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# The Abrek in Chechen Folklore

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In his formative monograph on *abrechestvo*, Yuri Botiakov argues that the abrek exists on the threshold dividing death from life.<sup>1</sup> He counter poses this view with Russian and Soviet ethnography's traditional reading of *abrechestvo*, which has typically seen it simply as an exalted form of robbery. Botiakov asks his readers, "Is it correct to see 'professional robbery' as the main idea, which united abreks in all the various incarnations of this social institution?" (9) and then works towards a more nuanced theory of *abrechestvo*, using source texts which dwell on the ways on which the classic abrek transcends the "bandit" moniker. For Botiakov, the mark of the abrek is his liminal nature: "[the abrek] loses the status of a living person, but he cannot attain the status of the dead, and therefore inhabits the border realm" (135). In order for the abrek to survive "he has to exchange his human nature for an alien one" (133).

Examples of the alien or uncanny nature of the abrek are amply found in the biography of the Chechen abrek Zelimkhan, including his magical feat of escaping from a cave when he was surrounded by Russian officers<sup>2</sup> after announcing theatrically that only after he was presented with "a document from the tsar promising that the persecution of the innocent would cease and that all those exiled on my account will be freed"<sup>3</sup> would he surrender.

Botiakov's underscoring of the abrek as a magical creature who belongs neither entirely to the world of the dead or of the living allows us to reach beyond a merely historical understanding of the abrek's role in Caucasian society. Such a critical "leap" is essential, because the abrek's capacity to haunt cannot be reduced to the role he filled in history; his magic must be sought elsewhere. And yet, it is precisely in the context of history that the abrek's role was transformed and that he attained his magical status. The sources of this transformation if not their effect, can be traced to the concrete circumstances of the Caucasian War. In his 1916 introduction to his translations of Chechen songs, the Bolshevik leader Aslanbek Sheripov delineated a tripartite historical evolution of the abrek in Chechen folklore which emphasized the relationship between history and the abrek's development:

<sup>1</sup> Botiakov, I.M. *Abreki na Kavkaze. Sociokul'turnyj aspekt javlenija*. SPb.:Peterburgskoe Vostokovedenie, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Sheripov, Aslanbek. *Stati i rechi*. second ed., ed. by E.P. Kireev and M.N. Muzaev. Checheno-ingushskoe knizhnoe Izd-vo . Groznyi, 1972, p. 68. Sheripov is citing *Razboi na kavkaze* by P. Kozalkovskii.

<sup>3</sup> Sheripov, Aslanbek, op. cit, pp. 68.

„Until Chechnya was conquered, abreks were “byronic types”: they couldn’t live alongside the people of their circle, and therefore cut their ties with them as they continued to hate human society in general. In this sense, abreks were “internationalists”, meaning that they took pity neither on people from their own circle, or on people foreign to them...The people [*narod*] were afraid of them and therefore hated them” (66).

For Sheripov, the abrek in his original incarnation was simply someone excluded from the human community. Many sources, from Botiakov to Bobrovnikov, attest to the historical accuracy of Sheripov’s assertion. In its original sense, it appears, the abrek was most often a victim of the blood feud, who has committed a crime for which neither he nor his relatives could compensate the victim with cattle or other commodities. He is therefore forced to hide from his own community, which in those days administered judicial punishment. He takes up residence either in an entirely new community under a new name, and hides his past from his new villagers, or he lives the life of a wanderer, roaming the mountains and forests until the day when he meets his tragic death from starvation.

