



ARTICLE IN THE SPECIAL SECTION

## Abkhaz and Abazin Communities in Cyberspace

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### ABSTRACT

The article explores the strategies implemented by two related Indigenous peoples, Abkhaz and Abazins (Abaza), aimed at preserving ethnic culture in the context of cyberspace. For Abkhaz and Abazins living abroad, it is essential to demonstrate their unity with their historical homeland, their belonging and inseparability from their traditions. Therefore, they take photos and videos of celebrations of traditional holidays, post them on social networking sites, thus indicating that they are an integral part of their people, regardless of the fact that they live outside. At the same time, the Abazins who are living in Russia, also use virtual communication for the popularization and revival of traditional culture. A content analysis was performed to study ethno-characteristic, linguistic, local, extra-territorial communities in popular social networks such as VK, Odnoklassniki, Telegram, Instagram<sup>1</sup>, Facebook<sup>2</sup>. As a result, the main trends that Abkhaz and Abazins use in cyberspace to keep their Indigenous culture alive were traced. In addition, the confrontation between classical Islam and traditional beliefs, which are an integral part of the ethnic culture of these two peoples, was revealed.

### KEYWORDS

Abkhaz, Apsuara, Abazins, Abaza, Türkiye, Russia, traditions, migration, identity, religion, communities, politics, culture, Indigenous peoples, ethnic groups

<sup>1</sup> Instagram™ is a trademark of Instagram Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries. По решению Роскомнадзора, социальная сеть Instagram полностью заблокирована в России как экстремистская организация.

<sup>2</sup> Facebook™ is a trademark of Facebook Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries. По решению Роскомнадзора, социальная сеть Facebook в России признана экстремистской организацией и заблокирована.

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## Introduction

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Caucasus became a focus point for two empires, the Russian and the Ottoman. The division of political influence and the long-lasting Caucasian war resulted in the most massive forced migration of a number of Caucasian peoples, including Abkhaz and Abazins, to the territory of present-day Türkiye and the Middle East in 1864. Consequently, the number of these ethnic groups sharply decreased. The exact number of deportees remains unclear, despite existing studies on the Caucasian War and the Muhajirs, or immigrants (e.g., Ganich, 2007). Although various figures are cited, they cannot be considered reasonable, since during the forced exodus to the Ottoman Empire one passport was issued per family, and a family could consist of a different number of people. One of the options for solving the problem involves counting the passports, though the resulting figure will be approximate; moreover, the passports did not indicate ethnicity. As we know, different peoples were evicted from the territory of the North and West Caucasus. The surnames of the deportees would be one more basis for counting, which, however, also does not constitute a reliable method (Ayba, 2022a).

At present, the Abaza people are officially recognized as a minor Indigenous people of Russia (O Edinom perechne, 2000). According to the All-Russian Population Census 2020, their total number amounts to 41,874 people (Rosstat, 2022). The Karachay-Cherkess Republic in the North Caucasus is known as the region where the Abaza population is predominantly concentrated. “Within the territory of the Karachay-Cherkess Republic, the Abaza people reside in the following auls: Inzhich-Chukun, Psyzh, Kubina, Kara-Pago, Elburgan (Abazinsky District); Krasny Vostok (Malokarachayevsky District); Novo-Kuvinsk, Apsua (Adyghe-Khablsky District)” (Golovnev et al., 2022; Trans. by Tamara Ayba—T. A.). The Abazins speak the Abazi language, which belongs to the Abkhaz–Abazi subgroup of the Abkhaz–Adygian (West Caucasian) group of North Caucasian languages. The closest related language is Abkhazian. Among other related languages are Kabardino-Cherkessian and Adyghe languages (Albogachieva, 2021). “Linguistically and ethnoculturally (folklore, conversational etiquette, code of behavior, etc.), the closest related ethnic groups are the Abkhaz and the Adyghe people in Russia (Circassians, Kabardians, Adygei)” (Pis’mennye iazyki mira, 2000; Trans. by T. A.). The Abazins profess Sunni Islam, as do some Abkhaz; besides, there are adherents of traditional beliefs among Abkhaz (Krylov, 2001). Meanwhile, Abkhazia is a secular republic with Christianity as the state religion.

