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Рецензия / Book Review

**Vilen Uarziati. *Izbrannyye trudy. Etnologiya. Kul'turologiya. Semiotika: v 2kh kn* [Selected works. Ethnology. Culturology. Semiotics]. Book 1. Vladikavkaz: Abeta, 2018, 551 p.**

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**Уарзиати В.С. Избранные труды.  
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Vilen Savelyevich Uarziati (1952–1995) was a widely published Russian ethnologist, candidate of historical sciences, and a leading researcher of the I. Abayev North Ossetian Institute of Humanitarian and Social Studies V., and a Professor of the North Ossetian State University. His studies include *Folk Games and Entertainments of Ossetians* (1987), *Culture of Ossetians: Relations with the Peoples of the Caucasus* (1990), *Festivities of Ossetians* (1995) and other works enriched the treasury of Russian science and have an achievement of Russian ethnology.

Vilen Uarziati's name is associated with a qualitatively new stage in the development of Ossetian ethnography, which marked a transition from the description of cultural phenomena to in-depth analysis. Realizing the exhaustion of traditional methods applied in ethnography, Uarziati began to search for new opportunities for the study of traditional culture. Also, Uarziati actively utilized methodological tools developed in anthropology, cultural studies, and semiotics.

In 2018, almost a quarter of a century after his untimely death, “Beta” publishing house initiated a new project “Vilen Uarziati Selected works. Ethnology. Culturology. Semiotics” based on his work. The two volumes include the scientist's monographs, and his dissertation and articles, including previously unpublished works.

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In V.S. Uarziati's works, the culture of Ossetians is presented through semiotics and informative signs – symbols that led the scientist to the original interpretation of the ancient traditions of the Ossetians, and their affinity with the culture of the Scythians and Alans – East Iranian peoples, who played a major role in the history of medieval Europe.

V.S. Uarziati's candidate dissertation included in the peer-reviewed edition, was completed at the leading scientific institution of the country – N.N. Miklukho-Maklai Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the RAS under the guidance of famous ethnologist Boris Aleksandrovich Kaloev. Settlements, estates, outbuildings, housing and its interior, food, clothing were issues, that traditional Soviet ethnography had previously left largely unexplored. The young scientist was tasked with recording the contemporary form of these phenomena of everyday life. However, the originality and depth of thinking, and exceptional scrupulousness use of semiotics allowed V.S. Uarziati to present a new view on the deep aspects of Ossetian folk culture.

Developing the reconstruction of the world model of the Indo-European peoples, including that of Alan-Ossetians, which was proposed by J. Dumisile, D.S. Rayevsky, V.I. Abaev and other authors, Uarziati showed that the ritual three pies are a symbols not only of the three “major categories of life” – “Huytsau” (God), “Khur” (the Sun) and “Sahh” (Earth), but also of four corners of the earth:

...in cutting the pies with the first two straight intersecting lines, the eventual cross figure is inscribed in a circle through the three pies. In combination, these two geometric signs form a symbol of both the center and the four directions of the universe ... Thus, in the ritual we have the classical combination of the numbers “three” and “four.” The resulting figure ‘seven’ applies to oldest ... concepts of peace and harmony.<sup>1</sup>

V.S. Uarziati as discovered that the Ossetian table “fyng” was a combination of two geometric symbols – a circle and a triangle, which fit into the third figure – a rectangle, i.e. the walls of the dwelling. These chapes not only limited the space of the table, but also were strictly oriented according to the cardinal directions. The interpretation of the “fyng” as a marker of the sacred center of the traditional dwelling, the most important element of the microcosm – was once noticed by scientists in Hungary, where it is still the subject of research attention. Geza Szabo considers the memorial table laid on the day of Zærdæværaen to be the continuation of the traditions of Urartu, Gordion, the Hallstatt princely burials, Etruscan burial chambers, and Roman reliefs. The researcher claims that the ancestors of Ossetians left elements of their culture in Europe.<sup>2</sup>

According to A. A. Galiyev, Vilen Uarziati showed that a three-shape functional model of the world and societal structures defines Ossetian culture, and that this culture is not just a the results of a random set of signs, but a strict system, and all these signs form a single pattern of thought.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> V.S. Uarziati, “O stolike «fyng» i ritual'noy pishche osetin,” *Literaturnaya Osetiya*, no. 74 (1990): 165–190.

