

ILLNESS AND DISABILITY IN ABKHAZ SOCIETY

Despite its relative immaturity, medical anthropology has achieved notable success in studying local medical practices but has paid comparatively little attention to the situation of people with disabilities in non-European societies and cultures. Based on both published sources and her own field data collected through long-term participant observation, the author attempts to characterize the concepts and practices regarding disability that have developed in Abkhazia. In particular, she concludes that the traditional Abkhaz model of disability does not look too exotic and is not too different from the European medical model. But its general emphasis is still shifted because fewer manifestations of disabilities are interpreted as therapeutic (medical) problems, even when magical actions are considered a specific form of treatment and healing. At the same time, many ailments are fatalistically accepted. Being a person with disabilities in Abkhaz society is a problem for a family or clan, and not only and not so much for a single individual, as everywhere in European cultures. The lives of the most disadvantaged people here take place almost exclusively at the family level, and thus they are excluded from society. It is not typical for Abkhazia to recognize some special status for people with “deviations”.

Keywords: medical anthropology, folk medicine, Caucasus, Abkhaz, disabilities, models, constructivism

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