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**EXISTENTIAL PHENOMENA OF CIRCASSIAN WOMAN  
CONSCIOUSNESS IN XIX - XX CENTURIES**

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***Abstract***

The subject of this study is the impact of such phenomena as God, religion, magic, the other world, and death on shaping the vision of the world of a Circassian woman in the XIX - early XX century. The purpose of the article is to study the existential categories of consciousness of the Circassian woman, who had previously remained outside the interests of scientists. Lyric, historical and heroic folk songs, proverbs and sayings has become the most informative and productive source for the analysis of women's traditional consciousness among the peoples of the North Caucasus in the designated period. Only this type of sources allows to find echoes of real emotions and feelings experienced by a woman, which she shares with the audience. To solve the problem put forward, the application of the phenomenological method seems to be the most effective, as it allows to get inside the inner world of the object under study and "see things from her eyes". Phenomenological and gender approaches allowed to shift the focus of study and explore the Circassian consciousness through her everyday life. The scientific novelty of the research lies, firstly, in the fact that the Circassian woman has been presented as an active and creative subject.

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**Keywords:** Circassian woman, phenomenology, existence, picture of the world.



## **1. Introduction**

Circassian woman localization in social space, her status in society and roles ascribed to her served as a starting point in setting the coordinate system of her picture of the world and determining the categories of consciousness. The inner world of a woman was determined by existential categories: god, religion, magic, the other world, death. A person can comprehend and evaluate his abilities, knowledge, skills, he can try to analyze his mental acts and his thinking. The only thing that escapes from both practical and theoretical objectification, and is not subject to him, is his existence. Existence is an unconscious being of a person, which is not amenable to the unification, a true existence, that makes an individual unique and the only (Dasaeva, 2015).

In this study, the term 'existential category' refers to a special class of ideas, thoughts, attitudes and values that live for several generations. Though these ideas are partially separated from the objective world, the main elements of the spiritual life of an entire people and a particular person are laid in them. (Ivakhnenko, 1999).

## **2. Problem Statement**

The renewal of the informative space in modern science, the reinterpretation of scientific issues, the shift of historical research focus has allowed to bring to the fore the issues of studying mentality, value systems, symbolic systems, etc. In the light of the changes that have occurred, it has become apparent that only the external characteristics of life of the Circassian woman are studied. The pressing need for analyzing the inner world of the Circassian woman, her view on the world and herself implies, in our opinion, the study of such basic attitudes of the Circassian world, as the existential phenomena of her universe.

## **3. Research Questions**

The authentic ethnic thinking is the subject of research in this paper. It constitutes the hidden basis of national self-consciousness, which seems obvious and self-evident and at the same time imperceptible and uncontrollable for its carriers.

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to identify those categories of the Circassian picture of the world that formed the basis of her values and life attitudes.

## **5. Research Methods**

In recent years, the study of the female world in the culture and social life of Circassians has been enriched with new methodological tools. The study of existential categories of the Circassian woman's picture of the world in the XIX - XX centuries turns out to be extremely productive when adopting gender and phenomenological approaches. Following the gender approach provided researchers with the opportunity to include the history of women in the historical canon, to demonstrate that women were not a speechless mass, subordinate to men and not having their own views and ideas (Konovalov & Kumakhova, 2017). Genderology demonstrated that women were a force to be reckoned with, and even in the

fundamentally patriarchal, traditional North Caucasus (Tekueva, 2012) women's history gradually takes an important place in the historical scientific community.

## 6. Findings

God and religion. In the first half of the XIX century Islam has already spread among the Adyghe. At the same time, the majority of the people combined Islamic practices with their ancient tribal cults and some elements of Christian beliefs (Kasumov, 2013).

As confirmed by James Bell, a practical approach to Islam distinguished the Circassian women. 'The Letters from the Caucasus', published in the collection "Adyghe, Balkarians, Karachai in the News of European Authors of the XIII-XIX Centuries", recorded his impressions of female religiosity: "It was fun for me to find out how much effort our beautiful hostess makes to put a young handsome Georgian on the path of truth: she convinces him that the faith that he follows is only for this world, but he should also think about the other world, where he can be called any day now, or even any hour. But considering these eloquent arguments insufficient, she adds that if he becomes a Muslim, he will live in her family as her own son, will receive part of the inheritance and, above all, a beautiful young wife! Let our beautiful patrons of missionary societies ponder over this example..." As one can see, in the view of the Circassian woman, the master factor for adopting Islam was to receive wealth and a beautiful young wife, rather than other, more spiritual factors. But this does not mean that Adyghe women did not believe in God. Their attitude to faith was more ingenuous and applied, and in the difficult hours of their lives they turned to God with prayers:

