

REVITALIZATION AND INNOVATION OF TRADITIONAL CULTURE IN ABKHAZIA

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Abstract: The contradictory, political and socio-economic processes that emerged at the end of the 20th century had a peculiar effect on the multi-ethnic society of our country, including Abkhazia. As a result of the conflict in Abkhazia, only Georgians remained in the Gali region, and a small part in other regions. Isolation occurred between Georgians and Abkhazians. The difficult situation created in the region had a significant impact on the lifestyle of Abkhazians and Georgians living there. Significant changes in everyday life, caused by the socio-political environment, are noticeable. A number of important elements of traditional culture have survived in Abkhazia to this day, which are closely related to the traditional life of the Georgian and Abkhaz people. The transformation of life caused by the historical difficulties of this region was also reflected in the spiritual culture of the population. What gave customs a special vitality was that over the centuries, along with the emergence of new habits, the traditions of previous eras were also preserved.

The long and peaceful relations between the Georgian and Abkhazian peoples were disrupted by the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, which was inspired by the destructive forces of Russia in the 1990s and led to the interruption of the integration process of these two peoples. This circumstance was reflected in almost all spheres of the traditional life and culture of the Georgians and Abkhazians living in modern Abkhazia. On the one hand, this gave rise to innovative tendencies, and on the other hand, traditional culture, as one of the main conditions for preserving the ethnic identity, became a mechanism for the conservation of everyday culture and customs. There was a revival of those elements of culture that had been more or less forgotten and were revived thanks to new circumstances again - revitalization and the search for new methods and ways to improve the situation - innovation. Revitalization means the revival of traditional institutions, which in times of crisis, it is determined by the necessity of self-preservation of society. Due to the difficult political situation, society faced self-destruction and was forced to find a way out.

Keywords: Abkhazia, customs, revitalization, innovation.

Methods: The empirical basis of the research is the study of issues related to the customs of Georgians and Abkhazians in some regions of Abkhazia in the field. Field work was carried out by the method of direct observation and interviewing informants. I held individual meetings. We were allowed to collect materials and, based on data analysis, the dynamics of the main trends in relation to the question under study were determined. Also, theoretical materials in the scientific literature were discussed and analyzed.

Discussion: The present study is interesting, both from a practical and scientific point of view. Ethnographic data on the cultural traditions of Georgians and Abkhazians living in modern Abkhazia are being introduced into scientific circulation, which will create certain ideas about the ethnographic life of these two peoples. We consider it appropriate to live next to them for a certain period of time, to observe the traditions and life preserved in cultural and economic terms. Which, in our opinion, will further contribute to the unification of the divided ethnic groups.

The territory of Abkhazia has been inhabited by ethnic Georgians since ancient times. Their existence in this territory preceded the formation of the Abkhaz people. The appearance of the Abkhazians in the extreme northwestern part of Georgia, based on historical literature, sources, and Abkhazian folklore, is associated with the invasion and establishment of an early migration wave from the northwestern Caucasus in the 1st-2nd centuries AD. The consolidation and later assimilation of the indigenous and immigrant peoples was to lead to the formation of a new ethnic unity, the "Abkhazians". Thus, from the 8th century, they became part of the Georgian world linguistically, politically, culturally and socially. As a result of the collapse of the unified, centralized Georgian state, a renewed wave of migration from the North-West Caucasus in the 16th-17th centuries again led to ethnic changes. The ethnically indigenous Kartli people who settled in this part of Georgia and the partially Georgianized ancient Abkhazian Moslems, as a result of consolidation and transformation, led to the formation of the modern "Abkhazian" ethnic unit. Modern Abkhazians are divided into two ethnographic groups (territorial-local units) - Abzhuys and Bzipys. The migration of peoples of Circassian origin from the North Caucasus to Bzipys took place in the 16th century, and to Abzhuys, i.e. in the Ochamchir region, at the end of the 17th century (Bakhia-Okruashvili S, 2011, p. 10). The practice of coexistence of different groups, in addition to socio-economic factors, is also reflected in cultural relations and mutual influence. It seems that migrants from the North Caucasus have adapted to the new ethno-ecosystem and have assimilated traditional customs created by the indigenous population over the centuries and adapted to the local natural-geographical environment, where both similarities and local peculiarities are observed.

The migrant population had to interact with the more developed and higher-level indigenous population, and the high culture of the indigenous population had a great influence on them. Therefore, the migrants creatively assimilated various elements of culture and thus laid the foundation for the process of forming new traditions in the new territory (Bakhia-Okruashvili S, 2011, p. 42). A sharp difference was observed between the indigenous and the arriving population, both ethnically, socio-economically, religiously, and, above all, in terms of the concept of public life. As a result of centuries-old territorial, political-economic, and social relations with the Georgians, the process of historically forming the character, lifestyle, spiritual, material, and economic culture of the Abkhazians proceeded under the leadership of Georgian culture.

