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After the surrender of Imam Shamil in 1859, North Caucasian mountaineers were faced with the problem of developing new modes of expressing their cultural and political aspirations. As the promise of independent statehood offered by the imamate faded from the realm of possibility, the noble bandit of the Caucasus, known to natives by the term *abrek*, rose in cultural significance. The institution of the abrek is ancient to the Caucasus Mountains. It is linked as a social practice to *amanatstvo*, in which a member of one clan was found guilty of a crime demanding blood revenge and sought refuge with another clan, changing his identity in some ways in the process. In addition to changing places and therefore identity, as the *amanant* did, the abrek took on the task of providing for the community through the practice

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1 For details on *amanatstvo* as a social institution and its place in mountaineer Caucasian society, see M. B. Kandelaki, *Iz obshchestvennogo byta gortsev Gruzii—institut amanatstva* (Tbilisi: Metsniereba, 1987). I do not use the gender-specific “his” by accident. The abrek is a uniquely male category, and the links among the abrek, the construction of masculinity, and its relevance to national and ethnic identity are a theme that I will explore elsewhere, particularly with reference to the Georgian context. For the single important exception to the rule of the bandit’s masculinity known to me, we must turn to an entirely different world: the northern Indian state of Bihar, home to Phoolan Devi, a low-caste woman who rose to a position of political prominence and became a member of Parliament through her activities as a dacoit (Hindi for bandit). She was assassinated in 2003. See Phoolan Devi, Marie-Thérèse Cuny, and Paul Rambali, *The Bandit Queen of India: An Indian Woman’s Amazing Journey from Peasant to International Legend* (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2003), as well as the impressive if problematic film based on Phoolan Devi’s life: *Bandit Queen*, directed by Shekhar Kapur, 1994.

of raiding. Though often violent, the raids initiated by abreks should be
distinguished from other forms of aggression that took place between vil-
lages and clans. The aim of raiding was the capture of livestock and other
food, and it was governed by rules of reciprocity. When one village raided
another, it was expected that the raided village would return the favor.

Such is the indigenous practice of abrecestvo (to employ the Russian
term), which acquired an anti-colonial layer of meaning only during the latter
half of the 19th century, as contacts with the Russian army and other branches
of the colonial, administrative order increased in both intensity and frequency.
I focus here on the abrek as a latter-day social phenomenon representing what
I call “transgressive sanctity,” by which I mean to indicate a particular form
of religiosity that is constituted through its violation of the secular codes of
colonialism. This abrek (the embodiment of transgressive sanctity) was born
in the second half of the 19th century, with the decline in political power of
Caucasian mountaineer society, the rise of empire, and the concomitant need
for cultural expression in autonomous and indigenous registers.

If the abrek was born in the 19th century as a politically loaded phenom-
enon, he reached his apotheosis in terms of cultural and political significance
in the 20th century in Soviet representations of indigenous resistance during
the tsarist period and, finally, in the post-Soviet imagery of mountaineer
resistance to Soviet atrocities, such as deportation. I focus primarily on the
images of the abrek produced by Chechens and by those who wrote about
them, because the Chechen experience is in many ways paradigmatic of this
particular aspect of the North Caucasian experience, anti-colonial resistance
to Russian rule. Chechen culture thus offers a richly nuanced archive for the
historical and literary study of North Caucasian culture in general.

It is important, however, to place the Chechen experience inside its
Caucasian context and to remember that the abrek was not a uniquely
Chechen phenomenon. The word, of uncertain origin (for details on the
etymology, see below), is found in every North Caucasian language, which
testifies to the centrality of this practice to the social life of the mountaineers
in the past. But, more important for the present context, the abrek as cultural
symbol is amply reflected in North Caucasian literature and in Georgian
literature as well.²

fair between an abrek who is, unsurprisingly, Chechen and his beloved Fatima, whom he
is unable to marry because of the difference in their social estates: Khetagoov, Izbrannoje
(Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1956), 153–86. There is also a play published in 1971, titled Abrek
(Khadzhumar Tsopanaty, Abyreag: Èrmaaktton fondznvoon dram [Ordzhonikidze: Ir, 1971]).
With regard to the present, I simply note that the abrek is one element in an unexamined genealogy of images and histories that has led or, rather, been reduced to the stereotype of the Chechen bandit in Western and Russian media reports on Chechen culture and history. The following pages trace this genealogy with the hope not merely of shedding light on the abrek in history, as a cipher for reading the colonialism of the past, but with the additional goals of unpacking this image for the present and of interpolating colonialist stereotypes with their indigenous counter-images. (Though I should draw attention to the problematic fact that stereotypes and counter-images belong to the same discourse, and that any attempt to disentangle colonial representations from the anti-colonial images conceived in response to them is an exercise in futility.) My quest is not for an impossible indigenous purity cleansed of the taint of colonialism. I do not seek the real abrek, aware as I am that such a search would always result in another kind of fiction.

The abrek who is the subject of my analysis was born in the uncomfortable interstices of colonialism and resistance, and therefore of politics and culture. The rise of the abrek as a trope of indigeneity in periodicals, novels, folklore, and film in the latter half of the 19th and the early 20th centuries can be seen as an attempt on the part of North Caucasian intelligentsias to stall the forward movement of history as it wiped away the traces of indigenous life in the North Caucasus. Therefore, the abrek who arises from the discourse of transgressive sanctity is an invented tradition in the sense articulated by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. He is a latter-day hodgepodge of traditional customs that derive from adat, with the requirements for cultural self-preservation necessitated by Russian colonization. Even as I historicize and thereby add nuance to cultural representations of the abrek, I wish to keep present my conviction that any unpacking of an image produced in

Among the Kabardins, who have gravitated more toward the plains than the mountains, and therefore partake less of the mountaineer ethic that lies at the foundation of abrechestvo, the literature of the abrek is less widely represented. The most detailed treatment is Alim Keshokov’s The Green Half-Moon, a contemporary novel of a modern abrek, focused mostly on the glamour and rise in status that accrues to a young man who acquires the abrek label: Keshokov, Zelenyi polumesiats (Moscow: Izvestia, 1969). Finally, in the Georgian case, I limit myself to the most salient titles for the sake of brevity (the first two refer to the name of the main protagonist): Mikheil Javaxivshili, Arsena Marabdeli (Tbilisi: sabchota sakartvelo, 1977); Chabua Amiredjibi, Data Tutashkhia (Tbilisi: Merani, 1978); Alexandre Qazbegi, Mamis mkveli [The Father-Killer] (Tbilisi: sabchota sakartvelo, 1948). An important source on the Chechen abrek Zelimkhon is a Georgian-language brochure entitled Zelimkhon, published in Tbilisi in the 1930s, not treated here. Such are merely a few titles in what could be a lengthy bibliography of abrechestvo. For the most part, these works have been ignored by scholars in all languages. Of the titles listed above, for example, contemporary Russian researchers mention only Keshokov, Kalambii, and Amiredjibi.

the interstices of colonialism and anti-colonial response is always and forever a political project.

In place of rehearsing a time-worn saga of how the Chechens have been demonized in Russian imperial historiography, I seek a genealogy for the roots of the more positive images of the abrek, produced by the Chechens and by other North Caucasian minorities. This endeavor requires the examination of both Russian works and texts produced in indigenous languages. Locating the birth of the imagery of the Chechen rebel involves not only taking into account a dense set of representational configurations but also asking questions that perhaps do not admit of answers. It is not enough to wonder why the Russians demonize the Chechens; we must also ask ourselves what the Chechens have invested in their own self-representation, and what their chosen images of cultural self-expression tell us about the relationship between a marginalized culture and the empire that generated it. It is my assumption throughout this article that the abrek is the ultimate tool of Chechen cultural self-expression.

The article therefore tracks the rise of the latter-day abrek, the one who fills literary texts and Chechen cultural memory. Beyond the textual abrek lies a historical one, who existed as late as the 1970s in the mountains that divide Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge from Chechnya. But I would also argue that the real shift in terms of the abrek’s cultural significance occurs most clearly in the textual sphere. If the historical abrek is best understood as part of the ancient tradition of raiding and pillaging that characterizes Caucasian mountaineer culture, the abrek who appears in the literary imagination of Chechen authors is best interpreted in the light of another kind of history. This is a history of sanctity achievable only through transgression, which, I argue, stands at the heart of the North Caucasian mountaineer ethos, particularly as the dominant political structures of the Russian empire were increasingly perceived as hostile and contradictory to the best interests of the mountaineers. It is this historical trajectory that we must keep in mind if we are to understand the meaning of abrechestvo to the indigenous populations of the Caucasus.

Botiakov’s recent monograph on the socio-cultural aspects of the abrek in North Caucasian culture is the first full-length treatment of the abrek as an aesthetic phenomenon. It is a groundbreaking study to which the present work is deeply indebted. Bobrovnikov also offers an important contribution in his surveys of the history and indigenous significance of abrechestvo.

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5 V. O. Bobrovnikov, *Musul’mane Severnogo Kavkaza: Obychai, pravo, nasilie. Ocherki po istorii i etnografii prava Nagornogo Dagestana* (Moscow: Vostochnaia literatura, 2002). Most of the relevant material on the abrek is included in Bobrovnikov’s article, which is an early
see these texts, however, as starting points for what I hope will ultimately become a field in its own right and will expand to include studies of indigenous revolts (as well as their cultural representations) in a broad sense. For the phenomenon of the abrek in Caucasian culture and history is a subject of far more than narrow scholarly concern. It is, as I seek to demonstrate, a lens through which we can perceive (and perhaps experience) the indigenous content of the Caucasian cultural experience.

