

Introduction

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The Land and its People

The Abkhazians call themselves *Аԥсуаа/Аԥсацәа* 'Apswaa/'Apsa *ᲞᲗ᲏*, the collective and distributive plurals respectively of the singular *Аԥсуа* 'Apswa. The country-name is *Аԥсны* *Aps'ny*. The capital is most widely known as Sukhum¹, though the native term is *Аҭҭа* [or *Аҭәа* since the post-Soviet spelling-adjustment] 'Aq^w'a (Dioscurias or Seb/vastopol(is) in antiquity). Three other important towns are: Gudauta, T'q^w'archal, a mining-industrial centre, and, one of the most popular coastal resorts, Gagra in the north, often referred to as the 'Pearl' of the Black Sea².

The Language

The Abkhaz (Abkhaz-Abaza) language (known to the Abkhazians as *Аԥсуа бызшәа/Аԥсшәа* 'Apswa byz^wa/'Aps^wa) belongs to the small, geographically defined North West Caucasian language-family, whose other two members are Circassian and Ubykh. No serious commentator doubts that these languages underwent a long development in, and were spoken from prehistoric times across, a compact area which will have roughly coincided with the range of territory occupied by their speakers at the time of the Russian conquest of the North Caucasus in 1864 (see the map below). This extended from Abkhazia northwards along the coast to the R. Kuban and inland to abut Ossetian and Chechen territories in the North Central Caucasus. It has been suggested that the range of North West Caucasian speakers must once have been wider, reaching at least the River Don in the north and southwards into regions that are today inhabited by Kartvelian speakers (Mingrelians and Georgians -- see below, also Chapters 2 and 3); for other possible linguistic affiliations (in ancient Anatolia or the modern North Caucasus) see Chapter 2. However, it is certain that there is no genetic link with the Kartvelian (or South Caucasian) languages (Georgian, Mingrelian, Laz, Svan) -- indeed, no relationship for Kartvelian has been proved with any other language(-family), still spoken or extinct.

Colchis and Græco-Roman Chroniclers

The ancient world referred in general to the Black Sea's (or Pontic Euxine's) eastern coast, of which Abkhazia is a part, as Colchis.

It is extremely difficult to try to identify with any confidence the ethnicity of the carriers of most of the tribal names used by classical authors writing before the time of Christ in reference to the denizens of contemporary Abkhazia and their neighbours,

¹The final -i of the variant Sukhumi is the Georgian ending of the Nominative case and was introduced in the late 1930s as part of the intensive drive to georgianise Abkhazia, which explains why its use is no longer tolerated by Abkhazians.

²The mountains come almost to the sea just to the north of this town, leaving a very narrow stretch on which the railway-line and the road have been constructed. The most likely etymology (by V. K'varch'ia [K^w'arch'yja]) derives the toponym from 'a-ga 'the sea(-coast)' + a-k'-'ra 'holding it'.

though the possibilities for speculation are virtually limitless. However, we are on safer ground from early in the modern era when we find reference in Latin to the *gens Absilae* (Pliny Secundus Major, 1st century), which ethnic group palpably correspond to the *Apsilai* in the Greek of Arrian a century later; to their north Arrian locates a tribe he called *Abasgoí*. Attempting to argue that anything other than the Abkhazians' own ethnonym could have provided the source for the Græco-Roman 'Apsilians' smacks of sophistry, whilst the Greek term for the 'Abazgians' must surely derive from the ethnonym 'Abaza', the self-designation of today's Abazinians (see Hewitt 1993a) -- the ancestors of the Abazinians, who speak the Abaza dialect, still had over 1,000 years of residence in Abkhazia before migrating to their present dwelling in the North Caucasus. There is no reason to believe that the local distribution of Abkhazian and Kartvelian tribes will have substantially altered since the start of historical records right upto the movement of populations that began in the wake of the North (West) Caucasian migrations in and after 1864. In 1404 an insightful European traveller, Johannes de Galonifontibus, wrote in his significant but little known diary: 'Beyond these [Circassians] is Abkhazia, a small hilly country...They have their own language...To the east of them, in the direction of Georgia, lies the country called Mingrelia...They have their own language...Georgia is to the east of this country. Georgia is not an integral whole...They have their own language' (Tardy 1978). Thus, in the high mountains to the east of the upper reaches of the K'odor valley the Abkhazians' eastern neighbours will always have been the Svans, whilst in the lowland-regions there will have been contact with the (Laz-)Mingrelians -- the linguistic evidence of language-contact is testimony to a long period of symbiosis (cf. Hewitt 1988 & 1989a; 1991; 1992a; 1992b).

