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Religions as Innovative Traditions: The Case of the Juhuro of Moscow

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Abstract: This paper examines some historical, cultural, and institutional processes involving a Jewish minority from the Russian and Azerbaijani Caucasus, now mostly displaced in the huge and multiethnic Moscow: the Mountain Jews, or Juhuro. These Jews were subjected to a historically multifaceted and endangering diaspora, but they have been making big efforts to preserve their identity and survival by means of accommodating, mimetic, and cultural strategies. In the present day, despite the few representatives living in the Russian capital, the community is striving to find its own niche to transmit its history, language, and tradition within the multicultural “salad bowl” city of Moscow. More changes and transformations are at stake to preserve their long-lasting ethnic, religious, and linguistic characteristics. This paper is devoted to analyzing such elements, in an attempt to explain why and how Juhuro seem likely to succeed in preserving their religious community by innovating it in spite of their minority position within a globalized society.

Keywords: Mountain Jews; Juhuri; freedom of religion; religious traditions; language and religion; languages of Russia; Moscow

1. Introduction: Cultures and Religions in Global Moscow—The Case of Juhuro, a Blurred Minority in the Salad Bowl

Moscow is nowadays a multiethnic megalopolis, home to at least 13 million people, which reproduces on a smaller scale all the nationalities of the Russian Federation and the former Soviet Republics. Few cities in the world can claim the same historical, economic, and social role that Moscow has.¹ Being the capital of the previous Soviet Union and of the later Russian Federation brought major changes to the innermost fabric of this city. From being the center of the most extended and influential regime of the 20th century, where many desired to emigrate to, Moscow has become, in the last two decades, a place where previously repressed minorities of the Soviet empire found room to be represented.² As a result, within the diversified urban society, different groups, religions, and cultures coexist, giving rise to a complex and idiomatic multicultural milieu.³

It should be noted that emigration to Moscow has some specific features that distinguishes the reality from similar phenomena in the European continent. Generally speaking, though the Russian Federation is often thought of as the land of the Russian people, statistics, regional policies, and history

¹ (Brade and Rudolph 2004).

² (Lebedeva and Tatarko 2013, pp. 170, 173).

³ For an analysis of intercultural relations among migrants from Caucasus and Russians in Moscow see (Lebedeva et al. 2016).

say quite the opposite.⁴ The idea of contemporary Russia as a political representation of an Eastern Slavic people is misleading because of the multitude of people living and having settled in this immense territory throughout complicated historical events and political changes. As far as the capital city is concerned, the immigration of Caucasian and Central-Asian people redesigned the urban landscape, making differences among the Moscow neighborhoods visible, with not a few conflicts with the Muscovites.

The process of emigration flowing to Moscow is still difficult to take account of, and even the most recent research cannot trace an up-to-date ethnic map of the city.⁵ In the last decade, the inflow of migrants, in particular young people looking for a better life, has increased constantly.⁶ This phenomenon is not confined to the city borders, but extends to cities around the capital and is the most relevant factor in population growth, supported also by a stable supply of newly constructed apartments.⁷ Moscow is not only the most active job market in the former Soviet Union, but also the most prestigious city to move to,⁸ especially if we take into account the former common language with the 15 republics and the ease of movement within the Eurasian Economic Union. As a result, the concept of multiculturalism, which proved to be unsuccessful in Europe,⁹ is still prevalent in Russia.¹⁰

However, here, the characteristics of multiculturalism are quite different from those in the European countries. The relationships and coexistence of different communities depend on the peculiarity of the Russian Federation and, to some extent, the former Soviet Union. As a matter of fact, not all immigrants are from outside the federation; as some scholars remark, there are Yakutian Russians, Chechen Russians, Russian Tatars,¹¹ and many other ethnicities who have a Russian passport but are far from being historically connected with the Slavic Orthodox Russian people. More specifically, there is a basic difference in the emigration process between, shall we say, “newcomers” and “immigrants.” The former are from the inside of Russia, and even though the approach of “natives” is not always friendly, they are considered in-group members.¹² The latter are the out-group members, the “real” immigrants who come mainly from the former Soviet republics.

This situation entails “ethnicity” as an element made of different layers of cultural identity: the ethnic identity, quite obviously, comes first, so that we can distinguish Russians from Tatars, Avars, or Kumyks; at the second level we can find an “all-Russian state” identity, where the most important factor uniting people of different ethno-cultural groups may be the official state language and common culture as the basis;¹³ other levels of ethnic identity are people’s religion, local dialect, language, customs, etc. Moreover, each diaspora of expats in the Russian capital city is not as tight as we might imagine. The internal structure of each minority is much more complicated and does not represent a unique group of compatriots; ethnicity is not the main linking factor, as was proved, because religion and family networks are far more important.¹⁴ In this vibrant exclave of enclaves, where migrants, newcomers, and natives live together with contacts and, sometimes, conflicts, it seems that there can be room for everybody, including those who are at the same time “ours” but “others.”

⁴ See last census data (2010) https://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis_itogi1612.htm, see also the Constitution of the Russian Federation, art. 3 “The bearer of sovereignty and the only source of power in the Russian Federation is its multiethnic people”, at <http://www.constitution.ru/10003000/10003000-3.htm>.

⁵ (Вендина et al. 2019).

⁶ (Вендина et al. 2019).

⁷ (Мкртчян 2015).

⁸ (Мкртчян 2015).

⁹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-12371994>; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/oct/17/angela-merkel-german-multiculturalism-failed>; <https://www.ft.com/content/dd122a8c-8720-11e7-8bb1-5ba57d47eff7>.

¹⁰ For an overview of multiculturalism in Russia, see (Chebankova 2013, pp. 326 ff).

¹¹ (Родоман 1979, pp. 14–20).

¹² (Vendina 2018, pp. 395–403).

¹³ <http://www.upf.org/resources/speeches-and-articles/4788-ib-orlova-multiculturalism-in-europe-and-russia-theory-and-practice>.

¹⁴ (Варшавер and Рочева 2014, pp. 104–14).

