

# Circassian Family Life

by

Amjad Jaimoukha

## Historical familial structures

Classical Circassian society went through two phases of gender domination. There is some evidence that the society was initially matriarchal, later transforming to patriarchy when the physically more powerful males sought to overturn the tables. According to Maxime Kovalevsky (1893), there were some aspects of the customs and traditions of the Circassians that could only be explained by assuming an antecedent matriarchal society. He constructed a model of Circassian society in which confraternities were the basic units of social structure. These prescribed exogamous marriage, and the 'bought' bride became a communal possession. Circassian custom had it that a widow was obliged to remarry one of the brothers of her deceased husband. In Kovalevsky's model, the widow was only able to remarry outside the group if she could redeem her price. Otherwise, any member of the confraternity could claim her. The offspring of the union were considered those of the deceased.

In the seminal tale 'The Council of the Matriarchs' of the Nart Epic, we learn that:

... in the olden times, there was the Council of Matriarchs, which was made up of wise and far-sighted mature ladies. The Council discussed the day-to-day issues of the young Narts, and legislated laws and customs by which the youth had to abide in their mundane life. The Council members relied on their long experience and perspicacity in formulating relevant edicts.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> From original Bzchedighw text, in Asker Hedeghel'e (compiler and editor), *HAPTXƏP: АДЫГЭ ЭПОС. Nartxer: Adige Épos. Narti: Adigski épos* [The Narts: Circassian Epos, Vol. 7], Maikop: The Adigean Science and Research Institute, 1971, p106.

In other tales, marking the transformation to patriarchy, the formidable Nart Nesren Zchach'e (Нэсрэн ЖъакIэ) expressed his refusal to obey and swear allegiance to Lady Satanay, imploring the Narts to appoint a male leader.

Kovalevsky cited the legend of the Amazons in Circassian oral tradition as the record of transition to patriarchy. The Amazons and Circassians had been engaged in continual war. One day, the former resolved to enter into parleys with the latter. The queen of the Amazons spent a few hours in Prince Toulmey's tent, and came out intent on putting an end to the futile conflict. She declared that war was over and she announced her betrothal to her erstwhile adversary. She advised her followers to follow suit and pair with Circassian warriors. They took her counsel—and there an end to matriarchal rule. In Kovalevsky's estimation, the temporary union between groups of men and women of different societies preceded the patriarchal custom of life-long marriage consecrated by vows of fidelity. He considered male domination as a later development in Circassian society.

Some Western travellers of the 18th and early 19th centuries commented on the looseness of sexual morals in Circassian society, being unable to appreciate fully the complex social processes at work. According to them, for a married woman to have a lover, *sch'ase* [шIасэ], was not considered as a shame. In fact, husbands felt proud and were flattered that other men admired their wives and took interest in them.

Incest was prohibited a very long time ago. The Nart Epos preserved ancient tales that provide a vestige of those far away days when this practice was not yet tabooed. Circassian traditions took the prohibition to the extreme. Prospective couples were supposed not to be related up to the seventh forefather. Many men chose their partners from outside the village. It would seem that the ancient Circassians were aware of the detrimental effects of close-relation marriages.

## Traditional family life

The Circassian clan was not divided into nuclear families. The normal familial unit was the extended household (унэзэхэс; *winezexes*) consisting of a father and his married sons. The head of the family was loath to allow sons-in-law to demur in his house, in accordance with the saying ‘*Malhx’esch, zhip’ew wineghw wimisch*’ («Малххэщ, жыпIэу унэгъу умыщI»; Say not ‘He’s my son-in-law’, and take him into your house). All obeyed the eldest member of the clan.

Avoidance customs entailed the prohibition of association of some members of the same family. Siblings avoided fraternizing in private and in public. If a person approached a group of people and he saw one of his brothers in the group, then, according to seniority of age, he either walked away from the group, or joined it, whilst the junior bid his leave. This custom was sanctioned to lessen sibling rivalry. Some vestiges of this custom can still be evidenced in the Caucasus and in the diaspora.

