

# THE SONGS OF THE KODOR ABKHAZIANS

## A Collection of Ethnographic Materials with Musical Notations

1. Historical Songs (The struggle for the independence of the Caucasus, the Russian-Turkish War (1877–78), feudalism, revolutionary events).
2. Everyday Songs (labour, heroism and *abrek* [a traditional Caucasian outlaw figure embodying resistance and heroism —Ed.] practices, Abkhazians in the mountains, one song of an abstract nature, Abkhazian dances, communal songs).
3. Songs associated with customs and rituals (blood feuds, weddings, funerals, illnesses and injuries).
4. Songs of the Bzyb Abkhazians.
5. Songs of the Batum Abkhazians (*muhajirs*).

**Published by Narkompros of Abkhazia and the Academy of the Abkhazian Language and Literature**

Sukhum – 1930

Konstantin Kovács's *The Songs of the Kodor Abkhazians* is a seminal collection of ethnographic materials complete with musical notations, published in 1930 by the People's Commissariat for Education of Abkhazia and the Academy of the Abkhazian Language and Literature. This 72-page volume represents a significant exploration into the musical and cultural heritage of the Abkhazian people, focusing on the distinct traditions of the Kodor region. With a print run of 1,500 copies, this work serves as an essential document for understanding the intricate connections between music, folklore, and historical memory in Abkhazia.

Kovács, renowned for his pivotal work *101 Abkhazian Folk Songs* (Sukhum, 1929), compiled this collection to document the cultural expressions of a people who had faced centuries of struggle, marked by conquest and resilience. His work captures the profound role that music plays in preserving collective identity, narrating historical events, and portraying social structures.

AbkhazWorld presents the first translations of *The Songs of the Kodor Abkhazians*, encompassing the **Author's Preface (pp. 3-5)** and the initial section, **Historical Songs (pp. 7-11)**, which covers topics such as the struggle for the independence of the Caucasus, the Russian-Turkish War (1877–78), feudalism, and revolutionary events. In time, the remaining chapters will also be translated and made available.

These translations were conducted with the aim of preserving the academic integrity and ethnographic detail of the original text, making them accessible to English-speaking researchers and enthusiasts of Abkhazian folklore.

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

A small country, inhabited by a freedom-loving people, the Abkhazians, has, for three and a half millennia, been the object of desire for various “conquerors,” “invaders,” and “assimilators,” starting from the renowned Jason, who sailed here on his “famous” ship, the *Argo*, looted Abkhazia, and then “successfully” fled, to the generals of Tsarist Russia, who came to Abkhazia with Cossack whips in hand, pursuing their notorious policy of “integration into Russian civic life” with gallows and... forced baptism.

For approximately one hundred and twenty years, the Abkhazians tirelessly fought against Russian Tsarism and its appointed agents. They rose up in rebellion, only to be expelled to Turkey, their homes reduced to ashes; those who remained in their homeland rose again, but their homes were once more burned, and the Abkhazians themselves were again forcibly relocated under the guise of “voluntary migrations.”

It was only the October Revolution of 1917 and the final expulsion of the Menshevik “benefactors” in 1921 that brought the Abkhazians what they had so heroically and long fought for, complete national independence, the right to cultural revival, and the right not to be those “savages” whom adventurers of all nations had so insistently sought to “integrate into culture” through violence.

The full integration into the development of national culture for all peoples inhabiting the Soviet Union demands the utmost dedication. The Abkhazians are well aware of this and diligently study both the past and present state of their republic.

This small collection of folk songs of the Kodor Abkhazians is merely a modest contribution to that immense creative and constructive work which the whole of Abkhazia is currently undertaking with perseverance, unwaveringly moving towards its socialist future.

I have titled this collection of ethnographic materials “The Songs of the Kodor Abkhazians” for the following reasons:

1. The same Abkhazian songs are performed by the Bzyb and Kodor Abkhazians in completely different variations; there are also songs that are either purely of Kodor or purely of Bzyb origin. This can be explained as follows: the Abkhazians, as a people, are divided into two groups — the Bzyb and the Kodor. Geographically, this division is as follows: the Bzyb Abkhazians inhabit the territory from Sukhum westward (part of the Sukhum, Gudauta, and Gagra districts), while the Kodor Abkhazians occupy the territory from Sukhum eastward (the Kodor and Gal districts). The Bzyb people are named after the Bzyb River, while the Kodor people are named after the Kodor River. There are differences between them in type, dialect, the structure of their dwellings, and certain aspects of daily life. Culturally, they have been influenced from different directions: the Bzyb, on the one hand, by the North Caucasus (from the north) and the Russian population (from the west); and the Kodor, on the other hand, by the Mingrelian population (from the east).

