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Collective Memory and Violence: The Use of Myths in the Chechen Separatist Ideology, 1991–1994

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Abstract

This paper deals with the political uses of freedom myths in the Chechen separatist ideology between 1991 and 1994. By adopting a constructionist perspective, it shows that these myths could have a pervasive role in a period of deep political crisis. It explores the way myths have been evolving over times. It particularly points out the role of collective memories of past tragic events in reshaping myths and their political significance. From that point onwards it analyses how myths have been included into political rhetoric. Chechen separatist leaders make a linear reading of Russo-Chechen relationships and put forward independence as a necessity. In so doing, the new self-proclaimed independent state represents, beyond political and economic arguments, a 'guaranty for safety'. While the embryonic Chechen state was failing, separatist leaders borrowed from mythology to legitimize the Chechen state and raise the struggle for an independent state to the status of a right and just struggle. This paper demonstrates the strength that the narratives conveyed by myths could have in terms of constructing a common sense to past and present in a period of changes.

Introduction

The two Russo-Chechen wars have created a kind of fascination outside Russia. The resistance offered by the Chechen fighters during the first war (1994–1996) has been "glamorising",[1] as were the killings of the main Chechen leaders, Dzhokhar Dudaev or Aslan Maskhadov.[2] More than often the metaphor of the wolf symbolizes the heroic resistance of the Chechens against the Russian armed forces. By referring to this symbol, analysts take up the arguments of Chechens themselves and contribute to romanticizing the Chechen resistance.[3] Yet, the wolf is a central character in the Chechen political mythology for it embodies a set of beliefs. It depicts Chechens as resolute fighters who defend their freedom, another core concept to the Chechen collective imaginary. Wolf and freedom are besides strongly associated. This paper intends to analyze the significance given to the wolf and freedom by the separatist ideologues and supporters.

We define myths as a set of beliefs and representations, "usually put forth as a narrative held by a community about itself".[4] As such, myths are strong ethnicity markers,[5] ethnicity being defined here as a way of seeing the world.[6] Myths create and consolidate a specific collective imaginary through which a group perceives its distinctive traits. The notion of collective imaginary is a polyphonic one. But it definitely refers to a "repertoire of senses and explicatory values which integrate social activities, individual as well as collective behaviour in a reassuring continuity".[7] The continuity is artificial and invented. Collective imaginary is subject to continuous adjustments. In addition, myths don't

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reactivate ancient emotions or references, but give shape to new references presented as historical ones.[8] Though, if myths are rhetorically adjusted for political purposes, the narratives they support could be true for the people who strongly believe in them.[9] Myths have a real political force and their evocation could have a strong mobilizing role, for they could produce a reality of their own.[10] They could therefore be considered as tools manipulated by identity entrepreneurs to give sense to present in a dramatic way.[11]

Myths primarily circulate through folklore. During the Soviet period, folklore has been raised to the status of identity emblem, as it was—and still is—considered as the less altered cultural element. The Soviet period definitely played a role in the development of what Ernest Gellner calls the "low culture":[12] ethnographic studies and folklore were promoted under the strict Soviet ideological rule;[13] folkloric tales and accounts were standardized and put on paper. At the same time, a shift in the cultural activities from high cultures to low cultures appeared.[14] Despite censure and control, folklore became a sort of refuge for identity. Therefore, folklore has been described as an integrative identity marker and a source of authentic references available to the group during the Soviet period, as well as after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In this paper, we show that the wolf and the ideal of freedom to which it is commonly associated in the Chechen collective imaginary has been ideologized for political purposes during the late Perestroika and the first years of the post-Soviet period. We consider only what we call the first "separatist period", lasting from 1991 to 1994. We rely on discourses and works published by the supporters of the independence, and on interviews during which we ask informants questions about the wolf and/or and the ideal of freedom. We also consult popular literature and folkloric sources available in Russian, or translated mainly into English or French. Discourse analysis drives us to consider the dynamics between dominant identity visions, ideology and social attitudes.[15] Accordingly, it leads to question the way the system of representations surrounding the wolf and an ideal of freedom were integrated into discourses and actions by separatist ideologues or supporters. The wolf was raised to the status of a national symbol and the ideal of freedom presented as an intrinsic value of the Chechen ethnic group. The representations and images they convey also fuel ideology. The spirit of resistance underscored by the separatist ideology was first used to justify the independence. It was also used to claim for the right to defend the territory.

The Wolf and the Myth of Freedom

During interviews with Chechen refugees, many informants pointed out spontaneously that the Chechen people have preserved an exclusive identity since remote ages. Some of them were representatives of the separatist Chechen government abroad at the time the interviews were conducted (2003–2004). Therefore, they sought to defend the idea of independence by underlining the Chechens' particular sense of identity. All my informants were not politically engaged. Most were ordinary people who fled Chechnya and the war's extreme violence.[16] All proudly stressed that Chechens could not be compared to any other people, even in the North Caucasus. In short, Chechens are said to be unique. And when they were prompted to tell what makes this uniqueness, they unanimously answered freedom and equity. The egalitarian social organization, which has been, according to my informants, prevailing in Chechnya since time immemorial, would incarnate both values turned to myths. They insisted on the fact that Chechens never knew monarchy, nor feudalism, nor slavery. Though, Chechens are divided into *teips* (clans), composed of extended families; *teips* are united into *tukhums*.[17] There

were no centralized instances of power but traditional self-government bodies like the Councils of Elders.[18] "We are a free people", one of my informants told me, and he immediately added "and we will preserve this liberty".[19] *Marsho* (freedom) doesn't refer to a modern conception of freedom. It first of all means liberty in a romanticized sense, but also "peace" and "well-being".[20]

