

An Introductory Account of

Circassian Theatre

АДЫГЭ ТЕАТР: ХЭЗЫГЪЭГЪУАЗЭ

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One of the first instances of dialogue in Circassian literature is in the ancient tale ‘The Elegy of the Maid who Refused to Marry her Brother’ («Дэльхум дэКӀуэн зымыда хъыджэбзым и уэрэдыр») which gives us a glimpse of those far away days when incest was not yet tabooed. The poor girl begs the members of her family in turn to let her inside the house. Such stories are considered the forerunners of Circassian drama.

— А си анэ дыщэурэ,
А си дыщэ плъыжь,
Мы бжэр нысхуӀупхыркъэ,
ЩыӀэм сегъалӀэри.

— My dearest Mother,
Radiant as red gilt!
I beseech you: Open this door.
The chill is killing me.

— Си гуащэжьыр жыпӀэтэмэ,
НыпхуӀусхынт.

— If you would just call me mother-in-law,
I would open it for you.

— Си псэ тӀэкӀур пытурэ
Дауэ пхужысӀэн.

— How can I call you thus,
Whilst there is still life in my bones.

Modern theatre and drama as an independent genre saw the light in the early Soviet era. As in other literary genres, early dramatists had a rich tradition to fall back on. Light themes extracted from oral tales, such as jokes, situation comedies,

satire, short stories and fables were used very extensively at first. Even today, very few playwrights fail to take scoops out of the ancient treasure chest for adornment and even for themes.

Theatrical societies were set up in the 1920s. However, faceless bureaucrats in the Ministry of Culture of the USSR soon assumed the reins of the theatre movement and regulated all theatrical activities in accordance with Party dogma. Although Circassian theatre developed enormously in a short time, a plateau was soon reached. The creative process was stifled and experimentation and broaching of some themes were not allowed.

One of the most influential and popular figures in Circassian theatre was Ibrahim Tsey (1895-1936), who studied law and became famous as a writer of legendary tales and plays. Many of his fables were collected and published.¹ He was a great patriot and dedicated his life to the dissemination of Circassian culture, organising the Adigean National Theatre Institute and the drama theatre in Ekatinodar in 1929.

Another important dramatist was Kuba Csaban (Gebelli), who taught Circassian literature in the Drama Institute in the Adigean Autonomous Region in the 1920s and 30s. He penned many plays like *The Night Raid on Kabarda* («Къэбэрдей жэщтеуэ»),² which tells of a Russian nocturnal attack of Kabarda in the 18th

¹ Dumézil, G. and Namitok, A., *Fables de Tsey Ibrahim (tcherkesse occidental)*, Paris, 1939.

² Angered by the continued expansionist policy pursued by Russia into their country, despite persistent protestations, the Kabardians resolved in the spring of 1779 to rid their country of Russian presence and undo the Russian fortresses that had been constructed in the northern parts of their territory. The Circassians mobilized their forces and began to fight back against Russian expansion. In response, Empress Catherine II instructed the Governor General of Astrakhan, Prince Potemkin, to pacify Kabarda by fair means or foul. General Jacoby was given his marching orders. He conducted an offensive in Kabarda, which lasted all summer. After the arrival of fresh enforcements from Russia, the expedition succeeded in penetrating deep into Kabardian lands. At the end of September 1779, a fierce battle was fought in which the Kabardian force, taken unawares, was massacred. About fifty princes and more than 350 noblemen were killed, a huge toll by the reckoning of those days. Dubbed 'Qeberdey Zheschtiwe' ('Kabardian Night Assault'), the battle marked one of the bleakest days in Kabardian history. The war is referred to by the Kabardians as 'Meziybl Zawe' («Мэзибл зауэ»; 'The Seven-Month

century, and *Yistambilak'we* (Истамбылак'уэ; 'The Great Exodus') on the forceful expulsion of the Northwest Caucasians. In Jordan, he directed and produced some of his plays, which were staged at cinema theatres with casts of enthusiastic volunteers. The public was entranced by the shows performed in the mother tongue.

