

“From Father” or “From Both Parents”? Variations of the Descent Classificatory Rule Regulating Membership in Ethnic Categories in Modern Dagestan

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the transmission of membership in ethnic categories in modern Dagestan, specifically in families where parents belong to different categories. Based on the material of 133 interviews conducted in urban and rural settlements of Dagestan, it is demonstrated that two main classificatory rules coexist in the republic. The first rule, patrilineal, assumes that nationality is inherited from the child’s father, and the nationality of the mother is not significant. The second, ambilineal, rule assumes that a child in a mixed marriage is classified as a representative of both paternal and maternal categories. Such a child is often defined by informants as “metis”, a category which tends to be ethnicized. The paper presents the results of two stages of research. The first part describes, based on informants’ narratives, the functioning of the descent rules of nationality transmission. The second part presents results of the analysis of a data set of coded and quantified interviews, which demonstrate that patrilineal rule is widespread mainly in rural areas, while ambilineal rule is prevalent in cities. The discussion presents hypotheses on the origin of both rules in Dagestan, clarifies the relevance of the study of the descent classificatory rules for the modern constructivist theory of ethnicity, and shows how, due to the spread of the ambilineal rule, ethnic classification might become irrelevant.

Keywords

ethnicity, Dagestan, descent rule, ethnic classifications, nationality

Although modern approaches define ethnicity through a set of specific classificatory rules, according to which children “inherit” the classificatory category of their parents (this set is known as *rule of descent/descent rule*) (Chandra, 2006; Chandra, 2012; Varshaver, 2023; Varshaver, 2022a), the rules themselves are rarely the focus of ethnicity studies. The most significant exception to this trend are studies devoted to the *hypodescent*, a rule according to which children of parents belonging

to different ethnic categories in ethnically hierarchical contexts are assigned to the less prestigious category of the two (Hollinger, 2003; Sharfstein, 2006). To some extent, such studies also include those examining the issue of self-identification of children born in “mixed” marriages¹. There, implicitly, another classificatory rule is used, according to which a person is who they consider themselves to be (Zotova et al., 2018; Akulenko, 2019; Stephan, Stephan, 1989). The attention to the issue of category inheritance, however, does not compare to the theoretical significance of this phenomenon for understanding ethnicity in itself. Indeed, all existing ethnic categories (no matter what they are defined as and limited by) are replenished primarily through the assignment of children to the category of parents. Moreover, the presence of some type of a classificatory rule for children from “mixed” marriages is a social universal. Research into this rule (or these rules) is important for studying the patterns describing the dynamics of ethnic classificatory systems. Obviously, ethnic categories and classifications appear and disappear at some point in time. If a classificatory rule says that a man A and a woman B have a child who is both A and B (and not just A or B), and the number of such children increases, we can predict that within several generations most people will be both A and B (and C, and D) to some extent, and so the classification will lose its social meaning. On the contrary, if ethnicity is determined by the category of only one of the parents, even if more and more children are born in “mixed” marriages, the classification itself will not suffer any changes or reductions.

In the fall of 2021, one of the authors, as part of a research team, observed the census activities in the Republic of Dagestan in Russia, and, in particular, how people answered questions about ethnicity (Varshaver, 2022b, 2025). In the vast majority of cases, when census participants had to list the nationality of children whose parents belonged to different nationalities (according to census procedures, the households were registered according to any one of their members), the children were assigned the category of their father. This occurrence surprised the members of the research team (who grew up in the non-Caucasian European part of Russia), as according to the classification rule most familiar to them, such children are classified as belonging to both the father’s and the mother’s category (“half A, half B”). Thus, came the decision to study the degree of universality of the recorded classification rule in Dagestan and whether it has any variations. In the summer of 2022, as part of the HSE expedition “Rediscovering Russia”, a study was conducted on the rules for classifying children from “mixed” marriages in various locations in Dagestan. A total of

¹From here on, for simplicity’s sake, the term “mixed marriage” is used in the paper to refer to the cases in which children are born to parents belonging to different ethnic categories. The children may also be born to an unmarried couple, and in such a situation the importance of their ethnic classification is not lost, but rather intensifies even further. In addition, the idea itself that such a marriage is mixed (though it may also be the case that the wife enters the ethnic category of her husband or this phenomenon is not referred to at all) is more of a cultural fact than a universal.

133 in-depth interviews were conducted with people born in the republic. Each of the informants was presented with a case that modeled a “mixed” family and then was asked to classify a child of such marriage. The paper presents the results of the study, demonstrates the variability of the classificatory rule of descent in Dagestan, and presents the authors’ suggestions on what this variability may be associated with and what it may indicate in terms of the larger theory of ethnicity.

