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**NATIONAL RELIGION OF THE OSSETIANS: FROM
REMYTHOLOGIZATION TO POLITICIZATION OF NATIONAL
SELF-AWARENESS**

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Abstract

The article uses current empirical and theoretical data to analyze the phenomenon of contemporary remythologization of national religion of the Ossetians and its transformation into neoethical one. The work determines the reasons (mainly political ones) of this process, its character and results, as well as possible threats it bears. The processes of ethnoreligious revival currently proceed for many folks in the world, in particular in Western Europe. As a rule, in the revival of Rodnovery (Slavic Native Faith) the disciples see the way to save ethnical identity in the globalizing world. On the other hand, the ethoreligious remythologization is accompanied by aggression against dogmatic world religions. The work implements interdisciplinary approach to make a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of national religion of the Ossetians and the process of its remythologization under the conditions of globalization. The main characteristics are determined, as well as actors, internal and external factors of the remythologization of the national religion of the Ossetians. The current theoretical and empirical data are used to forecast the potential social, cultural and political risks of remythologization and politicization of ethnical and religious mentality of the Ossetians in the context of conflictogenic ethnopolitical situation on North Caucasus and challenges of globalitarian world.

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Keywords: National religion of Ossetians, religious mindset, remythologization.



1. Introduction

The Ossetians are the only Persian-speaking folk in Caucasus, the descendants of the Alans (I-XIV centuries) who were Persian-speaking nomadic tribes of Scythian-Sarmatian origin. Similarly to all small peoples, they struggle for preserving their ethnocultural traditions under globalization. Religion as the most conservative form of social sentience in this situation plays the role of ethnos-preserving core: the domination of the religious sentience in the society preserves its traditional nature. That is why under the increasing effect from globalization processes on public mind weakening the position of traditional cultures, the popularity of religion in the society striving to preserve their traditional nature begins to grow. The Ossetians are the people with common religious identity. Despite the majority considering themselves Orthodox Christians, the youth becomes susceptible to the influence of Islam and traditional ethnoreligion. The problem is further escalated by increasing politicization: the federal center is interested in stronger positions of Orthodoxy in North Ossetia playing the role of Christian and traditionally Russian-friendly enclave in the “Islamik block” of North-Caucasus republics has unexpectedly faced the opposition of actively constituting neoethnoreligious groups.

2. Problem Statement

Current work attempts to follow the transformation of religious-mythological mindset of the Ossetians. We assume clear differentiation between mythological and religious types of mindset. The main trend of this transformation, as we see it, is the formation of new mythology represented as “revived original” one. In particular, we base our research on the data of the survey conducted to identify the mindset of modern Ossetian society. The analysis has demonstrated the problematic nature of ethnoreligious mindset of the Ossetians who ambiguously identify the phenomenon of their own national religion. We also assume that the revival of Rodnovery with its strict opposition to the rest of the world is substantially promoted by nationalistic reasons. This contributes political sense to such “religion revival”.

3. Research Questions

The subject of the study are religious and mindset transformations of the national religion of the Ossetians facing the threats of globalitarian world. The most important among them are, on the one hand, the revival of Rodnovery (pre-Christian/pre-Islamic religion of the Ossetians), on the other hand, the creation by a number of Ossetians of new myths that justify the uniqueness of original Ossetian religion, its optimal nature for all Ossetians, attempts to represent it as the national religion and, as a consequence, aggressive rejection of dogmatic world religions (Orthodox Christianity and Islam) as alien to the Ossetians and destroying their ethnoreligious identity.

4. Purpose of the Study

The goal of this paper is necessitated by the demand of scientific analysis of the most interesting—and polemic process of remythologization of the religious mindset of modern Ossetians. To achieve the goal we distinguished the following questions that determined the content of the paper: 1) how

manifested the process of ethnoreligious remythologization?; 2) what are its reasons?; 3) what are the primary consequences?

5. Research Methods

The study is based on the interdisciplinary synthesis during cognition of the reality with involvement of the methods of ethnology, religiology, culturology, psychology, philosophy, politology, sociology. The absence of comparativistics would have made impossible the comparative analysis of Ossetian ethnoreligious branches and their features. The investigation also uses theoretical and methodological principles of “new cultural-intellectual history” where becomes principal the consideration of interactions between the movement of ideas and their historical “habitat”, those social, political, religious and cultural contexts in which the ideas originate, disseminate and develop (Repina, Zvereva, & Paramonova, 2006)

6. Findings

The ethnical cognition of modern Ossetians experiences active transformation under the conditions of globalization threats and anxiety about loss of language, national and cultural identity composing the basis of modern ethnonational eschatology. The intensified myth-creation processes manifest as glorification and idealization of history and as revival of national religion. When striving to consolidate everybody around original religious tradition, the national activists have found its current state unsatisfactory and started its active reconstruction. In such a situation, the myth-creation is inevitable, because the restored ideal object cannot be recreated in initial condition; it is always complemented or reduced, updated according to subjective ideas of the recreator and his tasks.

