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Diaspora of Diaspora: Adyge-Abkhaz Returnees in the Ancestral Homeland

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Focusing on the diasporic characteristics shown by ancestral return migrants, this case study looks at the Abkhaz-Adyge (Circassian) returnees from Turkey to the Caucasus and how they become the “diaspora of the diaspora.” The next generations of diasporans continue to dream of return, and, with recent developments in communication technologies and cheaper transportation, many find ways to realize this dream. There are many different forms of return, but some “return-migrate” and settle in an unfamiliar ancestral home. The relocation creates new experiences as the homeland turns out to be very different from that which they imagined, and the return migration is transformed into a new form of migrant experience that, in fact, produces renewed diasporic characteristics.

Keywords: return migration, Abkhaz diaspora, Circassian diaspora, Turkey, ancestral homeland

Introduction

This article is about the Adyge-Abkhaz ancestral return migrants to the Caucasus from Turkey and how they became what I call a “diaspora of the diaspora.”¹ Abkhaz and Adyge (Circassians) are among the autochthonous people of the Caucasus, which is famous for its ethnic and language diversity.² They were deported from their homeland in the Caucasus as a result of long-lasting wars and continuing clashes with the Russian military forces. During their mass exodus in 1864 and over the ensuing years, the ethnically related Ubykh, Abkhaz, and Adyge were deported together and settled in different parts of the Ottoman Empire. Although 21 May 1864 officially marks the end of the war

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and commemorates the mass exodus of the Adyge-Abkhaz people, their migrations continued until the mid-twentieth century for various reasons. Today the majority live in Turkey, but many are also found in Jordan, Israel, and Syria. They have diaspora organizations in a variety of other places, for example, the Netherlands, Germany, and the United States, as a result of secondary migrations from these earlier diaspora settlements and recent migrations from the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation.

With the political and technological developments that gave access to their ancestral homeland, the Adyge and Abkhaz diaspora established links and became familiar with the borders and realities of their homeland in the Caucasus only toward the end of the twentieth century. An often repeated argument of the Adyge-Abkhaz who believe in the ideal of return from the diaspora is based on the fact that the Adyge and Abkhaz are only a minority in the ancestral homelands, divided between many administrative units and outnumbered by Russians, Georgians, Armenians, and others who settled there during czarist and Soviet times. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Adyge and Abkhaz could identify with four republics, three of which—Adygeya, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachai-Cherkess—remained part of the Russian Federation, while the fourth, Abkhazia, broke away from Georgia in 1993 after a war that brought together the North Caucasian peoples and diaspora on the side of the Abkhaz. The majority of the Adyge-Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey lived in close-knit village communities that contributed to the protection of ethnocultural identities in the diaspora. This was before the rapid urbanization of Turkey in the 1960s brought many of them into cities through rural-to-urban migration. At this period, diaspora ethnocultural-political associations were established that played an important role in the construction of an urban diaspora identity.

There was also a much-debated ideal that promoted the dream of return migration to the ancestral homeland, “Caucasus,” from the current home, “Turkey.” With the opening of the borders, some realized this dream in the early 1990s. The first returnees were very critical about links to Turkey; they would marginalize those return migrants who watched Turkish channels through satellite TV or those who bought property in Turkey, claiming that, for a real return, one should leave everything about Turkey behind. Nevertheless, they always valued communication with the diaspora in Turkey, and the majority of return migrants kept up their contacts with diaspora organizations.

In recent years, especially with more frequent and cheaper transportation, the link between the homeland and the diaspora has gained strength, leading to increased mobility and transnationalism among both the diaspora and return migrants. There was also increased return migration, as many found it easier to settle in the homeland in this period. The study that this article derives from has at its center the following dual research question: “What are the dynamics that led to the

decision for return migration to the Caucasus, and what is the effect of these dynamics and return migratory projects on the lives of returnees?" To answer this, multimethod, multisited fieldwork took place in Adygeya and Abkhazia—two homeland territories with different political statuses, return policies, and socioeconomic processes—and in Turkey, in some of the main diaspora settlements and selected diaspora associations. I focused particularly on the dual transnationalism of return migrants in the diaspora and in the homeland, as well as on identities and perceptions of the homeland in the diaspora. Even though there were clear transnational links that could be identified at both the diaspora and the homeland ends of return projects (whether an imagined return or an actual relocation in the homeland), there were also diasporic characteristics that could be observed. Moreover, some return migrants had started to call themselves "the diaspora in the homeland." This article tries to identify and exemplify such characteristics and show how the Adyge-Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey is now dispersed in its Caucasian homeland. I examine how the return migrants create diaspora "bubbles" through establishing new ethnocultural boundaries and belongings and how they get involved in diaspora politics through frequent visits to diaspora homes and associations, becoming "the diaspora of the diaspora."

Methodology

My data come from participant observation in the Caucasus and the diaspora settlements in Turkey, collected on numerous field visits between 2005 and 2013.³ More specifically, the narrative material I draw on for this paper derives from twenty-six life-history interviews with return migrants in Adygeya and Abkhazia, twenty life-history interviews with transnational migrants, and over eighty in-depth interviews with the Adyge-Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey. These three sets of interviews were conducted in 2011–2013 and are at the core of the analysis I develop in this article.