North West Caucasian Tribes and their Distribution

North West Caucasian speakers were distributed across their ancestral homeland at the end of the Caucasian war as shown below:

**DISTRIBUTION OF NORTH WEST CAUCASIAN TRIBES
(CIRCASSIANS, UBYKHS, ABKHAZ-ABAZINIANS) WITH THE
MAIN CIRCASSIAN DIALECTAL DIVISIONS PRIOR TO THE MASS-
EMIGRATION OF 1864**



The first wave of Abazinians crossed the K'lukhor Pass from Abkhazia in the 14th century (as acknowledged in the Georgian Encyclopædia, vol. I, in 1975) to form eventually the speakers of the T'ap'anta sub-dialect of Abaza, whilst the ancestors of the second sub-dialect, Ashkharywa, a bridge between Abaza and more standard forms of Abkhaz, followed some time after the 17th century. In the 1640s the (half-Abkhazian) Turkish traveller Evliya Çelebi visited the Caucasus. From his travel-book it is clear that he regarded the land along the coast from Mingrelia as Abaza territory (even today in Turkey 'Abaza' is the general term applied to Abkhazians and Abazinians), noting of his so-called Chach tribe (cf. the main princely Chachba family) that they **also** spoke Mingrelian (many southern Abkhazians even today, at least before the war, tending to grow up with Mingrelian as their second language). The examples he quotes of the 'extraordinary and surprising Abaza language' clearly represent a form of Abkhaz-Abaza (probably Sadz), whilst the examples he gives of what he styles 'Sadz Abaza' are the earliest attestation we possess of Ubykh. Sadz was in fact the dialect of Abkhaz spoken immediately to the south of Ubykh -- is it possible that the Abkhaz plural-form *А'сазкыа A'sadzkw'a* was the source of Arrian's *San(n)igai*? Following Chirikba (1996), who regards Sadz as a separate 'south-western' dialect within the Abkhaz-Abaza group, we can name the three remaining 'south-eastern'

dialects as: Ahchypsy, Bzyp, and Abzhywa (= 'middle one') -- the sub-dialect of Ts'abal (upper K'odor valley) presumably derived from the speech of the tribe *Misimianoí* (Missimians), placed in this locale by Agathias (VIth century). When Russia finally took control of the North Caucasus after defeating the last remnants of resistance amongst the North West Caucasians, the entire Ubykh nation, together with most of the Circassians, all the Sadz, Ahchypsy and Ts'abal Abkhazians, and many other North Caucasians chose to migrate to Ottoman lands -- a flavour of the misery of their hasty departure is conveyed by 'Papers Respecting the Settlement of Circassian Emigrants in Turkey' (Presented to the House of Commons, 6 June, 1864). Descendants of those migrants form today a substantial diaspora spread over a number of formerly Ottoman territories, though most are concentrated in Turkey, where there are certainly many more North West Caucasians than in the Caucasus, the Abkhazian population perhaps exceeding half a million. Apart from in the two Circassian villages found in Israel, the native Caucasian languages have not been taught amongst the exiles, and younger speakers today often command (at most) a passive knowledge of their ancestral tongue(s). Ubykh became extinct in the autumn of 1992 with the death of Tevfik Esenç -- for a summary of the history of the Ubykhs in Turkey see Dumézil (1965), whilst the Abkhazian author Bagrat Shinkuba (Bagrat' Shynk^wba) wrote a novel based on their story entitled in its English translation 'Last of the Departed' (Raduga, 1986). This means that in Abkhazia today one finds only the two dialects of Bzyp (north of Sukhum) and Abzhywa, the literary base. In the last Soviet census (1989) there was an all-union Abkhazian population of 102,938 (a 13.2% increase on the figure for 1979), 93.3% regarding Abkhaz as their first language. Of these 95,853 lived in Georgia, representing 1.8% of this republic's population, whilst of these 93,267 lived in Abkhazia itself. The all-union total for Abazinians was 33,801 (a 14.6% increase on 1979), 93.4% giving Abaza as their first tongue.

