# Scripts Used for Abkhaz

George Hewitt

A while ago I posted on Facebook the scan of a page from A. M. Ch'och'ua & V. Maan's 1935 primer *Apswa Byzsh^wa* 'Abkhaz Language' as an illustration of the script in used at that time. One viewer commented that he found it easier to read than the current, Cyrillic-based orthography. This gave me the idea of presenting a short text written in the different scripts that have been employed over the decades since an orthography was first devised for the language in the second half of the 19ᵗʰ century. The problem was finding a text published in all of the said varieties.

Despite the difficulties let us begin with the tale entitled *Aq'yz* 'The Goose'. Ch'och'ua included this text in his 1968 *Sobranie Sochinenij v 3-x Tomax. Tom Pervyj* [Collection of Works in 3 Volumes. First Volume], as recapitulated in this scan:

The Goose (Ch'och'ua 1968 p.100)
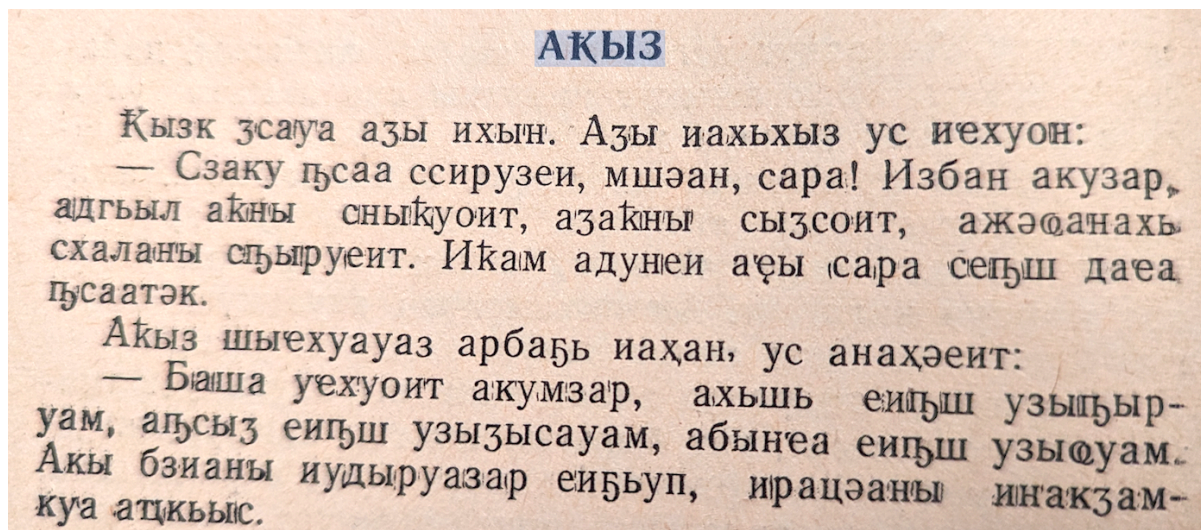
If one were writing this today, it would read as follows[1]:

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[1] There are 3 examples of the sequence -a.wa-, where -a- is part of the verbal root and -wa- the Dynamic marker, in 1968, which suggests influence from the northern Bzyp dialect, whereas in the standard (Abzhywa) literary dialect this sequence is articulated as [ɔ], as seen in the 2024 rendering.

<div align="center">

The Goose (2024 orthography)

Аҟыз

</div>

Қызк ҙсо аҙы ихын. Аҙы иахьхыз ус иҿехәон:

"Сзакә ҧҵаа(тә)[2] ссирузеи, мшәан, сара! Избан акәзар, адгьыл аҟны сныҟәоит, аҙаҟны сызҙсоит, ажәҩанахь схаланы сҧыруеит. Икам адунеи аҿы сара сеиҥш[3] даҿа ҧҵаатәк."

Аҟыз шыҿехәоз арбаҕь иаҳан, ус анаҳәеит:

"Баша уҿехәоиг акәымзар, ахьшь еиҥш узыҧҕыруам, аҧсыз еиҥш узыҙ(ы)сом, абынҿа еиҥш узыҩуам. Акы бзианы иудыруазар еиҳьуп, ирацәаны инакҙамкәа[4] аҵкьыс."

These two versions can now be compared with the one included by Ch'och'ua and Maan in their afore-mentioned 1935 primer with its roman-based script:

<div align="center">

The Goose (Ch'och'ua 1935)

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[2] The form ҧҵаатә 'bird', as used later in the text, is preferable.
[3] Is сеҧш in 1968 a typo for сеиҥш, as in both the 2024 and 1935 variants (see below)?
[4] Preferably инагҙамкәа, as written in the scan from the 1935 publication below.

