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CIRCASSIAN RE-IMMIGRATION TO THE CAUCASUS

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The Circassians, people of the northwestern Caucasus, have been in a state of Diaspora ever since the Russians forced their migration to the Ottoman Empire in the second half of the last century. Today, besides the Caucasus, the Circassians live mainly in Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Germany and the United States. Over the last few years, a Circassian national movement is crystallizing and a few thousand Circassians have already re-emigrated to the Caucasus.

This study,¹ which is based on anthropological field work in the Galilee between 1990-1994² and on field trips to Northern Caucasus in 1990 and 1993, deals with questions concerning the re-emigration of the Circassians to their homeland up to the beginning of 1994. This chapter will examine this process and the changing attitude of the Israeli Circassians towards their relations with their homeland, namely, the transformation from an aspiration and vision of returning to their homeland sometime in the future, to a claim that the relation of the Circassians to the Caucasus and their brothers who live there should be like the connection between the American Jews and the State of Israel. In other words, the chapter examines the definition of a community in exile who are in

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² In 1990 I lived about three months in the village. In the years following, I stayed a few weeks every year in the villages, and kept an on-going connection with the community.

the process of re-defining a more complicated definition of Diaspora-Center connections. This new definition influences group identity and patterns of accommodation in Israel.

The Circassian case contributes to the comparative study and understanding of 'Diaspora populations'³ and focuses on the unique pattern of social interaction and accommodation of a non-Jewish and non-Arab group in Israel.

Though they describe themselves as Adyge, the term Circassian (Hebrew: *Cherkessim*; Arabic: *sahrkes*) is used in this paper because of its familiarity in the Middle East. Likewise, the term re-emigration, though not an exact expression, is used to refer to 'immigrating back' as a people, which has a similar connotation in the Hebrew expression *Shivat Zion* ('returning to Zion') or *Aliya* ('going up').⁴

The Circassians-Background⁵

The Circassians originally come from Northwest Caucasus. They speak Adyge or Circassian, a language of the Caucasus that assumed written form only in the last century⁶. These ancient people are probably indigenous to the Caucasus. They shared Pagan and then Christian beliefs, but today most of the Circassians are Muslims. In any case, religious influence upon their collective identity both in the past and in the present has been limited and superficial (Spencer 1838; Traho 1991). The Islamization of the Circassians is a subject not studied carefully yet. It seems that the Islamization, during the 17-19th centuries, had been connected to the struggle with Christian Russia. Islam penetrated from the Ottoman Empire with the help of the khan's (Rulers) of Crimea. Another Islamic influence came from the Sufi orders that were active in east Caucasus,

³ 'Diaspora populations' such as Armenians, Tibetans, Palestinians and Jews.

⁴ This connotation do not only reflect my own way of thinking, as an Israeli anthropologist, but it also reflects, as we shall see, the world of connotations of the Israeli Circassians. In addition, it also reflects "wishful thinking" by some activists of the Circassian national movement. This was manifested not only in some conversations with me, but also in some speeches in the Circassian World Congress.

⁵ Traho (1991) gives a good survey of Circassian history. (The article is a new English translation to a work first published in Russian in 1950). General background can also be found in the entry "Cherkes" in the Encyclopedia of Islam (1982).

⁶ At first, attempts were made to adopt the Arabic alphabet in 1897, then the Latin alphabet in 1919 and, only afterwards, the Cyrillic alphabet, that has been in use since 1938.

such as the *Nakhshebendia*. Some Circassians became Muslims only during their mass migration, on the ships taking them to the other side of the black sea.

The important feature of their identity lies in the Circassian cultural system that crystallized long before their Islamization, namely, the *Adyge habza*, a Circassian system of laws, rules, etiquettes, and ethos (cf. Ozbek 1982). In short, the *habza* provided the rules of behaviors and morals that are handed down in other societies through religion.

Organized into tribes, the Circassians never had a state; but all Circassians identify themselves as *Adyge*. During the Russian invasion of the Caucasus in the 19th century, the Circassians fought under one flag and aligned with Shamil and the struggle of the peoples of east Caucasus(Traho1991; Uner Turgey 1991). After a long and bitter struggle, the Russian army took over the Circassian lands (Henze1986). Many Circassians, and some other peoples, such as Chechens, emigrated, or forcefully transferred to Turkey and other parts of the Middle East. While some Ottoman sources talk of 600,000 migrants (Encyclopedia of Islam 1982), modern scholars such as Karpat (1990) and Uner Turgey (1991) argue that between 1.5 to 2 million people were transferred. The number of victims of the war and arduous journey outside the Caucasus is unknown. According to the Circassians, the number is enormous; either way, it is clear that thousands died from hunger and shipwreck in the Black Sea.

