

Ossetians Revive Pagan Rituals

Author: [Valery Dzutsev](#)

Disenchanted by the post-Soviet wilderness, North Ossetians are eagerly embracing the religious beliefs of their ancestors

North Ossetia's own curious blend of Christian, Islamic and pagan beliefs - fiercely suppressed by both the tsars and the Soviets - is experiencing a renaissance.

Today many of the old practices, including animal sacrifices, are being eagerly revived as people in the North Caucasian republic seek to fill the spiritual vacuum left by the fall of Communism.

But many observers are wary of the religious resurgence, pointing out that, while the rituals themselves are being observed, the moral context has evaporated.

According to most historical studies, Christianity came to Ossetia via Georgia some time between the 5th Century and the 10th Century AD. However, over the years, the traditional Christian beliefs became intertwined with Islamic teachings and pagan rites, creating a unique local faith which had no equivalent across the Russian Empire.

In the 19th Century, the Russian colonial administration in the North Caucasus set up a "Society for Christian Revival in the Caucasus" which was aimed at eliminating pagan elements from local religious observances.

A Russian ethnographer of the day commented, "When accepting Christianity, an Ossetian observes some of the Christian customs: he gets baptized, fasts, sometimes goes to church and occasionally mentions the name of Christ and the saints. But, at the same time, he celebrates his former pagan feasts, makes sacrifices - sheep, goats, bulls - on certain days and certainly does not consider that his ancient customs in any way conflict with the teachings of the clergy."

When the communists came to power in 1917 and declared war on the Orthodox Church in a bid to win over the souls of the Russian people, the Ossetians swiftly divested themselves of the last remnants of the Christian faith and renewed their old practices - albeit in secret. The process was accelerated by the fact that most people associated the Orthodox Church with hated colonial regime.

During the Soviet era, Ossetian religious circles were marked by rampant hypocrisy with highly placed Communist officials practising the old customs in private whilst persecuting fellow believers in public.

Ossetia's religious community prefers to worship God, the saints and the angels in traditional pagan settings - such as forest groves or mountain gorges invested with mystical significance.

Many of the rituals are centred around the dining table. Toasts are drunk in a strict order - the first to God Almighty, the second to St George and so on, depending on the occasion. Animal sacrifices are commonplace, although, in contrast to most pagan religions, the dead animal later becomes part of the feast.

In effect, the dining table serves as a portable place of worship for the Ossetians. Even in the republic's

towns, apartment blocks are equipped with communal dining-halls built by local residents.

When Vladimir Odintsov, a Russian government envoy, was sent to bring law and order to North Ossetia in 1981, one of his first acts was to demolish the offending buildings with bulldozers. With the advent of perestroika in 1985, the Ossetians promptly rebuilt their former "temples" and today no self-respecting block of flats is without one.

But many old believers fear that the religious renaissance currently gripping North Ossetia is little more than a fad - the rituals have become more elaborate than before but their moral content has been eroded.

The new worshippers are highly selective in their approach to the old ways - ascetic practices such as fasting have been abandoned while hedonistic rituals have been embraced with renewed enthusiasm. Prayer is little more than an accompaniment to feasting and drinking, with an emphasis on the latter. Being unable to respond to the spiritual challenges which face it, Ossetia's religious legacy has been transformed into a social pantomime.

Meanwhile, local Muslims - who make up around 20-25 per cent of the population, have mimicked this casual attitude to religious worship - they also toast St George and eat pork on feast days.

In short, the situation mirrors many of the social phenomena in North Ossetia today as a vulnerable society searches for a new identity.

Valery Dzutsev is the coordinator for an international NGO in North Ossetia

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