The scenario of Moscow matches with the so-called salad bowl theory¹⁵ and the settlement of the Jewish Juhuro community in Moscow seems to confirm this evaluation. According to this version of multiculturalism, a “salad bowl” is a context that maintains the unique identities of individuals that would otherwise be lost to assimilation. In other words, this concept acknowledges the discrete identities and cultural differences of a multicultural society. Contrary to the melting pot theory, where the identity and influence of the dominant ethnic group prevails regardless of the transformation as a result of assimilation and cultural morphology, the salad bowl retains the individuality and independence of ethnic groups and permits their existence side-by-side.

This special multicultural urban setting is generally fostered and surrounded by the idiomatic type of protection that religion has had in the legal system since 1997. After the fall of the Soviet Union, a period of liberalization followed, but the situation changed again in 1997, when the state decided to regulate the religion–state relation in an attempt to restore its dominance over new emerging religious groups. This new approach was due to the wars in Chechnya and security concerns of terrorist attacks. In September 1997, a new law was implemented to replace the previous legislation of 1990. It provided Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism the with status of “privileged” religions. In addition, the special contribution of the Orthodox Church to the development of Russian culture was recognized.¹⁶ The effort to limit or prohibit the activity of non-traditional religious groups was the main reason for the new law, establishing the so-called traditional religions paradigm. The position of privilege of these religions led further to the introduction of an experiment with religious education at schools.

Since 2010, an attempt to include religious studies in the curricula of Russian schools has been carried out based on a project called “Conceptions of the spiritual and moral development and education of the identity of the Russian citizen.”¹⁷ This project determines the “traditional sources of morals and the basic national values” as patriotism, social solidarity, citizenship, family, work and creativity, arts and literature, nature, humankind, and specifically traditional religions. Even though there were attempts to teach religion at school, it was only on regional basis and mainly supported by the Russian Orthodox Church. From 2010, a new subject called “Fundamentals of religious culture and secular ethics” was introduced on a national basis.¹⁸ According to this experiment, schoolchildren and their parents select the subject themselves, choosing from the so-called basics of Orthodox, Muslim, Jewish, or Buddhist culture. Students can eventually choose a course describing a number of basic religions represented in Russia, or can study secular ethics. Secular teachers, and not priests, are supposed to teach these subjects, in order to ensure impartial instruction in the basics of any religious tradition. *De facto*, this choice does not depend on the willingness of pupils, but on the educational institution where they are enrolled.¹⁹

In 2015, a further subject was introduced, called “Fundamentals of the spiritual and moral culture of the peoples of Russia,” in the framework of which different modules can be used depending on the school.²⁰ Since the federal standard of subjects related to ethics and religions of Russia is still a

¹⁵ (Berray 2019, p. 143).

¹⁶ The preamble of the 1997 Russian Federal Law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations” reads: «The law, however, has the following preamble: “Basing itself on the fact that the Russian Federation is a secular state; recognizing the special contribution of Orthodoxy to the history of Russia and to the establishment and development of Russia’s spirituality and culture; respecting Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and other religions that constitute an inseparable part of the historical heritage of Russia’s peoples; considering it important to promote the achievement of mutual understanding, tolerance, and respect in questions of freedom of conscience and freedom of creed; the Russian Federation hereby adopts this federal law»”; (Zhukova 2013, pp. 163 ff.; Marsh and Froese 2004, pp. 139 ff).

¹⁷ (Данилюк et al. 2009), see the original document at: mosmetod.ru/metodicheskoe-prostranstvo/nachalnaya-shkola/orkse/fgos/kontseptsiya-dukhnovno-nravstvennogo-razvitiya-i-vospitaniya-lichnosti-grazhdanina-rossii.html#:~:text=духовно-нравственное%20воспитание%20личности%20гражданина,иерархическую%20структуру%20и%20сложную%20организацию.

¹⁸ (Ожиганова 2017).

¹⁹ (Ожиганова 2016) at <http://www.nlobooks.ru/node/7253>; (Ожиганова 2016, pp. 288–309; Köllner 2016, pp. 366 ff).

²⁰ (Ожиганова 2017).

matter of discussion, further changes could be introduced in the near future.²¹ To date, the system of “traditional religions” seems to satisfy the expectations of privileged group members: the head of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, Rabbi Berl Lazar, supported the idea of compulsory teaching of the basics of all religions and declared that he was satisfied with this solution: “A specific feature of Russia is that our religious leaders are friends, and religious communities help each other. There is mutual respect among traditional religions. [. . .] Schoolchildren must know that Russia is a multinational country, and that each nation has its traditions. I’m deeply thankful to the Ministry of Education for a decision that respects the spirituality of every child and every family.”²²

The blurred nature of different ethnicities, nationalities, and religions within the former Soviet Union and contemporary Russia is the reason for the interest of this paper and its peculiar case study, that is the Mountains Jews, or Juhuro, who were part of Soviet Jewry along with Ashkenazi, Georgian, and Bukharian Jews, who started to move far from their original motherland in the 1970s.²³ In the present day, despite having few representatives living in the Russian capital, the community will find its own niche to transmit religious, linguistic, and traditional characteristics. To a certain extent, the religious boundaries remain blurred. According to scholars who studied the communities of Mountain Jews in Southern Russia,²⁴ before answering the control question, “Who do you consider your people?” the majority of respondents (55.9%) self-identified with the Mountain Jews, a significant number of respondents considered the Juhuri as a part of the Jewish people (34.5%), and less than 4% said “Tat.”²⁵ The most significant perceived markers of identity are the following:

- National language (Juhuri), 81%;
- Tradition and customs, 73.2%;
- Religion, 54.7%;
- Historical homeland, 33%²⁶.

This is a scenario in which more changes are at stake for the Juhuro of Moscow, in order to preserve, or renew, their long-lasting religious tradition. The authors of this paper consider religion as a phenomenon embedded in cultural and social practices, so that preserving them implies social interconnections and, to a certain extent, cycles of inner transformation. Thus, this paper aims to disentangle the cultural markers of the Juhuro minority, notably “ethnos” and “religion” in a narrower sense, and “language” in order to evaluate their historical legacy and current vitality. In the following three paragraphs, each of these elements will be discussed separately, analyzing their cultural linkages and dependencies within the context of the origin of the Juhuri minority. Conclusions will be focused on the present day and to the potential of preserving this community in the face of the challenges of new settlement and accommodation in the context of international and multicultural Moscow.

