

**THE DAILY LIFE AND MORALS OF CIRCASSIAN SOCIETY:  
A HISTORICAL-COMPARATIVE INVESTIGATION BASED ON SOURCES FROM THE  
PERIOD BETWEEN THE MID-16<sup>TH</sup> AND THE FIRST HALF OF THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES**

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**Abstract.** *This article, based on records of personal origins left behind by travelers from the period between the mid-16<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, features a historical-comparative study into the evolution of the daily life and morals of Circassian society. The author examines the language, religion, social fabric, apparel, anthropological appearance, traditions, and social avocations of Circassians. The paper introduces into scientific circulation for the first time the idea that the civil war in the littoral part of Circassia was provoked by the uprising headed by Sheikh Mansour in Chechnya. As a result of his study, the author establishes that Circassia was comprised of fragmented tribal units which spoke different languages and had no uniform language of interethnic communication but, at the same time, brought together many tribes across its area which were different from each other in many ways. This diversity lay in the mentality of the area's mountainous, littoral, and lowland inhabitants, as well as their religious beliefs. Note that there are no records of any migration processes taking place in Circassia at the time.*

**Keywords:** *Circassia, Circassians, daily life, morals, historical-comparative study, period between the mid-16<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries*

**Rezumat:** *Articolul se bazează pe memoriile călătorilor străini din perioada cuprinsă între mijlocul sec. al XVI-lea și prima jumătate a celui de al XIX-lea, fiind în fapt un studio istorico-comparativ asupra vieții cotidiene și moralei societății circasienne. Autorii examinează limba, religia, trăsăturile antropologice și tradițiile acestei societăți. Lucrarea aduce în fața publicului de specialitate pentru prima dată ipoteza conform căreia războiul civil de aici a fost provocat de Sheikh Mansour din Cecenia. Unul din rezultatele acestei cercetări a fost și faptul că Circassia s-a format dintr-o uniune de triburi ce vorbeau limbi diferite dar care aparțineau aceluiași teritoriu. Această diversitate rezidă și din mentalitatea oamenilor din regiuni diferite precum și din credințele religioase. Trebuie menționat și faptul că nu există migrări atestate dintr-o zonă în alta.*

**Cuvinte cheie:** *Circassia, viață cotidiană, morală, studiu istoric comparative, mijlocul secolului al XVI-lea – prima jumătate a secolului al XIX-lea*

### Introduction

The evolutionary development of peoples has always been of interest to not just researchers but a significant segment of the general public as well. This interest always rises when it comes to areas which have been impacted by various civilizations. Circassia, whose tribes have inhabited the vast

territory of the North-West and partially Central Caucasus, is rightfully considered an area of this kind. There are various maps of Circassia. One of them, which dates back to 1830, is provided in a work by L. Ya. Lhuillier dedicated to the native peoples of Circassia (Lhuillier 1990, 19-30). The map features the following tribes across Circassia: the Natukhai, Shapsugs, Ubykhs, Abazins, Kabardians, Abadzekhs, Besleney, Hatuqwai, etc.

This article aims to explore, through a historical-comparative prism, the evolution of the daily life and morals of Circassian society during the period between the mid-16<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

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### Materials and methods

This article utilizes published firsthand accounts and diaries by travelers who visited Circassia during the period between the mid-16<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

One of the first testimonies on life in Circassia known to us is the account of Giorgio Interiano, a Genovese traveler, historian, and ethnographer, who visited the region in 1551. The materials provided by him have given us an insight into what had changed and what had not in the traditions of the mountaineers of the Black Sea area over the period at issue. It should be noted that there is a nearly hundred-year timeframe between the time of the fall of the empires of Byzantium and Trebizond and that of Interiano's visit to Circassia. In this regard, of major interest is the degree to which certain traditions of the Christian empires had persisted with Circassians.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a few more European travelers visited Circassia. In 1629, the area was visited by the Catholic missionary Giovanni da Lucca, who laid his observations out in his work "An Account of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith on Tatars, Circassians, the Abaza, Mingrelians, and Other Peoples". At around the same time, between 1622 and 1633 the office of Prefect of Kaffa had been held by Emiddio Dortelli d'Ascoli, who also left behind accounts of daily life and traditions in Circassia. In 1637, Circassia was visited by Adam Olearius, who was among the ambassadors sent by the Duke of Schleswig and Holstein and wrote "Travels to Muscovy and, through Muscovy to, Persia and Back".

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the commencement of an open confrontation in the Caucasus, Circassia began to be visited by not only travelers but foreign spies, emissaries, as well.

One of the first individuals to visit Circassia was member of the Imperial Academy of Sciences at Saint Petersburg Julius von Klaproth, who explored the Caucasus between 1807 and 1808. He was followed by the French traveler Jacques Victor Édouard Taitbout de Marigny, who also left behind impressions about Circassia and Circassians.

In 1833, Circassia was visited by the Frenchman Frédéric Dubois de Montpéreux. Of interest is the fact that, compared with the other travelers, de Montpéreux was an archaeologist and naturalist by trade.

Two years later, the region was visited by the Russian spy Fedor Fedorovich Tornau, who lived in the area until 1838 and wrote his "Reminiscences of a Caucasian Officer" during his stay.

Edmund Spencer is an English traveler who visited Circassia in 1836. In 1838, he released in London an account of his trips.

The English emissary James Bell resided in Circassia between 1837 and 1839. His in-depth work "Journal of a Residence in Circassia during the Years 1837, 1838 and 1839" was published in London in 1840.

It was around the same time that John Longworth, who was an employee of the London *Times* newspaper, lived among the mountaineers in Circassia (from 1837 to 1838). Upon his return to London in 1840, he published the diary he had kept during his stay in the region, "A Year in the Region of Circassians". John Longworth had stayed among the mountaineers in company with James Bell, and Longworth's diary thoroughly complements J. Bell's account.

