

## Chapter 31

### Zana the Ogress

Some stories certainly sound like tales of fairies and witches. Such, for example, is that of Zana, described by Porchnev and later by Bayanov.<sup>1</sup>

One day, in Abkhazia (eastern Caucasus), a group of hunters captured a dark-skinned female. She was struggling furiously and they tied her up. Sold a number of times, she eventually became the property of a local noble, Edghi Ghenaba.

She was locked up in a solid paddock, where she behaved like a wild beast. She dug a sleeping hole in the ground. For three years, she was fed by throwing food on the ground. As she became domesticated, a small sun-screened enclosure of intertwined branches was built for her near the house. After a while, she was allowed out without a leash.

She could not stand heated rooms and slept in her hole, under the sun screen. She bathed, even in the winter, in a freezing stream that still bears her name. In the summer, to cool off, she lay down in a puddle next to the cattle.

She chased dogs away by throwing heavy sticks at them. She enjoyed breaking stones by hitting them against each other. She tore off the dresses she was given to wear, preferring to go naked. Eventually she got used to wear a loincloth.

Sometimes, she would come into the house, but the women



Artistic conception of Zana by Brenden Bannon. See the color section for the full image.

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1. Bayanov, D., *In the Footsteps of the Russian Snowman*.

were afraid of her, for she would sometimes bite when she was angry. Her master, who was enormously strong, could make her obey. She could run faster than a horse. With a single hand, she carried a 180 lb (80 kg) bag of flour from the water mill to the village. She climbed trees to pick fruits, and ate grapes by the bunch. She could drink large quantities of wine, after which she fell into a kind of alcoholic stupor.

Although she never attacked children, they were afraid of her, and parents in the area would threaten their brood with beckoning the “ogress.”

An ogress she may well have been, considering her gluttony: she gobbled up, with her hands, everything she was offered, with a strong preference for meat and cornmeal.

Zana was taught to perform some simple tasks: turning a hand-mill, carrying firewood and flour bags, fetching water, pulling her master’s boots. The best she could do was to light a fire with flint and tinder. She did not manage gardening, or riding a horse.

In the village of Tkhina, where she lived for some decades, Zana never learned a single word of Abkhazian. She uttered inarticulate sounds or incomprehensible howls. However, she was sharp of hearing and would come when her name was spoken.

Her face was frightening and large, with sharp cheekbones and rough features. Her nose was both upturned and flattened. The lower part of her face stuck out, like a muzzle, with a big mouth and large teeth. Her forehead was low, with thick eyebrows, and her eyes had a reddish tinge. Her expression always remained that of an animal, without a trace of humanity.

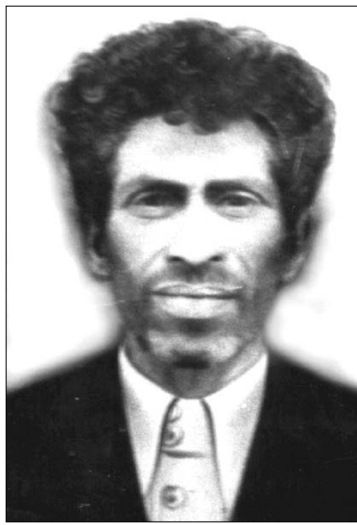
Zana lived for many years without any change in physical appearance: no loss of teeth, white hair or loss of muscle tone. Her skin remained black or dark gray, covered with reddish black hair.

Zana gave birth, without any help, to many children which she immediately washed in the stream bed. These small hybrids all died and soon the villagers took her newborns away from her to raise them. Thus survived two sons and two daughters who, in spite of some physical and mental peculiarities, turned out to be able to fit in Abkhazian society. The younger son, Khwit died in 1954. Rumor had it that Edghi Genaba was the father of those children.