Bobrovnikov’s recent study of the ethnographic and legal traditions in the North Caucasus has been rightly heralded as an extraordinarily important contribution to the study of this region from an indigenous perspective. His reading of the abrek, however, particularly with regard to the relationship between banditry and violence, bears the mark of the Russian Orientalist traditions within which he is writing. The limitations of Bobrovnikov’s approach to the abrek are revealed most clearly in his articulation of the final historical stage of abrechestvo, which he calls “political banditry” and links to participants in the contemporary Chechen War—such figures as Shamil Basaev, Zelimkhan Iandarbiev, and Aslan Maskhadov. If we read Bobrovnikov’s characterization of the last stage of abrechestvo in light of the fact that none of the people whom he deems “political bandits” have ever in any interview called themselves abreks, and that he cites absolutely no evidence for his claims, his conclusions come across as rather disturbing:

At the end of the 20th century, abrechestvo gave birth to a new kind of criminality. This criminality does not oppose itself anymore to government law but rather requires a rethinking of law as well as of the entire governmental structure of a country…. It appears to me that here we are dealing with an extremely dangerous form of political banditry, which Dostoevsky aptly characterized in the 19th century.6

While this attempt to delve into the psychology of the bandit is certainly admirable, it also seems to build on the stereotypes of Bobrovnikov’s scholarly predecessors, who were also fond of equating indigenous resistance with political violence. With regard to the abrek who single-handedly renews “the entire governmental structure of a country,” I would like to keep

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6 Bobrovnikov explains the reference to Dostoevsky with a quote from The Idiot: “Even the most unrepentant murderer knows that he is a criminal. That is, his conscience acknowledges that he acted wrongly, albeit without any kind of repentance” (Musul’mane Severnogo Kavkaza, 95). The block quotation comes from the same page.
present the possibility that far from “representing an extremely dangerous form of political banditry,” the transgressive sanctity of the abrek offers a useful tool for imagining less politically repressive and colonially biased ways of organizing Russia’s political life.7

What I mean is that Bobrovnikov’s own discomfort with the bandit might mark a deeper (and therefore unacknowledged) discomfort with the Russian state itself and its colonial legacies in the Caucasus. The abrek can be read as a form of repressed consciousness, a manifestation of the uncanny within political and social life.8 It is perhaps the abrek’s uncanny status (which is not unrelated to his transgressive sanctity) that accounts more than anything else for the way in which he has lodged himself in so many imaginations during so many historical periods and among so many groups whose interests run counter to one another, and explains why he continues to haunt us (Botiakov, Bobrovnikov, myself, and hopefully future scholars) in the present.

Though Bobrovnikov does provide a genealogy for the abrek in its indigenous forms elsewhere in his work, his historical account is curiously severed from the extreme political danger that he imputes to the contemporary political bandit. Bobrovnikov’s attempt to link these two different and in many ways unrelated instantiations of the abrek must be questioned at the level of ideology, because the narrative trajectory he presents of the move from indigenous abrek to “political bandit” is a clear argument for an essentialist reduction of the Chechen to a terrorist.

Botiakov, in a different and more purely aesthetic vein, makes no attempt to link the abrek to a broader social and political problematic. He offers a groundbreaking inventory of aesthetic representations of the abrek, and he is to be commended for the fact that his attention is firmly focused on the North Caucasus itself, where the abrek was born. He does not situate his analysis of the construction of abrechestvo primarily within Russian colonial discourse, and that is to be welcomed, for I believe that it is precisely this context that leads Bobrovnikov to make rather questionable linkages between the abrek as a product of history and culture and the bandit as a political phenomenon. Botiakov’s analysis, however, while it must be the starting point for any future analysis of abrechestvo, limits itself to local claims. I believe that a close reading of the abrek has at least as much to offer us generally

7 Though “governmentalization” has a Foucauldian ring to it, and Bobrovnikov cites Discipline and Punish in his bibliography, he makes no reference to Foucault in the body of his text. The relationship between the abrek and the carceral network that Foucault describes in Discipline and Punish is another theme for future studies of the abrek.
as it does for understanding the North Caucasus specifically. I therefore try to demonstrate that the abrek need not be read solely as a local phenomenon with local consequences, although we must read the abrek locally before extrapolating his meaning into broader global, social, and political spheres.

Hobsbawm’s seminal work *Bandits* (1969) gave birth to a field of studies called “bandit history,” which marked part of a larger shift in historians’ attention to subaltern peoples—bandits, rebels, criminals, and thieves—in the place of historiographies centered around states and elites. Bandit history is however, still largely the domain of the regions of Hobsbawm’s own focus: Latin America, Great Britain, and, to a lesser extent Africa. Eurasia has yet to make its mark on the map of this particular field. Botiakov and Bobrovnikov do not position their work within the field of bandit studies (except through a bibliographic reference in Bobrovnikov’s book). In part, then, I would like to use this opportunity to extend Hobsbawm’s contributions to the study of history “from below,” via the figure of the social bandit, to the Caucasus.

But what Hobsbawm has to say about banditry certainly does not exhaust the cultural significance of the abrek. He focuses primarily on instances in which the colonial divide between the rebel and his persecutor is not nearly as sharp as it was in the North Caucasus. Hobsbawm’s is a Marxist analysis, which places class and social status at the forefront of his analysis. Such frames of interpretation are vital to any attempt to understand the significance of social rebellion, but I would argue that the abrek’s genesis must be sought in a domain other than that of class struggle. For the abrek is both an indigenous phenomenon (i.e., one that precedes the advent of capitalist culture) and a cultural expression, directed toward a heterogeneous audience of the colonizers and the colonized, the colonial administrators as well as the subjects of that administration. Hobsbawm’s work, as well as the field of bandit studies generally, does not pay sufficient attention to the culturally nuanced mode of the abrek’s signification.

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9 For details on the birth of the field of bandit studies, see Hobsbawm’s introduction to the 2000 republication of *Bandits* (New York: New Press, 2000). For a more searing critique of Hobsbawm than I can offer here, refer to Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford, 1983), which critiques the category of the pre-political in Hobsbawm’s writing on the social bandit as a Marxist attempt to separate politics from the field of religion and indigenous experience. According to Guha and other subaltern theorists, the attempt to separate politics from religion bears the stamp of a secularizing colonial ideology. The debate over these issues lies at the crux of my dissertation in progress—a study of the abrek, and peasant rebellion more generally, as a non-secular mode of anti-colonial resistance. Another critical text on this subject is Dipesh Chakrabarty, * Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).
I turn now to indigenous attempts by the Chechens to reinvent the abrek.

Botiakov’s underscoring of the abrek as a liminal creature who belongs entirely neither to the world of the dead nor to that of the living allows us to reach beyond a 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. At the same time, however, it is precisely in the context of history that the abrek’s role is transformed and he attains 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 Chechen Bolshevik leader Aslanbek Sheripov delineated a tripartite historical evolution of the abrek in Chechen folklore that emphasized the relationship between history and the abrek’s development:

Until Chechnya was conquered, abreks were “Byronic types”: they could not live alongside the people of their circle and therefore cut their ties with them as they continued to hate society in general. In this sense, abreks were “internationalists,” meaning that they took pity neither on people from their own circle, nor on people foreign to them…. The people [narod] were afraid of them and therefore hated them.10

As an early Soviet attempt to reinvent the abrek for a Bolshevik audience, Sheripov’s work must be read with care. The abrek in his original incarnation was, according to Sheripov, simply someone excluded from the community. This indigenous abrek, who precedes the Russian conquest, was a victim of the blood feud who had committed a crime for which neither he nor his relatives could compensate the victim with cattle or other commodities. He was therefore forced to hide from his own community, which in those days administered judicial punishment. Either he took up residence in an entirely new community under a new name and hid his past from his new villagers, or he became a wanderer, roaming the mountains and forests until the day when he met his tragic death from starvation.

From the perspective of Sheripov’s Bolshevik politics, the subsequent two stages in the abrek’s evolution are of far greater significance. Sheripov outlines the trajectory of the latter-day abrek’s apotheosis, and the relationship between that transformation and historical circumstance:

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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 *abrecestvo took on its most specific form only once Russian power began to establish itself in the Caucasus.*\(^{11}\)

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 that we witness in Soviet and post-Soviet texts. This aspect of their historical evolution marks the abrek symbolically as the bearer of the burden of the Chechen people’s desperation. 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). Once Shamil surrendered in 1859, and the Russians effectively won the war, however, 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 bandit to savior. Admittedly, Sheripov’s argument follows (and could even be said to establish) an orthodox Bolshevik teleology and reminds us of the way in which representations of the abrek in Soviet texts were themselves artifacts of politics and historical circumstance, but the ideologized content does not automatically render this 20th-century representation of the abrek any less interesting or relevant. 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 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 abrecestvo on the incompatibility between indigenous law and 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

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 66 (ital. added).
well as other official institutions … but those in power continued to punish the [innocent] civilians with fines, executions, exile to Siberia, and hanging.\textsuperscript{12}

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 in future articulations of abrechestvo, the perceived tension between the arbitrary bureaucracy of imperial power and the internally cogent structures of native social configurations provided the spark for latter-day abrechestvo, whose ideology I describe in terms of transgressive sanctity. True, the abrek existed long before the first clash between imperial power and the indigenous peoples of the Caucasus; my argument, however, is that the colonial encounter marks the birth of the abrek who haunts us today, and that his transgressive sanctity denotes a much more complex realm of non-secular experience with which scholarship on the subject has yet to grapple.

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 despised status and crown him with the wreath of a martyr:

Power terrorized the peaceful population, and abreks terrorized those in power. Of course, too, the people looked on 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.\textsuperscript{13}

Although Sheripov does not dwell on this point, one crucial element in the abrek’s rise to the position of hero and even, in the case of Zelimkhan, to the position of imam (which places him within a Sufi context) is the abrek’s logic of despair, which stands in contrast to the more successful resistance to colonialism exhibited by Imam Shamil. The difference in historical terms is that in a post-1859 world the Chechens had no grounds for hope regarding their anti-colonial struggle. Shamil had surrendered. That chapter in their history had closed. Now it was left to them to turn to figures such as the abrek, who offered less in terms of political power but (perhaps for that very

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 66–67.
reason) more in terms of cultural capital. Insofar as he represents the courage of those who fight battles they are predestined to lose, the abrek is therefore one of the most important tropes in Chechen self-representation. 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 are the structuring principle of abrechestvo.

The Abrek and Print Culture

The abrek entered the Russian language in the philological sense concurrently with the publication of three literary texts in the 1830s: Mikhail Lermontov’s Hadji Abrek (1833); and Aleksandr Bestuzhev-Marlinskii’s Caucasian novels, Ammalat Bek (1832) and Mullah Nur (1836).\(^\text{14}\) Though the abrek was popularized almost exclusively via Russian sources, it is important to stress, given my subsequent emphasis on the Soviet versions of the abrek produced by Caucasian (Chechen and Ossetian) authors for a largely native audience, that he was not a Russian invention. Perhaps his literary articulation was largely Russian, but this does not mean that there was no indigenous discourse to precede it, nor does it mean that the majority of those who produced the discourse articulated in the Russian language were themselves Russian.