Theoretical background

The theoretical “elusiveness” of ethnic phenomena has been noted by many authors (Baumann, 2004; Isajiw, 1993; Phinney, 1990). For a long time, scholars attempted to define ethnicity through the most common features that distinguish representatives of some ethnic categories from others—language, various aspects of material culture, phenotypic characteristics, etc. (Hutchinson, Smith, 1996; Charsley, 1974). Simultaneously, there was a discussion about the relationship between such phenomena as race, nation, ethnic group, in terms of distinguishing which it was often the types of features that played a defining role (race—phenotypic, ethnic group—cultural, nation—political, territorial) (Connor, 1978; Sollors, 2008; Wimmer, 2013). These definitions of phenomena, while claiming universality, were most often based on the specific features of the context in which they were created. As more and more comparative studies emerged, as well as studies that simultaneously analyzed drastically territorially distant and different contexts², it became clear that, on the one hand, there is no “mandatory set” of distinctive features that is present in all contexts, while on the other hand, phenomena, intuitively regarded as ethnic, persist from one context to another. Subsequent research work consisted of conceptualizing this intuition. The most influential tradition to this day remains the one established by the Norwegian scholar Fredrik Barth, who defined ethnic groups as a derivative of regular acts of “signalling an [ethnic] boundary”, which are carried out on the basis of “cultural features” defined specifically for this purpose (Barth, 1998). The mentioned features can be very diverse, and their content does not really matter, while of importance are the acts of distinction themselves, since social life (membership in categories, communication between “representatives” of categories, etc.) is regulated according to them. Barth’s and similar definitions, however, were criticized for being too broad (Jakoubek, 2019; Isajiw, 1993; Vermeulen, Govers, 2000): cultural markers are a universal of social life, and they indicate not only membership in intuitively understood ethnic categories, but also in any other social categories. In the wake of this criticism, emerged definitions that moved away from an appeal to culture—whether it was about the real cultural features of ethnic groups or about a signaling system that uses culture as a resource for selecting markers of belonging,—and drew attention to the fact that membership in

² Perhaps the key study in this category is the classic work by Horowitz, “Ethnic Groups in Conflict” (Horowitz, 2001).

ethnic categories is usually passed on from parents to children. It is this rule of descent, which is essentially a rule of social categorization of new members of society, that has become definitive for ethnicity within the framework of this approach. Its most important modern proponents are political scientists James Fearon and David Laitin, as well as Kanchan Chandra. The former, among other things, point out that an ethnic group is a group “larger than a family and membership in the group is decided by a descent rule.” (Fearon, Laitin, 2000). The latter emphasizes that such a membership rule is the only definitive characteristic of ethnicity, and states that ethnic identity (Chandra’s key term) as “a subset of [social] identity categories in which eligibility for membership is determined by descent-based attributes” and, due to its simultaneous brevity and essentiality, calls this definition minimalistic (Chandra, 2006, 2012). In Russia, this approach is also used to define ethnicity; in particular, by Evgeni Varshaver, who, referring simultaneously to Barth, Chandra and Valery Tishkov (n.d.), defines ethnicity as “the organization of differences constructed around categories, membership in which is inherited” (Varshaver, 2022a: 43).

But how exactly is membership inherited, or, in other words, what rules underlie the social classification of children born? Despite the importance of the issue of inheritance for the theoretical understanding of ethnicity, empirical studies of the social categorization of children have become a separate thematic area, and in order to describe current academic ideas on this issue, it is necessary to collect them piece by piece from studies that pose the question rather differently or that do not directly answer this question at all, as well as from “common knowledge” of varying degrees of verification (e.g., “among Jews, it [ethnicity] is inherited from mother”). The most developed while being directly related to the issue of the inheritance of membership and social classification topic in the literature currently is the aforementioned hypodescent rule, postulating that children born to representatives of different ethnic categories in hierarchical systems are classified as representatives of the less prestigious category. A significant portion of such studies was conducted on American material, where the so-called “one-drop-rule” was in effect for a long time, that is, the categorization of children born in “mixed” unions, where one parent is “white” and the other “black”, as “black”. And while some of these studies concern the history and institutionalization of this rule (Hollinger, 2003; Sharfstein, 2006; Washington, 2011), other focus on the extent to which, despite its abolition on institutional level, it continues to function at the level of regulation of social behavior (Campbell, 2003; Spencer, 2004) and even at the level of spontaneous perceptions (Krosch et al., 2013; Peery, Bodenhausen, 2008). In particular, Ho and colleagues (Ho et al., 2011) conducted a series of three types of experiments in which respondents were asked directly about the rules of inheritance of membership in racial categories, showing family trees and faces of people born in “mixed” unions.

The results were consistent from one experiment to another—people continued to categorize other people based on the hypodescent rule. Such studies are much less often conducted on material other than American (Heuer, 2009; Kowal, 2016), although it is often the latter that they are compared with (Skidmore, 2003; Fry, 2006).

Clear rules of categorization, such as hypodescent, presumably characterize contexts in which ethnicity is the most important line of social demarcation and resource. Other contexts may not have such clear and explicit regulations of membership in ethnic categories, leaving the decision of child's categorization to their parents (in the cases where it's necessary to register the child's ethnicity in official records) or to the child themselves when they grow up. An example of a study of parental choice is the work of Ruixue Jia and Torsten Persson (2014), which, using Chinese empirical material, explores how children are registered in families where one spouse is Han, and the other belongs to another ethnic category. Based on mathematical models, the researchers show that, when deciding what the formal ethnic affiliation of children will be, parents partly proceed from institutional material incentives (for example, benefits to “small peoples”), and partly focus on existing classificatory norms and traditions. An example of a study of personal self-identification of people born in “mixed” unions is the work of Cookie Stephan and Walter Stephan (Stephan, Stephan, 1989), which focuses on the way Americans of both Japanese and Latin American descent classify themselves, and concludes that identification is associated with the culture in which the informant, in their opinion, was brought up, and poses that if they were brought up in several cultures at the same time, the probability that their identification will be “mixed” is higher. While there are a number of such studies (Fishman, 2004; Zotova et al., 2018; Ang, Shik, 2013; Teicher, 1968), they are mostly based on the idea implicit in the concept of self-identification, according to which categorical membership can be freely chosen, while, firstly, this freedom is limited, and secondly, this limitation is partly determined by the implicit rules of membership (the main one of which is the descent rule, stating that a person's ethnic category must correspond to the ethnic category of one or both of their parents). The few studies on the problem of categorical membership of children that exist in Russia were carried out almost exclusively in the described “self-identification” logic (Gubanova, Kyzy Manafova, 2015; Akulenko, 2019; Kutjavina, Malysheva, 2010). Other approaches to the issue have not been recorded in the Russian academic literature. Thus, the study of the general rules governing the classification of children as representatives of certain categories is, firstly, novel for the Russian context, and secondly, important in general due to the simultaneous scarcity of research on the topic and centrality of the issue of inheritance of membership in ethnic categories for the general theory of ethnicity.

