



Lilit Matevosyan

AN ISLAND SURROUNDED BY LAND





Launched in 2023 with the support of the Garage Field Research program, Lilit Matevosyan's artistic research project *An Island Surrounded by Land* explores the folklore of the indigenous peoples of the Northwest Caucasus. Drawing on a broad range of literary sources, from foreign nineteenth-century travelogues and memoirs of officers who fought in the Caucasian War (1817–1864) to present-day publications on the geography, ethnography and history of Cherkessia and Abkhazia, as well as materials from her own research expeditions, the artist aims to trace the connections between mythological characters, literary tropes, and historical events associated with the region. This publication showcases the first stages of Matevosyan's research, highlighting the stories of the communities dwelling in Circassian (Adyghe) auls (fortified villages), collected by the artist during her trips.





When I was a child, my family moved a lot due to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the political challenges in the South Caucasus in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Living by the sea was my parents' longtime dream. In 1998, we moved to Sochi and found a home there. Only much later would I take interest in the meaning behind this southern city's name. The Stalinist architecture of its grandiose sanatoriums, the glittering kitsch of the nineties, the scorching noisy summer season—the "socialist paradise" enveloped us in its dizzying embrace. However, these places always seemed to conceal something behind the looming mountains, the vast relict forests, and the depths of the Black Sea. It was hard to imagine how many tragic stories lay hidden behind the resort's cultivated image.

As part of my 2021 project Resortworld, I collected stories and archival photographs of resettlers whose families found themselves on the Black Sea coast as the region started to be colonized after the end of the Caucasian War in 1864. Among those resettled to the deserted lands were peasants from central Russian provinces, Pontic Greeks and Hamshen Armenians who fled the Ottoman Empire, as well as Estonians, Moldovans, and others. The development of the Black Sea coast began with the selling—on preferential terms—of large plots of land to merchants and the nobility. With the advent of Soviet rule following the October Revolution, Sochi acquired a new function, as the city rapidly transformed from a bourgeois community into a "resort for the workers," thus shifting the narratives surrounding the city. Along with largescale construction of recreational and healthcare infrastructure, parks were being built that would completely change the city's landscape. This was how the non-native species of palms, plane trees, and cypresses were introduced—these "outsiders" adapted to life in the subtropical climate and became iconic subjects of tourist postcards. My historical "excavations" and working with the memory of the place as part of *Resortworld* lead me to new research—an inquiry into the works on the indigenous peoples who inhabited the territory of today's Greater

Sochi. Bytkha, Aibga, Mzymta, Azhek, Matsesta, Ashe—these Circassian names of mountains, rivers, and settlements serve as one of the few reminders of a past so obscure to the new inhabitants. In their book The "Insular" Civilization of Cherkessia, Bella Agrba and Samir Khotko describe the country of the Adyghe people as a culture that once hid from prying eyes behind a natural fortress. The poetic trope of an "island surrounded by land" mirrored my own sense of this place, evoking something elusive, inaccessible, and lost. The beginning of my research coincided with my newfound status as a mother. What will I tell my son about the city where he was born? What do I myself know about these places? In March 2023, my husband, child, and I set out on our first expeditions to the Lazarevsky and Tuapsinsky Districts, in order to meet the residents of the Circassian (Adyghe) auls.

"Every person should know the history of the place they live in," is what the ninety-three-year-old elder of the Shkhafit aul, Murdin Teshev, told me in an interview. I doubt we would ever learn even a fraction of what this wise man knows, but we decided to try. Behind how many layers of new meaning can history be hidden? And what can it sound like today?

Throughout their centuries-old history, the Circassians lived along the Caucasian Mountains and the Black Sea coast. Their strategically important geographical location between Europe and Asia would often embroil these lands and their inhabitants in military conflicts. Following the Caucasian War (1817–1864), hundreds of thousands of Circassians were deported to the Ottoman Empire. Those who remained submitted to the Russian Empire and moved to the swampy plains of the broader Kuban area. Another few thousand people, however, turned into ghosts on the land of their ancestors, evading search parties in the mountains for several years. They were subsequently allowed to settle in the valleys of the Ashe, Shakhe, Psezuapse, and Agoy rivers at a distance of no closer than ten kilometers from the Black Sea, leading to the formation of auls towards the end of the nineteenth century. One of the sub-ethnic groups of the Circassians—the Shapsugs—live in these auls today.