Kabardians are good riders  
languishing in Beshmakir,  
When the women are languishing in the dungeon -  
how can the heart bear it!  
"I give my gilded Erejib gun  
and the youngest of my children  
to the saint Tkha!" (Adyghe songs of the Caucasian war, 2014)

The tragic song of lamentation "Devastation of the aul" is about the events of the Caucasian war period. Its authors appeal to the god Tkha in their prayers, asking him for mercy. The above passage describes how Shumakho Shogenov, one of the war heroes who died in this battle, tied his young son to the gun and brought him from the mountain into a river to save the boy.

Admiring the heroes' feats, women beg God's paradise for them:  
Both forearms hit by rifle bullets,  
He is attacking with saber, spinning,  
Who takes his spouse <from the soldiers>, -  
<this is> the younger Ismel Atlaskirov,  
May Tkha grant him paradise! (Adyghe Songs of the Caucasian War, 2014)

Noteworthy is the fact that in the same work there are prayers addressed to Tkha, who was the supreme god in the pagan pantheon of the Circassians, and to Allah, denoting the god in Islam. There are lines in the same song:

Muslims who hear us in the black earth buried their faces, crying

Allah! Allah! We are a dying aul,  
Those who will die for us  
Are true shahids (Adyghe songs of the Caucasian War, 2014).

Obviously, in the Circassian consciousness, the images of Tkha and Allah were identical, and their names served to designate the same god. The words of the following song prove it:

Tha, I swear, all my kin, o woe, are angry with me because of you ...  
If my family find out, they will slaughter me, o woe, I loved you!  
Tkha, I swear, I wanted to go out to you so that my mother would not know, my beloved, o woe!  
On a silk scarf, o woe, I am writing your name,  
To someone who solemnizes our nachikh (i.e. Muslim marriage), my love,  
I will read the Koran!

In the above sources, the mention of God serves for requests for salvation, mercy, and as an oath. In the context of other sources, the hopeless situation of a woman is displayed, when, no longer hoping for God's help, she comes to the idea of God's punishment:

We are stray girls, we see a group of horsemen riding toward us.  
Allah did not leave me, Nafin is among them, – I said and was delighted.  
The group of riders, coming to us, is approaching  
Nafin gets close and stops.  
He spreads his burka and thrusts his double-edged sword into the ground.  
To lie on this burka or to fall on this sword, choose! - he tells me.  
Allah has punished me, we were drinking the same breast milk,  
We were sitting on the same lap!  
I will not lie on your burka, I will fall on this sword!

According to the popular version recorded during a number of expeditions, the plot is based on a fact that took place during the First World War. A group of young people roaming on the eve of being sent to the army asked a harmonica girl to play a dance melody. Her refusal was the reason for the brutal abuse described in the song: the instigator of the crime was a guy who was brought up by the girl's mother and was therefore treated as her family member.

As noted by Yu.Yu. Karpov, one can observe parallelism and opposition of the male and the female in the ratio of the official religion (in this case Islam) and the traditional cult. The parallelism of the parties caused their dissimilarity, often fundamental, but never conflict or struggle (Karpov, 2013).

Islam did not play such an important role in everyday life of Circassians as it did in some other peoples of the Caucasus. Adyghe Etiquette (Adyghe Khabze) regulated most of the moral rules, and seemed to replace religious ideology at times. The requirements of religion "melted" in the Adyghe Khabze, for it was broader than the religion in the coverage of the problems of society.

Magic and the other world. Having left a greater part of the magical superstitions in past centuries, the 19th century retains their vestiges, mostly in the form of everyday magic. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie in the book "Montaillou" says that above all peasant and rural cults are marked by the magical perception of the world, the remnants of paganism, rituals of healing and soil fertility, and ceremonies meant to cure diseases and harvest a rich crop.

In addition to songs intended to call for rain after a drought and requests for a bountiful harvest, charms were the most frequent manifestations of magic among the Circassians that existed in various genres of folklore sources. One of the most well-known and preserved in various variations of work songs are songs of wool combers. The first volume of the collection “Folk songs and instrumental tunes of the Circassians” contains songs with preserved motifs of verbal magic, which is called «тәләй» in Adyghe (“prediction”). With their magic word the combs try to influence the things that will be made of the wool they have been combing: these are predicted to be happy.

Apparently, the girls worked for the groom, who was getting ready for a wedding.

Comber, comber – a sharp sword!