The works of G. Interiano, J. Klaproth, J. Bell, E. Spencer, J. Longworth, and other foreign authors were introduced into scientific circulation in the Russian language by scholars from Kabardino-Balkaria who organized their translation and publication, including with commentaries, in Nalchik during the period between the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

One of the first attempts at historical-comparative research into Circassia was made by Frédéric Dubois de Montpéreux in his book "Voyage au Caucase chez les tcherkesses et les abkhases en Colchide, en Géorgie, en Arménie et en Crimée", published in Paris in 1843. The work contains elements of comparison of testimonies by the Genovese Giorgio Interiano, who visited Circassia in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, with those of his own. Note that the book includes interpolations of additional materials published at the time.

Currently, there are historiographical surveys of compositions by domestic and foreign authors coming out now and then on Circassians and other peoples of the North-West and Central Caucasus (Ivantsov *et al* 2015, 70-80).

### Methods

The methods of investigation utilized by the author in this work are the principles of objectivity, historicism, systemicity, taking account of things in an integrated manner with respect to the object of study, and maintaining as much neutrality as possible in terms of the researcher's attitude towards interpreting and assessing the material discussed in the sources of personal origins.

This article places a special emphasis on the significance of the historical-comparative method, which is about investigating the content of sources of personal origins while comparing the segments

of the evolution of daily life and traditions in Circassian society during the above centuries. Based on the problem-chronological method, the author identifies key issues in each period, more specifically: the people's anthropological appearance, language, religion, social fabric, apparel, traditions, and social avocations.

## **Results**

### **Anthropological appearance**

The Genovese Giorgio Interiano left us in the 16<sup>th</sup> century just a brief description of the appearance of Circassians. He notes that the Zikhs [Circassians] were, par excellence, handsome and well-shaped, their beauty much admired among Cairo mamluks. That said, their women never seemed to shy away from men (Atalikov 2010, 28).

Almost 300 years later, descriptions of the anthropological appearance of Circassians became more detailed. Thus, for instance, in describing the appearance of a Circassian, Frédéric Dubois de Montpéreux notes: "The Circassian inhabiting the seashore is tall in stature, shapely in body and limbs, and thin in waist; relentless in striving to enhance this type of beauty even more, he tightens his waist with a leather belt. His gait is graceful and light, his head is oval-shaped; by default, the Mahometan shaves his head but keeps a mustache and grows a black non-thick beard; as black are his deep-set eyes; his not long thin nose is quite shapely; the frame of his jaw is elongated and clearly defined. Quite often you can come across Circassians with auburn hair and beards" (de Montpéreux 2010, 40-41).

In 1836, the English traveler Edmund Spencer, who visited Ubykhia, took notice of the anthropological appearance of Ubykhs. Spencer noted that Ubykh peasants had "dark-brown hair, prominent [noses], narrow [faces], ears like those of the Jews, and a head more compressed than we usually see among the Circassians; the latter, in this as in every other particular of their external physical conformation, resembling some of the most favourable specimens of the European population" (Spencer 2008, 164) [11].

It is worth noting another circumstance which was mentioned in the notes of the Russian spy F.F. Tornau: "...they [Ubykhs] originated from the Abazins, Circassians, and Europeans cast up on a Circassian shore, according to a legend, back in the time of the first Crusade" (Tornau 2008, 164) [13]. There is a tale that says the Europeans were able to assimilate a portion of the locals and thus create a new community – the community of Ubykhs.

So what were the reasons behind the fact that the anthropological identity of Ubykhs had persisted? E. Spencer notes that, in line with the practice followed throughout the centuries, "with few exceptions, each tribe intermarries only with its own members" (Spencer 2008, 166) [15]. Had inbreeding among the tribes been a more common practice, the Ubykhs would likely have lost their anthropological appearance. Besides, it is worth remembering that the geographical situation of the area inhabited by the Ubykhs, in terms of defense, was better than that of other tribes. This circumstance protected the Ubykhs from hard-power external impact. There was another circumstance that had a direct impact on the preservation of the anthropological appearance. Each tribe, each clan had been in a state of constant competition: if someone started to, all of a sudden, have the edge, wealth-wise, over the rest, forays would normally ensue. The mountaineers differed by reputation as well. It was commonly believed among them that it was the Medoveys from the Abazin community who had the reputation of inveterate brigands (Tornau 2008, 157) [16]. According to F.F. Tornau's testimony, all the tribes within the Abazin community were at feud with each other (Tornau 2008, 162) [17]. Note that all the mountainous tribes were distinguished by being highly bellicose, impunity being the major reason behind this bellicosity. It was a virtually hopeless task to adequately react to the actions of the mountaineers who were protected by gorges and rocky terrain. Feuds often grew into vendettas, which, in turn, produced no positive impact in terms of the interbreeding of clans.

Julius Klaproth had this to say about the appearance of Circassians: "The Tscherkessians upon the whole may be termed a handsome nation; and the men in particular are distinguished by the elegance of their shape, which they use all possible means to preserve and improve. Their stature does not exceed the middle size; but they are extremely muscular, though not corpulent. The shoulders and breast are broad, but the waist is always extremely small. They have in general brown hair and eyes, rather long faces, and thin straight noses" (von Klaproth 2008, 219).

E. Spencer found Jewish roots with the Abazins. To prove it, he furnished evidence of the existence of certain ancient manuscripts in Georgia, Mingrelia, and Armenia attesting that some of the clans that existed at the time (the 19<sup>th</sup> century) in Abazia (with the Abazins) descended from early

Hebrews converted into Christianity. The Hebrews, persecuted by their tribesmen and the rulers of the Roman Empire, fled to the Caucasus and settled down there. E. Spencer corroborated his point of view with his personal observations, noting that “the features of several of these tribes still bear the stamp of their Israelitish origin; their religion to this day is a mixture of Judaism and Christianity” (Spencer 2008, 159) [18].

There is another circumstance pointing to the southern origins of Abazins that can hardly be overlooked. It is known that the mountaineers of the Black Sea area highly revered their sacred groves, springs, etc. It was the nature of this phenomenon that was brought to light by English traveler Edmund Spencer, who received the following reply to this question he put to the Abazins: “... our fathers, on arriving from the parched desert, found friendly shelter beneath their venerable shade” (Spencer 2008, 180) [19].

Thus, in contrast with the brief description by Giorgio Interiano, the 19<sup>th</sup> century travelers discovered that the anthropological appearance of Circassians was not uniform, i.e. the travelers noted certain differences in appearance between the Adyghe, Ubykhs, and Abazins<sup>1</sup>.