## Murdin Teshev 93 years old (b. April 22, 1930)

The elder of the Ashe River valley, Murdin Teshev is a community leader, political figure and a musician. He is a veteran of the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945); an honored artist of the Republic of Adygea; and the honorary chairman of the *Adyghe Khase* NGO, dedicated to the preservation and development of Black Sea Adyghe culture. Teshev is one of the founders of the *Shapsugiya* (an out-of-use term developed in the Soviet era among the Black Sea Circassians to describe their indigenous territory—Lilit Matevosyan) NGO and its eponymous newspaper. In 2023, Murdin's family opened the Ashe ethnographic center in the Shkhafit aul.

Just like my ancestors, I was born in the Bolshoe Pseushkho aul in the Tuapsinsky District. My parents were collective farmers. My father fought in the war and taught himself to read and write during the 1925–1930 Likbez ("eradication of illiteracy") campaign. Having inherited his father's genes, he could have lived a long life, had he not been captured during the war. He was horribly tortured, even harnessed to a cart like a horse. After the war ended, former prisoners of war were not allowed to return to their homes, which is why he spent another seven years working in a mine in Prokopyevsk (a mining town in the Kemerovo Oblast in the southern part of Western Siberia-Lilit Matevosyan). He only came back home in 1952.

I was raised and educated by my grandfather. He had seven hectares of land and loved his garden very much. I inherited this trait of his, with many of the crops he had cherished currently growing in my own garden. These are mainly walnuts, hazelnuts, apples, and pears—varieties that our Adyghe ancestors also grew. There used to be a lot of apples and pears back then. In late June they'd already be eating early apples and pears! And late apples would still be hanging on trees in snowy December. Our ancestors cultivated an "extended" garden, so we had fruit all year round. They would cover the fruit with hay in barns and eat it all winter. That's why they lived long and rarely got sick.

The Adyghe treated oak trees with great respect. Any decent Adyghe family in a Turkish village will have an oak near the house. It was considered a mighty, healing, longest-living tree. The hawthorn tree was sacred. In the old days, on New Year's eve, they would even decorate seven or eight hawthorn branches like a Christmas tree. As he grew old, my grandfather cultivated walnuts in his yard: his bed always stood under the tree. He would constantly make wooden spoons and ladles from boxwood (buxus colchica— Lilit Matevosyan), as well as walking sticks for old folks, which he gave away as gifts to his guests.

Shichepshin, an Adyghe folk bowed string instrument, is considered the oldest and most elite in the Adyghe world, played by few people nowadays. I learned to play the shichepshin around 1943: the war is in full swing, the youth are bored sitting out in the rear, and I have this violin left by my father. I didn't touch it, didn't know how to play it. And then they started asking me, "learn to play it!", and I did. I didn't know the notes, did it all by ear: I'd hear it once and play it. Nobody taught me, did it all on my own. Guess I had the talent.

Today, we should talk about the Adyghe only in the past. Presently, the Adyghe have lost a lot of what they had. We never defied our mother, our father, and especially our grandparents. I never heard our father speak loudly, he would speak to us as equals: what needs to be done, how it needs to be done. And my mother too. We were raised in the spirit of loyalty.









## Madin Khusht 56 years old (b. 1967)

An alumnus of the Voronezh State Academy of Forestry and Technologies, now a retired law enforcement officer, Madin collects information on the history of the Black Sea Adyghe people.

After the Russian landing at the mouth of the Shakhe River and the founding of Fort Golovinsky in 1839, tsarist troops began to carry out punitive expeditions to exterminate the Shapsugs and Ubykhs (sub-ethnic groups of the Circassians—Lilit Matevosyan). By then, the overwhelming majority of my people's battleworthy men had already died in attempts to stop the imperial expansion. Born in 1835, my great-grandfather Kelmet had three brothers and a sister. My great-greatgrandfather Leusten gathered the family, and, together with two other surviving Shapsugs, migrated from the Shakhe Valley to a mountainous region behind mount Autl, thirty-five kilometers away. This place is called Khakuch. Presumably, up until the 1870s, several dozen Shapsugs, as well as a number of Russian deserters, lived in the Khakuch area while under constant pressure from Russian troops and various mercenaries. The construction of a fortress in the upper reaches of the Psezuapse River, in the immediate vicinity of the Khakuch tract, made it impossible to remain in those territories. My great-great-parents were buried in Khakuch. Today, beechfir forests grow there and nothing reminds of those events. Roaming the mountains in search of food with his brothers and teenage sister, my greatgrandfather Kelmet relocated closer to the Shakhe Valley. While the brothers were still able to walk, the sister was so emaciated that they hid her. On that day, a punitive expedition of Cossack mercenaries approached the area, which is nowadays known as "Thirtythree Waterfalls." The Cossacks caught the girl. On that day, she disappeared

forever. All that was left of her was a small piece of red twine from her clothes, which the family has kept.

