The Gendered Experiences of Return to Adygheya and Abkhazia: Dual Transnationalism Between The Caucasus and Turkey

Jade Cemre Erciyes*

Abstract

This article analyses the gendered experiences of ancestral return migration from Turkey to Abkhazia and to Adygheya. There is an ongoing transnational movement of diaspora and return migrants between Turkey and the Caucasus. With strict and conflicted border regimes families are divided, having less opportunities to travel back and forth. Though in much fewer numbers than men, there have been women in constant mobility between their two homes, being involved in trade, keeping two halves of the family intact, or being part of diaspora political groups. Their migration and mobility are considered as a challenge to the traditional image of women in the community and to social norms. However, it is also seen as a 'courageous act' due to the policy restrictions on mobility and the limited knowledge of the homeland conditions by the diaspora. The study is based on data collected between 2005 and 2014 through qualitative research, in-depth interviews, participant observation and ethnographic research. The aim of the article is to bring the gender lens into analysis of return and dual transnationalism revealing how contested statehood and border regimes are experienced, navigated and seen differently by women and men.

Keywords: Gender, Return, Migration, Circassian, Adyghe, Abkhaz

Adıgey ve Abhazya'ya Dönüşün Toplumsal Cinsiyet Bağlamında Deneyimleri: Kafkasya ve Türkiye Arasında Çifte Ulusötesilik

Özet

Bu makale, Türkiye'den Abhazya ve Adıgey'e geri dönüş göçünün

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toplumsal cinsiyet bağlamındaki deneyimlerini analiz etmektedir. Türkiye ve Kafkasya arasında diasporanın ve Kafkasya'ya dönüş yapmış olanların süregelen bir ulusötesi hareketliliği bulunmaktadır. Katı ve çatışmalı sınır rejimleriyle aileler bölünmekte ve gidiş geliş fırsatları azalmaktadır. Erkeklere kıyasla çok daha az sayıda olsa da, anavatan ve diasporadaki evleri arasında sürekli hareketlilik içinde olan, ticaretle uğraşan, ailenin iki yarısını bir arada tutan veya diaspora siyasi gruplarının parçası olan kadınlar bulunmaktadır. Bu kadınların göç ve hareketliliği, toplumdaki geleneksel kadın imajına ve sosyal normlara bir meydan okuma olarak görülmektedir. Ancak bu durum, hareketlilik üzerindeki politika kısıtlamaları ve diasporanın anavatanın koşullarına dair sınırlı bilgisi nedeniyle aynı zamanda "cesur bir eylem" olarak da değerlendirilmektedir. Çalışma, 2005-2014 yılları arasında niteliksel araştırma, derinlemesine mülakatlar, katılımcı gözlem ve etnografik araştırma yoluyla toplanan verilere dayanmaktadır. Makalenin amacı, dönüş ve çifte ulusötesilik analizine toplumsal cinsiyet perspektifini dahil ederek, tartışmalı devlet statüsünün ve sınır rejimlerinin kadınlar ve erkekler tarafından nasıl farklı şekillerde deneyimlendiğini, bunlarla nasıl başa çıkıldığını ve nasıl görüldüğünü ortaya koymaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Toplumsal Cinsiyet, Geri Dönüş, Göç, Çerkes, Adıge, Abhaz

The Abkhaz and Adyghe (Circassians) were exiled from their homeland Caucasus during the 100 year wars and in-mass to the Ottoman Empire in the second half of the 19th Century with the Tsarist Russia taking control of the region. Their displacement as whole villages and communities cut their ties to their homeland but their ideal to return stayed with them throughout generations. Today they live mostly in Turkey but also in Syria (with further displacement after 2012 mostly to Turkey), Jordan, Israel, Europe and USA (as 20th century migrants and their descendants). Especially, post 2000s saw constant back and forth movement between the diaspora and the Caucasus, with a lot of people from Turkey joining in this mobility. Many diasporic Circassians and the Abkhaz travel to their ancestral homeland establishing various transnational links. Some of them settle permanently in the Caucasus making use of the old transnational links but also establishing new ones. This is what I call a "dual transnationalism" that shapes the everyday lives of the returning migrants (Erciyes

2014).

International actors affect migration and transnational involvement of diasporas in various ways. The ancestral return of the Adyghe-Abkhaz people is not acknowledged by Turkey or Russia, the two key regional actors, due to the contested and blurred border situations in the Caucasus. Still, the Turkish and Russian policies try to limit diasporic mobility through restricting travel regulations, laws on double citizenship and settlement rights. The political situation between Russia and Turkey worsened with the 24 November 2015 plane crisis (Kılıçkan 2021), making the border crossing even more brittle. Though the political situation between the two countries improved over time, the visa free regime to Russia was not brought back and dual citizenship was not allowed. With further political and economic developments in the region post 2022 it just became harder to travel to the Caucasus for Turkish citizens.

Even so there is an ongoing transnational movement of diaspora and return migrants between Turkey and the Caucasus. With strict border regimes families are divided, having less opportunities to travel back and forth. Women have been involved in return mobility in much fewer numbers than men. Still, there have been women who have had constant mobility between their two homes, doing trade, keeping two halves of the family intact, or being part of diaspora political groups that focus on homeland-diaspora relations. Their migration and mobility are considered to be a challenge to the traditional image of women in the community and to social norms. However, it is also seen as a 'courageous act' due to such policy restrictions on mobility, hardships of the journey and everyday life. Still in this article the return narratives of both men and women are given. They show similarities but also reflect the gendered understanding and experiences of return.

The data for this article was collected with the help of several methods and at multiple sites between 2005 and 2014. The majority of the narratives are part of the life-history interviews with transnational migrants conducted between 2011 and 2013 during an extended fieldwork in preparation of my PhD thesis.