2. Winding Road of Minority Denominations: From Mountain Jews to Tats, Juhuri, and Kavkazi

In the last two decades, Moscow was one of the main choices of a relatively small community of Russians (by passport) and ethnic Azerbaijani people who professed Judaism but were culturally and linguistically far from the European Jews. We are talking about the Mountain Jews, or, as they refer to themselves in their native language, the Juhuro. The case of the Jewish Juhuri²⁷ minority is

²¹ For more updated news, see <https://rg.ru/sujet/561/>.

²² See *Jewish.ru*, 21 July 2009. <http://www.jewish.ru/news/cis/2009/07/news994276316.php>. In Russian <http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=news&div=31160>.

²³ (Рашковский 2019, pp. 1–11).

²⁴ (Shakhbanova 2018, pp. 781–89).

²⁵ To compare, in the community of New York the main markers are Juhuri tradition (60%), Juhuri language (25%), being Jews from the Caucasus (15%), see (Borijan and Daniel 2016, pp. 59–74; Shakhbanova 2018, pp. 781 ff).

²⁶ (Shakhbanova 2018, p. 784).

²⁷ Note that *Juhur* (s.) and *Juhuro* (pl.) are the nouns used to indicate the Mountain Jews as people. They refer to their language with the term *Juhuri*, which is the adjective deriving from the above-mentioned noun.

emblematic of the peculiar system of multiculturalism in Russia and Moscow, made by multilayered ethnicities, blurred boundaries between Russian nationalities, and the legal protection of (only) “traditional” religions.

According to researchers,²⁸ the Mountain Jews are a part of Iranian Jewry, with whom they share cultural and economic bonds. Evidence for this line of descent may be found in their understanding of the *zuhunumrani* language, used as a lingua franca among Jews speaking different Persian dialects.²⁹ Their presence *per se* represents an exception within the multilingual environment of Dagestan, where the majority of languages are of Turkic and Caucasian origin, while Juhuri is an Iranic language of Indo-European origin.³⁰ The other Caucasian peoples, mainly professing Islam, use a Turkic variant of the word “Jew” to refer to the Mountain Jews, which in the end became a synonym for all Jews. In fact, Dagestan is an extremely rich region from an ethnic point of view, where Lezgins, Dargins, Kumyks, and Avars, to name just some of the most known nationalities, live together with Russians and Mountain Jews.

From the names given to them by their Muslim neighbors, they took the actual name of Juhur,³¹ which just means “Jew” in their language. This specific denomination comes from a language transformation in Juhuri where the word for “Jew” follows the same line as English *Jew*, French *Juif*, and Polish *żyd*, where the first letter is pronounced as /dʒ/, while in other languages it follows the original Hebrew pronunciation, where in the word *Yehudi* the first sound is /j/ as in Arabic, German, and partially in Russian [ɨʲvʲrʲɪɪ]; the other transformation, typical of Juhuri, sees the phoneme /d/ becoming /r/, from *Yehud* to *Juhur*.³² This term is also used by the same Mountain Jews to refer to Jewry in general, however they tend to use further determinants such as “Russian Jews” or “our Jews” for self-identification. The combination of the words Mountain and Jews dates back to the war administration of the 19th century, when the need arose to distinguish them from European Jews. The tendency was to call all peoples living in the Caucasus “mountain” people.³³ Then, this denomination was included in the official language of administration, and remained official during the Soviet regime.

The Juhuro, as well as all the other religious communities living in the Soviet Union, had to comply with the anti-religious policy of the Communist Party, which did not permit Soviet citizens to keep their religious identity. In the case of the Jews, the name of their “ethnos” was directly associated with their religion. In a centrally controlled form of government, where a religious marker was considered a burden to getting access to bureaucratic positions or a good education, the correspondence between cultural identity (and therefore nationality) with religion was not acceptable. Particularly in the Dagestan region, around the intelligentsia of the capital city Makhachkala,³⁴ the issue of the national attribution of Mountain Jews started to be taken into account. Calling yourself a Jew, as well as a religious person, was not acceptable by the communist doctrine,³⁵ and for this reason a group of Mountain Jews started to support identifying their people with the “Tats,” giving rise to what is called the process of “Tatization” or the “Tat myth.” This idea of assimilating with other Iranian peoples living in the region before their settlement in the Caucasus was first stated by Ilya Sherebetovich Anisimov in 1888.³⁶ This theory was accepted by a group of scholars and was also reflected in the normative grammar of “zuhuntati” dating to 1932.³⁷ Actually, the ethnonym “Tat” is more social than ethnic,

²⁸ (Семенов 2018a).

²⁹ (Жуковский 1888); see also (Семенов 2018a, p. 15; Шахбанова 2018, pp. 229–34).

³⁰ (Назарова 1996).

³¹ (Семенов 2018a).

³² Skype interview to Gennady Bogdanov, co-head of the Juhuri preservation program and author of the first handbook of Juhuri for Russian speakers, Moscow, 11 June 2020.

³³ (Семенов 2003, pp. 191–92).

³⁴ (Семенов 2018a, p. 17); see also (Куповецкий 2002).

³⁵ (Умланд 2002).

³⁶ (Анисимов 1888, p. 12).

³⁷ (Анисимов 1932), see also (Назарова 2018, pp. 231–37).

given to subordinate people of Iranian origin by the Turks; anyway, this self-nomination started to be accepted among the Mountain Jews, and after the 1927 congress, it was recognized as one of their official names.³⁸

In light of spreading atheism, there was the idea of one “Tat-ethos” with three religions, Judaism, Islam, and Christian, and further efforts were made by the Soviet regime to code their language as a Tat language.³⁹ According to the official archive of the Dagestan Soviet Republic, from 1933 the names Tats and Mountain Jews were both in use, and from 1937 they were mainly referred to as Tats.⁴⁰ Supporters of the Tat myth were mainly those with higher education, who were a minority, but thanks to their acceptance and efforts to diffuse this idea, there was a wave of “Tatists” who believed in this myth as a substitution for Judaism. This line of thought had particular success in Dagestan, while it had difficulty spreading in Chechnya and Azerbaijan, maybe because the people there understood the pejorative meaning of the word.

