

'Modern civilization is connected by a thousand threads to all previous developments, with cultural values which were created by many people on all continents throughout millennia. Traditions substantially defining the ethnically individual aspects of a people form the richest fund of its culture, as a result of its centuries-old intellectual and practical activities'

Shalva Inal-ipa

Shalva Inal-ipa is one of the most outstanding figures in Abkhazian science, the prominent representative of the creative and intellectual elite of Abkhazia during XX century. A large quantity of printed works - over three hundred - testify to more than a half-century of intensive scientific creativity. The subjects which were invariably interesting to Shalva Inal-ipa were connected with the ethnic and psychological aspects of mass consciousness. These were especially shown clearly and at great depth in his works connected with the study of behavioural stereotypes, whilst analyzing their functional role and ideological content. Inal-ipa considered the various features of local etiquette to be the major basis of the national life and ethnic culture of Abkhazians.

Oleg Shamba

Shalva Inal-ipa



ABKHAZIAN ETIQUETTE



Abkhazia is situated on the eastern coast of the Black Sea,
on the border of Europe and Asia

'Abkhazian etiquette' is the latest part of the unique project 'Apsny is my heart and soul', which so far includes 'Abkhazian proverbs', 'Abkhazian stories', and 'Abkhazian folklore'. This venture has been organized by a person of stature, an academician with numerous publications in economics whose passion for folklore has brought remarkable results. Oleg Shamba has more than ten thousand proverbs in his archives, and a fair number of them have been presented in more than 20 books. To continue introducing Abkhazia to the world, further volumes in this series are planned for the near future.



'Abkhazian stories' is a collection of short stories, mainly based on tales remembered by local people and 'retold' by talented Abkhazian writer Michael Lackerbye. They have fascinating plots and were translated into English rather quickly, because it was always interesting to find out what would happen at the end of each story.



'Abkhazian folklore' contains charming illustrations by the Beletski brothers to Abkhazian epics about Narts (lost in the 1992-93 war and restored due to Oleg Shamba's efforts), with short descriptions by famous Abkhazian writer and journalist Igor Khvartskia here presented in English, Russian and Abkhazian.



'Abkhazian proverbs' contains 'wisdom of centuries' in around a thousand proverbs, in Russian and English, previously translated from Abkhazian by Oleg Shamba.

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***ABKHAZIAN
ETIQUETTE***

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Abkhazian etiquette
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PREFACE

I will not die but feel forever alive
While Abkhazian language is heard
As long as the country Apsny will thrive
Honour for Abkhazians will be the main word.
My Apsny is about the size of my hand
But as an Abkhazian, I thank the Lord
There is no more beautiful country or land
And for me Apsny is my hope and reward!

Dear reader!

You have in front of you a book by the famous Abkhazian academician and writer Shalva Denisovich Inal-ipa. The author was an Abkhazian, and he was born in Abkhazia. That's why I'd like to set out in writing some pre-history.

...More than fifteen years have passed since the Abkhazian/Georgian conflict of 1992-1993, which is and always will be engraved in the memory of all by the frightening word 'war'. Because of a powerful information blockade, most people are still unaware of the scale of the assault upon Abkhazia, which was the bloodiest conflict to date upon the territory of the former USSR, and was inflicted by the monstrous and criminal Georgian regime of Eduard Shevardnadze.

Nevertheless, the Abkhazian army was able to completely defeat its many times larger enemy, and on the 30th of September, 1993 the Abkhazian flag was hoisted at the border with Georgia along

the River Ingur. In October 1994 the Constitution of the Republic of Abkhazia was accepted, according to which the country became an independent democratic state, a subject to the international law. In August 2008 Abkhazia was recognised by mighty Russia as well as some other countries, and thereby received the opportunity for a peaceful existence and development. Following this recognition, world interest in Abkhazia increased dramatically.

The population of the country is slightly more than 300,000, living in 8,500 sq km (the population of Iceland in a territory the size of Cyprus). Abkhazians share their country with Armenians, Russians, Greeks, Georgians, Estonians, Turks, and others. The predominant religions are Christianity and Sunni Islam. Abkhazians have every right to be proud of their country's ancient history, which is full of brilliant victories and dramatic events.

Abkhazians form one of the most ancient indigenous ethnic groups in the Caucasus and are closely related to the North Caucasian peoples: Abazinians, Adygs, Kabardinians, Circassians and Ubykhs. Their language is included within the Abkhaz-Adyg group of Caucasian languages. The great expert in Abkhazian language K. Machavariani emphasises that it is very flexible and sonorous, and can express feelings of high spirit as well as the most tender emotions, and also authentic sounds of nature such as the murmur of a rill or the sound of the wind. Following scientific research, this language has been identified as one of the oldest in the world. The Abkhazian alphabet consists of 64 letters with only 6 vowels!

The first mention of Abkhazians was in Assyrian inscriptions from the twelfth century BC. The ancestors of Abkhazians were creators of a megalith culture in the 3rd millennium BC, and at the beginning of the 1st millennium BC they created Colchis-Koban metallurgical province.

The forefathers of Abkhazians heard their first Christian sermons from apostles Andrey Pervozvanny and Simon Cananit, and Christianity was adopted in 530-550 AD under Emperor Justinian the Great.

During the 8th-10th centuries the Abkhazian Kingdom existed, the first king of which was Leon II. In the 13th-15th centuries, Abkhazia was absorbed into the political and economic sphere of influence of Genoa and San Sebastian (Sukhum) became an important trade centre in the area.

In the 16th-18th centuries, the Abkhazian Princedom was under the protectorate of the Turkish Sultanate.

From the end of the 18th century, under the sovereignty of Keleshbey Chachba, the Abkhazian Princedom was again strengthened, and with assistance from the Russian fleet controlled the Black Sea coast from Anapa to Batum. However, in 1808 Keleshbey was killed.

In July 1810 the Russian navy disarmed local troops and seized Sukhum-Kale. Sovereign Prince Aslanbey Chachba had to leave his fortress. The Tsarist authorities installed their own protege Seferbey Chachba on the throne.

In contrast with Georgia, Abkhazia did not completely lose its statehood at that time. From 1810 to 1864, whilst incorporated within Russia, the Princedom retained its status of autonomy.

Over many centuries, Abkhazia survived despite a lot of wars and invasions, but as a result of Caucasian conflicts in 1866 and 1877 more than half of the population left their motherland and became exiles (makhadjirs) in Turkey.

Starting in the 1870s, many Kartvelians and Mengrelians flooded into Abkhazia from West Georgia, and the ethno-demographic situation sharply altered: in 1886 Abkhazians formed 86% of the population, but only 55% by 1897.

Following the collapse of the Russian Empire Abkhazia entered the Union of Mountaineers of the Caucasus and the South-East Union, and in May 1918 at the Batumi international conference the formation of a Mountain Republic was announced, into which Abkhazia entered.

On 26th May, 1918 the Democratic Republic of Georgia was declared, which in June of the same year, with military support from the German Empire, occupied the territory of Abkhazia. Widespread resentment by the population of this action encouraged

the establishment of Soviet power, and the creation of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia on 4th March, 1921. At the end of the same year, under pressure from Stalin, a Special Alliance Treaty was concluded. From February 1922 to February 1931, SSR Abkhazia was called a treaty republic. Then due to personal efforts by Stalin the Treaty SSR Abkhazia was transformed into an autonomous republic. This question was discussed in Tbilisi, which led to a 9-day national protest meeting of Abkhazian people (18-26 February, 1931).

On 28th December, 1937 the then Chairman of the Government of Abkhazia, N. Lakoba, was poisoned at a dinner party at L. Beria's house in Tbilisi. Terror and repression started straight afterwards, leading to the complete elimination of the Abkhazian political and intellectual elite. Abkhazian schools were gradually closed, primordial Abkhazian toponyms were replaced by their Georgian equivalents, Abkhazian writing was forcibly transformed into a Georgian calligraphic basis, etc.

From 1937 to 1953 tens of thousands of Georgians were resettled in Abkhazia from Georgia. As a result, the Georgian population of Abkhazia went from 6% in 1886 to 46% in 1989. Periodically there were mass meetings and demonstrations demanding the exit of Abkhazia from the composition of Georgia (1957, 1964, 1967, 1978 and 1989).

On 23rd July, 1989 the Supreme Soviet of Abkhazia readopted the Constitution of 1925, and accepted a new coat of arms and national flag.

On 4th August, 1992 Georgia, having been newly welcomed into the United Nations Organisation, unleashed a war against Abkhazia and then occupied a part of its territory, which was not completely liberated until 30th September, 1993.

Abkhazia is now a presidential republic, and its first democratically elected president was Vladislav Ardzinba. In 2005 Sergei Bagapsh was elected to this position, and was re-elected in 2010.

Much of this fascinating history has been investigated by academics at the Abkhazian State University, who during a

comparatively short period have produced a large number of research papers devoted to the culture, history, folklore, economics, etc. of the country. Many of their findings have become well-known both in the former Soviet Union and elsewhere further abroad. Important books include: 'Abkhazians - who are they?' (Prof. U.Voronov), 'History of Abkhazia' (Profs. O.Bgazhba and S.Lakoba), 'Abkhazia - Hell in Heaven' (Prof. A.Argun), 'Obezians' (Prof. A.Papaskiri), 'People made from armour' (Prof. E.Bebia), 'Annals of war' and 'Abkhazian proverbs' (Prof. O.Shamba). The University authorities are planning future publications which will enable foreign readers to find out more about Abkhazia and its inhabitants, who call their country Apsny. In the Abkhazian language this means 'the country of the heart and soul'. This book 'Abkhazian Etiquette' is a part of the project 'Apsny is my heart and soul' and continues the series of publications, aimed at introducing English-speaking readers to different aspects of Abkhazian culture.

Shalva Denisovich Inal-ipa, the author of the book, is one of the most outstanding figures in Abkhazian science, the prominent representative of the creative and intellectual elite of Abkhazia during XX century. A large quantity of printed works - more than three hundred - testify to more than a half-century of intensive scientific creativity.

The basic direction of the research work of Shalva Inal-ipa was connected with the ethnographic study of Abkhazian culture. At the same time his scientific interests were so diverse that it is almost impossible to define their disciplinary specialisation unequivocally. So, along with ethnography, his spheres of application show that the creative power of the scientist likewise involves history and folklore. Among his major directions of research into the spiritual culture of Abkhazians was a study of their rich folklore heritage: Nart epics, myths about dwarfs (atsans), legends about the Abkhazian tsar (apskha), etc.

