Music as Medicine: Healing Song and Ritual in Circassian Tradition

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Every people that has left a record of itself has at some time sung to its sick. The intuition that organised sound can act upon a suffering body is among the oldest in human culture, older than writing and incomparably older than pharmacology, and it has never entirely left us. In the United Kingdom today, music therapy is an established clinical intervention delivered by therapists registered with the Health and Care Professions Council; it works through a therapeutic relationship developed in live, frequently improvised musical interaction between therapist and client, and it has proved especially valuable for people whose access to verbal communication is limited, from children with autism to elderly people isolated by dementia.[1] The clinical and the traditional senses of 'music as medicine' are not the same thing, and this essay will be careful to keep them apart. They do, all the same, illuminate one another, and few traditions reward the comparison as richly as that of the Circassians, the Adyghe of the north-western Caucasus.

The Circassian case stands out for three reasons. It is unusually well documented: the cult of smallpox and the festive treatment of the sick were noted by European observers across several centuries, and the songs themselves were taken down from elderly singers and instrumentalists in the twentieth century, transcribed, archived and published in scholarly editions that remain open to study.[2] It is unusually long-lived: the healing vigil survived as living practice into the 1960s and 1970s, within the memory of people who were still alive when the first systematic analyses were written.[3] And it is unusually articulate. Adyghe healing music was embedded in a complete mythological system, with its own deities, its own etiquette, its own poetics of euphemism and praise, so that the surviving texts allow us to reconstruct not merely what was sung over the sick but why the singers believed it worked. What follows draws principally on the ethnomusicology of Alla Sokolova in Maikop and the mythosemiotic studies of Andzhela Gucheva in Nalchik, on the documentary anthologies assembled under Evgeny Gippius and his Kabardian colleagues, and on the older ethnographic literature these scholars cite.

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[1] "What is Music Therapy?', British Association for Music Therapy, definitional statement on HCPC-registered clinical practice.

[2] А.В. Гучева, «Адыгский магико-врачевальный обряд чапш: мифосемиотика и презентация культурных образов и символов» [The Adyghe magical healing rite of chapsh: mythosemiotics and the presentation of cultural images and symbols], *Известия СОИГСИ*, 59 (98), 2026, pp. 134–144 (here p. 136), DOI: 10.46698/VNC.2026.98.59.007; Б.Г. Ашхотов, «Новое свидетельство креативности адыгской музыкальной фольклористики» [A new testimony to the creativity of Adyghe musical folklore studies], *Доклады Адыгской (Черкесской) Международной академии наук*, vol. 8, Nalchik, 2006.

[3] Гучева, «Обряд чапш», p. 136.

The night vigil

At the centre of the tradition stands the chapsh (Kabardian щӏапщэ, shchapshche, also щӏопщакӏуэ, shchopshchak'ue; western Adyghe кӏапщ, k'apshch), the all-night healing vigil at the bedside of the sick or wounded. The word derives from the verb епщэн (epshchen), literally 'to blow upon someone', that is, to charm an illness away by magical breathing and whispering, and it seems to have served as a general designation for ritual actions in which a miraculous cure was sought.[4] Zaur Naloev, whose studies of the rite remain foundational, distinguished two principal varieties: the chapsh at the bedside of a smallpox patient, фэрэкӏ щIапщэ (fereq' shchapshche), and the chapsh for the treatment of traumas, that is, of wounds, broken bones and the extraction of bullets.[5] Each was sounded by its own repertoire of healing songs, щӏапщэ уэрэд (shchapshche wered), of which the scholarship identifies three strictly ritual types: songs for the treatment of smallpox (фэрэкӏ уэрэд, fereq' wered; in the western dialect шъорэкӏ орэд, shoreq' ored); songs for the treatment of wounds (щӏэпщэкӏуэ уэрэд, shchepshchekue wered), to which are joined songs for the removal of bullets (щэхэх орэд, shchekhekh ored) and of arrows (сагъындакъ, sagyndaq); and songs for the treatment of injuries and bone fractures (щӏэпщэ уэрэд, shchepshche wered).[6]

What did a chapsh look like? The descriptions agree on its essentials. When someone lay wounded or gravely ill, the young people of the whole aul gathered at the bedside, most often at night, since night was when illness was believed to take its acute forms. There were songs, dances and merry games, and there was зэфэусэ (zefeuse), the playful versified quarrelling exchanged between young men and women. The cardinal rule of the late-night chapsh was that the patient must not be allowed to fall asleep, and above all must not be left alone with the disease. In its archaic form the vigil deployed a battery of magical instruments against the evil spirits of illness: laughter, noise, an iron ploughshare, an egg, all enlisted for the victory of life over death. The vigil was repeated night after night, and ended only when the fever fell and the signs of the illness receded.[7] Sokolova's account adds that the rite was held for bullet wounds, snake bites and bone injuries from the most ancient times until the middle of the twentieth century; that the dancing and singing were accompanied on the Adyghe bowed fiddle, the shichepshin(a); and that the player was always a man who knew the content and the proper order of the ritual well.[8]

