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On the Political and Ethnic History of Myrzakan (Samurzakano) in the 19th Century

By Denis Gopia

Throughout different historical periods, any state undergoes complex political processes, including the expansion and contraction of political and ethnic boundaries. Abkhazia, one of the oldest states in the Caucasus, is no exception to this rule. Following the events of the Russo-Caucasian War in the 19th century, Abkhazia became a multi-ethnic country. Its land was colonised by Russians, Armenians, Estonians, etc., while the eastern part of the country, namely the modern Gal District, was ethnically populated by Megrelians and Georgians. The Gal District of Abkhazia is located in the southeast of the country, covers an area of 500 sq. km., borders the Ochamchira District of Abkhazia to the west, the Tkuarchal District to the north, and to the east along the Ingur River - with the Samegrelo and Upper Svaneti regions of the Republic of Georgia, with the city of Gal as its administrative centre.

In the past, this region of Abkhazia was called Myrzakan (Samurzakano in Russian sources. Note by Gopia D.K.), but it is this region of Abkhazia that has caused and continues to cause many disputes about its historical affiliation to either Abkhazia or Georgia. In its historical past, this region was part of the ancient Abkhazian kingdom of Apsilia (1st-7th centuries), inhabited by one of the ancient Abkhazian tribes. From the 8th to the 13th centuries, it was part of the Kingdom of Abkhazia, but by the end of the 13th and the beginning of the 14th century, it was annexed by Giorgi Dadiani to the Principality of Megrelia and underwent partial Megrelisation.

At the end of the 17th century, as a result of a prolonged struggle, the reconquest of this territory was completed, and the ruling dynasty of Abkhazia, the Chachbas (Shervashidzes), reclaimed their region.

Historian Z[urab].V. Anchabadze wrote about this: "Sarek Shervashidze (son of the ruling prince of Abkhazia Sustar Chachba-Shervashidze) together with his cousin Kvapu in the early 1680s invaded the territory of the Principality of Megrelia and captured its northern districts up to the Ingur River. Unlike previous times, when Abkhazian feudal lords, after a raid, returned with loot and captives, Sarek Shervashidze, as reported by the Italian missionary Rasponi, decided to settle in the captured territory"^[1]. Thus, the border of Abkhazia along the Ingur River was established. Soon after, a serious conflict arose between Sarek Chachba (Shervashidze) and his uncle Zegnak Chachba (Shervashidze). Sarek did not want to submit to

