

The Social Structure of the Circassians

by

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THE social structure of Circassian society was extremely complex and was generally based on hierarchical feudalism. A few egalitarian tribes existed in the mountainous regions of Western Circassia. These were socially differentiated from the other Western Adiga of the plains and were characterized by absence of any caste system.

The age of feudalism in Circassia may have started as early as the fourth century AD, becoming fully established by the 14th. In feudal societies, laws enshrined in the ubiquitous Xabze (Хабзе), which was differentiated according to class, regulated the rights and duties of each caste and defined class inter-relations. Disputes and contentions were looked into by ad hoc councils whose jurisdiction ended after resolving the cases at hand.

Circassian feudalism is reminiscent of the feudal systems that dominated Western Europe in the Middle Ages. Common characteristics like societal stratification into aristocratic and common castes and the sacred law of chivalry tempt one to place Adiga society in the continuum of European feudalism. However, Circassian society was more fragmented than its counterparts in Europe. Whereas the ultimate, and only, allegiance was to the local prince in Adiga society, the knights of Europe were engulfed in a multitude of allegiances and sub-allegiances, although all swore fealty to one monarch.

The feudal system came to a tragic end in 1864 when Russia conquered Circassia. On 31 July, the triumphant tsar issued an edict prohibiting slavery. Eight days later, the princes and noblemen let go of their bondsmen. Slavery in the Caucasus,

which had existed for millennia, was no more. However, the institution was taken by the Circassians to the diaspora, where it survived for a few decades after.

Towards the end of the 18th century, a series of upheavals rocked some parts of Western Circassia. In 1770, a twenty-year class war erupted in Abzakhia (the land of the Abzakh) that resulted in the extermination of the princely caste and the banishment of most of the nobility. Encouraged by the success of their easterly brethren, the Shapsugh masses overthrew their overlords at the beginning of the 19th century in a bloodless coup. Curiously enough, many of those deposed opted to live in exile in Russia roughly at the same time as the French aristocrats found refuge in the tsarist empire.

Despite the fact that before Russian conquest Circassia had barely advanced beyond feudalism, there were indications that by the end of the 18th century some segments of Circassian society were becoming aware of the advantages of modernity and progress. Through mercantile and cultural contacts first with the Europeans, especially the Genoese, and then with the Ottomans, the rudiments of civil society were slowly but surely taking root. According to Paul B. Henze: 'After the Georgians and the Armenians, the Circassians came closest of all the Caucasian peoples to developing the prerequisites for nationhood. They had traditions of roots extending back to the dawn of recorded history' (1992, p67).

Adiga civilization was at its most crucial phase of development at the end of the 18th century. It needed the goodwill of Fate. Moira turned her head! It was one of the harshest ironies of Circassian history that, as this realization was dawning on the Adiga, Russia launched its war that pushed the nation to the brink of extinction.

[The Kabardian Class System: Social Hierarchy in Eastern Circassia](#)

Clan divisions

The pyramidal clan structure ensured the existence of many social units, internally cohesive, but whose inter-cohesion was, at best, suspect. With very few exceptions, no one prince was powerful enough to subdue the others in order to establish central authority. A state of anarchy pervaded Circassia which many of its neighbours took advantage of (C. Lemerrier-Quellejay, 1984, p26). The title of king was never coined in recent Circassian history, although some of the more ambitious princes made strong bids to mint it. The only case worthy of mention is that of Prince Inal Nexw (the Great; also Inal Nef, in reference to his blindness in one eye), who founded a strong state extending over the whole of Circassia and some of the adjoining regions in the first half of the 15th century AD. However, his reign did not last long, and his dominion fell apart after his death. The case of prince Temryuk, who ruled Kabarda in the period 1554-1571/2, and his courting of the favour of Tsar Ivan the Terrible by betrothing his daughter Gwascheney to him in 1561 to cement the so-called 'Union' between Russia and Kabarda, is illustrative of this point.

