HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Northern Caucasus Fiction

Fiction, Legends, Myths

Contents

ANCIENT PERIOD

Greek Perspectives

For the Caucasus in antiquity, the space of fiction was filled by legends and myths. Strabo, Herodotus, and Plutarch all testified to the rich folkloric traditions of the northern Caucasus, but these only began to be formally and systematically transcribed during the mid-19th and 20th centuries. Even when these traditions and belief systems pertain by and large to the domain of oral culture and were not immediately expressed as written texts, they were foundational for subsequent literary works across the centuries. Hence it is necessary to be attentive to the ancient myths and belief systems of the Caucasus in order to understand and appreciate its modern literature.

Indigenous Gods

Although Islam took root early throughout much of the Caucasus, the pantheons of pre-Islamic and pre-Christian pagan traditions heavily shaped the extant folklore and legends. Among the Chechens and Ingush, it was believed that life was created by the appearance of a giant white bird. Water and plants were believed to have evolved from the excrement of this bird. In the Chechen pantheon, Deela is the supreme god, comparable to the Greek Zeus, and the Sun and Moon are half-brothers. Erd and Tusholi are the gods of agriculture, fertility, and harvest. Far from being mere relics of antiquity, these deities often figure into modern 20th century literature, including in particular the fiction of Idris Bazorkin (see the final article in this section).

Daghestan's pagan pantheons developed in response to the mountaineers' immediate geography. Daghestanis worshipped sacred mountains, caves, groves, trees, stones, and rivers. In southern Daghestan and northern Azerbaijan, shrines (calls *pir*s) were dedicated to local saints. Unsurprisingly, in areas where Islam had penetrated deeply, pagan demonology intermingled with Islamic beliefs. The spirit world (of *djinns* and others) included creatures who were small in size, with the heels of their feet turned forward, who could become people, animals, monsters, or become invisible. As evidence of the influence of Persian traditions on Daghestani folk beliefs, there is a dragon-like creature named Azhdeha (Persian for dragon), with multiple heads that projects fire from its mouth. Azhdeha resides near springs, and demands human sacrifices, mostly young women whom it eats alive, in exchange for access to water. Tabasarani demons are particularly multifaceted, and many of them specialize in tormenting women in labor, impersonating diseases, and haunting cemetery grounds.

A Pan-Caucasus Cosmology

Scholars past and present have considered whether it is possible to situate the legends of the northern Caucasus (and of the Caucasus generally) within a single cosmology. Abkahz scholar Viacheslav Chirikba has suggested that if there is such a thing as a pan-Caucasus pagan belief system, it would include the following features, many of which can be found in other belief systems as well : 1) the world is separated into three horizontal realms (celestial, inhabited by gods; middle, inhabited by humans; lower, inhabited by demons); 2) a tree connects these three worlds to each other; 3) a supreme god is assisted by other gods; 4) certain groves, trees, woods, and mountains are deemed sacred; 5) the moon

is a male god and the Sun is a female god; 6) a dragon (Azhdeha) or demon causes eclipses by eating the sun and moon; 7) a mermaid seduces lonely travellers; 8) there is a forest man and a forest woman; 9) a sacred animal, usually a cow or bull, is sacrificed to the gods; 10) there is an incubus (a house-dwelling creature which has only one or no nostrils and which smothers sleepers during the night by closing their nostrils); 12) snakes act as spirits, protecting the home; 13) there are vampires; 14) a hero is born from a rock or stone (this motif recurs in Bazorkin's novel *From the Darkness of Ages*, described below); 14) a hero whose biography resembles that of the Greek Prometheus is punished by the gods and chained within a cave or on a rock, high in the mountains.

Prometheus

This last-mentioned feature is widely attested under different names, each of which have been the subject of poems and stories in their respective traditions. In Chechen, the Prometheus-like figure is called Pxarmat; in Georgian, Amirani; in Lak, Amir; and in Ossetian, Amran. (Prometheus also appears much later, as a pivotal figure in inspiring modern literary movements, such as the young writers association in 1970s Chechnya, which called itself "Prometheus," as well as in Dzakho Gatuev's versified *Amran, An Ossetian Epic*, published in 1932) Chirikba also posits the following gods as elements of a pan-Caucasus system: a thunder god, a hunting god, a god of cattle and procreation, a god of rain who is summoned using a doll that resembles a human, a god of blacksmiths, and a god or goddess of harvest and agriculture.

