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A MOBILE HOMELAND?
TRAJECTORIES OF SYRIAN CIRCASSIAN REPATRIATES TO ABKHAZIA

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ABSTRACT

The thesis explores the trajectory of a group of Circassian Syrian repatriates to Abkhazia, a largely unrecognised republic in the Caucasus. Uprooted from their homeland by Russian imperial expansion in the 19th century, their ancestors fled to the Golan Heights before being displaced again in 1967. Offered refuge from the Syrian War by the Abkhaz Committee for Repatriation, around five hundred members of the diaspora made their way to the shores of the Black Sea. Combining ethnographic fieldwork, oral history and insights from a wide range of disciplines, the work retraces this singular diasporic trajectory. How can their present-day encounter with a quasi-state trouble our perspective on state-building and citizenship? What does their historical trajectory reveal about the intersection between indigeneity and diaspora? Neither reducible to eager builders of a late nation-state nor to modern-day refugees or transnational migrants, their case evades readymade categorisations. Casting them as inter-imperial actors, my work charts their journey across a wide diaspora space defined by overlooked mobilities, shifting boundaries and impossible homelands. In highlighting the way their journey unsettles prevailing perspectives on citizenship, belonging and indigeneity, I hope the work can contribute to a wider interdisciplinary and methodological effort that seeks to recognise a variety of modernities, globalisations and transnational identities.

Keywords: Displacement, diaspora, indigeneity, citizenship, state-building

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all my informants for their time and their patience, and particularly S. and O. Thank you to Asya, for all the help during fieldwork in 2015 and 2017. Thank you to my family. Thank you to my supervisor, Prof. Violetta Zentai, and second reader, Prof. Alexandra Kowalski, for the insightful discussions on the topic.

In May 2023, en route towards my third bout of fieldwork, I was denied entry to the Republic of Georgia. No reason was given despite my entreaties. I was told to appeal the decision; I appealed but received no answer within the prescribed time. A month later, I called the Ministry and was told that the appeal was being processed. Another month passed, I called again and was told it had been processed, I should come pick it up. I could not pick it up, I said, because I had been denied entry to the country. Well, they said, someone could pick it up for me in Tbilisi, someone with a notarial authorisation. A digital one would work too, they said. I made one and sent it to a Georgian friend who lives there. She called the Ministry and was told this was not sufficient, they needed paper, actual paper. I asked a notary in Budapest if it was possible to make such an authorisation. She told me it was not possible; the friend would have to be there in person to make it, make it official.

I dedicate this thesis to those who fight against bureaucracy and borders.

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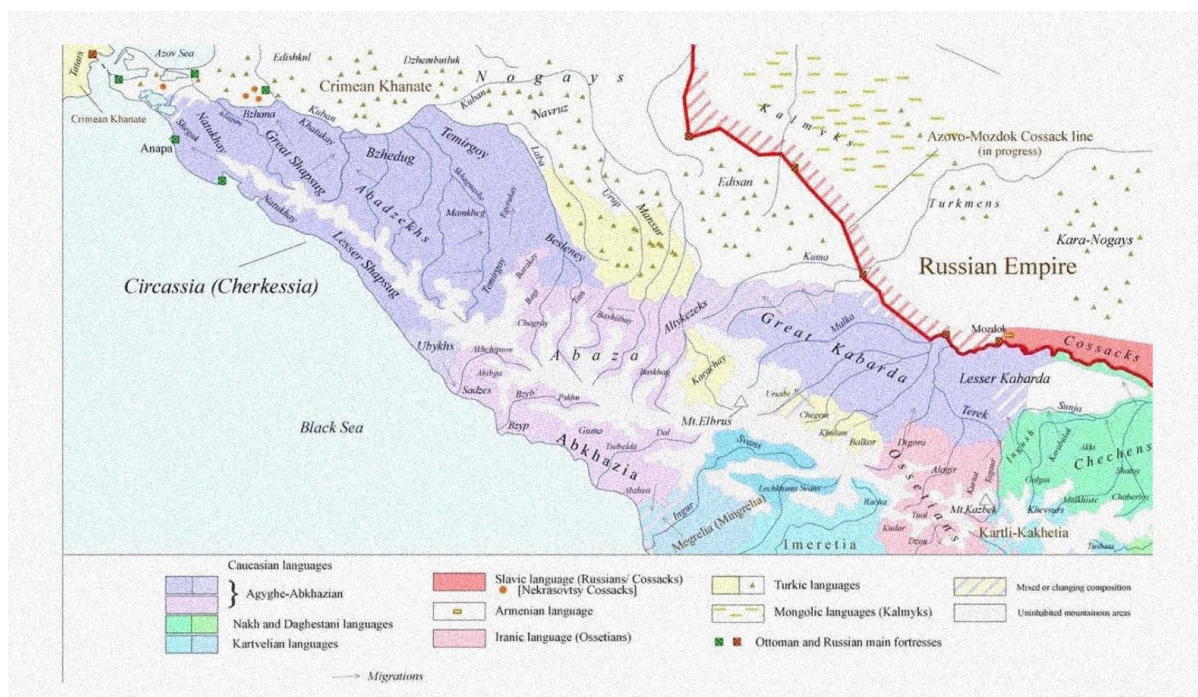
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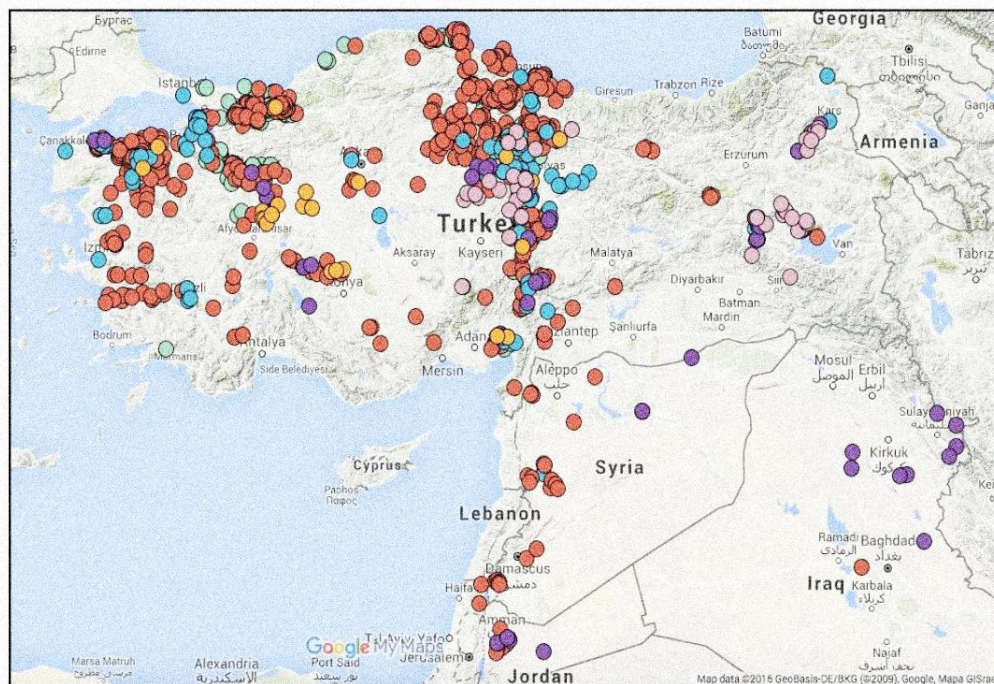
In this visualization, each dot represents a muhajir village.[67] All villages, over a thousand in total, were founded between the 1850s and 1914. The map is color coded for ethnic origins of villages' majority inhabitants: red – western and eastern Circassians (704 villages); green – Abkhaz and Abazins (199); blue – Daghestanis (98); purple – Chechens and Ingush (55); pink – Ossetians (43); orange – Karachays and Balkars (22).

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AN INTRODUCTION

I had not expected to meet Syrians during my first stay in Abkhazia, back in 2014. Abkhazia is a small, historically multi-ethnic republic in the North Caucasus that broke away from Georgia in the upheavals that followed the USSR's collapse.[1] Still largely unrecognised and isolated from the world, it has slowly become a de facto Russian protectorate, living mostly from Russian tourism and citrus exports. No industry to speak of, few prospects and most of the urban middle class and intelligentsia – mainly Georgian, Russian, Jewish or Greek, mostly profoundly *Soviet* – had left, often forcibly, in the catastrophe of the 90s. Syrians, here? I was surprised.

Some corrected me quickly – *'We're Circassians'* they said – while others said *I'm Adyghean* or *I'm Kabardian* and one or two even said *I'm Abkhaz*. But almost all had been born in Syria and most had arrived only recently there. Arrived? Returned? *Circassian* broadly refers to a group of nations indigenous to the North Caucasus. It includes the Adygheans and Kabardians; Abkhaz are not counted among the twelve major Circassian tribes, but are usually considered their closest, southern relatives. They share closely related traditions, a moral code known as *khabze* and widespread conversion to Islam in the 18th century. As the Russian Empire stormed the North Caucasus a century later, 'Circassians' – an etic term of disputed origin – came to design these various people. It was a brutal conquest. The Caucasus simultaneously existed as an imagined romantic frontier and a settler-colonial laboratory that fuelled

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[1] Abkhazia is still a disputed territory. Its independence has only been recognised by a handful of countries including Russia (in 2008) and Syria (in 2018), making it a 'quasi-state' (Kolstø 2006) within the international order. The overall choice of terms referring to Abkhazia used here was made for the sake of brevity and ease of reading: they do not reflect a political statement on my part. It is the same for place-names, for which I have used the Abkhaz/Russian variants used by the repatriates.

Russia's modernising effort at empire. Hundreds of thousands of indigenous people were methodically killed, displaced and expelled to the Ottoman Empire in the process.

The Circassian diaspora eventually became a central actor in the late Ottoman era and the competing, at times contradictory and violent processes of modernisation that unfolded from the Balkans to the Hejaz. Some of the refugees from the Caucasus were settled in the Golan Heights, where many of them remained until Israeli occupation in 1967 forced them to relocate once more. In 2011, the Syrian Civil War erupted; as millions of Syrians were displaced, the government of Abkhazia provided for the resettlement of approximately five hundred Syrians of Circassian origin. This was not merely prompted by immediate events. For years, the government had, with modest success, invited the diaspora to 'repatriate' to their ancestral homeland.[2] And then, suddenly, the Arab Spring's shockwaves rippled to the shores of a disputed statelet in the Caucasus.

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After my first meeting with the repatriates, I returned for fieldwork in 2015 and 2017. During these visits, I made interviews, shot footage and played hide and seek in Abkhazia's bullet-riddled ruins. This research period was fuelled by an interest in migration, nation-building and boundary-work. Retrospectively, the questions guiding these field trips could be linked to tenuous nation-building (Bryant 2021; Navaro Yashin 2012), 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1991), the 'in-betweenness' inherent

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[2] According to their own figures around four thousand repatriates have moved to Abkhazia, with over ten thousand having received official papers. (While probably inflated, these numbers cannot be independently verified.)

to diasporic populations (Bhabha 1994) or multi-generational trauma and postcolonial ruination (Stoler 2013) for I, like many others, found the ruins of Abkhazia fascinating and even more so the way they mirrored the drone-shot ruins of Syrian cities. I did not entirely forego these questions when I picked up the research a few years later; they inform much of the central section of this thesis. Yet is only relatively late that I started reflecting on the concept of repatriation itself. The idea is premised on a seemingly clear-cut premise: a rightful return to one's ancestral home, mediated through citizenship. Yet the more I dissected it, the more its apparent self-evidence was undone by the returnees' trajectory.