his uncle, the main ruler of Abkhazia. Eventually, Sarek Chachba was removed, "after Sarek, who ruled a fairly extensive territory between the Bzyp River, the Caucasus Mountains, and the lower course of the Ingur River, it was ruled by his uncle Zegnak, who headed Abkhazia for another 20 years... The line of Sarek is not further traced, being replaced by the branch of Zegnak, whose children after his death divided the father's possessions. The eldest, Rostom, received the territory between the rivers Bzyp and Kodori and the title of ruling prince of Abkhazia, the middle one, Dzhikeshia, received the area between the rivers Kodori and Galidzga, which territory was later named Abzhua, and the youngest, Kvapu, who received the lands between the Galidzga and Ingur"^[2]. The latter's residence was located in the village of Bedia, and he also owned the fortress of Rukhi on the left bank of the Ingur River. After the death of Kvapu, around 1761, his son, named Myrzakan Chachba, became the ruler, and then the territory between the rivers Aaldzga [Abkhaz for Galidzga – ed.] and Ingur was named after Myrzakan or Samurzakano, meaning "belonging to Myrzakan". Thus did the neighbouring Megrelians call this region. Later this name was borrowed by the Russians and entered official documents. After Myrzakan, Khutunia, Levan, and Manuchar ruled in succession, "the Samurzakano feudal lords in the 18th century, although dependent on the ruler of Abkhazia, nevertheless enjoyed great independence"^[3]. According to researcher S. Esadze: "Despite this autonomy, it was incomplete, as the rulers of Abkhazia and the Megrelian Dadianis constantly interfered in Samurzakano affairs"^[4]. From 1737 to 1780 in Abkhazia, the main ruler was Zurab Chachba, who resided in its capital, Lykhny. His brother Manuchar Chachba became the commandant of the Turkish fortress Sukhum-Kale, and their third brother Shirvan-bey was a Turkish pasha in the city of Batumi and its surroundings. It was thanks to his trustful relationship with the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire that Zurab and Manuchar came to rule in Abkhazia. As Machavariani wrote: "Abkhazia was once again united as a whole (from Batumi to Gagra) under the administration of the three brothers"^[5]. During the reign of Zurab Chachba, Levan Chachba, Myrzakan's grandson, ruled in Myrzakan. In 1771, they jointly instigated an uprising against the Turks and captured the fortress of Sukhum-Kale. Zurab ruled over Bzyp Abkhazia, and Levan also ruled over Gum Abkhazia. However, later, due to a feud, Levan handed the fortress back to the Turks in retaliation against Zurab. Three years later, "abandoned by his defenders and hated by his people, he was forced secretly to flee to Anaklia"^[6]. At the end of the 18th century, Kelesh-bey Chachba (Shervashidze) came to power in Abkhazia. He ruled from 1780 to 1808. Initially, he was forced, for political reasons, to marry a princess from the Dzyapsh-ipa family, Mariam, with whom he had a son, Aslan-bey. But soon, "having become the ruler, he divorced her and began to oppress the Dzyapsh-ipa. In doing this, Kelesh-bey had in mind not only family-calculations but mainly feared the influence that Dzyapsh-ipa had gained among the people"^[7]. Having strengthened his political position in Abkhazia, in 1794, Kelesh-bey "in order to force the Dadianis to cease their interference in the affairs of Samurzakano, moved against Zugdidi, where Grigor and Manuchar Dadiani, not expecting his attack, made peace with Kelesh-bey. According to this peace, they renounced their claims on Samurzakano. He took the sons of the Dadianis as security for the peace and appointed his son Mehmed-bey to govern Samurzakano"^[8]. However, "throughout all subsequent periods until the abolition of the Principality of Megrelia in 1856, the Dadiani princes intrigued against Abkhazia and pushed the imperial viceroys in the Caucasus and influential officials to revise the terms of this treaty in their favour"^[9]. The political situation around Myrzakan began to change with the incorporation of the Principality of Megrelia into the Russian Empire in 1803. Just two years later, in 1805, Mehmed-bey, the ruler of Myrzakan, died. The region was then ruled by Manuchar (Mancha) Chachba (Shervashidze), who was married to the sister of the ruler of Megrelia, Levan Dadiani's sister Ketevan, a fact of which the ruler of Megrelia was sure to take advantage. Manuchar Chachba, "while simultaneously striving to strengthen his independent power and taking advantage of the turmoil in Abkhazia, feeling no resistance from

Kelesh-bey, stopped obeying him. Behind his very back, he negotiated the incorporation of Samurzakano into the Russian Empire. The mediators in the negotiation-process were his Megrelian relatives"^[10].

In 1805, Manuchar and Levan Chachba, with the help of Levan Dadiani, sent a letter to Russia with the following content:

"We, the undersigned, Abkhazian princes of the state of Samurzakano, have entered into the service of His Imperial Highness, the most merciful Russian monarch, along with our land, princes, and noblemen. We swear by Almighty God and the Holy Gospel to be faithful slaves and subjects forever and never to disobey His Majesty or to commit treason. If we become aware of treason or disobedience by others, we will promptly report where necessary. If we fail to fulfil as written above, may we be cursed by God and the Holy Gospel and also rejected by the most merciful Sovereign"^[11].