2. In January 1929, my collection *101 Abkhazian Folk Songs* was published by Narkompros of Abkhazia and the Academy of the Abkhazian Language and Literature. While collecting

materials for that collection, for a number of objective reasons, I did not manage to cover the entirety of the Kodor region at that time. This is why the collection predominantly consisted of songs from the Bzyb Abkhazians (88 to 13). This year, I was able to conduct a more thorough study of the folk creativity of the Kodor people, and in this current collection, I am presenting mainly their songs: 34 Kodor songs compared to 11 from the Bzyb and Batum regions. (I will elaborate on the latter below.)

3. I could have simply titled the materials in this collection as “Abkhazian Folk Songs,” but I intentionally refrained from doing so. The reason is that some of the songs included in this collection raise doubts regarding their purely Abkhazian origin and to some extent resemble the harmonic combinations and intricate melodies of the Mingrelian songs.

It was impossible for me to include all of these songs in this second collection for the simple reason that I do not feel entitled to omit any element of folk creativity, elements that constitute the culture of the Kodor Abkhazians.

I dedicate the fourth section of this collection to the songs of the Bzyb Abkhazians. These nine songs serve as an addition to the previously published collection, and apart from what I will state when providing ethnographic notes, there is perhaps little more to add.

In the fifth section, I include two songs of the Batum Abkhazians, which I happened to find in the Abkhazian villages surrounding Batum during a visit unrelated to the song collection.

The Batum Abkhazians are none other than the same Abkhazians residing in Abkhazia itself. They were named “Batum Abkhazians” quite recently and only by chance. The correct name for these Abkhazians is “muhajirs,” which in Russian translates to *exiles*.(\*) They were expelled from their native Abkhazia in 1877 due to the harshest repressions by the Tsarist government, which were provoked by the major uprising of the Abkhazians in 1866 in the village of Lykhny (then the capital of Abkhazia) and which continued without interruption for 11 years.

The Abkhazians currently residing in Batum are those impoverished Abkhazians who could not afford to migrate with the others to Turkey and stopped by the Batum shores, where they gradually settled.

The songs they brought with them from Abkhazia, I consider the purest Abkhazian songs, judging by their structure, their ethnographic significance, and because, apart from exceptionally ancient songs, the Batum Abkhazians could not have taken any other Abkhazian songs with them.

Various reasons prevented me from thoroughly presenting the ethnographic data on the songs in my previous collection, from explaining various everyday phenomena, and from revealing the essence of customs and rituals, etc. I have endeavoured to rectify this gap in the present collection, which essentially serves as a continuation of the previous one.

The samples of song and musical creativity presented here are precise recordings of the melodies and instrumental performances by working peasants, without any embellishment or addition of harmonised elements. What I took from the peasants who sang and played for me, I convey to the reader exactly as it was.

When speaking of the customs and rituals of the Abkhazians and their way of life, I divide them into princes, nobles, and peasants, and in reference to the latter (peasants), I exclusively refer to that hardworking majority who, under the scorching sun, earn their piece of mamalyga [A traditional dish made of cornmeal —Ed.] solely with their own hands.

Sukhum, 1929

K. Kovács

(\*) See three “Songs of the Exiles” in the collection *101 Abkhazian Folk Songs*.

## I. HISTORICAL SONGS

### The Struggle for the Independence of the Caucasus

In the Kodor district of Abkhazia, people still recall (albeit only in song) the harsh times of the conquest of the Caucasus by “fire and sword.” Perhaps there would no longer be an Abkhazian or, indeed, any mountaineer who would remember the arduous struggle for national independence if the consequences of that struggle had not manifested in the severe policies of the Tsarist government towards the conquered peoples. It can be assumed that it was precisely these circumstances that led the Abkhazians to always remember the heroes of the past struggle with both pride and regret.

When I asked the elders to remember these songs, they looked at me in surprise and clearly indicated that recalling the times of subjugation now, in an era of complete national liberation, seemed out of place and untimely. However, I justified my insistence by scientific necessity, and the elders agreed to sing, occasionally recounting stories as well.

#### 1. The Song of Shamil

This song has nothing in common with the contemporary “Dance of Shamil.” The melody of this song undoubtedly belongs to Abkhazian folk creativity, but the words were apparently borrowed from other mountain peoples, and in Abkhazian folk versification, they naturally acquired, so to speak, their own hue.

*Who made a fortress from soldiers' skulls (1),  
Covering it with a roof of officers' ribs (2);  
Who did not allow a bird to sit on a branch,  
Nor sons to be raised by their mothers;  
Who did not let the Tsar's army rest —  
He himself was driven out like an epidemic (3).*

The narrative then shifts to another hero, presumably also a participant in the struggle for the independence of the Caucasus, as the words about him follow immediately after those about Shamil.

(1). In a literal translation from the Abkhazian language, this would mean: a stone wall.

(2). This refers to Russian officers.

