

ISLAMIC VALUES IN EVERYDAY LIFE OF NORTH CAUCASIANS IN FRANCE

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ABSTRACT

The author has identified the place of Islamic values in everyday realities of the North Caucasians in France, an effort of great practical importance. On the one hand, we learn how Caucasian migrants live in Europe; on the other, it helps obtain more specific ideas of how radicalization and criminalization of the younger generation of Caucasian migrants in France can be avoided. The article is based on new (2015-

The article has been prepared within the project of the RNF "Mechanisms of Ensuring Civil Harmony in Multiethnic States: Russian and Foreign Experience," No. 15-18-00099 II headed by E. Filippova.

2016) field ethnographic materials gathered in France that confirmed that the North Caucasian diaspora is divided into active (practicing) and passive (so-called ethnic) Muslims who practically never communicate. The very natural desire to belong to a community has brought Northern Caucasians to the Muslim milieu of Europe; they become

Islamists or even radical Islamists. In case of the North Caucasian migrants, Islam serves as a psychological instrument of sorts that helps them adjust to life in France. Due to a stronger role of Islam in the life of the North Caucasian diaspora, its national identity is being gradually dissolved in religious identity.

KEYWORDS: *Islam, North Caucasian peoples, France, adaptation, French culture, society, religious identity, national identity.*

Introduction

In the course of the 20th and 21st centuries, Europe admitted several waves of Caucasian migrants. In the 1990s, an impressive outflow from the Caucasus was caused by political (the war in Chechnia) and social-economic circumstances (crisis in Russia and the Transcaucasian states).¹ France has become one of the host countries for migrants. Islam, the prevailing religious confession among the North Caucasians, figures prominently in the process of adaptation to the French lifestyle, culture and society. European ideologists of multiculturalism and European leaders are convinced that sooner or later North Caucasian migrants, and migrants from other countries for that matter, will gradually accept European values and European cultures. Nothing of the sort has happened so far: as a rule, the efforts of North Caucasian migrants to become “one of us” in Europe fail; while new adaptation mechanisms appear.

Today, the Muslim population of Europe has reached the figure of 15 to 20 million. Divided by their ethnic, economic, social and political differences, the Muslims of Western Europe are aware of the fact that they are members of a single community (due to the specifics of integration of contemporary Islam) and are perceived as such by the indigenous populations of host countries.² A different trend observed in Europe is especially obvious in Germany and Poland: the radicalized Chechen diaspora that is fighting for the independence of Chechnia has developed a mechanism of propaganda of certain (mainly radical, but not Islamic) political ideas among the North Caucasians (Chechens in the first place). The “Studies without Borders” educational program, implemented in Germany, is one of such instruments. Chechens, including those who live in the Chechen Republic, receive a higher education without leaving their homeland. The program, which promotes the idea of an independent Chechnia, is an instrument of political brainwashing.³ This does strongly affect the social and political situation in the Northern Caucasus.

Today, the North Caucasian diaspora is present in many European countries: France, Germany, Poland and others. Its numerical strength in France is practically impossible to establish for many reasons: first, North Caucasian migrants in Europe are registered as citizens of Russia and are treated

¹ See: L. Vinatier, *Tchéchènes: une diaspora en guerre*, Pétra, Paris, 2013.

² See: E.A. Ivanchenko, “Musulmanskaya obshchina vo Frantsii: problemy religioznoy i kulturnoy integratsii,” *Vestnik Mogilevskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*, No. 2-3, 2009.

³ [<http://www.studieren-ohne-grenzen.org/ru>].

as such by immigration statistics. According to the Cultural and Spiritual Association of the Caucasians of Strasbourg, there are about 10 thousand Chechens and Ingushes in this city.

So far, the adaptive processes of North Caucasians in all European countries, in France in particular, and their specifics received little or no attention from the academic community. I relied on the field ethnographic materials gathered in France in 2015-2016 to analyze the specifics of Islamic life of North Caucasian émigrés in France and the place Islamic values occupy in their life.⁴ I have anonymously interviewed about 40 Kabardians, Balkars, Ossets, Chechens and Ingushes between 15 and 45 years of age; as a rule the social status of migrants in France is not high.