Thus, "in July 1805 in Megrelia, in the settlement of Bandza, Manuchar Shervashidze with his brother Levan as 'Abkhazian princes, rulers of Samurzakano', swore allegiance to Russia; they were led in the oath by the Chkondidi Metropolitan Vissarion. Thus, five years earlier than the rest of Abkhazia, Samurzakano entered the Russian Empire^[12]. It should be noted, however, that not all representatives of the ruling house of Myrzakan agreed with this, as Manuchar's brother Bezhan did not sign the appeal to the Russians. The ruler of Abkhazia, Keleshbey, due to the complex political situation, could not prevent such actions by Manuchar Chachba (Shervashidze), although he tried during negotiations with the Russians to raise the issue of returning some villages that were removed from Myrzakan and actually transferred to Mingrelia. In 1808, Keleshbey was killed, and Aslanbey Chachba became the ruler; in 1810, with the help of the Russians, his son Safyrbey ascended to the Abkhazian throne. He was weak in governing the country, and in 1813, Manuchar Chachba was also killed. He left two sons, Alexander and Dmitry, but due to their being under-age, as Esadze pointed out, 'the ruler of Mingrelia, Levan Dadiani, as a close relative, took them under his guardianship, and at the same time, relying on force and status, appropriated the governance of Samurzakano in the name of Alexander'^[13]. Maps of the period also reflect political changes in the region. On the 1810 map^[14], Myrzakan is shown as part of Abkhazia, but on the 1813 map^[15], as part of Mingrelia. Bronevsky, who published his work on the Caucasus in 1823, stated that: 'in the Black Sea near the fortress of Anaklia, forming the border between Mingrelia and Abkhazia'^[16], he included a map of the entire Caucasus, where the Myrzakan region occupies the space in the north to the Main Caucasus Ridge, and in the south, the Black Sea coast, west from the Aaldzga River, and east to the Ingur River. Important points indicated are Aku, Shkhorcheli, Bedia, Tskhori, and Gudava^[17]. Thus, according to Bronevsky, real Abkhazia ends at the Ingur River.

In 1827, it seems, the princes of Myrzakan were dissatisfied with the situation, and as Esadze reports, 'Paskevich sent a detachment to bring the Samurzakano princes into obedience to the Mingrelian Dadiani. Baron Rosen, governor of Imereti, wrote to Vakulsky: 'From our government's side, the main goal should be to maintain peace, quiet, and complete obedience of all inhabitants to the ruler in Mingrelia and the territories under his control, among which decisively belongs Samurzakano'^[18]. Already in 1829, Alexander Chachba (Shervashidze) - came of age. Levan Dadiani, realising that this threatened him with the loss of Myrzakan, conspired against his nephew, and as a result of his report, Alexander was exiled to Siberia by the Russian commander-in-chief Paskevich. However, there was another contender for the rule of Myrzakan, so 'Alexander's brother, Dmitry, died in 1832 in a skirmish with Dadiani's

men^[19]. Thus did Levan Dadiani deal with the contenders for the rule of Myrzakan and decided to secure this region for Mingrelia, using the help of the Russians. Moreover, tsarist Russia built its policy in Western Caucasus via Mingrelia, just as Byzantium did via Lazica in the 6th century.