Thus the abrek, from his inception in the sphere of print culture, is a borrowed discourse and an invented tradition. Russian officers such as Zisserman who wrote memoirs of the Caucasian War appropriated the outlaw romanticism of the abrek for their own purposes,\(^\text{15}\) while native Caucasian writers during the Soviet period reclaimed the outlaw figure in their literature and elevated his way of life into an exemplary model of transgressive sanctity.\(^\text{16}\)

The texts I examine here derive simultaneously from the discourse of empire and the discourse of anti-colonial resistance. Rather than undermining the anti-colonial emphases of such texts, I believe that their eclectic genealogy constitutes an argument for exploring them more deeply on their own

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\(^\text{14}\) According to Bobrovnikov, the word “abrek” first appears in Russian in Vladimir Dal’’s Tolkovyi slovar’ zhivogo velikorusskogo iazyka (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia Imperatorskoi Akademii nauk, 1869), where it possesses the negative connotation of razboinik (bandit). See Bobrovnikov, Musul’mane Severnogo Kavkaza, 28, and below.

\(^\text{15}\) A. L. Zisserman, Dwadtsat’ piat’ let na Kavkaze, 1842–1967 (St. Petersburg: Suvorin, 1879). For my purposes, however, the most useful 19th-century treatments of banditry in the Caucasus, and of Caucasian mountaineer life more generally, have been Clive Phillips Wolley, Savage Svanetia (London: Bentley, 1883); Wanderer, Notes on the Caucasus (London: Macmillan, 1883); and Milton J. Mackie, Life of Schamyl, and Narrative of the Circassian War of Independence against Russia (Boston: Jewett, 1856).

\(^\text{16}\) There are a few exceptions to my general claim that the Caucasian reappropriation of the abrek occurred during the Soviet period; both the Georgian writer Alexandre Qazbegi and the Estonian Ossetianophile V. Ia. Iksul’ wrote about the abrek in laudatory terms during the tsarist era.
terms, in their own contexts. One of these contexts is, inevitably, Russia: Russian language, Russian literature, and the Russian cultural and political sphere. But the Russian context has already been explored with a great deal of critical insight by a wide array of scholars.\textsuperscript{17}

Here I focus on a lesser-known story: the Caucasians’ experience of their encounter with the Russian empire, initially in the form of military incursions, later in the sphere of nation-building. While the Caucasian experience bears the irrevocable imprint of Russian and Soviet modes of experience, Russian and Soviet models do not exhaust the Caucasian cultural realm. Thus, while Soviet abrechestvo texts authored by Caucasian writers in many ways fulfilled Soviet ideological requirements, the credos of Soviet power were appropriated, supplemented, and ultimately deconstructed by the native imagination.

I document the cultural significance of the abrek for the Chechen people. While history, ethnography, and literature are my main sources, my guiding principle is, to quote the anthropologist Michael Taussig, that “representations are a source of experience” and not mere conveyors of information.\textsuperscript{18} My real subject is the representation of the abrek in Chechen culture and the cultural and historical uses to which he has been put, rather than his historical reality. History enters this narrative simultaneously with its representation. Thus, while my point of departure is the abrek’s representation in literature, I place him in his social context by looking at his historical evolution. Every work of literature has a back story, however, which is often as worthy of documentation as the text itself.

In Bobrovnikov’s account, abrek is derived from the Persian, in which language it is spelled as aparak and means a wanderer or thief (27). The main evidence that he offers in support of his thesis is that certain Dagestani languages such as Avar have retained the Persian form of the word in contemporary speech. Bobrovnikov asserts that aparak entered the Caucasian lexicon via Turkish, in the process changing its form to aparag. Originally aparags were “free settlers, who occupied a position in their community halfway between citizens and slaves … many aparags had escaped from their


native village in an effort to avoid the blood revenge which awaited them as punishment for a murder they had committed.”

Aparag entered Kabardin as abredzh, Abkhaz as abrag, Ossetian as abireg, Mingrelian, Svan, and Georgian as abragi, and Ingush and Chechen as obarg, to cite merely a few Caucasian languages. Bobrovnikov points out that although in its original Persian meaning, aparak had negative connotations, the connotations changed when it adapted itself to the Caucasian lexicon; in its Caucasian variant, an abrek is “a prince or nobleman, exiled from society for a crime or other mistake. In no case did this term refer to a homeless tramp [brodiaga] forced to live the life of a criminal.”

If in official Russian discourse, abrek was synonymous with bandit, for Caucasian mountaineers it denoted an entirely different reality. This difference is succinctly expressed by Abdurakhman Avtorkhanov, a Chechen political scientist and scholar taken as a prisoner of war to Germany while fighting on the Russian side during World War II, who remained in exile in Germany for the rest of his life. Avtorkhanov’s appropriation of this term to characterize his people indicates the prestige that abreks enjoyed in Chechen and, more broadly, mountaineer culture.

If Russian commentators view the abrek largely as a bandit who conducts raids against a higher social estate for purposes that may be partially but are not exclusively mercenary, Avtorkhanov takes it as his task to imagine him differently. He emphasizes that the abrek-as-bandit (the Russian reading) must be concerned not only with his own economic well-being but with the well-being of his entire community. Avtorkhanov then extrapolates this detail—the abrek’s selflessness—to undermine the solidity of the Russian imagery of the abrek-as-bandit. The most honored abreks in Caucasian society fought against an unjust power structure, which usually was connected to the Russian state. Thus the abrek’s struggle is political as well as economic—and political not only in the Marxist sense but in the sense of national self-preservation.

Avtorkhanov’s ultimate definition of abrek echoes that commonly encountered among Chechen commentators. The abrek, Avtorkhanov writes, arguing against Russian constructions, is a “solitary revolutionary who wreaks vengeance on foreign invaders for their unjust and cruel abuse of the Chechen people.”

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19 Bobrovnikov, Musul’mane Severnogo Kavkaza, 27.
word *abrek* is of Chechen origin just as the phenomenon is a purely Chechen one, born during the war for the expansion of the Russian empire to the Caucasus.”

Although his claim cannot be justified historically, what concerns me here is not the historical reality but Avtorkhanov’s reasons for making it, the reasons behind its invention.

Russian officials demonized the abrek because they saw him as a challenge to the new colonial order. This demonization in turn filtered into Caucasian perceptions, where it acquired a politically subversive dimension. What interests me particularly are the cases in which abrechestvo received its sharpest, most politically subversive formulations, for even as abrechestvo was liquidated as a historical and social problem, it was elevated to the status of myth by Caucasian authors who saw in it an expression of resistance to Russian colonialism.

The lesser-known part of this story is the Caucasian dimension. For the peoples of the Caucasus—not the Russians—were the ones who produced abrechestvo, albeit in response to Russian oppression; they were the ones who in their folklore and literature invested their dreams and yearnings in these elusive heroes who sacrificed their lives and well-being for their people. The Caucasian texts and oral traditions explored here suggest an alternative discourse about the Caucasus. That these texts were often composed in Russian as well as in local languages, and that their authors were in many cases heavily influenced by the Russian tradition, does not negate their alterity, though it certainly complicates the interpretation of the Caucasian experience and vanquishes any attempt to essentialize Caucasian indigeneity.

**Preparing the Ground for a Hero: Dzakho Gatuev’s *Zelimkhan***

In 1926, a little-known Ossetian writer named Dzakho Gatuev published the first literary account of the life of the abrek Zelimkhan Gushmazukaev (1872–1913), from the village of Kharachoi, in the mountains of Chechnya.
As Chechnya’s most famous abrek and the prototype for my analysis, Zelimkhan and the literary accounts of his life are the centerpiece of what follows.

Gatuev chose a title that reverberated with historical ambition: *Zelimkhan: From the History of the National Liberation Movement in the North Caucasus.*\(^{23}\) That the book was written in Russian was typical of much Ossetian literature of the period, in contrast to the literatures of other North Caucasian peoples, which were more frequently composed in indigenous languages.

Zelimkhan had been captured by Russian troops 13 years earlier. Though Zelimkhan’s exploits had filled the local newspapers for years, this was the first book-length account of his life. The official attitude during the early days of the Soviet Union toward insurgency against tsarist power is indicated by the book’s unabashedly “liberationist” stance: Zelimkhan, the author tells us, fought against the Russians, and in doing so he fought for the freedom of his people. Twelve years after publishing this book, Gatuev was to pay for his ideological excesses with his life: he was shot in 1938.\(^{24}\)

Gatuev’s novel is in many ways a direct assault on the Russian ethnographic representations of the Caucasian mountaineers:

In the ethnography of the Caucasus, there are those who believe that the mountaineers lack the capacity to love. [These ideas] serve a single purpose: to prove that the mountaineers have neither culture nor civilization and can be called human only by a stretch of the imagination.\(^{25}\)

In 1926, such a critique of the Russian ethnographic tradition, and implicitly of the Western tradition from which it derived, was, if not welcome, then tolerated. Gatuev’s account is marked by its passionate sympathy for his hero Zelimkhan, portrayed as a leader of the Chechen people. Though

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\(^{24}\) According to the only published text I have been able to find that makes reference to Gatuev’s death: “[Gatuev] was arrested 16 November 1937 and transported to Ordzhonikidze [present-day Vladikavkaz]. On the next day, his wife was arrested as well. He was accused of participating in an armed uprising organized by a group of Ossetian nationalists…. He was shot on 13 June 1938 and rehabilitated in 1955.” See *Liudi i sud’by: Biobibliograficheskii slovar’ sostokovedov-zhertv politicheskogo terrora v sovetskii period (1917–1991)*, ed. Ia. V. Vasil’kov and M. Iu. Sorokina (St. Petersburg: Peterburgskoe vostokovedenie, 2003). (My information concerning Gatuev’s final days is therefore very imprecise, and I would be grateful to hear from anyone with more information on this subject.)

Rather than referring directly to his mentor’s death, Mamakaev, in his foreword to a posthumous edition of Gatuev’s collected works, ends his account of their friendship obliquely: “It was difficult to imagine at the time that this great literary talent and human with a pure heart would soon cease to exist.” See “Dzakho Gatuev (1892–1938),” in Gatuev, *Izbrannoe* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1970), 5–14, quotation from 12.

\(^{25}\) Gatuev, *Zelimkhan*, 41.
the text is in Russian, Gatuev includes Chechen phrases in it. By his own account, Gatuev spent many years in the mountains of Chechnya collecting stories about his protagonist, and therefore the impressive degree of firsthand knowledge concerning Chechen customs does not come as a surprise.