The poet and dramatist Pshiqan Dzadzu Shejehesch'e (ШэджэхьэщІэ Дзэдзу и къуэ Пшыкъан; 1879-1937) and writer and playwright Zhansex'w Mirzebech Nalo(ev) (Нало Мырзэбэч и къуэ Жансэхъу; 1906-1937) wrote the tragedy of *Korgat*, which was staged at the Nalchik Theatre in 1934. The former engaged in anti-religious rhetoric directed mainly at mullahs. The latter, who was the first president of the Kabardino-Balkarian Branch of the Union of Writers of the USSR, was persecuted in the Stalin purges. He was arrested in the summer of 1936 and executed in 1937, but was rehabilitated posthumously in 1957.

The writer and dramatist Askerbiy T. Shorten (Шортэн Аскэrbий; 1916-1985; Honoured Art Worker of the Kabardino-Balkarian ASSR and Honoured Art Worker of the Russian SSR) published *The Theatrical Art of Kabardino-Balkaria* on the history and development of Kabardian drama and theatre in Nalchik in 1961.³ Born in Kabarda in the village of Leskan II in 1916, he wrote many plays, for some of which the music was written by Arseni M. Abraamov and Truvor K. Sheibler, two of the most influential composers in Kabarda in the first half of the 20th century. In 1940, Abraamov wrote *Batir Village* (Аул Батыр), an overture for symphony orchestra based on Shorten's famous play of the same name (staged in 1939), and Sheibler for *Qanschobiy and Gwascheghagh* («Къанщобийрэ Гуащэгъагърэ») and *For Ever* (staged in 1957). Muhedin F'. Vale (Балэ Мухьэдин) based his symphonic suite *Qizbrun* («Къызбрун»; 1959) on Zalimx'an Aqsire's play of the same name (written in 1954; on the tragic fate of a

War') or 'Qwrey Zawe' («Къурей зауэ»; 'The Qwrey War'), the place where it all took place. By December, the Kabardian princes were defeated and the northern frontier of Kabarda retracted to the rivers Balhq (Malka) and Terch (Terek). An audio recording of a song (sung by Ziramikw Qardenghwsch') on the battle of the same name is available on this webpage.

³ Shorten's historical novel *Bgirisxer* [«Бгырысхэр»; *The Mountaineers*] (Nalchik, 1954; Russian translation appeared in 1967) is considered as one of the masterpieces of modern Circassian literature.

Kabardian woman in feudal times) performed by the Kabardian Theatre Group. Other works include *Picture, Some Household*, and *When the Light Is On* (written in 1947; on life in a kolkhoz farm; Russian translation in 1950).

Hesen Qwedzoqwe's (Къуэдзокъуэ Хъэсэн) very popular poem 'The Poet and History' («УСАКИУЭМРЭ ТХЫДЭМРЭ») (1992) was dramatized and shown on TV (shot and directed by Dr. Mohy Quandour).⁴



Hesen Qwedzoqwe, Circassian poet.

⁴ An audio recording of the drama is available on this website.

Theatre companies & drama groups

The Drama Theatre in Kabardino-Balkaria was established in the early 1920s, with two national companies, one for the Kabardians, the other for the Balkars. In the mid-1950s, the Kabardian National Theatre staged *The Song of Daxenaghwe*, which, according to Maria Menapece, 'is an outstanding drama in verse which draws its themes from Circassia's most ancient heroic epos ... Its rare artistic qualities ... place it on a level with ... Gerhart Hauptmann's *Die versunkene Glocke*, or Maeterlinck's *L'Oiseau Bleu*.'⁵ Written by Zalimx'an A. Aqsire (Акъсырэ Залымхан; Aksirov; b. 1919) in 1942, *Daxenaghwe* («ДАХЭНАГЪУЭ»; name of the heroine; literally: 'Brown-eyed Beauty') was kept in the repertoire of the Theatre for a long time due to its popularity.⁶ It was devoid of Communist dogma, which corrupted many plays of the time, like *The Testing* by Hechiym Teiwine (Теунэ Исхъэкъ и къуэ Хъэчим; 1912-1983), and Shorten's *When the Light Is On*. Other plays by Aqsire include *Lashin* (Лашын), which was written in 1946 on the theme of the well-known Nart heroine.