Additionally, ethnographic fieldwork and many semi-structured interviews were conducted in rural and urban areas among the diaspora in Turkey and with return migrants in the Republics of Abkhazia and Adygheya. The study, due to both financial, political and mobility constraints of the time, didn't cover all existing settlements with Adgyhe-Abkhaz people or return mobility in the North Caucasus but focused only on these two republics. Due to ongoing academic and political discussions on who is Circassian and who is not and three different usages of the term in English literature I chose to call the people Adyghe (the name they call themselves) though while referring to history or quoting other resources or the participants, I use Circassian.

Abkhaz and Adyghe diaspora

The number of Abkhaz and Adyghe people deported and scattered across the Ottoman Empire (today Jordan, Syria, Israel, the Balkans and Turkey) as a result of the 100 Year wars and events of the 19th century is not exactly known. It is estimated to be more than a million, many of whom died on the way or just after their arrival due to disease and starvation (Shenfield 1999). The majority of the native population of the Caucasus left for the Ottoman Empire starting from the 1830s onwards but their mass deportation is marked by the year 1864 though the exodus continued in the following years (see Wesselink 1996, p. 30). During the Great Exodus and Genocide, as it is referred to by the Adyghe-Abkhaz, the majority of the population living in Circassia (including 90% of the Adyghe and some Abkhaz tribes, and all of the Ubykhs) left for the Ottoman Empire and settled in places they were allowed to. In 1877 there was a second wave of deportation mainly from Abkhazia, when Tsarist Russia gained full control of the area (Allen and Muratoff, 1953, p. 126). The emigrants who were settled in the Balkans during the Great Exodus were also displaced one more time to be resettled in Anatolia and Middle East after the Ottomans lost control.

The Ottoman settlement policy for the emigrants aimed at dividing different ethnic groups of the empire and controlling religious minorities that could rebel against the Empire (Kushabiev

1991, Doğan 2009b). The end of the Ottoman Empire divided Circassian diaspora in various countries. Families were separated, people had suffered through continuing migration due to various wars and conflicts throughout the following one hundred and fifty years (World Wars, Turkish Independence War, Turkish Republican period forced population resettlements, Golan Heights population resettlement, Syrian displacement are just a few examples). All this dispersion and self and public victimisation through memories of exile and displacement created strong diaspora identities for the Adyghe-Abkhaz, or as they are widely known in the diaspora for the Circassians, Cherkess or North Caucasian peoples.

Kaya (2004: 225) suggests that 'Circassians have developed a common belief that they are not very well received by the [Turkish] majority (increasing consciousness to return to the homeland partly derives from such a perception)'. Miyazawa (2004: 67) quotes some Circassians of the Uzunyayla region recalling that their ancestors 'died dreaming of going back to the Caucasus'. Doğan (2009b) argues that the ideal of 'return to the homeland' was a myth recreated in the 1970s as part of the urban diaspora politics. Besleney (2014, p. 133), explains the role of earlier diaspora leaders to have visited the Caucasus in early 1970s created an enabling environment for Returnism - a Turkish diasporic ideology of return to the homeland being at the center of diaspora politics that eventually became the official doctrine of the North Caucasian associations. The "returnists" were advocating return to the homeland, and they could only fulfil their dreams after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union this ideal turned into a possibility and the complex political reality of the Circassian homeland divided between different legal entities and regions became more clear for the diaspora. Return mobility and transnational connections were established with all parts of the Caucasus. Hence, this article focuses on recent return mobility from Turkey specifically to the two republics in the Caucasus: Abkhazia and Adygheya.

In Abkhazia the State Committee of Repatriation was established in 1993 during the Patriotic War to help the adaptation

of the returning migrants from the diaspora to the ancestral homeland. Abkhazia in terms of laws and regulations is very open to the return of descendants of the Abkhaz/Abaza people who are accepted as natural citizens of the country. Today the committee is supported by the State Fund for Repatriation established in 1998 which is formed with 2% tax from all private sector and state employees' monthly salaries. The State Committee using the Fund and other budgetary resources provides temporary and permanent housing, health care and education support as well as language courses and adaptation projects to returning diaspora. However, due to its contested recognition status (see Başol 2025 for discussions on Abkhazia's statehood and why it is contested and defined as partly recognised), it is hard for the diaspora to access the homeland. Until the 2020s they could only travel via Russia. In this case they had to go through Russian visa regimes till they get Abkhazian travel passports and pass four border controls to reach their ancestral homeland even if they did receive a travel passport from Abkhazia that let them travel though Russia without visas.

Adygheya is a republic that is part of the Russian Federation and is regulated by Russian laws. In the early years of dissolution of the Soviet Union the return migrants from the diaspora to Adygheya could receive Russian Federation citizenship and later settlement rights. However, since 1995 it is getting harder for ancestral returnees to get resident permits and citizenship. There is no state support for housing and other necessities but there is an NGO called Home of Adaptation for Repatriates that was established in 1992 to help with official documents and adaptation of returnees. The returning migrants are officially accepted as migrants and there is a quota for the number of migrants Adygheya can receive which is usually filled up by other ethnicities. There are no direct flights to Adygheya but to the neighbouring Krasnodar region where there are daily flights from Turkey. There is no border passage to Adygheya so the return migrants' arrival to the homeland is virtual. Though Krasnodar and surrounding cities as well as the Republic of Adygheya were traditionally part of the historical Circassia today they are seen as Russian settlements.

