

# **Circassian Religion and Beliefs**

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## A Descriptive Account

Amjad Jaimoukha

2009

## **Circassian Culture & Folklore**

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## Introduction

**F**ROM the cradle to the grave, the Circassian native creed (ФІЭЩХЪУНЫГЪЭ), intertwined with the code of conduct, *Adige Xabze* (адыгэ хабзэ), dictated the way an individual behaved, formed his system of values, and certainly influenced the way he conceived the world. Religion and customs and traditions were the dual formers of the Circassian outlook on life and they meshed perfectly together. Rejecting one of these intimately associated components would have entailed forsaking the other, and ultimately compromising the essence of Circassianness (адыгагъэ). Nevertheless, religion and customs and traditions were two different entities. Considering the *Adige Xabze* as the traditional religion of the Circassians is a common mistake made even by the Circassians themselves. Whereas ancient religion regulated the spiritual and ritual domains, the *Xabze* regulated the day-to-day aspects of a Circassian's life.<sup>1</sup>

Religious beliefs had until the early part of the 19th century been centred round a backbone of polytheism, paganism and animism with some Christian and Muslim influences. It may be that the nature of their country and the set ways of the Circassians played a significant part in ingraining the native beliefs and marginalizing religious imports. Monotheistic religions have had little bearing on the Circassian way of life in the Caucasus and this explains the eclectic nature of the Circassian system of beliefs emphasised by outsiders. In the latter part of the Middle Ages the Circassians were caught in the middle of a power struggle between Orthodox Russia and Muslim Turkey. They switched their religious allegiance very readily, converting from Islam to Christianity and vice versa, as the circumstances demanded and for convenience. According to Chantal Lemerrier-Quellejey, 'The co-existence in the same [Kabardian] family of Orthodox Christians and Muslims was practically a unique phenomenon in the history of Islam.'

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<sup>1</sup> See A. Jaimoukha (2009c) for an introductory account of Circassian customs and traditions.

(1992, p27). Shi'i Islam never penetrated into Circassian lands. Nevertheless, the Circassian slaves in Persia were converted to Shi'ism.<sup>2</sup>

There was some resemblance between ancient Circassian priests and Celtic Druids. Both castes venerated trees, had sacred groves, and practised some form of human sacrifice. In addition, the Circassian Elders and Druids were the arbiters and judges in their respective societies.

The most substantive source of information on the Circassian beliefs and ritual ceremonies is the Nart Epos. Many aspects of the ancient religious life of the Circassians are embedded in the Nart tales. Sulht'an Khan-Girey's works (1836, 1989) provide good references on native Circassian religion and beliefs. The Circassian pioneering scholar enjoyed the vantage-point of living at an age in which ancient religious rites were still practised, and thus he was able to preserve for posterity some of the native rituals and ceremonies. The first work was republished in Nalchik by the Elbrus Book Press in 1978. The section on religion can be found on pages 96-102. Shora Nogmov's *Istoriya adikheiskogo [adigeiskogo] naroda* [History of the Circassian Nation] (1861) has interesting bits about ancient Circassian religious beliefs and practices.

This short thesis attempts to provide a skeletal account of the ancient native Circassian creeds and the later influences of Judeo-Christianity and Islam on the beliefs and ethos of the Circassians. The account is fleshed out with still extant prayers, chants, toasts, and other ancient manifestations of the archaic belief systems in Circassia. Pieces for which audio recordings are available are indicated by asterisks.

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<sup>2</sup> See T. Ricks (2001) for an account on the religious affiliation of the Circassian slaves in Persia during the Safavid dynasty.

# 1 Time-line of Faith

In order to appreciate the chronological dimension of the manifestations of religious beliefs and practices amongst the Circassians, a basic time-line of the progression of religious systems in Circassia is presented.

## **Animism**

Animism is probably the most ancient religion of the Circassians, and it was prevalent among all peoples of the North Caucasus. Its origin probably dates back to the Palaeolithic Age, or the Old Stone Age, more than 10,000 years ago. The basic tenet of animism was the belief that a soul resided in every object, animate or inanimate, functioning as the motive force and guardian. In animistic thought nature was all alive. In a future state the spirit would exist as part of an immaterial soul. The spirit, therefore, was thought to be universal. Ghosts, demons, and deities inhabited almost all objects, rendering them subject to worship.

The Circassians, like most North Caucasians, used to worship trees and considered them as totems, believing that they housed invisible deities. Many ritual services were developed associated with particular trees and sacred groves were visited by supplicants in processions. Animals were sacrificed at the foot of trees and feasts held in celebration.

Totemism, defined as the intimate relation supposed to exist between an individual or a group of individuals and a class of natural objects, i. e. the totem, is at the root of primitive religion and is intimately related with animism.

## **Paganism**

The path moved from animism and the associated totemism to paganism, the belief in the possession of some objects of nature of supernatural powers, and a primitive conception of deities and patrons. Perhaps paganism found origin in the Neolithic Age, more than seven millennia ago.

## **Polytheism**

It is thought that some time after the fifth millennium BC, the Circassians started on the path of transition to polytheism. The transition to polytheism pre-supposes a civilizational stage of social development. Polytheism segmented the universe into manageable units, with each unit generally governed by an individual deity. As a rule, every natural phenomenon or heavenly body had its own god. The collective of deities, gods, and patrons, who were part of the natural world and controlled all its aspects in a collective manner, formed a Pantheon with a presiding god (Тхьэшхуэ (*Theshxwe*)=Supreme God). Special rites and ceremonies came to be associated with each deity for appeasement and supplication. Depending on the nature of the wish, offerings were made to this or that god, be it the god of sun, rain, war, love, or fertility.

## **Christianity**

Christianity came to Western Circassia from Byzantium during the reign of Emperor Justinian in the sixth century (AD). Many priests were dispatched to Circassia and churches were built on some mountainous locations, from which the native population was proselytized. The Georgian Bagratids subjected Eastern Circassians and converted them to Greek Orthodox Christianity in the 13th century. Churches were built, which were destroyed at the end of Georgian rule in the 15th century. Other sources state that in the 11th and 12th centuries the Russian princes of Tmutarakan and the kings of Georgia carried out the conversion. From the 13th to 15th centuries, Catholicism made some inroads in the Western parts of Circassia due to the influence of the Genoese, who constructed trading posts on the coastal regions. Some churches were erected in the area.

## **Islam**

Islam started to make inroads in Circassia in the 18th and 19th centuries. Islam had little impact on the folklore and literary traditions of the Circassians. The only appreciable influence of the Muslim faith was the introduction of a new literary genre, '*Mevlid*', associated with the celebration of the birth of Prophet Mohammad.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See R. Smeets (1980) for a study on a Circassian *Mevlid* by the (Shapsugh) Circassians in Turkey.

## **2 Ancient Native Religion & Mythology**

As in other ancient creeds, the genesis of the indigenous Circassian system of beliefs is wrapped in uncertainty and intertwined with myth and mystery. The Circassians did not produce a native sacred book. By the time they attained literacy in early 19th century, most of them had converted to Islam. Nevertheless, relics of those far away days have fortunately been preserved in mythology, giving us insights into the world of the prehistoric forebears of the Circassians. In addition, the accounts of native writers of the 19th century and foreign visitors throughout the ages provide snippets of pre-Islamic religious practices and ceremonies.

Animism was probably the first creed in ancient Circassia, anteceding and later mixing with polytheism. Items in nature were believed to be governed by spirits, which needed to be appeased if man was to wield control over the forces of nature. However, the will of the spirits had to be foretold, hence the need for and development of augury.

The principal features of the ancient religion were belief in life after death, polytheism, rendering of homage and honour unto the deities, performance of rites and ceremonies of supplication and prayer, and other beliefs and superstitions associated with the pantheon of traditional gods.

Fire worship goes back to the age when the ancestors of the Circassians discovered fire and made the first tentative efforts to master it. It may also have been an influence of Zoroastrians.

## The Circassian Pantheon

Like all polytheistic creeds, classical Circassian religion divided the world into manageable segments, each of which was under the auspices of a deity. The presiding supreme god, Theshxwe (Тхьэшхуэ), headed a divine cast of three scores or so who controlled the world in a collective manner.

Like their Greek counterparts who had their abode in Mount Olympus, the Adiga gods and goddesses met for deliberations and held festivals on top of the sacred mountain, Tatartup. According to popular belief, this was located at the confluence of the Balhq (Malka) and Sherej (Cherek) Rivers (in the northeast of the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic). Its ancient name was Zhulat (Жулат; from Joritla Ant, Temple of the Ants, presumed ancestors of the Circassians— Shora Nogmov, 1861), but this changed (to Tatartup [Тэтэртуп] = Tatar Hillock) when the Tatars temporarily occupied the environs in one of their forays into Circassia. It used to have temples for worship and supplication, and at which sacrifices were offered to the gods.



Zhulat, or Tatartup, the sanctum sanctorum of the (Eastern) Circassians (Жулат [Тэтэртуп], адыгэ тхьэхэм я зэхуэсынIэ.). Perhaps the essence of Circassianness resides in the ancient edifices of native culture and beliefs, unadulterated by extraneous effects engendered by the vicissitudes of time.

If two persons fell out with one another, Zhulat was the place to go, to heal the breach. Each party took a bow and arrow, which was held between them as they reiterated vows of friendship. Once the pledges had been made, the arrow was snapped in consummation of their renewed bond. This custom was called ‘Going to Zhulat.’ The expression ‘*Tetertup be sch’esin,*’ ‘May I be many times in Tatartup,’ was sworn on the truth of an allegation.

Around each god and goddess, there arose a cult and special rites of worship and supplication. Every deity had his/her special attributes. Some of the gods had human forms, and a few were even mortal. The fleeing of Lhepsch from a dissatisfied ‘customer’ is indicative of this—an attempted deicide, so to speak. It is believed that the god of the smiths started out as an ordinary human being, a mere apprentice. It was in appreciation of his metallic feats that he was elevated to the rank of the gods.

Some gods had control over natural phenomena. Schible (ШЫБЛЭ) was the god of thunder and lightning, and Zchithe (ЖЬЫТХЬЭ) master of the wind. Sozeresh (Созэрэш; *also* Soziresh [Созырэш], Sozeresch [Созэрэш], Sozresch [Созрэш]), god of fertility, family hearth, well-being and illness, had the winds and waters at his command. Other gods provided wisdom, guidance and indispensable services to the Narts, and patronized important crafts and professions. Lhepsch manufactured metal implements and arms for the benefit of the Narts. In one story, his wife gave him the idea of making tongs when she saw a dead snake doubled on itself. In another, the shape of the crescent moon provided the blueprint for the sickle. Those dedicated to serving humans included Amisch (АМЫШ), Axin (АХЫН), Mezithe (МЭЗЫТХЬЭ), and Theghelej (ТХЬЭГЪЭЛЭДЖ). Amisch, god of fauna, occupied his time with catching all kinds of forest animals, which he presented to the Narts to raise and multiply. Later he shared this profession with Axin, but eventually each specialized in a specific species of animals, Amisch becoming the god of sheep, Axin that of cattle. Theghelej, god of flora, found his calling in the search for wholesome crops for the Narts to grow.

There were also some goddesses, but these were lesser in number than their male colleagues. The most famous were Hentsiygwasche, goddess of the rain, and Mezgwasche (Мэзгуашэ), goddess of forests and trees. A minor deity, Merise (Мэрысэ), acted as the protectress of bees. The story goes that at the time of perdition of bees, Merise saved the last

surviving bee, hiding it in her sleeve. The divinity took good care of the bee, which subsequently reintroduced the species. In appreciation of this feat, a festival was held in her honour in summer. Merise had three sisters: one was protectress of family life, another patroness of warriors, the last of peasants. It is thought that female deities lost some of their significance with the transition of Circassian society from a matriarchate to patriarchy.

Hubris, although an indictable sin, was not always punished. Two episodes in the Nart Epos illustrate this point. In the legend of Tilale (Тыллалэ), the arrogance of the protagonist was castigated by chaining him to the top of a mountain, as was Prometheus fettered on Mount Olympus.<sup>4</sup> In another tale, Sosriqwe (Сосрыкъуэ) got away with stealing a tun of wine from the very abode of the gods, which malfeasance was pardoned because the supreme god was well-disposed towards the indomitable, though oftentimes reckless, hero.<sup>5</sup>

#### **‘Order’ and ‘disorder’**

The Narts also had their fair share of false gods. In our Greek analogy, if the Pantheon is to be considered cosmos, or ‘order’, these represent chaos, or ‘disorder’. In the Nart tale ‘Wezirmes Saves the Narts from Famine’, Peqwe (Пэкъуэ), the demi-god who created the fields, punished the Narts by ordering the clouds to withhold their waters for Wezirmes’s (Уэзырмэс) ingratitude and disobedience. The fearsome hero had been shocked and greatly disturbed by the obsequious behaviour of his people towards the pusillanimous godhead. He vowed to slay him and rid his people of his tyranny. His bluff having been called, Peqwe took refuge in a spider web that he wove deep in the heavens. Wezirmes chased him on his magic steed and used ruse to sever his holy head.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The tale of Tilale is told in Appendix 2.

<sup>5</sup> The dregs were planted by Lady Satanay, Sosriqwe’s fawning mother, and the fruit was turned into the spiritful elixir.

<sup>6</sup> The tale ‘Wezirmes Saves the Narts from Famine’ is reproduced in Appendix 2.

## List of Circassian Deities

<b>Амыш, Амыш, Емыш</b> ( <i>Amisch, Amish, Yemish</i> )	Initially god of fauna, then god of sheep.
<b>Аушydжэр, Аушdжэрджий, Даушdжэрджий</b> ( <i>Awishijer, Awischjerjiy, Dawischjerjiy</i> )	God of courage and bravery. Circassian version of St. George. Later identified with Jesus Christ.
<b>Афы</b> ( <i>Afi</i> )	God of lightning.
<b>Ахын</b> ( <i>Axin</i> )	God of (large) cattle.
<b>Гуашэ</b> ( <i>Gwasche</i> )	Goddess, protectress, patroness.
<b>Гъуабжэгъуэш</b> ( <i>Ghwabzheghwesch</i> )	Cosmological deity of righteousness and light.
<b>Джэдынэ</b> ( <i>Jedipe</i> )	God of rivers and seas (literally: 'hen's beak').
<b>Елэ, Еллэ</b> ( <i>Yele, Yelle</i> )	Prophet (St.) Elijah. Shared the godhead of lightning with Schible in the Christian era.
<b>Емыш</b> ( <i>Yemich</i> )	Demi-god. Had a day consecrated to his worship.
<b>Жыг гуашэ</b> ( <i>Zhig Gwasche</i> )	Goddess of trees.
<b>Жьэгупатхэ</b> ( <i>Zchegwpathe</i> )	God of family hearth.
<b>Жьытхэ</b> ( <i>Zchithe</i> )	God of wind.
<b>Зек'уэтхэ</b> ( <i>Zeik'wethe</i> )	God of campaigns (roads), later, also of horsemanship. He was not set into any particular form by popular tradition.
<b>Исп гуашэ</b> ( <i>Yisp Gwasche</i> )	Protectress of the Yisps (a race of pygmies mentioned in the Nart tales).
<b>Къуэдэс</b> ( <i>Qwedés</i> )	God of sea, in form of fish (literally: 'living in a depression').
<b>Лъэпш</b> ( <i>Lhepsch</i> )	Patron of smiths, iron, weapons and fire.
<b>Мамыш, Мамыш</b> ( <i>Mamisch, Mamish</i> )	Patron of fortunetellers, specifically of scapula readers.
<b>Мэзгуашэ, Мэз гуашэ</b> ( <i>Mezgwäsche, Mez Gwasche</i> )	Goddess of forests and trees.
<b>Мэзытхэ</b>	God of forests, trees, the hunt and beasts. He

<i>(Mezithe)</i>	disposed of the fate of beasts, and brought good luck to the hunt. He is depicted as riding a golden-bristled boar. He took his deer to a meadow wherein a group of virgins milked them.
<b>Мэрэм, Мерэм</b> <i>(Mereim, Meirem)</i>	Mother of Mighty God (Mary, Mother of Jesus Christ). Patroness of apiculture and grass in (later) association with (native) Merise. In the Christian era in Circassia Mereim shared the magical healing powers of Sozeresh. In Eastern Circassian Friday is named in her honour.
<b>Мэрысэ</b> <i>(Merise)</i>	Protectress of bees; later associated with Mary, Mother of Christ. Her three sisters: patronesses of family life, warriors and peasants.
<b>Пэкьюэ</b> <i>(Peqwe)</i>	'False' demi-god - creator of the fields - debunked by Wezirmes.
<b>Псатхьэ</b> <i>(Psathe)</i>	God of the soul or life. Also denotes icon of Christian Circassians (in Mozdok).
<b>Псытхьэ</b> <i>(Psithe)</i>	God of water.
<b>Псытхьэгуашэ, Псыгуашэ</b> <i>(Psithegwasche, Psigwasche)</i>	Goddess of water. Popular tradition had her portrayed as a beautiful maid.
<b>Псыхьэгуашэ, Псыхьуэ гуашэ</b> <i>(Psix'wegwasche, Psix'we Gwasche)</i>	Goddess of rivers (river valleys).
<b>Созэрэш, Созырэш, Созэрэш, Созрэш</b> <i>(Sozeresh, Soziresh, Sozeresch, Sozresch)</i>	God of fertility, family hearth, well-being and illness. He was a great voyager and controlled the winds and waters. He was also the protector of herds ( <b>Shawzerish [Шаузэрыш]</b> in Shapsugh).
<b>Сотрэш</b> <i>(Sotresh)</i>	God of gaiety and holidays.
<b>Тэтэртуп</b> <i>(Tetertup)</i>	God of war and bloodshed. Equivalent to Grecian Ares and to Roman Mars.
<b>Тхьэ</b> <i>(The)</i>	God.
<b>Тхьэгуашэ, Тхьэ гуашэ</b> <i>(Thegwasche, The Gwasche)</i>	Protectress of women (literally: 'Matron of the gods').
<b>Тхьэгьэгуфлэ шу</b> <i>(Theghegw'f'e Shu)</i>	God of good news (literally: 'rider who brings joy to the gods').
<b>Тхьэгьэлэдж</b> <i>(Theghelej)</i>	God of fertility and plants.
<b>Тхьэгьуичу</b> <i>(Theghwiychu)</i>	Protector of people. Intermediary between gods and people.

<b>Тхъэкъуафэшү</b> ( <i>Theqwfeshu</i> )	God's herald.
<b>Тхъэшү</b> ( <i>Theshu</i> )	Protector of horsemen.
<b>Тхъэшхуэ</b> ( <i>Theshxwe</i> )	The Supreme God.
<b>Тхъэшырыпхъү</b> ( <i>Theshiripx'w</i> )	
<b>Уащхъуэ</b> ( <i>Waschx'we</i> )	One of the supreme cosmic deities; god of the skies (literally: 'blue sky').
<b>Унэ гуащэ</b> ( <i>Wine Gwasche</i> )	Protectress of the domestic/family hearth.
<b>Утхъуей Къес-Къес</b> ( <i>Witx'wey Qeis-Qeis</i> )	God of rain and snow (Black Sea Shapsugh).
<b>Хадэ гуащ(э)</b> ( <i>Xade Gwasch[e]</i> )	Goddess of gardens.
<b>Хы гуащэ</b> ( <i>Xi Gwasche</i> )	Goddess of the seas.
<b>Хьэдрыхэ, Хьэдырых</b> ( <i>Hedrixе, Hedirix</i> )	Protector of the dead.
<b>Хьэдрыхэтхьэ</b> ( <i>Hedrixethe</i> )	God of the hereafter (Abzakh).
<b>Хьэкүсташ</b> ( <i>Hekwstash</i> )	Patron of horsemanship.
<b>Хьэкүщтащхьэ, Хьэкущтыхь</b> ( <i>Hek'wschtaschhe, Hekwschtix'</i> )	Protector of oxen (Shapsugh).
<b>Хьэнцийгуащэ, Хьэнцэгуащэ</b> ( <i>Hentsiygwasche, Hentsegwasche</i> )	Goddess of rain.
<b>Хьэуц-Хьэш</b> ( <i>Hewits-Hesh</i> )	God of seas and demi-gods.
<b>Хьэхь-Мохь</b> ( <i>Hex'-Mox'</i> )	God of cosmic bodies.
<b>Шуу-Муц</b> ( <i>Shuu-Muts</i> )	God of wild animals.
<b>Щыблэ</b> ( <i>Schible</i> )	God of sky, thunder(storms) and lightning; also of war and justice. Equivalent to Thor in Scandinavian mythology.