The Kabardian State Drama Theatre (in the Name of Aliy Schojents'ik'w) staged many works of local and Soviet writers, including Biberd Zhurt's *If the Head Is Abed, Woe unto the Feet* («ЩХЪЭМ ИМЫТМЭ, ЛЪАКЪУЭМ И МЫГЪУАГЪЭЩ»; *Schhem Yimitme, Lhaqwem yi Mighwaghesch*), which was staged in 1972. Outstanding actors of the Theatre Company included Vladimir Yiwan (Иуан Владимир), Valera Balhqiz (Балькъыз Валерэ), and K'wne Zchach'emix'w (Жъакъэмыхъу К'унэ).⁷

The National Theatre in Bakhsan in Kabardino-Balkaria staged many works of Circassian and other North Caucasian playwrights. In addition, classical works

⁵ 'Review of *Soviet Kabardian Dramaturgy*, Moscow, 1957 (214 pages)', by Maria Menapece in *Caucasian Review*, Munich, no. 9, 1959, pp 139-44. {The following works are discussed: 1) *The Song of Dakhanago [Daxenaghwe]*, Zalimkhan Aksirov (Акъсырэ Залымхан); 2) *The Testing*, Khachim Teunov (Теунэ Хъэчим); 3) *When the Light Comes On* [sic], A. Shortanov (Шортэн Аскэрий)}

⁶ The Circassian classical musician Vladimir Mole (b. 1940) wrote the opera *Daxenaghwe* (Дахэнагъуэ) in 1969 based on Zalimx'an Aqsire's play.

⁷ Website (only in Russian) of the Kabardian State Drama Theatre is found at: <http://stdkbr.by.ru/kab_main.html>.

were produced, like Molière's splendid comedy *Le Malade imaginaire* in 1974 [rendered «ЗАЛЫМЫГЪЭКИЭ ЯГЪЭИЭЗЭ» (*Zalimighech'e Yaghe'eze*) in Circassian]. The company's amateur actors included Beit'al Вах'we (Бахъуэ БетIал), who is also an accomplished poet, Fat'iymet Mereimiqwe (Мэремыкъуэ ФатIимэт), Muse Qebarde (Къэбардэ Мусэ), He'iyshet Ghwch'e (ГъукIэ Хъэишэт), Sufyan Hemdex'w (Хъэмдэхъу Суфян), Hemiymbiy Vzhenich'e (БжэныкIэ Хъэмидбий), and Lyuba Abdoqwe (Абдокъуэ Любэ). There is a memorial plaque in the theatre for the actors who fell in World War II, including A. Ghwo (Гъуо), S. Qenemghwet (Къэнэмгъуэт), Q. Shibzix'we (Шыбзыхъуэ), S. Nartizch (Нартыжь), T. Qambiy (Къамбий), Q. Qereghwl (Къэрэгъул), and not forgetting Hetu Teimirqan (Темыркъан Хъэту; Temirkanov), President of the Art Directorate in Kabarda at the time.

The Adigean State Drama Theatre was established in Adigea in 1937. It has a Circassian section that stages plays in the Circassian language.⁸

⁸ More information (in Russian) on the Adigean State Drama Theatre can be found at: <<http://www.mkra.ru/iskusstvo.php>>.



