UC Santa Barbara

UC Santa Barbara Previously Published Works

Title

On becoming citizens of the 'non-existent': document production and Syrian-Circassian wartime migration to Abkhazia
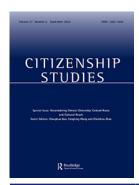
Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/17x395pq

Author

Abaza, Gehad M
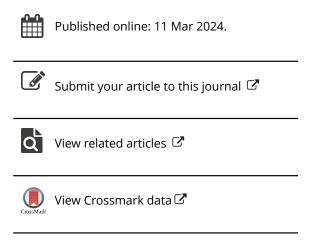
Publication Date

2024-03-11

Peer reviewed

On becoming citizens of the 'non-existent': document production and Syrian-Circassian wartime migration to Abkhazia

Gehad Abaza

Published online: 11 Mar 2024.

Submit your article to this journal

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

ARTICLE

On becoming citizens of the 'non-existent': document production and Syrian-Circassian wartime migration to Abkhazia

Gehad Abaza

Department of Anthropology, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA, USA

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the centrality of passports and identification documents (or their lack thereof) in peoples' everyday lives and life chances, particularly in the contexts of forced displacement and protracted conflict. While the production of largely internationally unrecognized passports reasserts the logics of the globally dominant modern nation-state order, it also lays bare the problematic, fragile, and performative qualities of that system. I argue that the bureaucratic processes of document production for wartime migrants reveal the racializing effects of codified legal and ethnic classifications. As such, the production of passports and legal identification documents plays a formative role in the ethno-racial exclusions embedded in statecraft projects. This paper invites readers to consider how passports and identification documents affect multiple aspects of life, including access to work opportunities, mobility, and housing—and how people creatively traverse the confinments of these documents and their bureaucratic categories.

'*You know what my dream is? My dream is to have a caravan and to move with it as much as I like, and for borders to not exist . . . so that I could choose whichever country I want to go to, and just go. – Salma*

The State Committee for Repatriation of the Republic of Abkhazia sits in the center of Sukhum, the capital of Abkhazia, a small breakaway state squeezed between Russia and Georgia in the South-East Caucasus. In March 2023, Abkhazia's State Repatriation Committee celebrated 30 years since it was first founded by the Republic's first post-secession president, Vladislav Ardzinba, as a fund meant to support the repatriation of Abkhazia's diaspora. The ceremony included professionals and children performing traditional Abkhazian dances and singing historical ballads dedicated to the homeland. State officials spoke about the Repatriation Committee's work and stressed the importance of repatriation for the 'construction' of the state, using the Russian word *postroit'* (to construct or to build). Meanwhile, spokespeople for members of the diaspora in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, in Arabic and Turkish, expressed appreciation for the Committee's efforts to reach out to the diaspora and urged them to remember Ardzinba's initial goals for the repatriation fund.

CONTACT Gehad Abaza ✉ g_abaza@ucsb.edu

During one of my initial visits to the Repatriation Committee's office in 2015, I met a few elderly Syrian-Circassian men on the lawn outside the building. 'We heard you were doing some sort of research or something like that', one of them told me. 'Yes', I responded, explaining my plans to conduct research about repatriation. 'About the repatriates or the refugees?... the two are different'. I was silent for a few seconds trying to think of what to say. He continued, 'Here they treat the *Abaza* like a repatriate, but not the rest of us ... the *Abaza* here is like a chicken landing in a bowl of hot soup', he said in Arabic (metl el *jaj nazel fi shoraba sukhna*). By referring to how the State Committee of for Repatriation positively saw the *Abaza* as chicken fittingly added into hot soup, the elderly uncle's comment reflected what I saw as his views on the politics of belonging in this context. While official state discourse welcomed all the Syrians of Caucasian descent, some people were more welcomed than others based on whether their family genealogy linked specifically to Abkhazia. Since my first fieldwork visit in 2015, I heard the word *Abaza*, a common surname among families originating from the region, used in ways that would have never crossed my mind before. Whereas I had grown up in a context where *Abaza* was just a family name, in the Caucasus *Abaza* refers both to an ethnic group and a language that is the closest linguistic and ethnic kin to the Abkhaz (Chirikba 2013, 2015, 343). The widespread presence of the surname across what used to be the Ottoman Empire is a testament to the long histories of movement and connection between the Middle East and North Africa region, and the Caucasus.

In this article, I analyze the processes through which forcibly displaced Syrians of Circassian descent repatriated to the contested state, Abkhazia, and wherein the Abkhazian Repatriation Committee facilitated the production of passports and identity documents for the Syrian newcomers. In 2012 and 2013, Abkhazia, an aspirant state with limited recognition, invited up to five hundred Syrian descendants of historically displaced Circassians to repatriate to the region their ancestors had fled from in the late 19th century. Officials expressed their hopes that by acquiring more Abkhazian citizens, Abkhazia was investing in its chances towards gaining further international recognition and increasing demographics of 'ethnic Abkhaz'. This article investigates documentation, passportization, borders, and control of movement by looking at the production of largely unrecognized Abkhazian passports, and people's engagement with paperwork.

My argument for this paper is twofold. First, I argue that Abkhazian statehood was performed through the repatriation of Syrian-Circassians and the production of passports for the new coming 'returnees'. Second, I highlight how the processes of document production entailed that different categories of identification were brought to the fore as more deserving of citizenship, thus reifying racializing categorizations. This paper invites readers to think of passports and identification documents as contentious, and often repressive, through the exclusionary practices or the unequal access to mobility, space, and rights that ensue. I address these categories in terms of identification (Brubaker and Cooper 2000) rather than identity to address the changing contexts in which people adopt different legal, national, or even ethnic and racial categories to navigate systems of power and bureaucracy. Often there is a gap between such identifications and peoples' self-understanding and collective perceptions of their identity, which is itself neither fixed nor stable.