The fullest elaboration belonged to the smallpox vigil. Its composition followed mythological consciousness and the norms of etiquette in addressing the Lord of smallpox, Ziuskhan

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[4]З.М. Налоев, «У истоков песенного искусства» [At the origins of song art], in *Народные песни и инструментальные наигрыши адыгов*, ed. Е.В. Гиппиус, vol. 1 (Moscow: Советский композитор, 1980), p. 15, cited in Гучева, «Обряд чапш», p. 135. See also З.М. Налоев, «Функция песни в обряде "чапщ"» [The function of song in the chapsh rite], in *Из истории культуры адыгов* (Nalchik: Эльбрус, 1978), pp. 5–24.

[5]Налоев, «У истоков песенного искусства», p. 15, cited in Гучева, «Обряд чапш», p. 135.

[6]Гучева, «Обряд чапш», pp. 135–136.

[7]«Древние адыги знали секрет борьбы с болезнями» [The ancient Adyghe knew the secret of fighting illness], *АиФ-Адыгея*, journalistic feature incorporating interviews with Alla Sokolova and Khanya Batova; the account of the rite is given there by Sokolova.

[8]A.N. Sokolova, 'Music as Medicine: The Adyghes' Case', conference paper, Adyghe State University, Maikop, section 6.1 (unpaginated).

(Зиусхьэн), the patron deity Sozeresh (Созэрэщ), the god of fire and iron and patron of smiths, Tlepsh (Лъэпщ), and the disease itself, which could be approached only as цIэимыIуэ (ts'eimyue), 'the unnamed one'.[9] Around the sickbed unfolded what Gucheva describes as a minutely developed canon: the ritual purification of all present; a rite of 'investiture' by which Ziuskhan and the smallpox were formally invited; sacrifice and the preparation of ritual food; the ceremonial 'feeding' of the deity, the patient, the healer and the whole company; ritual swinging on swings; and, at the close, the thanksgiving dance Фэрыудж (Feryudzh), performed by the girls and women in honour of the coming of the Lord of smallpox, of the 'happy guest' that was the disease itself, and of those who had recovered from it.[10] The whole action could extend over five days and more, sometimes seven; and within it the procedure that a modern physician would recognise as its medical kernel, variolation, the deliberate inoculation of the patient with matter from a mild case, occupied less than a single hour.[11] Gucheva accordingly reads the fereqI shchIapshche as a universal ritual of variolation bearing the features of a particular canon: a piece of practical immunology wrapped, protected and transmitted inside an elaborate magical performance.[12]

That reading has an old and curious echo in Western letters. Voltaire, in the eleventh of his *Lettres philosophiques* (1734), held up the Circassian women as having inoculated their children against smallpox 'from time immemorial', long before the procedure scandalised and then conquered Europe.[13] The travellers' corpus behind such claims is considerable. European orientalists and travellers who passed through the Caucasus between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries repeatedly described the Circassian cult of smallpox and the festival held in honour of the disease and its Lord; their accounts were gathered in the Soviet compilation edited by Valentin Gardanov.[14] The corpus runs from Giorgio Interiano, whose description of the 'Zichi, called Circassians', printed by Aldus Manutius in Venice in 1502, is the earliest substantial European account of Adyghe life and custom, to the journals of nineteenth-century British residents such as James Stanislaus Bell, who lived on the Circassian coast from 1837 to 1839.[15] Gucheva is careful to note that these reports, though invaluable, are fragmentary and sometimes equivocal on the healing rites themselves; what they establish beyond doubt is a consistent model of behaviour, a culture that publicly prized the healthy and beautiful body.[16]

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[9]Гучева, «Обряд чапш», p. 136.

[10]Ibid., pp. 136–137.

[11]Ibid., p. 137.

[12]Ibid., p. 136.

[13]Voltaire, *Lettres philosophiques* (1734), Letter XI, 'Sur l'insertion de la petite vérole'.

[14]Гучева, «Обряд чапш», p. 136; the compilation is *Адыги, балкарцы и карачаевцы в известиях европейских авторов XIII–XIX вв.* [The Adyghe, Balkars and Karachays in the reports of European authors of the thirteenth to nineteenth centuries], comp. В.К. Гарданов (Nalchik: Эльбрус, 1974), cited there.