'The categorised are themselves chronic categorisers' Brubaker and his colleagues note (2004: 35); as such, we had been discussing categories and ways of naming with Manal, one of my main informants, when she suddenly said '*I like being a repatriate. It's nice, it's really nice. To be back.* 'Repatriate' is the official term, the one used by the Комитет по репатриации, short for The State Committee of the Republic of Abkhazia for Repatriation[3]; it is also used by most locals and my informants themselves. But for all its officialness, it is not a relevant category in international law; domestically, many of the social provisions envisaged by the Law on Repatriation have not been maintained. It is the indeterminacy of the term 'repatriate' that seemed to appeal to Manal, the way it non-bindingly evoked return and homeland. Or perhaps, more precisely: the act of return, the possibility of a homeland.

'Repatriate' brings together three different forms of membership: citizen, diaspora and indigenous. Put them together and you've got members of a diaspora who receive a nation-state's citizenship by virtue of their indigeneity. Yet, as soon as

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[3] Indicated subsequently as the Committee for Repatriation.

one starts disaggregating these terms, a much more complex, nuanced image emerge. First, the repatriates are not only given citizenship, but their presence is essential to the making of an Abkhaz people, that is, the core of the local nation-building project. Yet, unsurprisingly – after 150 years of exile – most repatriates have a different socio-cultural baggage than most of the Abkhaz population, which, moreover, has little capacity to integrate them into its body politics. Second: repatriation itself is made possible by a claim to indigeneity by members of the diaspora. Yet it is only very late that a seemingly evident fact dawned upon me: while many of the repatriates had some Abkhaz ascendancy – a few even had parents or grandparents who still spoke the language – most of them traced their origins further north, in regions belonging to present-day Russia. In other words, the claim to indigeneity sustaining the whole process cannot be circumscribed within the Abkhaz state's aspirations; moreover, the repatriates' claims towards a homeland were not linked to a clearly delineated territory.

My thesis coils around these axes. In doing so, I explore how repatriates' encounters with a nation-state in-the-making that claims to be 'theirs' but is 'not quite their own' unsettles the link between indigeneity, diaspora and citizenship. What practices and forms of citizenship does the encounter between the repatriates and the Abkhaz state project reveal? If a nation-state cannot 'solve' a diaspora's return – do displaced people end up displacing the putative homeland too?

Given the limitations imposed by this work's format – as well as the unfortunate way in which fieldwork planned for 2023 has unfolded – some of the research's thrust remain rather aspirational for the time being. But I hope this piece can do more than simply recount an idiosyncratic group's unique trajectory, that it can contribute to a wider interdisciplinary and methodological effort which seeks to recognise a variety of

diasporas, globalisations and transnational identities; that the approach guiding it can help recognise the dynamics within other diasporic trajectories and nation-building projects. My account has sought to remain fluid throughout, in order to account for my subject's mobility, imperial quicksand, the indeterminacy of a *'sloppily-built state'* (Bryant 2021). Nods towards longue-durée, history – but also the contingent and aleatory nature of travel – hopefully give a frame expansive enough to carry these entanglements to their destination.

On the shores of the Black Sea, among ruins overgrown with kudzu and ivy, tea fields gone rogue, unending rows of mandarin trees, homelands grow too, go to seed, travel.

ON EXISTING LITERATURE AND STRUCTURE

'History doesn't tell our names. We are just unknown persons for history' said Nadeer. *'You mean the Circassians* ?' I asked. '*Yes. We're just unknown persons for history'* he repeated. And yet, I couldn't make a step in my fieldwork, my interviews or research without bumping into history. Just as many of my informants framed their destiny (Eliott and Mennin 2018) and aspirations in historical terms, in the near-decade that has elapsed since my first meeting with repatriates, I also realised it was quite impossible to get across the research's most basic questions without doing so myself. History, yes – but of what kind?

Much of the scholarship concerned with Abkhazia has focused on the 1992-93 Georgian-Abkhaz war and its repercussions (Shesterinina 2021; De Waal 2019; Hille 2010), whether in tracing the situation of Georgians refugees displaced from Abkhazia, memory politics, or approaching the area as a 'frozen conflict' tinged by cold-war era geopolitics, orientalising and the *'sanctioned ignorance'* (Parvulescu and Boatca 2022: 13) that defines much of the scholarly gaze on Eastern Europe. The typical framing of Abkhazia as a 'failed state' usually fails to address the long-term processes that led to its present situation, while discourses underlining its 'exceptionalism' overlooks the ways it partakes in global dynamics. All this is compounded by the inherent difficulty to shoehorn the Caucasus into an East/West dichotomy and its own daunting, multi-faceted complexity.

The Circassian diaspora has been studied from a variety of perspectives and in a variety of contexts (Jaimoukha 2001; Zhemukhov 2012) – but most of this scholarship has focused on their situation in Turkey (e.g. Besleney 2014; Kaya 2005) and only a few authors such as Seteney Shami and Vladimir Hamed-Troyanski have developed genuinely original frameworks for their research. The specific case of

Syrian Circassian repatriates to Abkhazia has, to my knowledge, been only the object of scant journalistic attention and an MA thesis (Abaza 2017). Post-2011 Syrian Circassian repatriation to Russia has also only recently become the focus of scholarly attention (Korotayev et al., 2022). Given the lack of research on my subject, I have turned to case studies from other parts of the world, ranging from Eastern Europe to Central Asia and the Indian Ocean.[4] While there is an inherent risk in adopting terms and theories that have emerged from specific histories and locales, I believe the ones I adopt can prove themselves to be 'portable' (Polit and Beck, 2010) enough.

I address the question of history in the first section through a series of vignettes that introduce the Caucasus, the Circassians and Abkhazia. Much of the perspective informing this (and the following) sections seeks to push against entrenched methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002); as such, my readings are informed by works revealing transregional claims to sovereignty (Ho 2004, 2006, 2014, 2017), hybrid territorial formations (Amer and Doyle 2015; Boatca and Parvulescu 2022; Doyle 2020), shifting modalities of migration (Çağlar 2016; Hansen and Stepputat 2005; Siegelbaum and Moch 2016) and overlooked mobilities and diasporas in imperial Russia (Randolph and Avrutin 2012; Kane 2020), the Ottoman Empire (Kasaba 2009), the Soviet Union (Hirsch 2006; Scott 2016) and post-Soviet Eurasia (Brubaker 1994; Hagen 2004) with a specific emphasis on the Caucasus (Grant and Yalcin-Heckmann 2007; Smith 2008).

The next section explores the repatriates' situation through the prism of citizenship. It takes the basic fact of repatriation – offering citizenship – and measures

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[4] There are obvious parallels with Zionist Aliyah, but also with the repatriation of Volga Germans or Pontic Greeks (in a criss-crossing of fates, around a thousand Abkhaz Greeks were rescued during the 92-93 War by the Greek Navy).

how the actual experiences of its recipients play out in relation to the purported aims of the Committee for Repatriation. Centring my interviewees' testimonies, I rely on an expended notion of citizenship to better frame how an 'actually existing citizenship' functions in practice. Underlining the repatriates' boundary-making practices and an understanding of citizenship as a *'domain of struggle'* (Isin 2012: 10) leads into the third chapter. Recognising that the nation-state scale is not expansive enough to properly understand their trajectory, I conclude the essay by sketching a wider framework against which to place their diasporic indigeneity and elusive search for a homeland.

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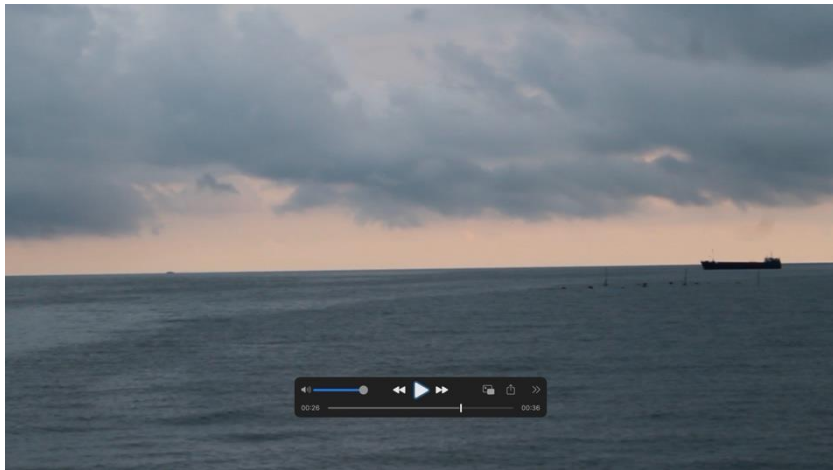
ON FIELDWORK AND METHODOLOGY

During my 2015 and 2017 stays in Abkhazia, I pursued what I then imagined as a blend of ethnographic research and experimental film-making, centring on the trajectory of the repatriates. In this context, I conducted some fifteen interviews with returnees.[5] Around half of my interviewees were young men; the others were of varying ages and gender.[6] I chatted with a few adolescents and had a few long talks with older repatriates, two having arrived in the 90s already. Wimmer rightfully calls attention to those individuals who are 'lost to the group' and inevitably drop out of studies devised along ethnic lines (Wimmer, 2009: 265) – I tried to address this as much as possible. Despite my efforts, I have been probably less successful in avoiding 'snowball sampling' (ibid).

Recorded and coded, these conversations form the backbone of much of the data used in this thesis. Most repatriates have had to rely on their English – most spoke English – in the process of arriving to Abkhazia, and nearly all of my interviews and conversations were conducted in English.[7] During this period, I also talked to countless locals about the repatriation process itself, Abkhazia's state-making aims, its place in the world; I talked to junior ministers, political activists, NGO workers, friends and families of friends. I was also involved in the working of local art space Sklad ('Depot') and, in winter 2017, even held an exhibition there on the topic of Abkhazia's destroyed state archives.

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[5] Names have been modified throughout.

[6] My own gender doubtless facilitated access to a certain subset of the population; just as my own cultural and class background facilitated rapport with certain interviewees with whom we shared common interests and experiences.

[7] My total lack of Arabic and the fact that my Russian was even more lacking than today doubtless impacted the quality of my finds.

Why interviews? Keeping in mind the iterative nature of question-making (Alford 1998), the potential pitfalls of in-depth interviews (Allmark et al. 2009) as well as the situated and relation nature of the researcher-interviewee rapport (Vasquez-Tokos, 2017) I still believe that it is the best method to collect both oral history and life stories. The conversations themselves were recorded, they mostly lasted from an hour to two and were marked by a *'conversational tone'* and *'detached concern'* (Hermanowicz 2002); touching many subjects, they addressed both my informants' individual trajectories and a wider exchange on community, place-making and history.

My interdisciplinary, multi-media work on the Syrian repatriates to Abkhazia never came about (even if I remained in touch with some of the repatriates I had met). But as I embarked on my studies at CEU, I took a fresh look at the material I had collected, the footage I shot, the transcripts I had. I re-coded my interviews and developed an active correspondence with Manal, one of my main informants. I was scheduled to spend a few weeks in Abkhazia in May 2023 for my fieldwork, but was turned back from the Georgian border for unstated – and seemingly inaccessible – reasons. I did record two additional online interviews in the following period, but by and large, this meant I had to fall back on the material I already had.

