

Abkhazians

Abkhazians call themselves Apswa (plural Apswaa). Abkhazia (capital: Sukhum/Aq^w'a) comprises 8,700 sq.km. (between lat. 43° 35'-42° 27' N and long. 40° - 42° 08' E) bordering the Black Sea, the Caucasus, Mingrelia, and Svanetia. The early Soviets' drive to eradicate illiteracy saw Abkhaz attain literary status; like Circassian and Ubykh (extinct since 1992), Abkhaz is a North West Caucasian language. Christianity arrived two centuries before its official introduction under Justinian (sixth century). Sunni Islam spread with Ottoman Turkish influence from c. 1500. Traditional paganism has never entirely disappeared, making adherence to either major religion relatively superficial, though within Abkhazia most Abkhazians are nominally Christian. Life revolves around the extended family, morality (including respect for elders) being essentially determined by the dictates of custom (aklabz) and an ever-present sense of "Abkhazianness" (apswara). Local nobility fostered their offspring among the peasantry to cement societal relations -- only captured foreigners served as slaves, English visitor James Bell noting in the 1830s that Abkhazians rendered this concept by their ethnonym for "Mingrelian" (agarwa); milk-brotherhood was another social bond, symbolic establishment of which between two warring families could end vendettas. A semi-tropical climate with abundant water-resources, forests and mountain-pasturage dictated an economy based on animal-husbandry, timber and agriculture, with fruit, viticulture and millet (yielding to maize in the eighteenth century) playing dominant roles; tea and tobacco gained importance in the twentieth century. Greece, Rome, Persia, Lazica, Byzantium, Genoa, Turkey, Russia and Georgia have all influenced Abkhazian history. In the 780s Abkhazian prince Leon II took advantage of Byzantium's weakness to incorporate within his Abkhazian Kingdom most of western Georgia, this whole territory being styled "Abkhazia" until 975 when Bagrat' III, inheriting Abkhazia maternally and Iberia (eastern Georgia) paternally, became first monarch of a united Georgia. This mediæval kingdom disintegrated during the Mongol depredations (thirteenth to fifteenth centuries), part of Abkhazia's population (the Abazinians, who speak the divergent Abaza dialect and

today number c. 35,000) settling in the north Caucasus. The Chachbas controlled Abkhazia, the Dadianis Mingrelia, vying for dominance in the border-regions; the current frontier along the R. Ingur dates from the 1680s. Abkhazia became a Russian protectorate in 1810 but governed its own affairs until 1864 when, in the wake of imperial Russia's crushing of North Caucasian resistance (1864) and again after the 1877-78 Russo-Turkish war, most Abkhazians (along with most Circassians and all the Ubykhs) migrated to Ottoman lands. Soviet power was established in 1921; this Abkhazian SSR was recognised by Georgia, the two then contracting a treaty-alliance that lasted until Abkhazia's 1931 demotion to an "autonomous republic" within Georgia, henceforth viewed as Abkhazia's main threat -- forced (largely Mingrelian) immigration and suppression of the language and culture in an attempted georgianisation characterised the Stalin years. Post-Soviet Georgian nationalism led to war (August 1992). Abkhazian victory (September 1993) resulted in the mass-flight of most of the local Mingrelian population, numerically the largest group in pre-war Abkhazia. The conflict remains unresolved at the time of writing. Abkhazia declared independence in October 1999 but remains unrecognised. There are roughly 100,000 Abkhazians in Abkhazia (or ex-Soviet territories) and upto 500,000 across the Near East, predominantly in Turkey, where the language is neither taught nor written.

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B. George Hewitt

Ajars

In 1913 Stalin posed the question: "What is to be done with the Mingrelians, Abkhasians, Adjarians, Svanetians, Lezghians etc., who speak different languages but do not possess a literature of their own?". Of the Ajars, however, who style themselves Ach'areli (plural Ach'arlebi), he more accurately observed two paragraphs later that they were a people "who speak the Georgian language but whose culture is Turkish and who profess the religion of Islam." Ajaria (capital: Batumi) occupies 2,900 sq.km. in S.W. Georgia, bordering the provinces of Guria, Meskheta and (predominantly Armenian) Dzhavakheti, the Black Sea and Turkey (Lazistan and the old Georgian region of Shavsheti). The last Soviet census (1989) showed 324,806 Georgian (viz. Ajarian) residents, constituting 82.8 percent of the autonomous republic's population. The local dialect betrays both Laz and Turkish influence -- Islam was introduced here and in other border-regions to the east by the Ottoman Turks. It was as a result of the ceding to Georgia of Batumi with territory to its north by Turkey according to the terms of the Russo-Turkish Treaty of 16th March 1921 (Article 2(a) -- Burdett, 1996, 744-45) that the Ajarian Autonomous Republic came to be established (July 16, 1921). Ajarians share with the Abkhazians, some of whom settled here in late-Tsarist times, a sub-tropical micro-climate with consequently similar agriculture, though Ajaria held first place in the USSR for precipitation, sea-facing slopes experiencing an annual rainfall of 2,500-2,800 mm. When Stalin deported to Central Asia the neighbouring Meskhians (usually called "Meskhetian Turks", though their precise ethnicity is disputed) and Hemshins (Islamicised Armenians) in 1944, the Ajars escaped this fate, suffered also by certain other Muslim peoples in the N. Caucasus (1943-44). The regional leader, Aslan Abashidze, appointed by Georgian president Zviad Gamsakhurdia in the dying years of Soviet rule, managed to turn Ajaria in the turmoil that followed Georgia's 1991 independence into a personal fiefdom to the extent that central government writ was

(as of January 2002) no longer running in what had by then effectively become an undeclared but de facto independent statelet.