[15]Giorgio Interiano, *La vita: & sito de Zichi, chiamiti ciarcassi: historia notabile* (Venice: Aldus Manutius, 1502); James Stanislaus Bell, *Journal of a Residence in Circassia During the Years 1837, 1838 and 1839*, 2 vols (London: Edward Moxon, 1840).

[16]Гучева, «Обряд чапш», p. 136.

The unnamed guest

To understand the smallpox songs one must first understand the fear they managed. In the traditional view, recorded for the neighbouring Abkhaz by Mery Khashba in terms that hold equally for the Adyghe material, every disease had its particular deity, whose anger caused the illness; the sufferer was assumed to have offended the gods or the spirits of the ancestors, perhaps by performing a sacrifice or a commemoration carelessly or late.[17] From this followed a strict economy of speech. It was forbidden to call the deity, the disease or any other source of danger by its own name. People used substitute names, compliments and diminutives; they attached endearments and polite forms of address; they altered their voices, speaking quietly and insinuatingly; they brought the deity gifts and propitiated it. Gucheva calls this the exemplary form of address, a code of 'correct behaviour' before the sacred and the dangerous.[18]

Out of that economy grew a whole canonised imagery. Smallpox, the unnamed one, appears in the tradition as 'three bright beads', as 'a burka of quality' (the felt cloak of the horseman), as 'three pies', 'three petal earrings', 'the down of a golden dove's wings'.[19] In the musical tradition the disease is likened to an angel, a goddess, a beautiful brown-eyed woman with silky golden curls, on whose skin, white and soft as cotton wool, the pocks ripen.[20] The Lord of smallpox himself is never described directly; the incantations and laments render him in circumlocution as the golden horseman, the patterned one, the sun-eyed, the master, he who has appeared with a happy end, or simply as a swift-footed horse.[21] Around him stand his consort, the good mistress Khana Guasha (Хана Гуаща), and his herd of magical horses.[22] Within this repertoire the scholarship distinguishes four functionally and symbolically equivalent varieties of fereqʾ wered: songs of treating smallpox, songs of address to the Lord of smallpox, smallpox incantation songs, and smallpox songs proper.[23]

The most vivid surviving embodiment of this world is the Bzhedug healing song «Си кӏакӏор кӏэкӏошӏу» (Si kʾakʾor kʾekoshʾu, 'My burka is a burka of quality'). It was first recorded in 1959 by Asker Gadagatl during an expedition to the aul of Teuchezhkhabl in the Adyghe Autonomous Oblast, from the singing of Ali Udzhukhu, born in 1871, and was published in 1980 in the first volume of the anthology *Folk Songs and Instrumental Tunes of the Adyghe*.[24] Its poetic text is, in Gucheva's phrase, an encoded message: the mysterious disease

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[17]М.М. Хашба [Mery Khashba], *Жанры абхазской народной песни* [Genres of Abkhaz folk song] (Sukhum: Алашара, 1983), p. 56, cited in Гучева, «Обряд чапш», p. 137.

[18]Гучева, «Обряд чапш», p. 137, drawing on А.В. Гучева, «Чапш и песни лечения оспы черкесов (адыгов): структура, семантика, динамика культурных смыслов» [Chapsh and the smallpox treatment songs of the Circassians (Adyghe): structure, semantics, dynamics of cultural meanings], *Музыковедение*, 2022, no. 7, p. 38.

[19]Гучева, «Обряд чапш», p. 137.

[20]*Народные песни и инструментальные наигрыши адыгов*, vol. 1, p. 99, cited in Гучева, «Обряд чапш», p. 137.

[21]*Народные песни и инструментальные наигрыши адыгов*, vol. 1, pp. 147 and 157, cited in Гучева, «Обряд чапш», p. 137.

[22]Гучева, «Обряд чапш», p. 138.

[23]Ibid., p. 142, n. 1.

[24]Ibid., pp. 142–143, n. 2; the song is printed in *Народные песни и инструментальные наигрыши адыгов*, vol. 1, pp. 100–101.

is depicted entirely through tabooed cultural images and signs, and the content unfolds through a fixed sequence of motifs, the 'birth' of the smallpox, its coming into the human world, its acceptance by its host as a 'happy guest' (хьакIэмафэ, khakʾemafe), the happy 'ripening' of the pocks, and the symbolic prediction of a happy cure and a happy outcome of the rite.[25]