The old women of this house do not cover their heads [with headscarves].

The girls of this house are tireless combers.

They are combing [wool] for the burka

Of the dark-skinned young man with beautiful eyebrows

The girls, who give their sisters to good husbands,

Are combing wool to his burka!

Predictions could also apply to the future owner of the house where they work:

Playfully and joking

Our [young] mistress will give birth to a son,

The born by her does not die,

The stitched by her does not spoil.

The utilitarian function of wool comber songs is to emotionally alleviate the monotonous work and make things happy with the magic of the word.

Healing songs (щӀащӀэ уэрэдхэр) are considered to be songs-charms. They constitute the organic part of the magical rite of chapsh, which was arranged at the bedside of a patient in order to protect him from the influence of evil forces and to heal with the help of word and intonation magic. The word «щӀащӀэ» comes from the verb «ешцэн» (literally – “to blow on someone, something”), meaning “to do a magic spell by blowing and whispering”.

Wishes expressed in lullabies present a vivid manifestation of the phenomenon of magic in the Circassian consciousness. Adyghe usually put their children in cradles (less often - in cradles, hanging from the ceiling) and sang songs while swinging them. This was performed by mothers, grandmothers, elder sisters, and in rich families – by nurses. Repeating, monotonously pronounced formulas of “lau”, “lau-lau”, “ualalau”, “boliley”, “da-nau” in lullaby songs suggest the idea of a sleeping magic, a charm in them. In addition to the practical implications of rocking babies, lullabies performed more important functions, such as protecting children from bad spell, the evil eye, bad luck, also wishing a baby a long life:

To make you lucky, to protect you from severe winds

To send you well-being

I beg my Tkha.

Our kin is very small,

I pray for the one Allah

To make my boys grow.

Lullabies were also designed to help children grow beautiful, strong, courageous, brave, lucky people:

The boy's eyes are radiant  
My boy is big-fingered,  
My boy shoots with big arrows  
Shoots and does not miss  
Those, hurt by his arrow, will not survive.

One of the main functions of the genre of wishes is the magical function (charms, spells). The implementation of the genre can be in the form of congratulations, wishes, parting words, thanks, toast, spells and other text forms (Kremshokalova, 2014).

Judging by the wedding toasts published in the "Kabardian Folklore", they wished and foreshadowed a happy family life to the bride, emphasized her dignity as a housewife (skills in sewing, embroidery, care for family members) and her external beauty:

Your spouse is soaring as a gray eagle // Ouri-dada! Live with him for many years  
Her skin is a delicate silk  
Her black eyes shine  
Her eyebrows are swallows.

The praises listed in the toasts, of course, did not mean that every bride, in whose honor these songs were sung, fully corresponded to them. Hyperbolization was aimed at bringing these qualities into the future of the girl. The relevance of the poetic images of the wedding song to reality was not of great significance: people believed in the magical transforming power of the word. The goal of goodwill remains always the same – to ensure, establish the normal course of life, balance the present and the desired future, and ensure a fair distribution of material and spiritual benefits (Bgazhnokov, 2011).

Belief in God, thoughts about death inevitably entail explication of ideas about good, evil and about such their carriers as good or evil spirits. Was there a supernatural world in the system of perceptions of the Circassian woman? How did it show itself, in her opinion, what were its representatives: carrying the horror and fear, or those who helped and protected? Of particular interest to the researcher should be the fact that the evil spirits and demons of the Circassians are almost universally represented by females (Karpov, 2013).

The belief of the Circassians in the existence of inexplicable phenomena that are beyond the control and alien to man, in the existence of the supernatural, other world was manifested in plots of folk tales and fairy tales. The fact, that the Circassians did not cast doubts on the existence of magical characters in real life, is testified in the "Circassian legends" by Khan-Girey. He wrote that in Circassia there existed people who were suspected of dealing with evil spirits, they were called ouds. They could turn into cats, dogs, wolves, and walk invisibly among people. Ouds were attributed the most terrible misfortunes that happened to people, such as childhood illnesses, the headache of beautiful girls and boys, the death of cattle. Shora Nogmov confirms the Circassian belief in the blame of the witches for crop failures, citing a folk song in the "History of the Adyghe People": "Our croppers put off work until next summer. Our ripe millet is destroyed by boars. Millet grains are removed from heads by besleneev witches".

For this research, it is relevant to note that despite some plots about male sorcerers in folk art, the majority of oulds are women that “act primarily against male characters ... and mainly at night” (Карпов, 2013 ).