Abkhazian Relations with Georgia

Georgian propaganda persistently blames Kremlin intrigue for the enmity between Abkhazians and Kartvelians.

Even if one were to concur in the ascription of (much of) the blame to the Kremlin, one should recall that it was a Georgian, Iosep Dzhughashvili (aka Stalin), who largely determined that policy³. But if one takes the trouble to examine the history of regional

³Those who believe Stalin to have rejected his Georgian identity and to have been totally russified may like to ponder why, after brutally expelling the entire Karachay and Chechen (plus other) peoples to Central Asia in 1943-44, he bestowed parts of their eponymous lands, then wiped off Soviet maps, upon his native republic; why, as described in his memoirs by a Georgian officer in the British army who was present at the Big Three wartime-conference in Tehran, Stalin's inner bodyguard was made up of Kartvelians (Merab K'vit'ashvili 1990); and why Donald Rayfield (Queen Mary Westfield College, London), a specialist in Russian and Georgian literature, should have characterised the period in Georgia from the late 1980s as 'not so much a de-Stalinisation of Georgia as an attempted de-georgianisation of Stalin'... (SOAS talk 6th March 1990).

relations since the 19th century migrations, one soon appreciates that there is no need to look beyond Georgia's frontiers to find the explanation of this ethnic antagonism. And perhaps the basest aspect of the long-running confrontation is the way that some academics in Tbilisi have been prepared over the years to prostitute their disciplines in the service of local chauvinist politics⁴.

The first to suggest that the Abkhazians were relative newcomers to the territory we have qualified as autochthonously theirs seems to have been the Georgian historian Davit Bakradze. Writing in 1889 (pp.271-273), he argued that the Abkhazians came over the mountains, driving out the Mingrelians and eventually forcing them over the R. Ingur, so that in his day only the area between the rivers Ingur and Tskhenists'q'ali was Mingrelian-speaking; without giving a precise date to this hypothesised southern push, he seems to suggest that it must have occurred after the 11th and before the 17th century. It is interesting to note that, when the Georgian educationalist Iak'ob Gogebashvili, was publishing articles about Abkhazia and Mingrelia in the 1870s, he described the inhabitants of Abkhazia's southernmost province (now called Gal but then known as Samurzaq'ano) as 'a branch of the Abkhazian race'. And yet, when he later included reference to these people in his famous children's book 'Nature's Door', he switched their ethnicity, saying: 'The Mingrelians and the Samurzaq'anoans are one people' (p.512 of the 1912 edition⁵) -- note, however, that according to even Bakradze's testimony Mingrelian was not spoken on the Samurzaq'anoan/Gal side of the Ingur when he was penning his monograph! However, it is the self-taught literary critic, P'avle Ingoroq'va, who is generally regarded as the progenitor of this tendentious 'theory', which he originally propounded in the Georgian journal *mnatobi* 'Luminary' in 1949, repeating the material as chapter 4 of his monumental *giorgi merchule* (1954). In short he tried to argue, largely on the basis of specious Kartvelian etymologies of toponyms in Abkhazia, that the 'Abkhazians' referred to in mediæval Georgian sources had been a Kartvelian tribe with no genetic affiliation to today's North West Caucasian Abkhazians. These last, he claimed, migrated from the North Caucasus only in the 17th century, displacing the Kartvelians resident there and adopting the ethnonym of the dislodged population. In partial support of this

⁴That the intelligentsia in Georgia was not naturally pre-disposed to anti-Abkhazian sentiment at the time of the mass-migrations of the 1860-70s is evidenced by the views some of their number committed to print, as with the following on 'Abkhazians and Abkhazia' by Sergei Meskhi (*droeba* 'Time-being', issue 158, 6.VIII, 1878, reprinted on pp.20-21 of vol.III, 1964, of his collected works, and part-translated into Russian in Achugba 1995.38-39): 'Abkhazia and in general the whole of this Caucasian Black Sea littoral is one of the most beautiful and richest of spots on the earth. [...] We must hope that our government will not hinder but rather permit those Abkhazians who may wish to return to and settle anew their own land to do so. Apart from feelings of philanthropy, this is demanded both by justice and indeed self-interest, for undoubtedly it is better to have people like the Circassians and Abkhazians as friends than as enemies'. Sadly, new attitudes were not long in forming.