The detail repays attention. The burka of the title is made by a 'good woman'; the epithet, Gucheva argues, is no ornament but a prognosis, since the adjective attaches metaphorically to the disease itself and predicts a favourable end to the event.[26] The verbs of the song fall into two groups. One set ('was made', 'they gave me', 'they call me', 'they came to us') describes actions performed not by the patient but by an outside personage, the disease arriving in the human world by someone's intent; the other ('I go', 'I laid', 'I lay down', 'I fell asleep', 'they ripen') registers the human response to the illness and its working in the body, oriented towards cure.[27] The gifts of the guest behave like seeds. 'Three pies they gave me, I laid them at the foot of the wattle fence'; 'the three beads ripen, each apart; they ripen to our joy'. Pies and beads, conventional symbols of plenty and fertility, are sown like grain and ripen like a harvest, and in this interaction, Gucheva suggests, they acquire magical properties foreign to such objects in ordinary life and come to act as mediators between worlds.[28]

The geography of the song is a geography of boundaries. 'In it I go to the funeral feast': the world of the living and the world of the dead collide in a single line. The wattle fence (чэу, cheu) at whose foot the pies are laid marks the frontier between the divine and the human worlds, or a neutral ground on which the two meet; in the mythological picture, the fence a man wove around his dwelling, his yard and his field was a magic circle, and joined to a spoken spell or a sung incantation it served, perhaps, as a protective boundary between Cosmos and Chaos, between one's own and the alien.[29] Even the small word 'apart' carries weight: the three beads ripening 'each apart' model, in Gucheva's reading, the disordered condition of the 'sick world', the chaos out of which the many possible outcomes of the chapsh unfold.[30] And the text as a whole is strangely impersonal. The smallpox is never named; things are made, given, brought; the disease acts as an anonymous force whose course does not depend on the human being. Yet the sounding song was itself understood as a force of the same order, able to stand against the spread of the epidemic and to act upon the illness and upon the process of healing.[31]

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[25]Гучева, «Обряд чапш», pp. 137–138.

[26]Ibid., pp. 138–139.

[27]Ibid., pp. 138–139. The Adyghe verb forms are ышIыгъ, къысати, къысаIу, къытфэкIуагъэри in the first group, and срокIу, есхьакIи, сегъолъыIишъи, сычъой, мэтIыгъуи in the second.

[28]Ibid., p. 139. The lines quoted in translation are хьалыжъуищри къысати, чэу лъапэми есхьакIи and зэрызищыштъы мэтIыгъуи, ятIыгъуакIэри гухахъуи.

[29]Ibid., pp. 139–140; the line on the funeral feast is хьадэIусми срокIу.

[30]Ibid., p. 140.

[31]Ibid., p. 140.

The music is built to the same design as the words. The poetic text uses the chain strophe, a pantun-like device in which the line of one couplet is taken up at the opening of the next, levelling the metre and marking length in the following strophe; the syllabo-rhythmic figure си кIакIо (si k'ak'o, 'my burka') serves as the hinge. The melodic strophe falls into two contrasting parts built on a single syllabo-rhythmic model, and the tune unfolds as a series of varied repetitions of the first phrase over an unchanging second, a scheme Gucheva renders as ab, a1b, a2b, a2b.[32] Two elements never vary: the exclamation si k'ak'o, which closes the opening phrase and functions as a refrain, and the final уорида (uorida), built on the falling notes of a triad, B flat, G flat and E flat.[33] Repetition here is not poverty of invention but a structural and semantic cliché, a melodic lexeme: its pace and rhythm match the rapid patter in which spoken spells were traditionally delivered, a special form of recitation, and the apotropaic force of the song lives precisely in these repetitions, verbal and melodic, while the manner of delivery, sung, declaimed or whispered, at once exposes and conceals fear, despair, pain and the sense of doom, which the rite is designed to convert into the joy of recovery.[34] A song of this kind, Gucheva concludes, is the myth itself brought to life in present time, a phenomenon sounding on several levels at once and never fully decipherable in any one of them.[35]

Anaesthesia by melody

The chapsh for wounds has left a legend that condenses the tradition's claims into a single scene. A bullet, it is told, was removed from the leg of the warrior Kozheberduko (Kodzhebardiqo) to the sound of a designated tune; the surgery was performed without any anaesthetic, the buoyant melody alone playing the anaesthetic's part, and from that day the tune entered the rite as its obligatory ceremonial text.[36] The melody survives in the instrumental corpus: the 2005 collection of Adyghe folk instrumental music includes, among its dance tunes, the zygatlat played after the removal of the bullet from the wound of Kozheberduko Mahamat.[37] A zygatlat is an ordinary dance genre of the western Adyghe; what made this one extraordinary was the story attached to it and the work it was asked to do.

The pharmacological cupboard of Adyghe folk medicine was, by the standards of many traditional cultures, bare. Sokolova notes that the Adyghe knew neither opium nor any comparable drug widely used in the ethnomedicine of other peoples, and that their medical culture developed different methods.[38] Those methods were psychological before the word existed. Songs with heroic texts helped the sick man to bear pain by identification with the

[32]Ibid., pp. 139–140.