In addition, the Shapsugh had the following tribal gods: Txaraley, Txatapas, Toxliyt and Chashte.

## Tenets of Polytheism

The dichotomy of good and evil was an integral concept of Circassian religion. It is possible to cull proto-religious ‘commandments’ that are scattered here and there in the Nart tales, and other folk sources, to make up a Circassian equivalent of the Hebrew/Christian Decalogue.<sup>7</sup> Examples include: ‘one must not hanker after other people’s possessions’ and ‘One must ask before taking other people’s belongings.’

The Circassians had their own version of the redemption of the world in the legend of Tilale.<sup>8</sup> This chained hero was supposed to break out of the irons and come into the world after the people had been stricken with famine. He then cleansed the world with the waters of the seas, and restored life to the lost world.

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<sup>7</sup> There are a number of works on the Circassian Nart tales in the *Bibliography & References*.

<sup>8</sup> The legend is a fusion of Caucasian, Greek, Judeo-Christian and Muslim elements. The redemption theme is found in all these religious traditions. ‘Tilale’ is the Circassian version of the Arabic name ‘T’alāl’. Nesren Zchach’e (Нэсрэн ЖъакІэ [жъакІэ = beard]; also Nisren Zchach’e, Nesrenzchach’e and Nisrenzchach’e) was the Caucasian Prometheus. Like his Greek counterpart, the Nart hero was accused of hubris and he was chained to the top of one of Mount Elbrus’ twin peaks. The vulture kept preying on his heart, and Nesren Beard shuddered every now and then trying to throw away the shackles. The Earth trembled, his chains knocked against one other sending sparks as if from striking spears, making thunderous noises. His breath issued forth like uncontrollable gales. His heart-rending moans and roans were like rumbles coming from the centre of the Earth. The hot streams coming down the lofty Mount were his tears. In the Caucasian ethos, the protagonist is never released from captivity. It is only upon the influence of Judeo-Christian mythology that the chained hero is transformed into a saviour of humanity. The tales of Nesren Zchach’e and Tilale are found in Appendix 1.

## Rites & Ceremonies

Some social and festal ceremonies, like dance, song, toast making, trace their origins to pre-historic beliefs and are latter-day developments of ancient religious rituals.

It is quite probable that at one time the Circassians had a separate priestly caste that officiated religious services and rites. However, there are no indications that arcane sects nor a power wielding priestly class jealously guarding hidden mysteries inaccessible to the common folk, as was the case in ancient Egypt, ever existed. The oldest partaker, who passed on the knowledge to his lay disciples, performed religious rites.

It was believed that performance of special rites of worship in which supplicants encircle a venerated object, like a holy tree, or a spot stricken by lightning, invoked the resident spirits and unlocked their latent powers. Some accounts tell of solemn processions round a tree with the supplicants carrying torches. These formed a significant part of a complex system of prayers. The most sacred class of dances was called *wij* (*x'wrey*) (удж [хьурей]), which was performed by dancers forming a circle round a venerated object. It later turned into a dance performed by couples with music, losing all religious significance. A special dance consecrated to the supreme god, *Theshxwe wij* (Тхьэшхуэ удж), was executed with the bodies of the participants in compact formation. It was revived recently, but merely as a dance form.

Religious rites were sometimes accompanied by chanting. Songs were intoned during feasts in honour of thunder, during sacrifices and other pagan festivals. When lightning struck a place or an object, a special kind of *wij* was performed round the stricken spot accompanied by 'Schible Wered,' (Шыблэ уэрэд)—'Song of Lightning.'



Depiction of generic festive ceremonies.  
No matter what the occasion, activities, such as dance,  
horse racing, shooting, gaming, were constant staples.

Another class of rites of supplication was concerned with prevention of disease. In a curious wedding of superstition and practical nous, small pox was first treated by inoculation, a technique discovered and developed by ancient Circassians in their efforts to spare their beautiful women. Then, so as not to leave any room for chance, the stricken person was placed in a swing and rocked to the accompaniment of a special chant ‘Ziywis-hen,’ (зиусхьэн) ‘Your Lordship,’ which invoked the mercy of the deity of the disease.<sup>9</sup> In the Mesopotamian civilizations that existed about 3,000 BC, swings were thought to have magical and religious properties, suggesting contacts with ancient Circassian cultures.

It is worthwhile to mention that pagan songs, now completely out of use, give us clues as to the concept the ancient Circassians had of the creation

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<sup>9</sup> Several versions of this song can be found in K. C. Gebelli, 1954.

and the world. These same songs were adapted twice, in the Christian and Muslim eras, and used to praise the new deities.

A person smitten with lightning was thought to have been ordained by an angel for benediction and a solemn ceremony was conducted in his honour, the parents overjoyed with the new-found status. The crowds would go outside listening to the clamour created by the aerial angel, and if no thunder was heard for some time, prayers would have been said for its return. This is apparently a melange of the ancient ceremony of adoration of Schible (Щыблэ) with a later Christian influx.

## Oaths & Vows

Oaths invoking a deity, *theri'we* (тхьэрыуэ) or *thelhane* (тхьэлъанэ), were performed in accordance with special rites. Oftentimes these were taken at some wine-drinking festivals, since pledges made facing wine tuns were considered most binding. Contravention of an oath brought everlasting damnation, contempt, and shame, not to say retribution and punishment. In the language of Longworth, if customary law was tyrant, then the oath was the sole monarch to whom all peoples of the Caucasus submitted. 'His seal it is that confers validity on every compact, social or political. He is the mighty arbiter in all differences....,' he concluded. In fact, he hinted that the sacredness with which the Circassians held their pledges contributed to some extent towards their downfall at the hands of the more worldly Russians.

## Holidays & Festivals

Holidays and red-letter days (махуэшхуэ [*maxweshxwe*]; literally: ‘big day’; or тхьэлъэу [*thelhe’w*]; literally: ‘supplication to a deity’), on which religious ceremonies were held, were divided into two categories: fixed occasions (теуа тхьэлъэуэхэр; *tei’wa thelhe’wxer*) in the Circassian Calendar on which religious ceremonies and feasts were held, and random events (темыуа тхьэлъэуэхэр; *teimi’wa thelhe’wxer*), such as when a calamity befalls, or threatens to smite, a family or community, and where ceremonies of supplication are held to ward it off or alleviate its effects. The first group comprehended the Circassian New Year, Christmas (хьуромэ; *X’wrome*), Easter (Иутыж; *’Wt’izh*), Passover (also Иутыж; *’Wt’izh*), Supplication of the Cross (жор тхьэлъэу; *Zhor Thelhe’w*), Start of Ploughing Campaign (вакӀуэдэӀ; *Vak’wedech’*), End of Ploughing Campaign (вакӀуэкъихьэж; *Vak’weqiyhez*), and others.

Each deity had a day, sometimes more, consecrated to his/her worship. The god of fertility, Sozeresh, for example, was adored on the first three days of spring. Schible, the god of thunder and lightning, was an exception in that it was not possible to predict lightning strikes, augury and astrology notwithstanding.<sup>10</sup>

The first day after the autumn harvest was considered a national holiday. Ceremonies were held before allotment of crop shares. Toasts addressed to the supreme god were pronounced, followed by supplications and prayers to bless the harvest. Feasts were held and song and dance parties were organized. A meal called «хьэм Иуамыха» (*’Hem ’Wamixa’*; literally: ‘Not removed from the threshing-ground’) was prepared from the new produce for relatives and friends, the equivalent of the Western harvest meal. Afterwards, everyone was free to dispose of his portion as he wished. One could sell the surplus or give out some of it as alms. Another harvest festival took place in March marking the Circassian New Year.

In many festivities, the clown or jester, *azheghafe* (ажэгъафэ; literally: ‘donning a billy-goat skin’), took part and played his games to inject a dose of good cheer. He also played the principal role in a game of charades during the festival of the ‘End of the Ploughing Campaign’ that

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<sup>10</sup> Schible was the god of the sky and thunder(storms) and lightning. He was also god of war and justice. Corresponds to Thor in Scandinavian mythology.

required the collection of substantial victuals and animals for slaughter. Being well versed with the circumstances of all the villagers, he would visit each household to importune them for supplies by ‘dropping dead’ at their threshold with his entourage ‘sobbing’ over his prostrate body. The head of the household would go along with the act and enquire on how his household could help to ‘resurrect’ the deceased. On hearing that they expected a contribution, the head of the household would start the bidding by offering a lamb from his fold. If the clown thought that that was too little, he would remain ‘dead’. The head of the household would then up his bid to a sheep. Again, if no signs of reanimation were detected from the jester, the bid was taken to the ultimate level: a young cow. Upon hearing the magic words, the mummer would wag his tail for joy, open his eyes, and make a snorting sound as he darted towards the head of the household, dancing around him and fawning upon him with gratitude, making as if to kiss him.

According to E. N. Studenetskaya (1980), the ‘resurrection’ of *azheghafe* symbolized the growth of cereals from the seeds strewn in the earth, and the cult of the death and resurrection of the god of fertility was prevalent among all agrarian peoples. In the case under consideration, the ‘fool’ was allowed to act the god.

### **Circassian New Year**

The family whose hearth had remained alight for a whole year held ceremonies on the day the soul returned to Earth, which fell on March 22nd, according to the modern calendar. The Circassians considered this day, when winter was over and summer began (*ghere sch'ire schizexech' maxwem*; гьэрэ щырэ щызэхэкI махуэм), as New Year's Day.<sup>11</sup> It was believed that the soul returned first to air, then to water and finally to earth, with an interval of one week in between. There were two festivals associated with the New Year: *Maf'aschhetih* (мафIашхьэтыхь; literally: ‘Hearth Sacrifice’), and *X'wrome* (хьуромэ; also *X'wrame* [хьурамэ]).<sup>12</sup>

In the first, which was later dubbed ‘*Maf'aschhe Jed*’ («мафIашхьэ

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<sup>11</sup> The ancient Circassians had only two seasons: winter (щымахуэ) and summer (гьэмахуэ).

<sup>12</sup> *Tih* (тыхь) was the (native) word used by the Circassians for ‘religious offering, sacrifice’ before (the advent of the Muslim/Arabic term) *qwrmen* (къурмэн). In the Christian era the *X'wrome* festival was associated with Christmas, as it still is among the Christian Kabardians in Mozdok.

джэд»; ‘Hearth Hen’), the festivities were initiated with a rite of sacrifice in which a black hen was immolated on the altar of the hearth. After the offering had been made, the members of the household whose smoke kept issuing for a whole year assembled in front of the hearth. The elder then said the prayers (тхьэльэIу; *thelhe'w*):

With lasting fire in our hearth,  
And well-lit and hot stoves,  
Lacking no victuals to boil,  
Nor crops to cook,  
May God see us through next year!

A sumptuous feast was prepared for the occasion, an essential ingredient of which was either *heljeu* (хьэлджей), a large loaf of maize or barley (originally only barley) bread baked in a bread-pan, or *x'irshin* (хьыршын), pie. The lady of the house cut the *heljeu* or *x'irshin* into triangular pieces and presented one to each member of the household. Typical dishes and foodstuffs prepared and served included meat (of animal slaughtered for the occasion), chicken, turkey, gravy (шыпс; *ships*), crushed-millet dumplings (пIастэ; *p'aste*), fried chicken in sour cream sauce (джэдлыбжьэ; *jedlibzche*), pastry straws (джэдыкIэрыпщ; *jedich'eripsch*), short-cakes (тхьурымбей; *tx'wrimbey*), doughnuts and short-cakes (лэжъум; *lejum*), pasties (хьэлывэ; *helive*), pancakes (тхьурыжь; *tx'wrizch*), sweetmeat (хьэлыуэ; *heliwe*), and many more.



Celebration of the Circassian New Year (мафӀащхьэтыхь; *Maf'aschhetih*), 22 March 2007, in Nalchik, the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic. On the left is Yura Schenibe (Shanibov), leader of the Circassian nationalist movement in the early 1990s. [Courtesy of adygaunion.com]

The celebrants, young and old, did not sleep a wink all night long, whiling away the time playing the game '*de qeighezhex*' («дэ къегъэжэх»; 'rolling down the nuts'). It was considered shameful and a bad omen to sleep on that propitious night. At dawn, 'before the mangy pigs and wolves had the chance to bathe in the river in the new year' («кхьуэ бэгумрэ дыгъужь бэгумрэ псым илъэсыкӀэм зыхамыгъэпскӀыхь щыкӀэ»); '*q'we begwmre dighwzch begwmre psim yilhesisch'em zixamigheps-ch'ih sch'ich'e*'), all headed to the river to cleanse themselves, no matter how cold the water was. This was essentially a ritual to harden the body and temper the soul.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> River water (псы; *psi*) was used in (the ritual of) cleansing and tempering the soul (псэ; *pse*). For example, upon delivery, a baby was taken immediately to the river, whence it was bathed, even in freezing weather. It was believed that cold water tempered the body. There were also some instances of cleaning infants in snow.



Circassian youth celebrating the Birth (or Return) of the Sun (дыгъэгъазэ; *Digheghaze*) on 22 December 2007 in Nalchik. This is the time when the sun reaches its lowest apparent point in the sky and starts to rise up, a propitious occasion for an agrarian-pastoral society. This is one of a number of pre-historic festivals that have been resurrected in the new millennium. The pole in the background is the principal emblem of this celebration. The round loaf of bread high on the pole is an ancient folkloric depiction of the sun-god.

In the (pre-Christian) *X'wrome* festival, the elders went round the village pronouncing their toasts and the young ones went in a group, called '*X'wromashe*' («хъуромашэ»), collecting victuals and singing '*X'wrome*', basically a toast wishing for plentiful crops, good health, prosperity and success. All households donated generously, for it was thought that otherwise the coming year would prove bad to the stingy household. After finishing their round, the groups gravitated towards a designated homestead, where the foodstuffs were cooked and prepared for the feast.

There was renewed interest in these ancient holidays after the collapse of the Soviet regime. Modern-day Circassians have revived New Year celebrations. A large festival was held in Nalchik in 2007. The prevalence of the belief in the sanctity of the red-letter day among present-day Circassians is not known. However, there is a growing demand for making this an official holiday in the Circassian republics.

## Augury & Astrology

Augury was perhaps the oldest method of divining the wishes of the gods and determining the course of future events. Like pre-Christian Circassians, the Narts used to have soothsayers and fortunetellers, *thegwrimaghwe* (тхьэгурьмагъуэ), who used many devices to pronounce their prophecies.

A special sub-class of priests called '*mamisch*' («мамышц») told fortunes by reading the shoulder blades of animals, *blathe* (блатхьэ). According to Longworth, the scapula was held up to the light, and the marks read, the patterns auguring ill or well for the course of impending campaigns, predicting famine and harvest, severe cold and snow and so on. He commented sneeringly on the strength of belief in them. 'Those infallible sources of information, the mutton bones, were referred to every day, and fleets in full sail were seen approaching the coast in the *scapula* or shoulder-blades... so convinced indeed were the authors of these prognostications that they would be realised, that they demanded, as a matter of course, the *backshish*, or gratification, it is customary to make to the bearers of good news [*gwf'apsch'e*; ρυφίανσιλῆ]' (Longworth 1840, vol. 2, pp 79-80).

Haricot beans were thrown to tell somebody's fortune, mainly by old women. In later times, divination by coffee-grounds, apparently a Turkish influence, became fashionable. Perhaps the closest thing the Circassians had to the Greek Delphi was Zhulat, the holiest sanctuary. Unfortunately, there are no records of oracular rites or of an officiating priestly caste.

Beyond the primitiveness of looking into animal entrails, star-gazing offered a model of the universe and a more ordered view of how it worked. Since time immemorial, Circassians took guidance from the stars literally and in their spiritual and mundane life. Astrology was named *vaghwaplthe* [вагъуапльэ], literally star-gazing. There is some evidence that the cromlechs found in Circassia and Abkhazia served as observation posts of celestial bodies, and were used to predict natural phenomena, including the weather.<sup>14</sup>

At any rate, the Circassians were aware of most of the well-known heavenly bodies and some celestial phenomena. A comet was called

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<sup>14</sup> See G. Shamba, 1999, p50.

*vaghwe abrej* (вагъуэ абрэдж), literally ‘star-horseman’, Mars *Ax’shem Vaghwe* (Ахъшэм вагъуэ), ‘Evening Star’, Ursa Major *Vaghwezeshiybl* (Вагъуэзэшибл), and the Milky Way *Shixw Lhaghwe* (Шыху лъагъуэ), literally ‘path of horse-driver’, and so on.

Besides the scientific endeavours, there was inevitably a corpus of superstitions attached to heavenly bodies. According to the Circassian scholar Askerbi T. Shortanov (Shorten; 1982, pp 36-7):

Every person had his own star – it was considered as a reflection of his/her soul ... It was prohibited to recount stars, for it was said that doing so would cause a rash, or warts to erupt all over the body, with number of warts equal to number of stars counted. The Circassians believed that if an ill person rubbed his eyes with his fingers and saw stars, he was destined to live, otherwise he would meet his doom within 24 hours.

## Rites of Devotion to Specific Deities

### *Hentsegwasche*

Adorable deities were represented mainly by effigies made from trees. In times of droughts, a procession carrying an effigy of the goddess of rain, Hentsiygwasche (Хьэнцийгуашэ) or Hentsegwasche (Хьэңцэгуашэ), marched through the stricken village with supplications for rain:

<b>Хьэңцэгуашэ зыдошэрэ!</b>	<b>Song to Hentsegwasche, the Goddess of Rain: ‘We are escorting Hentsegwasche!’<sup>15</sup></b>
Хьэңцэгуашэ зыдошэрэ! Ежью. Я дэ ди тхьэ, уэшх кьегьэщэщэх!	We are escorting Hentsegwasche! Chorus: Our Lord, let it pour down from above!
Хьэңцэгуашэ зыдошэрэ! Ежью. Я дэ ди тхьэ, уэшх кьегьэщэщэх!	We are escorting Hentsegwasche! Chorus: Our Lord, let it rain in plenty upon us!

The households along the route poured water on the idol, also exclaiming, ‘Our Lord, let it rain in plenty upon us!’ (Я дэ ди тхьэ, уэшх кьегьэщэщэх!). They donated (uncooked) victuals, such as husked millet, eggs, dried meat, etc, to the procession, which then headed to the river-valley, where the foodstuffs were cooked and consumed whilst prayers were being said. The partakers also performed *psixelhafe* (псыхэляфэ), the rite of bathing fully-clothed to call forth the rains. According to Kabardian tradition, the idol was later taken to the village centre, where it was fixed to the ground and the supplicants then performed the dance *wij x’wrey* (удж хьурей) round it. On that day, it was considered a great sin to appropriate other people’s possessions, and it was strictly forbidden to engage in *wineyidzihe* (*wine-yidzihe*; унэидзыхьэ) or *k’wese* (кIуэсэ), the age-old custom according to which

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<sup>15</sup> This is the Kabardian version of the chant, which addresses the native Circassian deity, *The*. The ‘Christian’ rendition of the self-same chant channels the imploration to Awisch-Yeliy (St. Elijah, or Elias), or Yele. The Cherkess version of the supplication, i.e. the one used by the Circassians in the Karachai-Cherkess Republic, invokes the Muslim God Allah (*Alih*), but which otherwise preserves the prayer to a letter.

a suitor, with a group of trusted friends, abducted his beloved (with her own assent) from her parent's house on a set date and time.<sup>16</sup>



Depiction of the ritual of supplication for rain. The effigy of Hentsiygwasche, the Goddess of Rain, is carried across the village and doused with water.

Despite their specific regionality, two Shapsugh versions of the rain supplication – enchanting and sweet – are included as the Western Circassian representatives of this song genre, for the sake of comparison (V. H. Bereghwn and Z. P'. Qardenghwsch', 1980, p80; pp 87-8).<sup>17</sup> The residents of the three villages of Lighwetx, Qalezch and Hajeqwe (in what is now called the Lazarevsky District) would assemble at a set location on the bank of the River Ashe, after escorting the effigy with the ritual chant 'Hantsegwasher zeteshera...' («Хъанцэгущэр зэтэщэра...») ('We are escorting Hantsegwashe...'), to perform the supplication

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<sup>16</sup> This custom, which still exists to this day, corresponded to the old Western custom of elopement.

