, it turns out, every time she was hit with a bullet, the dev would come to her

1 Professor G. Tevzadze, who reviewed this paper before publishing suggested the cause-effect relationship could have been, in fact, reversed, i.e. it might have been the killings of the baby girls that were thought as a solution to the problem of incest. While the men's (Sakatsebo) and women's (Sakalebo) areas were clearly separated in the common ground-floor 'machubi' hall, maidens might still be in danger. So, he speculated, neonaticide could have been committed in order to prevent incidence of incestuous relations.

2 The same plot is found in the folk tales of other nations as well. The Korean fox-sister is a good example.

senses. So, he stopped shooting and let his dogs finish her off. In the end, all the fortune went to him.^{1 2}

Here, the narrator does not compare the insatiable daughter with a dev. Rather, he explicitly says she was a dev. Such qualification will justify the brother's actions as devs have been fought by the humankind since the times immemorial. Devs are an enemy and whoever overcomes them is a hero. Moreover, while murder is a sin, familicide is twice as such, and requires to be validated.

However, the tale is interesting in one more regard. It exaggerates the potential danger the daughter may pose to her family members, especially her brothers, if the infant, who is not like a dev in any way and is, in fact, a normal human, may actually turn out to be a dev, i.e. take away food from the others and leave even her brothers' dead. Let me explain the special emphasis on brothers.

In the tradition relation to the afterlife, souls of the deceased who only left behind female offspring would remain cheerless and without any offering. A married woman was not allowed to give offerings for the soul of her blood-kin. This could explain why Svans tried hard to validate their preference of having sons over having daughters.

The materials I have reviewed above allow me to suggest that Svan oral tradition, including their perceptions of the afterlife justified female infanticide, which was caused by extreme poverty. That it would be followed by adverse consequences is an evident fact, but hardest still is to offer explanation for the moral side of the practice. There exist no records that would shed light on who actually killed the girls, mother, father, other family members or some other specially designated person.³ In my opinion, Svans did not even view neonaticide as a directly accomplished

1 Transcripts/notes from folk fantasy and lifestyle (Tiflis and Kutaisi Governorates), pp 229-410, №18, CMOMPIK, 1894.

2 The tale is one more indication that Professor Tevzadze's suggestion as to where the reasons of female infanticide lay is noteworthy. Having a fourth female child may be dangerous when there already are three sons in a family. An elder daughter poses less threat as she may get married and leave the household before the younger brothers get older and stronger.

3 According to Besarion Nizharadze, such women were not allowed at the gathering or near the church. So, we can assume it could be a woman actually performing the killing (we still do not know if it was the mother).

murder. Rather, weaning off the infant too early or filling its mouth with hot ashes (a sufficiently cruel method) was a somewhat symbolic deed, which was representative of punishing of an additional mouth to feed. Getting rid of infants in this particular manner and not otherwise also explains why neonaticide frequently applied to baby-girls. Slaughtering as opposed to murder exonerated the killer. Furthermore, it was indirect as a Svan heavy with the sin of murder would avoid ending up on the dark side in the after-world. Nothing in the after-world tradition indicates if and how killers (even indirect) of female infants were punished, and not because neonaticide did not exist or was rare enough. Tradition is silent about the subject because Svans just did not place the custom side-by-side with murder in order to escape the feeling of remorse. Tradition has nothing whatsoever to say about the souls of the dead infant (at least in the material available to me) and I do not think it was because Svans knew nothing of the practice, but because the spirits of the dead girls would also be required to be fed in the after-life.¹

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¹ Acknowledging the existence of slaughtered girls would also require numerous changes. I have yet to trace if children who had died otherwise also held a specially appointed place in the after-world. E.g. in the Ingilo tradition, a family is exempted from caring for the souls of their children who died at an early age. Such children reside on a tree that grows by a lake of milk. When they are hungry, the tree lowers its branches and they drink their fill.

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Folkloric Text as One of the Tools in Teaching Foreign Language in Non-lingvistic Environment (base on Russian fairy tales).

In the present articles authors review the possibility of development of speaking skills of students learning Russian language through the usage of the precedential text.

The learning material is supplemented by exercises containing fairy tale paremias.

Key words: speech skills, proverbs and saying, debate