Research context

Dagestan is a republic within the Russian Federation, most of whose modern territory was incorporated into the Russian Empire as a result of the Caucasian Wars (Pokrovsky, 2009). At the end of the 19th century, economic integration of these territories began to take place (Karpov, Kapustina, 2011). Even at that time, there existed a significant degree of cultural and linguistic diversity in Dagestan, but the most important categories of social identification for Dagestanis were patrilineal *tukhums*, as well as rural communities (*jamaats*), which were related to each other in various ways (Gadzhieva, 1985; Magomedova et al., 2021; Khashaev, 2007). In the 1920s, in Dagestan, as elsewhere in the USSR, partly based on the work of ethnographers and linguists, partly due to administrative pragmatics (Hirsch, 2005) and revolutionary romanticism (Alpatov, 2000), official ethnic categories were identified, referred to as “peoples” or “nationalities”. By the 1926 census, a list of about 40 Dagestani nationalities was finalized, but as part of the policy of consolidating nationalities, for the 1939 census their number was reduced to 11³: Avars, Dargins, Kumyks, Lezgins, Laks, Azerbaijanis, Tabasarans, Russians, Chechens, Nogais, Jews. This list, with minor changes (in particular, in the list of nationalities for the 1959 census, such categories as “Tsakhurs”, “Rutuls”, “Aguls” and “Tats” reappear, and a separate category of “Mountain Jews” is distinguished from the category of “Jews”) survived until the last Soviet census of 1989. In the three post-Soviet censuses, the list of ethnic categories, with rare exceptions (e.g., the case of the category of “Kapuchins” that ceased to exist and was partially replaced by the category of “Beztins” based on the composition of the villages) corresponded to the list of 1926. Although no special studies have been carried out, it can be assumed that during the Soviet period, nationalities became important identity categories for Dagestanis, which was then facilitated by the post-Soviet politicization of ethnicity—for some time, the supreme executive body of Dagestan was the State Council, which was formed on an ethnic basis (Landa, 2016). Nowadays, the political importance and social relevance of national categories seems (Varshaver, 2022b, 2025) to be in decline, partly due to Islamization and the religious identities’ rise in relevance, and partly due to the intensive migration of Dagestanis to other regions of Russia and the formation of a pan-Dagestani identity.

³The concept of “Dagestani nationalities” is nominal and often political in nature. However, it conventionally refers to either categories whose representatives “traditionally” lived in Dagestan, or categories whose representatives are more numerous in Dagestan than in other regions of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic or Russian Federation.

Research methodology

The data for the paper was collected by the authors and their colleagues⁴ in the summer of 2022. For this purpose, a guide designed to find out the current state of ethnicity in Dagestan was developed. One of the thematic parts of the guide included questions that allowed to determine the informant's ideas related to the rules of membership in Dagestan nationalities. The questions are listed below:

What is the nationality of a child in a family where the parents are of different nationalities? [If the answer is “like father’s”] Is it possible for it to be determined by the mother’s nationality/by the “proportion of blood”? Are there exceptions or contexts in which nationality is determined differently? What are these exceptions and what are these contexts? Do you know such families and situations? Could you describe them? What nationality are the children considered to be there? Why?

Sometimes the question was asked in the form of a vignette, phrased along the lines of: “Dad is an Avar, mom is a Dargin, what is the nationality of their child?” Additionally the guide included questions revealing the biography of the informant. A total of 133 interviews were collected and transcribed, which were conducted both in Makhachkala and the environs (78 interviews), and in seven mountain villages of the Akushin, Rutul and Tsuntin administrative areas—Kubachi (10), Urkarakh (6), Arakul (8), Nizhniy Katruk (8), Ikhrek (6), Bezhta (8) and Tlyadal (9). The villages were selected based on a number of reasons. Among those were the diversity of the nominal ethnicity of the residents of these villages (Avars, Dargins, Laks, Rutuls, Bezhtins, Kubachins, Azerbaijanis), the spatial variance of the locations, the complexity of the local construction of ethnicity, etc. All the interviews were conducted in Russian, the quotes in this paper have been translated into English by the authors with an attempt to preserve the original cadence and tone of the speakers.

