



Memory of The Mountains: Centuries-Old Cultural Heritage in the North Caucasus

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Abstract. In the contemporary period, instability is observed in the ethno-political situation of the peoples of the North Caucasus, which is characterized not only by the region's socio-economic conditions but also by socio-cultural processes. Recently, the issue of historical memory has gained relevance in the socio-cultural life of the region, and the cultural heritage that local communities have formed over centuries has become the subject of numerous studies. The main aim of this article is to examine the cultural heritage created by the Ossetians living in the mountainous areas of the North Caucasus throughout history, to determine whether cultural or historical memory predominates for them, and to assess the impact of these memory mechanisms on socio-cultural and ethno-political processes in the contemporary period. Additionally, the study addresses the reactivation of ethnic identity in the era of digital transformation, as well as traditions and their preservation mechanisms. The research indicates that historical memory plays a significant role in the dynamics of socio-cultural processes. This situation compels each ethnic group in the North Caucasus to protect its national identity and historical memory, which increases ethno-political risks in the region. The study shows that strengthening unity and peace among the ethnic and religious groups of the North Caucasus, including the Ossetians, as well as activating cooperation mechanisms, is essential. Directing the historical consciousness of the region's inhabitants from historical memory toward cultural memory can help achieve these objectives. The article employs historical, descriptive, analytical, observational, and comparative qualitative methods.

Keywords: *North Caucasus peoples, Ossetians, cultural heritage, historical memory, cultural memory, ethno-political situation, socio-cultural experience*

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1. Introduction

In addition to the rationally managed material resources of mountain-dwelling peoples, there exist intangible assets of exceptional significance, their cultural heritage. Without the intensive use of this heritage, it is impossible to confidently speak about the sustainable development of local communities. The intangible cultural heritage of each mountain people forms the foundation of their national identity as well as the spiritual connection between generations and eras. Undoubtedly, in the present day, intangible cultural heritage continues to play a key role in shaping the cultures of all ethnic groups.

Customs, rituals, ceremonial practices, performing arts, and knowledge and skills related to traditional crafts recognized as part of the cultural heritage by both communities and individuals are closely linked to tangible and natural heritage, transmitted from one generation to the next, and help foster a sense of identity and continuity among members of an ethnic group. Periods of stagnation, followed by notorious reconstruction, the collapse of the USSR, shifts in the sociopolitical landscape, and the transition to a market economy, all of which inevitably negatively impacted the social and moral environment. People's moral standards significantly declined, and interpersonal relationships deteriorated. Many cultural values and



customs, developed and refined over centuries and millennia, were distorted or deformed, while a culture of money and consumerism literally engulfed society.

It is necessary to attempt the revival of moral values embedded in folk customs that, for various reasons, were forgotten at certain stages and are no longer transmitted from generation to generation, but can be effectively utilized by the current generation. Many values formed in the depths of community life align with ethical demands and are worthy not only of revival but also of further development. It is certainly mistaken to assume that everything forgotten is bad, and that only what survives the passage of time is good.

There is a pressing need to revive traditional family and household rituals, restore moral values, and re-establish traditional etiquette governing relationships between elders and youth, men and women. This is because the element that makes a nation a nation and determines an individual's belonging to a particular people is primarily their national identity and language. Today, it is no longer sufficient for any ethnic group to rely solely on the national heritage inherited from the past. It is important to recognize that preserving heritage does not mean limiting ourselves to it. Skillfully and creatively learning from the best practices of other people and drawing lessons from one another is a reliable path toward progress and moral enrichment.

It is vital to protect and cultivate qualities that define humanity: compassion, nobility, generosity, selflessness, honesty, patriotism, humility, and courtesy, as well as the customs that shape them. These values have always played a key role in the upbringing of generations and serve as useful regulators of human relations.

When considering sustainable development in mountainous regions, one cannot overlook the unique aspect of the intangible heritage of mountain peoples as an ecological culture. This aspect can and should serve as an important tool in forming a new ecological ideal. In particular, elements of the traditional ecological culture of the Ossetians, shaped over centuries under the conditions of forced isolation in harsh mountain valleys, serve as an exemplary case in this regard.