<sup>17</sup> The sheet music of both chants is available in the book. Recodings of the songs by the Adigean State Folk Song Ensemble 'Yislhamiy' are available on the CD accompanying Amjad Jaimoukha's book *Circassian Culture and Folklore: Hospitality Traditions, Cuisine, Festivals & Music (Kabardian, Cherkess, Adigean, Shapsugh & Diaspora)*, London and New York: Bennett and Bloom, 2009. The chants can also be heard at <http://iccs.synthasite.com/circassian-journal.php>.

ceremonies, including chanting, dancing, drenching each other with water, and symbolic sacrifice. The effigy of the Goddess of Rain was fixed in the middle of the river until the arrival of the rains.<sup>18</sup> In the first chant, ‘We are escorting Hantsegwashe...’, the supplication is addressed to the (native Circassian) Goddess of Rain (Hantsegwashe, in Western Circassian), whilst in the second, ‘We Yeleme, siy schewe naschwx’we!’ («О Елэмэ, си шъэо нашъухъ!») (‘Oh Elijah, my grey-eyed laddie!’), St. Elijah (Yele) – personified as a grey-eyed youth – is invoked. The latter chant accompanied ritual dancing in the annual rain ceremonies of the Shapsugh held in April supplicating the Deity of Rain for summer rain.

<b>ХЪАНЦЭГУАЩЭР ЗЭТЭЩЭРА...</b>	<b>Song to Hantsegwashe, the Goddess of Rain: ‘We are escorting Hantsegwashe...’</b>
Хъанцэгуашэр зэтэщэра — Ощхэр къещха!	We are escorting Hantsegwashe — It is raining! <sup>19</sup>
Ныхэтхы къыщэгъуагъо — Ощхэр къещха!	It is thundering in Nixetx — <sup>20</sup> It is raining!
Лыгъотхы къыщегъэшха!	May it rain in Lighwetx! <sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> More details of these ceremonies (in Russian) are found in B. Kh. Bgazhnokov, 1991, pp 62-4.

<sup>19</sup> This is more like wishful thinking.

<sup>20</sup> Nixetx is the name of a summit (in classical Shapsughia in Western Circassia), a few kilometres from where the supplication ceremony used to be held.

<sup>21</sup> Lighwetx (=Ridge of Fire) is the ancient (Circassian) appellation of a Shapsugh settlement on the left bank of the River Ashe, at a distance of about 13 km from the Black Sea coast. The village is located in the Lazarevsky District (of Sochi) in the Krasnodar Krai. In the 1920s, the name of the village was supplanted by the Russian onomastic ‘Krasnoaleksandrovsky III’. However, the original name was restored in 1993. With the choice of Sochi as the site of the 2014 Winter Olympic Games, it would be apt to emphasize that the whole northeast coast of the Black Sea was once part of the homeland of the Circassians. The Circassian nationalists still lay claim on the whole area and are adamant that the original Circassian place names be restored in all of Circassia. For Circassian onomastics of the region (and historical Circassia in general), refer to J. N. Kokov’s and K. Kh. Meretukov’s works listed in the bibliography.

Ощхэр къещха!	It is raining!
Шъэонажъор — къоепсы рагъашъуа!	Schewenazchw — they are giving him whey for a drink! <sup>22</sup>

<b>О ЕЛЭМЭ, СИ ШЪЭО НАШЪУХЪО!</b>	<b>Song to St. Elijah, invoking rain: 'Oh Elijah, my grey-eyed laddie!'</b>
О Елэмэ, си шъэо нашъухъо! Жъыу. О Елэрэ Ялэу!	Oh Elijah, my grey-eyed laddie! Chorus: Oh Elijah Elias!
Шъэо нашъухъор къоепсы рагъашъо! Жъыу. О Елэрэ Ялэу!	They are giving the grey-eyed lad whey for a drink! Chorus: Oh Elijah Elias!
Гъуитхы къыщэгъуагъу! Жъыу. О Елэрэ Ялэу!	It is thundering in Ghwyitx! <sup>23</sup> Chorus: Oh Elijah Elias!
Лыгъотхы къыщцебгъэщхэу! Жъыу. О Елэрэ Ялэу!	Will it to rain in Lighwetx! Chorus: Oh Elijah Elias!
О Елэмэ, си шъэо нашъухъу! Жъыу. О Елэрэ Ялэу!	Oh Elijah, my grey-eyed laddie! Chorus: Oh Elijah Elias!
Шъэо нашъухъор къоепсы рагъашъо! Жъыу. О Елэрэ Ялэу!	They are giving the grey-eyed lad whey for a drink! Chorus: Oh Elijah Elias!

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<sup>22</sup> 'Schewenazchw' is the name of a brother of a (hallowed and benedict) 'victim' of lightning. It literally means 'Half-Awake Lad'.

<sup>23</sup> Ghwyitx is the name of a ridge in the mountains of Western Circassia, accessible from the road connecting Maikop to Tuapse on the Black Sea coast. Tuapse (Туапсе [T'wapse]=Two Rivers, in Circassian) is situated between Sochi in the south and Gelendzhik in the north.

### **Sozeresh**

Sozeresh (Созэрэш; also Soziresh [Созырэш], Sozeresch [Созэрэш], Sozresch [Созрэш]), the god of fertility, family hearth, well-being and illness, was a great voyager and had the winds and waters at his command. A connection has been suggested between Sozeresh and Osiris, the Egyptian god of fertility, life, and death. It is believed that the principal point of commonality of the two deities (apart from nominal similitude) is that (the fertility rites depicting) their ‘death’ and ‘resurrection’ signify the sprouting of vegetation.<sup>24</sup> Sozeresh and Zchegwpathe (patron of the domestic hearth), as a collective, correspond to the Lares and Penates in Roman mythology.

Sozeresh was adored on the first three days of spring, starting on the Circassian New Year’s Day, which fell on 22 March. The Circassians mark this day as the end of winter and the beginning of summer (*ghere sch’ire schizexech’ maxwem*; гьэрэ щырэ щызэхэкI махуэм). It was believed that the soul returned first to air, then to water and finally to earth, with an interval of one week in between. In the ceremony of worship of Sozeresh, a hawthorn or pear (кхъужьей е хьэмкIутей) sapling was cut down in the forest and configured so that seven branches were left intact (‘seven’ was a particularly significant number in ancient Circassian folklore). Almost all households had such an image.

The Sozeresh tree (пхьэлъантхьуэ; *px’elhantx’we*) was kept in the granary in the yard.<sup>25</sup> On the day of his festival, it was brought out of the granary in the evening in a solemn ceremony presided over by the newest daughter-in-law. As the members of the family approached the granary, the daughter-in-law addressed the deity: ‘Sozeresh, open the door and let us in!’ («Созэрэш, бжэр Iухи, дыныщIэгъыхьэ!»). The daughter-in-law fetched the tree out of the barn, and the effigy was brought inside the house in a grand ceremony, with accompanying music and to cheers from all the members of the family, who complimented him on his arrival after spending the whole year on the surface of the sea. Little candles were stuck to the branches and a piece of cheese was attached to the top.

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<sup>24</sup> The ‘fact’ that the fish ate the private parts of Osiris, with the consequent tabooing of consumption of fish, also resonates with the aversion of the Circassians towards fish as food.

<sup>25</sup> There is another meaning for ‘*px’elhantx’we*’ in the Circassian language: ‘A tree trunk with twigs for hanging up articles and utensils in a courtyard, field-camp, etc.’

The tree was placed upright in the middle of the living room in front of the hearth, and the family members sat around the tree and supplicated thus:

Я дэ ди тхьэу тхьэшхуэ,  
ГьэфI кьыдэт,  
Ди гьавэр гьэбагьуэ,  
МафIэм дыщыхьумэ...

Our god, the supreme god,  
Bless us with a propitious year,  
Multiply our harvest,  
Protect us from fire...'

The participants then indulged in revelry in which *makhsima* was had, songs sung, and a grand dance part held. Afterwards, the idol was taken to the yard (and Sozeresh returned to his abode on the surface of the great sea), where it stayed without any mark of reverence until the next holiday.

Other rituals and ceremonies associated with Sozeresh include those associated with vigil over the sick.

### ***Vigil over the Sick***

In the *sch'apsche* (щIапщэ) or *sch'epsche* (щIэпщэ) ritual (кIапщ [ch'apsh] in Adigean), the friends and relatives of a person with a bone fracture or an illness kept a vigil over him to keep him company and prevent him from falling asleep by making loud clamour, chanting songs, and engaging in games by his bedside. On these evenings, in contrast to others, many witty and lively pranks and jests were played to amuse the patient and keep him alert.

The collective term for the games played at a vigil is '*sch'opschak'we*' (щIопщакIуэ). In the game hobby-horse (пхьэш; *px'esh*; Adigean), a long wooden stick was hung by ropes from the (roof) beam in the middle of the room. A player would sit astride the wooden 'horse' with a small stick in hand. Upon hearing "May you have a safe journey!", the other players, in jest, would shake the stick to cause him to fall off, and the player astride the 'horse' would try his best to stay up.

The earnest side of the *sch'apsche* ritual consisted of reciting songs and chants of supplication to the lord of the disease in question to cure the affliction and exorcise the disease. The miasmatic realm of disease and injury was lorded over by Sozeresh.<sup>26</sup> It was taboo to address the dreaded lords of disease with their proper names, so replacement epithets were used instead. It was considered taboo to utter the word «фэрэки» ‘*ferech*’ («шъорэки»; ‘*schwerech*’, in Adigean). Instead, it was referred to with substitute designations, such as ‘The Nameless One’ («ЦІэимыІэу»; ‘*Ts’eyimi’ew*’), ‘The Guest Sent by Sozeresh’, or simply ‘Sozeresh’. A typical song-charm to alleviate smallpox (*ferech*’), namely ‘Swift White Horse...’\* («Тэпырагъошъы пкІэгъуала...»),<sup>27</sup> from the Western Circassians (Bzchedighw), and which was sung by the bed of the sick, ran as follows (V. H. Bereghwn and Z. P’. Qardenghwsch’, 1980, pp 102-3):

<b>ШЪОРЭКИ ОРЭД: «ТЭПЫРАГЪОШЪЫ ПКІЭГЪУАЛА...»</b>	<b>Smallpox Chant: ‘Swift White Horse...’</b>
Тэпырагъошъы пкІэгъуала, Бланэуи чъэрэмэ дэльохъуа.	The swift white horse, Tears along fleeter than the deer.

<sup>26</sup> Some of the sinister residents of this kingdom of disease and injury were Black Death (тэлэу [telew], емынэ [yemine]; the latter term is more generic of disease, for it could comprehend ‘cholera’, as well as ‘plague’, and is more folklorically charged), malaria (техъэгъуэ [teihewwe]; the term is also used generically for fever), smallpox (фэрэки; *ferech*’), chicken-pox (бжэнтепкІэ; *bzhenteipch’e*), consumption (жъэн уз; *zchen wiz*), measles (фэгъазэ; *feghaze*), cholera (тало; *talo*), green-sickness (фэншэуз; *fenshewiz*), influenza and catarrh (пыхусыху [pixwsixw], пскІэІэпкъльэпкъ уз [ps-che’epqlhepq wiz]), typhus (хуабэуз; *xwabewiz*), leprosy (уэшын; *weshin*), diarrhoea (ныбажэ; *nibazhe*), stomach-ache (ныбэуз; *nibewiz*), and mutilation (фэбжь; *febzch*).

<sup>27</sup> ‘Swift White Horse...’ is in the repertoire of the Adigean State Folk Song Ensemble ‘Yislhamiy’. The sheet music of the prayer chant is included in the quoted book. A recoding of the song by the Adigean State Folk Song Ensemble ‘Yislhamiy’ is available on the CD accompanying Amjad Jaimoukha’s book *Circassian Culture and Folklore: Hospitality Traditions, Cuisine, Festivals & Music (Kabardian, Cherkess, Adigean, Shapsugh & Diaspora)*, London and New York: Bennett and Bloom, 2009. The song can also be heard at <<http://jaimoukha.synthasite.com/circassian-religion.php>>.

Лыхъухэр копкыджэ ефызы, Дэнэгъу бзыери дельэшъуа.	The brave ones are squeezing its thighs, <sup>28</sup> Itself in gilded silk.
Дэнэгъо бзыери дельэшъуа, Ошьогъуанэми шагъэхъуа.	Itself in gilded silk, They pasture it at the edge of the heavens.
Ошьогъуанэми шагъэхъуа, Зыусхъаным ишыгъэхъупІа.	They put it to pasture at the edge of the heavens, Where the Master’s horse pasture lies.
Зиусхъаным ишыгъэхъупІэр, Алахъэ, гъэхъунэ даха.	The Master’s horse pasture is, By Allah, a lush meadow.
Алахъ гъэхъунэ дахэу, Чъыгэе дахэри кырокІа.	By Allah, a lush meadow, Where splendid oak-trees grow.
Чъыгэе дахэри кырокІа, Зибэ гушэ кыкІэри кьальошъхъэ.	Fine oak grows there, As well as more clover than anywhere else.
Зибэ кыкІэри кьальошъхъа, Яунашъхъэри дышъабгъа.	More clover grows there than anywhere else, His ethereal abode is roofed with gold.
Яунашъхъэри дышъабгъа, Бгъэнэуи тельэри къурища.	His roof is covered with gold, The roofing on it – three blades of grass.
Бгъэнэуи тельэри къурища, Чэмищэу дафыри мышыхъуа.	The roofing on top is of three blades of grass, Three of his bovines are perennial milch-cows.
Чэмищэу дафыри мышыхъуа, Зыдафырэ кьалэшъы хъурая.	Three of his cows are permanent milkers, His cow-house is a magnificent palace.
Зыдафырэ кьалэшъы хъурая, Тыжъыны хъураери шагъэчъа.	His cow-house a resplendent palace, Where silver ingots are cast.
Тыжъыны хъураери шагъэчъа, Зыпчъэ нахъыджэ имыІа.	Silver bullion is founded there, Where there is but one entrance.
Зыпчъэ нахъыджэ имыІи, Зыпсынэ яІэшъы мыжъуакІэ.	It has but one door, The bottom of its spring – shingle.

<sup>28</sup> The horse’s thighs are squeezed so as to subdue it.

Зыпсынэ ялэшгы мыжъуакIа, Ращы кыкIэчъырэр шъоупса.	The bed of its spring is of pebbles, The welling water is mead.
Ращы кыкIэчъырэр шъоупса, Типсэ-купсэри уихъакIа.	The welling water is honey-sweet, Our souls are guests in thy realm. <sup>29</sup>
Типсэ-купсэри уихъакIа, ХъакIэри мафэшгы кытфакIуа.	Our souls are thy guests, The auspicious guest is coming to us.
ХъакIэри мафэшгы кытфакIуа, КъызыфакIори щыгъища.	The propitious guest is coming to us, Issuing forth from three beads.
КъызыфакIори щыгъища, Щыгъыфищыри зырыза.	He hails from three beads, The three beads issuing forth disjointed brightness.
Щыгъыфищыри зырыза, Зэрызищышгы мэтIыгъуа.	The three beads issuing their light in disconcert, They ripen separately.
Зэрызищышгы мэтIыгъуа, ЯтIыгъуакIэри гухахъуа.	The three beads ripen separately, Their ripening is such a joy.
ЯтIыгъуакIэри гухахъуа, Гум хэзгъахъори зиуза.	Their ripening is a great joy, A delightful bliss for the one with disease.
Гум хэзгъахъори зиуза, Зиузыгъори фэпсынкIа!	A delightful bliss for the ill, May his disease ease up!
Зиузыгъори фэпсынкIа, ПсынкIэ охъушгы охъужъа!	May his illness be mitigated, May thee get better, may thee recover!
ПсынкIэ охъушгы охъужъа, Ухъужьынэуи тхъа еIуа!	May thee get well, may thee recover, May God predestine it for thee to heal!
Ухъужьынэуи тхъа еIо, Тхъам ыIуагъэри нахъышIуа!	May God will it for thee to recover, What God ordains is so much better!
Тхъам ыIуагъэри нахъышIуа, Тхъам ишIушIэри IэшIэха.	God's will cannot be surpassed, God is so swift in his beneficence.

<sup>29</sup> Therefore, our souls ought to be inviolable.

Тхьам ишлушІәри ІәшІәха, Тхьам идахәри хьопсагъуа.	God is swift in his beneficence, God is lavish in his mercy.
Тхьам идахәри хьопсагъуа, Чылэ хьопсагъоуи тыкъана!	God is so lavish in his beneficence and mercy, That our village shall remain an object of envy!

From the Eastern Circassians (Cherkess) there is the chant «Уо Истэ, Истауэ!» ‘Oh, Yiste, Yistawe!’, which were sung by the bed of the sick. It ran as follows (V. H. Bereghwn and Z. P’. Qardenghwsch’, 1980, p105):<sup>30</sup>

<b>ФЭРЭКИ УЭРЭД: УО ИСТЭ, ИСТАУЭ!</b>	<b>Smallpox Song: ‘Oh, Yiste, Yistawe!’<sup>31</sup></b>
Уо Истэ, Истауэ! Ежью. Уо уэрида!	Oh, Yiste, Yistawe! Chorus: Wo weriyda!
Истэ, Истаушц! Ежью. Уо уэрида!	Yiste, Lord-Yiste! Chorus: Wo weriyda!
Я нэхьыпшыр зымыдэ! Ежью. Уо уэрида!	Who acknowledges no greater lord! Chorus: Wo weriyda!
Зи джэмыдэ тхьэрыкъуэ! Ежью. Уо уэрида!	Whose dove is light chestnut! Chorus: Wo weriyda!

### **Zchegwpathe**

The festival of Zchegwpathe (Жьэгупатхьэ; Jegwpath [Джэгупатхь], in Adigean), patron of the domestic hearth, was celebrated on the first day of January.<sup>32</sup> This was a strictly familial affair, and the special viands

<sup>30</sup> The sheet music of the prayer chant is included in the quoted book.

<sup>31</sup> ‘Yiste’, ‘Yistawe’ are epithets of the Lord of Smallpox. The Christian Mozdok Kabardians use the name of the god Sozeresh (Sozeresch [Созэрэш] in their dialect) as a euphemism for the disease.

<sup>32</sup> Zchegwpathe and Sozeresh, as a collective, correspond to the Lares and Penates in Roman mythology.

were specifically called ‘Хаме’wemixwe’ (ХамәІуэмыхуэ; ‘Missing Strangers’). The role of Zchegwpathe was assumed by the most senior (male) family member. To him was consecrated the most prestigious part of the sacrificial animal – the side (дзажэ; *dzazhe*), smoke-dried in the hearth flue. To Zchegwpathe was devoted the whole established complex of cults connected with initiation of the new bride into her father-in-law’s hearth, the inauguration and upkeep of the hearth-fire, and funeral feasts, and other rites and ceremonies. These cultic rituals are representations of the conception of the Circassians of the soul of their primeval ancestor, Dade. The cult of Dade is still alive, though mainly symbolically, in the Circassian ethos.

Prayers were then taken up by the priest, usually the eldest person in the group, who delivered a sermon that included a homily and thanksgiving for blessings rendered by the god. Next the rite of *thelhe’w* (ТХЪЭЛЪӘІу) took place. The idol was presented with many culinary offerings, including *makhsima* [махъсымэ], the national beverage. Animals, such as bulls, rams, lambs, ewes, and goats, were then sacrificed in front of the idol for the purpose of propitiation and propagation of bliss. The priest then distributed the flesh among the worshippers, not forgetting the ill and the poor who were unable to attend. The slaughtered animals were then cooked and feasted upon. The occasion merged solemnity with merry-making in a natural and healthy manner.

### ***Theghelej***

The rites of worship of the god of flora and crops, Theghelej, had people of both sexes gather in the early hours of the day and start on a procession to the local sacred grove. They took with them an ample supply of victuals and a number of sacrificial animals. Festivities started when they entered the ancient wood. An effigy of the deity in the shape of a cross was placed near one of the most venerated trees in the wood. Prayer chants were intoned in single voice and chorus. The men and women formed a circle round the idol and the sacred dance, *wij* (удж), was performed solemnly in much the same way it is done today. Couples moved round the icon holding hands, with music and chant in the background. When the effigy had been circumambulated a few times, a new formation was assumed in which all partakers in the dance faced the icon holding hands and lifting them periodically in supplication.

Theghelej found his calling in the search for wholesome crops for the Narts and ancient Circassians to grow. Sowing and harvest festivals and

rituals, such as ‘Start of Ploughing Campaign’ (вакӀуэдэжӀ; *Vak’wedech*), ‘Attaching the Ploughshare’ (вабдзэ тельхъэ; *Vabdze Teilhhe*), ‘Drawing the First Furrow’ (гъунэилъ; *Ghwne-yilh*), ‘End of Ploughing Campaign’ (вакӀуэкъихъэж; *Vak’weqiyhez*), were initiated by pronouncing toasts supplicating Theghelej for abundance. For example, before drawing the first furrow, Theghelej was invoked thus:

ГЪУНЭИЛЪ ХЪУЭХЪУ	Toast of the First Furrow
Я дэ ди тхъэ, Тхъэгъэлэдж, Тельыджэр зи Іужь, Едгъэжъа Іуэхур гъэбагъуэ!	Our god, Theghelej, Lord of wonder, We pray thee: Multiply our harvest!
И гугъур яхуэмыІуатэу, Матэ щІэдзауэ дыпсэууэ, Псапэр хэтщІыкІыу, КІыщыр дгъэгугфІэу, Ди фІыгъуэ тІэкІур Гъэбагъуэ! <sup>33</sup> ...	Nill our work to be toilsome, May we live in clover, May we be able to do charity, May our forge give us joy, Our small fortunes Will them to multiply! ...