To strengthen their arguments, some of the interviewees quoted the Russian classical authors Leo Tolstoy and Mikhail Lermontov.[21] Both writers expressed through their respective works a real fascination for the Caucasian Mountain peoples' struggle against the Russian conquest: their characters—Hadji Murad, Hadji Abrek to name but a few— embody an ideal of freedom. The classics of Russian literature have contributed to make Chechens and Caucasian Mountain peoples more generally resolute warriors, fighting to death invaders and raiders to protect their territory. They moreover make the Mountain peoples' and specifically the Chechen's resistance during the whole nineteenth century a struggle in the name of freedom. One famous Lermontov poem states, "They have one God, freedom, one law, war".[22] Such metaphors back the Chechen interpretation. Anatol Lieven indeed remarks that the Chechens have adopted these images as almost their own.[23] According to the Chechen ethnographer Ian Chesnov, these works have had a great influence on the perception that the Chechens have developed about themselves.[24] Incidentally, the works of the two Russian classical authors have contributed in a certain way to the incorporation of a myth of freedom and equity into the Chechen collective imaginary. Chechen folklore is full of tales and legends that present Chechens who have heroically resisted to assailants. Most of these accounts insist on this spirit of freedom which drives Chechens to fight enemies, most of the time in unfair confrontations.[25]

Two symbolic characters represent freedom, courage and equity. The first one is the personage of *abrek* (also *obarg* in Chechen language). *Abrek* was first used to name the men who hid in the mountains to escape blood revenge. By extension, it came to describe those who resisted over time to the Tsarist army and to the Soviet soldiers. Abdurakhman Avtorkhanov, a Chechen historian exiled in Germany during the Second World War, portrays *abreks* as "isolated revolutionaries, who take revenge on a foreign power which has committed acts of cruelty and displayed injustice against the Chechen people".[26] It has to be noticed that this term has become a pejorative expression in Russian, meaning savage, bandit. In the Chechen traditions, *abreks* are still representing as men fighting enemies to defend their territorial integrity and the values common to the ethnic group. Historical figures who belong to this category, Bey Bulat and Zelimkham for example, are revered like national heroes whose actions are recalled in many songs, accounts and legends.[27] Besides some Chechens, and particularly some politicians, do not hesitate to compare many of the Chechen fighters combating the Russian armed forces—with the exception of those who use terrorism as a political strategy—to *abreks* fighting for the liberty of their people.[28]

Those resisting the assailants are commonly associated with the wolf, the second symbol that embodies the myth of freedom and equity.[29] *Borz* (wolf) appears as even more meaningful as it encompasses a repertoire of images, references, but also calls for romanticism and sensationalism. A noble but feared creature, the wolf is, along with the bear, a typical character in many mythologies. He is most of the time represented as a terrifying animal, ready for devouring his enemies.[30] This dimension is not absent from the Chechen representations. But, in the Chechen context, the wolf primarily symbolizes freedom, strength, slyness and agility. It emblematizes independence, the pride of the Chechen people and their historical struggle for preserving their

traditions. The Chechens often compare themselves to a pack of wolves linked by a strong solidarity.[31] This solidarity would find its better expression in times of crises. Indeed, many informants underline that Chechens don't need a leader, except possibly in war time. This leader is told to be the bravest, or at least the one capable of bringing together the different *teips*. While *abreks* are said to fight assailants to defend a territory and an identity, wolf incarnates a rejection of any form of domination. In his memoirs Abdurakhman Avtorkhanov recalls:

> Once, I asked my grand-father, whether wolf or lion is the strongest. [He] answered: "Of course, lion is the strongest, but, we, the *Nokhchii*, we do not compare ourselves with the strongest, but with the bravest: lion only attacks the weakest, but if the latter massacres the lion, he savagely cries out. On the contrary, wolf attacks stronger animals, and if he dies in front of them, then he dies with dignity and in silence. We, the *Nokhchii*, always give battle to stronger enemies, but die silently . . ."[32]

Wolf is a metaphor which frames a system of representations. It has been integrated into the national symbolic system for its strong evocative power. The 1989 resolution adopted by the first session of the all-National Chechen Congress made the wolf the national emblem of the Chechen people.[33] About one thousand representatives attended the Congress and they voted unanimously to support this decision.[34] The Chechen elites adopted a symbolic system that borrows from folklore and mythology. While the all-National Congress became quickly dominated by a radical faction, the pro-separatists took on the symbols conveyed by the wolf and placed the myth of liberty at the centre of their ideology.

Memories, Myths, and Ideology

The wolf definitively became the national emblem of the Republic of Chechnya following the declaration of independence on first November 1991 and the election of Dzhokhar Dudaev as president.[35] It was put on the national flag and became a central reference to the national anthem. Entitled *Death or Freedom*, the latter was, according to a common version, composed by a Chechen writer, Abuzar Aidamirov. But Chechens have been singing this anthem since the thirteenth–fourteenth centuries or so. At that time, the North Caucasus Mountain peoples were confronted with the invasions of the Tatar-Mongol hordes. This song has been orally transmitted over centuries, and then put on paper and standardized by Aidamov. It first became the national anthem after the fall of the Russian Empire in 1917, and was revived on November 1989 by the all-National Congress before being appropriated by the separatists. All Chechen statements about this text and its content elude the adjustments made to one of the many versions of that song. It could therefore be categorized as part of "invented traditions".[36] This small excerpt illustrates the place given to the notions of freedom and courage.

> Never will we appear submissive before anyone,
> Death or Freedom, we can choose only one way.
> Our sisters cure our wounds by their songs,
> The eyes of the beloved arouse us to the feat of arms.[37]

Its emotional signification consolidates a system of representations and norms. Reference to folklore and myths has also a moralizing role: it ritualizes norms presented as

specific to the group. The mobilization of a national mythology aims at imposing a dominant norm, but also at promoting an illusory unity of the Chechen people in front of a danger. In other words, myths and national symbols crystallize national identity,[38] as they construct a difference and, consequently, group boundaries. Myths of freedom and equity could be compared as an identity prescription as they became central to the perception a majority of Chechens have of their collective identity.