### Language

The Genovese Giorgio Interiano testified in 1551 that the language of Circassians was completely different from that of their immediate neighbors, its sounds pronounced gutturally (Atalikov 2010, 25). Besides, the traveler noted that the mountaineers did not have their own writing system. In administering the divine service, their clergymen used the Greek alphabet and writing system, which the Zikhs did not know. If the mountaineers wished to write something to someone, which happened rarely, it was done for them by the Jews, who would use the Jewish alphabet at that. The mountaineers preferred to communicate their news orally, through messengers (Atalikov 2010, 26).

The Russian spy F.F. Tornau noted in the first third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that Circassians did not have an official language. Thus, for instance, there were three languages in use on the coast of the Black Sea in the Ubykh village of Sochipsy: Circassian, Abazin, and Ubykh (Archive, s.a., 13-14). There is no doubt Turkish was used in the region as well.

James Bell wrote that the Circassian “language is used from the eastern extremity of Kabarda to the Black Sea, including Abazak. Along the coast the people reckon three languages, viz., Adighe, as far south as the small stream Bu (which is the boundary of Notwhatsh); Abaza, between the Bu and Hamish; and Azra, thence southward to the frontier of Mingrelia. The difference is such that natives of any two, who speak only their own languages, cannot understand each other” (Bell 2007, 42).

In 1833, Frédéric Dubois de Montpéreux noted that Circassians did not know how to write, just like in the time of Interiano; legends and reminiscences about great epochs in their history were preserved in songs. Their trade and industrial relations being scarce, they did not have a need in that powerful tool, the messenger being like a living letter to them. When that method would not work, they would normally turn to some Turkish mullahs, living with them, asking them to write a message for them, and mullahs would do them that favor. The only hieroglyphs known to Circassians were the symbols they used to mark their horses.

When they got together, upon the arrival of fall, with their associates, princes and noblemen, to set out for a foray, they would speak, in an attempt to conceal the import of their messages from others, a totally original language, which they called *Takobza* and which had nothing in common with Circassian, but the people were not allowed to speak in it (de Montpéreux 2010, 54). Thus, de Montpéreux also notes the fact that the mountaineers had their own little-known dialect.

Mentions of the language of Circassians made during the period between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries attest that different Circassian tribes spoke different languages. No language was set apart so as to be given the status of the language of interethnic communication.

### Religion and religious rites

Religion was a crucial component in the life of the mountaineer community. Giorgio Interiano had this to say commenting on the religiousness of Circassians in 16<sup>th</sup> century: “They call themselves Christians and have Greek clergymen among them, but they baptize their children after the age of 8. That said, the clergymen just sprinkle them with holy water, in accordance with their custom, and utter a brief blessing” (Interiano 1974, 47).

Speaking of the nobles, G. Interiano wrote that “nobles never enter a church until they are sixty years of age, because, as they live by rapine, they are deemed to desecrate the sacred edifices. But when they reach the age when they stop robbing

<sup>1</sup> For more details, see: Cherkasov, A. A., Šmigel', M., Ivantsov, V. G., Ryabtsev, A. A., & Molchanova, V. S. (2014). The mountaineers of the Black Sea region (the early XIX century): Geography, demography, and anthropology. *Bylye Gody*, 32(2), 152–153.

and looting, they attend the divine service, which they used to listen to on horseback in their youth behind the walls of the church” (Interiano 1974, 47).

The catholic missionary Emiddio Dortelli d’Ascoli wrote in the first third of the 17<sup>th</sup> century that Circassians retained a number of kindly Christian customs. For instance, on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays they ate no meat throughout the year. They observed fasts before the holy apostle holidays in June and the Dormition of the Mother of God feast in August, fasted for several days before Christmas and throughout Lent – all in alignment with the tenets of the Greek denomination (Atalikov 2010, 49).

Before we move on to describing the numerous testimonies by travelers in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, it should be noted that the process of creating a religious society in Circassia was rather lengthy. In the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Russian princes of Tmutarakan, as well as the tsars of Georgia had been converting Circassians into Christianity. The Christianization of the region was largely facilitated by the activity of Byzantium as well. The fall of Byzantium in the 15<sup>th</sup> century facilitated the creation of the Crimea Khanate and the possibility of impact on Kabardians on the part of Crimean Tatars. Having found themselves surrounded by the Ottoman Empire, Circassians, just like a number of other ethnicities of the Caucasus, continued to stick to their Christian traditions, which had become for them the legacy of their ancestors. Christianity gained an especially firm foothold on the coast of the Black Sea, while Mahometanism was penetrating Kabarda from Crimea. Nonetheless, despite the implantation of Islam in 1763 and 1768, Circassians (the Ingush and Kabardians) were asking the Russian leadership to christen them into the Orthodox faith (Yudin 1914, 221). This situation persisted up until 1785, when the Black Sea Circassians had just three religious books: the Bible, the Psalms of David, and the evangelists’ book.

The situation changed due to the civil war in the mountainous community, which had to do with the activity of the so-called Sheikh Mansour. Following large-scale military clashes and the defeat of the Circassian gentry, a new system of religious rules was instituted in Circassia, which now included four books: the Bible, the Psalms of David, the evangelists’ book, and the Quran (Bell 2007, 192). This triggered an influx of Turkish missionaries into Circassia.

Despite the introduction of the new system of religious rules almost 60 years later, in 1837, the Black Sea Circassians continued to perform Christian rites on a mass scale. The English emissary J. Bell had this to say on the matter: “At a marriage-feast Georgi attended the other day, between Pshat and Ghelenjik, the greater number of those present went to an ancient cross, and, taking off their bonnets, kissed it. It is said that but a small proportion of the people are as yet circumcised Mussulmans. I am inclined to believe this, from the small proportion I see say their prayers” (Bell 2007, 256-157) [6].