2. The National and Ecological Culture of the Ossetians in Mountainous Areas

The historically established way of life of the Ossetians fostered sustainable behavioral patterns aimed at maintaining a balance between human activities and nature. Throughout the lives of Ossetian communities, all efforts within the communal model were directed toward preserving both natural and economic equilibrium. This model ensured the harmonious coexistence of natural and ethno-social systems.

Like many other mountain peoples, the Ossetians' national culture developed on the basis of human nature interaction. The extreme conditions of the mountainous Caucasus taught communities to live in accordance with the laws of the environment. Accordingly, the national culture was primarily built on fundamental principles such as labor, a caring attitude toward nature, rational use of natural resources, morality, and respect for individuals as carriers of popular wisdom.

Ossetian folk wisdom reflects immutable universal values, including moral norms and principles of coexistence with nature. Ossetians have a deep and ancient history of human connection with nature. Because their ancestors served nature as a second home; they recognized its value and treated it with care. At the same time, nature acted as both instructor and guardian, developing diligence and vigilance while helping them survive in adverse conditions.

The specific climatic and geographical conditions in which the national identity of mountain communities developed have had a great impact on their traditional lifestyles. The uniqueness of the environment has influenced many areas of daily life, culture, and psychology.

Agronomic, meteorological, and astronomical information, as well as everyday philosophy and ethics, were all strongly related to folk wisdom. The Ossetians created their own ecological knowledge



systems by developing a deeper perception of objective reality through an understanding of the essence of natural events and processes. (Tsogoeva, 2007, p.97).

Therefore, harmony with nature became a sign of personal perfection through the diligent actions of adults. People were able to observe and interpret nature, as well as intentionally change it. By internalizing folk taboos and ecological rules, mountain dwellers became carriers of ethical life principles.

In agricultural production, knowledge and skills in performing various labor tasks, which depended on the “caprices” of nature, were vital. Accordingly, the process of acquiring knowledge developed a specific approach aimed at understanding the diversity of nature and explaining natural phenomena. Studying soil relief and familiarizing themselves with flora and fauna were closely linked to farming practices, which in turn stimulated the development of traditional mountain medicine.

The harsh climatic conditions of the mountains also contributed to the emergence of various superstitions in Ossetian thought; these were characterized more by mystical uncertainty than by systematic logic. Among those who migrated to the lowlands, these superstitions were preserved to a lesser degree.

2.1. Nature Cults: Religious and Mystical Reverence for Natural Objects

One distinctive feature of the Ossetians’ national culture is the existence of nature conservation traditions formed on the basis of religious and mystical reverence for certain natural objects. Like other peoples, the religious worldview of the Ossetians developed over centuries, incorporating several beliefs that emerged in different periods and ethnic contexts. The most significant of these are purely local beliefs that originated in the Caucasus and share similarities with the faiths of neighboring peoples.

In later periods, Christianity and Islam clearly absorbed elements of these earlier nature cults, which were integrated into the new religious systems in an acceptable form. Natural objects chosen as tribal totems were excluded from economic use: if it was an animal, hunting it was partially or completely prohibited, and approaching its habitat was considered taboo.

Another important aspect of Ossetian nature preservation culture is the tradition of worshiping natural objects known as *dzuars*. The shared reverence for these objects among both Muslims and Christians was the result of long-term peaceful coexistence and interreligious interaction. The Ossetians use the word *dzuar* to mean a sacred place, deity, or protective spirit, and the same term is also applied to the specific locations of religious veneration. This dual meaning is explained by the belief that a particular spirit resides in the place. These sites are usually located outside village boundaries, often in highland areas.

Deities associated with human economic activity agriculture and animal husbandry were of particular importance. Based on origin and distribution, Ossetian *dzuars* are classified into pan Ossetian, community, and family types. Among the pan-Ossetian *dzuars*, the oldest cults combine Iranian and ancient Caucasian elements, widely reflected in mythology and religious songs. One of the most famous agricultural *dzuars* is *Uatsilla*, the god of grain and fertility, who was also considered the protector of lightning. Annual sacrifices of oxen and rams and ceremonial feasts known as *kuvd* were held at temples dedicated to *Uatsilla*. In many locations, especially in the lowlands, *Uatsilla*’s festival was celebrated before plowing began and was called *Xori-bon* (“Day of the Harvest”) (Gostiev, 2010, p.123). In the Ossetian pantheon, *Uasturci* holds a special place. Believed to reside in the sky, this deity observes and hears earthly events and serves as the protector of the poor and oppressed. Women did not directly name him, instead referring to him metaphorically as *lagti dzuar* (“protector of men”).

