

Macmillan American Immigrant Encyclopedia, (1997)

CIRCASSIANS

NAMES. The Circassians are also known by the Turkish designation Cherkess. They call themselves Adyghe (three syllables, stress on the second), with various tribal designations, such as Kabardians, Besleneys, Shapseghs (often erroneously Shapsughes), Bzhedukhs, Abadzakhs, and Chemgwis being most common within the ethnic designation. Living among them can also be found Abkhaz, (also known by the Russian designation of Abazins and by the Turkish one of Abazas), who call themselves Apswa, as well as a few descendants of the Ubykhs, a small but distinct people who also called themselves Adyghe.

ETHNIC IDENTITY. The Circassians and their kin are indigenous to the northwestern region of the Caucasus mountains of what is today southern Russia and modern Georgia. They were distinguished from the other numerous ethnic groups of the Caucasus by several features. They were famous for their beauty and strength. Many among the Circassians and Ubykh were distinguished by fair complexions, light eyes, and blond or red hair. Their languages formed a unique family, characterized by extremely complex grammars and enormous consonantal inventories accompanied by only two or three vowels. They had complex and varied societies, with a range of economic activities, from hunting in the mountains, to farming, pastoralism, handicrafts, and trading in the lowlands. The social order was extremely stratified with what seems to have been a caste system of princes, nobles, freemen, and peasants. The princes practised a mystic discipline that involved spiritual visions and physical feats of a martial character. The peasants were often captives of war or their descendants.

Coupled to this caste hierarchy was an elaborate kinship system that was organized into regionally based tribes, each with its own divergent dialect. These in turn were overlain by a network of clans within which were found collateral assemblages (“blood frames”) and lineal descent groups (“man’s trace”). Many of these clans crossed ethnic divisions to embrace Ubykh

and Abkhaz families as well. These peoples were capable of mounting a fierce defense of their homelands in times of war, and some have even characterized their societies as natural military organizations. Many of the men were known for their consummate skill at stalking game or their enemies. One peculiar form that this stalking took was a socially sanctioned practice of theft in which men would take items from each other in an effort to be as stealthy as possible. Being caught was a great disgrace.

Along with the other peoples of the Caucasus, the Circassians and their kin showed a love of dancing, reverence for their elderly, respect toward women, religious and racial tolerance, loyalty to clan, hospitality to guests, a love of elaborate feasting, great equestrian skill, a fine sense of style and design reflected in elegant clothing and artifacts, a strict sense of social decorum, and a well developed herbal medicine tradition which seems to have reached its peak among the Ubykhs.

IMMIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT HISTORY. Their original homeland extended from the center of the North Caucasus, near the modern city of Vladikavkaz westward to the Black Sea coast with the Kuban river as a northern boundary, then south over the mountains and along the coast to the Ingur river in western Georgia. The Circassians shared the northern regions with the Tuallar, the Mountain Turks, who are today's Karachays and Balkars. The Abkhaz formed a small population in the center of Circassian territory, but resided primarily south of the mountains along the coast, with the Ubykhs, confined to the coast, occupying a transitional zone between their two larger kinsmen.

Starting in the late eighteenth century the Caucasus came under attack from the expanding Russian empire. When in 1810 Moscow tried to annex the Circassians and their kin a war erupted that was to last until 1864. Because of the tenacity of their resistance the Tsar ordered much of the population expelled in 1865. May twenty-first is still commemorated by the Circassians and their kin as the anniversary of this exodus. The Ottoman Empire accepted them and based them in the Balkans where they were used against Serbian insurrections. During the

Russo-Turkish war of 1877-78, the Circassians played a heavy role in an attempt to reclaim the Caucasus. At the Congress of Berlin in 1878 the Ottomans agreed to withdraw the Circassians into the Asiatic portion of the empire and to accept more refugees from the Caucasus. Further mass expulsions began in Russia and continue until 1905. At this time Circassians could be found in large numbers in the heartland of Turkey itself with smaller communities in what are today Jordan and Israel, with only a fraction left behind in the homeland. Subsequent immigrations into the United States reflect the geographic proportions of this large diaspora.

The first Circassians to come to America arrived in 1922 as refugees from the Russian revolution. These belonged to the large Natirba (Russian "Natirbov") family, which is still one of the most prominent in the community. After this the first large wave of Circassians, roughly one hundred men, arrived in the years after World War II. These had been prisoners of war taken by Nazi forces in their battles with Russian formations. Many of these men took German wives before immigrating. This small nucleus underwent a major expansion twenty years later when roughly 1,800 families emigrated from Syria in a second wave. The people of this wave of the early seventies had been driven into Damascus from their homes in the Golan Heights of Syria during the 1967 Arab - Israeli war. Their immigration into the United States was assisted by the Tolstoy Foundation. In addition to these two main waves others have immigrated from the early fifties until the present from diaspora communities in Turkey, Jordan, and Israel.