The Tat myth continued to grow after the death of Stalin, concurrently with the diffusion of higher education, with waves of emigration to Israel and an anti-Israel campaign in the Soviet press. Influenced by new theories on the “disappearing” role of religion and the idea that the only bond between Mountain Jews and Jewry was the very religion, in the 1970s the Soviet regime started to support this idea of ethnicity. In light of this, many meetings were organized where Soviet Juhuro had to express their concern for the “Israeli aggressor.” Another important factor was the campaign to change Soviet passports at the end of the decade, when the Mountain Jews could change their nationality to Tat, in order to delete any connection with religion and gain the opportunity to have a good career.⁴¹ It turned out that more than half of the Mountain Jews took the nationality of Tat on the new Soviet passport.⁴² The reasons for this breakthrough may be also found in the historical complexity toward Ashkenazi Jews and pressure from the government. It should be noted that, on some points, the debate inside the community of Moscow is still ongoing.⁴³

The Juhuro, like all the inhabitants of the former Soviet Union, saw their lives change along with the political situation of the USSR. Despite the Western praise of Gorbachev, the 1990s were anything but bright for those who lived far from the capital. This was a historical turning point in the timeline of Mountain Jews, because this period saw the mass emigration of an entire people from their ancestral land, where they were first registered in the 10th century,⁴⁴ to “foreign” lands, particularly since the escalation of instability and violence in the Northern Caucasus, when the ethnic factor started to be relevant after the collapse of the Soviet Union and communist ideology. A strong ethno-cultural revival took place in the republics of the Russian Federation, where ethnic identity became an important marker of social distinction and political and socioeconomic change.⁴⁵ Waves of radicalization in the name of Islam steeped in nationalism contributed to creating an unbearable social condition for those who were already underrepresented.⁴⁶ As a result, the Juhuro started a mass emigration to Europe, the USA, and above all Israel.⁴⁷ No less than half of them are now living in Israel, where they are called *Kavkazi*,⁴⁸ which means Caucasian Jews, and are placed somewhere between the *Rusim*, the hundreds of thousands of natives of the Soviet Union, and the *Sefardim*, the no less numerous natives of Eastern

³⁸ (Семенов 2018b, p. 18).

³⁹ (Назарова 1996).

⁴⁰ (Рамазанова 2014, pp. 25–26).

⁴¹ (Семенов 2018b, p. 24).

⁴² (Семенов 2018b).

⁴³ Meeting at the STMEGI Center on the “Academic status of the language of the Mountain Jews”, 13 February 2020.

⁴⁴ (Семенов 2018b).

⁴⁵ (Рыжова 2011, p. 280).

⁴⁶ (Бобровников 2007).

⁴⁷ (Чарный 2018).

⁴⁸ (Семенов 2018a, pp. 13–29), see also (Borijan and Daniel 2016, pp. 59–74) where an extensive use of the word *kavkazi* is made. Here the term seems to be used as to compare the Caucasian community with the majority of Ashkenazi Jews.

countries.⁴⁹ Accordingly, the same terms are employed in the other countries where they emigrated (USA, Germany, Canada), but not in Russia. Those who chose not to leave their country (but to leave their motherland) opted mainly for the Stavropol region, in particular the city of Pyatigorsk, or Moscow.⁵⁰

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the majority of Mountain Jews emigrated elsewhere. According to the official census of 2010, there are fewer than 1000 (exactly 762) Mountain Jews in the whole Russian Federation.⁵¹ However, unofficial data report about 13,000 Juhuro in Moscow, 10% of the whole diaspora, and another 10% live in the United States, while the most relevant community (80,000) lives in Israel.⁵² Through the initiative of a group of experts, the Moscow community is also attempting to obtain a more real representation of the community within the territory of Russia in the next census.⁵³ The basic assumption is that only from a correct statistical accounting of their members can a correct policy be derived for them and the community be officially preserved.⁵⁴ We should remark that the Moscow community remained the most influenced by the Tat myth, so they used to refer to themselves with pseudoethnonyms (Tat Jews, Jewish Tats, Mountain Tats), but these terms will probably not be used for long, since no Mountain Jewish publication makes reference to “Tat.” The only exception is the city of Derbend, in their original motherland, where this denomination continued to live as an official status until 2013, and is still in use a local journal, *Vatan*.⁵⁵

As far as the future of their ethnonym, as well as the whole community in Russia, is concerned, this decision is indirectly the object of a debate concerning the name of the language spoken by the Moscow community, which is the most active in preserving the Juhuro traditions. From their ethnic origin derives the common name (Jew), however they never called themselves “Mountain Jews,” which was an external ethnonym applied when Dagestan entered the Russian Empire. Rather, the future policy of the Moscow community seems to support the endoethnonym “Juhuri,” which in the long run will hinder identification of these people with international Jewry. Currently, in Moscow, an initiative group is working toward changing the name of the language, and if this attempt succeeds, in the future it will be logical to change the ethnonym accordingly.⁵⁶

3. Swinging Jews in between: From the Ashkenazi Paradigm of Jewishness to the “Namus” Code of Dagestani Muslims

Even though scholars of religions are fully aware of the fact that “traditional” religions are internally diverse and embedded in culture, with variety in time and space, such a wide plurality of ideas and practices is not always appreciated from within a religion and sometimes leaves room for identity crises, normative controversies, and bitter cultural confrontations. As far as the Juhuri religious identity is concerned, it has always been a reason for argument, because the Tatization policy did not really work, as they are two different peoples, but at the same time their connection with the Caucasus and culture seemed stronger to them than their connection with the Ashkenazi Jewish heritage, the most important and cohesive group of the Eastern communities. It is not an accident that

⁴⁹ (Chlenov 2009, p. 30).

⁵⁰ (Чарный 2018, p. 588).

⁵¹ (Миронов 2017, p. 173).

⁵² (Куповецкий 2018, p. 315).

⁵³ Planned for October 2020, see <https://www.strana2020.ru/>.

