

parties. Mediators tried to convince the injured party to accept financial indemnification, so that the cycle of violence in society would end. The courts of mediation negotiated cases addressing property disputes (landed property, violation of agreements, etc.), murder, wounding, rape, beating, theft, etc.

After the strengthening the Soviet state's authority, judging severe crimes became the privilege of the official bodies. My field material shows, however, that conflicts of relatively less importance and everyday relationships continued to be regulated independently according to traditional norms. Relationships within one clan, brotherhood or family were settled by the traditional institutions, especially for disputes around land distribution and property, arguments between family members, etc.

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The Resurgence of Blood Feud in the Georgian Lowlands

By Natia Jalabadze, Tbilisi

Abstract

This article discusses the problem of blood feud in the multi-ethnic region of Kvemo Kartli, where its resurgence is related to the migration of Svans since the 1980s. It seeks to explain the causes of preservation and sustainability of the custom among the Svan migrants. The results show that today blood feud practices are comparatively rare in the lowlands, while they remain alive in self-representations among Svans.

The Blood Feud in the Georgian Lowlands

Georgians have long preserved the norms of their traditional legal system and its practices. Until now, the institution of blood feud (though considerably transformed) continues to be practiced in the highlands, especially in Svaneti and Khevsureti. Scientific studies of the problem, however, are based mainly on data from the

To conclude, it could be argued that although the communist government tried to enclose the whole Georgian population into one legal system and make Soviet legislation govern all spheres of life, traditional law continued to be practiced. Different legal systems, formal (official/state) and non-formal (traditional law, religious law, and thief's law) co-existed during the socialist period in Georgia. My research results allow me to say that the traditional legal system was especially functional among the Georgian highlanders (Svans) and one can even say that representatives from the Soviet government sometimes even acted as the main actors (judge or mediator) in traditional legal processes.

highlands. Researchers have never studied this institution in the lowlands, because of the established opinion that this practice can only be traced in the highlands and not outside of them. But blood feud was not only a phenomenon in Svaneti or Khevsureti; it was a part of life in Georgia's different lowland regions during different historical periods and even exists sometimes today.

We chose Kvemo Kartli as a useful area to study the custom of blood feud in the Georgian lowlands. This region is distinguished by its diverse ethnic and religious composition. Besides a small number of indigenous Georgians, its population consists of different ethnic groups—Azeris, Armenians, Greeks and others—and a migrated Georgian population from the country's various districts (Imereti, Lechkhumi, Svaneti, Khevsureti, Ratcha, and Adjara). During the last century, Georgian populations moved to Kvemo Kartli in several waves, mostly caused by ecological catastrophes and, more recently, by economic problems.

The diverse ethnic composition of Kvemo Kartli made it possible to research the situation in different ethnic groups and observe the rate and causes for the preservation or disappearance of the custom among them. I carried out my fieldwork in Kvemo Kartli's six municipalities: Tsalka, Tetrtskaro, Dmanisi, Bolnisi, Marneuli and Gardabani. The main focus was on the communities of the migrated Svans.

My fieldwork demonstrated that today blood feud in Kvemo Kartli is not practiced among non-Georgian groups, though the respondents assert that it was popular among Azeris in "old times." Among the various Georgian groups who migrated to the region, the Adjarians, Khevsurs and Svans practiced blood feud in their home districts. Blood feud cases are, however, not observed among Adjarian migrants in Kvemo Kartli. Neither is blood feud observed among indigenous Georgians. Though not frequent, its practices among the migrated Georgian groups is preserved among Svans and Khevsurs. Except for the Svans and Khevsurs, however, murder among or between the different groups is rarely followed by a retaliatory act inspired by blood feud ideology. Generally such cases of murder come under the jurisdiction of the defence and law enforcement agencies and are resolved through standard legal proceedings.

When they first arrived in Kvemo Kartli, there were bloody confrontations between Svans and locals—Azeris, Armenians, and non-Svan Georgians. Confrontations between Azeris and Svans occurred several times in different districts of the region. However, cases of murder involving Svan and non-Svan individuals, though they were followed by retaliation, did not escalate into blood feud. Historically and traditionally Svans have never practiced blood feud with different ethnic groups such as Azeris, Armenians, Greeks, etc. Hence, this custom does not define relations between the migrant Svans and the other ethnic groups in Kvemo Kartli.