### **Lords of the hunt: Mezithe and Dawischjerjiy**

Prayer songs of the hunt were addressed to the patrons of the activity, namely (the pagan) Mezithe (Мэзытхъэ) and (the Christian) Dawischjerjiy (St. George) (Даушджэрджий; *also* Awischjerjiy [Аушджэрджий], Awischijer [Аушыджэр]). The pagan-Christian duality in Circassian folklore shows itself most vividly in the musical lore. In fact, the penetration of Christianity into the Circassian ethos goes much deeper than mere ‘scissors placed crosswise on the chest of the deceased,’ as this study is making increasingly obvious.

Two chants from the Kabardian repertoire are presented in Appendix 2.

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<sup>33</sup> Full text of toast can be found in Z. Qardenghwsch’, 1985, p23.

### **Lhepsch**

Every deity in the Circassian Pantheon had his/her special attributes. In the Nart universe, Lhepsch was the Patron of smiths, iron, weapons and fire. He manufactured metal implements and arms for the benefit of the Narts. In one story, his wife gave him the idea of making tongs when she saw a dead snake doubled on itself. In another, the shape of the crescent moon provided the blueprint for the sickle. At one time Lhepsch shared the smithy with X'wdimizch (ХЪУДЫМЪЖЪ). The metallic exploits of the assiduous smith engendered universal veneration. It was in appreciation of his extraordinary feats that he was elevated to the rank of the gods. It is believed that the god of the smiths started out on his life as an ordinary human being, a mere apprentice.

Some of the gods had human forms, and a few were even mortal, as was our protagonist. The fleeing of Lhepsch from a dissatisfied 'customer' in one tale is indicative of this—an attempted deicide, so to speak. In another tale, an angry client (Имыс; Yimis) severs Lhepsch's legs at the knees. Thenceforth tales fork in their accounts. Some state that the legs were sewn back on again and that Lhepsch recovered following a period of intensive care rendered by the Narts to their beloved smith, including holding vigils (щлпщэ; *sch'apsche*) by his sick bed. However, in a Hetiqwey tale the assiduous efforts of the Narts to heal Lhepsch proved unsuccessful, as he succumbed to fate and gave up the ghost.<sup>34</sup>

The ceremony of worship of Lhepsch consisted of libations over a plough and an axe, symbols of plenty and might, respectively. Lhepsch corresponds to the Roman god Vulcan and to Hephæstus in the Greek Pantheon.

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<sup>34</sup> The Hetiqwey tale is found in A. Hedeghel'e, *Nartxer* (The Narts), vol. 1, third cycle, tale no. 77, Maikop, 1968, pp 265-6. The Hetiqwey make up one of the (still extant Western) Circassian nation-tribes.

Lhepsch also possessed magical healing powers. An ‘exorcism’ to heal a wound is drawn from the Shapsugh musical store (V. H. Bereghwn and Z. P’. Qardenghwsch’, 1980, p118):<sup>35</sup>

<b>КІЭПЩЭ ОРЭД: УАТЭ, УЭТЭЖЪЫЕУ...</b>	<b>Song of vigil over the wounded: ‘Hammer, little hammer...’</b>
Уатэ, уэтэжъыеу, уэтэжъые псынкла! Уэ Лъэпшьэуэ зиуатэмэ уатэр егъэпсынкла! Уэ Лъэпшьэуэ зиуатэмэ псынклэу егъэхъужьа!	Hammer, little hammer, fast little hammer! Lhepsch, lord of the hammer, knocks quickly with the hammer! Lhepsch, lord of the hammer, swiftly heals [the wound]!

This curious custom (of keeping vigil over the sick) was a relic of animist times, when evil spirits were believed to be lying in wait for the patient to fall asleep to take possession of his body. The friends and relatives took turns to bring along all that is necessary for the wake. The fare consisted of boiled chicken, loaves of cake and bread, fruits, vegetables, etc. A practical benefit of this practice was to ensure that the break did not get worse by the injured flinching or assuming a wrong position in his sleep.

It is worthy of notice that the Circassians, despite their firm belief in the might and glory of their deities, also took practical steps to guard themselves against the ravages of some of the diseases that afflicted their country. According to Voltaire (1734), ‘The Circassian women have, from time immemorial, communicated the smallpox to their children when not above six months old by making an incision in the arm, and by putting into this incision a pustule, taken carefully from the body of another child. This pustule produces the same effect in the arm it is laid in as yeast in a piece of dough; it ferments, and diffuses through the whole mass of blood the qualities with which it is impregnated. The pustules of the child in whom the artificial smallpox has been thus inoculated are employed to communicate the same distemper to others. There is an almost perpetual circulation of it in Circassia; and when unhappily the smallpox has quite left the country, the inhabitants of it are in as great trouble and perplexity as other nations when their harvest has fallen short.’ The Ottomans adopted inoculation from the Circassians, which practice was transmitted to England through the open-minded Lady Wortley Montague.

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<sup>35</sup> The music sheet of the invocation is available in the quoted book.

***Elegies for the drowned***

Elegies were chanted and ritual melodies were played by the water body in which a man had drowned as incantations to recover the body. The Cherkess tune «Псыхэгэ» ('Psixeghe') played on the theme of a drowned man on the *bzchamiy* can be found in V. H. Bereghwn and Z. P'. Qardenghwsch', 1980, p96.

## Beliefs & Cults

Dancing was believed to have locked powers that might be invoked to ensure success of an undertaking. Dance was initially a religious rite, a kind of spirited prayer. Later it turned into a form of festive celebration, keeping some of its ritual significance. Disease and injury were considered as the works of evil, so that the sick were blown upon to exorcise the malevolent spirit. Toasts were first uttered as magic invocations and incantations to unlock hidden powers. The wind was thought to have some evil power, hence the adoration of Zchithe (ЖЫТХЪЭ) and the rites of supplication associated with him.

Friends and relatives of a person with a bone fracture kept him company and kept him from sleeping by making loud clamour and chanting songs by his bedside. This curious custom, named *sch'apsche* (щӀапщӀэ), was a relic of animist times, when evil spirits were believed to be waiting for the patient to fall asleep to take possession of his body. A practical benefit of this practice was to ensure that the break did not get worse by the injured assuming a wrong position in his sleep.

### Immortality of the soul

Immortality of the soul was one of the basic beliefs of the Circassians. Upon death, the soul transmigrated to the world beyond, or *hedrix* (хьӀдрыхӀэ). To make it to the eternal abode, the deceased was in need of an ample supply of provisions, concomitant wares, and his personal weapons to sustain and protect himself on the perilous trek. One rite in the elaborate burial ceremonies had the kin of the deceased inhumate these requirements, which were commensurate with the status of the deceased. Archaeological finds of victuals fit for lavish feasts and impressive arsenals have confirmed this thesis.<sup>36</sup> Ancestor worship was a direct consequence of this credo. It is not clear whether women of the upper classes enjoyed the same exquisite funereal treatment.

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<sup>36</sup> See 'Death & obsequies', Chapter 9 of A. Jaimoukha, 2001, pp 182-5.

## **Ancestor worship**

Ancient Circassians venerated their ancestors, believing in the immortality of the soul. They buried the dead with full panoply of arms and other accoutrements near their sacred groves. Feasts were held annually at certain times in honour of the dead, who were presented with fares in the belief that they maintained their bodily functions and were capable of feeling.

## **Cult of the hero**

Stemming from ancestor worship was the cult of the hero. Like in Greek religion, some humans of extraordinary abilities were elevated to the rank of gods. Many of the gods associated with the Nart Epos probably started out as human beings. For example, the metallic exploits of Lhepsch engendered universal veneration. Some characters seem to have been stuck between humanity and godliness, having unusual faculties but not really admitted into the Pantheon. In this category may be included Satanay and Sosriqwe. Human and animal bones found in ancient burial grounds provide evidence that the ancestors of the Circassians practised sacrifice, which might have held a special position in ancient proto-religious rites. According to legend, association of human immolation with crop growing, hence bliss, followed the mysterious slaying by Theghelej (Тхьэгъэлэдж) of a man who attacked him and the subsequent sprouting of three corn plants on his grave.

## **Pyrolatry**

Intimately connected with the cult of the hearth was fire-worship. The Ancient Circassians venerated fire, either because it was difficult to master, or probably as an influence of Zoroastrianism. One of the deep-rooted traditions of the Circassians was to keep their hearths afire, never allowing them to get cold. This sacred and onerous task was fulfilled by the household matriarch (Унэ гуащэ; *wine gwasche*). In fact, ‘Унэ гуащэ’ was the protectress of the domestic hearth in the Circassian Pantheon.

The quality of a housewife was assessed by the upkeep of her hearth fire. A woman was complimented in this manner: ‘That woman’s fire never went out all her life. Is there a housewife like her?!’ In contrast, about a lazy housewife it was said: ‘Isn’t she a slothful hag, letting her hearth grow cold!’ The technique for perpetuating fire was to feed it with logs

for cooking and heating, the embers collected in one corner of the hearth and covered with ash when not in use.

When a new bride first crossed the threshold of her father-in-law's house, a fire was lit in her quarters called 'start of fire of bride's room.' The bridegroom's mother who usually lit the fire, toasted her daughter-in-law thus:

May your fire never be extinguished!  
May your hearth never go cold!  
May it remain warm and bright!  
May you never want crops  
Nor meal to cook, my little one!

The bride there and then took a vow never to allow her hearth to grow cold.

A warm Circassian greeting went thus, 'May your fire be blessed!' If somebody's fire went out, it was considered a sign of his impending doom. To this day, the Circassians use the following maledictions: 'May your fire go out!', 'May your hearth be extinguished!', 'May your fire be washed by water!'

A household whose smoke kept issuing swore invoking god of the fire. 'I swear by the lord of light of this hearth.' 'I swear by god lord of this hearth.'

The Circassians used brands lit from hearth fires for light. The best kind of lighting wood was obtained from the pine-tree (уэздыгъей; *wezdighey*; literally: 'lamp-tree'). Two kinds of lamps were used, black lamps and ordinary ones. The former was fixed inside another kind of carved-out wood. In this case, it gave out brighter and better light. Women lit these lamps when they sewed at night. As an indication of the superiority of a black lamp, the following expression has survived to this day: 'You won't be able to find him, even with a black lamp.'

## The Circassian hearth: The inner sanctum

In Circassian (and in general North Caucasian) cosmology everything was held in place by the Universal Chain. The hearth-chain (жьэгү лъахъш; *zhegw lhax'sh*) was the household's link to the cosmos – the coupling to the universal scheme of things. Every home had a permanently lit hearth with a wrought iron chain hanging down the chimney. All native North Caucasian religions regard the family hearth with special reverence and it was the principal place at which family rituals were conducted, principally offerings and sacrifices and the rites associated with the cult of Dade (Weriydade; Дадэ; Уэридадэ), the clan hero, the head of the household, whose immortal soul transmigrated to *hedrixé* (хьэдрыхэ; the world beyond) after death. The patrons of the domestic hearth were the deities Sozeresh and Zhegwpathe (Жьэгупатхьэ; literally: God of the Hearth). A new bride was 'un-chained' from her father's hearth and then 'joined' to that of her father-in-law in special circum-ambulatory ceremonies. Vestiges of the cult of Dade are come upon in the corpus of ceremonial songs collectively referred to as 'Weriydade', the most famous of which being the one chanted during the bridal homecoming. The hearth chain still retains symbolic functions and significance.<sup>37</sup>

The hearth was built in the middle of the inner or outer wall of the spacious kitchen/living room, or in a corner, where it had a special triangular shape. Beyond the cultic realm, it was used both for warming and for cooking. About 125 cm above the hearth, a piece of wood was placed to which a metal ring was fixed to support the hearth-chain (лъахъш; *lhax'sh*) of the cauldron (шыуан, лэгъуп; *shiwán, leghwɔp*=copper cauldron that tapers towards the top). The cauldron had a metal grip/handle (лэгъупыкъу; *leghwɔpɔqɔw*) for hanging and carrying, and was supported on an iron trivet (шыуанлъакъуэ, шыуанщIэт; *shiwánlhaqwe, shiwansch'et*).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> For further information on the cult of the hearth of the Circassians, refer to M. A. Meretukov (Meretiɔwe), 'Kult ochaga u adigov [The Cult of the Hearth of the Circassians]', in *Scientific Transactions of the Adigean Science and Research Institute, Ethnography*, Maikop, vol. 8, 1968. See A. Jaimoukha's *The Circassians: A Handbook* (Routledge, 2001, pp 179-80, p182, and p228), and *Circassian Culture and Folklore* (Bennett and Bloom, 2009), for yet more information on cultic practices of the Circassians associated with the hearth and fire-worship.

<sup>38</sup> '*Leghwɔpɔqɔw*' also designates 'the (arch of the) rainbow' in Circassian.

### **Tree worship**

Circassians worshipped certain trees, believing that they were inhabited by invisible divinities. There were two deities associated with trees, one male Mezithe (Мэзытхэ; Forest-god), and another female, Mezgwasche (Мэзгуашэ; Forest-lady). There were sacred groves and shrines in which ceremonies were conducted to propitiate local divinities, procure good weather for the harvest, good luck in expeditions and so on. Thunder and lightning were venerated; the patron of which was Schible (Щыблэ). Some rivers were also considered sacred.



Artist's impression of ancient tree worship ceremonies of the Circassians in the sacred grove. It seems that the animist spirit is by and large still alive in the hearts and minds of Caucasian Circassians. Separation from Mother Earth and various and sundry influences from hosting peoples and cultures have caused the diaspora Circassians to be deprived of the quintessence of the ancient spirit.  
(Felix Petuvash in B. Kh. Bgazhnokov, 1991, p36)

## Entreaties & toasts

Offerings to deities in form of festive meals, *thelhe'w* (тхьэлъэIу; entreaty of god), were made to beg for favours, like rain, recovery of the sick, plentifulness, etc. Supplications were incorporated in religious ceremonies. *Thelhe'w* also refers to religious festivals during which entreaties were addressed to the deities.

Snippets of the old beliefs are also to be found in the toasts that are uttered at certain ceremonies and occasions. Toasts were initially invoked to appease the gods and as supplications, among other purposes. Before an important undertaking, toasts were pronounced that invoked the supreme god, *Theshxwe*:

ИУЭХУ УБЛЭ ХЪУЭХЪУ	New Undertaking Toast
Ди тхьэ, Тхьэшхуэ, ПсынцIэ теIуэ, ФIы теIуатэ, Iэ ижъым егъэублэ, Iэ сэмэгум егъэух. УзыншагъэкIэ къедгъэхьэлIэж, ГуфIэгъуэкIэ дыгъэшхьж!	Our God, The Greatest One, Destine it to be accomplished in a trice, Pronounce it to be profitable, Let it start with the right hand, Let it end with the left. Let us reap its fruit with a whole skin, And let us have it with joy!

The toast is rendered into Latin script.

### 'Wexw wible x'wex'w

Diy the,  
Theshxwe,  
Psinsch'e tei'we,  
F'i tei'wate,  
'E yizchim yeghewible,  
'E semegwm yeghewix.  
Wizinshaghech'e qeidghehel'ezh,  
Gwf'eghwech'e digheshxizh!

Toasts were first uttered as magic invocations and incantations to unlock hidden powers or to appease the gods. Important occasions and undertakings were preceded and accompanied by complex rituals of toast-making. A feast could only start with a toast by the eldest participant, then by the guests, and the affair could last throughout the session, which at times lasted for hours on end.

There were two kinds of toasts. The first had the toastmaster addressing one of the gods of the Circassian Pantheon. The other kind, believed to be more ancient, consisted of a corpus of toasts that were more like wishes, invoking no deity.

There were toasts to the new moon, good ploughing, blessed seed planting, increase of cattle, plentiful harvest, marital bliss, and so on. Marriage rituals claimed a considerable chunk of the toast repertoire. Before setting out on a hunt, toasts invoked the goodwill of Mezihe (Мэзытхэ), god of forests, the hunt and beasts. Before going out on ploughing campaigns, toasts were addressed to Theghelej (Тхэггэлэдж) god of the crops, praying for abundance.

The first day after the autumn harvest was considered a national holiday. Ceremonies were held before allotment of crop shares. Toasts addressed to the supreme god, Theshxwe (Тхэшхуэ), were pronounced, followed by supplications and prayers to bless the harvest. Feasts were held and song and dance parties took place. Another harvest festival was held in March marking the Circassian New Year.

Toasts addressed to the ancient Circassian deities (principally, Theshxwe, Theghelej, and Amisch) can be found in Ziramikw Qardenghwsch', 1985.

## Death & life after life

Central to the cult of death was the belief in *hedrix* (хьэдрыхэ) or the afterlife, and in the immortality of the soul. The Circassians venerated their ancestors, and took good care of the ancient burial grounds and sepulchres, *q'ezch* (кхъэжь). Elaborate ceremonies of death were developed, which sometimes touched on the bizarre.

A wife mourned her husband in a wild manner, scratching her face and body until they were bloodied. A husband struck his face with a whip until it turned black and blue. The corpse underwent ceremonious washing, *hedegheps-ch'* (хьэдэгъэпскI), on a special slab, *hedegheps-ch'-px'ebghw* (хьэдэгъэпскI-пхъэбгъу).

Dirges were chanted by the corpse of the deceased, and special prayers were said. The collective of laments over the dead was called '*bzhe*' («бжэ»; literally: 'door'). A couple of examples are presented (V. H. Bereghwn and Z. P'. Qardenghwsch', 1980, p201; p202).

<b>БЖЭ: АЙ, ЛЪЭБЫЦЭ МЫГЪУЭ!<sup>39</sup></b>	<b>Dirge: 'Alas, hapless Lhebitse!'<sup>40</sup></b>
Ай, Лъэбыцэ мыгъуэ! Уи кIуэцIыкIыщIэм жиIэр уи жьэм жегъэИи Уи гур гъэзагъэ, (уэуэу, ы-ы)! Уа, уа, уа, уа, уэу! Уа, уа, уэу! Уа, а, а, а, а!	Alas, hapless Lhebitse! What grieves thy heart, let thy mouth relate, And relieve thine soul, (wewew, i-i)! Wa, wa, wa, wa, wew! Wa, wa, wew! Wa, a, a, a, a!

<sup>39</sup> This is a Kabardian elegy.

<sup>40</sup> 'Lhebitse' (literally: 'Shaggy-legged'; 'Covered with long fluffy hair about the ankles') is the name of the (male) person whose death is being lamented.

**БЖЭ:  
УЭ, СЫТУ ІЕЙ  
МЫГЪУЭУРЭ КЪЫТХУЗЭТРАПІА  
УИ НИТІ МЫГЪУЭР!<sup>41</sup>**

(А ды-ды-ды-дыд,) мыгъуэ!  
Уэ, сыту Іей мыгъуэурэ къытхузэтрапІа уи нитІ мыгъуэр!  
(Ей-ей), си Мурат!

А, си нэжан цЫкІу мыгъуэ!  
А, си нэжан цЫкІу мыгъуэ, (ей-ей)!  
Уэ, сыт мыгъуэр сусыну, (уэуэу)!  
А, ай!  
(А, уэу, уэу, уэу, уэу, уэу,) мыгъуэ!  
(А ды-ды-ды-ды-дыд,) мыгъуэ!

**Dirge:  
'Oh, how thou have shut  
your pitiful eyes to us  
for ever and ay!'**

(A di-di-di-did,) alas!<sup>42</sup>  
Oh, how thou have shut your pitiful eyes for ever and ay!  
(Ey-ey), my Murat!

Ah, my poor bright-eyed little one!  
Alas, my clear-eyed lad!  
Oh, I am lost for words for my grief, woe is me!  
A, ay!  
(A, wew, wew, wew, wew, wew,) woe unto me!  
(A di-di-di-di-did,) alas!

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<sup>41</sup> This is a Kabardian elegy.

<sup>42</sup> 'A di-di-di-did' is an interjection expressing woe and sorrow.