Adygheya and Abkhazia are two Republics that have different political realities. Hence, the return of the ethnic peoples is very crucial for the Adyghe-Abkhaz to continue their nation/statehood. But, the state policies in Adygheya do not call upon its diaspora to return migrate as it is ruled by the laws and regulations of the Russian Federation, where 'the way migration is framed at the official or state level has impacted upon local-level migrant resettlement' (Flynn *et al.* 2003, p. 184).

"Transnational practices generated by the diaspora will presumably be affected by national policy and by states acting across national borders" (Olsson 2012, p. 179). The ease of transportation and communication technologies triggered more diasporic interest in the ancestral homeland. Especially in the last decade more and more people are travelling back and forth, getting residence permits in Adygheya, and applying for permanent accommodation where they can live for the rest of their lives in Abkhazia. The ancestral return of the Adyghe-Abkhaz people is not acknowledged by Turkey or Russia, the two regional actors, which are the sending and receiving/transit countries for the returning migrants. Due to the contested and blurred border situations in the homeland the returning migrants are not officially recognised and there are no direct policies towards this type of migration. However, policies of related actors try to limit such mobility through restricting regulations in travel, laws on double citizenship and settlement rights.

Dual transnationalism

The study of dual transnationalism in relation to return mobilities gives a thorough and more nuanced understanding of the return process. This approach moves the discussions on pull and push factors, which hitherto have focused on sending and receiving countries separately, one step further, introducing the transnationalism of practices at both ends of the return route. The distinction between diaspora and transnationalism, and return and transnationalism, supports challenging the debates on how transnational identity and behaviour dissolve diasporas and return. The two-ended transnational approach helps identify the

difference and overlap between these processes.

The data that this work is based on was collected during the extended fieldwork in Abkhazia and Adygheya, as well as many diaspora settlements and urban diaspora organizations in Turkey between 2011 and 2013 as part of my PhD research. However, my observations and notes on return and diaspora date back to 2005 when I first gained academic interest in my 'ancestral homeland'. My inclination to talk about diaspora and return derive precisely from the fact that the Adyghe-Abkhaz living in Turkey for many generations have called themselves a "diaspora" and refer to migration to resettle in the ancestral homeland as "return".

The experience of return for second and subsequent generations can be argued to take the form and essence of a new migration. They are not "real" returnees as they have never lived in their homelands, but new immigrants settling in a new place. King and Christou (2011) argue that ancestral return reverses the diasporic scattering and returnees are likely to develop a reversed transnationalism by being involved in new transnational links to their country of birth, changing the direction of their transnational involvement. The dual transnationalism framework, on the other hand, does not look at the transnational links to the countries of birth as the reverse of transnational links to the homeland, but more holistically as a component of transnationalism of return migrants. With this approach the pre-return transnational involvement in the diaspora and the post-return transnational practices, which are mostly new in nature, are seen as part of the return process.

Previous studies argue that diaspora communities' maintaining their ties to a homeland become part of return migratory processes (Oxfeld and Long 2004, p. 4). These transnational ties help the creation and re-creation of diasporic identities according to changing images (and realities) of the homeland, while supporting return migratory projects. When diaspora communities return to their homelands, the same process is observed the other way around. They sustain their cultural, physical, and economic ties to their countries of birth. I call this "dual transnationalism" that is being involved in

transnational activities that facilitate the decision to return-migrate and post-return adaptation processes. Returning migrants develop a new homeland-oriented understanding of the diaspora, what it is and what it should be, which creates an impression that they have highly integrated (or assimilated) into the homeland mentality, which is argued to be pro-Russian by the diaspora. In this sense, through the collective mentality and constant contact with other returnees (and visitors from the diaspora), 'through literal and imaginative identification and interaction with multiple places' (Oeppen 2013, p. 276), the return migrants develop a sense of belonging and at the same time, of difference with the homelanders.

Gendered return

Above I have tried to explain the blurred border realities of the Caucasian homeland and the recent transnational mobility of the diaspora and returning migrants. It is important to discuss the way gender relations are formed and reproduced in transnational return. The sex aggregated data estimates from around the world confirm that nearly half of the migrants in the globe are female (Piper 2005, p.3). In case of return migration the number balance doesn't change by gender (Dumont and Spielvogel 2008, p.163). It is argued that 'a gendered analysis of return can potentially change our understanding of both migration and gender theories' (Girma 2017). 'Gender operates, usually simultaneously, on multiple spatial, social, and cultural scales' (Mahler and Pessar 2006, p. 43). As gender roles change through cultures and societies, during migration processes gender roles play out differently and 'the limited existing literature indicates that return perceptions differ between men and women' (Bilgili et al. 2018). Vathi (2017) argues return is a sophisticated process where gender hierarchies and power positionalities determine the timing, logistics, and settlement dimensions of migration.

Different studies on return mobility as a gendered phenomenon have argued for this very result that agency, autonomy, and experience is different for women but not necessarily negative. Women are usually more prone to gender

role based pressures but they feel more empowered due to their migration experience. In her study of Greek-American ancestral returnees, Christou (2003) states that: “Female return migrants mobilize multiple socio-cultural geographies and spaces, meanings of spaces and spatial meanings. The mobility of these women is a shifting in locations and identities.” Greek-American women were expected and even forced to play the role of the “good” mother, wife, sister and “above all, honourable and obedient daughters” (Christou 2011).

If the Greek-American returnee women didn’t meet these expectations and had adapted more American gender roles and relations, their life satisfaction turned out to be higher than men who expected more from their families (Christou 2011). In her study of gendered narratives of renegotiated identities of second-generation Turkish-German diaspora returning to Turkey, Nilay Kılınç (2014) argues that:

> Based on the gender norms of the Turkish culture, the second generation males and females experienced their process of belonging differently and they constantly renegotiated their gendered agency in different diaspora spaces. The study also presented that ‘home’ was a gendered construction and this led female and male second generation perceive their parental homeland in relation with the gender roles they grew up in… Even though they thought that they returned to their motherland which they belonged to, they experienced that they were different. Females struggled renegotiating their gendered identity; they had to adapt the new rules of gender roles.