The Circassians in the United States habitually live and associate with other peoples from the North Caucasus: with their kin the Abaza and Abkhaz, with the Turkic Karachay, Balkar and Noghay, with the Iranian speaking Ossetians, with the Chechen-Ingush, and with the various Daghestanis. Thus, in New Jersey there are roughly 3,500 Circassians, 200 Abaza or Abkhaz, 150 Ossetians, 250 Ingush or Chechens, and 300 Daghestanis of various ethnic background, but fully 3,500 Karachays and Balkars, with a sprinkling of Noghays. A small community of 300 Circassians and Abaza exists outside Los Angeles, California, in the Anaheim area, and another of roughly 100 people resides in Texas in Dallas and Houston. A unique community of Circassian speaking Jews lives in Brooklyn, but maintains some contact with their Moslem

compatriots.

LANGUAGES. The Circassians of both waves spoke one of several forms of Circassian, predominantly Kabardian (an eastern dialect), or Bzhedukh, Shapsegh, and Abadzakh (western dialects). A few, because of mixed parentage or childhoods spent in mixed communities, spoke several dialects as well as other Caucasian languages. All also spoke second languages. Those of the first wave spoke Russian fluently, as well as some German. Those of the second wave spoke Arabic, and frequently Turkish. Those of the first wave could also read and write in a literary form of Circassian (Kabardian or Adyghean). All have acquired a command of English.

Speech interaction among the dialects shows an interesting skewing. Kabardian is quite different from the western dialects, with a distance greater than that between Dutch and German, for example. Members of the community often acquire a multi-lingualism at the dialect level. In mixed conversations each uses their own dialect and the level of comprehension is generally high, though western dialect speakers generally understand Kabardian better than the Kabardians understand them. This is due to the fact that Kabardian has lost many of the contrasts still preserved in the west with the result that the Kabardians have trouble hearing what the western speakers are saying.

Knowledge of Circassian has died out among children of the first wave due, in part, to the fact that they had mixed parentage. Usually they speak German and English, abiding by the universal trend to learn the mother's language. Those of the second wave still understand the language, but rarely use it. Magazines and newsletters have appeared in a mixture of English and Circassian, the Adyghe Zhwaghwe [The Circassian Star] from California, the Adyghe Maq [The Circassian Voice] and its successor the Circassian Times, both from New Jersey. Since 1992, with the wars in the Caucasus, many young people have taken a renewed interest in their language and original homeland. Kabardian classes are now offered on weekends at the Community Center in Wayne, New Jersey, and they are well attended by both adults and children. Problems of literacy, which are hampered by disputes over orthography, have clouded

the issue of language maintenance so that the prospects for the survival of the language, however, are not promising. It has yet to find a social setting where its use is habitual and this bodes poorly for its future.

CULTURAL TRENDS. First wave immigrants generally have greater access to their heritage because of their literacy and their education in Circassian primary schools in the Soviet Union. Unfortunately their knowledge has generally not been passed on to their own children, because of language problems, or to the members of the second wave because of schisms within the community.

Immigrants of the second wave come from a diaspora which is over a hundred years old and which has endured cultural and linguistic suppression. Only in Israel was Circassian written or taught in the schools. Limited cultural and linguistic rights in Turkey or Jordan came only recently long after most immigrants had resettled in America. Thus, this group, along with other Caucasians, is literally engaged in an effort to rediscover its identity against the backdrop of turmoil and war back in the Caucasus.

In both waves the individuals have come to occupy a range of economic niches. Some have become doctors, others teachers or successful businessmen. Most are workers. Many have shown extraordinary manual dexterity and have found careers as skilled machinists. Others have drawn upon time honoured martial customs and have entered the military, law enforcement, or the FBI. Younger people are pursuing high levels of education and will occupy generally higher economic positions than their parents did. In economic pursuits the community has been aided by a tradition of hard work, a respect for learning, and a high sense of personal integrity. The group has been hampered, however, by the general destruction of its old social structure of rank or caste. This has led to competition and rivalry within the community for prestige and influence, which in turn has led to schisms and hostilities. While individuals who have achieved wealth are usually ranked highly, wealth alone is not sufficient to assure social position. Devotion to heritage, however defined, integrity, hospitality, and generosity are also essential for

a social leader, man or woman.