Although many Nart sagas are recorded in verse, there are also many extant stories are also in prose, and concern historical events, such as wars between the Circassians and invading Goths, and the invasion of Attila and the Huns during the 5th century. Yet another historical invading people discussed in the Circassian Nart sagas are the Avars, not to be confused with the Avars of Daghestan.

Impact of Modernity

Our access to legends of the ancient north Caucasus is necessarily refracted through the lens of modernity. Our most detailed sources on ancient Caucasus legends were transcribed by people who operated within frameworks that were quite different from the frameworks within which these legends originated. These include colonial officials working in the service of the Russian tsar, such as the linguist P.K. Uslar, and local ethnographers such as Bashir Dalgat, who pioneered the documentation of their traditions according to the standards of modern scholarship. In the latter group should also be included the members the Institute of History, Archeology, and Ethnography of the Daghestan Research Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IIAE), created in 1924 by Ali Alibekovich Takho-Godi, and many similar institutions across the republics of the North Caucasus, who have uncovered numerous new sources on the literatures of the North Caucasus during the past several decades.

<u>Further Reading:</u>

Nart Sagas, ed. Naira Bepieva and Nino Popiashvili (Tbilisi, 2020).

Viacheslav A. Chirikba, "Between Christianity and Islam: Heathen Heritage in the Caucasus. In: Studies on Iran and The Caucasus," *Studies on Iran and The Caucasus: In Honour of Garnik Asatrian*, eds. Uwe Bläsing, Victoria Arakelova, and Matthias Weinreich (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 145–191.

Ruslan Seferbekov, "On the Demonology of the Tabasaranians: Typology and Description," *Iran & the Caucasus* 5 (2001): 139-148.

<u>Discussion Question:</u>

What features do the pagan belief systems and folkloric traditions of the northern Caucasus share in common?

POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD (ISLAMIC)

Abu Muslim

The legends pertaining to Abu Muslim, who is regarded by Daghestanis and other peoples of the northern Caucasus as the most important spreader of Islam, is among the most widely circulating cycles of legends from the Islamic period. References to Abu Muslim permeate local historiographic sources as well as epigraphic inscriptions across the northern Caucasus. Across the Caucasus, many sacred sites of pilgrimages and shrines are named in Abu Muslim's honor and in honor of his associates. Abu Muslim is however more of a legendary than a historical figure. Although there is an historical Abu Muslim from Khorasan who helped the Abbasids seize power in the middle of the eight century, yet who never actually visited the Caucasus, the Abu Muslim whose life and work are the stuff of legends in the northern Caucasus has a rather different profile. In the northern Caucasus, Abu Muslim came to embody the figure of the heroic preacher of Islam, and is a confluence of Arabic, Turkic, and Persian, and local legends that has circulated throughout the Caucasus from the medieval period onwards.

The earliest extant written record pertaining to the Abu Muslim of the Caucasus is an anonymous and untitled Arabic-language historical chronicle, which was discovered and published in the Arabic original and in French translation by the orientalist N. Khanikoff. This chronicle tells of a certain Shaykh Abu Muslim, who was born in Damascus as a *sayyid*, meaning that he was descended from the Prophet Mohammad. He became an orphan in early childhood, when his father was martyred in a battle against the Umayyad Caliph Marwan II. When Abu Muslim became an adult, he gathered together an army of fifty thousand people and killed Marwan. After leading a number of invasions throughout the Near East as well as Central Asia, and according to some Daghestani sources, India, Abu Muslim embarked on a seven-year war for the propagation of Islam in the Caucasus. First, he conquered Shirvan, then Derbent and the mountainous regions of Daghestan. Finally, he conquered Circassian lands.