Such is the necessary background for understanding the abrek’s genesis, but, from the perspective of Soviet politics, it is far from the full story of the abrek’s evolution. The next two stages in Sheripov’s analysis outline the trajectory of the abrek’s apotheosis, and the relationship between that transformation and historical circumstance:

„When the Russian conquerors appeared in the Caucasus, then the people transferred their terror of the abreks onto their uninvited guests, and therefore during the war, abreks became the leaders of the Chechen resistance. But abrechestvo took on its most specific form only once Russian power began to establish itself in the Caucasus” (66)

The last two stages in this tripartite formulation are thus intimately linked to the appearance of the Russians in the Caucasus. It is noteworthy that, according to Sheripov, only with the defeat of the Chechen resistance did abreks acquire the halo of sanctity which we witness in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century texts. This aspect of their historical evolution marks the abrek as a symbol of the desperate position of the Chechen people. When they were not overwhelmed by an enemy whose army seemed to be inexhaustible in its resources, the common people, according to Sheripov, despised abreks and even killed them (this latter claim is not supported by other scholarly accounts). However, once Shamil surrendered in 1859, and the Russians effectively won the war, abreks began to be worshipped by the people; onto their images were projected all the crushed hopes of the powerless and defeated.

In his short introduction, Sheripov offers a remarkably precise account of the sanctification of the abrek, his rise from the position of bandit to savior. Admittedly, Sheripov's argument follows (and could even be said to establish) a orthodox Bolshevik interpretation, and reminds us of the way in which the representation of the abrek in Soviet texts was itself an artifact of politics and historical circumstance, but its ideologized content does not automatically render this 20<sup>th</sup> century representation of the abrek false. Sheripov's account is both prescient in terms of forecasting future policies and sensitive in terms of its exposition of what was at the time a genuinely "revolutionary" idea. The trajectory he delineates would be followed by many of the Caucasian writers who tackled the abrek theme in future decades, in spite of all the fluctuations in the official attitude to this simultaneously subversive and ideologically assimilable phenomenon of the abrek. Sheripov founds his history of the birth of abrechestvo in the incompatibility of the indigenous law with state structures of authority:

„The incompatibility of Russian justice and the local law of the mountaineers, the criminal administration of the Caucasus and the general politics of colonialism forced many respected Chechen leaders...to enter an illegal mode of life, and [the Russians] simply exiled these people from civil society..... People were made to suffer who had the bad fortune to be related to or simply to be from the same village as these "criminals"....Then they began to take their revenge on the authorities: abreks killed officials, robbed the post and Cossacks, as well as other official institutions...but those in power continued to punish the [innocent] civilians with fines, executions, exile to Siberia, and hanging." (66)

The clash between state structures and indigenous law is derived from a native sense that Russian law is arbitrary in its persecution of the innocent, for criteria used to determine punishment can be as random as being unlucky enough to be born into the same village as an abrek. As we will see in future articulations of abrechestvo, the tension between the arbitrary bureaucracy of imperial power and the internally cogent structures of native social configurations provided the spark for the modern day abrek. True, the abrek was not born when imperial power first clashed with the indigenous peoples of the Caucasus, but I will seek to argue in the following pages that it was in the context of such conflagrations that the abrek in his final stage came into existence, and that it is precisely this latter-day abrek who has captured the imagination of artists, politicians, and scholars, and society at large.

Sheripov thus far has accounted for the way in which Russian politics created the abrek. He turns next to the contribution made by the

“people”, to the way in which they raise him from his former despided status and crown him with the wreath of a martyr:

„Power terrorized the peaceful population, and abreks terrorized those in power. And of course, the people looked upon the abreks as fighters against the barbarism of the colonial authorities...Chechens call simple thieves and bandits by other, offensive terms. But ‘abrek’ became a term of respect, and the people did not honor just anyone with this title. The most respected and successful abreks so captivated the Chechen people that they were considered to be carrying on the battle initiated by Shamil and his murids. At one time, rumors even circulated that Zelimkhan had announced himself to be an imam and was annihilating Tsarist power.” (66-7)

In other contexts, I have referred to the importance of the idea of the “lost cause” in Chechen self-representation. The abrek is certainly one of the most complete embodiments of this principle. He is the standard bearer for the cause abandoned by Imam Shamil in 1859, but with the crucial difference that the abrek’s battle has been determined in advance; the victory of the enemy and defeat of the hero is the structuring principle of *abrechestvo*.