Shalva Denisovich Inal-ipa was born on October 20th, 1916 in Abkhazia. He studied in Moscow at philosophical and historical

faculties, and subsequently graduated with an honours diploma from the historical faculty of Sukhum University. Inal-ipa started his labour activity as a journalist, combining this work with a postgraduate study of history topics. Shalva Inal-ipa's scientific merits were honoured by titles and awards, and in 1993 he was selected as an honorary member of the Adyg International Academy of Sciences.

A considerable part of his scientific heritage is occupied by works in the field of literary criticism and the history of literature. Inal-ipa's great efforts were devoted to the popularisation of science, to educational publications, and the writing of textbooks and provision of educational grants. He worked intensively in the field of translation. The published heritage of this academician is extremely significant and valuable.

The subjects which were invariably interesting to Shalva Inal-ipa were connected with ethnic and psychological aspects of mass consciousness. These were especially shown clearly and at great depth in his works connected with the study of behavioural norms of Abkhazian etiquette. In detail, having described a variety of behavioural stereotypes, analyzing their functional role and ideological loading, Inal-ipa considered the behavioural features of etiquette as the major basis of the national life and ethnic culture of Abkhazians.

In spite of the fact that a fire destroyed a huge part of his scientific archive, Inal-ipa left to his descendants an invaluable and ingenious heritage which forever will remain the strong foundation of the historical and ethnographic study of Abkhazia.

Professor Oleg Shamba

CHAPTER ONE

SOME HISTORICAL ROOTS OF TRADITIONAL ABKHAZIAN HOUSEHOLD CULTURE

Various forms of household culture developed in Abkhazia under the influence of different social and economic conditions. Genetic roots of the traditional Abkhazian etiquette which has substantially existed up to now are connected partly with communal-patrimonial and partly with military-democratic and patriarchal-feudal conditions of life. As has happened with many other peoples (for example, the Japanese with their etiquette code 'busido'), traditional Abkhazian etiquette, which includes features of chivalry in some respects, essentially developed within the environment of tribal dynasties and military aristocracy during the epoch of early feudalism. As a result of such influences the rules and principles of traditional public behaviour were formed.

The breakdown of communal-patrimonial relations led to the formation of a tribal dynasty, and then to a military-feudal nobility. Private property became a more and more important stimulus. At the same time, in conditions of a growing aspiration to enrichment, mutual tribal relations became more complicated. There were constant battles with the aims of cattle seizure, hostage capture, vengeance for insults, and the acquisition of pastures and other territories, as well as 'living space' for a growing population, etc.

So gradually war conditions developed methods of behaviour for the acquisition and maintenance of property. War and the organisation

of people for conducting it became a regular feature of national life.

Peace was regularly shattered, dangerous traps were everywhere. 'Wherever you go, you will come back!' (Wahitso waalent!) – a person who safely returned from a campaign or other dangerous enterprise was welcomed thus.

Since the earliest days a weapon was probably appreciated by Abkhazians above all else. It was a constant accessory of any man and a subject of special pride for him. It was considered inappropriate to disarm a person or to leave one's own weapon with an enemy, for according to old traditions, a man without a weapon was not a man any more.

The population was under eternal fear of attack and the stealing of people and animals, and attackers had to be beaten off in bloody armed fights. Even after the arrival of Russians the roads of Abkhazia remained unsafe for a long time, and along them predatory gangs and adventurers from different mountain societies still ransacked. It was difficult to be safe from them: they hid in woods, arranged ambushes; travellers were plundered, killed or stolen into captivity. Therefore Abkhazians never left home without weapons.

The life and consciousness of people was heightened by a military spirit. Preparation of brave and hardy soldiers was one of the first tasks in the education of the rising generation. All men from their childhood were able to skilfully ride a horse and to shoot.

Military concepts dominated ideas of heroism and honour. So it was considered unworthy for a man to go without a weapon, but also to disarm a person was equivalent to bringing huge insults and humiliations upon him. His fighting horse was considered untouchable too. The horseman took it as a personal blood insult if somebody struck his horse or even only touched its ear with a whip. Bravery and fearlessness were extolled above all.

As a result of all this, there was a cult of the man-hero (ahatsa, ahatsara). Accordingly, in Abkhazian national poetry 'songs of courage' glorifying heroism (ahatdarashare) and bravery in fights with enemies strongly prevail, whilst the love lyric is seldom found.

A magnificent monument to an epoch of a military-democratic system is the well-known epic about the Narts heroes, in which the cult of military campaigns 'to obtain glory' (h'izhratsara), heroism and valour reaches deification.

Arash is a mythical winged horse, Narts' friend and adviser. Such horses are frequently endowed with reasoning and human speech.

'Atarchei' was a ceremony of commemoration of a lost soldier which included the participation of his horse; its death during horse races was considered as a good sign (Abkhazians had a tradition of sacrificing a fighting horse to its owner as a victim and burying it near the soldier).

Af'i was a deity of thunder, lightning and weaponry, and also the patron of soldiers; his name and striking force was called upon to defeat and punish the enemy - 'Af'i will strike him!' (Af'i asaait!). The utmost heroism (af'irhatsa) is the integral quality of this terrible deity. Spears with huge tips, which often had two prongs, were attributed to him (sometimes these 'Af'i arrows' are considered as belonging to Aerg (St. George). A set of these 'arrows' of different sizes and a huge bow were stored in Ilori church. Such 'arrows' were brought into the temple as a gift to Af'i, and only the smiths of selected families had the right to make them. 'Af'i's arrows' quite often are found at excavation sites in some areas of Abkhazia.

'Apkhyartsa' is an important musical bowed instrument played by men (a traditional Abkhazian violin with two strings), probably connected with their military life. In particular, the etymology of the name refers to this: 'forward the leader', 'forward calling' (apkhya - ahead, rtsa - forcing to go), and the instrument possibly dates back to extreme antiquity.

'Ahurashea' is the wound song, a heroic song of soldiers, but additionally some kind of a medical song which friends sang together with a wounded man at the bed of the latter. 'The wound song' is usually sung with apkhyartsa accompaniment, and the lyrics, which are meant to inspire, are given below:

Waah-ry-dah...
He is not a man
Who is not able
To hide his sufferings ...
Waah-ry-dah...
He is not a man
Who with a sigh or groan
Will reveal his torments...
Waah-ry-dah...
Groans and sighs
Are women's fate
They gain relief in them
Waah-ry-dah...
Heavy wounds
Are sent to us as an ordeal
To test our endurance and will
Waah-ry-dah...
If cowardice could save us
And bravery meant nothing
The hare would live the longest
Waah-ry-dah...
Death likes a coward
The clever bullet can choose
And will not miss that fool
Waah-ry-dah...

The above words leave no doubt that Abkhazians were not only farmers and cattlemen, but also soldiers. In their historical life, military activity was not only overland, because the sea also played a rather important role.

In national traditional festivals, militarised games and competitions prevailed, forcing men to show their speed and dexterity as well as their ability to use weapons and horses. Competitions in walking a long distance, running, long and high jumps, wrestling, throwing of heavy

stones with no run-up, fighting on horseback, horseracing, shooting at targets from guns and pistols, and, in the not-so-remote past, archery, were regularly arranged, which testifies that the practical use of these activities ended only rather recently. Archery was still a favourite pastime of children and young people even in XIX-XX centuries.

The following evidence was given by F.Dubua in his 'Travel round Caucasus', written in 1937: 'A young Abkhazian noble, fourteen years old, by the name of Gassan was invited to a spot-check on a vessel standing in the Sukhumi bay. His attention was drawn to pistols and guns, hanging on the captain's cabin wall, and it was possible to notice at once that our young Abkhazian was an expert in the matter'.

The Abkhazian artist A.K.Shervashidze (Chachba), a grandson of Keleshbei and a nephew of the last possessor of Abkhazia Michael Shervashidze (Chachba), spent almost all his childhood in the Abkhazian settlement of Lykhny.

Recollecting that childhood, he wrote: 'I remember that my late father made bows and arrows for me when we lived near Moscow. The arrows were very smooth and straight, and had a thick end on which the bark was left. Then he taught me to shoot from a bow. I remember what great pleasure I received from these exercises.'

CHAPTER TWO

THE SOCIAL ASPECT OF COMMUNICATIONS ETHNOGRAPHY

It is hard to understand features of Abkhazian traditional household culture, including etiquette, without an explanation of what Abkhazian society represented in the recent past, in the sense of its social structure and degree of development.

Abkhazia until the 1860s was a feudal principedom with considerable remnants of earlier social structures, occupying in respect of its general socioeconomic development a position between West Caucasian mountain semi-patriarchal societies on the one hand, and feudal Georgia on the other. In other words, on the whole Abkhazia was a country with typical features of so-called mountain feudalism.

The ruling class was a feudal nobility, in the persons of princes and noblemen, with clergy adjoining them. The most exclusive group of feudal lords comprised representatives of the princely Chachba (Shervashidze) family, of which the country's possessor was also a member.

The power of the possessor extended, mainly, over inner Abkhazia (Bzyb, central Abkhazia, Abzhua and Samurzakan). Mountain societies were actually independent of the power of the possessor, which was abolished in general by the imperial government in 1864.

It is notable that there were a relatively large number of aristocratic families in such a small country as Abkhazia. In addition to Chachba (Shervashidze), a princely rank was carried by the Achba (Anchabadze), Aimhaa (Emuhvari), Marshan, Dziapsh-ipa, Inal-ipa,

Chaabalirhua, Gechba, and Chkhotua families. The most influential surnames of other noble families were considered to be Maan, Lakrba, Mkanba, Zvanba, Akirtaa, and Blabba.

On a prince's estate, in addition to a different sort of spongers, there always lived many village girls and young men, who formed a court yard of youth, undertook every possible kind of work, and at the same time joined the culture of the court yard; in particular, they acquired elements of the etiquette of the estate.

