



Article Reprint

THE *ALMASTY* OF THE CAUCASUS – LIFE STYLE OF A HOMINOID*

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The *almasty*, this relict hominoid of the Caucasus, so close to man and yet so elusive, has now been studied successfully, thanks to direct eyewitness reports collected in the region over more than thirty years. Their scientific analysis enables us today to be familiar with the diet of the *almasty*, its pace of life, its behavior and the structure of its population.

In a preceding article (*Archéologia*, No. 269, June 1991), we attempted a reconstitution of the physical aspect of the *almasty*, the “wildman” of the Caucasus, based on descriptions furnished by countless witnesses, simple people for the most part – cowherds, hunters, woodcutters – often illiterate and, in any event, totally ignorant in matters of primatology and paleoanthropology, which fact, under these circumstances, gives their testimony especial value.

Effectively, an analysis of their reports, translated into terms of descriptive anatomy, discloses not only the authenticity of each of the anatomical characteristics described – never before observed by eyewitnesses, as they have disappeared in modern man – but also, moreover, the exactness of the structural complexes formed by them, in perfect agreement with the very exacting canons of anthropometry. The “morphology-function” connection, the conformity of verbal descriptions with material evidence collected, at times in other places (for example, footsteps

and footprints), all go to complete the anatomical verity of this personage, this unknown primate claiming to be a member of the hominid family.

Today, this personage is going to come to life and move about before our eyes. It should be mentioned, however, that these pages will deal exclusively with the hominoid of the Caucasus, and this fact must be specifically stressed.

Whereas the open spaces of Asia, of the American continent, and of Russia itself have allowed the relict hominoids, in their slow movement of withdrawal before Man, always to preserve between themselves and this dangerous biological rival, a sort of “no-man’s land”, the geomorphology of the Caucasus, and its situation in the heart of emerging civilizations, very early caused the hominoid population, confined between two seas and pushed up against an enormous mountain mass, to become prisoner of human societies, living in enforced proximity of primitive peoples. This forced coexistence was to mark profoundly the ecology and the ethology of the *almastys*. Their

**Editor’s Note:* This article was originally published in *Archéologia* 276:52-65, February 1992, in French. It was translated into English by Dr. Edward Winn, June 1993. Much of Dr. Koffmann’s original publications have remained relatively inaccessible to English-speakers. Portions have been summarized and restated by such authors as Tchernine, Shackley, or Bayanov. While this article was written for a semi-popular publication, this translation provides fuller access by Anglophones to Dr. Koffmann’s own summary and discussion of her seminal field research. Therefore, it is deemed appropriate to reprint this classical work, with the author’s permission, in the RHI.

resemblance to man inspired in this latter a mixture of fear and pity, comforted later by the taboos of all of the Caucasian religions. Effectively “neither man nor beast,” where to place these creatures if not among the theogonic categories? Not caring to bring upon himself the enmity of beings redoubtable both by their physical strength and, especially, by their assumed appurtenance to a disquieting world, man preferred to maintain peaceful relations with them. Food and old clothing were put out for them. The “women”, notably, with their nursing young in their arms, begging timidly, aroused pity on the part of the peasant women.

The hominoids knew very well how to exploit this state of affairs and to extract the maximum of benefit, without ever passing certain limits, which, once exceeded, would have brought down upon them the wrath of humans. The relationships which, in the course of centuries, developed in the Caucasus between man and his wild counterpart, have no analog anywhere else in the world.

GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION

The Caucasian range of the species studied embraces practically the entire territory of the isthmus. The *almasty* is not attached to one particular site, and is not subject to any constraint of climate, altitude or temperature.

We encounter it, in the marshes and the jungles of reed-beds of the Podkumok and of the Terek, on the slopes – of an almost Central Asian harshness – of the mass of Elbruz, on rocky cliffs, in the depths of caverns, in the snows and the glaciers of the Great Caucasus, on the plateaus of Karabakh and of Armenia, lying quiet and still under the sultry, stifling heat of summer, in the thick, humid, subtropical forest of the Colchide and of the Talych, and among the dunes of the deserts of the Caspian depression.