The beginning of ethnopolitical and ethnotransformational processes in the territories occupied by the mountaineers since the 18th century, the fusion of the settlers with the indigenous Georgian population, led to the formation of the Bzipi and later Abzhui Abkhazians. Thus, a new stage of mixing and consolidation of the mountain Caucasians, mountain Abkhazians and the indigenous Georgian population laid the foundation for the process of formation of the modern Abkhazians. After the mountaineers' descent, the ethnic face of the Abkhazian population changed radically. As a result of the fusion of the settled mountaineers with the local population, the modern Abkhazian (Apsua) ethnos was formed. Abkhaz is no longer culturally and politically Georgian the Abkhazian tribe has formed a new ethnic form. The Georgians mechanically called this new ethnic group Abkhaz, while they call themselves Apsua (Khorava B, 2004, p. 89).

Migrants brought from the North Caucasus an element of culture that was previously unacceptable to the Christian religion in Georgia. They managed to revive the pagan religion. In the modern socio-cultural environment, the Abkhazians still observe the tradition of conducting family and ancestral rituals near selected, so-called sacred trees. This circumstance indicates that historically, in the traditional religious practice of the Abkhazians, a specially constructed material building rarely served as a cult center. On the contrary, sacred space was mostly associated with the natural landscape. Such spaces included mountains, forest edges, individual groves, and selected trees, which were perceived as sacred places in local tradition. These religious and cultural beliefs were passed down from generation to generation through oral tradition, and in modern conditions, their dissemination and maintenance are carried out through various means of communication, including social networks.

Traditional customs are a reflection of life. Its structure may be threatened by a certain threat, undergo certain changes when it settles in another territory, surrounded by other ethnic units, where it is in the minority. As a result, its future depends on which turns out to be stronger - the past, which includes traditions, historical memory, or the present, which is formed in a foreign environment, with customs characteristic of another ethnic group. Such a foreign environment may replace old traditions with new ones, or synthesize them. However, it may be resistant to changes, undergo assimilation for a certain time, but retain the main values, historical memory, individual signs of national identity, which were not appreciated as a result of confrontation with the present. The migrant population based the social and economic life of the mountain region on traditional rules brought from the mountains. As a result of the settlement of the population descended from the mountains, the socio-economic, religious and cultural background changed.

At the end of the 20th century, a complex ethno-political conflict process developed in Abkhazia, which was provoked by the Russian authorities. The indigenous Georgian population was expelled from Abkhazia, most of whom settled in various regions of Georgia, and part of the population dispersed abroad to various countries. A certain part of the Abkhazians also left Abkhazia. The remaining population, which lived in the mountains and foothills, settled in the lowlands and occupied the closed houses belonging to Georgians. The population in Abkhazia significantly decreased. In Abkhazia, in particular in the Gali region, the Georgian population remained, while in other regions of Abkhazia, Abkhazians predominate and are almost empty of Georgians.

The political processes that developed at the end of the 20th century hindered the natural daily development of both Georgians and Abkhazians. They changed the mentality and lifestyle of the population. Their ethnic culture was suppressed and instead of it, elements of the Russian language and culture were forcibly introduced. Which is reflected in traditional life, material and spiritual culture.

Over the centuries, the contact and ties between the Georgian and Abkhazian peoples have been deepening. The coexistence of two different ethnic groups, living side by side, has made them friendly towards each other. Therefore, throughout their historical coexistence, a conflict situation between Georgians and Abkhazians has never arisen, but since the 19th century, thanks to the reactionary policies of the Russian Tsarist government and then the ruling circles of the Soviet Empire, they have created an image of the Abkhazians as enemies in the form of Georgians (Bakhia-Okruashvili S, 2011, p. 29). If for centuries the relationship between the settlers and the indigenous population was regulated by economic and cultural ties, various everyday institutions, the destructive power of Russia brilliantly played its role in the emergence of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, and in modern life, the ethnic disappearance of the Abkhazians is at greater risk today, because the fact of their Russification is a more advanced process. Radical socio-political transformation, accompanied by an economic crisis, leads to two opposing tendencies in society: an attempt to correct the situation by reviving old, half-forgotten methods (revitalization) and the search for new methods and ways to improve the situation (innovation).

Among the traditional customs of the Abkhazians, the most enduring were the wedding customs. Initially, they brought the Urvadi in the form of purchasing a woman. The Abkhazians strictly observed exogamy during marriage, but by the time of settlement, the levirate form was widespread in their large family, which was associated with Urvadi and the economic situation. By the time of settlement, the Abkhazian family was polygamous a man could have several wives. This was a Muslim-Moorish influence, which was caused by the invasion of the Turks in the North Caucasus in the 17th century. In the 19th century, the rules of marriage almost completely changed. Urvadi was replaced by the institution of dowry, as in Georgia, and polygamy was abolished. The levirate form of marriage was also abolished (Kharchilava N, 2016, pp. 72-93). In modern life, as in ancient times, the Abkhazian son-in-law does not participate in his own wedding.