Since the study of the return migrants' involvement in transnational activities before return migration and a detailed understanding of their return migratory projects required a historical perspective, the life-history technique was preferred when interviewing the returnees themselves. However, during my fieldwork in the diaspora in Turkey, especially when interviewing those who frequently travel back and forth between the Caucasus and Turkey, the in-depth interview method naturally evolved into life-history interviews. As those transnational diasporans were also returnees, dwelling in both the homeland and the diaspora, I could equally have met them in the Caucasus.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to gather a broad range of information in the diaspora. The interviews were conducted with active diaspora members through diaspora associations in the

cities of Istanbul, Ankara, Samsun, and Bursa. In the rural context, interviews were conducted with participants who were residing either in Adyge-Abkhaz villages or in rural district centers connecting these villages and who were involved in transnational activities between the diaspora and the Caucasus (and who either planned to return-migrate or had chosen not to). The interview method was used to understand multiple subject positions, both those which the return migrants and the diasporans define for themselves and those which others define for them.

When I first started the fieldwork, I had listed from a priori knowledge and conceptualization some sixteen different return migratory projects and pathways. Consequently, I tried to interview returnees from each group. However, there were people who fell into multiple groups, and people from some groups, such as those who were running away from something in Turkey, did not agree to be part of a research project. Participant observation was used to develop understanding of such “other” return migratory projects and to observe return migrants in their everyday lives. Despite the relatively large scale of my field research and interview samples, I cannot claim total representativeness for them, given the variety of locations, social class positions, and economic backgrounds from which the returnees come to the diasporic homeland, and the fact that the diaspora is scattered in some four hundred villages and several cities in Turkey. I tried to compensate by contacting returnees from a variety of networks in Adygeya and Abkhazia, by doing field research in several places in Turkey, and by trying to interview people of different social backgrounds and political standpoints. It is also important to note that women make up less than one-third of all the interviewees because return migration is a gendered process and in the Caucasus there are relatively few female return migrants. In the rural diaspora context in Turkey the women were usually from other regions or from other ethnic groups and so were not interviewed. In this study, women—especially the elderly—are relatively less represented than men; however, this is reflective of the Adyge-Abkhaz diaspora family formations, association member structures, and the selective return migration process to the Caucasus.

The Adyge-Abkhaz Diaspora and Return

The Adyge-Abkhaz and Ubykh are people of the Caucasus who were dispersed from their homeland due to the Russian advance toward the Black Sea in the second half of the nineteenth century. Although the exact number of Abkhaz and Adyge deported and scattered across the Ottoman Empire (today Jordan, Syria, Israel, the Balkans, and Turkey) is not known, it is estimated to be more than a million, many of whom died during the journey or just after their arrival in new destinations as a result of disease and starvation (Jaimoukha 2011; Shenfield 1999). It is

estimated that all the Ubykh, 90 percent of the Adyge, and 60 percent of the Abkhaz population residing in the North Caucasus left for the Ottoman Empire in 1864 and ensuing years (Wesselink 1996, 30).

Brubaker (2005, 5) identifies three core criteria that are widely used to define a group as a diaspora: dispersion, homeland orientation, and boundary maintenance. According to Safran (1991, 84–5), a “classical diaspora” forms when ancestors were dispersed, the people retain a collective memory about their homeland, many feel partly alienated from their host societies, and many believe in an eventual return and try to maintain and restore, and continue to relate to, their homeland. Cohen (1997) suggests the term *victim diaspora* for diasporas that have a historical experience of enslavement, exile, and displacement. Although there are other definitions of diaspora, including non-dispersed groups, such as ethnic communities living in adjacent states, and non-victim groups, such as trade diasporas, as a “descriptive typological tool” the definitions of classical and victim diasporas suggested by Cohen and Safran are frequently used to refer to the Adyge and Abkhaz living outside their homeland. Many researchers working on the Adyge and Abkhaz diaspora (also sometimes known as the Circassian or Cherkess diaspora, as explained in note 2) agree with this definition of a classical or victim diaspora (Bram 1999; Kaya 2004, 2005; Shami 1995, 1998; Vardania 2007). This article considers that there is variety both within the diaspora and in the ways in which communities conceive their homeland; as a result of their different ideas, various components and members of the diaspora act differently (Pattie 2005, 49). Tölölyan (1996) and Brubaker (2005) argue that “putative diasporas,” including assimilated ethnic descendants as part of diasporas, can still have practical political and cultural projects in the diasporic center. The political elite of the Adyge and Abkhaz had started defining themselves as a diaspora, and referring to their “huge numbers” dispersed in different nation-states away from their homeland, in the 1970s. They continue to “construct and disseminate numerous representations of what they are, what their diasporic experience feels like and what it means or should mean” (Tölölyan 2003, 56).

The first generation of Adyge-Abkhaz immigrants had thought of their settlement in the Ottoman Empire as temporary, and it is believed that they had aimed to return to their homeland at the first possible opportunity.⁴ However, some of the immigrants, especially those with existing economic and social ties with Istanbul, “became part of the [Ottoman] political apparatus and elite” from the early years (Doğan 2009, 37). After the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, the Adyge and Abkhaz—or, as they came to be known in the Ottoman Empire, the Cherkess—were not listed as minorities but as part of the main population of Turkey. This limited their rights to speak their ethnic languages, open their own schools, take their family-line names as surnames, or even give ethnic names to their children. Although there

are no estimates of their exact population, it is believed that the Adyge-Abkhaz population in Turkey is about 3 million, living in many dispersed locations and settlements, mainly in ethnically homogeneous Adyge or Abkhaz villages and more recently in urban settlements. According to the proximity of their settlements to urban areas and other ethnic groups, the Adyge and Abkhaz had varying experiences of assimilation, acculturation, adaptation, and urbanization. However, [Kaya \(2004, 225\)](#) argues that “Circassian subjects [including all North Caucasian migrants] in Turkey . . . maintain a memory, vision or myth about their original homeland” since the first generation.