After the peoples of the north Caucasus converted to Islam, Abu Muslim built mosques throughout the region, including in Derbent, and especially in the difficult to access mountainous regions of Daghestan: Akty, Qala-Qureysh, Ghaziqumuq, Qubachi, and Khunzakh. He appointed other *sayyids* (descendants of the Prophet) as heads of these regional centers. These leaders in turn founded a number of powerful and significant dynasties within Daghestan, including the shamkhal of Ghaziqumuq, the *utsmi* of Qaitagh, and the *mausum* and *qadi* of Tabasaran. After he had Islamicized the Caucasus, Abu Muslim returned to Syria, where he died in 739. Although the primary source of information on Abu Muslim's biography is the untitled Arabic historical chronicle discovered by Khanikoff, Abu Muslim's Syrian origins are also affirmed in local epigraphy, including inscriptions on the mosques of Ghaziqumuq, Akty, and Richa, as Vladimir Bobrovnikov has shown. Arabic sources outside Daghestan refer to this Abu Muslim as Maslama bin Abdul Melik.

This however is just one among many versions of Abu Muslim's biography. Other versions, which are more commonly encountered in local histories such as the Avar-language *History of Daghestan* by Muhammad Rafi, describe Abu Muslim as a local hero and propagator of Islam. He was a descendent of one of the five shaykhs of Qureysh who had travelled to the Caucasus from Syria and settled there a few decades earlier. This Abu Muslim lived in the village of Khunzakh in mountainous Daghestan, and his grave in Khunzakh is a site of continuous and ongoing pilgrimage.

Many of the aforementioned legends pertaining to a Muslim saint contain admixtures of pagan and pre-Islamic belief systems, as well as of Christianity. The syncretism of the Sufism that was widespread through the northern Caucasus, particularly in Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Daghestan, facilitated an extraordinary cross-pollination of Muslim, Christian, and pagan traditions that shaped the ways in which figures such as Abu Muslim were remembered in local cultural memory.

Further Reading:

V.O. Bobrovnikov "Абу Муслим в культурной памяти мусульман Дагестана," *Ислам в современном мире* 15.3 (2019): 81-110. Available at: https://islamjournal.idmedina.ru/jour/article/view/732/449

Khanikoff. "Mémoire sur les inscriptions musulmanes du Caucase," *Journal asiatique* (1862): 82-155.

Discussion Question:

How did history and myth relate to each other in legends that developed in the early Islamic period?

EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Epic Fiction

Epic songs narrating the exploits of brave Daghestani warriors in battle that were discussed in the article on early modern poetry had a counterpart in oral legends, which later when recorded in writing took the form of prose. As with epic poems, their dominant themes are the struggles of Daghestani peoples with foreign invaders. Notwithstanding their aesthetic orientation, these legends often have strong historical content. This means that the boundaries between fact and fiction, or fiction and documentary prose which have been adopted for the purposes of this study guide, are necessarily porous.

Historical Fiction

Also as with epic poetry, historical figures abound in such legends. These legends are set in the towns of Qumyq, Turchidag, Khunzakh, Qubachi, Sogratl, Chokh, Megeb, and Obokh. They feature Mutazali, son of Surkhai-Khan I, who helped to defend Daghestan from the invasion of Nadir Shah, and Shakhman, a Daghestani who is remembered for his traitorous dealings with Nadir Shah. After three years of being educated in Persia, Shakhman returned to Daghestan as part of the Nadir Shah's retinue of. He led many campaigns against the Daghestanis who were resisting the Persian conquest, and local legends remember him as an enemy. After Nadir Shah's defeat at the battle of Andalal in 1741, Daghestanis began to seek out Shakhman in order to punish him for treachery. Eventually, Shakhman decided to surrender and hand himself over to the Daghestanis who planne to kill him. According to legend, his final words were: "Muslims! I swore to take my revenge on you and found many ways of doing this. Now my life is reaching a close. I arrived here in order to die by your hands."