The main question brought up in the paper is the correlation of two different mindset types: mythological and religious. We will not describe them in details, but only note that the mythological mindset (in contrast to religious one) is much less abstract. Moreover, in terms of its main purpose—explain the world view and give clear answers to the questions of humankind—it possesses rationalizing basis. The rationality of mythological mindset does not accept evangelical preaching “whosoever shall smite thee on the right cheek, turn to him the other also”, which is a quintessence of irrational religious mindset formulating the ethnical ideal represented in the call “love your enemies, bless those who curse you”. It is not a secret that for absolute majority of people, the astounding moral level of this norm remained unachievable due to its very paradoxical and irrational nature. The myth never assumed similar formulas. It does not even now, because a person prefers to answer to love with love and accordingly to hatred.

In contrast to abstract religious formulas becoming increasingly less understandable to rationally thinking majority, everywhere in the revival of so-called “paganism” they see the same specific task of recreation of an important part of national culture, which contains spiritual and moral values, love to home ground, subtle sense of nature and capability to understand it, etc.: “... the mind comprehends and realizes social and historical necessity that is determined by demands and interests of complicating social organization rather than a caprice of mind. This means that these or those mythological or religious ideas, customs and rituals are conceived and materialized in life as separate individuals, social or ethnic groups

only in the cases when they get into benign ground of demands and interests ultimately determining the human activity (Tsoraev, 2007).

At the genesis and development of new religious movements, the ethnoreligious revival manifests as the striving to struggle against foreign influence, rather than a moment of spiritual and religious searching. This leads to the creation and rooting of new identities denoted by several authors (Riggs, 1998; Biard, 2010) as “neo-national religions”. For instance, according to English politologist Oliver Roy (2010) the new term “neo-ethnicity” is directly connected with national religions and is primarily used when constructing new ethno-religious groups.

The processes of mindset drifting expressed as remythologization of the consciousness of the Ossetians have first manifested in the revival of pre-Christian religion of the ancestors of the Ossetians (Scythians, Alans) on the one hand; on the other hand, to the justification of its strict monotheism. Thus, a controversial connection evokes between modern social reality and archaic myth, more precisely, its revival, which is a myth no less since it is not correct to speak from the scientific perspective about complete and authentic revival of pre-Christian Alanian religion. At his time V.I. Abaev wrote, “Historical data on religions of Alans is very scarce, and we are going to refer not to them, but to the data of the language, mythology and religious vision of contemporary Ossetians. Taking into account the abundance of information that preserved in the Ossetian language, we can expect noticeable leftovers of ancient Iranian background also in the sphere of religion. *Indeed, one cannot expect the recreation of the whole picture of ancient Alanian religion. Ten centuries of Christianity could not pass without leaving a trace. A thick layer of Christian terminology and rituals has overlaid on the old religions* (italicized by us – S.K., B.B.). Inevitably, one has to take into account that the Christian propaganda has demoted revered divinities to demons, evil spirits, monsters, etc. The task of revival of pre-Christian religion of Alans is similar to reading a rescript: in new text here and there one can hardly distinguish separate, often corrupted traces of ancient. *I am not thinking about reconstructing pre-Christian religion of Alana as a whole system* (italicized by us – S.K., B.B.). I am talking about separate fragments” (Abaev, 1990a). This point of view of highly authoritative scientist, who has made larger progress than anyone else in studying cognitive functions of the Ossetian language as the most accurate cultural and historical source for investigating Scythian-Alanian past, was taken by us as the prototype to compare against alternative positions.