The transcripts were uploaded into the Atlas qualitative data analysis program and thematically coded. In the first stage, general codes were created to denote material relevant to the topic. In the next stage, specific codes were created and attributed to statements that allowed us to determine the informant’s ideas about how nationality is inherited: “from father,” “from mother,” “from both parents,” and also “determined by documents” (the informant believes that there is no

⁴The authors are grateful to N. Ivanova, Yu. Gupalova, M. Gutsunaev-Malinovsky, S. Kuznetsova, A. Kunina, A. Malinovsky, D. Pokhilchuk, A. Rakacheva, A. Orlova, and A. Shulga for their participation in data collection, as well as to R. S. Abdulmedzhidov, Kh. N. Kurbanov, I. Kh. Kurbanova, R. M. Magomedova, A. A. Murzaev, and S.A. Ninalalov for their hospitality and assistance in organizing data collection. The preparatory stage of the project was held within the framework of the workshop of the Center for Field Research of the Free Educational Project “Summer School”.

essential categorical rule, and a person's nationality is determined based on how they themselves/their parents record them in official documents⁵) and "self-identification" (the informant believes that the key criterion for membership is self-identification). The coded fragments were analyzed by the entire team of authors of the article; the main types of informants' ideas were reconstructed based on those fragments and are presented in the first part of the "Results" section. Additionally, a database for quantitative analysis was created, in which the informant's position on how ethnic belonging is determined, was turned into a nominal scale, informants' personal information (gender, age, place of birth and socialization, etc.) was coded, and based on this data a regression analysis was carried out, allowing us to determine the factors connected with the informants' views on the classificatory rules⁶.

Research results

Descent Classificatory Rules: Qualitative Analysis

The analysis of the interviews has shown that in Dagestan there primarily coexist two classificatory rules of descent that work in the situations of "mixed" marriages and determining the ethnicity (nationality) of children of such marriages. The first rule is patrilineal, according to which nationality is inherited from the father, and, accordingly, the nationality of children from a "mixed" marriage is the nationality of the child's father.

*Well, in general, we believe that the family line is the paternal line. Naturally, if the father is Russian, of course, he [the child] will be Russian.
(female, 56, Tlyadal)*

Interviewer: *Well, what do you think: if dad is Lak, and mom is Jewish. Who is the child?*

Informant: *Lak, of course.
(male, 53, Arakul)*

Interviewer: *For example, if in some family the wife is Azerbaijani and the husband is Dargin, they have a child. What nationality will this child be?*

Informant: *If the father's Azerbaijani, the child will be Azerbaijani, too. It doesn't get [inherited] from the mother. Only from the father.
(male, 40, Nizhniy Katruk)*

⁵ For further findings on "documentary constructivism" see (Varshaver, Orlova, Shulga, 2023, 2025).

⁶ The relatively small number of cases included in the calculations (114 in total and 83 in the regression analysis) was offset by the strength and significance of the effect presented in the results. Given that the appropriateness of using certain methods is a function of the objectives and design of the study, as well as the interpretation of the results of the calculations, such moves as quantification of the array and the use of regression analysis were determined to be appropriate. The limitations of the findings in connection with the method are discussed in the relevant section of the article.

*Well, they say, let's say, a Lak woman marries an Avar—the children are Avars.
(male, 29, Makhachkala)*

*We have always believed that it is [inherited] from the father's side. Only from the
father's side.
(female, 45, Makhachkala)*

According to the second rule, nationality is determined by both parents and, accordingly, the child has two nationalities, which are perceived in a certain proportion to each other.

Informant: *Yes, a girl was born.*

Interviewer: *And your daughter, who is she? A Lezgin or an Avar?*

Informant: *Half-Lezgin, half-Avar.
(female, 20, Makhachkala)*

*Well, I am Russian and Avar.
(male, 23, Makhachkala)*

*I'm a Metis, it turns out! My mother is Russian, and my father is Lak.
(male, 65, Arakul)*

In the latter case, a person whose parents belong to two different nationalities described himself as a “Metis”. This vernacular term is often used in Dagestan to describe children born in “mixed” families. In some cases, both nationalities are subsequently specified, and in those cases “Metis” is more of a collective concept, generalizing the idea of mixed blood.

*No, well, we knew what kind of nationality each of us was, we knew. For example, for
some reason they called us Metises, that's these mixed nations, Metises. (male, 64,
Makhachkala)*

Informant: *Basically, they always say that I am a Metis.*

Interviewer: *And then they list the nationalities?*

Informant: *Yes, yes, that Mom, for example, is an Avar, Dad is a Dargin and that's
it.
(female, 21, Makhachkala)*

*We even had a lot of Metis children—that's people whose parents were of different
nationalities.
(male, 21, Makhachkala)*

In some cases, however, this clarification seemed redundant—the category of “Metis” itself had sufficient descriptive power for the informants. Moreover, sometimes a narrative ethnicization of

“Metises” happened, endowing them with special characteristics inherent only to this group, distinguishing it from the rest. In some cases this category was placed alongside the “traditional” Dagestani nationalities in the classification.

It is often said that if, for example, a person has some kind of mixing of blood, he says, “I am a Metis.”
(female, 20, Makhachkala)

I really like Metis people. I think they are great people. It's even on a base level great that two different bloods have mixed.
(female, 29, Makhachkala)

The ethnicization of Metises, however, did not always occur, and, on the contrary, being born in a “mixed” family (and, possibly, the coexistence of different rules of categorization) has resulted in reflection on one’s own ethnicity, thereby giving space to a narrative within which nationality is not determined through established rules, but a person’s self-identification, their desire to belong to one or another ethnic category.