It was only during the perestroika period in the Soviet Union, when access to the homeland became easier, that “return” and the possibility of reuniting in the homeland turned into a reality for many. With increased communication, people in the diaspora started to learn about the social, political, and economic conditions in the homeland. Knowledge started to materialize the homeland in people’s minds, transforming imagination into reality, since the homeland was just a mythical story before the 1970s. The host countries where the Adyge and Abkhaz resided also became more liberal, giving rise to more cultural freedom. Due to these changes, the last generation of the diaspora grew up in an environment of ethnocultural revival and had a clearer understanding of the political dynamics, territorial divisions, demographic situation, and sociocultural values in the Caucasus (see [Doğan 2009](#); [Kaya 2004](#); [Shami 1995, 1998](#)). It was also during these last decades that many people started to visit their homeland; some, with considerate personal effort, return-migrated.

In fact, although return was widely discussed in the diaspora and argued by some as the sole way for a true existence of the Adyge-Abkhaz people and culture, the notion of return remained only an ideal for many and did not materialize into definitive migration. Visits demonstrated that everyday life in the homeland was very different from the nostalgic expectations that were created in the diaspora. Still, there were some people who settled in Adygeya and Abkhazia in the early 1990s. However, economic stagnation in the next five years both in Adygeya, which was experiencing economic crisis due to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and in Abkhazia, which was put under a severe embargo by the Commonwealth of Independent States and the international community, resulted in many returnees going back to the countries where they were born. Nevertheless, many of them stayed in contact with the homeland through family connections, neighbors, and friends, and some resettled in the homeland again at a later time.

The return migration of the Adyge-Abkhaz diaspora has gained speed in the last five years, mainly as a result of political changes in the Caucasus. Abkhazia was recognized by the Russian Federation as an independent state in 2008 (followed by five other UN member states), creating a politically, socially, and economically more secure environment.

Despite increased and cheaper transportation to the region, Adygeya has introduced quotas for the settlement of “foreigners,” including the ethnic descendants of the native people of the Caucasus, as a result of the imposition of Russian Federation regulations. These political pressures created fear in the diaspora that, in a near future, there would not even be an opportunity to make regular visits to the homeland, and this has triggered more return visits whereby people come to get residence permits.

Many in the diaspora and the returnees established their new post-perestroika existence through constant back-and-forth movement, some becoming transmigrants and settling in two (or more) localities, as other studies on the return of diasporas have found (see [Tsuda 2009](#); [Vertovec 2001](#)). With a variety of encounters unfolding, the North Caucasus presented an arena for interaction for the Adyge and Abkhaz through which “community, identity and loyalty” were questioned:

Even with the formation of collective approaches to the homeland, the people who journey back and forth, their motivations, aims, representations and the kinds of landscapes they construct as they travel these circuits vary significantly. The countries that they come from, the class and gender politics that they embody, also frame their encounters. ([Shami 1998](#), 633)

As Shami argues in her study about Adyge (Circassian) returnees, there were differences in the experience of returnees depending on the country where they had been born, as there was no “homogeneous, unified conception of Circassian identity . . . in any locality prior to the encounter with the homeland” (628). In this sense, there were also differences among the returnees from Turkey: depending on the region they had come from in Turkey, they had gone through a different sociopolitical diasporization. Some kept their Turkish and/or Muslim identities and their sense of belonging to Turkey as a tool with which to adapt to their ancestral homelands, and some established new transnational links to the places they came from.⁵ Hence, a majority of the returnees maintained a collective diasporic identity and a belonging to their respective diaspora communities, either through the associations they were members of in the urban locations in Turkey or through constant contact with their close-knit ethnic rural communities.

Dispersion of the Diaspora in the Homeland

Although today in the diaspora there are some separate Adyge and Abkhaz associations carrying ethnic names, the North Caucasian associations that were established in the 1960s have members of different ethnic groups of North Caucasian origin. Since the early years, people in the diaspora who had migrated to urban settlements from their village communities argued that the diaspora associations were the only

places where they could be with people “like themselves.” It was argued that the people of the North Caucasus (including the Abkhazians) were culturally distinct from “others” in Turkey; depending on the region in Turkey, the mixture in the associations could include Adyge and Abkhaz, Ubykhs and Ossetians, and others. There were many mixed marriages between these peoples, who spoke different languages but lived under a similar code of behavior and etiquette (*khabze*). In the associations’ ensembles and social events, those who took an active part would learn to dance all the North Caucasian dances, exchange ethnically or regionally particular dishes, and share other distinctive cultural codes. Inside the associations, all would know the ethnic group one belonged to, the region one came from, and the family lineage. There was a political division called the *returnists* who believed that return to the Caucasian homeland was the only solution for the existence of Adyge-Abkhaz people in particular, as they were only a minority in the homeland. So when those people who socialized with other North Caucasian groups in the diaspora started returning, they were dispersed into different administrative units in the Caucasus for various reasons. A desire to use the language, job and employment opportunities, connections with friends and relatives (including those who were not returnees but kin who carried the same family-lineage names), and political arguments such as “Adygeya needs an ethnic population” were among the reasons for return stated in interview narratives focused on the decision-making process. Below is an excerpt from the long narrative of Tlepsh (male, in his sixties), who had settled in Adygeya before 2000; he explains his reasoning and also touches on the common elements of North Caucasian diaspora culture resulting from a shared history of exile:

I settled in Adygeya, because I could speak Circassian. However, in everyday life it was not much use, as Russian was spoken in the streets. Since we are Ubykhs, we [our historical settlement] were closer to Abkhazia. I feel more connection to the Abkhaz. However, as an Ubykh, one could settle in Grozni [Chechnya, Northeast Caucasus] or Vladikavkaz [Ossetia, Central-North Caucasus]. In terms of values I could have felt comfortable anywhere, but Abkhazia, Sochi [the historical Ubykh settlement], Adygeya lack ethnic populations . . . In the Caucasus they speak different languages, the lingua franca is Russian, in the diaspora it is Turkish . . . We share a common culture, a common history . . . of pain that was not transferred to the next generations . . . In the diaspora the Caucasian movement is healthier.