According to Saint-Petersburg researcher of topical problems of Ossetian nation religion anthropology S.A. Shtyrkov “... the beginning of 1990s was marked in North Ossetia, and only here, with two bright events in social life: explosive interest to national tradition and sharp outburst of religiosity. In the beginning, these two processes existed in parallel. On the one hand, the customs of ancestors were glorified and resurrected by a formed by that time cohort of ethnical traditionalists. On the other hand, the churches, mosques and preaching houses of the republic were filled with people that had different attitude to the ethnical tradition of Ossetians. Certainly, the customs of ascendants and religion itself were perceived as phenomena relating to the sphere of spirituality; however, the traditionalism was conceived more in secular terms. In the mid-1990s, the situation changed. The attractiveness of the perspective to have own specific national religion from ancient ages preserved by the nation in a dramatic struggle with external ideological expansion became obvious (Dzusev & Shtyrkov, 2015). It can be said that the myth creation process in corresponding context begins in this very period. “These conditions necessitate the understanding

of the national religion of the Ossetians not like paganism, but as original pre-Christian (and pre-Islamic) monoteism... Probably, this concept is given more clearly in the interview of a profound Vladikavkaz historian R.S. Bzarov: “When they say: ‘We, the Ossetians, are pagans’, I want to ask this question: ‘Are you from Africa?’ He has the right to call himself pagans, but why does he call me pagan too? Our nation are not pagans anymore for thousand of years after the majority adopted Christianity. National tradition can be clearly followed over several millenia. It is pre-Christian and largely very close to the ancient religion of all Indo-European nations. But they have lost it, because it did not endure evolution. It was not transformed into finished monoteistic religion, i.e. everything was lost in cultural and religious struggle” (Dzusov & Shtyrkov, 2015). The comparison of this view with the afore given excerpt from the paper of V.I. Abaev identifies radical controversy, because along with everything else V.A. Abaev has stated the presence of seven different Scythian gods along with Alanian politeism (Abaev, 1990b).

Obviously, we deal with the politicization of the problem. At current stage, as in the whole history, the political conjuncture is the most convincing not always peacemaker, but always myth-maker. This certainly needs rationale, so let us refer to the analysis of ethnopolitical situation in the republic and region.

The religious revival that seized the Russian community from the late 1980s continued in North Caucasus. While across the country with prevailing Orthodox people the renaissance was smooth, in North Caucasus—a region with complex ethnoconfessional and ethnocultural structure and elevated ethnopolitical risks—it took the course of “collision of civilizations”, Islam and Christianity. In contrast to traditional “Muslim” republics, a qualitatively different religious situation was observed over the whole period in the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania that is called a “precise projection” of Russia (Ossetia: religious situation and political challenges, 2012) because of its multinational and polyconfessional structure that for centuries has been preserving harmonic balance.

Ethnical and confessional variety in the republic is traditionally substantiated by active historical cultural and political connections with the nations of East and West, and by transborder position between Christian and Muslim worlds. High level of international and interconfessional harmony in the international republic was called by Ossetian theologian T.E. Dzeranov as “a phenomenon of social life”, who noted that “the people of Ossetia have elaborated the traditions of peaceful coexistence of representatives of different nations and confessions; after the Timur’s invasion, there were no confrontations on religious ground” (Dzeranov & Oleinikova, 2009).

The key word here is “elaborated”: immanent to the mindset of the Ossetians traditions of hospitality and tolerance to representatives of other ethnic groups are actively fixed by social and state institutes. In the republic, the Ministry for National Affairs is actively operating that has wide toolset and authority for promoting “the achievement of social and international consent, establishment of the principle of equal rights for citizens of different nationalities and confessions, strengthening of understanding between them and formation of all-Russian civil identity” (Regulations ..., 2018). In the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania, 29 national public associations are registered that in addition to active humanitarian efforts (study of history, traditions, customs, ethnic culture; charity; strengthening and expansion of collaboration with historical fatherland and expats, etc.) make substantial contribution to the reinforcement of international and interconfessional world and stability in the republic. While as on January 1, 2001, according to the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation in Republic of North Ossetia-Alania, 62 different religious

organizations were registered, as on January 2017, their number grew up to 103 (Republic of North Ossetia, 2017).

The processes of religious revival in the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania were noted not only by evolutionary development of Christianity and Islam, but also by already noted revolutionary appearance in the spiritual and social life of so-called “neo-paganism”, more scientifically, national religion of the Ossetians having as disciples 22.5% of population (Monitoring of state-confessional relations, 2013).