The cause for the mass migration is still an open historical question. The marginality of the Caucasus in the eyes of western scholars and the ideological approach of Soviet research may be the reason the study of this event is only just beginning⁷. From the available data it seems that we should consider a combination of factors. Fear of the freedom fighters to live under occupation, the Russian settlement policy⁸, Islamic religious ideology and the Ottoman interest in absorbing the Circassians as a loyal element in their army all contributed to this mass exodus. The Ottomans settled the

⁷ The major influences of this migration upon the Ottoman empire and on the emergence of modern Turkey are widely discussed in Karpat(1987, pp.131-153).

⁸ As a continuation of their colonization, the Russians, particularly the Cossacks, started to push the Circassians southward and eastward as early as the 17th century. In the 19th century, after a long war, this probably became a policy of forced transfer of the Circassians, who were the last to surrender, long after the defeat of their ally Shamil's army.

Circassians near the borders and other unstable areas of their Empire⁹. This was the reason for their presence on either side of the Syrian Arabian rift valley, where local Bedouins chiefs did not obey the central Ottoman Government (Lewis 1985). They were the first founders of the town to be built in the relics of Hellenistic Philadelphia, today known as Amman. They constitute the town of Kuneitra, several villages in the Golan heights, and two flourishing villages in the Galil, established by a few small groups that had arrived in Israel, or Ottoman Palestine in the late 1870s, a few years before the first Jewish- Zionist **aliya** (immigration) to the land of Israel.

According to contemporary Circassian sources¹⁰, there are approximately 3-5 million Circassians in the world and in a number of states one can find organized Circassian communities. Even though most of them live in Turkey, there are no reliable statistics, because of the Turkization policy¹¹. This policy also threatened their separate identity. There are about 40,000 in Jordan¹², a flourishing community that plays an important role in the Hashemite Kingdom. Approximately 75,000 live in Syria. As a result of secondary migration, there are Circassian communities in the United States, Holland, Germany and other western countries. In Germany, for example there are at least 30,000 Circassians. Due to different degrees of assimilation, today many of these communities are facing the problems of losing their language and culture. Yet compared to other groups, the Circassians have a greater tendency to maintain their separate identity.¹³

The descendants of the minority who did not leave the Caucasus constitute today approximately 600,000 people living mainly in the three autonomous republics: 125,000 in the Adyge autonomous republic; 52,000 in Karachay Cherkess; and 391,000 in

⁹ Some of these immigrants spent the early years in the Balkan, where they fought the Balkan wars on behalf of the Ottomans. After the 1878 Treaty of Berlin, many were settled in Turkey, mainly in the Anatolian heights, while other groups were transferred to the south and east areas of the Ottoman Empire.

¹⁰ Based on information I was given by different officials during the second Circassian World Congress held in Maikop, the Autonomic Republic of Adyge, in North Caucasus (Bram, 1994, pp.127-36). Hatukay & Achmus (1991, p.290) give the same figures, while Gerchad gives an estimate of 4.5 million (1993, p.52), which is probably too high an estimate.

¹¹ In August 1994, I heard that the latest estimate in Turkey was of about 2 million who consider themselves "Cherkes", less than a million who can speak the language, and 5-7 million people of Cherkes origin.

¹² Some Jordanian Circassians gave me much higher figures.

¹³ Especially in the villages, Circassians tend to preserve what Barth (1978) called social boundaries, based on ethnic identity.

Kabardino Balkar. This was an outcome of the Stalinist system that divided the Caucasus in order to enforce Russian rule and combined the Circassians with separate ethnic groups like the Balkars. Only in Kabardino Balkar the Kabardinians, one of the Circassians tribes, constitutes a substantial majority.

Circassians as a Diaspora People

Circassians all over the world refer to the Caucasus wars, and especially to the forced migration, as the "Circassian Disaster", "Tragedy", and sometimes even "the Circassian Holocaust"¹⁴. The consequences of the war and the state of Diaspora since then cause Israeli Circassians, as well as Circassians in the Caucasus elsewhere, to make a comparison between the situation of Jews and Circassians. There are many stories, poems and songs about the victims of the war, the emigration itself and the state of exile. Rituals and memorial days are devoted to these events.

