

Submitted Abstract

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the ways in which practices of “caring for” and “guarding” the churches and heritage objects in the Caucasian highlands of Upper Svaneti, shape forms of belonging through material and symbolic agency. The wealth of the religious heritage kept in Svaneti - rarest samples of religious manuscripts, Georgian and Constantinopolitan iconography, numerous precious items and church inventory dating to Middle Ages - are kept in the small churches, hidden within inaccessible landscapes of Upper Svaneti that only highlanders can navigate freely. Locals refer to heritage objects as “gandzi” (treasure) and guarding and caring for it is part of the communal self-organization practices, as heritage objects become sites of contestation between the locals, the state and the Orthodox Church. As such, beyond its religious function “gandzi” functions as a communal resource rooted in alternative understandings of 'property' and 'ownership' and enables power practices for renegotiating local sovereignty vis-à-vis hegemonic power structures.