
ABKHAZIANS:
GROWING IN AGE
AND WISDOM

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Woe and ruin to a people whose young do not honor the old.
(Abkhazian proverb)

INTRODUCTION

The people whose ancient and modern story I tell in this chapter are, as I write in May 1993, dying in battle, fighting off cold, hunger, and fear in territory occupied by the forces of their Georgian foes. Refugees from the warfare who are living in the unoccupied parts of Abkhazia and Russia are sharing cramped quarters and anxieties over relatives and friends with whom they have lost contact. So it is highly unlikely that any of these people are leading lives that resemble pieces of the culture I am about to describe.

When I originally contemplated introducing to anthropology students this tiny corner of the world where I did my first fieldwork, I was reluctant to dwell on peacetime life knowing that such a devastating war was raging. Friends and colleagues developed over twelve years of frequent visits have seen their lives shattered, loved ones tortured and killed, and all primary sources of Abkhazian culture and history destroyed by fire and pillage. Clearly, physical and cultural genocide is under way, while only a handful of linguists, anthropologists, and historians watch helplessly in horror.

As I listened to tapes of my conversations in Abkhazia, dating back to my most recent visit there in the summer of 1991, my protest grew against depicting a life that may never more exist. I wept at hearing the birds chirping in the background as ninety-one-year-old Grisha Aiba, sitting in his peaceful rural homestead, recounted his life's experience solving community disputes. I agonized as I listened to the voice of my guide, Yermolai, and remembered the shy, awkward manner of this fifty-year-old man, his refusal to take pay for his work on grounds that it was his duty as an Abkhazian to open up to me all avenues to information about his people. I couldn't bear to visualize the story I had been told about him being shot in the foot by occupying forces as he wept in front of the fire that demolished the Abkhazian history archive in October 1992.

It was precisely this surge of passion that ultimately showed me the way to this chapter. I realized it was imperative to explain the powerful aspects of this culture at peace that had so thoroughly impacted my life, that had lifted this floodgate of emotions. The wisdom of the culture that I was reminiscing about through my tapes and notes persuaded me that, indeed, this story did have to be about Abkhazia in a more normal time.

People in every culture have children, parents, lovers; they experience everyday sorrows and joys. This is what they all lose in time of war, and we accept it as a given that this is a tragedy. However, when we read about foreign peoples at war, we usually know few specifics about their peacetime lives. Perhaps this ensures a certain level of indifference. In the case of Abkhazia, a society on the verge of extinction, I thought it all the more necessary to know about what world culture stands to lose if genocide prevails.

THE LAND

Abkhazia covers 3,300 square miles between the eastern shores of the Black Sea and the crestline of the main Caucasus range, from the rivers Psou (in the north) and Inguri (in the south). To the north Abkhazia is bordered by Russia, and to the south by the Georgian provinces of Svanetia and Mingrelia. Around seventy-four percent of the territory is mountains or mountain approaches. The coastal valleys are humid, subtropical. At higher altitudes the weather ranges from moderately cold to such freezing temperatures that the snow never melts. The relatively small distance between seashore and mountains lends Abkhazia a striking contrasting landscape.

The area is best known by non-Abkhazians for its prime resorts for vacationers from all over the former Soviet Union; and for its major cash crops of tea, tobacco, and citrus fruits. There are two cities: the capital Sukhum,¹ with a population of one hundred thousand, and Tkvarchel, an industrial center. There are three urban resorts—Gagra, Gudauta, and Ochamchira; two rural spas—Pitsunda and Novy Afon; and 575 villages.

Abkhazians describe their country as harsh but beautiful. A legend they often tell is about how God was distributing land to all the peoples of the earth while the Abkhazians were entertaining guests. Because it would have been impolite for the hosts to leave before their guests, they arrived late. All that God had left for the Abkhazians were some stones out of which he created a land that was hard to cultivate but paradise-like in its beauty.

THE PEOPLE

The Abkhazian language belongs to the northwest Caucasian fami-

ly spoken by only a few other peoples in the world—the Abazins (or Abaza), Adyghey, Kabardians, and Circassians, all of whom live in the North Caucasus. Historically these peoples and other related groups in the North Caucasus maintained close ties until they were divided by modern transportation lines that made direct travel to one another impossible. Until this century they could ride their horses to each other through the mountains. However, plane and train routes developed under the Soviet government were designed so that each of these peoples had to first travel all the way to Moscow, then transfer to get back to the other parts of the Caucasus.

The closest neighbors of the Abkhazians (they were not related linguistically or ethnically) were the Mingrelians, Svans, and Georgians.² After Abkhazia was incorporated into Russia in 1810, large numbers of migrants came from other parts of the empire—primarily Russians, Armenians, and Jews. These settlers were also joined by Greeks fleeing religious persecution in the Ottoman Empire and Iran.

HISTORY

Abkhazians hold on to their history for dear life, dreading the same fate as a now-extinct related group, the Ubykhs, who were their northern neighbors around Sochi (now in Russia). All Abkhazian children for millennia have been taught their family's history at least seven generations back, as well as the legends and history depicting Abkhazian mores, heroes and villains, friends and enemies. The war today is essentially over that history, contested by Georgians who perceive Abkhazians as guests on their land.

According to Abkhazian legends the people originated in prehistoric times on the territory they now occupy. The people have no collective memory of having ever lived on another territory. Archeological evidence of proto-Abkhazian tribes in the Western Caucasus dates back to 4,000–3,000 B.C.³

The Abkhazian people were first mentioned by Pliny Major in the first century A.D. The territory that Pliny Major assigned to the early Abkhazians was in the same area as contemporary Abkhazia. This had been the site of several Greek colonies from the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.⁴

The Abkhazian principalities were subsequently controlled by Rome, the Laz Kingdom, and then Byzantium. Under Byzantine's Justinian I (543–546) the Abkhazians adopted Christianity (Russia adopted Christianity in the late 900s). Byzantium lost its power over the area in the late eighth century. At that time, Leon II, potentate of the Abkhazians, seized the land, thus establishing the Kingdom of Abkhazia (the whole of today's Western Georgia). This kingdom lasted for two hundred years, during which time the ancient Abkhazian tribes consolidated into one ethnic entity.