Similar to the Abkhaz, the majority of the Abazi population lives outside their native country. The largest Abazi diaspora lives in Türkiye. However, the number of Abazi and Abkhaz population in Türkiye cannot be estimated, as the ethnic groups are not counted in the national census. Nevertheless, Turkish census data on mother

tongue proficiency indicate the presence of 150–200 thousand speakers of Abazi (Mukov, 2021) and 400 thousand speakers of Abkhazi in the country. Meanwhile, the population of the Abkhazian people in the Republic of Abkhazia amounts to 125,726 people (Ayba, 2022b). Given the data presented, the conclusion can be drawn that forced migration to the territory of the former Ottoman Empire has put Abkhaz and Abazins, the autochthonous ethnic groups of the Caucasus, in a vulnerable position both in their historical homeland and beyond its borders.

Larger Adyghe ethnic groups abroad, such as the Kabardians, could have assimilated the Abkhaz and Abaza peoples, who constituted comparatively smaller groups. In response to these factors, the Abkhaz and Abaza communities abroad have adopted a strategy of consolidation, both online and offline. These ethnic groups are closely related, sharing highly similar customs and traditions, as well as linguistic connections through related languages with distinct dialects.

A. N. Genko (2021) observed the following regarding the linguistic kinship between two languages: the Ashkhar dialect of the Abaza language closely resembles the North Abkhazian, or Zelenchuk, dialect of the Abkhazian language (Dzhapua & Chekalov, 2019). A. N. Genko and L. I. Lavrov authored the earliest and most significant works on the ethnography of the Abaza people. During the Soviet period, L. I. Lavrov's student, L. Kunizheva, who elevated academic Abazinology to a new scientific level, further advanced the study of the Abaza population. Collaborating with members of the national elite, she contributed to groundbreaking studies on the history and ethnography of the Abaza people, which now serve as foundational texts for their scholarly exploration (e.g., Danilova, 1984; Kunizheva, 1974). However, the amount of empirical material available on the ethnography of the Abaza people remains significantly smaller than that of other Caucasian peoples (Dzhapua & Chekalov, 2019). Among the most recent noteworthy contributions to the study of the Abaza people are the works of M. S.-G. Albogachieva (2023).

Modern research frequently applies interdisciplinary methods, combining linguistics, historical anthropology, and sociology. Due to this, researchers are more actively using oral sources and field data, and therefore are able to draw conclusions based on the real practices and traditions of the Abazins. Moreover, the interaction of the Abazins with neighboring peoples causes interest among researchers, thus opening new perspectives for the analysis of adaptation and coexistence of cultures. Consequently, further study of the Abazin people in the context of the general history of the Caucasus appears to be a significant issue, contributing to the preservation of not only linguistic but also cultural heritage. Each new step in this direction helps to shed light on the uniqueness of the Abazi identity and its place in the diverse cultural landscape of the region.

The ethnic identities of Indigenous peoples are greatly impacted by globalization processes. Recognizing the benefits of hybrid communication, leaders and members of national minorities started to actively build ethnic communities across various platforms, often simultaneously.

Technological advances have made it possible to bridge geographical and cultural divides, fostering spaces for dialogue and mutual understanding. In this new

context, communities are able to share their identities, traditions, and values with a broader audience. Each post, each message becomes a piece of the mosaic reflecting the uniqueness and diversity of Indigenous peoples, which in turn contributes to their self-awareness and solidarity. Global connectivity serves as a powerful catalyst enabling these communities not only to preserve their roots but also to adapt to a rapidly changing world. This connectivity creates platforms for a future where their traditions and their cultures can exist and furthermore, thrive.

Caucasian ethnic groups, including the Abazins, largely represent conservative societies characterized by rigid social hierarchies, defined roles by age and gender, and an overarching cultural emphasis on shame. As a distinct social mechanism, shame regulates behavior within the community. The phrase “What other people will think,” commonly heard in everyday interactions, reinforces adherence to traditional norms, with public opinion exerting significant pressure on individuals in the Caucasus region.

In the cyberspace, however, anonymity through avatars and nicknames provides users with greater freedom of expression. This shift is particularly evident among men and women aged 15 to 30, where radical sentiments are increasingly prevalent. This new generation of Muslims often challenges the secrecy traditionally observed in Abazin ritual practices, expressing their opinions in an uncompromising manner. For the past two decades, tensions between traditional beliefs and Islam have been a prominent issue in the Caucasus region, with the Internet serving a convenient space for the dissemination of Islamic teachings.

As part of the research, I have compiled a register of online communities dedicated to the history, culture, and language of the Abaza. The analysis of comments in social network VK (also known as VKontakte),<sup>3</sup> in all Abazi groups has revealed several of the most frequently used terms. The word “Abazin” appeared 2,389 times, making it the most common, while “Allah,” with 1,471 mentions, ranked fourth. In cyberspace, traditional age and gender hierarchies are often blurred; for example, younger individuals may engage in heated debates with elders—an act considered disrespectful in offline settings. This generational divide has become a significant source of societal tension, with ideological differences contributing to the formation of a new identity. As a result, the Internet has become not only a platform for discussing cultural and religious topics but also an arena for rethinking traditional values.