Falvara is another significant divinity who protects tiny animals, primarily sheep. The statement "May your flocks increase" expresses one of the cherished wishes of Ossetians. Every village had a *kuvd* to celebrate *Falvara*'s day near his shrine every spring, during which each home brought three pies, *araka* (spirits), *dzykka* (cheese dishes), or beer. Animal sacrifice was prohibited on this day.



Afsati, the god of hunting and protector of deer, oxen, goats, boars, and others, along with Donbett, the ruler of the water realm, are also ancient and widely worshiped deities. Only men participated in the autumn ceremony honoring Donbett, where the village elder offered prayers for abundant water, favorable weather, and plentiful fish.

One of the oldest cults is the mother goddess cult, later sanctified by Christian clergy in the Middle Ages as Mady Maryam (Mother Mary). The widespread presence of shrines dedicated to her in almost every village attests to the cult's extensive reach.

The supreme entity in the Ossetian pantheon is Xutsau, to whom all major and minor gods, saints, and spirits are subordinate. Prayers generally begin with his name, and he is invoked in aspirations. The religious beliefs of the Ossetians place a strong emphasis on pastoral and agricultural cults.

Several local religious traditions have helped preserve mountain ecosystems. The veneration of sacred hills, trees, woods, stones, and water sources, along with restrictions on their commercial use, has facilitated the preservation of certain natural places in North Ossetia to the present day.

Recently, terms such as "efficient use of nature", "nature conservation zones", and "ecological thinking" have been widely used. Initially, these may seem to be modern topics. The origins of wildlife conservation trace back to history.

Throughout history, many societies have designated certain areas, such as mountains, forests, caves, and springs, where economic activity is prohibited, and access is restricted. Often, these places are protected by selected guardians.

The establishment of these "primitive reserves" was mostly motivated by beliefs in religion rather than environmental concerns. The deities' and spirits' actions and ancestor worship were tied to sacred natural sites. Because of their exceptional natural beauty or unique tranquility, several locations were declared sacred.

In addition to this, it can be argued that a fundamental function of the state is to establish conditions that safeguard and enhance the cultural identity and intangible heritage of mountain communities.

2.2. Measures for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage

In 1989, Russia became a party to the "Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage" established by UNESCO. In accordance with this Convention, States Parties must guarantee the protection of the cultural and natural heritage on their territory, implement sound policies in this regard, establish appropriate administrative frameworks, and take administrative, financial, scientific, legal, and technical measures.

The political, socio-economic, and cultural transformations that have taken place in Russia over the past few decades have shown how significant innovative processes have become. Nevertheless, the state has partially lost its position as the main initiator of cultural heritage protection initiatives and is currently not investing enough in their implementation. (Kul'turnoe nasledie narodov Rossiiskoi Federatsii, 2009, p.66).

Effective management decisions at the regional and local levels are made more difficult by the absence of objective data on the state of cultural heritage monuments. Consequently, it is essential to establish cultural heritage preservation initiatives, primarily at the regional and municipal levels.

There are about 70 large and small communities in the mountainous regions of North Ossetia, whose population constitutes only 2-2.5% of the total population of the republic. Unfortunately, several mountain villages, each with its own unique historical and cultural environment, are in decline.



Certain cultural aspects might disappear as a result of the loss of carriers of intangible cultural heritage. Therefore, it is crucial to plan ethnographic and folklore expeditions. It is strongly advised to engage students from North Ossetian State University and other educational institutions in this endeavor.

The outcomes of these excursions should be shared with the general public rather than being kept for academic purposes. This can encourage the growth of ecological tourism and intangible cultural heritage. Involving youth in these procedures would also aid in addressing the lack of subject-matter experts in the country. Cultural memory can be strengthened by schoolchildren conducting studies and teaching about the history, culture, and folklore of their village and region; encouraging genealogy investigations; and recording family histories.