⁵The earliest edition of this work that I have seen containing this passage is the 7th, which appeared in 1892.

extraordinary historical fabrication he adduced the testimony of Evliya Çelebi to the effect that the Abkhazians of his day were speakers of Mingrelian -- we saw above that the text actually says that they 'also speak Mingrelian'. Ingoroq'va does not refer to Bakradze, and it is unclear whether he knew of that earlier work, but, since it is known that preparations were underway in the late 40s to deport the entire Abkhazian population either to Kazakhstan or Siberia, it is likely that Ingoroq'va was writing to order, providing an academic 'justification' for their removal from 'Kartvelian' land. Knowing what was expected of them, most of Tbilisi's academic élite wrote favourable reviews of Ingoroq'va's 1954 opus⁶. But with the deaths of Stalin and Beria and the subsequent reversal of anti-Abkhazian measures, Ingoroq'va spent the rest of his long life a deserved academic pariah. That was until the heady days of resurgent nationalism as Soviet communism headed for collapse...

In the weekly organ of the Georgian Writers' Union *lit'erat'uruli sakartvelo* 'Literary Georgia' (21 April 1989) critic Rost'om Chkheidze published a lavish praise of Ingoroq'va, urging his academic re-habilitation for his 'contribution to the study of the history of Western Georgia'⁷. Zviad Gamsakhurdia himself, then one of a band of unofficial oppositionist leaders, in the Russian pamphlet *Letopis' 4* 'Chronicle 4' (1989), which he designed to instruct his fellow-Mingrelians how to conduct anti-Abkhazian agitation, urged them to read Ingoroq'va to learn why the true inheritors of the territory of Abkhazia were Mingrelians. Again in the Georgian paper *kartuli pilmi* 'Georgian Film' (6 Sept 1989) Gamsakhurdia sought to lecture the late A. Sakharov on how the Abkhazians had come to Abkhazia only '2-3 centuries ago'! After the first Kartvelian-Abkhazian skirmishes in July 1989, a predictable consequence of the hysteria whipped up against the Abkhazians by a barrage of propaganda issuing from Tbilisi, a two-part article published over the New Year 1989-90 in another Georgian paper *saxalxo ganatleba* 'Popular Education' the Svan linguist, Aleksandre Oniani, strove through linguistic argumentation to buttress the Ingoroq'va-hypothesis, even though his date for the Abkhazians' arrival on 'Georgian' soil was '400-500 years ago', presumably because he knew that Çelebi's text when correctly translated does not support a 17th century influx⁸. This resurrection of the Ingoroq'va-fantasy was not accidental; it was in complete harmony with, and underpinned, an anti-Abkhazian campaign, which, since the media was still under typical Soviet, central control, must have been officially supported by the Georgian government. When fighting broke out

⁶The noted scholar of Abkhaz, Ketevan Lomtadze, was an honourable exception.

⁷The street in Tbilisi on which stands the Institute of Linguistics has since been renamed 'Ingoroq'va Street'.

⁸The best known devotee of Ingoroq'va, Georgian Academician Tamaz Gamq'relidze, entered the fray in 1991 with yet another linguistically-based defence. My 1993a article is a detailed rebuttal and is preceded by my English translation of Gamq'relidze's 1991 Georgian original; my 1992a article is a response to Oniani.

on 15-16th July 1989, the quick introduction of Soviet Interior Ministry forces restored calm and kept the warring parties at bay. But if Georgia broke free of the Soviet Union (as it then existed or in a revised form such as envisaged by Gorbachev), no such help would be forthcoming (as indeed it was not after Georgia's 14th August 1992 invasion of Abkhazia), and so the only protection would be if Abkhazia were to distance itself from Georgian control, which is what Abkhazians set out to achieve by peaceful and wholly political means.

