

The Pagan Religious Practices of the Chechens and the Ingush

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Chechnya Map; courtesy, Wikimedia Commons

Before considering the religious practices of the Chechens and Ingush, it might be best to start with some background information on the region.

The Chechens live in a small territory called Chechnya bordered by Dagestan to the east and northeast; Ingushetia and North Ossetia to the west; Russia's Stavropol Province and Cossack region to the north; and Georgia to the south and southwest. The Caucasus Mountains, which stretch along a line 1,100 kilometres long between the Black Sea and Caspian Sea, protect the people not only from enemies but from outside influences in general. The Chechens therefore have retained many traditional customs and practices. As for Ingushetia, it was created in June 1992 as a result of the secession of the Ingush from Checheno-Ingushetia, where the Ingush had been very much in the minority. The decision to break away followed the declaration of

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independence by the Chechens in 1991 (see Matveena, 1999, pp. 91 & 92).

The Chechens and Ingush have lived where they are now since prehistoric times, and while the Mesopotamians,

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Persians, Turks, Mongols, Slavs and others have greatly influenced the region with their wars, conquests and trade, being fiercely proud and protective of their roots and background, the inhabitants of Chechnya have remained ethnically the same for thousands of years.

As for the languages spoken by the peoples, both Chechen and Ingush belong to the Nakh branch of the Nakh-Daghestanian, or Northeast Caucasian, language family and they can both understand each other.

Although the current generation of Chechens and Ingush are Muslims and what they practise is a localized Sufi tradition, they still preserve remnants of their pagan past in both their traditions and their folktales. Like many other tribal peoples, the Ingush and the Chechens believed in existence beyond the grave and this was reflected in their burial practices:

The belief was based on the evidence of eye-witnesses, of people who have visited the other world – very typical of many other peoples of the world. The other world is similar to this one; it is constructed with the imagination of

the Ingush and Chechens by analogy with their native land, the mountain region ... The other world is under the ground. It is ruled by the underground God, Eshtr or Eter. A man dies only when that God wishes to take him. The other world is called in Ingush Deli-Ailli, while this present world is Deli-Malkhli. The Ingush say, Deli-Malkhli was built in three years, Deli-Ailli was built in seven years.
(Dalgat, 2004, p. 25)

This, no doubt, partly explains why the numbers three and seven feature so prominently in the folktales from the

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region. (The fact that traditionally an Ingush or Chechen man is expected to know the names and birthplaces or origins of his paternal ancestors going back seven generations is yet another indication of the importance attached to this number).

These peoples did not view death as going to one's eternal rest, since the deceased in the other world were believed to do "all their work just exactly as in this world, and moreover simulta-

neously with the latter: when haymaking or harvesting finishes in this world, the work ceases simultaneously in the other world. The only difference is that the dead people work at nights, when the sun leaves the world of the living for the land of the dead” (Dalgat, 2004, p. 26).

According to folk belief, at the moment of death, on the boundary between this world and the other one, when the divine Eshtr has already taken half of a man's soul for himself, the dying man sees the other world with all those who have died before him. Those around him ... pose him questions like: "How is such and such a dead person living?" ... If the deceased had not been buried in the proper manner ... [in a burial vault that was regarded as the necessary dwelling for a dead person], then the dying man would usually reply that the dead man was troubled without a roof. If a memorial feast had not been made for the deceased, then

the dying man would say that the deceased had no food and was living on charity. The dying man would be given various errands to perform in the other world too
(Dalgat, 2004, p. 27).

As for the burial of a dead person, he was buried along with everything it was thought he might need on the road to, and in, the other world. And at one time in the distant past, this would have included both his horse and his wife (see Dalgat, 2004, p. 32).

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The Chechen and Ingush concepts of the soul had much in common with those of other tribal peoples, as we can see from the following tale.

One day lame Temir, whose son had been lost, called into a smithy. At that time the blacksmith was sleeping, and Temir,



Fly, original art, Lonnie Hanson

not wanting to interrupt his sleep, sat down next to him and began waiting for him to wake up. He noticed that a fly came out of the blacksmith's nose, crawled along the tongs across a basin to the anvil. Beyond the anvil there was a huge fissure; the fly descended into this fissure and stopped there quite a long time. Then it crawled back out and, after passing the anvil, crossed the basin by the same tongs, but while crossing it fell into the water. For a long time it was struggling in the water, with difficulty it crawled out on to the tongs, and went back into the nose of the blacksmith. "It seems I have been asleep for a long time!" "Yes, and I was sitting here all the time you were asleep". Temir replied. Temir said to the blacksmith, "Amuse me. I have lost my son, and I am in great grief. Tell me something". "But what can I tell you. After all, we cannot reach what I have just seen in my dream". Temir started asking him to relate his dream. The blacksmith began, "In my dream I crossed a big river and an iron mountain and went down into a large cave, where there was treasure of gold and silver; for a long time I stood there, not having the strength to tear my eyes away from the brilliance and the splendour. But being conscious that I had to return, I climbed out of the cave.

On the return journey when I was crossing the river, I fell off the bridge and almost drowned". Temir realised that the soul of the blacksmith had come out in the form of a fly. And guessing that there had to be a treasure in the smithy, he persuaded the blacksmith to give the place up to him. Then after digging up the place where the soul of the blacksmith had crawled, Temir exposed untold wealth, with which he collected an army and subjugated the whole world (Dalgat, 2004, p. 39-40).

