

## **Nart Sagas from the Caucasus**

### **Myths and Legends from the Circassians, Abazas, Abkhaz, and Ubykhs**

**John Colarusso**

#### **Introduction**

A ship sailing across the Black Sea in the year 1780 eventually would have come upon a lush shore at the eastern end of the dark gray waters (compare Odell 1977; Lotz et al. 1956; and the earliest account, Sanazaro 1506). If the course setting had been east-northeast, then this would have been the Circassian coast, a rolling land with distant mountains rising behind it. If due east, then the ship would have come upon the Abkhazian coast, with the hills and mountains descending to the beach and at a few points dipping into the sea. This stretch of shoreline might well be the same on which Jason and his argonauts are said to have landed three millennia earlier. In that year these were the watery boundaries of two large nations, Circassia and Abkhazia, with the land of the Ubykh falling between them and sharing allegiances with both. In Abkhazia the traveler would have encountered a state with a ruler, albeit under the thumb of the Ottoman Empire, whose inner boundary petered out in the high reaches of the mountains (see Lak'oba 1998). The nobles of Abkhazia shared pedigrees with the nobles of the small Ubykh tribe farther up the coast, on the far side of the river Psow. In Circassia the traveler would have encountered a series of tribes structured by clan lineages and allegiances, all of whom called themselves Adyghey, including the small Ubykh tribe. This realm would extend eastward through tribes, each having its own dialect, across the Caucasus Mountains, which run for one thousand kilometers from the northwest to the southeast, and along the south bank of the Kuban River, to the very center of the North Caucasus. Here, in the shadow of Mount Elbruz, the highest mountain in Europe, the Kabardian tribe dominated with an almost statelike cohesion over the Turkic-speaking Noghay nomads of the plains and the Iranian-speaking Ossetian mountaineers. Here too the Terek River began its eastward flow to form the northern boundary of the Northeast Caucasus. In the mountain pastures of the Circassian realm lived Turkic-speaking pastoralists, the Karachais and Malkars (or Balkars). Some northern Abkhaz, the Abazas, also lived among them. Across the Kuban and Terek Rivers were settlements of Russian- and Ukrainian-speaking people who had fled the system of serfdom farther north and who had intermarried with many of the Caucasian and Turkic women. These were the Cossacks. In many ways they resembled their Caucasian neighbors but traditionally maintained a hostile relationship with them. They were the vanguard of the invasion that was to come in the next century.

In this lush realm at this time may have lived as many as 2 million people, all sharing a set of striking features of language, dress, and custom (Hewitt and Watson 1994; Colarusso 1994a; Volkova 1994; Shamanov 1994; Khodorkovsky and Stewart 1994; Fritz 1994). In peace, the peoples were organized into a number of tribes, each with its own language or dialect. In war, they united and behaved like a conventional state. The Circassian tribes of the coast, the Shapsegh and Natukhay, practiced trade and exhibited a loose social structure, but farther along the coast, among the Ubykh and Abkhaz, and inland among the other Circassians, an elaborate social structure existed. These people were warlike, and their society was highly structured to enforce a discipline and order that served them on the battlefield. They were ranked into princes, nobles, freemen, and serfs, the last serving the nobility and chiefly descended from prisoners of war. Clans and lineages interpenetrated with this hierarchy and shaped almost all social interactions. Despite this social order, feuding was rampant, and no man was without his weapons. Since social rank was inherited and prestige was measured by valor, material goods were not socially important outside of the trading tribes. In fact, a sort of sporting theft was common, so that goods tended to circulate in the community. Although the princes and nobles entrusted their children to retainers, family values as a whole were strong, and this fosterage actually served to tie the serfs to their overlords not as slave to master but as family

member to clan leader. In fact, the visitor, if all went well in following social decorum and restraint, might eventually receive the great and lifelong honor of being adopted by a clan. Despite the strict codes of conduct, the concern with honor and social face, and the elaborate hierarchy, the overall social values reflected ideals of individual freedom and democratic participation in community life. The power of the princes and nobles was moderated by the views of the elders of the community, and these in turn were sensitive to the needs of all the community's members.

