



**Georgia – Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 15 March 2017**

**Information on culture/traditions of the Svaneti/Svanetia region including acceptability of leaving one's husband. (Update to Q19966 of 1 September 2015)**

Information in addition to that already provided in query response number Q19966 of 1 September 2015 was scarce among sources available to the Research, Learning and Development Unit.

An article from the online magazine Slate states:

“This is Svaneti, a rugged region of Georgia whose emerald green valleys are carved by rivers that snake off toward the Russian border. Its people, the Svan, once welcomed hikers and thrill-seekers from all over the Soviet Union. Georgia was one of the USSR’s premier holiday destinations. But post-Communist political and economic turmoil has emptied towns like Kichkuldash. Svan culture, millennia old, is in danger of vanishing as well.”  
(Slate (19 December 2016) *Svan Song: A remote region of Georgia is hoping tourism can save a vanishing culture*)

This article also states:

“This remote region is unique from the rest of Georgia. Their Svan language, though written in the Georgian script, is completely different from the country’s national tongue. It contains no vowels and is notoriously complex. ‘When you can hear the river running,’ one local jokes to me, ‘you can understand Svan.’ They also practice their own religion, a fusion of early Christianity and paganism.” (ibid)

An article originally published on the digital media website Mashable states:

“Up until the late 1990's, Svaneti still had a reputation as a wild place, governed by traditional rule of law and blood feuds. Some of this was exaggerated, some of it spot on. But today, with open roads and growing tourism, it is more known as a place for great hiking, food, and UNESCO recognized architecture. Yet besides the regional capital of Mestia, tourism has not changed too much about Svaneti.” (Mashable (28 March 2016) *Welcoming the dead to dinner: How an isolated village in Svaneti honors their deceased*)

A report from Reuters states:

“The Svans - as the local people are called - actively nurture links with their ancestors and their isolation high in the Caucasus has cocooned its people and cemented traditions.” (Reuters (20 February 2017) *Caucasus "land grab" feared in remote UNESCO heritage site*)

In a paper written by Stéphane Voell of the Philipps University of Marburg the author states:

“There are some similarities between Northern Albania and Svaneti, a highland region in Georgia. One of these is striking as soon as one wanders around the respective regions. In Northern Albania, you find massive towers called kulla. These are towers with a defensive character and small windows that look like embrasures. They were built starting in the 17th century to provide shelter and security, also in times of blood feuds. In Upper Svaneti, there are also defensive towers called koshki. The towers in Svaneti are much larger in number. They were built earlier, between the 9th and the 12th century, and besides being a refuge against avalanches they were also used in times of conflict and blood feuds. The respective local people both claim to have practiced traditional law for centuries or – more generally – that they have conserved their culture despite century-long foreign occupation. And in both regions, there has been an area with a clan structure that for some time achieved a certain autonomy and self-regulation.” (Voell, Stéphane (2 August 2016) *Identity and Traditional Law in Albania and Georgia*, p.1)

In a section of this paper headed “Traditional law among Svans in Georgia” the author states:

“Traditional law in the Caucasus was a prominent topic in the past and is again increasing in importance, in particular in academic writing in the northern Caucasus. Since the middle of the 19th century the Caucasus can be considered a ‘hotspot’ for research on traditional law (Turner 2005). Like in the Albanian case, numerous reasons can be put forth why traditional law continues to be vital in post-Soviet Georgia. Traditional law is brought up in Svaneti to support local claims for land in the process of de-collectivization that started in 1992. In Svaneti, the principles of the state have stood vis-à-vis local legal conceptions, like Jan Koehler (1999: 249, 2000: 38) points out. He confronts traditional law with the official one to finally come to a description of a ‘real rule of law’ that can be conceived as a mix of both frames of reference. But even until recently, tradition has been put forward as a basis for claims for people’s rights. Recently, land in Svaneti was sold to Canadian investors. Svaneti is one focus region of the Georgian government to promote tourism and important investments have been made (Voell et al. 2014: 105-107). The local population said that the land has belonged to their families for many generations. The state’s position was that the land was not registered and therefore belonged to the state even if it might have been used by other people. In these cases, ‘tradition’ is a tool arbitrarily used by the parties involved. Svans claim to own the land in question, possibly to have a share of the tourist business, and the government sells the ‘traditional’ region of Svaneti to tourists.” (ibid, pp.9-10)

Regarding the practice of oath-taking this paper states:

“The oath on an icon (khatze dapitzeba) is an important aspect of Svan traditional law (Voell 2013). Today, it is mostly connected to Svan traditional law and to folk Orthodox religious practice, but it used to be common in many regions of Georgia. The oath on an icon is performed to find out the truth in conflict mediation or to encourage people to respect their social duties. If, for example, someone has doubts about a statement made in a process of

conflict mediation, like in cases of contested borders or concerning the knowledge of a fact relevant for a conflict, elders can ask the person who has made the statement to swear an oath on the icon that he did declare the truth. The oath generally has to be supported by relatives or other warrantors. The takers of the oath swear before God and the community that the statement made was the truth." (ibid, p.11)

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research and Information Unit within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

### **References:**

Mashable (28 March 2016) *Welcoming the dead to dinner: How an isolated village in Svaneti honors their deceased*

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### **Sources Consulted:**

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European Country of Origin Information Network

Google

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

Lexis Nexis

Refugee Documentation Centre Query Database

UNHCR Refworld

US Department of State