I would have asked different questions had I been able to go to Abkhazia in the spring; while the material I collected years ago and the questions that interest me now do not align perfectly, I have done my best to overlay them as much as possible. With all these caveats, I can hardly claim that the image I paint is an accurate account of the repatriates' experience as a whole. It hopes to be a faithful account of a moment in time; hopefully, the wider socio-historical backdrop I sketch anchors it beyond the anecdotal.

There are many things to keep in mind while writing a thesis – and particularly one whose field material can only be accessed through increasingly pixelized memories. In their riveting study of early 20th century Transylvania, Parvulescu and Boatca read the Romanian classic novel *Ion* as an '*an extended case study* [that] *allows us to place our theoretical arguments alongside the novel's narrative'* (2022: 11). On an incomparably more modest scale, I aim to do something of the sort with the repatriates' trajectory. In doing so, I have kept in mind their injunction not to treat the periphery *'as a source of data and a repository of myth, folklore, and indigenous art'* (Id 13). I have also kept in mind Engseng Ho's call to treat *'mobility… not so much a concept* [but] *as a method'* (Ho, 2017: 918); not to take any group – particularly ethnic ones – for granted (Brubaker 2006); to remember that anthropologists do have a knack for focusing '*on tragedy and suffering even as they emphasise the agency and unique subjectivities of migrant subjects'* (Ramsay 2020); that they – we – are '*inextricably caught up in the production and deployment of indigenous identities'* (Myers, 2002: 18).

And finally, I keep in mind a specific pause. A few months ago, mid-conversation – or perhaps even mid-sentence, mid-word – Manal paused. '*Hey'* she says. '*Even if I have difficulty understanding who I am. Sometimes, I wake up and feel at home here. Other days, I miss Syria.*' We pause. We discuss it. How can any researcher claim to say who she is when it changes day-to-day, depending on the weather, the news…a whim? Much of the following pages are taken up by flow. But hey, she said. Pauses are important too.

CHAPTER 1: MOBILE HISTORIES

About The Caucasus

Debates around the Caucasus' true extent, the identity of its 'rightful' rulers or the character of Caucasian indigeneity endure – often painfully – to this day. When asked, anthropologist Sergei Arutiunov quipped that the *'Caucasus can perhaps be defined as the land where every free man wore a cherkesska'*, a traditional male waistcoat (Demirdiirek 2009: 431). It is thus perhaps harldy surprising that no regional hegemon ever established effective rule over a territory spanning from the Black Sea's subtropical riviera to the Caspian hinterlands. Home to countless languages and ethnic subdividision, the '*Mountain of Tongues'* (Catford 1977) is also the cradle of some of the world's most ancient churches and different forms of Islam, from the sizeable Shia Azeri population in the South to various Sufi and Sunni currents in the North. (Animistic beliefs continue to mingle with each). Even when the Soviet Union held sway throughout the region, it was not ruled as a single or even cohesive unit. Administrative and political divisions criss-crossed it. Many of these eventually hardened; as in most regions of the global (semi-) periphery, the boundaries embraced by present-day nationalisms are more often than not the result of inter-imperial legacies and conflicts, erasure, history's quirks.

As a semi-periphery, much of the region's convulsions can be read in its relation to varying imperial cores and its place within a wider world-system (Parvulescu and Boatca 2022: 7sq). As such, struggles over seemingly disparate sources of power and income – ranging from the Circassian slave trade to oil exploitation or the development of tourism – all testify to local elites' efforts towards political and economic reproduction in a context of volatile core-periphery relations. Western powers have their own history

in the region (Shell and the Nobel company owed much of their early riches to the oil fields near Baku) but most of the gravitational field in the Caucasus was the effect of the pull of subaltern empires (Tlostanova 2012) such as Russia, Iran and the Ottomans, whose own adoption of modernity's practices were contradictory, hotly contested and then reproduced as a form of '*double colonisation'* (Tlostanova 2015) throughout their own peripheries and borderlands (Brower and Lazzerini 1997; Hagen 2004; Ludden 2011).

And yet, despite being routinely referred to as a 'crossroads' – or even the fabled meeting point between East and West – much of the existing ethnography of the Caucasus continues to operate along *'a paradigm of closure'* (Grant & Yal̦çın-Heckmann (2009) which emphasises insularity rather than hybridity and whose dichotomic worldview and hard borders are echoed today in over-simplified takes on decolonisation from Russia. The trajectory of the group under study pushes against precisely such closures[8]; by foregrounding mobility and exchange, its study can offer new angles to read history and re-draw pre-established geographical boundaries.

About The Circassians

Indigenous to the Caucasian Northwest, the Circassians – *Adyghe* in their own language – share a common cultural space with other Caucasian people such as the Avar or the Chechen, with whom they share the Nart epics (Hille, 2010: 12); their language and culture are considered to be the closest to the Abkhaz, their neighbours to the South (Hewitt 1999). Circassian's economic activity has been traditionally based

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[8] For example Hamed-Troyanski's ongoing research on the Circassian diaspora frames the North Caucasian world as *'part of the broader Russo-Ottoman Muslim world, which was sustained by the communication of Muslims across the Russo-Ottoman frontier through private correspondence, public debates over hijra, and a culture of rumours'* (2018: 49).

on pastoralism and farming. Their highly hierarchical societies – slavery existed well into the 19th century – were paralleled by relatively horizontal power-sharing arrangements for nobles, semi-codified through the *Khabze*, an unwritten moral code (Jaimoukha 2001: 172-89). Their growing adoption of Islam and increased trade with the Ottoman Empire were doubtless accelerated by Russian incursion into their homeland, starting in the late 18th century (Kreiten, 2009: 216). While mutually reinforcing, these were nonetheless highly asymmetrical trends; faced with an increasingly potent centralised state, the Circassians were a loose federation of people that never emerged as a united polity.

An inter-imperial space, the Caucasus became an increasingly contested borderland throughout the 19th century, with Russian expansion marking it as a key battleground in its own state-building project. Running some fifty years from the late 1810s onwards, the Russian Empire's Caucasian Wars were a long, protracted affair, running against the backdrop of the Russo-Ottoman War (1828-29), the Crimean War (1853-56) and continuous hostilities with Qajar Iran. As most imperial expansions, it followed different, at times, contradictory aims – and as such relied on a variety of means. The Kingdom of Georgia, for instance, had been annexed without bloodshed already back in 1801, but the idea of large-scale ethnic cleansing in the North Caucasus was floated as early as the 1850s. Guerrilla warfare and mass departures continued in waves until the 1870s, well after the main thrust of North Caucasian resistance had been defeated.

Circassians were often mythologised as a barbarian, freedom-loving others both by Russians – think Pushkin's famed *Prisoner of the Caucasus* – and Westerners alike; an eccentric Brit diplomat, David Urquhart, even claimed to have designed their flag in use to this day (Manning 2009). Ideological and cultural justifications for the

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expansion oscillated between the idea of a 'natural' conquest – the same rhetoric that accompanied the takeover of much of Central Asia – and a logic of improvement and modern governmentality as noted by Irma Kreiten (2009). In contrast to historians who underline the near-teleological continuity in Russian imperial conquest's brutality, she frames the conquest's harshness as the result of accumulative radicalisation that emerged amidst the chaotic realities of war and policy-making in a wider context of societal transformation (the modernising period of the Great Reforms). Either way, there is no doubt that the ruthlessness was linked to the highest spheres of power. By 1864, under the aegis of 'final subjugation' of the Western Caucasus, half a million (Hille 2010:50), 1.5 million (Shami 1998: 623) or even possibly 2 million (Kreiten 2009: 222) Circassians had been uprooted in a deliberate campaign led by the Tsar's brother. Most of them were resettled to the Ottoman Empire.[9] Up to half of them perished in the process of resettlement.

With effects rippling up to this day, the conquest's brutality cannot be downplayed. Yet a more granular attention to the period that follows testifies that Russian policy towards these 'frontier Muslims' was more nuanced than often portrayed. A shift in policy following the 1870s saw Russian authorities scramble to prevent large-scale emigration in a bid to stabilise their own southern borders, even allowing tens of thousands of Caucasian Muslims to return to their homelands. The Russian imperial social contract (see in particular Burbank et al. 2007) codified an often minute set of rights and obligations ascribed to specific groups which – albeit hardly liberatory – also recognised different cultural practices and forms of self-government. Recent works such as Eileen Kane's *Russian Hajj* (2015) also retrace

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[9] Despite rumours persisting to this day about an official agreement between the Russian and Ottoman empires to exchange their respective Christian and Muslim populations, there is little historical evidence towards any kind of formal agreement (Hamed-Troyansky 2018: 486). Russian authorities claimed that most of the expelled Caucasians were pilgrims en route to Holy Sites.

how Tsarist authorities increased the mobility of their own Muslim population in an increasingly mobile world.

Despite widespread displacement, many North Caucasian Muslims were able to remain in Tsarist Russia, and later the USSR. The Cold War-era notion that the eruption of national movements in the 80s was the result of long-repressed, 'natural' sentiments (Suny 1993) in the face of a system inherently hostile to them remains widespread to this day – even though scholarship of the past decades has demonstratively documented a different reality. While recognising the regular swings between indigenisation (*korenizatsia*) and Russification throughout the Soviet Era (Funch Hansen 2020: 16, Brubaker, 1996), Brubaker described the Soviet state-sponsored institutionalisation of nationalities *'unprecedented and unparalleled'* (Brubaker 1994: 49). The role of the USSR, this *'affirmative action empire'* – the provocative title of Terry Martin's book (2001) – in shaping specific national sentiments (and cultural practices which were enshrined as 'national' characteristics) was significant. Nationalities were introduced in internal passports as early as 1932 and remained a key feature of the system throughout. In turn, the 'developed/backward' classification that guided nationalities policy played a determining role (Abashin and Jenks 2015: 372), particularly as it coincided, under Stalin, with the consolidation of titular ethnic groups' sway in SSRs' at the expense of other groups (Shnirelman 2006: 73). In Georgia, this meant that Georgians – themselves the amalgamation of different people – were able to consolidate their position vis à vis other populations such as the Abkhaz, Ossetians, Armenians or Ajarians who, for a variety of reasons, were less integrated into nation-building processes enabled by the Soviet ethno-federalist system (Broers 2004; Pelkmans 2006). The Circassians in the USSR thus found

themselves not only classified as four different national groups – Adyghe, Cherkess, Kabardians and Shapsug – (Shami 1998) but also scattered over different regional units, which later carried into the Russian Federation; Adyghea, Karachay–Cherkessia and Kabardino–Balkaria.

The Circassians remained a significant minority in all of these regions, but this 'divide and rule' tactic ensured their ongoing difficulty in self-organising and facilitated cracks among their local elites after the change of regime. Musa Shanibov – the remarkable protagonist of Giorgi Derlugian's *Bourdieu's Secret Admirer in the Caucasus (*2005) – did co-found a revived Caucasian Mountain People Confederation[10] which played a determining role in the Georgian-Abkhaz War, but the organisation was effectively disbanded after the First Chechen War. Following the chaos of the 90s, renewed central control following Putin's consolidation of power has also meant opportunities to learn indigenous languages have been significantly reduced these past years (Funch Hansen, 2020: 16). For many Circassian activists, the Sochi Olympics came to represent a tragic continuity between imperial and present-day oppression (Catic 2015; Petersson and Vamling 2016) since Krasnaya Polyana – where much of Olympic infrastructure was erected – is the site of the largest massacre of Circassians by Russian forces during the 1860s War. While Circassian associations (and even a 'World Congress') has existed for the past decades, large-scale return to the homeland has not materialised. Reasons, as always, are multiple: the reluctance of Russian and local authorities to facilitate immigration, the overall high level of integration of diasporas into their host societies, a lack of interest from international players have all played a role.