As far as performing religious rites, the mountaineers seemed to have divisions by income qualification. J. Bell shares one representative example. The Shapsugs had a rite wherein up to 50 representatives of the local gentry, noblemen, once took part. Each participant brought with them some food items as a contribution. In addition to food, several “goats were sacrificed, lighted tapers being placed at their heads at the time, while others were placed on the cross. At a short distance from the latter the tables were arranged, and each person, on passing them, took off his bonnet; but no one approached the cross excepting some three or four individuals who said aloud a short prayer – an invocation to the Deity for the averting from them of war, pestilence, and every other evil, and sending them plenteous harvest and happiness. On approaching the cross and saying the prayer, one of these individuals held in one hand some of the eatables taken from the tables, and in the other a bowl of the national drink, shuat, which were then distributed among the congregation” (Bell 2007, 80-81) [7].

John Longworth called this national drink “suat”. The drink was a mixture of overfermented millet-flour and honey. The liquid was thick and turbid (Gardanov 1974, 535) [8]. Shuat was generally served in large wooden bowls with a handle; the bowl would be passed around from hand to hand among groups of tough warriors (Bell 2007, 98) [9]. The ancient name of the bowl is “bratina”. The bratina in Ancient Rus was a vessel with a lid in which drinks were served at feasts (Yuzhakov 1902, 645) [10]. Slavs and many other peoples associated the honey drink with crossing over to the other world. Honey was a sacred beverage for special occasions: weddings, burials, and special holidays. It was in this context that mead was used across the Black Sea area.

As regards the traditions dealing with sacrifices, these were highly common among Christians not

only across the Black Sea area but the Caucasus as well. Thus, for instance, the ancient rite of animal sacrifices is still in use in Georgia, despite the fact that Georgians are an Orthodox people. In other words, in rare exceptional cases the Church did not forbid practicing certain regional characteristics of the cult, which normally was the case when it was impossible to suppress it through imposing bans.

Another author who testifies about the Natukhai's Christian holidays is Taitbout de Marigny, who noted that one could observe in the vicinity of Gelendzhik a number of clergymen, who were wearing plain burkas, or felt coats, and were surrounded by a crowd of people standing in deep silence, approaching a cross in the forest which had sacred significance to them; there they prayed to the Creator, asking him to preserve their fields, grant them abundant crops, and rid them of plague. Several small candles were affixed to the cross; over one of them the clergymen would burn a tuft of wool pulled off a bull that was going to be sacrificed; they would pour over the bull's head some millet ale that was presented to God, along with some unleavened bread cooked with cheese. The ceremony ended with a feast that was put together with contributions from the locals chipping in whatever they could afford, followed by dancing and games (de Marigny, 307).

The English emissary J. Bell, who had lived among the mountaineers for about two years, depicted a good deal of Christian rites practiced by the mountaineers of the Black Sea region. Thus, for instance, in October 1837 Bell penned in his diary: "At this season, and for about a fortnight, is celebrated a very ancient festival, called Merem. Troops of young folks go from house to house in succession, and spend the night in dancing, singing, and regaling with boze, etc. Part of the ceremony consists in some of the company holding cakes, with cheese in them, which they wave about, while all shout out an invocation to Merem, begging her always to send them health, plenty, and happiness. It is in disuse in the north of Notwhatsh, excepting hereabouts; but prevails to the south, and to the east" (Bell 2007, 281) [11]. You can learn more about the nature of this holiday in a special article (Ryabtsev Cherkasov 2011, 154-161).

Despite the fact that the holding of the Merem festival overlapped with the time of crop harvesting, the mountaineers of the Black Sea area were fully confident that it had been instituted in honor of the mother of Jesus at the time Christianity had prevailed in the region (Bell 2007, 281) [15].

The epicenter of the spread of Islam in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries was the city-fortress of Anapa, which was inhabited by Turkish citizens who traded with neighboring regions and Kuban. At the same time, starting from Gelendzhik and further into the littoral part of Circassia, Christianity was the dominating religion all over. The locals observed Lent, celebrated Easter (with painted eggs) and Maslenitsa [Butter Week]. Also still in use with the majority of Circassians was the ancient custom of drinking wine, despite all the prohibitions and prescriptions of the Quran (Bell 2007, 390) [16].

At the same time, many faithful Circassians observed just external rules. On the one hand, they completely renounced wine drinking, but on the other that did not prevent them from consuming the other type of liquor – mead (a beverage made of honey and overfermented grape syrup). The mountaineers consumed local vodka as well (Bell 2007, 17) [17].

This fact has also been confirmed by the naturalist Frédéric Dubois de Montpéreux: "It is done only by Circassian princes and nobles – the Moslems observe Mahometan rites, but they do it only for the sake of removing their scruples and in total indifference, often making fun of all those ceremonies" (de Montpéreux 2010, 49). We believe that some of the princes and nobles adopted Islam in an attempt to retain their control over the major portion of the population, for following the civil war the gentry had lost much of their power over the common people and the system of governance had been shifted to the so-called democratic path.

In 1838, following the establishment of the Russian military presence in the Sashe district (today the modern city of Sochi; the littoral part of Circassia at the time), the Ubykhs had a great debate about removing some ancient crosses located within the area where the Russians were likely to operate. Of these crosses, there were three particularly noted: one pendent from a tree and two erect of some gilt. According to J. Bell, "the people, in general, wish them removed for fear they should fall into the hands of the Russians, who might thereupon found some claim to the country, as having been originally Christian; while the chief, Ali Achmet Bey – who drinks wine abundantly, has never been known to say Mussulman prayers, and is suspected of a bias to the ancient faith of the country – protests against the profanation – by removal – of these relics of their forefathers; prefers defending them where they are, and claims the right of ordering that they shall be left intact" (Bell 2007, 20) [18].

J. Bell left us a detailed description of a cross pendent from a tree on Mount Aublaarmykh in the vicinity of the village of Sashe: “Here I came to the object of my curiosity, pendent from the arm of a huge old oak, to which it was attached by an iron wedge. The accompanying sketch can best convey some idea of this curious relic of antiquity and undoubted proof of Christianity having once here prevailed, as well as of the locality chosen for it. The hooks were the recipients of many a various offering, which were scrupulously left there till borne off piecemeal by the elements. Some rags of the last showed that such offerings had not long since been made” (Bell 2007, 48).