A comparison between these expressions and better known Jewish expressions of exile can be made. J.Z. Smith, in his analysis of Jewish exile stated: "The category of exile is not an exclusively Jewish one" (1978, p.119). Smith quotes a text, recorded by Trilles from the Gabon pygmies after they had to leave their ancestral land:

The night is black, the sky is blotted out, We have left the village of our fathers.
The maker is angry with us....He is no longer the host seated with us at our fire
(Trilles 1932, p.503, cited in Smith 1978).

According to Smith:

...this last phrase... sums up best what has been for the Jew his experience of exile... To be exiled is to be cut off from land, from history, from the blessing, from the ancestors, from life...from the deity (ibid, p. 120).

In a similar way, the state of exile and Diaspora play an important role in the collective identity of Circassians. A Circassian proverb says: "The one who lose his homeland loses everything" (Hatokay and Achmos 1991); other proverbs are: "Caucasus, My

¹⁴ This term was used especially by a few Israeli-Circassian activists.

Homeland, I will never forget you”; or, “ I’ d rather lose my eyes than forget you” .

These and similar other statements are not only a romantic longing or nostalgia for the Circassians, they reflect the existential condition of the individual in the Circassian community. This condition is the key to understanding later developments.

Current Developments and Re-Emigration

Resurgence of ethnic and national identity in the world and the collapse of the former Soviet Union brought about a process of crystallization of a modern national movement and the foundation of the Circassian World Congress. The Congress, where different Circassian communities are represented, held meetings in 1991 and in 1993. Its main goals are to foster more autonomy for the Circassian autonomous areas, to promote Adyge language and culture and to support the motherland (Bram 1994). These activities had some influence on both the process of turning the autonomous region of Adigea to an autonomous republic, and the construction of a new national curriculum that would be largely conducted in Adigea language (Bridges 1995).

Already in 1980s the Circassian in the Caucasus had institutionalized the connection with the Diaspora communities. An office called *Rodina* (Motherland in Russian) was established to develop contacts with the Circassians elsewhere. Apparently the Soviets supported and even promoted this office as means of gaining another channel of influence on Middle Eastern countries such as Jordan and Syria. The office offered assistance to students to study in the Caucasus and encouraged cultural relations between the various Circassian communities. However, during a visit to the Caucasus in 1990 I was informed that when a group of Circassians from Syria wanted to re-emigrate to the Caucasus they appealed to Prime Minister Gorbachov, but even this did not change the refusal of the Soviet as well as of the Syrian governments.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union changed the situation. The Russians had major problems in some autonomic republics such as Chechenia and Tatarstan that wanted to leave the Russian Federation and declare independence, like other Central Asian Socialist Republics. This might be one of the reasons why the Russians, since 1991,

conceded to some of the demands of Circassian National Activist in the Caucasus, and agreed to constitute a law that deals with the rights of the newcomers. The existence of the 'Rodina' office, which now started to function in supporting Circassian new immigrants became a two-edged sword for the Russians, who for over a century demographically russified the North Caucasus. The Circassian nationalists in Kabardino Balkarya who were more powerful and also more in opposition to the local government also established their own organization to support re-migration. This organization became connected with the Circassian World Congress.

The question of the legal status of the new immigrant is not in the hands of the local governments of the autonomous areas, but is the responsibility of the central Russian federation. According to the new law, the Russian emigration office, *ovir*, is empowered to grant a two-year temporary passport to the new immigrants. After this period they can become full citizens. During these two years, they enjoy a number of financial benefits: they can obtain special work, buy houses, purchase properties [a favor not granted to other foreigners], and enjoy most of the rights and duties of citizens. During this time they can go out of the country a few times and while coming and going they do not have to pay for visas or other taxes. These arrangements, by the way, made it possible to issue Russian passports to some Israeli Circassians, who do not plan to immigrate but want to be citizens and obtain a second passport. The newcomers receive financial help both from the federation and from the local governments and the Circassian World Congress in the form of tax discounts and other measures that mitigate their hardships. Nevertheless, there are serious financial problems in the implementation of the benefits.