These very diverse landscapes constitute for it a perfectly natural setting for its life. It lives and moves with ease in one as well in other,

demonstrating a high degree of ecological flexibility. Eminent mountain climber, unsurpassed sprinter on level terrain, it moves with speed and skill in the crown of trees and in the water of rushing streams, and procures shelter and food in the desert, marshes and...in the abode of man. It exhibits, nevertheless, an evident preference for the forest, thus justifying its name of “man of the forest” in all the Caucasian languages. The band of mountain forests which runs between the steppe and the high rocky chains constitutes its preferred refuge.

Need it be recalled that it was the boundary region between savanna and piedmont forest which saw the first anthropomorphs of Africa and Asia emerge in the Tertiary Era and that still today the surviving members of the great primates, apart from man, all are inhabitants of the forest and, particularly, of mountain forests, gorillas themselves living at altitudes of up to 4000 m (G. Schaller).

A VARIED DIET

As might be predicted by the listing of its various biotopes, the *almasty* is omnivorous, vegetable matter occupying a predominant place in its menu, even if only by virtue of its abundance and ease of access. Along the way, a botanist of our group catalogued in a few minutes, in a little woods at the edge of a road where an *almasty* had earlier been seen, no less than 19 edible wild species. Nonetheless, the *almasty* lives too closely to the riches of man to be unaware of them. It is difficult to evaluate in quantitative terms the portion of its food supply which it acquires there. But, it is not an exaggeration to suggest that, in the Caucasus, the relict hominoid has become a table-companion of man.

In search of information on its existence, we are going to quote the word of shepherds, more often, perhaps, than would be customary in a scientific discourse.

“They eat a lot of cow-parsnip; I have heard

this said by old people, and I have seen myself that they eat it in great quantities” (19k)^{1,2} (cow-parsnip is likewise a favorite of the bear).

“Sitting on its heels, it digs up roots, cleans the earth from them by rubbing them between its palms, and gobbles them up”.

“Here is the “*amou*” which your *almasty* eats and which you asked to see. We call it *amou*, or earth nut, I don't know what it is in Russian. It grows on the roots of hazel-nut trees, and it's very good – here, taste it. It digs them up and eats them” (152 k).

It is in fact anthriscus, an umbellifer similar to fennel. A recollection came to my mind, and I sought out a copy of the book by the zoologist I. Sanderson, *Abominable Snowmen: Legend Come to Life*. A certain Mr. Ostman had had the occasion to observe over a long period a group of sasquatches (Indian name of the North American analog of the *almasty*) in the Rocky Mountains of British Columbia: “The old female also brought back a large number of earth nuts [...]. It was possible to verify that these were nodules from the roots of an

herbaceous plant of the same family as the European fennel, one of the species of which yields edible nuts which, in fact, have a delicious taste.”

“It was sitting on its heels in the potato patch of the vegetable garden. In its left hand it held the end of a rag, and with its right hand it was digging up potatoes. I thought – well, look, it's not damaging the potatoes, like a wild boar would do, for example; it's digging them up intelligently; it was not pulling on the tops and was not destroying the furrow, but was digging down to reach the potatoes” (66k).

“It climbed up on the step of the spreader, at the back, opened the chest and began to eat the grains of wheat which had remained after the work” (noted the 10 Dec 78).

There are innumerable instances of *almastys* surprised in the act of picking cherries, plums, apples, pears, watermelons and other fruits, often still green and inedible for man. Its food also is composed of herbs (wild sorrel, bugloss), acorns, nuts, hemp seeds, vegetables (cucumbers, tomatoes, and onions), corn, and red peppers. But, it also likes to eat frogs and lizards, squirrels, rats and mice.

