

V. Warziati (1952-1995)

A Biographical Report on an Ossetian semiologist

By A. Galiev

An outstanding Ossetian specialist in ethnic semiology and ethnology, Vilen Warziati was born in 1952 in Vladikavkaz, capital of North Ossetia Republic and part of the Russian Federation. In 1975, he graduated with honors in Ethnography from the Historical Faculty of the North-Ossetian State University. He further pursued postgraduate study at the Institute of Ethnography, a department of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR in Moscow. There he began working on the problem of innovation in the traditional material culture of the Ossetians.

It should be noted that the Ossetians are a small nation: the only one in the North Caucasus speaking the East Iranian language. They are descendants of the Scythians and Alans – the East Iranian nations that had played a significant role in the history of medieval Europe since the time of the Great Migration. Surrounded by various ethnic groups, Ossetians however retained many ancient traditions and customs. Studying them, B. Warziati came to the conclusion that the traditional ethnographic methods had exhausted their potential and it was necessary to look for new options to investigate traditional culture. According to Warziati, semiotics offered the best options. (1) In the Soviet Union, this science has undergone considerable development: Scientific schools were created in Moscow, Tartu, Leningrad (St. Petersburg) and other cities, for example. Many scientists successfully applied the methods of semiotics in the study of the problems of language, literature and history. Warziati studied the works of A. Losev, V.V.Ivanov, V.N.Toporov, M.Bakhtin and others. In addition, he studied the papers of many Western scholars, including Claude Levi-Strauss, Michel Foucault, and Georges Dumezil. Knowing full well the culture of his people, Warziati applied perfectly his

knowledge in the field of semiotics so that a deeper understanding might be had of ancient traditions, rituals, and material culture. (2)

In 1978, he defended his doctoral dissertation on the theme of “New and Traditional in the Material Culture of the Ossetians”. His supervisor was a famous ethnologist B. A. Kalojev. In his dissertation, as well as in the subsequent works, Warziati successfully engaged the methods of semiotics, which facilitated a fresh look at many of the seemingly long-known things. First of all, he continued the scientific research of Georges Dumezil, D.S. Rajewski, Vyacheslav V. Ivanov, V.I. Abaev, who had reconstructed the world model of Indo-European peoples—including the Alans-Ossetians. He proved that the three-function model of the world and society (productive, military, and sacred functions) both structures and determines all the cultural phenomena of Ossetians, and that this culture is not just a messy set of signs, but a strict system in which all these signs form a single text.(3) In particular, since they are composed of three layers symbolizing not only three levels of the Universe, but also three groups of people, he revealed that ritual cakes (a traditional sweet in the Ossetian world) replicate the tripartite world. In turn, each of these groups is associated with the conception of three functions. The same idea lies in the traditional ritual dance “Simd”, performed by males in the most important moments of social life. (4) Based on the idea of three levels of the universe and the four cardinal points, traditional Ossetian table “fyng” also appears as a model of the world. Published in Hungary, as an interesting aside, the article on the table “fyng” was noticed by researchers and became an indicator of international recognition in the context of closed Soviet society.

Warziati left behind not only 90 or more articles, but also several books. They cover the variety of material and spiritual culture of the Ossetians, and their historical and ethno-cultural contacts with neighboring peoples of the Caucasus. Written in a highly polished professional style, and displaying a deep knowledge of the studied aspects of culture and everyday life of the Ossetian people, works by Warziati represent a significant contribution to ethnographic Caucasian studies.

One of Warziati’s books considers the Ossetian festivals, which played an important role in the life of the people. The author demonstrates that all these festivals

and rituals also act as texts, with each element of the festival a sign bearing a particular meaning. Moreover, he finds that each of these festivals has a well defined structure and discrete purpose.(5) It is actually quite difficult to say which cultural phenomenon had not attracted the attention of the researcher. He had studied the Ossetian puppets and flags, ritual beverages, and housing. Of course, all of these had been studied by earlier scientists as well, but through the methods of semiotics, used by Warziati for their capacity to reveal nuanced meanings, he helped to realize the connection between various cultural phenomena. It is therefore not terribly surprising that Warziati was awarded the Prize of the Academy of Sciences of the Russian Federation.