At the heart of Abkhazian traditional household culture some major principles prevail: the principles of an estate, of blood relationship, of respect for age with a cult of seniors and following from this a corresponding system of complicated subordination, a principle of hospitality, a principle of military courage and heroism, etc. All of these are united in one extraordinarily broad and powerful concept 'apsuara' or 'abkhazstvo'. The concept of apsuara incorporates a set of Abkhazian national traditional characteristics, including concepts of good and justice, honour and conscience (alamis), and national aesthetic and moral principles - in a word, everything that connects with the features of national culture and with the traditional household culture of the Abkhazian people.

Certain democratic features had been incorporated in the ancient tradition of 'atalychestvo', which as one of the elements of 'apsuara' was widespread in Abkhazia up to the beginning of XX century. Through this, children from noble families were brought up by peasants from the moment of their birth, frequently up to their majority, and had a complete course of national mountain education according to apsuara.

One of the main elements in an education, according to Abkhazian belief, is the mastering of traditions and customs of the people. This thought is expressed in the proverb: 'If you respect what you have, you will get what you don't have'.

In respect of those characteristics which make someone a worthy person, a not unimportant role is played by complicated Abkhazian etiquette, which worldly-wise diplomats from the League of Nations

could envy. This etiquette, developed in many respects to the smallest detail, represents the epitome of unwritten laws and rules of behaviour for a person in a social environment. It is difficult to know what is the more surprising - the variety of unwritten laws regulating the acts and behaviour of a person in company, the knowledge expected of its moral principles and psychology, or the widespread possession of the difficult unwritten book of graceful manners by simple people who never usually held books in their hands.

In Abkhazia, etiquette is not simply an external form of the ability to behave in society, but a part of apsuara or Abkhazian alamis, which is the conscience of the people. About the great value that Abkhazians give to this word, two characteristic sayings will suffice: 'Seven mules don't lift Abkhazian alamis' and 'Instead of death, for the Abkhazian there is alamis'. This last expression presents difficulty in translation from Abkhazian, and can be understood in the sense that death is not only the termination of physical existence - all people are mortal - but also incompatible with alamis when a person dies alive and becomes a live corpse, as a shameful moral death is a hundred times more terrible than physical death.

CHAPTER THREE

APPEARANCE OF A PERSON

Some earliest representations of Abkhazians, giving an ideal appearance of them, are contained in the most ancient monuments of their national oral epics, though, as is known, the possibilities of folklore in this respect are rather limited. In Abkhazian folklore a maximum economy of artistic means is characteristic of descriptions of attire and other external signs of characters. In corresponding places in the text the general appearance of a person is usually given, but the image has only the most necessary details of features connected with clothes. We know almost nothing, for example, about how Abrskil, the well-known rebel against God, or the most popular Nart hero Sasriqua were dressed, though in general thought they are abstractly considered to be at the peak of physical perfection. Outwardly they are associated in our consciousness only with their legendary horses, weapons, and some other insignificant attributes.

Occasionally separate details of the appearance of folklore characters are met. For example, Satanei Guashia's skirt made from a leopard skin or the steel moustache of athlete Narjhio, etc. As a rule, these always have some special function, and their mention is usually justified as necessary for the further progress of a plot (for instance, a steel moustache was very useful to the glorified hero when enemies wished to poison him).

From folklore material of an incomparably later origin, it is

possible to refer for example to I.Kogonia's poem 'Abataa Beslan', written on the basis and in the spirit of traditional Abkhazian national oral poetry. We will consider its first couplets, which will allow us to judge some basic ideas of national aesthetic taste concerning a man's nature, one of the essential elements of which is the moral and psychological quality necessary for heroism and courage:

Abkhazia raised Abataa
The great hero was he in due time,
In his appearance
Sparkled and shone like the sun.
He was equestrian, the horseman-hero,
Sat on a black stallion.
Its beautiful saddle was elegantly decorated,
It was the colour of a horse, was for it created.
The sabre, dagger, pistol,
The Circassian, arhalukh, shapely hood,
At least with this attire
It was impossible to confuse with anyone
Abkhazian hero Abataa!

This attractive poem characteristically represents a certain approach to the idea of man's appearance which was developed by Abkhazians in more recent times. In general, as is known, for each society at each given period of time there is a historically defined criteria of beauty.

Great value was given in ancient times to a beard and moustache. The head of a man was quite often completely shaven, leaving only a shred of hair on top, but a beard and moustache were worn inviolably all through life. Shaving a person was considered a sign of some kind of disaster or a heavy punishment. 'I swear by my beard!' or 'I will shave my beard completely from top to bottom if I tell a lie!' - so older people spoke, having put a palm on their beard, and this without any excessive formalities served as an indestructible oath and assurance

both of the correctness of information given, and of a guaranteed undertaking of a promised deed. A beard was both esteemed and taken great care of.

On the whole, it is possible to say that in literature and art, as well as in Abkhazian oral creativity, at the end of XIX to the beginning of XX centuries the stereotypical image of a traditional Abkhazian with certain external features was affirmed. He wore a Circassian coat with an arhalukh, a dagger and a pistol, or earlier a sabre, tightly held by a Caucasian belt decorated with white silver, and a shaggy papakha on his head with a hood hanging behind. He sat astride a fighting horse with a saddle decorated with incrustations. The clothes fit precisely to his body, corresponding to the size. In a word, nothing was present in his outfit which was superfluous.

The signs of external female beauty were sufficient height, symmetry, a long neck like the graceful neck of a gold jug, small breasts, a thin waist, small elegant feet and hands with long fingers and nails, white skin with a pink shade for which special blush was used, a high forehead, thin eyebrows, big shining almond-shaped eyes with long thick eyelashes, white teeth, a small mouth, etc. It was considered that girls and women should also possess a graceful gait and refined manners.

Dense long hair weaved into two plaits coiling down the back and reaching almost to the knees has entered into a saying. According to a historical legend, a poor peasant woman once lived in the small town of Ochamchira. The prince's servants collecting tax came to her, but from her there was nothing for them to take. Then they cut off the magnificent plaits of her daughter and brought them to the prince. The sons of the poor woman, who were then out hunting, decided to take revenge for this violation of their sister. They killed the prince, and all their family moved to Abkhazian Bzyb, under the protection of the possessor (their far-off descendants with the surname Sergegi live now in the village of Jirhva).

The Abkhazian people throughout their long history accumulated a great positive experience in housework and 'atalychestvo' as well

as in the moral education of the rising generation, starting with good manners and military preparation, and leading to advanced handicraft skills, as well as decorative and medical cosmetics as the means and methods of improvement of the appearance of people, especially girls and young women.

As we know, up to the beginning of XX century many people of the Caucasus, especially perhaps Abkhazians, had a wide circulation of the so-called custom of 'atalychestvo' - the sending of children from exclusive estates to peasant families, where they received a traditional mountain education, perfect for that time.

Tutors made every effort to ensure that their pupils looked their best in every respect. A female pupil should captivate everyone with her beauty, manners and dexterity, should be resourceful, brave and vigorous, never be out of place in life, and should meet danger bravely. To make a girl's feet look tiny, her wet nurse sewed shoes made from goatskin to the pupil such that the legs of the poor thing were deprived of free growth. To allow a girl's waist to be captured by a gold wedding ring her nurse sewed a brassiere for her, in comparison with which the corset of a European woman was a spacious blouse. At the age when a woman started to feel the desire to be liked, a princess already knew the secrets of every possible make-up to give her face a white matte tone, make her eyebrows and eyelashes velvet, and give her lips and cheeks the colour of a flashing morning dawn. To make her skin soft she collected grains of milk corn, squeezed out the juice, dried it in the sun and with the resulting starch she washed herself before going to bed. Against sunburn, she washed herself with foam appearing during the boiling of cherry plums in water. If her eyebrows were thick, she had to have the patience to pull out each superfluous hair with a penknife tip. To make her forehead clearly exposed, a girl was shaven to move her hair line some centimetres up, and to the shaven area meat from a recently killed raven was applied.

Besides the qualities described above, great value was given to labour education. In particular, a girl should be hardworking and skilful in all housework, and she studied everything that each Abkhazian

woman should know: sewing, dressmaking, embroidery, etc. But her education would not be complete if a princess had not learnt to use both hand weapons and firearms, and also to handle a horse. In dancing and singing a princess had to be tireless.

For obvious reasons, peasants had no opportunity to give so much effort, means and time to the education of their own children, who nevertheless, being constantly within such an environment and absorbing family traditions from their mothers' milk, very early became accustomed to work, managing weapons, horsemanship and so on. The customs of people and their rules of etiquette imperceptibly became an integral part of their daily household and spiritual life.

Tastes vary under the influence of fashion and for other reasons, but many traditional elements often show a surprising survivability, and sometimes are even revived. The national clothes of Abkhazians have undergone radical changes in latter times.

Rather recently (1920-30) men in villages wore a Caucasian shirt under a wide belt, trousers in the style of riding breeches, narrow Asian boots, a peaked cap and rather rare Russian trousers. Now all these have almost disappeared. Only the older generation still wears some elements of the old clothes. From parts of national men's wear more or less often met nowadays (especially on older persons and on shepherds in the mountains) there are a papakha and a hood, a Caucasian belt with a knife, a burka, an arhalukh, etc.

A characteristic accessory of male costume is a traditional Abkhazian staff or wooden pike with a sharp metal tip called an 'alabashia'. It could serve as a rather thick piercing weapon made from a tough wood (mainly from a specially processed young fir-tree, a maple or a cornel). An alabashia served as a support for a rifle, during walking on mountain slopes and at performances of orators at national meetings. A copy of such a hunting staff from a cornel tree, exhibited in a Leningrad museum, has a ledge on which they put a gun when aiming. Its length is 115 cm, on the end a tetrahedral steel edge is attached, and the handle is decorated by a ball made from horn.

An alabashia was an inseparable companion of a hunter and of a

shepherd. From the early period of cattle breeding the characteristic saying applied to the best shepherds and hunters has reached us: 'The one who was awarded with a stick earlier than Aergs'. In the ancient sense of this expression, deities of animals and hunting (Aergs) were not only patrons of game, but also the earliest shepherds who first, according to the legend, started to use a stick as a work tool and war weapon. According to one of the legends, a traveller, having lost his way among terrible rocks, hammered an alabashia into the earth and asked it to show him where to go. The stick fell in the direction of a road which could manoeuvre him into a safe place.