Religious Life of the Northern Caucasus Reproduced in France

As could be expected, the North Caucasian Muslim immigrants in France tend to reproduce the religious Islamic life as they knew it in Russia. On the whole, it is a combination of two lifestyles: the youth of Daghestan, Chechnia and Ingushetia, the so-called “practicing Muslims” and most of the migrants from the North-Western and Central Caucasus (Adygei, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia and North Ossetia-Alania), the so-called ethnic Muslims who observe the main Islamic holydays (Kurban-Bayram and Uraza-Bayram) but do not attend Friday services and never pray at home five times a day as is required by their religion.⁵ The North Caucasian diaspora in France is no exception.

Reproduction of the specifics of North Caucasian religious life calls new trends to life: some of the ethnic Muslims become practicing Muslims, while others appeal to Islam much less than they did it at home. In France, Adyghe, Balkars and some of the Ingushes who speak of themselves as Muslims do not attend mosques for many years. They randomly observe the main Islamic holidays and rarely sacrifice a ram (as is required by the Islamic tradition) on Kurban-Bayram (the feast of the sacrifice): first of all, it is not that easy to buy a live sheep in France; secondly, the places where people can sacrifice live animals are few and far between and, thirdly, in the absence of public opinion they do not feel obliged to perform the ritual. Many of my informers admitted that back at home they would have been obliged to follow the Islamic traditions for the simple reason that this was a common practice to be observed to avoid public condemnation. There is no North Caucasian public opinion in France, which means that the private life of each and every North Caucasian migrant is not conditioned by the Islamic influence of the North Caucasian society: each migrant is free either to sacrifice a ram or not. These migrants are benevolently disposed to the religions practiced in France; they might even go to a church to light a candle to ensure the success of an important family venture.⁶ For example, a teenage Adyghe girl, having discovered that the Bible was much more interesting than the Koran, attended a high mass in a Catholic church together with her French friend. Parents of children born and raised in France in the families of ethnic Muslims tell them about the North Cau-

⁴ See: L. Babich, “Islamskie tsennosti v zhizni kavkazskikh emigrantov vo Frantsii (1919-1939),” *Islamovedenie*, No. 1 (27), 2016.

⁵ See: I.L. Babich, “Sovremennoe islamskoe dvizhenie v Kabardino-Balkarii,” in: *Islamskoe vozrozhdenie v sovremennoy Kabardino-Balkarii*, Moscow, 2003.

⁶ See: I.L. Babich, Field materials, France, November 2015, interview with B., Kabardian woman, 40, November 2016, interview with L., Kabardian man, 45.

casian traditions and the religion of their ancestors. The new generation, girls in the first place, find the status of Islamic women in the family and society in the Northern Caucasus incomprehensible. They think that women in Islam are not free, while the girls raised in a European country prefer freedom in its Western variant.⁷

The Roads which Bring North Caucasians to European Islam

On the whole, the North Caucasian diaspora can be divided into two groups: a fairly big group of Chechen migrants and a mixed group of migrants from other North Caucasian republics. To my mind, the Islamic life of the Chechens is very different from that of other North Caucasians since nearly all or even all of them are practicing Muslims. Chechen Muslim immigrants are determined to teach Islam to their children born in France. For this purpose in 2011 they set up a Cultural and Spiritual Association of Caucasians (Association Culturelle et Culturelle des Caucasiens se Strasbourg⁸) in Strasbourg. It is headed by Shamil Albakov, with Izmail Baykhanov as its treasurer. It teaches children and young people the Islamic norms (expressive reading of the Koran, lessons of Islamic dogmas, etc.), languages (French, Arabic and Russian); helps migrants cope with legal problems and extends material support to those who need it. Strange as it may seem, it does not promote ethnic Caucasian cultures (there are no ethnic dance courses, etc.). This is done by other North Caucasian diaspora organizations unconnected with Islam. In France, there is an obvious opposition between Islamic and ethnic traditions in contemporary society and the contemporary system of moral values.

As I have already written, part of the North Caucasian Muslims (not necessarily Chechens) in France are determined, for different reasons, to move away from their status of ethnic Muslims to become part and parcel of the Muslim community in a wider sense.

