Beliefs of the Svanetians Concerning a Future Life

Translated by Marjory Wardrop

From the Article by ‘Thavisuphali Svani” (B. Nizheradze) in the Georgian newspaper “Iveria.” Tiflis, 1888

Translated- August 12, 1895

The beliefs of the Svans concerning a future life are original and characteristic. They believe that the souls of the dead dwell in a vast plain covered with eternal verdure. Good and bad souls alike must enter this plain through the same door, and it is only after their arrival that they are separated, some going to Paradise and some to Hell. According to the ideas of the Svans, Heaven is a great plain; in the middle stands a long table, at which Christ sits in the place of honour, and the souls of the just with him. The table is always spread with the best and most varied viands, The place where Christ sits is most brilliantly lighted by an ever-shining sun. Neither Christ nor the just eat nor drink, but only enjoy the sight of the well covered table and the smell of the food. Everyone has before him the viands which have been consecrated by his kinsfolk at the feast of commemoration. The dead are not permitted to give food to each other, except in the case of near relations. To take food from a distant kinsman or mere acquaintance is, in the first place, an insult to the self respect of the soul that has no consecrated food of its own, and, in the second place, it may bring upon the recipient the ill-will of him that offered it. [pg 2]

The souls of the dead, both saints and sinners, are represented as shadows. They are dressed either in the garb in which their bodies were buried, or in the clothes dedicated to them by their kinsfolk after their death -- whichever of them are best. If the kinsfolk dedicate a new suit to the deceased he puts it on immediately, and presents the old one to the soul having no kinsfolk on earth able to interest themselves in his costume. The souls of the dead must have at least two suits of clothes. But if the kinsfolk dedicate superfluous clothing to them, this is agreeable to the dead, and they do not fail to show their gratitude for the attention. In the spirit world, men carry their arms, and women their ornaments. The souls are quite free in the other world: they either walk about in the magnificent plain, or, when they like, sit down at the

well-spread table and, as the Svans say, “Satiate themselves” with the sight of Christ, which forms their highest joy; or they quietly talk together. Noise and shouts are not permitted. They also frequently converse with Jesus Christ Himself.

In a distant corner of the plain is the place for sinful souls. Here utter darkness eternally prevails. Hence it is impossible to see the Divine Light of Christ and His presence. According to the opinion of some the wicked also receive the viands dedicated to them by their kinsfolk, but these dishes are tasteless and disgusting, on [pg 3] account of the darkness in which they dwell (in Svanetia it is considered disgraceful to eat in the dark). But according to the opinion of others, food destined for the wicked is, by the order of Christ, given to those righteous souls who have nobody left to attend to them on earth. The Svans are convinced that if the kinsfolk of a dead sinner often commemorate the deceased by dedicating food to him, Christ will pardon him and transfer him into Heaven. The same thing may happen if the righteous ask Christ to pardon any sinner.

As we see, in the Svan idea of a future life there are none of those horrors which may be found in various Christian beliefs, e.g. a fiery Gehenna, rivers of fire, red hot frying pans for sinful souls etc., and on the other hand Heaven does not offer any exceptional joys and pleasures.

It is strange that in the Svan beliefs about the other world there is not a single reference to the first person of the Trinity. The Svan never addresses Him in prayer for pardon of his dead kinsmen. Among the Svans the only mortal sin is the infraction of the sanctity of spiritual relationship by adultery. Of illicit relations between actual kinsfolk they have no idea, and cases of this kind never happen among them.

For adulterers who have violated spiritual kinship the Svans have in the other world a lake of pitch [pg 4] where into souls are thrown, and from which no prayers can release them. Murder and seizure of a neighbour’s land are considered great sins, but not mortal. The murderer is punished by having the soul of his victim to follow him about everywhere, tormenting him with a ceaseless howl of complaint from which there is no escape. The man who has stolen land from his neighbour is punished as follows: he must eternally drag about on his back a full basket of earth, and must run all the time with it without stopping to rest. Not only the soul of the person who was robbed, but all the other souls are obliged to strike the basket with sticks, so that the earth falls out, and not to let the sinner rest. But it is easy to escape from this torture. The man guilty of seizing another person’s land has only to appear in a dream, or even openly, to a

kinsman or some other person and confess his sin. They, in their turn, restore the stolen land to the rightful owner (there have been cases of this in Svanetis) and the sinner is relieved from his punishment.

The following are considered to be sins in Svanetis: theft, slander, torture of animals, neglect of festivals, failure to assist a neighbour, oppression of the weak and helpless, neglect of fasts etc. But the punishment of these sins in the other world is so slight that nobody is afraid of it. Those who have committed the sins in question are punished by not being allowed to come near [pg 5] Christ or sit at his table.

In the other world there is no eating and drinking. Although one may hear frequently among the Svans the following reproach to ungrateful people. "May God punish thee as much as I have fed thy living and dead kinsfolk", yet this is nothing more than a figurative expression. With the exception of the absence of work and the impossibility of matrimonial relations, the Svans look upon the life beyond the grave as being very like the present world. There are the same joys and sorrows, the same quarrels between dead souls, though in a less degree, because fighting is strictly forbidden among the dead. Husbands recognize their wives, parents their children, brothers their sisters, and kinsfolk always do each other a good turn. This assistance begins at the moment of a man's death. During the last minutes of life the souls of dead kinsfolk come from the other world and surround the dying man, awaiting his end in order to take his soul to the other world, and give him hints about the unknown life he is entering upon. A man at the point of death, often in delirium utters the names of dead kinsfolk. His family are firmly convinced in such a case that the souls of the dead have appeared to the soul of the sick man to take him away with them. "Surely you might leave him to us a little longer", say the grief stricken family addressing the souls, "Sooner or later you would see him. Do you think [pg 6] we can spare him any more than you can?... But if you will not relent, and will take him away, at least take care of him, so that all may be well with him, and if you do not we shall punish you when we come to you." When a Svan wishes to convince anyone that he is speaking the truth he utters the following oat: "May God not let me meet my kinsfolk in yonder world if I deceive thee."