When Porchnev visited the region, in September 1964, together with the archaeologist V.S. Orelkin, he interviewed local people

who had known well Khwit and the younger girl, Gamasa. Porchnev described them:

Both were sturdy individuals, with dark skin and some negroid features. They had inherited hardly any of the Neanderthalian features of Zana. The human characteristics had dominated and erased the other component of their heredity.<sup>2</sup>



Khwit

Porchnev returned to Abkhazia three times to discover Zana's grave: in vain. In his last attempt, in October 1965, he exhumed Gamassa bones: they presented significantly neanderthaloid characteristics.

After Porchnev's death, Igor Bourtsev led three expeditions to Abkhazia, in 1971, 1975 and 1978. Khvit's skull was dug up and studied in Moscow by a pair of anthropologists who detected both modern and primitive characteristics.

One might regret that investigators did not manage to find Zana's remains. On the other hand, she deserves to rest in peace.

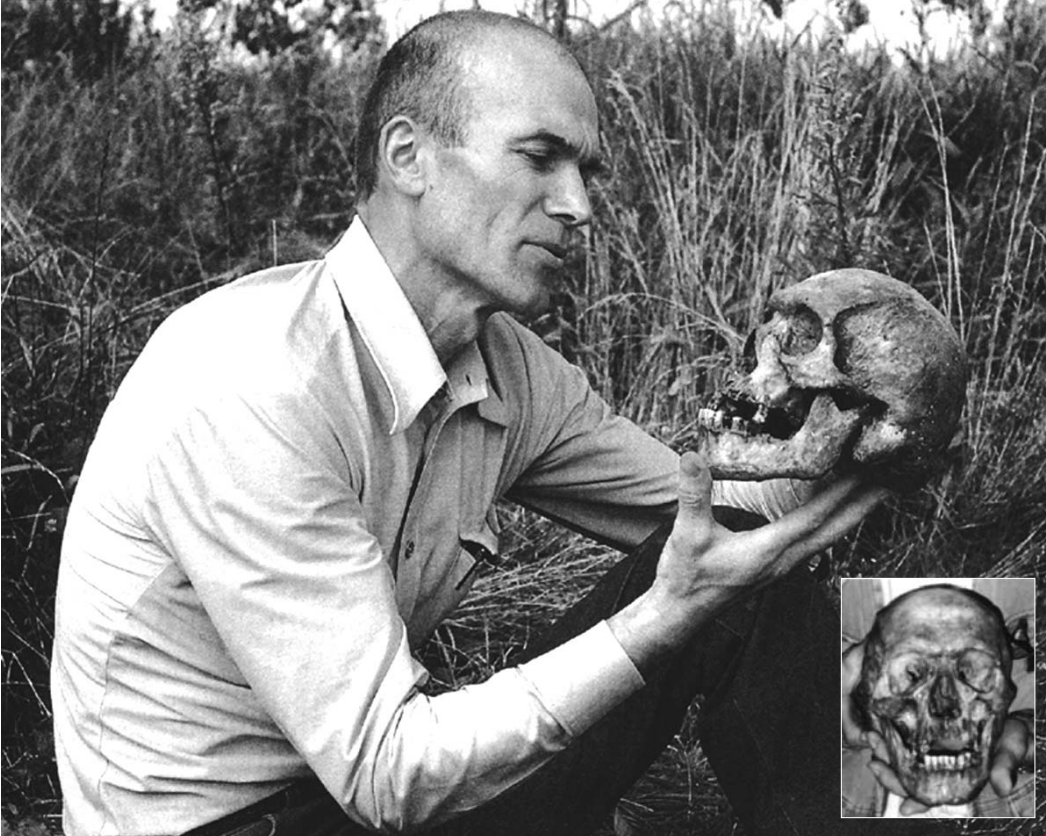
One more item: in 1962, zoology professor Machkovtsev dug up an arrow head, chipped from a pebble, on the hillside where Zana loved to wander. Strangely enough it was of Mousterian type. A coincidence? The Mousterian culture—from the Mouster cave, in the Dordogne district of France—is characterized by new stone chipping techniques from flint blocks and pebbles.<sup>3</sup>

The stirring story of Zana brings us back to the hypotheses about the disappearance of the Neanderthals. Against the holders of

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2. Porchnev, B. loc. cit. p. 175.