And so I was sitting there one day, and I realized that I don't identify myself with Russians at all. I can't sit down and think that these are my roots, remember some Russian folk dances, but I love all things Dagestani, wear outfits, jewelry. They're very beautiful.
(female, 20, Makhachkala)

I have a girl at work, her father is Tabasaran, and her mother is Avar. She says that she was always more drawn to her mother's side, she knows Avar.
(female, 25, Makhachkala)

He will probably consider himself a Metis by nationality, or he may choose whatever nationality he likes.
(male, 21, Makhachkala)

Interviewer: And from which parent is nationality inherited?

Informant: Let's say an Avar and a Dargin got married—it's already a question for the child how and whom to perceive themselves as.
(male, 37, Makhachkala)

Moreover, we can assume that with the increase in the number of nationalities that are passed on from parent to child (often the child’s parents themselves are “Metises”), the chances also increase that the child will “self-identify” their ethnicity rather than inherit it from the father or both parents at once. In cases like that, it does not matter what ethnic category the parents identified

themselves as, but it is important that for the informant the question of determining nationality becomes less straightforward.

I rarely say that I am half-Dargin. Although, most likely, it is not even half. My grandfather is Azerbaijani, so my dad's parents... My grandmother is Dargin, and my grandmother has someone else [ethnic category-wise] there [in her ancestry]. There were Russians, too, I think. So everything is mixed up there. And my mother is a pure Lak.
(female, 19, Makhachkala)

And my father, the blood that I have, is Avar, Dargin, Adyghe... One grandfather is Italian even. I myself say that I am Dargin.
(male, 32, Makhachkala)

The possibility of self-identification itself, however, is still limited by the existing set of nationalities, “received” from previous generations—there must be a certain basis that would be a reason for classifying oneself as belonging to an ethnic category. In other words, self-identification does not mean complete freedom to determine nationality, and this freedom is limited by the framework of at least some existing blood ties.

This is what I understand at the moment: in order to say that you belong to at least some [nationality], you need at least some blood in the 10th, 13th, 15th, some further generation. This is a necessary condition for me to “call myself anything”, be it an Avar, a Dargin, a Kumyk, etc.
(female, 23, Makhachkala)

No, it's just that when you say that “I am a person of such-and-such nation”, you mean that “I was simply born into a family in which the parents also belong to this nation”.
(male, 18, Makhachkala)

Interviewer: *But let's say there is a Dargin family, and they have a child, there are no other relatives, only them and the child. So, when, the child is not even a year old—say, about four months old—the parents die in a car crash. The child is then left an orphan, and they are adopted by an Avar family. What nationality will the child be?*

Informant: *I'm telling you, we don't perceive this, this is not perception... You don't attach nationality to the child either. They will identify themselves.*
(male, 37, Makhachkala)

But it is reinforced by traditions and upbringing. That is, you cannot get educated and say: “Ah, today I decided to be an Avar”, there must still be some relatives.

*[pause] You cannot call yourself a Frenchman, can you?
(female, 23, Makhachkala)*

Other classificatory rules were also mentioned in the interviews. However, they were of an additional nature rather than primary one, and would become relevant in a situation when for some reason the rules “from father” and “from both parents” could not work. There are two different rules of that kind—“from mother” and “determined by documents”.

Given the obvious prevalence of the rule of nationality being inherited “from father”, a child is classified as a representative of the mother’s nationality if the parents are divorced and the child grows up with the mother, or if the father is unknown. However, divorce itself is not a basis for violating the rule “from father”—for this to happen, the divorce and the relationship with the father’s part of the family must be hostile.

*If you have a bad relationship with your father, that is, [your parents are] divorced.
Your mother immediately instills it in you—you are an Avar.
(male, 26, Makhachkala)*

Interviewer: *Oh, and you also said that there are exceptions, that sometimes [ethnicity is inherited from] the mother, if with the father...*

Informant: *Well, it just happens that way. Because the child grows up in the mother’s family, so what can you do?
(female, 48, Makhachkala)*

Interviewer: *Look, you said that nationality is usually passed down from the father. Are there any cases when this is not true?*

Informant: *When they get divorced and the children stay with their mother, they take their mother’s [nationality].
(male, 65, Arakul)*

A kind of classificatory collision also occurred when informants discussed a situation in which the father belongs to one of the “Muslim” Dagestani nationalities, and the mother was Jewish, about whom in Dagestan there is an idea that their nationality is inherited from the mother. In this case, however, informants could not always simply classify the child, but the classification was rather speculative in nature and not tied to the direct experience of informants.

Informant: *And among Jews, it is passed down from the mother?*

Interviewer: *The mother’s side, yes.*

Informant: *I think that Dagestanis simply will not allow a child to be considered a Jew. He will still be an Avar. They will not forgive such a thing. I don't know any Avar who would make a child a Jew.*
(female, 37, Bezhta)

Interviewer: *Oh, and there was also a question about marriages between different nationalities. For example, among Jews, their nationality is passed down through the mother. And if a Jewish woman marries a Dargin, what nationality will the child be?*

Informant: *Jewish.*

Interviewer: *That is, [the nationality will be inherited] from the mother's side?*

Informant: *From the mother's side. He is Jewish because of his mother.*
(male, 75, Arakul)

As for the “determined by documents” rule, it is applied for classifying people in complex, controversial cases—in “mixed” families or in situations where the rural community to which the informant belongs has been reclassified one or more times at the official level, as a result of which members of such communities began to perceive the reality of nationalities as external, not connected with their real identification (for more details on this, see (Varshaver, Orlova, Shulga, 2023, 2025)).