Ian Chesnov asserts that the "Chechen national idea" is based on the notions of "freedom, equity and consent".[39] This primordialist definition of the Chechen identity, very close to the one defended by the separatist ideologues, created a distinctive relationship to both the past and current politics. Myths of freedom and equity inform the understanding of the whole Chechen past. All wars or struggles against invaders are presented as a perpetual struggle for freedom. It is all the more noticeable when assailants were or are Russians. Besides, the term "Russians" is used by the Chechen ideologues as a static one. It commonly refers, without distinguishing the historical periods or the nature of the regime, to the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union as well as the Russian Federation. Contemporary wars and dreadful present strongly influence the interpretation given to the past. Hence, this rhetorical effect is of great importance as it ultimately compares struggles for freedom to struggles against Russians and personifies the image of the "other". Myths and collective memory fuel each other: myth "plays a role in the maintenance of memory and forgetting",[40] while collective memory provides collective imaginary with references and images. All tragic events recall a tradition of fighting unfair struggles against stronger enemies to preserve a territory and an identity. In fact the Chechen collective memory is mainly a memory of conflicts against Russians: the bloody nineteenth-century Caucasian wars; the strong repression of the 1920s and 1930s when Chechens opposed on a regular basis the Soviet rule, collectivization and Sovietization; and the 1944 massive deportation of all Chechens to Central Asia.

This last episode could be considered as the strongest marker of the Chechen identity.[41] Its consequences have been more than often overlooked. The Chechens were deported on 23 February 1944 along with the Ingush. They were rehabilitated in 1956 and authorized to return. But, the accusation leveled against most of the "punished peoples"[42] deported during the Second World War on a pretext of massive collaboration with the German occupiers, remained as a stigma.[43] Chechens considered themselves as being citizens of second zone after 1956: they were not allowed to resettle in their ancestors' villages located in the mountains; and they were excluded from high-ranking positions in oil industry and governmental positions. Chechens tended to occupy mid or low-qualified jobs in other industrial sectors and in agriculture, which has undergone collectivization and profound changes between 1944 and 1956. As underlined by Georgi Derlugian, the society in Chechnya–Ingushetia was divided into two distinct parts: the cities inhabited mainly by the Russians; the countryside mostly populated by Chechens and Ingush.[44] Moreover, Soviet authorities tried to modernize the Chechen society through the interdiction of Sufi brotherhoods and Russification.[45] Some interpreted these politics as attempts to "corrupt" the Chechen identity and eradicate traditions. Said-Khasan Abumuslimov, a separatist ideologue, describes the late Soviet period as a "spiritual and moral genocide".[46]

If some of the deported peoples did get financial compensation at the end of the 1990s, neither the Chechens, nor the other punished peoples were offered an apology. The massive deportation which claimed thousands of lives[47] has become during the Soviet time a non-event of history:[48] even after the 1956 rehabilitation, it was forbidden to commemorate the deportation and the censure prohibited all references to the tragic forced

resettlement. Consequently, the memories of the deportation were transmitted through the large family context. This led to a withdrawal of the national group into itself. Pain and traumatic experiences were interiorized by the survivors and descendants. Memories of deportation become a "chosen trauma", defined following Vamik Volkan as "a shared mental representation of the event which includes realistic information, fantasized expectations, intense feelings and defenses against unacceptable thoughts".[49] Besides, the massive deportation still represents an open wound, and following the expression of the Russian writer, Aleksey Kosterin, "an offence that wasn't cleared away".[50]

Mass deportation is still recalled as an unrecognized genocide.[51] This widespread interpretation has led to the entire re-writing of the history of the Russo-Chechen relationships. All the confrontations which opposed Chechens and Russians are presented as a continuous genocide that started three centuries ago with the North Caucasus's conquest. The use of the term "genocide" has two functions. The first function aims at attracting the attention of the international community. The thesis of a continuous genocide was formulated in the early 1990. It endorses a global strategy of victimization whose first objectives were to justify the claim for independence. It is moreover congruent with the memories of deportations for it reactivates traumatic recollections about a recent event. This remark leads us to the second function assumed by such an interpretation.

To use the term of genocide to describe the Russo-Chechen relationships over centuries intend to level a firm accusation against Russia and to firmly condemn its politics towards Chechens over centuries. Since 1948, the term of genocide is at the top of the pyramid of violence.[52] The Russian politics illustrated by the deportation is compared with a succession of state-sponsored atrocities. Russia is thus presented in the separatist discourse as a physical danger and as a threat to identity.[53] More than fear, narratives express strong feelings of humiliation related to the attempts to eradicate traditions and to "tame" the Chechens in exile.[54] A. Avtorkhanov considers that "the deportation of Chechens and Ingush from Caucasus illustrates concretely the nature of the Leninist-Stalinist national politics: it aimed not only to spiritually reduce to serfdom, to politically oppress, but also to physically exterminate peoples who love freedom".[55] Such assertion, which reflects a common belief about the imposition of rules which didn't prevail before the forced resettlement, put forward a sentiment of vulnerability of the nation under domination, a sentiment felt both in the past and in the present.