The home and host countries, or countries where the returnees are at home in the diaspora and migrants in the homeland, “are not homogenous in terms of norms, culture, ethnicity and religion either” (Ameen 2018). Whether it is considered abroad or at home, “current forms of transnational… migration are both extensions and negotiations of already-existing gendered mobility practices” (Valentin and Laxmi 2016). Looking at the return mobilities to Adygheya and Abkhazia, there is a clear gender difference in terms of numbers migrating or being involved

in transnational activities between the diaspora and the ancestral homeland. Men are more likely to return and to return migrate. Women of return make less than 10 % of returning migrants (if not less – unfortunately there is no sex aggregated data available on the number of returning migrants). It is challenging to talk about "other" genders' return as the Adyghe and Abkhaz people are conservative and traditional, and 'others' are repressed and hidden, if not excluded. The return narratives of both men and women show similarities but also reflect the gendered understanding of return.

The narratives which I will share below reflect the hardships of the journey to the ancestral homeland especially in the early years of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. However, during the interviews I realised that women were more likely to share their stories with deep emotional reflections which Setenay Nil Dogan (2009b) also states in relation to her own study among the Adyghe-Abhaz diaspora. The women return migrants' narratives of their first journeys to the homeland also reflect the feelings of challenge to identity and loss of self. This is exemplified in an earlier article by Seteney Shami (2000, p. 182):

> The overwhelming tone of Shengul's narrative is that of loss: loss of self, loss of consciousness, loss of honor, and loss of religion. Paradoxically, on a journey "back" to the "homeland" that is meant to be about the recovery of identity and the redemption of history, … ends the journey feeling that she is in an alien and foreign land...

In my PhD thesis I reflect upon my own gendered experience among the diaspora and return migrants, as a single female transmigrant (Erciyes 2014). Before I thought that being a woman in the Cherkess culture was a powerful thing; while my fieldwork experience helped me see that the women are not as empowered as they are claimed to be by members in these societies. The "protective" reactions from men, who were also frequently intervening into my personal life and giving remarks about my mobility as a single woman became disturbing as the fieldwork progressed. I heard from many different men, "how I was the girl

to marry" and a few times that, "I should marry them". During fieldwork, and even after 6 years of completing my PhD, I am still told by many men who believe they are prominent leaders and thinkers of Circassian society, what I shall research about, who I shall talk about for that study, how I should write it and with whom I shall collaborate.

In an earlier article, I divide the experiences of return mobilities to the Caucasus into three periods. The early period falls between 1989 and 1995, when travel between the Caucasus and diaspora was long, hard and expensive, whereas the faster routes (e.g. flights) were financially challenging. The Soviet communication technologies, where one had to wait for days to make the call they had registered, reminded the returnees of 1950s Turkey. The communication and the mobility of the diaspora and returnees were very limited. Still, this was the period when the returnees themselves carried a lot of things across the borders, from food items to house equipment; from business equipment to small trade items to be able to live in the homeland. The stagnation period (1995-2005) is when the return of Adyghe and Abkhaz had nearly stopped. In this period, despite the political and economic stagnation, there was increased cultural exchange through dance troupes and ethnographic researchers visiting the diaspora settlements. In the period after 2005, which I refer to as the recent period, but can also be called the period of transnationalism, the developments in communication technologies and cheaper transportation facilitated the mobility of return migrants, as well as the diaspora. The return took a new form, and even the returnees started to argue for the benefits of a transnational life lived in between the ancestral homeland and the diaspora, which they used to think as a distraction for adaptation during the early and stagnation periods. Unfortunately, due to new tensions between Turkey and Russia, travel between these countries is back to its strict regime since the end of 2015. (For detailed analysis of my suggested periods of return please see Erciyes 2017)

The early transnationals: The mother, the daughter, the wife, the grandmother

> We heard a granny had arrived with the ship to Abkhazia. We ran for our lives to the port to see. (Veteran F50s)

These are the words of a patriotic war veteran returnee woman in Abkhazia (see Dogan 2015 for participation of Abkhazian women from Turkey to the Abkhazia's Patriotic War in 1992-93). As a young girl one of her most important memories of life in the homeland is the arrival of an elderly woman, someone to be all the returnees' grandmother. In the early years of the dissolution of the Soviet Union many would travel in groups or meet with others in the relatively rare and irregular ships that went from Trabzon to Sochi. It was nearly impossible for the return migrants to be politically involved in two countries because of the lack of communication and mobility. Nevertheless, as they had the right, the majority kept their dual-citizenship, their rights for pensions and property ownership in Turkey, as well as the health care rights. At the same time, those with Russian citizenship gained some rights for state benefits such as pensions in the homeland, while in Abkhazia they gained the rights for return-migrant benefits such as land, house or flat ownership free of charge. In this period the majority of return migrants would only rarely move between two homes. If they had the economic means, they would go once a year for the holiday time, to visit the villages and family members who had stayed behind.

As there was not a developed economy in the homelands, many from the diaspora established businesses based on the knowledge they gained in the diaspora, or with "suitcase" trade items they carried across the borders. It was especially women who did the suitcase trade together with the local populations. Women were also taking their children back and forth to see their fathers or grandparents, or just traveling between the homes of their grown-up children in the Caucasus or Turkey to help them with the grandchildren.