Using ethnographic fieldwork among Syrian-Circassians in Abkhazia, I explore the centrality of passports and identification documents (or their lack thereof) in peoples'

everyday lives, mobility, and life chances. More broadly, I point towards how the production of largely unrecognized passports in Abkhazia reasserts the globally dominant modern nation-state system, but also highlights the problematic, fragile, and performative essence of that system. The arguments I present here are based on 13 months of ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation that I conducted in Abkhazia throughout several visits, the first of which was in 2015 and the most recent in 2023. My father, who is a heritage member of the community, introduced me to the field site and to my first interlocutors. Given that he was my main gatekeeper, many people initially knew me, or would introduce me to others, as Mohamed's daughter. This, along with a shared native language (Arabic), helped me gain rapport among interlocutors (Abu-Lughod 1988, 139). Through familial historical ties to the region, I too was able to receive an Abkhazian passport and I documented the process as part of my research. During my visits to Sukhum, I attended Russian classes when the Danish Refugee Council offered them to Syrian-Circassian repatriations, worked at a Syrian restaurant, participated in community gatherings, made regular visits to Syrian-Circassian friends, and conducted in-depth interviews with Abkhazian officials and members of the Syrian-Circassian community. Additionally, spending time with local Abkhazians helped me to better understand the larger context in which Syrian-Circassians live and the issues that affect the inhabitants of this small aspirant state at large.

Abkhazia's repatriation program and registers of return

The Caucasus mountains have been a home to dozens of different ethnic groupings that have been formed and reformed in complex processes of fusion and fission throughout the region's long history of invasions and migrations (Shami 2009). The Adyge, Kabardians, and Circassians are all indigenous to the North-West Caucasus, and the Caucasian-descendent communities in Syria included these groups, in addition to Abaza and Abkhaz descendants. As Shami (2009) notes, foreigners, including Arabs, Turks, Russians and Europeans often referred to these different Caucasian groupings under the umbrella term 'Circassian' in its variants (i.e. Sharkass, Cherkess, Tcherkess, Cerkez, Çerkes, Jarkass).[1] Such was the case in Syria, according to my interlocutors, where outsiders to the community referred to all those from the northwest Caucasus as *Sharkass*, or Circassian. As such, I refer to my interlocutors as 'Syrian-Circassians' because this is how they frequently refer to themselves, though these references change depending on the topic of conversation, whether it is bureaucratic, about their experiences in Abkhazia, or about memories of Syria. Through bureaucratic functions, the distinctions between categories that were irrelevant in Syria began gained relevance in Abkhazia as these identifications acquired new legal repercussions and meanings. Abkhazian processes of repatriation bring forth the question of how certain informal 'communities' become institutionalized categories of 'nationalities' through demographic and administrative state practices.

'I'll tell you everything you need to know about Abkhazia', Huda, would tell me, smiling, 'but, you know despite everything, if it weren't for the war in Syria 99% of the Syrians that are here wouldn't be here'. Through this statement, Huda, a young Syrian-Circassian woman who at the time had been in Abkhazia for almost three years, reminds us that migration to Abkhazia is aligned with the dispossession and

limited mobility that larger Syrian-national diaspora and people have been experiencing over the past decade. Huda and her family were among the Syrian-Circassians who boarded one of the chartered flights that the Abkhazian government sponsored from Beirut to Sochi, for Syrian-Circassians wishing to repatriate to Abkhazia. Back in Damascus, Syrian-Circassian community leaders spread word of the Abkhazian initiative through the Circassian Association (*el jam'eya)*, and according to Abkhazian officials, up to 500 Syrian-Circassians took up the opportunity. However, not everyone remained in Abkhazia; many decided to return to Syria and others made their way to Western Europe as refugees. For most Syrian-Circassians I met in Abkhazia, the idea of a permanent 'return' to the Caucasus only came about because of the lethal conditions they faced during the Syrian conflict. Until now (2023), Syrian-Circassian returnees differentiate their experiences from those of their Turkish, Jordanian, and Egyptian counterparts by highlighting that this is an involuntary 'return', a wartime displacement from their natal homeland.

Though efforts towards repatriation date back to the early 20th century, it was after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, in 1992, that Abkhazian leaders such as Vladislav Ardzinba and Taras Shamba founded the World Association of the Abkhaz-Abaza People (World Abaza Congress, Ardzinba, Astanda n.d.). Since their first meeting in Lykhny, the association has convened several forums that officially became the World Abaza Congress in 2017 (ibid). According to the organization's website, in their second meeting the association's executive committee identified its objectives as, 'the revival of the ethno-cultural unity of the Abkhaz-Abaza (Abaza) people', creating condition for voluntary return, diaspora contribution to the 'development of Abkhazia', and the 'preservation of national identity' (ibid).

The 2005 Law of the Republic of Abkhazia about Citizenship of Republic of Abkhazia states that the republic: 'respects the right and encourages the returning of Abkhazian (*Abaza*) diaspora, who live outside of RA, to their historical homeland'. Meanwhile, according to the State Committee of Repatriation, a repatriate – also referred to as repatriant- is recognized as follows:

> Ethnic Abkhaz (Abaza), direct descendants of refugees who left the historical territory as a result of the Russian-Caucasian and Russian-Turkish wars and other events of the 19th century, who received the right to return to The Republic of Abkhazia, in the manner prescribed by the Constitutional Law are recognized as Repatriants.

Abkhazia's Repatriation Committee promised to facilitate work opportunities, housing, passport production, and language classes for the Syrian newcomers. Some of these promises were fulfilled (housing for some), others weren't (work opportunities), and some initiatives were only temporary (the Abkhazian and Russian language classes lasted a few months). Interlocutors often explained to me that the way they saw it, Abkhazian state officials initially facilitated their repatriation because Abkhazia needs people – citizens – (*himmā bedhūm nās*) so as to gain international recognition.

