

# Values Stronger Than War

by Zalpa Bersanova

During the Soviet period, the Chechens, along with other ethnic minorities, were unable to research their traditions fully, because communist ideology deemed national traditions relics of the past. Non-Russians lived in two worlds: the world of official Russian discourse and of their own national consciousness. With the beginning of *perestroika*, people were allowed to practice their religion and to study their traditions. I took advantage of this new freedom and began examining the ethical values and priorities of Chechen society.

When the first war ended, I began researching to what extent the war has affected the hierarchy of Chechen values. While I was preparing my material for a presentation at the Sakharov Museum in 1999, the second war began. I was forced to return to Moscow. The recent apartment explosions created an anti-Chechen atmosphere. Newspapers and television screens were filled with negative images of the Chechen people.

The Chechens have a saying: “When the bear wanted to eat his child, he covered him with mud”. Similarly, when the Russian government wishes to destroy the Chechens, she covers them in mud. I felt that it was my job as an academic to show that the Chechens are just like everyone else. As with any other ethnic group, they have a moral code which defines their identity, and a hierarchy of values which helps them orient themselves in the world.

The questionnaire which I gave my informants changed at every stage during my research. New questions appeared, old questions changed. But the goal always remained

the same: to chronicle the changes in Chechen society in the context of the political situation in the Republic.

The results I received were in some ways predictable, but I will focus here on the ones which surprised me.

My sample was three hundred people. I made a special effort to obtain a representative selection of Chechens from all ages and an equal number of men and women. My most recent research has extended to the Chechen diaspora in Moscow, France and the USA.

One of the first questions I asked in my questionnaire was: has anyone in your immediate family or among your relatives died or disappeared as a result of the war? I wanted to find out if my informants' responses varied according to the extent that they had been directly impacted by the war.

Only 8% of my respondents said that they had lost no one in the war. 27% of the respondents had lost a member of their immediate family. Perhaps surprisingly, my research indicates that there was no significant connection between resentment of the Russian people and Chechens' individual losses during the war.

Before the first war, according to my research, Chechens ranked *ǎ èèèèè* or what might be roughly translated as decent behavior, as their highest value. After the first war, *éúí í ààèèè* (courage) and *ñî áàð* (patience, self-restraint) were the most highly prized values. During my most recent research, Chechens cited *í èéñ*, which might be translated as justice or fairness, as their highest value. This value seems the most crucial after years of lawlessness and insults to human dignity.

After the first and second war, the majority of my respondents marked hospitality as one of the most important Chechen traditions. The tradition of hospitality became more intense during the war period; it proved necessary for the survival of many people who had lost their families and/or homes had no place to stay. Many Chechens ended up staying with complete strangers. Thus, hospitality has acquired a new meaning in contemporary Chechen society.

One story I heard suggests something of the value of hospitality in contemporary Chechen society. An old man invited several people into his home who were escaping from their villages which were under attack from air strikes. He accepted them warmly into his home, giving them food and a place to sleep. The next morning, these refugees learned that the old man had just lost his only son. According to Muslim tradition, his son's body should have been buried before the sunset that day. However, in this instance, the old man considered the Chechen tradition of hospitality to be more sacred than Islam. Chechens say: "you can put a corpse anywhere, but you must receive a guest according to tradition". Apparently, the old man took this saying literally.

Respondents cited respect for women as the second most sacred Chechen value. Such results testify to the great sacrifices women made during the war. Chechen women are the primary bread winners when it is dangerous for men to leave home. Women are the only ones allowed to rescue their sons and brothers from the hands of soldiers. Often, by claiming a blood relation to the victim, they save men completely unknown to them. Women also are the ones who raise orphaned children, many of them nephews and nieces or other relatives whose parents died during the war.

The hardest question for my respondents to answer was: what Chechen traditions would you like to see abandoned? The majority answered that they would like to do away with bride-kidnapping. I would like to note here that bride-kidnapping is not a deeply rooted Chechen tradition. When I asked elderly men about bride-kidnapping, they said that it is a criminal act and has always been condemned by Chechen society.

Regarding bride-kidnapping as a tradition is sort of a self-fulfilling prophecy. People saw it happening everywhere around them and assumed therefore that it was a part of Chechen culture. Even as it rejected bride-kidnapping, Chechen society tried to regulate its excesses. A kidnapped girl could not be brought directly to the groom's home; she had to stay with one of the groom's friends or relatives. No male had the right to see her until her relatives arrived to ask her if she consented to the marriage or if she preferred to return to her parents. If the girl consented to the marriage, it has to be blessed by a mullah; otherwise, the marriage was not considered genuine.

During the Soviet period, bride kidnapers were persecuted under article 117, a law which was generally reserved for rapists. They could be sure of a long prison sentence. Frequently, the kidnapped girl agreed to a marriage because she did not want to destroy the futures of those who had kidnapped her. Sometime, the kidnapper would be sentenced, serve his entire prison sentence, and then return to his beloved and ask her to marry him. She would agree, this time voluntarily.