The narratives of Khibla (pseudonym like all names in this text) an early woman returnee to Abkhazia who is in her 60s, reflect

upon the hardships of the journeys she made in those early years and how being a mother helped her pass through the borders in hardest times. In her narratives she also frequently repeats how she was all the time being taken for a Russian.

> I came here on the ship, on the catamaran, on the ferry, by planes, by land road, on bus, and even took a helicopter once. I told you how I passed the military control during the war shouting at the soldiers that my son who was studying there when the war broke out was there and that I would go there and pick him up and no one could stop me. You know it was so hard to travel. But I was doing trade in the whole Black Sea region, I travelled back and forth to Trabzon. On the ship or upon arrival people will try to talk with me in Russian, making immoral suggestions. I would shout at them in Turkish. You know a man told me you cannot be a Turk. You must be Russian. I had blonde perm you know. I said no, I am not a Russian. He insisted, and I said I am Abkhazian. Do you understand? Abkhazian. After that he let me be. Oh, those times… (Khibla F60s)

The blonde transnational women being taken for Russians and being treated as 'available for immoral proposals' are repeating in the narratives even as years pass by. Those who are not blonde but travel back and forth for economic or health reasons, or to visit their elderly family (or all of these) were also destined to be gossiped about as 'having someone here or there'. The men on the other hand that travelled back and forth frequently were not targets of such gossip.

Below is Mafe's, an early returnee woman in Adygheya in her late 30s, long narrative about the challenging journey that they needed to make every year to go to Turkey and their first ever journey to the homeland:

> Every year at least once we went [to Turkey]. Taking the Sochi route. [Laughs]. We have lots of memories there as well. Even yesterday, we were talking with a friend about those adventures; going to Turkey was such a big adventure for us. We reached there in one week sometimes. It was a problem to travel to Sochi from here. It was hard to get to the train station [outside of

Adygheya]. Catching that train and travelling to Sochi, waiting for that ship in Sochi for days, sleeping in parks. Getting on the ship, the ship wouldn't take off for days. On the ship, we were caught up with a storm in the open sea. How to say, reaching Trabzon [a city in Turkey], then from Trabzon taking other buses to go to other cities, for days, 5 days, 6 days, 7 days…We could reach Turkey through very hard journeys. For that reason, going to Turkey was a big event. Now everything is cheaper. Now if you decide tonight, the next day you can be in Istanbul. There is plane each and every day for affordable prices. For that reason… now "return" is different. There were lots of people who couldn't go to their mother's, father's funerals. For example, we didn't have passports. The residence permit required visas. We were waiting for weeks to get that visa… People couldn't catch their mother's, father's funerals, they didn't even know about it. They knew that it was not possible to come, so they thought it was best not to tell, to not make that person suffer. Even there wasn't a phone... We had a life like in the medieval ages. How to tell you? Others must have told already but we had to register three days before to make a phone call. We had to wait till mornings for three days, for that call to be connected for example. We lived through all these things. I don't know when life was like that in Turkey, maybe... 50-60 years ago. As if when we came here, history, time were rewound [back].

Me: Can you tell a bit more about your coming here? How did you leave your life there?

Mafe: We did that very simply, we sold all we had. We had a car that my father had bought with his retirement gratuity. Father sold that to use the money for the travel expenses. We loaded all our furniture in a lorry. Mother had a workshop. We loaded all the machines from the workshop as well. We said goodbye to all the people we knew. They all came to the bus station to see us off. We took the boat and came here. There wasn't much that was thought over, inquired or discussed. We made a simple decision to come and we came. Nothing before or after. We didn't have long discussions on it. My father was a very bold person. I now think it over. The Russia of twenty years ago, the Soviet Union had just collapsed. There were bread queues. Shops were empty. Coming to such a country from urban Turkey, together with his extended family, without a job, without any prospects, it is something that takes courage. Thinking it over

> now, I tell my father as well, I tell him that he was very bold. I ask myself, could I take my children and go to a country that I don't know anything about? I don't think so. One has to have a strong ideological background in order to take such a step. My father never complained, never said anything when faced with problems… (Mafe F30s)

As other studies on migration have found out 'it is frequently households and families who determine which members of the domestic unit will migrate, how their contributions will fit into the household's economy, etc.' (Mahler and Pessar 2006, p. 34). The decision to move to an unknown reality is something as a mother Mafe says she will not dare to do like her parents. However, many women young and old, followed their husbands, sons, and brothers to an unknown in those early periods.

Amra a returnee in Abkhazia in her 70s narrates her first journey to settle in post-war Abkhazia was receptive to the possible conditions they would face in a post-war state:

> We went to the [Committee of Repatriation]. The president [of the Committee of Repatriation] said for now you sit in the hotel. We will get rid of this crowd, then we will look for a home for you. On the second day, my local relatives had heard of me, they found me… Then they found this house, brought us here, settled us in. I had bought from there [Turkey] many many things, sugar, I don't know, forgot now. Sugar I had gotten, tea I had gotten, tea pot, ceramic tea pot… But I came here, I never thought of bringing a cooker. Where will I make the tea? I light up a fire in the garden, it doesn't work… I asked somebody from Turkey who works at the Committee of Repatriation [return migration], where am I gonna find a cooker. There is no Abkhazian word, I don't know the Russian word. (Amra F70s)

The above narratives are crucial in terms of their gendered perspective. Mafe's narrative about moving to the unknown and the courage it required, and that as a mother she wouldn't have done it, is a feeling repeated by a few other women. In fact, over the years, I have heard many stories about mothers, who, having seen the hardships of life in the homeland in those early years of

the dissolution or not finding the education or health infrastructure good enough, had re-migrated with their children to where they had come from, or to their parents' home in Turkey; sometimes getting a divorce and sometimes dragging their husbands along, too. It's noteworthy that Amra's narrative of not being receptive enough about the conditions of the homeland is based on her own belief that she should be receptive as a mother, calculating every need of the family upon migration.

