



They Call It Home

Ethnic and religious violence keep Russia's North Caucasus region in the news. A portrait of daily life in one small village reveals a richer, more hopeful reality.

BY MARGARET PAXSON

AKHMED DOESN'T LOCK HIS GATE AT NIGHT. HE doesn't lock his doors, and he leaves his windows open to let the curtains twitch in the breeze. The night sounds with frogs and yipping dogs. Not so long ago, in his village of Baliiko* in the Russian republic of Kabardino-

Balkaria, you could hear the Chechen War exploding at night in the distant mountains. A few years ago Chechens kidnapped the brother of a rich man in Baliiko for ransom, along with his friend; the friend was murdered in the woods when he didn't run fast enough to keep up. In Nalchik, the Kabardino-Balkarian capital, roughly 20 miles away, violence in

*I have changed the name of the village and the names of its people.



The high walls around family compounds in a typical Kabardino-Balkarian village give little hint of the profusion of life inside their gates.

2005 left scores dead in the city's tree-lined boulevards.

Akhmed doesn't lock his doors, but he is not a foolish man. He remembers being poor enough as a boy to experience the kind of hunger that drives children to eat grass while their parents toil on collective farms. In adulthood, he mastered the art of trade to sell the produce he grows. Now he works from before the sun rises until long after it sets to make a pretty home for his wife and daughters. Akhmed—a thick, strong man of 56 with an easy smile and a shock of white hair—knows what is important to him: his family. The endless conversation of birds and dogs and sheep and cows, the call to prayer that wafts from the local mosque at dusk, the flood of stars at night: This is the background of his life.

Akhmed's world is not defined by war or the baroque nuance of ethnic identification. In an off-hand way, he has been known to say about the two chief ethnic groups of his region, "The Balkars and the Kabardians, they're pretty much the same." A

Kabardian himself, Akhmed is simply not used to thinking of the world as divided into irreconcilable ethnic units. Many in his region—particularly in cities and capitals where power is parsed—do. Power grabs flared between Kabardians and Balkars in the first years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and there have been far more destructive clashes in other parts of the North Caucasus, such as Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Dagestan.

The Kabardians trace their history to great Circassian principalities, and the Balkars to Turkic tribes. Perhaps the more important difference between these peoples is that the Balkars were the traditional inhabitants of high mountain villages—where they raised horses, herded sheep, and grew potatoes and cabbages—and Kabardians were herders and farmers in the rolling foothills and plains.

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Traveling between mountain aeries and grassy farmlands, Balkars and Kabardians—despite speaking different languages—have worked together and traded with one another for hundreds of years.

Akhmed doesn't spend his days fretting about who will get more seats in the local parliament, which languages dominate on television, or whether a particular dish his wife cooks is Kabardian or Balkar. He worries instead about his children's health and education and prospects for happiness in marriage. He wonders if the price for cucumbers will rise if local government officials start selling cucumbers of their own. Or if some Chechens will come by and give a good price for radishes. Or if he will be able to trade tomatoes for potatoes and cabbages with the Balkars in the mountains. War does worry him, and he expresses concern about some of the more violent nationalist movements he's heard about over the years. But Akhmed—born and raised in the countryside, far from the passions that drive power struggles in urban capitals—doesn't define himself by how different he is from others. His first concerns, like those of so many of his compatriots, are deeply and intimately local.

Famous in history for the romance of its warriors and the diversity of its cultures and languages, lately the region around the Caucasus mountain chain—that magnificent topographic crush that marks the boundary between Russia and its southern neighbors Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan—has been known best for its troubles. In the past 20 years, in Russia's North Caucasus alone, two wars in the Republic of Chechnya have caused tens of thousands of deaths. Though Chechnya's conflict began as a struggle for independence, as conditions deteriorated over time the conflict took on religious dimensions. Russia now has its own suicide bombers and homegrown terrorists, a reality that brings an existential sense of danger to authorities in Moscow, and to regular citizens as well.

There have been horrifying acts of terrorism, such as the 2004 attack by Chechen separatists on a school in Beslan, North Ossetia, that resulted in the deaths of nearly 200 children. There have been significant conflicts between the Ingush and the North Ossetians in the region west of Chechnya, and religious and ethnic violence regularly spills into the Republic of Dagestan, east of Chechnya on the Caspian Sea. Last year, Russia and

Georgia went to war over the contested territory of South Ossetia—which has been a de facto independent state since 1991—and brought the region to the brink of international conflict. Even Kabardino-Balkaria has had its troubles. People across the republic were deeply affected by the violent clash in Nalchik four years ago. Some blamed an extreme version of Islam adopted by a band of disaffected youth; others pointed a finger at brutal police practices fostered by the previous presidential administration.