The impact of Gatuev’s novel was not felt immediately, but over time it received its due among the small group of people who cared about the struggles of the mountaineers of the Caucasus. In fact, Gatuev’s book can be said to have given birth to another book in another language, immeasurably greater in psychological and emotional depth, called simply *Zelamkha*, after the Chechen form of Zelimkhan’s name.26

*Zelamkha* was published in Chechen in 1968. Magomed Mamakaev points out in his Chechen-language afterword that as early as 1926, probably not coincidentally the same year that Gatuev’s *Zelimkhan* was published, he sought in the form of a poem to “create a memorable image of the famous abrek [Zelamkhanan surt isba’kh’allii]” (293, Chechen edition); however, this attempt was destined to remain latent in the author’s imagination for 40 years. *Zelamkha* was Mamakaev’s first major novel and the first literary account of Zelimkhan in his native language. Mamakaev regarded Gatuev as his literary master. Not only does the dedication page of *Zelamkha* read, “To my beloved teacher, Dzakho Gatuev,” but Mamakaev also fondly recalled Gatuev in the preface he wrote to the collected edition of Gatuev’s stories published in 1970. In his Russian-language introduction to Gatuev’s collected works, Mamakaev writes, “it would be impossible to find among the North Caucasian mountaineers a writer of my generation who did not benefit from the support of Dzakho Gatuev.”27

Mamakaev goes on to describe how the young mountaineer writers living in Moscow (presumably in the 1920s and early 1930s) would gather in Gatuev’s apartment for long evenings of intellectual conversation and reminiscences about their homeland. Gatuev’s Moscow apartment served as a home away from home for those who found themselves far from the Caucasus because they had come to Russia’s capital in search of work and education. Mamakaev adds, “if in literature it is possible to speak of students and teachers, then, for many of us, Gatuev was our teacher in the highest sense of this word.”28

The same preface addresses Gatuev’s contribution to the Zelimkhan thematic, which was to shape Mamakaev’s own masterpiece. Gatuev’s *Zelimkhan*, along with another book of Gatuev’s, titled *Ingush*, were “the only literary works of their time that acquainted the reader with the ways

26 Magomed Mamakaev, *Zelamkha* (Grozny: Nokhch-g’aliain knizhni, 1968). Page numbers for quotations from this source are given in parentheses in the text, with reference to the Chechen or Russian editions.


28 Ibid.
and life of the Chechen and Ingush.” Mamakaev also dwells on Gatuev’s use of Zelimkhān’s image as a way of “writing back” in an antagonistic mode to Russian colonial discourse: “In place of the ‘bandit’ [razboinik] Zelimkhān,” Gatuev resurrected the image of the true (podlinnyi) Zelimkhān, a man to whom nothing human was foreign, a brave and fearless warrior, who fought for the interests of his people, a man who wanted to change the existing order.” Such words offer an indication of what Mamakaev himself sought to achieve in his rendering of the famous abrekh.

The abstract of Zelamkha that appears on the title page of the 1983 Russian edition indicates that times have changed in regard to the official attitude toward abrechestvo. No longer is the abrekh a national hero in the realm of official discourse. Now he is both an “extraordinary person” and a “religious fanatic” motivated by the “cult of blood revenge.” The final two sentences in particular contain the typical Soviet formula for exposing the ideological inadequacies of a text that crosses the boundaries of appropriate Soviet discourse:

There is no doubt that Zelimkhan is an extraordinary person, a legend. However, the author poeticizes him and his “feats” [podvigi], which at times were driven by religious fanaticism and the cult of blood revenge…. “In spite of all the heroism of the abreks,” according to Notes on the History of the Chechen-Ingush Republic (1: 218), their rebellions often bore the character of banditry [razboi], terror…. Abrechestvo was

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29 Ibid., 10.
30 The Russian edition is Magomed Mamakaev, Zelimkhan, trans. V. V. Timofeev (Grozny: Checheno-ingushskoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo, 1983). My citations refer to both the Chechen and Russian editions, and, except for one instance below, in which separate translations are provided from the Chechen and Russian editions, respectively, my English translation is based on the Russian, with modifications made in some instances after consulting the Chechen. In the particular quotations I use, the differences are minor, though there are instances where the Chechen and Russian texts diverge. I should note that my encounter with this text, and hence the interpretations I derived from it, was largely shaped by my initial reading of the Russian edition. It is hoped that future scholarship will explore the original Chechen text in more detail and note the differences between the versions. Here I merely emphasize the importance of the author’s afterword (k’ezzig bilgaldakhkhar), which appears only in the Chechen version. In the afterword, Mamakaev draws a precise lineage between other textual and folkloric accounts of Zelamkha. Though he does not name Gatuev specifically, perhaps because the Ossetian author was still in official disfavor in 1968, Mamakaev does cite a 1926 edition of an unnamed work on “Zelamkha” as the most important influence on his 1968 novel. The afterword ends with the statement that “Zelamkha was a great abrekh [obarg], and the violence he endured from the clerks of the state was the same as that experienced by the simple Chechen peasants” (294, Chechen edition). Thus, Mamakaev links Zelamkha’s struggle with a broader one, which is imagined in Marxist terms but can just as easily be read as the author’s attempt to place Zelamkha in a broader Chechen national context and to remove from him the stigma of mere banditry.
not connected with the broad revolutionary movement of the masses. It was without perspective. (Title page of Russian edition)

Indeed, in Mamakaev’s rendition, Zelamkha is a savior of his people. The shepherds of Chechnya regard Zelamkha as a political leader around whom they would rally and through whom they would be saved:

Thus the man from Kharachoi stood before them. Their only thought was for the abrek who stood before them. His amazing life only now struck them in all its power. No man was more beloved by the villagers than Zelamkha, but today he seemed as though he was on the verge of falling into an abyss. They observed Zelamkha, trembling beneath the generous light, full of the knowledge that, no matter how hard he tried, he knew that he was destined to die. (126, Chechen)

The hope awoke in them that this man, Zelimkhan, would gather around him his brothers in arms and initiate a battle for freedom. They passed from ear to ear tales of the new guest. In this way, a legend grew about an undefeatable abrek who defended the wretched. Zelimkhan listened to them and understood that he was engaged on a noble mission. He gathered strength from their faith in him and felt his path all the more consciously, the path of a fearless warrior and inevitable death. (110, Russian)

Though Mamakaev emphasizes that Zelamkha was forced into abrechestvo, he is equally clear that once he found himself on this path, there was no turning back. The very fatality of his existence is a source of heroism. Unlike Gatuev’s Zelimkhan, Zelamkha experiences self-doubt and longs to return to the simplicity of his pre-abrek existence. But it is not only tsarist imperialism that makes an eternal abrek of Zelamkha; his people themselves demand this sacrifice from him.

One feature that runs through all narratives of abrechestvo, in both the Georgian and the North Caucasian traditions, is that the abrek fights not only and not even primarily for his own well-being but for his people. Here, in Mamakaev’s novel, Zelamkha is a chosen figure, and chosen figures are by definition incapable of acting only in their own interest. Heroes, in the epic world of abrechestvo, are only indirect participants in the process of their selection.

Another way in which Mamakaev’s Zelamkha stands apart from Gatuev’s is in the degree to which he questions the path for which he has been selected. At several crucial points in the novel, Zelamkha dreams of turning himself in to the authorities, of returning to civilian life, but he realizes to his regret that such an escape is not open to him; there is no turning back. For example, after his native village of Kharacho is invaded by Russian soldiers in search
of their enemy, Zelamkha considers the possibility of surrender: “Zelimkhan had even decided to hand himself over to the authorities, if it would have meant stopping this unjust abuse of innocent people. But he remembered the experience of his ancestors, and understood that there was nothing he could do” (119, Chechen; 91, Russian).

The mere fact that there is nothing he can do to keep himself from abrechestvo, however, does not keep Zelamkha’s conscience free of remorse over his vocation. One example of such remorse is the conversation Zelamkha has with his father when the burden of being an abrek has become too heavy to bear. He informs his father about his dreams of resettling in Turkey with his family and beginning a peaceful life:

“I am ready to go to the end of the earth, if only it means that innocent people will cease to suffer on my account. And if I were not afraid of God…” Zelimkhan didn’t finish his words. “What would you do then?” his father asked him.

“I would kill myself.”

“You should be ashamed of yourself! […] Didn’t Bakho [Zelimkhan’s grandfather] teach us never freely to surrender to evil people? A true man kills anyone who keeps him from living a free existence.”

“I’ve had enough killing, Gusha [Zelimkhan’s father]! Enough!” Zelimkhan shouted. A note of repulsion trembled in his voice. (122, Chechen; 94, Russian)

Zelamkha’s father Gushmazuko is elsewhere portrayed in the novel as experiencing second thoughts about the morality of killing, but here Zelamkha’s moral code is presented in even sharper contrast to the morally ambiguous life he lives.

In another scene, when Zelamkha speaks to his wife Bitsi about his wish to move to Turkey, the abrek wavers in his steadfast faith; he is not eager to risk everything for the sake of abrechestvo. As in the conversation with his father, it is his interlocutor who keeps him on the path of abrechestvo:

When Zelimkhan saw the half-burned homes of his fellow villagers, their empty, desecrated courtyards, he decided to abandon Chechnya. Not for his own sake, not even for the safety of his family, but to free his villagers from this nightmare. He still dreamed from time to time of ceasing to be an abrek. In Turkey, he would take up the most arduous, but at least peaceful, kinds of work. Then, with the passage of time, he would be forgotten by the authorities, and, if Allah willed, he would return to his native land. (137, Chechen; 108, Russian)

Zelamkha shares these dreams with his wife, who helps him overcome his self-doubt. She says in response to his plan to resettle with his family in
Turkey: “the main thing for me is to be with you. But I don’t believe that a man should abandon his homeland. It’s better for me to be an abrek alongside you, if you’ll take me” (137, Chechen; 108, Russian). Zelamkha is not strong enough to be an abrek by himself; he relies on support from those who love him. Hence in Mamakaev’s novel, abrechestvo is a community-driven endeavor; it is not simply the decadent lifestyle of the abrek-as-bandit acting in isolation. Abrechestvo engages the will, the strivings, and the dreams of an entire people. Whereas Gatuev celebrates the bold feats of a national hero, Mamakaev emphasizes the yearning of the Chechen people for freedom, peace, and justice. He focuses on Zelamkha’s dependence on his community as a supplement to the solitary heroism which Gatuev renders so poignantly.