Of course, the peak of Warziati's scientific activity coincided with a particularly difficult period in the life of the country. The Soviet Union experienced a deep crisis that resulted in the union's disintegration. Economic hardship did not really contribute to the research efforts, but at the same time, in the hope a new era, the scientific intelligentsia felt a strong creative impulse. Warziati took a great interest in everything going on in the country and sincerely hoped that his people might decide their own fate. As a true patriot and son of his people, he worried deeply about the fact that Ossetia was embroiled in ethnic conflicts that began in the Caucasus: in particular, the Ossetian-Ingush and Ossetian-Georgian armed conflicts. While at the conference of ethnologists and anthropologists in Almaty in 1990, he tried to discuss with his Georgian colleagues ways out of these conflicts. Perhaps a celebrated ethnologist could have found a solution, but when have governments ever listened to scientific sense? Yet even in that difficult period, the in-depth knowledge of history that distinguished Warziati was needed.

Particularly useful was his knowledge of medieval Ossetian heraldry. Warziati had proved that the medieval image of Ossetian national emblem found in the ancient books depicts a world model.(6) The coat of arms shows five mountain peaks, which symbolize the four cardinal directions and the center (Axis Mundi). The mountains themselves, as well as the World River and the World Tree (Arbor Mundi), appear as one of the personifications of the Universe. (7) According to traditional notions, the snow leopard pictured in the center of the composition embodies a guarantor of stability in the world. Soon, the government of North Ossetia adopted this as a state

emblem. Then, the ancient name of the people was restored, and North Ossetia became officially known as the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania.

Openness (*glasnost*) became one of the positive results of the processes occurring at that time. Through it, scientists got the opportunity to communicate with their foreign colleagues. In 1993, an expedition called “Via Alanica” was organized. Ossetian historians, archaeologists and ethnologists were to proceed over the route by which former Alans had once moved during the period known as the “Great Migration of Peoples”. Among them there was ethnic semiologist V. Warziati. It was not just a scientific expedition; the scientists had to bring together different peoples, recalling their shared history and common past. Warziati brought from the Ukraine, Hungary and France not only new experiences and facts, but also many ideas that were to be considered and implemented in the new papers and books.

As observed above, despite economic difficulties, during the post-Soviet phase the social sciences experienced a strong recovery. This also applies to Kazakhstan, one of the states that emerged from the ruins of the Soviet Union. Here also appeared more opportunities for the study of ancient history. In the ancient period, the steppes of Kazakhstan were inhabited by Alans, Sakas, Sarmatians – the peoples who spoke East Iranian languages. Turkic-speaking ethnic groups, which came there during the Great Migration, mingled with them and on this basis the Kazakh nation was formed. Thus, one might reasonably expect that in the modern culture of the Kazakhs it is possible to detect traces of the cultures of ancient Iranian-speaking peoples. Even in the period of the Soviet Union researchers found these traces in a variety of cultural phenomena. In an independent Kazakhstan, these studies were continued, but with the purpose to more fully elucidate the influence of the ancient Iranian-speaking peoples on the culture of future generations. To this end it was decided to involve a specialist on the history, semiotics and ethnology of Ossetia.

The Institute of Oriental Studies of the Republic of Kazakhstan decided that Warziati would do well in solving this problem and in 1992 invited him to take part in the project “East Iranian Component of the Kazakh Culture”. Warziati was very pleased to respond to this offer and brilliantly addressed the challenge. He confirmed the

assumption that the traditional social structure of Kazakhs (three zhuzs-hordes that are three major tribal unions) goes back to the Alan tradition. Within the frameworks of the project, it was revealed that the three-functional structure of the Kazakhs and the Ossetians was the matrix for all the manifestations of culture. It correlates with the arrangement of the traditional dwelling unit, determines the order of places in the ritual meal, and identifies which part of the meat each participant of this meal might receive. This three-part organization of the Universe and the society is re-actualized during a ceremony of archetype that is the sacrifice of the animal. It was further shown that each of the three parts of the society is marked by a certain color. Indeed, just like the Indians, each of the three varnas (varna means color) has a certain color. This conclusion has made possible the understanding of why the names of the mythical ancestors of the Kazakhs (Alash) and Ossetians (Alguza) are translated as “varicolored”. The ancestor-governor acts as a symbol of national unity: the “sum” of three colors—so he is “varicolored”. Thus, it was proved that the traditional culture of the Kazakhs and the Ossetians is not merely a set of individual signs, but a complex, and strict, system of interrelated signs.

Unfortunately, disease took Warziati at a young age and so he had no time to realize all of his plans. But his books continue to be published. Friends and colleagues have published the first volume of his works: “Selected Works. Ethnology. Cultural Studies. Semiotics” was published in 2007 in Moscow and received the highest appraisal of experts. The ideas expressed by Warziati are being developed by scientists in Hungary, Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and other countries. His work and legacy may be said to be no less than profound.

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