The economy of the region was varied. Aside from traders with fortified outposts, people lived in villages strung along rivers deep in the forest. In the higher hills, stone houses with single towers predominated. Each of these was like a self-contained fortress. The mountain pastures, however, were by and large the domain of the Karachays and Malkars, Turkic pastoralists, who like the Cossacks and the other Caucasians had simpler social systems. The Circassians, Abkhaz, and Ubykhs bred horses, cows, oxen, sheep, pigs, and chickens, and grew abundant fruits and vegetables. Apiculture and the gathering of walnuts were also vital parts of their agricultural economy, as was hunting. Felt rugs were a prime manufactured good. Splendid horses were also traded, with the Kabardian breed being one of the most prestigious. The skill of the men on horseback was most impressive.

The peoples were highly variable in appearance, some being dark and others light, with light eyes and blond or red hair. Some looked like northern Europeans, and others had a distinctly Mongol cast to their features. Their varied appearances testified to their long and complex history. Many of the princes and nobles were tall. Many individuals were strikingly handsome, with both genders frequently showing expressive faces, lithe physiques, and graceful movements. The men of this region accorded their women great freedom and respect, even if their economic roles were traditionally set. Elders were revered, and many lived to be well over a hundred. Even in advanced age--and many claimed to be more than a century old--they remained an integral part of society, and perhaps most strikingly, they were accorded passions and hopes just like the younger members of their clans.

Dance was a crucial aspect of social life, the men spinning and leaping with astonishing speed and power and the women gliding about with fluid grace, the motion of their legs hidden by their long, gownlike dresses. Women's clothing consisted of a gown with false sleeves. On their heads they wore a hat shaped like an acorn, usually with a scarf trailing from the crown. They walked on platform shoes. The men's clothing was also striking, consisting of loose trousers tucked into soft leather, soleless knee boots, resembling leather knee socks. Their high-collared shirts were covered by a *cherkesska*, a robe-like coat with a fitted torso and a flaring lower portion that draped over their horse's haunches while riding. Across their chest, they had a series of sewn cylindrical pouches into which silver tubes were placed. Each of these contained a measured charge of powder for the muskets, which they always bore, along with swords and daggers.

The religions were many, with some Christians among the Abadzakh of the hills and some Jews living intermixed with other Circassians. Islam dominated the region, but no mosques were to be seen. In fact, religious tolerance was a feature of the Caucasus as a whole, and strong pagan traditions still shaped many beliefs among the peoples and lay behind most of their rituals. Great feasts were often held, especially at times of seasonal rituals, and these were headed by a toastmaster, *t'hamada*, a term destined to spread north into Russia and south into Persia. At such feasts bards, both male and female, would recount old legends in their various languages. These languages were most remarkable and complex, ranging from the mellifluous Kabardian to the percussive and subtle Bzhedukh and Shapsegh to the hissing and throaty Ubykh and Abkhaz to the startling Abaza with its almost gargled quality. They clearly bore no links with any of the more familiar languages around them. Great buildings and monuments were absent, but the chief monument of their civilization

resided in the languages and the folklore these enshrined. Most varied and revered among the various tales was a body of lore in which a band of heroes was depicted, all of whose members were said to have a single mother, an ageless beauty. These were the Nart sagas, legends found across the North Caucasus.