In Caucasus during the summer of 1993, I learned that about 3,000 to 4,000 people already registered for re-emigration, and obtained a two-year temporary passport. 3,000 or more were in different stages of settling in Kabardino Balkar, most of them in Nalchik. About one thousand were in a process of settling in Maikop, the capital of the Adyge autonomous republic of Karachai Cherkess. One should not underestimate the importance of these numbers, since less than this number of Jews immigrated to the Land of Israel during the early years of the first *aliya* in 1882 (and eventually the Stae

of Israel was declared in 1948). When the data for this study was collected in north Caucasus in 1993, it seemed that Circassians re-emigration had a potential to continue. However, it was clearly too early to say whether this re-emigration marked the beginning of a larger process, or the first, as well as last *aliya*, to the Caucasus. The continuing war in Chechnia changed the situation. Although the battles were taking place farther east from the Adyge areas discussed here, the whole of northern Caucasus was affected. This also affected re-emigration of the Adyge to the northern Caucasus; instead, there began waves of in-land immigration from Chechnia to the western parts like Kabardino-Balkar¹⁵. Bearing all this in mind, in the long run, there could be new directions of development for the Adyge national movement, depending on the economic situation in Russia and the former Soviet Union (Krag and Frunch 1994).

Altogether, we are referring to only small amount of immigrants, but enough to cause changes and influences in the area. The Cossacks, for example, are worried that this population movement will continue. This was one of the factors that accentuated the renewal of their semi-organized militia or gangs. Still the atmosphere is relative peaceful and congenial for the successful absorption of Circassians and others. The tribal origin and dialect of the new immigrants influence their choice of destination: Circassians, who belong to the Kabartay tribe (Kabardinians) and speak the Kabardinian dialect, settle in Kabardino-Balbar. Circassians from west-Adige tribes, such as Abzach and Shapsur, who speak these dialects, settle in Adigea.

At this stage, information about the attitude of the local Circassians residents towards the immigrants is limited. It appears that they are integrated in the local society, although some differences in customs and social behavior are salient. In a comparative context, it is interesting to see what vocabulary is used to describe the newcomers. Thus, in Israel new immigrants are usually referred to by their country or area of origin (“Russians”, “South Americans” etc.), while in Armenia all immigrants are

¹⁵ At the time of publication, it is clear that the events in Chechniya influence the attempt of re-emigration, and many people who want to check the possibility of re-emigration delay it until more peaceful days. Many people who already obtained a Russian passport still keep it but do not formally immigrate, although many have bought houses in their old-new homeland.

known as *Achpar* (brothers)¹⁶. My impression is that in many cases the Circassian newcomers are called by their country of birth (“Turk”, “Jordanian” etc.), as in Israel¹⁷. Most of the immigrants come from Turkey and the Middle East, fewer from the United States and only a few from other western communities. Although exact numbers are unavailable, it seems that immigrants come from Turkey and Syria, where Circassians are not completely free to articulate their national identity, and in many cases their economic situation is not better. Another very interesting group is the refugees or the displaced persons from the big Circassian population of the Golan Heights who settled in the Damascus area and in the United States after the June 1967 war. This, however, needs a separate discussion.

The role of the Israeli Circassians

The 3,000-odd Circassians in Israel reside mainly in two villages (population 2,200 and 900). As most of the Arabs in Israel, they are Sunni Muslims but describe themselves as a distinct community and are recognized as such¹⁸. The villages maintain good relations with the nearby Jewish villages and towns, as well as with neighboring Arabs (Achmos and Hattokay 1991, p.362). Circassian men serve in the army, so structurally their position in Israel is similar to that of the Israeli Druze.

The Israeli Circassians, although small and isolated, have succeeded in preserving their culture and identity more than any other Diaspora Circassian community. This has

¹⁶ Prof. K. Lerner, department of Indian, Iranian and Armenian Studies, the Hebrew University, personal communication 14.8.94.

¹⁷ One explanation, which requires further study, is that in both cases (but less in the Adyge), influence of the country of birth and its culture on social behavior, appearance and cultural patterns are salient. It seems to be different in the Armenian case, where the distinction is mainly between locals and all other immigrants who speak another dialect, and not differences caused by the influence of the "host" country. This hypothesis requires more evidence which is not available today.