⁵⁴ Skype interview to Evgeniya M. Nazarova, professor at Russian State “University named after Kosygina”, specialist in Iranian linguistics, researcher of Juhuri language, scientific co-redactor of the monograph “History and culture of Mountain Jews” (2018), author of 28 articles on the Juhuri language, Moscow, 8 July 2020.

⁵⁵ (Семенов 2018a).

⁵⁶ Skype interview to Evgeniya M. Nazarova, professor at Russian State “University named after Kosygina”, specialist in Iranian linguistics, researcher of Juhuri language, scientific co-redactor of the monograph “History and culture of Mountain Jews” (2018), author of 28 articles on the Juhuri language, Moscow, 8 July 2020.

today, in the context of emigration, they are usually confused with other people, like Azeris, Turks, or Russians.⁵⁷

As to the Ashkenazi paradigm, we should not forget that any group of Jews has two strong ties, the first with international Jewry, which is geographically independent, and the other with the region where they were or are settled. From this perspective, we can understand the importance of the comparison between this small group of Mountain Jews and the larger Ashkenazi community. However, this relation has not been without tension. From the Juhuri side, they suffered an inferiority complex, in particular with regard to their “Jewishness,” that led them to depart from this model of Jewry to join the linguistic and cultural paradigm of Tat Muslims.⁵⁸ We should say that the complexity toward Ashkenazi was still in place for those Mountain Jews who were well educated. Actually, in the middle of the 20th century, this complexity had no basis, because from the position of Mountain Jews, Ashkenazi were not Jews: they dressed in the European way, ate non-kosher food, and did not go to the synagogue. This was a result of contact with Soviet-educated Ashkenazi, who did not distinguish themselves with a particular religiosity. But when the Mountain Jews started to get higher Soviet education, the dichotomy between we (religious Jews) and they (Europeanized Jews) was no longer applicable,⁵⁹ and once more, religious boundaries were blurred toward a more secularized version of Jewishness.

As to the Dagestan Muslim embedding process, Mountain Jews are the expression of Jewry settled in the Eastern part of the Caucasus, nowadays in Dagestan (the southernmost region of Russia on the Caspian Sea) and Azerbaijan. Hence, they are native people of a predominantly Muslim region, guaranteeing their Jewish status.⁶⁰ The deeper basis for the Tatization process, as discussed above, can be found in psychological discomfort toward their European counterparts, not just in the process of the erosion of religious tradition by the majority. In the dichotomy of us versus someone else, the Mountain Jews consider themselves a part of the Caucasus ethnos, but at the same time they recognize their Jewish origin and their particular religiosity within a Muslim predominant region. It is remarkable that they have been sharing with Muslims the customary code of *namus* for centuries.

Namus is the aggregate of ethnic norms of the Caucasian peoples, which does not differ from the Muslim norms apart from the religion itself. In the Turkish and Muslim culture, *namus* can basically be considered a reference of sexual honor. Commonly, the *namus* is accompanied by the *sharaf*, which refers to the “honor” of a man, or a family or clan. More exactly, the notion of *namus* can be explained by saying that a man’s reputation, social standing, or social legitimacy is tied to the chastity of specific women. In this sense, *namus* refers to that special relationship between a man and his women that prevails in Mediterranean and Near Eastern societies. It must be stressed that *namus* requires some relationship between a person and her community not in the moralistic terms of conscience, but in terms of collective convention: *namus* is validated by communal standards and men apply communal standards to insure their *namus*. Moreover, *namus* is a sacred quality somewhat akin to our own idea of self-respect. For this reason, in many Muslim societies of central Asia, it is connected with the religious law—the *shari’a*—and implies that men “control” the “sexuality” of “their women,” and men have *namus* when their control is socially legitimated:

Like *sharaf*, *namus* is a kind of sacred quality, but some differences are immediately apparent. *Namus* can be used to refer to a quality of a person collectivity just as *sharaf* can, but it most frequently is applied to individuals small groups of persons. This is partly because the idea of “control” over women is very important in *namus* and the problem of “control” most frequently emerges in the context of a family or a small knot of kinsmen. Nevertheless, it can

⁵⁷ (Chlenov 2009, p. 30).

⁵⁸ (Shakhbanova 2018, pp. 218–19).

⁵⁹ (Chlenov 2000).

⁶⁰ (Chlenov 2000).

refer to the *namus* of a clan, of a village quarter, of a village, even the *namus* of a nation or of the Muslims. Unlike *sharaf*, *namus* is never used to refer to acts or events in which a person or collectivity participates. Instead, *namus* refers to a “state” of the person or collectivity.⁶¹

Namus was, remarkably, a “not-Jewish” custom, but at the end of the day, the value of respecting one’s ancestors and the strict observance of their folk-code helped Juhuro to maintain their traditions. From the Ashkenazi point of view, *namus* was even considered as a “benefit”: this tie resulted in the severity of preserving the self-identity of Mountain Jews, including their Jewishness, and they were not “russified” despite Soviet policies being applied to them.⁶²

To sum up, the minority religious identity of Juhuri had to transform itself because of continual confrontation with two majority groups, Ashkenazis over the ideal framework of the Jewish religion and Dagestanis over local customs and honor. This double “minority condition” led them to swing from the international paradigm with the Ashkenazi component of Eastern Jewry to sharing the customs and codes of Muslim communities of Dagestan. On the other hand, we should not forget the role of the Soviet regime on the Tatization process, which left a heritage difficult to get rid of. In light of this theory, the Mountain Jews were seen as a Caucasian people of Persian origin who throughout history took Judaism as their religion but had no connection to the Jewish people. Though the majority of Mountain Jews do not support this theory anymore, there are still authors supporting the Tat myth,⁶³ who will probably hinder any attempt to change the actual name of the language (Tat or Mountain Jew language) or any further official revision that would erase the connection to Tats.⁶⁴

In the present day, this question is still relevant in Israel, where many Mountain Jews call themselves Kavkazi⁶⁵ (Caucasians) and call their language Kavkazit, which sounds⁶⁶ more neutral and less related to Jewry. The Soviet anti-religious policy made the community of Mountain Jews weaker in the internal structure (Tatists vs. Judaists) and undermined their relationship with Israeli Jews, at least at the beginning of migration, with markers still visible today. It may be for this reason that the latest decision on their name, as a community today in Moscow, will depend on further results of this transformation process combined with the new socio-legal conditions of settlement in the capital city.