The deceased was carried off to the cemetery on a stretcher, *q'able* (кхъаблэ). A monument, *q'aschhedese* (кхъашхьэдэсэ), was erected by the head of grave. A slab, *hedex'ebghw* (хьэдэпхьэбгъу), was used to shut the niche in the grave. Special guards, *q'ex'wme* (кхъэхъумэ), ensured the upkeep and sanctity of burial grounds.

The deceased was buried with full panoply of his arms and accoutrements, and an ample supply of food, to serve him well on his journey and in the afterlife. In the 16th century, upon the decease of a nobleman, a high platform was constructed in the open, on which the corpse, with the innards removed, was placed in a sitting posture for eight days. The kin and companions of the dead visited him every day, offering cups of silver, bows, fans and so on. The two eldest relatives stood guard at each side of the exposed body, supporting themselves against the estrade and propping themselves with staffs. On the left hand, a young girl holding a fan was posted to drive away the flies. In front of the estrade sat the wife with her eyes transfixed on the corpse, but she never cried, as this was considered shameful. At the expiry of the wake, the body and the gifts were placed on a cross formed by sowing a tree trunk in half, and taken in a procession to the sepulchre. A mound was piled over the sarcophagus, which contained the favourite weapons and costumes of the dead. The mightier the deceased, the greater was the tumulus.

With the body inhumed, an attendant was instructed before dinner to saddle the steed of the deceased and take it by hand to the new tomb. He was to call thrice upon the departed to come out and take a meal with his family and friends. Having done that, the attendant returned with the steed, needless to say, with his entreaties unheeded. Dinner was then had—the partakers content that they have done their duty towards their dead kin. This charade was repeated for many days.<sup>43</sup> In later times, priests officiated burial ceremonies.

Some aspects of these curious ceremonies were confirmed by archaeology. Finds that go back to the Circassian Belorechenskaya culture (Belorechenskaya is situated to the northwest of Maikop), which existed from the 13th to the 16th centuries, revealed the remains of barrows belonging to Adiga (Circassian) nobility. Objects found included exquisite sabres, pieces of armour, helmets, and other objects of foreign

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<sup>43</sup> Details of ancient burial rites are found in S. Khan-Girey, 1978, pp 315-22.

origin. Some food vessels were also found in old burial grounds. This is one happy occasion when accounts by a foreign traveller (Giorgio Interiano, who wrote in the middle of the 16th century) and archaeology coincided.<sup>44</sup>

It would seem that the custom of burying personal implements, especially arms, gave way to more pragmatic considerations, as the exigency of defending the land against a determined foe gained ascendancy in the 19th century. John A. Longworth, in his usual mock-serious style, commented on the discarded practice: 'In former times it was the custom to bury the dead with their arms and accoutrements; but the modern Circassians, wiser in their generation, seem to think the defunct will be equally satisfied by being decorated with them previously, and then buried without them.' (1840, vol. 2, p17).

After the funeral rites had been completed, a sumptuous feast was held in honour of the deceased in the sacred grove, under the trees. Games were played and dance galas took place as festal rites. For the poorer families, the celebration was postponed until the necessary victuals have been accumulated. During the first week of the death of a member of a family, the household was spared any culinary chores. The friends of the deceased took turns in providing catering for and wait upon the mourners and condolers.

The traditional period of mourning was forty days during which the closest members of the family visited the grave daily. At the end of this term, a memorial festival took place and alms were handed out. A year later, a ceremony was held in full mourning garb in which the steed and the rest of the weapons of the deceased were displayed and sacrifices made. A procession with lit torches and bare-foot partakers was made to the house of the deceased bringing cattle and victuals. The next morning the men of the village gathered to engage in sport competitions. Commemoration ceremonies called '*hede'ws*' («хьэдэԼуc»; 'pottage for the cadaver') were held annually in winter.

Those killed in battle were collected at cessation of fighting at sundown and taken back home to be received in a macabre ceremony called '*hedepeizche*' («хьэдэпежьэ»; 'corpse-reception'). If a corpse was seized

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<sup>44</sup> For Interiano's work, see Ramusio, G. B., *Giorgio Interiano, Genovese a M. Aldo Manutio Romano, Della vita de Zychi chiamati Circassi*, Raccolta di Viaggi, t. 2, Venetia, 1583.

by the enemy, a price was paid to ransom it. During the last and desperate phase of Circassian resistance against Russian advance, an edict was issued to keep the bodies of the dead at the front, so as not to give shirkers the chance to keep away from battle. Similar ceremonies were held for those killed while travelling.

At one stage of their social development, the Circassians used to practise geronticide, or the ritual killing of old people when they reach a certain age. This might have been an ancient form of mercy killing, euthanasia, which allowed the old and feeble to die in dignity. Some societies in Eastern Europe kept this tradition until the 1930s.<sup>45</sup>

The Narts had a special council of doom, *Zchiwich' Xase* (ЖЪЫУКІ хасэ), whose duty was to summon people whose time had come on the eve of their execution, and to inform them of the council's verdict. The Nart Tribunal of Doom used to be held at the mighty house of the Alij (АЛЫДЖХЭ я унэ), where the Nart Council usually held its sessions. At the end of the meeting, the doomed one was presented with a glass of wine as a toast. He was allowed to spend the eve with his loved ones. On the day of execution, the condemned was thrown down the Yinzhiy Gorge.<sup>46</sup> The height from which the doomed ones were pushed to their death was called '*Zchigheyibg*' («ЖЪЫГЪЭИБГ») ['Mount of Old Age'].

Legend has it that one elder on death row managed to save the people from a number of impending disasters and, in gratitude for the feat, the custom was scrapped, and the wisdom of the old started to be appreciated. Subsequently, Circassian society held its elders in great esteem, and appreciated their wisdom and perspicacity.<sup>47</sup> According to

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<sup>45</sup> See for example T. P. Vukanović, 'Killing of Old People among Gypsies on the Balkan Peninsula', in *VI Congrès International des Sciences Anthropologiques et Ethnologiques*, Paris, 30 July-6 August 1960, vol. 2, Paris: Musée de l'Homme, 1964.

<sup>46</sup> Yinzhiy (Инжыдж) is the Zelenchuk River, a left tributary of the Kuban (Псыжь; Psizch). Located in the Karachai-Cherkess Republic, the Yinzhiy River has its source in the Caucasus Mountains.

<sup>47</sup> See «НАРТХЭ ЗЫХАНА ХАБЗЭ» ['The Custom Renounced by the Narts'], in *The Hearth Tree: Circassian Cultural Miscellany*, vol. 1, issue 1, January 2009, pp 23-30. Online. Available HTTP: <<http://iccs.synthasite.com/circassian-journal.php>> (accessed 8 May 2009). [In Circassian and English]

another version, a young Nart forcefully saved his doomed father and the custom consequently fell into disuse, as the council lost some of its prestige.

### **Magic numbers: 'Seven' and 'three'**

There is a duality, a perceived competition, in the significance of the numbers '7' and '3' in Circassian folklore. It seems that the former numeric is the more ancient of the two, going back to the 'classical era' of Circassian civilization. For example, the ancient saying, '*L'ewizchir bzchiyblch'e mawe*' («Л'эужьыр бжьиблк'э мауэ»; in Adigean: Л'эпкьыр блэ мауэ; 'Heredity is passed on for seven generations'; literally: 'Heredity's strike reaches seven spans'), encapsulates the Circassian custom of interdicting marriage between persons related up to the seventh ancestor so as to minimize the chance of genetic defects due to inbreeding. This was perhaps the next stage of prohibition of incest after the interdiction of close-relative marriages.

One interpretation of the salutatory expression, '*Yeblaghe!*' («Еблагъэ»; 'Welcome!'), is the wish on the part of the host for the guest to become a relative (*blaghe*; благъэ) (subject to the 'seventh-ancestor' rules and prohibitions).

The number '3' is encountered in more traditional (recent) settings. Yet, even in apparently homogeneous settings, both numbers seem to make strong showings, for example in the Nart tales. One explanation would be that in some tales the latter number was able to replace the former to incorporate some cultural novelty. Perhaps number '3' (a significant number in Indo-European folklore) was one of the introductions of the Indo-European invaders in the North Caucasus, particularly the (Iranian) Scythians and Sarmatians (ancestors of present-day Ossetians and most probably contributors to Circassian ethnic make-up), with whom the Circassians had a fertile interaction for hundreds of years. The presence of number '3' in some Circassian versions of the Nart tales was cited by the Caucasologist Georges Dumézil as evidence of the Indo-European origin of the epos, obviously not taking into account the possible explanation of the phenomena and processes stated here.

## **Magic & witchcraft**

The world of the ancient Circassians was replete with monsters, dragons, behemoths with several heads and eyes, one-eyed colossi, giant-killers, wood elves, creatures with canine heads and bodies of oxen, weird crews of witches and warlocks, old women with iron teeth and breasts thrown over the shoulders. The fiendish cast was tempered with knights in shining armour, fairies and belles capable of changing their shapes, plus magic flutes and magical trees. There was a widespread belief in magic and the black arts were thought to have been wielded by demonic creatures and a terrifying assortment of witches and warlocks. Lhepsch, god of the smiths, used to lock his smithy whilst at work, to keep people out, but one day, someone peeped into his workshop, and the magic was gone.

It was believed that evil spirits, *ch'erisch'en* (кIэрыщIэн), attached themselves to certain people, who, on this account, could master dark powers to harm unwary victims. One class of witches, *wid* (уд), were thought to have such contacts and had the uncanny ability to change their human form to that of wolves, dogs and cats, and even go invisible. They had avail of this power only at night. To these creatures were attributed children's illnesses and headaches, and murrain that smote cattle. They were also suspected of killing their own children. These fiends were supposed to effect these calamities by casting the evil eye on hapless creatures, though there were more elaborate methods.

There was a popular belief among some tribes that on spring nights these witches flew together astride an assortment of domestic and wild animals to the top of Mount Sibir-'Washh within the limits of Shapsughia. There they revelled all night long. Before dawn, they swept down the mountain and flitted about the houses strewing diseases from their bags. Thus, all spring illnesses were attributed to these sirens.

Those suspected of witchcraft were subjected to cruel harassment and persecution, oftentimes on mere suspicion and hearsay. One particularly horrible method of torture had a witch placed in ropes between two fires and thrashed with prickly birch-rods. The ordeal went on until she swore to forsake her devilish pursuits.

A sorceress, *almesti* (алмэсты), having the form of a naked woman with vertical eyes and flowing hair, was also said to have associations with powers of darkness. Her magic resided in her hair, hence the saying, 'To seize the *almesti's* hair,' meaning the achieving of a longed-for object.

Marie-Jeanne Koffmann, a cryptozoologist, believes in the existence of *almesti*, but only as the local wild man. She claims to have recorded hundreds of sightings in Kabarda.

### **Superstitions, jinxes, omens & black cats**

There was a plethora of old wives' tales. Households complaining of paucity of children abstained from doing the laundry on Friday (Day of Mary). The shape of a pregnant woman's abdomen told the gender of the fetus; a bulging belly predicted a male child, a flat appearance a baby girl. An expectant mother who cast eyes on fish gave birth to an infant with protruding eyes. A sneeze during a conversation was a confirmation of the truth of what was being said. If the sternutation occurred while talking about a dead person, someone had to pat the sneezer on the shoulder to prevent his joining the subject of the conversation. Fingernails had to be clipped in the morning, toe-nails in the evening. Seeing eggs in sleep predicted snowfall. Seeing oneself in sleep standing on a height presaged well.

A cat stretching in front of a hearth presaged the illness of a member of the household. A cock making his dawn call before the usual time omened the death of the family elder. A hen emulating cock's morning call foretold a calamity. Lovers who looked simultaneously in the same mirror separated soon after. Lunar eclipses presaged spread of contagion. Other presages of evil included keeping the dead at home at night, rocking an empty cradle, breaking a mirror, antagonizing one's neighbours, and talking about the dead while travelling at night.

## 3 Related Religions

### Circassian & Abkhaz Pantheons

The one hundred or so gods and goddesses of the Abkhaz Pantheon were divided into two distinct classes, superior and inferior, according to a strict hierarchical system. Deities were mostly associated with natural phenomena and with flora and fauna. The supreme idol corresponding to Theshxwe was An'tcwa, or 'god of gods,' 'the creator, in whom all the other gods are contained.' As in Adiga toast making, the first pronouncements invoked his name.

The Abkhaz Pantheon had more female deities than its Circassian counterpart. These were protectresses and patronesses of agriculture, water, and earth. The Abkhaz god of hunting and war, A'jarg, corresponded to Awishijer, the god of courage and fortitude. A'fy or Ayrq, god of thunder and lightning, answered to Schible and Afi. The counterpart of Sozeresh was Aj'tar, god of reproduction and domestic animals, and Hentsiygwasche corresponded to Dzi'waw, the rain-goddess. The Abkhazians also had a smithy patron-god. It is noticeable that there were a few 'loan' deities in the Pantheon, such as Aris, god of war, and Merceri, god of riches, apparently borrowed from the Greeks and Romans during their long stays in the Western Caucasus.

Like the Circassians, the Abkhazians had sacred places at which prayers and other religious ceremonies took place. Both shared their reverence for ancient groves and trees. A typical Abkhaz religious festival differed little from its Circassian counterpart. According to Rachel Clogg (1999), a specialist in Abkhazian cultural history, a wooden or iron cross was placed at the sacred location, reminiscent of the cross-shaped effigies of Sozeresh and Hentsiygwasche.<sup>48</sup> Offerings, including wine, were made to

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<sup>48</sup> For an account of Abkhazian native religion, refer to R. Clogg, 1999. For comparison with the ancient beliefs of the Chechens and Ingush, refer to A. Jaimoukha, 'Religion and Beliefs', in *The Chechens: A Handbook*, 2005, pp 106-22; B. K. Dalgat, 1893, pp 41-132; and B. K. Dalgat, 2004.

the deities and animals were sacrificed before the cross and then cooked for a feast. Prayers for a good harvest were a communal affair. The Abkhazians also venerated fire and the hearth, which were represented by special deities.

## Connection with Hattian Religion

The Hattians believed in a number of gods representing various acts of nature in the form of animals. Major deities included Storm-god, Patron-god, and Warrior-god. Statues of their most popular idols are on show in some major museums of Turkey.



Hattian idols in Museum of Anatolian Civilizations. These stone statues survived the vicissitudes of nature for millennia, whereas the wooden Circassian godly representations soon found perdition.

There is growing evidence that Hattian, or Hattic, a non-Indo-European and the oldest known language of Asia Minor, was kindred to proto-Northwest Caucasian. It is different to all other ancient Anatolian languages, perhaps with the exception of Kaskian and Hurrian. The language, which was never written, has been extinct for some four thousand years. The Hattians, who are considered amongst the earliest settlers in Anatolia, founded a Bronze Age civilization around 2,500 BC. They occupied central and southeast Anatolia and their city-state lasted for some 500 years. Some of the Hattian kingdoms included Hattus, Mahmatlar, Horoztepe, and Alacahoyuk, all of which were in Central Anatolia on the banks of the Kizilirmak.

The Hattian language and culture influenced the Indo-European Hittite civilization to no small extent. There are some indications of Mesopotamian influence on Hatti art and culture.

A connection has also been proposed between Hattian and Kaskian. The Kaskians formed a conglomeration of martial tribes that lived north of the Hattians. It was suggested that that they came from the Caucasus about 3,800 years ago and occupied Northeast Asia Minor. They managed to establish the mighty Kasku State. These formidable warriors had been a thorn in the side of the Hittite Empire until its last days. It is hypothesized that the Kashka, one of the Kaskian tribes, were the ancestors of the Circassians, whereas the Abshela, another tribe in the Union, engendered the Abkhazians. If there is truth in this, then it follows that the Circassians and Abkhaz had been already differentiated by that time.

It may be that the proto-Northwest Caucasians, the Hattians and Kaskians formed the eastern branch of an arch of kindred nations that spanned across southern Europe up to the Atlantic Ocean. These included the Basques, who still inhabit the Pyrenees, Iberians, Legurs, Etruscans, whose culture was influenced by the Hattians, Rets, Pelasgians who are an ancient pre-Aryan race which used to be widely spread over the coasts and islands of the Eastern Mediterranean and Aegean, and believed to have occupied Greece before the Hellenes, Kars, Cappadochians, Amazons, a race of female warriors alleged to have existed in Scythia, Khalybs, Colchians, Hattians, Kaskians, Hurrians, etc. These peoples were violently destroyed and replaced by Indo-European tribes. The present-day North Caucasians seem to be the only eastern remnants of this once mighty conglomerate of related peoples, with the Basques and the rump of the Iberians being the last of the western branch.

## 4 Christianity

Christianity came to Western Circassia from Byzantium during the reign of Emperor Justinian in the sixth century. Many priests were dispatched to Circassia and churches were built on some mountainous locations, from which the native population was proselytized. Orthodox and Catholic creeds were in competition at the time. According to Nogmov, the Christian period was characterized by cultural ebullience that lasted until the downfall of the Byzantine Empire. It presented the Circassians with the opportunity to catch up with the other advanced nations of the time, but they blew it due to their clinging to their old ways.

Priests were called *schojen* (Щоджэн) and bishops *shekhnik*.<sup>49</sup> Oral tradition still bears memory of the first bishopric in Circassia at a place near Nalchik, built more than 1,400 years ago:

Shekhnik is our protector and the mentor of our progeny  
He is the light sent by the Lord to save us from darkness

...

He erected for the Creator an iron tower with silver doors.

Other sources state that the Georgian Bagratids subjected Eastern Circassians and converted them to Greek Orthodox Christianity in the 13th century. Churches were built, which were destroyed at the end of Georgian rule in the 15th century. It is hypothesized that at the time Christianity was formalized in Circassia. Other sources state that in the 11th and 12th centuries the Russian princes of Tmutarakan and the kings of Georgia carried out the conversion.<sup>50</sup> Christianity never took deep root

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<sup>49</sup> There are still Circassian family names associated with the ancient caste, for example, Schojen (Щоджэн) and Schojents'ik'w (Щоджэнцык'у) (-*ts'ik'w* = diminutive suffix).

<sup>50</sup> In the 11th century, the Russians under Mstislav the Bold (son of Vladimir the Great) took part in routing the Khazar army in the Crimea. They then crossed the Taman Strait and defeated the Kassogs, or Kabardians, under their

in Circassia, being unable to supplant pagan and animistic beliefs and the age-old customs and traditions. However, the penetration of Christianity into the Circassian ethos goes much deeper than mere ‘scissors placed crosswise on the chest of the deceased,’ as this study is making increasingly obvious. The pagan-Christian duality in Circassian folklore shows itself most vividly in the musical lore.

From the 13th to 15th centuries, Catholicism made some inroads in the Western parts of Circassia due to the influence of the Genoese, who constructed trading posts on the coastal regions. Some churches were erected in the area. Catholic missionaries kept a presence up to the 17th and even later centuries.

According to Giorgio Interiano, who wrote in the middle of the 16th century, the Circassians were Christians of the Greek Orthodox domination and had priests to officiate religious ceremonies.<sup>51</sup> The rite of baptism was only performed when a child was eight years of age. A priest sprinkled blessed water while reciting a short benediction. There was no book of scripture in Circassian, and the priests recited Greek prayers that they could hardly understand. Noblemen were loathe to set foot inside temples until they were sixty, at which age the days of campaigns and warfare came to an end, lest they desecrated them.

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legendary leader Prince Reidade (Редедя, Rededyа, in Russian sources). Legend has it that at first Mstislav was unsuccessful and was forced to take refuge in a swamp, whence he sold his soul to the Devil (promised the heavens to erect a church, according to Russian sources). The Demon counselled him to challenge the invincible Reidade to a wrestling match. An epic duel was fought in 1022 AD, in which the Circassian giant was slain. Mstislav then subjugated the Iron, or Ossetes. He founded a small principality, Tmutarakan («Тмутаракань» in Russian), or Tamtarkan, under the suzerainty of Russia, with the Kabardians and Ossetes, amongst other peoples, as subjects. Mstislav was the prince of Tmutarakan in the period 988-1036, that is until his sudden death in a hunting accident. The Kassogs took part in Mstislav’s military campaigns. The town of Tmutarakan was situated on the Taman Peninsula, opposite Kerch. The Tmutarakan Principality lasted for a few centuries, but with diminishing influence in Circassia. According to Shora Nogmov (1861), Tamtarkan was destroyed at the hands of the Circassians, who still have the saying, ‘May the lot of Tamtarqay befall you!’ («Тамтаркъай (Тамтаркъей) и махуэр къыпхукӀу!»), е «Тамтаркъай (Тамтаркъей) ухъу!»).

<sup>51</sup> For Giorgio Interiano’s work, refer to G. B. Ramusio (1583).