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[10] The name refers to a short-lived Pan-Caucasian polity that declared independence in 1918. It was recognised by Turkey before being subsumed by the USSR (Hille 2010: 55sq).
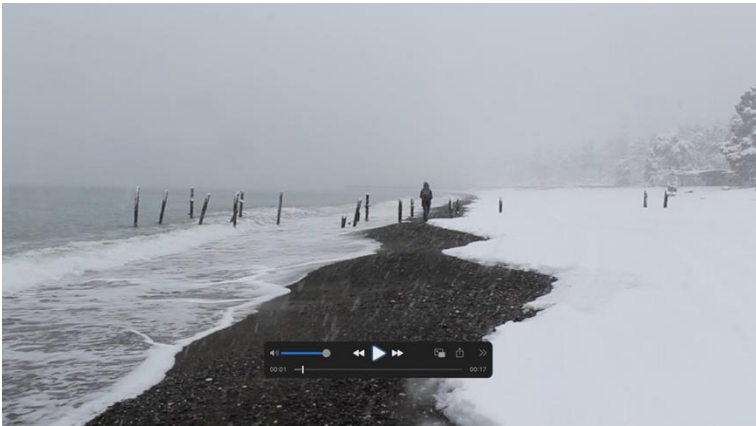
About The Circassian Diaspora

Known as *Muhajirs*, Muslim refugees from the Caucasian Wars – mostly Circassians, but also other people such as the Abkhaz, Chechens or Ingush – were resettled throughout the Ottoman Empire, from the Balkans to Arabia. The first group to (re)settle modern Amman where Shapshugh Circassians, who built their homes amidst the ruins of the Roman theatre (Hamed-Troyansky 2017: 609). Central and Western Anatolia counts upwards of 600 Circassian villages (Hille 2010: 50). As early as 1867, Circassian refugees in Kosovo attempted to return to their Caucasian homeland, but were prevented by Ottoman authorities (Hamed-Troyansky, 2018: 451) – in a twist of history, their descendants are the only members of the Circassian diaspora who were resettled through Russian state efforts, in the midst of the 1999 Kosovo War.

The outstanding number of refugees did place a huge burden on the Ottoman state and fuelled intercommunal conflicts over land, but it also contributed to the expansion of state capacity, ushering in new forms of real estate regimes (Hamed-Troyansky, 2017: 605), the rise of new elites both in villages and rapidly expanding urban centres, as well as militarised control in the Empire's peripheries. Owing to their reputation as fierce fighters, many Circassians were recruited by the state into armed forces in a context of increasing militarisation and ongoing states of emergency. The late Ottoman period that saw millions of Muslim refugees arrive into the Empire was also the stage of the mass murder of Ottoman Christians and the displacement of Jewish Populations. Many of these atrocities did not follow pre-determined ethnic lines, but nationalistic sentiments came to play an increasingly preeminent role in the upheavals that unravelled along these inter-imperial fault lines. The role of the Circassians in these processes was complex; while they played a preeminent role in

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the late Ottoman period and the establishment of the Turkish Republic, the Turkish government closed down all Circassian organizations as early as 1923 (Doğan 2010: 13). Despite such tensions, Circassians have often been upheld as a 'model minority' in Turkey – often in contrast to Kurdish populations – and have, by now, mostly blended in with the majority population. Certain contemporary estimates put the number of Turkish of Circassian origin from 2 up to 7 million (Çelikpala 2006).

The Circassian population in the Golan Heights – at the time part of the Ottoman *vilayet* of Syria – was swelled by successive waves of Caucasian refugees. '*We – when I say 'we', I mean my grandfather and the rest of his folk – did not choose the Golan Heights. The Turkish administration moved us there. For the sole purpose of protecting the pilgrims going to Mecca'* one of the old older repatriates narrated. Many Circassians were indeed employed in the *Zaptiye* (Gendarmerie) that protected the Hejaz Railway. Throughout their century in the Golan, the Circassians were often engaged in conflicts over land, mainly with the local Druze populations (Hamed-Troyansky, 2018: 277), all the while they were gradually integrated into the French colonial and then Syrian state apparatus (Adamczyk and Jomma 2021; Benslama-Dabdoub 2021). The Heights were annexed by Israel during the 6-Day War, an illegal – and ongoing – annexation that resulted in the Circassian being expelled again. Memories regarding the Israeli occupation differed slightly; Hasan said that '*Israelis showed that they did not want people to stay there… They started to kill people in every village and proved staying there was impossible'*, while John, an older repatriate, claimed to have stayed four days into the occupation and even met a surprised Israeli officer who asked him why everyone had left. But all agree that the expulsion from the Golan *'changed the whole lifestyle'*. Even if some refugees were resettled in villages close to the ceasefire line, most moved to Damascus and other urban centres. The

displacement accelerated the gradual dilution of what had been tightly-knit communities until then. While testimonies from and regarding the older generations indicate that Arabic was hardly spoken in the Golan, John claimed that *'85 %-90 % of the people born after 1967 don't speak Circassian language anymore.'* Yet, this is also the moment when contact between the Caucasus and Circassian communities in Jordan and particularly (Soviet-allied) Syria were initiated (Shami 1998, 2001). A handful even started to return.

Numbering up to a hundred thousand (Korotayev et al. 2022: 3), the Syrian Circassian population was, by all accounts, generally well-integrated into Syrian society. Some informants did underline how they *'kept to their own circles'* and others continued to live in small rural settlements, but many members of the community occupied high-placed positions within the Ba'athist regime; the Assads perpetuated the Ottoman and French policy of placing minority members at key military posts. Some informants had officers as their relatives, others worked in state administration. The Syrian Civil War – death toll and devastation: unfathomable – divided the Circassian community in half. Most of my informants did not disclose their political leanings (I did not press). They all spoke of the horrors of war. Nadeer talked at length about his trauma – he had worked for the Red Crescent – and then said suddenly '*If I hear any new news about my village or Syria, I actually don't care anymore. I feel more comfortable when I don't think about the past years.'*

Many Syrian Circassians were caught up in the waves of displacement that pushed millions of Syrians into neighbouring countries, in refugee camps, into dinghies flung at the Aegean Sea. Despite Moscow's support for the Assad regime, only about two thousand Syrians were officially allowed to seek refuge in present-day Russia

(Korotayev et al. 2022). But even *as 'lots of bullets in the wall, broken windows',* and
'*friends who died*' riddled their every-days, probably few expected they would find
themselves in Abkhazia within a few days.

About Abkhazia

Just as its neighbours, Abkhazia was caught up in the 19ᵗʰ century Russian takeover of the Caucasus, but little predestined it to the singular trajectory it has had in the past decades. Culturally closer to the Circassians, Abkhaz were nevertheless associated with various Georgian states for the past millennium; the exact nature of medieval fiefdoms, treaties and associations – Was this prince an ethnic Abkhaz? Was his mother Georgian? – continues to be hotly debated today by nationalists on both sides. In the wake of the Russian annexation of the Kingdom of Georgia, Abkhazia became a protectorate of the Russian Empire, until it was eventually incorporated as a Russian province in 1864. Russian, German, Jewish, Greek – and even Estonian – people flocked into the coast at the time, towards what was already a highly multicultural region and vaunted touristic destination. (To this day, Abkhazia brings to the mind of millions the image of an idyllic shoreline, with persimmon and palm trees.) As the Romanovs were overthrown and Russia descended into Civil War, Abkhazia's situation changed numerous times; eventually, the SSR Abkhazia was proclaimed before Soviet troops put down Menshevik Georgia (For accounts on the period, see Broers 2004; Hille 2010:). It is only a decade late, under Stalin, that the Abkhaz Republic was downgraded to an autonomous republic within the Georgian SSR. Stalinist collectivisation was staved off as much as possible by local leader Nestor Lakoba (Hille, 2010: 126), but these years also saw a considerable influx of State-sponsored Georgian population (another hotly debated issue). By 1989, ethnic Abkhaz only formed less than 20 % of the republic. Amidst growing Georgian nationalism and an increasingly weakened Soviet core, the fear that the Abkhaz would end up like the Ubykh (a Circassian tribe who had gone extinct following the Russian conquest) was seized upon by local elites. Rising tension erupted in political disputes before all-out

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war broke out. The New Union treaty (basically a re-forming of the USSR) was broadly approved by the Abkhaz population, most of whom boycotted the referendum of Georgian independence in March 1991. Georgian troops under ultra-nationalist president Gamsakhurdia invaded Abkhazia in August 1992. The war was brutal, with atrocities committed both by Georgian troops and Abkhazian forces buoyed by the support of Shanibov's North Caucasian volunteers. The Abkhaz eventually prevailed, with most of the ethnic Georgian population fleeing or being forcibly expulsed (with the exception of Mingrelians in the South). Within a few months, a fragile ethnic mosaic and rich cultural heritage had been all but destroyed (De Waal 2018). Proposals for a federal union with Georgia were rejected by Tbilisi repeatedly during the 90s; it is only in late 1999 that a referendum regarding Abkhazia's independence was passed locally. While today Abkhazia is widely portrayed as a Russian pawn, Yeltsin's government remained largely noncommittal during the fighting (Zhemukhov 2012). Abkhazia remained under blockade from all sides until the ascent of Putin in 2000, with Russia (and a handful of other states) recognising its independence in 2008, in the aftermath of the war around South-Ossetia.

Despite the de facto disenfranchisement of large sections of the population – out of a population of roughly 250 thousand, only half are Abkhaz and thus eligible to vote – Abkhazia has nevertheless a democratic tradition of its own (Kopeček Vincenc, Hoch Tomáš, and Baar Vladimír 2016) with regular elections and a constitution modelled on the Czech one. In the past decade, the post-independence enthusiasm has nevertheless given way to widespread scepticism and apathy, amidst a deteriorating economic situation, corruption, the curtailing of the civil sphere and rampant impunity; even the civic enthusiasm I witnessed during my first visit in 2014 following the ouster of then-PM Ankvab has been dilapidated. Most houses destroyed

in the fighting thirty years ago still stand half-ruined. Despite being over-dependent on Russian tourism, direct support and remittances, patron-client relations remain strained (Kolstø 2020). Few see bright prospects: in recent years, Abkhazia has hit the headlines most often for political factions' routinely storming the parliament in an effort to gain the upper hand in endless power struggles; there are also regular reports about the electric grid buckling under strain from illegal crypto farms.

This, then, is the stage for return.

CHAPTER 2: UNSTABLE CITIZENSHIP

To enter Abkhazia from the south, you must cross the checkpoint at the river Engur. From the nearby Georgian city of Zugdidi, a taxi or a *marshutka* leaves you by a small bus shelter on the roadside. A huge Georgian flag flaps in the wind. Passports are to be shown to the soldiers to the left. They check, you wait, you pass (in recent years, I've heard, you've had to wait longer and longer). Some hitch a ride on a horse-cart, you can see old ladies and old men sitting on horse-carts, bags, many bags nestled at their feet. You cross the bridge on foot; there are less potholes now that it's been repaired, some international aid had trickled in. Below, the water meanders, coiling lazy in the shallows, river islands full of white stones, cows grazing in the mud. There are two checkpoints on the other side: Russian and Abkhaz. A gigantic Abkhaz flag flaps in the wind. You stand in line. Others besides you – mainly the old women and men who had been riding in the horse-carts – carry passports in their hands. I was surprised the first time I stood in line with them: many of them were Soviet.