Prince Ali Achmet Bey, standing in defense of the cross, “claimed the right of preventing the desecration of this relic of the faith of his remote ANCESTRY” (Bell 2007, 48). It is worth noting another circumstance mentioned in the notes of the Russian spy F.F. Tornau: “...they [the littoral Circassians] originated from the Abazins, Circassians, and Europeans cast up on a Circassian shore, according to a legend, back in the time of the first Crusade” (Tornau 2008, 164). The first Crusade, which took place between 1096 and 1099 (Yuzhakov 1902, 514) [22], had, no doubt, a great impact on the region, as the troops had been gathering in the vicinity of Constantinople.

Prince Ali Achmet Bey, also known as Ali Achmet Oblagu in Russian transcription (Cherkasov 2006) [23], was the most influential prince across the area from Sashe to Bzyba (the present-day river Bzyb in Abkhazia). During Bell’s first meeting with Ali Achmet Bey, the Englishman took notice of the prince’s Spanish silver sword. Bell looked it over and discovered an inscription in Spanish on it: the word “cavalero” alongside the motto “Ad majorem Dei”. The sword bore information on where and when the sword was made, “Anno, 1664”. In noting the other characteristics of the sword, Bell stressed its being greatly worn out (Bell 2007, 72) [24]. In all likelihood, the motto copied by J. Bell from Ali Achmet Bey’s sword was incomplete – it must have lacked the last word, “gloriam”. If we gather these words into one phrase, we get the Latin motto of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits), “Ad majorem Dei gloriam”, which is translated from Latin as “For the greater glory of God” (Laktionov 2007) [25].

This fact about such a sword being owned by a powerful Circassian prince and its condition testifies, in our view, to its having something to do with Christianity and, quite possibly, to that this

relic had a direct relation to the clan (Cherkasov *et al.*, 64-72).

Crosses were seen by other English emissaries as well. Thus, for instance, John Longworth describes a cross he saw in the vicinity of Pshada: “There is a mouldering wooden cross on the acclivity, not far from the sea, which, while it probably still attests the zeal of the Georgian queen, Thamar, who laboured to spread the light of Christianity on these shores, has long ceased to convey the slightest knowledge of Christianity or, a ray of its light, to the Circassians. Those who accompanied us, it is true, doffed their bonnets on approaching it; but on asking why they did so, they answered me with a shrug, that their fathers had done so before them. Shreds of cloth were attached to the wood, which I was told were meant for votive offerings; also to tie up the malady of those who placed them there” (Gardanov 1974, 542) [26].

In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the mountaineers of the Black Sea area celebrated one more Christian holiday – Commemoration of the Sacrifice of Abraham. This day can be called the day of bringing an infant to the temple. According to an ancient custom, every child, upon reaching a certain age, had to be presented to the Lord and one animal had to be sacrificed for him. The custom became common among virtually all of the residents of the Black Sea area, including even the so-called “Moslems”. J. Bell offers a representative example on the matter: “and such consideration has this usage attained, that even those who profess themselves Mussulmans, and hold all these observances somewhat in aversion, as “not ordained by their book,” are constrained, either by the force of habit or the influence of the opinion of the majority, to comply with it. Thus my present kind host, Zekwahaz-oku, one of this class, to-day presented his son” (Bell 2007, II 94-95) [27].

The rite was held in the valley of the Pshat. As was customary on many such occasions, a green with a little grove of oaks was chosen as the sacred venue for the rite. In the midst of it stood a cross, across from which there were several other crosses, which were decayed from time. Before it were arranged tables covered with loaves of bread and pasta. Some of the donators, upon handing their donations to the priest, took off their caps, knelt before the cross, and bowed their foreheads to the ground.

After that, the rite commenced. We shall examine this ceremonial in greater detail: “[the ceremonial] commenced... with a short petition to the “Great God” (Ta skho), for the conferring of every

blessing, and the averting of every evil. The chief priest in pronouncing it held forward towards the cross in his right-hand a wooden goblet (of the same form as those used in our church service) filled with shuat, and in his left a large cake of unleavened bread, which he then handed to his attendants, and received from them five or six times successively other goblets and cakes, over which the same benediction was said, and repeated aloud by all the congregation, who had placed themselves in ranks behind the priest on their knees, and with their caps off, bowing their foreheads to the ground at the termination of each benediction, as did the matrons also. The shuat and cakes were then distributed to all of us. The victims; viz. a calf, a sheep, and two goats, were next brought in front of the cross, each held by a couple of men, while the priest pronounced a benediction over each, poured upon its forehead some shuat from one of the goblets, and singed some of its hair there with one of the waxen-tapers which burned at the foot of the tree behind the cross. They were then led away to be slaughtered, which was the signal for the congregation dispersing rather tumultuously – at least the younger portion of it – some of whom went to aid in the cutting up and preparing of the meat, in a row of large kettles, and others to amuse themselves till it was ready, by racing, leaping, etc.; while the seniors spent the interval in conversational parties. As for the chief priest – who performed his duties with considerable dignity – he remained, during all the time, erect in front of the cross and tables, his head uncovered, a mantle over his shoulders, and a staff in his hand, directing his assistants in their duties, not the least important part of which appeared to be an equal distribution of the meat among the numerous tables, of which there were about sixty. Over each of them a benediction was pronounced by the priest before they were served to us on the green around – to the females as well as males – along with abundance of shuat” (Bell 2007, II 95-97) [28]. The number of guests present on that occasion might have been from four to five hundred, although on a number of occasions the number of participants exceeded two thousand. At the end of especially mass religious fetes, numerous amusements were held, such as dancing, horse-racing, mark-firing, etc.

Circassians held religious fetes quite often, and, apart from serving religious objectives per se, these solemnities were much “beneficial in frequently bringing the people amicably together, and in refreshing with animal food those who might otherwise seldom taste it; for besides what may be

eaten by all those who choose to make their appearance at the festivals, many of the poorer folks are to be seen carrying home portions of meat for their families – distribution to the poor being a part of the religious services enjoined” (Bell 2007, II 89) [29].