One of the stories in Sheripov’s collection of prose translations of Chechen *illi*<sup>4</sup> about abreks tells the story of the abrek Gekha, who according to Sheripov, belongs to the third stage in the *abrechestvo* trichotomy. Gekha is a perfect illustration of Botiakov’s “liminal hero” who exists on the borderland between life and death. The text early on informs us of the hero’s exemplary status, unable to find a peer to assuage his solitude: “Gekha’s heart of steel longed for friends and gentle caresses. Gekha began to call, to search for a friend. He looked for someone to relieve his moments of suffering and gloomy thoughts. But he found no one ... because he was strong and passionate, and no one was his equal. He had no equal, and without equality there can be no friendship” (157).

Gekha’s position as both hero and outsider are so intimately linked here that it is as though the one demands the other: there can be no heroism if the hero is not alienated from his social environment and yet, paradoxically, his alienation is the source of his personal tragedy. The

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<sup>4</sup> Scholars of Vainakh folklore define the *illi* as an historically recent genre of Chechen folklore (by which is meant that it dates back to the 16th century), a ballad with a strict rhyme and meter scheme, which typically narrates the adventures of a *dik k’ant* (good boy, parallel usages to *molodets* in Russian, *kai qma* in Georgian) who performs noble deeds which usually involve winning a girl and overcoming great obstacles. For specific details on the poetics and meter of the *illi*, refer to *Poetika chechenskikh geroicheskikh pesen illi*. Ed. I.B. Munaev. Institut istorii, sotsiologii i filologii: Groznyi, 1983.

personal exists here in dynamic opposition to the impersonal heroism demanded by the community; the abrek's tragedy is the community's gain. We will see below how such anomalies repeat themselves in other locations and contexts, particularly in the "lonely hero" analyzed by Vagapov's as the archetypal protagonist of the Chechen illi.<sup>5</sup> Rarely does heroism in the Chechen context take place outside the context of loneliness and despair.

Gekha fulfills the most fundamental requirement for the latter-day (third stage) abrek: he has no friends. He fulfills the second condition for heroism as well: "Gekha fell into despair, he who was not afraid of death and who knew no fear" (157). That Gekha is not afraid of death sets him apart from the average human being, and qualifies him to become a hero. His lack of fear also establishes his relationship with "the other world", and makes of both his body and his soul a fit vessel for the sacred.

The third element of Gekha's character which renders him a classic abrek is the fact that he is misunderstood. When Gekha fails to find friends to assuage his loneliness he curses "his former partners and those who, like beasts, poisoned him, not seeing his boundless compassion for humanity" (157). These lines establish not only Gekha's misfortune, that no one understands him, but also the compassion which lays the foundation for his divinity.

Fascinatingly, Russians are never mentioned in this tale which is so obviously about the experience of colonial occupation. His enemies who ultimately kill him are referred to as "worms" and "crows" but never as Russian officers and soldiers. Surely this is an instance where explicit naming of the Russians is superfluous and would even have the effect of the violating the text's poetics, which relies on implied analogies with the animal kingdom. Additionally, such explicitness would have the effect of destroying the ties between the audience and performer, which is produced in part by obliqueness and lack of specific reference; to refer to Russian soldiers as "worms" and "crows" implies a closer connection between the implied audience and speaker than more objective appellations would.

Nor are we provided with a specific reason why Gekha became an abrek. We are not told of any crimes he committed, or any other external situation which drove him to choose for himself the yoke of abrechestvo. Abrechestvo is instead presented here as a condition of his soul, a response to an internal, physis situation, and not at all as an attempt to escape from his fate, as according to Sheripov's trichotomy, it was in the days preceding Russian colonialism.

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<sup>5</sup> Vagapov, I. S. "Odinokii geroi v checheno-ingushskom illi" ("The image of the lonely hero in Chechen-Ingush heroic-epic songs.") *Izvestiya voprosi checheno-ingushskoi literature*. vol. 5, vyipusk. 3, pp. 95-116.

Such lack of particulars should not be taken to mean that this text is lacking in concreteness. To the contrary, *abrechestvo* texts are marked by the juncture they create between myth and history, and between the imminent and transcendent. The sacred exists here in a precise historical context, for, as Sheripov reminds us, Gekha was an historical personage who died in 1898 in the region of Veden and “the circumstances of his death are correctly narrated in the song” (68). Gekha’s song lends itself to textual analysis as easily as any work of written literature; it contains a subtext (the historical reality of Gekha’s existence) and reinscribes this subtext in mythical form.