The question of passports regularly resurfaces when it comes to Abkhazia. In the early 2000s, the first wave of 'passportisation' occurred as the Russian administration fast-tracked Russian citizenship applications for locals. Tbilisi cried foul play over what was perceived as a form of creeping annexation even before Russia had formally recognised Abkhazia's independence. A decade later, the Abkhaz Committee For Repatriation offered Syrian Circassians Abkhaz passports as part of their drive to bring the diaspora 'home'. But the repatriates did not receive Russian papers; some told me that in the build-up to the 2014 Sochi Games – perhaps out of fear of Circassian protests or 'terrorism' – they were not allowed to cross into Russia. One informant called it a *'prison'* and, in a subsequent email, his eventual move from Abkhazia a

'prison break'. Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the EU parliament voted to suspend the validity of Russian documents issued in Eastern Ukraine, South-Ossetia and Abkhazia. And then, those Soviet passports shown at the checkpoint by Mingrelians living in Abkhazia's south; documents which have expired long ago and whose validity is not legally sanctioned, but which were still accepted as a form of identification at the (self-proclaimed, de facto) border.

Each of these examples is the result of different dynamics, of a wider interplay of forces, of geographies that go beyond any nation state's boundedness. But what each of them shows is that the straightforward, and often seemingly self-evident relation between citizenship, state and nationality breaks down as soon as one scratches the surface. As illustrated by the example of the Soviet passports, the actual practice and performance of citizenship can reveal cracks in spaces such as borders, which are central to the state's claim to sovereignty. Through the example of the repatriates, this chapter explores the spaces opened up by precisely such fissures.

New Citizens For A New State

The <u>Committee for Repatriation</u> was officially founded in 1993, as the war between Georgian and Abkhaz forces was still raging, with the goal of *'strengthening and developing relations between the Republic of Abkhazia and the Abkhaz (Abaza) diaspora abroad and to provide assistance to repatriates.'* Even though it was the formalisation of an already ongoing process – the war had become a common cause for many North Caucasians both in Russia and worldwide – it is significant that this happened in the midst of what was largely perceived as a struggle for life; in turn, the law on repatriation was enshrined in 1998, in a period when Abkhazia was still under blockade and with its own survival still very much at stake. In the interval since then, repatriation has been officially addressed as a question of utmost importance; then-Abkhaz President Raul Khadzimba was <u>quoted in 2018</u> as saying '*The unity of our people, which was divided by a great historical tragedy, the return of compatriots home, the preservation of the Abkhaz people, our culture and language should be the highest national idea*.' (Dodgy translation aside) how and why did repatriation became a core part of the Abkhaz nation-building project? Small-scale migration to Abkhazia does exist and – in addition to the Mingrelians in the South – there are sizeable Russian and Armenian populations. Yet, none of these people have been integrated into the Abkhaz state-building project. Profoundly ethnonationalist, both its discourse and practice differs from the multicultural model professed in Rojava or the non-ethnicity-based Transnistria regime (to take two other quas-states). In a context of strife and international isolation, making a plea to the diaspora to 'come home' seems reasonable enough, particularly when a very concrete fear of extinction had become such an essential component of the collective experience. Continued isolation,

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emigration and overall stagnation have continued in the subsequent years, leading to an ongoing *'siege mentality'* (in the words of some repatriates). In the absence of effective state-building – one which would be capable of halting the demographic downturn – the promise of diasporic renewal has persisted, and so has the hope of economic possibilities sparked by diasporic return.[11] Finally, while diasporas have existed since millennia and at least since the 19th century have played a determining role in the emergence of nationalisms, ever since the 80s, there has been an uptick in diasporic activism and imagination (Brah 1996; Clifford 1994; Tölölyan 2000). This wider, global context – as well as the example of Israel or, closer-by, Nagorno-Karabakh with its diaspora-fuelled economy – have doubtless influenced decision-makers in Sukhum, the capital.

In Abkhazia, one finds a new state in need of new citizens. Step in the Committee for Repatriation; the Syrian War happens; descendants of refugees from the 19th century Caucasian Wars are given citizenship; alongside pan-Caucasian solidarity, there's also a state to build and citizens to have. Straightforward enough…but is this also how the repatriates talked about it?

Why Did *You Return*

Why did you return? Would inevitably pop up in our conversations, either because I'd ask (of course I did) or because my informants would start talking about it unprompted, and all I'd have to do was to follow up*, so* that *is the reason you've returned?* That reason would be more varied than what I could've initially expected, there were quite a few reasons overall, and at times even quite a few reasons given by one single

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[11] While businesses have been established by, predominantly, Turkish members of the diaspora, this has hardly fulfilled its promise.

person, narratives darting here-and-there, never quite gaining a sure foothold. Perhaps the most widespread answer – we will return to it in the final section – would be something along the lines of wanting to see and experience the Caucasus for themselves.[12] But other reasons varied, from following their families or a bride to '*just live in peace and faraway from the Arabs'.* Nearly all decisions appear to have been made with a degree of collective decision-making, involving extended families or partners.

Many underlined that their decision to come to Abkhazia was temporary, a place to weather out the worst of the war. Malak said that *'We only brought winter clothes… But after our arrival here, things got worse. Our main goal was not to stay here, but we're still here since then*.' Like her, many had been 'here since then' and were trying to make the best of it, even though her friend Sonia corrected me when I asked, saying *'in fact, I don't know if we decided to stay here. So far, I don't know. We decided not to go back. But to stay here… that's still a big question.'* News (and rumours) of other Circassians having found refuge in Abkhazia also appear to have played an important role in the decision of many repatriates*: 'When we heard that people were coming here and everything was good for them, we decided to come'* – just as the presence, in many cases, of a distant relative who had already repatriated earlier: '*We had my two uncles here, so we asked about the situation and knew everything.'* Others' families had visited earlier, before the war, and this had prepared them to the situation in Abkhazia – *'I didn't expect a lot, so I wasn't shocked, I didn't*

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[12] Ynal gave two reasons: *'first, to know what the Caucasus is. Second, to find fossils from the Jurassic Age here, there are lots of dinosaur fossils*.'

expect sky-high buildings' said Kuba – in contrast to those who only had a limited idea of what Abkhazia was and who upon arrival were, often, shocked and surprised.

The immediate reason behind most of my interviewees' decision to resettle was, predictably, the Syrian War: '*I just wanted to be far away from war'* said Kareem, while others emphasised that it was *the 'safest choice amongst all choices Syrians had'.* Kuba even used this danger to his advantage, threatening to enlist in the army if his father would not allow him to join his fiancée in Sukhum. The reality of military service conditioned many of my male interlocutors' trajectories, as Aliy testified: *'I got called to the military reserve (I did my service before the crisis started). I decided that I didn't want to be part of this and that I had to leave'.* Some were more candid than others: '*I had no chance to go anywhere else*' or *'we didn't feel or imagine that one day we were gonna come back here. It's just war that made us think about* it' said Larissa.

I asked Manal why her parents had decided to go to Abkhazia rather than Nalchik or Maykob, in Russian Circassia. She mentioned the climate, nature. The possibility of her father to work in Abkhazia, to be '*part of something great than in Nalchik'.* And, crucially, the fact that the government was making it much easier. She was the only one to mention this, to single out the Repatriation Committee's work in such a way – even though it doubtless played an important role in the others' decisions as well. The importance of receiving a passport cannot be understated: Seteney Shami's fieldwork among repatriates to Russia in the 90s shows how (lack of) passports was one of the main issues they encountered following their arrival (Shami 1998: 639),

The point of grouping these testimonies together is not to expose the failure of the repatriation programme's aims. Underlining that the choices of most refugees

fleeing from war were not guided by patriotic feelings is hardly a reveal: '*all the Syrians here they're so immersed in their daily lives…that they cannot think of those patriotic feelings, like 'I have returned to my homeland, I am glad and proud of it'. People have to survive'* said Malak. I also did meet older repatriates whose return seemed much closer linked to patriotic feelings, and, crucially, nearly-all my informants spoke unequivocally about *return*; most spoke of a *homeland*. What these testimonies show, however, is that the link between offering citizenship and nation-building is not all that linear or clear-cut, that an account of the intersection between Abkhaz-state building and the repatriates' trajectory warrants an expanded understanding of citizenship itself.

- Actually, it reminds me of my village.

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Unfinished Citizenship?

No doubt 'passportisation' has real-life consequences, not least in the scaffolding it lends to various political narratives or – in the case of the repatriates – a genuine avenue out of war. But the frenzy it elicits does seem to rely on a somewhat literal acceptation of the state's claim to *'nominate* [new subjects] *into existence'* (Brubaker 2009: 33). The notion that a given passport's recipients emerge as a fully-formed new citizens, as purposeful (or worse) actors of a reified state builds on a universal, abstracted approach to citizenship which emphasises its legal dimensions and the role played by the state apparatus (Çağlar 2015: 637) and which, despite its obvious shortcomings, continues to determine the prevailing doxa. As if the 18th century view of citizens as bearers of a nation's sovereignty (Hansen and Stepputat, 2005: 36) had not been challenged by the heyday of globalisation and the emergence of what Aihwa Ong has dubbed '*graduated sovereignty'* (1999). One doesn't need to fall into an unconditional embrace of a frictionless or flat world (from Appadurai to Latour by way of Bauman) to recognise alongside Engin Isin that '*it is no longer adequate (if it ever was) to think of states as 'containers' of citizens as its members'* (2009: 370) – a maxim true for state actors and academics alike. But if citizenship is not purely the marker of affiliation to a state or state-made bordering, how can we approach it? And how can the repatriates' case inform our understanding of citizenship at large?

In the past decades, concern with citizenship has reached beyond the confines of studies of migration and state-building to be embraced by a variety of academic areas, ranging from various socio-anthropological subfields to urban studies, where it has served as both entry point and object through which to investigate the struggles and developments of an increasingly urbanised world. For instance, in his urban sociology

of Brazil, James Holston sets out to make '*citizenship strange'*– both *'unsettled and unsettling'* (Holston 2009: 4sq); to do so, he traces the way *'insurgent citizenship'* emerges from urban struggles, pitting it against a notion of '*entrenched citizenship'*. In turn, much of Veena Das' work dissects who is included into the body politics by expanding Fassin's inquiry into the *'politics of life'* (2012); her ethnography of the urban poor living on the outskirts of New Delhi applies the term '*incremental citizenship'* to describe the piecemeal struggle wherein a form of citizenship is gradually established through the formalisation of illegal settlements. While state strictures can by no means be dismissed, anthropology's approach to citizenship has rather emphasised horizontality in lieu of vertical aspects, highlighting the everyday practices (Çağlar, 2015: 640), affects and representations that constitute 'actually existing citizenship' and conceptualising it as an enabler of participation in social life and a '*venue for sociability'* (ibid). In her roving studies of citizenship, Ensin weaves together the rarely-compared claims and 'acts' of widely different groups (ranging from climate activists to the sans-papiers) in order to challenge the prevailing, state-centric notions of citizenship.