In Russia and, indeed, the United States, the Caucasus region—wedged between Europe and Asia, the vibrant host of Persian, Ottoman, and Russian empires over the centuries—has been reduced to the most caustic terms: It is a “tinderbox,” a “cauldron,” ruled by “fire and swords” and “ancient ethnic hatreds.” Many policymakers and political analysts take as writ that Islamic extremism is inching its way up out of Middle Eastern deserts and down into European plains. To this way of thinking, the Caucasus is all dashing, dangerous mountain people, fierce, half-mad, and out of control.

When we stop to take in the full, rich social world in and around the Caucasus Mountains, we get a different picture: It is not a place riven by ethnic hatreds, nor are its people wrapped in old ideas, clinging to poverty and resentment. Certainly there is tumult, but that is not all. If we look closely at individual lives, it is possible to see another, equally important picture of the Caucasus, where there is movement and the air of possibility, and where belonging deeply to a place fortifies people to move out into the world.

I came to know Akhmed and his family last year, while conducting anthropological research. I had met him and his wife, Haishet, a couple of years earlier through their daughter, Asya, a dazzling young woman. At the time she was teaching at the local elementary school in Baliiko, and I sat in on one of her classes; the students performed skits in English, clearly besotted with their teacher. When I returned on a recent trip, I was looking, carefully, for a place in the countryside where I could live while I worked. Eventually, after discussing matters with his wife and daughters, Akhmed said to me, “All our doors and windows will be open to you!”

My research in Russia began in the mid-1990s in a

tiny village in the north, where I lived for a year studying social memory. I have returned to that village many times, and watched as the villagers slowed, nearly to their death. The sinking of that village into tangled grasses and bare ground has been a bewildering thing to witness. Villages die in that part of the world, and with them die the habits and ways accumulated over centuries. But in Kabardino-Balkaria, to my great surprise, villages seemed simply to bloom.

The first time I went to Akhmed and Haishet's house, I was ushered into the largest room in their compound, decorated with rugs on the wall and a bright chandelier hanging

from the ceiling. I was fed a rich meal of local dishes: meats—including rabbit, slaughtered in my honor from their own stock—vegetables, grains, and breads fragrant with garlic and herbs. Before the meal, the daughters of the family took me to their garden, a green expanse where tomatoes weighed down the vines. Haishet told me, "This is the girls' work; it's all theirs."

Over time, I learned that there are poorer and richer families and villages in Kabardino-Balkaria. But there is no mistaking the air of freshness and youth there. In Baliiko, days begin as early as four in the morning and finish at the sunset call to prayer. In between are work and family meals and cleaning, and resting to get ready for more work. There is silliness and teasing between family members and guests. Nothing that I had read before coming to Kabardino-Balkaria prepared me for this: the presence of everyday thriving.

Statistics on the region paint a dire picture. In important and rare survey research conducted in 2006, American scholars Theodore Gerber and Sarah Mendelson found that unemployment among young males in Russia's North Caucasus hovered around 30 percent (as compared with around 11 percent in the rest of Russia). In Kabardino-Balkaria, the figure was 35 percent. The majority of young men who responded to the survey said they did not earn enough money "to sustain themselves." A Chechen man who came by one day to buy cucumbers from Akhmed told me, "This generation is broken. If you knew what really happened in Chechnya, your head

would explode [with grief]. . . . Every family lost somebody." Poverty and disenfranchisement are very real, but they are not the whole story.

Walking the broad streets of Baliiko, you see children playing with a tire, someone loading hay or hollering at a cow, dogs napping in piles of dirt, boys and girls smiling at one another with bright eyes on the way to the bus

THOUGH STATISTICS PAINT a dire picture, there is an air of freshness and youth in Kabardino-Balkaria.

stop. But more than anything, a visitor sees straight dirt roads lined with benches and trees, and high walls punctuated by metal gates. No windows are visible from the street, no laundry hanging, no obvious domesticity. Normally, the gates are kept closed; they are only opened wide if there is a marriage or death. You would never guess that inside those gates there are sometimes up to three generations of a family.

