

A Foreigner's Observations on the Strained Relations between the Abkhazians and the  
Georgians

(An Open Letter to the Georgian People)

On 5<sup>th</sup> May 1989 there took place at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies the second Georgian Studies Day. As lecturer in Caucasian Languages I was asked to take part in the conference. I accepted and decided to read the paper which I would have delivered at last year's 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of the founding of Tbilisi University, had I had the possibility at that time of coming to Tbilisi. But following the tragedy of 9<sup>th</sup> April (for which my wife and I wish to offer our deepest sympathy to all the relations and friends of those killed and wounded), and in consideration of the present situation, I reconsidered and expressed just those thoughts which I now wish to share with you, the readers of this letter.

Perhaps many of you are asking yourselves who this Englishman might be who has dared to lecture you on the subject of this exceptionally bitter problem. Let me explain a few things about myself and then you will realise why I have taken upon myself this risky mission. I first came to Tbilisi in 1975 to learn Georgian. If we add up all the months I have spent in Georgia during the last 14 years, it comes to a total of 3 years – in other words, I am not short of experience when it comes to speaking of Georgian and the Georgians. As for my professional position, I hold the single academic post in Great Britain which is dedicated to Georgian and the Caucasian languages. One of my superiors recently asked me to write a new grammar of Georgian, which should be published in about 5 years in Holland in a new series devoted to oriental languages; and I was already gathering material for a grammar of Mingrelian. But it is not only the Kartvelian languages which represent the centre of my attention. In 1976 I married Zaira Khiba, an Abkhazian from Ochamchira, and, as a linguist, I took advantage of having an Abkhaz speaker in England, with the result that my grammar of Abkhaz appeared in Holland in 1979, and my doctoral dissertation, which appeared in 1987 in Germany, compared Georgian and Abkhaz subordinate clauses from the point of view of syntax. At the end of 1987 while spending a 5-month study-leave in Georgia, although I was mainly working on Mingrelian, I was also preparing a lecture entitled *Language-planning in Georgia (especially during the Soviet period)* – this paper will be published in the autumn as a

chapter in a book entitled *Language-planning in the USSR*. It was while preparing this lecture I believe that I lighted upon the source of the current difficulties between the Georgians and the Abkhazians, and, if I am right, the desired solution is simple in the extreme – but it will require magnanimity and self-restraint on the part of the Georgians. Lest anyone among you should be beginning to feel suspicious about my motives in writing this letter, I want to reveal to you what happened at the 150th anniversary of Ilia Chavchavadze in Tbilisi in 1987, after which it should be clear to you to what extent I support the Georgian language. You will remember that the international symposium was conducted basically in Russian. This so surprised and animated me that I would have finished my speech in the Philharmonic Hall with a request framed roughly as follows: “If ever such a conference again takes place on Georgian soil, it is to be hoped that the organising committee will behave generously and that the albeit honorary title of ‘international language’ will be accorded to the Georgian language!” However, Patiashvili unintentionally (he had no prior knowledge of the content of my speech) cut me out of the list of speakers, and, when at the request of a certain individual I subsequently wrote up my speech for publication in *Literary Georgia*, that august paper’s editorial panel refused to print it precisely because of these closing words! And so, I believe, I have earned the right to ask you not to forget the Georgian proverb ‘Criticise your friend to his face, your enemy behind his back’ as you read this letter.

First of all, I wish to make it clear that both my wife and I are violently opposed to the call raised in Lykhny for Abkhazian independence from Georgia and to everything else that has taken place in Abkhazia, which has recently so roused the Georgian people. Yet this too has to be said that the call for Abkhazian independence first mooted in 1978 is quite understandable. To tell you the truth, I was expecting this to happen after I read certain articles published in *Literary Georgia* at the end of 1988, e.g. Tariel Kvanchilashvili’s shameful *What will be then?* (30<sup>th</sup> September), in which the author complains about the high birth-rate of certain peoples of non-Kartvelian origin living in Georgia and in passing mentions the closure of Georgian schools that took place in Abkhazia and S. Ossetia after the death of Stalin. I very much urge you all to read attentively the wise and calm response to this unworthy article that Napi Dzhusoiti published in *Literary Georgia* on 9<sup>th</sup> December. On 4<sup>th</sup> November there was printed ‘The

State Programme for the Georgian Language’, where it is written that Georgian should be an obligatory subject of study in all schools in Georgia. Tengiz Sharmanashvili and Kaxa Gabunia then told us that in their opinion true internationalism requires respect towards, and an elementary knowledge of, Georgian by the representatives of all the non-Kartvelian peoples living in Georgia (2<sup>nd</sup> December). I am sorry, my friends, you have the right to instruct your fellow-countrymen on how the Georgians in general can shew their internationalism, and a foreigner like me can address the non-Kartvelian peoples of Georgia in your very words, but when you take it upon yourselves to address them in that fashion, your words sound to me more like unpleasant NATIONALISM.