After the first war, only one percent of the respondents expressed their desire to alter the "custom" of bride-kidnapping. This statistic drastically increased after the second war. Such a change in the attitude of Chechen society must be understood in the context of the kidnapping which provided income for many criminals during the interwar

period. If for whatever reason, a girl didn't return home on time, her parents would have much greater grounds for fear than if this had happened during peace time.

Another question that caused a great deal of consternation among my respondents was: how do you feel about blood revenge?

The Chechen poet Arbi Mamakaev once made an interesting observation on the subject of blood revenge:

A man wounded, wounds back.  
Every family revenges murder.  
But when scars heal, they  
count the harvest together.

Áñëè òǎ ǎ – ĩ èàèè ǎ é ǎǎǎ ĩ é.  
Êĭ èü óàèè – ñ ǎǎè ĩ àì éĭ ĩ ǎǎü.  
À çàø òǎ , áñëè çàèèè, ǎ ñǎǎ óò  
Ëÿǎ ĩ çǎǎǎ ǎǎñ èàòò ñ-èèèü.

Mamakaev is saying here that the need to survive and build a decent life is a more fundamental human instinct than the urge to wreck revenge.

Chechens took revenge not only for murder, but also for wounded inflicted on them. The custom common among the mountaineers was for the perpetrators of any violent attack to pay their victims according to the number of wheat seeds that measured the lengths of the victim's wound.

Perhaps this is one source of Chechens' restrained behavior in public. They were well aware of the punishment awaiting anyone guilty of offending someone else. They had to guard every word and action carefully. Chechens have a saying: a doctor can heal a wound from a sword, but only a sword can heal a wound caused by words. This presents an interesting (if somewhat inexact) contrast to the English saying: "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me."

Chechen society has a complex set of customs for dealing with blood revenge. Both sides involved in the conflict meet and explain their respective sides to each other. In cases where the conflict is particularly complex, a representative from a neutral family or a neutral *teip* observes the proceedings. The old men try to persuade the people seeking blood revenge to settle their accounts in other ways. If they succeed, the blood revenge is cancelled and no one has the right to violate the peace.

Sometimes, blood revenge is cancelled by exiling the murder and his family from the village. There are also times, however, when the blood revenge is passed on from one generation to the next, until the murder is revenged. Interestingly, the majority of my respondents who expressed a desire to preserve the tradition of blood revenge were women.

Another question that yielded unexpected results was: Do you consider the Russian people to blame for the Chechen tragedy? Immediately after the first war, 17% of the respondents said yes. The percentage who answered yes now however has dramatically decreased to. It is not hard to figure out the reasons for this change. First of all, the Chechen people have become more politically aware in the last few years. Now they understand better the roots of the evil which has befallen us. Second, the political chaos which reigned in Chechnya in the interwar period resulted in more criminals within Chechen society, and Chechens themselves have suffered from the crimes of other Chechens. Third, when Chechens left their republic for other parts of Russia during the war, they discovered that Russians were also victims of the regime. Russians also live in poverty and receive very little protection from their government. Hence, we can see that

the relationship between Chechens and Russians is much more complex than many of representations in the mainstream Russian media suggest.

Now, let's turn to the positive news: the percentage of Chechens who speak foreign languages had rises significantly in the past few years, particularly among Chechen youth. These statistics are mostly caused by the large numbers of Chechens currently living outside Russia, in various diasporas around the world. Many Chechens who currently living abroad speak not only the foreign languages of their host countries, but other languages, too. For example, Chechens who live in France often speak English in addition to French.

When I asked what languages they would like to speak, 92% of my respondents named English. Among youth, nearly 100% listed English. At least one reason for the popularity of English can be traced to a myth which Chechens often turn to in times of crisis. After Chechen society is almost completely destroyed, so goes the myth, an English-speaking country will rescue us from destruction and bring us peace and prosperity. After that happens, according to this story, the Chechens' biggest problem will be that there won't be any poor people left to give alms to. English is so popular in Chechnya right now that many parents are more concerned with having their children learn the English language than Russian.

Arabic received the second most popular rating among languages my respondents wished to learn. 100% of my elderly respondents listed Arabic as their first choice. Probably this was motivated by their desire to read the Koran in the original language. However, the overall response indicated that the Chechens orient themselves more towards the West than towards the Arabic world.

Finally, we come to the question: Would you change your nationality if you had the opportunity? It was always difficult for me to find anyone who would answer yes to this question. Even after the Nord-Ost hostage crisis in Moscow, during the mass repressions of the Chechen population which followed in the heels of that tragedy, I didn't find a single person who answered "Yes, I would like to change my nationality".

In spite of all the catastrophes the Chechens have endured over the past decade, my fieldwork has led me to the conclusion that Chechens have fundamentally remained loyal to their traditions. The primary impact of a decade of war has been to alter the relationships between our values and their place in our ethical hierarchy rather than to erase them entirely.

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*Translated by Rebecca Gould*