

Etseg Din – Caucasian paganism from Ossetia

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Etseg Din – or in Ossetian Ætsæg Din (Æцæг Дин) – is the religion of the Ossetians based on traditional folklore, such as the epic Nart, old traditions and costumes. Etseg Din is practised by 30% of the population of North Ossetia and is quite common in South Ossetia, an independent state with at about 50,000 people. The Ossetian word “ætsæg” means “exact” or “right”, the word “din” can either be translated with “faith” or “religion”. The word “din” is probably not of Ossetian origin, but assumed to be from Persian. “Din” is a widespread word in many other Caucasian languages, such as Chechen ¹.

Alongside with the Tat, they are one of only a few Iranian people in the Caucasian mountains, as most mountain people speak either a Caucasian or a Turkic language.

Etseg Din is a monotheistic religion, with XwytSau (Хуыцау) as god and creator. The word also equals the meaning for “heaven” or “sky”. Therefore, God equals the sky.

There are several respectful forms to call God. One is Yštyr XwytSau (Ыштыр Хуыцау) meaning “Great God” (Велики Бог). The name goes back to even pre-Greek times, when people settling in the Caucasus worshipped a god called Astarat or Ishtar ². As XwytSau is the creator of the universe and all beings in Ossetian faith, he is also called Duneskænæg (Дунескæнæг) meaning “creator of the universe”. Other respectful names are Meskænæg XwytSau (Мескæнаег Хуыцау) and Styr XwytSau (Стыр Хуыцау), the latter one meaning “the Great God” (Большой Бог). Sometimes it is also translated as “god of the gods”, however Ossetian belief has no more gods anymore. God can be found in each person. It is the human conscience that prevents bad or unworthy actions and as it is guided by God, there is the believe that God can be found in everyone’s conscious.

XwytSau is honored in a special tradition. To honor him, Ossetians put three round cakes with cheese and Ossetian beer (made after a purity tradition) on a table and gather around it. For this reason, the word for “toast” and “prayer” is the same ³. The ceremony is done at special days, such as holidays. On a holiday called Dzuary Bon (Дзуары Бон) ⁴ – the “day of the cross” – believers gift him a sacrificial offering and prepare the above mentioned three pies and beer. The one who is leading the prayer has to meet certain prescriptions. In the family when honoring him, the eldest man speaks the prayer, according to Æhdau (Æгъдау) – the moral etiquette of the Ossetian people. According to this etiquette, his respectful behavior towards God in the prayer should represent the whole community and therefore he has to keep sure that wise and respectful behavior is practised.

On Ossetian holidays, the chosen who had to speak the prayer ⁵, in Ossetian called Dzuary Læg (Дзуары лæг) ⁶, had to meet the following prescriptions: he has to be clean and is not allowed to have sex for two months, he is not allowed to act bad or even think of something bad.

If the chosen one meets this requirements, he can be dzuary læg and pray for the cakes and the beer. According to the etiquette, every community member has to wear clean clothes, take baths and keep clean and therefore everybody should try to meet the requirements. However, while the others “just” have to try, the dzuary læg has not only the try, but the duty to keep the rules himself.

Although there is only one God, he has several “supporters”. They are angels, archangels, patrons and intermediaries. Many of them are from the epic Nart, such as the Dauagi (Дауаги), which are the lowest spirits in the hierarchy of spirits. Although often being described as supernatural, none of them equals God. They just help the believer on the road of seeking the right way and accompanies him through the spiritual journey.

The Ossetian religion is very popular and far more widespread than it’s neighbour indigenous religions. A huge revival movement of Ossetian paganism appeared in the 1980s, however, certain traditions lived with unbroken continuity. Ossetian religion never disappeared completely and although many traditions seem to have declined in the Soviet era, Ossetian religion was always practised to a more or lesser degree. In the 1980s, a strong national identity revived, and with this identity, the Ossetian religion gained new popularity. It could probably be said that nowadays Etseg Din is a reformed version of the old Ossetian paganism and folklore. As many other Caucasian people, too, Ossetians never gave up their roots and kept up their moral etiquette and societal living, no matter to which state or country they belonged from time to time. Therefore, besides folklore, the etiquette and moral ethics of the nation always plays a strong role in the Caucasian society, and so it also does with Ossetian people and their Etseg Din, that tries to fit perfectly in the moral ethics and the well-established values. Etseg Din however does not persist as an isolated religion. It gained some influence of Christianity (the most influential religion in Ossetia besides folklore), such as worshipping Saint George as patron of Ossetia – represented in a patron called Uastyrdži (Уастырджи).

Ossetian ethnic religion contains the spirit of a whole nation and its traditions. And no matter which religion an Ossetian might have, they always remember their roots and their origin and never forget to respect Æhdau.

Notes:

1. Мациев А.Г.: Чеченско-Русский словарь/ Нохчийн-Оьрсийн словарь, Москва 1961, стр. 147: ‘дин = вера, религия’
2. To the word stem of Ishtar, compare Æстыртæ, Æстыр, Ыштыр.
3. In Ossetian: Къуырд (куывд)
4. Also spelled “Dzwary Bon” in Latin letters, since “u” and “w” share the same letter in Ossetian language. The reason for this is that when the letter “u” is followed by an “a”, it becomes a [v]-sound.
5. The Dzuary Læg changes every year, so every year there is an election to decide who will be the dzuary læg in the following year
6. Миллер, Всеволод Ф.: Осетинской-Русско-Немецкий словарь/ Ossetisch-Russisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch (I), Ленинград 1927, стр. 535: ‘дзўар = “крест, святой, божество, святилище, оспа; Kreuz, der Heilige, Gottheit, Heiliger Ort, Pocken”’; Миллер, Всеволод Ф.: Осетинской-Русско-Немецкий словарь/ Ossetisch-Russisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch (II), Ленинград 1929, стр. 756: “лæг = человек, мужчина, муж, мужественный; Mensch, Mann, Männlich”’; the word “dzuary læg” is therefore made up of the word for “cross” or “holy place” (dzuar) and “man” (læg) and therefore describes the man who prays at the holy place.

Timo Schmitz (born 1993) is a journalist and author of several books. He mainly focusses on languages, cultures, politics and religions and did several researches on the Caucasian conflicts. In 2015, he published “Tschetschenien und seine Rolle im Kaukasus”, a book about Chechnya and its role in the Caucasus region.

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