<sup>2</sup> Geza Sabo, “Nartskiy ctol i mobil'nost' doistoricheskoy Yevropy,” in *Nartovedeniye v XXI veke: sovremennyye paradigmy i interpretatsii* (Vladikavkaz: IPTS SOIGSI VNTS RAN Publ., 2017), 198–209.

<sup>3</sup> A.A. Galiyev, “V.S. Uarziati. K 60 letiyu uchenogo (1952–1995),” in *Narody Kavkaza: istoriya, etnologiya, kul'tura. K 60-letiyu so dnya rozhdeniya V.S. Uarziati. Materialy vserossiyskoy nauchnoy kon-*

V.S. Uarziati's ideas were significantly developed in the monographs *Folk Games and Entertainments of the Ossetians*, *Festivities of Ossetians*. The scrupulously revealed details of ritual games with their attributes showed new ethnographic parallels with the Iranian-speaking world, the results of ethno-cultural contacts with neighboring Caucasian peoples, as well parallels with Central Asian ethnography. The researcher was increasingly attracted by the idea of unity of the Scythian-Sax tribes, later illustrated with his colleague A. Galiev in their joint project "Symbols and Signs of the Great Steppe (History of Culture of the Eurasian Nomads)."<sup>4</sup>

His monograph *Ossetian Culture: Relations with the Peoples of the Caucasus* analyzes the contacts of Ossetians with Abkhazians and Abazins, Adyghe, Karachays and Balkars, highlanders of Georgia, and the emergence of similar forms in various spheres of everyday culture. Identifying the influence of Alan culture on the life of the North Caucasian peoples at its heyday, V.Uarziati notes that in the post-Mongol era, Alans-Ossetians borrowed the natural and ecological experience of the neighboring communities, by forming economic inter-dependence between the plain's inhabitants.

It was Yu.D. Anchabadze who noted the thoroughness of the study: "The author did not overlook any example of everyday communal characteristics of the cultures of local peoples. There are indeed many such examples. Taken from different spheres of life, they seem to be strung one on top of another, turning sometimes, to use the phrase dropped by the author, into "evidence of the most diverse and fragmented subjects."<sup>5</sup>

V.S. Uarziati also raised the question of that the common historical and ethnographic unity of Caucasian history and ethnography was a result of the long cohabitation, mutual influence and common historical destinies of neighboring peoples.

In our opinion, among V.S. Uarziati's scientific articles included in this edition, special attention should be paid to the works devoted to the issues of Ossetian religion which remain relevant and have scientific value, as well as its different components – traditional, Christian and Islamic: *Dzvigisi-dzuar, On the Origin and Dating of Ossetian sanctuaries Rnybarduag and Alarda, Chyryston tævag iron udvarny (Influence of Christianity on Ossetian Spiritual Culture, Islam in Ossetian Culture)*, and *Remnants of Islam in the Village of Zamankul*.

In the context of modern practices of the revival of Orthodox churches and traditional places of worship, of significant importance is Vilen Uarziati's remark about the long evolution characteristic of local sanctuaries of mountainous Ossetia – from a Christian chapel to a sanctuary and "ultimately... to a place of mass celebrations with the beginnings of a folk theater."<sup>6</sup> Today the sanctuary performs several functions, the object of cultural heritage for some, or a symbol of traditional religion for others, and, unfortunately, it becomes the subject of political intrigue.

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*ferentsii s mezhdunarodnym uchastiyem* (Vladikavkaz: IPTS SOIGSI VNTS RAN Publ.; RSO-A Publ., 2014), 13–18.