Although Tlepsh is atypical in being flexible in terms of where to settle, there were many, especially those who had grown up in a rural context in Turkey, who were more specific about which part of the Caucasus was their homeland. However, even they refer to the homeland as the Caucasus when they remember making the decision to return:

We always knew that we would come to the Caucasus one day. I don't even remember when it was first discussed. My father always had this wish and desire. We always knew that, if the conditions permitted, we would one day live in the Caucasus. We grew up with this consciousness. I don't even remember when it first started. I guess that was how we were raised. (Mafe, female, in her thirties)

This reference to the homeland as the Caucasus was based on a lack of knowledge about the territorial borders of the ancestral homeland until the 1970s but continued as a diasporic discourse after this period. Although the homeland was referred to as the Caucasus, once they returned not only did the returnees adapt to the administrative borders of the homeland, but also the divisions among their respective regional diaspora communities were reflected in their everyday lives. For example, in Abkhazia a returnee complains that the fact that his family line came from a particular sub-ethnic group was brought up as an issue by returnees from western Anatolia, where the majority were from another (more numerous) sub-ethnic group.

We settled in Abkhazia because this is our homeland but, because of my family lineage, they exclude me. The locals do not do that. For them we are all from the diaspora. But the returnees from the Adapazarı-Düzce region [in Turkey], they tell us we are separate. (Adamur, male, in his forties)

In Adygeya a similar kind of grouping of returnees according to their diaspora origins is also raised as an issue that reflected the diasporic dispersion of these people:

In the diaspora, our people had settled in different regions, and people stayed in close connection with people from their own area, even in the associations. Here [in Adygeya] our people [the returnees/those from the diaspora] mainly spend time with others from their region [in Turkey]. Those from Bursa [city] stick together, those from Reyhanlı [district in Hatay] spend time together. The Ankara group [from the association] do everything together . . . They say the returnees establish "little Turkey" in the homeland. That's not true. They have their little regional communities, little representations of their diaspora associations, even their little groups in the associations. (Nesij, male, in his sixties)

A return migrant in Adygeya, Gushav (male, in his thirties), argues that the post-return experiences of people from the diaspora differ according to the places in Turkey from which the return migrants came. He tries to explain what Nesij above calls "little representations" of where they came from as a natural process:

One naturally meets with everyone who has come from Turkey. You meet, you greet. But besides that, you spend more time with people

who are in harmony with your thoughts, your social upbringing. You share a common ground with them. Some call it “grouping.” But it is very normal, it is a natural social process. This would have happened if we had continued to live in Turkey.

So the returnees, especially when they return-migrate for idealistic reasons, feel out of place when confronted with the Russian and Soviet influence in their homeland. Creating a new diasporic bubble in the homeland, made up of their respective communities in the diaspora, the return migrants negotiate their belonging in their ancestral homes. At times they even call themselves the diaspora in the homeland, as Naala (female, in her thirties) does when talking about different everyday lifestyles in Abkhazia:

You know . . . , we, when I say “we” I mean those from the diaspora in the homeland, you understand, right? We expect different things from life, and the state. We raise our children differently.

In Abkhazia there are also two TV programs about the diaspora (one carries the name *The Heartbeat of the Diaspora*) that focus on the return migrants’ everyday lives as much as on the diaspora. In this context, the return migrants in the Caucasian homeland under different administrative units can be argued to be the “diaspora of their diaspora.” But are they culturally and socially a diaspora, maintaining their boundaries and believing in the distinctiveness of their ethnic diaspora culture?

Creating New Boundaries and Belongings

Like other ancestral or “next-generation” returnees (cf. [Conway and Potter 2009](#)), the Adyge and Abkhaz leave behind in Turkey (or in Syria, Jordan, etc.) their parents, sisters, brothers, and children when they move to the homeland. Although other studies (e.g., [Conway and Potter 2009](#); [De Bree, Davids, and de Haas 2010](#)) have shown that this created a different type of transnationalism after return and influenced post-return adjustment in the homeland, for the Adyge-Abkhaz diaspora the visits to the diaspora settlements have a political, social, and cultural meaning. For some, the repeated visits can be explained through transnationalism as a result of increased and cheaper transportation. On the other hand, the experience of the 1.5 and second generations now growing up in the homeland resembles the diasporas’ return visits to the homeland ([King, Christou, and Teerling 2011](#); [Wagner 2008](#)).

The returnees’ visits to their birthplaces are not always “seasonal, mobile livelihood circulation,” and the returnees are not necessarily “circulators living between two worlds”; neither are they merely transnational movers like “swallows” ([Potter, Conway, and Phillips 2005](#), 1). Growing up in sacred spaces of survival in the diaspora, the Adyge and

Abkhaz had a very strong feeling of superiority. In contrast to Japanese-Brazilians' experiences in the homeland, where "on return . . . [they] lose their confidence in being Japanese" (Ishikawa 2009, 62), the Adyge and Abkhaz develop a stronger identity when challenged in the homeland. They argue that, living in the diaspora, they had been more determined and more able to protect their ethnocultural values and traditions. *We have protected our culture; they have protected the language* is a sentence repeated by many who have had first-hand experience of the homeland. The close-knit communities in isolated and segregated villages and in diaspora associations in Turkey have been the settings for the Adyge-Abkhaz to maintain and promote their cultural heritage. So, once in the homeland, they start to long for that particular environment, just as those in the diaspora were, and still are, longing for a mythical homeland. So it is not Turkey, Turkish culture, or Turkishness but *the diasporic experience in Turkey* (or other places), and particularly their specific regional experiences,⁶ that continues to define feelings of belonging among many return migrants.