Here is the fate of a Balkar family that moved to France about 15 years ago with its children. The elder generation, 35-40 years of age, consists of a Balkar woman, an ethnic Muslim back at home who, having landed in France, became a practicing Muslim in an ardent desire to acquire a social milieu. There are not enough Balkars in France to create a specifically Balkar context of their own.

In fact, an increased interest in Islam as the only sphere that North Caucasian migrants see as familiar and close is kindled by unemployment and lack of relatively important occupations in an alien country. Many of the North Caucasian migrants in France live on social welfare benefits of about €400. An average family of two adults and a child gets no less than €1000 every month, sufficient for more or less modest living. Social dwelling is free. This means that there is a group of people in France with no apparently meaningful occupation. No wonder that practicing Islam comes to the fore in the everyday life of North Caucasian émigré groups and helps them resolve many problems, up to and including the psychological problems of the younger generation.

In the absence of higher, or at least secondary, professional education received back at home or acquired in France, a North Caucasian migrant has no choice but to seek employment at enterprises that hire migrants (French people prefer to get an education and seek better paid jobs) where his life and behavior are strongly affected by his environment. An educated migrant may find employment among the French; the new milieu affects him strongly and positively. In France,

⁷ See: I.L. Babich, Field materials, France, November 2015, interview with B., Kabardian woman, 40, November 2016, interview with L., Kabardian man, 45.

⁸ [www.acccs.fr].

which is a secular state, secular values prevail. On the other hand, it is highly hierarchical, which means that certain social groups are closed off to “aliens” and open to those who occupy high posts and actively communicate with their French colleagues. This means that it is much easier for the North Caucasian migrants to become a part of the North Caucasian emigre environment than to assimilate.

Here is a confirmation of the above. A Kabardian family with two teenage sons moved to France some 15 years ago. The boys found it hard to adjust to the new environment. Today, at 30 they have no higher education or interesting work and survive on chance earnings. So far, they do not frequent mosques, yet have become practicing Muslims who strictly observe all Islamic prescriptions and regularly perform namaz. In fact, their life in France is geared towards Islam. They have not yet become radical Muslims. It should be said, however, that young men with no clear aim in life might later join the ranks of radical Muslims. Their younger sister, born in France, has no problems. She studies at a French school, has become a part of French society, has French friends, is invited to their homes and remains a Muslim.⁹

This family is not an exception; there are many similar cases and there are many young Chechens who live in Paris. It is highly important to understand how their relatives respond to them. There are several branches of one Kabardian family in the city of L. (about 30 people). L., a teenage member of this big family of ethnic Muslims, who had been absolutely indifferent in Islam in his homeland, developed serious interest in Islam in France.¹⁰ He found it hard to adjust to French society and to find his place at school (he switched between several in search of a more or less favorable atmosphere). Exasperated, his relatives sent him back to Nalchik where he, likewise, failed to adjust. He moved to Moscow where he started attending a mosque, met a Russian girl and returned to France with her. Their son was born in France, the young father grew a beard, he fasts, performs namaz, and attends mosque from time to time. He has no job; he does not study and sometimes talks about radical Islamic ideas. His younger sister is perfectly adapted, she graduated from a French school, learned several tongues and is studying in Britain (Manchester). She obeys all Muslim rules including fasting, she and her brother are good friends who understand each other well. L. is psychologically comfortable among French Muslims; he has no other milieu—his friends are Chechens and Azeris. He is 27-28.

His relatives admitted that they had been appalled to hear him talking “about Islam, the Islamic world and Islam in France.” They tried to dissuade him, to no avail, by saying that “in our homeland Kabarda Islam is different.” His Adyghe relatives prefer to keep their teenage daughters and sons away from him, despite the fact that he is a close relative. They explain to their children: “Everything that you might hear from him is lies; he himself does not observe Islamic morals” (which is partly true because he lives with his Russian common-law wife without performing nikah).