However a military-hunting function did not limit the purpose of this weapon, unique in its own way. At the same time an alabashia served as a distinctive sign, as a symbol of a family leader, an elder in a wide-spread family or a national orator who, leaning on an alabashia, proclaimed long speeches at vast national gatherings. Thus an alabashia is one of the most durable elements of original Abkhazian national culture.

Several decades ago it was considered unworthy for a man to appear in public places without a headdress and a Circassian coat, instead of European so-called short clothes. But even the Circassian coat has conceded to time requirements. It has been replaced now by modern European clothes, though the Circassian coat is saved by many older persons to be worn on special occasions, especially for celebrations and during horse-riding events.

Under the influence of modern European clothing, Abkhazian national female wear has almost disappeared too. For example, the ancient long wide-bottomed trousers tightly bunched at the ankles, an ancient corset or breast concealer which was an indispensable accessory of the maiden's outfit, and others, have been completely superseded.

Among representatives of the senior generation there still exist some strict customs and traditions concerning clothes. Elderly women and even men try to dress so that except for the face and hands, the whole body is covered.

As we see, people in ancient times gave great value to the appearance of a person, and this was understood not only as a natural, physical entity, but also an organic combination of the person and their vestments, including such accessories for personal use as the above-described stick-staff, which together are suitable, pleasant and desirable for their owner in both public and private life.

A person's occupation left a mark on his appearance. In particular, an Abkhazian shepherd or hunter could be distinguished at once because of his clothes. These clothes, and all equipment of shepherds and hunters, had to resolutely correspond both to the character of their basic trade, and the district in which they had to live and work. They had all necessary things with them and at the same time nothing superfluous. The suit which was sewn from homespun wool was strong, comfortable and warm, and had the important value that it quickly dried out, even if it had become wet to the last thread. For the protection of their eyes against the blinding beams of the sun they used a special solution made from gunpowder. In a word, practicality and smartness were obligatory conditions for their clothing and equipment.

All of a male or female outfit was basically prepared at home from local materials by the women living there, about whom there are many national fairy tales and legends, and a lot of folk songs which are sung by amateurs. We will mention, for example, the well-known Narts mother Satanei Guashia, who within a day had to prepare clothes for all her sons without everyone trying them on, and, as is known, these sons were 99 incomparably good fellows. In another legend we are told that a certain perfect prince pledged his word to only marry a beautiful girl who would be able to make a complete set of clothes for him in one day. None of the girls thirsting to marry the prince could cope with this difficult task. At last, he met a daughter of some poor peasant. In a trice she estimated the prince's size with her eyes and in the morning started to sew his costume. By the evening everything was already completed, except for minor details. She prayed to God to allow her more time, and He prolonged the day a little to let this young skilled worker have enough time to finish her job. That is

why - the fairy tale ends - the sun shudders before setting and slightly slows down its course.

Appearance is an aesthetic concept. Clothes are not simply material protecting us from heat or from bad weather, but also an indication of the spiritual culture and moral development of the wearer, one display of his or her moral consciousness. 'Feelings of beauty and shame force a person to put on clothes' is one Abkhazian proverb, and shame, according to Karl Marx, is some kind of anger only directed inside.

It was the summer of 1938. After finishing at an Abkhazian school in Sukhumi, for some time I worked at a primary school in the village of Gup in Ochamchira region. Once I decided to go to see a local mullah, Khasan Shamba, who I had heard was much the oldest wise person - he was far more than a hundred - and the greatest expert on Abkhazian traditions. I entered into a wide courtyard covered with a carpet of green grass caressing the eye. It was hot, and the owner sat in a casual snow-white shirt on an open verandah of the low wooden house. Having noticed me, the old man quickly rose, dressed himself in an arhalukh of a dark colour, buttoned it tightly from top to bottom, tied it in a belt with a set of metal ornaments, took his staff in his left hand and only then came towards me to welcome me in the correct clothes and in the correct manner.

In Michael Lakerbye's short story 'Alamis' an old Abkhazian man is revolted by the shamelessness of some health-resort visitors perambulating in the city centre in over-frivolous dresses. In this connection the old man recollects the tragedy which happened to his younger sister. Sixteen-year-old beauty Chimsa, having injured her eyes and lost her sight, had put on a man's trousers and, throwing herself under a train, had committed suicide. It seemed that before her death she had still thought of her female honour, had worried that the train, having crushed her, would expose her nakedness and consequently had dressed in the trousers of her brother. 'You are surprised that, taking such a step, she still thought of her nakedness? Alamis is stronger than death!' With these words the old man concluded the story.

CHAPTER FOUR

A HORSEMAN'S ETIQUETTE

In Abkhazia the husbandry of cattle and other animals was one of the main economic employments for men from time immemorial up to XIX century. In various locations throughout the country archeological excavations reveal numerous remnants of domestic animals bones, as well as their images. From the Neolithic Period undoubted rudiments of animal husbandry, along with hunting and fishing, have been traced. In the monuments of Kolkhida-Kuban culture (XII-VI centuries BC) clay, stone and metal sculptural figures of dogs, goats, wild boars, deer, bulls, birds and horses (as well as their images) are widely represented. This reflects the value of animal industries and hunting in the economic and social life of the population, which is also proved to be true from the surviving works of ancient writers, as well as from items of both ethnography and folklore.

It is possible to mention, for example, that an exclusive role as a colleague and kind friend in the lives full of danger of legendary heroes of the Abkhazian national epos - God's rebel Abrskil and Narts athletic trailblazers - belongs to a fighting horse.

The horse first appeared in Transcaucasia towards the end of the second millennium BC. Abkhazians and their far-off ancestors were engaged in horse breeding for at least three thousand years, in the development of which over such a long period they achieved rather considerable successes. This is expressed in various original ways by skill in the care of horses, and in the special love and affection

of the people for these animals, which was particularly embodied in the proverb 'A horse has human blood in its veins', and in masterly horsemanship and etiquette.

First of all it is necessary to underline that horsemanship since ancient times has given Abkhazians a significant national character. Not only princes and noblemen were able to ride a horse, but peasants of all categories - not only adults, but also small children who were far less than ten years old, and not only men, but also women, who additionally used special female saddles.

Since long ago, unwritten rules have demanded specific items of attire from a horseman. A number of elements of the Abkhazian men's outfit were called into existence by the military way of life, which included the requirement to ride constantly (some of these are retained up to now, but only as accessories or ornaments).

As a rule, a horseman put on a Circassian coat, which apparently developed from the suit of a cavalryman. In addition, a first-rate horseman wore a burka made from felt, which, with its wide and straight shoulder parts, gave to his figure a grandiose appearance and in addition covered and warmed the croup of his horse. A burka was carried by him in good weather too - just in case, but at that time it was carefully folded flat and tied behind the saddle with leather straps.

The climax of the etiquette rules for a polite Abkhazian horseman is a ceremony of real or symbolic help during the dismounting or mounting of a horse by any visitor in general, or an honourable horseman in particular. A long process of suggestion and refusal of help is necessarily followed by some special words of gratitude such as 'Thanks' (Itabup), 'Let those who are stronger than you support a stirrup for you!', 'May much wealth be with you!', and 'Best wishes for a happy journey!' (Meuamsh ukulaait!).

This ceremony is basically repeated over and over again with each visitor on horseback. It is important that each of them takes their seat on their horse after having turned towards the hospitable house, delicately expressing by that action their gratitude and respect for all the kindness and generosity shown. To help a woman to mount, it is

necessary to bring her a chair or a stool, and if this is not available near at hand, somebody seeing her off or accompanying her (usually a young man) kneels to offer her his knee to climb on, and she (supported also by his hands), climbs up onto the saddle and then takes a bridle and a lash given to her.

In general, a horseman's etiquette, as well as other forms of Abkhazian good manners, is based on the principles of consanguinity, seniority, hospitality, attitude towards a woman, etc. These rules were developed in detail to the smallest subtleties - how to sit on or descend from a horse, how to hold a bridle and a lash and how to use the latter, how to choose the best horse for various purposes, how to treat and look after it, how to prepare and hold national horse-racing competitions, and so on. Any physical damage publicly inflicted on a horse was equated as a personal insult to its owner.

Abkhazians rode their tiny but strong and ardent horses very well, and not only on lowlands but also in high-mountainous places, without apparently fearing the dizzyest of climbs or descents. It is amazing with what habitual dexterity and care a local sinewy horse bears a horseman along unimaginable slopes and how he, having seized the horse's mane or by leaning one hand on the croup of the horse, keeps in the saddle. For trips over steep rocks, mules (which had a large distribution in old Abkhazia) were especially irreplaceable. Only in the most inaccessible and dangerous places was a saddled horse driven ahead of a horseman or led by a bridle.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE ROLE OF SENIOR AGE GROUPS

Even among gods there are seniors
Abkhazian proverb

One of the subject matters of traditional household culture of Abkhazians is the position of older people, known as seniors, in established Abkhazian society, and the relationship of younger generations with them. High esteem for a senior, irrespective of his origin, national identity, sex, education, or position in society is a traditional law. Throughout a long period of time, the most delicate rules of mutual relationships between people of different ages have been developed. A complicated, mainly unwritten morally-aesthetic code regulating father-son relations, and based on a principle already familiar to ancient Eastern civilisations, was created: 'Grief and destruction to people if juniors cease to respect seniors'.

It is not necessary to rummage through scientific books to understand the extent of the vast intellectual work done by those who created this specified code over centuries. It is better to look at it in operation, in its practical application. Let us observe young Abkhazians in ordinary life. I don't mean of course those who, not having really joined either a new or an old culture, give a self-confident and forward-looking, though ultimately depressing, impression, but those who, being quite modern people, have acquired at the same time in their character gold reserves of kind traditions, obtaining these from

their environment and making them pleasant and very welcome in society. Such conservatives stand up, for example, when their elders enter, but not simply to concede them a place to sit; they will not sit down until their seniors have done so, and even then not until they are invited to sit down themselves. They will not say a word before their elders have spoken, will not drink too much in front of them, will not be too talkative, will not interrupt their seniors, will not cross the road in front of them even in the woods, will not pass between them, will not enter any building before them, will try politely to guess their wishes, understand the inadmissibility of any lie, deceit or obscene expression not only when speaking to them but simply in their presence, etc. And all of this was not read from books and not learnt by heart, but simply and naturally follows from those daily norms of behaviour which they absorbed with their mothers milk. People visiting the country for the first time are amazed by the delicate manners of ordinary Abkhazian peasants.