[33]Ibid., pp. 140–141.

[34]Ibid., p. 141.

[35]Ibid., p. 141.

[36]Sokolova, 'Music as Medicine', section 6.1.

[37]Ашхотов, «Новое свидетельство»; the collection is *Народная инструментальная музыка адыгов (черкесов)* [Folk instrumental music of the Adyghe (Circassians)], comp. З.П. Кардангушев and А.В. Гучева (Nalchik: Эль-Фа, 2005).

[38]Sokolova, 'Music as Medicine', section 6.

figures of heroes; quieter tunes ran in a narrative vein; merry dance melodies distracted the patient while the young onlookers genuinely enjoyed themselves; and the patient's attention, drawn into games and laughter, was, in Sokolova's formulation, disconnected from pain and alarm and shifted to other dominants of perception.[39] Even the praise formulas of musical life carry the trace of this faith: well into the twentieth century, to compliment a fine accordionist one said that he played so well the paralysed rose from their beds and danced.[40]

Sokolova's most important analytical point concerns what the tunes were and were not. With the single exception of the ceremonial melody proper to the rite, almost everything performed at a chapsh also circulated outside it, in ordinary social life, where it carried a purely aesthetic or applied function. Performed within the ritual, the same tunes were vested with therapeutic sense. Nothing in the notes changed; what changed was the frame. A sublimation of genre occurred in the context of the rite: a simple song became a ceremonial song, a common dance melody became a magical one, and individual tunes became acoustic symbols of the rite itself. The tunes became salutary, Sokolova writes, because people perceived them as salutary; the medical property of this music rests not in melody, intonation or rhythm as such but in the attitude of those who receive them as beneficent, within a particular ethnocultural context.[41] She stands here with the wider ethnomusicology of perception associated with Izaly Zemtsovsky, who cautioned against seeking anything supernatural in ceremonial tunes and directed attention instead to how they are heard.[42] It is a rigorously unmystical account of a mystical practice, and it marks the precise point at which the traditional rite and the modern clinic face one another: in both, the efficacy of music is inseparable from relationship, expectation and frame.

Sound, cosmos and the kamyl

Behind the healing repertoire lies a broader Adyghe philosophy of sound, and its emblem is the kamyl (къамыл, qamyl), the ancient end-blown flute made from the lake reed and, in later times, from a gun barrel, with two or three fingerholes set near its lower end.[43] The Nart epic gives the instrument a cosmological charter. The flute of the hero Ashamez was no simple shepherd's pipe but the flute of Tkhagoledzh, god of fertility: one of its ends was white and the other black, and the song that flowed through the white end was unlike the song that flowed through the black. When Ashamez blew into the white end, life grew flowering and abundant; had he blown into the black, joy would have vanished from the earth, the grasses

[39]Ibid., section 6.1.

[40]Ibid., section 6.2.

[41]Ibid., sections 6.1 and 8.

[42]И.И. Земцовский, «Теория восприятия и этномузыковедческая практика» [The theory of perception and ethnomusicological practice], *Советская музыка*, 1986, no. 3, pp. 62–63, cited in Sokolova, 'Music as Medicine', section 5.

[43]А.В. Гучева, «Семантика архаичной музыки черкесов (адыгов): звуковые и цветовые "преамбулы"» [The semantics of the archaic music of the Circassians (Adyghe): sound and colour 'preambles'], *Проблемы музыкальной науки / Music Scholarship*, 2022, no. 1, pp. 134–141 (here p. 140, n. 1), DOI: 10.17674/2782-3601.2022.1.134-141.

would have withered, people and animals would have perished.[44] Gucheva reads the making of the first instrument as one of humanity's decisive steps in the cognition of the surrounding world: created sound had to be received not merely as a material for communing with the world of the gods but as a phenomenon capable of containing a multitude of meanings.[45]

Two ritual shepherd tunes preserve this black-and-white cosmology in sounding form. «Мэлегъажьэ» (Melegazhe) accompanied the driving of the flocks out to pasture; «Мэлгъэжей» (Melgezhei) accompanied their settling to sleep. Both rites, and the kamyl tunes that sounded them, belonged to the herding cycle and to the dedications of the anthropomorphic god Amysh (Амыщ), patron of small livestock. Our only monographic witness to the actions themselves is Askerbi Shortanov, who records that the tunes were played usually on the bzhami, a kind of flute made of reed or of a gun barrel, and that it was enough to begin the melody for the flock to set off without any shout or other prompting, which suggested to him that the tune held a magical significance for the shepherds and was bound up with the name of Amysh.[46] The recordings we possess are precious precisely because the rituals themselves had already gone. Melegazhe was first taken down in 1949, in the village of Zayukovo in the Baksan district of Kabarda, from the kamyl player Andulakh Batitov, born in 1890; both tunes were recorded again in 1971 by Zaramuk Kardangushev from Alisag Kushkhov (1894 to 1989), together with a shepherd's pasturing melody, and once more in 1972 and 1977. The tapes are held in the phonogram archive of the Kabardino-Balkarian Institute for Humanities Research (Nos 12/1, 124/16 and 124/18), where they form part of the golden fund of Circassian musical culture.[47]

