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## **PROFESSIONAL PAINTING AND MUSICAL CULTURE OF CIRCASSIANS IN TURKEY AND RUSSIA**

Alla Nikolaevna Sokolova (a)\*

\*Corresponding author

(a) Institute of Arts, Adyghe State University, 198, Pervomayskaya str., Maykop, 385000, Adyghe Republic,  
[professor\\_sokolova@mail.ru](mailto:professor_sokolova@mail.ru)

### **Abstract**

Lack of a visual art culture in Circassian tradition is emphasized with appearance of professional Circassian artists in Turkey and Russia with a setback of about 50 years and different foundations for formation of artistic circles. A significant difference is noted in the number of schools that teach artists in Turkey (several dozens) and Russia (about half a dozen). Common and different topics and imagery are identified in Circassian art in diaspora and ancestral homeland. The authors emphasize governmental regulation of creative activities in Russia and individualistic nature of work of Circassian artists in Turkey, the latter being clearly oriented towards commercial success and global professional recognition. Similarly, musical and dance components of Circassian culture in Turkey and Russia have been analyzed. The authors state difference of dance systems, lack of professional Circassian composers in diaspora, integration of Russian Circassian music into the culture of Turkish Adyghe. Attempts are made at explaining popularity of musical and dance works of Russian Circassians among Turkish Circassians. Use of Sheshen and Tllepech'as dances in dance education in republics of North Caucasus is noted. The main methods of the research were the comparative typological method and the method of overt observation provided by expedition to Istanbul, Ankara, Düzce and Bodrum. Basing on the principles of methodological holism, the authors present professional culture of Circassians in Russia and Turkey not as a total of its components (quite different), but as a systemic integrity brought together by a spiritual component.

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*Keywords:* Adyghe, Circassians, Circassian Artists In Russia, Diaspora, Holism, Turkish Artists

## 1. Introduction

Adyghes (Circassians) arrived in Turkey as a result of the Caucasian War, which ended in 1864. Population of Circassians (Adyghes) in Turkey is many times that in Russia. This is a rare but not exclusive situation. According to the Russian Census of 2021 there are less than one million Circassians in Russia, while according to various sources Turkish Circassian diaspora amount to two to five million people (Kaya, 2005; Kushkhabiev, 2018). For a long time, life of Circassian diaspora in Turkey took place in compact settlements (enclaves), thus, lost connection to parent country did not mean loss of traditions. Up until a certain time (approximately 1970s), life in diaspora in Turkey was largely traditional. Turkish policy aimed at levelling ethnic differences facilitated cultural isolation and closed nature of Circassian communities where not all elders, who managed the community using traditional rules, were even speakers of Turkish. Circassian often did not allow Turks or representatives of other ethnic minorities into their villages. Circassians kept ethnic endogamy; intermarriage with locals was very rare (Kushkhabiev, 2018). Following the Young Turks Revolution (1908), the Circassian Mutual Help and Unity Society was founded in Istanbul. Active cultural and educational activity of this society among Circassian diaspora throughout the Turkish Empire was banned in early 1920s (Kushkhabiev, 2018). Turkish nationalism was enshrined in the Constitution of 1924. A principle of “One state – One nation – One language” was cemented. In 1934, a decree was issued that allowed using only Turkish names and surnames for Turkish population.

The situation has started changing only after 1970s. Circassian youth started leaving villages for cities, enroll into colleges and universities. Links had been established between various Circassian enclaves and a common Circassian artistic elite was formed. A significant role in uniting various Adyghes subethnic groups was played by Hase, which were a sort of ethnic clubs.

In Russia, formation of ethnic artistic elites was initiated at the national level. Comparison between activities of Circassian artistic elites in Russia and Turkey is the main task of this research. Two groups of the artistic elites were selected, painters and musicians. This selection was largely informed by the goals of RFBR project 20-012-00065 Cultural diffusions of Circassians in Turkey and Russia: artistic and socio-cultural analysis.