Within these compounds Kabardians first understand the moral and social code they call *khabza*, which dictates how to behave rightly and with *guakach*, or "heart talent," and young Muslims learn to wash themselves, cover their heads, and turn to Mecca for their daily prayers. Garden work is done that can pay for children's educations or nicer clothes or Internet service. The money earned by old and young is pooled and, as needed, redistributed. Married couples with troubles come to elders for guidance; the frail, the ill, the young men without work or just back from obligatory stints in the Russian army, go there for healing. Survival and thriving, in homes such as these, are ensured by mutual obligations to family, to neighbors, and to the broader lineage clan.

One morning, while I sat writing in the compound courtyard, Akhmed put down a heavy sapling he was stripping to use as a pole in the garden, and told me the story of how he built his home.

He'd grown up in Baliiko. His aged mother—the source of his and his eldest daughter's strikingly pale skin, fair hair, and light green eyes—still lives two doors away. As a young man, he'd studied construction in a nearby town and had done so well that when he graduated, he had his pick of where to work, unlike many of his friends, who, in keeping with the centralized Soviet system,

same time, vigorously exploit them for resources, trade, and access to other empires.

Various strategies were used, including treaties and agreements, subjugation, and, when imperial armies were finally able to flush communities out of their high mountain homes, ethnic cleansing. In the 19th century, Russia attempted to clear the indigenous

FOR VARIOUS EMPIRES, the Caucasus Mountains have presented a quandary: how to keep peace with the people and also exploit them.

Circassian peoples from the mountains, driving many of them in a treacherous exile, to the regions that would become Turkey, Israel, and Jordan. The Circassians who remained behind were the ancestors of Akhmed and his family. In the 20th century, Stalin exiled four peoples of the Caucasus,

ended up in Central Asia or far to the north. Akhmed didn't choose a bigger, richer city, but Baliiko. Home.

He was given a stony plot of land at the edge of the village and had to build his compound from nothing. And so he did. First a small set of rooms for living. Then another, larger living room, and a wash room with running water and cheery dolphin tiles over a bathtub. Then a little building to cook in. First one barn, then others, to house chickens, sheep, rabbits. An outhouse. The large garden plot connected to his compound was built up in neat rows over the years. There, he grows radishes, cucumbers, tomatoes, and green onions; cherry and plum trees and berry bushes bloom. Over time, a full compound formed where this family, like all Kabardian families in the countryside, could live securely.

Home has a mighty pull in the Caucasus: Much of life consists of forming, maintaining, and enriching the world that abides behind the gate. For hundreds of years, empires dealt warily with the mountain peoples of the Caucasus. As the poet Mikhail Lermontov—the great 19th-century Romantic of the Caucasus—mused, “Savage are the tribes of these gorges; their god is freedom; their law is war.” For Persian, Ottoman, and—as early as the 16th century—Russian overlords, these mountains presented a quandary: how to keep the peace with entrenched and able mountaineers and, at the

accusing them of collaboration with the Germans in World War II: the Chechens, the Balkars, the Karachays, and the Ingush.

Today, Kabardino-Balkaria, like many parts of the Caucasus, is made up of people (and their descendants) who were forced to leave but came back, and people who managed to stay but now have kin living in faraway lands. Though home is a powerful vector pulling people toward courtyard, kitchen, and hearth, there's a lot of moving going on. There are the Meskhetian Turks who returned to the Caucasus from Central Asia after their exile in the Soviet period; Balkars, Chechens, and Ingush live in nearby towns. There are those who live and work in Russia's steppe country but return in the summers, hoping their children won't forget their language and ways so they can marry according to the customs of *khabza*. Many young men go to Moscow or St. Petersburg to work for a time and send home money; some go to Turkey for business, others to Egypt for religious education, returning with soft beards and polite handshakes and the new honorific of *effendi*, which means they can conduct religious rites in local mosques. There are those who return from holy pilgrimage to Mecca, now hajis and somehow changed.

In the Soviet period, Akhmed doubled his income by selling vegetables on a long trade route in his little green

Lada for weeks at a time, winding his way through Penza and Saransk in Russia, Tbilisi and Kutaisi in Georgia, Yerevan in Armenia. While I was in Baliiko, five of us piled into the Lada and traveled to the mountains for a day to trade cucumbers for potatoes with a Balkar family he has known for years. Sometimes, this family is too poor to give him the potatoes they owe. But Akhmed brings his cucumbers anyway. An open, entrepreneurial spirit has lifted his family—and many of the people in his region—above the post-Soviet poverty that afflicted so many of his Russian compatriots to the north.