These diffuse feelings of fear and vulnerability were repeated as the main arguments to defend the right to self-determination and independence. Independence has been presented from 1990 onwards as a necessity to safeguard the physical, territorial and moral integrity of the Chechen people. Beyond political and economic arguments, the separatists revived a traumatic collective memory alongside with references to freedom and equity. In a text probably written in 1991, Dudaev revealed that at the end of the 1980s several Chechen elders worried about unusual trucks' activities and the presence of Ministry of Interior troops near numerous villages. Many thought that the 1944 scenario could be repeated. And Dudaev concluded: "That's why we don't have today other choices than to let each people [the Russians and the Chechens] to go their own way and to deal with their own errors".[56] Hence, the independence is presented as the only choice available for the Chechens who are concretely facing a new risk of deportation. At the same time, references to other past tragic events brandish recollections deeply rooted in the Chechen collective memory. Russia is presented as a danger and as a continuous menace. "Russia has not been a Paradise for the Chechens, but a Hell; it has not been a mother but a cruel stepmother", as Dudaev put it.[57]

Through their actions and discourses, elites take in charge the collective emotions related to past collective traumatic experiences.[58] They make independence a necessity and the new self-proclaimed independent state a guarantee for safety. Such narrative articulates the conception of the nation that the separatists promote: a free people into an independent state. "The wolfish allegory is a depiction of how Chechens have dealt with outside invaders for millennia".[59] As such, it re-activates the primordial attachment to an idealized relationship to politics. It would not only give the Chechen state its own legitimacy, but also raise the struggle for an independent state to the status of a right and just struggle. According to the separatists, Chechnya has been humiliated during the whole Tsarist and Soviet periods; it then has to get away from the status of colony to which it has been confined.[60] Not all the Chechen population supported the idea of independence when Dudaev declared it in November 1991; some opposed it in the streets.[61] But Boris Eltsin's decision to blockade the secessionist Caucasian Republic has definitively contributed to rally temporarily a majority of Chechens behind independence. Threat became concrete and the separatists enjoyed during a few months strong support. Myths serve here to legitimize authority: during the first euphoric months of independence, the "symbol's sacred aura" was transposed to the newly formed state formal structures.[62]

Myths and Violence

The glorification of the idea of freedom and courage has led to easily associate Chechen culture with violence. As underlined above, the Chechen folklore glorifies fighters and weapons. Folkloric performances show young boys manipulating swords and daggers. Weaponry manufacture counts among traditional folk arts: from the nineteenth century onwards, Chechen artists used to ornament sabres, swords and daggers with decorations in noble metal such as gold and silver, or in ivory.[63] Collective imaginary is full of images of war and confrontations; it ennobles fighters and downplays invaders. As repertoires of senses and values, myths incorporate such references, but the relationships between myths and violence should not be considered as a "natural" one. In other words, violence is by no means a product of culture, but the result of social and political changes.

Generally speaking, political scientists have neglected the study of the period ranging from 1991 to 1994. Yet, the failure of the embryonic Chechen state helps understand the fragmentation of the Chechen society and the rise of violence. It also offers insights into the strategy of militarization followed by Dudaev and his supporters. Three main processes led to the failure of the Chechen state. The first Dudaev's decision was to fire non-Chechens working in the administration and to replace them by Chechens. This led to an ethnicisation of politics. Some other national groups present in Chechnya, like the Cossacks, try first to organize themselves and create their own national Congress to discuss the modalities of their possible participation in the Chechen state.[64] In the meantime, many ethnic Russians continued to run away.[65] Dudaev's ethnic politics made the Chechen state incapable of imposing a federative principle. This tension between state-building and the Chechen nation-building is enhanced by the difficult implementation of the decisions adopted by the President and the Parliament. In some localities, administrations refused to execute reforms. Struggles for influence also resulted in some other districts in a duality of powers: the former Soviets suppressed by Dudaev refused to disband, while most of the new local elected or co-opted assemblies were paralyzed by local rivalries.[66]

Furthermore, Dudaev made concessions to unite and seduce local leaders with the ideal of independence. He promoted a hybrid structure for the Chechen state: alongside with political and judicial institutions, Dudaev institutionalized the *Mekh-Khel*, presented as a traditional instance of power through gathering the representatives of the Elders coming from all regions of Chechnya.[67] This institution had only a consultative power, but its institutionalization proved to add more political confusion. The picture shows how "ineffective"[68] this state structure was, according to Akhmed Zakaev's own word. Dudaev was unable to build strong administration in the service of the State. His decisions only encouraged further fragmentation. Moreover, his formal authority was regularly challenged. Dudaev first faced a badly organized opposition in 1991. Nevertheless, his drive toward authoritarianism contributed to swell its ranks. In 1993, Dudaev dissolved the Parliament whose members were negotiating with the Russian Parliament a solution to the political *cul-de-sac*;[69] he revoked the Constitutional Court and fired Groznyy's Mayor. Most of these personalities joined the ranks of the opposition. While it was far from being united, the opposition constituted an active force, especially when Russia overtly supported and instrumentalized it from 1993 onwards.

Finally, the Dudaev government failed in regulating the circulation of weapons within the Republic. The 1992 agreement concluded between the Russian leadership and Dudaev stated the Russian army's complete retreat from Chechnya; but half of the military materials remained within the Chechen Republic. Dudaev secured control of part of the arsenal. But the main part fell into the criminal/armed groups' hands, which began to proliferate in Chechnya after Dudaev made Chechnya a free zone.[70] Dudaev's government never even tried to impose the state's monopoly of violence. Indeed, Dudaev had no power to oppose emerging warlords. Moreover he showed no political will to struggle against the criminalization of the failed Chechen state. The context of anarchy indubitably encouraged the rise of violence. In short, the embryonic Chechen state was collapsing well before the Russian military intervention in 1994. Russia definitively had a role in destabilizing a very fragile situation. Russia armed the opposition and encouraged an armed confrontation between the opposition and armed forces loyal to Dudaev. But its role should not be overemphasized. The "transplanting of state"[71] on the Chechen society was a failure, not because of its social organization, but because of the political tensions, economic disillusions, and Dudaev's authoritarianism. Hence, a culture of violence gradually settled in Chechnya, in the sense that violence became a norm in the social interactions as the state was unable to regulate it.