Gucheva's analysis of these two miniatures, which must be read as scholarly interpretation rather than as the tradition's own commentary, finds in them a complete sound cosmology. Melgezhei she identifies with night: a quiet, calm melody, a muffled flute timbre, a slow tempo, the whole conveying pacification and rest. Night in the mythological picture is an ending, a frontier, a symbolic death followed by the birth of the new or the transfiguration of the old; its most magical hour is midnight, жэщ ныкъуэ (zheshch nykue), when the visible and invisible boundaries between worlds are erased.[48] The tune's low register is, in her phrase, a cryptogram demanding philosophical decipherment: repeated trills on the notes f1, g1 and a1 convey a nascent urge to rise out of the depths towards the light, a flight that is never resolved and that returns each time to the foundation note c1, so that the melody discloses the ambivalence of the ritual's governing idea, the denial of dying and, at the same time, the possibility of a symbolic death.[49] Melegazhe is its antithesis in every parameter: a bright tune in the high register, a range of an octave and a half, a capricious rhythm, and a

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[44]*Нартхэр. Адыгский героический эпос* [The Narts: the Adyghe heroic epic] (Moscow: Наука, 1974), p. 259, cited in Гучева, «Семантика архаичной музыки», p. 136.

[45]Гучева, «Семантика архаичной музыки», p. 136.

[46]А.Т. Шортанов, *Адыгская мифология* [Adyghe mythology] (Nalchik: Эльбрус, 1982), p. 93, cited in Гучева, «Семантика архаичной музыки», pp. 137–138.

[47]Гучева, «Семантика архаичной музыки», p. 137 and nn. 2–4 (p. 140), where the KBIGI phonogram archive numbers and recording details are given.

[48]Ibid., p. 137.

[49]Ibid., pp. 137–138.

recurring ascending figure (e2, a2, d3) that pushes the line upwards, creating the effect of flight and a sense of sounding perspective, what Gucheva calls the mysticism of sound, realised in the nature of the kamyl itself.[50]

Octave relations carry the architecture. The saturation of the melody with stable notes an octave apart (a1 and a2) marks out registral boundaries that personify the upper, middle and lower worlds of the myth, the upper register communicating with the sacred world of the gods, the middle holding the neutral frontier between the extremes, the lower answering the darker tune of night; a dispersed 'octave echo' on the stable degrees fixes the spatial coordinates of the tune, and of the myth, while the mirrored descent of the octave at the close signals completion, an end, and therefore the possible birth of a new myth.[51] To this sound symbolism corresponds a colour symbolism: Melegazhe is associated with white and signifies day, Melgezhei with black and night, the two forming an antithetic pair that maps onto life and sacral death, so that the naigryshes function, in Gucheva's terms, as ready formulas of resolution, a universal image code of the myth, performed at fixed times and in fixed circumstances.[52] Sokolova's ethnophonic studies add a further, geographical layer of interpretation. Adyghe song is characteristically a solo-drone polyphony in which a high, bright leading voice traces pointed phrases above low, muffled supporting voices intoning meaningless syllables, and she hears in this texture the topography of the mountains themselves: the drone as the massif, the soloist's phrases as summits of differing altitudes, the dull answering voices as mountain echo. The consonant-saturated Adyghe language and the short melodic breath of the songs belong, on this reading, to the same acoustic environment of gorges, rivers and rockfall.[53] These are suggestive correspondences, advanced by their authors as interpretation; they should be received as such, and not mistaken for the tradition's own testimony.

The wider healing soundscape

The Circassian healing repertoire did not stand alone in the western Caucasus. The Abkhaz, close neighbours and old kin in culture, maintained a strictly parallel system, documented in Konstantin Kovach's pioneering collections of 1929 and 1930 and analysed by Mery Khashba.[54] Abkhazian tradition knew songs for the treatment of burns, with a legend that a song about a burn made the wound skin over more quickly; it knew the paradoxical lullaby, sung over a child sick with a contagious disease, in which death is wished upon the infant, a magic by contradiction apparently designed to deceive whatever powers were listening; and it knew the converse case, the lullaby sung in the woman's room at a difficult birth, affirming

[50]Ibid., pp. 138–139.