Zelamkha’s heroism is based on his consciousness of himself as a Chechen. The abrek’s cultural and ethnic identity informs all his actions and renders him a complete human being, more self-aware and wiser than his Russian foes. Whereas Mamakaev renders Zelamkha’s family in a manner that emphasizes their interconnectedness, their willingness to support and die for one another, the Russian soldiers whose task is the conquest of the Caucasus and of Zelamkha in particular are presented as deracinated, alienated individuals, deprived of any sense of community, as ignorant of their own inner nature as they are of the dreams and strivings of the Chechen people. They arrive in Kharachoi with the task of arresting innocent Chechens in retribution for the raids and daring feats performed by Zelamkha. Mamakaev masterfully contrasts the soldiers’ indifference to human life with the Chechens’ rage:

Long ago torn from their native land, their family and friends, they apathetically carried out the orders that they had been assigned, forgetting that somewhere far away in the depths of Russia, their family was enduring the same injustice from tsarist officials. Long accustomed to the subjugation of everyone around them, they did not understand that those Chechens whom they were exiling from their native land and deporting [to Siberia] were their brothers. (134, Chechen; 104, Russian)

This description of the Russian soldiers’ position with respect to their homeland and the new circumstances in which they find themselves resonates with the 19th-century Georgian writer Alexandre Qazbegi’s description, in his short story “Eliso,” of Russian soldiers engaged in one of the many deportations of the Chechens to the Ottoman empire that occurred after the surrender of Imam Shamil:

Who could fail to be touched by the Chechens’ grief, aside from those soldiers whom someone had placed in charge of the deportation and whose job it was to ensure that the rules were obeyed, peace was maintained, and the operations were carried out successfully? Only they
stood cheerful amid the general sorrow; only they laughed and made fun of the Chechens’ wordless grief. The soldiers were accustomed to life far away from their homeland, their people and their hearth. They felt nothing in the presence of other people’s grief. Used to a life of aimless wandering, they couldn’t understand what these honest and patriotic people were complaining about. All their life, they had moved from one place to another at the behest of those who did not even know their names. Enslaved to what they didn’t understand, the soldiers had no wishes or dreams of their own; they lived according to the orders of others and thought that the entire world should live as they did.31

Qazbegi’s works were widely available in Russian while Mamakaev was writing and were even translated into Chechen in 1961.32 Given Qazbegi’s popularity with Chechen writers, it is almost certain that Mamakaev was familiar with the works of this famous Georgian writer, and most particularly with “Eliso,” as it, along with Qazbegi’s other short story “Elberd,” is the most famous literary account of the Chechens during the 19th century in a language other than Russian. Both quotations reveal writers trying to articulate for a native audience the experience of being a Russian soldier and to understand how the Russians’ feelings of alienation and displacement shaped their relationship to the Chechen population. Significantly, both writers go to great lengths to indicate that not only do the Russian soldiers not understand the Chechens, but the Russians are also alienated from their own native space.

Unlike the Chechens, the Russian soldiers have no place they can call home. The Russian lack of sympathy, as depicted by Mamakaev and Qazbegi, for the plight of the Chechens must be understood in this light. The Russians have no sympathy for the Chechens; they also have neither sympathy nor compassion for themselves. The Russians’ lack of self-knowledge proves relevant below in illuminating the complex origins of the tensions among Russian soldiers, officers, and the abrek. As we will see, the emptiness of the Russian self and its inability to articulate for Chechen ears a satisfactory spiritual discourse with which to justify the conquest of the Caucasus renders Russians serving in Chechnya particularly vulnerable to the spiritual power of the abrek.

32 A. Kazbegi [Qazbegi], Kha’rzhinarsh: Davtsiinarg, Tsitsia, Elisa, trans. from the Georgian by I. Margoshvili (Grozny: Nokch-g’alain knizhni, 1961). The translator was a Kist, a Chechen from Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge, living in Grozny when he decided to undertake the translation of these three masterpieces of Georgian literature into Chechen. Though Qazbegi is by no means a household name among the Chechens, among the intelligentsia his works are much better known than they are, for example, to the average educated Russian reader.
In Qazbegi and Mamakaev’s renditions, the colonial encounter between the Chechens and the Russian soldiers is characterized by the sense of being caught inside a system that neither party understands but which impinges on every aspect of their relations with each other. Such strained relations, based more on ignorance of the other than on knowledge, inform my later investigation of the death of the abrek and the Russian reaction to it.33

The villagers of Kharachoi stand by passively as their fellow Chechens are sent away, but, as the author tells us: “Inside them a revolution was taking place. Every last one of them was ready to fight and to die, to fall against the rocks and break into pieces. But everyone was restrained by the fear of endangering the others.” In sharp contrast to the Russian soldiers’ habit of looking out only for themselves, the villagers of Kharachoi place the welfare of their fellow Chechens before the satisfaction of their personal vendettas. It is precisely this unity that is the source of their strength, as it makes it impossible for the Russians either to defeat or to understand them. Mamakaev continues: “The soldiers, standing beside their guns, knew nothing of the despairing palpitations inside the heart of every mountaineer” (Russian, 134; Chechen, 105). The Russian soldiers’ insensitivity to the inner lives of the Chechens, their inability to understand what goes on in the hearts and minds of the mountaineers, constitutes their most egregious flaw and is presented by Mamakaev in the context of this novel as the reason for the collapse of the Russian empire.

Thus, in spite of the imbalance of power that obtains between the Russians and the Chechens, the Chechens are endowed in Mamakaev’s novel with a power that renders them infinitely stronger than the Russians. This is their sense of purpose, the common goal that every member of the community is prepared to defend with his or her life. Contempt turns the Russian soldiers into carbon copies of one another and proves incapable of suppressing the moral–political struggle via which the Chechens defend their values and homeland.

33 There is one other important Georgian intertext for Mamakaev’s depiction of Zelimkhah. This is Mixeil Javaxishvili’s novel Arsen iz Marabdy: Roman (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1959). The novel was published in a huge print run of half a million copies, and while I have no proof that Mamakaev read Javaxishvili’s novel such as might be obtained from archival sources that have been destroyed, there is no doubt in my mind that Mamakaev’s Zelamkha was written in response to Javaxishvili’s Arsen. Arsena is arguably the most famous Caucasian abrek in history; therefore, textual accounts of his life would have been well known to Mamakaev. But beyond that, Zelamkha contains several passages that quote verbatim from the Russian translation of Arsen. The reader who compares, for example, Mamakaev 129, Russian edition, with Javaxishvili 118; Mamakaev 229, Russian edition, with Javaxishvili 396; or Mamakaev 227, Russian edition, with Javaxishvili 403 will see that Zelamkha was clearly written under the influence of Arsen. A comparison with the Javaxishvili text deserves much deeper analysis, but that has to be left for another time and place.
More Frightening Dead than Alive: The Making of an Epic Hero

Zelimkhan in Gatuev’s and, in particular, Mamakaev’s account possesses the spiritual inclinations of an artist. He is often seen with a chinar by his side, and at all crucial moments in his life he can be found singing and composing poetry to music. Both Gatuev’s and Mamakaev’s renditions of Zelimkhan coincide in this respect, and their fictional reconstructions in turn coincide with their accounts of the last moments of Zelimkhan’s life. According to contemporary newspaper accounts, Zelimkhan died singing the yasin, the prayer that a faithful Muslim believer recites before death.\(^{34}\)

Gatuev’s description of Zelimkhan’s final moments, cited below, derives its power from the parataxis of poetic composition in place of prosaic exposition. The sheer incomprehensibility of Zelimkhan’s words in Arabic reinforces the sense of his otherness in the text and strengthens the reader’s sense of his spiritual vocation. The pseudo-simplicity of the narrator’s voice in the following lines is also a poetic device, a form of defamiliarization which has as its goal the unsettling of the readers’ consciousness:

Zelimkhan sang and aimed at the Russians. He shot.
—Li tun zira kaimen ma in zira sa baa igim.
Zelimkhan sang. He sang a long time. As many hours as the battle dragged on, that many hours he sang.
The battle began at nine in the evening.
—Fegim gi fil lush.
The sky blanched white. Rain ceased to fall. Only the trees trembled with their tears. The last drops.
—La kad khakal kai lei. A la ek ser egim fegim. La ei minui.
The sky blanched white. The grass turned grey from the drops of rain.
—In na dzhaal ha fi agna kigim. A glalal fegnia il’ilial azi ko’oni.
Zelimkhan saw the hats of his enemies making their way toward him in the grass. Then he stood up. He could not raise his gun anymore. He raised his Browning [pistol]. For the last time, he killed two more.
—Fegim. Mokh mexui. Va dzhaal na.\(^{35}\)

Zelimkhan’s struggle is vividly expressed in a quotation from Mamakaev’s novel that underlines the abrek’s dream of redeeming his people and of his idealism (in contrast to the shrewdness more characteristic of political leaders, such as Imam Shamil, who is represented in the novel as a corrupt demagogue). In the midst of one of the most difficult periods in his life, Zelimkhan retreats to the forest with his chinar, and for the first time in his life realizes

the incredible, unbelievable weight that lies on the shoulders of anyone who tries to transform the sad and miserable existence of [the

\(^{34}\) P. Chinskii, “Zelimkhan,” Rannee utro, no. 185 (1913): 2 (cited in Botiakov, Abreki, 166).

\(^{35}\) Gatuev, Zelimkhan, 174.
Chechen people. He remembered that even his grandfather went to the grave without overcoming even a fraction of that evil which ruled the world…. [W]ho is strong enough to annihilate evil? Could Zelimkhah do it on his own? Could such a feat be accomplished by a single human being? (179, Chechen; 141, Russian)

As is typical of a spiritual hero, Zelamkha prophesies his own death in Mamakhaev’s narrative through a dream that he relates to his wife. His wife refuses to believe her husband, but Zelamkha knows better. He cultivates his gift for interpreting the songs of nature, and nature tells him that his days are reaching their end: “The stars looked down on Zelamkha from their sky-blue heights like guards over his destiny. The sickle of the moon stood above him in the highest echelon of the sky … the birds chirped restlessly from the perches on the trees, immersed in ominous dreams” (225, Chechen; 285, Russian).