Yet, the interpretation given by the separatist ideologues to this deliquescent situation exclusively pointed out the role of Russia. From 1991 on, Dudaev repeatedly played on an ideology of threat. As demonstrated above, Russia is presented as a Sword of Damocles over the heads of the entire Chechen people. Dudaev imputed all internal difficulties to Russia, which, according to him, was trying its best to destabilize the newly independent Chechnya by ordering subversive actions within the Chechen borders. Though, it can be noticed that the more Dudaev drove toward authoritarianism, the more he referred to an inalienable freedom and unchallengeable equity to characterize not only the Chechen people, but also the Chechen state. In short, Dudaev made the yet collapsed Chechen state an incarnation of the mystified ideals of freedom and a rampart against all possible aggressions.

This strategy materialized in an excessive militarization of the failed Chechen state. When examining the decrees issued by Dudaev, one is struck by the place given to military affairs. Basically, no decree concerned social matters: education, health, pensions, payment of arrears of salary seemed to have been out of the presidential scope.

However, reform of the institutions, economic affairs (the creation of a free zone, and attempt to conclude commercial agreements with foreign countries) and military preparation were given high priority.[72] At the same time, Dudaev reinforced several times the powers of his National Guard and encouraged, or never discouraged, the possession of weapons by individuals. Such a strategy was congruent with both Dudaev's objectives—to defend the independence of Chechnya by all means, including war—and beliefs. In early 1992 he declared, "Chechens know the price for freedom".[73] The militarization of the failed state structures was conceived as the only answer to the internal and external uncertainties created by the social anarchy and the rise of the opposition to Dudaev. Dudaev didn't mean to promote the idea of a confrontation with Russia, but never excluded this possibility, even if he repeated that Chechnya and Russia have to negotiate further to find a political solution to the conflict. Thus, violence is only conceived as a liberating violence confronting an oppressive violence.

At a time were his leadership was quite contested in the whole population, Dudaev and his supporters resort to a shared mythology to motivate patriotic action and to create a yet very illusory cohesion. In this perspective, "Russia" was often compared with a strong bear ready for attacking the pack of wolves in a dramatic version of David versus Goliath struggle. The mobilization of an animal bestiary which made sense to the majority of Chechens served political purposes. Myths here justify ethnic fears and were supposed to support mobilization in favor of a contested government. But, the continuous deployment of myths also acted as an instrument to reject responsibility on the others' shoulders.[74] Finally, myths of freedom and equity filled out a loss of sense in a context of political and social crises. This worked superficially from 1991 to 1994 despite the fact that the Chechen population had the cognitive instruments to understand the messages conveyed by such references. Disillusionment, the rise of violence, and the context of quasi-civil war in 1994 may explain the low popularity Dudaev had before 1994.

The Receding of the Symbol

The use of violence to defend one's territory and identity is part of the Chechen system of beliefs which makes struggle for freedom an essential value. These beliefs have been shaped by a long collective memory of sufferings and oppression, which give them a strong social efficiency, as shown by the large and unexpected mobilization of the Chechens to fight the Russian army in 1994.[75] In a way, the discredited Dudaev's regime kept some legitimacy by continuously referring to the Russians as a peril for the Chechen people. This strategy constantly reactivates the tragic collective memory and makes Russians a constant peril for the community. The Dudaev's expression "the slave who accepts his slavery deserves double the slavery",[76] has become, since 1994, on the main separatist slogan. It is used to emphasize the need for continued fighting to protect the Chechen mystified liberty.

The symbol of the wolf and the notion of freedoms were strongly associated with the separatist ideology. But independence and wars have enhanced divisions within the Chechen society.[77] First divisions split the separatist camp in several tendencies, including an Islamist one personified by Shamil Basaev. The separatist camp also faced a strong pro-Russian opposition, which contested their legitimacy even on the ground of national symbols. The nomination of the Chechen pro-Russian government in 2000, the so-called elections of two presidents in 2003 and 2004 led to a redefinition of the Chechen symbolic system. The wolf was rejected and replaced by other symbols.

A tower, an oil rig and a rising sun now compose the Chechen coat of arms adopted by the pro-Russian government in 2004.[78] Ramzan Kadyrov appointed president in 2007 has averred the validity of such a very symbolic move. If this decision never met unanimity within the Chechen society,[79] it shows how folklore could be turned to a reservoir of references, yet very contested. The debates surrounding the change of the symbolic system not only concerned heraldry and the aesthetic of the new symbols. They were also related to the meaning given to the representations conveyed by new imposed symbols. Some consider that this new coat of arms is "historically groundless".[80]

The move decided by Akhmad Kadyrov, the pro-Russian president "elected" in 2003 and assassinated in 2004, has given to some Chechens the feeling of being dispossessed not only from their history, but also from their sense of identity. Such a reaction shows the force of certain representations and the importance political leaders converted into identity entrepreneurs may give to myths and folklore, especially in periods of crisis. Not only did the pro-Russian governments deny the rebel spirit traditionally attached to the Chechens, but they also intend to get more legitimacy by trying to impose a new narrative on the Chechen identity. At the same time, they put forward their own vision of the Chechen political future within the Russian Federation. Among the messages clearly conveyed appears a political will to reject violence as a way of achieving political goals. Yet, this interpretation passes over silence the practices of the pro-Russian militia who commonly resort to violence, torture, and forced disappearances.[81] The adoption of new national symbols, the invalidation and finally the forced eradication of all references to the wolf were not the result of an identity negotiation, but of an identity imposition. But in a context where most of the Chechens are still facing symbolic and physical violence, both symbolic systems proved to have lost their integrative role.