[51]Ibid., pp. 138–139.

[52]Ibid., pp. 139–140.

[53]Sokolova, 'Music as Medicine', section 3.

[54]К.В. Ковач, *101 абхазская народная песня. Этнографическая запись с историческими справками* [101 Abkhaz folk songs: an ethnographic record with historical notes] (Sukhum, 1929) and *Песни кодорских абхазцев* [Songs of the Kodor Abkhazians] (Sukhum, 1930), both cited in Гучева, «Обряд чапш», p. 136; M. Chashba, 'The Abkhaz Musical Folklore', in *The Problems of Art and Ethnography*, ed. B. Kagazezhev, vol. 2 (Maikop: Adyghe State University, 1998), pp. 30–39, cited in Sokolova, 'Music as Medicine'.

in advance the magic of a successful delivery.[55] The Abkhaz smallpox cult mirrored the Adyghe one down to its dramatis personae: a special rite was held through the night at the bedside, with songs honouring the god who had visited the patient, the golden lord Achy Zoschan, and at times his consort, Chania the White.[56] Elsewhere in the ritual economy, aerophones, wind instruments whose voice is breath itself, were held capable by their very morphology of joining the earthly and unearthly worlds, and were used in the rites of searching for the drowned and for those lost under snowslides and rockfalls.[57] The dance, too, could be medicine and public prayer at once: in the Sandrak, childless women danced around a sacred stone, for three days or as many as seven while their strength lasted, asking the gods for a child and driving away the malicious spirit thought to cause the affliction.[58] Music sounded before battle, summoning bravery; the tales of the Abkhaz and Adyghe world remember musicians who healed warriors' wounds with tunes so that they could fight again; and in the twentieth century fieldworkers recorded repeated testimony that the sick recovered more readily after surgery when they could hear their native music.[59]

It would distort the tradition, all the same, to present song as the whole of Circassian care for the sick. The chapsh was one strand in a practical folk medicine that set broken bones between wooden splints, treated with herbs, and understood convalescence as a matter of rest, distraction and good feeding.[60] The dietary culture had its own quiet pharmacology: the everyday cuisine described by Azamatova ran to nourishing broths and fermented milk drinks, among them kundysu (кундысу), the boiled-down whey blended with fresh milk that was served after rich food and credited with quenching thirst and regulating the digestion.[61] Tkhagapsova's monograph on Adyghe folk medicine surveys this larger system, within which the sung rite takes its place as one therapeutic register among several.[62] The songs did not replace the splint or the broth; they surrounded them.

What the chapsh knew

Read with modern eyes, the chapsh looks like a remarkably complete anticipation of practices that clinical research has since articulated. Popular treatments make the point bluntly: a newspaper feature on the rite, quoting Sokolova alongside a family psychologist, rehearses the physiology of laughter, the fall in cortisol and adrenaline, the release of endorphins that blunt pain and lift mood, and reaches for the celebrated case of Norman

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[55]Chashba, 'The Abkhaz Musical Folklore', p. 34, cited in Sokolova, 'Music as Medicine', section 6.2.

[56]Chashba, 'The Abkhaz Musical Folklore', p. 33, cited in Sokolova, 'Music as Medicine', section 6.2.

[57]F.F. Kharaeva-Gvasheva, 'The Mysticism of the Timbre (On the Mythology of Musical Instruments)', in *Etudes on Adyghe History and Culture*, eds A. Sokolova and R. Unarokova, vol. 2 (Maikop, 1999), p. 43, cited in Sokolova, 'Music as Medicine', section 7.

[58]A.N. Sokolova, 'Sandrak', in *The Results of Folk-Ethnographic Studies on Ethnic Cultures of Kuban for 1997*, ed. M. Sementsov (Belorechensk, 1998), pp. 79–82, cited in Sokolova, 'Music as Medicine', section 7.

[59]Sokolova, 'Music as Medicine', section 6.2.

[60]«Древние адыги знали секрет борьбы с болезнями» (the details of splinting and herbal treatment are given there by Khanya Batova); a journalistic source.

[61]М.З. Азаматова, *Адыгейская кухня* [Adyghe cuisine] (Maikop: Адыгейское отделение Краснодарского книжного издательства, 1979), section «Кундысу».

[62]G.G. Tkhagapsova, *The Adyghe Folk Medicine* (Maikop: Meoty, 1996), cited in Sokolova, 'Music as Medicine'.