Intrigued by its periodic visits to an enormous empty barn, the eyewitness decided to spy on the *almasty*: “[...] it jumped effortlessly onto a very high beam, extended its arm in a familiar gesture, pulled a bat out from under the roofing, sat down on the beam, gutted the animal and ate it [...]. Subsequently, I saw it do the same thing several times. Normally, it ate one single bat, sometimes two, but never more” (168k).

“The *almastys* eat dead horses and other dead animals” (19k).

Among the foods of animal origin there very often is found a strange and unusual item – the placenta of domestic animals (and thus, in all probability, placentae from females of wild species as well).

“I know that it eats the after-birth of cows, mares, ewes” (45k).

“At that time the ewes were lambing and it came to collect the after-births. One day, when I

¹The parentheses contain the file numbers of the eyewitness reports, with the letter designating the region: k - Kabarda, Balkaria, Karachal; g – Georgia; a - Azerbaijan, etc. The numerical data presented farther along have been taken from 265 interrogations of witnesses having personally observed the *almasty*: 205 for the central Caucasus, 60 for Azerbaijan. Second-hand reports, although identical, do not figure in these statistics.

²Certain readers of *Archéologia* were troubled by the fact that the dates of the encounters cited in the first article ended in the 1960s, and were concerned that there have been no more since that time. This is not the case at all, and the explanation is quite simple - Having come to France for a brief visit, I had brought with me only the first volume of reports, which was already quite voluminous. Moreover, the subsequent volumes would in no way have changed the essence of the results: Effectively, only the level of the numbers would have been increased, but their relationships would not have changed at all - for a larger number of encounters, the relative proportions (males to females, the seasons, time of day of the sightings, etc.) remain strictly the same. The observations, although much less numerous than before, continue regularly.

was about fifty meters away and was advancing toward it, it grabbed the after-birth and went away into the rocks, growling in irritation” (111k).

“The period of foaling lasts about two months, in the course of which’ the mares give birth at various times of the day. During this time, if a mare delivers at night and later she begins to run about, to call out, to search, it means only that her colt has simply run off and that she is looking for it. On the other hand, if she remains standing, quiet, with her head down, if she is not looking for anything and does not eat, it means that an *almasty* has stolen her little one. The *almastys* steal newborn foals and eat them” (175k).

So far, we have been observing the *almasty* from a distance – in fields, in vegetable gardens, among herds. Now, it is going to approach our dwellings, in search, first of all, of milk, of which it is very fond.

“The milkmaid complained that someone was milking the cow Marussia during the night. The foreman decided to stand guard and watch himself. Early in the morning he came looking for me, very pale and worried. “Umar, he said, I saw who is milking the cow. He sits under it, squeezes the udder between his hands and the milk shoots directly into his mouth. It’s not a shepherd, Umar, and it’s not even a man”. Our foreman was a Ukrainian who was not familiar with *almastys*, and he understood nothing at all about this. As for us, we laughed” (22k).

“In the winter, he is very comfortable in the stables – it is warm, there is milk, the cows give birth and he eats the after-birth. And, in fact, certain cows had their teats damaged – all dried out and spotted with blood” (64k).

“At the time, we had some fifteen mares [...]. Someone was milking them at night. And, the foals were hungry. Grandfather armed himself with a big club and hid himself. All at once, in the middle of the night, the mares began snorting and became very agitated. And behold, here came this real witch. She went quietly up to a mare, patted her on the neck, calmed her

down, sat down under her and began to suck. First one teat, and then another, and then she went to a second mare. Then, grandfather couldn’t restrain himself any longer. He jumped out, grabbed her by her long hair and gave her a thrashing with his club. She never came back” (47k).

“The cheese began to disappear from the reserves”, “upon going into the mill, I saw that someone had eaten the flour,” “at night, the products disappeared from the cabin. And all of the dishes and the pans had been licked clean,” “all of my provisions had disappeared: cheese, bread, a piece of mutton,” “someone came at night to eat our food.”