My great-grandfather made his way to Turkey, his promised new homeland, on his own. But seeing the mass deaths of Adyghe in camps from hunger and disease, as well as children being bought and sold, made him come back. He brought with him a little boy who would become the progenitor of one of the Shapsug clans living on the coast today. The boy was emaciated, so Kelmet had to leave him with a poor Turkish peasant family for a while, before returning for him some time later. My great-grandfather thanked the family that fostered the boy with several parts of a modest silver belt with a dagger. A little over a year later. Kelmet visited Turkey again, took the boy and returned to his homeland, where there were no more Adyghe left. All the survivors, about 250 people in total including my great-grandfather, were placed in a guarded camp. Today, this place is known as Lesnoe and is situated not far from the village of Golitsyno on the road to Krasnaya Polyana. By the tsar's decree, the Shapsugs were subsequently spared and, as a lesson to other rebellious peoples, resettled in the river valleys of Ashe and Shakhe under the supervision of the Cossacks and former mercenaries. Today these are the auls Khadzhiko and Kichmai.



Years passed, the Bolsheviks overthrew the tsar, and the Shapsugs were among the first to support the Soviet government. Kelmet had four sons, all of whom left to defend their homeland during the Great Patriotic War. Only one of them survived, becoming disabled from his wounds. My grandfather Ramazan was reported missing in action at the crossing of the Kerch Strait. The vast majority of the Black Sea Shapsugs' descendants who survived the Caucasian War died during the Great Patriotic War. Only children born before 1941 became the successors of the Shapsug lineage, which explains the small number of Black Sea Adyghe. The fate of my people resembles that of a relict boxwood tree. Although pests destroyed 99% of boxwood throughout its area of distribution, its seeds can endure in the ground for more than a decade, so when adult trees die, the seeds awaken and grow saplings. The same inevitable fate awaits these saplings, however, since the pests are still there to consume them before they can produce new seeds.

None of the Black Sea Adyghe living today are skilled in pottery or blacksmithing, cattle are no longer bred, most of the knowledge and craft accumulated by the people over thousands of years have been lost. Almost no young people speak the language. Our language, our dialect is impossible to learn as an adult—it can only be passed down from mother to infant. Another half a generation and our language will die. The cult of sacred trees is most

developed among the Black Sea Advghe inhabiting mountainous forests. Various species can be considered sacred (most commonly the pedunculate oak, walnut, or pear). The trees grew in places where people would gather. They were looked after. It was forbidden to cut down or prune these trees. If they fell from old age, they remained untouched, left to decompose naturally. Areas around the trees were public places for rituals: petitions to the god Tkha (the supreme god in the religion of the Adyghe, the creator of all that happens and exists—Lilit Matevosyan), gatherings of people, solving urgent problems, etc. Today, the worship of sacred trees has endured in its simplest, most basic form. It is performed by women, praying for their vital interests. Sacred oaks have remained in Nadzhigo, Tkhagapsh, near Agui-Shapsug and in the mountains of the Verkhniy Kichmai District.







Kh.S. Sizo (Chuntyzheva) reads a prayer in the Khadzhiko aul. June 1995 Photograph courtesy of: Tamara Chuntyzheva



Grandma's Escape (nyoezhezh). Wedding. Tuapsinsky district, 1998 Photograph courtesy of Tamara Chuntyzheva

## Tamara Chuntyzheva 77 years old (b. 1946)

With a research degree in pedagogical sciences, she is the author of *Wedding and Ritual Culture of the Black Sea Adyghe as an Ethno-pedagogical Value* and *The Ritual Culture of the Black Sea Adyghe: Birth and Upbringing.* 

My mother, Khadzhet Salikhovna Sizo, was born in the Bolshoe Pseushkho aul in the Tuapsinsky District, into a then-largest family in the entire Black Sea Shapsugia: they had seventeen children (albeit from two wives). Being a large, friendly, and hardworking community, they lived in a remarkably healthy atmosphere and loved each other very much. Family members worked in the field, growing all the produce they needed. The men practiced sheep herding and bee keeping. My grandfather discouraged idleness, so everyone kept themselves busy from early morning. Even my mother's hundred-year-old father did gardening, providing the family with fruit.