In the late tenth century Abkhazia lost its independence and became part of the united Georgian state. After central power in Georgia collapsed in 1245, with the appearance of the Mongols, the whole region became a conglomeration of princedoms. From the early sixteenth century Abkhazia is mentioned as an independent entity. It is also during this century that the Ottoman Turks gained considerable influence in Abkhazia and converted part of the population to Islam.

When Czarist Russia conquered Ottoman Transcaucasia in the first half of the nineteenth century, Abkhazian and other northwest Caucasian peoples fought for their independence in fierce and unequal battles. Their resistance was finally put down in the 1870s, when the North Caucasus came under imperial Russian domination.

This prompted the tragic exodus to Turkey of around half the Abkhazian population (one hundred thousand),⁵ which left whole villages and vast areas of Abkhazia vacant. The mass exodus was of enormous consequence to the Abkhazian and other recalcitrant mountain peoples forced out of their ancient homelands, either by assaulting Russian troops or by their Turkish rulers. The vacated territories (primarily the middle part of Abkhazia around Sukhum) were settled by Russians, Georgians, Armenians, and other ethnic groups. Consequently, the Abkhazians were reduced to a small majority on their own territory, making them culturally and politically vulnerable.

The Russian Revolution brought the Abkhazians a degree of political autonomy and cultural resurrection. Within the Soviet state Abkhazians originally governed their own republic (from March of 1921). This was short-lived, however. In 1931 Stalin and Beria (both from Georgia) changed the status, designating Abkhazia a republic within Georgia.

For all practical purposes Abkhazian affairs were administered by Georgia until the collapse of the USSR. In those few decades, primarily due to the Stalin-era mass deportations, executions, and major population-transfer programs for the settlement of Georgians, the Abkhazians dwindled to 17.1 percent⁶ of the population on their own ancestral territory.

The Khrushchev period brought the Abkhazians relief from the Stalinist terror and gave them the appearance of control over their government. The most significant decisions, however, were still made in Tbilisi (capital of the Georgian republic) and Moscow (building permits, land rights, language policies), and most of the economic resources (revenue from the port, resorts, cash crops) were lost to Tbilisi and Moscow.

Nevertheless, the 1960s and 1970s brought new opportunities for reviving Abkhazian culture—schools that offered instruction in the native language, the cultivation of dance, drama and music, limited publishing rights, and the promotion of the local Institute of Abkhazian History, Language and Culture.

This was the time when I began working in Abkhazia and found a relatively peaceful multiethnic society. I discovered a thriving ethnic pride that people openly exhibited. Relations between ethnic groups, including Georgians, appeared to be quite healthy.

The only people who expressed hostility were Georgians from outside the Abkhazian autonomous republic, and a few local Georgians who clearly thought of Abkhazians as ungrateful guests occupying their land. These Georgians did not hesitate to express to me their indignation. They maintained that there was no such ethnic group as Abkhazians. The argument offered was that Abkhazians were actually Georgians who had been assimilated by some “Abkhazian-speaking mountain tribe” arriving there in the seventeenth century from an unspecified place, and were essentially “pretending” to be Abkhazians for the “benefits” they reaped in the Soviet system for being a demographically small nationality—special affirmative action rights to higher education, and during the war, exemption from military service (which was a myth). These Georgians also complained of reverse discrimination by the local Abkhazian leadership.

Despite these animosities, there was no bloodshed between the two groups. Furthermore, Abkhazian-Georgian marriages were not uncommon.

The policies of political openness and decentralization efforts

that characterized the Gorbachev years unleashed the latent forces of discontent among all the country's ethnic groups. This new energy was first focused on the restoration of neglected historical sites and an honest examination of the black holes in history left by the legacy of the Stalin period. Abkhazia was no exception.

As the Soviet Union collapsed, this movement among the various ethnic groups grew into a struggle for resources and power, eventually leading to warfare in some former republics. When Georgia separated itself from the Soviet Union in 1992, its leaders tried to incorporate the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic into an effectively unitary Georgian state, controlled from Tbilisi. All the minorities in Abkhazia, including the Abkhazians, who together constitute a narrow majority, resisted. In response to the Georgians' measures to "Georganize" Abkhazia (all too reminiscent of the Stalinist period when the Abkhazian language and cultural institutions were banned), Abkhazia declared its sovereignty and attempted repeatedly to negotiate a federal relationship with Georgia.

On August 14, 1992, the Georgian government, led by Eduard Shevardnadze, moved troops into Abkhazia. Georgian forces terrorized Abkhazian civilians as a group. Additionally, Georgians either pillaged or destroyed every Abkhazian cultural institution in the Abkhazian capital of Sukhum, including its history archives and museum. The primary sources of Abkhazian history and culture no longer exist.

If there are any remnants of Abkhazian culture after the war, it will require miraculous healing measures for Abkhazians and Georgians to live once again as peaceful neighbors.

A careful examination of Abkhazia in peacetime may point to the society's internal healing forces. I personally count on the wisdom of the elders in a country most famous for its centenarians. Let's more closely examine this phenomenon of active old age in Abkhazia where the elderly are the primary decision makers and resolvers of conflict in their families and communities.

THEORIES ABOUT THE LONG-LIVED PEOPLE OF THE CAUCASUS

If we are to believe the journalists of the 1970s and 1980s who

brought this phenomenon to the world's attention, centenarians (one hundred years or older) are really old people who till the land from sunrise to sundown, dance and sing in professional folk ensembles, and look no older than sixty. I found this image was not a reality. Centenarians look like very old people; some of them have no teeth, are shriveled with wrinkles, and move about slowly like all very old people. Nevertheless, they work in the fields and around the house, even if at a slow pace, and they are mentally alert. (Later I will discuss how scholars verify an elder's approximate age when documents are lacking.)

