

*A New Explanation of Female Infanticide from the Sexual  
Selection Point*

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## **The Beginning**

The idea of female infanticide fall in the scope of my academic interest when a friend sent me her, by that time unpublished article[1]. This text told about the tradition of female infanticide in Svaneti, in the mountainous region of northern Georgia. Running small research on tradition, described in the text, I have found Svan origin sources, who still remember that. Moreover, according to them, this tradition was maintained in Svaneti until the 30-es of the twentieth century. Usually, according to the sources, new-born girl were put ashes into their nose and mouth to shut down her airways. The new-born was dying almost instantly. The name of this action was “feeding with ashes”. This description differs from the references from the 19th century, according to which the Svans practicing female infanticide by putting burning coals in the mouth of new-born girls[2]. Clearly, stopping breathing with ash is both more humane and less brutal. Existence of this mind-breaking description (use of burning coal) in the 19th century sources can be explained for two reasons: 1. a misunderstood of the explanation from locals; 2. The Russian imperial attempt to describe the conquered locals (in this case the Svans) as savages as possible.

## **Short history**

It is well known that infanticide, like cannibalism, is a universal phenomenon and has no exceptions in the history of peoples and continents[3]. The search for the social causes of

female infanticide, as well as the social causes of infanticide in general, is not going beyond the ideas of economic hardship and, therefore, birth control[4]: The reasons for this are a) a woman's physical weakness (that is, she eats more than she produces); B) in some cultures, the irresistibility of the dowry factor (dowry is so expensive that a woman might be obliged to stay in her parents' family forever, thus further intensify the threat of hunger); Consequently, according to this widely spread theory, when there was a choice, parents always chose to kill a girl and leave boys alive.

In general, according to the common notion, female infanticide is associated with the low value of women in public perception, lack of protection of their rights, etc.

## **The Svan case**

As a sociologist, I had nothing against these findings/attitudes until I read about the infanticide of Svan women in the above article that pushed me to start a social-historical analysis of this fact[5].

The point is that the social-economic situation of infanticide of Svan women does not correspond to the reasons described in the relevant literature:

1. Economic situation: The Svans, according to historical documents, were distinguished by considerable wealth, considering the medieval parameters: they had a lot of cattle and owned enough pastures. According to Arnold Zessermann, a Russian traveler of German descent of the 19th century, the people of the North Caucasus, i.e. the Kabardians, paid an annual tribute to the Svans until the middle of the 19th century[6];
2. The role of women in society and in daily work: Women had a special place in the household of Svaneti: their responsibility was to take care of cattle and animals, to prepare food and complete other household duties. The duty of the men amounted to guarding, hunting, participating in military campaigns, construction works and making hay. In the second half of the 19th century, the function of men in the household was limited to hunting, hay making and construction works.

Therefore, even with this brief overview, it is clear that the role of women in Svaneti is not leading to the description of behavior of women as 'over-eaters'. On the contrary, their role was important. On the other hand, it is known that due to the constant lack of women in Svaneti (because of women infanticide), the Svans had to bring wives from far away places, sometimes even kidnapping married women[7].

Then what could have been the explanation? What compelled the Svans, who are referred to by Strabo[8] and Pliny[9] as strong and wealthy peoples, to turn to female infanticide?

## Spatial and climatic causes of female infanticide

Probably, we should look for the reason for the existence of female infanticide in the Svan dwelling: the Svan dwelling in the Middle Ages was a large, two-storey stone house (native name *machubi*); without any sexual/age separation, the whole family slept along with their cattle on the ground floor; the first floor was allocated to hay, goods, etc. Sleeping outside of *machubi* was impossible due low temperatures outside. It is likely that during last Little Glacial Period (from the middle of 14th to the beginning of the 19th century)[10] Svaneti, as well as the whole globe, experienced a sharp drop in temperature, which necessitated the whole family to spend the night in one place. Clearly, in this case, the possibility of incest increases, not only between brothers and sisters, but also between fathers and daughters. There is a Svan myth/legend linking the beginning of prolonged, heavy snowing with incest[11]: A sibling got married at the insistence of his parents. It angered God and He wiped out the entire household, and as a punishment doomed the Svans to live under eternal snow. The central phrase of this narrative is that “after the incest, incessant snow began” - an interesting case for narratology and mythology when cause and effect alternate each other.

The second reason, which is no less important, in the case of father-daughter interbreeding could be the possibility of daughters occupying the mother’s social place in the family hierarchy. If incest between fathers and daughters cannot be avoided, it is likely that mothers will lose their place in social hierarchy, being substituted by younger females (their daughters).

This last hypothesis is supported by the 19th century record that in Svaneti the murder of new-born girls was not absolute: the girl was not killed if she was given out in marriage at birth, that is, there was a guarantee that she would leave her parents’ house at a certain age[12].

It is also known that incest is one of the main sins in the Svan moral code[13]. Ultimately, the main cause of infanticide of Svan girls seems to be the avoidance of inbreeding that could result in the emergence and spread of genetic disorders.

It is probable that in Svaneti this rule was established during the Little Glacial Period, that is, from the middle of the 14th century. We do not know if this rule existed before because neither Pliny nor Strabo, nor other historians describe or mention it. On the contrary, much is written about the wealth and power of the Svans. However, in Svaneti this rule may also have originated during the first Little Glacial Period of the new era (AC) - from the 6th to the 9th century[14].

Therefore, the reason for the infanticide of new-born girls, I think, and not only in this particular Svan case, should be sought not in economic hardship and/or control of family size, but in avoiding incest and the desire of mothers to maintain their social roles in the

family hierarchy.

Building of modern houses in Svaneti began in the end of 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. The first house with isolated rooms was built in Mestia in the 1870[15]. It is likely that the emergence of isolated spaces rendered the infanticide of girls unnecessary. Therefore, female infanticide gradually declined and disappeared somewhere in the 30s and 40s of the 20th century.

## **What could have happened under hot conditions and the conclusion**

However, it must be noted that cold should not be the only factor that led to such a custom: the same rule may have arisen in countries with high temperatures, which would also lead to people living rather densely in cool areas (e.g. near water), basically, forcing a household to live in too close proximity. Consequently, in both cold climates and very hot climates, the cause of female infanticide may be the same: avoiding spreading of the incest in the population, i.e., spreading of genetic disorders. This conclusion is strengthened by the well-known fact that incest is forbidden in almost all cultures as an act banned by the gods. It is quite possible that female infanticide was the preventing means of incest, in addition, fostered in some cultures by the need to preserve certain roles in family hierarchy.

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