But apparently there was already talk in August 1988 in Abkhazia about independence, and, if that is so, we must conclude that this reaction was brought about by the question of Georgia’s own independence raised earlier last year by the non-official groups active in Tbilisi and by their rallying-cry *Georgia for the Georgians!*

No doubt at this point you will want to interrupt me with the question: “Fine, but why should the Abkhazians explode at all of this?” And with just this question we have reached the heart of the problem.

In my experience there exists amongst the Georgians a greatly to be regretted ignorance about the Abkhazians and the history of Abkhazia. For example, during the last 13 years how often have Georgians told me that, although the Abkhazians know Georgian, they deliberately refuse to speak to Georgians in Georgian – what nonsense! No doubt there are some Abkhazians who behave like this, but I have to tell you that the overwhelming majority of the Abkhazians do NOT know Georgian and thus CANNOT speak it to Georgians or to anyone else. When I was preparing the above-mentioned article, I asked many Abkhazians for their ideas about the source of their present negative attitude to the Georgians. And, if I tell you that this was their reply: “The politics of Tbilisi towards the Abkhazians begun in the middle years of this century”, you will probably be surprised and be unable to understand what the Abkhazians have in mind. This is the problem and also the potential solution. In the climate of today’s *glasnost* many hitherto concealed, unknown and horrifying facts have seen the light of day in your press concerning the crimes of Stalin and Beria. But as yet I have seen nothing concerning the attempt to georgianise Abkhazia, which Beria began in 1933. The most

virulent period of this campaign were the years 1944-1953, when the teaching of Abkhaz was banned and Abkhazian schools were closed to be replaced by Georgian ones, where Georgian was forced upon the pupils. If this is not linguistic and cultural suppression, then I do not understand the meaning of this word. After the re-opening in 1953 of the Abkhazian schools that had existed up to 1944, the repression of Abkhazia continued, albeit on a less severe level, as a result of which the Abkhazians' patience finally ran out in 1966/7 and again in 1978. Do not think that all of this is a fantasy dreamed up by my acquaintances – in 1985 in the journal *Central Asian Survey* the American Sovietologist Darrell Slider gave a detailed description of these facts. I am convinced that this will be all totally new to the majority of you. And so, I earnestly entreat the new Georgian government to reveal as soon as possible to the whole of Georgia the contents of Slider's article. It will then become as clear to the Georgians as it already is to me that what took place in Abkhazia from 1933 represents an exact reflection of the politics of russification that were attempted throughout Georgia as a whole by Tsarist Russia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And, if it was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that today's well-known feelings by the Georgians towards the Russians had their origin, then should it not be perfectly understandable why the Abkhazians are so afraid of the Georgians and of Georgian independence, when it was only 40-50 years ago that the government in Tbilisi (under Kandid Charkviani and then Akaki Mgeladze) was attempting their cultural annihilation? It even seems that there were plans to deport all of the Abkhazians to Central Asia, as had previously been done with the Chechens, Ingush and Meskhians. Would that the Georgians could learn the sad history of western Georgia in the middle of this century, acknowledge this indisputable crime, apologise to the Abkhazians and then sit down with them, so together in harmony you might improve the future for the whole of Georgia! When the Abkhazian schools were closed, who led the Georgian Communist Party? – Kandid Charkviani. He is apparently still alive, and he would (at last) be performing a very worthy act, if he were voluntarily to stand up before the Abkhazians and apologise personally for his part in this business.

But the reconciliation of the Abkhazians with the Georgians will not be realised, unless I persuade you Georgians of another painful fact, namely that the Abkhazians do not consider it necessary for them to learn Georgian, and this too is for me quite natural.

