

Traditional social organisation of the Chechens

Patrilineages with domination and social control of elder men.

The Chechens have a *kernel family* called *dëzel*¹ (дëзел), consisting of a couple and their children. But this kernel family is not isolated from other relatives.

Usually married brethren settled in the neighbourhood and cooperated. This *extended family* is called “*ts'a*” (цIа - “men of one house”); the word is etymologically connected with the word for “hearth”. The members of a tsa cooperated in agriculture and animal husbandry.

Affiliated tsa make up a “*neqe*” or *nek'e* (некъий - “people of one lineage”). Every neqe has a real ancestor. Members of a neqe can settle in one hamlet or in one end of a village. They can economically cooperate.

The next group of relatives is the “*gar*” (гар - “people of one branch”). The members of a gar consider themselves as affiliated, but this can be a mythological affiliation. The gars of some Chechen groups function like taips (s. below).

Taip

The main and most famous Chechen social unit is the “*taip*” (тап, таур, тайп)

A taip is a group of persons or families cooperating economically and connected by patrilinear consanguineous affiliation. The members of a taip have equal rights². In the Russian and foreign literature taips are usually designated as “clans”.

For the Chechens the taip is a patrilinear exogam group of descendants of one ancestor. There were common taip rules and/or features³ including:

- The right of communal land tenure;
- Common revenge for murder of a taip member or insulting of the members of a taip ;
- Unconditional exogamy;
- Election of a headman;
- Election of a military head (bjachi, бјаџи, бячча) in case of war;
- Election of a Council of Elders without property qualification;
- Open sessions of the Council of Elders;
- Equal right of all members of the Council of Elders;
- The right of the taip to depose its representatives ;
- Representation of women by male relatives ;
- The right of the adoption of outside people;
- The transfer of property of departed to members of the taips;

¹There are different systems of transcription and/or transliteration for the Chechen language. The forms here could be inconsistent.

²According to M.Мамакаев after the 16th century the shell of the taips didn't correspond to the real ownership relations in the society. See M. Мамакаев. Чеченский тайп в период его разложения. Грозный. 1973.

³M. Мамакаев. Чеченский....

- Every taip has a name derived from the ancestor;
- The taip has a defined territory and a traditional mountain;
- The taip had a taip tower or an other building or natural monument convenient as a shelter, e.g. a fortress, cave or rock;
- In the past the taip had an own godhead;
- The taip had specific festivities, customs, traditions and habits;
- The taip had an own taip cemetery ;
- There was a common taip hospitality .

The classical taips functioned as typical lineages, although the cultural anthropologist Yan Chesnov see their origin in neighbourhood communities of agriculturists. He argues with a great number of inner-taip marriages before the 19th century⁴.

At the middle of the 19th century there were about 135 taips. More then 20 taips originated from newcomers, in particular Avars, Kumyks, Jews, Georgians, Russians, Turks. The taips descending of non Chechen ancestors are called “impure taips”(su’lijn taipa, соъли тайпа)

The tradition says that the „pure“ and original 20 taips came from the region Nashkho in the mountain area and spread over whole Chechnya. According to a legend their names and their history were written on a giant copper cattle either melted by member of the „impure“ taips or thrown into the lake Kezenoi at an order of Imam Shamil, head of the North Caucasian resistance against the Russian Empire in the 19th century, because he wanted to consolidate all mountaineers.

The “impure“ taips originated from parts of other ethnic groups who migrated to Chechnya and were integrated into the system of the Chechen taips. In particular, member of Dagestan peoples, Georgians, Kumyks, Russians, but also members of far away living ethnic groups, such as Jews⁵, Turcs, Arabs, Indians are considered to be ancestors of taips. Some of the ancestors of the “impure” taips migrated in search for better lands other migrated because of adverse social conditions in their homelands. They adopted the Chechen language and the local customs. In difference to older taips they had no communal lands and no stone burial vaults for their departed congeners. But their taips functioned the same way with consanguine affiliation, mutual support, blood feuds etc. Since the presence of the Russian Cossacks there was a diffusion of population between them and some Chechen taips, in particular the taip White Gunoi. The close interaction between Cossacks and Chechens was described in Leo Tolstoy’s novel The Cossacks: “A very, very long time ago their ancestors, Old believers⁶ fled from Russian and settled behind the Terek among Chechens on Greben, the first ridge of the wooden mountains of Great Chechnya. Living among the Chechens the Cossacks became related to them, adopted customs, stile of live, morals and manners of the mountaineers, but preserved the Russian language in its previous purity and the Old believe.... Since that time [of Ivan the Terrible] Cossack lineages are considered to be related

⁴Ян Чеснов, Чеченцем быть трудно. Независимая газета, 22.09.94

⁵The Jewish ancestors could be connected as well as with the Judaist state Khazar Kaganat, dominating in the 7 – 10 centuries in the Northern Caucasus and/or with the Persian speaking Jews in Dagestan.