Having learned that there is no place for him in human society, Gekha turns to the animal kingdom and himself metaphorically becomes an animal: “He groaned like a bear and howled like a wolf” (157). A wolf appears at Gekha’s cry, and it turns out that this animal is better able to understand Gekha’s soul than his fellow Chechens. The basis of their mutual understanding is the fact that the same “brave heart” beats inside both man and beast. And it is not by accident that the wolf becomes Gekha’s soulmate. Wolves are not the most powerful beasts in the animal kingdom. “The lion and the eagle are more powerful than many predators and are therefore brave and worthy” but Gekha does not find his soul reflected in these creatures. Rather, he finds common ground with the wolf because though he is weaker than many animals he still “rushes into battle without hesitation” (158).

The wolf is already the victor, if not in the strictly literal sense, then in the metaphorical one: “either he defeats the enemy, or he himself perishes in an unequal battle”. In a pattern we will see repeated elsewhere, Gekha’s song undermines the values which structure many epic narratives: honorable death is equated here with victory. Might does not make right in this carefully attenuated context, and the single criterion for “victory” is the *abrek*’s preparedness to die.

The wolf as a symbol of Chechen manhood has been vulgarized to the point of kitsch in contemporary discourse; however I believe it is worthwhile at this point, given the centrality of animal imagery in Gekha’s *illi*, as well as the parallel typologies between the *abrek* and the wolf, to make a short detour and provisionally recover the wolf’s image. The wolf (*borz* in Chechen) possesses many traits to the Chechen cultural imagination which characterize the *abrek* as well: among these, the primary ones are manhood, the capacity for being alone, and an abiding sense of homelessness (analyzed in depth by Botiakov in his discussion of the *abrek*’s *burka* as a surrogate space for home). One short Chechen wolf text is particularly revealing in this regard:

„A long time ago, farther back than anyone can remember, a hurricane swept over the earth. The sea ascended to the mountains, trees died

uprooted, their corpses desiccated on the ground. Everything alive went into hiding. Alone of all the animals, only the wolf was not afraid. He greeted the hurricane calmly, though it ripped the skin off his back, bathed him in blood, and paralyzed him. [...]

The animals returned and asked the wolf: "When the wind killed the trees, made the sea surge, and every animal sought shelter, only you stayed behind. Why didn't you seek protection?"

The wolf, still bloodied and in pain, set his gaze towards the distance, and answered: "The earth on which I stand is my home. No matter what happens to me, I cannot leave."

The wolf's words made the animals think. Shame pricked their conscience. They went their separate ways and passed the night in silence. The wolf stayed behind. He had no other home.<sup>6</sup>

A clear typology can be drawn here leading from the wolf to the abrek. This wolf text singles out the wolf as a vessel for suffering: a hurricane rips his skin off his back and bathes him in blood, yet he stands stoic, ready to face whatever challenges come his way, for the capacity to bear suffering is a marker of the Chechen hero. The wolf/hero is wedded to fate as well: "No matter what happens to me," he says, "I cannot leave." Similarly, the task of the latter-day abrek is to make the best of a dead-end situation. The abrek is fated not only to die, but to lose the battle, which potentially means dying in vain. However, the threat of a futile death is avoided through the discourse of "lost cause aesthetics" at the crucial rhetorical moment. Instead of accepting defeat according to the enemy's terms, the wolf and abrek, assert counter claims to another universe of discourse.