“How can it be inessential for anyone living in Georgia not to know Georgian?” is the question you will hurl at me. And you will no doubt appeal for support to the statistics that shew that in 1979 Georgians represented 43% of the population of Abkhazia. But I must put the question back : “Who are these ‘Georgians’?” Almost without exception they are Mingrelians, and the Mingrelians’ mother-tongue (not mother-dialect) is Mingrelian – it is true, the majority also know Georgian, but this is their 2<sup>nd</sup> language (Russian being their 3<sup>rd</sup>). And if, from the point of view of knowledge of languages, internationalism is to be demanded of the Abkhazians, then I can cheer you with the news that, where Mingrelians and Abkhazians live together in the same village, in addition to Abkhaz and Russian the Abkhazians know their neighbours’ main language, Mingrelian – regrettably, the same cannot be said of the Mingrelians when we are discussing a knowledge of Abkhaz. This means that, roughly speaking, to the south of Sukhum the Abkhazians are tri-lingual, whereas to the north of Sukhum they are bi-lingual (in Abkhaz and Russian), since Mingrelians are here rather few and far between. A man will learn as many languages as it is necessary for him to know for the purposes of his daily life, and it remains a fact of life (like it or not) that it is perfectly feasible to live in Abkhazia without learning Georgian. My dear readers, do you not understand that you will not implant in the Abkhazians respect towards and love of yourselves and your language, if you swamp them and force your language on them? As a linguist, I have to tell you that it is no exaggeration to say that Abkhaz is close to extinction, and if you (Georgians) fail to take appropriate measures to guarantee the learning and use of Abkhaz, then after a few generations it will disappear, just like its sister-language, Ubykh. By the way, if I may be allowed to poke my nose into this affair, how are we to assure the survival of Svan and Mingrelian too?

Unfortunately, I cannot finish my letter with the offering of the above-advice. After the meeting in Lykhny at the end of March this year what articles have we been offered by the organ of Georgia’s intellectuals *Literary Georgia*? It seems they first speedily rummaged in the archives and dug out for re-publication reviews first published about 10 years ago of two works written by two Russians touching upon Abkhaz and Abkhazia, in which there was included material which deserved to be censured, but so far as A. Bakradze’s review of Y. Voronov’s little book *In the World of Abkhazian Architectural*

*Monuments* is concerned, it is a pity that the author travels somewhat far from his main topic – what relevance is it that Abkhazian Christians used to worship in Georgian and that churches in Abkhazia are adorned with Georgian inscriptions? Read, friend Akaki, Don Giuseppe Giudice’s letters (pp. 92-3), written in the 17<sup>th</sup> century: “Although the Mingrelian language is a separate language, they perform their church-services in Georgian, just as Europeans count Latin to be their language of religion.” The same may be said of the Abkhazians, and no other conclusion (perhaps the one favoured by Bakradze?) is tolerable, and that is the end of the matter.

According to the reply to the *Abkhaz Letter* composed by the presidium of the Union of Georgian Writers, published in the edition of 7<sup>th</sup> April, it is clear that your writers either do not know or prefer to ignore the history of Abkhazia in the middle years of this century. And in the same edition N. Lomouri tries to convince us of the view that the people who today carry this ethnonym have nothing in common with the historical *Abkhazian Kingdom*, since at the time today’s Abkhazians were called *Apsarni*. Finally, in the edition of 21<sup>st</sup> April there was published the most shameful letter to have appeared so far, which was put together by a certain Rostom Chxeidze. This article examines the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of Pavle Ingoroqva’s *Giorgi Merchule*, which concerns the history and toponymy of Abkhazia and analyses (unless the more accurate description would be ‘perverts’) the etymology of the ethnonym *Abkhaz*. This chapter of this book seemingly received the criticism it was due as soon as it came out in 1954, but now Chxeidze is praising it to the skies, desires the scholarly rehabilitation of Ingoroqva, and cries that the well-founded thoughts of this ‘true Georgian scholar’ should be circulated everywhere. In essence what is it that Ingoroqva tried to prove?

In history there were apparently two groups called ‘Abkhazians’ – the first were apparently a Kartvelian people, and in the half a millennium up to the 1<sup>st</sup> century of our era the Greeks called them *Moskhi* – that is to say that every other historian (as well as the Georgian Encyclopædia) is in error, when they maintain that this tribe should be understood as the Meskhians from the south-west corner of Georgia. The term *Abkhaz* it seems represents a dialectal variant of the word *moskhi* – dear readers, on the basis of such a weak approach to etymology I could convince you this very minute that London too is an old Georgian town! This Kartvelian-speaking tribe in the 17<sup>th</sup> century apparently