Cousins, the American editor who described laughing himself back to health from a grave collagen disease.[63] Such framings are journalism rather than scholarship and should be weighed accordingly; Cousins's account, in any case, was a memoir and not a clinical trial.[64] What can be said more carefully is this. The structural features of the chapsh (the refusal to leave the patient alone, the mobilisation of an entire community around the sickbed, the use of laughter, games and flirtatious banter, the offer of heroic models with which the sufferer might identify, the designation of particular music as belonging to the work of healing) correspond closely to mechanisms that contemporary clinical music therapy and the psychology of pain treat as genuine: distraction, social support, positive emotion, identification, and above all the therapeutic relationship as the vehicle through which music does its work.[65] None of this licenses the claim that song cured smallpox. Where the smallpox vigil genuinely protected, it did so through the variolation concealed within its single medical hour; the songs managed terror, secured the patience of the patient, and bound the community to the sickbed. The distinction between what the tradition believed and what analysis can support must be kept throughout; and it is the tradition itself, with its sober recognition that the same tune heals inside the rite and merely pleases outside it, that comes closest to drawing that distinction unprompted.

The documentary record is now the tradition's principal body, and its history is itself a chapter of Circassian cultural achievement. The multi-volume anthology *Folk Songs and Instrumental Tunes of the Adyghe*, four volumes of which appeared between 1980 and 1990 with two more long awaiting publication, was produced by the folklorists Zaur Naloev, Zaramuk Kardangushev and Adam Gutov with the linguists N. Ivanokov and A. Gukemukh; the singer and folklorist Vladimir Baragunov transcribed the recordings across the entire corpus of genres using the method of analytical notation, the Moscow folklorist A. Kabanov verified the transcriptions, and the whole enterprise was directed by Evgeny Gippius, one of the outstanding ethnomusicologists of the twentieth century.[66] The first volume of that anthology is where the smallpox songs, including «Си кIакIор кIэкIошIу», found print. At the end of 2005 the El-Fa publishing centre in Nalchik issued the companion collection *Folk Instrumental Music of the Adyghe (Circassians)*, compiled by Kardangushev and Gucheva: a project begun as early as 1971, when Baragunov and the composer Dzhabrail Khaupa were charged with notating the instrumental fonds of the republican radio and the research institute. The volume gathers 525 items recorded in 46 settlements of the North Caucasus, together with tunes sent in 1962 from the diaspora communities of Syria and Turkey, and preserves the playing of bearers born at the turn of the century: Elmurza Shaozhev (born 1898, shikapshina), Guasha Teuvazhukova (born 1885, pshina), Guatizh Temizok (born 1877, kamyl), Amirkhan Khavpachev (born 1872, voice), Alisag Kushkhov on the kamyl, and many others.[67] Behind both publications stands the phonogram archive of the

[63]«Древние адыги знали секрет борьбы с болезнями» (the physiology of laughter is given there by the psychologist Elena Ionova); a journalistic source, to be weighed as such.

[64]Norman Cousins, *Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979).

[65]'What is Music Therapy?', British Association for Music Therapy.

[66]Ашхотов, «Новое свидетельство».

[67]Ibid.; *Народная инструментальная музыка адыгов (черкесов)* (Nalchik: Эль-Фа, 2005).

Kabardino-Balkarian Institute for Humanities Research, where the field tapes of 1949 to 1977 still sit.

The urgency of this work is not antiquarian. Gucheva closes her study of the shepherd tunes with a warning: under the conditions of globalisation that define the present cultural situation, local musical systems are being destroyed, and a growing number of instrumental pieces and whole musical-ethnographic complexes are passing rapidly out of use and out of researchers' sight, which makes the study of the surviving archaic specimens a matter of preserving them in memory and making sense of them within musical culture at large.[68] Ashkhotov, reviewing the 2005 collection, makes the complementary point: in a world of deepening assimilation and convergence, where elements of ethnic culture are becoming artefacts, such documented records allow the national identity of the material to be recognised at all, and fix the tradition in the social memory of the people.[69]

What, finally, does the chapsh tell us? That a small mountain people, facing the most terrifying disease of the pre-modern world with no drugs and no physicians, assembled out of song, dance, laughter, etiquette and communal presence a technology of care whose working principles, distraction, identification, social support, the healing relationship, would be rediscovered and given clinical form only centuries later. That the same tradition, far from being naively credulous, located the power of its music not in the notes but in their reception, and so anticipated the modern scholar's conclusion that tunes became salutary because people received them as salutary. And that this achievement was never a primitive draft of our medicine but a complete cosmological system of its own, in which the deadliest of guests was met at the wattle fence with pies, bright beads and a fine felt cloak, and sung to, all night, by the whole village, until the fever broke. The recordings in Nalchik and the published anthologies keep that world legible. It falls to the present generation to keep reading it.

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[68]Гучева, «Семантика архаичной музыки», p. 140.

[69]Ашхотов, «Новое свидетельство».

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