In 2019, I interviewed Aslan and Timur, two young charismatic and well-spoken politicians in Abkhazia's Foreign Ministry, who were also very active in organizing conferences, meetings, and diplomatic trips with the World Abaza Congress.[2] The flags of the Abkhazia, Syria, Russia, South Ossetia, Adygea, and the few other countries that recognize Abkhazia as independent stood behind us, as Timur stated, in English, that: 'In

order to (re)build Abkhazia after the war, as I said before, we need our compatriots to come back and do their best in every field to [help] Abkhazia cure from the wounds of the war, and since that time [1992] WAC and to establish ties and strengthen ties between Abaza family living all over the world.'

Abkhazian repatriation discourses, efforts to communicate with the diaspora, and attempts to facilitate their return date back to the late 19th century and early 20th century (Indzhgia 2021). For example, in 1920, Abkhazian intellectual and lead editor of Abkhazia's first print paper, Apsny, Dimitri Gulia, wrote about the tragedy of the exiled, or the *muhajjirs (mukhadjirov)*, and proposed the idea of forming an Emigration Committee (ibid: 23). Shortly after, members of the Abkhaz intelligentsia met and created the Sukhum Committee for the Affairs of the Abkhaz-*Muhajjirs* with the purpose of communicating with the diaspora, collecting donations, and planning diplomatic trips. Known as the *muhajjirs*, the descendants of those who were expelled are now primarily located in modern-day Turkey, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, and even a minority in the United States and Europe.

Although efforts to build connections with descendants of the *muhajirs* in the diaspora continued throughout the century, it was after the disintegration of the USSR and Abkhazia's subsequent secession from Georgia that repatriation became a structured project (ibid). The political and social realities of the time, newfound autonomy, limited recognition, and a demographic reality whereby the Abkhaz were a minority, dictated how policies and narratives of repatriation were framed. As such the issue of demography is central both to discourses of repatriation and statecraft. Anxieties about Abkhazia's declining population of ethnic Abkhaz have been an issue of concern for Abkhazians since the late 19th century, particularly after the mass displacements that occurred as the Russian empire made its way into the region (Müller 1998). During the Soviet era as well, particularly after the Stalinist Terror, Abkhazian leaders resisted the policies of persecution and the imposition of Georgian language and culture by pushing 'to make the republic more Abkhaz' (Suny 1994, 321).

Abkhazia's repatriation efforts are not unique. Numerous states have initiated 'repatriation' trips for second and third generation 'co-ethnics' throughout the 20th century (Ikeuchi 2020). States have reached out to diasporas for reasons that include the need for a labor force, to change the demographics in favor of a specific ethnic group, or in their aspirations for nation-statehood (Tsuda 2010). While second or third generation 'returnees'' do not technically 'return' where they came from by birth, they can still have 'affective connections', that give 'return' an 'ontological meaning even if it contravenes the logic of migration statistics' (King et. al 2011, 2).

The notion that Abkhazia is an ancestral homeland shifts people's expectations of the region about the region that featured in their childhood stories? For example, some interlocutors would say, 'in Europe, we would be considered refugees', with the term 'refugee' giving the connotation of an outsider, or a guest, never fully belonging to the host state as one of the positive points about their move to Abkhazia as 'compatriots'. In one instance, Iman Abaza, an elderly Syrian-Circassian woman stood outside her apartment chatting in Circassian with another elderly woman.[3] Donning a wide, friendly smile, the women turned to me and gave me a tight hug before she turned and said bye to Iman. Iman translated parts of the conversation for me, stating the woman had seen me before in the marketplace and had been curious about me as an unfamiliar presence in

a small city where strangers' faces are quickly known as you come across the same people daily. The woman was a Turkish national who came to Abkhazia 15 years ago, also as a repatriate. Iman explained to me that they spoke different dialects of Circassian, each marked with its own decades of mixture with Turkish or Abaza, but they could still, for the most part, understand each other well. There is a degree of kinship. Here, 'we are not refugees', Iman told me as she walked me to the bus stop. She elaborated that doesn't mean there are no instances of discomfort or difficulty in being in Abkhazia. The Abkhaz, Iman explained to me, see the Circassian-Syrians as just Arabs, and they think that all Arabs are 'uncivilized' peoples who 'live in these tents in the desert'.

Peoples' presumptions that they are returning to live with 'co-ethnics' often stain their experience of 'return' with shock and more disappointment (Shami 1998). In her studies of the return of Circassians from the diaspora in Jordan and Turkey to the Caucasus after the break-up of the Soviet Union, Shami argues that upon encountering the homeland, 'ethnicity is suddenly experienced not as a fact but as a contradiction' (1998, 627). While common ethnicity expectedly constitutes a 'sameness' or a familiarity, the more salient experience that accompanies men and women's journeys to the Caucasus is one of shock, of non-recognition, and of experiencing 'the self as other' (Shami 1998, 627). Within the Syrian diaspora, Syrian Armenians who also repatriated to Armenia in 'refugee-like' circumstances felt their deep affinities to Syria emerge in their unfamiliar ancestral homeland (Della Gatta 2019, 351).

Interlocutors frequently recounted to me what they knew about the Caucasus before they had ever stepped foot in it from the stories their great grandparents passed down to them about brave warriors, beautiful and dignified women, and landscapes of endless mountains. Others made statements such as, 'I knew we were Circassian, but I didn't know anything about the Caucasus'. For most of the community members, at least in Abkhazia, the Circassian Association was a core backbone for the community with the dance classes, language classes, events, and social support that it provided, including informing the community about the chance to go to Abkhazia. People's upbringing as Circassians in Syria shaped the images that they had of the region before experiencing it themselves. This made the encounter with Abkhazia in the context of forced displacement a shocking and disappointing one many, including the few elderly people who had travelled to the region on short trips during the Soviet-era. One elderly member of the community, Essam, a proud man with a strong posture, even told me that 'the people here changed', since the first time he had been to Abkhazia on holiday in the 1980s. People then, 'they used to be so generous and so open to us [as returnees]', he said, adding that 'perhaps it because the circumstances have changed and now, we came to stay'.