The Adigean State Drama Theatre

One of the popular themes in Soviet times was the heroism of Andeimirqan.⁹ The Circassian Robin Hood was used as a symbol of the struggle between the legions of darkness, in this case the aristocracy, and the advocates of light. The first writer to use the motif was M. Qaniqwey (Къаныкъуей). However, his work was deemed as being unworthy of publishing by the Union of Writers, and the manuscript was lost during World War II. In the 1930s, Abdul Pschinoqwe wrote the play *Andeimirqan*.¹⁰ In 1974, Zalimx'an Aqsire wrote a play of the same title

⁹ Andeimirqan (b. circa 1509), the equivalent of Robin Hood in the Circassian ethos, was a contemporary of the 16th-century potentate Prince Beislhen (Beslan) (son of Zhanx'wet), nicknamed 'Pts'apts'e' ('The Obese'), who is credited with modifying the structure of the peerage system and updating the *Xabze*. Andeimirqan was the progeny of a *mésalliance*; his father was a prince, his mother was of unknown stock. According to one legend, he was found by Andeimir while on a hunting expedition. When his hound barked at the trunk of a tree, he wondered what the matter was, only to find a twig-basket perched on a forked branch. He brought it down and found a tiny baby covered in the basket. Andeimir, who was childless, was joyful at the find, and he brought up the child as his own. Andeimirqan grew up to be an intrepid horseman. The news of his exploits went far and wide. He was in the entourage of Prince Beislhen, and one day while the potentate was on a hunting expedition – carted in a carriage, as the Prince was too large to fit on a horse – the Prince took aim at a wild boar, but missed the mark, and the boar fled into the forest. As the boar was driven out of the forest, the Prince took another aim, but missed again. However, Andeimirqan's arrow pierced the boar and stuck him to the Prince's carriage. By some accounts, it was there and then that Beislhen resolved to get rid of Andeimirqan. He instigated Qaniybolet, one of Andeimirqan's closest friends and younger brother of Prince Temriuk Idarov, to betray him. One day, Qaniybolet asked Andeimirqan to go out with him on a hunting expedition. A contingent of Beislhen's troops lay in ambush, and they put the hero to the sword. Some analysts maintain that the murder was a result of the internecine war for supremacy over Kabarda, as Andeimirqan, despite the obscurity of his mother's lineage, could have claimed the mantle of sovereignty for his warrior character and bravery. It is thought that Andeimirqan was killed before 1552. He was Christian. At the time, the Circassians venerated Dawischjerjiy (St. George) and Yele (Prophet, or St. Elijah), in addition to their pagan gods. It was Beislhen Pts'apts'e's son Prince Qaniqwe who left Kabarda (in the second half of the 16th century) to establish the Beislheney (Beslanay) nation-tribe. A full account of Andeimirqan, his exploits and murder can be found in Z. Qardenghwsch', 1969 (1970), pp 223-336.

¹⁰ The identity of the playwright of this play is in dispute. There were two writers bearing the surname Pschinoqwe in the 1930s.: Abdul and Mechre'iy. In his *Today's Kabardian*

in verse relying on tested historical and oral styles. He also made use of a narrator (ГүэтэжакГүэ; *wetzhak'we*).

Among famous actors were X'wsain Тоқwiy (Токъуий Хъусайн) who portrayed Qazbek, Romeo, and Jeriymes (Джэримэс) [from Aqsire's play *Daxenaghwe*],¹¹ Muhediyn Sekrek (Сэкрэк Мухъэдин), and Beshiyr Shibzix'we (Шыбзыхъуэ Бэшир), who played a mean Demon in Pushkin's classic *The Demon*. In 1992-1993, Hebas Beishtoqwe (Бештокъуэ Хъэбас) translated and published King Lear in the literary journal *Waschhemaxwe* (Гуашхъэмахуэ).

Soviet Prose, L. Qeshezh (Къэшэж) cited the work as having two joint writers: Mechre'iyl and A. Bole (Болэ; Boleev).

¹¹ An audio recording of 'Jeriymes's Aria' from Vladimir Mole's opera *Daxenaghwe* by Vladimir Bereghwn is available on this webpage.

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