I could fill up pages with these litanies. I say litanies, and not lamentations: The recollection of these little misadventures, to which no importance is attached, brings smiles to the faces of the narrators, who do not hide a certain feeling of admiration for this “rascal” of an *almasty* and his clever tricks. Could it really be otherwise, as they themselves do not hesitate to offer him something to eat?

“It was in winter. Night had overtaken me and I decided to pass it in an old abandoned sheepfold. The moment I opened the door, I felt a gust of warm, humid air. I struck a match, and saw an *almasty* lying down with a little one, about the size of a three-year old boy. She was holding him stretched out, almost under her side. At my appearance, she continued to remain quietly lying down. I held a candy out to the child, but the mother prevented it from taking it by gently turning its head with her hand. Then, I went out, took some bread and cheese from my cart, and went back toward the *almasty* and put them down close to her. Then, I left” (123k).

Among my observations in the field I could cite:

– The traces of the passage of a very large creature in a field of corn, where an *almasty* had been seen shortly before. Someone, going along the rows, had pulled back the husks on numerous ears, at a height of 1m60-1m80 from

the ground, and had bitten into each of these once or twice, perhaps to test the degree of ripening, which was quite low at the time. The jaws, larger than those of a grown man, had closed with such force that they had chopped off, as with a cutter, parts of the cob having a density close to that of wood.

– The characteristic remains of rodents (rats, spermophiles). In all regions, the relict hominoid exhibits this characteristic of cleaning his prey and leaving their entrails on the scene. In our cases the thoracoabdominal viscera had been very curiously and very carefully drawn out in one single piece – without the slightest damage to organs as fragile as the liver or the lungs! The tails of rats seemed to have been cut off with a razor, right at the root.

– The feces, which are remarkable by their volume and their heterogeneous constitution. In one case, they were collected at the very spot where, the day before, two little girls had seen an *almasty* in a cherry-tree. In addition to the remains of insects and of various grasses, they contained more than 160 pits and stems of cherries, which were still green at the time.

– A little pile of vegetables and fruits, all still green themselves, placed on some straw at the back of a rather difficultly accessible niche, in the upper part of a cliff of friable rock, overhanging the river. A week before, a guardian had observed an *almasty* on this terrace. The pile was composed of: 8 potatoes, 4 apples, 2 little pumpkins, a partly-eaten ear of corn, a half-eaten sunflower (seeds and pulp), some wild-rose berries and, mixed in with everything, 4 very firm and smooth balls of horse manure.

FRUGALITY OF THE *ALMASTY*

In spite of its large size and robust constitution, the *almasty* eats very little, according to the Caucasians, whose own frugality is nothing less than legendary.

“You think that he eats like us? Well, I can tell you, if we ate like him, we would die of

hunger! Three hundred grams, that's enough for him for a whole day” (note of the 26 Aug 64).

The same holds true for his needs in the matter of drink. Settled down in a cornfield, he can stay there for several days, contenting himself with the juice contained in the vegetation. In the course of the week which she passed in their corn patch (cf. *Archéologia* No. 269, p. 33), her involuntary hosts did not once see the *almasty* leave it to go drink, and her food was composed uniquely of corn, which was still green.

Necessarily incomplete, this inventory nevertheless justifies certain observations. The dietary regime of the *almasty* is nothing other than that which is typical of a primate. The food is predominantly vegetarian but also includes meat and lithophagy and even coprophagy as well, which are common to all anthropoids. Chimpanzees hunt some fifteen different species of mammals, carrying off the young of antelopes and pigs; in Indonesia, a couple of orangutans devoured a gibbon, without leaving any remains, in three hours; gorillas in captivity prove to be very fond of meat; the insufficiency of salts in their food drives numerous animals, including the great apes, to eat certain types of earth: G. Schaller found a high content of potassium and sodium in samples of the earth which he had seen consumed by gorillas. For the same reason they are impelled at times to eat excrement: After having seen gorillas eating this, Dian Fossey added that this practice enables them better to assimilate the nutritive substances contained in vegetable matter; the orangutan rarely comes down to the ground to drink, the juice contained in leaves and the humidity condensed on their surface being sufficient for it.