It is safe to assume that many Kabardian princes refused to accept this unholy alliance as it brought no advantage to them. In the 1563-66 civil war between Temryuk and his principal rivals, Pschi'epschoqwe and his brothers Tazryut and Maet,¹ Tsar Ivan IV sided with his father-in-law, contributing a motley contingent of boyars, Cossacks and Circassian archers with Prince Mamstryuk, son of Temryuk. It would seem that for some time, at least till the flare up of hostilities between the Tatars and Ottomans on one hand and the Russians on the other, in 1569, Temryuk managed to become the most powerful Kabardian prince, even controlling parts of the Shamkhal's Tarki state in Daghestan. This is the closest that the Kabardians had ever got to establishing a centralized state after the time of Inal the Great.

¹ Pschi'epschoqwe (Pschiapschoqwe) Qeitiqwe (КЪЕТЫКЪУЭ ПЩЫЭПЩОКЪУЭ [Пщыапщокъуэ]; 1540-1580) was Prince of Western Kabarda. He was grandson of Beislhen son of Zhanx'wet (son of Tabile son of Inal the Great).

Examples of upper-class structures

Because of their small sizes and tractability, the upper classes of the Hetiqwey and Mokhosh are described as examples of the feudal structure of the princely and noble classes. For larger nations, like the Kabardians, an extremely large volume would be required.

The Hetiqwey (ХЪЭТЫКЪУЕЙ)

Princely clans:

Hetiqwe (ХЪЭТЫКЪУЭ)

In three villages:

Zancharey yi qwaj (Village of Zancharey), on the Laba.

Selton yi qwaj.

Zankklish yi qwem yi qwaj (Village of Son of Zankklish), on the River Psizch (Kuban).

Noble clans:

Sobepshi. In Sobai village of on the Shkhakqwasha river.

Khapsepsi in the village of Khapai, in Cherchenay territory.

Padisay. In the village of Padisay on the Kuban (emigrated en masse to Turkey at end of 19th century).

The Mokhosh (Мэхъуэш)

Table 1. shows the only princely Mokhosh family, the village which it inhabited and the river on which it lied. The last entry was the prince contemporary of Khan-Girey.

Beyxgarsoqwexe (<i>xe</i> is plural suffix)	Sozeriqway	Farz	Bayzroqw
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Table 2: Noble families of the Mokhosh clan

Name of noble family	Name of village of residence	Name of river
Shx'appatsoqw (<i>qw</i> , son, is Kiakh equivalent of Kabardian <i>qwe</i>)	Shx'appatsoqwim yi Qwaj (Village of Shx'appatsoqw)	Farz
Mamizch-xe	Mamizch-Habl	Farz
Neytrbiy-xe	Neytrbiy-Habl	Farz
Mef'edz-xe	Mef'dziy	Psifir
Toxg-xe	Toxg-Habl	Psifir
Ashnashoqw-r	Ashnashoqway	Qeilh
Leybxgoqw-r	Leybxgoqway	Qeilh
Deychiqw-r	Deychiqway	Qeilh
Ortsey-r	Ortsey-Habl	Qeilh

Principal & noble congresses

Notwithstanding fragmentation, in times of national crises the princes formed a coalition of sorts under a prince of exceptional leadership qualities. The Kabardians could not have held their own in face of the incessant menaces posed by the powers that coveted their lands throughout the Middle Ages, had they remained disunited. The supreme leader was elected in separate assemblies of the two upper classes by popular vote. He was invested with the title 'Pschim Yapsch' ('пщым япщ'='Prince of Princes') or 'Pschishxwe' ('пщышхуэ'='Great Prince'). However, his period of tenure terminated with the expiry of threat. Then things went back to the way they were. Among the most famous of these chiefs were Inal the Great of Kabarda and Prince Bolatoqwe of the Kemirgoy (or Temirgoy, one of the Western Circassian tribes; self-designation: КӀэмгуй, Ch'emgwy), one of his offspring.

The Circassians had three kinds of congresses. At the level of a single principedom, the local prince chaired the meeting, which was held away from inhabited areas, preferably by the edge of a forest or in a field, for privacy. If two or more princes were involved, the meeting place was carefully chosen, treachery figuring high on the list of things to guard against. National questions were deliberated on and decisions made by two congresses, one of princes, the other of noblemen. Each was chaired by the oldest chief. In all kinds of congresses, the two groups were placed at some distance from each other, with special officers liaising in between. In Lesser Kabarda, some meetings took place in villages.