In their discussions of tradition and modernity, youth communities address not only issues of national identity but also the reinterpretation of Islamic principles. Influenced by global trends and enhanced access to information, young Abaza are reexamining their cultural roots through the lens of modernity. A challenge of preserving cultural heritage while embracing contemporary social norms becomes a central theme in these conversations. In addition, cyberspace facilitates the emergence of new leadership roles, where authority is no longer determined by age but by the relevance and resonance of ideas. This shift has created opportunities for activists to influence public opinion and shape a new discourse on the identity and culture of the Abazins within the context of globalization.

<sup>3</sup> VK (short for its original name VKontakte) is a Russian online social media and social networking service. <https://vk.com> VK™ is a trademark of VK.com Ltd.

Abazin communities on Russian social networks also support the core idea of uniting the Abaza people and revival of their traditional culture. The situation of insecurity has framed their strategies to ensure the survival of the ethnic minority (Inglehart, 2018). These strategies are based on solidarity within the ethnic group, following the Apsuara (Abazara) traditional code of honor that regulates all spheres of life for Abkhaz and Abaza peoples. This study examines the strategies employed by both Abkhaz and Abaza peoples abroad, as well as the Abazin community in Russia, to protect their ethnic heritage, focusing particularly on cyberspace.

### Analytical Data on the Online Communities

Since the forced migration of their peoples, the Abkhaz and Abaza cultural centers (derneks) have continuously sought ways to ensure effective communication with their fellow nationals in their historical homeland. Karim H. Karim provides an interesting perspective on this topic, suggesting that “the phenomenon of inter-continental diasporic communication has existed for centuries” (as cited in Lieberman, 2003, p. 78). Those from immigrant communities quickly embraced and adapted new communication technologies for their needs, from telegraphs and landlines to mobile phones and social networks (Golovnev et al., 2021). This point is further supported by Lieberman (2003) who argues that the Internet, with its accessibility and global reach, proves particularly beneficial for diaspora communities and their needs, fostering both adaptation to new surroundings and the reinforcement of cultural identity (Lieberman, 2003). Besides these functions, the Internet plays a crucial role as a meeting point, offering a democratic platform for discussing current issues.

Hence, the performed content analysis used the materials from the ethnic, language, local, and non-territorial online communities on social media platforms such as VK, Odnoklassniki<sup>4</sup>, Telegram<sup>5</sup>, Instagram<sup>6</sup>, Facebook<sup>7</sup> (Belorussova & Siuziumov, 2024). The Abaza people in Russia primarily used social media platforms VK (59 groups) and Odnoklassniki (11 groups) to create online communities. An analysis of statistical data for the reporting period, based on markers such as date of creation and activity status (active/inactive, open/closed), reveals a decline in the relevance of such communities within these social networks. While exceptions exist, these communities often duplicate their content from other platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube<sup>8</sup>. Presently, Instagram serves as a favored platform for representation of Abaza traditional culture among Russian-speaking online users, although the social media platform is forbidden in the Russian Federation. The most commonly-used

<sup>4</sup> Odnoklassniki is a Russian social network owned by VK. <https://ok.ru>

<sup>5</sup> Telegram™ is a trademark of Telegram Group Inc., its operational center is based in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates.

<sup>6</sup> Instagram™ is a trademark of Instagram Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries. По решению Роскомнадзора, социальная сеть Instagram полностью заблокирована в России как экстремистская организация.

<sup>7</sup> Facebook™ is a trademark of Facebook Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries. По решению Роскомнадзора, социальная сеть Facebook в России признана экстремистской организацией и заблокирована.

<sup>8</sup> YouTube™ is a trademark of Google Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries.

social media service abroad has always been Facebook<sup>9</sup>. All ethnic minorities from Caucasus that live overseas utilize the platform to express their identity. Telegram, a less widespread platform, can be effectively used to represent traditional culture and foster communication between diasporas across continents.

Despite their distinct interfaces, Instagram and Facebook both fulfill the common need for visual representation. Abkhaz and Abaza ethnic groups prioritize highlighting their connection to the historical homeland, belonging and integrity with their traditions through photos and video recordings of traditional holidays. They share these materials online to exhibit their involvement in the community, even while living overseas. They place importance on performing religious practices that are accepted and respected at their native land. The Abkhaz and Abaza traditional cultures are deeply rooted in spirituality, with traditional beliefs functioning as a distinguishing marker of their identity. For those Abaza that are recognized as a minor Indigenous people, photo and video recordings of reconstructed rituals offer a vital tool for reviving traditional culture, as it was nearly lost during the forced migration, including traditions such as calendar ceremonies, oral folklore tradition, and life cycle rituals.