According to Seleznev, "In 1832, General Rosen annexed Samurzukhan to Mingrelia on the grounds that the ruler of Mingrelia, Prince Levan Dadiani, reported that in ancient times, Samyrzykhan undoubtedly belonged to his ancestors, but unfavourable circumstances allowed it to break away and join neighbouring Abkhazia"^[20]. In 1831-1834, the Swiss Frederic Dubois de Montpéreux visited Abkhazia, writing that "the mouth of the Galidzga River, which forms the border of Abkhazia on the side of Samurzakano, was still ahead when we passed Markula"^[21], but on his published map, Myrzakan is shown as part of Abkhazia. From Montpéreux's account, we learn that in 1832-1833, Myrzakan became the arena of confrontation between the Abkhazian prince Achba and Levan Dadiani, and "the Samurzakano people themselves were dissatisfied with the removal of their natural rulers, and therefore frequent disorders occurred in the country with the goal of getting rid of Dadiani"^[22]. Seleznev informs us of the cause of the unrest among the population, "but the Samurzukhans did not obey and, hating the newly established authority, beat and drove away officials sent by Dadiani"^[23]. In 1834, Russian troops under the command of General Akhlestyshev invaded Myrzakan and built fortifications near the village of Elyr, subduing the local population. At this time in Abkhazia, Mikhail Shervashidze (Abkh. Хамытбей Чачба) ruled, who took advantage of the turmoil in Samurzakano and asserted rights to this region. Russian Lieutenant General Blaromberg in 1835 stated: "Abkhazia, or Abazia, called by the locals Apsny, is separated from Mingrelia to the south by the Ingur River...",^[24]. "The Samurzakano community is located between the Ingur and Galidzga rivers. It is considered to belong to Mingrelia and is under the patronage of the ruling Mingrelian prince Levan Dadiani"^[25].

Thus, Samurzakano served as a reward for L. Dadiani's loyalty to the Russian throne^[26].

In 1839, the idea of creating a temporary Myrzakanian administration and its direct subordination to Russian governance arose, "and in 1840, a supreme decree followed about adding it to the lands under the direct administration of the government"^[27]. In 1841, the village of Okumi (Abkh. Гѡѡма) became the centre of Myrzakan, Levan Dadiani was paid a certain compensation for Myrzakan, and the villages of Small and Large Koki, Shamgoni, Orsantia, and Pahulan were transferred to Mingrelia, which offended the ruler of Abkhazia, Mikhail, who considered Myrzakan to belong to his family, "the new administrative district did not include Ilori and some other villages: the border was drawn along the Okhuri/Okhurej River. This decision did not satisfy Mikhail Shervashidze, who continued to assert his claims to this region"^[28], in connection with which he wrote a letter requesting his dismissal, that is, removal from the management of Abkhazia. However, Prince Vorontsov wrote him a letter with the following content: *"I cannot regard such renunciation by the ruler as a simple dismissal of an official. You wish to reject the rights, power, and duties bestowed or imposed on you by God, sanctified by time, the fame of your origins, the valour of your ancestors, your own merits, and the recognition of the people. You are burdened by these rights, duties, associated, of course, with cares and labours, but also with glory, with primacy in society, with significant advantages and benefits personally for you and your family. Think about the impression that such renunciation of the rank, which you received and must pass on by inheritance, will make on the population under your authority and the neighbouring one. Think that your descendants will not share your opinion, will not be burdened by this high title, and that your memory will*

be hated by descendants whom you deprive of their inheritance without necessity and without sufficient reason for it"^[29].

However, it seems that even earlier, Myrzakan had lost not only these villages but also the north-western part of its territory. On the maps of 1816^[30] and 1823^[31], the eastern border of Abkhazia strictly followed the Ingur River, apparently up to the confluence of the two rivers Ingur and Larikuara, as can be seen on the 1842 map^[32], above the village of Dzhvari, and then along the latter river up to the Bakhushvynjara Mountain, and north along the line of the mountains Ergdzashyra → Khudzhhal → Arrymjwa → Khida → Mguashirkhua to the Main Caucasus Ridge. Now, the border of Abkhazia begins much lower than the Larikuara River at the village of Pakhulan and stretches westward towards Mount Aisyrra and up along the line of mountains Aisyrra → Apsarakhu → Apshyrrha → Akiba → Bakulztou → Ergdzashyra → Khudzhhal → Arrymyua → Khida → Mguashirkhua to the Main Caucasus Ridge, leaving significant lands between these mountains and the right bank of the Ingur River now in Georgia.