'Souvenir passports', the codification of surnames, and exclusionary documents

'In Syria, everyone was just *sharkas*', Salma, a mother and caretaker for her young family told me. She explained that now, *in Abkhazia*, there are differences, 'differences that weren't there before'. Now there are *Abazāt* (Abaza) and other *Sharkas*, Adyge, and Kabardins, she said listing a few of the many indigenous groups of the Caucasus. In other words, in Syria, those whose surnames were 'Abaza' or who delineated their family descendance to Abkhazia were clumped together with other groups whose ancestry

traced to the Caucasus at large under the umbrella term 'Circassians'. As part of one community, the local Circassian Association represented and adopted all the descendants of different groups of Caucasians who were historically displaced to what is now modern-day Syria. However, once this community arrived in Abkhazia as 'returnees', the differences that people brushed over in Syria came to the forefront in matters of bureaucracy.

'Some people changed their *ansab* – their surnames, so that they can get apartments and the nationality more easily', Salma continued. The extent to which those whose surnames were Abaza, or who traced their lineages directly to Abkhazia received certain bureaucratic and administrative facilitations prompted some people to claim different lineages, according to Salma. As we sat in the living room, right by the window of the second apartment that Salma had lived in before having to move around the city multiple more times in the next few years, we talked about the advantages that the repatriation committee selectively grants people. Salma's mother joined the conversation and added that some people who are even 'Arabs' invented Abaza surnames, and Syrian-Circassian officials just gave them the nationality possibly 'because of corruption ... because they are friends, maybe there is money involved', she reckoned. The act, for her, represented an extension and resemblance of governmental corruption in Syria. For many in Abkhazia, identification documents, and the facilitations they provided for housing and movement, worked to reify, and manage differences between who was Adyghe, Abaza, or Arab.

In the repatriation building, which was very small, with older-style architecture and hallways full of photographs of Circassian diaspora communities and large portraits of Ardzinba, I sat in one of the rooms, filling out paperwork to hand in for the passport. 'You have to write a different surname', Bassel, a Syrian-Circassian man, would tell returnees from Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. 'Abaza *qawmeya*' he would say, 'Abaza is a nationality [here]... not a family, everyone here is Abaza'. Now in his late 40s, Bassam had been in Abkhazia since his early 20s. He grew up in Syria, but unlike most of the Syrian-Circassians now in Abkhazia, Bassam made his trip in the early 90s to fight alongside the Abkhaz in the succession war with Georgia. Many Syrian, Turkish, and Jordanian men of Circassian descent had volunteered as fighters during the 1992 war. Some stayed after secession and others returned to their natal lands. Bassam decided to stay, and when the fighting calmed down, he began attending the Abkhazia State University. 'I attended [Russian] classes for six months, but I had to walk 10 kilometers back and forth every day, so I eventually stopped', he told me. His native fluency in Arabic opened the door for him to work at the repatriation office, where translated for Arabic-speakers and guided us on how to obtain the passport. When I shared with interlocutors how strange it was for me that Bassam told me that *Abaza* is a nationality, those who shared my surname would remark: 'He told us that too!'

Surnames and their links to nationality play a political and social role in the region as they are often markers of ethnic identity, particularly along the Georgian, Ossetian, and Abkhazian border regimes (Muhlfried 2010). The idea that nationality is encoded in surnames is thus seen as a signifier of belonging and having the 'wrong' surname can even be risky (Pelkmans 2013). Risky surnames shaped life for the region's inhabitants during the Soviet-era, when groups such as the Laz, changed their Muslim or Turkish sounding names into Georgian names if they suspected falling victim to purges or if they wanted to pursue bureaucratic careers (ibid, 98). Local

Abkhaz, many of whom maintain strong links to Georgian relatives, told me of a Soviet time when many Abkhazians also had to 'Georgian-ize' their surnames by adding Georgian endings. In turn, I learned from other residents of Abkhazia who had Georgian fathers that their patrilineal surnames gave them trouble in the post-war era. Renaming and reclassifying was a Soviet strategy of control and pacification with lasting effects (ibid, 99).

Ten years ago, when they were leaving Syria for Abkhazia, a Syrian-Circassian state official told Salma and her husband that because she is not Abaza, and her husband is Adyge, they could not board the flight. Distraught by this news, her mother told the official that she herself is Abaza, and that Salma was her daughter. It didn't matter, he said; he needed proof that Salma was either divorced or that her husband had passed away. 'He's Syrian and he was saying this', Salma told me bewilderedly, explaining that eventually they let him board because 'they needed people'. Upon arrival, Salma and her husband went to the State Committee for Repatriation and registered themselves as Adyge. One of the Abkhazian employees told them that their surname exists in Abkhazia due to historical migration between the North Caucasus and Abkhazia, so they could register themselves as Abkhaz. It turned out people from the family traveled to Abkhazia a few decades ago from Nalchik and are considered Abkhazian now, she told me. 'Other people were making up *Apswa* – Abkhazian – surnames for themselves', she said, reasserting the information she had told me almost eight years earlier when I first met her.

One of the initial conditions for people to board the first chartered flight to Abkhazia in 2012, was that they had to be Abaza, or that one of the spouses in a nuclear family had to carry the surname 'Abaza'. For the second plane, this condition was made more flexible, and people who were Circassian but had Abaza links were allowed to make the trip. For example, Lara and her husband, who are both Adyge, could not go onboard with the first group setting off for Abkhazia, but with the second plane, Lara was able to make her case by arguing that her mother is *Abaza*, although she and her husband are not. The process is also gendered, as getting an Abkhazian nationality is a lengthier and more difficult process if the link is through the mother rather than the father. I have understood from interlocutors that by the time the third plane was getting organized, one only had to be a Circassian to board.