Islam and Christianity co-existed for almost three centuries in the Northwest Caucasus, starting from the conversion to the Muslim faith of some Circassian princes by the Tatars in 1570. In the latter part of the 16th century, some princes from Kabarda and Western Circassia went into service at the Russian court, and they were (re-)converted to Orthodoxy and assumed Russian names. These were the progenitors of the aristocratic and influential Cherkassky families in Russia. During this period, it was common to find both Muslim, Christian and even pagan members in the same family. Those adhering to the first creed would have Arabic names, those to the second Russian, and the third group retained their ancient Circassian names.

Christianity suffered a severe blow in 1717 when the Crimean Khan, Dawlat Girey, ordered the killing of priests and the burning of religious books. This horrific incident was captured in the saying ‘May your property find perdition like the sceptres of the bishops!’ Nevertheless, a substantial proportion of the population had remained Christian until the turn of the 19th century. The war hastened mass conversion to Islam. Pockets of Christianity survived well into the 1830s. According to some accounts, they had churches in their villages and priests to officiate ceremonies.

In the Christian era, trees kept being revered. Crosses were erected in ancient sacred groves, usually near burial grounds, and were etched on venerable trees, whose cutting was considered an act of desecration. Some deities in the old Pantheon acquired new associations. For example, there is some evidence that the ancient god of courage and bravery, Awishijer (Аушydжэр), was associated with Isa (Исус), or Jesus Christ. Merise (Мэрысэ) was connected with Mereim (Мэрем), the Mother of God, in whose honour an annual festal ceremony was held. This may well have been the feast of Assumption, *Wivi’ep’e* (увыIэпIэ), the reception of the Virgin Mary into heaven, with body preserved from corruption, held on 15 August. A weekday, *Mereim*, Friday, was also named after her. Sunday was dubbed *Themaxwe* (тхьэмахуэ), Day of God.

Circassians venerated Saint Elija. Fasting and celebration of Easter (IyTыж; *’Wt’izh*) had remained important religious rites up until the 1830s, notwithstanding ignorance of significance. Fifteen days earlier they abstained from consuming eggs. The word has survived in the expression «и IyTыж» (*’yi ’Wt’izhsch*); ‘bed of roses’; literally: ‘his

Easter'). It was the custom for the person who godfathers an infant to be presented with a baptismal shirt, *ts'ef'eschjane* (цІэфІэшджанэ).

A typical Christian ceremony, which was usually preceded by periods of fasting, was conducted by priests.<sup>52</sup> Covered with mantles, they led the congregation, laden with victuals, in a solemn procession in the grove to a tree consecrated by a cross and to which small candles were attached. In the presence of the sacred arbor, the head-priest addressed the Creator praying for abundance, safeguarding of fields, and protection from pestilence and contagion. *Makhsima* (махъсымэ) was poured over the head of a bull destined for immolation, as a libation, and a few of its hairs were burnt by a candle.<sup>53</sup> The bovine was offered to God together with unleavened bread and cheese. The worshippers then feasted on the flesh and other fare, and dances and games were held.

A national Church never developed fully in Circassia, and it certainly disappeared in medieval times, probably after the end of Georgian hegemony. No lasting priestly class formed to maintain literacy and preserve written records, although the bards preserved some religious chants for posterity. According to Shora Nogmov (1861), the first published Circassian historian in the modern era, there were many ancient church relics in Circassia. Two such brick edifices are (still) located between the (upper reaches of the) Kuban and Teberda (in the southeast of the Karachai-Cherkess Republic): 'Shone' («ШОНЭ»=«Шу УНЭ»; 'The House of Horsemen') and 'Xase Mive'. The Council Stone (Хасэ МЫВЭ; *Xase Mive*) had a mythical rock with inscriptions of a horseshoe and the paw of a dog. Carved in the rock was a narrow aperture, which was used as a touchstone of truth and innocence. The accused was required to pass through the hole. If guilty, he got stuck, even if lean as a rake. Otherwise, he wriggled through without much difficulty. This was the Circassian equivalent of the 'Judging Mirror.' A stone (feeding-)trough and a horse tethering post can still be found at the site of the Council Stone.

There is a Christian Kabardian community numbering a few thousands in the town of Mozdok in North Ossetia. It is thought that the Russians lured this group back to Orthodoxy in the early years of the 19th century

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<sup>52</sup> F. Dubois de Montpéroux (1839, vol. 1, pp 132-8) provided a short account on Circassian religion as it was practised in the first part of the 19th century.

<sup>53</sup> Sacrifice was practised by all Christian Caucasians.

by promises of protection from the princes and nobility. Circassian Christians are in general not very religious. Their customs and traditions are almost indistinguishable from those of their Muslim kin. A study of their religious heritage and that of the kindred Abkhaz would shed more light on obsolete Christian practices. There was a saying among Orthodox Kabardians to the effect that when the cousin comes, the icon weeps. This originated from incidents in which Kabardians on visits to their Christian kin smashed icons as objects of heathen worship.

## Christian Festivals

The Christian Kabardians, who mainly live in the town of Mozdok in the Republic of North Ossetia, to the east of Kabardino-Balkaria, celebrated *X'wrome* (хъуромэ) as Christmas. Other Christian holidays and festivals still observed by the (5,000-strong) community include Easter (ИутЫж; *'Wt'izh*), Passover (also ИутЫж; *'Wt'izh*), Baptism of Christ (Топгъауэ; *Topghawe*; literally: Firing the Cannon), Assumption of Our Lady (МерэмыІу; *Meiremi'w*), 'Night of the Wolf-burrow' («дыгъужьыгъуэ жэш»; *'Dighwzchighwe Zhesch'*), and Supplication of the Cross (жор тхьэлъэІу; *Zhor Thelhe'we*).

### Christmas

The following Christmas 'carol', from the Mozdok Kabardians, is presented as an example of the Christian musical heritage amongst the present-day Circassians (V. H. Bereghwn and Z. P'. Qardenghwsch', 1980, pp 89-93). It is a song of praise and congratulation sung by young people as they circumambulated the courtyard on Christmas Eve.

ТХЪЭЛЪЭІУ УЭРЭД: УО ХЪУРОМЭ!	Christmas Carol: 'Oh, Christmas!'
<b>I</b>	<b>I</b>
Уо хъуромэ! Ежъу. Уо-уо!	Oh, Christmas! Chorus: Wo-wo!
Уо хъуромашэ! Ежъу. Уо-уо!	Oh, Christmas is upon us! Chorus: Wo-wo!
Уо, мышэрытщІэ... Ежъу. Уо-уо!	Oh, plentiful millet for us... Chorus: Wo-wo!
Уо, напщІэ махуэ... Ежъу. Уо-уо!	Oh, what good fortune... Chorus: Wo-wo!
Уо, натІэ исэ! Ежъу. Уо-уо!	Oh, what merriment! Chorus: Wo-wo!
И кум ирасэ! Ежъу. Уо-уо!	The table is placed in the middle! Chorus: Wo-wo!
Іэнэ дригушхуэ! Ежъу. Уо-уо!	It gives us such a great joy! Chorus: Wo-wo!
ХъуэхъушщІэ Іэнэу...	New Year's regalement...

<p>Ежью. Уо-уо!  Ари кыфлысы!  Ежью. Уо-уо!</p>	<p>Chorus: Wo-wo!  May it also be your lot!  Chorus: Wo-wo!</p>
<p><b>II</b></p>	<p><b>II</b></p>
<p>Ерерэ...  Ежью. Еру!  Уэ мыщэ!  Ежью. Еру!  Жыр мастэ...  Ежью. Еру!</p> <p>.....  .....</p>	<p>Yereire...<sup>54</sup>  Chorus: Yeru!<sup>55</sup>  Oh, bear!  Chorus: Yeru!  Steel needle...  Chorus: Yeru!<sup>56</sup></p> <p>.....  .....</p>
<p>Іэнэуэрэ...  Ежью. Еру!  Льякьюищэ!  Ежью. Еру!</p>	<p>The table...  Chorus: Yeru!  Is three-legged!  Chorus: Yeru!</p>
<p>Уэщ гуэрэ...  Ежью. Еру!  Пхэ кьутэ!  Ежью. Еру!</p>	<p>The axe...  Chorus: Yeru!  Chops the wood!  Chorus: Yeru!</p>
<p>Пхэ зыкьутэр...  Ежью. Еру!  Уэщ-джыдэ!  Ежью. Еру!</p>	<p>The wood chopper...  Chorus: Yeru!  Is the axe!  Chorus: Yeru!</p>
<p>Щхэм фалхьэр...  Ежью. Еру!  Чы пыІэ!  Ежью. Еру!</p>	<p>They get on the head...  Chorus: Yeru!  A switch cap!  Chorus: Yeru!</p>
<p>Зипкь иныр...</p>	<p>That which has a big body...</p>

<sup>54</sup> The meaning of 'yereire' has been lost.

<sup>55</sup> The meaning of 'yeru' has been lost.

<sup>56</sup> The next two lines of the song were left out by the singer.

<p>Ежью. Еру!          Ар махьшэ!          Ежью. Еру!</p>	<p>Chorus: Yeru!          Is the camel!          Chorus: Yeru!</p>
<p>Зи пщэ дахэр...          Ежью. Еру!          Тхьэрыкьюэ!          Ежью. Еру!</p>	<p>That with a beautiful neck...          Chorus: Yeru!          Is the dove!          Chorus: Yeru!</p>
<p><b>Ш</b></p>	<p><b>Ш</b></p>
<p>Уэ мышэ, мышэ!          Ежью. Уэщри дадэ!          Мышэ янэ таукьюэ...          Ежью. Уэщри дадэ!          Мыр таукьюэм ещанэ!          Ежью. Уэщри дадэ!</p>	<p>Oh, bear, bear!          Chorus: Holy Dade!          Mama bear tawiqwe...<sup>57</sup>          Chorus: Holy Dade!          This is the third of tawiqwe!          Chorus: Holy Dade!</p>
<p>Иришы-уанэ...          Ежью. Уэщри дадэ!          Ди уанэжь лъэгубгъуэщ!          Ежью. Уэщри дадэ!</p>	<p>His riding equipment...          Chorus: Holy Dade!          Our great saddle is wide!          Chorus: Holy Dade!</p>
<p>Дыздимыхьэри ди бийщ...          Ежью. Уэщри дадэ!          Дыздэклүэр дифищи!          Ежью. Уэщри дадэ!</p>	<p>Those to whom we do not go — our foes...          Chorus: Holy Dade!          Those to whom we go — our friends!          Chorus: Holy Dade!</p>
<p>Джэд, ахьши кьыдэфт...          Ежью. Уэщри дадэ!          Сэ сыхуейр кIуркIурщи!          Ежью. Уэщри дадэ!</p>	<p>Give us chicken and money...          Chorus: Holy Dade!          What I want is a turkey-hen!          Chorus: Holy Dade!</p>
<p>Нанэ кIуркIур иIэкьым...          Ежью. Уэщри дадэ!          ЕтIэнэгъэ кьыдитынщ!          Ежью. Уэщри дадэ!</p>	<p>Grandma has no turkey-hen...          Chorus: Holy Dade!          Next year we shall get some!          Chorus: Holy Dade!</p>

<sup>57</sup> The meaning of ‘tawiqwe’ has been lost.

The carol is reminiscent of the children's song 'Little badgers...', which is presented later in the chapter. This is an example of how the Christian creed sought expression through already cast folkloric channels and means to take hold on the Circassian ethos.

### **Easter**

A festival from the Christian era is described in some detail. Forty-eight days after the start of the fasting season (Lent), called '*Limishx*' («ЛЫМЫШХ»; literally: 'Abstinence from Meat'), '*Q'weyishx*' («КХЪУЕИШХ»; literally: 'Cheese-Eating'), or '*Wghwsch'e*' («Лугъушцэ»; literally: 'Parched Mouth'), the Circassians celebrated Easter (Лутъж; '*Wt'izh*').<sup>58</sup> During the fast, it was not allowed to consume meat and eggs, but dairy products were not interdicted. Meanwhile, the lady of the house kept collecting the eggs, and one week before Easter she boiled the eggs and divided them among the young ones to eat, signalling the end of fasting.

On Easter Day, young and old donned their best and gathered in God's Field (Тхъэм и губгъуэ; *Them yi Gwbghe*), a neatly kept unplanted area in which a crucifix had been erected. A feast was prepared in which boiled eggs and *heljeu* (хъэлджей) were mandatory foodstuffs. The participants, young and old, performed the Dance of the Cross («жор джэгү»; '*Zhor Jegw*'), a special kind of *wij x'wrey* (удж хъурей; circular prayer dance), the most sacred class of dances, in which supplicants went round a venerated object (the Cross, in this case) in a compact dance formation clasping at each other's forearms. In pagan festivals, instead of the Cross, the celebrants danced round the Sacred Tree (Тхъэжыг; *Thezhig*).

### **'Night of the Wolf-burrow' and the Assumption of Our Lady**

The Assumption (Мерэмылу; *Meiremi'w*, in Mozdok Kabardian) is the reception of the Virgin Mary, called '*Meirem Nexw*' («Мерэм Нэху»; 'Holy Mary') by the Christian Kabardians, into heaven, with body preserved from corruption. On the 14th of August (Old Style), a fortnight before the Feast of Assumption, the Mozdok Kabardians marked the

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<sup>58</sup> Лы (*li*)=meat, мышхын (*mishxin*)=not to eat (smth.); кхъуей (*q'wey*)=cheese, шхын (*shxin*)=to eat (smth.); Лу ('*w*)=mouth, гъушцэ (*ghwsch'e*)=parched.

‘Night of the Wolf-burrow’ («дыгъужьыгъуэ жэщ»; ‘*Dighwzchighwe Zhesch*’).<sup>59</sup> The next day, pies were prepared and all set off to church. The worshippers moved round inside the church stopping at each of its four corners chanting the hymn ‘Meirem Nexw’ («Мерэм Нэху»; ‘Holy Mary’). In a variation on this ceremony, a group of choir women, each carrying a whole loaf of bread in one hand, would go round the village cross in a dance formation chanting a hymn to the Virgin (B. Kh. Bgazhnokov, 1991, p64):

<b>МЕРЭМ НЭХУ<sup>60</sup></b>	<b>Holy Mary</b>
<p>Мерэм янэм и нэр дыгъэс, Мерэм янэм и бгъэр дыщэс!</p>	<p>Mother Mary’s eye is the sun, Mother Mary’s bosom is golden!</p>
<p>А уи дыщэ джабэм кыщцІэбгъэнэну, Ди щІэжьей цыкІухэр кытхуэпхъумэну, Я нэ, я псэ цыкІухэр кытхуэпхъумэну, Ди щІэжьей цыкІухэр дахэкІэ хэпхыну – Мерэм янэм дынольэІу!</p>	<p>By thy gilded side watch over Our young and safeguard them for us, Their eyes, their little souls protect for us, Save our little ones – Mother Mary, we pray thee!</p>

Following this ceremony, and for two weeks, there was no cleaning, sewing, nor whitewashing done, right up to the Feast of the Assumption on the 28th of August (Old Style; celebrated on 15th August by the Roman Catholic Church).

It is noteworthy that some of the ‘prophylactic powers’ of Sozeresh were transferred to the Virgin Mary, and he himself became associated with her son Jesus Christ. The chant itself is adapted from a more ancient hymn addressing Sozeresh (Созэрэш). The following hymns, both from the repertoire of the Mozdok Kabardians and addressed to Sozeresh and Holy Mary, respectively, show an instance of direct adoption of pagan music lore in the Christian era in Circassia:

<sup>59</sup> *Dighwzchighwe Zhesch* («дыгъужьыгъуэ жэщ») corresponds to the Russian Orthodox (honey) festival ‘Медовый Спас’.

<sup>60</sup> The hymn is in Mozdok Kabardian. In literary Kabardian, the Virgin Mary is referred to as ‘Mereim’ («Мэрем»). In her honour, ‘Friday’ («Мэрем») was named after her (only by Eastern Circassians).

<b>СОЗЭРЭЩЫМ И БГЪЭР ДЫЩЭС!<sup>61</sup></b>	<b>Smallpox Song: 'Sozeresch's chest is golden!'</b>
Созэрэщым и бгъэр дыщэс! Созрэщ къаным и бгъэр дыщэс!  А уи дыщэ чIабэмэ сыкычIэбгъанэрэ, Сэ сыкыэбгъэнэнкIэрэ щхьэщэ пхузощI!	Sozeresch's chest is golden! Our beloved Sozeresch has a gilded chest!  By thine gilded side keep me safe, Safeguard me and I shall bow before thee!

<b>МЕРЭМ НЭХУ<sup>62</sup></b>	<b>Holy Mary</b>
Мерэм Нэхум и бгъэр дыщэс, Мерэм къанмэ и бгъэр дыщэс!  Ар уи дыщэ джабэм дыкыщIэбнэрэ, Уэр дыкыщIэбнэрэклэ щхьэщэ пхудощI, Уэр дыкыщIэбнэрэклэ щхьэщэ пхудощI.	Holy Mary's bosom is golden, Our beloved Mary has a gilded bosom!  By thine gilded side keep us safe, Safeguard us and we shall bow before thee, Protect us and we shall worship thee!

<sup>61</sup> The prayer chant is in Mozdok Kabardian. The sheet music is found in V. H. Bereghwn and Z. P'. Qardenghwsch', 1980, p116.

<sup>62</sup> The hymn is in Mozdok Kabardian. It is chanted thrice.

## 5 Spread of Islam

There were two patterns of Muslim penetration of the Northern Caucasus. In the Northeast, the first contact with Islam took place in the seventh century when the Arabs conquered southern Daghestan. Gradually Islam spread to northern Daghestan and westwards to eastern Chechnya through proselytization. By the 15th century, most of Chechnya had been converted. The Ingush to the west held on to their ancient beliefs for a further four centuries.

The Kabardians were the first among the Circassians to be subjected to the influences of Islam. In 1570, Ghirai, the Khan of the Tatars, defeated a combined force of Kabardians and Beslanays and forced some princes to become Muslim. The majority of Circassians, freedmen, peasants and serfs, kept their old beliefs. The rivalry between Orthodox Russia and Muslim Tatars and their designs on Circassian lands, spilled over into a confrontation between the two faiths. However, the struggle was never serious, the Circassians in their usual manner taking the precepts of monotheism with a pinch of salt. It was only contact with the Ottomans and the advent of the Russians that hastened mass conversion to Islam in the 18th and 19th centuries. By the middle of the 19th century, most Circassians had become Muslims.

The principal religious belief of the time was that in life after life sin would be subject to punishment in proportion with the unlawful deeds of a person. However, for a Muslim, this venal period would be limited by making offerings, and then he would be admitted to blissful and eternal life in paradise.

The Ottomans never attempted to force Islam on the Circassians; instead, they elected to convert them through evangelism. Mullahs were dispatched to spread the good news. As time went by, a small indigenous ecclesiastic class formed mainly from freedmen but also with some members from the gentry. Cadets aspiring to the title of Effendi underwent a short period of instruction among the Tatars in Tabasseran or Ender. They learnt to read and write and were taught the basics of

religion. Upon graduation, they went back home to start on a career of proselytization.

In their attempt to spread the new faith, some ecclesiastics put together religious songs, based on the ancient pagan chants in novel forms using words translated from Arabic, and sung them during festivals. The Circassian Pantheon was slightly affected by Islam. For example, Schible (Шыблэ) was superseded by Weliy (Уэлий) or Heliy (Хьэлий), Prophet Muhammad's cousin and the fourth caliph.

After the exodus, the destinies of the immigrants and those who remained took different routes. The latter group was cut off from further Muslim influences and the old system of beliefs persisted. Only a minority performed Muslim rites and rituals. No organized religious class was developed. Knowledge of the Qur'an remained superficial. Some hybrid feasts were developed, such as *Qwr'enaje* (къурІэнаджэ), a funeral repast with readings from the Qur'an. There was no prohibition of alcohol or pork.

The immigrants initially kept their old beliefs and traditions. Some reports recount that they took their pigs with them. However, as time went by, the influence of Islam increased.

## 6 Contemporary Religion

### Religion under Communism

During communist rule, the already weak hold of Islam was further loosened through anti-religious campaigns and atheist propaganda. Not a single aspect of history, religion or culture was spared sanitizing procedures. The small number of mosques was closed and the clergy was persecuted, some mullahs being summarily shot. In 1924, religious education was prohibited and all Muslim schools were shut. In the 1930s, all mosques were destroyed in Adigea. A few places of prayer were kept as itineraries for foreign visitors. Muslim holidays were not recognized.