Feuds Among Svans

The study of the Kvemo Kartli region has shown that the more frequent cases of feud occur among Svans. Sto-

ries about blood feuds are present in every district populated by Svan migrants. As a rule, Svans practice feud only in relation with Svans. The change of the place of residence did not release the responsibility of blood revenge initiated in Svaneti between certain Svan families (clans) and it continued in Kvemo Kartli. Each Svan community, which resides compactly in the region, has its authorities (elders) who know the traditional norms concerning the blood feud. Bypassing the police, Svans try to settle the problem autonomously, according to what they call their "old tradition," with the aid of their authorities, who are involved in the process of reconciliation with the consent of the opposing sides. In case the offender is arrested, he is not freed from blood feud responsibilities; the imprisonment of the perpetrator is not a mitigating factor, it does not prevent the avengers from carrying out their intentions. Though the number of blood revenge cases has dropped considerably in the Svan communities of Kvemo Kartli, no one among the Svans will blame a man who seeks out his father's killer, even many years after the incident, and kills the descendant of the murderer.

Generally the Svan traditions are well known not only to the elderly people, but also to the younger generation of Svans, who are not brought up in Svaneti. The disposition of most of the Svan population toward the custom is surprisingly positive.

Stages of Blood Feud

Traditionally, with Georgian highlanders, the system of blood feud was composed of several stages: the act of murder, the act of vengeance, and the act of reconciliation. Each of these stages consisted of different legal norms, norms of behaviour and restrictions which the representatives of both sides (the offender and the injured family) had to consider. There were some minor differences between them in different districts and communities.

For Svans, blood feud has been a customary norm of behaviour, which all male members were constrained to keep. The responsibility to maintain blood feud with Svans usually fell first of all on the closest male relative of the victim—the father, brother or son, but other members of the family (clan) could have taken the responsibility as well. The feud was directed against the culprit, but depending on the circumstances, the target could be his father, brother, son and then the other members of the clan, as it was not only a private problem of the culprit's and victim's families, but of the whole clan. Initially in Svaneti, no distinction was made between murder and manslaughter, accidental killing and purposeful killing were equally evaluated. The cases of blood feud were regulated according to the traditional legal

norms by mediators (*morval*), who mediated between the parties, made arrangements for their reconciliation, stated the penalties, organized fighting, and took care of other issues.

Changes Over Time

But, over the course of time, the norms and rules have changed. Though the Soviet regime failed to eradicate the custom, it transformed the system, but not in essential ways. The changes in the system in the homeland were directly reflected in the system of the lowland Svans. For example, the circle of those responsible for blood feud has narrowed down from male clan members to the close male relatives of the culprit. In this regard, in the lowlands one may hear a kind of discontent among some Svans (though they are not against the blood feud tradition) following the killing of a culprit's guiltless relative. If the offended party has no close male relatives, who usually are responsible for carrying out the killing, the blood feud will be stopped. Retaliation is not being carried out with increasing frequency. In most cases, reconciliation has become the best way out; money, paid to the offended family, has replaced compensation for blood by cattle and land. The traditional pompous ceremony of the reconciliation process of old times no longer takes place. Some situations, such as the burning of a house of a culprit or accidental murder, that traditionally were not considered to be mitigating factors, now are taken into consideration by *morval* when mediating cases. In Kvemo Kartli, the trial for disputes between Svans generally takes place locally in Svan communities with the aid of *morval*, but the problem could also be settled in Svaneti, depending on the situation and the demands of the mediators or elders.

The survival of blood feud practices among the migrated Svans results from their new circumstances. In Kvemo Kartli, Svans now live in the neighbourhood of ethnic minority groups (Azeris, Armenians, Greeks, etc.) which have preserved their ethnicity, self-awareness,

self-name, mother tongue, religion and cultural traditions. Svans now find themselves in the midst of alien ethnic and cultural groups, some of whom practice different religions. All these conditions increased the Svan's inclination to establish their place among these groups and firmly define their ethnic identity. This focus on preserving the Svan identity facilitated the preservation of traditional practices of everyday life and traditional behavioural stereotypes. The necessity to survive in alien surroundings activated the group's self-defence mechanisms. The fact that the Svan population in Kvemo Kartli mostly lives in compact and isolated settlements promoted their consolidation.

One of the reasons for the preservation of this custom and its ideology among the lowland Svans might be the family and kinship ties which are still an important source of authority. Almost all Svans residing in Kvemo Kartli have retained close ties to their home region. Some of them have relatives there, some have built new houses or repaired old ones, and some have even started businesses, so they remain in contact with the traditional Svan environment. The ties the Kvemo Kartli migrants have preserved with their home region help preserve the system and ideology of blood feud. The preservation of this institution until recent times is an important element of the self-preservation of the group. This situation caused a relative reduction in the number of blood feud cases, on the one hand, and the survival of the blood feud custom among the lowland Svans, on the other.

This research has demonstrated that the migration of Svans to Kvemo Kartli since the 1980s made it possible to revitalize the custom of blood feud, which had been lost among the rest of the region's population. However, it is also evident that new cases of blood feud are becoming comparatively rare in the Svan communities. Today the ideology of blood feud among the lowland Svans is more vital than the practice itself.

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