Years ago, Akhmed began building what will be his crowning achievement, a two-story house he designed himself. This is what Kabardians do: They build houses for years, sometimes never finishing them. In village after village, half-built houses peek over the heights of the highest metal gates. Akhmed's half-house is currently used as a summer kitchen and for storage. Birds dart in and out of its gray, heavy structure, fighting with Haishet and her daughters over who will have control of nesting there. Akhmed has slowed work on the building lately. But there it stands, a concrete skeleton filled with the bright outlines of still-invisible futures.

Haishet, Akhmed's wife, has black hair, nut-brown eyes, and a curl in the side of her mouth, ready to give way to a smile. She is constantly singing songs in Russian, Kabardian, and Hindi. These last, my favorites, she memorized note for note from Bollywood movies as a girl. She recites silly poems and serious ones. (She recited to me one she'd written in Russian, "Don't choose a man for his beautiful eyes . . . but for a warm, good heart.") In Kabardian, the word for "spouse" translates literally as "head-together." Haishet is indeed the other head that meets and merges with Akhmed's own. From early in the

morning until bedtime, she cooks, visits with sick family and neighbors, and orchestrates the garden tasks as she keeps in mind the big picture: how to make a family function, a garden blossom, how to create order and hospitality.

Akhmed and Haishet's household swirls with feminine chatter and laughter. Kabardian girls are raised to be modest and demure, and to respect hierarchies of age and status. At the same time, the girls fill the house with irrepressible ebullience. The eldest, Asya, fair of face and voice and mind, recently married a young man from Baliiko. She lives with him in Turkey, and visited home last summer in a happy whirlwind of stories about her new life. There is Marita, the second daughter, warm and open and also just married. She lives in Egypt with her husband, who is studying Islam at a theological school; she telephones regularly and constantly exchanges text messages with her sisters. Zalina, raven haired like her mother, and with an easy stream of laughter, studies Kabardian at the university in Nalchik and loves the arts; Liana, with a sweetheart mouth and freckled nose, studies physics and possesses a sure, skeptical eye; lit-



Russia's North Caucasus region, home to dozens of languages and cultures, is one of the world's most ethnically complex places—and has a reputation for unrest.

tle Amina, who in her 17 years has bravely endured several operations to correct a twisted spine, now studies Arabic. Like the daughters in Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*, these girls are placed socially by their virtues and talents.

For each daughter, marriage will be the defining adventure of her life. How will her talents and skills reflect on her family? What will her mother-in-law—a powerful figure in her new life—be like? Will the young woman master the new home and bring pride to her husband and her family? Or will she suffer bullying and debasement? Has she chosen a man of character? Or will he, in time, beat her or drink or shame her in other ways? Young women are, in a sense, the truest ambassadors in Kabardian society.

THERE IS A KABARDIAN saying: “If someone strikes you with a stone, return the blow with bread.”

They link one family to the next, one courtyard to the next, one clan to the next. They make the leap into new homes, new lands. When they are first born, girls can bring tears to the eyes of mothers for not being sons; in life, daughters cast themselves into the world, permanent pilgrims.

And for the young women in Akhmed's family, there are other kinds of pilgrimage. Though Akhmed and Haishet never learned a great deal about Islam, each of their daughters is devoted to exploring the religion. Kabardino-Balkaria has been, historically, a Muslim—specifically Sunni Muslim—region. Most people there today call themselves Muslim, but they mean vastly different things by this label. Some focus on moral law, others on political identification, still others on the poetry and mysticism of sacred texts. The Soviet period effectively wiped out a great deal of the theological expertise on Islam. But this purge never managed to affect deep moral codes such as those of *khabza*, local in their orientation and wound into the symbol systems of Kabardian, a seemingly

impenetrable language. Religion is complex in Kabardino-Balkaria; being a seeker there is a highly dynamic affair.

Renewed spiritual interest in Islam is especially apparent among the youth in the Caucasus since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Their parents look on their religious children with interest and sometimes a measure of puzzlement, wondering what this new devotion will mean. What are young people looking for? Order where there has been chaos in their lives? Holiness where there has been transgression? Belonging where there has been estrangement? Akhmed and Haishet—so respected, themselves, by their neighbors and kin—are supportive of their daughters' seeking. While I lived with the family,

Haishet would plan to serve dinner after the sunset call to prayer—as the first stars flickered into the twilight sky. In this way, she did her daughters the honor of letting them set the family clock.

