



# Eurasia Anthropology Newsletter

Volume 7 Number 2

April 2017

## From the editor

This month we hear from a region of Eurasia where the Christian tradition interacted with other religions resulting in a reversal of meaning of a key concept. Thorough investigation of how a term is used reveals the true meaning associated with the term.

What does it take to understand Scripture? S answers that we need to explain the socio-historical development of ideas and hermeneutics of both Scripture and the local religions. To do this, we need to study the local religion in depth, as well as do good exegesis. We also should recruit religious studies consultants into SIL to help with this.

## Contents

From the editor	1
Trying to be a good Chechen	1
Announcement	4
From linguistic to theological dynamic equivalence	5
Resources	9

## Editors

Janet McLaren

[janet\\_mclarren@sil.org](mailto:janet_mclarren@sil.org)

Eberhard Werner

[Eberhard\\_werner@sil.org](mailto:Eberhard_werner@sil.org)

## Trying to be a good Chechen

By Erwin R. Komen

Translation Consultant in Training

This paper zooms in on a Chechen word *meela*, glossed as 'retribution/benefaction' by Matsiev (1961), which is connected with an important religious concept, that of satisfying the expectations of God. While the current use of *meela* is very much associated with outward behaviour to earn a good standing, the word can be traced back to the (Biblical) concept of *grace*, which says that good standing cannot be earned.

The Chechens are one of the largest ethnic groups in the

Caucasus region. There are slightly more than one million Chechens. Most of them live at the slopes and plains north of the Caucasus mountain range in the Chechen Republic (North of Georgia), while others have moved to other parts of the Russian Federation as well as to Turkey, Georgia and Western Europe. Their language is closely related to neighbouring Ingush, and more distantly related to most of the languages spoken in Dagestan.

The Chechens originally had a

## Trying to be good (cont.)

religion where natural phenomena and heavenly bodies were closely associated with gods—something not uncommon in the Middle East (Anonymous 2008).<sup>1</sup> Christian influence from Georgia grew less over the centuries, especially when Sufi Islam entered the plains and, later, the mountainous areas. Some elements of ancient religion, such as visiting holy trees and the graves of ‘saints’, remain until today (Акаев & Дохаева 2014).

The life of a devout Chechen revolves around two important concepts: that of *ghillaqash*, ‘appropriate behaviour’ (Matsiev 1961), and that of *meela*. The *ghillaqash* are the customs that have been handed down from generation to generation. These customs answer the question what is proper behaviour in all kinds of different situations. *Ghillaqash* regulate when it is appropriate to stand up for someone (a sign of respect), how guests should be treated, conflict resolution, the central role of the oldest brother and many other culturally relevant matters. The importance of the *ghillaqash* cannot be underestimated: if one complies with the *ghillaqash*, one is accepted by relatives, neighbours, society—if not, this brings shame on oneself and one’s family. Shame leads to less help and respect from the community, and the ultimate consequence is forfeiting help and protection from family and clan. Just as the concept of *ghillaqash* is important in day-to-day societal behaviour, the concept of *meela*

focuses on the constant struggle to find favour in the eyes of God.<sup>2</sup> Since one cannot be sure of salvation within the Chechen religious framework, it is of the utmost importance to show behaviour that is regarded as *meela* before God, behaviour that God counts as positive at the time he decides about the future of one’s soul. I have often noticed people standing up and sitting down again in the minibus as it crosses a river. This behaviour is *meela* before

---

*“What is regarded as meela before God includes activities such as giving water, building roads, building mosques.”*

God, since it shows that the actor is conscious of life after death (the idea that one needs to cross a river of fire to get to God). The book *Saaghin dozalla* ‘The value of alms’ quotes verse 274 from Khalid, the son of Ali Suleiman: “Those who give their livestock as an alm during day time and night time, secretly as well as publicly—they will be *meela* before God, they won’t have to be afraid (on the day of judgment), they will not need to worry.”

