

THE RETURN OF REFUGEES VIEWED THROUGH THE PRISM OF BLOOD REVENGE

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Reaching a peace agreement in violent ethnic conflicts, which tend to be zero sum affairs, can be a long and arduous process which complicates the lives of refugees and prospects for their safe return home. This is a case-study of the obstacles to peace in the refugee problems caused by the AbkhazianGeorgian conflict. It analyzes Abkhazian culturespecific thinking about conflict and conflict resolution that must be taken into account in negotiating a peace agreement and a workable settlement on the return of Georgian refugees to Abkhazia.

The anthropologists Kevin Avruch and Peter Black point out the importance of the culture concept in conflict analysis, maintaining that the view of culture is often too "thin." They propose examining culture in a way that stresses local and indigenous ideas about human nature, personhood and self, and recommend the ethnographic casestudy method as a way to investigate these ideas (Avruch, Black 1991). Marc Ross (1994), a political scientist, stresses an understanding of what he calls psycho-cultural factors that hinder agreement in conflict management efforts, impediments that he complains are often overlooked or play an insignificant second to an interestbased analysis. My conclusions result from informal conversations and interviews in Abkhazia in August and September, 1994, and September, 1995. My informants were Abkhazian elders, war veterans and noncombatant citizens.

I was not expecting what I discovered. I found that the theme of blood revenge was a constant in people's explanations for why they opposed the return of Georgian refugees from the AbkhazianGeorgian war (August 1992-September 1993). I will go into this in more detail further. But first I would like to make a few more introductory remarks.

When the importance of this theme started to become clear to me, I reluctantly admitted to an Abkhazian official who had spent the war in Moscow, but was now working in Sukhumi in the national government, that I was embarrassed, that though I was an expert on Abkhazian culture, until I actually came to Abkhazia and talked to people I did not suspect that the culture of blood

revenge would be so salient in the issue of refugee return. I had to come and meet people face to face and listen carefully in order to really understand the resistance to the massive return of Georgians. My observation of representatives of international organizations is that they preach their universalistic guidelines more than they listen to the concerns of local populations.

Economic factors are also no doubt influential in considerations about the return of refugees. For instance, many families in the capital city of Sukhumi, Abkhazian and nonAbkhazian, have taken over apartments abandoned by Georgians who left the territory when Abkhazian forces drove out the Georgian army. Some moved into these apartments out of necessity, their own homes having been destroyed or made uninhabitable, and others, for unjustifiable reasons. In addition, many jobs became available from the loss of the large Georgian population. So I speculated that the benefits of newly acquired apartments and jobs might be the underlying motivation for resisting the return of Georgians. However, these considerations were not expressed to me, and when I raised them informants were adamant in their denial. Some people even told me that Abkhazia could not rebuild its economy adequately without the former Georgians, but that their safe return depended on a secure political status for Abkhazia.

I also do not know to what extent the Abkhazian leaders and/or peace negotiators even raise the issue in the terms that ordinary citizens brought them up with me. I assume that they are aware of this approach at the grassroots, although they may not be completely conscious of it in these terms. At any rate, they know that their public would be outraged if Abkhazian negotiators easily agreed to a large-scale return of Georgians without first securing certain guarantees.

How is the practice of blood revenge relevant to such a refugee problem? According to the theory of "refugee area warrior adaptation" (Boehm 1983, 1984), an important factor in the survival of peoples threatened constantly by formidable neighbors is the high value placed on local autonomy and on honor befitting a true warrior. Boehm is

the author of a comprehensive study of blood revenge in Montenegro and several other societies around the world where the traditions of retaliatory killing share striking similarities. These are cultures such as the Nuer and Nuba of North Africa, the Bedouins and certain Lebanese villages in the Middle East, Netsilik Eskimos, the Jivaro headhunters of South America, some tribes in the New Guinean highlands, and Albanians, just to name a few. Boehm concludes that the warriors in such societies tend to sharply limit the power of their own chiefs, except on the battlefield, where authority is needed. In these societies, some form of patterned vengeance killing is an integral part of conflict management. Such societies adapted to their vulnerable political status and geographic location by developing strict codes of behavior that allowed for retaliatory killing under certain circumstances. The measures were so harsh that they prevented disintegration of the society in the absence of strong centralized government and law enforcement institutions. Boehm maintains that feuding systems grow out of deliberate processes of problem solving and must be defined in such terms. So far in my attempt to compare different practices of retaliatory killing I see confirmation of Boehm's hypothesis when looking at blood revenge as practiced in the Caucasus.