Future Prospects

The Caucasus should and could be one of the great cultural and tourist centres of Europe with its stupendous mountain-scenery and lovely coastal resorts, with its huge diversity of exotic languages (many endangered), and with a unique treasury of folk-traditions in various fields. Abkhazia with its sub-tropical climate was long the USSR's riviera. But there can be no capitalising on these potential riches by any of the prospective beneficiaries until peace allows for proper development of necessary infrastructure. For all the money that Western institutions are pouring into Georgia, a glance at the map reveals that there remains only one direct rail-link to the North Caucasus and beyond, and this passes through Abkhazia. It has been closed to through-traffic since 1992, and until a viable settlement is achieved, Georgia will never be able to safeguard passage of goods or people between it and its main neighbour to the north. It is, therefore, in the interests of both Georgia and its trading-partners to help promote that settlement. The world, however, in its wisdom seems determined to force upon Abkhazia a return to something like the *status quo ante bellum*. Sadly, the evidence below suggests that the Kartvelians have failed to learn any lessons from their errors of the past, and so there is a very real danger that they could be repeated, unless appropriate restraint is applied.

Tamaz Nadareishvili, leader of the Kartvelian group in the Abkhazian parliament since 1992 (after the Abkhazian victory in September 1993 it went into exile, styling itself 'The Supreme Council of the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic') and a Deputy Premier of Georgia since that exile, has no compunction about writing (1996): 'Already in 1913 Academician Ivane Dzhavakhishvili wrote, "The population of Colchis belonged to three Georgian branches: Laz-Mingrelians, Apshil-Abkhazians, and Svans"' (p.5). Two pages later the reader is 'informed': 'Upto the XVIIth century (to be precise, upto 1621) the population of Abkhazia was purely Georgian; one met not a single representative with a North Caucasian surname...Historically, Abkhazia was the rear-part of Mingrelia' (p.7). Johannes de Galonifontibus' early 15th century observations would seem to have eluded Nadareishvili's notice. Even though no reference is given for the quote from Dzhavakhishvili, Georgia's most distinguished historian, it does in fact come from Appendix 2a to volume 1 of his *kartveli eris ist'oria* 'History of the Georgian People' (p.427 of the 1960 edition). As early as 1853, long

before a proper linguistic comparison had been made between the North West and the South Caucasian languages, D. Q'ipiani had asserted: '...but to this tribe [Kartvelians] also belong the Mingrelians, Abkhazians, Svans..', a claim that is explained thus by Uturashvili (1989.254): 'D. Q'ipiani's assignment of the Abkhazians to the Kartvel ethnos can, it appears, be explained by the long and intimate Kartvelo-Abkhazian cultural-historical relationship, by their multi-faceted common historical fate, which united both people... The Georgian thinker judged the Abkhazians ethno-culturally to be so close a tribe that he placed them among the Kartvel tribes.' Such unrefined attitudes to ethnic categorisation in the late 19th century might well have occasioned what could still have been a genuine, if naive, belief that the Abkhazians did indeed constitute part of the Kartvelian group. Perhaps in this atmosphere it was only natural to seek linguistic support for the notion, and the start of Dzhavakhishvili's Appendix reveals what led him to assert that the Apsilians (Apsilians in a Georgian variant), and thus the Abkhazians, were a 'Georgian' (more accurately, Kartvelian) tribe: it was a characteristically wild etymological speculation on the part of the eccentric Georgian-Scot, Nik'o Marr, that detected an entirely spurious root+extension *bas-kh- in the ancient *Abaskoí* (variant of *Abasgoí*), which he then connected with a sequence *mas-kh-, postulated as a variant for the name of the south Georgian Meskhian tribe⁹. Innocently (let us assume) believing that the Apsilian-Abkhazians represented a Kartvelian branch, Dzhavakhishvili was quite happy to argue (p.436) that they must once have occupied territory further south in today's Georgia, pointing to a possible parallelism of formation between the toponyms T'uapse (on the Circassian Black Sea coast) and Dvabzu (in the Georgian province of Guria)¹⁰. On the other hand, Nadareishvili has a quite different agenda. Today it is impossible to maintain that North West Caucasian Abkhazians are an off-shoot of the Kartvelian tribes -- if, therefore, Abkhazians have dwelt for millennia on the same territory, this territory can only be argued to be 'Kartvelian' by planting there a purely fictitious race of 'Kartvelian Abkhazians', which is precisely the inventing of history that we have delineated above. Thus, when Nadareishvili re-disseminates this quite deliberate slander against the Abkhazians and their history, his ulterior purpose is to be provocative and keep alive the implication that has underlain various anti-Abkhazian manifestations in Georgian politics since the 1940s, namely that the Abkhazians, unentitled to full rights in