All the long-lived people of Abkhazia have varying opinions about the secret of their "fountain of youth." This is what I learned from them during my visits between 1979 and 1985.

Elizaveta Shakryl (114 years old) thought that she passed her century because she never allowed herself to fret. Timur Vanacha (102)⁷ was sure it was because he had worked all his life. Jgug Chamagua (95) believed her habit of walking long distances and her even disposition helped her reach a ripe age. Arutan Gitsba (95) had no doubts about Allah's intervention. Other elders explained that Abkhazian food, the mountain air, or the home-made wine and vodka made the difference. A few told me the Abkhazians lived longer because they married later than most other peoples,⁸ hence waiting longer for their first sexual experience (pre-marital sex was and still is taboo). According to this theory, Abkhazians can continue sexual activity many more years and this, they say, is an important reason for better health in late adulthood. One man explained that his good health despite his advanced age was due to his satisfying marriage and happy family life.

The scientists who have been studying long-lived people, not only in Abkhazia, but in other parts of the world as well, also hold different theories about the factors that may promote longevity, such as genetic, physical environment, and lifestyle factors. What all experts agree on, however, is that there are certain territories, or ethnic groups, with a higher percentage of people over ninety than others. Abkhazia, Azerbaijan, and Yakutia in the former Soviet Union are just such territories. There are also pockets of large centenarian populations in Pakistan (the Hunzas northeast of the Khyber Pass) and Ecuador (the valley of Vilcabamba in the Andes). This information tends to reinforce the genetic hypothesis, that longevity is inherited.

There has been some controversy over whether the centenarians of the Caucasus really are as old as they say. After all, most of the elders of the 1970s and 1980s, when this phenomenon gained worldwide attention, did not have birth certificates to prove their claimed distinguished age. The Soviet-American program on longevity that I participated in was careful to verify the ages of the elders, contrasting our information with the age stated in their Soviet internal passports. We did this by interviewing elders, members of their families and their neighbors. These people did not know the intent was to verify their age because questions about age would come up only once in a while in a wide-ranging conversation about the person's diet, work habits, and life history.

My own study of Abkhazian longevity focused on lifestyle. I believe that one of the most basic factors is the inherited potential to live long. But having the potential does not guarantee its fulfillment. This is where other factors come in, such as diet, work, sex, and social environment; factors we can modify in our lives to one degree or another.

Perhaps one of the most popular theories is that the secret to long life is in one's diet. The everyday diet of all Abkhazians consists of homegrown and home-processed foods, abundant raw fruit and vegetables, moderate meat consumption and even less fish, and a low-fat, low-calorie intake.

Despite a relatively limited assortment of foods and the predominance of plant products, in particular grain and beans, the diet contains a balance of almost all the main nutrients. The proportion of the main nutrients remains constant for the people studied over sixty, irrespective of their overall reduction with age.

The following alimentary factors may play their part in the longevity of the given population: a diet relatively low in tryptophan; low consumption of raw vegetable oil; and an adequate content of food antioxidants (vitamins C and E).

Eating habits are formed in early childhood and have persisted consistently throughout the lifetime of the elderly, thus ensuring the necessary period of time to exert an effect on prolongation of life.

The diet of the population appears to have elements thought to be associated with low heart disease and low risk of cancer. These features include: low consumption of sugar and salt; a high proportion of plant products, hence fiber; moderate alcohol con-

sumption; low calorie food intake; optimal fat content in general and vegetable oil in particular; a high content of vitamins and antioxidants possessing antiatherosclerotic properties.

Another theory put forward by some experts and endorsed by several centenarians I met is that waiting until the age of thirty to forty (historically common ages of marriage) to begin sexual relations is related to longevity. The hypothesis of later introduction to sex, however, does not explain longevity in Azerbaijan, where most centenarians married before the age of twenty, according to local traditions; nor among the long-lived people of the Andes where there is no indication of late marriage.

As for attitudes to sexual relations, among the Abkhazians sex is considered to be a strictly private matter. Any manifestation of affection or sexual desire in the presence of others is scorned. Yet private attitudes to sex appear to be quite healthy. Sula Benet, the first American to do fieldwork in Abkhazia, summed up these attitudes:

Despite the elaborate rules—perhaps, in part, because they are universally accepted—sex in Abkhazia is considered a good and pleasurable thing when it is strictly private. As difficult as it may be for the American mind to grasp, it is also guiltless. It is not repressed or sublimated into work, art, or religious-mystical passion. It is not an evil to be driven from one's thoughts. It is a pleasure to be regulated for the sake of one's health—like good wine.⁹

Dr. Benet also recorded the results of a medical team investigating the sex life of the Abkhazians. It was learned that men retain their sexual potency beyond the age of seventy and 13.6 percent of the women were found to continue menstruation after fifty-five years of age. "Late menarche and late menopause for women," writes Dr. Benet, "are both expressions of the same biological principle of the slow aging process. Biologically speaking, they are 'late bloomers'."¹⁰

The Soviet anthropologists who worked in Abkhazia with me were also looking into the psychology of the people to see if it had any important contributions to make to the science of stress alleviation. They believed that the extensive and close family ties in Abkhazian communities—and hence traditions of

mutual assistance—may help to minimize stress. They particularly emphasized the prestige of growing old in Abkhazia, and the active participation in family and community life by centenarians as a possible explanation for the relative absence of senility.

Galina Starovoitova, a Moscow psychologist (who later became Russian President Boris Yeltsin's aide on ethnic relations), made a statistical study of the contact between the elders and the younger members of rural communities in Abkhazia. She learned that elders, including those over ninety, converse daily with relatives and close neighbors, and at least once a week with friends. Over eighty percent of the conversations the youth and middle-aged had with their elders were for advice on important everyday matters.

