

**TRADITIONS OF THE CAUCASIAN GARDENING
IN THE LIGHT OF A CUSTOMARY LAW OF ADYGHE**

R. Nutrikhin¹

Abstract

In article ancient traditions of gardening in the North Caucasus through a prism of usual and legal tradition of Circassians (Adyghe) are considered. The religious customs and beliefs connected with the Circassian gardens are analyzed.

Key words: Circassian gardens, North Caucasus, religious traditions, customary law.

The ancient Circassian gardens pose one of the greatest mysteries of the North Caucasus. In the vast territory once inhabited by Adyghe – right in the woods – you would come across large areas full of fruit trees – apple, pear, quince, cherry-plum, nut trees... The leading agronomists are saying now that the trees are extremely well grafted and, despite the unbelievable age, they still bear fruit. Who, and (most importantly) why cultivated the marvelous fruit plants in the woods?

After Russia took over the Caucasus many travelers visiting these areas were surprised to see the numerous ancient Adyghe gardens, fully abandoned, yet still yielding rich fruit and reflecting a high level of culture.

Countess Praskovya Uvarova, President of the Moscow Archeological Society, while on her trip around the Caucasus (1886) made a sad comment of this poor view: “In the numerous valleys you will see abandoned Circassian gardens, now gone wild”. And we are talking here not just about a couple of trees but one whole fruit empire...

The former masters of this land had their gardens spread over dozens of miles; they covered huge valleys and even mountain slopes, among virgin woods, thus making a selection Galaxy. In the spring this shined over the northern mountains of the Caucasus casting the scent of its myriads of flowers, while in the autumn it filled the land with a miraculous shower of ripe fruits.

In the XX Century already the great Academician Michurin wrote an article with a title speaking for itself: “The Circassian gardens are waiting for selectionists”. “About the amazing gorgeousness of the so-called ancient Circassian gardens I have known since long ago”, he wrote. “The wild fruit and berry bushes of Adyghea are extremely valuable for horticulturists of the Caucasus”. However, one thing is to be specified here – not just “wild ... bushes” but numerous remains of the ancient Adyghe gardens scattered all over the North Caucasus.

Another founder of the Soviet-time selection – Academician Zhukovsky, the teacher to Nikolay Vavilov, spent more than a few years studying the

¹ Nutrikhin Roman, PhD of Law, Docent of Environment, Land and Labor right of the North Caucasus Federal University, Russia.

precious heritage left after the Adyghe people and concluded that this was the ancient homeland to all the major fruits now found all over Eurasia.

Here, for instance, is what Zhukovsky wrote about how the common pear came to Europe: "The Mediterranean is not likely to hold the priority in terms of cultivating the pear. Quite the contrary, there is every evidence that it was the Caucasus that served the evolution arena for it, both wild and cultivated ... neither the great age of Greece nor its natural pear resources and experience can be ever compared with those of the Caucasus ... The Basques of the Mediterranean had known grafting before the Hellenes learnt it and they taught the Iberians. However, the Basques, deep down in their roots, may be related to the Caucasus, which explains their knowledge of grafting. It is the Caucasus that grafting originated from" [1].

A similar conclusion Academician Zhukovsky gave to apple, quince, cherry-plum, nut, plum, sloe, sweet cherry, cornel, and chestnut trees ... His conclusion expressed in a convincing fashion states that all the most common wild and domestic cultures you would come across in Eurasia originated from nowhere else but the Caucasus.

If the ancestors to the North-Caucasus highlanders could teach horticulture even the ancient Greeks then no wonder that up to the XIX Century these people had had almost the most sophisticated selection technology in the world thus gradually turning their fertile ground into one huge beautiful garden ...

The remains of the ancient Adyghe gardens still can be seen in the areas once inhabited by Circassians and related to them peoples. In Abkhazia, Adyghea, Circassia and other places around the North Caucasus there are lots with great ancient trees still bearing incredible fruit. The above-mentioned Academician Zhukovsky wrote that the old quince species "found in an old Circassian garden in the Caucasus at the Black Sea bore fruit weighing up to three kilograms each"!

How did the natives develop such a high level of unique cultivation? This could be accounted for by the Adyghe's commitment to the selection traditions of their ancestors who developed them for centuries.

The multi-ethnic Adyghe people did not just cultivate their gardens in open areas but year after year they also turned the nearest highland forests into the so-called "forest-gardens".

The Shapsugs for instance had a custom prescribing that when the spring was come every single one living in a village was to go to the woods to engraft a wild tree with a cutting from their garden. Some highlanders left hundreds of new fruit trees behind! The ethnographers in the pre-revolution Russia mentioned that in some Adyghe villages nobody would ever imagine going to the woods without taking along a fruit tree cutting.

These just like many other peculiar features of the North-Caucasus selection were described in detail by the historian Samir Hatko, the author of the two volumes of "The Circassian Gardens".

Countess Uvarova, too, praised the local gardening civilization and wrote: "Another equally admirable tradition with the highlanders is that all the elderly who could not work and perform any civic responsibility anymore were to engraft a certain number of fruit trees. And the trace of such care can still be seen, particularly on apricot trees, a type of care found in highly

civilized peoples alone, reminding of the duty that each single person has to pay to the society and the nation" [2].

What was behind the Adyghes' perseverance urging them to cultivating the endless gardens in their lands? This is all about their mythological views the tree being a key element of that. In the myths of the Caucasus all the tangible things found in the Universe, from parts of the human body to parts of our planet, are embodied in the "Tree of Life". And there is often a special toast proposed to this Tree at Abkhazian parties.