In the Adyghe language, to refer to magic, witchcraft, sorcerers, and witches, there is only one word “oud”, which can be applied to people endowed with magical abilities, and a derivative from it «удыгъ» which means “to practise witchcraft”. Nevertheless, despite some language scarcity for denoting these phenomena, life in the 19th century Adyghe society was literally saturated with magic and witchcraft, and as sources say, it was most often present in the daily life of a woman.

Death. Death is one of the recurring themes of culture. It creates customs, traditions and rituals unique for each nation. Being a physical act, it “creates around itself a special cultural space” filled with various symbols and reflections of the national mentality (Gugova, Nalchikova & Tekhoyeva, 2017). The historians of the Annales school argued that the phenomenon of death has gone into oblivion and is not studied by researchers based on the axiom that death is always death and there is nothing else to discuss. Now, the historical science has faced the issue of acceptance of death by people in different eras and their assessment of this phenomenon. Moreover, it turned out that this is a highly significant problem, the consideration of which is capable of shedding new light on the systems of worldview and values accepted in society.

Reflections about death and its inevitability inherent in every nation left their marks in the form of proverbs in the oral memory of the Adyghe. Thoughts about the inevitability of death appear in the following proverbs: Ажалым пхъуантэ кӀуэцӀми укьыщигъуэтынщ – Death will find you even in the chest. Къыщальхунур зэрымьщӀэм хуэдэу, щылӀэжынури зыми ищӀэркъым – As no one knows when to be born, so no one knows when to die. Adyghe also thought that when death strikes, both rich and poor are all the same and helpless: тхъэмыщӀагъэкӀэ ажалыр къыпхуэжӀуэркъым, къулеягъэкӀи пщхъэщыкӀыркъым – death does not come because of poverty, and no one can avoid it even having big money.

The Caucasian war had a huge impact on the XIXth century Circassian life and consciousness (Tekueva, 2014). Folklore sources that allow to study this influence are songs of lamentation (гъыбзэ). Called to mourn the dead Adyghe participants of the war, they provide the researcher with extensive material in studying the phenomenon of death in the picture of the 19th century Circassian world.

Living on standby for combat, the North Caucasus formed a special attitude to death, being day and night ready to protect the life of the family and native aul (Nalchikova, 2013a). In the heroic songs and *hybze* (гъыбзэ) made during the Caucasian War period, there is a constant choice both young men and true jigits, who have already earned fame for their heroes, face. The choice between life itself, the opportunity to see your house, your mother, children, and wife, but at the same time cover yourself with shame and remain a coward in the national memory for centuries, as it happened to the hero of the song about the inhabitants of Laba (Adyghe songs of the Caucasian War, 2014) or die without betraying the knightly code. Therefore, the warriors, solving this existential dilemma, chose death without hesitation. They did this quite consciously, clearly realizing what they are losing as a result, but the price of the hero's fame is too high, which can only be paid by death in battle.

Proverbs also prove this: ЛЭНЫМ ЛЫГЭА ХЭЛЫЦ – The courage lies in the way you accept your death. ЛЫХЪУЖЫР ЗЭ ЛЭГЪУЭШИ, КЪЭРАБГЪЭР ТІЭУ ЛЭГЪУЭЦ – Hero dies once, a coward dies twice. ШЫНЭКЪЭРАБГЭМ АЖАЛЫР И ГЪУНЭГЪУЦ – Death is closer to the coward. ЛЭНЫГЭМ НЭХЪРЭ ЕМЫКІУМ ФІЛЫКІ – Do not be afraid of death, but of shame. ЛЫГЭА ЗЫХЭЛЫМ ЛЭНЫГЭА ИЦІЭРКЪЫМ – A courageous person does not know what the death is (Adyghe, 2016).

Gender differences, different responsibilities and life goals formed a different attitude to death among Adyghe men and women. In the sources, where the death of men is described, the circumstances of the hero's death are mainly considered:

Yelchikoy women

Bypass fences crying.

Death for a devout man in battle is an honor (Adyghe Songs of the Caucasian War, 2014).

In the value system of a Circassian man, death in battle was considered sacred (Adyghe Songs of the Caucasian War, 2014). The main fear for a Circassian was to pass for a coward and disgrace the name of his own kin, rather than to die and leave his children orphans and his wife a widow. A slightly different understanding and attitude towards death was formed for Circassian women. Paying tribute to the heroes, making songs and glorifying them (Adyghe songs of the Caucasian War, 2014), however, women grieve that with the passing away of these soldiers they lose their usual way of life, their plans to marry their loved one and raise their children are destroyed. Therefore, first of all, it is important for them to know that their life has changed forever with the death of a man:

I wish uork boys

had not brought me <to this house>.