Native writers were directed to denigrate religion. Tembot Ch'erashe (Kerashev), who published many historical stories and works of fiction, dedicated his story 'The Tempest' to 'the emancipation of woman from the shackles of the Shariat.' Shejehesch'e wrote two anti-ecclesiastic poems, 'Spider and Fly' and 'The Old Mulla.' Generally, Islam was considered as a backward and reactionary force inimical to all progress, and the mullahs were depicted as a bunch of no-gooders, sucking the blood of the masses and sucking up to the nobles. When the Soviets began to woe the Muslim countries in Asia and Africa, the severe stance vis-à-vis Islam had to be ameliorated in order not to alienate them.

After World War II, religious life was regulated by the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of the Northern Caucasus, whose leaders were completely dependent on the Centre and fulfilled its instructions. They were selected from delegations sent annually to Mecca to perform the *hajj*. The main task of the official clergy was to reconcile Communism and religion.

## Glasnost & Post-Soviet Period

Glasnost and the subsequent disintegration of the Soviet Union started a gradual process of rehabilitation of Islam. This manifested itself mainly in the building of mosques, some of which were sponsored by diaspora Circassians. Seven mosques were built in various villages in Adigea since the early 1990s. However, plans to build a large mosque in the capital are facing financial problems. In Kabardino-Balkaria, the number of mosques grew from two to nine. In contrast, in Daghestan in 1995, there were, according to one count, 1,500 mosques, and by another, over 5,000. In the Karachai-Cherkess Republic, an Islamic institute was inaugurated in Cherkessk.

Government-sponsored students began to be sent to Middle Eastern countries to learn *shariat*, or Islamic law, at religious institutes. Upon return, the graduates filled official ecclesiastic positions sanctioned by local authorities. Among these was Sheikh Shafiyh Pschihesch'e (Pshikhachev), the present mufti of Kabardino-Balkaria who studied in Jordan in the early 1990s. Some Circassian returnees, being conversant with Islam and Arabic, but generally not religious specialists, also acted as mullahs and muftis. In addition, the whole Qur'an was translated for the first time ever into Adigean and Kabardian.



Post-Soviet mosque in Adigea.  
The Adigeans are the only Muslim nationality in the republic,  
the rest being Orthodox Christians in the majority.

Since 1991, there have been attempts by Christian missionaries to convert the Circassians in the Caucasus. The Gospels were translated and published in both Kabardian and Adigean in attractive packages. In addition, tape recordings of the Bible have been made available free both in the Caucasus and Diaspora. However, no inroads were made in this regard.

## Religion Today

The Circassians in the Caucasus are nominally Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi School, except for a small Orthodox Christian Kabardian community in Mozdok in North Ossetia. Special boards and councils supervise religious matters in the three NW Caucasian republics. The Spiritual Board of Muslims (established in 1989 and headed at the time of writing by Sheikh Shafiyh) and Council of Imams of Kabardino-Balkaria played a role in diffusing tensions arising following the declaration by the leaders of the Balkar nationalist movement of a separate Balkar republic in 1994. The Spiritual Board of the Muslims of the Karachai-Cherkess Republic was set up in 1990 and is headed by Ismail Berdiev, a Karachai. A separate board at odds with the local authorities was established by the Karachais in 1991, under the guidance of Ahmed Bidji-ulu. There is no religious board in Adigea and there are few religious leaders. All North Caucasian republics have religious newspapers and other periodical publications.

Northwest Caucasians are not known for their religious fervour, nor do they display fundamentalist tendencies. Islam in the Circassian Republics has thus far not been politicized. Most religious instructors who were drawn to the North Caucasus from the Middle East starting from the early 1990s found the Eastern North Caucasus a more fertile ground for their teachings. Wahhabiism, the dominant sect in Saudi Arabia has not gained any ground in the NW Caucasian republics. Even in Chechnya and Daghestan there is conflict between the new sect and traditional religious institutions.

In this respect, it is essential to emphasize the difference between the religious beliefs and practices of the Northeast and Northwest Caucasians. Islam forms an integral part of the social and spiritual life of the former. There has developed a synthesis of Islam and the old beliefs culminating in Sufism and the *Tarikat*. These ideas have never gained ground among the Circassians who see in them a threat to their traditions and ancient way of life.

All kinds of religions are tolerated. Orthodox Russians and Cossacks have their own churches, which are witnessing some revival. The Circassians have co-existed with the significant Jewish community concentrated in Nalchik for years. In the early 1990s, the number of Jews

in Russia fell in all areas except in Kabardino-Balkaria, where the number rose by 1,700.



Church in Adigea.

Thus far, religious conflict has escaped all Northwest Caucasian republics.

Muslim-Christian solidarity of the NW Caucasians was plainly demonstrated in the Abkhaz-Georgian conflict in 1992-93, when Circassian volunteers fought hand in hand with their Abkhaz kin. The Muslim Circassians had no qualms about helping the mainly Christian Abkhazians, and there was no love lost between these and their Georgian co-religionists.

The majority of Circassians in the Northwest Caucasus are harking back to their ancient traditions and systems of belief. Ancient festivals have been revived and publications on the theme of cultural revival are becoming more common.



Modern-day Circassians dancing round a Fire/Cross in celebration of the Circassian New Year, 22 March 2007 in Nalchik.  
The round turf represents God's Field (Тхьэм и губгъуэ).  
The animist-cum-Christian rite is a phenomenon of the eclectic nature of the Circassian system of beliefs.  
The kindred Abkhazians are more avowedly animist-pagan, despite the fact that the majority are formally Christian, still clinging tenaciously to their old traditions and rituals.  
(Photograph courtesy of adygaunion.com)

Diaspora Circassians tend to be more religious than those in the Caucasus, although the survival and strength of ancient beliefs among the latter definitely deserves investigation. This fact has been creating some friction between the two groups. Most diaspora visitors frown upon some of the customs and traditions of native Circassians that contravene Islamic law. The resulting tension is a consequence of the cumulative differences between the two groups. The situation will be under control for the near future owing to the small number of returnees. However, if the number is ever to increase substantially, then tension might develop into animosity, not to say conflict, which would defeat the whole purpose of the exercise.

## Appendix 1

### Prayer Chants Addressed to Lords of the Hunt: Mezithe and Dawischjerjiy

Two chants from the Kabardian repertoire are presented. The words of the chants and the sheet music are available in the quoted reference. Audio recordings of both chants by the Circassian musicologist and folklorist Ziramikw Qardenghwsch' are available at <<http://jaimoukha.synthasite.com/circassian-religion.php>>. The first, 'Pschimezithe'\* ('Lord Mezithe'), invokes Mezithe, the native deity of the chase (V. H. Bereghwn and Z. P'. Qardenghwsch', 1980, pp 65-9):

#### ЩАКИУЭ УЭРЭД: ПЩЫМЭЗЫТХЬЭ И УЭРЭД

1. ПщымэзытхьэКІэ, (уо уор,) соджэр, (иджы, уара уойдэ,) (уэ,) пашцІэ, (уа,) бзиипльрэ...

Ежью. Уо!

- Санэплъмэ, (уа, уо,) и бзабзэр, (иджы, уара уойдэ,) (уэ,) зыхуа(уо)гъэхыжьи...

Ежью. Уо!

2. Гьэлъэхъу хужьмэ, (уо, уо,) и бжьабэркъэ, (уара уойдэ,) (уа,) зи тыхьэ, (уа уари,) щІасэрэ...

Ежью. Уо!

- (Уэ,) зи нысэ, (уа-а, уо,) щІасэр, (иджы, уара уойдэ,) (уэ,) зыхуэльъэгуажьи...

Ежью. Уо!

3. Дэ недгъэ(уо)жъа гушэр, (иджы, уара уойдэ,) (уэ,) зэрыІэ(уари)щхьэхурэ...

Ежью. Уо!

- Ерэжьми, (ар, уэ,) махуэт, (иджы, уара уойдэ,) (уэ,) зэрыхуэІэжьи...

Ежью. Уо!

4. Щыхъыжъми, (уа,) и бжьэпэркъэ тІэ, (уара уойдэ,  
 (уэ,) зи сотэ(уэ-уа-ри)рэшрэ...  
 Ежью. Уо!  
 Бланэ пшэрми, (уо, уо, уор,) и щхъэфэркъэ, (уара уойдэ,  
 (уэ,) зи фэ, (уо-уэ,) сулыкъуи...  
 Ежью. Уо!
5. Пылыжъмэ, (уо-а, уо,) и пкъыркъэ тІэ, (уара уойдэ,  
 (уэ,) зи, (уо-уэ-уо,) быдакърэ...  
 Ежью. Уо!  
 (Уэ,) зи альтыныкІэм<sup>63</sup>, (иджы, уара уойдэ,  
 (уэ,) зрисэ, ди тхъэмадэжъщ,  
 бжьабэц пІэщхъэгъщ...<sup>64</sup>  
 Ежью. Уо!

### Song of the Hunt: The Song of Lord Mezithe

1. ‘Lord Mezithe’, (wo wor,) is his name, (yiji, wara woyde,)  
 (we,) his moustache, (wa,) is ginger red...  
 Chorus: Wo!  
 Red wine, (wa, wo,) cheery and fine, (yiji, wara woyde,)  
 (we,) is kept to maturity for him ...  
 Chorus: Wo!
2. The white wether, (wo, wo,) fattened and many- horned, (wara woyde,)  
 (wa,) is the offering to him, (wa wariy,) delectable and right...  
 Chorus: Wo!

<sup>63</sup> ‘АльтыныкІэ’ is a compound word formed of the Turkic ‘альтын’ (‘gold’, ‘golden’) and the Circassian ‘кІэ’ (here: ‘topknot’). In the olden days, Circassian men shaved their heads, leaving only a tuft of hair on the crown of the head. It is evident that not only did Mezithe have red moustaches, but he also had golden-red hair. When he got into a rage, his topknot would stand on end, terrifying all those around him.

<sup>64</sup> ‘Бжьабэ’ (‘multi-antlered’, ‘with branching antlers’ = ‘deer’) affords an example of a word used in the (secretive) language of the chase (*schak’webze*).

(We,) whose daughter-in-law, (wa-a, wo,) beloved and dutiful, (yiji, wara woyde,)  
(we,) kneels before him...

Chorus: Wo!

3. We sent to him, (yiji, wara woyde,)  
(we,) the white-sleeved maid...

Chorus: Wo!

Custodian of victuals, (ar, we,) blessed protector of people, (yiji, wara woyde,)  
(we,) masterly and dexterous...

Chorus: Wo!

4. The great deer's, (wa,) antler tips, (wara woyde,)  
(we,) are his toy sabres...

Chorus: Wo!

The fat fallow-deer's, (wo, wo, wor,) skin of head, (wara woyde,)  
(we,) is the material, (wo-we,) for his wineskin...

Chorus: Wo!

5. The mighty elephant's, (wo-a, wo,) hulking bone, (wara woyde,)  
(we,) is his, (wo-we-wo,) cudgel...

Chorus: Wo!

(We,) whose golden-red topknot, (yiji, wara woyde,)  
(we,) stands on end, our great leader,  
From the wool of deer is the head of thy bedstead...

Chorus: Wo!

The other song of the hunt is addressed to St. George, who shared the patronage of the hunt with Mezihe in the Christian era (V. H. Bereghwn and Z. P'. Qardenghwsch', 1980, pp 70-7):

**ЩАКИУЭ УЭРЭД:  
ДАУЩДЖЭРДЖИЙ И УЭРЭД**

1. Си уэройдщ, си уэройдщ, (уэуиуэу, уареди, уо,) угъурлыжът, угъурлыжъ!  
Ежбу. Уо, уоу, уоу рирари!  
(Уэреда уей, рауэией,) Псышхуэ и банэт, (иджы, уэ,) хуэгъуа(уэ)бжэт, (уоу, уо,) хуэгъуабжэти, (рауэией)..  
Ежбу. Уо, уо!  
Ди хъэ гъуа(уэ)бжэжъ гушэхэр, (уэр,) къальэф, (уэу,) я Іуст, я Іуст!  
Ежбу. Уо, уо!
2. Си уэройдщ, си уэрэдщ, (уэуиуэу, уарэди, уэ,) махуэт!  
Ежбу. Уо, уоу, уоу рирари!  
(Уэреда уи, рауэиай,) гъуэдыджмэ, (уэ,) ис гушэхэр, (уэ,) зэдэди, (уо-уа,) зэдэдизахуэти, (рэуэией)..  
Ежбу. Уо, уо!  
Іэзахуэм дыкІуэмэ, (тІэ, ар,) шытІуэтэ, (уо-уо,) шытІуэтэжынт, шытІуэтэжын!  
Ежбу. Уо, уо!
3. Си уэройдщ, си уэрэдщ, (уэуиуэу, уарэди, уо,) угъурлыжът!  
Ежбу. Уо, уоу, уоу рирари!  
(Уэрэда уи, рауэиай,) Даушджджэрджийт, (жи, уэ,) и тхэ(уо)шхуэр, (уоу, уо,) игъусэти, (рэуэиай)..  
Ежбу. Уо, уо!  
Пэшабэ,<sup>65</sup> (уэ,) гъусэт, (иджы,) напэ(уо)хур, (уоу, уо,) и кІэст, и кІэст!  
Ежбу. Уо, уо!
4. Си уэройдщ, си уэрэдщ, (уэуиуэу, уарэди, уэ,) махуэт!  
Ежбу. Уо, уоу, уоу рирари!  
(Уэрэда уи, рауэиай,) бажэ дешэнуэмэ, (уэр,) шы къуэ(уэ)гъукІэ, (уэр,) дывгъакІуи, (рауэиай)..  
Ежбу. Уо, уо!  
Бланэ деуэнуэмэ, (уэр,) шы пшэ(а)ркІэ, (уо,) девгъажьэт, девгъажьэ!

<sup>65</sup> In the language of the chase (*schak'webze*), wild boars and hogs were referred to as 'пэшабэ' '*peschabe*' (literally: 'soft-snouts').

Ежбу. Уо, уо!

5. Си уэройдш, си уэрэдш, (уэуиуэу, уарэди, уэ,) махуэт!

Ежбу. Уо, уоу, уоу рирари!

Мыр махуэти, (рауэиай,) ди Амэ(уэ)укъуэ гушэмэ, чыблэркъэ,  
(уо, уоукъэ, уоукъэ, уэ,) шагъэшри, (рауэией)...

Ежбу. Уо, уо!

Фэ гъуза(уэ)къашэхэр, (ар,) гуфэ зы, (уо-уо,) гуфэ зэтетт, гуфэ зэтетт!

Ежбу. Уо, уо!

6. Си уэрайдш, си уэрэдш, (уэуиуэу, уарэди, уэ,) махуэт!

Ежбу. Уо, уоу, уоу рирари!

(Уарэда уи, рауэиай,) ди Арыкъыжь гушэхэм мыр бжьабэ(уо)жьхэр,<sup>66</sup>  
(уоукъэ, уо,) кышоохъури, (рауэией)...

Ежбу. Уо, уо!

Бланэ е(уэ)хъуахэр, (иджы, ар,) лъэгуа, (уо-уо,) лъэгуажьэ фЫцІэти, (рауэией)!

Ежбу. Уо, уо!

7. Си уэрайдш, си уэрэдш, (уэуиуэу, уарэди, уэ,) махуэт!

Ежбу. Уо, уоу, уоу рирари!

(Уэрэда уи, рауэиай,) ди фоч фЫ(уэ)цІэжь гушэхэм, (уэр,) дызэды,  
(уо-уо,) дызэдышІопльри, (рауэией)...

Ежбу. Уо, уо!

И нэр зы(уэ)теплъэ гушэр мыр пшэрыхъмэ, (уо, уоукъэ, уоу, уэ,) ІэщІыкІкъым, ІэщІыкІ!

Ежбу. Уо, уо!

8. Си уэройдш, си уэрэдш, (уэуиуэу, уарэди, уэ,) махуэт!

Ежбу. Уо, уоу, уоу рирари!

(Уарэда уи, рауэией,) Бэдзэлэ(уэ)ижь гушэхэм мыр блэ фЫцІэхэри,  
(уоу, уо,) щызэпропщри, (рауэией)...

Ежбу. Уо, уо!

Сырымэ, (уэ,) Іэщхьэхэр ар зи щхьэм хуи(й)мыт, къритІ зэхуакум

ІэпщэкІэ кыдэзышыжыр Даушджэрджийш, Даушджэрджий!

Ежбу. Уо, уо!

<sup>66</sup> Another incidence of the (language of the chase) word ‘Бжьабэ [Bzchabe]’ (‘deer’). ‘Бжьабэжьхэр [Bzchabezchxer]’ = great deer (plural).

**Song of the Hunt:  
Hymn to St. George**

1. My song, my song, (wewiywew, wareidiy, wo,) is the harbinger of fortune, bringer of good luck!  
Chorus: Wo, wow, wow riyraryi!  
(Wereida weiy, rawe-yeiy,) the thickets by the Psishxwe River,<sup>67</sup> (yiji, we,) Are grey, (wow, wo,) are grey, (rawe-yeiy)...
- Chorus: Wo, wo!  
Our hardened grey hounds, (wer,) are dragging here, (wew,) their food, their food!  
Chorus: Wo, wo!
2. My hymn, my chant, (wewiywew, wareidiy, we,) augurs well!  
Chorus: Wo, wow, wow riyraryi!  
(Wereida wiy, rawe-yay,) in the deep burrows, (we,) dwells, (we,) our, (wo-wa,) our common prey, (rewe-yeiy)...
- Chorus: Wo, wo!  
If we set off to 'Ezaxwe,<sup>68</sup> there, (t'e, ar,) about our failures, (wo-wo,) Might we forget, might we forget!
- Chorus: Wo, wo!
3. My song, my chant, (wewiywe, wareidiy, wo,) is the omen of good fortune!  
Chorus: Wo, wow, wow riyraryi!  
(Wereda wiy, rawe-yay,) St. George, (zhiy, we,) his Supreme God, (wow, wo,) is in his company, (rewe-yay)...
- Chorus: Wo, wo!  
Herself, (we,) always with the soft-snouts, (yiji,) the white-faced [beauty], (wow, wo,) Is his bag, his booty!
- Chorus: Wo, wo!
4. My hymn, my chant, (wewiywew, wareidiy, we,) is propitious!  
Chorus: Wo, wow, wow riyraryi!  
(Wereda wiy, rawe-yay,) if foxes we are to hunt, (wer,) on lean steeds, (wer,) let's set off, (rawe-yeiy)...

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<sup>67</sup> Psishxwe literally means 'Big River' in Circassian. There is a mountain called 'Psishxwe' (2,100m) in the present-day region of Krasnaya Polyana in southwest Circassia.

<sup>68</sup> 'Ezaxwe' is the name of a place (in Circassia). 'Ezaxwe' means 'drinking party' in Kabardian. Perhaps 'Ezaxwe' was the place to be to drown one's sorrows!

- Chorus: Wo, wo!  
 If deer we are after, (wer,) on stout mounts, (wo,) let's depart, let's depart!  
 Chorus: Wo, wo!
5. My song, my hymn, (wewiywew, warediy, we,) is auspicious!  
 Chorus: Wo, wow, wow riyrary!  
 All day long, (rawe-yay,) at our Amewiqwe,<sup>69</sup> staffs,  
 (wo, wowqe, wowqe, we,) are bent, [stretching hide] (rawe-yeiy)...
- Chorus: Wo, wo!  
 The dried off hide that they bring, (ar,) is packed full, (wo-wo,) in layers in bullock carts,  
 In layers in bullock carts!
- Chorus: Wo, wo!
6. My hymn, my chant, (wewiywew, warediy, we,) omens well!  
 Chorus: Wo, wow, wow riyrary!  
 (Wareda wiy, rawe-yay,) at our ancient Ariq the great deer,<sup>70</sup>  
 (wawqe, wo,) are grazing, (rawe-yeiy)...
- Chorus: Wo, wo!  
 The fattened deer, (yiji, ar,) with knees, (wo-wo,) are with black knees, (rawe-yeiy)!
- Chorus: Wo, wo!
7. My song, my chant, (wewiywew, warediy, we,) bodes well!  
 Chorus: Wo, wow, wow riyrary!  
 (Wereda wiy, rawe-yay,) our great black muskets, (wer,) together we,  
 (wo-wo,) we fire simultaneously, (rawe-yeiy)...
- Chorus: Wo, wo!  
 If he looks into the eyes of whatever breed of prey, (wo, wowqe, wow, we,)  
 It cannot flee, it just cannot break free!
- Chorus: Wo, wo!
8. My chant, my hymn, (wewiywew, warediy, we,) is the omen of good luck!  
 Chorus: Wo, wow, wow riyrary!  
 (Wareda wiy, rawe-yey,) Old Bedzele,<sup>71</sup> with dark and gloomy snakes,  
 (Wow, wo,) is swarming and teeming, (rawe-yeiy)...

