

## Wednesday, November 07, 2007

### [Ethnology in Georgia | Kevin Tuite](#)

The [CESS Conference 2007](#) in Seattle in mid-October saw a range of papers and panels on the Caucasus. One of the most engaging presentations was delivered by Kevin Tuite, who teaches in the department of anthropology at the University of Montreal. Professor Tuite has been coming to Georgia since 1985, wrote his dissertation on "Number Agreement and Morphosyntactic Orientation in the Kartvelian Languages" and describes himself as an ethnolinguist.

His particular research interest are rites in the Georgian highlands, both in Svaneti and in Pshavi/Khevsureti. Unsurprisingly, celebrations are characterized by much drinking. But they also include less obvious moments, such as the turning of plates counter-clockwise before eating at a ceremonial feast.

While the highlands are set apart from Georgia, they are also markedly different. Svaneti has been largely christianised, whereas the Orthodox church has only had superficial impact in Northeastern Georgia, so that pagan rites still predominate. Now, Professor Tuite says, some of the traditions are beginning to wane through migration out of the harsh valleys, and some locals are turning back to ethnographic literature to rediscover their older practices.

What makes such a presentation stand out are the stories, the usual ethnographer's privilege. Perhaps the most entertaining account was that of a shrine in Pshavi/Khevsureti that is so sacred that even the priest (khevisperi) remains outside the fence and does not dare enter.

So how, then, did the priest get the blood of the sacrificed animal onto the shrine, as tradition demands? Trust local ingenuity: apparently the priest stood outside the fence, prepared three snowballs, slaughtered the animal over them, and then threw the three snowbloodballs over the fence at the shrine.

For a glimpse into this world, check Professor Tuite's website which provides an engaging account of his field trips, as well as access to his various publications. It is available at [www.philologie.com](http://www.philologie.com).