4. Main Marker: Juhuri Language and the Processes of Preservation

Even if the previous literature did not see the language of Juhuro as the main marker outside Russia, leaving space for religion and Caucasian origins,⁶⁷ in the communities of southern Russia, the language is the strongest marker, though few people are fluent in Juhuri. In Moscow, the language seems to be a crucial marker of connection and a key element for the future preservation of the community. Within the community, the language is increasingly called Juhuri in everyday life as well as in resources published by the STMEGI International Charitable Foundation, and also by other peoples of the Caucasus. For this reason, this denomination will be soon be proposed to replace the official denominations of the Institute of Linguistics of the Russian Academy of Sciences of Tat language or Mountain Jewish language as an alternative official name,⁶⁸ which, according to some researchers, does not represent the real status of the Juhuri language, as a sort of macro-language including three

⁶¹ (Meeker 1976, pp. 243 ff., especially pp. 260–61). Moreover (King 2008, pp. 317–42) who stresses also the “honor killing” as a consequence of the sovereignty of men above women.

⁶² Skype interview to Evgeniya M. Nazarova, professor at Russian State “University named after Kosygina”, specialist in Iranian linguistics, researcher of Juhuri language, scientific co-redactor of the monograph “History and culture of Mountain Jews” (2018), author of 28 articles on the Juhuri language, Moscow, 8 July 2020.

⁶³ (Мататов 2002, p. 205).

⁶⁴ Skype interview to Evgeniya M. Nazarova, professor at Russian State “University named after Kosygina”, specialist in Iranian linguistics, researcher of Juhuri language, scientific co-redactor of the monograph “History and culture of Mountain Jews” (2018), author of 28 articles on the Juhuri language, Moscow, 8 July 2020.

⁶⁵ (Семёнов 2018a).

⁶⁶ (Semenov 2003, pp. 165–73).

⁶⁷ (Borijan and Daniel 2016, p. 60).

⁶⁸ <http://iling-ran.ru/web/ru/jazykirf>.

different peoples (Muslim Tats, Armenian Tats, and Juhuro).⁶⁹ Juhuri was considered, until the most recent research, a dialect of a wider Caucasian Tat language,⁷⁰ but the latest research considered Tat and Juhuri two independent and different languages.⁷¹ Now, the community is struggling to officially rename the language as Juhuri, or at least to erase the Tat legacy from the denomination itself. At the moment, an initiative group is working to bring these modifications to the Council of Nationality Affairs and to the president's administration to request the Institute of Linguistics to carry out research and, consequently, to change the official name of the language.⁷² More specifically, the Juhuri language presents some peculiarities that are worth analyzing in order to understand the challenges it faces in the multiethnic capital of Russia.

The first main feature is its prevalent use in families. Informal oral usage was mainly among members of the same family,⁷³ and there was a strong prevalence of use on the women's side. According to Mountain Jews, the paternal language is without a doubt Hebrew, and the maternal language is Juhuri, but what does this mean concretely? The Juhuri language was historically spoken at home, and the role of women was mainly to take care of children, while the men worked and had contact with people outside (mostly Russian or Azerbaijani speakers). Hence, in the early education of children, Juhuri had a prominent role at the family fireside. As a consequence, future speakers had a basic informal education on the practical use of the language in a countryside context. Nowadays, when women are more involved in social life and often have to work, there is little room for home transmission of language skills (mainly speaking and listening). On the opposite side, due to the relative competition in the job market, new skills are required, and parents, who tend to overburden their children with additional courses, prefer to focus on prospective "foreign" languages. Unfortunately, many parents, who are already bad speakers of Juhuri, consider this language an additional assignment for their children and are not eager to enroll them in language courses organized by the Moscow community.⁷⁴ A similar attitude is observed in the community in New York, where there is little objection to the loss of language.⁷⁵

However, this is not the only challenge this language is facing. Many attempts to write this language have been made, which, on the one hand, contribute to enriching the language with synonyms and phonetic variations,⁷⁶ but on the other hand, lead to some arguments on the most suitable writing system to adopt, which also depends on the area where speakers are settled.

The Juhuri language has three variants still alive, which take the name of the city or region of origin. Let us look at them briefly:

- Quban, from the city of Quba, also called Krasnaya Sloboda, in Northern Azerbaijan;
- Derbendi, from the southernmost Russian city of Derbend, on the coast of the Caspian Sea;
- Kaitaghian, from the inland of the Dagestan countryside, specifically the region of Kaitag.

The first variant is the most active, as the city of Quba is the core of the motherland of Juhuro, and also the only city where Juhuri is currently spoken as the local mother tongue. The second variant is still in use and is the main variant of the Mountain Jews living within the Russian border; it is also the "dialect" in which most of the literature is actually written and the lingua franca between the other

⁶⁹ Meeting at the STMEGI Center on the "Academic status of the language of the Mountain Jews", 13 February 2020.

⁷⁰ (Занд 1982, Т. 2, pp. 459–62; Zand 1991; Lazard [1971] 1989, p. 442).

⁷¹ (Назарова 2002, pp. 9–10).

⁷² Meeting at the STMEGI Center on the "Academic status of the language of the Mountain Jews", 13 February 2020.

⁷³ (Брам 2018, pp. 501–13).

⁷⁴ Skype interview to Gennady Bogdanov, co-head of the Juhuri preservation program and author of the first handbook of Juhuri for Russian speakers, Moscow, 11 June 2020.

⁷⁵ (Borijan and Daniel 2016, pp. 60–61).