Because in our passports we have “Avar”. That is why we say [that our] “native language” [is Avar], but in reality we speak Bezhta.
(female, 65, Bezhta)

You can change it in your passport. Change it in your passport, call yourself a different nation. Who will know?
(male, 21, Makhachkala)

Mother is Dargin, father is Avar –[in the passport] it's written Avar.
(male, 35, Tlyadal)

It is also important to note, however, that different, sometimes contradictory, classification rules could appear in one interview subsequently:

Interviewer: *By the way, on what basis is the child's nationality recorded, simply at the parents' request?*

Informant: *No, according to the father's nationality.*

Interviewer: *So your children are listed as Azerbaijanis?*

Informant: *Yes.*

Interviewer: *Do you consider them Azerbaijanis?*

Informant: *No, they are Metis.*

Interviewer: *What do you mean?*

Informant: *They are half-Azerbaijanis, half-Tsakhurs. I don't know, probably more Azerbaijanis because their father is Azerbaijani. Because [they have] the father's surname and all that, he probably has more rights to them according to their traditions.*

(female, 38, Nizhniy Katruk)

Descent Rules: A Quantitative Analysis

The number of interviews collected allowed us to conduct a basic statistical analysis, the main goal of which was to identify patterns that explain the informant's view on the issue of inheritance of membership in nationalities. The resulting data is not in any way representative of Dagestan, but the quota variations included in the informant selection procedures allow us to pinpoint the relationship between some variables on the one hand, and classificatory perceptions on the other. Table 1 describes how classificatory perceptions are distributed within the array of collected data.

Table 1—Classificatory perceptions: distribution by main categories

Nationality/ethnic category is...	N	%
...inherited from father	76	67
...inherited from mother	13	11
...inherited from both parents	59	52
...self-identified	46	40
...determined by documents	35	31
<i>Total</i>	114	100

The table total $N=114$ (i.e., 114 interviews contained responses that could be classified), but summing up all n , the number is greater than 114 due to the aforementioned possibility for different views to be present in one interview. The view most frequently expressed by informants is that nationality is inherited from the father (this idea was present in 76 interviews or 67% of cases), the other popular opinions are, in order of descending frequency, “inherited from both parents” (59 cases, 52%), “self-identified” (40 cases, 46%). The remaining views are less represented than the three main ones. In the next stage, in the course of collective analysis of the interviews and the use of the triangulation procedure, one single position was correlated with each informant, and the following distribution was established (see Table 2):

Table 2—Classificatory perceptions: distribution by joint categories

Nationality/ethnic category is...	N	%
...inherited from father	59	52
...inherited from both parents	23	20
Other (inherited from mother, determined by documents, self-identified)	22	19
Impossible to determine	10	9
<i>Total</i>	114	100

Table 2 shows that the “self-identified” position is also marginal, and the two main “opposing” positions are “...from father” and “...from both parents”. However, to what extent are these positions truly opposing? Additional calculations demonstrate that generally they are quite so. Of the 97 cases in which the informant expressed one or the other position (“...from father” or “...from both parents”), in 60 of them this position was the only one. As a result, these positions were contrasted and transformed into a binary variable, which was analyzed using the logistic regression method, which allows us to determine in which socio-demographic groups each opinion is more common, and to make an assumption about the social determinants of them. Table 3 presents the results of the analysis.

Table 3—Logistic regression results

Predictor	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Lived in the village: 1—all life or for a long time; 0—for a short time or has not	0.168**		0.191*
Age	1.01.	1.014	1.009
Gender: 1—male, 0—female	0.65	0.696	0.65
Place of residence: 1—urban; 0—rural		3.738 [†]	1.256
Constant	-4.951	1.281	5.01
<i>N</i>	82	81	81
-2 log likelihood	83.240	89.320	82.981
Nagelkerke R-squared	0.227	0.87	0.223
Cox and Snell R-squared	0.158	0.124	0.155

[†] $0.1 > p \geq 0.05$, * $0.05 > p \geq 0.01$, *** $p \leq 0.001$

Model 1 included three predictors: age, gender, and experience of living in a rural environment. If the informant had lived in the village for a long time or all his life, this variable took the value of 1; if they had lived there for a short time, only visited occasionally, or had no connection to any village at all, the value of this variable was 0. The results show that, among these variables,

the only one associated with ideas about the principles of inheritance of nationality membership is village experience. As follows from the indicator of the “odds ratio”, into which the regression coefficient was transformed, people with long-term experience of living in the village (and most likely, those who were socialized there) believe that children in “mixed” marriages inherit the nationality of the father with a probability 6.5 times greater than those with mostly urban experience. The second model checks what role the place of residence plays at the time of the study. According to the calculations, the statistical significance of the relationship is in the range of $0.05 < p < 0.1$, which is interpreted either as the absence of a relationship or as a relationship at the marginal values of significance. The remaining predictors continue to be insignificant. The third model includes all variables simultaneously, and in this case the significance of place of residence disappears completely, while the experience of living in a village remains significant. Analysis of the R-squared indicator allows us to say that this small number of predictors explains about a fifth of the distribution of the dependent variable. The general conclusion, however, is that the main factor identified that explains the informant’s position on the issue of classifying children from “mixed” marriages is long-term residence (socialization) in the village, or, in other words, in villages it is believed that nationality is inherited from the father, in the city—from both parents⁷.