The first observation one can make is that the first owner of the booklet (the German-?Czech linguist Karl Bouda, from whose estate it passed to the late Winfried Boeder, who in turn gave it to me) made some insertions[5], including the addition of the grave accent to mark stress, a practice greatly to be recommended for ANY Abkhaz script! One also sees at a glance that, although most of the characters are taken from the roman alphabet, there are several additions whose phonetic value it would be impossible to work out without background knowledge. A phonetic transcription, based on the 2024 version, would be (with stress marked in bold):

Phonetic transcription (2024)

q'əzk' dzsɔ adzə jəχən. adzə jaχʲχəz wəs jətʂχʷɔn:

szakʷ' psa: s:**i**ru:zej, mʃʷan, sar**a**! jəzb**a**n **a**kʷ'zar, **a**dgʲəl aq'nə snəqʷ'ojt', adzaq'nə sədzs**o**jt', **a**ʒʷanaχʲ sχalanə spərw**e**jt'. jəq'am adu:nej atʂ'**ə** sar**a** sejpʂ datʂ**a** psa:tʷ'k'.

aq'əz ʂətʂχʷɔz **a**rbaʁʲ jah**a**n wəs **a**nahʷejt':

ba**ʂ**a wətʂχʷ**o**jt' **a**kʷ'əmzar, aχʲʃ ejpʂ wəzəpərwam, apsədz ejpʂ wəzədz(ə)sɔm[6], abəntʂa ejpʂ wəzəɥwam. ak'ə bz**i**anə ju:dərwazar **e**jʁʲu:p' jəratɕʷanə jənagdz**a**mkʷ'a **a**ts'kʲ'əs.

Translation

A goose was on the water swimming. From its position on the water it was boasting:

'What a lovely bird, after all, am I! The reason being I walk on the ground, on water I swim, I fly up to the sky. There is not in the world another bird like me.'

As the goose was boasting, a cockerel heard it and spoke to it like this:

'You boast in vain, considering that you can't fly like a hawk, you can't swim like a fish, you can't run like a hind. Better you know one thing well than many things imperfectly/without accomplishing them.'

Between the roman-based orthography of our 1935 text and the current version of the Cyrillic-based one in use since 1954 (sc. following the demise in 1953 of Stalin and Beria and the lifting of their anti-Abkhazian policy), a Georgian-based script had been introduced in 1938 and used for a few publications until publishing (and teaching) of Abkhaz was banned in 1945 – see the Appendix. I have been unable to find our text in this Georgian-based orthography, and so to illustrate it I offer a page from Dmitri Gulia's 1939

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[5] Indeed he added right at the start the word *zny* 'once (upon a time)', which often begins a story.
[6] Comparison omitted in 1935.

Collection of Abkhazian Proverbs, Riddles, Tongue-twisters, Homonyms and Homographs, Folk Guides to the Weather, Charms and Curses, where we have 9 riddles accompanied by the Russian translation:

Nine Abkhazian Riddles in Georgian Script
(published in 1939)

აჵჳეფარაქუა.
Загадки

1. აძ იახშჲაზ, ამრა იაადაზ, ზან დგზბარ იფჲჳა (აჯჩკა).

2. ამზგრ-ამძგრ შაზგ ზ�წოჳ, ადელაჯა ტიგზა ზხოჳ (არ-ბაჲ̇ა).

3. აჾგშიტი ჰზგ, ამჭჲტიგ უჯოჳ (ათათგზჭკოგა).

4. ზან ჹიაშჳოჳ, ზაბ ჹხჳა-ხჳოჳ, ზგჹჲა ჹხაგოჳ (აჭ-ლა, აჹახჳა, აჳჟ).

5. ზგბლაჭჳზ აბზ ზმოჳ, ზჳია-ტჳზ აჳაა იხარჭო (აკა-ჰანგა).

6. იმიკჳა იფსჳზ? (აჹამ).

7. შჭთაკ აჭჳზ იუცთანხო, აბ-ზიარა უზგზჳა, ამგან ჲჳ-ფგლარ იუზგმჹგრჳა? (აშბა).

8. უახჯცალაკჳ იჳცჳ, უჲახზშა ჲაზჭო, ხჳართას ზხზ უზგმ-თო (უგჲგა).

9. აკზსთაა ათია რხხზ ამცა აცრეიჭეიტ (ათათგზ).

Рожденное водою, воспитанное солнцем, увидя свою мать — умирает. (Соль).

В наростах нога, а на голове падубовые рога. (Петух).