In a 1980 conversation I had with Sula Benet she emphatically stated her belief that the honored position of the elderly is responsible for the self-respect so notable among them. "In the United States," she commented, "getting old is not exactly a good thing; people like to stay as young as possible. The same thing, I suppose, holds true in many other contemporary groups, but the position of the Abkhazian elders in the family and in the society helps them want to live long and be in good health."

As for wanting to be healthy, I noticed that most of the elderly I interviewed qualified their state of health as good. They mentioned an ache here or there, but were basically people not accustomed to complaining about their health. On the contrary, the subject did not seem to be of interest to any of them.

In Abkhazia there are no seniors who do not enjoy the everyday care of relatives and neighbors and there is no Abkhazian senior who lives in a nursing home because, no matter what the illness, the patient will be cared for by someone in the kinship group if there are no close relatives. A doctor or nurse will come to the house daily if necessary to administer medical care. An Abkhazian family will only agree to hospitalization for their elderly if an operation is required, or round-the-clock medical care is in order, such as intravenous feeding. Otherwise, they believe love and care to be the best medicine.

Anna Petrova, a Moscow psychologist I worked with in Abkhazia, had trouble getting any clear answers to her questions

about mechanisms for coping with stress. It was not because there is little stress as we know it in these rural communities. "I believe that there is psychological stress in any society, even in rural communities," said Petrova.

A death in the family, for instance, creates plenty of anxiety. Or what about marriage, the birth of a child? The emotions are positive, but this is still stressful. Nobody in Abkhazia, at least the elders I have interviewed, thinks of stress consciously, so they do not always know how to explain the coping mechanism that apparently comes naturally to them.

Galina Starovoitova revealed one aspect of the centenarians' psychology that may have some bearing on coping with stress and on longevity. She discovered by testing the rural population in Abkhazia, using methods devised by I. B. Phares, that the long-living people tend to interpret the events in their lives as the result of their own doing rather than of external forces. She found that this type of personality was most common among the elderly who were most healthy physically and psychologically. Therefore, it is possible that people who accept responsibility for what happens to them in life, feel they are masters of their own destiny, are more likely to live longer.

To me the most striking factor in Abkhazian culture was the place of honor the Abkhazian elderly hold in their communities and the resulting strong will to go on living active lives. So I turned to study child-rearing customs because the foundations of old age, attitudes to the elderly, and psychological well-being are laid in childhood. I wanted to see how these practices perpetuate in the culture a process of growing old in which people become increasingly important and gain power and honor in their families and communities the older they become. So let us take a look at what it was like growing up in Soviet Abkhazia.

SUSANNA'S STORY

In 1980, when I first met Susanna Jinjolia in an Abkhazian village named Jgerda, she was twenty-three. She was a typical young woman of her generation brought up in the countryside during the

mid-fifties, when most traces of the difficult years of World War II had been erased. Susanna's story of her childhood, which follows in her own words (translated by me), reflects the changes as well as the constants in the Abkhazian system of child-rearing. She describes her life most eloquently.

I was born prematurely, two months before I was due. The doctor who pulled me through in our local hospital was an Armenian. She asked my parents if she could choose my name. She wanted me to be Susanna. After I was brought home from the hospital the doctor visited every day for several months, and then at least once a week she came to see how I was doing. She loved me very much. My grandfather worked at that hospital then. I remember the doctor would ask him to have me come and visit her when I was a toddler. Now she works in Sukhum, but we still keep in touch.

I was a few years old when my middle brother was born, and remember as though it happened yesterday how excited the family was when he was brought home from the hospital. In Abkhazia a boy in the family has always brought great joy because so many men were killed in fighting in the old days. Now it is a habit to celebrate a boy's birth more than a girl's. All the neighbors came to see him, and as the baby was carried into the yard my father, who likes to hunt, picked up his rifle and shot it into the air twice in keeping with the old custom when a boy is born. I was so excited. I don't think I was jealous; I gave my new brother a doll to welcome him home. Grandma walked around his cradle three times, and said, "May all your illnesses be mine." My grandmother is a very kind woman and loves children. Of course, every grandmother loves her grandchildren but our grandmother has been especially fond of us.

When my brother was brought home from the hospital my mother did not go near him if my grandfather was in the room. If my grandfather entered the room where she was taking care of the baby she would leave at once. This is an old custom, a sign of deep respect to the head of the household and her father-in-law.¹¹ A woman who disregards this old custom might as well be saying to her father-in-law, "You see, your son and I were intimate and had this baby." Some women today don't pay attention to that custom, but I think such people just show disrespect for themselves because they don't appear to care about preserving our Abkhazian traditions.

After the child is given its name at a special ceremony, usually

three weeks after its birth, the mother can take care of her baby in front of her in-laws, or other elders, but she will still refrain from kissing or hugging the child in front of elders.

This name-giving ceremony used to have religious meaning: it was a time to pray for the protection of the gods so the child would grow up happy and healthy. In the past only women attended the ceremony and ate the sacrificial food, chicken and cheese pie. But now even men come and eat at the banquet that is given in the newborn's honor. The elders, of course, won't come. They still are strict about following the old ways. But the rest of the community comes to the celebration because it is a time for relatives and neighbors to get together and mark the birth of a new member of the community.

Traditionally the mother was not involved in selecting the child's name which was made public at the ritual. This right was reserved for the head of the family. And the child was never named after an ancestor, because its mother had no right to pronounce such names. Now no one pays attention to these rules, at least not anyone I know. But a person's name is still quite significant in our culture. In Abkhazian the word for "name" also means "fame."

The people who come to the ceremony bring presents and the women give their blessings to the child. An old woman in the community with a gift for oratory supervises the festivities and says the main blessing.

I don't think this custom will die out. Almost everyone has such a party after the baby's birth. When I am older I am sure my children and their children will organize such a gathering for the sake of the elders who want to keep the old traditions. The same goes for our weddings, which are so beautiful and so necessary to give a young couple the right start in life. A family that would not follow these customs would be considered quite strange in the community.

