

From M'elyay-T'elep'ia to Melia-Tulepia: language, literacy and representation in the Georgian province of Svaneti

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The Svan-speaking communities of Upper and Lower Svaneti have for centuries been identified as – and identified themselves as – Georgians, even though the Svan dialects are not mutually intelligible with Georgian. The basis of the Svans' Georgian identity was primarily shared Georgian Orthodox Christianity, and strong, long-standing links to lowland Georgian polities. The emergence of language-centered notions of identity, inspired by European models, and reinforced by the nationalities policies of the Soviet Union, problematized the identification of the Svans (and also the Mingrelians) with the Georgian ethno-national group. One particularly fraught facet of this problem is the issue of literacy: The use of Svan as written medium, especially in the schools, was regarded by many as tantamount to the recognition of Svan-speakers as a distinct ethnicity, separate from the Georgians.

In my talk, I will review the history of literacy in the Svan-speaking regions, and the use of Svan in writing, from Tsarist literacy materials, to Soviet-era anthologies of Svan oral literature, to the recent appearance of Svan-language blogs and e-books. The title of the talk refers to a collection of Lower Svan ethnographic texts published over a century ago, and reactions to the reappearance of some of these materials in a Georgian novel published a short while ago.