To conduct a more focused examination of content, I selected three representative groups (active and numerous) on social media platforms:

- The Alashara group, which has a combined social media presence of approximately 31,000 subscribers (with a margin of error) across all listed platforms including YouTube;
- Istanbul Abhaz Kültür Derneği online community, with a total of 8,835 subscribers (Instagram and Facebook);
- The Abaza Inform that has 23,800 subscribers on Instagram, 2,503 on TikTok<sup>10</sup>, and 758 on its Telegram channel.

## Reconstructing Intangible Ethnocultural Heritage

### **Alashara**

Alashara is one of the principal online groups that deals with preserving traditional Abazin culture conceptually and systematically. The group was created on VK on March 3, 2013 (Op-Ano Alashara, n.d.). As of now, the number of subscribers is 3,476. Another community on VK, registered as a personal page for Op-Ano Alashara, was created in 2013 (3,500 subscribers). Currently, the page is used to publish reposts from the Alashara group.

An analysis of the geographical distribution of Alashara's subscribers reveals that its activities garner interest not only in major cities but also in less populated regions. This goes to substantiate the broad appeal and significance of the content it provides. For instance, in cities such as Pyatigorsk and Nalchik, subscribers remain active

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<sup>10</sup> TikTok is a trademark of ByteDance, registered in China and other countries. TikTok has suspended all new posting and live-streaming for users in the Russian Federation.

despite their relatively small populations. This may stem from the engaging nature of the topics and the opportunity for relatability when it comes to empathizing with the individuals featured in its posts. Thus, the geographical distribution of Alashara's subscribers not only confirms its popularity but also highlights new possibilities for development and enhanced interaction with its audience.

In terms of the gender composition of the audience, a relatively balanced interest in content was revealed. The male audience, accounting for 52%, can be drawn to topics related to history, culture, and tradition, while the female audience, representing 48%, might find appeal in themes of social dynamics and personal growth. This balance offers a unique opportunity to craft content that resonates with a diverse audience. In addition, this group is distinguished by its high rate of publications on the page. News about the Abaza people and Alashara's work is updated multiple times throughout the day.

Alashara, like most public organizations, actively works to preserve the spiritual and cultural heritage, national identity, traditions, customs, and languages of the Abkhaz-Abaza people. Moreover, the project aims to create a unified ethnocultural space and encourage people to participate in public life. Seeking to broaden the opportunities for interaction and self-expression, Alashara established an online community on most popular social media platforms, such as VK, Instagram (Alashara. *Razvitie Abazino-Abkhazskogo etnosa*, n.d.), Telegram (Alashara, n.d.-a). The community has become an ethnocultural space on the online platform, providing relevant news and opportunities for feedback. The posts are extensively discussed and commented on, fostering an instant exchange of opinions online. Alashara is also working on the program *Razvitie Naroda Abaza* [Development for the People of Abaza], focusing on a healthy lifestyle, physical education, and sports. Posts on these topics elicit the highest number of comments. Topics related to the entertainment industry also attract significant attention, particularly with the participation of Abaza people in popular TV shows and music contests. It is seen as one of the most effective strategies for self-representation among Indigenous peoples. Therefore, the online sphere has emerged as another mean of communication within the Abaza community, adding a new dimension to their experience.

One of the Alashara's projects is *Fil'my-rekonstruktsii o traditsiakh i tsennostiakh abazinskoi sem'i* [Reconstruction Films About the Traditions and Values of the Abazi Family] (Alashara, 2022). Traditional rituals are recorded on video and posted on the Alashara online platforms in the form of short films (videos). Some of the videos posted on YouTube have their comments section disabled (Alashara, n.d.-b). This approach helps content owners avoid potential religious conflicts. In addition, the script tends to restrict material referencing traditional beliefs and paganism, due to the fact that this material has the potential to incite conflict among practicing Muslims.