There were other rites as well. Thus, for instance, F.F. Tornau noted after visiting the Abazin tribe of Medoveys (the present-day area of Krasnaya Polyana) that in Medovey only the prince and some noble families followed the Mahometan religion, while the common people were inclined towards heathendom and, having no defined faith, turned their prayers in time of trouble to certain rocks and sacred trees, while being “overwhelmingly childishly fearful of Shaitan” (Tornau 2008, 156) [30].

On certain occasions, Christian holidays incorporated other beliefs as well. Thus, for instance, during one of these rites held in the valley of the Pshat (by the Shapsugs) there were between 120 and 130 young people assembled, with several elders in charge of the congregation. The young men formed “two sides of a square, at some little distance from the largest tree; beside which stood erect one cross, while against it were laid numerous disused ones, which had served the sacred purpose in their day, and are now consecrated to “decay's slow ravage”. ... In front of the cross were ranged, in rows, from forty to fifty small tables covered... with loaves of bread and masses of pasta; and behind it hung from a transverse beam sundry large kettles over a blazing fire”. Two goats were then sacrificed, after which an “invocation was then made to the Spirit of Thunder [Shibla] by those few who had charge of the tables, and who remained uncovered throughout, interceding for general protection, and that the bolt, as well as every other evil, might be averted from them and their families. And immediately afterwards two large cakes were served to me, along with a bowl of shuat (millet-flour, honey and water fermented), and then a general distribution of these refreshments was made to all assembled, down to the very youngest boys, and the beverage continued to be circulated around” (Bell 2007, II 87-89) [31]. The cult of thunder and lightning had a purely pagan character, yet it, nevertheless, smoothly harmonized in the culture of the Shapsugs with Christianity. In our view, this was due to the fact that various religious layers had been superimposed upon each other for many centuries.

Thus, despite the active Islamization of the region in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, a significant, if not overwhelming, portion of the population of littoral



Circassia continued to follow Christianity. This was due to the existence of common Caucasian traditions, which also include the legacy of the ancestors. Christianity was the faith of the forefathers in the broad sense of the word, and Islam was becoming a compulsory measure, a measure imposed, including through military means, from the outside.

### **Social fabric**

In the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, according to the testimony of the Genovese G. Interiano, the mountaineer community was divided into nobles, vassals, serfs, and slaves. The nobles were held in high esteem among the rest of the population and spent all of their time on horseback. They did not tolerate their subordinates having horses like theirs. If someone outside the noble circle started to raise a foal, the nobles would take it away and give them a different animal in return, like a horned livestock animal. They would normally say to the person, "This is what's for you, not a horse" (Atalikov 2010, 26).

Many nobles had vassals and lived independent from each other. They did not acknowledge any authority over themselves, except that of God. They had neither written laws nor persons to administer justice. All their disputes were resolved in the 16<sup>th</sup> century through power, agility, and intermediaries (Atalikov 2010, 26).

The sacralization of the nobles' authority was reaching its peak. According to G. Interiano, "no man not born a noble can be one, even if he were a chief; they would want that a noble know neither how to count nor how to do trade, unless it is, however, about the sale of booty; the obligations of a noble lie in governing his subordinates, protecting them, hunting, and doing military exercises" (Atalikov 2010, 27).

In the first third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in regards to Circassia's social fabric, Frédéric Dubois de Montpéreux compared the region to the civilizations of Germany and France during the reign of their first kings and called Circassia an exemplar of the feudal knightly aristocracy of the Middle Ages and the heroic aristocracy of ancient Greece. According to de Montpéreux, the Circassian "constitution is purely feudal; the caste spirit reigning there is as strict as it once was in France and Germany" (de Montpéreux 2010, 35).

Frédéric Dubois de Montpéreux identified five major classes: princes, nobles, those set free, serfs, and slaves. In classifying and characterizing the classes, the author notes that "one no longer acquires the title of a prince but by birth.

Therefore, the princes, desirous to preserve their genealogy in spotless purity, are highly strict in respect of matrimonial unions, unequal matches considered a great disgrace to them. The extent of their power is gauged by the number of their vassals, next of kin, and allies who could stand up for them in time of trouble".

De Montpéreux goes on to describe the rest of the classes. "The second class includes the nobles (worq); some of them become powerful by establishing ties of kinship with many families; they perform the duties of a squire to the prince and attend on him at the table.

The class of those set free consists of serfs who were granted freedom for certain achievements or, after having been sold into slavery, came back with some fortune and acquired a mansion; they enjoy the same rights as the nobles, and their fortunes are passed on to their progeny.

The bondsmen, or serfs, make up the fourth class; these are like vassals in Europe at the time of feudalism; they live in total subjugation to the will of the prince or nobleman, tilling the soil in time of peace and standing up for them in time of war, and this bondage is passed on from father to son. Each serf has a parcel of land and some cattle, to which his overlord has no rights; nor does the overlord's authority apply to the vassal himself and his family, and, if the bondsman, or vassal, is not happy with his overlord, he can leave him and settle somewhere else. Except, as a punishment or through the court, the overlord can sell his serf, in which case the community has to convene to decide on the matter.

The four classes differ little in terms of the kind of clothing their representatives wear and the kind of lifestyle they lead. One could even venture the assertion that they are totally equal; that is how insignificant the authority of the prince or nobleman over their vassals is; all of their sway is founded on trust, on patriarchal conviction; the entire authority is determined by ancient customs.

The fifth class is made up of slaves, or tchohhotl (tliquatle). Any stranger who has the courage to penetrate the region but fails to name his kunak (consecrated friend) or master, can always expect being turned into a slave; day by day the princes and nobles enlarge the number of their slaves, as they range about the area occupied by the Russians in search of them; the slaves are a source of wealth for slaveholders; they sell them to Turks or keep them and hurry to marry them off" (de Montpéreux 2010, 35-36).

Note that Julius Klaproth concurs with this division into classes and their characteristics (von Klaproth 2008, 208).

According to de Montpéroux, all “the princes are equal to each other, just like the nobles are. In all that vast population... no man of influence and intelligence is capable of forming a close-knit union with someone else... : every noble, even every serf granted freedom is his own overlord and only obeys himself”.