## 2. Problem Statement

Turkish political and military elite had included members of Circassian descent for a long time. It is known, that from 16th to 20th century, the title of pasha was obtained by about 250 Circassians, 12 of them became prime ministers, one of them was awarded the title of sheih-ul-Islam (the highest official in Muslim religious matters), about 115 Circassians served as marshals, generals, commanders of military regiments, ambassadors (Kushkhabiev, 2018). Among them, there were quite a few educated people who engaged with literature, music and painting at an amateur level. However, professional artistic elite started forming among Circassians only in the late 19<sup>th</sup>–early 20th century.

Professional culture (term coined by Podmarkov (1972) is related to purposeful, consistent and organized activity that influences the world around and transforms it. As a result of such activity, artistic elites are formed. Elite is a specific group of people considered as such thanks to their intelligence,

unconventional thinking and unorthodox actions, thanks to their cultural and mental development and high integrity standards (Averianova, 2014). Artistic elite of Turkish Circassian has been identified by the authors only theoretically, as in practice it is inseparable from the common Turkish artistic elite. In Russia, the opposite is true, as artistic elite in national republics has certain preferential advantages and is institutionally separated. During the second half of the 20th century, various regional creative associations appeared in republics of North Caucasus and were objects of special attention from authorities.

Having studied activities of professional painters and musicians of Circassian ancestry in Turkey and Russia, the authors succeeded in identifying common and different traits characterizing these two types of social practice. Preliminary results from comparative analysis of works produced by Circassian artists in Turkey and Russia were presented in our previous works in 2020 and 2021 (Suleymanova, 2021; Sokolova, 2020a; Sokolova, 2020b; Sokolova, 2021). Due to absence of cultural contacts for a prolonged period of time (150–200 years), Circassians in Russia and Turkey inevitably formed different artistic systems. The causes of these differences lie in different socio-cultural conditions under which the artists lived and developed, different educational base and conditions for manifesting one's talent. It should be remembered that, first, painting was completely absent in traditional Circassian culture; second, the Circassian segment in artistic movement of Turkey formed about 50 years earlier than in Russia. One of the first Circassian artists in Turkey was Hüseyin Avni Lifij (1886–1927), while back in 1913, Mihri Müşfik Hanım (1886–1954), an Abkhazian princess, organized an art school for girls in Istanbul, where preference was given to Circassian students. As it is known, in Russia first professional artists among Circassians appeared in Kabardino-Balkaria and Adyghea only in the second half of the 20th century. However, our analysis has revealed the common part preserved in the core of both cultures. It consists of genetic memory manifested through topics, plots and imagery and in some artistic principles embraced by Circassians. This implies three principle questions:

- 1) what is the common core of Circassian culture in diaspora and ancestral homeland?
- 2) how does the Circassian culture change in Turkey and in Russia in the context of renewed cultural contacts in the last 30 years?
- 3) what is the specific integrity (holism) of Circassian culture of a dispersed ethnicity?

### **3. Research Questions**

#### **3.1. About Circassian painters of Turkey**

While preparing our first expedition in Turkey within the framework of the project titled “Cultural Diffusion of Circassians in Turkey and Russia: artistic and socio-cultural analysis”, we tried to find through the Internet people who could assist in finding artists of Circassian descent. The matter is complicated by it is being impossible to determine person's ethnicity from their surname as Kemalists kept strict watch over all Turkish citizens having been named only with Turkish names and surnames. At that, in Turkey a Circassian is anybody whose ancestors came from Caucasus: Lezgins, Osetins, Darghins, Chechens, Adyghe, Abkhazians, etc. Besides, cultural links between Turkey and North Caucasus republics in the artistic world were minimal and usually based on personal contacts, thus the research team did not have information about artists or musicians of Circassian (Adyghe) descent. The

first year was basically spent collecting facts and creating a data base. The network of Circassian NGOs Hase rendered great assistance in that matter. After the first contacts with the leaders and representatives of Hase it became evident that Adyghe artists and those who organized our meeting still have their Adyghe cultural identity (*адыгæгæбæ*). Virtually every Adyghe knows their tamga (family sign), remember their Adyghe family name and names of those who moved to Turkey almost 200 years ago. Following the migration, several generations of muhajirun (refugees) lived an isolated life. Kushkhabiev (2018) notes that “inside Circassian settlements, hasa had judicial power. Any quarrels and conflicts arising between the members of the community were judged exclusively by elders in accordance with the Adyghe moral and legal code *Adyghe Khabze* (*Адыгæ хабзæ*). At that, any intervention of an Ottoman court was prevented”.