More important, perhaps, is this further observation: The dietary panoply of the *almasty* corresponds to that of the first hominians.

Finally, it turns out that, here again, the elements of information communicated by the shepherds have an indisputable air of authenticity, this time biological. This will be

our third observation.

WITH THE RHYTHM OF THE SEASONS

According to the teachings of zoology, an animal whose food is composed largely of vegetable matter, and which lives in the changing climate of the mountains, is constrained to seasonal migrations. Although freed from numerous constraints, the *almasty*, as an honest claimant to a real existence, answers this requirement as well. The cycle of its annual migrations is perfectly clearly to be seen.

It shows up clearly in certain regions, for example, in the north of Azerbaijan, where encounters last practically for only three months in the year. Beginning in July, they reach their maximum in September, and cease thereafter. Now, this season is that of walnuts, acorns, chestnuts, hazel-nuts, blackberries, and numerous fruits and berries, both wild and cultivated. It is also the time of the year when all of the fauna of the forest – jackals, lynxes, bears, wild boars, foxes – come down from the steep northern slopes of the Great Massif toward the piedmont, which has taken on such an alluring air. The animals come in such numbers that the kolkhozes must organize night watches which, with the loud support of drums, pans, rifle shots and other percussion instruments, endeavor to keep all of this tribe at a distance from the planted fields. Outside of this season, the *mecha-adam* is rarely encountered.

In winter, do you also hear the cries of the mecha-adams? “No, in winter we do not hear them.” *And where are they, in winter?* “I don't know. That doesn't concern us” (45a).

In the Northern Caucasus, the slopes of which are less steep and more open and rolling, and thus where the regions of altitude and vegetation change less abruptly, the migration does not stand out in such a sharp and clear fashion. Nevertheless, it remains quite in evidence.

In a summarizing table we have presented, broken down by levels of altitude and by seasons, 185 encounters reported from one of the regions of the Central Caucasus for the years 1920 through 1969.

Here, there is to be noted a strong summer and autumnal migration toward the very low levels of the plain, which is an abundant source of food from June to October. These levels are totally abandoned in winter and, practically, in spring as well. Effectively, they are devoid of all vegetation at these times.

Summer encounters likewise become more numerous in the mountains, to which the *almastys* are drawn by the presence of herds of sheep and of sheepfolds, which are completely open to the wind and weather. It must nonetheless also be recalled that this likewise is the only season when men are to be found there in numbers.

In contrast to these two levels, the piedmont, rich in cultivation and close to the zones of refuge which the forest offers, constitutes a privileged region for encounters; they take place throughout the year, and with a perfectly natural summer peak since, at that time, the human population as well as the *almastys* are to be found in the fields, although, it is true, for different reasons.

The drop in the curve of encounters in the spring – the most rigorous season in this region, benumbed with damp cold and ice, especially in March – cannot be attributed to a decrease in village activity, which carries on at the same pace as in winter.

But, for a wanderer, this time is one of cold and hunger: Exhausted, the last reserves of autumn gone, access to farms dangerous because of the prevailing feverish activity in preparation for the great departures toward distant alpine pastures. The *almasty* deals with this time of testing by various means. It can abandon the desolate hills of the piedmont – where, for the most part, the human population lives – for the forests of the first ridges, still rich in dried fruits and berries and in roots and

rhizomes which wild boars dig up, and where the open hillsides are sunny.

I had assumed that the *almasty* was likewise capable of avoiding days and even particularly unfavorable short periods of time by taking refuge in sleep. This hypothesis was subsequently found to be confirmed.

