

The Circassians: Death and Obsequies

(From A. Jaimoukha's book *The Circassians: A Handbook*,
Routledge, Palgrave, 2001, pp 182-5)

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

A wife mourned her husband in a wild manner, scratching her face and body until they were bloodied. A husband struck his face with a whip until it turned black and blue. The corpse underwent ceremonious washing, *hedegheps-ch'* (хьэдэгъэпскI), on a special slab, *hedegheps-ch'-px'ebghw* (хьэдэгъэпскI-пхъэбгъу). Dirges were chanted by the corpse of the deceased, and special prayers were said. Then the deceased was carried off to the cemetery on a stretcher, *q'able* (кхъаблэ). A monument, *q'aschhedese* (кхъашхьэдэсэ), was erected by the head of grave. A slab, *hedepx'ebghw* (хьэдэпхъэбгъу), was used to shut the niche in the grave. Special guards, *q'ex'wme* (кхъэхъумэ), ensured the upkeep and sanctity of burial grounds.

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

was piled over the sarcophagus, which contained the favourite weapons and costumes of the dead. The mightier the deceased, the greater was the tumulus.

With the body inhumed, an attendant was instructed before dinner to saddle the steed of the deceased and take it by hand to the new tomb. He was to call thrice upon the departed to come out and take a meal with his family and friends. Having done that, the attendant returned with the steed, needless to say, with his entreaties unheeded. Dinner was then had—the partakers content that they have done their duty towards their dead kin. This charade was repeated for many days.¹ In later times, priests officiated burial ceremonies.

Some aspects of these curious ceremonies were confirmed by archaeology. Finds that go back to the Circassian Belorechenskaya culture (Belorechenskaya is situated to the northwest of Maikop), which existed from the 13th to the 16th centuries, revealed the remains of barrows belonging to Adiga (Circassian) nobility. Objects found included exquisite sabres, pieces of armour, helmets, and other objects of foreign origin. Some food vessels were also found in old burial grounds. This is one happy occasion when accounts by a foreign traveller (Giorgio Interiano, who wrote in the middle of the 16th century) and archaeology coincided.²

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

After the funeral rites had been completed, a sumptuous feast was held in honour of the deceased in the sacred grove, under the trees. Games were played and dance galas took place as festal rites. For the poorer families, the celebration was

¹ Details of ancient burial rites are found in Khan-Girey, 1978, pp 315-22.

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

postponed until the necessary victuals have been accumulated. During the first week of the death of a member of a family, the household was spared any culinary chores. The friends of the deceased took turns in providing catering for and wait upon the mourners and condolers.

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

Those killed in battle were collected at cessation of fighting at sundown and taken back home to be received in a macabre ceremony called '*hedepeizche*' («ХЪЭДЭПЕЖЪ»; 'corpse-reception'). If a corpse was seized by the enemy, a price was paid to ransom it. During the last and desperate phase of Circassian resistance against Russian advance, an edict was issued to keep the bodies of the dead at the front, so as not to give shirkers the chance to keep away from battle. Similar ceremonies were held for those killed while travelling.

At one stage of their social development, the Circassians used to practise geronticide, or the ritual killing of old people when they reach a certain age. This might have been an ancient form of mercy killing, euthanasia, which allowed the old and feeble to die in dignity. Some societies in Eastern Europe kept this tradition until the 1930s.³

The Narts had a special council of doom, *Zchiwich' Xase* (жъыукI хасэ), whose duty was to summon people whose time had come on the eve of their execution, and to inform them of the council's verdict. The Nart Tribunal of Doom used to be held at the mighty house of the Alij (Алыджхэ я унэ), where the Nart Council usually held its sessions. At the end of the meeting, the doomed one was presented with a glass of wine as a toast. He was allowed to spend the eve with

³ See for example T. P. Vukanović, 'Killing of Old People among Gypsies on the Balkan Peninsula', in *VI Congrès International des Sciences Anthropologiques et Ethnologiques*, Paris, 30 July-6 August 1960, vol. 2, Paris: Musée de l'Homme, 1964.

his loved ones. On the day of execution, the condemned was thrown down the Yinzhiy Gorge.⁴ The height from which the doomed ones were pushed to their death was called ‘*Zchigheyibg*’ («Жыгыъэибг») [‘Mount of Old Age’].

Legend has it that one elder on death row managed to save the people from a number of impending disasters and, in gratitude for the feat, the custom was scrapped, and the wisdom of the old started to be appreciated. Subsequently, Circassian society held its elders in great esteem, and appreciated their wisdom and perspicacity.⁵ According to another version, a young Nart forcefully saved his doomed father and the custom consequently fell into disuse, as the council lost some of its prestige.

⁴ Yinzhiy (Инжыдж) is the Zelenchuk River, a left tributary of the Kuban (Псыжь; Psizch). Located in the Karachai-Cherkess Republic, the Yinzhiy River has its source in the Caucasus Mountains.

⁵ See «НАРТХЭ ЗЫХАНА ХАБЗЭ» [‘The Custom Renounced by the Narts’], in *The Hearth Tree: Circassian Cultural Miscellany*, vol. 1, issue 1, January 2009, pp 23-30. Online. Available HTTP: <<http://iccs.synthasite.com/circassian-journal.php>> (accessed 8 May 2009). [In Circassian and English]

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