

2014—Ossetians (I'ron language group)

A town in North Ossetia (southern Russia, in the central Caucasus mountain region) in the present time:

The living room is filled with 15 of Soslan's older cousins and uncles, but everyone is completely silent. Being the youngest in this company of men, Soslan stands in the corner--humble, respectful and still. No one will talk unless the conversation is first started by grandfather, the clan elder. He is now quite old but still held in highest honor as elder and as a brave veteran of the war against the Fascists.

Today the men are gathered in order to attend the funeral of an Ossetian kinsmen - the member of a related clan. Without a word Soslan's grandfather stands and begins to lead the men out the door in silent procession towards the home of the deceased. No one is talking about the details of the death, but news has already spread that the death was by gunshot. Thoughts of anger and revenge are on everyone's mind but no one talks of it.

For 40 days all attention will be focused on mourning – a time with no public singing or dancing. Later, though, the elders will decide if this death is a situation that requires blood revenge. If it is, then the honor of the clans and the elders will be at stake, and - as in generations before – the men of the clan will put into effect the unwritten code of blood revenge. This is the code that has governed the Ossetians and all peoples of the Caucasus for dozens of centuries. Thinking of this possible turn of events, Soslan clinches his jaw as a sign of his resolute support and says to himself, "Shame, and humiliation are unthinkable signs of weakness . . . they must not be allowed".

Walking on in silence behind his clan elders, Soslan's thoughts drift to happier things . . . Spring and the coming of Easter when all the men of his clan will gather at the Cathedral to patriotically proclaim aloud, "Christ is risen!" and then repeat in response, "He has risen indeed!" Soslan sighs to himself as he continues to daydream, "And after worship at the Cathedral, what a happy feast we will have together with all our relatives! Ahh, but still better will be the mid-summer feast on the clan's 'holy hilltop!' That is the day when the men will sacrifice a bull to our clan's Ancestral Spirit – the source of our good luck in hunting and victories in battle! "

Looking down, Soslan tries to suppress his smile as he muses to himself, "Perhaps such sacrifices to spirits are un-Christian, but they always lead to great parties! . . . It is strange the way we Ossetians have come to live, surrounded by Muslims, claiming Eastern Orthodox Christianity, all the while maintaining ancient pagan rituals."

The clan procession is now moving very slowly as it approaches the home of the deceased. Arriving together is a sign of support to the grieving members of the kindred clan. Minutes pass as the crowd of nearly 100 men stand waiting for the casket to be brought out and the public memorial to begin. Again Soslan drifts off in his thoughts pondering to himself; "What were the circumstances of his kinsman's violent death? Was it an attack from the side of their enemies - the Ingush? Why is there such hatred between the Ossetians and their neighboring nations? Is it because our language is not like theirs? Is it because we have held true to the rituals that we received from the ancient Orthodox religion? Our religion is the one factor that gives us favor in the eyes of the Russian government – a position of favor that the Muslims around us cannot have. Every time that the Russian Government distrusts Muslims it turns out to be a hidden benefit for us Ossetians."

"Is it just jealousy that causes the Muslims to speak so critically of our holy icon paintings? They sneer and refer to them as 'idols'. Hmm -Jealousy is certainly the case when it comes to the wealth that our Ossetian businessmen gain from their Vodka factories. This profitable business is forbidden to the Ingush because of their Islamic faith. Oh the hypocrisy of it all! Everyone knows that Ingush men drink and suffer alcohol addiction just as much, if not more, than we Ossetians!" Soslan's eyes flash with the glare of ethnic hatred.

Trying to return his thoughts to the memorial, Soslan says to himself, "Today the funeral, and after the 40 days of mourning the elders will decide if we will take blood revenge. Though it seems wrong, it must be right. It is the way of our people. What could ever move us from the path that we have been on for so long? Is there any other way to be an Ossetian? Has there ever been any other attitude among the elders of our clans? Who could ever lead us out of this cycle of violence and revenge?"

Silently Soslan whispers a desperate prayer, "God - if you are there – please show us the way out!"