¹⁸ Shtendel (1973, pp.20-44) give a short general survey of Israeli Circassians. Another survey, dedicated to Circassians in general but which also deals with the Israeli villages is Gerchad (1993), a Kfar Kama inhabitant. Hattokay and Achmos (1991, pp. 323-431), also from Kfar Kama gives a more detailed description of the two villages. A first anthropological study of this community is now being written by the author of this essay.

created a situation in which the preservation of ethno-national and cultural identity have come to be identified with the preservation of the village community.

Although the existential state of exile is common to all Circassians, there are differences in the degree of its manifestation. For Israeli Circassians, this state is the major characteristic of the community and of almost every individual, whose identity is meaningful only insofar as he/she is a member of the larger community. A comparison with Jordanian Circassians is useful in order to stress the Israeli community's characteristics. In Jordan, more than in any other communities, the Circassian also have an important civil identity. In the Hashemite Kingdom, neither the Bedouins, nor the Palestinians, have adopted a civil Jordanian Hashemite identity to the degree that the Circassians have.¹⁹ The Circassians have been allies of the Hashemite rulers ever since they came from Hijaz to Trans-Jordan and established their kingdom with the support of the British. The Circassians have emerged as the most loyal group to the Hashemite court²⁰. Thus, the Jordanian Circassians share a duality between a sense of belonging to their country, and a feeling towards their Caucasian Identity and the Caucasus that constitutes their cultural identity ²¹. Their situation, therefore constitute a different model of acculturation. Many Jordanian Circassians, for example, speak mainly Arabic, and hardly speak the Adyge language. On the other hand, the Adyge habza is important.

The situation of the Circassians in the Jewish state is different. Their identity is a fascinating example of what some call "primordial identity". It is hard to differentiate between their national and cultural identity. The civic as well as religious identities are clearly secondary to and dependent upon their ethno-national identity (Bram 1996).

Israeli Circassians see themselves as full and loyal Israeli citizens, but this is more as a result of a relation of exchange between them and the state, which gives them an

¹⁹ Palestinians have a strong Palestinian identity; as for the Bedouins, the major segment support the king, but tribal identity is primary, and the federations of tribes is very important in Jordanian politics.

²⁰ This analysis is based on several meetings and conversations with Jordanian Circassians (mostly in the Caucasus). I also want to thank Dr. Y. Zilberman and Dr. A. Selah from the Hebrew University for their remarks on this issue.

²¹ Thus, from a sociological point of view, the situation of Jordanian Circassian is more similar to the situation of American Jews. But our primary concern here is with the comparison that the Israeli Circassians themselves make and not with a comparison from an outsider sociological point of view.

opportunity to survive as a distinguished group. Their army service does not, for example, create any tension or conflict with their national identity or their special religious affiliation. The familiar Circassian position runs like this: " We are loyal to Israel, and Circassians in Syria, for example, have to be loyal to the country in which they live. Loyalty is a major obligation, as well as value in the *Adyge habza*... As for the conflict between Jews and Arabs, this is a conflict between Semitic cousins and does not relate to us, the people of the European side of the Caucasus."

For Israeli Circassians, the relationship with the Jewish society and their civil identity are influenced by a strong feeling of partnership in a similar destiny with Jews. The claim and the connection of Jews towards their land are understood in terms of the Circassian connection to their country. Together with the high standard of accommodation for this group in Israel, this can explain why, when a new model of relation towards the homeland is necessary, the situation of the American Jewry emerges as a favorite theme. Common Jewish and Zionist vocabulary become part of the Israeli Circassian lexicon. In the same way, I heard Circassians refer to the difference between the two Circassian villages as differences between *sepharadim* and *ashkenazim* ("Oriental" and "European" Jews). The internalization of Zionist discourse in a Circassian version is an interesting example of partial acculturation. Their connection to the Caucasus- the home land behind the erstwhile iron-curtain and a wish to return, played an important and decisive role in the Israeli Circassian values and identity²². Israel is probably the only state where the Circassian language and heritage are studied in the village schools.²³

With the changes in the former Soviet Union and the renewal of diplomatic relations Moscow in 1991, the Israeli Circassians, for the first time in more than

²² Still over the years, the Circassians' ability to maintain their culture and its influence upon the socialization process has gradually weakened. The Circassian homeland has become a distant and vague notion and the connections with various Circassian cultural centers are not sufficient. The influence of Western culture and media with its Israeli variation and Islamic revivalism (although in a very limited way), begun to threaten the traditional value system (Bram 1993) . The new connection with the Caucasus came just on time for the preservation of a unique cultural and national identity, although the over-all importance of the notion of the homeland and the sense of national identity always remain strong and central among Israeli Circassians.