Земляной дом, деревянная труба. (Чубук).

У кого мать пряма, отец кривой, а дочь сумасшедшая? (Дерево, виноградная лоза и вино).

На спине язык: что скажет, — люди верят. (Весы).

Кто не родившись умер? (Адам).

С тобою в одном дворе живет, много пользы тебе приносит, а встретишься с ним на дороге — не узнаешь. (Пчела).

Куда не пойдешь — везде с тобою; что ты не сделаешь и она подражает, а никакой помощи никогда не окажет. (Тень).

Сам чорт сено скосил, и огнем подпалил. (Табак).

In Gulia's collected works (in 6 volumes) published in the 1980s these 9 conundra can be found on p. 188 of volume 5 in the post-1954 script. I repeat it here:

АҴУФАРАҞУА

ЗАГАДҚИ

Аӡы иахшаз, амра иаазаз, зан дызбар иӈсуа (аҵьыка).

Рожденное водою, воспитанное солнцем, увидя свою мать— умирает (Соль).

Ампыр-ампыр шьапы зҵоу, адыҕаҵьа тәыҩа зхоу (арбаҕь).

В наростах нога, а на голове падубовые рога (Петух).

Анышәтә ҩны, амҿәы уаҵьаҟ (аҭаҭыныжәга).

Земляной дом, деревянная труба (Чубуҝ).

Зан диашоу, заб дхуахуоу, зыпҥха дхагоу? (Аҵла, аӡахуа, аҩы).

У кого мать пряма, отец кривой, а дочь сумасшедшая? (Дерево, виноградная лоза и вино).

Зыбҕаҿы абз змоу, зхәатәы ауаа ихарҵо (акапанга).

На спине язык: что скажет— люди верят (Весы).

Имикуа иӈсыз? (Адам).

Кто, не родившись, умер? (Адам).

Шҭак аҿы иуцҭанхо, абзиара узызуа, амҿан дуӈылар иузымдыруа (ашьха).

С тобою в одном дворе живет, много пользы тебе приносит, а встретишься с ним на дороге — не узнаешь (Пчела).
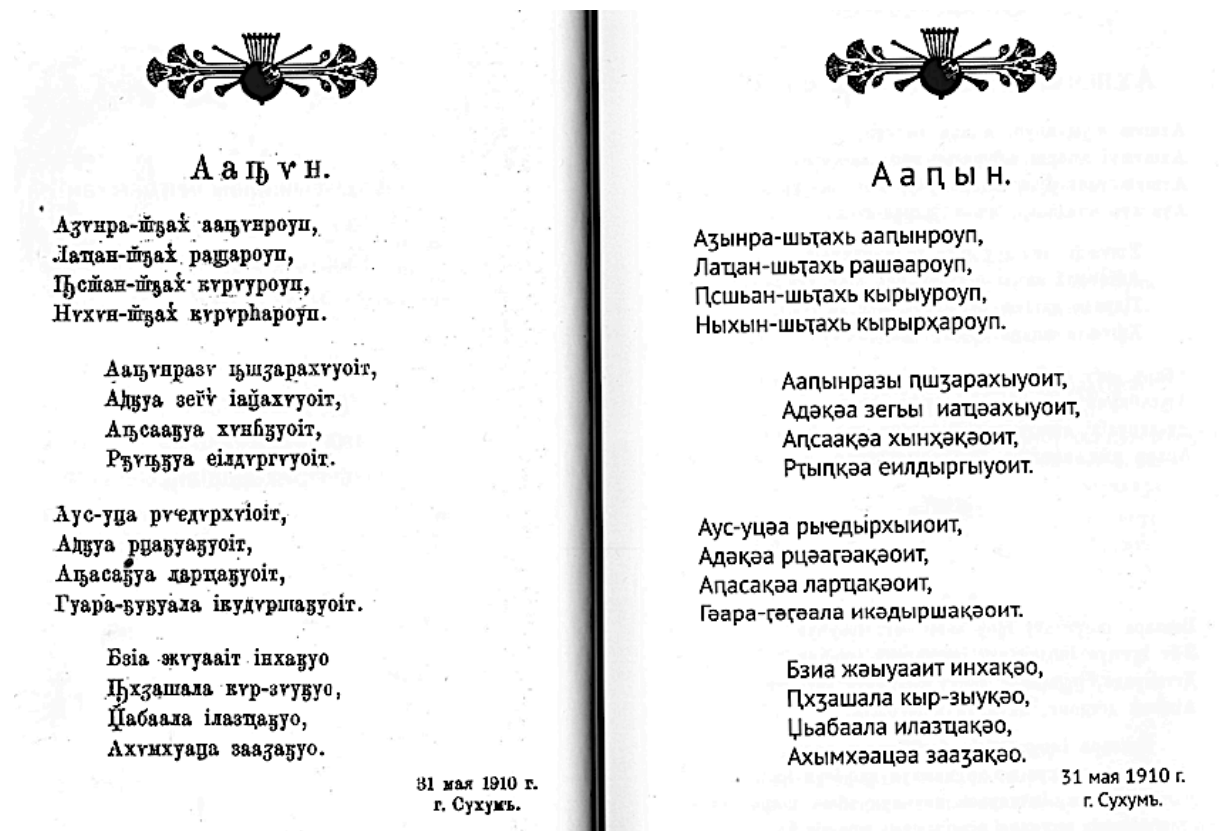
Уахьцалакь иуцыу, уҟазшьа ҟазҵо, хуарҭас зхы узымҭо (угага).