Conclusion

The "mythological effervescence"[82] that we observe since 1991 reflects as many attempts to culturally homogenize the Chechen nation-building and to politically legitimize it. Relationship between politics and myths are very complex. We intend to put forward the strength that the narratives they convey could have in terms of constructing a common sense to past and present in a period of change. Myths definitively have a mobilizing role for they sustain dominant representations. This article illustrates the role of identity entrepreneurs who rely on a system of representations that they contribute to develop, re-define in a continuous negotiating process. Therefore, references to the wolf should be taken up more carefully as they first of all reflect a system of perceptions at a given time. While images of wolves fighting lions or bears are very appealing, to compare Chechens with wolves is finally to corroborate certain beliefs which still circulate particularly within the Chechen diaspora, who maintain an idealized relationship to identity.

NOTES

1. Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya, Tombstone of the Russian Power*, New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1998, p. 330.
2. Both of them were referred to with the name "Chechen wolf", whether in the media, in scholarly works, or in biographical essays. See for instance Alla Doudaïeva, *Le Loup tchétchène. Ma vie avec Djokhar Doudaev* (*The Chechen Wolf. My Life with Djokhar Doudaev*), Paris: Maren Sell Editeurs, 2005.

3. See for instance: Sebastian Smith, *Allah's Mountains. The Battle for Chechnya*, New York: I. B. Tauris, 1998; Vanora Bennett, *Crying Wolf: the Return of War to Chechnya*, London: Pan Books, 2001; Paul Murphy, *The Wolves of Islam. Russia and the Faces of Chechen Terrorism*, Washington, DC: Brassey, 2004; Moshe Gammer, *The Lone Wolf and the Bear. Three centuries of Chechen Defiance of Russian Rule*, Pittsburgh, PA: Pittsburgh University Press, 2006.
4. George Schöpflin, *Nations, Identity, Power*, New York: New York University Press, 2000, p. 80.
5. Anthony Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Oxford, New York: B. Blackwell, 1986.
6. Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 81.
7. Elise Féron and Michel Hastings (eds), *L'imaginaire des conflits communautaires* (*The imaginary of community conflicts*), Paris: L'Harmattan, 2002, p. 18.
8. Marc Howard Ross, *Cultural Contestation in Ethnic Conflict*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 3.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
10. Walker F. Connor, "Myths of Hemispheric, Continental, Regional, and State Unity", *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 84, No. 4, December 1969, pp. 555–582.
11. Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1964.
12. Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1983, pp. 103–110.
13. Stephen P. Dunn and Ethel Dunn, *Introduction to Soviet Ethnography*, Berkeley, CA: Highgate Road Social Science Research Station, 1974.
14. Alain Besançon, "Nationalisme et Bolchevisme en URSS" ("Nationalism and Bolchevism in the USSR"), in *Passé turco-tatar, présent soviétique* (*Turco-Tatar Past, Soviet Present*), eds Chantal Lemercier-Quelquejay, G. Veinstein and S.E. Winbush, Paris: Éditions Peters, 1986, p. 82.
15. Florence Giust-Desprairies, *L'imaginaire collectif* (*The Collective Imaginary*), Paris: Éditions Erès, 2002, p. 4.
16. We conducted 10 interviews between 2003 and 2004 among the Chechens who took refuge in France. We also had numerous informal discussions with men, women and children during refugees' gatherings or demonstrations.
17. A *tukhum* is composed of several *teips* (clans). A Council of Elders, which represented all *teips*, rules it.
18. A. Aidaev, *Chechentsy: Istoriia i sovremennost'* (*The Chechens: History and Modern Times*), Moscow, 1996, p. 185; Ekaterina Sokirianskaia, "Families and Clans in Ingushetia and Chechnya. A Fieldwork Report", *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 24, No. 4, December 2005, pp. 453–467. Some of my informants told me that they did not know exactly to which *teip* they belonged before the war. War would have activated old solidarities.
19. Anonymous, interview, Strasbourg, 28 March 2004.
20. Moshe Grammer, *The Lone Wolf and the Bear*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
21. Tolstoy served as an officer in the Tsarist army in the Caucasus. See Luba Jurgenson, *Tolstoï*, Paris: Pygmalion, 1998. As for Lermontov, he spent some time in the Caucasus during his childhood; he returned in 1837, being exiled on the orders of the Tsar after he wrote a poem to Pushkin in which he accused the court aristocracy of being responsible for what he called a tragedy, i.e. the Pushkin's death. He then went back in 1840, being exiled a second time and enlisted in an infantry regiment. Kelly Laurence, *Lermontov: Tragedy in the Caucasus*, London: IB Tauris, 2003 (first printing 1977), pp. 26–40 and pp. 122–149.
22. Lermontov, *Ismail-Bey*, quoted in Abdurakhman Avtorkhanov, *Memuary* (*Memoirs*), Frankfurt: Possev-Verlag, 1938, p. 40.
23. Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya*, *op. cit.*, p. 333.
24. Ian Chesnov, "Etnokulturnyi potentsial chechenskoi natsii" ("Chechen Nation's Ethno-cultural Potential"), in *Severnyi Kavkaz: etnopoliticheskie i etnokulturnye protsessy v XX g.* (*North Caucasus: Ethno-political and Ethno-cultural Processes*), ed. Valery Tishkov, Moscow: Institute of ethnology and anthropology N. N. Miklucho-Maklaja, 1996, pp. 41–43.
25. For example, the play written by the Chechen writer and poet, or the collection of tales; both are translated into French: Moussa Akhmadov, *Les Loups* (*The Wolfes*), Paris: Editions l'Espace d'un Instant, 2002; *Contes tchétchènes* (*Chechen Stories*), translated by Philippe Frison and Bernard Outier, Paris: Fayard, 2002.
26. Abdurakhman Avtorkhanov, *Memuary*, *op. cit.*, pp. 41–42.
27. Amjad Jaimoukha, *The Chechens, A Handbook*, London, New York: Routledge Curzon, 2005, p. 147.
28. Ruslan Khasbulatov, oral presentation at the Caucasian Institute, "The Moscow tragedy and the search for peace in Chechnya", November 21, 2002.

