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Structure and socio-dynamics of Chechen culture

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Introduction

The understanding of culture is as diverse as its manifestations, and it depends on the amount of knowledge accumulated about it and on the specificity of the perception of one community or another. Attempts to study the national culture in a variety of aspects and from different angles of vision contribute to an increasingly holistic vision, which makes it possible to more clearly understand its underlying foundation.

Chechen culture in a broad, panoramic review has never been the subject of a special academic study. Our task is to consider it at the key historical periods, not in separate fragments, but in a holistic relationship with the fate of the ethnos through the prism of time and transformation.

In our article the structure of culture is understood not as a set of different spheres of culture (material, spiritual, etc.), but in separation into different cultural and historical layers, a complex symbiosis of which somehow led the Chechen ethnos on the eve of the third millennium to a painful search for a cultural identity of the nation.

The formation of the structure of culture is associated with its social dynamics, which should be understood as the process of the development of a particular ethnic culture in time and space and in interrelation with the social structure and social transformations.

Culture is inextricably linked “with history, always implies the continuity of the moral, intellectual, spiritual life of man, society and humanity. And therefore, when we talk about our modern culture, perhaps, without knowing it ourselves, we are talking about the great way this culture has passed”.¹

¹ Lotman YU.M. Besedy o russkoy kul'ture. Sankt-Petersburg: 1994. P. 8

We are used to talking about spiritual and material culture, about ancient and modern culture etc. and do not think at all about the fact that culture is not only different areas of reality, but the very reality of man in these areas.

Each ethnos for millennia forms not only its culture, but also its own understanding of culture. The specificity of national cultures depends on a number of factors: geographical determinants, historical development and ethnic and mental attitudes.

The Chechen direct concept of culture is focused around two lexemes (words) – “*Gillakh*” and “*ozdangalla*”. Traditionally, under the notion of *gillakh* (politeness, kindness, culture), Chechens, in the first place, have in mind the culture and ethics of communication, behavior in interpersonal, group, interethnic relations.² In a word, this is an external culture, i.e. it is directed from the individual to the surrounding world, the society. The term “*ozda*”, derived from which is the word “*ozdangalla*” (educated, noble, cultured). Moreover, “*ozdangalla*” is the purity of the body, heart, thoughts of a person inextricably linked with faith in God and the surrounding world. Culture manifests itself not only in the behavior and character of a person but must first of all be present in his soul and consciousness.

This concept emphasizes the inner world of individual culture, its spiritual and moral appearance. If you take into account all of the above, the meaning of the words will become clear: “The culture of behavior (*r1illkh*) came out of paradise”. This means that noble norms of behavior between people have a sacred nature.

In a more detailed form, this idea is set forth in the Chechen proverb: “The culture of behavior has come from paradise, and in paradise it will return with the people carrying it”. These words show the great importance that Chechens attached to ethics and culture. In one of the Chechen religious songs (*nazma*), so the connection between reason and ethnic norms is transmitted:

*It is known that the apple falls under the apple tree,
But would there be an apple if there was no apple tree?
Gillakh is a tree, and a mindset is the fruit of that tree,
Is knowledge possible where there is no gillakh?*

Here, the “mind” is set according to ethical norms. This is always true when it comes to a mind that benefits people.

² Mezhdidov D.D., Aliroyev I.Y. Chechentsy: obychai, traditsii, nrawy. Sotsial’no-filosofskiy aspekt. Grozniy: 1992. P. 196

Whatever abilities a person possesses, no matter how valiant and talented he was, he has the same moral responsibilities as any other person.

In these two concepts the quintessence of the Chechen understanding of culture is concentrated. The “inner world” and the “external manifestation” are interconnected by thousands of threads, they are interdependent and complement each other. In the Chechen ethnic understanding, initially culture is not a mass, public, to a certain extent, impersonal phenomenon, or a set of achievements. For the people, whose highest values included personal dignity, honor, conscience and freedom, the concept of culture had and has a concrete personal, individual perception and understanding.

The philosophy of the Chechen vision of culture appears as a model, the “external-internal code” of the individual, a kind of standard of actions that every Chechen must meet if he is the true bearer of his ethnic culture.

Here, culture is interpreted as characterizing a person's properties in the sphere of individual and social behavior, including tact, internal dignity, respect for other people, delicacy, the ability to always find the measure of one's actions. It is used as a form of regulation of their personally and socially significant actions.