“In winter, it eats very little. In winter, it makes a big hole in a haystack and stays lying down there. A loaf of bread which it has stolen will be enough for it for three days. It eats a little piece at a time and then goes back to sleep”.

This is not at all the very deep sleep of the bear or the marmot but, rather, a torpor, a state of somnolence, probably with reduction in the rate of metabolism as well (cf. the lethargy in man, as a primitive reaction of defense and nervous protection).

This rest is superficial. It is not without reason that, when speaking of an activity which has only the appearance of pleasure, the Kabardas add: “It’s just as agreeable as the winter sleep of the *almasty*.”

The *almasty* formerly had a third resource. This is a Balkar speaking, one of the most venerated old men of this very close-knit little people who had to undergo a fearful experience: Deported by order of Stalin in a single night, that of 8 March 1944, toward the deserts of Central Asia – women, old people, children – they came back only 13 years later, their numbers diminished by half. The Balkars occupy the mountainous region of the little republic and preserve numerous and ancient traditions, having passed from paganism to Islam, against their will, only at the beginning of our century. Here is what I had recounted to me by Topa Chavaev, more than a hundred years old.

“In the winter, the *almastys* live in the caves or in the stables of the families which they know. There were many of them then, and often they lived with people. Take our neighbors, the Akhmatovs, for example: They had one. Then, we were deported. Now, these people no longer

exist, and even the foundation of their house has disappeared. They brought them something to eat in the stable, where they lived with the cattle [...]. You see, for us, Balkars, the *almasty* is like a poor wretch, down and out, like the village idiot. We must not do it any harm. Today, it’s very difficult to encounter an *almasty*. The hangars where they lived have all burned and the people all are dead” (5k).

This report, and others identical to it, are confirmed by the tales of the Kabardas – who were not involved in this ferocious repression – who ventured into the ghost villages in the mountains and, in the weeks which followed the deportation, surprised in the deserted houses a number of baffled and lost *almastys*, most often females with their little ones.

“It was about midday...I pushed open the door. In the corner, seated on the hay, was an *almasty*, her child of one year in her arms. Then, she turned around and went out through the embrasure of the window. At the time, it often happened that our people (the Kabardas) found them in abandoned Balkar houses” (60k).

The brutal loss of their winter quarters, just in a period of hunger - the expulsion involved the Karachals, the Chechens and the Ingushes at the same time, in a few hours emptying the mountain over hundreds of kilometers – must have had catastrophic consequences for the species, and all the more so as it struck especially the females – the mothers and their little ones, the privileged tenants of the village people, and also as it followed the fighting in the battle of the Caucasus, which had already upset the entire ecology of the region.

AN ALMASTY'S DAY

It is easy to deduce the responses to two of the questions of our inquest: The time of day of the encounter and the activity of the *almasty*.

At night (3% of the encounters), the *almasty* is engaged in searching for food or, quite frequently, in petty pilfering. In the hours before dawn, its activity falls off (only 11.5% of

the observations). In the day (35.5%) the *almasty* sleeps, soundly this time and, in fact, so soundly that often it does not hear men approaching it.

“I was looking for my goat...All at once, I saw in the grass an *almasty* which was sleeping, curled up in a ball. I very nearly stepped on it” (10k).

“Its tracks led us into a thicket of wild grass. It was there, sleeping peacefully, lying on its back. We were eight guys, we surrounded it, and we watched it. And it – it just kept on sleeping” (135k).

A slight peak of activity is to be noted between 11:00 hr and 14:00 hr. The evening produces 18% of the encounters. These figures concern Kabardino-Balkaria, in the Central Caucasus. In the north of Azerbaijan the proportion of diurnal and nocturnal encounters shifts in favor of twilight and night, leaving to the day only 14.9% of the encounters. Two factors – the period of encounters limited to a few weeks of the year, and the predominance of males among the individuals observed – lead me to think that, at the present time, this region now constitutes no more than an area of only occasional appearances of hominoids which have been driven out of their usual territory. They thus behave with considerable prudence.

