

Social Hierarchy in Eastern Circassia: The Kabardian Class System

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The Kabardians had the most elaborate class structure among the Circassians. The classical Eastern Circassian hierarchical system is shown in the following table:

	Пщы (Pschi) 'Prince'	
Мырзэ (Mirze) 'Offspring of equally ranked parents'		Тумэ (Tume) 'Children of unequally ranked parents'
	Уэркъ (Werq) 'Nobility, Courtiers, Vassals'	
ЛакъуэлIэш (L'aqwel'esh) 'Most Noble=duke'	Гудэс (Gwdes) (literally: 'Carriage- Riders') 'Nobility of foreign origin'	Дыжбыныкъуэ (Dizchiniqwe) 'Less Noble=earl'
	ЛьхукъуэлI (Lhxwqwel') 'Freemen and peasants'	
УнэIут (Wine'wt), Унэзехьэ (Winezeihe) 'Menial; Housemaid'	ЛакъуэлI (L'aqwel'); Лакъуэнпыт (L'aqwenpit); Унэпыт (Winepit); ЛьщIэ (L'isch'e) 'Bond peasants, Serfs'	ПщIантIэдэт (Psch'ant'edet) 'Hand'; ПщылI (Pschil') 'Slave'

Classical Kabardian hierarchical system.

In the 16th century, Prince Beslan (Beislhen) Zhanx'wetoqwe (Беслъэн Жанхъуэтокъуэ; nicknamed 'Пццлпцлэ' ['Pts'apts'e']='The Obese') restructured the five-layered classical social strata of Kabardian nobility and lower classes, without touching upon the principal caste. According to Shora B. Negwme (Ногмов), the nobility was divided into five sub-classes, the commoners into four. It is interesting to note that the new structure came to resemble the English peerage system. Thus, the nobles were divided into: *l'aqwel'esh* (л'акъуэл'эш), corresponding to duke, *dizchiniqwe* (дыжъыныкъуэ), equivalent to marquis, *gwdes* (гудэс), earl, or the Continental count, *pschi-werq* (пщы-уэркъ), viscount, *werq* (уэркъ), baron. The lower classes were divided into *pschischawe* (пщыщавуэ; prince's lad), *l'aqweschawe* (л'акъуэщавуэ; clan-lad), *l'aqwel'* (л'акъуэл'; clansman), *wine'wt* (унэлут; menial, literally: 'standing by the house') and *pschil'* (пщыл'; slave, literally: 'prince's man').

The Principal Class

Each tribe was divided into princedoms, which were effectively independent, although there was a council of princes, which met at times of national crises. At the apex of each principality stood the prince who wielded almost absolute power over his subjects, who were considered as his property. The title of prince was hereditary, never acquired or bestowed. Although absolute power usually led to complete corruption, it was in the prince's interest to gain his vassals' unquestioned loyalty, which virtue was of the greatest essence in feudal society. Treason, the great underminer, was severely punished.

Investiture and deprivation of titles were in the hands of the princes. The lord of the manor was expected by his noblemen and subjects to adhere rigorously to the code of chivalry. A feeble or undisciplined prince soon found himself with very few followers indeed. In extreme cases, a prince was deprived of his title and demoted to a lower class. The first recorded sentence of this kind was pronounced against a prince belonging to the Kabarda Tambiy (Тамбий) family, who was reduced to dukehood.

No intermarriage was allowed between the upper classes and the 'commoners.' This law was strictly adhered to, to preserve blue blood. There were some instances of intermarriage between the nobles and the princely caste. The male offspring of the prince were classed as either *mirze* (мырзэ) or *tume* (тумэ), according to the rank of the spouse. The first was a result of an equal marriage, the other of a *mésalliance*.

Modes of address and salutes were of special importance. Nuances of Etiquette were so fine that many a foreign traveller missed their significance. The lord of the manor, be he prince or nobleman, was addressed 'Ziywis-hen' ('зиусхьэн'), or 'Dotenexw' ('дотэнэху'), his sons only by the latter. The lady of the house was called 'Gwasche' ('гуашэ'), a term later demoted to denote the female head of an ordinary household, and the unmarried daughter of a prince 'Zhan' ('жан'). 'Dote' ('дотэ') was later used as an honorary nickname given to a respected man by his younger relatives.

The name of a principality derived from that of the ruling family, the constituent regions taking theirs from the reigning noble clans. Princedoms varied in size from small hamlets to family congregations of a few dozen villages. In Kabarda, where the most stable feudal system in Circassia had existed, the most powerful princes exercised their dominion over a few thousand subjects. For example, in the 16th/17th centuries, Prince Sanjalay, who sired seven sons and two daughters, had 400 men in his town and a further 600 Tatars in Otary.¹ Oleguk and Hatikuk with their brothers had more than fifty villages between them, and they could muster around 1,000 cavalymen and more than 2,000 serfs.²

The Nobility

Next to the principal caste came the nobles, who were divided into the proper and lesser nobility, and the vassals who were given a free hand in their fiefdoms in return for their allegiance. They paid no taxes, but were expected to take part as cavalry in expeditions mounted by the princes.