⁷⁶ (Назарова 2018).

two variants. The last one is broadly spoken also around the city of Makhachkala and is the variant that preserves most of the original Hebrew lexicon.⁷⁷

There were four attempts at transliteration throughout the history of the language. One of the earliest attempts⁷⁸ was to use the Hebrew alphabet (until 1917), with little success and limited current usage; this variant is still in place in the Juhuri community of Israel.⁷⁹ One of the most notable sources of Juhuri literature in the Hebrew alphabet is the prayer book *KolTfila*, translated by Arafa Itom Pinkhasov into Juhuri and issued in 1909 in Vilnius,⁸⁰ which is considered evidence of a pre-revolutionary Juhuri literature and is a key argument against the Tat myth. From 1939, the Juhuri language started to be written down using the Cyrillic alphabet. However, since the community was spread throughout the territory of two states, both in the Soviet Union, they adopted two versions of alphabet, Azeri and Russian Cyrillic. After the independence of Azerbaijan and the romanization of the Azeri language, the Juhuro living in the territory adopted a variation of the Latin alphabet to write their language. In this area, it is important to note the crucial role of Russian as a lingua franca among all the peoples living in the former Soviet Union, in the contemporary Russian Federation, and among the Juhuri diaspora spread around the globe. For this reason, the most employed written variant is Derbendi, along with Russian Cyrillic, which is considered by some scholars a “prestigious” dialect of the Juhuri language.⁸¹ The role of the alphabet is still an open issue in the Juhuri community of Moscow.⁸²

Active participation in the matter is due to the mixed language “dialects” that coexist in the capital of Russia. As a matter of fact, all people living in the Russian Federation have to write their language in Cyrillic by law,⁸³ thus Juhuri taught and published in Russia has to comply with the law. As said above, the last fortress of Juhuri is KrasnayaSloboda, the Jewish part of the city of Quba in Azerbaijan, where the Latin alphabet is in use. Those Mountain Jews who moved to Moscow had to adapt to a different alphabet and a different dialect (Derbendi), and though they are recognized as “real” native speakers, they have to cope with the use of Cyrillic to transliterate their language.⁸⁴ This question is more formal than real, because the Akademiya Juhuri, where the language is taught to adults and children, makes great efforts to include dialectal synonyms and make use of both the Latin and Cyrillic alphabet, but de facto all publications in Juhuri must be in Russian Cyrillic. According to those who are more involved in the teaching process, the alphabet, as well as the dialects, should be seen as an indicator of the richness of the language itself and not as a source of argument. The key goal of the Moscow community in regard to the language is to preserve it primarily as a family oral language that can still be alive thanks to the efforts of the community as a whole, and all the debates about the “best” variants to use will become meaningless if there is nobody to speak this language with.

Another peculiarity of the Juhuri language, which turned out to be a major cause of impoverishment among the native speakers, is the extensive use of the verb “soxdə” (to do).⁸⁵ This verb is used in the construction “to do what” instead of using a specific verb for many actions. As an example, to say “to help,” which in Russian uses the single word “pomogat’”⁸⁶ in Juhuri you would say “kuməkisoxdə” (to help), or “gofsoxdə” (to speak) or “korsoxdə” (to work). This structure is more often used in a

⁷⁷ Skype interview to Gennady Bogdanov, co-head of the Juhuri preservation program and author of the first handbook of Juhuri for Russian speakers, Moscow, 11 June 2020.

⁷⁸ (Брам 2018).

⁷⁹ Skype interview to Gennady Bogdanov, co-head of the Juhuri preservation program and author of the first handbook of Juhuri for Russian speakers, Moscow, 11 June 2020.

⁸⁰ (Шалем 2018, pp. 378–85).

⁸¹ (Zand 1991, pp. 378–441).

⁸² Meeting at the STMEGI Center on the “Academic status of the language of the Mountain Jews”, 13 February 2020.

⁸³ <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/12/12/2002/5703b5239a7947783a5a4233>.

⁸⁴ Skype interview to Gennady Bogdanov, co-head of the Juhuri preservation program and author of the first handbook of Juhuri for Russian speakers, Moscow, 11 June 2020.

⁸⁵ To ease the reading here we used the Azerbaijani alphabet with Roman letters, one the “official” alphabets of the Juhuri language. For a deeper knowledge of the use of alphabets and their mutual transliteration see (Назарова 2018, pp. 240–44).

⁸⁶ Here was used the scientific transliteration of the Russian alphabet, the original form of the verbs pomogat’, rabotat’ and govorit’ is the following: помогать, работать, говорить.

Russified version with the verb “to do” in Juhuri plus the verb, but not the noun, in Russian. Given the frequent use of “soxdə,” it is easy to remember and is used by speakers of different levels, while the nouns that need to be connected to it are more often Russian for the sake of simplification. You can hear “rabotat’ soxdə” (to work), “govorit’ soxdə” (to speak), and others. Thus, the endangered status of the Juhuri language is worsened by the original vocabulary being spoiled in favor of the majority’s language.

To sum up, among the challenges that the Mountain Jews have to face to preserve their cultural heritage, as one of the markers (if not the main marker) of the community, as well as the most endangered part of their heritage, language plays a major role. The “exodus” from their motherland, the parents’ attitude toward the language, and different dialects and writing systems present a demanding issue to the Moscow community, whose fundamental role in keeping the Juhuri culture alive is recognized by Juhuro around the world. In this regard, the Moscow community seems to be committed to make all possible efforts to preserve the language in all its dialects, and to promote it among the new generations of Mountain Jews. The community has already won a government grant in the framework of the Presidential Grants Fund,⁸⁷ while future applications are planned for the Foundation for the Preservation and Study of the Native Languages of the Peoples of Russia,⁸⁸ funded in 2018 by the president of the Russian Federation to promote the languages of Russia (295 at the time of writing)⁸⁹ among new generations.

The main idea of the community is to make available new virtual instruments to learn and practice the language. At the moment there is already a Russian/Hebrew–Juhuri (Latin and Cyrillic) vocabulary app for portable devices, which is constantly being improved. Moreover, community members are working to make available a version translating from and to English, to reach new generations of Mountain Jews who live in America and may not be fluent in Russian. The AkademiaJuhuri is working to make audio books, which have turned out to be one of the best resources to make people acquainted with the spoken language, and to remark its oral and family prevalence. However, the most challenging project is an app to learn Juhuri through the gamification process, with grammar and exercises at different levels of knowledge, and for English and Hebrew speakers as well, planned to be available within the next two years.⁹⁰

Another strategy should be to make people around the world aware of the Juhuri language. We would say that the relative scarcity of academic and internet resources in English about Juhuri is an obstacle for those researchers who do not know Russian or Hebrew. There are also apps to find native speakers of minority languages to speak with, although there are not many potential speakers and learners; apps like Tandem⁹¹ are taking steps to include them. This app already offers at least 10 languages, apart from Russian, spoken in the Russian Federation, six of which are spoken in Dagestan (Tabasaran, Lezgian, Lak, Dargwa, Avaric, Kumyk); however, Juhuri and Tat (both of Persian origin) are not yet available. In this regard, the Akademia Juhuri already recognizes the crucial role of English in the diffusion of Juhuri, which bodes well for the coming years.