Finally, Zelamkha’s spiritual gift reaches its climax just a few hours before he dies. He sings a song in a soft voice about a Chechen hero by the name of Balu, who is victorious over a Circassian prince who attacks Chechen territory. Like Zelamkha, Balu dies in battle, and it is no accident that the song is described as “taking over his soul.” The song, we are told, “reverberated in Zelamkha’s soul like the Argun River between a rock and a cliff. It rustled like the wind on the tall mountains” (226, Chechen; 286, Russian). This beautiful metaphor accomplishes much in the way of reinventing the abrek, via the colonial encounter, from his original role as a refugee from blood revenge into a mythical hero. (For in the end, this is what colonialism “did” to the abrek: it transformed him from his status as a less-than-honored element in the indigenous social order into a sacred figure, and the very demonizing romanticization performed by the Russians is directly linked to the abrek’s sanctified status for the Chechens.) First, Mamakhaev’s metaphor positions Zelamkha in a chronology of mythical heroes, of which Balu is but one example. Second, it reinforces the ties between Zelamkha’s fate and nature, for Zelamkha’s recollection of his (mythical) predecessors is compared by the narrator to the flow of the Argun River, which is figured simultaneously as interruption and as part of a natural, eternal process.

The “naturalization” of Zelamkha indicates that the roots of his battle reach beyond the current political–historical position of the Chechen people. While liberation from Russian conquest is obviously part of his spiritual mission, Zelimkhan’s vision extends beyond the temporal sphere. He is concerned with freedom not merely in the political sense but in the moral-philosophical sense as well. In both Mamakhaev’s and Gatuev’s accounts, nature participates in Zelimkhan’s grief. The rain falls heavily, just as it did on that fateful September day in 1913.
In both texts, when Zelimkhan knows he will die, he begins to sing a Muslim prayer in Arabic. Mamakaev writes that Zelamkha “sang the *doa* loudly and passionately. There was something terrifying in his singing; even the officer felt the goose bumps run down his neck” (227, Chechen; 287, Russian). Singing figures in both Mamakaev’s and Gatuev’s narrative as a form of resistance, political as well as spiritual. It is striking for the nonviolent form it takes, given that the resistance originates with an abrek notorious in Russian circles for his viciousness. Zelamkha’s singing, in a language that perhaps he only half-understands, is a self-conscious assertion of his own alterity. In spite of the charge of “religious fanaticism” directed against him by Russians, when he sings, Zelamkha does not aspire to revenge.

Zelamkha’s mystical behavior is contrasted to the rationalism of the Russian soldiers, whose first priority is their own safety and welfare and who therefore hesitate to attack the abrek: “In spite of all the officers’ bluffs, the number of officers who were eager to fight to the death turned out to be quite small, and the cross-fire [between Zelamkha and the Russian army] soon died down” (227, Chechen; 287, Russian). Hours pass, and the soldiers imagine that Zelamkha has died. Zelamkha is no ordinary human being, however; he cannot be killed with one bullet.

Freud remarked in his essay on the uncanny that “after the collapse of religion, the gods turned into demons.” Zelamkha’s body bears the traces of such a transformation, in which that which is sacred for some spectators is metamorphosed into an instrument of torture for the uninitiated who cannot enter into the covenant between the Chechen abrek and his people. Much like Hoffman’s “living doll,” analyzed by Freud, Zelamkha’s body is a source of discomfort precisely because it occupies the liminal space between life and death, which Botiakov has analyzed as the abrek’s native realm.

The battle between the abrek and the Russian soldiers takes place in a space rendered godless by war and, even more devastatingly, by the bureaucracy of Russian imperialism. But the abrek’s presence infuses the battleground with the aura of sanctity; rather than a war motivated by greed, lust, and boredom, the abrek’s battle is *gāzot* (*gazavat*) in the Chechen sense, a holy war which is all at once noble, just, and sacred. Freud argued that it is the very act of substitution (the “double” or the “repetition,” in Freud’s terms) that constitutes the uncanny. Here it is the absence of holiness in the Russian soldiers’ cognitive field that renders the presence of death all the more terrifying, and Zelamkha’s body, which will soon be transformed into a corpse, becomes a surrogate vessel for the sacred. Zelamkha’s acquisition of powers he does not innately possess likewise bathes him in an aura equally composed of the strange and the worldly.

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Troubled by this impure mixing of the sacred and the profane, the soldiers refuse to approach Zelamkh’a’s body and prefer to wait until morning to take away his corpse. Zelimkhan’s superhuman power reasserts itself when he rises from the dead: “In the clouds that covered the earth in the predawn hour, a new world began to appear, and as if from beneath the earth Zelimkhan appeared” (227, Chechen; 287, Russian).

By this point in the narrative Zelamkh’a’s body has been penetrated by hundreds of bullets, and the soldiers long ago had reason to believe that Zelamkh’a was no longer to be counted among the living. The indeterminacy of Zelamkh’a’s status in the world of the living is not unique to him; Botiakov, though he does not analyze Zelimkhan’s death scene, devotes ample attention to the liminal status of other abreks in other Caucasian contexts.

Every detail of the novel’s final page anticipating Zelamkh’a’s re-emergence points to the otherworldly nature of reappearance, and encourages us to read this final scene as Zelamkh’a’s resurrection from the dead. Finally, convinced of his own divinity, Zelamkh’a announces to the astonished soldiers: “My body doesn’t take your bullets!” (227, Chechen; 287, Russian). Then he begins to pray. The officers are terrified by Zelamkh’a’s unworldly behavior after he has come back to life. Mamakaev notes that “they froze in terror, unable to believe their eyes” (227, Chechen; 287, Russian).

The presence of the uncanny, be it demonic or sacred, in Zelamkh’a’s resurrected body is precisely what terrifies the soldiers more than anything else, for if God is on the side of a fanatical Muslim bandit engaged in g’azot, then the soldiers are deprived of a justification for the murder they are about to commit. They prefer to exist in the sphere of the canny, where the rules of bureaucratic, imperial conquest prevail. Zelamkh’a, however, transports them to another sphere from which they are unable to extricate themselves. Hence their response to the terrifying image which Zelimkhan’s nonviolent resistance presents to them.

In a vain attempt to interrupt the abrek’s namaz (prayers), one officer screams: “Don’t listen to him! That bandit has no God!” (227, Chechen; 287, Russian). Then the officer orders his soldiers to fire at the risen Zelimkhan, to kill the horrifying creature whose very proximity to the sacred produces anxiety with which no Russian, soldier or officer, is prepared to deal. At long

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37 For the idea that the uncanny, as a form of psychological repression, is relevant to understanding the impact the abrek has on the Russians not so much because of his inherent alterity but rather because the abrek invokes a “return of the repressed” within the Russians themselves and tells them more about themselves than they want to know, I am deeply indebted to Bruce Grant, who comments: “What is repressed here is the violence brought on by the Russians themselves, not simply by the Chechens in response to Russian incursions.” It is the Russian soldiers who are the bandits, not the abrek, and the very fact that they sense it on some level drives their demonization of the abrek-as-bandit, as well as, perhaps even more ironically, the Chechen appropriation of it.
last, after a violent battle, the soldiers manage to kill the uncanny element of Zelamkha’s presence which troubles them so much. Mamakaev writes: “Everything was over…. Zelamkha fell to his knees. The blood flowed from his numerous wounds so vigorously that he resembled a red vision. Still, [despite his wounds] Zelamkha stood up at his full height and, loudly reading the yasin, he rushed toward the soldiers running toward him” (228, Chechen; 288, Russian). The “red vision” into which the soldiers transform Zelamkha is not only a synecdoche for his bleeding corpse; it is also a sign of the soldiers’ stained consciences, as it is blood in which they have doused their souls.

Finally, in the middle of his prayer, Zelimkhan falls to the ground. But the soldiers find it hard to believe in the death of the magical force they have unsuccessfully tried to kill so many times. Rather than approaching him to take away his corpse, the soldiers plant ten extra bullets in his body for good measure, in a superstitious gesture of self-defense that does much to reveal their cowardice, because no abrek—no Chechen, for that matter—would fire unnecessary bullets into the body of his dead enemy. According to the Chechen code of conduct, as represented in Chechen folklore and literature, the body of the dead enemy must be treated with respect. Killing has its own rules and regulations, its own moral code, which the Russian soldiers and officers violate. The final words of the novel (before the epilogue) offer a cryptic explanation for the soldier’s cowardly behavior: “To his enemies, even when he was dead, Zelimkhan was alive” (228, Chechen; 288, Russian).

In these final pages, Mamakaev presents us with a far more nuanced, philosophically subtle, and imaginative reading of resistance—political

38 For the cultural stigma in Chechen culture against shooting the enemy from behind, see, among other texts, Zaindi Shakhbiev, *Sud’ba checheno-ingushskogo naroda* (Moscow: Rossiia molodaia, 1996).

39 The magical powers commanded by the abrek are by no means limited to the Caucasus. See, for example, the Czech novel *Nikola the Outlaw* by Ivan Olbracht, in which Nikola, an outlaw with character traits very similar to those of Zelamkha, possesses the capacity to terrify his enemy, who more often than not happens to be a German officer, by performing feats that can be explained only with reference to the supernatural. Olbracht’s text is also based on an historical outlaw who existed around the turn of the 20th century. See *Nikola the Outlaw*, trans. Marie K. Holecek (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001). More generally, the theme of abrechestvo as a form of resistance to colonial or otherwise dominant power is also not limited to the Caucasus. One of the most fascinating texts that presents banditry as a state into which the outlaw is forced by poverty and social injustice and at the same time a political choice with the goal of working for a more just social order is Phoolan Devi’s co-authored autobiography, cited above. While problematic from the point of view of authorial voice, this texts and texts like it indicate to us that social banditry is political in the sense that it does not accept the laws that govern the society in which it operates and refuses to abide by them; however, which is probably more important, it is at the same time profoundly apolitical in the sense that it asserts a different kind of world order, based on a different set of spiritual understandings.
and spiritual—to the existing order than more conventional and one-sided representations of Caucasian mountaineers by Russian writers. Mamakaev also offers us an unconventional interpretation of Zelimkhan’s legacy, one that goes well beyond the familiar version of abrechestvo as stealing from the rich and distributing to the poor or the debates over the criminal foundations of mountaineer society. Mamakaev elevates Zelimkhan beyond his social and political context and uncovers—some might say invents—the universal and cosmic elements of the abrek’s struggle.