<sup>4</sup> V.S. Uarziati, A.A. Galiyev, *Simvoly i znaki Velikoy stepi (Istoriya kul'tury nomadov Yevrazii)* (Astrakhan: KazGos INTI Publ., 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Yu.D. Anchabadze, "V.S. Uarziati. Kul'tura Osetii: svyazi s narodami Kavkaza," *Sovetskaya etnografiya*, no. 6 (1991): 145–147.

<sup>6</sup> V.S. Uarziati, *Izbrannyye trudy. Etnologiya. Kul'turologiya. Semiotika* (Vladikavkaz: Projekt-Press Publ., 2018), 481.

Appreciating the role of Christianity in the history and culture of Alan-Ossetians, and the changes in the cultural life of Ossetia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the scientist noted with satisfaction that “educated people decisively turned to the Christian world, to the progressive European cultural environment,” with particular reference to educational activities of Iuana Aguzata who “from the bookless darkness began to pave the broad way for his poor people to the Christian world, to education and knowledge.”<sup>7</sup>

In the study on Islam in Ossetia, Vilen Uarziati outlined important but misinterpreted facts in historiography and showed that Islam was predominantly practiced not in Western Ossetia, but in its Eastern regions, where the bearers of this faith predominated, and that the underwhelming professional evaluation of the Muslim clergy did not correspond to historical reality. The revealed features of Islamic culture in the life of Ossetians deserve attention and further research. It is safe to say that for Vilen Uarziati religion was, above all, a cultural system; it is in this capacity that it became the subject of his research.

The reader may also be interested in the discussions about Ossetians living in Turkey, because Vilen Uarziati was the first to turn to ethnographic study of our compatriots; once some representatives of the Ossetian Diaspora began to come from Turkey in the 1990s, and he found an opportunity to work with them. His first contact was Halis Asety (Aseev) – a respected senior of the Turkish Diaspora, a great connoisseur of the history of Ossetians living in Turkey. It was a great turn of fortune, because in Turkey there are no longer such individuals as the late Halis Asety. Today, through intensive communication with representatives of the Ossetian Diaspora, Vilen Uarziati’s comprehensive study of the history and culture of Anatolian Ossetians, and interesting observations and conclusions are still of great value.

Vilen Uarziati tried to perceive all the phenomena surrounding him as an ethnologist, and often repeated the phrase “I went to collect ethnographic material.” This is what T.K. Salbiev recalled his memoirs about him, noting that

he studied everything that happened in the cultural life of Ossetians through the well-known method of involved observation: that is, he was both a participant and an observer at the same time.<sup>8</sup>

Vilen Uarziati’s works written with deep knowledge, affection and awareness of the greatest value of culture and have become a significant contribution to the development of Ossetian studies – a comprehensive scientific direction included in the broad context of Iranian studies, Caucasian studies, Russian and world science.

This edition is not only a tribute to a great scientist, whose magnificent works will have a long life in science.<sup>9</sup> The book is a response to the social demand of society, and its desire to know its true culture. V.S. Uarziati’s research is in opposition to ignorance,

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<sup>7</sup> V.S. Uarziati, *Izbrannyye trudy. Etnologiya. Kul'turologiya. Semiotika* (Vladikavkaz: Proyekt-Press Publ., 2018), 539.

<sup>8</sup> T.K. Salbiyev, “Ushel sobirat’ etnograficheskiy material. Vilen Uarziati v vospominaniyakh kolleg,” *Sputnik International*, <https://sptnkne.ws/6Nhx>.

<sup>9</sup> Z.V. Kanukova, A.Kh. Khadikova, “Vilen Savel'yevich Uarziati,” *Etnograficheskoye obozreniye*, no. 5 (1996): 165.

and the falsification of humanitarian knowledge. His work provides a reliable foundation for the preservation and actualization of historical memory as well as historical and cultural heritage by investigating a complex series of cultural, religious, ideological factors integrated into many spheres of life of modern society.

V.S. Uarziati's works are of interest not only for the scientific community; they are in demand by the general public and will always be relevant, as well as the public's interest in Ossetian history and culture.

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