What these approaches have in common is their understanding of citizenship as contingent and unstable – simultaneously terrains and objects of contestation. Manifest in urban spaces (ranging from enclaves and informal areas to polities such as Abkhazia), it is encoded in the everyday practices of both official figures and citizens in-the-making. Constitutive of modernity and of high modernist practices, citizenship's malleability also challenges modernity's tenets and institutions. Revealing the crucial role of informality in all areas of governance – remember the Soviet passports shown to border guards – these perspectives invite us to pay attention to the fluid

infrastructures of citizenship, its unfinished nature, the in-betweenness of the claims and acts associated with it.

On paper, the repatriation procedure in Abkhazia involves an expanded understanding of citizenship, one that does not limit itself to the awarding of a passport, the formal transformation of a foreigner into a citizen. Per the law, repatriates to Abkhazia are officially afforded the 'repatriate' status for a period of five years, during which they receive state backing in the form of support for housing, as well as access to higher education (the law stipulates *'allocation of land'*, 'employment' and the possibility of *'training in new professions' a*s well – though in practice I have not heard of these occurring, or occurring on a significant scale). In a largely bankrupt state, these social measures, however meagre, do play significant a role in alleviating the difficulties of arrival – even if, according to some informants, a few locals were allegedly upset at what they saw as state expenditures made at their expense.[13]

Yet, when my interviews discussed the social aspect of citizenship (this *venue for inclusion*), it was almost exclusively to describe it as lacking; nearly all of them evoked the difficulty of integrating into local society. Echoing the experience of Circassian refugees who had gone to Russia in the wake of the Syrian War (Korotayev et al., 2022), the repatriates I spoke to evoked the lack or bad quality of work; having to survive on a day-to-day basis; the difficulty of building a social life and friendships with the Abkhaz; the *'mentality'* of the locals, often described as *'closed'* or *'Soviet';* the abundance of gossip; the loss of tradition; the language barrier. '*The family got a flat and was lucky to get one job. But besides that, you don't have access to anything'*

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[13] I asked Manal about this and she told me that when *'I first came, I heard stories of racism, of islamophobia. But I don't know if these things happened because of racism or islamophobia or simply because of the way people behave here in general.'*

said Manal. When I asked about the hardest thing that she had experienced in coming to Abkhazia, Sonia answered *'There are so many difficult things, I can't think of the hardest one.'*

Instability regularly came up throughout my discussions: *'You don't know what will happen the next day' s*aid Kuba. *'Will I stay here for the couple of years to come?'* asked Malak. *'Will I be able to survive in this country?'* Nadeer wondered. Much of this difficulty was linked to finding jobs – '*I changed so many works'* he sighed, as he described the difficulties he encountered on the job market, even though a *'Turkish guy (a Turkish-Abkhazian guy) came to offer a job'* shortly after his arrival. Malak's trajectory acknowledged the aid provided by Committee, but also pointed to the fact that it was simply not enough:

> *'First, we need to learn the language. There were some classes offered by the Repatriation Committee…we had some classes in university. Only Russian and Abkhaz classes though. And then I started to look for a job. I got frustrated. It's not easy without a language and English is practically dead in this country. I thought, that was my strength point – to know English – but it wasn't so useful at the time. I stayed for a year without a job, even if I looked everywhere.'*

Instability also appeared in the guise of housing issues. Even though the Committee had provided housing to the repatriates, many said that they had struggled with having to move from one place to the next, often on short notice. '*You never know when you are going to leave. In the sense that you may have to pack your stuff and go to another house and then in a few days or months to another'* said Malak. Sonia's family had

moved three times. Fuad's family lived in Dranda, a town near Sukhum, after they had been moved from one of the hotels to which repatriates had been assigned upon arrival. '*In Dranda, the buildings are very old and destroyed…it reminded me a bit of the crisis in Syria now*' he said. Kuba claimed he could '*not complain*' since they had '*water and electricity*'. But his family had had to move as well.

Perhaps more aggravating than the lack of jobs and economic opportunities – a condition, after all, shared by most locals – was the difficulty of social integration. The Abkhaz '*were trying to modernise the country*', but they still had their '*old mind, like old Russian, Soviet thinking*' said Aliy; Fuad agreed: '*the mentality and behaviour is very rigid*' he said. Bassem talked about the prevailing '*negativity*' of the locals – '*they had very difficult times and you can tell by their way of speaking, way of living*'; Malak said she hadn't met anyone outside of the '*Syrian community*' to make friends with. A few mentioned that religion might have a role to play, since repatriate are Sunni Muslim – though many are not religious in practice – and most Abkhaz are Christian (though many animistic beliefs still playing an important role in local society). Recognising their own difficulties – and particularly the difficulties of their parents' generation – to adapt, many seemed to believe this was, after all, a generational issue. Kids growing up in Abkhazia would be fine – some gave the example of a sibling or an acquaintance that was doing just fine – but they themselves had simply arrived '*too late*' (most of my interlocutors were young by any account). Manal said that '*new generations have an easier job in getting integrated.*' But then she added that this was not only the case in Abkhazia, but rather a '*general thing.*'

There were caveats of course. While Larissa – a middle-aged woman who had found work in a bar on the promenade – complained about the difficulties of integration and all the '*gossip*', she also stressed that '*some people treat you in a very kind way.*

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They encourage you to continue your life here, encourage you to make friends here, introduce you to new people'. After discussing his family's housing difficulties, Bassem also talked about his gratefulness of being here and the help he had received. '*We are very thankful for the government of our homeland because she has taken us as her sons'* he said. When I asked Arsen how he felt about Sukhum, he simply said '*We're like a big family here in Abkhazia'.* And in a revealing exchange, Aliy said that in all his time in Abkhazia not a single cop has stopped him to ask *'Where are you from? Maybe it's because I blend in between them, maybe it's because I feel they are my own people…'*

(I told Sonia and Malak about this and asked if they felt the same; they shot a quick glance at each other and then both answered that they still felt '*as foreigners, so far'.* When I wrote them, nearly two years later, to ask if they'd like to grab a coffee, they both answered saying so sorry but things were so busy with family and jobs maybe next time would work out?)

Sometimes I wish I could just go back
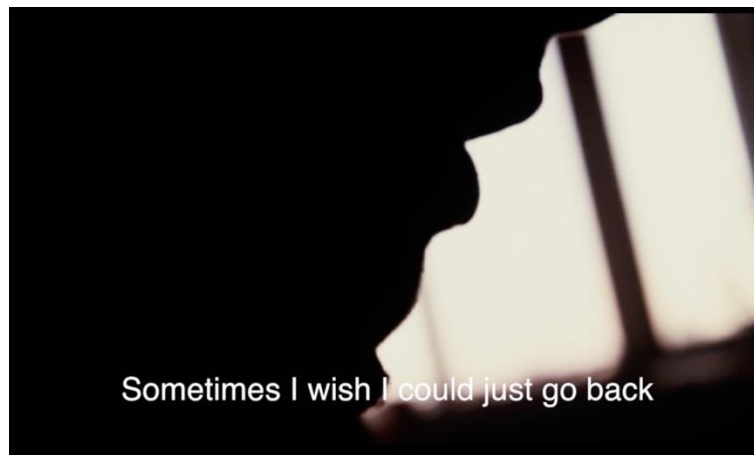
Bordering The Other

Citizenship, at its core, establishes a boundary. But assumptions that this is simply a question of drawing a line between an 'us' and a 'them' breaks down upon (any) closer inspection. Balibar's contention that citizenship is always *'unfinished'* (2015) does not exist in a vacuum; states themselves – whether long-established or 'states-in-the-making' (Brubaker 1994: 63) such as Abkhazia – are always 'incomplete' and in need to emphasise their legitimacy (Das and Poole 2004: 7). The effects of the state's boundary-making ripple throughout any given society, but this is never a preordained process, or one that follows clear-cut boundaries as an Agambian refugee/citizen dichotomy would suggest. Agamben's work on bare life (1998) has done much to illuminate modern civilisation's barbarous heart, but as Ramsay contends (2020a, 2020b) – via Fassin– the politics of displacement and exclusion can never be fully mapped onto a binary grid of citizenship. In other, perhaps oversimplified words: refugees do not cease to become refugees once they receive citizenship. Refugeehood does not dissolve upon reception of a passport.

Perhaps this is why it was so striking that nearly all my informants – people who had, in effect, just fled a brutal war – were so adamant that they were not refugees. There might be a certain universality in the displaced claiming agency in times of chaos and war, but it must also be underlined (Lubkemann 2008) lest we reinforce an image of helpless 'others' caught in liminal limbo. Ramsay underlines how liminality has become becoming something of a central trope in anthropological accounts of refugees' experiences (Ramsay 2020: 9sq) despite many refugees making sense of their experience through a different register. Keen to avoid othering my interlocutors by pigeonholing them into the readymade category of 'refugee' or 'migrant' (Çağlar 2016), I have tried to make sense of their experience through their own words. As

Hasan put it*: 'I do not consider myself a refugee because we've had this idea of returning to Abkhazia* [for a long time*]. So I consider us to be repatriates, not refugees. In our family, everyone made this decision: me, my wife, my son – they all said yes to go back to Abkhazia.'* In a similar vein, Manal was also at pains to stress that she had made an informed decision which set her apart from other refugees.

– How do you feel about the word 'refugee'? Is it a word you'd ever use to describe yourself?
– Lots of my friends in Syria applied for asylum after 2012…and I kept making decisions that made me avoid becoming a documented refugee… So I've been avoiding it. But, you know, I left Syria not because it was bombed but because I'd be probably arrested and then I'd die.

She was one of my rare informants with whom we had discussed politics and what had actually happened in Syria before departure. I felt that I could press further.

– What's the difference between being arrested or bombed?
– The thing with refugees is that…you're escaping war. And I didn't escape war. I was in a safe city, a government city, and I was escaping because of my political views. It's a different kind of experience and it's also important for the record. Not all Syrians left Syria because of the war.

I might have been initially struck by the strong divide repatriates drew between themselves and refugees, but this boundary-making occurred also in relation to the majority population in Syria (or *Arabs*: most often, the terms were used interchangeably). '*Most of the time, while I was in Syria, I used to feel that I'm a*

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stranger' said Aliy. Others evoked a sense of mis-belonging going back to childhood*: 'I couldn't blend in'*, *'I always felt we were different.'* For those born into families that spoke Adyghean/Circassian at home, there was a shared experience of surprise when first attending state schools, where the teaching language was Arabic. Nadeer told me about returning from his first school day and asking his mother '*Which language are they speaking? Why are they not like us? I couldn't stop crying…'* But quite a few talked about positive differentiation: '*they respected us Circassians, considered us serious and honest people'* said Hasan, one of the first repatriates, who had arrived in the early 90s, and so did Malak, who had arrived two decades later: *'they differentiate us ... they made us feel that we are good people, with good traditions and morals.'*

Boundary-making with the majority population took place mainly along the fault line of *'tradition'* – with gender being a salient element of demarcation. Sonia mentioned that her friend group at university was mixed '*but maybe for some (not all!) Arabs, this isn't acceptable or preferred'.* Nadeer said that his sister '*can go out and dress, wherever. She can walk with people, it's normal. But for them, girls cannot go out with anyone, girls cannot dress as they wish. Everything must be covered. It's the difference between us and them'.* Quite a few mentioned the dances and games that would bring young Circassian men and women together. Rather than a hard fact which proves essential differences between groups[14], this emphasis on difference in terms of gender arrangements shows how a specific social element has become a marker of ethnicised, essentialised difference maintained by my interlocutors.