(3). The Abkhazians were aware that every epidemic was driven out through persistent and prolonged struggle. By comparing Shamil's expulsion to that of an epidemic, they likely meant the duration and persistence of Shamil's resistance.

*Young Efendi Mahamed of Pyatachkovy (1)  
He was a hero himself.  
But with a superior shashka (2), his head was cut off,  
And his blood was scooped with a silver ladle.  
He held his severed head under his left arm,  
And with his right hand, he fought to the end.*

This song was recorded in the village of Beslakhuba, Kodor district.

## 2. The Song of the Young Circassian Mahamed

It might seem surprising why the Abkhazians would sing about a Circassian named Mahamed. However, this is easily explained. There were no particularly sharp national frictions between the Abkhazians and other mountain tribes until the final conquest of the Caucasus. National complications and antagonisms were artificially created later through the policies of the Tsarist government, which aimed to weaken the power of each mountain tribe individually. Prior to this, even the occasional national disputes did not escalate to significant levels, even when the Abkhazians raided the Ubykhs and Circassians and vice versa (3), as these raids were the primary occupation of the privileged part of the tribe on both sides. The material gain from this occupation lay in the capture of prisoners and livestock, for which ransom was received. If no ransom was paid, the captives were sold into slavery in Turkey and Egypt, while the livestock became the property of the victor.

Circassian Mahamed was a hero, and that alone was enough for Abkhazian folk wisdom to compose a song about him, as the Abkhazians greatly respect heroes, regardless of their nationality.

(1). *Pyatachkovy* refers to a diminutive, likely indicating a young or slight-built figure.

(2) *Shashka*: A traditional [North Caucasian] sabre, significant for its use and craftsmanship, representing courage and martial skill.

(3) These mutual raids were perceived in a balanced way: today the Circassians took from us, tomorrow we will take from them. No one was especially offended by this.

This song narrates, in simple terms or "in their own words," what happened to Mahamed and what his wife sang afterwards.

Mahamed was regarded as a great hero and *dzhigit* (cavalryman) [intrepid horsemen —Ed.] not only in his *aul* (village) but far beyond it. His bravery did not falter even when, the morning after his wedding, his comrades arrived and informed him that Shamil was in trouble and that he needed to go help him. Without uttering a word, Mahamed set off with them. In the very first battles, Mahamed was killed, and his body, contrary to custom (1), was not brought home. When his young wife learned of her husband's death, having not seen his body returned, she sang:

*Better than the whole hundred that were with you,  
Would have been one — the son of Beslan Hadji-Kelamat.  
If he did not bring you back alive,  
He would have surely brought your body.  
The red Circassian dress,  
That I put on you when you left — I do not see...  
To weep — I am ashamed before people,  
Not to weep — my heart breaks (2).*

This song was recorded in the village of Beslakhuba, Kodor district.

This is all that I managed to find from the material about the moments of the Caucasus conquest era, reflected in the folk creativity of the Abkhazians.

### **The Russian-Turkish War (1877–78)**

From the very first days of this war, Abkhazian *muhajirs*, that is, Abkhazians who had previously left Abkhazia under the pressure of Russian Tsarism, landed on the shores of Abkhazia from Turkish warships. These *muhajirs* became the link connecting the Abkhazian population with the Turkish landing force and served as the inspirers of the armed uprising.

The Abkhazians, suffering under the heel of Russian oppressors, rose in revolt en masse and, unaware of the treacherous policies of the Turkish pashas, assisted the Turkish troops in their struggle on Abkhazian territory.

Alongside the organised uprisings, there were cases when individuals, acting on their own initiative, gathered brave comrades and launched raids on Russian units.

### **3. The Song of Mustafa Cholokua**

One such individual in the Kodor region of Abkhazia was Mustafa Cholokua. He recruited fifteen brave men from his community and set out with them into battle. On one occasion, Mustafa's group fought against a strong enemy detachment for five days. Realising that victory was unattainable, Mustafa resorted to a cunning tactic by announcing a temporary truce. The Russian forces, exhausted and believing they were facing a major combat unit, agreed to the truce. However, when the Russian detachment settled down for a meal, Mustafa attacked them, causing panic during which several Russian soldiers were killed and the rest scattered. One of them managed to hide in the nearby rocks, and as the Abkhazians began to return, he shot Mustafa, inflicting a severe abdominal wound.

Summoning his strength, Mustafa set off on foot towards home, but after covering about five versts (approx. 5.3 km), he weakened considerably, and his comrades carried him the rest of the way on a *burka* (a traditional felt cloak). His mother met the wounded Mustafa with lamentations, in which she sang (3):

*Son, son. I told you,  
The word "hero" destroys a man,  
But conscience — it reproaches a Circassian cloak...*

(1). Among mountain tribes, it is customary to bring the body of a fallen comrade home. This task falls to the friends of the deceased. Those who fail to bring back the body of their comrade are considered poor friends and comrades.