Abkhazian traditions of blood revenge are typical of a refugeearia warrior society. A central tenet of this practice is that all the adult male members of a family are held responsible for the actions of one individual and are therefore fair targets for retaliatory murder (See Inallpa 1965 for more on Abkhazian blood revenge). An understanding of these traditions and how they have shaped the people's thinking about conflict and conflict resolution is crucial to seeking solutions to the issue of the return of former Georgian residents to Abkhazia, which is a major obstacle to a final peace settlement of the GeorgianAbkhazian war. These psycho-cultural factors are shaping public opinion at the grassroots level and are resulting in pressures on the government to resist the mass return of Georgians.

I first came across the phenomenon of blood revenge in the late 1970s and early 1980s in meetings with Abkhazian elders who served on local councils of elders; they told me about how they prevented animosities from escalating into revenge killing. For instance, in 1980, members of a village council of elders told me of a case of blood revenge that they had preempted with their

traditional negotiation techniques. A villager had killed a fellow villager in an automobile accident. The Soviet court convicted the driver of involuntary manslaughter and sentenced him to a prison term. Relatives of the deceased, believing that they needed to take their own action in accordance with the traditions of blood revenge, appeared to be preparing some retaliatory action against a member of the convicted man's family. The elders who told me this story said they did not really think a retaliatory murder was imminent, but that talk about taking action was the family's way of showing its high value of Abkhazian traditions, a mark of honor in any Abkhazian community, then and now. From these and similar stories I heard over the years, I concluded that these traditions were modified, in some cases, ritualized, but not eradicated in Soviet Abkhazia.

During fieldwork in Abkhazia in July of 1994, I was struck by the frequency with which the subject of blood revenge came up. I was told that members of families engaged in blood revenge with each other had reconciliations on the battlefield, and that some feuds have developed since the war. One case that occurred within the first year after the end of war involved members of two families, the Ks and the Js, who got in a fight in which one J was killed. Members of the J family immediately struck back and killed a member of the K family. When some Ks went into hiding in preparation for another counter attack, a delegation of high ranking government officials, including the minister of defense, the prosecutor, and a university official, went to the Js to ask their permission to mediate the case and to suggest that they send a delegate with them to the Ks. This was to give the Js a chance to know everything that the mediator talked about with the Ks. First the officials from Sukhumi said to the Ks, whose house was burned down by the Js and who were preparing to bury their relative, that the mediators had come to express their condolences and offer assistance to end the conflict. After long, eloquent speeches by representatives of each side they agreed to have the dispute mediated. Only after eight sessions over a period of time did the families agree to a "cease-fire." It was agreed by all parties that anyone who broke the truce would be exiled from Abkhazia.

In June of 1995 the council of elders in the village of Otara told me of a recent case that had only been partially settled. A man killed another during a drunken argument. A member of the victim's family, believing that the

killer's family did nothing in the spirit of an apology, killed a member of the other family. The council of elders, fearing a cycle of violence, approached the families to inquire whether they would accept the involvement of the council. The families agreed to let the dispute be mediated after several mediators caucused for about three hours with each family. The agreement that was finally reached was that the disputing families would be "neither relatives nor enemies." According to Abkhazian tradition, complete reconciliation between two families requires that they become relatives so that blood revenge is no longer possible among the former disputants. The ritual, usually a banquet, that makes all members of both families relatives, is an agreement that is more binding than a modern legal contract. So, when the disputants in this conflict declared that they are "neither relatives nor enemies," they meant that they have not yet reached a final agreement, but are willing to cease hostilities, at least temporarily. They vowed not to pursue further vendettas, but also refused any formal reconciliation that would allow them to interact with each other. The mediators remain vigilant about the case, and their final goal is to bring about a reconciliation that will completely preclude any further revenge. They believe it is time and careful monitoring of the situation that will enable a final resolution. This story illustrates how bitter conflicts can be resolved one stage at a time. A legitimate stage is to simply ignore each other's existence, but this is carefully monitored by the elders who wait for an opportunity to bring about complete reconciliation, the ultimate goal.