New religious direction (“traditionalists”) was created by “Uatsdin” movement (from Ossetian Holy Faith). The doctrine of “Uatsdin” is based on national mythology (“faith of ancestors”), which core is Nart epos, unwritten Ossetian ethical Code “Æg`dau”, and the faith in ancient saints (dzuærttæ) and spirits (daudzhy`tæ) that became a part of ethnic self-awareness. The disciples of “Uatsdin” reach out to the return to the origins, privileged status of the Ossetian language and culture by peremptorily opposing their ideology to Abrahamic religions as superficial things. We should note that in general the Ossetians have ambiguous attitude to the new belief system, which, according to the activity in information space—in social networks in particular—can be identified as a socio-political movement, rather than religious one. This is confirmed by the fact that the disciples of “Uatsdin” are increasingly active in political statements, including the rejection of “outpost” status and mindset and general disregard of all-Russian civic identity, radical solution of the consequences of the Ingushetia-Ossetia conflict down to the discrimination measures, criticism of the federal center’s policy (including national one), etc. The “Uatsdinians” gradually increase their mobilization potential in socio-political sphere by extending the network of social organizations.

The religious institute more and more actively hold themselves not only in religious, but also in information and political space. This trend can be described as mediatization of the religion as specific social field. The processes of mediatization of the religion promote its politization and transformation into a tool of political influence on public consciousness and behavior. The religious leaders have certain authority in the society and often act as newsmakers like politicians or other key persons in the society.

The increased presence of religion institutes in media-political space of Ossetia is due to different means of mass communication:

- 1) official regional mass media paying notable attention to religion (press releases and post releases of religious holidays, interview and comments of religious figures, materials on religious topics);
- 2) official mass media of religious organizations (websites, newspapers);
- 3) private accounts of religious figures of the republic or media offices of religious organizations in social networks as private means of communication with lambs.

The mediatization of religion empowers religion actors—represented by religious figures and organizations—with strong mobilization potential, which gives the capacity of exerting information and psychological influence on public mind and behavior, thus capable of construction and destruction.

The disciples of ancient and new religions by using the means of mass communication, form qualitatively new religious mythology (based on ethnical myths, as was told above), which in their interpretation transforms into political and, in particular, ethnonationalistic mythology.

However, we should note the absence of monolithic status of the mindset. Ossetian religious traditionalism lacks it: the majority of Ossetian traditionalists avoid representing Ossetian religious culture in theological terms and insist on the inherent value of traditions as an ancient ethnic observance (“Æg’dau”). These moderate positions are the foundation for public organisation “Styr Nyhas”.

Along with radical and moderate directions, there is one more direction of Ossetian religious traditionalism—Ossetian people Christianity—that positions the Ossetian nationality as original bearer of ancient Christian culture inherited from the ancestors, Alans. It is known that the origination of Christianity on North Caucasus is connected with coming of Andrew the Apostle in the Ist century AD, and the mass dissemination of Christianity in Alania occurred in early Xth century (Sinanov, 2014). The same (though on incommensurably less scale) can be said about Ossetian people Islam, the establishment of which in North Caucasus is connected with Arab conquest of Dagestan in the VIIIth century, while the active islamization of the region started after establishment of political domination of the Golden Horde in the first half of the XIVth century. The largest islamization of Ossetian communities was during the Caucasian War in mid-XIX; however, over the recent decades the position of Islam in Ossetian society has greatly weakened.

Obviously, active search for ethnoconsolidating basis can have reverse effect, since they pose a threat for its atomization.

For the sake of more objective analysis of religious and mindset characteristics of modern Ossetian society and identification of corresponding percentage groups, we have made an independent sociological survey. It involved 824 respondents. The survey was made in social networks and as paper questionnaires (Monitoring of political and confessional, 2013).

The survey results have demonstrated interesting peculiarities of religious mindset of modern Ossetians. The first question (*Do you think that the Ossetians are under the threat of cultural identity loss?*) has unveiled serious eschatological attitude (68%) connected with the concerns about the fate of the nationality under the conditions of globalization. Among the reasons enumerated in answers to the second question (*What, from your perspective, pose the threat to the survival of the nationality?*) the largest percentage of the respondents have named the destruction of traditional moral norms and language loss. The key question in this study was whether a common religion for all the Ossetians can be regarded as an important condition for preservation of Ossetian ethnicity: 51% of Ossetian respondents answered negatively versus 37% of convinced in necessary mono-religiosity of the Ossetians, and this indicator in terms of emerged trend of ethnoreligious renaissance appeared to be unexpectedly low.

According to the answers to question No. 4 (*Which of the religions, to your mind, is capable of inhibiting the destruction of traditional Ossetian culture?*), for the national religion of the Ossetians as an ethnocementing factor gave voices 48% of respondents, which testifies its high positions in the national mind. Though, on the other hand, a lot of respondents (34%) are confident that no religion can unite and preserve the nationality on current stage.