Circling back to citizenship, many interlocutors drew a boundary between a shared political – Syrian – citizenship and their own Circassian (ethnic) identity.

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[14] When I asked Manal if these games and dances were indicative of a more 'equal' Circassian community, she said *'it wasn't about 'equality, but about mingling'* and that they had all grown up in a *'totally patriarchal context'* whether considering their Circassian or the wider Syrian milieu

Bassem told me '*We have a concept in our house…Abkhazia is our mother-land and Syria is our sister-land because we are born and raised in Syria, we speak Arabic, we have jobs, friendships here. But also we had our origin homeland.*' Hasan said that after he had completed his military service in Syria, he felt that he had been freed from his citizen's obligations and could move on. What these perspectives have in common is that my informants clearly understood their own citizenship as incremental and multi-layered; and that – however dynamic and varied – their boundary-making did not cease as they passed from one state to the next.[15]

As shown above, most of my interviewees explained their difference from the majority population in Syria by pointing to different traditions, language, the role of women in their respective societies. But instead of seamless integration into a society with which they purportedly shared ethnicity and tradition, they faced difficulty in integrating its social body after repatriation. In effect, their citizenship was reduced to a formal status, reinforcing their own sense of groupness rather than the Abkhaz social body as a whole.

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[15] Groups might be 'easy to think' but this does not mean that they should be seen as '*universally active or salient' (*Brubaker 2009: 34) – and particularly not along pre-ordained ethnic lines. Rather than illustrating the continuous, cohesive character of their community, the repatriates' testimonies point to the changing terrains of their boundary-making, showing how *'groupness'* – the sense and quality of a shared, collective identity – waxes and wanes as socio-political contexts shift.

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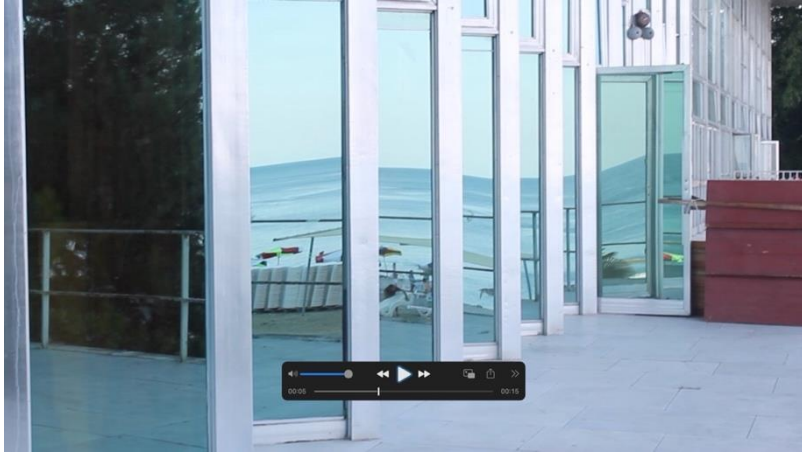
CHAPTER 3: AN INDIGENOUS DIASPORA?

On a surface level, the nation-building project in Abkhazia follows a well-established template: heavily controlled borders, local elites peddling an ethno-nationalist agenda, the disenfranchisement of minorities and an appeal to diasporic populations to rebuild the ancestral homeland. The ethnographic account I have given in the previous section follows the contours of a nation-state scale; it also showed how the repatriates' lived experience does not quite align with the repatriation programme's aspirations. But a nation-state scale reveals as much as it obfuscates – particularly in this case, where the repatriates' longue durée trajectory is that of an inter-imperial diaspora whose claim to indigeneity hardly fits into the Abkhaz state-building project's confines.

Clifford's dictum that '*location is an itinerary rather than a place'* (1997: 11) should dissuade us from looking for fix places to house either homelands or indigeneity. As imperial formations crumbled, nation-states styled themselves as natural, obvious embodiments of autochthonous populations (Anderson 1991; Brubaker 2009). Their history of mass displacement tells a different story – and so does their often-fraught relation with diasporic populations; *'the nation-state, as common territory and time, is traversed and, to varying degrees, subverted by diasporic attachment'* (Clifford 1994: 307) Taking this a step further: could it be that rather than reaffirming the solidity of the Abkhaz state-building project, the repatriate's experiences, aspirations and claims to indigeneity effectively distend it?

Amidst Empires

Framing the repatriate's trajectory beyond their passage from one nation-state to the next entails a rejection of methodological nationalism, but also of a framing still too-present in diaspora studies which sees these populations' place in the world solely as

the intersection between their place of origin and current place of residence, or what Ipek Demir calls the '*tyranny of in-betweenness'* (2022).[16] But if the nation-state is a trap, towards which frame to turn?

Strikingly, almost none of my informants used the word diaspora (or related terms) when talking about their experience.[17] When Manal did, she almost immediately corrected it to *displaced people*. I asked about it. *'I started to use this term'* she said. '*Before, it was diaspora. But recently, particularly after I came here and started to think about…our history, I started to think that this isn't emigration but…displacement, genocide. So I find it more appropriate to describe myself and my people.*' Retracing the lineage of this displacement and violent mobility, the inter-imperial history outlined earlier comes to the fore. The term itself was developed by Laura Doyle (2014, 2020) as both a concept and a method. Understood as *'a political and historical set of conditions created by the violent histories of plural, interacting empires and by interacting persons moving between and against empires'* (Doyle 2014: 2), inter-imperiality assumes the existence of various imperial cores that produce different levels of coloniality and uneven and combined development (Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015). Seen from this prism, the repatriate's route becomes less of a passage from one nation-state to another, but rather part and parcel of a multi-generational journey throughout a space primarily defined by the interaction of Russian, Ottoman and Soviet empires. Other imperial formations – from Qajar Iran to US-led coalitions – have intervened in this space, but its main drivers have been these subaltern, competing, multiple modernities (Doyle 2014: 3; Kamali 2007; Nederveen Pieterse

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[16] Much of these studies also remains influenced by the 'Jewish diasporic model' (for instance, see: Safran 1991) without accounting for the specificity of this trajectory or the fact that large parts of Jewish historical experience do not meet the test of Safran's diasporic criteria.

[17] Perhaps, it matters little: '*Whether we want to call these different mobile groups…societies, diasporas, ethnics, or traders changes according to scholarly fashion. What is significant is the patterned configuration of directions, circuits of mobilities, clusters of association...'* (Ho 2017: 909)

2011) in which the practices of modernity (citizenship, the nation-state, hard borders etc) are being shaped, shifted and internalised by inter-imperial actors – including members of the Circassian diaspora.[18] These practices are forged in contact with state actors, but also through what Pnina Werbner has dubbed *diasporic public spheres '…in which different transnational imaginaries are interpreted and argued over* (1998: 11). I would argue that these spaces do not cease after diasporic return. The friend groups, extended families, long afternoon spent drinking tea on the Sukhum promenade – perhaps even the interviews which I have conducted and moments of waiting too (Eliott 2016) all constitute part of this sphere. They are all spaces in which the homeland is interpreted and argued over and over.

A thorough documentation of the repatriates as inter-imperial actors would necessitate a form of historical research whose scope goes beyond this paper's limitations. But highlighting this aspect emphasises that the interaction of imperial and post-imperial formations does not solely happen on the state level (Parvulescu and Boatca 2022: 10) but also through the agency and unique, individual trajectories of inter-imperial agents of whom the repatriates form a contemporary example. It also underlines how diasporic mobility cannot be understood as happening in 'stages', or along a linear model that would find its resolution in a nation-state. This is particularly true if a given community's historical experience has been shaped by imperial rather than national forces. (Maybe 'return' is just one stage, one aspect, of mobilities shaped by the cyclical tug and pull of core-periphery relations.)

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[18] It is also crucial to place the repatriates' current-day experience within the specific post-imperial soviet context; the USSR's demise ignited diasporic politics who *'locate their historical `homelands' in this region'* (Shami 1998: 618) but also created de facto diasporic populations via its own internal boundaries. According to the Soviet 1989 census *'a quarter of the total Soviet population, lived outside 'their own' national territory'* (Brubaker 1994: 57).

Many of my informants said that '*if they had the choice'* they would *'maybe choose Europe'.* John had first moved to the US before repatriating. Hassan's son had not found work and had moved on: *'if he could've found a job, he would've stayed'.* Nadeer mentioned that many Syrians, *'maybe even fifty'* had returned to Syria, which was a fact that never ceased to shock me, even though I came across many such cases and when I returned in 2017, I learnt that some of the people I had met had already returned. *Returned?* Larissa's adolescent daughter wished to join her brother in Austria; another relative of hers had gone to Nalchik. When asked, she said that perhaps she too would return to Syria *'if it's like it was before*.' Manal's journey to Abkhazia had not followed a straight path either. After she chose to leave Damascus, she had lived in Turkey and the Emirates. She had come to Abkhazia to see her family, whom she hadn't seen in a few years, and also because she had wanted to make a project about this place because it was so intriguing, wasn't it? She, like most others, was not sure of how long she would stay and though she too spoke of *return*, this was not something fixed, necessarily long-term and definitely not, forever.
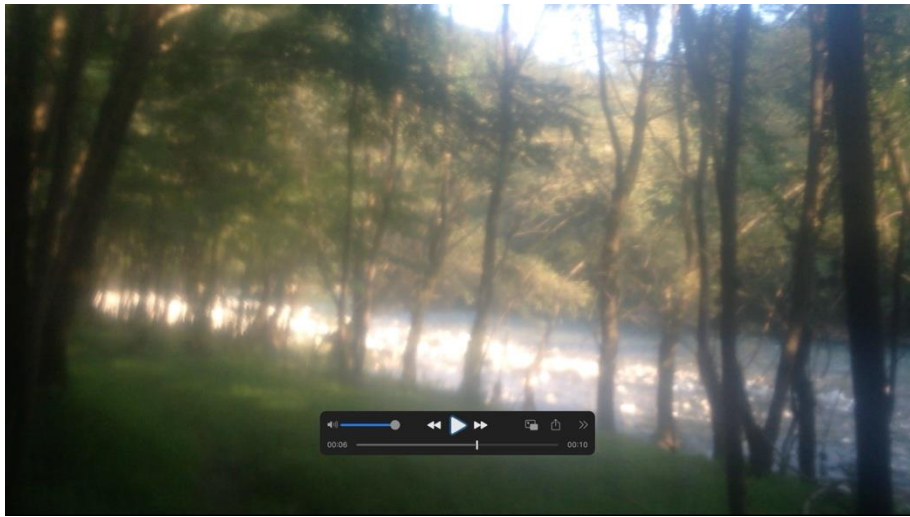
Native Among The Pines

The scene that first comes to mind when I think of indigenous people in Abkhazia does not involve repatriates. Nor does it involve a display of taut, proud men wearing the *cherkesska*. We were on the beach in Pitsunda, about an hour's drive from Sukhum, resting in the shade of the pines, which do indeed, mercifully reach just about down to the water. It was high season, the beach was full. I was woken from my lull by the sound of drums. I look up, and, a stone throw away, I see two young black men in leopard skins and loincloths beating drums amongst the sprawl of sunbathers. Every few steps, someone stops them, snaps a portrait or a selfie, hands them some cash. I run up to them, we talk, they're from Africa they say. Do they live here? No, in Russia, they say, but it's summer season and business is good, they say, they like it here, beautiful beach, heh?