Crying for the killed is instead of the wedding song to me –

so two azats take me home under their arms (Adyghe Songs of the Caucasian War, 2014).

The phenomenon of death is a complex and multidimensional problem. It includes the attitude of a Circassian woman to the death of a man (warrior, defender of the homeland), to her own death and suicide. Rare cases of suicide were concealed by the Adyghes, as the entire genus of a self-destroyer was dishonoured at once. In this case, male suicide almost never met. The absence of male suicide is understandable: men had a more acceptable way from the point of view of the national mentality – the search for the possibility of a decent death on the battlefield. Moreover, the conditions for the implementation of this model of behavior always existed: the researchers of traditional North Caucasian cultures record the peculiar state of permanent war. We have more folklore evidence of female suicide (Nalchikova, 2013b). The insignificant total number of suicides makes it possible to specifically stipulate that we are talking about exceptional cases, such as war, which being one of the most tragic pages in the history of the Circassians, forced the Circassian woman to choose between life in captivity or death:

"We, women, are not in the habit of such thing –

they force us with bayonets ", - having said that,

Shogenov's daughter Goshakhurei

turns and meets her death. (Adyghe Songs of the Caucasian War, 2014)

Often the choice was in favor of death:

Saying "Why should I stay?" -

this is Sharukhovs' noble gouasha

who turns and meets her death. (Adyghe songs of the times of the Caucasian war, 2014).

These lines describe crisis moments in the life of a woman when the destruction of her world, the death of her children and loved ones, has just occurred in front of her. In such exceptional circumstances, society "excused" women's weakness, "understood" that a woman in a similar way avenged her honor or protected the good name. Female suicide in this situation became the only form of protest, since the armed combat was not a woman's business (Nalchikova, 2013b).

The circumstances that forced a woman to commit suicide were, as a rule, related to questions of honor/ disgrace and unhappy or forbidden love. The few semi-legendary stories of female suicide are determined by personal love experiences (Nalchikova, 2013b).

But when the Circassian woman stayed relatively safe, forced to think not only about her own grief, the choice was made in favor of life:

Khazhihan would like to kill herself

But in our area there is no such custom (Adyghe songs of the times of the Caucasian war, 2014).

Life asked her to not only mourn and bury the dead, but also to perform daily rituals, raise children, care for the survivors, continue to reproduce the life of the Adyghe society:

Your father died, and I stayed.

However, I would not fear death,

Now I will grow a hero

A fearless warrior,

A defender of my Kabarda (Adyg songs of the Caucasian War, 2014).

The following proverb supports the idea that the death of a loved one does not end the life of his relatives: Зыр ла шхъэкӕ, зым зилӕжыркӕым – Although one has died, the other does not kill himself (Adyghe, 2016).

Despite the fact that the sources of the Caucasian war times provide wealth of material in the study of the phenomenon of death, yet death was not always associated with war and military events. There were lamentations (бжэ) for mourning the dead in people's memory. Ritual lamentations for the dead are the least studied genre of the Adyghe folklore. It is known that those were the women, who created and performed them in the house of the deceased for three days, while the ceremony of mourning lasted. The mourners improvised the texts of ceremonial weeping every time, getting the rhythm of the melodies going and using poetic clichés. Grieving the dead man, the mourners listed his virtues and regretted how their lives would change with the death of their loved one.

## 7. Conclusion

Existential categories in Circassian woman consciousness are represented by the phenomena of god, religion, magic, the other world, and death. The analysis of these concepts made it possible to find out that this whole stratum of sometimes unconscious and not objectified phenomena in the life of the Circassian woman was focused on routine things, and resulted in the following conclusions:

1. In the ideas of God, syncretism was characteristic of the entire Adyghe people. In Circassian woman's mind, the pagan supreme god Tkha and the designation of the god "Allah" in Islam were identical, as is observed in some songs where these names alternate.

2. The whole life of the Circassian woman was permeated with the phenomena of magic and magical rituals. Being present in everyday actions of a woman, magical charms and "whisperings" were commonplace, and the reality and effectiveness of these rituals did not cause any doubts.

3. In the value system of the Adyghe people, death did not matter as a separate phenomenon, it was important how and why a person died, which is confirmed by the analysis of the proverbs mentioned above. Regarding death as an inevitability that no one could escape, neither the poor nor the rich, the Circassians believed that what matters is how you died. In case with the Circassian woman, the phenomenon of death was most often associated not with the fear of her own death, but the fear of losing the loved ones and the established order of things.

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