The girls pray five times daily, though they do not attend mosque. Privately, they strive to understand what Islam is and what it should be. This is hard sometimes. They love to sing, but resist doing so because somewhere they heard that Islam forbids it. They are of open and warm natures, but they also wonder if they should be wary of those who are not Muslims. There are very few non-Muslims in their everyday world (only Russians and Ukrainians in the city, mostly), and the girls have learned at home to treat all strangers with kindness and respect. They love to dress in the latest fashions, but should they limit themselves to long skirts when they leave the house? Marita, now married, covers her head prettily with a scarf, but most young Kabardino-Balkarian women, including her older sister, do not. Here and there, the girls question the rightness or righteousness of certain customs of *khabza* that appear to contradict what they are learning. They seem to want simply to be good; religion offers new and dynamic aesthetics of holiness.

Amina listens to chanted verses from the Qur'an

all day long on her cell phone, an instrument that also allows her to make videos and send text messages to her sisters in Egypt and Turkey—as well as her other sisters in the kitchen—which she seems to do ceaselessly. Marita, head covered, looks jauntily into the camera in photographs taken in tourist spots in Egypt. Their cousin Lena, who is studying law, has Muslim friends from the Caucasus who live in Brooklyn; she's never met them, but they write silly letters back and forth all day while her cousins crowd around and comment. Asya, who had plenty of suitors before settling on her husband, said to her parents after one offer from a village boy: "I don't want a garden! I don't want a cow!" She was the first in her family to fly in a plane, and phoned them after she landed to tell of her amazing trip on the metal bird soaring to Turkey. From the inside of a village courtyard, the world opens wide.

In the Caucasus, the youth are moving. Akhmed's daughters reveal the bright side of this fact, but the sons of the Caucasus carry dynamism's heaviest social burdens. They are coming back from the army, looking for work. They are laboring in their family gardens and waiting for something better. A young man has lost a brother in Chechnya, maybe; maybe his family lost its wealth to some dark misfortune; he goes to Moscow to work, far from home; there is bad treatment there, sometimes. A young man who has no job, no wife of his own, is seen as somehow socially ill. But where will he turn for his cures? Religion? Drugs? Trouble? Where will his strong legs take him?

Just about anything could happen in Kabardino-Balkaria, even though it hasn't known the horrors that Chechnya and other parts of the Caucasus have. Ethnic strife could return, or spill over from other regions. Religious movements could morph into something frightening. The pressures of unemployment and other disenfranchisements could turn young people toward antisocial behavior. What is clear is that there are choices.

One day, after a particularly large job was completed in the cucumber garden, we loaded ourselves in the Lada with a lunch and drove for a couple of hours to a famous waterfall,

piling out of the car every several miles for photographs among the high, jagged rocks and cascading falls. After lunch, we started back home. The car moved slowly on the winding mountain road, thick with tourists and cows and donkeys and women selling wares and shish kebab. We were full and happy and getting sleepy.

We passed a Balkar boy on the road, walking alone, with a shaved little head—perhaps five years old. He looked up as the car passed, watching us with big brown eyes. Then, for no apparent reason but boyish mischief, he raised his hand in a rude gesture. What could this mean? Should something be done? Akhmed stopped the car with a jolt. Then he smiled and shifted into reverse.

We drew even again with the boy, and Haishet opened the car door on her side. In Russian—and looking straight at the child—she asked, "What is your name?"

The boy answered, assuredly, "Akhmed!"

Haishet gestured to her husband and said, "He's Akhmed too. Here!" She handed the boy a bag full of tomatoes and cucumbers, left over from our lunch. Balkar villages, high in the mountains, are often poor. Cucumbers and tomatoes are costly and rare. "You tell your father that this is from Akhmed to Akhmed!" She smiled.

The boy took the bag. Haishet shut the door and we drove off. On the long ride home, Haishet sang Russian and Hindi songs, her pure voice arching high to keep Akhmed awake.

Later, when we were home, I asked Akhmed about the Balkar boy. "What made you turn the car back?"

He said, "I don't know. He had an unhappy face. It was nothing for us, but something special for him. I wanted him to feel better."

There is a Kabardian saying: "If someone strikes you with a stone, return the blow with bread." When I lived in the north of Russia, in the small dying village, I learned another saying, "*Dobrom, dobro*," or "Good comes through good"—the elegant answer to how to solve the battle between good and evil: through good acts alone. In the Caucasus, the sounds of war are heard periodically. Young men die; cities and villages are destroyed. Without words and in perfect concert, Akhmed and Haishet fight back. ■