Intangible cultural legacy has social value in addition to cultural significance. It is crucial for promoting civic qualities and patriotism among young people as well as preventing harmful social occurrences. Consequently, without paying close attention to local cultural assets, rural communities cannot prosper socioeconomically.

3. The Transformation of Traditional Culture in Modern Society

The existence of traditional culture in modern society has a historical trajectory closely associated with the evolution of modernization ideology. Initially, this theory adopted the position that tradition could not survive in modern conditions, but over time, it evolved into the modernization paradigm. Its more complex form acknowledges ethnic cultures' capacity for innovation.

Historical studies now include discussions on the compatibility of tradition and innovation. Nobody denies tradition's adaptability or society's ability to accept and revive it these days.

"When traditional societies are introduced into a vast foreign cultural space, attempts to 'destroy' tradition often conflict with the principle of 'cultural integrity', which preserves customs and ensures painless adaptation to innovations." (Mironov, 2005, p.8). Concepts of traditional cultural structures that were created using the framework of the theory of cultural diffusion are significant in this respect. These structures are robust and comparatively resistant to change since they are made up of the values and living norms that uphold social identity and transmit it to subsequent generations. In the context of the North Caucasus, the core-periphery model was substantiated by S.A. Razdolsky. By identifying a stable cultural core within Adyghe culture, Razdolsky developed the core-periphery model for Adyghe culture, treating the cultural core as a central, consistent, and stable component: "this core influences the periphery, determines its cultural type, and keeps it cohesive" (Razdolsky, 2012, p.213).

The customs and traditions of the North Caucasus peoples have been validated over centuries under various external cultural influences, adapting to each new historical period. Efforts to eradicate "harmful" folk customs were accompanied by the establishment of the Russian administration, which targeted costly customs that raised concerns about the population's social conditions. Educated and influential representatives of local peoples were actively involved in the campaign to eliminate destructive practices in weddings, funerals, and other customs. K.L. Khetagurov urged reconsideration of the appropriateness of such propaganda, arguing that "public judgments cannot destroy what has been created and preserved over centuries... demanding that the Ossetians consciously eliminate 'barbaric and destructive customs' is like trying to make a Chinese man wear a European tailcoat" (Khetagurov, 2000, p.48). To reject the practice of bride abduction, it was necessary to cultivate individuals who rejected class discrimination and recognized equal rights for men and women. To abandon funeral rituals, people would have to cease believing that "every deceased person in the afterlife needs food and drink and that it is a sacred duty for the deceased's relatives to provide these in prescribed ways" (Khetagurov, 2000, p.48). Khetagurov considered fines and other punishments meaningless, as such policies "anger fanatics, force them to resort to secret rituals, and doubly punish those accused of violating the law" (Khetagurov, 2000, pp.48–49).

Not all intellectuals understood that familiarizing their people with European culture and



education required that individuals first comprehend the value of their own cultural heritage to find their proper place in a civilized society. Among those opposing traditional culture, some sincerely believed that certain customs were harmful and needed elimination as a duty to their people, while others acted to satisfy the administration and advance their careers.

Some intellectuals believed that only education and enlightenment could liberate traditional society from “harmful” customs. Experience, however, demonstrated the ambiguity of this claim: high levels of education and culture in contemporary society did not prevent the emergence of revivalist ideas and practices.

Historical and economic conditions shape tradition and cannot remain unchanged amidst the dynamics of social development. Ancient customs, such as memorial competitions for the deceased or the cutting of widows’ hair, disappeared not because they were forbidden, but because they no longer corresponded to people’s living conditions and worldview.

Tradition also evolves under external cultural influences. For instance, under the influence of the Orthodox Church, innovations appeared in funerals, memorial rites, and cemetery culture: fences were erected around graves, priests were incorporated into rituals, and so forth. These innovations also developed in the context of conflict with the Church: priests complained about locals violating fasting rules and bringing traditional drinks like “araka” instead of wine to the church. Ossetians resented priests who destroyed worship sites or interfered with ritual performance. As a result, eclectic traditions emerged, such as church candles appearing in ceremonies honoring sacred trees and bushes.