⁹Dzhavakhishvili was himself unwise enough later to deviate from his main discipline, producing in 1937 754 pages (with many dubious etymologies) designed to demonstrate that all the autochthonous Caucasian languages derived from a single source, which is no longer a tenable hypothesis (at least as far as the inclusion of the Kartvelian group is concerned).

¹⁰Unfortunately, he went on to spoil the observation by detecting a Mingrelian derivational prefix *do-* (e.g. *do-xor-e* 'palace, area of residence' < *xor-ua* 'living' -- how *t'u-* developed is unexplained) in combination with roots he interpreted as deriving from *Apswa* -- in fact, the Circassian toponym is analysable exclusively in terms of Circassian (*t^w'y* '2', *psy* 'water').

Abkhazia if relatively recent newcomers on 'Georgian' soil¹¹, will always be faced with the threat of expulsion (or worse), should Tbilisi ever reestablish control¹². That Nadareishvili's views are not those of just an eccentric maverick is proved by the fact that another member of his group, Gia Gvazava, interviewed in Georgian on Radio Liberty in April 1994, also stated that the Abkhazians were not indigenous to Abkhazia and that he, a Mingrelian, was a true 'Abkhazian'! On 5th April 1996 Zurab Erkvania, so-called Chairman of the 'Council of Ministers of the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic' (sc. in exile), described Abkhazia as 'the oldest territory of Georgia', and ten days later Shevardnadze contributed a typical apparatchik's reinterpretation of history with the following hyperbole: 'Today's Abkhazia...is racism in force, racism in practice. There was never this amount of cruel, wide-scale persecution, such exiling of hundreds of thousands of people from their native places, even in the times of Stalin, Beria and Lenin' (English corrected from Georgia's Internet site¹³).

Every right-thinking person would advise that mutual coöperation between the patchwork of peoples living in the relatively small expanse of territory that constitutes the Caucasus was in all their interests. But this ideal will only be achieved when the integrity and rights of each of the peoples concerned are acknowledged and fully respected by their neighbours and international players alike. Such elementary courtesy must itself be predicated on knowledge of the region and its inhabitants. With the publication of the present volume all relevant facts about Abkhazia finally become accessible to the English-speaking world, which should thus be better placed to understand the philosophy behind Abkhazian aspirations. A convenient summary of the book, perhaps already familiar to some readers, is contained in an eloquently moving passage composed over 200 years ago:

'When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume, among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions

¹¹Hence the necessity for Nadareishvili to add (also on p.7): 'Certain toponyms or hydronyms on the territory of historical Colchis once regarded as Circassian (*Supsa, Maltaq'va*) turned out to be Georgian.' Naturally, no reference is given for the relevant 'proof' of their Georgianness.

¹²Some critics respond to this argument over the length of time the Abkhazians have resided in Abkhazia by asking what difference their length of residence (200 or over 2,000 years) makes to their right to remain in place today, and the point is valid -- to a degree. Given that relative shortness of tenure is palpably so critical in shaping Kartvelian attitudes (otherwise they would not invest so much energy in manufacturing a history for the Abkhazians), it is important for purely scholarly reasons to reassert the facts as often as may be necessary -- this in no way implies that over two millennia of residence is to be regarded as bestowing greater territorial claims than one of two centuries, as is implicit in such criticism. What is the role of scholarship if not to establish the truth and then to buttress it when it is abused?

¹³At least three Internet sites are devoted to Abkhazia. Their addresses are:

www.channell.com/users/apsny

www.abkhazia.com/intro.htm

www.gse.uci.edu/abkhazia/homepage.htm

of mankind requires that they should declare the causes...'

(Preamble to the American Declaration of Independence)