3. Mousterian is a name given by archaeologists to a style of predominantly flint tools (or industry) associated primarily with *Homo neanderthalensis* and dating to the Middle Paleolithic, the middle part of the Old Stone Age. Mousterian tools that have been found in Europe were made by Neanderthals and date from between 300,000 BP and 30,000 BP. In Northern Africa and the Near East they were also produced by anatomically modern humans. (Wikipedia).



Igor Bourtsev examining Khwit's skull at the grave site. The inset shows a frontal view of the skull.

a sudden disappearance, the specialists of the St. Césaire Man<sup>4</sup> showed that the remains they found in the upper paleolithic levels of that site clearly demonstrate a cohabitation in time of Neanderthals and Modern Man. For millennia, the two populations exchanged technological innovations. Did they also have biological intercourse? Zana's story suggests the possibility of hybridization.

For some, hybridization is out of the question, so that in the limit, Neanderthal man would be a different species, completely separate from *Homo sapiens*. For others, the recent discovery in Portugal of parts of the skeleton of a child born 24,000 years ago would indicate the existence of a hybrid population. The skeleton

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4. St. Césaire, a village in the Charente area of France where Neanderthal remains have been found and dated at about 36,000 years ago.

has both neanderthalian and modern human characteristics and belonged to an individual born after the disappearance of the last Neanderthals (but, had they really disappeared?). Cross-fertilizations would thus have given rise to a population presumed to have lived isolated for 4,000 years, i.e., about 200 generations, without noticeable influence on the future of mankind.

*Homo sapiens* achieved dominance by his expertise in exploiting his environment, by his breeding success, and by the brutal elimination of its rivals. However, it is probably the development of symbolic thinking which has bestowed to modern man the dominion of the Earth. Neanderthal was left behind. Although its brain closely resembled that of sapiens, its symbolic practices limited its ability to act on the world around it.

Does natural selection explain the surprising abilities of modern man? Here's how I would summarize what Ian Tattersall has to say about it: The best way to describe evolution is to say that it is opportunistic, that it merely exploits or rejects possibilities as they appear; these possibilities in turn may be favorable or not, depending on the environmental circumstances (in the widest possible sense) of the time. The process does not obey any secret directive, there is nothing inevitable to it, and it may reverse itself if the environment, ever variable, were to change.

If Darwinian selection has nothing to do with the creative process, one must conclude that *Homo sapiens*, under the influence of some stimulus, took a veritable quantum leap. What could have been the nature of the stimulus that provoked such extraordinary cognitive progress? It's anybody's guess.

We should not forget about the Neanderthal's great talents, undoubtedly due to its great powers of intuition. Its intuitive reasoning allowed it to prosper for a time. The current fascination with Neanderthal man stems in good part from our unconscious admiration for its emotional brain. That part of the brain, called in turn the ancient brain, or the olfactory or visceral brain, and later the limbic system, is the favored seat of sensations and emotions. It might also be the seat of mythical thinking, which may arise, as Bernard Heuvelmans suggests, at the level of the limbic system, appropriately nicknamed our emotional brain.

Reminiscing about Neanderthal man awakens feelings buried deep in our ancient brain. Its adaptation to the natural world con-

trasts with the complexities or the simple-mindedness of today's prevailing myth, that of science, in the sense of "All-Powerful Science," inebriated with the latest successes of information technology or genetic engineering, ready to set the gene at the focus of life, while ignoring the living organism. Not of course science as it proposes explanations to clarify specific phenomena, or to demonstrate the effects of some elaborate mechanism, for example that of nocturnal vision, which we discuss below.