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352 words

Mingrelians

Mingrelians call themselves Margali (plural Margalepi) and are Georgian Orthodox. Mingrelian (like Georgian, Svan, and Laz) is a South Caucasian (Kartvelian) language; only Mingrelian and Laz, jointly known as Zan, are mutually intelligible. The ancient Zan continuum along the Black Sea's eastern coast from Abkhazia to Rize was broken by Georgian speakers fleeing the Arab emirate in Georgia's modern capital Tbilisi (655-1122), so that Georgian-speaking provinces (Guria and Ajaria) now divide Mingrelia (western Georgian lowlands bounded by Abkhazia, Svanetia, Lechkhumi, Imeretia, Guria and the Black Sea) from Lazistan (N.E. Turkey). The R. Tskhenis-Ts'q'ali traditionally split Mingrelian from Georgian (in Imeretia), though Mingrelian has here retreated whilst gaining at the expense of Abkhaz (Gal District) in the west. The Dadianis ruled post-Mongol Mingrelia (capital: Zugdidi), which came under Russian protection in 1803, though internal affairs remained in local hands until 1857. Traditional home-economy resembled that in neighbouring Abkhazia. A late nineteenth-century attempt to introduce a Mingrelian prayer-book and language-primer using Cyrillic characters failed, being interpreted as a move to undermine the Georgian national movement's goal of consolidating all Kartvelian

speakers. In the 1926 Soviet census 242,990 declared Mingrelian nationality, a further 40,000 claiming Mingrelian as mother-tongue. This possibility (and thus these data) subsequently disappeared, for since c. 1930 all Kartvelian speakers are officially categorised as "Georgians" -- today Mingrelians may number over one million, though fewer speak Mingrelian. Some publishing in Mingrelian (with Georgian characters), especially of regional newspapers/journals, was promoted by the leading local politician, Ishak' Zhvania (subsequently denounced as a separatist), from the late 1920s to 1938, after which only Georgian, the language in which most Mingrelians are educated, was allowed (occasional scholarly works apart); some Mingrelian publishing has restarted since Georgian independence. Mingrelian has never been formally taught. Stalin's police-chief Lavrent'i Beria and Georgia's first post-Soviet president Zviad Gamsakhurdia were Mingrelians. The civil war that followed Gamsakhurdia's overthrow (1992) mostly affected Mingrelia, where Zviadist sympathisers were concentrated; even after Gamsakhurdia's death (1993) local discontent with the central authorities fostered at least two attempted coups, reinforcing long-standing Georgian fears of separatism in the area.

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360 Words

Svans

Svans call themselves Mushwān (plural Shwanār) and are nominally Georgian Orthodox but preserve many pagan beliefs and practices in their mountain-fastnesses nestling in N.W. Georgia beneath the main Caucasus chain in the upper reaches of the rivers Ingur (Upper Svanetia) and Tskhenis-Ts'q'ali (Lower Svanetia). Svan was first to split from the Common Kartvelian that also produced Georgian, Mingrelian and Laz. The four main (and divergent) dialects are: Upper and Lower Bal (Upper Svanetia) vs Lent'ekh and Lashkh (Lower Svanetia), though linguistic particularities characterise virtually each hamlet. The language is not taught, and all Svans educated in Svanetia since the introduction of universal schooling by the early Soviets have received instruction through Georgian. The largely mono-ethnic population of Svanetia is usually given as c. 50,000, though the disastrous winter of 1986-87 caused many to abandon (especially Upper) Svanetia. In the 1926 Soviet census 13,218 declared Svan nationality, though thereafter all Kartvelian speakers became classified as "Georgians". Annual heavy snowfalls meant that Svans were historically excluded from the outside-world for months, penned up with their livestock inside appropriately compartmentalised stone-dwellings, alongside which stood the unique, twelfth-century, square towers for which (especially Upper) Svanetia is famous. Though rich in forests and minerals, the limited arable areas produce little apart from grass/hay, potatoes and barley, source of the local hard liquor (harāq'). Goitres were frequent through iodine-deficiency; the difficulties associated with providing another staple were depicted in the silent film "Salt for Svanetia". Ibex, chamois and bears have long been hunted. Svan men often served as migrant-labourers in Mingrelia during winter-months. Early in the nineteenth century Lower Svanetia became part of Dadiani's Mingrelia. In 1833 the Dadishkelian princes of western Upper Svanetia accepted Russian protection, governing their own affairs until the principedom was abolished in 1857. The eastern part of Upper Svanetia acknowledged no overlord, thus becoming known as "Free Svanetia", and was brought under notional Russian control later in the century through military action that saw the total destruction of the

village of Khalde, as described in a moving short story by Sergo K'ldiashvili (see Hewitt, 1996, 74-95).

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