With active inclusion into social processes of Turkey—their new motherland—social significance of Circassians increased, artistic elite was being formed; and simultaneously, the mother tongue was getting lost and inevitable processes of losing traditional lifestyle and rejecting traditions and rituals were underway.

Caucasian War and Adyghe exodus from their ancestors' lands is a hot-button topic even for modern young people. Its delicacy was amplified by inability to communicate with fellow Adyghe who stayed back in Russia. In our view, Turkish Circassian artists may be divided into two groups. One of them is obsessed with the topic of Caucasian War and factual (figurative) world that embodies the lost historical motherland. There we see mountains, horses, dancing couples, Circassian weapons, arts and crafts, etc. Artists in the second group are open to the world, their own impressions, modern events, etc. At that, they are not devoid of piety to their ancestors and history of their people. They express ethnic topics and stories in a rather delicate details, which may be hard to grasp on the first sight. Of primary interest for such artists is their professional and commercial success, which is unrelated to their ethnicity. Such artists are proud of having their painting exhibited in Europe, America, Japan, while most of them never had a single personal exhibition in their ancestral homeland.

### **3.2. Common and different between Circassian artists of Turkey and Russia**

Quite important for our work was the question of the number of professional artists among Circassians in Russia and Turkey and their status. Distinguished Turkish artists of Circassian descent are in demand at the global scale, they have their personal studios, are commercially successful, independent, have multiple sites available to present their art both domestically and abroad. Youth may obtain artistic education in arts in several dozens of cities. Circassian artist of Turkey are not united by any associations, however, their artistic fellowship is manifested through opening-days of multiple exhibitions held not only in state and private galleries and museums, but in shopping centres, university halls, hotels, etc. In Russia, Circassian artists can study in two-three central universities or academies, there is a bare minimum of sites available for personal or group exhibitions. At that, during Soviet times they were always provided with work, materials and state-supported studios.

It is only recently (approximately, in the last ten years) that artists from Turkey and Russia has started getting to know about each other existence and art, began meeting during exhibitions. Our surveys have shown that out of the Russian Circassian artists, expatriates living in Turkey know the names of

Ruslan Tsimov from Kabardino-Balkaria, Felix Petuvash, Abdulakh Bersirov, Teuchezh Kat, Ramazan Khuazhev and Nurbii Lovpache from Adyghea. Russian Adyghean artists were able to name only Ahmet Öcal as a Turkish artist.

### **3.3. Music, dance and dance systems of Circassians in Turkey and Russia**

The second year of the project and visits to dance classes in various Hases (Circassian public gatherings) in Turkey provided an opportunity for detailed study of differences in dance systems. The dance systems are also different between Russian Adyghe living in different administrative territories (Republic of Adyghea is Western Adyghe, Kabardino-Balkar Republic and Karachay-Cherkessia are Eastern Adyghe). However, these differences pale in comparison with differences between the dance systems of Russian Adyghe and Turkish Circassians in diaspora. The dance systems in parent country and diaspora differ in dominant and peripheral genres. They differ in their use of musical texts, instruments, composition of ensembles, location and form of dancing activity, costumes, genres, kinesics, etc. It is astonishing that while acknowledging difference between the system, on each side of the divide there is an inquisitive interest to the culture of the other side and a manifested wish to become familiar with previously unknown dances. This path passes through the professional stage and within a decade from the start of cultural contacts, dances of Turkish Adyghe started appearing at weddings and dance parties in republics of North Caucasus. In Russia, dances of Turkish Adyghe were included into choreography curriculum in the region, musicians, choreographers and ballet masters from Russia are regularly invited to Turkey for teaching the Russian Adyghe dances. Two Turkish Adyghe dances, Sheshen and Tllepech'as, became staples of celebrations among Russian Adyghe as a sign of unity of Circassians throughout the world and to a certain degree as an element of cultural memory.