In the coming decades Russia was to expand into this area, and war would rage across the North Caucasus. The resistance the Circassians, Ubykhs, Abkhaz, and Abaza offered is only scantily known (Berzeg 1998; Tsutsiev and Dzugaev 1997, maps 2-6; Henze 1992), in contrast to that of the Chechens and Daghestanis (Gammer 1994; Blanch 1960; Baddeley 1969), which has become the stuff of legends. It must have been ferocious, however, because the Caucasian campaign dragged on a full five years longer in the west (which ended in 1864) than in the east (which ended in 1859) and resulted in the wholesale deportation of the population into the Balkan region of the Ottoman Empire (Brooks 1996, 1995). Today the majority of the Circassians, Abkhaz, and Abazas and all the Ubykhs live in Turkey, with enclaves in Jordan, Iraq, Syria, and Israel. Recently small immigrant communities have been established in the United States (Colarusso 1997). Those remaining behind in their homeland are a distinct minority but nevertheless enjoy more cultural continuity than their cousins abroad. Russian authorities have devised literary languages in Adyghey (based on the Chemgwi dialect of West Circassian), Kabardian, Abkhaz (Abzhwi dialect), and Abaza (Tapanta dialect) and have established cultural institutions, such as museums, dance companies, and folklore institutes. Scholars have gathered the surviving portions of the old traditions. The Nart sagas have been recorded intensively, and large portions of the corpora have been published (see also Khamytsaeva and Bjazyrov 1989 [Ossetian]; Dalgat 1972 [Chechen and Ingush]; Aliev 1994 [Karachai and Balkar]; Dzidziguri 1971 [highland Georgian dialects and Svan]).

In a sharp irony of history, contemporary Russians, descendants of those who, caught in the juggernaut of nineteenth-century imperial expansion, sought to destroy this civilization, have provided the essentials for preserving and disseminating some of its most valuable aspects. For the Nart sagas the crucial step was the creation of literary languages in which this oral, bardic tradition, told by both men and women, could be collected and to some extent codified. In addition, museums, dance companies, and grade schools were founded. In fact, near the close of the Soviet period Moscow initiated a repatriation program (Colarusso 1991) and has since permitted the various Circassian republics to fly their traditional flag and has even promoted the singing of a national anthem. The Abkhaz, after their secession from Georgia in 1993 (Hewitt 1998; Colarusso 1995), have also flown their flag and taken on the trappings of nationhood. Following Moscow's earlier example, the Abkhaz have also invited the exiled Ubykh who also have a flag, to return to a part of their traditional territory in northern Abkhazia. Thus, after many tragedies and a hiatus of nearly two centuries, this realm may yet enter the world stage as two pluralistic states with large supporting diasporas.

The Nart sagas, which are not sagas in the usual sense of semihistorical accounts of a prominent person's life, closely resemble the myths of the pagan Norse (Davidson 1964) and Ancient Greece (Burkert 1985, especially pp. 119-225). Bards, male and female, render them through song, verse, and simple prose. Although the exploits of the characters have the magic and bravura of gods, only a few figures retain genuine deity status. In this sense they are once removed from the status of myth (note this designation by Özbay 1990), but starting with the first account of Circassian lore by the Kabardian Shora Begmurzin Nogma (Bergé 1866), the term *saga* has been used. Despite occasional references to tales (Dirr 1920; Nat'ho 1969) or legends (Dumézil 1930), I shall abide with this usage, since it has come to dominate later scholarship (Lang 1954; Özbek 1982). These sagas are of interest not only in their own right as a testament to the civilization of this lost world, but also because they show striking parallels with the traditions of the ancient peoples who at one time were in contact with the North Caucasus. They have been largely viewed as a relic of the old Iranian-speaking culture

of the Scythians, Sarmatians, and Alans, with only passing reference made to Circassian lore (chiefly Dumézil 1978; see pp. 34-49, 146-68). That there is an ancient Iranian core in the various corpora is not to be denied (Dumézil 1934, 1956; Bjažyrtý 1992). The name Nart is of Indo-Iranian origin r-, Greek anè-r, Lincoln 1981, 97 and n. 4); Sabine *Nero*- 'strong' (personal name), Umbrian *nerus*, Old Irish *nerf*, Vedic Sanskrit *nrtama* 'most manly' (an epithet of Indra), Sanskrit *na*, *náram* (accusative) 'man, hero', Avestan *nar-*, *nere-(gara-)* (Pisani 1947, 147, §302), Ossetic *nart* (Benveniste 1959, 37 and n. 1). Such a view distorts the sagas' value, however, especially the value of this tradition as preserved among the Circassians and their kin. The Ossetian material (May, Salbiev, and Colarusso 2002) has been reworked to form a smooth narrative. The Chechen-Ingush lore has a great deal of material peculiar to the Northeast Caucasus in it. The Northwest lore, however, has been published in virtually a raw form, with all the odd details constituting the detritus of earlier traditions and beliefs.