This traditional folktale illustrates the ancient Ingush belief in the reality of dreams and that the soul for them was something material rather than an abstract spiritual concept. In fact, it demonstrates an understanding of the soul that is remarkably similar to that of the Siberian Buryats. There is a parallel Buryat tale in which the soul takes the form of a bee when it crawls out of

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someone's nose for an out-of-body experience (see Dalgat, 2004, p. 40).

What the people practised can be described as a form of polytheism. Among the Chechens there were two systems of gods – a cult of ancestors and folk heroes and the worship of the deified powers of nature.

The High or Supreme God, the King of all creation and the Father of all other gods is called Dela, Dyala or Deyla.... The relation of Dyala to the other gods is like that of a father to his children: everything of course depends on Dyala; what He wants, that has to happen; but the other gods also act independently, each in his own sphere” (Dalgat, 2004, p. 98).

The Chechens also had great respect for the one-eyed god Elta,

the patron of hunters, who rules over the forests and the wild animals. He is the king of the forests and of all its inhabitants, both the forest people and the beasts. Success in hunting completely depends on Elta In translation Elta means corn (breaded grain), and actually he performs two functions in parallel – the god of hunting and the god of the harvests’ (Dalgat, 2004, p. 91).



Symbol of Dela Malkh, the High God; image, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

The Sun and the Moon are also anthropomorphised in Chechen folklore.

The Sun and the Moon have mothers; the mother of the Sun, or Malkh-Nana, is called Azoy, and the mother of the Moon, or Betti-Nana, is called Kinch. The Chechens say that the Sun comes out of the sea in the morning, and sinks into it once more in the evening; when it comes up on to the horizon, something black separates from it; the people say that it is the sea pouring off the Sun’ (Dalgat, 2004, p. 92).

The Mother of the Winds was important as well. At the god’s command she would raise a terrible storm to blow away the goods of the dead who had sinned before God.

For mediation between the gods and people the Chechens developed a special type of priest or shaman known as a tsaynsag. In order to become a tsaynsag,

besides intelligence and good conduct and the respect of the population, the man also required the ability to interpret his dreams and to tell fortunes – qualities required from the Roman augurs, Siberian shamans and Indian priests. These qualities make the priest a real mediator between God and the people ... The priest learns the cause of bad fortune and the will of the gods by means of divination, and several methods of divination exist

*among the Chechens.
 ... In former times there were
 very many sorcerers and sorceresses
 throughout Chechnya; everybody
 treated them with respect and
 resorted to their mediation in
 every difficult situation such as
 illnesses or general misfortunes,
 asking them to find out the cause
 of the misfortune and advise them
 how to be saved from it. "They
 were the mentors of the people
 and, like the gods, faithfully gave
 interpretation of dreams and
 explained illnesses", said Ganzhyb;
 they were called dzyry'.*
 (Dalgat, 2004, pp. 84, 85).

Various forms of divination were practised, including the measuring of a shawl with the elbow, winding cotton wool round a spoon, making use of stones, mirrors, sheep's bones and also by consulting Arab books (see Dalgat, 2004, p. 86).

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Of all the Chechens' gods, the most mighty and honoured was Seli the Thunderer. In the Caucasus Mountains, the land of thunderstorms, this god found suitable soil for himself. In the mountains the most terrible phenomenon is the thunderstorm with thunder and lightning from them the Chechen has to suffer many problems of all kinds; every minute both his field and

his very life suffer dangers from them. It is not surprising that Seli is held in such honour by the Chechens. He is the most terrible and most capricious god for them, and he has to be propitiated more than the others. But at the same time he is just, and punishes only those who deserve it ... All the Chechens honour him equally, and one could say

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that even all of the inhabitants of the Caucasus Mountains (of course under various names) he is a god, not of one community or tribe, but of them all ... One can judge the strength of the cult of Seli by the fact that they consider a man killed by lightning (Seli's firebrand) as blessed, and he is buried quite separately from other dead people" (Dalgat, 2004, pp. 94, 95).

A sacred place for the Chechens was the domestic hearth, believed to be chosen by God himself and so inviolable.

A terrible retribution follows any insult or disrespect towards it. The fire, the chain, the cauldron and hearth enjoy the highest respect in the home: the chain and the cauldron are respected as symbols of the domestic hearth, while the fire [whose deity is known as Seli] is an indissoluble component of it. Even the ashes, and soot on the ceiling, are considered sacred, thanks to its connection with the hearth
 (Dalgat, 2004, p. 53).

Apart from the fact that it was considered to be sacred, the family hearth, in concentrating the members of the family round itself, also had an “organising” importance:

Its cult sanctifies the power of the head of the family, as a devotee who brings sacrifices to the gods. Its influence [helps to explain] ...the sacred character of the family as a community ..., and the sanctity and inviolability of a guest as a temporary member of the family”
(Dalgat, 2004, p. 55).

And anyone who visits Chechnya will have the opportunity to experience firsthand the people’s legendary hospitality.

In view of the fact that the peoples clearly believed in the existence of at

least one other reality, that it was possible for adepts to undertake soul journeys, and in the efficacy of divination, to regard what was practised by the priests

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as a form of shamanism would surely be a reasonable assumption to make, even though the term itself would of course have been totally alien to them. As to whether the priests actually entered trance states in the course of their work, though, remains unclear. However, given the popularity of the mystic dance among followers of the Sufi *tariqat* or religious path, it would seem that people in the region have a natural propensity for doing so, which would suggest that even though we lack concrete evidence, it was very likely to have been the case.

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