Interlocutors have expressed to me their sentiments that bureaucracy exists not primarily to facilitate subjects' transactions with the state, but to also cripple individuals' daily prospects. If at any point in someone's lifetime, these papers do not exist, then they may be considered 'stateless', or 'illegal', and illegible to the state. Bureaucratic and identification documents are unpredictable governance techniques that often produce feelings of uneasiness, instability, and uncertainty for the people subject to them (Kelly 2006, 89). As Bourdieu, Wacquant, and Farage (1994) conceptualize it, the state's bureaucratic field is a site of symbolic production which reproduces taken for granted classifications that make their way into the realm of obviousness. The Abkhazian case illustrates some of the ways in which passports and other identification documents produce ethnic classifications, dictate citizenships, and hence access to mobility and spaces. The processes by which ethnic and national categorizations produce and are produced by identification documents are often marked by uncertainty and anxiety for the people who seek out these documents.

Abkhazia's passports offer limited options for travel abroad. When I first met her at a picnic organized by the Repatriation Committee in 2015, Safeya, an older Syrian-Circassian woman, had only been in Abkhazia for two years. We spoke about Russia, how she felt leaving Syria, and how difficult it was for her to build a new life for herself in Abkhazia. In her light-hearted manner which I had become acquainted with over the years, she explained to me how many of the local Abkhaz refuse further government cooperation with Russia they fear Russian occupation. She added: 'well, everyone knows that Russia is the one that's really in control anyway, and besides, if they wanted to take over, they would do it in twenty minutes'. She reckoned that this would be much better for us ('returnees') because we could receive Russian passports and 'then we can go anywhere in the world!' The Abkhaz don't care since they use Russian passports anyway, she said. Of course, my interlocutors' opinions towards Russia are nuanced, layered, and constantly shifting given Russia's historical imperialism and current political, economic, and military involvements in both Syria and Abkhazia. I see Safeya's comments as more revelatory of the impediments that forcibly displaced peoples, refugees, and migrants from the Global South experience. For this reason, the travel privileges that Russian passports grant in comparison to Abkhazian or Syrian documents made them more desirable.

When Safeya shared these thoughts with me, only Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Nauru had (since 2008) recognized Abkhazia. In 2018, Syria officially recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia, a diplomatic move that many attribute to the efforts of Syrian-Circassians. This recognition partially eased peoples' ability to visit family in Syria – which remains an adversity for the Syrian diaspora worldwide. Syrian-Circassians used their Syrian passports to enter Lebanon and, through negotiations between Russian and Abkhazian authorities they passed through the Sochi visa-free before entering Abkhazia. Those whose Syrian passports expire must travel to Moscow to renew their passports, which is expensive and difficult for many. Most Syrian-Circassians whoreceived passports in Abkhazia maintain dual Syrian Abkhazian citizenship. However, these documents hold little meaning beyond the contexts of each nation-state's borders as the Syrian passport is among the weakest in the world, and the Abkhazian passport is only minimally recognized.

As Safeya pointed out, many Abkhazian citizens also carry Russian passports. Russian policies towards Abkhazia allowed many residents to obtain Russian passports if they applied within a certain window of time. Scholars such as Muhlfried (2010) have pointed out the peculiar liminal positions residents of these areas held as 'citizens' of Russia that were neither residents of the Russian Federation, nor ethnically Russian. Still, spending time in Abkhazia dismantled many of my initial presumptions, including about how many Abkhazians hold Russian passports or how easily (or not) they can obtain them. Many Abkhazians only hold Abkhazian citizenship and cannot currently procure Russian citizenship, leaving them with few options for international travel. This immobility presented itself in instances when I have invited Abkhazians to come to Egypt and they would respond 'I don't have a passport', or 'I don't have a red passport', meaning they don't have a Russian passport for broader international travel. Abkhazia and Russia recently ratified a dual nationality agreement to simplify procedures for Abkhazians to receive Russian citizenship (Civil.Ge 2023). Still, many people remain skeptical as to how straightforward the process will be. Additionally, some European Union member states

have announced plans to ban Russian passports issued in what the EU officially calls 'Georgia's breakaway territories', in reference to Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Gabritchidze 2022). Meanwhile, Georgians and Mingrelians, who mostly reside in Abkhazia's Gal district and are Georgian citizens, are barred from receiving Abkhazian passports unless they renounce their Georgian citizenship (Borovikova 2021). However, this renunciation is a risky endeavor because of its uncertain outcomes (ibid). The shifting and difficult to track nature of passportization policies and the space these documents hold as avenues of geopolitical contention create more anxiety and confusion for their holders.

Passports are a cornerstone of surveillance and control which are central to governance. Yet, the fact that there are those who contend and knowingly produce internationally unrecognized passports can tell us something significant about a system that creates 'stateless' peoples and dependence on documents. By following document production as a process through which states 'perform', or exert, their statehood, scholars can dissect how the manufacturing of documents becomes a 'state activity', that essentially marks the 'state-ness' of states (Torpey 2000). As Navaro (2012) puts it, documents are a material culture and a primary apparatus for modern legal systems and nation-states. Hence, '[a] "wannabe" state has to produce documents, to look and act, like other states' (Navaro 2012, 114).