A man avoided being seen in public with his wife at all costs, although the severity of proscription eased with old age. Females walked behind their male co-ambulators. It was unseemly to talk about a man’s wife in his presence or inquire after her health. A man was loath to call his wife by her name in the presence of strangers or household members. He never mentioned her in conversations with outsiders. A newly married man had to devise ingenious plans to visit the bedroom of his bride.

A wife did not sit in the presence of her spouse unless he gave her permission to do so. She never called her parents-in-law, husband, or her brothers-in-law by their names. In the last case, she used pet names (пщыкьуэцIэ; *pschiqwets’e*) to refer to them, for example ‘ДыгъэцIыкIу’ (*Dighets’ik’w*) [‘Little Sun’]. It was a secretive appellation that she never divulged outside the family circle. A saying prevalent in the olden times was ‘ПщыкьуэцIэ мыхъуамэ, кьыджелэ щэхур!’ (*Pschiqwets’e mix’wame, qidzhei’e schexwr!*)—‘Tell us your secret, if it isn’t the pet name of your brother-in-law!’ Among the upper classes, it was considered a mark of courtesy that when the names of a woman’s husband, father, or elder brothers were mentioned, she stood up. Mothers usually used shortened forms of their children’s names to call them by. In some cases, totally different names of a more childish nature were used.

The ordering of Circassian personal names reflected the tribal structure of a

society which laid more emphasis on a person's clannish background rather than his individuality. Thus, the name was transposed, with the family name coming first and the first name last! In less formal settings, the patronym took precedence over the first name. For example, in the tale 'Sosriqwe Fetches Fire,' some Narts were addressed by invoking the patronym in the first instance—son of Ashe, Ashemez, son of X'imisch, Baterez. A class of surnames has a patronymic form obtained by adding the suffix *-qwe* 'son' to a personal name, e.g. Zhihoqwe, Hevzhoqwe, Themoqwe. Another onomastic nicety had to be observed. When the said suffix was added to a nominal stem, it was the preceding vowel which indicated whether the compound was a personal or family name. An *-i-* marked the former, *-o-* the other. For example, Ch'isch*i*qwe, son of Ch'isch, vs. Ch'isch*o*qwe, clan or family of Ch'isch; Ghwch'epsch*i*qwe vs. Ghwch'epsch*o*qwe (J. Kokov, 1983, p6).

In the Soviet period, Russianized forms of family names gained importance, and even supremacy, especially in the official spheres. These forms were standardized, and were usually made up of the Russian patronymic *-ov/-ova* suffixed to the nearest Russian renderings of the original names. In works on onomastics, such as J. Kokov's, Circassian surnames are usually followed by their Russian versions. Thus, two designations were associated with each person, one 'ethnic,' used within the national group, the other formal. This legacy, still prevalent today, makes it almost impossible for an outsider to recognize nationality from the name.

The relationship between father and children, especially his sons, was characterized by sternness, bordering on severity, on the part of the father and absolute obedience on the part of the progeny. The father did not show any emotion towards his offspring except to vent his anger on them whenever untoward behaviour needed to be rectified. Holding and fondling them was out of the question. He never called them by their names in the presence of strangers. A son was forbidden to sit in his father's presence. He only spoke when he was asked to by the patriarch. A small boy was not allowed to make his presence in front of his grandfather or his uncles until he had reached manhood.

When there were no guests in the house, the head of the family ate first either on his own or with his grandchildren. Nobody else was allowed to sit with him. When he had his fill and left the table, the other members of the household would have their meal. Such was the reverence for the elders.