Soon Myrzakan was returned to the structure of Abkhazia, as can be traced on the 1858 map^[33]. In 1864, the Russo-Caucasian War ended at Krasnaja Polyjana (Abkh. Аҕэыбаадэы), and "in June 1864, the Abkhazian principality was abolished with the introduction, pending the approval of the position and staff, of a temporary 'military-people's administration'. Abkhazia was renamed the Sukhum Military Department of the Russian Empire and divided into three districts (Bzyp, Sukhum, and Abzhui) and two administrations (Tsebelda and Samurzakano) under the subordination of the Kutaisi governor-general. As head of the Department was appointed General P.N. Shatilov, who received the order to enter 'into internal administration' of the region from 12 July 1864"^[34]. Ruler Mikhail was exiled from Abkhazia in November of the same year to Voronezh, where he died in 1866. "In administrative terms, the Sukhum Department was divided into the administration of the city of Sukhum and four districts: Tsebelda, Pitsunda, Dranda, Okumi. A city-head and a police-administration were appointed to manage the city of Sukhum"^[35]. In 1888, by the decree of the Russian emperor, the Sukhum Military Department, along with Myrzakan, was renamed the Sukhum District within the Kutaisi Governorate.

Discussing the ethnic population of the Abkhazian historical region of Myrzakan in the 19th century, we encounter two opposing views in historiography (especially in those of Abkhazia and Georgia) which is primarily related to the fact that this issue is viewed through the prism of today's political realities between the two countries. According to Solovjev, originally the majority of the population in the territory of Myrzakan were Megrelians, but due to Abkhazo-Megrelian wars, the capture, and the devastation of the territory between the Aaldzga and Ingur by Abkhazian feudal lords from the Chachba (Shervashidze) clan in the 17th century, this region became desolate, "this desolation continued until the time when Kvap Chachba (Shervashidze) settled in Samurzakano, which he received as part of his share of inheritance. He went there with his retinue of princes and noblemen who 'followed him with part of their subjects according to popular custom', and soon their families also moved there. The sparse local population willingly recognised the patronage of the newcomers, hoping for their protection." These same facts are also reported in a document compiled in the early 19th century and cited in the work of Antelava. It also follows that Kvap Shervashidze settled the area he received by enticing princes and noblemen from other parts of Abkhazia"^[36], the author points out that most sources of the 19th century assign the Samyrzakans to the Abkhazians, while noting: "One of the peculiarities of the ethnic history of Samurzakano were migrations

to this region of significant masses of the population from neighbouring areas of Western Georgia, mainly from Mingrelia"^[37], the author comes to the following conclusion: "It can be assumed that the sub-ethnonym (or toponym) Samyrzakans was in practice used throughout its existence in relation to the ethnically mixed population living in the zone of an ethnic borderland"^[38]. The issue of ethnic population is thoroughly examined by Abkhazian researcher T.A. Achugba. Based on sources from the 19th century, such as Bronevsky, Asha, Gamba, Montpéroux, Tornau, Berge, Philipson, Machavariani, and Bartholomew, Albov, and many others, he proves the affiliation of Myrzakans to the Abkhazians, and points out that "the Georgian press at the time also wrote about the affiliation of the Samurzakans to the Abkhazian ethnos"^[39]. Some Georgian researchers claim that the inhabitants of Myrzakan in the 19th century were Megrelians and cannot be attributed to the Abkhazians in any way.