Before reaching the fixed status they now hold, passports and passport controls were created as temporary security measures in the aftermath of WWI. Their enforcement continued as they served economic, political, and military interests (Torpey 2000, 116). Within the Soviet context, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the U.S.S.R was the police organization responsible for managing the internal passport system and peoples' internal movements (Shelley 1996, 130). After 1931, Soviet citizens could not find employment, food nor housing unless they were properly registered and, by extension, also properly domiciled in the labor force. Movement inside the Soviet Union required a *propiska*, which is the equivalent of an internal visa or residency permit and represented the 'legal right' to live in a particular administrative district within the Union (Simona and Pucciarelli 1985). To move to and live in a different district, one had to apply for a *propiska* and prove employment and residency in that district (Höjdestrand 2009). In Abkhazia, the *propiska* is still an essential element of some bureaucratic processes, such as the issuance of domestic national IDs.

From 1934 until the dismantlement of the Soviet Union, an ethnicity slot was integral to the Soviet passport (Akturk 2010). As is usually the case, some ethnic categories benefitted from this passport feature, while for others, this policy was a clear disadvantage (Pelkmans 2013). Blauvelt (2014) uses the Abkhazian case to argue that the early Soviet nationalities policy formed a way for Soviet power to consolidate in the peripheries. Still, ethnic categories in this region 'were in reality probably somewhat flexible, as peasants could sometimes adapt surnames to make themselves either Mingrelian/ Georgian or Abkhaz' (Akturk 2010, 23). Such choices depended on which category happened to be perceived as more advantageous, and this arguably continues to be the case. When the Soviet Union disintegrated, internal migration suddenly became international migration, causing uncertainty in the politics of citizenship for inhabitants of the Union's successor states (Brubaker 1992). It was a moment for the former Union's residents to 're-identify' with more favored nationalities and ethnicities for groups such

as Germans and Poles whose 'external homelands' offered more advantages for work, housing, and mobility (ibid, 272).

Passports and other identification documents, or their lack thereof, remain central to people's life chances. The color of a passport often works to identify the 'undesirables' and those who are grieve-able as documents have racializing effects (Butler 2009; Reeves 2013). Paradoxically, passport production in Abkhazia reasserts the globalized, dominant system of modern nation-state, but it also highlights how problematic, fragile, and performative that system is. Abkhazia was one of very few options available to Syrian-Circassians escaping the war in Syria during a time when militarizied border regimes are criminalizing, racializing, and hindering refugee movement. While repatriates to Abkhazia have occasionally joked that its passport is basically a 'souvenir' because it barely grants access to any countries, Syrian-Circassians have expressed gratitude that they have an ancestral homeland to 'return' to. 'As much as Abkhazia is tough, we're still lucky', one couple once told me, 'Other Syrians don't have this option of an ancestral land to go to'.

(II)legal identities and the everyday lives of documents

Fatima, a Syrian-Arab woman[4] in Abkhazia, once told me the story of how she fled her home in Syria with her family in 2013 when Jabhet Al-Nusra came to her neighborhood. 'They are supposed to give people a two-hour warning before bombarding the neighborhood, but they did not do that', she said, 'the regime's army let the terrorists raid our neighborhood . . . they left it unprotected'. She highlighted that amid these frightening moments, she rushed to grab her family's documents. 'I just took the most important paperwork. People always say that the first thing you should take with you are your papers', Fatima explained. It struck me that Fatima's caretaking instincts kicked in at such as a daunting time, and that she remembered to take the documents she knew her family would need. Her story is one of many that illustrate the ways that identity documents penetrate peoples' lives, anxieties, and opportunities (Kelly 2006).

Just as they are central to major aspects of peoples' life chances, identification documents seep into the banal details of daily life. When May came to Abkhazia with her family, a few years after the state-sponsored group flights, she was frustrated with the expenses of life in Abkhazia. With the start of the school year looming closely, she was particularly overwhelmed with the financial stresses of supplies, bags, and clothes. We were once walking on one of the few main streets in Sukhum, when May saw a red bag on the store's window display and got giddy with excitement. 'It is red!' she said, 'I love red!' We walked into the small store to have a quick look – the bag was very basic and not of particularly good quality, but it was very expensive. Everything was expensive – not compared to the other stores in Abkhazia, but to prices in the countries from which we hailed (Syria and Egypt). Abkhazia's isolated international position means that there are few venues for imported goods to enter the country – and mundane products are disproportionately overpriced. Based on the anecdotes I heard about what people did to navigate these prices, I suggested that she go buy her things from Sochi. 'I can't', she said, '[t]here is no passport'. She is not *Abaza*, so she needed to wait at least a year for her passport, unlike her husband who received his passport a month into his arrival because he was Abaza.

After Salma told me that in Syria, 'everyone was just *sharkas*,' as mentioned above, I began noticing how frequently people added statements such as, 'but I am *Adyghe* not *Abaza*' when introducing themselves. A Russian language teacher and local resident of Abkhazia also commented that, with time, her young Syrian-Circassian students started to distinguish, '*papa Adyghe*, and *mama Abaza*'. These differences began to matter not just when it came to the amount of time spent waiting for documents, but also how long one is made to wait for an apartment. Syrians whose last names are 'Abaza' get their Abkhazian ID cards and their Abkhazian passports and nationalities in almost a month while those who are Adyghe or Kabardian waited for months to a year. These differentiating discourses crept into and framed gossip (i.e. *this* woman only married *that* man because he's Abaza and could get an apartment). Despite its limited use internationally, the Abkhazian passport is an extremely useful document to have in Abkhazia because it grants access to Sochi, Russia where all kinds of necessary goods are cheaper. This politics of waiting for longer or shorter times based on surnames pertains to how the struggles for movement and 'legal existence' (in this case in an entity deemed 'illegal' by international institutions) constitute 'temporal processes in and through which political subordination is reproduced' (Auyero 2012, 15). It is through such processes and in the moments of border or police security questioning about one's residency, or passport, or ID card, that domination is asserted. Such are the tangible and intangible effects of codifying belonging, of codifying access to benefits and places, and of codifying identity and categories.