Another legend tells of a mountaineer named Antkilish (who names means "six fingered"). Antkilish is remembered alongside other Daghestanis who foiled the efforts to Nadir Shah to conquer the Caucasus. He is also believed to have been a friend of the noble bandit named Khochbar, from the town of Gidatl'. Antkilish assisted Khochbar in his efforts to protect Daghestani people. Antkilish's advice and counsel turned out to be crucial in Daghestanis' battles with invading armies. For example, on one occasion, Antkilish saw that the mountaineers were clearly outnumbered by an army that was trying to besiege them. So he advised that, rather than openly resisting the army, they should gather their ashes into bags and scatter the contents of these bags to the wind as soon as they came under attack. When the enemy began attacking, the mountaineers immediately opened their bags. Seeing the air become hazy, the invading army assumed that all the Daghestanis' ammunitions had been exhausted, and they moved to the next village. Thus was that village spared further destruction.

Soon after Daghestanis conquered Nadir Shah, they had to face ever-increasing encroachment from Russia. Yet whereas Daghestan was the frontline in the wars with invading Persian armies from the south, Chechnya became the frontline for invading armies from the north. The borderland regions of Chechnya and Ingushetia were particularly affected by the growth of Cossack settlements, which were first set up by Russia in the early modern period. Although Cossacks and Chechens shared some qualities in common, and borrowed each other's styles of dress and certain aspects of their ways of life, they were aligned with different political regimes, and for this reason often came into conflict. Chechen literature from this period reflects the increasingly tense relationship with the Cossacks who had settled along their borders.

<u>Further Readings</u>:

Thomas M. Barrett, "Lines of Uncertainty: The Frontiers of the North Caucasus," *Slavic Review* 54.3 (1995): 578-601.

Владимир Бобровников, "Насилие и Власть в Исторической Памяти Мусульманского Пограничья (К Новой Интерпретации Песни о Хочбаре)," *Ab Imperio* 1 (2003): 177-208.

U. B. Dalgat, *Fol'klor i literatura narodov Dagestana* (Moscow: Izd. vostochnoi literatury, 1962). Pages 116-117 for the legend of Shahmakh.

A. A. Akhlakov, *Geroiko-istoricheskie pesni avartsev* (Makhachkala: Dagestanskii filial Akademii nauk SSSR, In-t istorii, iazyka, i literatury im. G. Tsadasy, 1968), 163–179.

Discussion Questions:

What role did historical events play in shaping cultural memory in the northern Caucasus?

How did poetry shape the way in which historical events were memorialized?

19TH CENTURY : Russian Empire

The 19th century was a turning point for literary production throughout the Caucasus. Although the northern Caucasus had a developed oral and folkloric tradition, it was in the 19th century that writers began to consciously position themselves within the emerging marketplace of world literature. Writers who were educated in Russian schools and who on occasion served in the Russian army tended to write in Russian, sometimes while also writing in their native language. A nascent engagement with what we now call modernity is evident in all the regions with which this study guide is concerned—Chechnya, Circassia, Abkhazia, Daghestan, and Ossetia—albeit in different ways, in different languages, and to differing degrees.

Adil-Girey Ch'ashe

The most prominent northwest Caucasus fiction writer of the 19th century is Adil-Girey Ch'ashe (1840-1872), who published in Russian under the penname of Kalambii (Qalembiy, a possible pun on the Arabic word for "pen") in leading Russian periodicals. Born to an impoverished family of the Circassian nobility, Ch'ashe was one of the first Circassians to study at St. Petersburg University. Soon after he began his university studies, he was expelled for his association with revolutionary groups. Although Ch'ashe's stories are often read as ethnographic commentary, and are indeed presented as such by the author, they operate within a literary tradition and deploy the traditional devices of 19th century realism, that characterizies for example Tolstoy. In *Abreks* (1860), Ch'ashe selected the time-honored theme of the Caucasus *abrek*, a kind of noble bandit who permeates the literary imagination during this and the following century. The genre of this work, which was first published serially in the newspaper *Russian Messenger,* is disputed, with some referring to it as a novel and others calling it an article. This genre fluidity is reflective of the fact that many works of 19th century north Caucasus fiction were treated like ethnographic sources by contemporary readers.