Though I'm involved in the sociopolitical life here [in the homeland], what I say will be based on my experiences in Turkey. I make use of our political arguments, the social values from there, because I grew up there. My elder sister and brother are involved in the diaspora associations to live their *Abkhazness*. I came here to make a whole . . . If we can agree on our *abysta* [traditional polenta] one day, we will agree on everything. (Mkan, male, in his thirties)

The above extract from Mkan's narrative explains how culture is intertwined with politics in everyday life. The last remark about the *abysta*, the traditional dish that is eaten as the main accompaniment with every meal, refers to the fact that it is prepared in a slightly different way in every region, both in the Caucasian and the diaspora settlements.⁷ The returnee food culture is also an important marker of diaspora identities as it fuses the Turkish food they bring across the borders with other dishes they learned through contact with other North Caucasian peoples in the diaspora. During my fieldwork, I worked for a while in a restaurant run by a return migrant in Abkhazia, where there was frequent talk about common Adyge-Abkhaz cultural elements. One female return migrant, Albina (female, in her thirties), who had grown up in a rural region called Uzunyayla, related how other returnees and visitors from Turkey enjoy her mixed North Caucasian cooking, especially a Chechen dish, *gyrnysh*, and always ask her to cook something for them. Two years after this encounter, in 2013, on my visit to the Uzunyayla region, my host, a Kabardian-speaking Adyge woman, prepared *gyrnysh* for me, explaining the roots of their mixed North Caucasian cooking as deriving from the mixed marriages that were a common practice in the region. In the rural area, the associations were not very influential, but all the villages were somehow related through marriage to each other,

so they got to know each other's special dishes. In the conversation with Albina, I also noted in my field diary that she was referring to visitors from the diaspora knocking on her door frequently, which signifies the communication between return migrants and the diaspora who come for a visit to the homeland, and connecting to other return migrants through networks of friends and relatives. Jan (male, in his forties) reinforces the importance of this communication between the returnees and visitors from the diaspora:

We met with all people who came from the diaspora. It was very crucial. Besides pals and close friends, we wanted to know the latest position towards return migration, the current organization of the associations and also to have an informative chat, we would talk with everyone.

Having frequent contact with visitors from the diaspora and with Turkey was important for return migrants for social and cultural reasons, and also for political reasons, as they wanted to maintain the strength of the diaspora populations as well as those resettled in the homeland.

The importance of the diaspora in return migrants' lives also derives from the fact that there are cultural differences between the locals and the diaspora. Abrek (male, in his thirties) further develops this point and claims that the different cultural codes are written in the genes:

If one day I go [back to Turkey] I will go for [the homeland]. Some people had to die [for the homeland], now some people have to live here and put the seeds. Our customs and traditions have been written in our genes in Turkey. There, we marry late. Some things will make us "the other" instead of unite us [with those in the homeland].

Abrek touches on a very important issue for return migrant men—marrying a local woman. His words are very androcentric, and he argues that the diasporic culture is written in the genes and cannot be changed. He raises this issue because, in the diaspora, Adyge-Abkhaz people tend to marry at a mature age, during or even after their forties, or at the earliest during their late thirties while, in the homeland, they marry in their early twenties. This is a huge problem as it limits the chance to find a partner for those who return-migrate at later stages in their lives or who still want to wait to get married. Usually the local (i.e., homeland) wives of returnees adapt to the better sides of their husbands' culture, where women have a more equal place in the family, and need to do less farm-work or gardening; on the other hand, they mostly feel constrained to learn to speak Turkish, to teach their children Turkish, to learn to cook Turkish dishes besides ethnic ones, and so on. Many of the children of the returnees grow up in a diaspora environment, with frequent visits to the diaspora or visits by those from the diaspora, and they develop a clear understanding of diaspora divisions, organizations, and politics

through their returnee parents, who still continue their involvement and constantly try to shape the diaspora politics.

The Next Generations

The 1.5- and second-generation returnees have lived in the homeland most of their lives. Yet many have a great interest in their diasporic homes and in diaspora communities more generally.⁸ They are mostly able to speak Turkish besides their native language and Russian, many spend their free time with students from the diaspora and other young returnees (or children of the returnees), and on their Facebook pages they mainly communicate in Turkish and are in constant (virtual) involvement in the diaspora groups. Their regular diaspora visits to Turkey, either to take part in diaspora events or just to spend time with family and friends, create a covert desire to “go back,” though they continue their parents’ political stance in terms of the importance of the homeland and return. However, one transnational migrant, who is making regular visits to Adygeya to get a residence permit, explains how the girls she met there are all interested in being in the diaspora:

When we came [to the homeland] we had a chance to meet with young people [who had come from Turkey] in a return migrants’ house, every student introduced what they were studying . . . The girls I met [the children of returnees and the students from the diaspora], when we had a chance to talk privately, I saw that a majority wanted to go back to Turkey. But they could not state it openly [among the elderly] . . . They were right, somehow . . . looking for a job [in the homeland] they couldn’t find anything, but once in Turkey there is an opportunity to get a good job . . . because they speak many languages . . . For those who were born here, who grew up here, Turkey looks attractive. I don’t know, but maybe it is important to touch on women–men relations. Those from Turkey, when they need to choose the person to marry, the local Adyge men don’t fit their values. They feel the difference in customs, the way they position themselves [in the family and social life], how they dress, the ways they behave; they don’t feel attractive. (Janset, female, in her twenties)