⁶Orthodox dissidents rejecting the westernising reform of the Russian Orthodox Church in the 17th century

with Chechen lineages and the love to freedom, idleness, robbery and war are the main features of their character”.

In the last centuries Russian, Ukrainians and Poles integrated into the Chechen society too, in particular captured and deserted Russian soldiers during the Caucasus wars of the 19th century.

The last new taip was founded by the Russian German M. Weissert in Kazakhstan. 1941 the majority of the Russian Germans were forcibly exiled to Siberia and Kazakhstan, were 1944 were exiled the Vainakh⁷ peoples. M. Weissert is now a one of the respected Chechen elders⁸.

The taips had chronicles only accessible for the judges of the „Mekh-Khell“ (Мехк-Кхел) - the Council of all Chechen taips. These chronicles written in Arabic letters have been permanently copied. After the deportation of the Vainakh peoples to Kazakhstan many manuscripts were burned by the Soviet authorities. The history of chronicles is worth a special research.

Some taips, i.e the taip Benoi, have about one hundred thousand members dispersed in whole Chechnya. Their affiliation seems to be a fictive one. The Benoi are divided into 9 gars. There is no Benoi exogamy. Some Chechens consider them as a *tukkhum* (s. below)

Different features of different taips

The abilities of several taips and their places were of common Vainakh importance. In the 17th century the location Maisty and the whole middle of the Argun region were famous for wise and skilled physicians. They were able to make trepanations of the skull and they knew about vaccinations against smallpox before the Russians came the Caucasus. The people of Maisty were also famous as skilled builders of defensive and dwelling towers. And ultimately they were famous as experts of the Adat⁹. Thanks to its geographic position Maisty was secured against enemies. The elders of different taips gathered in Maisty to discuss questions of Adat.

An other meeting place for discussions about Adat was the mountain Khetash-Korta near the village Tsentoroi¹⁰.

Quite remarkable that the musicians “Chunguroi” are also considered to be a taip.

The economic base of traditional taips

The economic base of taips were mixed farming (animal husbandry and agriculture) and hunt. The taips possessed livestock and small livestock. Fields and farm lands were an important part of the taip property too.

⁷Common designation for the Chechen and Ingush peoples

⁸Ян Чеснов, Чеченцем...

⁹The Chechen culture is based on common Caucasian values. These values shaped the Caucasian Custom law matching with Shari regulations. The Caucasian Muslim custom law is called “Adat”.

¹⁰М. Мамакаев. Чеченский....

Chechen agriculture has a long tradition. At the begin of the 17th century the Kachkalyk Chechens had rich vineyards and sowed wheat, millet, barley and later maize (s. below *The taip revolution*)

Tukkhum

A group of affiliated or non affiliated taips can join in a *tukkhum* (тыкхум) - “*semen*”, “egg”. The aim of a tukkhum was common defence and economic cooperation. A tukkhum had a territory consisting of settled lands and surroundings. The taips used this territory for hunting, agriculture and animal husbandry. The division into tukkhums correspond to the dialectal divisions of the Vainakh peoples. Some tukkhums were considered as unions of affiliated taips, descending from one original taip, e.g. the Chanty and Terloi.

A tukkhum is commonly understood as a union of taips with a common territory and a common dialect. The main feature of the taips joining a tukkhum was territorial neighbourhood. For example, the taips of the Nokhchmakkhoi tukkhum, the kernel the Chechen people, lived in Eastern Chechnya: Bena, Sesana, Shela, and, partially, Veden. The Nokhchmakkhoi were the first who settled in Aksai and Michig along the Terek and Sunzha river.

Sometimes the Ingush people is considered as a single Chechen tukkhum¹¹.

In difference to taips the tukkhums had no heads and no military leaders.

The affairs of the tukkhum were solved by a deliberate body – the Council of Elders, consisting of representatives of all taips of the tukkhum. In tukkhums the taips solved quarrels and co-ordinated offensive and defensive actions against their enemies.

The Tukkhum Council had the right to declare war and make peace, negotiate threw envoys, undersign and denounce treaties. But the tukkhum had no functions to administrate taips.

Not all taips joined tukkhums. There were independent taips not joining any tukkhum, e.g. Zurzakhoi, Maistoi, Peshhoi, Sadoi.