A number of customs have survived. Love of the dance thrives still and is reflected in dance troops, both for adults and children. Traditional male and female costumes are used in the dance and for other important ceremonies. Hospitality is still a vital aspect of domestic culture. Feasting remains important, but its scale has shrunk as has the scale of the family or clan which hosts the feast. A t'hamada or toastmaster is still chosen to head such gatherings. Such small feasts have traditional food, walnut paste, chicken with walnuts, corn mush, beef or lamb, and, in secular contexts, wine. Often the whole Caucasian community, including non-Circassian Caucasians, gathers for such feasts in restaurants where the food is American. Throughout the meal speeches made. Gatherings of a more secular penchant will also offer toasts, but for all drunkenness and boasting are scorned.

Women enjoy high regard and substantial freedom throughout the community. It falls to the women to maintain traditional cuisine and household dynamics. In their penchant for elegance the Circassian women carry on, by modern fashions, the traditional strengths of styling and beauty that characterized older material culture. Young women enjoy substantial freedom and choice, and ties between brother and sister remain very close. Kinship patterns have not altered except that the bond between husband and wife, traditionally formal and highly structured, seems to have grown more flexible and spontaneous. Marriage by mock abduction still occasionally takes place, but is followed by the more usual Islamic or civil ceremonies. Partners are predominantly drawn from within the community of recent immigrants. Funerals are now conducted by Islamic norms. Elders are still honoured, everyone in a room standing upon their entry. Assimilatory trends are shown by a tendency to be flexible in the observance of social etiquette, expanding an older cultural pattern of conviviality. The old pattern of socially sanctioned theft has been reduced to a child's game in which baked goods are to be snatched without the housewife catching the culprit. If caught, the culprit is disgraced and soundly spanked. The youngest members of the community often show adolescent rebellion and insolence, even toward elders. This causes great dismay and confusion, and is seen not merely as

a passing trait, but as a challenge to the survival of the group itself since methods of social control, chiefly shaming, do not work for such young people and their behaviour is seen as utterly uncontrollable and beyond the pale.

ASSIMILATION. Other basics of culture have been lost or are moribund. The Nart sagas, the old myths of the North Caucasus, appear to be known only to a few of the elderly. Epics centering around historical figures have also fallen from the repertoire. Children's rhymes and stories, however, are being reintroduced from sources back in the Caucasus. The rich tradition of herbal medicine which drew upon the varied flora of the Caucasian forests and alpine meadows is moribund, but steps are being taken to codify what remains so that it might serve future generations. The terms for the stars, the seasons, the points of the compass, for many of the fine details of handicrafts or animal husbandry have become the restricted knowledge of a few or have simply vanished. Such loss of folkloric and lexical richness reflects a shift away from traditional culture.

The most serious cultural stress within the community, however, involves the role of Islam in ethnic identity. First wave immigrants were generally secular in their outlook, having been affected both by Soviet attitudes and by the general tolerance of the Caucasus. While a wide range of religious attitudes is exhibited, immigrants of the second wave generally see Islam as central to their community. Even among the most religious, however, Circassian identity is not to be compromised. Rather preservation of ethnic identity takes precedence over all other goals even when the content of that identity is nebulous. Religious tolerance still prevails. For example, the Circassian speaking Jews of Brooklyn have expressed some interest in moving to New Jersey and renting a room near the mosque as a synagogue.

Another aspect of assimilation that is currently emerging is that of mixed marriages. Circassians marry among themselves without regard to clan, and will even marry other Caucasians. Young people, however, are occasionally marrying Americans of other ethnic backgrounds. Such marriages cause substantial stress for the family because they represent a

challenge to the survival of the ethnic group, which is seen as endangered. Efforts are made to bring the non-Circassian spouse into Islam and to insure in some way that the children of the union will retain a Circassian ethnic aspect, at least as a component of their identity. With the content of ethnic identity already compromised by dispersal and suppression both in the Caucasus and the Middle East, and with surviving elements of culture being lost or changed, it is unclear how such children will carry on the ethnic identity. Clearly a unique form of Circassian American presence and self conception is in the process of formation. Its success and viability are matters that only the future can determine.

INSTITUTIONS AND LINKS. A number of cultural organizations exist for social activity and the expression and preservation of culture. There is a cultural center in California and two in New Jersey, the Circassian Benevolent Association and the North Caucasus Center. The Circassian Benevolent Association has a large community center in Wayne, New Jersey, containing a mosque, a school, and a social center. This association also owns a summer camp in upstate New York where families enjoy rural activities and reinforce the pastoral values that were once central to their culture.

The wars in the Caucasus, most particularly the Georgian - Abkhazian war of 1992-3 and most recently the Russo - Chechen war, have galvanized the entire Caucasian community. The Circassians and the other Caucasians now have an umbrella organization, the North Caucasian Heritage Foundation. This group has staged peaceful demonstrations in Washington and has lobbied members of Congress. Social rivalries are momentarily set aside for common goals. Circassians, like all Caucasians, feel the threat of extinction, and are bewildered by what they see as Western indifference to and ignorance of their historical plight. This sense of neglect is at odds with their general love of America and its freedom, which resonate with their own deep love of freedom. The American Caucasians are just beginning to enter into the active democratic processes offered by their new homeland and to use its democratic institutions to sustain and further the interests of their own community.