²³ Stern (1989) gives a sociolinguistic description of the Israeli-Circassian pupils of the smaller village primary school.

120 years, have a real possibility of establishing contacts with their motherland. In the summer of 1990, the first delegation from Israel visited the Caucasus and when a well-known Circassian writer²⁴ visited Israel later that year, he received an enthusiastic welcome. Initial reactions were of hope and happiness and many discussed the possibility of re-migration. Reacting to the prevailing mood, a resident of a nearby Jewish *moshav* (agricultural settlement) complained bitterly about the Circassians deserting Israel and claimed, incorrectly of course, that as many as seven families were planning to re-emigrate to the Caucasus. Since the summer of 1991, a vast number of Israeli Circassians visited the Caucasus and many sponsored reciprocal visits to Israel. As a result of these visits, the Israeli Circassian became more aware of the harsh political, demographic and economic situation in the Caucasus, and disappointment set in. The contradiction between myth and reality and gaps between expectations and the present situation in the Caucasus became apparent in three key areas: the economic situation and standard of living; the political and demographic situation; and the religious state of the Israeli community.

Economic Situation

The comparatively poor standard of living and the bad economic situation are the features which most disappointed the first visitors to the Caucasus. The image of the homeland was always one of a rich country where the Adyges live in prosperity. Relying on terms borrowed from agriculture and pastoral culture, the country was perceived as one endowed with prosperity, fertility and richness. Israeli Circassian visitors to the Caucasus could not ignore the contradiction, especially while discussing the option of re-emigration. Thus the visitors presented an ambivalent picture of the homeland. They found a land no less attractive than what they heard in their childhood, for the north Caucasus slopes and valleys is not only a land of milk and honey, but also a very fertile with rich water sources flowing out of thousands clear springs and rivers (Hattokay and Achmos 1991, pp.253-254). It is also a country rich in minerals and huge oil reserves. This wealth hardly reflects the economic situation of the people who

²⁴ A. Hadar'atel from Maikop, who collected the *Nart* epic stories.

reel under economic chaos, huge inflation and political instability. Moreover, the poor systems of transportation, communication and other features of modernity that affect the standard of living in the cities, made an unfavorable comparison to their lives in Israel. If one adds the havoc at local airports and the horrible and useless bureaucracy in general, it is easier to understand why some of the Israeli visitors heaved a sigh of relief upon returning to Ben Gurion airport in Israel. A few days later, however, most of them were relating enthusiastically about the excitement of meeting their brothers in the homeland.

During the last 25 years the prosperous economic situation of the Israeli villages became a symbol of the success of the community in preserving itself, and a means of justifying its political and social characteristics, including its alliance with the Jews. Usually people made a comparison with other Diaspora Circassian communities, underscoring their comparatively good situation. This background added another dimension to the contrast with the economic situation in the Caucasus and became a major element in adopting a new model towards the homeland.

Political & Demographic Situation

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the creation of new independence republics raised hopes for a political change in the Circassian areas among many Israeli Circassians who were not very familiar with the situation in the Caucasus. The Circassians in the Caucasus adopted a less romantic approach. In the beginning, developments looked positive: the Adyge autonomic region gained a status of autonomic republic, and in 1991 the first Circassian International congress was held in Nalchik, the capital of the Kabardino-Balkar autonomic republic (Bram 1994). The overall picture is much more complicated, if not pessimistic.

The image of the homeland is stronger than demography. For Israeli Circassians, this image was of a country that is completely identified with nation- an area where Adyge people live, and where Adyge language is spoken. The name - "The Adyge Autonomic area" helped create this image, which was stronger than any demographic data that was probably available. It was, therefore, difficult for these people to internalize that Circassians today are a minority in their own country especially in the Adyge

autonomous region, the original area where both the *Shapsur'* and *Abzakh* tribes, to which most of Israeli Circassians belong, reside. Even in the Kabardino-Balkar autonomous region, although Circassians are the biggest ethnic group, they constitute only 40%-50% of the population. Disappointment from the status of the Adyge language was even bigger. It was hard for Israeli Circassians to see that even in villages with no Russian population almost everything is handled in Russian. These conditions did not only affect the reaction of the Israeli Circassians, but also made it difficult to apply new programs for education and language in the autonomous republic of Adyge (Bridges 1995).