The cradle that my brother slept in until he was about a year old is the traditional Abkhazian cradle that our people used for centuries. The baby is strapped into it, and he eliminates through a hole in the bottom of the cradle. I remember as a toddler asking my mother if I could sleep in my brother's cradle. Of course, she wouldn't let me because it was for my brother, so I slept in a small bed by myself in my parents' room. Later I slept in my grandmother's room. When my brother got a little older I moved to my own room and he slept in my grandmother's room. It was very warm sleeping with her, and it made her happy to have one of us so

close.

My younger brother was born a few years after my middle brother. We repeated the same ceremony for him. The youngest son is usually a family's favorite although we all felt we were wanted and loved by everyone in the family and by our other relatives.

For instance, my uncle on my father's side lives nearby. Before he married and had his own children he became very close to my brothers and me. To this day if he sees something we might like he buys it for us, clothes and what-not, and treats us like his own children—even better, because with us he can show his affections more openly. He will not be affectionate with his own children if others are around.

When we were little my brothers and I played together in our yard or with our cousins who also lived nearby. Until I went to school these were my only playmates. I would only leave the yard to go to the neighbors or with my grandfather to the hospital where he worked or to the store in the center of our community. So our world was small, and the people we knew best were our own relatives.

Mama was always affectionate with us. She would give us a hug or say what good children we were every day. Papa rarely kissed us, but we knew he cared about us very much. It's customary for a father to keep his distance from his children when his parents are around.

Neither of my parents went to college, but they brought us up well. I think we were good children, although sometimes we got into trouble. Because I was the oldest child, and a girl, I was hardly ever punished. I was supposed to look after my brothers, and they were supposed to mind me because I was the oldest. If my parents had punished me my brothers would not have respected me so much and would not have minded me.

Nobody ever hit us. The worst punishment my parents had was to stand my brothers in the corner. But that was only a few times that I can remember. Once the boys had climbed our cherry tree to get some fruit after being told not to. Grandma was afraid they could have fallen, and she was very upset. She told my father when he came home so he put them in the corner for half an hour or so.

We were afraid of Papa even though he never hit us and never even raised his voice with us. But when Mama would threaten us that Papa would come home and punish us "*severely*," we begged her not to tell him and promised to mind her. I don't know why we

believed Mama that Papa would be so hard on us! He never was. Maybe after seeing how he put the boys in the corner once was enough for us to believe he was capable of punishing us even more harshly.

Some parents, I know, promise their children candy or some small favor when they want them to run an errand. But my mother did not have to. We were always willing to help. What she would promise us was to read or tell us a fairytale about a little boy who grew up with a deer. We also liked the stories she told us that came from Bulgaria. (The book we had was in Abkhazian, a translation from Russian, in turn a translation from Bulgarian.) Mother would tell us about the customs of other peoples and how they live in different countries.

I knew more fairytales than my brothers and many of my friends. I would go to my cousins and tell them the stories I knew and would correct the little ones when they made mistakes in telling the stories they had heard. My mother also taught my brothers and me how to dance and sing our folk songs. She plays our folk instruments very well; now my brothers play the guitar and sing for the family when we are all together.

We learned how to work around the house and on the farm before we went to school, but it was like play for us. We never had to do anything beyond our abilities. I would help wash the dishes, and my brothers would help my father with his work. Starting from the fifth grade, we helped the farmers with the harvest as a class and it was there that we learned the real skills of farming. The work was never hard work and we enjoyed it. Besides, grandmother taught us that work was good physical exercise. Our families and our schools believe work is good for children, and the earlier we learn work skills the easier it is to get used to regular work habits.

I went to our local school in the center of Jgerda. My first teacher had the title of "Honored Teacher of the Georgian Republic." She really deserved that honor, too, because she approached each child as an individual. She was my best teacher. My worst teacher taught German: she knew the language well, but did not have the gift to teach. I studied with her for six years, but cannot say that I know the language. Our math teacher, on the other hand, was a talented teacher. She taught us everything, not only math, because she shared with us her ideas and philosophy about life. The literature teacher we had when I was in my last few years of school was brilliant. His classes would begin and end and

we wouldn't even notice the time pass.

Not all schools are the same, of course; some are better, others worse. I would say that our school was a little better than average. Our students were also capable; I don't remember any children who were difficult to handle. If someone was doing badly in school, or perhaps misbehaving, the teachers, or principal, would call in the child's parents and ask them to talk to the child. This measure was used only in extreme cases, but it was always effective, because the family exerts the strongest influence on a child.

Many of my friends go to college, and some have already graduated. The others remained on the farm to work in the fields. I cannot do this because of a back injury from a childhood accident falling off a tree, so I help out at home and spend my time reading.

I was close to all the girls in my class. If you follow the Abkhazian customs, you will win lots of friends. If you don't, people are less likely to respect you. For girls this means dressing modestly and not wearing makeup. Abkhazian boys do not like girls who try to stand out: in our class there was one girl who, under the influence of the older sister, insisted on wearing makeup, not realizing how ridiculous she looked. Her parents finally stopped her.

I also had about five close friends among the boys. They would tell me their secrets, their problems, and would come to me for help or advice; when they had some good news they would share it with me too. I call myself a closed archive: any secret I am told goes no further. You could threaten to kill me and I would not give away any of the secrets people have told me.

I appreciate most of our Abkhazian traditions, the fact that we value modesty, generosity, hospitality, respect for elders, and elders' respect for those younger. Most of our bad customs have died away, such as feuding, blood revenge, and the limited mobility of women. We still have many complicated rituals that we should simplify, such customs as the taboo against a daughter-in-law speaking in the presence of her father-in-law, or a son handling his child in front of his father. Of course, one should feel some restraint around elders, out of respect, but it is not necessary in our modern world to keep to the letter of the old traditions. We see these customs being modified today, especially in the cities, but I do not know one Abkhazian family that is willing to give up all those traditions which make us Abkhazians, which give us our unique identity.

