

ABKHAZ-ADYGE LANGUAGES

INTRODUCTION

These languages fall into three groups: (a) Abkhaz and Abaza; (b) Adyge and Kabard-Cherkes; (c) Ubykh. Genetically, these languages are closely related, but the three groups are not mutually intelligible. As an isolated outlier, Ubykh (now extinct) diverges considerably from (a) and (b). The Ubykh people moved *en bloc* to Turkey in the middle of the nineteenth century. The other languages are spoken by about half a million people in the Abkhaz Autonomous Region, in Georgia, the Karachaevo-Cherkessia Republic, the Adygeia Republic, and the Kabardino-Balkaria Republic.

ABKHAZ

INTRODUCTION

Abkhaz belongs to the North-West Caucasian or Abkhaz-Adyge sub-group of Caucasian languages. Abkhaz is very closely connected to Abaza; indeed the Abkhaz-Abaza complex can be described in terms of four dialects: Southern – Bzyb and Abžui, the latter providing the basis for the Abkhaz literary language; and Northern – Aškhar and Tapanta, on which the Abaza literary language is based.

In 1979 there were some 90,000 speakers of Abkhaz, of whom about 95 per cent claimed Abkhaz as their mother tongue. Most Abkhazians live in the Abkhaz Autonomous Region (capital Sukhumi), with a residue in Mingrelia and in Turkey.

Abkhaz oral literary tradition possesses a version of the *Narts* saga, which is regarded as more archaic than the parallel Ossetian version. The saga combines mythological accounts of the origins of Iranian society and its culture with records, which may be historical, of migration and warfare. The fact that the Greeks seem to have borrowed some of the material (e.g. the Prometheus motif) goes to suggest that the *Narts* saga may date from at least 1000 BC.

The first Abkhaz newspaper, *Apsne*, was launched in 1917 by Drmit Gulia (1874–1960), who is generally recognized as the father of literature in Abkhaz. He translated widely from Russian and Georgian, and wrote a novel on social themes, *Kamačič*.