Before the revolution, the practice of bride abduction had become a tradition. This practice reemerged at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries due to economic crises following reforms and the population’s growing inability to afford wedding expenses. Its resurgence is again linked to social and economic transformations.

During the Soviet political regime, the “remnants of the past” were once more targeted in ideological struggles, obstructing the formation of a unified community, the “Soviet people.” According to V.S. Uarziati, “the pre-revolutionary officials’ fight against ‘harmful folk customs’ cannot be compared to the activities of Soviet party officials who boldly attacked the cultural heritage of the people” (Uarziati, 1995, p.8). Alongside officials, scholars, women’s and children’s organizations, and civic groups were mobilized to change the consciousness of those creating a new society. This phase of eliminating traditions was particularly severe due to its combination with strong anti-religious propaganda: the close intertwining of religious and ethnic traditions determined the effectiveness of these destructive initiatives.

However, as many ethnologists note, “the integration of the traditional culture of the Kabardin, Balkar, Ossetian, and other North Caucasus peoples into the all-Union cultural domain during the Soviet period did not lead to their disappearance; the protective mechanisms of these distinct cultures preserved many traditions alongside innovations” (Kuchmezova, 2003, p.31). Traditional culture that survived the Soviet period retained many of its positions in material, social, and spiritual domains.

Nevertheless, Soviet national policies damaged the cultural heritage of regional peoples. Many researchers associate this harm with the disruption of intergenerational connections (Volkova, 1982, pp.4–5), the replacement of traditions with surrogates that distorted the original meanings and symbols of moral culture, and the disruption of mechanisms for transmitting traditional culture to younger generations (Uarziati, 1995, pp.7–8).

Historical experience shows that the cultural inviolability validated by the social experiences of many generations of North Caucasus peoples ensured that tradition adapted to new economic and social conditions and preserved traditional culture for modern society.



3.1. The Re-actualization of Ethnic Identity in the Digital Age

In the North Caucasus, ethnic identity remains an important point of reference, especially for the younger generation. In July 2023, the North Ossetian Institute of Humanities and Social Studies named after V.I. Abayev conducted a sociological study titled “Core Values and Identities of Student Youth in the North Caucasus Federal District.” Preliminary results showed that ethnic identity is dominant within the system of personal identity-57%.

Today, ethnic identity manifests in new forms, often expressed visually online to demonstrate affiliation with a particular traditional culture. People share their participation in national holidays, old photographs of famous ancestors, stories about their native villages, relatives, and prominent figures of their ethnic group, as well as publications about various historical and cultural events. Recently, there has been a growing interest in Ossetian folk musical instruments; orchestras have been established, and children are beginning to perform traditional music.

Various apps, comics, children’s books, dictionaries, and popular cartoons are being translated into the Ossetian language. Supportive signage and advertising in the native language are also appearing. Young people achieve recognition more quickly than their predecessors by promoting online projects and public appeals that encourage love and protection of their language. As a result of this social influence, speaking Ossetian has become fashionable.

“Increasing attention to the native language as a form of presenting ethnic belonging has allowed researchers to identify it as an independent ethnic movement” (Volokitina, 2017, p.23). This manifests in various forms and at different levels. State programs are being developed to preserve and promote the native language, schools based on multilingual education principles are opening, and children are being taught Ossetian in kindergartens.

Alongside academic research, the “people’s history” is developing and increasingly occupying media space (Kanukova, 2021, p.196). Social media today is an important source of information about customs and traditions, but the quality of this information raises concerns. Young entrepreneurs and civic activists often rely on pseudo-scientific “research” filled with myths and fantasies, transmitting misleading information to the next generation.

Moreover, it must be acknowledged that historical and cultural heritage is also a focus of attention for destructive forces seeking to use it for provocations that threaten state stability. Distinguishing between provocateurs and those sincerely believing in their sufficient knowledge to publish public statements or books can be difficult (Kanukova, 2021, p.198).