Some modern Muslims within the community view the revival and promotion of traditional culture as outdated and reject religious syncretism. The religious syncretism is common among Abkhazians, Ossetians, and the Adyghe ethnic group as a whole. The question of ethics arises regarding the legitimacy of making changes to ancient rituals. Ethnologists and anthropologists alike emphasize the significance of every

aspect of a ritual. It is unclear who possesses the expertise to identify important and insignificant elements of a ritual. The desire to please everyone and avoid offence can lead to distorted narratives. The fear of negative online feedback to some extent contradicts the idea of the Internet as a safe space. Despite high levels of economic development and strong democratic foundations in developed countries, achieving existential security remains impossible, no matter the place.

The issue of preserving traditional languages remains a deeply troubling concern. According to the 1989 census conducted during the Soviet period, the USSR was home to 128 nationalities, each with its own native language. However, amidst this rich cultural diversity, the Russian language assumed the role of a *lingua franca*, continuing the function it held during the Russian Empire.

In most national republics, bilingualism became widespread, significantly reshaping the linguistic landscape. Perspectives on this bilingualism range from positive to negative, reflecting both the opportunities and challenges posed by the interaction of languages. It is crucial to recognize that preserving one's native language is not merely a question of identity but also an essential aspect of safeguarding cultural heritage for future generations. In this context, the need to honor traditions and linguistic roots has become more urgent than ever.

In the article "Ecolinguistic Problems of the North Caucasus in the Context of Language Policy," Aysa I. Khalidov highlights the significance of these issues, offering a perspective that underscores that

the national-Russian bilingualism, cultivated since the Soviet times, undoubtedly has some positive effects along with negative effects, which have recently become much written and spoken about. It is clear that with all its positive aspects bilingualism has a downside as it leads to minoritization of other languages except for Russian. In any Russian republic the Russian language performs the maximum number of public functions and has actually replaced the "local" languages from all spheres except for family communication and a monolingual environment. This is the reason to speak about a serious danger to the Caucasian and other national languages in the Russian Federation. (Khalidov, 2017, p. 29)

A team of scientists, including biologists, mathematicians, and linguists, conducted research under the leadership of Lindell Bromham from the Australian National University (Bromham et al., 2022). Language oppression for 6,511 languages was simulated using the ordinal probit regression model. The level of extinction threat, as the dependent variable, was assessed according to the EGIDS scale, which evaluates the generational transmission and usage of a language. For independent variables, the researchers analyzed over 50 factors influencing language extinction, such as regional linguistic diversity, official language recognition, demographic characteristics, educational policies, environmental aspects, and socioeconomic indicators. The study revealed that Indigenous languages have a lower average risk of extinction when in contact with numerous other autochthonous languages within



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a specific area. This phenomenon occurs because communities engaged in active interaction with speakers of other languages often become multilingual rather than losing their native language. Conversely, geographic isolation, such as living on an island, does not necessarily increase the likelihood of retaining one's native language. These findings highlight two distinct perspectives, each supported by significant research efforts.

The study led by Bromham underscores the critical role of social dynamics in language preservation. The research indicates that a linguistic ecosystem where languages coexist and interact fosters resilience among minority languages. Multilingualism becomes not only a practical necessity but also a form of cultural enrichment, while linguistic isolation often accelerates the loss of unique identities (Bromham et al., 2022).

In addition, the study raises important questions about the influence of educational policy and the recognition of languages as official languages. Languages granted official status benefit from greater support and funding, which enhances language retention among younger generations. In contrast, languages without state-level support are at greater risk of decline, leading to a disconnection from cultural heritage. Economic factors further complicate the situation. For example, in high-poverty regions heavily impacted by modernization and globalization, traditional languages are particularly vulnerable. Addressing these challenges requires an interdisciplinary approach to create conditions that foster sustainable language development.

Despite these efforts, the threat of language extinction remains real, especially among smaller ethnic groups both within and beyond the Russian Federation. In 2010, UNESCO published the *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, a landmark publication aimed at raising awareness about the loss of linguistic diversity and assessing the state of languages worldwide (UNESCO, 2010). This edition of the Atlas identifies approximately 2,500 languages, of which 230 have disappeared since 1950. Earlier versions were published in 1996 and 2001, while an interactive online version was launched in 2005.

The Atlas evaluates language vitality using nine criteria, including the total number of speakers, generational transmission, the scope of language use (e.g., in media), the attitudes of public officials, its official status, and the level of documentation and research. In this way, the Atlas serves not only as a guardian of linguistic heritage but also as a call to action for its preservation. According to data presented in the Atlas and its accompanying commentary, the Abaza language is currently at the stage described as follows:

The language is no longer being learned as the mother tongue by children in the home. The youngest speakers are thus of the parental generation. At this stage, parents may still speak their language to their children, but their children do not typically respond in the language. (UNESCO, 2010)

It is exactly for this reason that preserving and developing the Abaza language has become a central focus for the Abaza community. The Alashara organization plays a pivotal role in supporting initiatives such as language circles for various age groups and the Alashara language club. Prominent members of the community—writers, scientists, and cultural figures—are often invited to participate in these sessions. With the organization's assistance, there has also been published an online manual for learners of the Abaza language.