Discussion and Conclusions

What do the results demonstrate? As ethnicity is a classificatory phenomenon, and stable collective ideas about the existence of differently named ethnic groups are a by-product of classifications permanently produced by individuals and institutions (Bublikov, Varshaver, Stepanov, 2023), and also in connection with the fact that intergenerational transmission of “membership” is the main way of replenishing the populations associated with certain ethnic categories, the classificatory rules of descent governing the attribution of children born in “mixed” unions are important both in theoretical and practical terms. In Dagestan, there is a coexistence of several (primarily two: “from father” and “from both parents”) classificatory rules of this kind. Moreover, despite the limitations of the analysis, it can be argued that the “from father” rule is a concept common in mountainous rural areas, while the “from both parents” rule is common in the city. Apparently, those classificatory phenomena are social facts existing “in the background”—they are not a hurdle, but at the same time organize people’s behavior in situations (not frequent, but regular enough) when it is necessary to determine the nationality of a child from a “mixed” union. Most

⁷Note that this conclusion should be placed in the context of methodological limitations. The results not included in the paper indicate that to the extent that the categorization “by father” is preserved in the urban context, its social bearer is often religious Muslims, for whom such a principle of inheritance is reinterpreted through the patrilineality of Quranic time and society. This, in turn, allows us to assume a greater complexity of the distribution of the descent rule in modern Dagestan, which can be revealed in the course of a more detailed study, including the use of quantitative methods.

likely, these rules, along with the general worldview, are learned in the process of primary socialization and then do not change throughout life. This is illustrated by the fact that it is precisely long-term residence in a village, but not the current place of residence, that “outputs” the opinion that ethnicity is inherited “from father”. But what is the nature and origin of these coexisting and, apparently, competing ideas?

It can be assumed that the rule “from father” is rudimentary and stems from the idea that existed in Dagestan for a long time and regulated membership in patrilineal families, tukhums and rural communities. The patrilineal rule of inheritance of membership regulated the “social placement” of children, their social obligations, property rights and much more, being the main “framework” within which social classifications that then served as a basis for organizing social relations were carried out. The introduction of the classification of people “by nationality”, the institutionalization of this classification through censuses and various personal documents, as well as the organization of resource distribution on a national basis (given that people were often given neither any theoretical ideas about what nationalities are, nor any instructions of a more practical type, for example, concerning the determination of the nationality of a child from a “mixed” marriage) forced the inhabitants of the republic to essentially create such theories and instructions on their own. However, this process required templates—similar social phenomena that could be used as a guide. These were the tukhums, or rather the regulation of social relations based on them, including the classificatory rules. In other words, the rules of membership in tukhums were transposed onto a new classificatory system “by nationality”, which was initially incomprehensible to those being classified. This resulted in the rule which stated that membership in the nationality is inherited from one’s father becoming common and engraved in the mainstream, and to this day many determine the nationality of children from “mixed” marriages based on this rule. An indirect argument in favor of this hypothesis is that the rule is widespread in villages where other pre-modern ideas are preserved to one degree or another (Kazenin, 2014).

The “from both parents” rule, which, as can be seen from the interviews, is much more widespread in the cities, has a different genesis and was presumably “brought” into Dagestan as part of a variety of modernization processes. Despite the abundance of literature devoted to “mixedness” (Gunaratnam, 2014; Childs, Lyons, Jones, 2021; Akopyan, 2003; Nizamova, 2011), this idea, “natural” for many modern societies, but anthropologically non-trivial, according to which a child of parents belonging to two different ethnic categories will belong in some degree to both of these categories, has not been studied in detail for its genesis and distribution. Although there are works that, using anthropological material and cases of linear groups, reveal a rule according to which a

child is classified by both paternal and maternal clan categories (Lambert, 1966), the “naturalness” of this rule in Western modernity is presumably associated not so much with the “anthropological past” of the corresponding societies, but with two more “modern” factors. The first one is the emergence and spread of genetics and the ideas rooted in it, according to which a child equally inherits paternal and maternal traits; the second is the development of relatively modern constructions of ethnicity, in which, for various reasons, the rule of “mixed-ness” arose. For example, in the New World, where (specifically, Canada) the word “Metis” was borrowed and received global distribution, this word described people one of whose parents was European and the other—indigenous (Adams, Peach, Dahl, 2013; Andersen, 2008). Whatever the genesis and worldwide spread of the rule according to which the ethnicity of a child is determined by both parents, it was most likely “brought” to Dagestan in Soviet times. In this case, the “transport” could have been Soviet biology textbooks, as well as foreign historical novels (for example, (Verne, 1878)), which were actively translated and read and in which “metis” appeared (and were often romanticized)⁸. A reconstruction of this borrowing should be carried out, however, the idea of “mixed-ness” and the word “metis” took root in Dagestan, and, along with the patrilineal rule of descent, determines the practice of classifying children from “mixed” marriages.