One of the most interesting and complex ties is between the Circassians and their original homeland in the Northwest Caucasus. In 1989 the Soviets began a repatriation program which permitted anyone of Circassian descent to obtain a passport and land in one of the three Circassian republics: Adygheya, Karachai-Cherkessia, or Kabardino-Balkaria. This program attracted many visitors and even a few settlers who set up vacation homes. The program itself was administered by the International Circassian Congress, which is now called the International Cherkess Congress, a change of name that permits it to include any North Caucasian. Meetings have been held every other year, starting with 1987 in Amsterdam, 1989 in Ankara, 1991 in Nalchik (Kabardino-Balkaria), and 1993 in Maikop (Adygheya). The 1995 meetings were cancelled because of the Chechen war. The last meeting was attended by Caucasians of all ethnic types, including many Kuban and Terek Cossacks, and ethnic groups from the Urals, such as the Tatars.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union repatriation patterns took on a commercial form. Even before 1989 the Caucasus was seen not only as offering business opportunities but also as a natural repository for cultural treasures. Thus when the most famous diaspora Circassian writer, Kube Shaban, died in 1973 in New Jersey, his substantial literary estate was sent back to Maikop, the capital of Adygheya, where it was deposited in the Adyghe Institute for Languages and Literatures. It has since been published as a multi-volume collection by this same Institute, but sits in storage there, without significant distribution outside the republic.

The homeland is still seen as a geographical focal point of identity, as a repository for all things Circassian. Trade links, cultural ties, kinship relations, visits, vacations, and even sojourns of academic study or work are made to one of the three republics or neighbouring regions, but little resettlement has taken place. Since the unrest caused by the start of the war in Chechnia in December 1994 the repatriation program has been suspended. The International Cherkess Congress persists and visiting has continued. Since relocation was minimal this suspension has had little tangible effect on Circassian relations with the homeland.

In their relationship to their ancestral land American Circassians are entering into a

pattern set before them by numerous others who have fled persecution and war and found their way to America. They are yielding up some of their past to embrace a future, keeping much that is dear, creating some that is new, and paying homage to a homeland that will always be as dear as it is far away.

BIBLIOGRAPHY.

Anderson, Robert T. (1995) "Circassians." The Academic American Encyclopedia (1995 Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia version 7.0.2), Danbury, Conn.: Grolier Inc.

Colarusso, John (1995) "Caucasian Languages." The Academic American Encyclopedia (1995 Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia version 7.0.2), Danbury, Conn.: Grolier Inc.

_____ (1994, a) "Circassians." Encyclopedia of World Cultures, David Levinson, series editor, vol. 6, Inner Eurasia and China, edited by Paul Friedrich and Norma Diamond. Boston, Mass.: G. K. Hall & Co.

_____ (1994, b) "Two Circassian Tales of Huns and Khazars." Annual of the Society for the Study of Caucasia, vol. 3, 1991, pp. 63-75, edited by Howard I. Aronson, University of Chicago.

_____ (1992) A Grammar of the Kabardian Language. University of Calgary Press. (xxiv + 231 pages).

_____ (1991) "Circassian Repatriation." The World & I, November, 1991 issue. Washington, D.C.: The Washington Times Publishing Corporation. Pp. 656-669.

_____ (1989, a) "The Woman of the Myths: the Satanaya Cycle." The Annual of the Society for the Study of Caucasia 2: 3-11, edited by Howard I. Aronson, University of Chicago.

_____ (1989, b) "Myths from the Forest of Circassia." The World & I, December issue. The Washington, D.C.: The Washington Times Publishing Corporation. Pp. 644-651.

_____ (1989, c) "Prometheus among the Circassians." The World & I, March issue. Washington, D.C.: The Washington Times Publishing Corporation. Pp. 644-651.

_____ (1979) "Northwest Caucasian Languages." The Modern Encyclopedia of Russian and Soviet Literature, edited by H. Weber, vol. 3, pp. 225-234. Gulf Breeze, Florida: Academic International Press.

Henze, Paul B. (1990) The North Caucasus: Russia's Long Struggle to Subdue the Circassians. Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corp.

Luzbetak, Louis J. (1951) Marriage and the Family in Caucasia. Vienna and Mödling: St. Gabriel's Mission Press.

Wixman, Ronald (1984) "Circassians." In The Muslim Peoples: a World Ethnographic Survey, 2nd ed., edited by Richard V. Weekes. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.

JOHN COLARUSSO