It seems to us that one of the secrets of the renowned Abkhazian longevity is that old people do not feel themselves superfluous or a heavy burden, but, on the contrary, feel quite appreciated. They are shown their usefulness and full value, which promotes their moral and physical strength and endurance. In society and at home, in a circle of children and relatives they receive everything necessary for a quiet life and moral satisfaction, even in cases of long illness. This care, this attention with which they are surrounded by everybody - both kids and adults - gives them confidence, promoting longevity without ageing.

Lately, here and there in Abkhazia from time to time some kinds of family forum are held, which are led by elderly time-honoured men from among the relatives. They arrange a kitty, choose organizers and cheerfully and easily spend all the day long at the oldest family member's place. Participants at such a feast are all whenever possible namesakes, men and women, old people and youths, irrespective of their place of residence and affinity of relationship. At these widespread family meetings different types of conflict questions about daily rural life are discussed, demanding the intervention of skilled

and dear people who are the best experts in local etiquette rules, customs and traditions.

The honouring of seniors, as well as an affable relationship with visitors which is expressed in various forms and situations is given numerous displays. The rules and manners of traditional etiquette were developed very carefully - from the lexicon and gesticulations to great patience and courtesy. This can all be related to the fact that the senior is always the first, always the most important, and always the most honoured. Certainly, this inevitably involves a certain amount of self-restraint by those who render these signs of attention, but everything is tolerated which corresponds to Abkhazian decency, good form, or *apsuara*.

So, probably the first element of the cult of seniors is the standing up at each of their appearances. This gesture Abkhazians consider as one of the major displays of respect from one person to another. 'Even a cow rises from her place when another approaches her', they say.

Let's refer to the legend which was based, it is said, on a real event, and which has a wide circulation among Abkhazians. Once a young man, when his father was out, returned home from a campaign mortally wounded. He was put to bed, and his father soon appeared. Having summoned up his strength for the last time, the son rose to his feet so that his father would not find him lying down. 'He would have grown useful' the old man said to himself as he hastened to the door. However, before he could get out, the young hero fell down and died.

A senior is never asked for a light, and in general juniors do not smoke in his presence. They respectfully stand when he delivers a speech or a toast. They do not wash their hands, before meals or after, until he has done so, but must stand and wait; they will not sit down to the table earlier than their elders, and will not begin their meal first, but will rise from the table earlier than the seniors. It is obligatory to submit a light to an old man if he smokes, and to support the stirrup for him when he dismounts or mounts a horse.

Verbosity is condemned. It is not acceptable to talk about love, about women, or even about children in the presence of their father,

and in general it is not acceptable to speak to seniors until spoken to. Obscene words and expressions are absolutely excluded. There are very delicate but clear allegories for the expression of all different natural needs. Great value is set on the observance of good form, which requires the ability if necessary to keep silent tactfully, hold back about something or to find a suitable method of polite refusal.

The many-sided principle of seniority, as has already been noted, finds its reflexion in the various spheres of personal, family and public life. In the past it also had great value during military campaigns, whilst hunting, and in the course of labour activity - in particular, on high-mountainous Alpine meadows where annually in the summer months Abkhazian shepherds from nearby villages by tradition created associations for their joint protection and the pasturing of herds of livestock, whose quantity sometimes reached several thousand sheep and goats. These summer congresses of shepherds, which dozens of people of different ages - from the youngest to very old men - went to, were at the same time an original public university of traditions and etiquette, a school for exchanging experiences. They spent free time in songs and dances, in playing the shepherds archapan pipes, and in sitting around a constantly burning fire whilst telling historical legends, myths, and stories.

It is interesting to mention that in the Abkhazian language the word 'aihabira' (government) comes from 'aihabi' (a senior). The senior in an Abkhazian group is often called 'dad', from which comes the plural 'dadraa', with which they addressed foremen at people's meetings and in courts.

The value given to elders as religious leaders was equally great. In the past each Abkhazian clan (or widespread family) had a patrimonial cult (a sacred grove, sanctuary, blacksmith, etc.) and there was also a priest who carried out the role of an intermediary between the related group and their divine patron. All sacrifices and prayers to the gods were brought by this priest, in the role of whom the oldest representative of the clan acted, as the best expert on national traditions and customs.

According to the Abkhazian spontaneous-materialistic outlook, death at an old age is not only the natural end of a person's terrestrial existence, but in a sense is a blessing for people. As a proverb says, 'If there were only birth and no death, all the earth would become covered by worms.'

The Abkhazian people, who underwent numerous disasters during their historical destiny, have developed a courageous attitude to the ups and downs of life that found its expression, in particular, in one simple yet at the same time wise national saying: 'He who created life is the one who also created death.' Hence, proceeding from this point of view, it is necessary to neither be afraid, nor to aspire to avoid death completely.

Over centuries and millenia, in conditions of military danger and post-war situations, Abkhazians developed contempt for death, a cult of heroism and great presence of mind under any stressful circumstances. And who knows, it could be that this courageous attitude central to the optimistic and reasonable national philosophy of life and death is one of the secrets of Abkhazian longevity.

In spite of the fact that the influence of people of more active ages (approximately from 30 to 60-70 years) has increased more and more, and strict etiquette rules for a person's final decades in some cases have been softened considerably and became simpler, the honouring of senior age groups, and their role and value in a family and in public life (especially in traditional mountain and foothill settlements), have been largely retained up to the present. Abkhazians respect their family tree, and can list the names of their fatherly ancestors to the tenth generation back.

Addressing God with a prayer, an Abkhazian said: 'Bringing these sacrifices to your altar, as was done by our ancestors, we ask you to grant us your clemency!' The motive expressed in the words 'as was done by our ancestors' formed a rather considerable part of life for every Abkhazian, living in accordance with traditions. These traditional norms regulated the life of each member of society - for example, a rather late marriage (for men usually not earlier than 25

years old, and in the majority of cases much more senior), no age discrimination of children, their free education and development, early familiarisation with a life of labour (including skills of military preparation), and an unhurried flow of life in a family with a rarity of divorces or other dramatic situations.

In Abkhazian mythology, almost inaudible echoes still exist of the custom of subjecting to death any excessively elderly decrepit old men. Actually, the only legend is that there once lived a man who grew so old that not only could he not be engaged in any productive work, but also could not serve himself. His son, having decided to get rid of a superfluous burden on the family, made a wattled basket. 'What do you need a basket for?' his young boy asked. 'Your grandfather has grown old. I want to take him far away in this basket and dump him from a rock.' 'Daddy, save the basket, it will be useful for me when the time comes to throw you into a precipice' the little boy said. The son of the old man thought that the fate prepared by him for his father would be repeated, and he refrained from his intention. Since then, it is said in the legend, there has been no more custom of killing very old people.

Today, on the whole, almost the same position of seniors - men and women - in a family and in society still exists. All who are younger than them are by tradition obliged to render them respect, help and attention. Anything less is considered as a gross infringement of one of the major foundations of Abkhazian etiquette, and meets a sharp moral condemnation from associates.

In their turn, old men, including those who have passed a hundred years of age, understand their rights and duties defined by centuries of tradition, and try to fulfil them, to make an effort not to grow decrepit prematurely, to keep fit, and to be tidy and neat. They live an active life, and till the end of their days remain (at least nominally) as the heads of their wide spread families, who call them 'our big father' and consult with them.

They take part in decision-making not only in the family, but also whenever possible in public affairs.

Abkhazian old men display an optimistic outlook on life, and are interested in all new things. For example, 147-year-old Ashkangeri Bzhanian from the village of Tamysh examined a plane with curiosity, was excited by electric light, and once when he was shown a picture, this wise person made the remark: 'The picture is very beautiful, but why are people not present in it? Willows are growing - they were planted by a person. Here is a school - it was constructed by a person. It is essential that a person should be there. Unless you do not like people.'

CHAPTER SIX

SOME FEATURES OF HOME LIFE

The fundamental aspect of everyday home life is personal mutual relations within the family. These relations leant in the past mainly on the principles of submission of juniors to seniors, and women to men, which are patriarchal etiquette regulations. However the patriarchal power of the head of the family over members of the family group, the power of the husband over the wife, the big brother over a younger - in a word, a cult of men and a cult of seniors - never and nowhere reduced the status of women and juniors to a level threatening the further progressive development of a family or society.

For Abkhazians, marriage was connected with the whole system of limitations governing the mutual relations of spouses both between themselves, and with their relatives. Special rules determined the behaviour of each of the spouses in relation to the relatives of the other, including a taboo on certain names.

Among marriage traditions it is first of all necessary to mention the hiding of a newly-married couple from seniors between the moment of betrothal and the end of all wedding ceremonies (or even later), known under the name of the custom of avoidance. In Abkhazia not only the bride hid, but also the groom, who in particular disappeared for the period of the wedding night, and the next evening was violently guided by his friends and led to his bride, then stayed in a special small marriage house called 'amkhara'. However the next morning, before dawn, he left the house again so that nobody among the seniors

would see a newly-married couple together. This usually continued until a reconciliatory junket during the entering into the big house, arranged for two or three weeks after the wedding on the initiative of the companion of the groom.

The hiding of the groom from all seniors straight after the wedding, most importantly from his elder relatives, was one of the most characteristic elements of an Abkhazian wedding ritual. But sometimes a husband and wife for about one year or even more were not shown together to the senior representatives of the family. Also, a man wasn't supposed to have been present when his father was together with his grandchildren.

Among a number of strong taboos, it is necessary to mention a prohibition connected with names used in conversation. In traditional families a husband and wife in the presence of a third party could never say each other's names, but use only words like: you, he, she, master, mistress, or simply this, that. A daughter-in-law did not say the names of any of her husband's senior relatives, especially her mother-in-law or father-in-law. Her husband's father she called a lord or a big father (dad-du), and his mother a big mother (nan-du), etc.

An ancient custom is that a daughter-in-law all her life should stand and be silent in the presence of her father-in-law out of respect for him, and render him other signs of attention and honour. In the presence of her mother-in-law or her husband's other senior relatives she can take a seat and start to talk only after a long period of time.

Whereas a wife is occupied with housework, an unmarried girl more often attends weddings or feasts, and visits her friends or relatives.

After marriage a woman does not break off communication with her own family, who can support her interests at any time, and render to her moral and material aid. She continues to consider her father's house as the big house. Having some kind of support from her family, she feels more confident in her husband's house, and he should consider his wife's family in his relations with her.