We have always been concerned about the fate of our people and our traditions. For example, the first toast at an Abkhazian cel-

eboration is always to “the people.”¹² Perhaps because we were on the verge of extinction in the nineteenth century we are anxious to hang on to our traditions and care more about them than we otherwise would. When a person is guilty of some particularly serious misbehavior, the relatives say, “You are shaming your people.” At that first celebration after a baby’s birth the guests who come to look at the baby say, “May you become a son or daughter of your people.” This is supposed to guarantee that this new human being should never do anything to shame the Abkhazian people.

This was always the ideal of the people, yet in old Abkhazia, only one hundred years ago, people killed each other for a piece of land. When a man did not have enough food for his family, and someone stronger tried to take away the only source of income he had, he was ready to kill to protect it, and vice versa. The strong were greedy and stopped at nothing to get more.

I have lived for nearly a quarter of a century, but I have never heard of such a thing in Jgerda, in Abkhazia, or anywhere else in our country. There is work for everyone, and land for anyone who is willing to farm it. Some of us are better off than others, but basically we in Jgerda are all farmers with the same privileges and the same obligations. No one feels that they are on the outside of society and I suppose that is why our community is so peaceful.

HOW TYPICAL IS SUSANNA?

Susanna’s story, told in her own words in the last section, provides a glimpse into the mental set that ensures a process by which Abkhazians gain in stature as they grow older. This advance up the social hierarchy is gradual and sure. Each age group has authority over all those younger and must follow completely the wishes of all those who are older. This natural sequence of acquiring power and prestige is, perhaps, what minimizes the resentment a person from our culture might expect of individuals who are compelled by tradition to acquiesce to elders.

To be sure, not all young people share the same outlooks as Susanna. Increasingly, juvenile delinquency has been on the rise among Abkhazians, indicating a serious breakdown in the old system. Educators there explained that one of the reasons is that the school system, standardized in Moscow by a totally different cul-

ture, does not adequately inculcate the specifically Abkhazian value system. The code of behavior learned at home by implicit instruction is not reinforced in the schools. For instance, not only are younger people supposed to honor and obey those who are older, but those older are, in turn, supposed to treat their juniors with respect, and not abuse their power. In the schools this approach is not observed. Older children take advantage of younger children. This kind of school environment, point out Abkhazian educators, disrupts the traditional dynamics of interaction between the generations.

However, the vast majority of young people I observed, starting from the time they could walk, were well-behaved, demonstrated obvious respect for their elders, and seemed incapable of offending an adult.

Even more astounding to me (having agreed with the prevailing philosophy of my generation of the sixties, that you can't trust anyone over thirty) was the wisdom and inner energy I encountered in the elderly. I concluded that when you know that people look to you for the answers to important questions, you grow to meet the community's expectations. When a society defines "elderly" as synonymous with being sage, as in Abkhazia, the individual is more likely to strive to fit that profile.

ELDERS AS MEDIATORS OF CONFLICT

Because the elders are considered the society's most experienced and wise people, they are regarded as the primary mediators of conflicts. They are usually males, ordinarily around fifty and older, and among the most respected. Elderly women may also be mediators, but they are a minority. When a woman is called in to resolve a conflict it is because she is especially highly regarded. As one male mediator explained, "For a man it's almost enough for him to have lived long to serve as a mediator, but if a woman is involved it means she is a person of particular wisdom."

The formal mediation institutions are the Councils of Elders¹³ that function only when the members are called upon to settle a conflict. However, any elder, not necessarily serving on a council, may be asked to mediate. They may even be relatives of the conflicting parties, if the dispute is not major. Several mediators usual-

ly serve together, the more the better, and preferably those who live a good distance from the disputants or are not among the interested parties.

Mediators must have certain qualities. They are supposed to be objective, wise, and knowledgeable about traditions; they are influential people and eloquent speakers. The following reflects the typical statements I heard about the desirable qualities of mediators: "He was the ideal mediator because of his personal qualities. Each side knew him to be objective, not a politician. A good mediator is someone who is respected by both sides and is untainted, not hypocritical."

Abkhazian mediators are not called upon to resolve conflicts subject to a criminal suit. They are usually responsible for civil disputes which the involved individuals or the community do not want to be escalated. These disputes are typically feuds or potential feuds over an accidental murder (usually automobile or hunting accidents), cases of juvenile delinquency, and family conflicts.

The period that precedes the actual mediation is the most critical because this is when the parties decide that they are ready to cease hostilities. In the case of a feud, this decision usually seems to be voluntary and arises when both sides feel they have taken even revenge. In some instances the side that has caused the greatest damage to the adversaries is the one that calls in mediators in order to preempt a severe counter blow.

In all my conversations about feuds involving deaths¹⁴ it was clear that combatants are motivated to seek a resolution not just to save one's own family, but also out of an awareness of the small numbers of Abkhazians and a concern for the nationality's endangered status. So a sense of self-preservation as a group was found to be a strong motive for settlement if the conflict could result in loss of life.

Sometimes the decision to mediate a dispute is due to the pressure of public opinion exerted by the future mediators, or perhaps, by neighbors, family members, etc. One elder told me that mediators and members of the community talk to recalcitrant parties one at a time to get their agreement to begin negotiations. During these caucuses an experienced and eloquent elder cites to the parties many cases of conflicts as instructive examples of how to improve relations. Other influentials may also enter the effort to persuade the antagonists.

Fear of becoming an outcast is a strong motivation in such a closely knit culture as Abkhazia, so this kind of public pressure is

highly effective. The threat of ostracism and exile is ordinarily the method used to deal with juvenile delinquents. In these cases elders make the threats gently, knowing that the mere mention of such an action is taken seriously by the youth. Often this is done at annual meetings of the surname group (*azhvaala* which means "those who belong to the same root"),¹⁵ when influential members of the group summarize, as it were, the accomplishments of outstanding individuals, as well as the failures of others.

When mediators begin the actual mediation procedures, a standard opening, reflecting the power of public opinion, is as follows: "We've come at the request of society. Have you anything against us?" By this time, the parties are ready for mediation and will answer in the negative, thus confirming their willingness to bow to the authority of the mediators.