North or south, these parameters of the daily cycle of the Caucasian hominoid are those of species which lead a twilight and nocturnal existence. And, it will be recalled that Carl Linne, in 1758, described his second *Homo*, *Homo sylvestris*, as *troglydites* and as *nocturnus*.

We have seen in the anatomical chapter that the vision of the *almasty* is perfectly adapted to this mode of existence.

A NOMAD'S LIFE

Unfortunately, we know nothing of the weekly and monthly cycles – the very ones which would enable us to plan for contacts – other than that they take place during perpetual

moving about. Nomadism, a trait developed to an extreme in all of the hominoid populations of the globe, seems to be characteristic of this species as well. Like its analogs on other continents, the *almasty* has no point of attachment and dwells nowhere, taking only brief rests in cold weather in whatever refuges it can find – abandoned cabins, haystacks, caverns; in summer, even on the land, in a field, in thickets of nettles and brambles, in the foliage of a tree.

Sometimes it puts together rather hastily a bed of rags and grass. When it is very hot, it ties together the tops of tall grasses (the making of knots, moreover, is one of its preferred occupations, and so much so that, when swearing at a recalcitrant knot, the Kabardas often will compare the one who tied it to the *almasty*) and throws on this framework a bed of broad burdock leaves or of rags.

“In the morning, we left to surround the reeds. We followed directly the pathway that it had stamped out. It led us to its hut: It had tied the tops of the reeds together, and that made a hut for it” (126k).

“I approached and said to myself – “What is that?” I did not understand. All sorts of rags were hanging from tall grass, along with half of an old coat with one sleeve.” The *almasty* never came back (89k).

I myself, one winter day, was surprised to discover a padded coat in a dry and sunny rocky niche, where I liked to rest. Although a little worn, it was still in too good condition for its owner to abandon it and, moreover, to come and leave it in this remote corner, at three hours of walking and climbing from the village. It remained there for three years. Then, one day, it disappeared, just as mysteriously.

Nests, which are very rare today, have been reported to me only from Azerbaijan. However, it was in the Karachal, in the Northern Caucasus, that a hunter of long experience called me to examine an unusual object which he had discovered quite by chance. “Travel log. 23 October 1982. – Thick forest on very steep

slope. Hazel tree: Thin trunk (diameter 10 cm), round, flexible and smooth, leaning strongly outward toward the drop-off; at 3 m from the ground – the “nest”! As I climbed up, the trunk swung around in all directions and curved over more and more. As I climbed around it I found myself suspended 15 m above the ground. Able finally to grab the “nest” and climb into it. But what about the builder! What did he hold on to? Bear absolutely excluded. Oval nest: 1m20 x 1m. Outside edge: A branch 5 cm in diameter, partly broken, twisted around its axis (360°) then bent toward the left. At 80 cm to the left from the point of rupture of the first branch, an identical branch is broken, twisted around 360° and interlaced with the other, like arms crossed on a chest. On the rest of the perimeter, identical edges, but less strong. Smaller branches, all pulled toward the center, forming a thick hammock. A spacious, soft bed. I stretch out comfortably in it.

Curiously, it is from exactly this point that there is an open view, otherwise blocked by the forest, of the dump for garbage and food scraps of the little rest house, isolated in the valley, which is open in the summer and is located on the other side of the river (at about 350 m). Questioning of the game warden and the inhabitants of the neighboring village (10 km). “Exceptional harvest of hazel-nuts this year. Nevertheless, the bears are not more numerous than ordinarily. This ‘nest’ appeared for the first time. No one had ever seen anything like it.” And, very probably, never will see it again. In fact, hardly had it been built when the nest was immediately abandoned. It showed almost no marks of having been used.