Stagnation Period Transnationals: Either travel like refugees or stay put!

In the case of Abkhazia the stagnation period was marked with the post-conflict living conditions and the forcibly imposed embargo by the world. It was not only a period of immobility and economic stagnation but even a reverse migration had started due to post-war security problems. Life in Adygheya was also not very colourful. Economic development was slow, it was very hard to find the basics, and travel to Turkey was only slightly better off in the years that followed. Besides, after 1995 all the laws and regulations on Russian citizenship had changed (Flynn *et al.* 2003) and political existence as return migrants in the homeland turned out to be very hard. There was no flow of students to Adygheya or Abkhazia, as they were mainly going to Nalchik, Kabardino-Balkaria – another republic with predominantly Circassian population – which had been accepting students from the diaspora (Jordan, Syria) since the 1970s. There were still a few people, who had come to establish businesses that would flourish only after the 2000s with increased economic prosperity in the region. Jane who is Amra's daughter in her 40s remembered the hardships of going back and forth to the Caucasus when I asked her about her first journeys. Together with her mother and a sibling Jane had settled in Abkhazia just before the embargo first to make sure her family was doing fine, as she was worried. The rest of her life has been divided between her own-built home in the diaspora and the family home that was built in Abkhazia, which became her long-term home after her retirement. However, staying for many months in Abkhazia didn't stop her mobility, this time she has

continued her travels to her home in Turkey taking along her nieces for shopping, sightseeing and meeting the rest of the family. However, these shuttle journeys were not very pleasant, as a single woman, she had to go through lots of traumas. Jane's narrative below is about an illegal route she had to take. She was questioned for a whole day because of a problem in her Abkhazian documents by the Russian border police and the internal security team at the Abkhazia-Russia border crossing in the late 1990s, when crossing of non-Abkhazian citizens and males were prohibited due to the enforced embargo. At the end of the day, when the Russian border police agreed to let her go, she had already missed her plane so she had to go back to Abkhazia. In the end, because she was afraid to make the same border crossing again, she decided to take the direct cargo ship to Turkey:

> I went from here with the cargo ship out of necessity. As the Russian border police had stopped me and questioned me all day, all because my Soviet-Abkhazian passport had expired… I was afraid to go back from that border, I had already missed my plane so I went back to Abkhazia and went with the ship… But it was going to Istanbul. I went in 4 days. But Cemre, I was destroyed by vomiting. Already the Ritza ship [catamaran] was making me seasick as I went back and forth, that time I was coming and going in a state of coma. And 4 days… They let some acquaintances know. They waited with a car. I said, if you want, an ambulance can also wait, I was coming in a very bad state. But since we were illegal, there were also 5-6 men. Since I was the only woman, they had given me the captain's cabin. Eeem, the ship's firm had a fishing boat. From the ship we would jump to the boat. The boat is down. The ship is up. The men jumped one by one. I am looking. How am I going to jump? They threw my backpack, caught down there. They hold my hands, hanging me down. They hold my feet down there… We got stuck, like the refugees I mean. Like you enter illegally, smuggled. They said, if the coastguards catch you, tell them you are on an excursion. Now, I mean, among so many men, at an unearthly hour, I went for an excursion in the sea, can you think of such a situation, if that happens? It would have been terrible… that was a weird

> thing, like a scalded cat. Besides, I was in a really bad situation… I slept for two days. (Jane F40s)

Born to an Abkhaz family, Apsuana, a woman in her 30s, settled in Abkhazia in mid-90s with her family. It was not her choice to migrate, but her pain and adaptation problems due to lack of knowledge of either Abkhazian or Russian and poor conditions in the post-war homeland, were replaced by a self-built life of success and confidence. At some point in her life she tried to live in Turkey, but despite a well-paid job and support from the family who had stayed in the diaspora, she didn't feel happy and missed her life in Abkhazia. She instead got used to this transnational life on the move between Abkhazia and Turkey, because of the embargo laid on Abkhazia, many times the journey was through illegal routes. Below she also narrates the adventures of making these journeys:

> They were supposed to meet us when we went with my grandma, but they were late so we made our way to the border. And they didn't let us into Abkhazia, took our Abkhazian passports and sent us back... Later my brother came and said be ready you will pass through the stream... I was so afraid for my grandma.... They took us after midnight. That was such an adventure... I was worried how grandma would walk... My grandma passed so easily, I was wet all through. Because of the anxiety my feet were shaking...They said the border guards will look the other way when you are passing... But you are afraid, if they shoot you by mistake, if they shoot at you, you will die... Or the stream could take you. The year before somebody was nearly drowning... once we travelled on the ship and had been taken down to the bunker of the ship, in darkness. There was a little child... He started crying... We had to sit in silence, in the dark... Later they told us the Russian guards are gone and let us out. But there was no place to sleep on the ship. It was 17-18 of us (for 7 days)... There were other young children as well… (Apsuana, F30s)

During my stay in Abkhazia in 2006-2008 this route was still in use by a majority of the return migrants, mostly men. Especially those involved in imports and exports from Turkey or worked in the coal mines' firm, frequently used this route to not to deal with

taking a visa from Russia. However, it was not as easy for the women to make this journey for various reasons. First of all, as the narratives show, the conditions were very poor for travel and many women suffered severely from weather changes creating discomfort for the whole crew. Second, the Turkish border police created problems for the captains since the women couldn't be registered as part of the crew of the ship but as passengers which required special passenger controls. Still when a woman was in need, they would let her make this journey.