lived in Abkhazia up to some unspecified date in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, which ‘fact’ is proved by Evliya Chelebi’s book of travels, written in 1641, where we read (according to Ingoroqva): “The main race in Abkhazia is the Chach, who speak in that same Mingrelian which is in use on the other side of the Phasis” (*Giorgi Merchule* p.133). In 1971 Giorgi Puturidze published the Georgian translation of Chelebi’s book, and so we all now have the means of comparing Chelebi’s text with Ingoroqva’s contemptible distortion: “On the tribes inhabiting the Abaza country – the Chach, a tribe. Amongst themselves they also speak Mingrelian, since the land across the river Phasis is entirely Mingrelia” (p.100). It is clear that APART FROM ‘ABAZA’ they also speak Mingrelian, and, if you look at the examples of ‘Abaza’ given on p.107, you will see that the language in question is not Abaza but Abkhaz (just as Chelebi’s language of the ‘Sadzian Abazas’ is in reality Ubykh). It is unclear when and whence in Ingoroqva’s opinion the present-day North West Caucasian Abkhazians settled in Abkhazia, although (and here I will borrow the phrase of a real Georgian expert in this matter) according to the ‘twaddle put about by uneducated people’ this event occurred in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Ingoroqva’s huge book appeared in 1954; it was submitted for type-setting in July 1951. And how long would it have taken to write a book of over 1,000 pages? – let us say about 5 years. So, now all starts to become clear: if we take cognisance of the fact that Ingoroqva apparently set to writing this nonsense just at the time when Abkhazia was suffering the most violent repression from the Georgian authorities, then I suggest this can hardly be viewed as coincidental.

The facts are plain for those with eyes to see. The Greek ethnonym *Abazgion* (country = *Abazgia*), first attested in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, comes from the Abazinians’ self-designation *Abaza*, just as the Latin term *gens Absilae* comes from the Abkhazians’ own term *apswa*. It is in these terms that the source should be sought for the Georgian ethnonym *apxazi*. One can debate at one’s leisure who might or might not have been the *Kerketai*, *Heniokhoi*, *Akhaioi* local residents mentioned by Greek writers in the 500 years preceding our era.

At the conference organised to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of Akaki Shanidze I and a Mingrelian colleague, M. Cikolia, read papers that dealt with the linguistic influence of Abkhaz on Mingrelian, and I have since prepared another paper for publication in Paris

on this theme. In addition, some years ago Simon Dzhanaashia suggested that Mingrelian's equivalent to the Georgian conjunction *rom*, namely *-ni*, might be borrowed from the Abkhaz Absolutive ending. Now, as I noted earlier, Mingrelians today do not know Abkhaz, and we saw above further testimony from the 17<sup>th</sup> century that even then it was rather a case of the Abkhazians knowing Mingrelian than vice versa. And so, one has to ask: "When did the Mingrelians have a sufficient knowledge of Abkhaz to be able to borrow Abkhaz syntax (and possibly morphology)?" In my opinion we have to seek a time in history when the Abkhazians played a more prominent role in local politics and culture than they do today. I do not suppose this period could have been the *Abkhazian Kingdom* alluded to above, could it?!

Perhaps you are interested in why, having constantly mentioned articles published in *Literary Georgia*, I have submitted this article to another paper. The fact is that by accepting for publication the articles by Chxeidze and others the editorial board of that paper has completely lost the confidence of this particular reader, and if the members of the board think that chapter 4 of Ingoroqva's book is to become the standard for modern Georgian scholarship, then they are depriving Georgian scholarship of any future reputation and respect; they are also stripping the Georgian people of the fame that they have richly deserved in the world and in which they rightly take pride for magnanimity and fairness. In support of this view take a look at the edition of 28<sup>th</sup> April, where two letters are published. The non-Abkhazian authors, who live in Abkhazia, are seeking to calm the Georgians with regard to the Abkhazians. What did the editorial panel do? They appended to the letters a long commentary in order to lead their readers to the 'true' conclusion, to wit that the authors cannot be trusted to be presenting a fair assessment of the situation, though in my opinion both letters shew nothing but the kindest of dispositions in their attempts to cool tempers. If the editorial board has sufficient confidence in its readers' intelligence, why was it necessary to add such a commentary? And may I say to the editorial panel that, if you have not seen Georgians turn their backs on Russian-speaking Abkhazians (or even Russian-speakers in general), then you must walk around the streets and shops of Tbilisi with your eyes closed! (This point was raised in one of the letters and dismissed as nonsense by the editor's commentary).



Enough – it is not my intention to fan the flames of hatred. I wish only for this sad enmity that exists between two peoples dear to my heart to end. And, unless I view this matter naively, I think I may have found just that solution. What have you to lose, my Georgian readers, if you recognise just one more crime committed by Stalin and Beria and apologise for it, since it was done in your name? – absolutely nothing, and what a glorious prize might be won. More things unite you with the Abkhazians than divide you. Take advantage of what you hold in common, and, before any more innocent blood is spilled in Georgia, settle your differences with your brothers, since only the interests of your enemies are served by this conflict.

GEORGE HEWITT

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