The following year, two of the young girls to whom Janset was referring got married to men from the diaspora, with one couple settling in the homeland, the other in Turkey. There are many men who married local Adyge and Abkhaz women in the homeland; however, the diaspora women chose not to, despite the fact that they were raised with strong diaspora customs, where marrying a partner from their own ethnic community is the key argument stressed by parents. They argue that adjusting to the different family life and everyday life in the homeland is very hard. This pertains even to those who were born in the homeland,

since they were raised with more conservative norms in terms of ethnicity, religion, and family values but with more freedom in terms of social interaction with peers and involvement in social life.

Not only the children of returnees but also the majority of return migrants, especially those in early life stages, are involved in ethnocultural events, playing traditional instruments, singing in traditional music groups, dancing in national ensembles, and doing traditional handicrafts—as they used to do and value in the diaspora. Gupse (female, in her forties) had started playing an instrument in order to learn about her ethnic music, and this created a feeling of belonging in her life in the Caucasus. The following excerpts from her emotionally rich and sometimes conflicting narrative also explain how she feels a sense of belonging to her diaspora home and how this in turn creates a “question” about her belonging to the homeland community:

The associations [in the diaspora] are our first schools. There we learn to dance, we meet our people, choose our partners, learn our folkloric culture . . . Learning my music in a collective helped me forget my loneliness in the homeland. It is still an important motivation in my everyday life . . . Here we are always the returnees from the diaspora . . . There it was different, here it is different . . . There is a different kind of hunger . . . To catch the taste we had there, here we have got to do more. When you need to make a decision here, you always decide being aware of your relation to Turkey. There is a different balance to that side . . . We are physically divided, one part there, one part here . . . I feel equal belonging to every place in the Caucasus . . . When I got in the taxi, when I first came here, I would ask, “*Wuadyge?*” [Are you Adyge?]. They asked me, “Why do you ask? What difference does it make?” I didn’t want my money to go to a stranger.

Gupse’s last sentence demonstrates something that many people living in the diaspora habitually used to do, establishing their business connections with others in the North Caucasian diaspora or, if they needed something, getting it from an ethnic shopkeeper instead of from “the others,” so that the money would not go to a stranger but stayed within the ethnic community. Taking her everyday life culture to the homeland, Gupse tried to create her own bubble through the ethnic music that she had encountered in a diaspora association in Turkey as a child. She explains that the customs that she was raised with in Turkey are critical for making every decision in the homeland.

As the returnees took an active role in reviving their ethnic heritage in the homeland, they found that the majority of people who did so were other returnees. For this reason, in Adygeya the returnees established a diaspora solidarity fund that supports local youngsters to learn their heritage handicrafts and to be involved in ethnic music and dance ensembles, to do academic research about the ethnocultural heritage,

to publish music CDs and books, and so on. The returnees' communication with local non-ethnic people, who make up the majority of the population in Adygeya and Abkhazia, remained limited. However, those who could speak (or were able to learn) a relevant language found ways to communicate with the locals. Still, in their everyday lives the return migrants spent a lot of time with other returnees and visitors from the diaspora.

Diaspora Politics

There were, and are, many divisions in the diaspora in Turkey, sometimes due to different socialization in different parts of Turkey. Different definitions of “us” and “them” remain at the core of diaspora politicization. In the 1970s the main divisions in the associations superficially existed parallel to the political situation in Turkey, a right–left polarization. The following quote from a transnational migrant, Borej (male, in his fifties), is about this polarization:

When we moved to Istanbul, I heard about the [diaspora] associations, but my father wouldn't let me go there, because there was communism there . . . Generally, as my father had said, leftists were in the majority in the association. And those were the times, the years 1977–80 was when there was an acute polarization in the society. That [political] polarization is still not completely over. For a lot of people, both in the right wing and in the left wing, the same attitudes persist . . . but also there was this thing, *returnists* and *stayers*, *returnists* and *revolutionists*, or they were also called the *democrats*. There were two groups, the returnist group and the revolutionary group. I was among the returnist group, then. Because I come from a traditional family, it was very hard to be leftist, or communist.

Besides this left–right (revolutionists–returnists) division, there was also a division in terms of how to place the Turkish state and the Russian state in everyday diaspora politics. Both the returnists and the revolutionaries saw Russia as an ally for their own particular reasons, and Turkey as a host country where they wanted their freedom of speech and other rights. However, there were also those who were part of a United Caucasianism movement that saw Russia as an alien in the Caucasus, and there was an Islamic Circassianism movement that focused mainly on helping out the Chechen cause during its first years and later on being involved in religious developments in the Caucasus—both movements expressed anti-Russian trends (see [Besleney 2014](#) for further analysis of diaspora politics and organizations). Recent years have seen a move away from this polarization, and the new divisions derived from a homeland-centric *diasporism*⁹ in which some of the Abkhaz and the Adyge elite decided to become politicized in separate organizations to be able to get involved in homeland politics. These divisions were

mainly facilitated by the returnees, who argued that the diaspora was very influential in their everyday life experiences and were concerned that further political pressures could come, mainly from Russia, but also from other international political actors such as Turkey and Georgia. Gushef (female, in her twenties) argues that a diasporan has to have first-hand experience before talking about the homeland because, in her opinion, they otherwise perceive returnees as pro-Russian:

I follow [what Adyge in Turkey say and do] sometimes involuntarily . . . I want to know what is happening, what they think about . . . Looking from here [the homeland], the diaspora does not ever look correct . . . I lived in Turkey for a period . . . I used to see the homeland from the same diaspora point of view . . . To be an Adyge in Turkey is very different; you live it in a completely different way. However, when you return, when you look at the diaspora from the homeland you see the diaspora from a different point of view . . . Diaspora is our strength. This is what the locals say. There would be no homeland without the diaspora since most of our population is there . . . When we say about something that it is difficult, that it is not possible, [in the diaspora] they claim different things . . . in a different country you can shout as you like for your homeland . . . When we say that we need to be logical, to act with caution, they accuse us of being pro-Russian . . . This is wrong. It is not being pro-Russian. Even if it is impossible for one to return, they should at least come and see the conditions here . . . I am against anyone talking about, commenting on the homeland unless they come here and see what it is like.

Gushav (male, in his thirties), who is deeply involved in diaspora political life through the Internet, argues that the diaspora organizations are very much divided but that the diaspora has a crucial role in homeland politics:

I see the diaspora in this way: I care about the diaspora, I see it as very important. Because of the population ratio between the homeland and the diaspora, the majority of the population is outside of the homeland. For small peoples like us, who have lived through exile, genocide, the diasporas are very crucial. Especially if there is no democracy in the homeland, there is a totalitarian regime, the brethren in the diaspora are more comfortable, more flexible in the sense that they can organize events and activities for the homeland, to have an impact and to support the developments here [in the homeland], they become more important. But we know the divided, segregated, separated organizations of the Adyge in Turkey. There is not a single structure that can unite the Adyge. Instead, the current organizations try to pacify those who want to do something proper.

The returnees who believed in a stronger diasporic political unity kept up their communication with the North Caucasian associations in Turkey that they were involved with before their return. Each group

regularly sent news from the homeland to their contact organizations, suggested activities, asked them to use terms that reflected some homeland politics, and hosted visits from their respective organizations, and those with the economic means traveled to Turkey to take part in their activities. Below, Jan (male, in his forties) narrates how he connected to the diaspora once he was in the homeland and why it was important:

When I was in Maykop [the capital of Adygeya], the diaspora mattered as much as it mattered when I was in the diaspora. I would follow the news from the Marje-group [a diaspora-wide e-mail group]. Also some chat spaces were very important for communication. I was also following the printed diaspora publications, such as the Caucasian Association Federation's *Nart* journal or the *Jineps* newspaper. If you are from the diaspora, even if you are in the homeland, it is important to know what the diaspora in Turkey are doing. We got information from the associations. We communicated on the phone or with e-mail frequently. I mean the diaspora kept its importance in our lives all the time. The real [Adyge] population is in Turkey, every activity, every concert, every political mobilization is to our interest even when we are in the homeland.

Those who cannot travel or host the diaspora due to financial limitations prefer to be involved in virtual diaspora politics through Facebook (previously chat forums). The administrator of one such group, Azamad (male, in his forties), put it to me in a conversation that "*everything in the diaspora should be regulated from the homeland.*" This is supportive of the argument of many return migrants that diaspora politics should be based on homeland politics. On many Facebook pages, such as "Turkey Should Remove the Transportation Embargo on Abkhazia," the administrators include the return migrants and transmigrants. One of these homeland-administered diaspora groups, Returnees to Adygeya (2013), in its "about" section on Facebook, states that "diaspora aims to conserve its ethno-cultural aspects in a foreign environment, to preserve its common history with the homeland to transfer it to new generations, to try to influence decision making processes for the benefit of the community and the homeland, to perceive ancestral land as its real and ideal home, to believe in a certain return to the homeland for self or the next generation." Furthermore, the "about" section explains the aim of the group as being to *help construction of an ethno-cultural-political identity between the homeland and the diaspora* (my translation), which is at the core of the return migrant-oriented diasporism. Besides such virtual efforts to influence diaspora politics and identities, frequent visits are also important in the shaping of the Adyge-Abkhaz diaspora. After being involved in diaspora organizations, taking guests from the homeland to the diaspora associations, or hosting people from the diaspora, the returnees write memoirs of their journeys in diaspora

or online publications, where they define what was done “right” and what went “wrong.” An article written by a return migrant to Abkhazia who analyzes the existing political formations in relation to return, focusing, besides on homeland institutions, on the role of the diaspora organizations, states, “We know the interest of our people living in the diaspora to our homeland. When our people visit the homeland, also when we visit the diaspora, the main question is always return migration to the homeland” (Gogua 2013). The fact that this article was published online is illustrative of the way the communication triangle between the homeland and the diaspora works through virtual communication technologies and frequent visits, especially in recent years. While being involved in diaspora politics, the return migrants always note that they have come from there; as Gushef said in her quote earlier, they had the diaspora perception while in Turkey, and they have added to that a homeland perception of diaspora politics. Their efforts today in the homeland are based on the collective memory of their diasporic community back in Turkey; they try to maintain their role in diaspora politics and to take an active role in the construction and reconstruction of what diaspora is and should be.