We will not quote Russian travellers and military personnel who were here, as all of this is already included in Achugba's work. Instead, we will focus on sources that researchers might overlook. One source for understanding the ethnic situation in Myrzakan are the data from Zeydlicz (1877), Kraevich (1869), Chantre (1877), among others. Kraevich wrote: "In western Samurzakano, the Abkhaz language predominates, and in the east, a special dialect of the Megrelian language. Despite the tribal differences of some parts of the Samurzakano population, it is undeniable that the social structure of this country does not present any sharp changes compared to other parts of Abkhazia"^[40]. Of course, one cannot always determine ethnicity by language, but let's analyse some data. Zeydlicz noted: "Samurzakano - a strip of land between the rivers Ingur and Galidzga, inhabited by Abkhazians and Mingrelians"^[41]. Traveller and researcher Albov, who spent five years in Abkhazia, gives the following information in 1892: "Travelling for five years in Abkhazia, I had the opportunity to get more or less acquainted with the population of the country"^[42], and he wrote that Abkhazia extends from the Gagra Ridge to the Ingur River and that in all parts of Abkhazia it is practically only Abkhazians who live there. However, speaking of Myrzakan, he notes: "This section is inhabited by Samurzakanians - a tribe of Abkhazian origin with a significant admixture of the Mingrelian element. Its administrative centre is the small town of Okumi, located in the very middle of Samurzakano"^[43].

In the 1870s, prominent French archaeologist and anthropologist Ernest Chantre conducted research in the Caucasus. Based on his work, as well as that of Zeydlicz and Eskert, an ethnic map of the Caucasus was created in French, showing the approximate line of linguistic contact in Myrzakan between Megrelians and Abkhazians along the line "Pakhulani, → Papynyrha (Saberio), → Abaakyt (Dikhazurga) → Khatskha (Cheburkhindji), then westward in an arc towards the sea up to the river Yuardzy (Eristskali) and the village of Guda(v)a"^[44]. On a separate map by Zejdlicz in Russian, the following villages are listed as Abkhaz-speaking: "Ilori, Repi, Gudava, Shashleti, Rechkha, Makhura, Pakhulani, Babei-Aisyra, Etseri, Chkhortoli, Okumi, Eshketi, Beslakhuba, Atavzh, Ak^wask^ja, Kumuz, Adgakh'-dara," and the following as Megrelian-speaking: "Nabakevi, Barghebi, Gagida, Barbala, Etseri-Mukhuri, Saberi, Dikhazurga, Khutush-mukhuri"^[45]. Similar data are found in the work of Georgian philologist Tsagareli (1877), who provides important information about the geography of the Megrelian language: "In the northwest, there is a clash between the Mingrelian and Abkhazian languages in Samurzakano, where the residents consider Mingrelian their native language, women and children speak it, but men also speak Abkhaz. Currently, the Mingrelian language predominates approximately within the following confines: its south-eastern border is the River Tskhenis-tskhali, the western - the Black Sea, the north-western - the River Galidzga, and the northern - the borders of Svaneti"^[46].

This same author, in another of his works, provides a complete list of villages that are Megrelian-speaking, but where men also know the Abkhaz language, even on the right bank of the Ingur River: "Purashi, Etzeri, Dzhvari, Pakhulani (the first three villages are on the left bank of the River Ingur, and Pakhulani on the right; today they are part of Georgia. **Note by Gopia D.K.**), Saberio, Dikhazurga, Tskhiri, Tchuburkhindzhi, Tagiloni, Atangela (names of two different parts of the same village), Nabakevi or Nabakebi, Otobaia, Ganardzhiash-mukhuri, Isoreti and Dikhaguzube, parts of the same village, Koki, Khetush-mukhuri, Etseri, Barbala, Barghebi, Etseri-mukhuri"^[47]. He further indicates that from the right bank of the River AjWardzy (Eristkali) to the right bank of the River Okhurej, the population speaks both Mingrelian and Abkhaz, especially men, and from the River Okhurej to the river Aaldzga (Galidzga), the Abkhaz language predominates. Also listed are Abkhaz-speaking villages, including "Okhuri, Abzhigdara, Kumuzi, Atabzha, Abzha, Nadzhikhevi, Sagurgulio, Sachina, Reka, Sakakhubio, Bedia, Eshketi, Chkhortoli, Rechka, Okumi, Tsarche, Reni, Gali, Mukhuri, Shashleti, Repi, Gudava, Tkvarcheli, Kvezani, Urta, Pokveshi, Etseri"^[48]. It is worth noting the village of Elyr (Ilori), in accordance with Tsagareli's language perspective: "However, there is the small town of Ilori, where the Mingrelian language dominates both in the family and in society"^[49]. Bakradze also reported on the bilingualism of the residents of Elyr (Ilori) in his article: "160 households of ancient Christians of Mingrelian origin; they know the Abkhaz language but speak Mingrelian all the time"^[50]. At the same time, we must remember that it is in the village of Elyr that the ancient Abkhazian shrine "Ailyrnykha" is located, which has been revered by them since ancient times; in point of fact, the Ilori church was built next to the ancient Abkhazian shrine.