Each family used to have a unique symbol, *damighe* (дамыгъэ), which was cut out on belongings and used as a decoration pattern and to brand cattle. No family was allowed to use another's. The allocation of these emblems was the prerogative of the Council of the Nobles. These signs were first found in the Bosporan Kingdom, dated to the first century AD, inscribed on the walls of underground tombs or on ritual objects. It is known that the Sarmatians adopted these symbols and used them to brand their personal possessions, the ritualistic significance being lost. Later they took them to Poland, where they may have served as the bases for the heraldic clan symbols of the old Polish nobility. It may be that these signs were of local Caucasian origin, first adopted by the Bosporan Greeks and later by the Sarmatians, who then spread them across Eastern Europe. Two hundred and twelve of these ancient Circassian emblems with short accounts were collected and published in Cairo by Mustafa Lakhshoqwe in 1892, and republished in Yussef Izzat Pasha's book *The History of the Caucasus*, which came out in Istanbul in 1933. Kh. Kh. Yakhtanigov (Yex'tenij) collected Circassian and North Caucasian family emblems and published the impressive collection in 1993.

Despite the relative dominance of the male sex, women in Circassian society in general enjoyed a relatively good position, perhaps unparalleled by any other 'Eastern' people. Girls were not secluded, but enjoyed most of the pastimes of the boys. They were neither shy nor ill at ease in other people's company, and they served guests and strangers. A woman was free to choose her marriage partner. Coercion was rare. The father did not usually interfere in the matter, the mother making the proper arrangements with her daughter. There were exceptions as there always is. A suitor was allowed to visit a maid's house so that the couple would have the chance to get to know one another before making the binding decision. Divorce was rare and the eastern habit of taking second and more wives was frowned upon.

The Russian newspaper *Segodnya* published results of research on the lives and problems of Russian women in a special supplement in 1994. It was found that the position of women in Kabardino-Balkaria and the Karachai-Cherkess Republic was significantly better in many respects than the Russian average. Circassian society placed a great premium on lean female figure, and in order to ensure that girls attained this ideal they were fed sparingly, their diet consisting of milk and boiled millet cakes. On the negative side, the slave trade, in place from

time immemorial up to the conquest, had detracted from the status of women, at least those who belonged to the lower classes.

### **Charity & social work**

Within each clan or fraternity co-operation was essential to maintain a strong community. Social work and voluntary institutions were well developed. Mutual help, the backbone of a social safety net, ensured that the poorest families had decent abodes to live in. In times of calamities, people were never at a loss for places at which they would be put up in comfort. This mutual aid system was, and still is, prevalent in the whole North Caucasus. When Russian forces attacked Grozny in 1994-96, many Chechen residents were able to evacuate to relative comfort in the countryside, whereas the poor Russian citizens had to bear the brunt of the bombings for weeks.

After the rites associated with a new harvest, people were at liberty to donate part of the crop to the poor. This obsolete custom was called *sejit* (сэджит). According to a defunct custom called '*chirbishghezh*' («чырбышгъэж»; literally: 'adobe drying'), some Sundays were devoted to manufacture of adobe. Another tradition of note was *sch'ihexw* (щыхъэху), which was not unlike an American bee. Residents of a neighbourhood volunteered a day for house building, usually to accommodate indigent families. As befits a martial society, every member of which was expected to carry arms and defend his homestead, poorer residents of a community were given assistance in procuring personal weapons.

### **Tsarist & Soviet periods**

During the Tsarist period, no attempts were made by the Russians to undermine the traditional structure of the Circassian family, and no substantive changes were evinced. Russia was too busy consolidating her hold on the newly conquered lands, by resettling the tribes, and infusing the area with new Cossack and Russian settlers.

The Soviet system brought on a new set of rules concerning the structure of the ideal Soviet family. All people were expected to converge to this paragon. The age of consent was fixed at 18 for men and 16 for women. Marriage was contracted at a registry office with a lay person officiating. Divorce was initially easy to obtain. However, lax rules gave unscrupulous men the opportunity to gratify their carnal desires quickly and cheaply. The sanctity of married life was

compromised. However, bowing to public outcry, authorities made divorce procedures more stringent.