I would like to close this period with a short quote from the narrative of Gunda. Gunda is in her early 40s, was born and grew up in Inegol (Bursa). She moved with her family to Abkhazia just after the war. Her biography is divided between the two homes of her family in the homeland as well as in Turkey. Her family spent many years separated due to some financial difficulties they went through. She speaks very good Abkhazian and a fair enough Russian that she learned in Abkhazia, at a time when there were many students from the diaspora. Gunda's accounts were about being on the move and always away from one part of the family. Her suffering through the hardships of life in post-war Abkhazia was characterised by loneliness, and experiences such as sleeping with a kalashnikoff bigger than her size because she needed to protect herself while the family was away:

> We lost everything for the love of Abkhazia... Abkhazia is both very beautiful, we live our best days there, but we also suffered a lot, also financially. (Gunda F40s)

Recent Transnationals: Always the host, but don't host at a shop

> My father always dreamt of at least one of his children returning to the homeland... It was always being discussed in the family. We made the decision together... [Our mobility results in] not being able to explain ourselves neither there nor here. We are a group of people that will never be understood. We are smashed between two realities. We have different expectations from life, not different values. [...] Those who want to return choose a tiny,

> long path.[...] the majority of the girls went back (to Turkey). Those we thought can never stay, stayed. [...] (I remind to myself) it is your choice. Today people go in every direction. Human being is no more a constant. [...] I live in the devil's triangle. You are dispersed bodily, one half there, one half here. [...] Wherever I go, I am the host. I want to be the guest somewhere. When you live in between, you are always accepted as if you were at home there, people take you for granted and expect things from you. (Gupse F40s)

Gupse decided to return to her ancestral homeland in her 20s, mainly being supported by her transnational father who already had contacts with the Caucasus. Settling in the North West Caucasus in the early 1990s, Gupse went through all the hardships of the transition economy and lived through the people's transition as well. In her near 40s, finding a life partner in Abkhazia, she made another move, this time within the Caucasus. However, the Abkhazia she found, as it had gone through a long stagnation and embargo period, was entering the transition period only in the 2010s. Gupse had to live through similar problems one more time, finding relief only in her ability to travel between her three homes, in Turkey, Abkhazia and Nalchik (Kabardino-Balkaria).

The socio-cultural adaptation to the homeland for return migrants was usually parallel to the acceptance of different ways of behaviour and understanding. In the diaspora, there is a belief that the Adyghe-Abkhaz protected their traditional ethnic values and etiquette better than in the homeland. Chirikba (2006) argues that there has been a disappointment in the diaspora towards the homeland and towards those who were supposed to be "real Abkhaz", because they had expectations of an "ideal homeland" from where their ancestors had left, where the Abkhaz language was spoken, and people lived according to the traditional value system; but instead they had found people who were very much influenced by the Russian culture, frequent cases of corruption, and social and legal insecurity for return migrants due to post-war instability.

Chirikba also suggests that, compared to the earlier generations of the diaspora who were "romantic and idealistic",

the new generation of Turkish-Abkhazians, those in their 20s and 30s, were pragmatic and realistic, highly educated, and diaspora identity-oriented. In recent years, there has been an increased return of this young "pragmatic" generation Chirikba refers to, both to Adygheya and Abkhazia. The younger returnees have a different process of integration into the homeland communities, as they "do not expect anything", or they are "aware of the realities of the homeland". Also, due to being born into an era of mobility, and migrating in a period of increased transportation between the homeland and Turkey, they are more easily involved in both communities. Even those who do not like to travel frequently between Turkey and Abkhazia or Adygheya, state that they have families there and travel back and forth to visit them; have cultural and political interests in the diaspora; and hang out frequently with other returnees and diasporic visitors. So even for such people the family home turns into an 'enduring fixture' (Conway, 2009) connecting their life to their places of birth.

In her early 20s, Gushef was born to an Adyghe father and mother, and had lived part of her childhood in the homeland together with her family. Gushef was taken back to Turkey by her mother who left Adygheya for "personal reasons". Despite the fact that she finished school in Turkey, she studied in the university there, and even started to work there, she explains that her mind was always in the homeland:

> I always thought of return. I couldn't adapt to anything. School years had passed somehow, friends, jokes, other stuff, passed. But when one finishes the university and jump into the real life, one sees the truth all together. Falls into the emptiness. I couldn't adapt to the work places that I was working. Always, I had in mind returning back. Without that I wasn't able to breath. I always said to my mom, if I will not see Adygheya even once, I will not be able to adapt to any work I start. It wasn't destined… I had to work. When I quit one job I came here. First for a holiday. Then we decided as a family and I stayed here." (Gushef F20s)

Gushef's transnationalism starts with the dream of the homeland but doesn't end there. Managing to convince her family

about settling in the homeland, is now living there being transnationally involved with her diaspora home, travelling back and forth.

> Caucasia had always been in my life but I must have not been aware of it... When I flew to the Caucasus friends came to the airport to pick me up. When we arrived in the square at the city centre, I sighed and said "Oh I have missed it so much." I wasn't aware of what I was saying, it just slipped out. A place I had never been before, but you take a deep breath and feel good... that's how I felt. I really felt that I had missed it. Obviously, someone can miss a place that she has never seen before or feel that one belongs there. It felt strange. Later I went to a European country. I understood that it wasn't a question of leaving your place, going somewhere alone, because I felt distressed in Europe. It was more luxurious... much more freedom, I was always with strangers, had a lot of fun... [Europe] had to be much better, but I was bored there and wanted to come back. But in the Caucasus it was not like that. One felt part of it. Nevertheless, you have this feeling of being in-between. You are there, you feel happy, but on the other hand, all your family, friends, loved-ones are here. There is this feeling that something is missing, is incomplete... I felt that I belonged there (Gushef F20s).