<sup>69</sup> 'Amewiqwe' is the name of a place (in Circassia).

<sup>70</sup> 'Ariq' is the name of mountain ridge (in Kabarda; used for pasturage) and a settlement (also called 'Boriqwey') located on the right bank of the Terek River to the southwest of the ridge.

<sup>71</sup> 'Bedzele' is a place name (in Circassia).

Chorus: Wo, wo!

He who rescues the captive white-sleeved damsel, by leading her by the hand through the  
Crevice between the two massive rocks, is St. George, is St. George!

Chorus: Wo, wo!

## Appendix 2

### Nart Tales

#### The Old Man on Top of 'Waschhemaxwe'<sup>72</sup>

(Translated from Hedeghel'e Asker, *Geroicheski èpos 'Narti' i ego genezis* [Heroic Epos 'The Narts' and its Genesis], Krasnodar, 1967. This tale was translated by Hedeghel'e to Circassian from a Russian text published by Khan-Girey in the collection *The Legends of the Circassian People* in the magazine 'Kavkaz', no. 86, 1846)

**L**EGEND has it that on top the ever snow-clad Mount, there is a giant chained [to a huge rock] in punishment for his sins. When he awakes from his deep slumber, he asks his guards:

— “Does cane still grow on Earth, do ewes still give birth?”

The stone-hearted sentries retort:

— “Cane still grows, ewes still give birth down there.”

At hearing this, the giant starts involuntarily and tries to throw away the shackles. The Earth trembles, his chains knock against one other sending sparks as if from striking spears, making thunderous noises. His breath issues forth like uncontrollable gales. His moans and roans are those of the centre of the Earth. And the hot streams coming down the lofty Mount are his tears.

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<sup>72</sup> Mount Elbrus, which is the highest point in Europe (5,663 m), though Mont Blanc (4,810 m) would claim this honour, if the North Caucasus is not considered part of the continent. There are four more peaks in the Caucasus of loftier height than Mont Blanc.

[There are many accounts concerning the reason for this punishment. One tells of a Nart who challenged God and spoke of his uncomeliness. See next entry for another version of the tale. There is a consensus that Nesren Zchach'e was the hapless Nart who was incarcerated on top of the Mount. There is a striking parallel with the episode from Greek Mythology in which Prometheus was chained for his transgression against the gods. It is still a moot question as to which mythology influenced the other, which issue meriting further research]

## The Legend of Tilale

(Hetiway text translated from Hedeghel'e Asker, *Geroicheski èpos 'Narti' i ego genezis* [Heroic Epos 'The Narts' and Its Genesis], Krasnodar, 1967, p265. This tale was taken down by Hedeghel'e in 1961. It was recounted to him by Majeed Nanqwbiqw, who was 75 years old at the time)

**B**ECAUSE he dared to challenge God and disobey him, he had him seized and chained on top [of the Mountain].

When it is time for the world to perish, they say that Tilale will break free of his shackles and will come down [to Earth].

First, the world will be stricken with famine, and people will go through very trying times. Then Tilale will appear, blaring his horn, riding in his carriage full of sweetmeats and bedecked with sparkling jewellery.

“He who desires this, let him come to my side!” he will tell the people. Then he will invoke a great blizzard, and will sweep the earth with the waters of the seas inundating the world. In this manner, he will restore life to the lost world.

It was thus that I heard them relate the legend of Tilale.

[This is one of the Circassians versions of the redemption of the world. There is also a connection with the Muslim legend of al-‘A’war al-Dajjal=T’ilale]

## **Wezirmes Saves the Narts from Famine**

(Translated from a Kabardian text, tale no. 11, first cycle in Asker Hedeghel'e (compiler), *The Narts: Circassian Epos*, vol. 1, Maikop: The Circassian Research and Science Institute, 1968, pp 109-13)

**W**EZIRMES, the son of Ghwaze Pizghesch, was one of the Nart elders. He grew up among the Nart heroes. He always outplayed his Nart friends in the games that they played. Since his early years all people held him in high esteem. All the Narts concurred that he would grow up to be a perfect Nart.

One day, while playing with his friends, he saw the village people going in one direction carrying all sorts of food and drink. One was driving a sheep, another was carrying dried meat, and a third was holding a tub of wine. Wezirmes was most surprised by a poor woman toting a cask of food. Her children were walking behind her begging her for food. "Mummy, we are starving, give us something to eat!", they cried. She paid no heed to the heart-rending pleas of her little ones, and kept walking with the other villagers towards their destination.

Wezirmes stopped playing and approached the crowd. "Why are you carrying all these things? Where are you taking them?", he asked. They all had one answer: "We are presenting these gifts to Peqwe as offerings."

Those words broke Wezirmes's heart. He abandoned his games. He walked for a while, silent, crest-fallen and quite pale.

After returning from a campaign, the Narts used to amuse themselves by indulging in games. At those games the children of the Narts assembled to partake in racing, wrestling, knuckle-bone, and stone-throwing competitions.

The Narts at once sensed the absence of Wezirmes from those games, since he had never missed a single meeting. They became worried and wondered if he was ill. They sent someone to ask after him. The messenger came back with the following words:

— “There is nothing physically wrong with me. I am just disappointed with the Nart heroes who offer old Billy-goat beard, Peqwe, gifts as if he were a god.”

There and then he informed the Narts of his resolution:

— “If the Narts do not stop their demeaning offerings, I will part ways with them. I cannot, and will not come to terms with your obsequious behaviour. Old Billy-goat beard Peqwe does not deserve to be treated as a god by the indomitable Nart heroes. My heart will find no peace until I rid the Narts of this despot. This is all there is to it.”

When the Nards heard what Wezirmes had to say, they trembled with fear. They begged Wezirmes with tears in their eyes to unmake his vow, lest Peqwe wreak his wrath upon them once the news of the vow reaches him. Wezirmes brushed aside the advice and resolved to fulfil his pledge. Therefore, he gathered all the Narts one-day so that they all could hear his vow first-hand:

— “If I fail to cut off Peqwe’s head, and if I am unable to free the Narts from the tyranny of that cowardly old Billy beard, then I am not worthy of being called a Nart.”

The Narts did not attach much importance to these words. They thought that when Peqwe would hear about the vow, he would surely make their lives very miserable. Unheeding of any council to undo his resolve, Wezirmes began to devise a plan of action. First he went to his mother, Lady Mighezesh, and told her:

— “Our mother! I have solemnly vowed to rid the Narts of Peqwe’s oppressive yoke. Nobody on earth can make me alter my resolve, not even you, mother. Please tell how to fulfil my pledge. I have no weapon to wield!”

— “If you have resolved to fulfil your vow, then go to the vault below and bring out your father’s white-nosed steed. The saddle is hanging by the iron horse-belts. Take it down. In a black chest, you will find your old man’s sure-cutting sword. Attach it to your belt.”

Wezirmes brought out the white-nosed steed from the cellar, put the saddle on it, and donned his father’s sure-cutting sword. He rode out. When he first lashed the whip, his steed rose up to the depth of heaven.

He let his horse do his capers on top of the world. When he had enough frolicking, he turned to the road used by the people to convey their gifts to Peqwe and set up a barricade. He confiscated all the offerings and made the villagers turn back. From then on, he forbade anyone to make the journey to Peqwe.

The Nart elders were caught between the sledgehammer and anvil. They equally dreaded Peqwe's ire and Wezirmes's unbridled strength. They secretly dispatched a messenger to Peqwe through a secluded road to tell him that Wezirmes was blockading the way of the gift-bearers. They waited for the might of Peqwe to send Wezirmes to kingdom come. But, to their utter astonishment, Peqwe just kept aloof, despite the fact that Wezirmes went on impounding his gifts and turning back the bearers.

“So Peqwe pretends that he doesn't care. I know how to ruffle his feathers!” said Wezirmes, and headed to Peqwe's place. As he was approaching the house, he called out in a frightful voice:

— “Hey you, Peqwe, old billy-goat beard! Come out, you cowardly idol, and show yourself.”

When Peqwe heard this challenge, he trembled with fear and sent a word to Wezirmes that he was too ill to meet him. Wezirmes dismounted and walked to the door saying, “If he is ill, I am in perfect health.” He barged into the house and saluted Peqwe:

— “Good day to you, Peqwe!”

— “May you be smitten with misfortune!” retorted Peqwe.

Wezirmes bared his sword as he heard the insolent response and made to cut off Peqwe's head. But Peqwe bolted with Wezirmes at full tilt behind him. When Peqwe realised that there was no place for him to hide on Earth, he climbed up to the skies and wove a spider house to live in.

As Peqwe was a god, and as he created the fields for the Narts, he unleashed his anger on them. He ordered the skies to hold off the rains. He caused the rivers to dry. The earth became arid and the crops died. The trees shed their leaves, the cattle miscarried, and women became infertile. The Narts fell into hard times and they began to lay the blame on Wezirmes for the curse that had befallen them.

“Instead of bliss you have brought us misfortune by incurring the wrath of Peqwe. How do we suffer this dearth now?”

Wezirmes was dejected. As he reflected on his dilemma, he hit on the idea of consulting Satanay, the omniscient and wise Lady. He mounted his steed and rode to her place.

Wezirmes told Satanay the whole story.

The prophetess looked at Wezirmes’s steed:

Your old white-nosed steed is the progeny of the ancient Alhp breed. A brave hero reared it. Heat it well and strike it thrice with your lash. It will carry you like the wind to the eye of heaven. It will get you to your destination.

Wezirmes did exactly as Lady Satanay had bid him to do. He heated his horse, then struck it three times. It carried him instantly to the depths of heaven, and noiselessly they made inside Peqwe’s cobweb house.

Wezirmes Soared into the Heavens atop his magic steed.

— “Good day to you, Peqwe!” said Wezirmes, saluting him in a most seemly manner.

— “Go to hell! You had made my life a misery on Earth before you drove me out to this god-forsaken hole. Why don’t you leave me in peace in my new abode here?” riposted Peqwe tremulously.

— “Don’t cast your aspersions upon me, Peqwe. I have come to tell you about the calamity that has befallen the lands of the Narts.”

— “Pray tell me, what affliction has smitten the country of the Narts? Surely it can’t be that bad,” said Peqwe, pretending innocence.

— “It is said that because I had forbidden the Narts to send you gifts, you became so angry that you drove goodness out of the land. Crops do not grow anymore, cattle have ceased to breed, and women have become barren. The land is cursed with famine. The Narts have lain the blame at my door. They say that I am the cause of all this darkness.

— “Yes, you only have yourself to blame. You are the arch-villain. You seized the gifts that they had intended for me. You had hounded me with your until you chased me out of the world. And after all this, you have the temerity to track me down in heaven.

— “It is worry that has brought me to you. The Narts have sent me to make amends with you. ‘We can’t even find water to drink,’ they say.”

— “It pleases me no end that you find no water to drink. This will teach you not to make enemies with Peqwe,” howled Peqwe.

When Peqwe said this, Wezirmes continued:

— “Please forgive my one mistake. Do not doom all the Narts for a single slip. There, look down to earth. Can’t you see how those hapless Narts are looking up to you in beseechment? Young and old, women and children have climbed up Mount Hereme<sup>73</sup> to beg you to make it rain so that crops might grow anew,” said Wezirmes.

No matter what Wezirmes said, Peqwe refused to budge from his place. Realising that the conversation was going nowhere, Wezirmes continued:

— “There, look down. The Narts on Mount Hereme have brought you gifts. They are extending them to you. Take them, Peqwe!” Wezirmes stretched his hand towards earth.

Detecting no trickery in these words, Peqwe looked out of his cobweb house and down to earth. Wezirmes seized on his chance. He drew out his sword and smote Peqwe on his neck, his head flying off instantly.

Afterwards, it kept raining for seven weeks, with blood streaming down from the stricken body. The curse of Peqwe was lifted. The crops grew in abundance once more. The trees were full of fruit. The number of cattle multiplied. Women gave birth. Ever since this episode, all Narts held Wezirmes in great esteem on account of his bravery. He was admitted to the Nart Council. They toasted that in his adulthood he would be like a real Nart hero.

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<sup>73</sup> Mount Hereme (Хьэрэмэ Iуашхьэ) was an epic place where the Narts fought their duels.

## Amisch and Theghelej

(Translated from a Kabardian text in *Adige 'Weri'watexer* [Circassian Tales], Ziramikw Qardenghwsch' (compiler), The Kabardino-Balkarian Scientific Research Institute, Nalchik: Elbrus Book Printing House, 1963, p67)

**I**N one of them far away times, there lived an old women by the name of Werser. She had two sons: Amisch [god of fauna], and Theghelej [god of agriculture]. Amisch lived deep inside the forest, and he never ventured outside the woods. He occupied his time with catching all kinds of forest animals, and for the species which were too large to trap, he caught their young, and brought the whole lot and gave them to the people. To mention a few, he caught horses, bulls, goats, cows, etc., and presented them to people, who subsequently tended and multiplied them to herds, which people called 'Amisch' in appreciation. Those were the achievements of Amisch.

In contrast, Theghelej found his calling in the search for crops, and [the story of how he stumbled upon corn, goes as follows] one day someone intercepted his way and started to attack him without any provocation. Theghelej [smote the aggressor and] slew him.<sup>74</sup> And [before he died] he asked him to keep vigil over his grave. Whilst he was watching the grave, he noticed that three corn plants had grown by the headstone. It was from those that the crops that are harvest originated. In honour of Theghelej, people called those crops after him.

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<sup>74</sup> This mysterious murder may be the first association between crop growing and human sacrifice, which undoubtedly held a special position in ancient proto-religious rites. There is some evidence that the ancestors of the Circassians practised human sacrifice, albeit a very long time ago. Human and animal bones were found in ancient burial grounds.

## Lhepsch and the Tree Lady

(Translated from a Kabardian text, tale no. 76, third cycle, in Asker Hedeghel'e (compiler), *The Narts: Circassian Epos*, vol. I, Maikop: The Circassian Research and Science Institute, 1968, pp 263-5)

**L**HEPSCH (the god of the smiths), having manufactured all the implements and weapons that the Narts had wanted him to make, was left with no work to do, so he became very bored. When the ennui became unbearable, he went to Lady Satanay to seek her advice.

— “Lady Satanay. I am bored out of my wits. I have no more work to do, no challenges to rack my brain. I have flattened all the iron in my smithy, but I can’t think of anything to apply my strength and skill to. It is said that you are the wisest lady that there is. Think of something for me to do!” he said.

— “What am I supposed to think of!?” said Lady Satanay in an anxious voice. “You have made all the weapons that the Narts wanted. You have formed sickles for them. You have manufactured all that the people wanted. Now go and roam the earth. See how other peoples live and bring back new knowledge and know-how for the Narts. If God doesn’t forsake you, you might find some novel and interesting things.”

— “What would I need for such a journey?”

— “You don’t need much. Prepare clothes that would wear well, and then set off on your quest. The farmers like you a lot, and the cattle herds consider you as a friend, so you won’t go short of food.

Lhepsch made a pair of boots from the toughest steel, put them on, and embarked on his quest. Lhepsch was so fast he covered the distance of one month in just one day, the distance of one year in a single month. He needed to make just one step to cross the highest mountain. One jump would see him span the broadest river. Striding and leaping, springing and flitting, he traversed the Seven Rivers and arrived at the sea shore. He uprooted a hundred trees, removed the branches and tied the trunks together to make a raft. He put the raft to water and sailed across the sea. As he came ashore, he saw a group of very beautiful maidens engaged in playing. He instantly fell in love with them. He tried to seize them, but

was unable to catch a single one, as they were very slippery. He chased and chased, but was unable to catch up with them. Finally he beseeched them:

— “For God’s sake, tell me who you are. I have never met or seen anyone like you in all my life. No one has ever refused me a request,” he said.

— “We are the *huris* of the Tree Lady,” said the maidens. “Our Lady will receive you and she will grant you your request.”

— “Go on then. Lead me to her,” said Lhepsch.

He followed them. When they arrived, there was this most strange looking tree-like object. It was neither a tree, nor did it have a human form. You would have been at a loss to describe it. Its roots ran deep into the ground. Its hair hung up in the sky like a cloud. She had human hands. Her face was the most beautiful you had ever seen. It was made from the finest silver and gold. The Tree Lady smiled at Lhepsch and bade him welcome. She regaled him sumptuously and then let him retire to bed. Lhepsch woke up in the middle of the night. He found the Tree Lady, seized her and made to ravish her.

— “This is so very unseemly,” protested the Tree Lady. “No little man has ever laid hands on me before.”

— “I am one of the gods,” said Lhepsch. He stood up and made love to her.

She liked it so much, that she fell in love with Lhepsch. She asked him to stay with her.

— “This is not possible. I must be on my way.” Lhepsch declined her offer. “I have to find the edge of the world and take back new knowledge to the Narts.”

— “Lhepsch, you would be making a big mistake, if you leave me. I could give you all the knowledge that the Narts shall ever need. My roots go down into the very depth of earth. I could confide to you all the secrets in her bosom. My hair reaches the very eye of heaven. I would tell you all about the heavenly bodies. There is no need for you to roam the World.”

Lhepsch was unconvinced.

— “There is an end to everything, except for earth. Stay by my side. I would introduce you to all the stars in the sky. I would offer you all the treasures of the earth.

But her entreaties fell on deaf ears. Lhepsch chose not to believe the Tree Lady, and he set off again on his journey. His shoes wore down to his toes. His walking stick grew shorter than a span. His hat got eaten through and hung down like a hoop round his neck. He travelled on and on, but he couldn't find an end to the earth. He went back to the Tree Lady.

— “Have you found the edge of the World?” asked the Tree Lady.

— “No.”

— “What have you found, then?”

— “Nothing.”

— “What have you learned, then?”

— “I Know now that the earth has no end.”

— “What else?”

— “The human body is much tougher than iron.”

— “And what else?”

— “There is nothing harder and more desolate than travelling alone.”

— “That's all very well,” said the Tree Lady. “But what have you discovered to make the lives of the Narts better? What new know-how and knowledge would you be taking back to them?”

— “I have nothing to show for my labours.”

— “Then all your endeavour has been in vain. If you had listened to me, I would have given your people knowledge to benefit them for all time.

You Narts are a haughty and stubborn race. These traits would eventually lead to your undoing. But to let the rest go on living, I give you this," she said and handed Lhepsch a very handsome boy. "Take this child of yours. I have imparted to him all my lore and practical skills. You shall see how he turns up when he reaches manhood."

Lhepsch returned home with his lad. One day the child asked the Narts:

— "Do you see the Milky Way up in the sky?"

— "We do."

— "When you next set off on a campaign, keep sight of it all the time and you will not lose your way," he said.

— "By God! When he reaches his prime he would give us great ideas. We have to raise him up carefully," they said. Seven women were assigned to look after him.

However, one day the child lost his way while playing with the women and disappeared. The women looked for the child everywhere, but he was nowhere to be found.

When the Narts were informed about what had happened, they mounted their horses and went looking for the boy. They found people who saw him, they came across people who met him, but they just couldn't find the child.

— "He might have wandered back to his mother."

They dispatched Lhepsch to the Tree Lady. But the child hadn't been to his mother.

— "What hope do we have now? What could be done?" Lhepsch asked her.

— "There is no hope for you. When the time comes, he shall return himself. God only knows when that would be. If you will be alive when he comes back, then fortune would smile upon you. If he does not come back, then woe betide you, for that would spell your doom," she told him.

Lhepsch returned home wrapped in gloom.

## How Lhepsch Sought the Edge of the World

(Translated from a Kabardian text, tale no. 53, third cycle, in Asker Hedeghel'e (compiler), *The Narts: Circassian Epos*, vol. 1, Maikop: The Circassian Research and Science Institute, 1968, p217)

— “I shall find the edge of the world. I will see it with my own eyes,” said Nart Lhepsch.

He fashioned a pair of iron boots and formed a walking stick to roam the World.

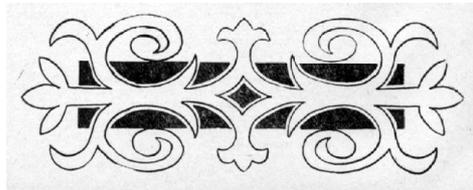
He travelled here, he travelled there, he travelled everywhere. He saw a few, he saw a lot, there was nothing under the skies that he did not see.

His boots wore out and fell round his ankles. His staff shortened to lesser than a span.

He roamed and roved. His quest took him to all corners of the World, but he never arrived at the place where Heaven meets Earth.

To this day Circassian elders have a saying about this vain endeavour: ‘Lhepsch did not reach the edge of the world.’

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