The politics of waiting are clearly not limited to Abkhazia, as many families in Abkhazia are waiting for spouses and brothers to arrange their paperwork so that the entire family can be reunited in Western Europe. For them, their lives in Abkhazia are another condition of waiting. State institutes compel people into these modes of waiting, whether it is through visions of hope or betterment, or as a form of 'waiting out' a crisis or liminal situation (Hage 2009; Jeffrey 2010). This temporal 'stuck-ness' creeps into how people navigate their lifeworlds. There are exclusionary administrative processes involved in generating and maintaining ethnic groups, and in the story of Circassian repatriation to Abkhazia, we can see some of these processes play out. A group often emerges as distinct and separate when they are defined as such by another group (Barth 1969), and in Abkhazia, different ethnic and/or national categories were crystallized or highlighted through the legal and administrative processes of repatriation.

In the very material sense that one can observe in Abkhazia, these categories can often also make up a part of what war, exile, and the economic distress that often accompany them entail. The State Repatriation Committee facilitated repatriation for those who were *Abaza* or *Abkhaz*, but still, despite the longer waiting time descendants of other North Caucasian exiled groups are eligible to claim 'repatriate' as a legal identity. For the few Syrians in Abkhazia who are not Circassian, Abkhazian citizenship is not easily accessible and their bureaucratic lived experience in the country is more complicated. For example, Amany, a middle-aged Circassian woman who married and divorced an Arab Syrian man, struggled with attending to her children's needs as a single mother in Abkhazia. Given that her former husband was Arab, her children were considered Arab, and couldn't easily get Abkhazian citizenship, which is not usually passed down through women. Certain quotidian aspects of Amany's children's lives, like enrollment in schools and daycare centers, consisted of more hurdles and their chances for travel were slimmer.

Conclusion

Legal identities are malleable; their instability impacts how people can move through the different categories that power/state institutions name, categorize, and classify for different purposes (Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Little 2017). When considering Abkhazia and all the categories that engulf those who inhabit it, we observe the continuous ambiguity of people and places as being in constantly moving conditions as boundaries, names, and contexts shift (Green 2005, 78). Abkhazia and the United Nations do not officially recognize Syrian war-time migrants as 'refugees' and the Abkhazian state refers to them as 'repatriates'. In this betwixt state, Syrian war-time migrants to Abkhazia defy and stand outside international understandings of refugee-ism and citizenship. They constantly move between identifications – of 'refugee', 'repatriate', 'Caucasian' or 'Syrian'. This case demonstrates the arbitrariness of how these categories are deployed, both bureaucratically and in everyday life, and the creative ways people mobilize ethnic identification to shape and secure economic, political, and social lifeworlds.

People's narratives of return, displacement, movement/migration, and return again are nuanced and dynamic. As documents, the conditions of their production, and their indeterminacies assert dominance, people continue to find ways to creatively traverse the confinements of these documents and their bureaucratic categories. The same person that highlights their position as a descendant of forcibly displaced Circassian to travel to Abkhazia as a repatriate, may later foreground their position as a forcibly displaced Syrian and travel to Western Europe as a refugee, or they may even choose to return to Syria as a national holder/Syrian citizen.

Ethnic, national, racialized, classed, and gendered categorizations, even as abstractions, reveal a lot about the workings of power both in the instances when they are highlighted and reified – as well as in the instances when they are erased and denied. In discussing some aspects of how passport-production processes have affected people in Abkhazia, I hope to address the uncertainty of the politics of citizenship, belonging, and migration in our contemporary nation-state system. As Navaro (2012, 32) argues, studying the administrative practices of aspirant states can reveal the workings and 'phantasmic elements' of other, internationally recognized, and established state projects. The legal identity documents of aspirant and unrecognized states are not anomalies produced in a vacuum but reflect something of the nature of contemporary global citizenship regimes (Klem and Sosnowski 2024). As other legal identity scholars in this issue argue and highlight, legal documents often fall into grey zones with their recognition and the authority or access that they hold changing based on context (Makili-Aliev 2024).

Legal documents often stain peoples' daily lives with anxieties, fear, suspicion, and uncertainty, despite being administratively introduced as 'security measures' (Kelly 2006, 104). The narratives, experiences, and rumors around passport production in Abkhazia, are revelatory of how documents penetrate the mundane details of peoples' daily lives, including access to work opportunities, mobility, housing, and more. People creatively navigate bureaucratic classifications in numerous ways by rejecting, adapting, claiming, and moving between categorizations, or even attributing or stripping certain categories of meaning.

Notes

1. These are different linguistic pronunciations of the same word, *Circassian*.
2. I decided to refer to these officials also using pseudonyms.
3. To protect peoples', I use pseudonyms throughout the article.
4. Kamila explained to me when we first met that she's an 'Arab-Syrian', and not *Sharkaseyh* (Circassian), but she fell in love with a Circassian man and this was her point of connection to the community, and eventually to Abkhazia.

References

Abu-Lughod, L. 1988. *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Akturk, S. 2010. "Passport Identification and Nation-Building in Post-Soviet Russia." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 26 (4): 314–341. doi:10.2747/1060-586X.26.4.314.

Ardzinba, A."United and Indivisible: About the History of the World Abaza Congress." *N/A. World Abaza Congress.* https://abaza.org/en/united-and-indivisible-about-the-history-of-the-world-abaza-congress.

Auyero, J. 2012. *Patients of the State: The Politics of Waiting in Argentina*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Barth, F. 1969. *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organization of Culture Difference*. Scandinavian University Books. Bergen, London: Universitetsforlaget.

Blauvelt, T. 2014. "The Establishment of Soviet Power in Abkhazia: Ethnicity, Contestation and Clientelism in the Revolutionary Periphery." *Revolutionary Russia* 27 (1): 22–46. doi:10.1080/09546545.2014.904472.