In its structure, Chechen culture has a symbiotic character, which is the aggregation of several cultural and historical layers. The first, archaic, Nakh autochthonous layer (*nokhchalla*), which is the core, the core of culture; the second layer is an Islamic, religious component of culture (Iman – Islam); and, finally, the third - the Russian layer, which was the result of the Westernization and colonial expansion of Chechnya and the Chechen ethnos by the Russian Empire, since the XVIII century.

This multi-layered cultural synthesis testifies to the complex historical process traversed by the Chechen ethnos. Each of the selected cultural-historical or civilizational strata has its own heterogeneous structure too. They are “amalgamated” from various cultural components.

The oldest layer of Chechen culture is the Nakh cultural layer of the North Caucasus. Nakh, Vainakh (“people”, “our people”) – the common name of the Chechen and Ingush peoples. Archeology dates the Nakh antiquities in the second half of the III millennium BC, i.e. an early bronze epoch, to the monuments of which are ancient settlements near the village Serzhen-Yurt of the Shalinsky district of Chechnya, mound (*kurgan*) burials near Bamut village and others.

The close-knit nature of the material culture of the Early Bronze Age in the Northern and Southern Caucasus can be explained by the existence of a single ethnic milieu of

the Caucasus in the III millennium BC. Maykop and Kuro-Araz archeological cultures reflect the oldest Caucasian ethno-cultural community at the stage of its disintegration and the close affinity of autochthonous peoples - carriers of North Caucasian languages. The isolation of the Nakh languages began precisely during the Early Bronze Age.³

Archaeological materials make it possible to study religious views of ancient Nakhs. At this time, solar cults are associated with archaic cosmology, as indicated by stone rings around the graves in the Bamut burial mounds, ornaments in the form of relief spirals and concentric circles on ceramics.

The ancient Nakh pantheon was quite extensive. The supreme god here was *Dela*, which served as the patron saint of the sun and sky. This theonim consists of two parts: *De* and *Ela*. *De* – day, light and *Ela* – the lord, the patron. The other cult found in Vainakhs beliefs was *Hal* – the deity of the sky, which was identical to the Khurri-Urartian god *Khald*, revered in Urartu and in some other areas of the Ancient East.

In the pagan beliefs of the Vainakhs, as in other archaic cultures, there were ideas about the duality of the world associated with the opposition of the earthly world, which was called *Dela Malche* (divine, sunlight), to the underworld, the realm of the dead, called *Dela Late* (divine, underworld). The afterlife in accordance with the ancient ideas of the Nakhs was ruled by a deity named *Elda*, *El* – the underworld of the dead and *Da* – the father, patron.

The ancestors of the Nakhs in the process of developing their horizons, expanding the knowledge of the surrounding world and the cosmos, gradually transferred the deities to heaven, turning them into the sun, the moon, the stars, thunder and lightning. Historically, the ancestors of the Nakhs realized that the Sun is life. Its rise was personified by the awakening of nature, the beginning of life and the cause of flowering. The sun is a symbol of purity and beauty. Perhaps this alone can explain that the legendary Malkh-Azni (Sun-Beauty) is one of the main heroines of the Nakh myths and legends. The history preserved even the name of the Nakh ancient tribe or clan (*taip*), which especially revered the sun - the Malkhistoy (Melchistins), and the cemeteries, consisting of stone crypts where they buried their deceased to this day called “Malkhan keshnash” – solar graves.⁴

It should be noted that the processes of growth and development of Chechen *taipes*, development of foothill and flat areas, contributed to the strengthening of tendencies towards ethnic consolidation of Vainakh tribes, which could not be answered by

³ Ocherki istorii Checheno-Ingushskoy ASSR. Grozniy: 1967. T. I., p. 12

⁴ Istoriya Chechni s drevneyshikh vremyon do nashikh dnei: T. I. Grozniy: 2008. p. 68

motley, religious and mythological ideas. They only retarded ethnogenetic and socio-cultural processes.

The patriarchal character of the social structure of the Nakh ethnic massif, which broke up into dozens of independent *taipes* naturally dictated the need for some cementing force, a system of higher values capable of completing the long process of ethnopolitical consolidation of Vainakh groups into a single ethnos. Islam became such a force. Acquaintance and acceptance of Islam by the Nakh tribes stretched for several centuries, from the 8th-9th centuries (acquaintance) to the 16th-17th centuries (approval), which is explained by the absence of external or internal coercion. The Chechen land did not know the Arab missionaries, the main conductors of Islamization were local proselytes, who accepted Islam from merchants, shepherds and mullahs of neighboring Dagestan.