29. See for instance, Dalkhan Khodjaev, *Chechenskii volk, Sultanmurad Benoevskii* (*Chechen Wolf, Sultanmurad Benoevskii*), available online at: <http://www.daymohk.info/biblioteka/soltanmurad_benoyevskiy/volk.html>, accessed February 24, 2004.
30. Sophie Bobbé, *L'ours et le loup, Essai d'anthropologie symbolique* (*The Bear and the Wolf. Essay of Symbolic Anthropology*), Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2002, pp. 30–31.
31. Anne Le Hérou, Aude Merlin, Amandine Regamey et Silvia Serrano, *Tchétchénie: une affaire intérieure? Russes et Tchétchènes dans l'étau de la guerre* (*Chechnya: an Internal Affairs ? Russians and Chechens at War*), Paris: Autrement CERI, 2005, p. 48.
32. Abdurakhman Avtorkhanov, *Memuary*, *op. cit.*, p. 71.
33. Sherip Asuev, *Tak eto bylo* (*The Way It Happened*), November 20, 1989, Grozny, available online at: <http://www.chechenpress.com>, accessed January 2, 2002.
34. During our fieldwork we were not able to empirically verify the reactions to this resolution in the Chechen population.
35. Observers and experts reported numerous irregularities during the elections, but most of them agree that it was a victory for Dudaev: Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya*, *op. cit.*, p. 63; John Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya. Roots of a Separatist Conflict*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 114; Marie Bennigsen Broxup, "After the putsch, 1991", in *The North Caucasus Barrier*, eds Abdurahman Avtorkhanov and Marie Bennigsen Broxup, New York: Hurst, 1992, p. 236.
36. As defined by Hobsbawm and Ranger: see Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
37. Chechen National anthem available online at: <http://www.chechen.org/content.php?catID=3>, accessed January 2002.
38. Karen Cerulo, *Identity Designs. The Sights and Sounds of a Nation*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995, p. 15.
39. Ian Chesnov, "Etnokulturnyi potentsial chechenskoi natsii", *op. cit.*, p. 46.
40. George Schöpflin, *Nations, Identity, Power*, *op. cit.*, p. 87.
41. Brian Glyn Williams, "Commemorating 'the Deportation' in Post-Soviet Chechnya. The Role of Memorialization and Collective Memory in the 1994–1996 and 1999–2000 Russo-Chechen Wars", *History and Memory*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2000, pp. 101–134.
42. Aleksandr Nekrich, *The Punished Peoples. The Deportation and Fate of the Soviet Minorities at the End of the Second World War*, New York: Norton and Company, 1978.
43. In the sense of Erwin Goffman, *Stigma, Notes of the Management of a Spoiled Identity*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963.
44. Georgi M. Derlugian, *Bourdieu's Secret Admirer in the Caucasus. A World-System Biography*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005, pp. 243–244.
45. Moshe Gammer, *The Lone Wolf and the Bear*, *op. cit.*, pp. 186–187.
46. Said-Khasan Abumuslimov, *Rossia i Chechenia: chetyre veka protivostoianiia, prestuplenie bez nazakaniia* (*Russia and Chechenya: Four Centuries of a Crime without Name*), available online at: <http://www.chechenpress.com/Ichkeria/history/beznak/part_1.shtml>, accessed March 23, 2002.
47. The death toll is very controversial. After the forced resettlement, Chechens became special settlers. Camps of special settlement were administrated by the NKVD, the ancestor of the KGB. Moreover, Chechens, like all the deported peoples, disappeared from the census during the 13 years of forced exile. On the debates surrounding the figures, see Aurélie Campana, "The Massive Deportation of the Chechen People – How and Why Chechens were Deported", *Online Encyclopaedia of Mass Violence*, available online at: <http://www.massviolence.org/The-Massive-Deportation-of-the-Chechen-People-How-and-why?cs=print>, accessed December 2008.
48. Sebastian Smith, *Allah's Mountains. Politics and War in the Russian Caucasus*, London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 1998, p. 67.
49. Vamik Volkan, *Blood Lines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997, p. 48.
50. Aleksei Kosterin, "Pervomu sekretariu CK KPSS Nikite Sergeevichu Khrushchevu, ot voenkoma Grajdanskoi boiny na Severnom Kavkaze, picatel'ia Kosterina Alekseia Evgrafovicha" ("To the First Secretary of the Central Comity of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev, regarding the Great Patriotic War in the North Caucasus, from the Writer Kosterin Aleksei Efgrafovich"), 1957, reproduced in Svetlana Alieva, *Tak to bylo. Repressirovannye narody sevodnia, 1919–1953* (*The Way It Happened. Repressed Peoples Today, 1919–1953*), Vol. 2, Moscow: INSAN, 1993, p. 230.
51. See for instance the testimonies published in Svetlana Alieva, *Tak to bylo*, *op. cit.*, pp. 169–251.