Borovikova, N. 2021. 'What Problems are Georgians in Abkhazia Faced with?' *JAM News*. Accessed December 15, 2023. https://jam-news.net/what-problems-are-georgians-in-abkhazia-faced-with/

Bourdieu, P., L. J. D. Wacquant, and S. Farage. 1994. "Rethinking the State: Genesis and Structure of the Bureaucratic Field." *Sociological Theory* 12 (1): 1–18. doi:10.2307/202032.

Brubaker, R. 1992. "Citizenship Struggles in Soviet Successor States." *The International Migration Review* 26 (2): 269–291. doi:10.1177/019791839202600205.

Brubaker, R., and F. Cooper. 2000. "Beyond 'Identity." *Theory & Society* 29 (1): 1–47. doi:10.1023/A:1007068714468.

Butler, J. 2009. *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*. London: Verso.

Chirikba, V. A. 2013. "Abaza Personal Names." *Iran and the Caucasus* 17 (4): 391–400. doi:10.1163/1573384X-20130405.

Chirikba, V. A. 2015. "Abkhaz Personal Names." *Iran and the Caucasus* 19 (4): 343–356. doi:10.1163/1573384X-20150405.

Civil.Ge. 2023. Moscow Finalizes Ratification of Dual Citizenship Agreement with Sokhumi Accessed June 29, 2023. https://civil.ge/archives/550003

Della Gatta, M. 2019. "A 'Nation in Exile': The Renewed Diaspora of Syrian Armenian Repatriates." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 46 (3): 339–357. doi:10.1080/13530194.2017.1403308.

Gabritchidze, N. 2022. 'EU to Ban Use of Russian Passports Issued in Abkhazia, South Ossetia,' *Eurasianet.*Accessed December 15th, 2023. https://eurasianet.org/eu-to-ban-use-of-russian-passports-issued-in-abkhazia-south-ossetia

Green, S. F. 2005. *Notes from the Balkans: Locating Marginality and Ambiguity on the Greek-Albanian Border*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.

Hage, G., Ed. 2009. *Waiting*. Carlton: Melbourne University Publishing.

Höjdestrand, T. 2009. *Needed by Nobody: Homelessness and Humanness in Post-Socialist Russia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Ikeuchi, S. 2020. *Jesus Loves Japan: Return Migration and Global Pentecostalism in a Brazilian Diaspora*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Indzhgia, D. 2021. *Vopros Repatriatsii Abkhazskoy Diaspory V Pervye Desiatiletia XX*. Sukhum: Abkhazian State University. [In Russian]. http://apsnyteka.org/4021.

Jeffrey, C. 2010. *Timepass: Youth, Class, and the Politics of Waiting in India*. California: Stanford University Press.

Kelly, T. 2006. "Documented Lives: Fear and the Uncertainties of Law During the Second Palestinian Intifada." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 12 (1): 89–107. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9655.2006.00282.x.

King, R., A. Christou, and J. Teerling. 2011. "We Took a Bath with the Chickens': Memories of Childhood Visits to the Homeland by Second-Generation Greek and Greek Cypriot 'Returnees." *Global Networks (Oxford)* 11 (1): 1–23. doi:10.1111/j.1471-0374.2010.00304.x.

Klem, B., and S. Marika. 2024. "Legal Identity in a Looking Glass World: Documenting Citizens of Aspirant States." *Citizenship Studies*. this issue.

Law of the Republic of Abkhazia About Citizenship of Republic of Abkhazia. 2005. Sukhum. http://presidentofabkhazia.org/en/vize_president/dejatelnost/zacon.pdf

Little, A. M. 2017. *The Many Captivities of Esther Wheelwright*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Makili, -A. 2024. "An Illegal Republic: The Formation and Continuity of the Collective Legal Identity of Karabakh Armenians." *Citizenship Studies*. this issue.

Muhlfried, F. 2010. "Citizenship at War: Passports and Nationality in the 2008 Russian-Georgian Conflict'*Anthropology Today*." *Anthropology Today* 26 (2): 8–13. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8322.2010.00721.x .

Müller, D. 1998. "Demography: Ethno-Demographic History, 1886-1989." In *The Abkhazians: A Handbook = [Aphsuaa]*, edited by G. Hewitt, 218–240. New York, N.Y: St. Martin's Press.

Navaro, Y. 2012. *The Make-Believe Space: Affective Geography in a Postwar Polity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Pelkmans, M. 2013. "Powerful Documents: Passports, Passages and Dilemmas of Identification of the Georgian-Turkish Border." In *Border Encounters: Asymmetry and Proximity at Europe's Frontiers*, edited by J. Lauth Bacas and W. Kavanagh, 90–107. New York: Berghahn Books.

Reeves, M. 2013. "Clean Fake: Authenticating Documents and Persons in Migrant Moscow." *American Ethnologist* 40 (3): 508–524. doi:10.1111/amet.12036.

Shami, S. 1998. "Circassian Encounters: The Self as Other and the Production of the Homeland in the North Caucasus." *Development and Change* 29 (4): 617–646. doi:10.1111/1467-7660.00093 .

Shami, S. 2009. "Historical Processes of Identity Formation: Displacement, Settlement, and Self-Representations of the Circassians in Jordan." *Iran and the Caucasus* 13 (1): 141–159. doi:10.1163/160984909X12476379008160.

Shelley, L. 1996. *Policing Soviet Society: The Evolution of State Control.* New York: Routledge.

Simona, P., and A. J. Pucciarelli. 1985. "The Soviet Internal Passport System." *The International Lawyer* 19 (3): 915–919.

Suny, R. G. 1994. *The Making of the Georgian Nation.* 2nd ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Torpey, J. 2000. *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship, and the State.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tsuda, T. 2010. "Ethnic Return Migration and the Nation□State: Encouraging the Diaspora to Return 'Home'." *Nations and Nationalism* 16 (4): 616–3.