In 2016, a ten-year scientific program titled *Abaziny i abkhazy: Sokhranenie i razvitie iazykov i istoriko-kul'turnogo nasledii* [Abaza and Abkhazians: Preservation and Development of Languages and Historical and Cultural Heritage] was launched. This initiative was developed with the involvement of leading experts in Abaza language, history, and ethnography from Karachay-Cherkessia, Abkhazia, Moscow, Stavropol, and Türkiye. The World Abaza Congress (WAC), in collaboration with NGO Alashara, supplemented and approved a comprehensive program for the preservation and development of the Abaza language. As part of this initiative, the WAC Info Portal publishes a video lesson every weekday, each featuring three to five phrases or sentences. At the end of each month, a summary of the material covered is to be prepared and shared on the platform. These video lessons are available online (World Abaza Congress, n.d.).

The educational material was developed by Jonty Yamisha, a representative of the Circassian diaspora from the USA, who has been designing language programs for many years. Yamisha has launched the Optilingo<sup>11</sup> mobile application for teaching 20 languages, including Kabardinian. For this project, he generously provided a free database of over 3,500 commonly used words and phrases in English, covering 95% of everyday expressions.

The first video lesson was posted on June 1, 2020 and has been viewed 2,239 times. The lesson was also uploaded to YouTube, where it accumulated 376 views over four years with the comment section being disabled. On May 17, 2021, when the final lesson was published, a total of 140 video lessons had been released, with the final lesson achieving 6,481 views. Each lesson lasts no more than 50 seconds and features a brief description of the phrases being taught. These lessons are tailored for native speakers of English, Russian, Turkish, and Arabic.

The introduction of Abaza language video lessons has significantly increased interest in learning the language. Despite relatively modest YouTube viewership, the concise and informative format of the lessons has enabled a wider audience to engage with the rich culture of the Abaza people. Each short video provides an efficient way to learn basic phrases and expressions, making the process particularly valuable for language learners.

The teaching methodology prioritizes simplicity, focusing on commonly used vocabulary and phrases, which facilitates a straightforward language acquisition process. By limiting each lesson to five key expressions, learners are able to concentrate on the material and internalize it effectively. Additionally, the absence of comment sections ensures a distraction-free learning environment.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.optilingo.com>

Through its video lessons, the Alashara organization continues to make significant contributions to the preservation and popularization of the Abaza language. These lessons have become a vital resource for individuals interested in exploring this unique linguistic heritage. By targeting a diverse audience of speakers from various linguistic backgrounds, the initiative expands the reach of Abaza culture and fosters its recognition on an international scale.

The community also declares its intention to revive the idea of shared identity of the untied Abaza people. In their offline interviews, the Abaza manifest a clear understanding of their identity, regardless of the fluency in their native language or place of residence. While recognizing their bond with the Abkhazians as a related ethnic group, the Abaza maintain a strong sense of their own distinct ethnic identity and the unique characteristics that define their people.

### ***Abaza Inform | Murat Knukhov***

The Instagram community was created by Murat Knukhov in December 2018 (Abaza Inform | Murat Knukhov, n.d.-a). The page functions as a blog, providing both educational and news-related content. The community's profile description states "The United People of Abaza," also using the name of the nation in the local languages. As of 2024, the number of subscribers is 23,800 people. Together with his family, Murat Knukhov has returned to Abkhazia, repatriating from the Karachay-Cherkess Republic. In the Repatriation Diary section of his Instagram blog, the author shares insights into life in Abkhazia, guiding subscribers through the nuances of adapting to the local culture. Following the War in Abkhazia (1992–1993), the idea of repatriation was gaining support among the Abaza people, especially for the Ashkhar subgroup. The Abaza, along with other ethnic groups of the North Caucasus, supported the Abkhaz people during the war. The Repatriation Diary aims to promote migration to Abkhazia among the Abaza, thus living among related ethnic groups helps to avoid potential assimilation concerns.