At the same time a husband, understanding his superior strength,

will show some kindness and knightly indulgences to the weaker sex. Therefore Abkhazian husbands even in the past almost never resorted to beating and cursing their wives. A true man considered such behaviour to be taking an unfair advantage, and in disagreement with custom. In a case of cruelty or rough treatment a wife can demand satisfaction or divorce, which even now is still sometimes completed without any formalities by the return of a wife into her parents' house. At the same time autocratic divorce without sufficient reason (childlessness, deceit, etc.) is not tolerated, and neither is leaving a husband or wife. To chuck one's wife means offending her entire clan, and a husband should either give a good explanation or take her back again.

In the community women enjoy great respect, especially mothers. Insulting a woman is considered equivalent to a personal insult. In the presence of women, indecent expressions are not permitted at all. To take revenge on a woman is considered to be a shameful act unworthy of a man. Even the most irreconcilable enemies avoid the murder of women from their opponent's side. Anyone who, contrary to custom, raised a hand against a woman would cover himself in shame, and even an unkind word or action would offend his honour. 'The good dog does not bark at a woman', so the Abkhazian proverb says. Protecting a pregnant woman was obligatory, though bashfulness forced her to hide her condition from seniors (and meanwhile her endurance and patience during heavy labour would make any hero envious).

As noted, relations in public between a husband and wife and between parents (especially fathers) and children were characterised by great restraint. To publicly show any special concern for, or to caress, a child was considered as an obscene weakness in a man. It is now sometimes difficult to breach this or that custom, which has perhaps become ridiculous, but was honoured for centuries.

It didn't matter how poor an Abkhazian was, he began to prepare for his own family by building a small but separate cone-shaped wattled hut (amkhara) for himself at some distance (15-20 metres) from the so-called big house where his parents lived. This was a

special marriage premises where seniors did not come and where all the private life of a newly-married couple, separate from the big family and leading to the establishment of their own independent economy, proceeded. The basic sense of this rather reasonable and delicate custom is moral and aesthetic: the personal intimate life of a newly-married couple was reliably hidden from extraneous eyes and they did not sleep at night under the same roof as the seniors. Now the functions of amkhara have passed to one of the most isolated rooms of the modern house. This is fitting, as the word amkhara in a literal translation means non-hearing, though its definitive origin remains undiscovered up to now.

However mysterious and complicated the basis of this archaic practice is, it has survived in some places up to the present time, and it appears to us to be one of the brightest indicators of the high moral and aesthetic development of the people who founded and have continued to follow it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

HOSPITALITY

A guest brings seven happinesses
Abkhazian proverb

Anywhere, perhaps, customs and ceremonies (including rules of traditional etiquette) are not shown so strongly and clearly as in rural family life, especially in the hospitality of mountain people, because mountains have not only magnificent pastures containing curative endemic plants, but are also reliable refuges for many rare elements of the spiritual heritage of our ancestors.

Hospitality (asasra) according to ancient Abkhazian concepts is a sacred law, obligatory for each and every person. Someone may have many virtues, but not to be hospitable is enough to be morally condemned and, from any viewpoint, to be defective in society.

First of all, it is necessary to understand that a guest certainly cannot offer money or any other payment for reception or services. This would mean seriously offending a host. It is possible to stop at any time with anyone, and a host will offer a guest everything that is in the house and will do all he can to ensure that the visitor spends his time well and has a comfortable rest. Help from neighbours will make sure that any lack of means, or absence of the host or mistress of the house when guests arrive, will be unnoticed.

For the reception of guests in olden times a special house in a courtyard was constructed. Even now a visitor is invited into the best

room, which has been specially prepared for him. A guest is seated in a place of honour, whereas the hosts (including sometimes even the head of the family) do not immediately take a seat - even the patriarch of a clan will try not to sit down earlier than a guest, and younger members of the family, despite any persuasions from the visitor, will continue to stand. To remain standing before a visitor, as well as rising at the entrance of any new arrival, each adult considers as a sign of deep respect for him.

According to Abkhazian traditional rules of behaviour, not to rise when a person comes in means to show him disrespect and even in a sense to offend him.

The refined reception offered to a guest involves various activities. From the moment of a guest's arrival up to his departure time, no matter how long it has lasted - a day or two, or more - he should be (especially if he is an important visitor from distant places) the centre of attention from all family members, and to some extent also from their close relatives and neighbours, who in this case also put aside their own affairs. Quite often a family invite worthy neighbours to sit with the visitor and entertain him with pleasant conversations, thereby honouring him, and also senior members of the family will be present at that time. Women and youths prepare a meal in the kitchen in honour of the guest, and secretly kill hens, a goat, a ram and so forth. The secrecy is so that the guest will not know what is happening, and so will not, according to custom, attempt to persuade them not to take any unnecessary trouble.

In a house where a guest is present, order and calmness should reign: all should speak without nervousness, avoid arguments and try to walk more silently without stamping. Inappropriate games and pranks by youths and children when seniors are present are also not tolerated. The best place at the table and during relaxation, the best food, the best bed - all these are for the guest. If he has arrived on a horse he need not worry about it - everything that is necessary will be done by his hosts, who will unsaddle the horse, will feed it and give it a drink, will take it away to a fenced pasture, and will keep it

in a stable in the winter.

It is not considered acceptable to ask a guest where he is heading, or what the purposes of his travel are. Such interrogation is considered inappropriate and tactless curiosity. All the best that is available at home in the way of foodstuffs should be placed on the table, for 'What is hidden from a guest belongs to the devil'. A feast for Abkhazians begins and comes to an end with the ritual of lavabo, which is one of the traditional elements of ceremonial hospitality.

Important value is given to the right places which should be taken at the table, and who should be seated near to whom. This decision is mainly based on the idea that younger people, out of respect for the seniors, should not have a seat near to them, but further away at a respectful distance from them. However, not only age is considered, but also how family members are related. For example, a son should not sit near to his father, nor a son-in-law with his father-in-law, a nephew with uncles from his mother's side, etc. The eldest of the hosts occupies the place of honour at the head of the table.

In olden days women or girls, except for representatives of the higher class, did not sit down at the table with men. They ate later, somewhere in a quiet corner or in another room, being content with the meal leftovers.

When a guest has been fed and given drink, the best bed in the house is prepared for him. As has been already noted, the life and well-being of the guest are protected and preserved by the host and his entire group of relatives. Insulting a guest is equivalent to insulting the host himself.

When a visitor leaves the hospitality of the house, everyone sees him off in the court yard. A youth supports the stirrup if the guest leaves on horseback, and he mounts only after having turned around to face the house again. No Abkhazians will leave a hospitable court yard without having said a last 'Abiarazie!', which is 'All the best!' or 'To the following safe meeting!' The same wish is the answer to this. According to Abkhazian belief, even the higher forces cannot break hospitality rules. The expressions 'You are the guest of the

Creator' (Uzshaz umsasup) and 'You are the guest of God' (Atsare wesasup) show, in accordance with old concepts, that even God is not of sufficient status to break the rules of hospitality.

Centuries of tradition have accurately defined the principles of mutual relations between contradictory parties, and between winners and the defeated, including guests who had seriously broken with tradition. Enemies should also adhere to some obligatory unwritten rules. So, if an offender somewhere casually meets the man he has offended he cannot attack first, and only has the right to defend himself, is obliged to let his enemy pass, and in crowded places or in a house the stranger should leave immediately as soon as the offended person appears. At a meeting of enemies the right of the first shot belonged to the offended, and a murderer was obliged to arrange the body of his victim, to cover it with a burka, to inform relatives as soon as possible of the death, to protect the body from animals, etc.

According to legend, one murderer disappeared from the persistent prosecution of relatives of the person he had killed, but once secretly came home to rest and change his clothes. He undressed, and his wife, washing him during bathing, expressed her fear that avengers could use this moment to attack him. He responded to her: 'My enemies would not like to lift a hand against a naked man.' His persecutors really were hiding behind a door at the time, but having seen their enemy in such a defenceless state they turned around and left.

Hospitality has found a wide reflection in Abkhazian folklore. Here are some sayings: 'With a guest seven happinesses come', 'He who visitors often stay with never has an empty pot', 'A guest is free to do anything he wants' etc.

According to one legend, guests came to a bullfinch, and the poor bird did not have anything to feed them with. So without hesitation it cut its neck, to feed guests with its own blood. That is why, this sad but beautiful legend says, a bullfinch has a red mark on its neck.

One of the most characteristic Abkhazian greetings 'Bziala sharebeit!' functionally corresponds to the Russian 'Welcome!', but its exact literal translation is a little different: 'It is good that we saw

you!', 'Your arrival was pleasant!'

According to a legend, during horse-racing competitions at an annual well-attended celebration two young men quarrelled, and one of them was killed. The murderer disappeared. Trying to escape from his pursuers, he ran into the first court yard he reached, admitted to the host all that he had done, and asked him for help. The old man, without thinking twice, hid his visitor in a safe place in an attic.

Soon after this, into his court yard a funeral procession with the blood-stained body of his son was driven. As he found out, his son had been killed by the person who he had just sheltered to protect him from revenge. This unfortunate father, after the funeral of his son and when all mourners had left, saw off the murderer from the house and told him: 'You have killed my only son, but you trusted me, were my guest, and I cannot defame the rule of hospitality. I spare you your life. Leave now before anyone notices you, and do not come into my sight again!'

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE CULTURE OF THE FEAST

The fundamental economic principle of the development of the culture of a feast, and of the table etiquette of Abkhazians, is based upon their traditional agricultural and cattle-breeding activities.

Among dozens of alcoholic and soft drinks, and dishes from vegetable, meat and dairy products which made a rich and in many respects rather original Abkhazian ethnic cuisine, only a few fresh foodstuffs were considered as the most prestigious.

Up until now, they traditionally form the pivotal basis of any Abkhazian ceremonial or funeral feasts. Included are corn polenta (mamalyga or abysta), which during XIX century replaced millet porridge, a wheat pie with a cheese stuffing (achashv), different cheeses, boiled meats from large and small cattle, dishes with walnut filling, hen or turkey with different sauces, the well-known Abkhazian salt with garlic, pepper and other spices (adjika) and local natural grape wine.