It is worth emphasizing, that cultural capital of the Turkish Circassian diaspora was not homogeneous at the time of their exile and it is not so in the 21st century. Subethnic division of the large ethnic unity found objective manifestations in subcultural differences. During the enclave period of diaspora, cultural characteristics of group's ancestral motherland were kept and preserved. In the new context, music and dance absorbed new artistic element and essentially formed a specific diaspora cultural identity. The first culture shock was experienced by Turkish Circassians 50–60 years ago, when Circassian youth started leaving their native villages, moving to cities and getting to know Circassians living in other regions of Turkey. They danced very different dances to the accompaniment of different instruments. The second culture shock was experienced when they actually saw dances and music from their ancestral homeland. Having recovered from it, Turkish Circassians were quick to acknowledge the culture of other Adyghe as something forgotten by them and started actively mastering dances of each other, understanding them as yet another cluster in their own dance system. Music and dance ensure a degree of social cohesion unattainable by religious or political means (Litvinova & Bdoyan, 2021).

It is known that in Turkey there have never been a Circassian with higher education in musical composition (Jaimoukha, 2010). Conservatories of Ankara and Istanbul currently do not have a single Circassian student. Amateur authors compose folk-styled songs, but even them are few and far between within quite a numerous diaspora. Attending dance rehearsals confirmed the authors in the opinion that talented Turkish amateur musicians of Circassian descent (Adyghe, Ingush, Osetians, etc.) copy by ear

the musical program of Caucasian dance ensembles–Nalmes, Islamei, Kabardinka–and use in their own performances. Music of Russian Circassians has a colossal influence over the Turkish diaspora. Taking into account that the whole Circassian population in the ancestral motherland amounts to about 700,000, while Turkish Circassian diaspora consists of several million people, the cultural influence of the minority over the majority is much stronger. Songs by Umar Tkhabisimov are very popular among Turkish Circassians, especially his song *Sinan* (My mother). Video and audio recordings of dance compositions performed by the State Academic Dance Ensemble Nalmes from the Republic of Adyghea have a wide fan base among the Circassian diaspora. Similar success is enjoyed by works of Aslan Nehay, which in the Turkish Circassian diaspora are understood exclusively as music of the Islamey ensemble.

So, what is going on? Why have Turkish Circassian painters attained global level, developed numerical strength, forms, styles and art movements, while Turkish Circassian musicians remained at a level of copying of works produced by Russian Circassians? The authors addressed this question to Turkish artists and other representatives of creative class, receiving every time a different answer. According to Mawlid Yenamuko (a Circassian professor from Ankara), a large number of Circassian artists in Turkey is explained by the large size of the Circassian diaspora. Then, however, how should one explain lack of professional composers and musicians? The answer was quite surprising. Music is often linked to lyrics. As only Turkish speech was permitted in Turkey, and even talking a different language in public could result in a jail sentence, there could be no songs in Circassian native language. So, any musical genres that require lyrics become impossible. At that, one of the founders of Turkish literature of the Tanzimat period is Ahmet Mithat (Hagur) (1844–1912), Circassian by descent, who wrote exclusively in Turkish, but dedicated all his works to Adyghe topics (Churey, 2003). Later, when control over development of ethnic cultures in Turkey was relaxed, Circassian creative class could not serve its ancestral motherland due to closed borders, and later still – because of understanding their significant professional marginalization in mastering musical genres and forms. By the moment when contacts were established between Circassian diaspora and Russian Circassians (1990s), in Russia there had existed a group of Circassian professional composers, members of Composer Associations of Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia and Adyghea. Many songs were recorded and issued on vinyl, including those issued by the Russian state-owned national recording label Melodiya. Adyghean music was transmitted on radio and television. In Adyghea, there was a special international broadcasting editorial office, operating with Turkey and Near East in mind. The whole Circassian world knew songs by Umar Tkhabisimov. Moreover, some of his songs were translated into Abkhaz, Osetian and Turkish. In Kabardino-Balkaria and Adyghea, there appeared musical theaters that staged productions with music composed by Circassian composers. In the context of such a cultural dissonance, Turkish Circassian could only consume or copy the music from Adyghea, inviting musicians, singers and dancers to transmit cultural values into the diaspora.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of this study lies in discovering the formative conditions of professional visual art and music among Circassians in Turkey and Russia and degree of their mutual influence following establishment of stable channels of communication.