The analysis of the related Telegram channel suggests that the community also aims to bring together two ethnic groups (Abaza Inform | Murat Knukhov, n.d.-b). The channel features posts with poems and songs in both the Abaza and Abkhaz languages, as well as popular pop hits. In most of his videos, Murat Knukhov addresses the viewers as united people of Abaza, never distinguishing between the Abkhaz and Abaza cultures. Another section on the channel named "Did You Know It?" explores the legends, folklore, and traditional culture of both peoples. The channel also features educational content, such as interviews with specialists in Caucasian studies, historians, anthropologists, and politicians. The content of the community focuses primarily on ethnic-related topics, targeting an Abkhaz-Abaza audience. The subscribers learn about historical facts, traditions, and religious practices of both ethnic groups. Through the channel, the author seeks to highlight the unified ethnocultural space of the Abaza people.

The analyzed blog serves as a bridge between the Abaza people and Abkhaz society. The channel builds a narrative that views Abkhazia as a historical homeland for the Abaza people that is currently fulfilling the role of the older sibling. Content analysis of the related TikTok channel is not feasible in 2024.

The idea of unification for the Abaza people is presented as a strategy that benefits both ethnic groups. Migration of the Abaza to Abkhazia offers a potential solution to the demographic decline experienced over the last two centuries that was fueled by the Caucasian War, the Russian Revolution, and the collapse of the Soviet Union, resulting in mass migration, political repression, and wars. The idea of the Abaza repatriation received a positive response in the Abkhaz society. It is currently difficult to estimate the popularity of this cultural preservation strategy among the Abaza people. No opinion polls or studies have been conducted within the Abaza community to date.

### ***Istanbul Abkhaz Kültür Derneği***

Similar to other ethnic minorities living abroad, the Abkhaz and Abaza people established cultural centers in Türkiye, known as derneks. The Abkhaz and Abaza associations, along with other Caucasian derneks, have made it their mission to preserve traditional culture and their native languages. Aiming to broaden interactions between the dernek and the Abkhaz and Abaza communities, the Abkhaz Cultural Center in Istanbul established an online community on Facebook, a popular social network platform that can provide new opportunities for self-expression (Istanbul Abkhaz Kültür Derneği, n.d.). The Facebook community, established on July 26, 2012, has grown to 6,300 members. The online group surpasses the offline dernek community in Istanbul in size. The members of the Facebook group are not only Abkhaz, Abazins, Circassians, and Ossetians from Istanbul but also members from other online communities around the world, including Abkhazia. This expands the reach of communication, engaging a wider audience.

When examining the digital platforms of the diaspora community in Istanbul, it becomes apparent that there is a deliberate strategy to archive traditional practices by sharing images and videos of offline events. This common approach, adopted by many Caucasian derneks, includes weekly folk dance classes, learning the native language, and regular monthly meetings. The members of the dernek aim to foster interest in their cultural heritage among younger generations by bringing traditional Abkhaz cultural events online.

One of the essential attributes of the traditional Abkhaz society is Apsuara, the moral and ethical code of the Abkhaz people. The code regulates nearly all aspects of life, including traditional beliefs, which remain central to the Abkhaz identity today. The Abaza people share a similar moral and ethical code, known as Abazara. However, the Abkhaz and Abaza people in Türkiye predominantly profess Islam, which contradicts a common practice of performing traditional rituals, especially in urban settings. One example is prayers involving animal sacrifice. It is important to mention that although several Abazins villages can be found in Türkiye, a leading role in the online sphere and the urban environment is taken by the Abkhaz people, as they outnumber the Abaza. However, these conclusions are limited to urban environments and online communities only.

Looking into the dernek's Facebook page offers perspective on the rituals associated with the traditional Abkhaz religion, as well as religious holidays of other

faiths. The Abkhaz community in Türkiye places great importance on demonstrating their unity with Abkhazia, emphasizing their strong connection to its traditions and heritage. They express their identity online by celebrating significant dates and traditional holidays. Such celebrations have become as a unique platform for sharing Abkhaz cultural heritage with the world.

As an illustration, one of the most important holidays in Abkhazia is Azhyrnykhua. It is celebrated on the night of January, 13–14 to mark the beginning of the Abkhaz New Year. Azhyrnykhua is an old traditional holiday that remains relevant to the present day. It is associated with the cult of smithing and iron. It has recently become a celebrated holiday in the Abkhaz cultural center in Istanbul, since about 2015. The celebration, held on January 14<sup>th</sup> at the center, features traditional cuisine, folk dances, ethnic musical instruments, and Abkhaz folk songs. In 2019, the members of the center made a collective decision to include the traditional prayer service prior to the festive meal. While reconstructing the prayer service, the Abkhaz diaspora aimed to closely follow authentic tradition, adhering to the fullest extent of their abilities (Ayba, 2023).