According to the beliefs of the Svans, every year, on the fifth of February, all the dead come from the other world (in the opinion of some, they rise from their graves) and return to their homes, remaining there till the first Monday following. The fifth of February is called by

the Svans “the day of the resurrection from the dead.” On that day a Svan spares nothing in his endeavors to give the dead a worthy welcome, and in this he is influenced by fear as much as respect. The Svan believes that if the souls are dissatisfied with their reception they will revenge the lack of hospitality by sending illness, bereavement, blights and murrains etc. The Svan therefore tries to do the greatest honour to the dead. In preparation for the day the whole house is cleaned up, all the domestic utensils are carefully washed; a sheep, which has been fattened for the purpose is slaughtered, supplies of vodka and cheese are laid in. Poverty is no excuse: the Svan would rather grudge himself food and clothing [pg 7] the whole year round than let his neighbours outstrip him on that day. And the neighbours do not allow him to forget the festival; souls dissatisfied with the preparations made for them fail not to appear to the neighbours in a dream, or in some other way, and complain of their inhospitable kinsman; he to whom this revelation is made hastens to tell his guilty neighbour how to appease the angry souls. The Svan takes this step partly from fear that he himself may be infected with any disease that may be sent to the guilty man, and partly because he thinks that if anybody in the other world suffers privation his dead neighbors are obliged to help him, and thus the survivors would have to supply the needs of people’s kinsfolk as well as their own. In Svanetia one can often hear the following reproach: “Surely you must know that the souls of your kinsfolk give no rest to the souls of ours, and deprive them of necessaries.”

If a Svan sells his real property and leaves his native place, the new owner has to fulfill all his obligations towards the dead. If the estate of the emigrating Svan becomes the property of a corporation, the corporation has to fulfill the same duties. In a word, in Svanetia there are certain conditions and obligations existing between the living and the dead. The living must perform their duties to the dead, for they fear them even more than they fear God Himself. The man who dies [pg 8] without leaving an estate to his heirs is in an unfortunate position. In the other world he drags out a weary existence and suffers from the want of everything. The heir must be a son, not a daughter. It is true that a married daughter celebrates festivals in memory of her parents and kinsfolk, just as her husband does not forget his wife’s relations, but this commemoration is performed unwillingly, and only after the man’s own kinsfolk have been honoured… “If you find it possible,” says the Svan to his dead kinsfolk, “do something for my wife’s parents.”

As we have said, cleanliness and order reign in the Svan's house from the 5th February to the next Monday. The richest food is prepared for dinner and supper. A long, low table is spread in the middle, and chairs are placed round it. Wax candles are lighted, the table is loaded with all sorts of food abundantly sprinkled with salt (eg. the mola salsa of the Romans). Then the master of the house places himself near the table, devoutly takes off his hat, and, amid deep silence, enumerates all the dead, all those present do the same. The Svan believes that the souls of the dead then come into the room and sit down at the table. When the host has mentioned all the dead, he does not trust to his memory, and concludes in the following world: "If I have forgotten any one of those for whom I ought to pray, I beg Christ to forgive you your sins; forgive us if we have not known how to please you; you see [pg 9] our poverty, our failings; all that we have belongs to you, we are ready to deprive ourselves of all if we may but please you, be not angry with us" and so on in the same strain.

After this speech, the oldest man in the house goes up to the table, takes a vessel containing vodka, and pours out a little of it on the ground, then he takes pieces of meat, bread, cheese, and throws them all on the ground near the table. After this the table is cleared and laid again for the living. It is strictly forbidden to sit down at the table when it is spread for the dead. All this ceremony is repeated daily until the first Monday after the 5th of February. The family must pass all these days quietly, without quarrels and dissensions. Every day, from morning to evening, folk-tales are told in the house, and the souls of the dead derive great entertainment from listening to them. If no member of the family knows any tales, professional storytellers are invited. This is the fairy tale season in Svanetia.

On the Monday, when the souls of the dead abandon their homes for a whole year and set out for the land of eternal rest, the farewell festival is particularly impressive. The table is laid with still better viands, and the doors are opened; the snow is swept away from the door. The oldest man in the house takes a wooden tray (tabaki) with food, and, bareheaded, carries it outside [pg 10] and puts it on the ground; after mentioning the dead by name he goes inside again. The family sits down to supper, the dead return to their place. On this night all the souls of the dead hold an assembly in which they enquire whether any of their kinsfolk have failed in their duties to the souls. If no misfortune happens to the family during the following year, this is a sign that the souls are satisfied. The fear of displeasure of the dead is so great that the Svan, who is generally brave and daring by nature, would not go outside on that night for anything.

After twilight children are not allowed to go out of doors, and if you offered the Svans mountains of gold you would not get one of them to visit the graveyard on that night.