The concept of *meela* is still very important, and because of the fact

that people have spread out over Europe, the concept seems to extend to all kind of help people can offer one another, possibly even overriding the *ghillaqash*. An invitation to participate in a demonstration in Strasbourg in 2006 includes the request to those Chechens that live in the city to offer help in lodging and food, adding: this will be *meela* for you from God (Оргкомитет 2006).<sup>3</sup> Social media have Chechens explain to one another what is regarded as *meela* before God; this includes activities such as giving water, building roads, building mosques.

While living in the village some 20 years ago, I noticed that young men blew the horn of their car when they saw a beautiful young woman. I was explained that this is *meela* before God, because it shows one’s remembering the Qur’anic scene of the virgins after this life (tradition based on 78:33). This idea is still very much alive and extended, witness this comment on an internet forum: “It is claimed that it is very *meela* to say something nice to an ugly girl, it is claimed that this gives a large reward” (Francuz 2011).

Vagapov (2011) does not connect the etymology of the word *meela* with the Arab language, one of the main languages from which religious vocabulary has been adopted because of Islamic influence, but with Georgian. Vagapov notes a connection with the Batsby word *madel*, which is close to Georgian *madli*. The meaning is given as ‘God’s grace’.

## Trying to be good (cont.)

The link with Georgian is not so surprising, when one takes into account that Georgian Christianity has had a thousand-year influence, up until the time the Islam entered the region (starting from the 17<sup>th</sup> century).

The Christian concept of 'grace' (expressed by the Greek word *χάρις*) can be illustrated by a citation from the Acts of the Apostles chapter 7, verse 45-46, where one of the church leaders Stephen explains: "Our ancestors received possession of it and brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our ancestors, until the time of David. He *found favour with God* and asked that he

could find a dwelling place for the house of Jacob." The words 'favour with God' translate the Greek *χάρις ἐνώπιον τοῦ Θεοῦ* 'grace before God', which compares well with the *meela* usages. David, the second kind of ancient Israel, found grace before God *not* because of his behaviour or his actions; God chose him and hung on to him despite some bad chapters in his life.

As far as anthropology is concerned, then, a word that started out as referring to the Christian concept of 'grace' (free mercy from God) entered the Chechen language, but its meaning over the centuries came to refer to a concept where God's favour

needs to be earned by good behaviour.

I will conclude this essay by looking at the implications for translation. Would there be any room for using the word *meela* in Chechen Scripture? One might think that the etymology of the word, its Christian origin, could justify its use in rendering 'grace'. And even if the word is not completely correctly understood right now, good teaching could remedy this, couldn't it? I don't think so. The meaning of the word and the associated value system has changed unidirectionally over the years, so that it has come to stand for a way of life that is fervently opposed by the apostle Paul in his epistles. ✕

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The information on Chechen ancient religion is taken from an article that originated as an information brochure (Anonymous 2008). The claims in the article match up with the research conducted by Savenko (2012) as well as earlier observations by Uslar (1869). The association between natural phenomena and deities in the Near East is described, for instance, in Walton (2012:chap. 4).

<sup>2</sup> It is not completely clear how deterministic (i.e. pre-ordained) the stance of Chechens is towards God. Interaction with the people there did show that something bad, such as a stillbirth, should be accepted without open grief, and that such a reaction to the bad event is *meela* before God.

<sup>3</sup> There is a linguistic variation here: behaviour can be *meela before* God (*Daalla hwalxa*), while this summon states that the desired behaviour will be *meela from* God (*Deeliera meela xir bu shuna* 'it will be *meela* from God for you'). One other example where it is used is in a Russian-language Chechnya Today (2015) internet article, where the concept is used to explain Russian religious terminology that is used in an article about a road improvement: *Это богоугодное дело (Делера мела болу г1уллакх) значительно расширяет границы возможных помех...* 'This God-pleasing action (an action that is *meela* from God) extends the borders of potential obstacles, ...'. I regard the '*meela from* God' construction as an innovation; one that definitely needs more research.

