

SAGA 1 ☉ *If Our Lives Be Short,
Let Our Fame Be Great*

The Narts were courageous, energetic, bold, and good-hearted. Thus they lived until God sent down a small swallow.

“Do you want to be few and live a short life but have great fame and have your courage be an example for others forevermore?” asked the swallow. “Or perhaps you would prefer that there will be many of you, that your numbers will be great, that you will have whatever you wish to eat and drink, and that you will all live long lives but without ever knowing battle or glory?”

Then without calling a council, but with a reply as quick as thought itself, the Narts said, “We do not want to be like cattle. We do not want to reproduce in great numbers. We want to live with human dignity.

If our lives are to be short,
Then let our fame be great!
Let us not depart from truth!
Let fairness be our path!
Let us not know grief!
Let us live in freedom!”

In this way they chose to be small in numbers but to perform deeds of courage and boldness. This was the answer they gave to that small swallow to take back to God. And so their fame has remained undying among people. The Natuquaja¹ are their descendants.

From GENEQ, 362, recorded in Syria in Abadzakh West Circassian.

☉ The heroic spirit articulated here is reminiscent of the Ancient Greek concept of *kleos aphthiton* ‘imperishable glory’ [KT]. This is the first of numerous parallels between the Nart tradition and the lore and civilization of Ancient Greece. Many of these parallels may have arisen during the long period of Greek colonization of the Black Sea coast (see Ascherson 1995, 49–88).

¹ I do not recognize the Natuquaja, the tribe referred to, as one of the historical Circassian tribes. The name seems to be a Shapsegh-derived form [nɑ(ɾ)ɾʰəqʰɑgʰe] ← /nahrtʰ-

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ə-q°a-a-g°a / , with the sense of ‘Nart-inal-son-conn.vowel-instr’ (as a derivational suffix), literally, “the sons of the Narts.” In a note Hadaghatl’a claims that this was one of the ancient Circassian tribes that lived along the Black Sea coast and that one village in this region is descended from them.

I have adopted a deep phonological representation of Circassian vowels (Kuipers 1960), whereby the neutral vowel is /ə / ([ə]), the mid, central, or front vowel is /a / ([ɛ], [æ], [a]), and the open back vowel, which also fills syllable codas, ([ɑ]), is either /aa / if it reduces when unstressed—because it arises from two /a/s—or /ah / if it persists regardless of stress—because it seems to be patterned after the plural allomorph /-ah- / in prefixes (/ -ha- / in suffixes). Once the equivalence of persistent [ɑ] with /ah / has been made, I have assumed that the speaker extends this equivalence to those persistent [ɑ]s found also in loanwords. A more conventional analysis of / i, e, a / would be closer to the Cyrillic orthography but would ignore a host of phonological patterns that link [e] as well as /ʔ / with reducible [a]. For more on Circassian phonology and vowels, see the introductory remarks in Appendix A.