If the classificatory rule “from father” functions primarily in rural Dagestan, and “from both parents”—in urban Dagestan, then, given the intensive urbanization and aging of the rural population, it can be assumed that one rule will gradually displace the other. Dagestan demonstrates a dynamic context where not only ethnic categories and their social meanings change, but also other elements of the construction of ethnicity. In particular, the rules of membership in ethnic categories, which have not previously caught the attention of scholars and are practically unexplored. The fact that the roots of the rule “from father” in the Dagestan context should be sought in pre-modern social relations, and the rule “from both parents” appeared in Dagestan with the advent of modernity, refers us to one of the important conversations for the theory of ethnicity—whether ethnicity existed “before modernity” and, if so, in what forms it existed and how those forms were modified during the transition to modernity. There are two significant theories on this topic.

The author of the first is the British historian Anthony Smith (Smith, 1986). According to this theory, beginning with the Neolithic Revolution, so-called “ethnies” began to form as stable intergenerational communities of people united by the idea of internal similarity and difference from all others. The main instruments for maintaining this idea were mytho-symbolic complexes—sets of

⁸ The idea of transmission through novels is courtesy of A.R. Sherstneva, who wrote an essay on this topic as a report for E.A. Varshaver’s course “Ethnicity in the Modern World” (2023).

texts and practices that constantly communicated to members of the “ethnie” various information about the origin of the “ethnie”, the characteristics of the people included in it, etc. As a result of changes in the instruments of political power, which previously did not particularly need the political loyalty of the governed population, states had started “involving” the population in political processes more and more. It has turned out that the easiest way to implement involvement is based on the already existing mytho-symbolic complexes. Thus, modern nations were based on pre-modern “ethnies”.

The second theory was created by Soviet ethnologists and found its most complete expression in the work of Yulian Bromley, “Essays on the Theory of Ethnos” (Bromley, 1983). In this Marxist work, the author also states that ethnic phenomena can be traced in all socio-economic formations. However, according to Bromley, the question of their existence in the Lower Paleolithic is debatable. These phenomena appear in the form of an ethnos—an intergenerational group united, on the one hand, by culture, and on the other—by self-awareness. Each formation more or less corresponds to “its own” way of existence of the ethnos: in the primitive communal formation it appears in the form of a tribe, in the slave-owning and feudal formations—in the form of a nationality, in the capitalist and socialist formations—in the form of a nation. Although this theory does not directly discuss the advent of “modernity”, ethnic groups during this period, firstly, achieve the greatest cultural differentiation, and secondly, politically consolidate. The transition from capitalism to socialism, in turn, is associated with the “cultural rapprochement” of ethnic groups. This theory has become the object of various criticisms and currently relates more to the history of science than to current ways of representing the world. Nevertheless, as an attempt to trace ethnic phenomena throughout history, this theory should be mentioned.

Smith was also criticized for the essentialization of “ethnicity” (Pain, Prostakov, 2016), however, the idea of the importance of studying mytho-symbolic complexes is still relevant today. It is important that both the first and second theories, agreeing that ethnicity has regulated human behavior throughout history, use a no longer relevant (Brubaker, 2006) “groupist” language to describe it. Modern constructivism tends, firstly, to consider national, ethnic and racial differentiations as one and the same phenomenon, and secondly, to “place” them in modernity. Only recently have universal constructivist languages and theories begun to emerge that allow for the existence of ethnicity before modernity. Nevertheless, constructivist projects commensurate in scale with those of Smith and Bromley have not yet been implemented. Modern constructivist languages generally agree that ethnicity is a classificatory phenomenon, at the center of which are categories and their various meanings, and the category-meaning link inevitably existed before modern times,

which indicates that such a redescription is possible. Moreover, works in which certain spatially limited territories would be analyzed for changes in the categorical grid, meanings of categories, rules for categorizing people as representatives of ethnic categories, etc., including at the intersection of “traditionality” and “modernity”, could become an important step toward creating such a redescription. The transition from tukhums and rural communities as the main ethnic classificatory unit of Dagestani society to nationalities, as well as the parallel change in the rules of membership in nationalities, are relevant tasks in this regard.

The results allow us to make a prediction regarding the future of Dagestani nationalities as a classificatory framework. The patrilineal descent rule is not sensitive to categorical exogamy or, in other words, “mixed” marriages, if the children born in them are classified strictly “from father”, do not lead to mixing and subsequent de-actualization of categories: a male child of an Avar and a Dargin will be classified as an Avar, and his child, if he marries a Lak woman, will also be an Avar. The same situation, in the case of the functioning ambilineal descendent rule, “reshuffles”. There will only be a quarter of Avar “blood” in such a person, he will speak of himself as a “metis”, and, given that “mixed” marriages in Dagestan are becoming more and more common, more and more people will be characterized by such “genealogy”. As a result, over time, a situation will inevitably arise in which “everyone will be everyone” (as one of the informants said: “Avars, Dargins, metises—everyone mixes with everyone” (male, 21, Makhachkala)), which means that the classification will lose its cognitive significance and won’t be applicable anymore. With the simultaneous relevance of other classificatory frameworks, for example, by religion, and also given that Islam in general has a negative attitude towards the “pedaling” of ethnic classifications, it can be assumed that the classificatory framework “Dagestani nationalities” will “die out” over time. And researchers of ethnicity will have the opportunity to describe the birth, life and death of a single ethnic classification, thereby making an important contribution to the theory of ethnicity as a classificatory phenomenon.

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