In the deepest sense, the abrek fights not merely or even primarily against social injustice, as Hobsbawm’s social bandit does, or even against Russian imperialism, as a superficial reading of Gatuev’s work might lead the reader to conclude.\(^{40}\) As we have seen in Mamakaev’s text, the abrek’s battle is most fundamentally against metaphysical evil. He is more than a typical revolutionary hero (though in his Soviet incarnation, as in Gatuev’s novel and the film \textit{Zelimkhan}, the abrek is certainly a revolutionary as well).\(^{41}\) The abrek’s struggle, particularly in Mamakaev’s work, is embodied in the Islamic notion of gazavat, which the Chechen intellectual Iandarov refers to as the “defense of the Muslim homeland against unbelievers and traitors to Islam” (111). Gazavat is defined by Iandarov in contrast to jihad, which is “an attack on non-believers driven by necessity” (111).\(^{42}\) Gazavat is, according to Iandarov, a much less organized phenomenon than jihad; and perhaps that explains why it, and not jihad, has formed the basis for what Iandarov calls the “ideology of national liberation” in the North Caucasus.

\(^{40}\) Hobsbawm sees the bandit as a surrogate for genuine political change, to be achieved through a Marxist revolution, whereas I am more interested in the abrek’s defeatist aesthetics, the ways in which his very failures have contributed to the structuring of heroism in the Caucasus. The sacralized status of the social bandit is not part of Hobsbawm’s analysis. Incidentally, Hobsbawm refers to Zelimkhan. His source is M. Pavlovich, “Zelim Khan et le brigandage au Caucase,” \textit{Revue du monde musulman} (1912), on the basis of which Hobsbawm characterizes Zelimkhan as a “Robin Hood of early twentieth-century Daghestan” (\textit{Bandits}, 49).

\(^{41}\) Unfortunately, this film is extremely rare, and I have not been able to view it or find any summaries of its content. \textit{Zelimkhan} was, however, screened in France for the film festival \textit{Tchetchenie criblee d’images} (2004), where it was billed as: “Zelimkhan, de O. Frylikh, d’après le roman de Khetagourov (ossète), 1929, 40 minutes, Ossetie (URSS). Alors que les tsars étouffent le peuple, l’histoire de Zelimkhan, bandit d’honneur tchétchène (abrech) présenté comme ... un bandit.” However, the film could not have been based on the work of Kosta Khetagurov (another famous Ossetian writer), because Khetagurov never wrote anything related to the abrek. Gatuev’s text is the most likely source for the film.

Whereas jihad can be declared “only by an iman or khalif in the name of the entire government” (110), gazavat lends itself better than jihad to the particular kind of resistance exemplified by Zelimkhan. Gazavat, as noted above in the quotes from Iandarov, is “defense” rather than “attack.” Rather than an attempt to convert others to the faith, it is an attempt to preserve the faith for oneself. Such distinctions were confirmed as well in my interviews with Chechen refugees in Nal‘chik in 2006. When I asked them what the difference was between jihad and gazavat, they were generally hard-pressed to answer, but ultimately they said that gazavat was about protecting the homeland, whereas jihad was about reaching beyond the homeland, and broadening the community of Islam through holy war.

In this context, it is significant that Zelimkhan does not attack the Russian officers, and that rather than shoot, as he would be expected to had he been engaged in an equal battle with his enemies, he accepts the Russian bullets passively into his body. Indeed, Zelimkhan’s passivity is Islamic in the deepest sense, and it is no coincidence that the singing of the *yasin* and his sanctification are accomplished precisely in those moments when he surrenders his will to Allah. Therefore, I would add to Botiakov’s arguments that the abrek engages with the supernatural, liminal realm the point that the abrek’s engagement is with a specific kind of supernatural (Georgian instances notwithstanding); in the 19th-century context of colonial encounter in the North Caucasus, that engagement can be defined as Islamic self-abnegation, which takes shape as gazavat. Certainly, there were instances in the encounters between the North Caucasian mountaineers and the Russians in which the mountaineer tribes were the aggressors; and it could be argued that Islam, just like Christianity, though in a different way, supports the idea of certain kinds of conquests. But gazavat, in the context of Chechen or (to make a more limited claim) abrechestvo culture, implies a specific kind of war; and that war is, by definition, undertaken for the defense of the homeland.

Zelimkhan is victorious over his enemies in the sense that he exercises his free will to the end of his life and, most profoundly, to bring about his death. (The structure of behavior here, and the values that attend it, run parallel in many ways to the contemporary Chechen response to war, in which it is perceived as more noble for a people to sacrifice half its nation to genocide than to admit defeat and accept assimilation into an unjust society.) In Mamakaev’s rendition, Zelimkhan chooses to die; the Russians do not kill him. After Zelimkhan’s second return to life, the Russian officer Kibirov shrinks back in fear from his archenemy, hides behind a bale of hay, and screams “hysterically,” as the author informs us, requesting that Zelimkhan fall to the ground and return to the realm of the dead. But the abrek cannot erase his liminality so easily; it is an indelible marker of his identity.
The irony of an officer issuing such a command to his enemy and structural inferior, even as his subordinates hide far away, is obvious. Zelimkhan refuses to submit to the officer’s command. Instead he runs toward the Russians reciting the Muslim *yasin*. By singing *yasin* as he rushes at the soldiers who are waiting with their guns, poised to kill him for the third time, Zelimkhan serenades his own death. Suicide, as his father Gushmazuko reminds him, is condemned by the Muslim and Chechen God, but a noble death, a conscious decision to die from the enemy’s bullet when no other avenue is open, is a respectable way for a Chechen to end his life.

What is the source of the abrek’s sanctity? In Zelamkha’s case, his sanctity clearly possesses a double derivation. On the one hand, he is glorified and romanticized in his native context by his family, friends, community, and the native writers who deify him. On the other hand, the abrek’s sanctity, insofar as it is aligned to the uncanny, derives its origins from the fear it instills in the Russian soldiers. The abrek’s power is based on his ability to instill fear in his aggressors, and it is that fear-instilling ability, combined with a complete innocence of character, that raises his status within the community and makes possible his transformation from ethnographic abrek, driven by blood feuds from one village to the next, to the epic hero of Soviet literature. We should therefore inquire into the origins of the abrek’s capacity to instill fear.

Freud’s essay on the uncanny can help us, insofar as it attempts to account for the return of the repressed in the form of an object that has the power to provoke. Freud views the uncanny as a reassertion of a pre-existing but hidden force via the mediation of the material world. In this case, the provoking object in question is the abrek. But in whom does the abrek provoke fear? In the Russian soldiers, not in the native population. Whereas the abrek may be uncanny to the Russians, he is not so to the native writers, except via his power to evoke within the Russians their own fear of what they represent to the natives and, by extension, to themselves.

The abrek’s uncanny status refers specifically to the brutality of the war waged by the Russians against the native population; it is a shorthand way of transcribing that which cannot be transcribed directly. The abrek, as he dies, reminds the soldiers of the brutality they and their superiors have inflicted on the native population, and when they back away from the abrek’s corpse, it is not so much because it is inherently repulsive but because it evokes in them their fear of themselves and what they have done.

To further nuance this reading of the abrek’s uncanny status as a manifestation of Freud’s repressed in a colonial context, we ought also to draw attention to the power hierarchy among the Russian soldiers and officers during the episode describing Zelamkha’s death. It is the soldiers who are sent out into the field, to do battle with the abrek, while the officer Kibirov remains hidden behind a bale of hay. His conscience does not trouble him.
when he sacrifices his subordinates to the colonial battle that he and his superiors before him have initiated. If we remember the social context, the chain of oppression linking one Russian to another, we can better understand why it is that the true hysteria inspired by the uncanny appears most clearly in the case of the officer rather than among his subordinates. The officer is himself the true source of the terror that causes him to hysterically instruct Zelamkhha to die. But this time, for once, the officer’s structural power dissipates in the face of the abrek’s spiritual authority.

In his final moments, Zelimkhan discovers the freedom for which he has spent his life battling; he achieves his goal, although the consequences of his victory remain limited to his own person. This is not to say that the abrek’s feat has no consequences in the larger social context or that the tale of his life and death cannot be used as a bulwark of faith, as a story—much like the story of Balu, passed from generation to generation as a means of teaching the Chechens about their own identity and of telling themselves who they are. A narrative of cultural placement is precisely what the abrek has become in the context of contemporary Chechen cultural ideology; witness the important role played by music in mobilizing the Chechen population around the war, in particular, the circulation of illegal, bootleg versions of the music of Timur Mutsuraev and Imam Alimsultanov, whose most popular songs are renditions of illi (Chechen epic songs) about abreks. A recent edition of literature by contemporary North Caucasian writers contains, as its Chechen contribution, a story about Zelimkhan; and a screenplay based on Zelimkhan’s life has been written in Chechen by the Chechen writer Khaji-Akhmed Bersanov.

I have focused here on the abrek in his less popular articulations and the way in which he captured the imagination of writers such as Gatuev and Mamakaev also as a metonym for the poet’s isolation from the community to which he is beholden. There is never an easy way of dividing the popular from the literary, and we must remember in the case of the Chechens that such categories are infinitely more difficult to articulate, as the articulation of culture itself has proceeded along different trajectories.

43 Perhaps we can also recall the contemporary context of the recent Chechen Wars, in which many tens of thousands of conscript soldiers have been similarly sacrificed by their superiors. The same pattern is evident now in terms of the Russians’ representation of the Chechen Other. Conscripts and low-level subordinates do not exhibit a tendency to demonize the Chechens, but the higher one goes up the military hierarchy, the stronger is the tendency to represent the Chechens negatively (correspondence with Serguei Oushakine, 14 April 2006, as well as my own fieldwork, January 2004).

In part because of the special circumstances of war, genocide, and deportation but also because of the sheer fact of their small numbers, Chechen cultural spokesmen (they are almost all men) attain an exemplary status; they are afforded extraordinary respect even as they are tied to extraordinarily hierarchical ideological frameworks. The abrek—who is folk hero, antisocial poet, and revolutionary leader all at once—is thus one of the most potent repositories for such contradictions. It is impossible to understand his cultural significance without turning to an eclectic diversity of source material, among which we must count, in addition to literary texts, music, folklore, and indigenous scholarship.

Though the abrek is most compelling in his mythological and literary incarnations, the awe-struck memories that he has inspired are equally noteworthy and suggest reasons for the abrek’s persistence, specifically in the Chechen context. For example, one Chechen reports of returning to his homeland after 13 years of exile in Central Asia to find that his favorite childhood picture, a portrait of Zelimkhan that had hung in Grozny’s art museum, had been removed. He inquired into the reasons for the absence of his hero’s picture but was not given a satisfactory answer.