During the first few years of communist rule, the family system remained intact, that is until the onset of collectivization in 1928-29. This period was characterized by great upheavals. Some aspects of traditional village life were disrupted, and the villagers were forced to work in kolkhoz and sovkhoz farms. Those who resisted the new system were dealt with harshly. The Bakhsan uprising of 1928 was a direct consequence of the cruel measures of implementation. Many people were accused of being kulaks (well-to-do peasants exploiting other people's toil) and were either executed or exiled. Women were expected to shoulder the effort of building the new utopia but without being given commensurate political power. The Soviet system was strictly a patriarchal affair.

Industrialization and concomitant growth of the cities attracted a part of the rural population, which had to adapt to a new way of life. Mixed marriages were not common, the pattern being for Circassian men to marry Russian women. It was very rare for Circassian women to marry Russians on both religious and traditional grounds, for they were expected to be, and actually acted as bastions of ethnic customs and traditions. Some ambitious Circassian men opted for Russian spouses to improve their chances of promotion. This is a typical pattern of intermarriage between two groups in which one feels, or is made to feel, inferior by the other dominant one.

Of the 1,250 marriages recorded in Kabardino-Balkaria last year, less than 40 involved members of different clans (Zarina Kanukova [Qaniqwe], 2000). The Kabardian elite lords it over the Balkars, who, in turn, consider themselves socially superior to the Cossacks.

The new ideology was inimical to Circassian traditions. Some customs were vehemently attacked as throwbacks to the dark ages of feudalism. Russian researchers picked some aspects of social life and denigrated them as reactionary. Avoidance customs were particularly targeted, and papers were published denouncing them. Despite the offensive to erode their traditions, and the many evils introduced by the Communist system, like alcoholism and crime, the Circassians managed to preserve many aspects of their traditional way of life, especially in the countryside.

One of the curious results of the October Revolution was that many Circassian family names were registered as a result of renaming. According to J. Kokov, there were 2,000 Kabardian family names in the three Circassian republics. Some families boast of a few thousand members. In addition, a new pattern of familial attachment emerged in which all bearers of the same surname considered themselves as one clan, even if they were not blood-relatives. Strict exogamy was observed no matter how distant the relationship. In the relative freedom of Glasnost years, large families began to organize themselves to foster co-operation.



## References & Bibliography

- Allen, W. E. D., 'A Note on the Princely Families of Kabarda', in *Bedi Kartlisa*, Revue de Kartvélogie, Paris, 13-14, 1962, pp 140-7.
- Beytuganov (Beitighwen), S. N., *Kabardinskie familii: Istoki i sudbi* [Kabardian Families: Origins and Destinies], Nalchik: Elbrus Book Press, 1989. [177 pages]
- *Kabarda v familiyakh* [Kabarda in Families], Nalchik: Elbrus Book Press, 1998. [556 pages]
- *Kabarda: Istoriya i familii* [Kabarda: History and Families], Nalchik: Elbrus Book Press, 2007. Online. Available HTTP: <<http://www.smikbr.ru/2007/elbrus/rus/beituganov%20s-1.pdf>> (accessed 3 October 2008).
- Castagne, J., 'Le droit coutumier familial des Montagnards du Caucase et des Tcherkesses en particulier', in *Revue des Études Islamiques*, 3, 1929, pp 245-75.
- Kabardino-Balkarian Branch of the Union of Journalists of the USSR, *Naselennie punkti Kabardino-Balkarskoi ASSR i perechen famili, vstrechayuschikhsya v nikh* [Settlements in the Kabardino-Balkarian ASSR and Lists of Families Found in Them], Nalchik, 1970.
- Kanukova [Qaniqwe], Z., 'Forbidden Love in Balkaria', in *Institute for War & Peace Reporting*, no. 25, 31 March 2000.
- Kirzhinov (Chirzhin), S., 'K voprosu ob etikete adigov v semeinom i obshchestvennom bitu [On the Matter of the Etiquette of the Circassians in Family and Social Life]', in *The Archaeological and Ethnographic Collection*, Nalchik, issue 1, 1974.
- Kokov, J. N., *Voprosi adigskoi (cherkesskoi) antroponii* [Questions of Circassian Anthroponyms], Nalchik, 1973.
- *Iz adigskoi (cherkesskoi) onomastiki* [From Circassian Onomastics], Nalchik: Elbrus Book Press, 1983.
- Kovalevsky, M. [M.], *Sovremenni obichai i drevni zakon* [Contemporary Custom and Ancient Law], vol. 1, Moscow, 1886.
- *Zakon i obichai na Kavkaze* [Law and Custom in the Caucasus], Moscow, 1890 (2 vols).
- 'La famille matriarcale au Caucase', in *L'Anthropologie*, vol. 4, 1893, pp 259-78.
- Lasyzenskij, A., 'Das Familiengewohnheitsrecht der Tscherkessen', in *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Rechtswissenschaft*, Bd. XLV, 1930.