Conclusion

In this article I have tried to explain the diasporic characteristics that return migrants to Adygeya and Abkhazia show when negotiating their belonging to their ancestral homeland. Previous studies of return have focused on the decision to return, the return migratory projects, and post-return adaptation processes separately. The research that this article derives from aims to combine theories of diaspora, transnationalism, and return to understand the decision-making process, the journey of return, and the post-return experiences of ancestral returnees from Turkey to the Caucasus through multisited and multimethod research. However, the narratives of return migrants showed a slightly different reality from “transnationalism” and “return.” Many returnees kept their diaspora identities, sometimes as a unified Adyge-Abkhaz (Cherkess) diaspora who shared a common culture and were dispersed around the Caucasian homeland; or in parallel to their diaspora regions, which kept people apart from each other due to some distinctive cultural and social elements in their everyday lives. Furthermore, they adapted to their homeland identities and started pushing for homeland-oriented divisions between the Adyge and Abkhaz people in the diaspora. As there is variety in the diaspora, there is likewise considerable variety among return migrants: a few sever all their relations with the diaspora and other returnees because they want to stay away from diaspora politics or to integrate thoroughly into the homeland communities, and some have established transnational lives, residing in two or more places, and so on. The above examples show that the Adyge-Abkhaz returnees continue to

esteem their ethnocultural values as they used to in the diaspora; indeed, they establish groups where their children can value their ethnic *diasporic* heritage through various activities focusing on language, music, dance, and handicrafts. The cultural bubbles or social networks that return migrants create for themselves can be argued to be the extension of the diaspora abroad. Nevertheless, the way they integrate the local ethnocultural resources in their efforts to create those bubbles distances them from the diaspora, who are limited by laws and regulations as well as by the resources of their host country; for example, teaching ethnic languages in private institutions is still prohibited by law in Turkey, and there is a fear of discrimination toward students who apply for elective ethnic language courses at state schools, whereas in the Caucasus the families have many options to develop the cultural and language skills of their children, from state schools to sponsored theater groups, and so on.

Potter, Conway, and Phillips (2005, 2), in their study of Caribbean return, argue that “return migrants are demographically selective, behaviourally diverse, they possess differing stocks of human capital, they have divergent attitudes, divergent images of their island homelands, divergent backgrounds, and consequently their experiences, adaptations, and behaviours will rarely be commonly shared.” When there is a strong diaspora organization, as in the case of Adyge-Abkhaz urban diaspora associations and rural communities, the return migrants could be experiencing somewhat similar post-return processes due to their similar socialization in the diaspora. So in the case of the second, third, and further generations, as argued by King and Christou (2008), return is not the end of the migration cycle, nor is it an episode of transnational sojourning, as some argue (Ley and Kobayashi 2005), but rather a new diasporic experience. Still, this is only a single case study of a relatively small community of return migrants and cannot be generalized. However, there is a need for further research into the ways in which return migrants can be conceptualized by diaspora studies, perhaps focusing especially on the close-knit diaspora communities (or organizations) and their post-return influences.

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Notes

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2. Adyge is the self-designation of several groups in the northwestern Caucasus, while Abkhaz is the name given to the ethnic peoples of the current Republic of Abkhazia. The Ubykh, whose language is now extinct, are ethnically and linguistically related to both the Adyge and Abkhaz, who surrounded their settlements along the Caucasian coastline before their exodus in the second half of the nineteenth century. These people are known by various names in their own languages and other languages but are frequently called the Cherkess; this derives from the fact that the authorities were unable to identify the differences between the exiled peoples and chose to label them as Cherkess, which historically referred to the Adyge people, as the Adyge comprised the majority of the Caucasian deportees. In this article, although I have chosen to refer to these people with their self-ascribed names (Adyge, Abkhaz, and Ubykh), there are points when it is not possible to do so. The Adyge came to be known in English as the *Circassians*, but researchers of the North Caucasian diaspora have occasionally used this term to refer to all the ethnic migrants from the North Caucasus. To address this plurality, I use *Circassian* to refer to the Adyge language, as widely known in the literature; prefer to put an explanation in parentheses when this term is used by the authors I cite; and use *Cherkess* as the direct translation of the word that refers either to the unified diaspora of the Adyge, Abkhaz, and Ubykh peoples of the northwestern Caucasus or to all North Caucasian diaspora.
3. My fieldwork in 2013 was made possible by the award of a MIREKOC Post-Graduate Student Research Grant.
4. There are no available data on the number of people who managed to return to their homeland from the first or second generations; however, some attempts have been recorded through family and life histories. See, for example, Dmitry Gulia's autobiography (Gulia 1973); also, Sagaria (1996) and Argun (2004) have written about different attempts to return, based on Russian and Soviet archives.
5. Smith and Guarnizo (1998, 27) argue that studies of transnationalism confuse conceptualization of how transnational relations take place with the effects of transnational practices. In my study of the dual transnationalism of the Adyge-Abkhaz return migrants, I have focused on conscious decisions of transnational practices, involvement in transnational networks, and the development of new transnational links to create a new form of diasporic belonging and as a survival strategy after return migration.
6. Among the most repeated regions are Adapazarı-Düzce (cities in western Turkey), Samsun (a north-eastern city), Uzunyayla (an eastern region that stretches from the city of Kayseri to the city of Sivas), and Reyhanlı (a district in southeastern Turkey bordering Syria).
7. The Adyge use salt while preparing *abysta* and put butter in the middle, while the Abkhaz do not; the Abkhaz in Abkhazia use fine and coarse white maize flour together, while the Abkhaz in Turkey use yellow maize flour; the Adyge of Eastern Turkey use *bulgur* (pounded wheat), while the Adyge of the eastern Caucasus use millet flakes; and so on.
8. However, the majority of the second-generation returnees are still too young to be included in this analysis, as return migration started only in the 1990s.
9. The term *diasporism* has been used by Besleney (2014) to refer to those who believed in staying and fighting for their rights in Turkey in the 1970s left-right movement, that is, referring to the revolutionists in contrast to the returnists, but today the term includes all the diaspora politics.

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