Arsen Kotsoyev

Arsen Kotsoyev was a luminary of Ossetian literature and one of the founders of modern Ossetian prose. He was born to an impoverished family in northern Ossetia in 1872, and studied at a nearby seminary until he had to leave his studies due to illness. He was expelled from his native village of Gizel for participating in an uprising against the tsar in 1912, following which he moved to South Ossetia, where he worked as a school teacher, wrote essays and short stories, and contributed to major Russian language newspapers such as *Kazbek* and *Terskie Vedomosti*. Kotsoyev's fiction focuses on mountaineer traditions, including the custom of blood revenge. In his fiction, he excelled in staging encounters between the rural mountaineer culture of his childhood. Unlike many of his fellow writers from the northern Caucasus, Kotsoyev adjusted successfully to the norms of Soviet rule.

Daghestani Literature

Daghestani writers were less active than their counterparts in the northwest Caucasus in the production of fiction that conformed to the norms of European Romanticism and subsequent realism. Instead of imitating Pushkin, Lermontov, Tolstoy and other Russian authors, Daghestanis writers by and large occupied themselves with ethnographic writings and with reviving—and transforming—Daghestani Arabic literature. While Arabic and indigenous-language historiography, biography, and poetry flourished throughout Daghestan during this period, fiction in the modern sense was a relatively marginal genre of literary production within the northeast Caucasus. When Daghestan scholars turned to writing in Russian, it was usually in order to produce ethnographies, for example D. M. Shikhaliev's *Story about Qumyq and*

Qumyqs (1848), Aidamir Chirkeev's *Avar Songs and Tales* (*Avarskikh pesen i skazov*, 1869, in *SSKG*), and Abdullah Omarov's *How the Lak Live* (1868-1970), described in the section on life-writing.

Russian Romanticism

Finally, although this study guide focuses on the literatures of the North Caucasus, rather than on the better-known Russian representations of the Caucasus, mention should be made of the tremendous influence that the northern Caucasus and the struggle of its peoples for freedom from Russian rule exerted on the development of 19th century and more broadly European Romanticism. Although Pushkin and Lermontov are best known as poets, they both composed fiction in the Caucasus. Their best-known works in this tradition are Pushkin's verse narrative *Caucasus Captive* (*Kavkazskii plennik*, 1820) and Lermontov's novel *A Hero of Our Time* (*Geroi nashevo vremeni,* 1839). In the next generation, after breaking with certain aspects of the Romantic tradition, fiction writers such as Tolstoy and Bestuzhev-Marlinsky developed a more ethnographic approach to the North Caucasus. These writers regularly use words from the indigenous languages of the northern Caucasus in their fiction, especially Qumyq, the Turkic language spoken by Akaev and others that was in wide use as a local lingua franca.

Further Reading:

Susan Layton, *Russian literature and empire: conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

Paul Friedrich, "Tolstoy and the Chechens: Problems in Literary Anthropology," *Russian History* 30.1/2 (2003): 113-143.

Discussion Question:

How did North Caucasus writers negotiate the relationship between fiction and documentary prose genres such as journalism and history?

20TH CENTURY : After the Revolution

Major Novels

The 20th century witnessed innovation in North Caucasus literatures in many domains, but the innovations in the domain of the novel were truly without precedent. Novels were not written by north Caucasus authors until the 20th century. When writers did start working in this genre, they were conscious of doing something that had never been done before in their respective languages. Three outstanding novels are worth mentioning at the outset: Magomet Mamakaev's *Zelamkha* (1968, Russian translation 1981), named after the famous *abrek* Zelimkhan Gushmazukaev, Bagrat Shinkuba's *The Last of the Departed* (1974. Trans. 1986), first written in Abkhaz and later translated into Russian, Idris Bazorkin *From the Darkness of Ages* (1968), first written in Ingush and later translated into Russian. The latter is a remarkable bildungsroman of the life and time of Kaloi—not coincidentally named after a mythical Nart who is born from a rock (see the above article on Legends in the Ancient Literature of the Northern Caucasus)—who is born in the tsarist era and witnesses the radical changes that swept through Ingushetia during the 19th century. By setting his story in the pre-Soviet period, Bazorkin was able to deal with a number of themes that would have been more difficult to write about had the story been set in the Soviet period, including sexual temptation, unconsummated desire, the tension between love and marriage, and the unjust expectations that parents project onto their children. Dzakho Gatuev's documentary realistic narrative *Zelimkhan* (1929), could also be included in this context, although there is a case to be made for reading this "documentary tale" as an example of documentary prose, as discussed above.