52. Yves Ternon, *Guerre et génocides au XX siècle* (*Wars and Genocide in the XX Century*), Paris: Odile Jacob, 2007, p. 77.
53. As stressed by Marc Ross, "among the strongest feelings people express are fears about physical attacks on their group, and about symbolic attacks on their identity"; Marc Howard Ross, *Cultural Contestation in Ethnic Conflict*, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
54. The comments of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, which make Chechens the only deported peoples to have actively preserved their identity specificity in the special settlement camps, have become emblematic of the Chechen resistance to repression and oppression; see Alexander Solzhenitsyn, "Chechentsy i drugie" ("Chechens and the others"), *Novyi Mir* (*New World*), 1989, Vol. 11, pp. 245–250. This account proves to have been romanticized: the strategies of adaptation and accommodation they developed like all other deported peoples are passed over in silence; see Michaela Pohl, "It Cannot Be That Our Graves Will Be Here: The Survival of Chechen and Ingush Deportees in Kazakhstan, 1944–1957", *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 2002, pp. 401–430.
55. Alexandr Uralov (Abdurakhman Avtorkhanov), *Narodoubiistvo v SSSR. Ubiistvo Chechenskogo naroda* (*Assassination of a Nation in the USSR. Assassination of the Chechen Nation*), Munich: Free Caucasus, 1952, pp. 66–67.
56. Dzhokhar Dudaev, "Za chto my boremcia? My pobedim, potomy chto my pravy" ("Why Do We Fight? We Fight because We Are Right"), in *Ternistyi pyt' k svobode* (*The Difficult Road to Freedom)*, ed. A. Bakanaev, Grozny, 1992.
57. *Ibid.*
58. Jacques Sémelin, *Purifier et Détruire. Usages politiques des massacres et génocides* (*Purify and Destroy*, *The Political Uses of Massacres and Genocides*), Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2005, p. 32.
59. Amjad Jaimoukha, *The Chechens, A Handbook*, *op. cit.*, p. 147.
60. Dzhokhar Dudaev, "Za cho my boremcia? My pobedim, potomy cho my pravy" ("Why Do We Fight? We Fight because We Are Right"), *op. cit.*
61. Sherip Asuev, *Tak eto bylo* (*The Way It Happened*), Grozny, available online at: <http://www.chechen-press.com/ichkeria/takbylo/sstuplenie.html>, accessed January 2, 2002.
62. Karen Cerulo, *Identity Designs. The Sights and Sounds of a Nation*, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
63. Isa Askhabov, *Chechenskoe oruzhie* (*Chechen Arms*), Moscow: Kavkaz, 2001.
64. Sherip Asuev, *Tak eto bylo* (*The Way It Happened*), news from November 29, 1991, *op. cit.*
65. It is impossible to give precise figures. John Dunlop estimates that from 200,000 to 250,000 ethnic Russians would have left the Chechen Republic between 1991 and 1994; see John Dunlop, *Chechnya Confronts Russia*, *op. cit.*, p. 136.
66. Sherip Asuev, *Tak eto bylo* (*The Way It Happened*), news from October 8, 1991, *op. cit.*
67. *Ibid.*, news from November 22, 1991.
68. Akhmed Zakaev and I. Chagaev, *Printsipy organizatsii gosudarstvennoi vlasti Chechenskoi Respubliki* (*Organizational Principles of the Chechen Republic's State powers*), November 8, 2001, available online at: <http://www.chechepress.com/ichkeria/history/printsipy.shtml>, accessed November 22, 2001.
69. Dudaev wanted negotiations to take place, but he wanted the discussions to he held at a presidential level, not at the parliamentary level. The decision to dissolve the Chechen Parliament was a Constitutional right given to the President. But he did not convene new elections, which is a strong indicator of his drive toward authoritarianism.
70. Valery Tishkov, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in and after the Soviet Union*, *The Mind Aflame*, Oslo: International Peace Research Institute, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 1997, p. 212.
71. Jean François Bayart (ed.), *La greffe de l'État* (*The Transplant of State)*, Paris: Karthala, 1996.
72. National Committee in charge of the legal reform for the President of the Chechen Republic, *Sbornik rasporiazhenii i postanovlenii presidenta chechenskoi respubliki* (*Collection of Arrangements and Resolutions of the President of the Chechen Republic*), Grozny: Kniga, 1993; National Committee in charge of the legal reform for the President of the Chechen Republic, *Sbornik ukasov presidenta chechenskoi respubliki s 1 iiulia 1992 po 31 dekabria 1992 g.* (*Collection of Ukases of the President of the Chechen Republic from April, 1 1992 to December 31, 2002*), Grozny: Kniga, 1993.
73. "Interview with Dzhokhar Dudaev (in Russian)", ITAR-TASS, reproduced in Sherip Asuev, *Tak eto bylo*, *op. cit.*, news from January 25, 1992.
74. George Schöpflin, *Nations, Identity Power*, *op. cit.*, p. 86.
75. "I began this battle with one thousand soldiers. Two days later, I had ten times more", said Aslan Maskhadov on January 2, 1995. Such an assertion shows the mobilization of Chechen men while

the Russian army entered into the Chechen territory in December 1994. See Aslan Maskhadov, January 2, 1995, quoted in Isabelle Astirraga, *Tchétchénie. Un peuple sacrifié* (*Chechnya. A sacrificed People*), Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000.

76. Dzhokhar Dudaev, "Rab smirivshiicia so svoim rabstom, zaslujivaet dvoinogo rabstva" ("The slave who accepts his slavery deserves double the slavery"), 1991, in *Ternistyi pyt' k svobode* (*Difficult Road to Freedom*), *op. cit.*, ed. A. Bakanaev.
77. For the consequences of war on the Chechen society, see: Valery Tishkov, *Chechnya: Life in a war-torn society*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004.
78. Timur Aliyev, "Towers on the Wolf's Bones, or Peculiarities of National Heraldry", *The Prague Watchdog*, May 5, 2004.
79. Aurélie Campana, "Conflict and Identity Construction in Chechnya: Competing Definitions of the Chechen Identity", *National Identities*, Vol. 8, No. 2, June 2006, pp. 129–148.
80. Timur Aliyev, "Towers on the Wolf's Bones", *op. cit*.
81. Non-governmental organisations regularly document violence committed by law enforcement agencies. See for instance Human Rights Watch, *Widespread Torture in the Chechen Republic*, HRW Briefing Paper for the 37th Session of the UN Committee Against Torture, November 13, 2006.
82. Raoul Girardet, *Mythes et mythologies politiques* (*Political Myths and Mythologies*), Paris: Seuil, 1986, p. 11.