According to the established tradition, the prayer service is held in the forge. As far as the sacred forge Azhyra is not available for them, the members create an improvised altar. The objects placed there possess a sacred meaning and are associated with smithery. Among the main items on the altar are an anvil, a hammer, tongs, a knife, a dagger, horse equipment, a sheepskin hat papakha, a bottle of red wine, a wine glass, a raw rooster carcass, and four candles. A chosen senior man from the community, who is considered suitable for the role, leads the prayer as an allocated priest. Before the prayer, the organizers talk about the holiday of Azhyrnykhua, its history and significance for the people in Abkhazia. Afterward, they invite the priest, presenting him with the heart and liver of a bull skewered on a branch, along with two loaves of bread. Then he says a prayer in the Abkhaz language. The entire ceremony was live-streamed on the community's Facebook page. The video has attracted over 10,600 views over the past four years, and the comments to it reveal some important viewpoints. The ceremony produced mixed reactions. While most comments are complimentary, offering standard greetings and congratulations, some show a contrasting response. One commentator suggests that the priest's words are empty and meaningless. Elaborating on this thought, the commentator states that an individual's freedom and worth in the eyes of Allah lies in living in accordance with Islam. Therefore, foolish words, games, and festivities will do nothing for the individual. The new generation, the commentator laments, is moving away from religion and Islam.

Among the Abkhaz diaspora in Türkiye, we can observe a confrontation between those who uphold classical Islamic principles and those who view traditional beliefs as an essential component of their ethnic identity. Despite online criticism and negative feedback, as well as internal conflicts, the Istanbul dernek community remains committed to the annual tradition, choosing to display it exclusively through photos on their Facebook account. The Abkhaz diaspora in Türkiye places importance on maintaining connections with the historical homeland and expressing their cultural identity and commitment to Abkhaz traditions. The analysis of social media posts

from Abkhaz and Abaza communities in Türkiye reveals a confrontation between classical Islamic principles and traditional beliefs as an essential component of the ethnic culture of both peoples. The Abkhaz and Abaza people abroad often refer to themselves as Abaza, showing the connection to their historical roots.

## Conclusion

Currently, the most popular social network for representing the traditional culture of the Abkhaz and Abaza in the Russian-speaking segment of cyberspace is Instagram, despite its status as a banned social network in the Russian Federation. Abroad, Facebook traditionally holds the leading position. This platform is actively used by all Caucasus-originating minorities living outside their homelands to represent their identities.

Telegram remains an underutilized tool for effectively showcasing traditional culture or fostering communication between transcontinental diasporas. While Instagram and Facebook differ significantly in their interfaces, they equally serve the general demand for visual representation. For Abkhaz and Abaza communities abroad, it is essential to demonstrate their unity with their historical homeland—their sense of belonging and inseparability from traditions—through the photo and video documentation of traditional celebrations and their online display. In doing so, they assert that they remain an integral part of their people, despite living beyond their historical homeland. It is important for them to observe and practice the same religious traditions that are honored and respected “at home”.

The entire traditional culture of the Abkhaz and Abaza is deeply infused with a spiritual dimension, rooted in traditional beliefs—one of the key markers of their self-awareness. For the Abaza, who are an Indigenous small-numbered people, the photo and video documentation of reconstructed rituals serves as a means of promoting traditional culture. This is particularly significant given that, during the period of mass forced migration, much of their traditional calendar rites, oral folklore, and life-cycle rituals were almost entirely lost.

Analyzing social media posts from both foreign and Russian communities that depict religious practices in cyber communities reveals a clear tension between classical Islam and traditional beliefs within the Turkish Abkhaz and Abazian societies, as well as among Abaza living in Russia. These traditional beliefs remain an integral part of the ethnic culture of both peoples.

The Abaza minority, both abroad and in Russia, utilize identical digital tools provided by cyberspace, with the primary goal of preserving and promoting the ethical and philosophical doctrine of Apsuara/Abazara. Examining the content presented and the comments under these posts in foreign social media networks gives the impression of a blurred ethnic identity. Over two centuries of living outside their historical homeland have inevitably left a mark on the self-awareness of the Abaza people. There is a noticeable dominance of Abkhaz identity, despite the fact that the communities are ethnically mixed and have historically interacted closely. However, the numerical advantage of the Abkhaz has led to a degree of assimilation within the

minority groups themselves. Increasingly, Abkhaz and Abaza communities abroad identify as a single people—Abaza. A similar narrative is observed in the Russian online Abaza community, where there is an attempt to revitalize the idea of a unified Abaza people. The term Abaza is becoming firmly embedded in the vocabulary of online community members.

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