Sine a young returnee to Adygheya reflects upon the contradiction of feeling at home but not free. Many women state living in the Caucasus is like living in a village, where you are always under observation of fellow return migrants. As the majority of return migrants are men, in many places one will see groups of men. Some of them, who are highly criticised by other returnees, spend their time gambling, smoking and drinking coffee in only-male coffee houses. Others, the majority, spend time in restaurants and workplaces owned by other return migrants, sitting in a corner. The Turkish-food restaurants, like the ones that I referred above, are also places where they sit for many hours, drinking Turkish tea if they serve it, eating their lunches and dinners, and occasionally even their breakfast. But women are less visible in these public spaces than men.

The communication of the returnees, especially the returnee

women, with local people that are not from their ethnic community, who make up the majority of the population in Adygheya and also due to tourist and migrant influx in Abkhazia, remained limited despite involvement in a variety of activities. However, those who could speak (or were able to learn) a relevant language found ways to communicate with the locals. For the women who stayed at home, not able to work due to lack of languages or limited choices of employment the involvement was even less. The limited employment was not only due to the conditions of the homeland economy but also the fact that many jobs are seen unsuitable for returning migrant women by other returning migrants [mostly men]. For example, a returnee woman should not work as a waitress in a café, or as sales personnel in a shop. Cooking Turkish food in return migrant restaurants is acceptable, but preferably as the partner of the place or with relatives, or with other women. I heard from some young returning women that they started to work in some places but during the first day was advised by elderly return migrant men that work doesn't suit them. Letting women work in the service sector is a thing to be ashamed of, though it is very acceptable and common for the same women to frequently host those being ashamed in their own houses, cooking for them and cleaning after them.

I now continue with the narrative of Maze, "a journey home" that was actually discomfortingly not to home, due to Russian border controls. However, the arrival of the Republican administrators to meet them at the border had changed their experience:

> They told us to run for the passport control when we got off the plane, but we were two traditional Circassian girls, we thought these people are older and we should let them pass through that single door first. When we got inside we understood why they had said to run, but in the end we were in a passport control queue, but this Russian border police said Russian citizens should pass first. We were very angry. This is my homeland, and that Russian at the border control is putting me at the back. But then they called us to the front when somebody [from the Republic

> administration] told that we were guests [of the National Adyghe Assembly taking place]. I felt like, 'you see?' (Maze F20s)

I have focused in detail on illegal migration routes to Abkhazia and how this influences the gendered narratives of transnational mobility. Let me complete this section with a narrative of a young returnee man from Adygheya who has suffered a lot due to lack of citizenship and how his experience is gendered. Having the proper documentation would have influenced the decision to return for many, and also affected the experience of return. Especially for those settled return migrants, getting citizenship in Adygheya is always an issue. Perit and Gufit both complained around the same time about their inability to apply for citizenship, which on paper they had acquired the right. Perit was even shown the application of Gufit when he went to the office to hand in his application:

> That woman there showed me Gufit's application and said 'he gave it to me by force, but if I send it to Moscow, it will return for sure. Why should I? You boys should better get married!'. That's what they tell us, go and get married to a local woman and then you can apply for the citizenship. But then, you got to wait another 3 years to be able to apply. I met the requirements of citizenship many years ago. So did Gufit. But they just tell us to go and get married (Perit M40s).

This example shows that marriage is not only a topic brought upon transnational women, but also a repeated statement to young unmarried men. When I asked Perit and Gufit if they have any interest in getting married, both answered "*if there is someone suitable, but not just for documents"*. There are not many women who have met the requirements to apply for citizenship like these two male solo return migrants. Hence both in Abkhazia and in Adygheya it is very rare for returning women to marry locals and there are many dimensions to this from religion to language limitations or cultural differences. They usually prefer to get married to other returning migrants or go back to Turkey to get married because they say they feel more comfortable in communicating with their husbands.

Conclusion

I have analyzed the gendered experiences of return and how the border and citizenship regimes influence these experiences through narratives of returning migrants. In the case of Abkhazia where borders are not recognized and embargo was forced upon for many years the returning migrants had to make the journey home like refugees. In the case of Adygheya, returning migrants are accepted as migrants and they have trouble feeling at home. Many returnees who did not or could not acquire the language skills and who did not have the capital to establish their own business, buy or build a home, had more problems and had longer adjustment periods, though, in time, they also developed the necessary skills and established new links and adopted new practices to stay in the homeland. All these new practices, combined with the old ones, turned out to be ways to define new boundaries of existence as an Abkhaz or an Adyghe in the homeland. For the women it is even more important to be involved in new and old transnational practices to adapt to their ancestral homeland communities. 'Many women describe return as suffering --- a renewed dependency on husbands' (Perez 2004, p. 183), as it is hard for them to find jobs, there are not enough things to do, and they are separated from their grown-up children. In the case of the Adyghe-Abkhaz mothers, many find the solution in a constant back and forth movement or accepting the role of the mother or grandmother of all return migrants. The migration and mobility of women is considered as a challenge to the traditional image of women in the community and to social norms. However, it is also seen as a 'courageous act' due to such policy restrictions on mobility. Thus this act is not merely 'personal' but a reflection of the gendered implication of geopolitical realities and border regimes on family and the body. In this regard, the past and current return mobilities of women are helping constantly negotiate the gendered dimensions of ethnic, diasporic and return migrant identity, belonging, and agency.

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