So, the archaeologist M.B. Muzhukhoyev believes that in the Auch area ("Gachalk" necropolis) Muslim monuments are dated to the beginning of the 16th century, the early Muslim cemeteries of Eastern Chechnya (Nakhch-Mokhk) back to the 17th-18th centuries. No later than the 17th century there also occurred the first Muslim burials in the mountainous region of Cheberloi (Makazhoy Hollow) bordering on Dagestan. The author refers the successes of Islamization in the Argun gorge to the 18th century, in the Galanchozhsky gorge (along the Fortang River) to the beginning of the 19th century, and in the mountainous Ingushetia, Islam, in his opinion, has been affirmed throughout the entire 19th century.⁵ [5]

In general, such a picture is relatively close to the characteristics of written sources, under correction of, as noted above, the well-known "delay" of material artifacts behind spiritual changes in the ideology of society.

Thus, in the 16-18th centuries Islam was spread in the plains, foothills and most of the mountainous zone of Chechnya as the dominant social ideology that affected all aspects of the life of the mountaineers and led to the unprecedented universalization of formerly isolated self-sufficient unions of "free societies". The broad national liberation and religious movement under the leadership of the sheikh and Imam Mansur in 1785-1791 undoubtedly had a great influence on this process.

This movement can not be viewed outside of the connection with the social, economic and political processes taking place in the Chechen society, painfully seeking the answer to the challenge of the northern empire, which brought its borders

⁵ Muzhukhoyev M. B. Srednevekoviye kul'toviye pamyatniki Tsentral'nogo Kavkaza. (K istorii religioznykh verovaniy v X-XIX vekakh). Grozny: 1989. P. 165-169

to the banks of the Terek and Kuban. The answer was given in an attempt to create a Chechen and common state on the ideological basis of a single religion - Islam.

In general, the process of development of the new religious consciousness of the Nakhs within the borders of Chechnya in the 16th-17th centuries was associated with the adoption of Islam and the emergence of common goals for all genera, *auls* and societies, and acquired the form of political genesis - the process of folding state entities. The emergence of some new phenomena in the organization of the Nakh (Chechen) society was the result not only of its inherent natural development, but also a response to the external challenges that great powers such as Russia, Iran and the Ottoman Empire had shown over three centuries.⁶ [6]

Islam dictated a spiritual-value order common to Chechen society, the most important principle of which was monotheism, inner faith and brotherhood in the community. Islam gradually penetrated into all parts of Chechnya, absorbing the established folk customs and traditions, but eventually did not become a "way of life" for each individual Chechen.

The culmination of the Islamization of Chechen society was the 18th-19th century, when the titanic efforts of Mansur (late 18th century), Udi-Mullah and Tashav-Haji (20-30s of the 19th century), Imam Shamil and Sheikh Kunta-Haji (40-60s of the 19th century) created a solid Islamic base in the system of life and the general structure of the Chechen people.

Russian expansion in the North Caucasus, which rigorously advanced in the second half of the 18th century, to some extent stimulated the internal potentials of the Islamization of the region, in general, and in Chechnya, specifically.

The creation of a Muslim state in the territory of Chechnya and Nagorno-Dagestan – Imamatus was a kind of institutionalization of the anti-Russian liberation movement, which was held under Islamic ideas. And, despite the unsuccessful finale, it left a notable mark in the historical memory of the people. The conquest of Chechnya by the Russian Empire in 1859 meant a gradual strengthening of the policy of Westernization on the "Russian model". This policy has repeatedly changed from peaceful, economic and "civil-educational" forms, to aggressive, military-colonial, sometimes transferring into a radical form of genocide policy.

The Chechen people who survived two hardest military campaigns, are facing today a difficult task to preserve their unique national culture, which developed over

⁶ Akhmadov Y.Z. Ocherk istoricheskoy geografii i etnopoliticheskogo razvitiya Chechni v XVI-XVIII vekakh. Moscow: 2009. P. 240-256

thousands of years, having acquired and at the same time rejected various cultural influences. And the future development of Chechen culture depends on the degree to which the compromise between all the components of the civilizational strata of the single ethno-cultural world will be organically realized.

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Summary

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The structure of Chechen culture, which includes various cultural and historical layers (Nakh, Islamic, Russian) is of a symbiotic nature. The ethnic core of culture in the process of formation has accepted and at the same time rejected various civilizational influences.

Keywords: culture, ethnos, structure, Chechens, Nakh, religion, Islam.