To understand the Ossetians of southern Russia, one must first understand the context of the Caucasus region--

The majestic Caucasus Mountains jet forth into the sky like a great wall dividing the southeast edge of Europe from the northwest edge of Asia. Throughout the ages great empires have sought to conquer and control the lands around this frontier mountain range: Arabs, Byzantines, Mongol-Tatars, Turks, Russians, and Nazis most recently.

The Caucasus region is an "ethnically diverse neighborhood" with more than 45 distinct languages. Though linguistically diverse, the peoples of the Caucasus share strongly-held mutual values such as: a free spirited love

for the mountains, caution towards outsiders, hospitality toward guests, the glorification of bravery, societies organized into patriarchal clans and an intense desire to defend both territory and traditions.

The central region of the Caucasus Mountain range is the traditional homeland of the Ossetian people. The Ossetian's forefathers (Iranian-speaking tribes of Alans, Scythes and Sarmatians) settled the lowlands to the north of the Caucasus Mountains in the beginning of the 1st Century. For several centuries they were able to control the trade routes passing through the region. During this time they came under the missionary influence of the Byzantine Empire and Eastern Orthodox Christianity. (NOTE: the persistence of pre-Christian pagan rituals and beliefs throughout all periods of Ossetian history points to an incomplete or syncretistic Christian conversion.)

In the 13th Century the Ossetian people were unable to withstand Tatar-Mongol invasions and took refuge in the central region of the Caucasus Mountains assimilating themselves into the common culture of the Caucasus region. However, Ossetians remained strongly distinguished from other Caucasus nations in two matters. 1st, they staunchly retained their identity as Eastern Orthodox Christians. (Today, 65% of all Ossetians claim Eastern Orthodoxy). 2nd, they maintained their own Indo-Iranian language – a language that is uniquely distinct from the 45 other languages of the North Caucasus region. Because of these two factors it can be said that the Ossetians are unique among the peoples of the Caucasus – like a thumb among fingers.

During the 14th Century, the Ossetians became politically subjected to the Islamic Kabardinian people. As a result, western Ossetian tribes, known as Digors, converted to Islam and the Ossetian language developed into two separated dialects; I'ron and Digo'ron. During the next 400 years the Caucasus region lived under the pro-Islamic regimes of: Tatar-Mongols, Tamerlane, and Ottomans. (A high percentage of the 100,000 speakers of the Digo'ron dialect are Muslims. When Digo'ron and I'ron Ossetians today speak to each other, they most commonly switch to Russian language. It is not clear if this is due to enmity or if the two dialects have become mutually unintelligible.)

In the 18th Century, Russia waged a violent and protracted war of Imperial conquest in the Caucasus region. Specific aspects of this conquest were facilitated by Ossetians. The establishment of Russian rule elevated the status of Eastern Orthodox Ossetians, and heralded the forced deportation of Islamic activists from the region. These factors directly influence the Ossetian relationship to the predominantly Islamic nations living across the region.

In the late 1800's Evangelical faith sprang forth among both among Russians and Ossetians. The publication of the four Gospels in the I'ron dialect as well as Ossetian-language preaching resulted in the establishment of several Ossetian evangelical congregations. Church planting and evangelistic ministries continued during the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and Russian civil war. However, in the 1930's the Soviet authorities outlawed all religious activity and believers came under deadly persecution. Only during the decline of the Soviet Union in the late 1980's were religious liberties restored. Today there are 25-30 evangelical congregations in North Ossetia. Approximately 7 of these congregations use Ossetian I'ron language during some portion of the Sunday morning worship.

Pray for the clans of Ossetian I'ron people:

- For spiritual awakening among elders of Ossetian clans.
- For revived clan elders to lead their families in repentance from pagan practices, dead religion, and vengeance cycles.
- Pray that spiritually revived clan elders would lead men of their clans in studying the Bible and in submission to Jesus as the ultimate Elder over all clans.
- Pray that the pleasure of true, holy and joyous worship will set entire clans free from the centuries-old practices of pagan spirit worship and animal sacrifices.



Ossetian I'ron Bible Translation

New Testament completed in 2004 by IBT
 Genesis, Exodus, Psalms, completed in 2012 by IBT

Ossetian Total Population 720,000

Regions with significant populations

 Russia	528,515
 North Ossetia	445,310
 South Ossetia:	45,000
 Georgia	38,028
 Syria	59,200
 Turkey	36,900