Then came 1933. My mother's family were labeled kulaks, my grandfather was sentenced to death on political charges: he was allegedly going to carry out a coup. And then they thought, how could an illiterate person who spoke next to no Russian organize a coup? So instead he was sentenced to seventeen years and exiled to the Southern Urals. The rest of the brothers were imprisoned. My mother's elder sisters escaped prosecution, as they had gotten married by then and lived under different surnames. The women and children who remained in the aul were robbed of everything, left only with the dresses they wore on their person. They were temporarily resettled into an old house on the edge of the aul, expropriated from another Adyghe family. They were not against the kolkhoz—they had in fact voluntarily ioined it back in 1930, but no one even asked them.

My mother was 18 at the time. Recognized as the head of the dispossessed kulak family, she was left with two elderly women as well as younger brothers and sisters. They lived in the aul for about two more years. The new authorities set impossible tasks for the family, imposing a plan for collecting chestnuts, while at the same time forbidding them from going into the forest and speaking to other villagers. The elder married sisters secretly gathered chestnuts for them at night. Then the deportation to Kazakhstan happened, it took them a month to get there, a whole month on the road. They were thrown out of the train into the steppes, totally exhausted. They had to build adobe houses for themselves, supervised by guards. Mom wore a work apron even outside, with the cotton wool of an already worn-out fufaika (Soviet padded jacket) sticking from underneath. Obtaining a piece of fabric to patch the holes up was not easy.

I was born in Kazakhstan in 1946. My father was from Ingushetia (currently the Republic of Ingushetia, part of the North Caucasian Federal District of Russia—Lilit Matevosyan), similarly persecuted. They did not have the right to resettle. Mom started working part-time as a hairdresser and saving money. She dreamed of returning to the Caucasus. In 1948, mom managed to obtain a passport, and we returned to our native lands, since nothing was keeping us in Kazakhstan.

Throughout their fifteen-year-long exile, mom remembered her grandfather and his stories about the life and culture of the Adyghe. She grew up in that atmosphere, seeing all the rituals from a young age. Mom read the Quran, knew all its translations, performed namaz. Until her death, she held prayers and sacred rituals in the Khadzhiko aul. She was a wonderful expert in Adyghe folklore.



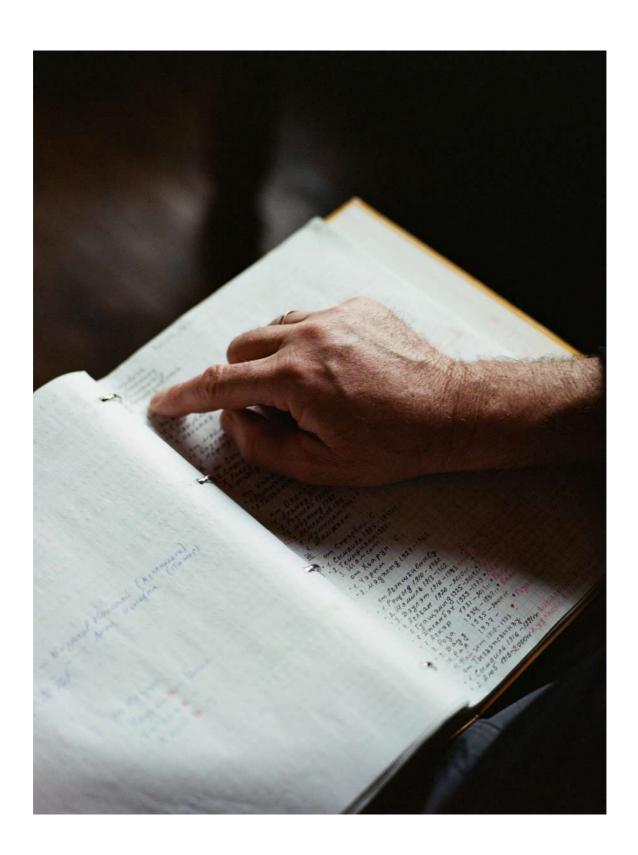












## Nabi Koblev 60 years old (b. 1963)

An alumnus of the Chelyabinsk Polytechnic Institute in Design Engineering, Nabi works as a physics teacher in the Kalezh aul.