A nobleman had the right to leave the service of a prince and join another principality. The *ataliqate* institution, whereby the children of the princes were

¹ Sanjalay (Сэнджэлей) was Prince Teimriqwe Yidar's (Темрыкъуэ Идар; Temriuk Idarov; father of Maria (Circassian name=Гуашэней, Гуашэнэ), wife of Ivan the Terrible) younger brother's grandson. Prince Sanjalay's father was Qanqilish (Къанкъылыш) son of Zhileghwet (Жылэгъуэт). In Russian sources he is referred to as 'Sunchaley Yanglichev' ('Сунчалей Янгличев'). He was appointed leader of the Terek Fortress and military camp north of present-day Grozny, capital of Chechnya. Sanjalay died in 1625. Many of his progeny also distinguished themselves as military leaders. Prince Grigory Senchuleevich Cherkassky was one of his sons.

² B. Nolde, 1952-53, p312.

entrusted at an early age to the vassals to be raised and trained in a military fashion, played a major role in strengthening the relationship between the prince and his nobles. Attached to princes and noblemen were a group of attendants and retainers. In descending order, there were squires, sergeants, yeomen, bedels, or town-criers (*ghwo*; гъуо), batmen (*sch'ak'wezeihe*; шIакIуэзехьэ), armour-bearers (*'eschezeihe*; Iэщэзехьэ), swains, grooms, and, at the bottom of the ladder, the pages.

Princes who took refuge in Circassia were allowed to retain their titles and were treated with great deference. However, they were excluded from the ruling elite, and did not take part in national deliberations. After the conquest of the Crimea by the Russians, many Tatars, the erstwhile enemies, found a safe haven among the Adiga, and their khans kept their titles. Resident noblemen of foreign origin were called *gwdes* (гудэс=carriage-riders), the Circassians not acknowledging their knightly status.

Despite their privileges, the nobility were under many obligations, a classic case of *noblesse oblige*. *Werq xabze* (уэркъ хабзэ) was the most developed and rigid of all the caste codes of behaviour. This class acted as the liaison between a prince and his people, and as such proper conduct was essential to ensure smooth running of the principality.

The Commoners

Below the nobility came the freemen and free peasants who formed the largest class and constituted the workhorse of Adiga traditional economy. Agriculture, husbandry, crafts, manufacture were some of the activities members of this caste engaged in. Serfs could be freed in exchange for particular services. Peasants made up the infantry of a prince's army, but were not allowed to don coats of arms (Wanderer, 1883, p25).

Slaves sold outside the country could go back to Circassia and redeem themselves if they chose to do so. They could even acquire estates and serfs of their own. Their descendants were also born free and could aspire to promotion to the noble ranks upon merit. Serfs could also redeem themselves and become commoners, in which case they were called '*pschil' azet*' ('[пщылI] азэт').

The Lower Classes

Thanes held land of noblemen by military service. Bond peasants, or serfs, were free to cultivate their plots in return for services rendered to the nobility. They had to work the lord's fields and, according to old custom, were obliged to pay their master fixed amounts of rent in kind. For example, at the beginning of the 19th century the rate in Kabarda was 14 sacks of millet for each pair of bulls used. Every bondsman possessed a small herd of domestic animals over which the lord of the manor had no rights.

Serfs were obliged to defend the manor against outside attack and accompany the lord on his campaigns, serving as military attendants. They were at liberty to leave the estate and re-establish themselves elsewhere upon paying redemption price. A prince had the right to sell his serfs as a form of punishment for a gross misdemeanour, but only after securing a judgement from a special council.

At the base of the pyramid were the menials, slaves, the(o)ws ('slaves' in Old English) and villeins, knaves, drudges, scullions and so on. These were mainly taken from war captives, as were the thralls in Anglo-Saxon England. In addition, a stranger venturing into the country without a bona fide *konak* (къуенакъ; host, protector) could soon find himself in bondage. Slaves could be either kept in the manor or sold. The prince secured suitable matches for his slaves to augment their number, and hence his wealth. Runaway serfs were called '*qwlhkesx'en*' ('къулькэшхэн').

The rigidity of the class structure and the lack of mobility between the lower and upper castes had produced some differentiation in the 'ethnic composition' of the classes, and hence in physiognomy. The aristocrats, especially the princes, preserved 'white bone' (*qwpschhe xwzch*, къупщхъэ хужь; the Circassian equivalent of 'blue blood'), whereas there was a certain degree of racial blending among freedmen and serfs. Foreign war captives started their new lives as slaves, marrying within their caste. Many of them remained within the bounds of the slavish class, but some more ambitious ones were able to buy back their freedom. To this day, some families are still aware of their foreign origin.

Related article:

[The Social Structure of the Circassians](#)

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