Almost everywhere now, the first toast by Abkhazians is for peace, for the people and friendship between them, and that there will be no war.

The content of a toast includes some standard, stereotypical elements, and is said in a loud voice, whenever possible in conditions of complete silence, and represents from beginning to end an improvised speech said in a solemn spirit in which the orator tries to include a maximum of kind wishes for health, happiness and success.

Abkhazian table etiquette expresses sometimes surprisingly subtle nuances of human relations, not always appreciated and not perhaps always clear to an outside observer.

For example, a visitor should under no circumstances be seated near a door or an exit, to prevent him leaving early and make it possible to detain him longer at the table, but the main thing is to ensure in advance that he has a place among the guests of honour. To leave the table and then return back for further participation in the feast is considered unacceptable (or at least, before taking your place at the table once more it is necessary to wash your hands again). Younger people should leave the table earlier and in the same order in which they came into the premises where a feast takes place.

Any meal in accordance with tradition begins with a purely formal, ritually symbolic glorification of God, or much more rarely of Allah. This unvaried ancient prayer says: 'My God, grant us your clemency! Grant us the warmth of your eyes!'

Visitors leaving the table at the end of the meal express their kind wishes to the host: 'May you always be in prosperity!, Let your wealth multiply!' The master of the house in his turn with the same compulsion answers: 'What you have eaten and drunk, let it serve to give you health!'

A lot of these external signs of good manners have long since amazed keen observers in Abkhazia!

All this philosophy is called 'apsuara' in Abkhazian, and as we have already seen it is possible to translate this as Abkhazian etiquette in the broad sense of the word, or as an everyday national Abkhazian system of beliefs and norms of behaviour.

Abkhazians since time immemorial have had the reputation among their neighbours as polite and courteous people. At the end of the last century Eugenie Markov wrote: 'Abkhazians are excellent people with subtle intellects, refined, gifted, the real Frenchmen of the Caucasus...'

The territory of Abkhazia is included within a wide area which is an ancient region of grape cultivation. It is believed that wild grapes have been growing here since the tertiary period, and new types were

bred over centuries from early species by selection, which certainly does not exclude the likelihood that some types were delivered to Abkhazia from the outside. Findings of viticulture experts refer to II millennium BC.

It is necessary to mention the exclusive role of wine in the home and religious life of Abkhazians. The laws of hospitality demanded that each passing traveller be greeted with wine, rather than plain water. Special value was given to wine as a force consecrating objects for sacrifice, as well as a means for the propitiation of deities or patrimonial patrons. By almost each peasant, at least one special inviolable clay jug of wine was buried, intended for the performance of an annual rite (aniharegatei) in honour of the Gods of such sanctuaries, as, for example, Ilory, Inal-cuba, Dydrypsh, Aatsi, Ldzaa, etc.

Among archeological findings are fragments of wine jugs (sometimes with remains of wine or grape pips). For example, pips of the species kachich were plentifully found in a III-II centuries BC layer during excavation of the Sukhum fortress, which as a whole dated from the first half of the I millennium BC up to the late Middle Ages. Regarding the cultivation of grapes here from extreme antiquity, an interesting fact from the book by L.H.Hashba, 'Cultivation of the walnut in Abkhazia', tells us: 'In 1927 whilst digging a well in the manor of the peasant called Gzhindzhua in the village of Lykhny (1.5 km from the city of Gudauta) at a depth of 7-15 metres the trunk of a large nut tree coiled by a grapevine was found vertically in the ground'. The deep bedding of this tree testifies to the ancient, thousand-year-old cultivation of walnuts and grapes in Abkhazia.

As a whole the Abkhazian feast is some kind of a performance, all the basic components of which - from the ceremony of lavabo to toasts, dances and songs - are in advance provided by tradition and unscripted staging, and the content of which is not only a celebration of life and a show with many faces, but also a self-affirmation of a human person.

CHAPTER NINE

FORMS OF GREETINGS AND COMPLIMENTS

An obligatory requirement of the aforementioned apsuara or Abkhazian conscientiousness (Apsua alamis) is the benevolent treatment of a person, expressed, in particular, in verbal compliments, as well as in some non-verbal symbolic signs. Greetings are one of the most basic and common forms of etiquette. Various types of greetings are met amongst all people all over the world. For Abkhazians there are a lot of them: for almost each more or less important aspect of home, public or business life there is a special greeting.

When meeting someone, addressing that person with a suitable greeting is an elementary duty for everyone, irrespective of the degree of acquaintance, their sex or age, or the place or time of meeting. The most widespread traditional forms are: 'Good morning!' (Shzhybzia!), 'Good afternoon!' (Mshybzia!), 'Good evening!' (Hulybzia!). The answer is with the words: 'Let you see the kindness!' (Bzia ubeit!), 'Welcome!' (Bziala uaabeit!).

An approached person greets first, and also a man greets a woman, a senior a junior, a horseman a pedestrian (though, generally speaking, the first welcome is from the one who has better manners). Anyone who is sitting on a horse should half-rise on the stirrups, for nobody can be welcomed in a sitting position. Men, welcoming each other, raise their right hand in front of themselves to chest level, having slightly clenched the fingers into a fist (it is probable that a vestige of a mans military greeting by means of lifting a heavy spear remains in this

important gesture). A handshake is not obligatory, but it is accepted to enquire about the health and affairs of each other and of relatives.

To the standard question 'How are you?' (Ushphako?) with which acquaintances and relatives address each other at every new meeting (usually firstly from senior to junior), the stereotypical answer generated by tradition is 'All right', 'Not bad' etc. In Abkhazian this cliché of etiquette is 'Hara siimam' which in a literal translation means 'I have no faults, I am not guilty, innocent, right, not privy to criminal acts, fair', etc.

Innocence and piety are the highest criteria of decency and humanity. The wise formula created by our ancient ancestors - I have no faults - served as an acknowledgement of the moral and legal cleanliness and full value of a person in society, although after such a long time it has become only habitual, almost a mere formality.

But even so this habitual greeting is not suitable in all cases. When a person is in grief or has bad troubles, the usual 'How are you?' is considered an inappropriate and tactless banality, and people only sympathetically and silently shake hands with him. Besides this, women can also slightly stroke his forearm or chest.

Needless to say, not to welcome someone in an appropriate way or not to answer a greeting are considered as the height of bad manners and even as an insult. There have been frequent cases when the deliberate and arrogant infringement of the standard rules concerning greetings has led to serious conflict situations.

Motives behind a polite interaction of people to each other have found a certain reflection in an ancient national epic about Narts. The Nart Sasriqua was so proud of his many glorious feats that he began to doubt whether there was any person in the world better and stronger than him. According to one of the variants of the legend, the wise mother of this hero did not like such bragging from her favourite son - the youngest of ninety-nine mighty brothers - and she told Sasriqua: 'To show you're bragging in vain, go along this road and you will see someone who is stronger than you!'

Without a word, the Nart jumped on a horse and went on his

way. He travelled along that road for exactly fifteen days, and on the sixteenth saw a ploughman tilling a field. The ploughman was one-armed, but extremely big and mighty.

‘Good afternoon!’ said Sasriqua, respectfully having half-risen on the stirrups.

But the farmer, who maybe did not catch the words, or maybe simply did not want to answer the greeting of a young stranger, silently continued to plough, turning out lumps the size of a proper house.

‘Gratifying work for you and your family!’ Sasriqua shouted again. The ploughman once more said nothing in reply. Then Sasriqua whacked his horse with a lash and rushed off towards the uncivil farmer. However the young man could not overcome the giant ploughman, who covered him with a huge lump of earth and continued his work.

At midday the ploughman’s wife came and brought a meal in an iron bowl. This bowl was as big as a barn in which corn is stored. Having gorged himself, the ploughman told his wife:

‘Yes, I’d almost forgotten. Here’s an entertainment for our children I’ve put by. He is some pathetic Abkhazian, take him with you!’

With these words he lifted the lump by which the unlucky hero was covered, and handed Sasriqua together with the horse to his wife. She placed the Nart in a bowl and without any effort carried him home through the woods.

The basic moral of this legend is clear: do not glorify yourself, keep your distance, do not allow arrogance to take hold of you. At the same time the legends testify about some Nart Age etiquette rules, showing the extraordinary antiquity of the origin of these and other delicate forms of human relations, which are also intrinsic to us and which without any essential changes are still used today by our contemporaries.

CHAPTER TEN

SOME FEATURES OF SPEECH BEHAVIOUR OF ABKHAZIANS

The greatest possession of both the traditional and modern culture of a people is their native language. The creation of writing, the development of literature, national schools, press and radio have all considerably advanced the development of the Abkhazian language and its public functions. The richest tradition of Abkhazian oral literature is as an untouched fund of native culture which, according to academician N.Marr, was a source supporting the public role of archaic Abkhazian speech, and a material for the exceptionable development of oratory in the country.

The presence of considerable dialect distinctions, even apparently in the early feudal epoch, did not interfere with mutual understanding between the main developed parts of the Abkhazian ethnos. At the heart of the language lay the unity of a grammatical system and a general fund of basic dictionary words from Abkhazian dialects.

D.Gulia, recollecting his childhood, speaks about how his father, thanks to his love of and ability to perform speech, had become a public figure, and in the evenings in the bosom of his family in front of the fire, in detail he told about all he had heard and seen.

‘Wherever he had been, after returning home he collected the family, put me near to him and in detail told us about all that had happened. He spoke at length, clearly described all events, and made us laugh with humorous catchphrases and jokes.’

Unfortunately, that unique material about the exceptional development of oratory by Abkhazians, as told in the words of Marr and Gulia given above, is still collected and studied insufficiently. Suffice it to say that now we have not one record of any performance by remarkable national tribunes, of which there were quite a few in each Abkhazian community. Therefore our representations of the glorified eloquence of Abkhazians, which are based mainly on the short and often casual remarks of pre-revolutionary authors who, as a rule, did not know the Abkhazian language, can certainly neither be complete nor exact enough.

For all that, as far as it is possible to judge from the available data, the speech of an Abkhazian national orator consisted of three sections: some kind of an introduction which began with a traditional reference to the audience 'People, I would be willing to give my head instead of yours!', the main section giving the most detailed merits of his argument, plentifully garnished with proverbs, aphorisms and legends corresponding to his topic, with questions and appeals to his listeners calling for their approving reaction, and a short conclusion. The ending of the conclusion had the style of an extremely compressed standard form of thanks: 'I have tired you with my words, forgive me! Gods blessings be with you!'