Besides, the Holy Books of the three Abrahamic faiths say that the garden is a symbol of Paradise, both Earthly and Heavenly. The Quran states: "Allah has promised the believing men and believing women gardens beneath which rivers flow, wherein they abide eternally, and pleasant dwellings in gardens of perpetual residence" (9:72). In other words, these Adyghes applying their labor for many centuries to fill their homeland with the beauty of gardens reflects the dream shared by the entire mankind – to bring back the Paradise once lost.

This explains the cult of holy groves so common all around the Caucasus. Even before Islam penetrated the area, Circassians, Abkhazs, Ubykhs and other peoples related to the Adyghes came to such groves to make sacrifice and to pray. Standing under these trees they also swore solemnly to enforce their promises.

When the Russian troops came to the North Caucasus they were surprised to see Adyghes fighting for their holy groves so fiercely. When seeing the overwhelming enemy troops they could leave their villages and retreat to the mountains, yet they never did so when it came to fighting for these precious groves. They fought, all of them, till the last drops of blood left their veins, and protected the sacred trees against desecration by the enemy.

The cult of holy groves in the Caucasus goes back to the ancient times, just like the sacred art of the Adyghes gardening. The myths of Eurasia hold it that the forefather of all farming and gardening was some divine civilizer, a hero-errant, the first king of the civilized humanity. And ages ago he brought people the knowledge of sowing bread, raising vineyards and turning wild trees into domestic and fruiting ones.

The people of Egypt called him Osiris; in Ancient Greece they called him Dionysus, while he was Bacchus to Romans. Strange as it may seem but all the ancient myths telling about this "divine founder of cultured gardening" mention the North Caucasus anyway. As Greek authors say, during his epic military march from Egypt to India, Dionysus went through the Caucasus where he founded eight cities and planted the first vineyards unveiling the secrets of agriculture to the highlanders of the Caucasus.

Even more surprising is the fact that the mythology of the North Caucasus holds a steady mention of this "divine horticulturist". The Adyghes called him very similarly to the way Egyptians did – Sozeris. Each year late December Circassians held feasts honoring him. Curious but around the same time Romans celebrated the Dionysian Mysteries while Christians nowadays celebrate Christmas on the same day, decorating the Christmas-tree, which is a Western equivalent of the "holy tree". The same cult had existed with the Adyghes, yet much before Christianity came to them.

As the historian Tatiana Fadeeva wrote, "The name Se-Oziris still lasts in

the memory of the Caucasian peoples. The Circassian, Ossetian, and Svan highland tribes celebrated an annual event honoring Seozeres – a deity not belonging to the aboriginal religions. This, as they said, is a great travelling king who went around the world and taught people useful skills and arts ... Circassians granted Seozeres his honors in a very archaic way – his symbol was the trunk of a pear tree, which must have symbolized the “world tree”, decorated with lit candles epitomizing heavenly bodies. This we know owing to the great traveler Dubois de Montpèreux” [3].

As the pre-revolution ethnographer Dubrovin observed, in the end of December each year Circassians gathered under a sacred pear tree with icon-lamps on it, and said the following ancient prayer:

“Sozeris, we thank you for this year’s harvest, and we are praying for abundant crops in the years to come. We beseech you to keep thieves away from our bread and to keep fire away from our barn” [4].

Obviously, Adyghe knew the cult of the pear tree at very early times. Besides, the Soviet horticulturist Zhukovsky argued that cultivated pear was first found in the Caucasus to be further taken to Greece and other countries of the ancient Mediterranean. Now, no wonder the ancient Hellenes related the very cult of Dionysus with the Caucasus and mentioned the area as the place that witnessed his archaic “gardening deeds”.

By the way, growing grapes was a feature typical of the ancient Circassian gardening culture. Adyghe had vines growing right in their gardeny twining round fruit trees and yielding extremely rich fruit. The Adyghe tradition of wine-making has its roots far back, and did not disappear after they adopted Islam, which is known not to welcome wine.

Circassians had trees that were planted here, as the legend runs, by Alexander the Great who worshipped Dionysus. As early as in the XVII Century the Turkish traveler Evliya Çelebi described an enormous sacred tree that Adyghe had; it took twenty two people to embrace its trunk while a herd of a thousand sheep could find place in the shade cast by its cyclopean crown.

As Evliya wrote, “The ancient legend holds it that Allah gave a sprout of this tree to Iskander Dul Kharnon after the latter erected the wall of Gog and Magog. Iskander only loosened the soil while Khyzer planted the tree” [5].

Even ancient Greeks mentioned the great age of the marvelous Circassian gardens. This glorious tradition is also related to the epos of ancient Egyptians, the mythology of many the indigenous peoples of Eurasia. In view of the Abrahamic faiths this transformed into the dream of Paradise on Earth, which the hard-working Adyghe people tried to create in their land for centuries, if not millennia.

Unfortunately this saga also narrates about the Lost Paradise because after Circassians and their related peoples were ousted from their home the blossoming galaxy of the Caucasian gardens suffered a sad lot of complete abandonment. The Adyghe culture of gardening has come to the verge of total failure. The concern about its revival is a holy duty for everyone considering himself a patriot of our multinational Russia – a country so rich in unbelievable traditions and yet so careless when it comes to keeping them for descendants...

References:

1. Nutrikin R. Lost Paradise // Examination of the Power. – 2011. – №19. – p. 17.
2. Ibid. p. 18.
3. Fadeeva T.M. The Crimea in sacral space. – Simferopol, 2000. – p. 68.
4. Dubrovin N. Circassians (Adige) // Military collection. – 1870. – №5. – p. 168.
5. Cheleb E. Book of travel. Release 2. Earth of the North Caucasus, Volga region and Podonya. – Moscow, 1979. – p. 70.