This demographic situation makes it hard to expect independence, and Israeli Circassians again adopted an ambivalent position. While being proud of the symbolic status of the republic, they highly value their personal situation as well as their position as a minority in more democratic Israel. The political instability in Russia during the last four years, the rise of crimes and "Mafia" activities and the war in the neighboring Abkhazia, accentuate the gap between aspiration and reality.

Religion

The Circassians in the Caucasus underwent an intensive process of secularization. In addition to the absence of any mosques, there is a strong norm of consuming alcoholic drinks and a whole set of social customs and rituals derived from the pre-Islamic Circassian culture.

The situation in Israel is different and religion enjoys an eminent position in the villages and phenomena contrary to Islamic morals are absent²⁵.

In the Caucasus there was a deep competition among various clans. This was not possible in their new and isolated situation in the Galilee. The religious rituals depressed the inner competition and provided cohesion to the community.

²⁵ Dr. Ozbek's works (1982) on Circassian traditions show that Circassians in Turkey and Syria frequently gave precedence to *Adyge habza*, the Circassian code, over the Koranic laws.

My observation in the Caucasus show an almost total absence of an Islamic way of life. On the other hand, *habza* is important and there are still social customs and rituals derived from pre-Islamic Circassian culture. In Israel, on the contrary, a system of social norms developed which has a greater degree of complementarity between *habza* and Islamic norms.

Paradoxically, the relation to Islam serves as a mechanism that creates inner cohesion in order to impose social boundaries with other Muslims in the area and to perpetuate endogamous marriages. The term *Umma* serves in Islam for the specific community as well as for the general community of believers. For the Circassians the Umma indicates only the local community itself and beyond the village level the identification is within the ethno-national level.

During the first Circassian National Congress, it was the representative from Israel and not from a Muslim state who had asked for the inclusion of religion in the ceremonies and demanded strengthening religious studies among the youth in the Diaspora. It is interesting that he used the word 'religion' and not Islam. Later he clarified that this was intentional, in order to prevent any possible conflict with the minority Christian Circassians. This example shows the relation between religious identity and national identity: the religious identity is sub-ordinate and secondary to the national identity. At the same time, it is combined with ethno-national identity and supports it by enforcing solidarity through Islamic communal rituals. This produces an interesting situation: Islam is not very important concerning group identity (in this sense the situation in the Caucasus is similar), but Islamic norms are very important in everyday community life (unlike the situation in the Caucasus).

The new interaction between the Circassian communities in Israel and in Caucasus, underscored the gap in the religious field. This did not prevent strengthening of the connections, but probably had some influence on the direction of these connections. Israeli Circassians did not judge their brothers as morally wrong, but at the same time, wanted to preserve their way of life, something that was not possible in the Caucasus. The gap in norms and way of life derived not only from religious differences, while being more secular, the Circassian society in the Caucasus appeared to be more conservative in many other aspects of life. Israeli Circassians are very conservative concerning sexual behavior (especially female behavior), but at the same time women have better position and more influence and power inside their families. For example, Circassian women usually do not drive in the Caucasus, while driving is normative in

the Israeli community. In many cases in Israel woman also tend to be more "religious". It can thus be understood why in many cases women oppose ideas of re-emigration²⁶. Israeli visitors to the Caucasus discovered that many aspects of national tradition and culture were at times better preserved in their own villages than in the Caucasus. At the same time, visitors from the Caucasus to Israel praised their successful preservation of identity and culture, and some even claimed that Caucasians should learn from them. This underscored the value of the Diaspora. It gave support to the development of an idea that there is a value in Diaspora life although possible to return, especially with the situation described concerning religion, economy, and political situation.

By the end of 1992, the initial euphoria died down. At that stage, a year or so after the first meaningful contact with the homeland, some started claiming that relations with the Caucasus should be like those of the American Jewry with Israel. With regard to economic condition and political influence, this comparison of course, is wishful thinking.

The emergence of a new model may be seen as a way of dealing with the dissonance between the old beliefs and new realities. Since 1993 one could notice that the Circassians moved towards crystallizing the evolving new model of a relationship between the Diaspora and homeland. This new model includes reciprocal visits of various groups including teachers, youths, dancers and sports delegations, providing financial help to people or organizations in the Caucasus applying for Russian residence passport (without of course, emigration or giving up Israeli passport), exchanging specialists in various fields and developing other kinds of relations. An Israeli Circassian is teaching Arabic and Islam in Maikop University, and Israeli Circassians appealed to the Israeli Ministry of Education to bring Caucasian teachers of the Adyge language to Israel.