The academic community must combat the falsification of history and culture, the dissemination of disinformation, and the transmission of various fabrications to younger generations instead of genuine cultural heritage. It should also promote the revival and development of historical traditions. However, numerous monographs, encyclopedias, articles, and other publications rarely reach beyond the scholarly community. Inaccessible to today’s broad “target audience,” these works fail to solve contemporary problems or popularize scientific knowledge, highlighting the need for a more rational presentation as a renewed media product.

Applied research using advanced technologies that enable the compilation of a unified information database of accumulated sources and studies becomes a critical tool in the current context.

In this vein, the project “Innovative Resources of Historical and Cultural Heritage” was developed to preserve and develop historical and cultural heritage. Drawing on monographic studies spanning generations in history, ethnology, archaeology, folklore, linguistics, and Ossetian artistic culture, as well as comprehensive encyclopedic works, archives, and field expedition materials, and audio, photo, and video collections from scientific archives, the project aims to present comprehensive, scientifically grounded, and systematized historical and cultural data about cultural heritage objects. This approach



helps to understand the meaning and essence of the original tradition, track its developmental dynamics, identify potential future prospects in contemporary society, and support the development of tourism, preservation, and promotion of folk crafts, and the implementation of social, educational, and cultural projects.

Encouraging young people with the skills and interest to creatively promote ethnic cultural assets in the context of folk culture not only supports entrepreneurship but also contributes to the moral health of modern society.

The “ethno-cultural renaissance,” the mobilization of ethnic identity, and the re-actualization of tradition in contemporary society are consequences of globalization. This process highlights the inconsistency of existing theories about the destroyed fundamental elements of traditional culture and clearly demonstrates the need to reconsider the relevance of traditional culture for modern society.

Traditional culture is a flexible and dynamic system that adapts to each historical period, forms psychologically comfortable mechanisms for its bearers, and aligns with historically conditioned social circumstances. Loyalty to tradition as a means of expressing ethnic identity retains its relevance in modern society, particularly among young people. Youth are creating new forms and mechanisms for self-realization, primarily occurring within the online cultural sphere

Modern practices of re-actualizing tradition can yield positive outcomes, but may also result in unforeseen negative consequences. For example, falsifications and pseudo-scientific or provocative interpretations presented online as “original cultural heritage” and transmitted to future generations fall into this category.

In the context of broad and unsystematic engagement with traditional culture, it is necessary to popularize scientific knowledge in an accessible manner and systematically identify the innovative potential and modernization opportunities of cultural heritage.

4. Conclusion

The cultural heritage of mountain peoples, particularly the Ossetians of the North Caucasus, represents a complex, multi-layered, and enduring cultural system that has developed over centuries under challenging historical conditions. Harsh geographical environments, community solidarity, the principle of intergenerational responsibility, and ethical behavioral norms constitute the core structural elements of this culture. Community institutions, ceremonial culture, oral traditions, heroic epics, and collective memory mechanisms have played a crucial role in maintaining social stability.

Ossetian cultural heritage is not limited to folklore and ceremonial practices; it also functions as a system for regulating social relations, strengthening the family institution, and fostering a sense of public responsibility. Despite historical trials, these cultural codes have been preserved in collective consciousness and have adapted to changing political regimes while maintaining their viability.

In this regard, the cultural heritage of mountain peoples should be viewed not as static but as a living social organism with inherent order and value systems that allow for renewal and adaptation.

The preservation of traditional culture should not be confined to nostalgia or symbolic propaganda. It must be approached as a strategic developmental direction that requires both scientifically grounded methods and institutional support. In particular, under conditions of digital transformation, the systematization of cultural heritage, the creation of reliable information platforms based on verified sources, and the active involvement of youth in this process are of critical importance.

The sustainability of cultural heritage depends on its ability to adapt to changing socio-economic environments. Tradition survives not only because it is preserved but also because it acquires new functions and aligns with the demands of contemporary life. Therefore, coordinated efforts among state policies, the academic community, and civic initiatives are essential to both the preservation and



development of traditional culture.

In conclusion, traditional culture is not an alternative to modern society but an integral part of it. It remains a vital resource for strengthening social cohesion, fostering a sense of identity, and preserving cultural diversity, and it must be taken into account in future development strategies.

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