One of the most credible testimonies on the life of the mountaineers in the vicinity of the river Socha (an Ubykh aul) was left behind by Staff Captain Baron F.F. Tornau, the Russian spy who had lived among the mountaineers for several years: “The people obey the princes and nobles little, whom the customs, some wealth, and personal prowess entitle to respect their compatriots, without providing them with any authority at that” (AOAGS. F. R-348. Op. 1. D. 19. L. 8). This statement by F.F. Tornau appears to indicate that by the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Ubykh community had reached the period of the disintegration of feudal relations with pronounced elements of decentralization. From now on, the prince is a nominal figure commanding no influence.

F.F. Tornau adds: “Within the council, when the prince is known for his prowess, when he is capable of winning over others by virtue of his qualities and is good at coordinating his intentions with the wishes of the people, then he can expect some, and then only temporary, obedience. The volatility of character and levity cause these people to constantly divide, with everyone pursuing only their own personal objectives” (AOAGS. F. R-348. Op. 1. D. 19. L. 9, 13).

In characterizing the system of governance in the mountaineer community, it is worth noting the way they had evolved: in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the centralization was highly intense and hinged on the authority of the nobles. Following the civil war of 1785, the community became decentralized. Here we can clearly see elements of social tension. First of all, it is the existence of two bodies of governance (the town council and the remnants of the authority of princes and nobles); in other words, we observe here a division of powers. Second of all, a characteristic trait of a decentralized mountaineer community is “living for today”. It goes without saying that the princes desired greater stability, if for no other reason than preserving their wealth.

### Apparel

In characterizing the way Circassians dressed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Giorgio Interiano noted that their upper garments consisted of a felt cloak with a slit designed in such a way as to enable the person to let out his right arm. Their headgear included a felt hat that resembled a sugarloaf helm. Under the cloak, the mountaineers wore a “silk or linen terrilicci with pleats from waist to bottom, as was the case with the Roman skirt...” (Atalikov 2010, 27). Besides, Circassians always wore a small leather pouch they hung sideways, in which they carried fire steel. These pouches were sewn for them by their wives... (Atalikov 2010, 28).

One can get an idea of the quality of the traditional clothing of Circassians in the 19<sup>th</sup> century from the materials from the exposition of the history museum in the resort-city of Sochi. The men’s suit on the left features both a felt cloak with a slit and a bashlyk (a cone-shaped headdress hood). The pouch was an indispensable part of the Circassian’s outfit as well.

In 1629, the Catholic missionary Giovanni da Lucca had this to say describing the Circassian costume: “Their apparel differs little from ours. They wear red cotton shirts and burkas of felted wool or felt, which they turn on the shoulders in the direction the wind blows, for it covers just half of the body” (Atalikov 2010, 38).

Julius Klaproth describes the Circassian’s costume the following way: “The dress of the men resembles that of the Kumück Tartars, but it is lighter, made of better materials, and in general richer. The shirt (*Yana*) is either white linen, or, agreeably to the Georgian fashion, of fine red taffety, and buttons at the bosom. Over this, they wear a silk waistcoat, which is generally embroidered, and above that a short jacket (in Tscherkessian *Ziéh*, in Tartar *Tschekmen*), which scarcely reaches half way down the back, and buttons very close over the belly” (von Klaproth 2008, 220).

Thus, based on what we can gather from the sources available to us, we can register the fact that the design of the Circassian costume persisted for a long period of time.

### Traditions

Of major significance in the life of patriarchal Circassian society were traditions. Giorgio Interiano thus describes the traditions and customs of Circassians: “...they inhabit this country, when there is not a single spot that is protected by walls” (Atalikov 2010, 29). G. Interiano testifies that all their homes were made of straw, reeds, or wood. It would be a disgrace to these overlords or nobles to

build themselves a stone house or fortress, for that could signify to their fellow tribesmen the lack of courage and inability to protect and defend oneself” (Atalikov 2010, 29).

According to descriptions by Interiano, Circassians attached high value to generosity and were always ready to give away everything they had, except, nonetheless, their horses and arms. “If any of them wearing an upper garment for the first time or a new, crimson silk, shirt, did not eagerly give it right away to anyone who asked for it, it would be considered a great disgrace to him. As soon as they are approached with such a request, they immediately take off the garment and put on the shabby, sometimes badly soiled, tatters of the entertainer; therefore, the nobles are almost always dressed worse than others, but shoes, arms, and horses, the three things they would never give to someone as a gift, are the primary luxury items to them. A nobleman will sometimes give away everything he has for a horse – that is how valuable it is to him” (Atalikov 2010, 28).

Interiano also mentions *kunachestvo* (consecrated friendship) as a tradition: “They [the mountaineers] show hospitality with the utmost heartiness and use the term “*kunak*” to denote the host receiving the guest and the guest himself. When the guest leaves, he is accompanied all the way to the next host’s house, as the host is guarding him despite the apparent dangers to his own life; and, although they view booty from robbing as quite legitimate, *kunaks* are known to be extremely loyal to each other both within the walls of the house and without” (Atalikov 2010, 28).

In 1637, Circassia was visited by Adam Olearius, who noted, in describing the dwellings of Circassians, that they “were very wretched ones, as being built only with laths nailed across, and plastered over with clay” (Atalikov 2010, 55).

We find a lot of things from the 16<sup>th</sup> century in the 19<sup>th</sup> century traditions of Circassians.

J. Klaproth, in characterizing the dwellings of the mountaineers, noted that all their houses were made of straw, reeds, and wood, for it “would be deemed a great disgrace to a prince or nobleman, if he were to build a fortress or a habitation with solid walls” (von Klaproth 2008, 256).

John Longworth relates that in the event of an enemy attack, the Circassians “would set fire to their houses and retreat precipitately with their families and cattle to the mountains” (Longworth 2002, 91). The author also testifies that the mountaineers were highly generous and easily gave away things. If someone had two shirts or two

pairs of shoes, it was a must for him to share them with others. A system of this kind had “also its serious disadvantages, entitling as it does the slothful and dastardly to share the fruits of industry and enterprise...” (Longworth 2002, 159).

