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Abazin

The Abazin live in the Northern Caucasus region, particularly in the Adygheya and Karachaevo-Cherkessia republics of the Russian Federation. They call themselves Abaza, Ashywua, or Ashkarywua, the latter two names referring to their two major tribes. Historically, the Abazin have practiced herding and some farming. They live on the northern parts of the Great Caucasus range, in the valleys of the Kuma and Great and Little Zelenchuk rivers. They also live on the northeastern shores of the Black Sea basin in a tier starting from Sochi down to the borders of contemporary Abkhazia. The most recent data show their numbers in the Russian Federation near 40,000; smaller numbers also live in Turkey, Syria, and Jordan. The Abazin language belongs to the West Caucasian subgroup of the North Caucasian language family, a subgroup consisting of Abazin (i.e., Abaza), Abkhaz, Adygh, Kabardinian, and Ubykh languages. The Abazin are Sunni Muslims. They are often confused with the Abkhaz (Apsywua), a related people now resident in Abkhazia. Some Circassians use the term Abazin for Abkhaz living outside of Abkhazia, but the two populations should be distinguished on the basis of the strong self-consciousness of the Abazin people about their identity.

One theory says that in the distant past the Ashywua and Ashkarywua split from

the Abkhaz in search of meadows for their herds in the northern plains of the Caucasus Mountains. Some accounts say that they are a Black Sea people with strong ties to Asia Minor as well. Yet others consider the Abazin a separate ethnic group and explain the similarity of the Abazin and Abkhaz languages as the result of historical relations. Abazin dialects are understandable for Abkhaz speakers.

On the eve of the Russian Empire's campaign in the Caucasus, the numbers of Abazin were estimated at around 45,000; about 10,000 remained in Russian territory at the end of the 19th century. The Ashywua subgroup consists of six families: Loo, Bibard, Darykua, Kylych, Jantemir, and K'achua. The Ashkarywua subgroup consists of seven families: Bashylby, Barakey, Mysylbiy, Kyzylby, Shegerey, T'am, and Bagh. In the face of Russian forces most of the Ashkarywua fled to the Ottoman Empire in the second half of the 19th century. They are now found in different parts of Turkey, Syria, and Jordan.

Abazin literature is predominantly oral, identified with the epic tradition of the Caucasus nations. The first written forms of Abazin literature were published by the famous Abazin literary figure Tobil Talustan in 1920s in the Soviet Union. The Abazin national movement tried to establish a homeland within the Karachaevo-Cherkessia Republic in 1991 but failed. Following a referendum in 2005,

an Abazin national district was formed in 2006. After a transitional period and reorganization of the administrative districts in northern Karachaevo-Cherkessia, in December 2007 elections were held to elect a 15-member parliament and a president of the Abazin national district. The population of the Abazin national district is estimated at 15,000. Its capital is the village of Psyzh.

Hasan Ali Karasar

Further Reading

Danilova, E.N. *Abaziny: Istoriko-etnograficheskoe Issledovanie Khozyastva i Obshinnoy Organizatsii XIX vek (Abazins: Historical-Ethnographic Study of Agriculture and Communitarian Organization in the 19th Century)*. Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo Universiteta, 1984.

Pershits, A.I. *Abaziny: Istoriko-Etnograficheskie Ocherk (Abazins: Historical-Ethnographic Essays)*. Cherkessk: Karachaevo-Cherkesskoe Otdelenie Stavropol'ckogo Knizhnogo Izdatel'stva, 1989.

Abkhaz

The Abkhaz (or Abkhazians) are indigenous to the Caucasus region and the autochthonous people of Abkhazia, a Black Sea republic whose self-declared independence is recognized by Russia and Nicaragua but disputed by the remainder of the international community, which accepts Georgia's right to the territory. Less than 100,000 now live in Abkhazia, and the number of native Abkhaz speakers has dwindled during the last century through Russification. While Christianity, Islam,

and paganism have coexisted among the Abkhaz for centuries, seven decades of Soviet rule has created a largely nonreligious people. In the 14th and 15th centuries, some Abkhazians moved to the North Caucasus, and their descendants became known as Abazinians. There is also a large diaspora in Turkey, mostly descendants of those expelled by the Russian empire in the late 19th century.

At the end of the 8th century, following a dilution of Byzantine power, an Abkhazian kingdom emerged, which encompassed the whole of western Georgia with its capital in Kutaisi. The kingdom consolidated Abkhazian tribes and thrived for two centuries before being superseded in 978 by a new state, known as the Kingdom of Abkhazians and Kartvelians. Ruled by the Bagrationi family, the capital remained in Kutaisi until 1122, when the expulsion of the Arab emirate of Tbilisi facilitated a move to that city. The kingdom succumbed to Mongol invasions in the 13th century, never to reappear, and was replaced by numerous smaller principalities, including Abkhazia, now ruled by the Chachba (Sharvashidze) family. The Abkhaz were in regular battle with the neighboring principality of Mingrelia, an ethnic Georgian region ruled by the Dadiani family.

Extensive interaction with the Genoese in the 14th and 15th centuries was eclipsed by the rise of Ottoman power in the region. The Turks brought Islam, which gradually replaced Christianity as the dominant religion in Abkhazia, though traditional paganism remained influential. The Ottomans were dislodged in turn by an expanding Russian empire and in 1810 Abkhazia became an unruly