This incident marked the beginning of what he calls a new “education,” during which he learned many things about the relationship between the citizen and the state and about the short attention span of Soviet power, which had aggressively propagandized the abrek’s image decades earlier: “I learned that there used to exist a street in Gudermes named in honor of Zelimkhan, and that a film was made about his life, and that folk songs resonated on the radio dedicated to his memory. ‘Chechen-Ingush men don’t forget Zelimkhan’ [they sang]…. When I asked who this hero was, I was told, ‘Forget about him! What does this criminal have to do with you?’”

I have assembled the material presented here in the ways that Chechens have presented their own stories to me and have been less concerned with the reality of the abrek than with the ways in which his reality has been imagined by Caucasian and Russian authors, first and foremost, and secondarily by the

45 M. U. Bakarov, Vospominaniia ob abreke Zelimkhane, trans. from Chechen by O. R. Iassievich. This is one of many relevant texts that have proved impossible to obtain due to difficult research conditions in the Chechen republic. (Hence the lack of more precise bibliographic information; the book was most likely published in Grozny). It is available in partial form online at www.kavkazchat.com/archive/index.php/t-4398.html. Another crucial text is Abuzar Aidamirov’s Buria, a novelized biography of Zelimkhan that exists in both Russian and Chechen variants. Finally, this account of abrechestvo in Chechen culture would be sorely lacking if I did not at least mention an important anthology of material on Chechen culture that focuses on the imagery of abrechestvo: “O tikh kogo nazyvali abrekkami”: Sbornik rasskazov, povestei, legend, skazok, stikhotvorenii i sotsial’no-ekonomicheskikh ocherkov o Chechne i chechentsakh (Grozny: Izdatel’stvo Chechenskogo otdela narodnogo obrazovaniia, 1927). I have not been able to obtain copies of either of these vital works, but I will treat them on another occasion.
Caucasian and Russian public. While my interests are firmly anchored in the present, I believe that the best way of accessing alternative visions (in this case, the best way of rendering an indigenously Chechen cultural experience outside the purview of Russian hegemony) is to dig into unreported spheres of experience with the methodologies uniquely afforded by philology’s textual excavations.

As I have suggested above, the abrek is no less significant now to the Chechens than he was 100 years ago. Inevitably, his modes of signification have changed, and the abrek is now a marker for irrevocable loss on many fronts: in the spheres of war, politics, and masculinity. He is also the bearer of a specific form of nostalgia and of a world that was in many senses annihilated by the 1944 deportation. Abreks continued to haunt the mountains after the deportation, engaged in a struggle that they knew they could never win. If there is one thing that defines the abrek in his modern Chechen incarnation, it is precisely this: a commitment to defeat. If the abrek’s commitment were only to the act of resistance, the paradoxes of Mamakaev’s internally divided hero would not have been present in my account. Beyond resistance, the abrek in many of the texts I have come across while studying his manifestations in the Chechen context is motivated by the prospect of defeat as much as he is by the hope of victory.

Death itself is the apotheosis of meaning for the Chechen abrek, the moment when his true task is fulfilled. In a recently published book, the Chechen writer Musa Geshaev tells the story of “the last abrek,” Khasukha, one of the few Chechens who escaped the deportation and stayed behind in the mountains for 30 years, hiding from the KGB but ultimately engaged in a cat-and-mouse game that he could never win. In a clear allusion to Mamakaev’s text on Zelamkha, when Khasukha is caught and killed, we are told that “though he was already dead, the soldiers waited two days” before they gathered the courage “to approach his body: so intense was their fear in the presence of this abrek.”

The repetition of this motif, the image of the fear that the dead Chechen inspires in the Russian soldiers, is one clue to the meaning that the abrek possesses for Chechen culture. For when the Russian is shown to be afraid, the Chechens’ victory is not one of military prowess but rather exists within the sphere of the moral and, arguably, the religious as well, in the sense of gazavat. Russian fear, from the perspective of the Chechen writers who describe it, is the logical consequence of Russian guilt, and when the Russian soldiers are afraid of the dead abrek, they do not fear the corpse of a defeated bandit as much as what he reminds them of, as much as they fear them-

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46 Musa Geshaev, *Izvestnye chechentsy* (Moscow: n. p., 1999). Khasukha’s story is presented by Geshaev as an account taken from history, and Khasukha is remembered by other Chechens as a historical figure.
selves and the corruption into which they have fallen. The Caucasian writers Mamakaev, Gatuev, and Geshaev therefore transfer the battles of the interminable Chechen wars onto a sphere that adheres to higher moral standards; according to the representations I have considered above, it is not the struggle between weakness and power that is at the heart of these conflicts but rather one between sanctity and degradation.

In a sense, one goal of the Chechen representations of abrekhestvo is to demonstrate the truth of the words of a White Guards officer, Sergei Berdiaev, who was entrusted with the task of capturing Zelimkhan during the seven years (1907–15) that he spent in the Caucasus: “the Chechens never fought with the goal of acquiring the territory of any other nation; … they were not warriors; they merely courageously [muzhestvenno, manfully] protected themselves, defending their sovereign rights.”47 I quote these words with a strong sense of irony, for Berdiaev proceeded to write two short tendentious accounts of his attempts to defeat his criminal nemesis, the razboinik Zelimkhan, which are generally marked by a patronizing and overly simplistic representation of both the Chechen people and his nemesis’s base of support.

My point in employing Berdiaev’s words, however, is to provide an example of how the abrek establishes an innocence that is coterminous with masculine dignity. For those who are too weak to win and too peaceful to fight, the abrek is a way of proving one’s lack of guilt without giving up the right to self-defense. For how can the abrek (and, by implication, the Chechen people) be guilty if he is engaged only in protecting himself and his people? The abrek allows the Chechen people to accept with grace the defeat that is their lot, all the while preserving their self-respect. One obvious and unfortunate condition for the maintenance of such dignity is the price of death, for the true measure of courage in this context is one’s willingness to die. The consequences and casualties of abrechestvo heroism are obvious to every Chechen alive today.

The abrek in his Chechen variant has been claimed by the Russians, and by other Caucasian peoples who already possess their own ample store of abreks and abrechestvo texts but who continue to look to Chechnya as the richest source of abrek material. The Dagestani scholar Akhlakov, for example, draws on Zelimkhan’s symbolic capital in Dagestani folk ballads in his 1968 study of Avar epic poetry. Akaki Shanidze marks the same phenomenon in his anthology of Khevsur folklore.48 In the Georgian context, we should also note the Mokheve poet Gabriel Jabushanuri’s cycle of poems

48 See A. Akhlakov, Geroiko-istoricheskie pesni avartsev (Makhachkala: Dagestanskii filial Akademii nauk SSSR, Institut istorii, iazyka, i literatury im. G. Tsadasy, 1968); and Akaki Shanidze, Kartuli xalxuri poezia Khevsuruli (Tbilisi: saxelmtsipo gamomtsemloba, 1931), 1:
dedicated to the Ingush population that was deported to Central Asia from an Ingush–Georgian border region in 1944, and the opening poem in his cycle, entitled “Lonely Aul” (1948), which ends with an appeal to the dead souls of the depopulated village (“Ghilgho” in this context refers to the homeland of the Ingush people—an ethnicity closely related, and, in certain contexts, identical, to the Chechens):

mimiRe, rogorc mkvidri RelRveli
da vyaroT ramli Cveni xvalisa,
kvlav Tu mogvaSTobs mainc naRveli
vimReRoT saga zelimxanisa.

Accept me, as an heir of Ghilgho
We’ll shed tears for our tomorrow.
If our hearts give birth to sadness
We’ll sing the saga of Zelimkhan.49

I have sought to arrive at a provisional understanding of the various registers along which the abrek has been articulated in Chechen culture, as well as the ways in which these registers—from the popular to the literary, the Soviet, the tsarist, and the contemporary period—interact with one another in the present. Such results should not only yield insight into the social function of the bandit in mountaineer societies; additionally, by exploring representations of the abrek in Chechen culture, I hope to shed light on questions concerning center–periphery relations and the ways in which the periphery frequently rewrites center-based representations by inscribing them within new contexts.

In the case of the Caucasus, the irony of the center–periphery model is that the abrek in many instances reached the Caucasus via Russia, even as Russians received and reworked the images of the abrek that they absorbed from the Caucasian landscape. Such a model of reception, transfiguration, and new reception would seem to indicate that we can never finally distinguish between the derivate and the original, and that it would be a factually egregious mistake to identify the colonized as something that is axiomatically derived from and therefore dependent on the dominant culture. The Caucasian philologist Nikolai Marr once claimed that on questions of cultural relations and influence, the receiving side matters more than the source from which influence derives.50 I have sought to echo Marr in arguing here

246–48, for an example of a Georgian-language poem dedicated to Zelimkhan (this is poem no. 604 in other editions of Shanidze’s text).


50 “Concerning questions of influence, the most active role belongs not to the side that imparts an influence but rather to the side that receives it.” Quoted (in Russian) in V. A.
that in the case of the abrek, his translated original (for the modern Caucasian text is a translation of the Russian translation of a Caucasian phenomenon) in the Caucasus ought to captivate our imagination as much as the “original” Russian translation.

Those who accept the premise that the receiver of influence is as worthy of attention as the more visible agent administering the reception process will be led to question the clichés of “belated modernity” that continue to structure most discussions of Russian–Caucasian relations, for which the abrek has become a key trope. It is argued, for example, that the abrek, as a Caucasian phenomenon, is proof of the Caucasian incapacity for government, civil society, and other modern intuitions.51

As I point out at the beginning of this article, the archive of abrek texts is both diverse and contradictory; it is impossible in the context of a single article to convey an adequate sense of its richness. That is a task for the future. Suffice it to point out here that the Chechen abrek is not an isolated phenomenon. An examination of his antecedents and analogues could fill many articles, which will, it is hoped, contribute to a deeper understanding of the abrek’s historical and regional context.

The abrek in many of his popular incarnations is an atavistic trope employed to reduce rather than to enrich the dimensions of Caucasian experience. I hope, however, that my survey here has gone some length toward demonstrating the flatness of representations that equate the abrek only with the bandit and wild outlaw. The abrek is all these and much more. It is precisely where the abrek’s criminality transgresses into sanctity and thereby subverts the colonially informed dichotomies of “barbarism” versus “civilization” that the abrek, through his historical genesis and the imaginative reworkings he has inspired, suggest to us a much needed trajectory for future scholarship.

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