Let us recollect, for example, a national tribune who was an illiterate peasant named Osman Shamba from the village of Eshera. Speaking at a historic glade in Lyhny on 26th July 1866, he gave a passionate speech to a crowd of seven thousand which lasted for eight continuous hours. It appears from documents that three men took turns to translate his words, but all of them became totally hoarse and could not speak further, and the well-known orator strode around the platform, by tradition addressing a question from time to time to those on whose behalf he was speaking: 'So have I transferred your thoughts correctly?' In reply, the crowd invariably expressed their enthusiastic approval, and gave loud exclamations of agreement.

A 115-year-old inhabitant of the village of Atara in the Ochamchira region of Abkhazia, Kuat Kvitsinia, whom I visited in January 1984,

told me a lot of interesting facts, in particular on the subject of the alabashia in relation to the oratory of Abkhazians. According to his information, a stick-staff alabashia was an indispensable accessory not only of hunters, but also was an essential implement for the orator, and a performance with an alabashia in hand was given the special term 'adowara'.

'They say' he continued, 'that old Dzhachy Kvitsinia, who lived in the second half of the XIX century, had the ability to make a speech skilfully, and he could speak non-stop 24 hours a day.' Give us a speech!' People asked him and handed over an alabashia. In particular, he was once sent by relatives to Sukhumi to appear as a witness in a court case. His namesake, peasant Dawei Kvitsinia, was accused of beating well-known Abzhui prince Grigory Shervashidze. In the heat of polemic this national tribune unintentionally stuck an alabashia into his foot, but he did not interrupt his speech for a minute and, eventually, despite pressure from the authorities, won a difficult case: the courageous peasant, compelled to apply force to protect his honour and property, was justified.'

The extraordinary development of oratory was promoted by certain conditions of public life, such as the long history of some patriarchal feudal institutes, including national meetings and national legal proceedings based on tradition. At these frequently convoked and populous forums where everyone could act in the protection of his own or another's interests and show his eloquence so valued by people, major questions regarding the mutual relations of separate people and of whole social groups were solved.

Abkhazians have always greatly appreciated the power and emotional influence of the spoken word, understanding its miraculous capability to heal deep wounds, defeat seemingly unapproachable fortresses - in a word, to do the almost impossible. They say: 'The language of the people is a remedy'.

Listen to Abkhazian language: how much heart-felt warmth and parental caress is in the Abkhazian words 'dad' and 'nan' by which seniors address their youngers, how much is ennobled in the words

‘ashhia’ - mountain, or ‘ahira’ - a steep rock? There is even a special national ‘Song of a rock.’ And how much cosmic greatness, force, nobility and glow is in the unique Abkhazian definition of unlimited daring and heroism - the term ‘af’irkhatsa’, which N.A.Lakoba translated brightly and colourfully as a hero of heroes, born of thunder and lightning . To be called as such is the dream of any Abkhazian man or woman. Ancient word combinations like ‘Uhatsky stseit!’ are often heard in traditional Abkhazian speech. Such expressions are difficult to translate, but that one means approximately: ‘Yes, I will take your death upon myself!’ which, having lost its original religious and magic sense a very long time ago, is now used to indicate great respect for a person.

For communication over a long distance Abkhazians used a wireless telegraph: they transmitted necessary information by shouting from a top of a hill to a neighbouring peak.

For example, it was said that Prince Golitsyn, the governor-general of the Caucasus, whilst passing incognito along the Black Sea coast, was extremely surprised to be met by a deputation in Lykhny. To his question on how they learnt about his arrival, he was answered: ‘through an Abkhazian telegraph!’

One of the most typical features of the vivid yet informal conversation of Abkhazians, especially male representatives of the older generation, is its extraordinary saturation with suitable national sayings, proverbs, aphorisms, short household and other stories and moralizing maxims. ‘He who has a suspended tongue has no need to carry a sharp sabre’, ‘A word is capable of wounding a person, but a word can also heal him’, ‘A sabre wound heals, a sword wound heals, but a wound made with a word does not heal’, ‘A person dies, but his word does not die’ - these and many other Abkhazian proverbs provide a representation of the value given by people to the huge, irreplaceable power of their native language, which should be developed without distortion or contamination.

CONCLUSION

Feelings of beauty have a universal character. Beauty in nature, public and private life causes a feeling of aesthetic pleasure in everybody capable of understanding the exquisiteness of people, irrespective of any tribal, racial or class association. If there were no valid criteria for an estimation of the phenomenon of beauty, mankind would not equally admire, for example, sunrise and sunset, majestic falls, open seas, mountain landscapes, the Egyptian pyramids, images of Prometheus, Greek art, Raphael’s paintings, the poetry of Rustaveli and Dante, Shakespeare and Pushkin, Mayakovsky and Yesenin, and the novels of Balzac, Tolstoy and Sholokhov.

However along with common features, ideals of beauty also have specific traits for various races, people and public classes, connected with the aesthetic views dominating in a given ethnic group, and tastes which under the influence of historical conditions can change, develop and be improved. Education in taste is improved by knowledge, including a mastering of the major elements of national culture. Modern civilization is connected by a thousand threads to all previous developments, with cultural values which were created by many people on all continents throughout millennia. Traditions substantially defining the ethnically individual aspects of a people form the richest fund of its culture, as a result of its centuries-old practical and intellectual activity.

In the diary of the well known Abkhazian artist A.K.Shervashidze (Chachba) we read: ‘... We live among people with beautiful ancient customs, with a large, beautiful and sincere internal culture... It

makes me extremely sad when I think that all that is so appreciated in Abkhazians could disappear, in particular from our mountain people. I imagine them to myself as harmonious, dexterous, very polite and with great dignity, calm, moderate in everything, honest and resolute. All of our culture is in these characteristics’.

Unfairly, some fine traditions for which Abkhazians were famous in the past have been forgotten, such as for example national - in the full sense of this word - horsemanship, the system of unique etiquette, the delicate rules of dialogue between people, the mass performance of national songs and dances, etc.

In the comparative analysis of losses and acquisitions in the field of national art creativity, preservation of the positive features of traditional heritage is also rather instructive. The national creativity of Abkhazians has not only historical and cultural importance, but also a large practical value.

In spite of many traditional items having already lost this direct practical value, they remain in the historical memory of the people, and at the same time continue to hold unique aesthetic functions, and are monuments to the ancestors of families as relics creating a special beauty which brings pleasure and educates people.

The question of aesthetic criteria - what should be considered as fine, and what ugly - is one of the most difficult problems in science. One unique answer to this does not exist. Inconsistencies in the culture and life of different nations of the world - historical and modern, backward and civilized - also confirm this to be true.

As is known, any civilisation accompanied by a destructive force of fashion not only receives but also inevitably loses a lot which is original and beautiful in life and human relations. In particular, modern means of communication and transport which have resulted, as Abkhazians say, in the disappearance of distances, have caused a decline in horse breeding. The oblivion of a variety of remarkable elements of material and spiritual culture is connected with this, for example Circassian coats, burkas, inlaid saddles, lashes, bridles, etc., all of which were indispensable accessories for any good horseman

in the past.

Collecting, and conducting scientific research into, such unique items provides not only an understanding of this or that ethnic culture and its specific features, but also allows the possibility of learning why it developed as it did, and at the same time helps us to find the best explanation for the ethnic psychology of the people and their character. Without considering the originality of the national Abkhazian traditions, customs and mythology, any concept of the Abkhazian person will not be complete.

The aspiration to keep and carry intact into modern times all the best and noblest old national traditions, and all which is precious from lessons of national history, is intrinsic to poets and artists in the broad sense of these words, and especially to the sons of those people whose development from narrow national patriarchal frameworks to the wide horizons of world culture was so prompt - as has occurred in Abkhazia. The national poet of Abkhazia, Bagrat Shinkuba, came back time and again to this theme, but perhaps most precisely expressed it in this rhyme:

The hearth is burnt, the flame is twisted
Do not forget to throw more wood
Eternal fire has been transferred
From one generation to the next
I wish that all were able to preserve
This fire which has come from centuries,
Whose reflected light has shone on cradles
And the grey hair of old men

Today it is not an idle question for us to ask how to preserve this fire which has come from centuries. The fire, not the ashes!

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL



Storyteller Makhti Hagba from the village of Achandara with Abkhazian academician Shalva Inal-ipa (far right) and poet Bagrat Shinkuba (far left).



Shalva Inal-ipa was a skillful and enthusiastic rider like any Abkhazian. They say he could even gallop up the stairs.



140-year-old Ashkangeri Bzhania says a prayer, 1947. There is a statement in the Guinness Book of Records that the number of Abkhazians of very old age is 25 times the proportion in the USA.



G.Gitsba and G.Pilia in traditional Abkhazian clothes (a hood, a papakha and Circassian coats), 1928



Abkhazian girl in traditional dress
Unknown artist

64

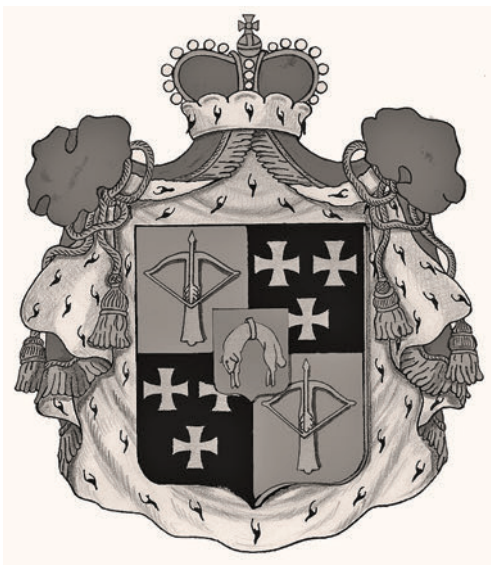


19th century Abkhazian aristocrat
Artist Prince G.Gagarin

65



Ruins of the castle near the river Bzyb in Inal-ipa's possession



The coat of arms of the Inal-ipas



Abkhazians, photo from 1870



The Republic of Abkhazia is situated on the Eastern coast of the Black Sea, on the border between Europe and Asia

Shalva Inal-ipa
“Abkhazian etiquette”
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