Here is another relevant case: fifteen years ago a family with a teenager boy B. arrived in France. The boy had found it hard, if at all possible, to fit into the French milieu and found a comfortable environment in Islam as a practicing Muslim and a regular visitor to Paris mosques. Very much concerned, his relatives, ethnic Muslims, sent him to Russia. He settled in Moscow, found a job, continued his education and remained Muslim with no radical excesses.¹¹

In some cases the path from “ethnic” to “practicing” Muslims is very short: still in hostels for emigrants where they live awaiting their paperwork, women begin to cover their heads and dress in Muslim style. In some cases, however, the process is several years long. Some of the Muslim Chechen women wear no headscarves for many years. One of them, let us call her Zh., adapted well to the

⁹ See: I.L. Babich, Field materials, France, March 2016, interview with V., Balkar woman, 50.

¹⁰ See: I.L. Babich, Field materials, France, March 2015, interview with B., Kabardian woman, 40.

¹¹ I.L. Babich, Field materials, France, March 2015, interview with Zh., Chechen woman, 45.

French lifestyle, set up a souvenir company and wore no headscarf in public for many years. Everything changed when she married a Chechen (from the Netherlands), the couple performed nikah and his husband asked her to wear a headscarf.¹² Another Chechen woman, K., for a long time wore short skirts and no headscarf and drank wine. Later she adjusted her behavior to the norms of Islam—she stopped drinking wine and started wearing long skirts.¹³ In fact, North Caucasian migrants do not necessarily follow Islamic prescriptions when it comes to their appearances: at dance parties, a frequent occurrence at hostels with a young Chechen population, Chechen girls do not strictly follow the Muslim dress code.

There is a fairly big diaspora of Turkish Muslims with a big share of Turkish North Caucasians in it. By this I mean the descendants of those who migrated to the Ottoman Empire in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the time when the Northern Caucasus was “incorporated into the Russian Empire.” It should be said that Turkish North Caucasian migrants in France remain loyal to Islam in all spheres of life. They form a fairly independent community and maintain minimal contacts with the life, culture and society of the receiving country. Russian North Caucasians communicate with Turks and sometimes even join their Muslim communities.

Islamic Radicalism and North Caucasian Migrants in France

Today, all European states, France being no exception, control radical Muslims (including those who arrived from the Northern Caucasus, Chechnia in particular).

On 13 February, 2015, DGSJ (Direction générale de la sécurité intérieure) officers detained six Chechens (aged from 32 to 38) in Southern France (in Albi not far from Toulouse) “in the course of investigation of the case of sending jihadists to Syria. They were accused of belonging to terrorist groups.” One of them was a French citizen; another has both French and Russian origin; others—political refugees. All of them were accused of involvement in terrorist activities and funding potential fighters.

According to official information, they were suspected of an involvement in dispatching potential jihadist fighters to Syria and/or extending them financial or logistic support.¹⁴

On 31 August, 2016, Special Services of Belgium compiled a list of terrorists, which contained 29 names of Russian citizens; four of them holding Belgian passports. Most of the Russian citizens who attracted the attention of the Belgian special services arrived from the Northern Caucasus, mainly from Chechnia, to be more exact, and was connected with the organization known as Emirate Kavkaz. Islamist propaganda and funding of extremists were their two main activities.

Eleven of those listed by the special services had Russian passports; they fought in Syria and Iraq; thirteen returned to Belgium. One of them was arrested on the way back; four others left the country. There were citizens of Russia, Belgium, France, Morocco, Algeria, the Netherlands, Italy, Syria, Tunisia and Macedonia among the 614 persons whose names appeared on the list.¹⁵

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ See: I.L. Babich, Field materials, France, November 2015, interview with M., Chechen woman, 45.

¹⁴ [<https://news.mail.ru/incident/21061404/>].

¹⁵ See: S. Kosiakov, “V belgijskiy spisok terroristov popali 29 rossiian,” 31 August, 2016, available at [<http://smiexpres.ru/news/world/-26159-v-belgijskij-spisok-terroristov-popali-29-rossiyan/>], 13 December, 2016.

School, North Caucasians and Islam

In French schools, children of North Caucasian Muslims have to face secular educational principles. In France all external signs of religious affiliation (such as hijabs) are banned. A Kabardian woman, an administrator at one of the schools, told us that girls who come to school in hijabs remove them as soon as they enter the school, yet keep very much to themselves.¹⁶ The law of 2004 bans all apparent signs of religious affiliation at state schools, be it Muslim headscarves or Jewish kippahs. There are no bans at private schools, which explains why a certain number of girls from Muslim families prefer Catholic schools, where they can wear hijabs.