Use of the concept of *apsuara* has traditionally been the most important element of mediation procedures. If I were to translate this term into one word it would be "Abkhazianism." However, it does not really explain this extremely broad notion. *Apsuara* embraces all the components of the entire, complex ethical code for Abkhazian behavior. Thus, an appeal to the parties by mediators to remember *apsuara* is essentially an appeal to ethnicity, to Abkhazian values, and to the very existence of the group. *Alamys*, or "conscience," is another related concept that is utilized. It is actually also encompassed by *apsuara*. These two words are integral to the main thrust of the mediators' arguments for reconciliation.

Mediators also commonly say: "Are you an *apsua* (Abkhazian)? If so, then you must do this," whatever the mediators suggest. Or mediators may ask this rhetorical question: "How can you do that to another Abkhazian; there are so few of us as it is?" This mechanism of conflict resolution clearly serves to preserve an endangered ethnic group, so it works best within a group that uniformly shares common values, as is the case with the Abkhazians.

This was how ninety-one-year-old Grisha Aiba (whose father and grandfather had also been well-known mediators) managed to end a long-standing feud in his village of Otkhara. He told me how he and his co-mediators used these considerations of Abkhazian group survival to persuade a father to forgive his son's killer. Aiba told me of the intensive three-day negotiations (no one eats throughout the negotiation period) with the father and the killer. Meanwhile mediators were negotiating with the murderer. When the man was ready to repent for his crime and agreed to go to the graveyard to be tied to his victim's tombstone, the negotiators who

were with the father began persuading him to go also to his son's grave. Finally the father realized the killer must be waiting at the graveyard and gave in, saying: "Since all of you insist I have no choice." When they arrived at the grave the murderer was guarded by several men to protect him from any harm from the other side. After being untied, the man approached the father and kissed him on the chest, making them father and son for life. This is a modern version of an ancient Abkhazian practice in conflict resolution.

Traditionally a feud could be ended either by fosterage, the custom of giving up a child to be raised temporarily (months or years) in another family, or by the adoption of a child or an adult as a means of uniting two families as relatives. In this case the hospitality ritual was combined with bringing the child or adult into the new home. Fosterage and adoption were widespread in the Caucasus until the nineteenth century and in Abkhazia it was practiced at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Even if one side did not agree to adoption as the solution, there was still hope. If a woman from the family which offered the adoption could get access to a child from the reluctant family and put the child to her breast, even symbolically, the relationship was sealed. No more blood could be shed between the two families. If no child was accessible, another alternative was for a man to find an opportunity to somehow steal into the home of the reluctant family and put his lips to a woman's breast, perhaps the wife or mother of the revenging male. Although the adoption was forced, it was fair and had to be recognized.

Although the appeal to ethnicity, to Abkhazian ethical codes and conscience, is the strongest means of persuasion among a group of people so acutely aware of their fragility, other techniques are also used, depending on the conflict. One approach is to persuade parties that the conflict is not worth the antagonism. For instance, in the small resort of Novy Afon, a conflict began when members of two families had a fist fight after drinking heavily at a party. Within four days, because of growing hostility between the families, all the respected elders in the town gathered together. They contacted the relatives, and appointed a day, time, and neutral site to discuss the conflict. Dmitry Smyr, a member of the local Council of Elders, recalled how he initially addressed the two families: "How could you fight over such a matter. Aren't you ashamed? Won't it be ridiculous if the dispute has to be heard in court?" After eloquent pleas by all the mediators the parties finally

agreed, he said: "They shook hands and hugged, and then we held a feast where we had gathered. Some time later one side invited the other side to their home for a banquet, treating them like honored guests." An important conflict, explained Smyr, "is over something that has economic value, something having to do, for instance, with agriculture."

It is important to the mediation outcome that both sides emerge from the conflict with their dignity intact, which is so highly valued in the Abkhazian culture. Thus, face-saving measures are part and parcel of the mediation process. In the 1950s and 1960s, Shalva Inal-Ipa, an Abkhazian anthropologist, extensively interviewed long-lived Abkhazians who provided rich oral history on conflict resolution going back to the nineteenth century. Inal-Ipa found that the goal of the mediators was not to establish who was right or wrong in the conflict because that would just exacerbate the circumstances. Instead, mediators emphasized the need for peace. He explained that, "It was felt that the guilty party had essentially discredited itself; it wasn't necessary to rub in the guilt."

The mediators I met with expressed varying opinions about whether mediators are supposed to determine the guilty parties in a conflict. Some said that the only way to solve a conflict is to ascertain which side is in the wrong. A fifty-year-old mediator stressed, "Of course the mediators must get to the bottom of the conflict, or it can't be resolved. The mediators' goal is not to smooth over the conflict, but to protect the honor of the victims."

Grisha Aiba said that it is imperative to determine the guilty party in order to get an apology, which in his experience, is absolutely necessary for a settlement to occur. The trick is to orchestrate an apology that is face-saving, and that allows both sides to feel completely at ease with the final agreement.

Others claimed that determining guilt is not important. Dmitry Smyr maintained, "In court it's important to determine who's guilty. But when elders are involved in conflict resolution, they're more interested in keeping the conflict from continuing. We say to the parties: 'We don't care who is right and who is wrong, that's past history. What we care about is that you make up, that you let bygones be bygones'."

This approach in interpersonal disputes is made easier in the Abkhazian culture because public expressions of pride in one's own family and children are culturally unacceptable. Therefore it

is unusual, for instance, for parents to take the side of their child in a conflict with another family, even if the child is clearly in the right. One informant told me of how, as a ten-year-old, he seriously injured a neighbor boy with a knife during a fight. The father of the victim did not fault the assailant, but his own son. He preferred to assume that his son had provoked the assault, rather than display what would have been considered undignified fatherly pride.