### References

Anonymous. 2008. Язычество и христианство в Чечне (Paganism and christianity in Chechnya). Религия в истории чеченского народа (Religion in the history of the Chechen people). <http://nohchalla.com/o-rodine/2012-01-30-14-24-06/2012-01-30-14-45-25/170-yazychestvo-i-hristianstvo-v-chechne.html> (28 February, 2017).

Anonymous. 2015. Общественный контроль над снижением аварийности в ДТП: «Автообзор – во имя безопасности» (Public control to lower the road accident rate: "Car checking for security's sake"). *Chechnyatoday.com*. Grozny. <https://chechnyatoday.com/content/view/288016> (3 March, 2017).

## Trying to be good (cont.)

### References (cont.)

- Anonymus. 2008. Язычество и христианство в Чечне (Paganism and christianity in Chechnya). Религия в истории чеченского народа (Religion in the history of the Chechen people). <http://nohchalla.com/o-rodine/2012-01-30-14-24-06/2012-01-30-14-45-25/170-yazychestvo-i-hristianstvo-v-chechne.html> (28 February, 2017).
- Anonymus. 2015. Общественный контроль над снижением аварийности в ДТП: «Автообзор – во имя безопасности» (Public control to lower the road accident rate: “Car checking for security’s sake”). *Chechnyatoday.com*. Grozny. <https://chechnyatoday.com/content/view/288016> (3 March, 2017).
- Francuz. 2011. Compliments to women (compliments to women). Reaction. <http://grommus.com/forum/archive/index.php/t-2891.html> (28 February, 2017).
- Matsiev, Akhmad Gekhaevich. 1961. *Чеченско-русский словарь. Составил А. Г. Мацев. Около 20 000 слов. С приложением краткого грамматического очерка чеченского языка.*
- Uslar (Услар), Petr Karlovič (Петр Карлович). 1869. Начало христианства в Закавказье и на Кавказе (The beginning of Christianity in the Southern and Northern Caucasus). *Сборник сведений о кавказских горцах - ССокГ (A collection of information on the Caucasian Highlanders)*, 1–24. Tbilisi. [http://apsnyteka.org/816-uslar\\_p\\_izbrannye\\_staty.html#1](http://apsnyteka.org/816-uslar_p_izbrannye_staty.html#1) (28 February, 2017).
- (Вагаров) Вагаров, А. Д. 2011. *Этимологический словарь чеченского языка (Etymological dictionary of the Chechen language)*. Тбилиси (Tbilisi): Меридиани.
- Walton, John H. 2012. *Ancient Near Eastern thought and the Old Testament: introducing the conceptual world of the Hebrew Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.
- Акаев, В. Х. & А. Б. Дохаева. 2014. Этническая культура чеченцев: противоречие языческих и исламских компонентов. *Исламоведение (Islamovedenie - Islamic science)* 4. 80–85. <http://islam.dgu.ru/Stat/islam2014-4-10.pdf>.
- Оргкомитет. 2006. Оргкомитет в поддержку акции Ибрагимова обратился к соотечественникам (The organizing committee that supports Ibragimov’s case has turned to his fellow countrymen). *kavkazcenter.com*. <http://kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2006/01/14/41023/orgkomitet-v-podderzhku-aktsii-ibragimova-obratilsya-k-sootechestvennikam.shtml> (2 October, 2017).
- Савенко, Е. А. 2012. Вопросы периодизации распространения и восстановления христианства на Северном Кавказе (On the periodization of the spread and establishment of Christianity in the Northern Caucasus). vol. II, 256–274. (Материалы IV Свято-Игнатиевских чтений (11-12 мая 2011)). Stavropol’: Издательский центр СтПДС. [http://stpds.ru/userfiles/file/IV\\_II\\_problems&prospects.pdf](http://stpds.ru/userfiles/file/IV_II_problems&prospects.pdf) (18 February, 2017).

### **Announcement:**

Remember to join us to discuss cultural background research on key concepts in Scripture.

**Friday May 19 at 14H England time. Zoom room: <https://sil.zoom.us/j/791528360>**