The gradual transition and adaptation of migrants to a settled life, especially the process of assimilation and the formation of a common Georgian-Abkhazian ethnic type, along with the economy, changed the form of settlement. The Abkhazians adopted many elements of Georgian culture and life.

Georgian-Abkhazian cultural and historical relations, the geographical environment of Georgia, and socio-economic conditions undoubtedly had a great influence on the residential and economic structures of migrants. From the second half of the 19th century to the 20th century, the main unit of settlement was the homestead complex, which was segmented by features characteristic of Western Georgia. These features also coincided with the main signs, since it included all agricultural plots, residential and agricultural buildings in a single homestead complex (Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2011, p. 40). The residential buildings of the Abkhazians were divided into two main stages in terms of construction and shape: round and rectangular. Several subtypes were distinguished among the main types in shape, which corresponded to the development of Abkhazian dwellings (a total of nine types of buildings) (Adzhindjal I, 1969, pp. 41-42). According to S. Bakhia-Okruashvili, A. Of the nine buildings listed by Jijali, four are specifically Abkhazian, brought from the North-West Caucasus, while the names of five types of dwellings are Georgian (Megrelian) (Bakhia-Okruashvili S, 2022, p. 65). The appearance of the Abkhazian village formed in the first half of the 20th century did not change. Residential houses were mainly made of stone, brick, or concrete blocks, two-story, and resembled houses common in Samegrelo (Gvanceladze T, 2011, pp. 512-522). The majority of the vocabulary denoting parts of residential and farm buildings is borrowed. Borrowing occurred in both directions, but at different intensities. Borrowings from Kartvelian (Megrelian) into Abkhazian dominate in terms related to household and agricultural buildings (Bukia M, 2013, p. 279). According to the ethnographic materials obtained by us, nothing has changed in relation to residential and agricultural buildings in modern life, because not only is the development and construction of residential and agricultural buildings ongoing in Abkhazia, but most of the buildings recorded in the first half of the 20th century have been destroyed. Thus, in modern life, the main unit of settlement among Abkhazians is the homestead complex, characterized by Western-Kartli features.

Among the monuments of material culture, clothing stood out with its ethnic features, social and aesthetic functions. The Abkhazian clothing initially repeated the traditional clothing of the small peoples of the North-West Caucasus in terms of form and material. In modern times, traces of Georgian-Abkhazian cultural relations are also visible in the terminology of clothing details. Abkhazian clothing seems to have a common Caucasian, specifically Adyghe and Georgian, influence. However, despite the strong Georgian influence, much of their terminology has remained West Caucasian, which in itself indicates the genetic connection of the Abkhazians with this population and their settlement in Abkhazia as a result of migration (Bakhia-Okruashvili S, 2011, p. 59).

The traditional food culture and table customs of the modern Abkhaz people, the accumulated experience, are connected with the geographical environment of Georgia and the food culture of the Georgians nevertheless, the food culture system reveals the peculiarities of the Abkhaz everyday culture and carries elements of ethnic culture. At the time of their arrival in the territory of Georgia, their traditional food was connected with the North Caucasian way of life, with their main agricultural activity - animal husbandry. Therefore, their daily or annual ration consisted mostly of dairy products and meat. Later, with the process of adaptation and the mastery of agriculture, the Abkhazian folk food production tradition transformed. Obviously, the diversity of food depended on the geographical environment and the agricultural activities of the people.

In Abkhazia, the customs related to the burial and mourning of the deceased are one of the important parts of traditional life, which is characterized by special conservatism. Ethnographic life has more or less

preserved the old customs until recently. Some rituals retain their former form and have survived almost unchanged, despite the fact that many of them are prohibited by Christian doctrine. The customs found in Abkhazia completely coincide with the data of the material and spiritual culture of the Georgian nation and at the same time contain local features. The rule of bringing the soul of a person who has died outside the family, associated with the customs of the deceased, to the family is interesting. Also in modern life, the Abkhazian a-kyalantar and the Megrelian kilantar participate in the customs related to the dead, which are well-known from the mythology and folklore of many peoples (including Georgians), a bird perched on a tree, symbolizing the soul of the deceased, it is a sign of the soul of the deceased. Among the Abkhazians, a-kyalantar - a symbol associated with the cult of the deceased - is a branched wax candle up to one meter long, the shaft of which is painted red in a spiral along the entire height and is wrapped with a white ribbon at the base. The head of the candle is decorated with an image of a bird made of wax. The Abkhazians knew how to light such a candle on their fortieth birthday or anniversary (Antelava N, 2006, p. 76). Among the Abkhazians, the kelaptar entered the cycle of customs related to the deceased from Megrelian and is still observed in modern times, both among Georgians and Abkhazians.