The taip-membership and the tukkhum-membership defined the social position of a Chechen. If Chechens wanted to stress the lack of any affiliation of a person they said: “This man has neither a taip nor a tukkhum”.

Despite all quarrels between the taips and tukkhums there was certainly a feeling of a common Vainakh identity given by the mutual comprehensibility of closely related dialects, common epic poetry, common customs and common Custom Law.

Deliberate bodies

¹¹ ЯН ЧЕСНОВ, ЧЕЧЕНЦЕМ...

As well as there was no central tukkhum authority but only a deliberate body – the Tukkhum Council there was no central authority of all Chechens. But there were deliberate bodies on different levels: "Mehk-Khell" - Council of the Country, "Gala-Khell" (гала кхелл) - Council of the town and "Evla-Khell" (эвла кхелл) - Council of the Village.

The pair taip – tukkhum of the traditional Chechen society seems to be a typical one for a segmented tribal society¹².

The "taip revolution"

Historically the Vainakh peoples were on the way to a chiefdom structure. There were as well as Chechen "princes" from ruling taips, e.g. the taip Sadoi is considered as a "prince's taip, as Avar, Kumyk and Kabardinian (Circassian) "princes". In the 16-18th centuries in Chechnya the "princes" were overthrown. Outside pressure stabilised the Chechen segmented taip-tukkhum structure¹³.

In general Chechens were aware of attempts to establish tribal ("feudal") authorities and reacted sharply against it. This is witnessed in the folklore and by the custom of dispossession or ouster (bajtal vajkhar, baytal vaykkhar, байтал вакхар) uncommon among other Caucasian peoples

The social patterns of some Vainakh groups could have been reshaped after the Muscovite troops defeated the Tatar khans dominating the steppes and unlocked the plains for the Chechens. It made it possible for the ancestors of the Chechens to colonise new territories in the fore-lands of the Caucasus and in the Terek valley and to switch to mixed farming.

In the 16-18 centuries into the region were brought new crops, e.g. maize, tomatoes, new kinds of pumpkins, kidney beans, tobacco, sunflowers, potatoes and turkeys. The results of this kind of a "agricultural revolution" allowed to feed more people.

The result was a demographic expansion into the steppe. The Vainakhs struggled as well as against other non affiliated Vainakh groups as against rests of the nomad people of the steppe e.g. the

¹²The same pattern, although perhaps not as strongly expressed, can be observed in Chechnya's religious life. Islam not only unites the Chechens but also brings about significant divisions in the society. Again, the Chechens and other people of the North Caucasus identify themselves with smaller religious groups rather than a nationwide Muslim community. They belong to virids - autonomous religious sects headed by ustaz - religious teachers. Every virid has its specific rules, principles and canons which may differ considerably from dogmas accepted elsewhere. The members of virids - murids - pledge allegiance to their sects and are obliged to obey the orders of their religious teachers. see e.g. www.jmu.edu/orgs/wrni/islam5.htm].

¹³Neighbouring ethnic groups, e.g. the Dagestan peoples, Kabardinians (Circassians) and Ossetians had chiefdom structures. During the expansion of the Russian Empire the chiefs – "princes" of these groups were granted with privileges and titles and were relatively easily integrated into the political system of the Empire. The "mountain societies" they headed remained autonomous. The lack of tribal chiefs – "princes" and higher social strata made difficult the integration of Chechens into the Russian Empire by nobilitation of an elite. The problem was solved by granting a de facto local autonomy and integrating Chechens into common Russian social domains, in particular proposing a military career.

Nogai, as against Cossacks, claiming the same territories. As described above, non Vainakh groups joined the Vainahks founding new taips and intermarried with them founding a network with rules of concurrency and "fair war".

According to some authors¹⁴ the Chechens are a new ethnic group grown during struggle for the virgin soil of the steppe. Their kernel were Vainakh taips but they were able to integrate and assimilate parts of other ethnic groups and individual members of other ethnic groups. That is why they have the typical features of colonists: they were pertinacious, bellicose and felt superior (as well as the Cossacks).

The permanent struggle for soil made a fast mobilisation of the adult men necessary. The taip system with the combination of private agriculture and communal land tenure, was probably efficient for this purpose.