## 5. Research Methods

During the research, the authors employed a complex of methods due to a complex nature of the research object. On the one hand, we identified Circassian cluster in the professional culture in Turkey and Russia, and on the other hand, we were interested in two branches of art, namely, visual arts and music. Thus, the method of overt observation was important for our research, as it manifested in fieldwork in artists' studios in Ankara, Istanbul, Düzce, Bodrum and studios of Circassian painters in Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia and Adyghea. Additionally, the authors employed comparative and comparative typological methods that allowed analyzing the conditions in which professional art schools and movements formed in Turkey and Russia. At that, we followed the principles of methodological holism, defining professional culture of Circassians in Turkey and Russia not as a sum, but as a systemic whole. While analyzing the creative results we employed cultural studies approach and special art studies methods: analysis of draftsmanship and composition, color separation, etc. Bibliographic, historical and compositional-structural methods were used in analysis of musical works.

## 6. Findings

Remaining on holistic positions, we imagine the world of Circassian culture as a wholeness which is larger than the total of its components. Circassian in their ancestral motherland and in diaspora remain Circassians, for whom the highest value is their Adyghe nature (адыгагъэ), which includes such characteristics as honor, conscience, pride, respect to elders, etc. The difference we saw during our expeditions in arrangement of Circassian weddings, youth parties, dances and music, attitude to artistic education and so on allows us explaining these phenomena in the context of integrity of the Circassian culture. Speaking from the position of methodological holism, there is an acculturation of one part of a disperse ethnic group with respect to another. As Turkish Circassian are to a certain degree adapted to the Turkish culture, and Circassians in Russia are adapted to the Russian culture, traces of the majority culture of their respective countries are evident and implicit. Circassians around the world are open to innovations and any novelties are actively transformed within their own culture. The cultural background is changed during the contact with between tribesmen and multiple differences are used as a resource for active selection and cultural enrichment.

## 7. Conclusion

Professional art produced by Circassians in Turkey and Russia, as well as their traditional art shall be considered from the point of view of methodological holism, defining its integrity not as a total of its parts, but as a complex unity reflecting cultural contexts. When they meet each other, Turkish Adyghes and Russian Adyghes feel close and related, a united ethnicity with the same attitude to their historical past, ancestors, tribe and children, having a similar understanding of honour, conscience, valour and duty. Differences in living conditions and command of language are seen as less important and surmountable

barriers against the background of mental proximity. The spiritual, mental component is the strongest brace that removes national and socio-cultural borders.

Professional visual arts of Turkish Circassians accepted the best that the educational and socio-cultural system of that country could offer. The same may be said about Russian Circassian artists. The most talented were given an ability of free education in the best artistic tertiary schools and academies of Russia; following that, master painters obtained certain preferences as members of the Russian Association of Artists – they got state orders, plein-air offers, their own studios, etc. The difference between the Turkish Circassian artists and those from Russia is seen at the cultural periphery and is manifested in dominating topics and plots. In the core, there are important values of ethnic identity, recognition and understanding of Caucasus, acknowledgment of its nature as a common motherland, understanding of the Nart Saga and Adyghe mythology as their cultural foundation that feeds the modern art; respect for traditions and a skill in representing them in various styles and movements, from ideologically spotless figurative art to abstract and Conceptualist paintings.

We are of the opinion that there is currently no prospects for blending or even serious influence from Turkish Circassian art onto the art of the Russian Circassians. At the moment of their contact, both systems had stable forms and continue developing in their specific socio-cultural conditions. Their development follows the line of recognizing each other and the will to understand and explain a significant difference in styles and directions.

In professional musical art, it seems that the ancestral homeland is going to be a cultural donor for a long time, supporting all the Circassian diaspora, not only Adyghe. Representatives of musical creative elite influence the emotional sphere of members of diaspora. That is why Russian Circassian musicians and dancers are more in demand among Turkish Circassians than painters. People in diaspora listen to their music, watch their videos on the Internet, finance their trips to festivals, concerts, corporate parties, anniversaries and weddings. Nevertheless, the process of active mutual understanding of these cultures is still at its initial stage. Synergistic unity of experience of Circassians in diaspora and those in the ancestral homeland may produce a new and surprising result. Observation of this process and generalization of such observation is a task for subsequent research.

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