The more visible outcomes of these new connections are the Circassian Cultural and National Association and the emergence of Circassian national movement. Founded as a

²⁶ In many cases the women are in charge of the house economy and therefore may be more "rational," giving priority to the economic factor.

registered body [*Amuta*] in the bigger village in 1992, the Association was connected directly to the creation of the Circassian World Congress. This kind of institution is part of an emerging Circassian civic society (Bram 1996). This development does not usurp the traditional manifestations of ethnic and specially religious identity and the Association sent religious literature to the Caucasus. In July 1993, the Association organized the Israeli-Circassian delegation to the second national Congress.

While in the beginning the formation of the Association was connected directly to the creation of the Circassian World Congress, presently its members are equally active in local issues, such as economic and cultural development, the promotion of education and tourism, and so on. These developments are similar to the activities of other Diaspora organizations, such as various Zionist organizations among American Jews. The vast majority of the Israeli Circassians population is unlikely to re-emigrate to the Caucasus, yet the aspirations and needs of Israeli Circassians to be involved in the emerging Circassian national movement and strengthening their ties with their brothers in the Caucasus, can give a new direction to the existing tendency of “accommodation-without-assimilation”.

Presently, some Israeli Circassians aspire to influence the evolving Circassian community and the process in the Caucasus. However, in accordance with their small numbers, they will only be able to influence the 'Circassian world' if they are less marginal in Israel²⁷. While accommodating, they tend to concentrate only on village life that preserves social boundaries and identity. This influences issues like employment orientation, education and cultural life. In a significant departure from this trend, for the first time the mayor of one of the Circassian villages accompanied the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin during a visit to Moscow (in the spring of 1994). During this visit the mayor met the representative of the Adyge autonomous region in Moscow, and worked out an arrangement with the Israeli Embassy to smoothe out the process of issuing Israeli visas to Circassians from the Caucasus. It is likely that in the social and

²⁷There are some similarities here to the double marginality problem of Israeli Arabs . The Israeli Arabs are afraid of being sidelined in the future both by Israel and by the emerging Palestinian entity in the West Bank and Gaza. It seems that the best way to deal with this problem is to be more influential in the country of residence (as are American Jews), and to "transfer" this influence towards the homeland.

cultural spheres, this may cause new motivation concerning education, development of cultural life and a drive for greater recognition.

Conclusion

The re-emigration of the Circassians to the Caucasus is a new phenomenon and is continuing. The successful absorption of new immigrants will depend upon the situation in the Caucasus. Political instability, economic hardships and raising crime rates limit the number of newcomers. Ideology plays an important and unique part in the re-emigration process of the Diaspora. The case of the Israeli Circassians, (and with some differences, of most Jordanian Circassians) shows that re-emigration is never a purely ideological one, but one that has certain practical and economic considerations.

However, the adoption of the American Jewry model by the Israeli Circassians does not mean giving up Circassian national identity, but rather the adaptation and modification of that ideology. The deep meaning of the comparison that the Israeli Circassians make with the American Jews does not refer only to their superior economic situation but to their aspiration to help their brothers. More than this it implies that as it is possible to be a Zionist without making *aliya*, one can be a Circassian nationalist, without an actual plan or desire of going back to the Caucasus. In short, one can be part of the homeland, without actually residing there.

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Abstract

Since their forced migration in the 19th century, the state of Diaspora is a central factor of the Circassians Collective Identity. Together with the changes in the former Soviet Union, a Circassian national movement has began to crystallized, by now a few thousand Circassians have re-emigrated to the Caucasus.

The study, based on anthropological field work in the Galilee and North Caucasus describes this process and focuses on the changing attitude of the Israeli Circassians towards their home land. With the new possibilities of connection with their mother land, the reactions were enthusiasm, and discussions of the possibility of re-migration. However, when people became familiar with the situation in the Caucasus disappointment set in. Many started to claim that relation with the Caucasus should be like those of American Jewry with Israel. A new model of relation with the Home-Land is developing today. This process can be seen as a way to deal with the disonance between of the old beliefs and values and the new situation.

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