Куда ни пойдешь, везде с тобою; что ты ни сделаешь—и она подражает, а никакой помощи никогда не окажет (Тень).

Аҿысҭаа аҭәа рхны амца аҵреиҵеит (аҭаҭын).

Сам черт сено скосил, и огнем подпалил (Табак).

If one carefully compares the 1985 and 2024 versions of the script, one will see that labialisation of velars and uvulars is today marked by 'ə' and no longer by 'y', hence: the 4th puzzle has дхәахәоу instead of дхуахуоу, and аӡахәа instead of аӡахуа; the 6th has имикәа instead of имикуа; the 8th has хәарҭас instead of хуарҭас. To give a flavour of the original Abkhaz, I now transcribe and gloss condundra 2, 6 and 8 (with stresses marked in bold).

Conundrum 2

a.mp'ər-**a**.mp'ər ∫a+p'**ə** ø.z.ts'a.w [zts'o:] a.dəʁadʒa
ART.lump-ART.lump foot it.which.beneath.NON-FIN/STAT/PRES ART.holly

tʷ'əɥa ø.z.χa.w [zχo:] (**a**.rbaʁʲ)
horn it.which.above.NON-FIN/STAT/PRES (the.cockerel)

'That beneath which are two lumpy feet (and) that on top of which is a horn of holly. (Cockerel)'

Conundrum 6

jə.mə.j.ø,kʷ'a jə.psə.ø.z
who/which.not.be-born.PAST.NEG-ABSOL who/which.die.PAST.NON-FIN
(Adam)

'The one who died without having been born. (Adam)

Conundrum 8

w.axʲ.tsa.ø.l**a**kʲ' jə.wə.tsə.w [jəwətsu:]
you-MASC.where.go.PAST-INDEF who/which.you-MASC.with.NON-FIN/STAT/PRES

wə.q'a+z+∫**ə** ø.q'a.z.ts'a.w**ə** [q'azts'**ə**]
your-MASC.manner it.PREV.who/which.do.DYN-NON-FIN-PRES

χʷa+rt**a**.s z.χə ø.wə.zə.m.ta.wa [wəzəmtə]
help-ADV whose.head/self it.to-you-MASC-who/which.not.give.DYN-NON-FIN-PRES
(w**ə**.gaga)

'What is with you wherever you go, what does/imitates your manner(ism), (but) which gives you nothing of itself by way of help/profit/advantage. (Your shadow)'

Prior to the roman-based script illustrated above one should note that in the mid-1920s the idiosyncratic Georgian-Scot philologist Nik'o Marr had devised a weird method of writing language which he employed in his 1926 *Abxazo-Russkij Slovar'* (Abkhaz-Russian Dictionary) and which V. Kukba and A. Khashba used in their 1928 *Russko-Abxazskij*

Obratnyj Slovar' (Russian-Abkhaz Reverse Dictionary) reproduced in Kukba's 2007 *Izbrannye Trud*y (Selected Works), but perhaps the less said about that the better!

The first attempt to devise a script for Abkhaz was made by the eminent soldier-linguist Baron Pjotr von Uslar for representing the language in the first of his series of monograph-grammars of Caucasian languages, which was his description of Abkhaz that first appeared in lithographic form in 1861 and then in a printed version in 1887 – *Ètnografija Kavkaza. Jazykoznanie. Abxazskij Jazyk"* (Ethnography of the Caucasus. Linguistics. Abkhaz Language). Uslar and other early commentators worked on the Bzyp dialect, phonetically richer than the Abzhywa dialect which became the basis of the literary language in the 1920s, and it took a number of refinements over the years by such activists as Dmitri Gulia and Konstantin Machavariani before all phonemes were identified and this orthography was perfected. In 2013 Sukhum published a de-luxe facsimile of a 1912 publication in Tbilisi that featured Gulia's poems and short humorous verses (Ажәеинраалақәеи Ахьзыртәрақәеи) with the addition on facing pages of graph-by-graph transcriptions in the modern Abkhaz script to help readers unfamiliar with what was in use a century before. To give an idea of what written Abkhaz looked like in the early years of the 20th century I present a scan of the poem Ааҧын (Spring):

Gulia's Poem 'Spring' as written in 1910 (with modern transcription)

А а ҧ ѵ н.