Julius Klaproth, who visited Circassia in 1807, writes about the hospitality of the mountaineers, relating that guests were “waited upon by the host himself, never by servants, and accompanied to the next *Kunak*” (von Klaproth 2008, 125). Klaproth notes: “Among these people age procures the highest consideration. When therefore any business is to be transacted, the oldest of the princes, usdens, and also of the most opulent boors, assemble and discuss the matter” (von Klaproth 2008, 209-210).

Thus, the mountaineers exhibited much permanence in the way of preserving their traditions. The conservatism of traditions was a distinctive trait of the life of Circassians.

#### **Social avocations**

In describing the social avocations of Circassians, Giorgio Interiano notes that “they chiefly subsist on the species of fish still called *Anticei*, as it was named by Strabo of old; it is properly a kind of sturgeon, thicker and shorter than the common sort. They drink the water of their rivers, which tends to promote digestion. They eat also the flesh of all kinds of tame and wild animals. They have no wheat or grapes, but great quantities of millet and such-like grain, of which they make bread and other sorts of provision, as well as a beverage named *boza*. They likewise drink mead” (Atalikov 2010, 29).

Speaking of the land inhabited by the Circassians, Klaproth notes: “Their country is for the greatest part swampy, covered with reeds and rushes... [The mountaineers have] many [secret] fords and passages [by which] they clandestinely proceed to attack the poor peasants, whom they carry off with their cattle and children from one country to another, and sell or barter them away” (Atalikov 2010, 26-67). Klaproth adds that the “greatest part of the slaves sold by them are carried to Cairo in Egypt; and there fortune elevates them from the lowest rank to the highest honours and dignities, as to the rank of Sultan, Admiral, etc.” (Atalikov 2010, 26).

Among the social avocations of women in the mountaineer community, Giorgio Interiano mentions just those of noblewomen. The traveler notes that all the avocations of Circassian noblewomen were limited to just sewing fire steel pouches and belts of very soft leather (Atalikov 2010, 29).

In 1629, in characterizing the social avocations of Circassians, the Catholic missionary Giovanni da Lucca noted that they traded in slaves, animal hides, and wax. They utilized hoes to till the soil, but they used no money and exchanged their goods (Atalikov 2010, 38).

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the social avocations of Circassians remained virtually unchanged. In this regard, Frédéric Dubois de Montpéroux writes that “no matter which class the Circassian belongs to, he is always lazy and does everything he can to shirk any kind of work that is a bit harder; he prefers to be exposed to the dangers of a life of brigandage, rather than engage in labor to earn his daily bread. This is especially the case with the Natukhai, Shapsugs, Ubykhs, and all the mountainous tribes in areas with unfavorable soil conditions” (de Montpéroux 2010, 44).

Julius Klaproth notes that there were “very few handicraftsmen among [the Circassians], and of these only smiths, some of whom work in iron, and the others in silver; the former make any thing else than daggers, sickles, and bits for bridles, and the latter than arms and armor. The wife performs the part of tailor to her family, and the husband makes all the household furniture and utensils, in which there is no metal” (von Klaproth 2008, 222).

Frédéric Dubois de Montpéroux testifies that there was almost no industry and trade in Circassia. “The relations they had with the Turks at the time were limited to just negligible barter trade. Captives always made up the basis of these relations... The entire industry of Circassians revolved around the ways to lay their hands on this sort of bargaining chip through forays into the area occupied by the Russians and enemy tribes, as well as through sea brigandage, the latter method remaining the same as in the time of Strabo, although it will soon be nineteen centuries since then. The warship headed by Captain Wolf, which took me aboard, has been ordered twice already to chase after the galleys of the Circassian pirates, and it has been convenient for me to watch them. I have noticed just one change: their galleys are large in size and normally accommodate more people; you can count between 60 and 70 people in them (in Circassian, these galleys are called *kaf* or *kouafa*, as well as *kamara*; *akhbat* in Abkhaz; *ghemet* in Turkish-Nogai). They only run on oars, gliding along the coast; the Mamay port (near Tuapse), known in antiquity for its pirates, is still the central location for the Circassian corsairs to this day.

In each family, women are engaged in making almost all objects needed in the household: they weave a sort of cloth, of a rare, yellowish-green or

grey in color; they also can make felt cloaks or mantles, *burkas* in Russian and *djako* [qakua] in Circassian, sew shoes and even undertake [59] the making of saddle cushions and containers for rifles and sabres (de Montpéroux 2010, 54-55).

In confirmation of this testimony of the duties of Circassian women, we may engage the reminiscences of F.F. Tornau, who noted that Circassian women (wives) were invested with the duty of taking care of the household. Assisted by their maids, they wove cloths and linen and dressed their husband and children from head to toe (Tornau 2008, 206).

Based on the above testimonies, we can conclude that over the past centuries the social avocations of Circassians did not change in any way. This was facilitated by the preservation of the originality of their culture, the isolatedness of their territories, and their being true to their traditions.

### Conclusions

The absence, noted in the above sources, of uniformity in the anthropological appearance of the various tribes within Circassian society, allows us to speak of there being various independent ethnic groups within its population.

This inference substantiates both the fact that there were different languages spoken by the peoples of Circassia and that they had no uniform language of interethnic communication.

Religion-wise, Circassia was divided into two parts: the population of the Black Sea region was dominated by Christian and pagan rites, while the mountaineers of the Trans-Kuban area were Islamized for the most part, although heathendom persisted here as well. On the whole, the spread of Islam in the region was governed by not only external influences but by the social stratification of the local population and the role played in society by its various social groups.

The unique nature of the social stratification of Circassian society was expressed in the preservation of the rights of the free state of its population (except for the slaves), as well as staying true to common levelling traditions and customs. The civil war of 1785 led to the decentralization of governance and its democratization.

The isolatedness of the territory of Circassia, the poor development level of external relations, the lack of migration processes, and the peculiarities of the population’s mentality provided a rationale for the poor development of crafts, industry, and trade and, on the whole, the character of the people’s social avocations.

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**LIST OF ILLUSTRATION/LISTA ILUSTRĂȚILOR**

**Figure 1.** A holy oak with a cross

**Figure 2.** Circassians apparel

**Figure 3.** Circassians. A drawing from the book “Three Voyages in the Black Sea to the Coast of Circassia” by Taitbout de Marigny



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3