Details survive millennia (epithets, names, specific features, such as size and color, social patterns, for example, as with the hero or god who has one hundred or ninety-nine followers or brothers). Thus the nonsensical and functionless features of a tradition are the oldest. One must be wary of folk reinterpretations along the lines of later cultural patterns and developments.

The relevant features may also be scattered among an array of figures, but details still survive due to the rote nature of the bard's task of learning a saga. Other details may be ascribed to different figures as the fortunes of a cult shift down through the tradition of a people. In the Nart sagas heroes are almost interchangeable in their roles, and Satanaya and her last son, Sosruquo, have expanded to assume the roles of a wide range of earlier figures, especially in the Abaza and Abkhaz corpora.

By judiciously sifting the folklore at hand for, in effect, nonsense and odd details, including names (see also Knobloch 1991), and by carefully using external controlling factors, for example, archaeological, historical, and linguistic information, one may reconstruct ancient myths and cultic beliefs from very remote periods with as much certainty as the data permit and as much certainty as any historical reconstruction may have, as the present cases show. This can be done at least for the basic lineaments of the myths, enriched by the occasional peculiar detail that may safely be posited on the basis of its survival in the attested traditions. Much more of the unwritten past may now be recoverable by such techniques than many ever dreamed possible.

The reader will gain an idea of the significance of this lore for comparative mythology by reading some of the parallels I have proposed. For Ancient Greece there are Nart figures with clear links to Aphrodite and her shepherd lover, Anchises, with the Gorgons, with Prometheus, with the Cyclopes, and with the Amazons (Colarusso 1989a, 1988). For Ancient India as depicted in the *Rig-Veda*, the Nart hero offers close ties to and insight into the great hero Indra, who slays the monster Vrtra atop a mountain and thereby releases the waters of life (Colarusso 1984b). More surprising are the striking parallels between the grim Norse war god Odin and a Nart named Wa(r)dana, as well as between the Norse world tree Yggdrasil and Lady Tree of the Narts (Colarusso 1989b, 1989c, 1984b). There may even be parallels between this Nart tradition and a myth of the ancient Hittites (see my comments at the end of sagas 23 and 60). Parallels with the Arthurian cycle are also undeniable (Littleton and Malcor 1994; Colarusso 1994b, 1994c) but are more evident in the Ossetian Nart tradition (May, Salbiev, and Colarusso 2002). I have made notes at the end of each saga regarding some of these parallels. For a few of the more important parallels, I have offered discussions in the end comments.

Good tales, like useful words, can jump language barriers. So even though the languages of the present corpora are non-Indo-European, many of the details preserved in them seem to have Indo-

European parallels. Some of these, however, such as the giant atop the mountain, may ultimately be of Caucasian origin, as is most of the material in the sagas. I have suggested the dates and paths of such borrowings in a few places, but most cases present difficult questions of historical layering that can be answered only with further study. The Ossetian Nart tradition has already offered some insights into Indo-European myth (Dumézil 1978; Puhvel 1987, 217-18). Surely experts whose knowledge lies beyond my own will draw further links from the present corpora, links not only with the traditions that I have already examined but further afield, both within Indo-European and in the Turkic and Mongol traditions. It is safe to say that an incisive analysis of ancient Eurasian myth will not be possible in the future without an examination of the Nart sagas. It is also safe to say that the lover of myth will not be truly satisfied without the pleasure of having read them.

[www.johncolarusso.net](http://www.johncolarusso.net)