Most of my interviewees would probably balk at the idea of there being anything in common between their indigeneity and the performance of Africanness by the two African men on the beach. Their performance might have built on racist tropes, but they too were members of a diaspora pointedly gesturing towards an entity, an idea – rather than anything concrete (let alone a nation-state). In her account of transnational Kurdish struggles, Ipek Demir admits that for a long time, she had not envisaged the indigenous component of her study; she underlines how an 'ethno-political' prism or an accent on security or the nation-state scale has often glossed over the indigenous element inherent to these processes (2022: 100sq). Her conceptualisation of what constitutes her Kurdish subjects' indigeneity might not run deep enough, but it constitutes an important call to read diverse transnational struggles, claims to sovereignty, the right to land – a homeland – through an indigenous lense. To do so,

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she leans on Avtar Brah's work, which was ground-breaking in that it conceptualised the *diaspora space* as an area defined in equal parts by mobile populations and those *'constructed and represented as indigenous'* (1996: 181). I argue that the repatriate's figure brings the two together.

Indigeneity might always be framed from the outside (Myers 2002, Povinelli 1999, 2011) and more often than not via rights-based conceptual frameworks (Boween 2020) but I too had remained for too long oblivious to this aspect. It might be a mobile term (Li 2010) which has been seized upon in a huge variety of contexts, but it remains at its core affixed to the idea of a culturally distinct people inhabiting a fixed, measurable place*. 'Precisely how long it takes to become indigenous is always a political question'* notes Clifford (1994: 310). The political will of the Abkhaz state-building project has upheld and accepted the indigeneity of the repatriates: they are given citizenship by the fact of their origin. Yet the interviews revealed two crucial, intertwined points: many of the repatriates had mixed Circassian ancestry and few expressed a specific attachment to an Abkhaz identity or state. The Caucasus they constructed as their homeland was only tenuously linked to Abkhazia itself. In other words – the belonging, the citizenship they claimed, was one of mobile indigeneity.

Recognition of indigeneity is a formal acknowledgement, but also a formal moment when it is scrutinised and must be performed; *'this inspection always already constitutes indigenous persons as failures of indigenousness as such'* writes Elizabeth Povinelli (1999: 23). This failure is present in the specific encounter between repatriates and Abkhaz society, but the testimonies I gathered point towards a more nuanced reality. Many repatriates expressed a form of disappointment regarding the

ways indigeneity – or more explicitly, tradition – had not been quite upheld in Abkhazia. The homeland might exist. But not quite yet, not quite there.

About The Colour Green

As in the case of many exiled populations, different groups were gradually subsumed under more general terms: *'the Abkhaz and Ubykh are usually glossed as Circassian/ Adyghe in the communities outside the Caucasus'* (Shami 1998: 624). This accelerated after the Circassians' expulsion from Golan, when much of the linguistic knowledge was lost and Adyghean reinforced its position as lingua franca in these communities. Many interviewees evoked grandparents or great-grandparents who spoke Abkhaz or even Ubykh and there was even one Ossetian grandmother. What happened in Sonia's family – '*Grandfather and grandma talked Abkhaz between each other when they didn't want us to understand'* – was a common occurrence. Larissa's family came *'from the mountains of Sochi'*. Bassem explained it this way: *'In Syria, the Abkhaz population was very small…With time, the Abkhazians started to speak Kabardinian* [an Adyghean dialect] *because all our wives were Kabardinians. That's why we started to speak Kabardinian.'* Language plays a crucial role in identity-formation, as Nadeer testified: *'Not all Circassian are blond or have blue or green eyes…we prove that we're Circassian when we have our language.'* He later added *'when I hear the Circassian language, I just feel my soul dancing.'*

Almost none of the repatriates spoke Abkhaz – even those who had visited Abkhazia earlier or whom, like Malak said '*from my childhood, I've always known that Abkhazia is my homeland.'* Some, like Nadeer, were shocked upon arrival. *'When I first came here, I was just shocked to hear that there was another language…I thought I could speak Adyghean and no need to learn Russian. And then, when I heard the*

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Abkhazian language, I thought 'Oh my God where am I?' I came to the wrong place.' The Law on Repatriation makes clear that citizenship is only afforded to '*direct descendants of refugees who fled the historic territory of residence of Abkhazians (Abaza) as a result of the Russian- Caucasian and Russian-Turkish wars and other events of the 19th century*' – and yet, most of the repatriates I met traced their lineage a bit further north, just as their use of language shows. In other words, the de facto application of repatriation followed a more expanded understanding of whom a repatriate could be, one that harkens towards a transnational identity, the kind of North Caucasian solidarity that had guided Musa Shanibov's troops to Abkhazia during the 1992-93 War (Derlugian 2005). I was puzzled at first since this was seemingly not evoked, or only in hushed tones and certainly not officially, as if the nation-state building project's integrity, self-image had to be maintained at all costs.

Shami notes how her subjects constructed *'a homeland devoid of geographical detail, of territoriality'* (Shami, 1998: 625) and I am struck how, two decades later, in a different context, a similar observation still holds: my informants talked about a general, almost abstract Caucasus, which was, recurringly, a green, lush mountain. John, who had described himself as '*Caucasian nationalist*' said that returning '*was a dream for a lot of us. It didn't matter…where, as long as it was in the historical homeland'.* Bassem said he remembered *'a feeling of warmth after I crossed the border. Like I'm in the homeland.'* Ynal too said he too had fantasised about coming to the Caucasus for a long time and '*the easiest way to come was to go to Abkhazia'.* Arsen appeared to make something of distinction: '*We are from the Caucasus, but we love Abkhazia too'.* Nadeer said that he didn't feel this was his country. '*It's all the Caucasus. But here, in Abkhazia, it's not my homeland'.* Using slightly different terms,

the differentiation was strikingly similar to the Syrian sister-land/Caucasian mother-land analogy used by Bassem.

Some made a clear distinction between the place and the people. Quite a few drew a boundary – as they had with the majority population in Syria – saying that '*in the homeland, the tradition had been lost'*. Ynal added: *'here in the Caucasus, where they're the majority, they let the traditions go away'*. What were these traditions? Mention of the elders, respect, recurring mentions of dance and of nature, trees, snow, green. When I asked Manal about how her parents felt in Abkhazia, she thought for quite a while and said they had been more and more isolated there. '*They belong to the place, not the society'* she added. Nadeer said that he had an image about the Caucasus before coming, in fact he had had it since childhood. *'The image was not like what I saw when I came here…But for me, it's still the Caucasus. For me, it's not the city, not the village, just the mountain and nature.'* Some talked about their or their parents' lost lives in the Golan as something closer to a 'homeland' than what they had found in Abkhazia – *'It was like the Caucasus, but in the Golan'* said Larissa. When I asked Manal if she thought the Golan was also something of a home, she said this was a problematic question since the word 'home' was problematic in itself. *'I can't even fathom the concept'*.

Nearly all talked about childhood stories and images involving nature. Aliy said that *'they used to picture the Caucasus to us like a big huge mountain. With trees, with forest, with wild horses.'* He said that in his villages everyone would climb trees. Manal evoked her first experience of going to the Caucasus as an adolescent: *'The nature was beautiful. That's the only non-romantic thing in the Caucasus. It was green.'* Aliy said that on his first day in Abkhazia, he had *'woken up like a kid on Christmas Day...The first thing I saw in Abkhazia was a valley with a river and a mountain, filled*

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with snow. That made me think I'm really in Paradise.' Ynal, a beekeeper, had immediately started looking for an appropriate place where he could install hives, even if the honey would, of course, *'be different than in Syria'*. Malak said that when she had arrived, it had been *'mind-blowing. All the trees, all the green. Just the green colour…it's such a lovely colour'.* Nobody mentioned Abkhazia or anything remotely resembling people, a society (let alone a nation-state).

I asked Nadeer what he liked the most in Abkhazia.

> *– The thing I like the most here is the nature. The sea, the forest, mountains,*
>
> *the rain.*
>
> *– The rain ?*
>
> *– Yes, this is what I like.*

A CONCLUSION

In the first chapter, I charted the repatriates' wider historical trajectory, underlining how it has been shaped by competing empires and processes of modernisation. The next section explored their experience in Abkhazia, measuring it against rhw repatriation programme's purported aims. Relying on an expanded understanding of citizenship, I charted their sense of social inclusion and discourse on boundary-making. The final chapter reflected on the imbrication of indigeneity and diaspora; seeking to overcome the nation-state scale, I cast my informants as inter-imperial, indigenous actors, whose mobility must be understood within a wider context of displacement, place-making and construction of an ever-elsewhere homeland.

The case of the repatriates to Abkhazia offers a complex answer to Isin's call for *'a new vocabulary of citizenship'.* As I have shown, their arrival to Abkhazia reinforces the body politics upon which the Abkhaz state's claim to sovereignty hinges, while also destabilising the very premise of a self-contained nation-state. The sedentary quality of the state also grates against the repatriates' mobility and their claim to a homeland which they maintain through language, tradition, boundary-making, as well as a clearly avowed yearning. References to nature – the lush green mountain which stands in for the homeland in nearly all my interviews – must be engaged for what it reveals: the citizenship claimed by the repatriates, *while non-exclusive*, links them to this *elsewhere.*

This is not to say that their claim to an authentic tradition should be treated at face value; as with all diasporic groups, each of their encounters with social formations has resulted in a process of mutual transformation. In her study of the Kurdish diaspora, Ipek Demir seeks to *'uproot indigeneity, yet embed transnationality and diasporicity'*

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(2020: 9); the *'transnational indigeneity'* she attributes to her subjects brings together terms that have too often been framed as polar opposites. I too understand the trajectory of the repatriates as one of transnational indigeneity that transcends reified nations, societies or states, that goes against the *'deceptively sedentary'* (Li, 2010: 20) quality of indigeneity. But in contrast to her case, the previous pages hopefully show how such an identity can exist and reproduce itself in the absence of a unifying political project and *despite* an actual state.

Manal told me that it is only after leaving Syria that she realised that *'mass displacement creates a new identity.'* More resources and time would allow for this research to further investigate the character of these displaced identities and what makes them indigenous; to follow how their claims to certain rights and places — to sovereignty — have concretely played out within the different states they have traversed and contributed to build; to chart how the imposition and embrace of capitalist structures have conditioned their journey; to link their specific displacement to the near-universal displacement and precarity which has come to define the contemporary moment (Ramsay 2020a); to study how their trajectories relate to other diasporic populations, ranging from fellow North Caucasian exiles to the Palestinian guerrilla fighters Manal's father had helped in the 70s, or even members of the Roma diaspora who have claimed *'themselves as a nation on a par with territorial nation-states but without asserting claims of sovereignty* (Isin, 2012: 161). The emergent geography constituted by their journeys — from former Ottoman lands in the Golan to the northern tip of the Caucasus — reveals overlooked connections, influences and inherently hybrid forms of being. It invites us to look beyond nation-states' (and academic) confines, to ask what makes some people move and binds others to a

place, to chart the afterlives of the mobile societies that have played such a crucial role in the emergence of local modernities and present-day states. To ask ourselves what the homeland can be, when it is always a bit further away, beyond the next passport, the next mountain, the next return.

Povinelli writes: *'The proper ethnological thing* [he] *sought would always just elude him, would always be somewhere he was not. Maybe this ancient order survived in the remote interior of the nation, but it was never where he was'* (1999: 20). Maybe a forest still awaits them (and us.) Remote, Paradise, Wild Horses, Green.

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