The proceedings were conducted with dignity. Each 'house' had its spokesmen or orators, and deputation frequently passed from the one to the other. Deputies were selected from the elders of the noble class.

Property

Land and serfs were owned collectively. The clan was not divided into nuclear families and all obeyed the eldest member of the clan. In one system of inheritance, property was not devolved from father to son but from brother to brother. In another, the whole estate went to the eldest son. This system produced a surplus of dispossessed warriors some of whom sought their fortunes outside their country. In the absence of male heirs, a prince's daughter transmitted the principality to her spouse upon her father's demise. One peculiarity of Circassian

law was that the statutory limit for litigation of inheritance cases could extend to forty years after death.

The judiciary

Courts and arbitration councils meted out justice in accordance with the Xabze (Хабзэ). The first courts were established by prince Inal the Great in the Middle Ages. He set up forty judicial houses spread across his empire. These institutions survived until 1427 AD. Prince Beslan of Greater Kabarda reformed the judicial system and established courts of cassation in large towns, which were headed by noblemen of unblemished records, and with two or three members. These courts, which were called *Xeyzisch' Xase* (хейзыщI хасэ; Congresses of Innocence), looked into everyday matters. Weighty cases and issues of national importance were looked upon personally by the prince in his supreme court. Beslan's legacy survived until the early years of the 19th century.

Downfall of feudalism

After the pacification of Kabarda in the 1820s, there followed major societal imbalances that eventually destroyed the traditional class structure. With loss of independence, princes were faced with a very difficult situation. Their suzerainty over neighbouring peoples came to an end and with this loss of tributes. Pillaging campaigns also came to a stop, thus an end to spoils of war. Thirdly, in the 1830s to 50s, a deep economic recession hit the country, which added to the woes of the princes. The only remaining income to sustain the upper classes was the rent paid by the peasants, but this was not enough to maintain the turgid caste.

The noblemen's main task was to accompany the prince on his expeditions. In the new circumstances they found themselves out of work. First rate warriors they might have been, but when it came to fending for themselves, they were at a complete loss. Many came down from their high horses, literally, and started to learn how to till the land. Many of them went to neighbouring regions looking for work. This fall from grace brought them an unforeseen mishap. They were taken for serfs, since they did the same work. Some unscrupulous princes took advantage of the situation and started to claim that their vassals were serfs and demanded that emancipation money be paid for their release from service. Many cases were tried in court.

The Russian conquest and mass expulsion irrevocably undid the caste system. Most of the upper classes immigrated to the Ottoman Empire before the end of the War, and they actively sought to have their erstwhile subjects follow them to re-establish the class system in the diaspora. There is no point being a prince if there is no roast to rule. In Turkey there were violent clashes between the princes and nobles on one side and bondsmen on the other in 1876-7 near Çorlu (Tcherkeskoy, near Istanbul), which ended only when government forces came between the warring parties. That conflict hastened the dismantling of the last major strongholds of class distinction.

During the Soviet period, the remnants of the upper classes were treated as pet bug-bears and were oftentimes persecuted as enemies of the people when the state wanted to renew its reason for being. Many dissidents were readily condemned by being falsely accused of belonging to the princely or noble classes. On the other hand, evidence of feelings of superiority stemming from 'white bone' was recorded as late as the early 1960s among Circassians in Jordan [see G. H. Weightman, 1961]. One is hard-pressed to find families that own up to their slave past, the matter still being of a highly sensitive nature.

Egalitarian societies

After the prolonged war in Abzakhia and the bloodless coup in Shapsughia, a new social order obtained that ushered in new ideas of equality and democracy. Gone were the princes and many of the noblemen. However, some of the nobility stayed, acting as arbiters. Leaders, *themada* (ТХЪЭМАДЭ), were elected by all adult members of a clan in an open vote. This system ensured that persons of the highest calibre reached the top of the executive ladder. Unsatisfactory performance was censored by special councils that had the right to divest leaders of their powers. Legislative councils enacted laws that regulated the everyday life of the people. Again, members of these councils were democratically elected.

This unique experiment in pluralism was still in its infancy when it was rudely challenged by Russian ambition in the 1830s. By the end of the war not only was it nipped in the bud, but also the clans that had adopted it all but disappeared from the Caucasus.

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