Some authors compare this system with private agriculture in agrarian communities, general armament of the population, clannish solidarity and permanent concurrency of neighbouring groups of agriculturalists and stockbreeders with the "poleis" system. "In such self-contained communities all free men had the right or better to say were obliged by custom norms and social belief to possess weapons, chargers, an own household and, if possible, home bondsmen. A warrior was obligated to supply himself by means of his farm and loot, because the armament was very expensive. The social autonomy of Caucasian farmers and their ability to arm allowed them to go without tribal chiefs, princes and kings, coordinating the individual units of the social structure threw flexible communal and super communal relations. Except the division between free and bondsmen captives there were no definite classes and formal status differences in the Chechen society¹⁵." But other authors saw a developing social stratification especially in the 19th century¹⁶

An other interesting aspect is the interdependence between the „Taip revolution“ and the Islamisation of the Chechens. It is part of the very interesting theme of tribal Islam¹⁷

Taips after 1917

The relation of taip structure and communist regime needs additional investigation, but Soviet collectivisation lead to strong resistance when traditional land tenure became endangered. The functioning of taips during the exile in Kazakhstan is worth an additional investigation too. But certainly the Soviet time influenced and weakened this traditional institution. At first, the Soviet authorities precise struggled against "backward social relics", but, at second, the common social and economical situation really changed. The forced migration supported a specific modernisation

¹⁴Г. Дерлугян. Чеченская революция и Чеченская история. in Чечня и Россия: общества и государства. Москва. 1999

¹⁵Г. Дерлугян. Чеченская революция...

¹⁶М. Мамакаев. Чеченский....

¹⁷See e.g. Wolfgang Kraus. Islamische Stammesgesellschaften. Wien – Köln – Weimar. 2004

as well as later the seasonal labour migration of Chechens to different parts of the USSR.

The Chechen urban population in Grozny increased, then other urbanised locations were founded or got a Chechen population. The Vainakh population of such urbanised locations was mixed and consisted of members of different taips.

The affiliation to taips became more relevant after the dissolution of the USSR. Since 1990 taip congresses were convoked and new taip structures were founded, e.g. taip administrations and taip foundations. This undermined the official administrative bodies of the common (post) Soviet pattern. That was an additional reason for some Chechens to be sceptical about the absence of a central power able to function as an arbiter.

Highlanders and Lowlanders

Present day Chechens are divided into Highlanders (Lamanroi – “Mountaineers”) and Lowlanders (Chekharniakh – “People of the inner part”). If the upper Terek Chechens – Terkkhoi will be mentioned as an own group, the Chkharanakh could be considered as Midland Chechens living southward. Highlanders are considered as more traditional orientated. Now the different groups have their fixed territories.

In ancient times there was a common system of highland pasture lands in summer and lowland pasture lands in winter. The taips developed a system of territoriality including plain lands and mountain lands. Highlands and particular mountains were also used as fortified refuges in case of invasions of Turkic and Kalmyk horse nomads. As it was mentioned, the “indigenous” taips had their own taip mountains, e.g. Chermoi-lam, Kharachoi-lam etc.

Territorial expansion as a result of demographic growth was directed into the plain lands. But the demographic growth and the neighbourhood of other groups, in particular the Russian Terek Cossacks, fixed the territorial situation and caused the division into more conservative mountain taips and more open lowland taips, who had more relations including intermarriages with the neighbouring Cossacks.

As a result of the Russian expansion the Chechen populated areas shrank and the border moved at first to the Sunzha river where the fortress Grozny (“Terrifying”) was founded and then to the Argun river. Cossacks and colonists from Russia settled in the newly conquered areas. Their locations (“stanitsa”) became attractive objects for armed robberies of young Chechen men in a way typical for segmented societies. After their initiation groups of 15 year old boys left their homes with arms and horses and settled in the Terek reeds¹⁸. In the Nineties almost young people supported the Sharia movement, because the Sharia law would have eased the traditional Caucasian privileges of elder people. But these facts could also be taken as a result of the

¹⁸According to Y. Chesnov it was an expression of the permanent conflict of generations. See Ян Чеснов, Чеченцем...

demographic explosion in inner Chechnya.

The Russian expansion into the mountain area was often taken as a struggle against mountaineers robbery because neither Cossacks nor Russian colonist settled directly in the mountains. At the opposite Chechens understood the Russian expansion as an unreasonable brutal raid of the Russians¹⁹.

Some lowland territories twice changed their possessors in the 20th century. Populated before 1917 by Cossacks and Russian colonists they were later granted to Chechens and Ingushs as a reward for the support of the Communists against the White armies during the Russian Civil War. Then these lands were partially returned to the Cossacks or given to Ossetians²⁰. Nowadays after the exodus of the Russian population from Chechnya there lands, houses and property were taken by the Chechens.

¹⁹Such a Russian raid to the mountains and all its brutalities is described in L. Tolstoy's Novel „Hadji Murat“. L. Tolstoy was officer of the Russian Army during the Caucasian war.

²⁰s. e.g. www.iea.ras.ru/archive/maps/1944.pdf

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