This is how close relatives can exert pressure on members of their family to take blame for their wrong-doing in the conflict. Public opinion favors such relatives over those who are more protective, because the former are behaving more within the confines of the traditional values of *apsuara*.

Abkhazian diplomacy, also referred to as Caucasian diplomacy, was a term used frequently to explain the actual style of mediation. Informants had a strong sense that this style is distinctly different in the Caucasus than in other cultures. Often people told me that the art of persuasion required mediators "to start from afar," to gradually work their way toward a mutual agreement. Humor was also cited as an important element of this diplomacy. How mediators express themselves, even in subtle ways, is as important as what solutions they propose. As an informant explained, "Caucasian diplomacy can be expressed in a particular gesture, facial expression, reinforced by the right words said at the right time."

When I came to this part of my conversations with informants it was hard to learn details because apparently so much of the art of mediation is spontaneous and creative. Mediators had difficulty recounting their exact words, the eloquence of their expressions, and as an outsider I was never able to witness these sensitive negotiations.

Once the mediators persuade the antagonists to reconcile, the next step is to finalize the agreement. Usually this is done by an offer of hospitality and, if applicable, material compensation for whatever the losses were, "the price of blood," as the compensation is called. The initiator of the hospitality might say, "I want to get rid of these hard feelings and invite you over to say some kind words, to apologize, and give gifts."

Acceptance of hospitality has an even more binding effect than a modern contract, signed and sealed in a court of law. Eating someone else's food precludes any animosity. A solemn ritual oath of reconciliation is sacred and cannot be broken.

Can such traditions of conflict resolution, that work so well within a group with the same values and concern for survival, operate effectively in settling disputes between ethnic groups with different values? Of all the elders I met only Aiba had any experience mediating conflicts involving Georgians. All of them, however, took an acute interest in the conflict that was brewing between Abkhazians and Georgians the last time I met with them in the summer of 1991.

Some elders believed this was not a conflict that they could solve because the roots of the dispute reached too far out of their cultural experience—all the way to the government bodies of Moscow (the capital of Russia) and Tbilisi (the capital of Georgia). “This is a problem to be tackled only by politicians,” was a common refrain.

Other elders clearly wanted a role in resolving the dispute between the Georgians and Abkhazians before it escalated into war. Grisha Aiba was certain that he could manage a settlement based on his experience living peacefully with Georgians and Svans in his village. But he complained, “Nobody will let us elders get involved in this conflict.”

Eventually the traditional peacemaking customs of the Caucasus will find their place into the contemporary arena. These practices appear to have been set aside, but I believe they are being utilized to varying degrees behind the scenes. The Caucasian peoples now at war are not so far removed from their cultural heritage that they are completely ignoring the lessons of their past. The whole Caucasus, including Abkhazia, has known frequent warfare throughout its history. But, in the process, these peoples have also fine-tuned their practices of resolving even the most protracted conflicts.

They will find their way to return, once again, to life without trenches, tanks, and machine guns. I hope at that point anthropologists will be welcome to work in this area which is one of the last frontiers for understanding traditional cultures, the role of the elderly, and the mechanisms for conflict resolution and cultural change.

NOTES

1. On most modern maps these cities are denoted as Sukhumi and Tkvarcheli. The i's were dropped by the Abkhazian government in 1991 as part of a general campaign to restore historical toponyms that had been Georgianized during the Stalin period.
2. In the Soviet census all three of these related peoples, with distinct dialect and cultural differences, are referred to as Georgians.
3. Shalva Inal-Ipa, *Abkhazy: istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki* [Abkhazians: Historical-Ethnographic Essays] (Sukhum: Alashara Publishers, 1965).
4. B. G. Hewitt, "Abkhazia: A Problem of Identity and Ownership," paper presented for the PHRG, 1991. The colonies were Pitiunt (contemporary Pitsunda), Dioscurias (contemporary Sukhum), and Guenos (near contemporary Ochamchira).
5. Georgy Dzidzaria, *Makhadzhirstvo i problemy istorii Abkhazii XIX stoletiya* [Emigration and the Problems of Nineteenth Century Abkhazian History] (Sukhum: Alashara Publishers, 1975).
6. 1989 Census data.
7. When I met Vanacha in 1980 his passport (Soviet identity papers) said he was 135 years old, but one year later when I went to a performance of the Nartaa Amateur Folk Company where he was the oldest member, the master of ceremonies proudly announced that Vanacha was 117. Anthropologists who verified his age by a methodology explained in this section have him on record as a few years over one hundred.
8. Traditionally it was not uncommon for men to marry in their forties and fifties (after they had established a homestead nearby their parents), and for women to marry in their thirties. Even today, early marriages are not the norm.
9. Sula Benet, *Abkhazians: The Long-Living People of the Caucasus* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1974), p. 86.
10. Ibid.
11. When couples marry, the wife always moves to the husband's home and often lives in the same house with her in-laws or nearby. The youngest son is obligated to remain in his parents' home with his family. Three-generation households are prevalent.
12. "The people" spoken as a toast in Abkhazia is an all-inclusive concept that simultaneously refers to the Abkhazian people, to each individual group of people, and to all people of the world as a whole.
13. The traditional institutions were banned during the Stalin period,

but restored in the 1960s. Under the republic's constitution the councils can mediate civil disputes.

14. A feud may begin between two families when a member on one side is killed by a member on the other side, even if the death is accidental. This is because it is culturally imperative in the Caucasus to avenge any injury or death. It is not even enough that the guilty party has been tried, convicted, and is serving time.
15. The traditions of these meetings have roots that go back millennia, before Christianity and Islam, when each surname group had its own sacred site where it prayed to its patron spirits for the group's well-being. Almost every surname group in Abkhazia revived this practice in the 1970s and 1980s, using the opportunity to praise its outstanding members and scold in public all those who could blemish the reputation of the *azhvala*.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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- Garb, Paula. *Where the Old Are Young: Long Life in the Soviet Caucasus*. Palo Alto, CA: Ramparts Publishers, 1987.