

Circassian New Year

(from Amjad Jaimoukha's book
Circassian Culture and Folklore,
London and New York: Bennett and Bloom, 2009)

The family whose hearth had remained alight for a whole year held ceremonies on the day the soul returned to Earth, which fell on March 22nd, according to the modern calendar. The Circassians considered this day, when winter was over and summer began (*ghere sch'ire schizexech' maxwem*; гьэрэ щырэ щызэхэкI махуэм), as New Year's Day. It was believed that the soul returned first to air, then to water and finally to earth, with an interval of one week in between. There were two festivals associated with the New Year: *Maf'aschhetih* (мафIащхьэтыхь; literally: 'Hearth Sacrifice'), and *X'wrome* (хьуромэ; also *X'wrame* [хьурамэ]).¹

In the first, which was later dubbed '*Maf'aschhe Jed*' (мафIащхьэджэд; Hearth Hen), the festivities were initiated with a rite of sacrifice in which a black hen was immolated on the altar of the hearth. After the offering had been made, the members of the household whose smoke kept issuing for a whole year assembled in front of the hearth. The elder then said the prayers (тхьэлъэIу; *thelhe'w*):

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

A sumptuous feast was prepared for the occasion, an essential ingredient of which was either *heljeu* (хьэлджей), a large loaf of maize or barley (originally only

¹ *Tih* was the (native) word used by the Circassians for 'religious offering, sacrifice' before (the advent of the Muslim/Arabic term) *qwrmen*. In the Christian era the *X'wrome* festival was associated with Christmas, as it still is among the Christian Kabardians in Mozdok.

barley) bread baked in a bread-pan, or *x'irshin* (хъыршын), pie. The lady of the house cut the *helje* or *x'irshin* into triangular pieces and presented one to each member of the household. Typical dishes and foodstuffs prepared and served included meat (of animal slaughtered for the occasion), chicken, turkey, gravy (шыпс; *ships*), crushed-millet dumplings (пастэ; *p'aste*), fried chicken in sour cream sauce (джэдыбжьэ; *jedlibzche*), pastry straws (джэдыкларыш; *jedich'eripsch*), short-cakes (тхъурымбей; *tx'wrimbey*), doughnuts and short-cakes (лэкъум; *lequm*), pasties (хъэлывэ; *helive*), pancakes (тхъурыжь; *tx'wrizch*), sweetmeat (хъэлыуэ; *heliwe*), and many more.



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

The celebrants, young and old, did not sleep a wink all night long, whiling away the time playing the game '*de qeighezhex*' («дэ къегъэжэх»; 'rolling down the nuts'). It was considered shameful and a bad omen to sleep on that propitious

night. At dawn, ‘before the mangy pigs and wolves had the chance to bathe in the river in the new year’ («кхъуэ бэгумрэ дыгъужь бэгумрэ псым илъэсыкIэм зыхамыгъэпскIыхъ щIыкIэ»; ‘*q’we begwmre dighwzch begwmre psim yilthesisch’em zixamigheps-ch’ih sch’ich’e*’), all headed to the river to cleanse themselves, no matter how cold the water was. This was essentially a ritual to harden the body and temper the soul.²

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

Modern-day Circassians have revived these New Year celebrations. A large festival was held in Nalchik in 2007. There is a growing demand for making this an official holiday in the Circassian republics.

² River water (псы; *psi*) was used in (the ritual of) cleansing and tempering the soul (псэ; *pse*). For example, upon delivery, a baby was taken immediately to the river, whence it was bathed, even in freezing weather. It was believed that cold water tempered the body. There were also some instances of cleaning infants in snow.