Religion and religious culture are absent from the state school curricula in France: pupils are taught philosophy and encouraged to think and acquire personal ideas of life.¹⁷ Children are taught that religion is a purely personal matter, that it should not be a part of social life in France. This is what the French Muslims do not like most of all in French school education. It is *a secular state based on the principle of equality* applied, specifically, to all religions; this means that *it is impossible to treat different religions differently*, and that *none of them are officially supported*, yet all of them have the right to exist.

Here is another fact that is just as interesting. Some schools, if allowed by the mayor, serve three different lunches—without pork, without meat and a regular lunch. Each and every parent is free to choose one of the three. According to the teachers at a primary school near Paris, parents of 25 percent of pupils chose lunches without pork. The mayor can change the rule, which will stir up a lot of indignation among Muslims, who will claim that there is no equality in France. It should be said, however, that there are no privileges for Jewish children—no kosher food is offered at schools. It looks as if France has “partly succumbed to Muslims.”¹⁸

On the one hand, North Caucasian Muslim migrants plunge deep into Islam and the life of Islamic communities in France for want of a different and more interesting life in the new country. On the other, whether wittingly or unwittingly, they are removed from the huge community of Russian immigrants. Some of the North Caucasian migrants communicate with them to compensate for the scarcity of other contacts. It should be said, however, that if Russians detect an increased interest in Islam in their North Caucasian friends or acquaintances, they immediately limit their communication with them. This happened in a school outside Paris, attended by Chechen and Jewish girls from St. Petersburg. They became friends and frequented each other’s homes, yet when at the age of 12 to 14 the Chechen girls developed a strong interest in Islam and started talking about religion, not necessarily Islam, to their Russian friends, the latter did not like this at all and gradually discontinued their communication.¹⁹

Islamic Culture and Everyday Life

In France, North Caucasians wear no ethnic or Islamic clothes, they dress in a European style; their wives and daughters who practice Islam wear headscarves or hijabs not frequently. In fact, a headscarf says nothing about the degree of Islamization of its wearer.

¹⁶ See: I.L. Babich, Field materials, November 2015, interview with D., Kabardian man, 50.

¹⁷ See: I.L. Babich, Field materials, November 2015, interview with I.D., Kabardian woman, 18; interview with S.D., Kabardian woman, 17.

¹⁸ I.L. Babich, Field materials, November 2015, interview with A., teacher at primary school, 45.

¹⁹ See: I.L. Babich, Field materials, November 2016, interview with A., Russian woman, 40.

Food is an important attribute that helps preserve ethnic culture in a foreign country: North Caucasian migrants, on the whole, remain devoted to their national cuisine. Chechen marriage feasts are marked by an amazing variety of national dishes.²⁰ Adyghe migrants mark Kurban-Bayram with a national soup (*ashryk*) made of seven grains: white maize, three types of beans, pearl barley, milled wheat, rice and millet), jerked beef kept from the previous Kurban-Bayram. Meat (fresh in the past, now cooked) is distributed among all North Caucasian Muslims.

Wedding and Funeral Traditions and Islam

Everyday life of North Caucasian migrants in France is full of ethnic rather than Islamic components. They listen to North Caucasian and Russian pop music and watch Russian TV.²¹ Practically all families have lots of discs with national and national pop music. Dances are another important attribute of ethnic identity among migrants. In France, North Caucasian dances are an inevitable attribute of festive occasions. Chechens invariably celebrate what they call “positive” (the date they received a positive decision on the political refugee status). On such occasions everybody dances—boys and girls, men and women. In France, marriages and all sorts of holidays are accompanied by national dances; it is shameful not to know how to dance.²²

North Caucasian Muslims have not abandoned the Muslim rite of *nikah*: they either go a mullah or a mullah comes to the bride and groom to perform it. The marriages are practically never confirmed in the mayor’s office. The groom pays the bride’s parents a small dowry. In France, ethnic traditions are only partly reproduced at weddings: feasts are organized in restaurants with no ethnic components (except certain dishes).²³ North Caucasian migrants, first and foremost, Chechens, look at marriages as the central event in their lives (*lovzar*). Guests (from 300 to 500) are invited from all corners of France or even Europe. Chechens have preserved the tradition of introducing the bride to the groom’s home.