In conclusion, the future of the community is strictly correlated with the future of the Juhuri language. The idea that the language is the main marker is confirmed by previous research and by fieldwork involving the community of Moscow. On the one hand, there is the objective loss of native speakers and a shrinking vocabulary. On the other hand, great efforts are being devoted to preservation, teaching, and denomination, to give official recognition to the language of Juhuro. It is remarkable to say that this issue is made harder today because the “new” native languages of Juhuro are Russian,

⁸⁷ <https://xn--80afcdbalict6afooklqi5o.xn--p1ai/президентскиегранты.рф>.

⁸⁸ <https://xn--d1acejpf6hc6b.xn--p1ai/родныеязыки.рф>.

⁸⁹ <http://iling-ran.ru/web/ru/jazykif>.

⁹⁰ Skype interview to Gennady Bogdanov, co-head of the Juhuri preservation program and author of the first handbook of Juhuri for Russian speakers, Moscow, 11 June 2020.

⁹¹ See also (Carluccio and Rubakova 2019, pp. 11596–603).

English, and Hebrew, and this is also taken into account when designing new multimedia strategies for preserving and teaching the language.

5. From Emigration to Affirmation: Toward a New Definition of the Juhuri Community in Moscow

In the early 1980s, there was a Juhuri community of about 2000 people in Moscow, and after the exodus the community grew by five times. Some Juhuri who came to the capital gained popularity and wealth, such that they started to form international organizations of Mountain Jews, the most notable of which was the Russian Foundation for the Conservation and Development of Mountain Jewish Culture in 1997, based on which the World Congress of Mountain Jews was officially established in 2003. Moscow changed from being the headquarters of an atheistic government that wanted to delete the culture of Mountain Jews through the process of “Tatization,” to a city where Juhuri can actively promote their culture to a multiethnic audience and formal institutions. Let us give some examples of their vitality through the most recent history:⁹²

- In 1993, the first religious community of Mountain Jews, called *BeitTalkum*, was established, and six years later they founded a synagogue by the same name. This community tried to find a niche from a religious as well as an educational and cultural point of view;
- In the early 1990s, *Amaldanik* was issued as a collection of folk songs with special issues on the ethos and proverbs of Mountain Jews;
- In 1997, the first issue of the Juhuri dictionary (Russian–Juhuri), with about 9000 words, was printed in the capital;
- In 1999, the book *Mountain Jews: History, Ethnography, Culture* was published;
- In 2008, the Mountain Jew *Shaarey Kedusha* yeshiva was opened, around which an association grew along with another congregation that registered the next year in the southeast of Moscow under the name *Mir* (“peace” in Russian);
- In 2001, at the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA), there was an international symposium, Mountain Jews: History and Present, with support from the Russian fund for preservation and development of Jewish culture;
- On 13 September 2012, a conference of Mountain Jewish women was held on the topic “Who is the 21st century woman: family hearth or business lady?”;
- From 2000 to 2005, a journal called *Minyan* was published with the support of the World Congress of Mountain Jews, and a special annex on the history of Mountain Jews appeared in the *Mezhdunarodnayaevreyskayagazeta* (International Jewish Journal). In the same period, three books of Mountain Jewish folklore were published: *Tales of the Ancient People*, *Stories of the Wise Traveler*, and *Legends of the Popular Storyteller*, the first of which was awarded as one of the best books of the year;
- The most relevant organization actively developing and preserving the culture and language of Juhuri is the STMEGI International Charitable Foundation. Thanks to this fund, the international conference Mountain Jews: Historical, Cultural, and Religious Dimensions was organized at the Russian Academy of Sciences in 2008. An electronic and offline library of Juhuri literature was created in 2014, issuing a virtual journal every month.⁹³ In March 2014, the first TV channel entirely dedicated to the Mountain Jews was fully available online.⁹⁴ STMEGI is today a reference point for Mountain Jews around the world.⁹⁵ The webpage is available in Russian, English, and Hebrew, but news and programs are available just in Russian. The STMEGI fund also invests

⁹² (Чарный 2018).

⁹³ See the journal and other resources, at <https://stmegi.com/library/>.

⁹⁴ <https://stmegi.com/tv/>.

⁹⁵ (Borijan and Daniel 2016, p. 71).

in creating opportunities for the youngest Mountain Jews, giving financial support to young entrepreneurs through all available channels of communication.⁹⁶ Instagram is another good channel of communication, where the main representatives of the fund are available, along with the junior club and the Akademia Juhuri dedicated to the language.

In conclusion, the authors of this paper have had the opportunity to analyze, from a close point of view and through personal interactions, the means that Juhuro employ to make people aware of them and their ancient tradition within the chaotic environment of a “foreign” megalopolis using the latest available instruments to share the community’s activities and events and maintain links within Mountain Jews spread throughout Moscow and the world. Using new technologies along with traditional forms of media, Juhuro appear likely to succeed in the challenge of preserving their religion, culture, and identity. Their case study confirms that religions exist in time and space and are constantly interpreted and reinterpreted by believers. Religious ideas, beliefs, and practices have deep cognitive profiles that make them more like flows of phenomena than unitary and monolithic sets of experiences.⁹⁷ As they are embedded in cultures, their transformations and accommodations are, in fact, better expressions of their strength and vitality.

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⁹⁶ <https://stmegi.com/junior/business-club/>.

⁹⁷ (Barrett and Jonathan 2008, pp. 109–24; Whitehouse 2002, pp. 293 ff.; Sørensen 2005, pp. 465 ff).

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