A particular interest is posed by question No. 5 (*How do you determine the national religion of the Ossetians?*), because it is mostly connected with the sphere of the most intensely constructed myth about unique Ossetian monotheism. The majority of the respondents (36%) believe that the Ossetian national religion is this very monotheism formed even before adoption of Christianity by Alans. This dominating

indicator demonstrated the growth of the popularity of mentioned worldview model. This is obvious from the survey results conducted a year ago. At that time, this indicator amounted to 34%.

On the second place are 30% of those thinking that the Ossetian monoteism has formed under the influence of Christianity with preservation of traditional Ossetian religion. The total number of votes for monotheism of the Ossetian national religion amounted to 66%, which is 6% more than the indicator of similar survey performed a year ago (then this figure was 60%) (Ktsoeva, 2017). Thus, only over one year, the percentage of worldview ethnomonoteists among the Ossetians increased. In its turn, the percentage of polytheists decreased: only 15% against 16% a year ago. Noteworthy, these figures included mainly elder people, whose religious mindset was formed in 1950s-1970s. Finally, almost a fifth (19%) of the respondents remained undecided with the identification of the national religion from the perspective of its mono/polytheisticity.

Thus, the analysis of the fifth question, from the one side, revealed considerable differences in understanding by the nation of the principles of its own traditional religion, from the other side, it discovered the trend of increased perception of its as a unique pre-Christian monoteism. Being in the situation of external information pressure of “big world”, where “prestigious ‘traditional’ religions are directly correlated with specific nations forms in a part of the Ossetian community the striving to decide on this question, which of the religions is the Ossetian one. It is the reason (which is confirmed by the analysis results) why a substantial part of the nation has strong concerns connected with the fact that the mentioned striving to religious determination threatens with the destruction of the stability of ethnical existence of the Ossetians: many of them do not want to “choose the religion”.

When answering to the sixth question (*What do you think are the advantages of the national religion of the Ossetians versus other religions?*) 50% of the respondents regarded the main advantage of the national religion its original nature for the Ossetians, which is also the demonstration of the ethnoprotective problem which have been imposed on the religion over the recent decades. For almost a quarter (23%), the main advantage of the national religion of the Ossetians is revealed only when comparing it with Abrahamic religions: unlike Christianity and Islam, it does not regard man as “servant of God”. The focus on this aspect is fairly explainable in the situation of social progress, one criterion of which is the increased degree of freedom of an individual. This interesting aspect of modern mindset shows the trend to *rationalization* of perception of *abstract* aspects of religious consciousness. Thus, the rationalization of religion, not its rejection and atheism, demonstrates the main mythologizing trend of the Ossetian ethno religiosity on current stage.

7. Conclusion

The processes of religious remythologization—manifested as the revival of “paganism”—intensify on the global scale, manifest in different nations in the world, in Russia and in Ossetia, in particular. Due to its rationality, the myth can answer the questions “what for?” and “why?”, which shows its rationalizing function. That is why among the reasons of any myth-creation, the main one will be the achievement of a practical result. Due to the afore mentioned, among the most important reasons of noted processes, the particular significance is born by fairly specific political (expressed as active revival of nationalism) and ethnoprotective reasons (when the revival of the national religion is considered as the factor of return to

origins capable of inhibiting the processes of ethnical assimilation). However, in the striving to oppose themselves to Christianity and Islam, which weak points are the excess dogmatization and regulation of the religion, and to avoid such aspects, the myth creators paradoxically, wishing or not, have built their own religion and system of dogmata, which in turn objectively put them into opposition to everybody dissentient. The Ossetian traditionalism, thus, divided into two directions (as minimum), radical and moderate ones, that advocate the inherent value of “Æg`dau” as the main ethic observance without the need to building religious constructs on it. The same active position is adopted by the representatives of Ossetians people Christianity, who are sure that the original religion of the Ossetians is Orthodox Christianity adopted by Alans in the Xth century. Preliminary results of the popularization of revivalism are ambivalent: on the one hand, there are visible manifestations (reconstruction of ancient sanctuaries, active involvement of youth in nationwide holidays (“Thousand Simd” of youth in Hetag's Grove, and other)), which surely promotes the growth of national self-awareness; on the other hand, there is clear opposition to other intra-ethnic religious groups, the major part of which are Orthodox Christians and much lesser one are Muslims. In this sense, one can state that theoretical striving of myth creators to national and ethnical and religious unity on the basis of ancient/new myth practically has opposite effect becoming a factor of intra-ethnic religious and mindset disintegration (see the survey analysis) that is nontypical for the Ossetians.]

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