Аӡунра-шҭаӿ ааҧынроуп,
Лаҵан-шҭаӿ рашароуп,
Ҧсшьан-шҭаӿ кѵрѵуроуп,
Нѵхѵн-шҭаӿ кѵрѵрһароуп.

Ааҧѵпразѵ ҵшӡарахѵуоіт,
Адәҕуа зеӱѵ іаӱахѵуоіт,
Аҧсаадуа хѵнҧҕуоіт,
Рҧѵҧҕуа еіддѵргѵуоіт.

Аус-уда рѵ^едѵрхѵіоіт,
Адәҕуа рцадѵадуоіт,
Аҧасадуа дарцадуоіт,
Гѵаҏа-дѵдуала ікѵдѵршадуоіт.

Бзіа эжкѵуааіт інхадуо
Ҧхҕашала кѵр-зѵҕуо,
Цабаала ідазцадуо,
Ахѵмхуада зааӡадуо.

31 мая 1910 г.
г. Сухумъ.

А а п ы н.

Аӡынра-шьҭахь ааҧынроуп,
Лаҵан-шьҭахь рашәароуп,
Пссьан-шьҭахь кырыуроуп,
Ныхын-шьҭахь кырырхароуп.

Ааҧынразы пшӡарахыуоит,
Адәқәа зегьы иацәахыуоит,
Апсаакәа хынхәкәоит,
Рҭыпкәа еилдыргьуоит.

Аус-уцәа рыʿедырхыиоит,
Адәкәа рцәагәакәоит,
Апсаакәа ларцакәоит,
Гәара-ҕеҕәала икәдыршакәоит.

Бзиа жәыуааит инхакәо,
Пхҕашала кыр-зыукәо,
Цьабаала илазцакәо,
Ахымхәацәа заазакәо.

31 мая 1910 г.
г. Сухумь.

The poem, composed in 1906, was included in the first volume of Gulia's collected works (1981, p. 51). For the sake of completeness I now also present a scan from this publication, where, of course, labialisation of velar and uvular fricatives and plosives is marked by 'y'. The English translation is:

<div align="center">

After wintertime it's springtime,

After sowing it's weeding-time,

After resting it's time to do some work,

After outlay it's time for some gain.

At springtime there emerges beauty,

All fields turn green,

The birds return,

They sort out their domains.

Workers get ready,

They plough the fields,

They carry out early sowings,

They lay firm fencing around them.

May your work go well, you labourers of the field,

You who toil exuding sweat,

You who sow with great exertion,

You who nurture the helpless!

</div>

Gulia's Poem 'Spring' as presented in volume 1 of his collected works (1981)

ААҦЫН

Аӡынрашьҭахь ааҧынроуп,
Лаҵаншьҭахь рашәароуп,
Ҧсшьаншьҭахь кыруроуп,
Ныхыншьҭахь крырхароуп.

Ааҧынразы ҧшӡарахоит,
Адәқуа зегь иаҵәахоит,
Аҧсаақуа хынҳәқуоит,
Рҭыҧқуа еилдыргоит.

Аусуцәа рыҽдырхиоит,
Адәқуа рцәаҕуақуоит,
Аҧасақуа ларҵақуоит,
Гуара ҕуҕуала икудыршоит.

Бзиа жәуааит инхақуо,
Ҧхӡашала кырзуқуо,
Цьабаала илаӡцақуо,
Ахымхуацәа зааӡақуо!

1906

This brief survey of writing-practices gives readers an idea of how Abkhaz has looked in print from the earliest times to the present day.

Appendix

Table of the post-Stalin Cyrillic-based script for Abkhaz alongside its Georgian-based predecessor (from newspaper *Sabch'ota Apxazeti* 'Soviet Abkhazia' 3 April 1954)

Abbreviations

ABSOL = absolute

ADV = adverb

ART = article

DYN = dynamic

MASC = masculine

NEG = negative

NON-FIN = non-finite

PAST-INDEF = past-indefinite

PRES = present

PREV = preverb

STAT = stative

George Hewitt