- Luzbetak, L. J., 'Marriage and the Family in Caucasia: A Contribution to the Study of North Caucasian Ethnology and Customary Law', in *Studia Instituti Anthropos*, Vienna-Modling, vol. 3, 1951.
- Meretukov (Meretiḡwe), M. A., 'Semya i semeini bit adigov v proshlom i nastoyashchem [The Family and Domestic Life of the Circassians in the Past and the Present]', in *Kultura i bit adigov* [The Culture and Way of Life of the Circassians], The Adigean Science and Research Institute, Maikop, issue 1, 1976.
- *Semya i brak u adigskikh narodov (XIX–70-e godi XX v.)* [The Family and Marriage of the Circassian People (19th Century–1970s)], Maikop: Adigean Branch of the Krasnodar Book Press, 1987.
- Musukaev (Misiḡwe), A. I., *Ob obichayakh i zakonakh gortsev* [On the Customs and Laws of the Mountaineers], Nalchik, 1986.
- *K istokam familij: Predaniya i legendi* [Towards the Fountain-Head of Families: Traditions and Legends], Nalchik, 1992. [On Kabardian families and clans; 86 pages]
- Smirnova, I. A. S., 'Avoidance and Its Gradual Extinction among the Peoples of the North Caucasus', in *Soviet Anthropology and Archæology*, vol. 15, no. 2, 1986, pp 1-56.
- Smirnova, Ya. S., 'Natsionalno-smeshannie braki u narodov Karachaevo-Cherkessii' ['Mixed Marriages among the Peoples of Karachai-Cherkessia'], in *Sovetskaya ètnografiya* [Soviet Ethnography], no. 4, 1967, pp 137-42.
- Smirnova, Ya., Ter-Sarkisants, A., *Narodi Kavkaza, Kniga 3: Semya i semeini bit, Chast 1: Formirovanie, tip i struktura* [The Peoples of the Caucasus, Book 3: The Family and Family Life, Part I: Formation, Type, and Structure], Moscow: The Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, The Russian Academy of Sciences, 1995. [The institution of the family and family customs and traditions of the peoples of the North Caucasus and the Transcaucasus. Monograph. 270 pages; paperback; Bibliography on pp 249-61]
- Yakhtanigov (Yex'tenij), Kh. Kh., *Severokavkazskie tamgi* [North Caucasian Familial Heraldic Devices], Nalchik: Printing House of the Consultative Firm 'Leiter-ibn-Marat', 1993. Yakhtanigov (Yex'tenij), Kh. Kh., *Северокавказские тамги* [North Caucasian Familial Heraldic Devices], Nalchik: Printing House of the Consultative Firm 'Leiter-ibn-Marat', 1993. Online. Available HTTP: <<http://zihia.narod.ru/library.htm>> (accessed 18 January 2009).