The fact that the Abkhazian population in Myrzakan was clearly predominant is also confirmed by Albov: "Finally, southeast of Okumi, in the communities of Sabierio, Dikhazurga, Chuburkhindzhi, etc., the dominant language is exclusively Mingrelian, although the elders told me that in the old days they spoke more Abkhaz here. Thirdly, the names of mountains and rivers are almost exclusively Abkhaz"^[51]. When looking at various maps from different periods, covering the territory of historical Samyrzakano, we do indeed find that all major mountains, numbering over twenty, have Abkhaz names. For determining the ethnic population, various statistical data on the population of Abkhazia, including Myrzakan, are also important. According to the "Family Lists" of 1886, as pointed out by German researcher Müller, "Some (pro-) Abkhazian scholars claim that the percentage of Abkhazians in Abkhazia in 1886 was 85.7%; this is clear –to the Abkhazians are added the Samyrzakanians (30,640 + 28,323 = 58,963 or 85.7% of 68,773). On the other hand, some (pro-)Georgian scholars claimed that they, 'Georgians,' were actually the majority at 50.6%, clearly achieved by adding all Kartvelians (Mingrelians and some Laz people from the city of Sukhum + Georgians, including Imeretians and Gurians) to the Samyrzakanians (30,640 + 3,558 + 515 + 84 + 9 = 34,806 or 50.6% of 68,773). While the (pro-)Abkhazians can be criticised for the form they chose, they are fully justified in essence: the source itself compiles additional summary tables, and in them Samyrzakanians are not listed, but the number of Abkhazians in the Kutaisi Governorate is given as 60,432. So, in Batumi (city and district), there were 1,469 Abkhazians; thus, there remained 58,963, clearly, these are the Abkhazians plus Samyrzakanians in our district," the researcher further indicates that "obviously, it was difficult for the authorities to distinguish between Abkhazians and Samyrzakanians; instead, they are divided into territorial subdivisions. On the other hand, they had little difficulty separating Mingrelians and Samyrzakanians, who are regularly listed as living side by side"^[52].

The historical Myrzakan (Samyrzakano) stretched approximately 46 km from north to east from the River Aaldzga (Galidzga) to the River Ingur, and from north, from the mountain Kun

Iashta, to the Black Sea coast in the south approximately 50 km. When studying the available historical sources, we can conclude that the majority of this territory of historical Myrzakan in the 19th century was inhabited by a population of native speakers of the Abkhaz language – they spoke the Abkhaz language . The speakers of the Abkhaz language lived in the northern, north-western, central, and north-eastern parts of the region. The speakers of the Megrelian language occupied the eastern part of the region from the village of Pakhulani south along the right bank of the Ingur River and to its mouth, as well as along the sea-coast to the River Aj^wardzy (Eristskali). Thereafter, the population was bilingual, or the Abkhaz language was dominant. The historical past of Myrzakan remains little studied.

Therefore, when working on such issues, it is important to consider, in my opinion, the following aspects:

1. the specific historical situation up to a time-period;
2. who was the informant, eyewitness (scholar, traveller, cartographer), their political orientation and nationality;
3. being more cautious with data from toponymy, as even inherently Abkhaz names can change depending on certain circumstances, of which there are plenty of examples from the 20th century.

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8. *Ethnographic map of the Caucasian region by Seidlitz. 1880.*

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