The authors, be they the anonymous creators of folklore or the self-conscious producers of literary texts, never fail to draw attention to impact made by the wolf-abrek's counter discourse upon a skeptical audience: "The wolf's words made the animals think. Shame pricked their conscience." Even after this reconciliation of conflicting world-views, however, the wolf remains a creature apart: "The wolf stayed behind. He had no other home." The internal poetics of the text here determines the vector of the plot's development; the impossibility of compromising with a non-native world order, along with the sanctity of unconditional steadfastness mean that the wolf and the creatures who admire but

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<sup>6</sup> *Mze deda chemi, Malkh nana ju sa, solntsa mat moia*. Kavkaziuri saxli. Tbilisi: 2000, pp. 119. My translation from a composite of the Georgian and Russian. This is a trilingual anthology of Chechen folklore, in Chechen, Georgian, and Russian; however, the Chechen text was not included in this case or in any of the available anthologies of Chechen folklore. (This does not however mean that the text itself is inauthentic, as many of the major collections of Chechen texts are impossible to obtain at present, and in many cases no longer exist.)



misunderstand him will never see eye to eye. Such is one articulation of Chechen heroism.

To return to Gekha: the abrek's relationship with death is the keynote of this text. Gekha "thirsted for death as the groom thirsts for his bride" (158) and after he dies we are told that "for the strong in heart, death is beautiful; it is a beautiful woman in a fairy tale" (160). The final battle, into which he rushes to a sure death is both "delightful" and "joyful". Gekha draws strength from the words of the innkeeper's wife, the very same innkeeper who ultimately betrays him to the authorities. This woman reminds him that he is a "hawk", symbolically related to the wolf. She tells him not to "shame his glorious name" and to "die beautifully". She contrasts his courage with the cowardice of women to reinforce his sense of masculinity: "if you [intend to] deceive me, then, like a cowardly woman, clothe yourself in my shawl, and vanish without a trace" (159). Gekha's courage thus ironically derives from the very antithesis whose gendered weakness he seeks to define himself against: "the woman's words multiplied his strength ten times" (160) he says. The abrek's romance with death is again underscored through metaphor: "[Gekha] dived into the thick, dark sea of fire and bullets".

Towards the end of the text, Gekha's name is replaced with the epithet "abrek-hawk". It is the "abrek-hawk" who "jumps into the embrace of death" "as a youth hurls himself into his beloved's arms". The battle between humans is here transposed onto the natural world, losing none of its historical specificity in the process, but gaining in depth and metaphysical breadth. The Russian officers rip his trembling body apart like a flock of crows and suck his warm blood like leeches. They squawk "cowardly, joyfully, and deceptively" over the dead body of the "proud, noble hawk". These adjectives serve the purpose of generating a counter thesis to the commonly accepted laws of war; in the world of this text, victory is not in the hands of the strongest, but rather is the reward of he whose death is most dignified. Gekha lays on the ground "ripped apart, like a champion" while the insatiable crows gaze on him in terror because "they were afraid of the brave hawk even when he was dead".

The prolongation of fear even after the life which produced the fear has been extinguished will appear in many of the texts to come, culminating in the description one author uses for the corpse of his dead abrek-hero: "To his enemies, Zelimkhan was alive even when he was dead"<sup>7</sup>. These details remind us that the abrek's power derives not merely from his

<sup>7</sup> Mamakaev, Magomed. *Zelamkha*. Grozny: Nokhch-g'aliain knizhni Izd-vo, 1968, pp 228; in Russian, Mamakaev, Magomed. *Zelimkhan*. Trans. by Timofeev, Grozny: Checheno-Ingushskoe knizhnoe Izd-vo, 1983, pp. 288.

talent for banditry. More to the point, he haunts and terrifies because of his unique relationship with death itself. The source of his power is his sanctity, which is based on his romance with death. This relationship has the power to change the outcome of a battle, to turn a defeat into a victory and vice-versa. The song ends on an eloquent and analytical note, leaving the moral of the story clear for anyone who has not yet discerned it: "Thus Gekha died a beautiful death. He died a victor. A victor is not he who defeats the enemy, but rather he who sacrifices himself to the battle, who, without thinking twice, throws his soul and his body to a certain death" (160).

