

## 2014—Abkhaz

At the eastern end of the Black Sea, a pleasant stretch of land rises from the shores of the Black Sea to the southwestern slopes of the mighty Caucasus mountain range. For millenia this is the ancient homeland of the Abkhaz people. One writer states, “From the earliest of times, the warmth and mildness of the climate and the fertility of the land have defined the Abkhaz way of life.” Abkhaz village and small-town life is strong in the breeding of cattle, agriculture, beekeeping, and vineyards.

The disputed province of Abkhazia holds a total population of 240,000—with almost exactly half of that total being composed of native Abkhaz, speaking their own distinct Abkhaz language. The Abkhazians then for the most part utilize Russian as a 2<sup>nd</sup> language. Abkhazia, in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, was considered a province of Georgia, but the 1992-93 War in Abkhazia left the province in an uneasy semi-autonomous state, estranged from Georgia but not independent. A second conflict in 2008 further distanced the region from Georgia and left the region in a quasi-union with Russia, and with an uncertain international status. In Abkhazia, approximately 50% of the 125,000 Abkhazians are city-dwellers and the other 50% live in rural village settings. North across the border in southwestern Russia, the 11,500 Abkhazians are 85% urban and only 15% rural.

In the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, most of Abkhazia became nominally Christian; then in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century due to the Ottoman Turk takeover and pressure from the Muslim Adyge to the north, the region became largely Muslim. This changed again in the 1860’s, when Russian conquest forced massive numbers of western-Caucasus Muslims south into the Ottoman Empire. Present-day Abkhaz are considered 60-80% Orthodox Christian and 20-40% Sunni Muslim—both in Abkhazia and in southern Russia. But many Abkhaz will observe that these Christian or Muslim formal influences are “less enduring than older animistic cultural ways of reverence for trees and nature, and ancestor worship.” One present-day Abkhaz historian said, “We’re 80% Christian, 20% Muslim, and 100% pagan.” Evangelical Christians in Abkhazia are less than 1%; and among the Abkhazians located in southwestern Russia, there are less than 20 evangelical believers. Furthermore, in Abkhazia the Orthodox Church is badly splintered between Armenian, Georgian, Russian, and the (unrecognized by Eastern Orthodox hierarchy)predominant Abkhazian Orthodox Church. A fresh reading of the New Testament, coupled with a fresh breeze of the Holy Spirit (Acts 3:19), is deeply needed for the Abkhaz people.

*PRAY for a re-emergence of the simple transforming gospel (Romans 1:16) among the Abkhaz people. PRAY for open-hearted Abkhazians to be graced with the power of the Holy Spirit (John 7:37-39), and through them for the Fruit of the Spirit (Gal.5:22-23) to begin to flourish in a society wracked by conflict and clan power struggles. PRAY that many Abkhazians will be inspired by the example of Acts 8, where robust pagan worship was superseded by the power of Jesus' gospel, accompanied “by signs and wonders following” (Heb.2:3-4). PRAY success for the Abkhaz Bible Translation Team which is preparing the 4 Gospels for publication, with Acts & Epistles to follow.*



Abkhazian Men --- 19<sup>th</sup> Century



Abkhazian Traditional Cultural Celebration  
—21<sup>st</sup> Century



Lake Ritsa -- Abkhazia

### **ABKHAZ ESTIMATED TOTAL POPULATION**

*at least 300,000 worldwide*

### **REGIONS WITH SIGNIFICANT ABKHAZ POPULATIONS (approximate figures):**

- |                                  |                  |
|----------------------------------|------------------|
| 1. Abkhazia --                   | 125,000          |
| 2. Georgia (outside Abkhazia) -- | 3,500            |
| 3. Russian Federation --         | 11,500           |
| 4. Syria --                      | 5,000-10,000     |
| 5. Germany --                    | 5,000            |
| 6. Ukraine --                    | 1,500            |
| 7. United States (New Jersey) -- | 1,000?           |
| 8. Turkey --                     | at least 150,000 |



Abkhazian Dance