(2). Among the Circassians, as among the Abkhazians, the wife (or husband) of the deceased should not mourn in the presence of people or even relatives.

(3). Abkhazian women, when lamenting over the wounded or the dead, always sing.

All this is now recounted by the elders in their song, which was recorded in the village of Pokveshi, Kodor district.

**Note:** The word “*conscience*” in the mother’s lament should be understood as *conscientiousness*. This is significant because, due to this conscientiousness, Abkhazians receive, offer drinks, and feed anyone who comes to them, which naturally impoverishes the peasants. Thus, it is ambiguously said that for someone who welcomes all, the Circassian coat (*cherkesska*) becomes too short for him. In this context, it should be understood that the mother considered Mustafa’s participation in the battle to be unnecessary (from her point of view), merely an act of conscience befitting a free highlander.

## FEUDALISM

### 4. The Lullaby Song

I am including a “lullaby” song as a historical document, based on the following considerations:

This song had a “special” purpose. The Abkhazian princes, who had fully indulged in the use of their privileged status, had at one time reduced the working peasantry to a condition akin to slavery. They used their serfs and their labour not only in their fields, vineyards, and stables — they even exploited the peasants at times when they simply could not sleep. During such moments, the princes would summon their serfs, place them in a room adjacent to their sleeping chamber, and make them play the *apkhartsa* (1) and sing this “lullaby” song. To the genuinely soothing melody of this song, the prince would “blissfully” fall asleep.

The elders refer to this song as “princely.” It was recorded in the village of Pokveshi, Kodor district.

## REVOLUTIONARY EVENTS

### 5. The Marching Song

Since time immemorial, this song has been considered a “marching song” or a “song of the army” among the Abkhazians (called “Ar-rasha” in Abkhazian). Whether in the past or present, wherever Abkhazians go or travel in groups, they always sing this song.

I classify this song as historical because it has now become a historical song, also associated with revolutionary events in Abkhazia.

The fact is that in 1905, this song was sung by the Abkhazians who rose up against the Tsarist regime during clashes with the police and guardsmen; in 1914, it was sung by

Abkhazians who, as volunteers, went to the front, accompanied by it. And in the years 1918–21, the armed *Kiaraz* sang this song. I find it necessary to provide a brief historical background on the latter.

In earlier times, *kiaraz* referred to groups of armed men sent by the princely landowners of Abkhazia to carry out punitive actions against peasants for offences such as tax defaults, etc.

Subsequently, *kiaraz* (or *uaxypra*) came to refer to an old Abkhazian custom of communal labour mutual assistance, where all the nearby village neighbours would collectively work each other's cornfields for free, as well as for widows, orphans, the sick, etc.; when the house of any Abkhaz was built, it was done with the cooperative labour of all the neighbours.

And since the term *kiaraz* fundamentally means “union,” it was used during the days of struggle against Menshevik rule in Abkhazia (1918–21) to denote the fighting brigade of the Gudauta Bolsheviks, who fearlessly fought under the leadership of Comrade N. Lakoba for the establishment of Soviet power against entire armies of Menshevik-generals.

At present, in some Abkhazian villages, kolkhozes (collective farms) are called “Achag-Kiaraz.”

The song was recorded in the village of Tkvarcheli (in Abkhazian — Tquarchal), Kodor district.

(1). *Apkhartsa* — a two-stringed bowed Abkhazian instrument. (For a detailed description, see the collection by K. Kovács, *101 Abkhazian Folk Songs*).

## 6. The Marching Song

This is essentially the same song as the previous one, but in a slightly different version, performed with the accompaniment of the *achamgur*. The latter is a four-stringed instrument (depicted on the cover) similar to a guitar. It is mostly played by women and girls, and the *achamgur* is considered a women's instrument among the Abkhazians. Its strings are made of silk threads, which is also regarded as a female task. It is customary to play it by tapping one finger on the upper soundboard in rhythm with the song.

However, the full range of the *achengur's* capabilities is never utilised by the Abkhazians. The *achamgur* cannot be considered an Abkhazian national instrument, as it is an adopted instrument borrowed from Mingrelia. This song was recorded in the village of Mokvi, Kodor district.



1st string

2nd string

3rd string

4th string

But in most cases, the second string is tuned as follows:

Its full range extends...

The image displays four musical staves representing the strings of a violin. The 1st string is tuned to G4, the 2nd to D4, the 3rd to A3, and the 4th to E3. Below this, it shows the 2nd string tuned to D4 with a sharp sign, indicating a higher pitch than standard. A final staff shows the full range of the 2nd string from its lowest note to its highest note, indicated by a diagonal line.

***The Songs of the Kodor Abkhazians***

*Author's Preface* (pp. 3-5) & *Historical Songs* (pp. 7-11)

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