Though it is beyond argument that the image of the abrek changed drastically in folkloric and literary texts produced during and after the Caucasian War, the abrek still retains many of the characteristics which distinguished him in the days when the Chechens' primary antagonists were neighboring indigenous tribes. Vagapov, for instance, in his article on the "lonely hero" in the Chechen illi, does not once refer to the latter-day abrek, though the profile he delineates for the Chechen hero is in many ways a precise description of the latter-day abrek battling Russian colonialism. Thus, it would appear that even when the Chechens were not threatened with cultural annihilation, even when they did *not* unite around a hero to lead them into freedom, their folkloric heroes were nevertheless alone, founding their self-definition on the tension between their needs and the needs of the group of which they were an esteemed part. Vagapov argues that the "lonely hero" is a determining characteristic of Chechen folklore.<sup>8</sup>

Nor is the hero's loneliness a matter of choice. As Vagapov notes, in the illi, he is nearly always an impoverished orphan: "Defenselessness and poverty are the foundational traits ... of the lonely hero in the illi. The lonely hero is opposed to his fellow villagers by virtue of his poverty and defenselessness" (107). In the language of the illi, as cited by Vagapov, the hero is alone because "he has no leader in front, no elders with whom to seek counsel, and no friend with whom to be close"

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<sup>8</sup> Though it lays outside the scope of this paper, the "lonely hero" in Chechen culture ought to be seen as the counterpart to the centripetal forces pushing towards conformity which at least in the contemporary context play a large role in shaping current Chechen conceptions of heroism. I could be criticized here for making uncritical and unhistorical linkages between centuries-old texts and contemporary concepts which are obviously only tenuously related in a genetic sense. However, I use this methodology because that is the one which I believe is most relevant to the way contemporary Chechens articulate their understanding of the abrek, and I seek here to reproduce, to whatever limited extent possible, that singular form of representation.

(105). Vagapov glosses: “His poverty and defenselessness offends his fellow villagers” (105). In the world of the illi, then, loneliness is the natural state of being for the brave man; even though he may have followers, he inevitably experiences a lack when it comes to spiritual companionship. Not only is he friendless; he is the underdog as well: poor, defenseless, and, in the case of the abrek, exiled from society.

It would be incorrect to cite this element of the abrek’s character as purely a result of the impact of Russian colonialism. What is different, however, as we move from one historical era to the next, is the abrek’s sacred status, the way in which he captivates the imaginations of the producers of texts and the audiences who participate in their creation, and the way in which he is elevated in many texts, from a typical, admirable but forgettable hero, into a god. If the hero’s loneliness in earlier texts was simply one among many aspects of his personality, in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century texts, the hero’s loneliness is a mark of his greatness. This difference, as Sheripov pointed out, is the difference made by history.

### **რეპეკა გულდი**

#### **ბრანსაბრმსიული სიწმინდე - აბრაგის სახე ჩეჩნურ ფოლკლორში**

ეს წერილი, რომელიც ნაწილია უფრო ვრცელი ნაშრომისა, ეხება აბრაგობის ფენომენის ასახვას ჩეჩნურ ფოლკლორში. კვლევის ძირითად წყაროებად გამოყენებულია ვაგაპოვის, შერიპოვისა და ბოგიაკოვის ნაწერები. ჩემი დაკვირვებით, გვიანდელი (მე-20 საუკუნის პირველი ნახევრის) აბრაგობა კავკასიაში, უპირატესად კი ჩეჩნეთში, რუსეთის დაპყრობის შემდეგ გაჩნდა, თუმცა აბრაგობა ამ დრომდე არსებობდა, ოღონდ სხვა სახით.

ამ წერილში ყურადღება გამახვილებულია აბრაგობის ისტორიული განვითარების პოლიტიკურ მხარეზე და ხალხის დამოკიდებულებამ აბრაგისადმი. განვიხილავთ საკითხს თუ რა მიზნით გაჩნდა აბრაგი და რა გამოხატული ნიშნები აქვს მას?

ჩემი ზოგადი დასკვნა კი ასეთია: აბრაგობის ძირები მომდინარეობს როგორც ღუხჭირი საციალურ-ეკონომიკური მდგომარეობიდან, ასევე ხალხის სულერი მოთხოვნილებიდან. აბრაგობის მოვლენის გაგებისათვის აუცილებელია ამ ორივე მომენტის გათვალისწინება.