The Abkhazians still had empirical knowledge and experience of winemaking in the 19th century. As for the linguistic, folklore material, religious beliefs and accompanying inventory of this economic branch of the Abkhazians, they remained scarce even then. Their special terminology is secondary, newly emerged and descriptive, or is borrowed from Georgian (Megrelian) (Bakhia-Okruashvili S, 2011, p. 75). Viticulture and winemaking, which were not the main branch for the Abkhazians, seem to be the agricultural equipment, the vessels intended for wine, the shape of the baskets intended for grapes and the terminology, which are mostly borrowed from Georgian. It is enough to add that the Abkhazians never created symbolic and divine images of a winepress, a winepress, or a vine. During their pagan holidays, at first they gradually replaced the buza (a glass made of honey wax) brought from the Caucasus with wine, although this ritual drink was used in the Kelekhi. The cult of the winepress did not exist among the Abkhazians either. The culture of the Zedash is recorded only among the Abzhuy Abkhazians, since they had closer cultural relations with the Mingrelians. According to custom, only the Mingrelians who were converted to Abkhazia preserved the Zedashes in the name of St. George of Ilori and some other Christian saints. Other religious beliefs and beliefs related to vines, vineyards, and grapes have never been confirmed in the lives of the Abkhazians of Bzipi or Abzhui. In 2024, ethnographic materials obtained from Abkhazians living in the Ochamchir region did not record marani and marani-related zedashes in families. Scientific literature shows that a rather primitive method of winemaking was widespread among the Abkhazians even in the 19th century, and viticulture and winemaking were not the main field the terminology related to it is mostly borrowed from Georgian. The zedash culture was recorded among the Abzhui Abkhazians in the late Soviet period, because they had closer cultural relations with the Mingrelians (Bakhia-Oqruashvili S, 2020, p. 128).

The smithy and rituals related to it are interesting. Among the Abkhazians, the blacksmith's craft was one of the most developed. The symbolic shrine of the blacksmith's shop was the only expression of religious material culture. A pitcher full of the finest wine was hidden in the blacksmith's shop, which was dedicated to the blacksmith's deity, and the patriarchal elder prayed for its offering (Bakhia-Oqruashvili S, 1982, pp. 183-187). Until the middle of the 20th century, small blacksmith shops, no longer serving an economic purpose, survived, where only prayers and sacrifices were performed, and the ingot, the hammer and the anvil were cult objects. So great is the reverence and fear before the deity Shashvi that the site of the forge is considered one of the most sacred places in modern Abkhazia, and family rituals are still performed today (Author's Field-Ethnographic Diary, 2024).

A radical change in the socio-political, economic, and geographical environment in a group of people leads to a transformation of the way of life, its adaptation, which is reflected in traditional life, material and spiritual culture. This process is dominated by socio-normative and ethical norms developed over centuries and established in ethnic culture. Not only is physiological adaptation of essential importance, but also the cultural-historical aspect, which implies, on the one hand, the assimilation of the cultural-economic achievements of the local population and, on the other hand, the preservation of one's own specificity (ethnic physiognomy) (Shubitidze V, 1998, pp. 160-161). In the post-conflict period, the lives of both Georgians (the minority) and Abkhazians living in Abkhazia faced cardinal changes.

Georgian society in Abkhazia faced self-destruction and was forced to find a way out. The change in the socio-political environment in a group of people determines the transformation of the way of life, its adaptation, which is reflected in traditional life, material and spiritual culture. Revitalization refers to the revival of an element of culture that was more or less forgotten and was revived thanks to new external influences.

Conclusion: Thus, in modern Abkhazia, the Georgians, who are a minority, are forced to revive elements of their forgotten culture due to the difficult socio-political situation and isolation. The dominant ethnic group - the Abkhazians - takes the tradition of the minority, makes it lose its original content, declares it their own national heritage and ignores its true origin. The Abkhazians have to revive traditional institutions with the appropriation of Georgian customs, in order to survive in a society crisis. As the minority is weakened, their customs are transferred to the dominant culture and almost all historical memory is lost. The new generation can no longer distinguish their origin, which is why the tradition either almost disappears or actually continues to exist under a different name. The Abkhazians have a desire to strengthen their national identity by appropriating someone else's culture. The reasons for limiting innovation in Abkhazia are: geographical isolation - border barriers that prevent new ideas and traditions; political control - the occupation controls education, media, and communication, which blocks external cultural influences. The Georgian population living under occupation is focused on preserving the existing, as a result, cultural innovation almost does not occur, or occurs very slowly. In the occupied territory, the dominant ethnos adopts the customs of the smaller ethnos, although cultural signs become expressive evidence of identity.

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