These traditions are increasingly salient today in the absence of strong law enforcement which is characteristic of postwar society and postSoviet successor states. Another reason is that the Abkhazians' military triumph provided a strong impetus for the reconstruction of Abkhazian ethnic identity and, consequently, of cultural traditions.

This is why I began listening very carefully when Abkhazians explained why they were so adamant that Georgians should not return under any circumstances, at least not for a very long time. It appears to be quite clear to Abkhazians that vengeance will be taken against returning Georgians, who are regarded as war criminals; Abkhazians thus cannot comprehend why the Georgians would want to return, knowing their fate according to the rules of blood revenge. Thus, the only way Abkhazians

can understand the reasoning of such Georgians who want to return is that their true intention must be to resume the fighting. This is a common theme that runs through conversations with Abkhazians about the possible return en masse of former Georgian inhabitants.

In line with the logic that a whole family is responsible for the actions of one member, I heard stories of Abkhazian soldiers who, immediately after liberating occupied territory, committed crimes against Georgian families that resembled the crimes that were committed by Georgian troops against their own families. This can happen after any war, but in Abkhazian culture it is perceived through the prism of the rules of blood revenge and therefore condoned, or at least, not condemned and the perpetrators apparently are not prosecuted. This gives cause for further anxiety about the safety of returning Georgians.

At the same time there is evidence that Abkhazians are also capable of protecting Georgians from harm. I learned of several Abkhazians who have shielded their Georgian neighbors or friends from hostile Abkhazians.

Have Georgians preserved these traditions to the extent that the Abkhazians have? Can they genuinely understand how Abkhazians think about these matters? Without doing equivalent fieldwork in Georgia it is not possible for me to answer these questions. I suspect that these practices have not been so well preserved in Georgia, and that this may affect the ability of Georgian elite or ordinary people to fully comprehend the fears of the Abkhazians.

I made a special point of asking Abkhazian elders who have long experience resolving blood feuds within their own society how they, using their traditional skills, could help facilitate the process of reconciliation between Abkhazians and Georgians. They all maintain that their conflict management skills are inadequate to prevent or settle cases of retaliatory murder against former Georgian residents of Abkhazia, or to advise the government on such matters. In their minds an early resolution is hindered for two reasons.

First, they say, the conflict is not between two feuding families, but between many families from two cultures. The diversity of the personalities of all the families and individuals immensely complicates mediation efforts that ordinarily involve a painstaking individualized approach

of caucusing with all involved parties. This is time-consuming and cumbersome even when the conflict is only between two families; for instance, eight sessions were required to reconcile the Ks with the Js. The argument stated by elders is that mediation between so many families on both sides would be infinitely complicated, essentially impossible. A second argument made by Abkhazian elders is that rape or other indignities to women (harm to women is forbidden by the rules of blood revenge) are acts that preclude any resolution between two families and therefore preclude resolution with the Georgians since the Abkhazians maintain that crimes were committed against women.

Looking through the traditional framework of settling cases of retaliatory murder, elders see time and separation as the only alternatives at present. The recent case in Otara, when the two conflicting families agreed to be "neither relatives nor enemies," might be the best scenario for the Georgians and the Abkhazians for an unknown period of time. At this point the elders believe ten or more years are needed for healing before mutual relations can be resumed. If international mediators of a Georgian-Abkhazian peace treaty are to facilitate a lasting settlement they must have a clear understanding of the widespread and passionate public opinion reinforced by a group survival mentality that draws on tradition for security. Taking into consideration these psycho-cultural factors might assist in the development of ways to help lessen the fears that each side has of the other, and might facilitate eliminating the impediments to productive peace talks.

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