I am currently working on a book for which I am collecting Adyghe toponyms along the Black Sea coast. A lot of the information is distorted. I plan to publish several works. I have already collected a lot of material on the flora and fauna, recorded the genealogies of our auls and continue to collect Adyghe names. I cannot say that I am strong in toponymy as a science, but I know our region and my native language well. A lot of work has been done to study the area, including trips to auls, meetings and conversations with their dwellers. For example, I have recorded around seventy family names in our gorge.

The name of the Kalezh aul is most often translated as "kal/kale" which is Turkic for "fortress." There have never been fortresses here, however. "K/ke" means "grave," "le" signifies "many" (graves), "zhe" is for "ancient" (graves). In our aul alone, there were about a hundred dolmens, which were dismantled into blocks in 1933 before the construction of a School for Peasant Youth. Then came an earthquake, followed by war bombings. The dolmens were destroyed. Vestiges of seven or eight dolmens can be found on that slope.

My father often took my brothers and me to the forest. He told us about the names of the slopes and mountains, I wrote all of them down. As a university student, I drew my own map of the Ashe River with names marked on it. People interested in my research come to visit me from Adygea, Kabarda (the Republic of Adygea in the Southern Federal District of Russia and the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic in the North Caucasian Federal District of Russia, respectively—Lilit Matevosyan), and St. Petersburg.

As a child, I used to participate in rituals, but not anymore. During a summer drought, we would go to the river and pour water over ourselves. We would invite as many people as possible to join us. If you were passing by, we could throw you into the water too. The women prayed before treating everyone to special unseasoned flatbread made with water and cut into slices, so that each participant could try some. Sometimes they slaughtered animals, prayed, and handed out pieces of meat. They still do it today, even though slightly differently.

It's all up to us. If we do not give our children knowledge, nothing will happen. I have long wanted to organize classes for children in our community center. We can gather them and show them where their ancestors used to live. In ten years we could put together a book: names of plants in Latin, Russian, and Adyghe. We could ask our grandmothers, aunts, those who know. We will record everything, the school will publish its own book, and the kids will improve their language.

I am neither Muslim nor Christian. even though at different times there have been attempts to introduce us, the Adyghe, to both. In the Adyghe language, the Almighty is called Tkha and I believe in Tkha. I get up in the morning, go to Krasnodar (the largest city on the Kuban River in the South of Russia—Lilit Matevosyan) two or three times a week. On my way from here to Ashe I'm always praying in my language that the road is straight and I reach my goal, that everyone at home wakes up alive and well, that I return home alive and well, and that nothing bad happens in the aul.

For their contribution to *An Island Surrounded by Land*, the artist wishes to express her gratitude to: Alij Alallo, Damir Achokh, Aydamir Baste, Darya Bobrenko, Diana Goncharova, Yuri Dudin, Ksenia Zhukova, Natalya Karpun, Kristina Klemesheva, Nabi Koblev, Mikhail Kudin, Marina Kurashinova, Natalya Loktea, Yulia Naberezhnaya, Madina Pashtova, Oksana Polyakova, Vladimir Pshenokov, Marina Romanova, Ekaterina Savchenko, Murdin Teshev, Safet, Shamset and Maria Teshev, Aisa Tlif, Bulat Khalilov, Ruslan and Saret Kheyshkho, Madin Khusht, Tamara Chuntyzheva, Vitaly Shtybin, Auches and Valid Skhalakhov, Batmiz Skhalakhov, the Achmizov family from the aul Psebe and Tereshev family from the aul Nadzhigo, workers of the houses of culture of the village Tsypka and the auls Agui-Shapsug and Maloye Pseushkho, all the residents of the Tuapsinsky and Lazarevsky districts who opened the doors of their homes, shared literature and supported me while working on this project, as well as the *Adyghe Kheku* Telegram channel, the *Shyble* podcast (Islam Sapiyev and Gunef Yedydzh), and the journal SCAPP.

Special thanks to my companions during all the expeditions: my husband Andrey Kuznetsov and son Nairi Kuznetsov.