Chechen Fiction

To this list should be added Abuzar Aidamirov's Chechen-language trilogy: *Long Nights, A Lightning in Mountains,* and *A Tempest*, the first volume of which was published in Chechen in 1972, with a Russian translation appearing in 1996 and an Arabic translation appearing in 1998. These novels achieved great popularity among everyday Chechen readers and are regarded as the first major

sequence of historical novels in the Chechen language. They were however preceded by an even lengthier sequence of historical novels: the Chechen-language *Years of Fire* (*Alun Sherash*, published in four volumes from 1957-1964), by Khalid Oshaev (1898-1977). Oshaev was also a short story writer, whose works include "The Death of the Vendetta," as well as a number of works about Chechen folklore, as well as plays. Aidamirov is also the author of the national anthem of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, as Chechnya was called following its temporary succession from Russia (1991-2000). Aidamirov's first short story was published in 1957, which was also the year when the Soviet state rehabilitated the Chechen and Ingush people from the accusations of betrayal that has been leveled against them by Stalin's regime and due to which they had been collectively deported to Central Asia.

Circassian Fiction

In the northwest Caucasus, which by and large was spared the trauma of forced deportation, Tembot Kerashev (1902-1988) picked up on where his predecessor Kalambii had left off: with the theme of the noble bandit (*abrek*), which was the subject of his novella "Abrek" (1957, Russian translation 1959). While "Abrek" was first composed in Circassian, other fiction, such as *The Daughter of the Shapsugs* (1951), was originally composed by Kerashev in Russian.

Russian Fiction

As in the tsarist era, Russian authors during the Soviet period continued to be obsessed and inspired by the peoples of the North Caucasus and to engage with their literary outputs. Among the works of Russian authors set in the North Caucasus which deal with the Chechen deportation are Semyon Lipkin's *Dekada* (1983, French translation in 1990) and Anatoly Pristavkin's (*Nochevala Tuchka Zolotaia*, 1981), made into a film in 1989. Alongside these Russian authors whose fiction drew inspiration from the Caucasus, some North Caucasus writers, such as Fazil Iskander (1929-2016) of Abkhazia, choose to write exclusively in Russian, and thereby reached a wider audience.

Further Reading:

Idris Bazorkin, "Evening Prayers," trans. Rebecca Ruth Gould in *The Russia Reader: Culture, History, Politics*, eds. Bruce Grant and Adele Barker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 293-302.

Idris Bazorkin, "Light of the Ancestors," trans. Rebecca Ruth Gould *Washington Square* 27 (2010): 152-167.

Steffi Chotiwari-Jünger, *Die Literaturen der Völker Kaukasiens. Neue Übersetzungen und deutschsprachige Bibliographie* (Wiesbaden: Reichert-Verlag, 2003).

Rebecca Ruth Gould, "Enchanting Literary Modernity: Idris Bazorkin's Postcolonial Soviet Pastoral," *Modern Language Review* 15(2): 405-428.

Rebecca Ruth Gould. *Writers and Rebels: The Literature of Insurgency in the Caucasus* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016).

Semyon Lipkin, *L'histoire d'Alim Safarov, écrivain russe du Caucase* (La Tour-d'Aigues: Editions de l'Aube, 2008). French translation of *Dekada*.

Bagrat Shinkuba, *The Last of the Departed,* translated by Paula Garb (Moscow: Raduga Publishers, 1974).

Discussion Question:

What are the key novels written by North Caucasus writers during the Soviet period? What makes these works significant?