To perform this ritual, the floor is covered with sheepskins, the groom addresses the elder members of the bride’s family with a request to forgive him for taking his bride from their home; the bride and groom imitate escape, etc. During the wedding, the bride and her girlfriend stand in a corner; the groom is absent. Chechen migrants still serve separate tables for men and for women. Other North Caucasian peoples have already abandoned this tradition. There is a *tamada* (toastmaster) at each table at Chechen weddings; other North Caucasian peoples prefer one *tamada* for all tables²⁴; there are dance *tamad*s who select dancers.²⁵ In France, Chechens still prefer to serve their national dishes at weddings: *zhizhig galnash*, pilau, *chepalgash* with soft cheese, cheese or meat...²⁶ *Salade Olivier* (also known as Russian salad), dumplings, and sweet dessert—halva and sweet rice. More complicated dishes—*kurze* (ravioli) and *galushki* (hand-made pasta with meat)—are also served. Sometimes Chechen artists from Chechnia or from other European cities (i.e., Strasbourg) are invited to weddings.

²⁰ See: I.L. Babich, Field materials, March 2016, interview with Zh., Chechen woman, 40.

²¹ See: I.L. Babich, Field materials, March 2015, interview with Kh., Chechen woman, 45.

²² See: I.L. Babich, Field materials, November 2015, interview with T., Kabardian woman, 35.

²³ See: I.L. Babich, Field materials, March 2015, interview with A., Kabardian woman, 46.

²⁴ See: I.L. Babich, Field materials, 2016, interview with M., Chechen man, 30.

²⁵ See: I.L. Babich, Field materials, 2015, interview with A.Ch., Kabardian woman, 40, Lion, 10 November.

²⁶ See: A. Chleïnikov, Les particularités de la société traditionnelle tchétchène. Identité tchétchène. Master d’Ethnologie. Nanter, 2008 (manuscript).

Today, every time when a North Caucasian dies in France, his relatives and representatives of all North Caucasian immigrant communities gather money to send the body to his native land for burial.²⁷ People are buried in their homeland,²⁸ while funeral repasts to mark 40 days after death, half a year and a year are organized in France.²⁹ Kabardians serve a ritual dish (called *lakumy* in the Kabardian language), which is distributed among seven families of North Caucasian migrants. While eating a *lakum*, the Muslim should pray for the dead (*tkhaytu* in the Chechen language). To avoid misunderstanding, French neighbors are never offered *lakums*; besides they do not know the right prayers.

Conclusion

An analysis of the Islamic dimension of North Caucasians' everyday life in France has demonstrated that the diaspora (and each of the North Caucasian national immigrant communities) is divided into active (practicing) and passive (ethnic) Muslims who have no common ground and, therefore, practically never communicate.³⁰ The desire to belong to a community leads North Caucasians to the European Muslim context, where they become Islamized or even radicalized. Islam serves as a psychological instrument of sorts that helps the North Caucasian Muslims adjust to the specifics of life in France. Those who become active Muslims limit their lifestyle to a great extent: they have no interest in French life and remain unadjusted to it. They concentrate on their religious family. Islam plays a greater role in private lives of the North Caucasian diaspora in France than at home, which means that *national identity is gradually replaced with a religious identity*. In France North Caucasians strive not only to preserve their religious and cultural identity but sometimes to oppose it to the values of the state that made them its citizens.

²⁷ See: I.L. Babich, Field materials, 2011, interview with B., Ossetian man, 46.

²⁸ See: I.L. Babich, Field materials, 2015, interview with D., Chechen man, 40.

²⁹ See: I.L. Babich, Field materials, 2011, interview with B., Kabardian woman, 46.

³⁰ See: I.L. Babich, "Sotsiokulturnye i politiko-pravovye aspekty adaptatsii kavkazskikh musulman v sovremennoy Evrope (postanovka problemy)," *Sotsiodinamika*, No. 1, 2015.