Let no one see here a contradiction with the elements of information presented above. The reports where the hominoid, alone or in groups, reappears persistently, generally motivated by the prospect of a meal, belong to times past, when the *almastys* were infinitely more numerous and men were more rare and more dispersed in their miserable mud-brick huts, which were scarcely better than those of the

“forest man.” Already quite infrequent at the time, these episodes are totally absent from our present statistics, and this is a guideline for the researcher – if an *almasty* has been seen today at a given place, it is a simple waste of time to wait for it there, other than in exceptional circumstances.

A vital question arose – where are the limits to the roaming of isolated individuals – and do they exist! Tireless wanderers, do they nevertheless remain confined to a defined territory, by imperative need, or does their ecological space correspond to the range of distribution of the species, in which case all research would become hopeless? To respond, I endeavored to “personify” to the maximum the *almastys* of which I had heard spoken (sex, size, fur color, behavior, particular signs, etc.). The method proved to be fruitful and I was able to localize five quite distinct individuals, each one in its own “domain,” on a territory of 2500 km², a figure to be doubled if not tripled, since calculated on the horizontal projection of a mountainous country.

This point established, I was obliged, for external reasons, to interrupt my work. But, when I returned six years later, I “found” again two of these old acquaintances.

Today, others have replaced them. Nevertheless, we are justified in supposing that, whether it has entered or has been born in a certain perimeter (containing hundreds of square kilometers), the *almasty* can remain there for several years, all the while ceaselessly travelling across it, back and forth, up and down.

One last parallel with the great apes will close this chapter on nomadism. And justly so, since, like the *almasty*, none of them knows either rest or family home. Every evening, chimpanzees, gorillas, orangutans make primitive nests, sometimes on the ground, sometimes in trees, which they abandon in the morning and to which they do not come back. “Gorillas lead a nomadic life and every night sleep in a new place,” writes W. Baumgartel, a great expert on

these apes. “It is true that, during several weeks, they wander around the same region and then, suddenly and for a reason which remains unknown to us, they go away.” “The group of gorillas moves around its territory with such a lack of motivation that I suspect the total absence of any plan in the head of the chief,” echoes G. Schaller, “the only thing that one can predict regarding the itinerary of gorillas, is that it will be absolutely unexpected.” But, whereas the heavy and phlegmatic gorilla will move at the most 3 or 4 km, the more mobile chimpanzee can find itself at the end of the day some tens of kilometers away.

TO EACH REGION ITS POPULATION

The structure of the population is characterized by its constancy in a given region, but it can be quite different elsewhere. Thus, in Azerbaijan, the males constitute 50% of the individuals the sex of which has been determined (which is far from always being the case – Brevity of the encounter, insufficient light, distance, position of the creature, etc.), and the females 36%. Young individuals are totally lacking in our statistics of recent years. Only the very old men recall “that, in the time of Nicholas,” that is, in the time of the tsar, “the *mecha-adams* were encountered fairly often in groups – the father, the mother and the children”.

For the same period of time (1930-1970), these proportions differed substantially in the Central Caucasus: 54% of females, 10.5% of which with little ones, 16% of adolescents of 8 to 16 (?) years, only 20% of males, but 9.7% of groups. The age of young individuals being rather naively estimated by comparison with humans, these figures must be accepted with reservation.

If one considers that the “kids” are encountered alone only beyond eight years, then it must be believed that the presence of the mother long remains necessary for the child. The little one is born naked, but from the age of

one year it is already covered with hair, albeit short and sparse. From the age of three years it is seen trotting along with its mother, whose hand it holds.

Occurring fairly frequently in the past, groups, which necessarily included young individuals, contained 5 to 8 members, rarely more. They clearly showed no fear of man, sometimes even amusing themselves by “mimicking” them, but from a distance, to be sure. Discretion was not their outstanding characteristic.

“They were heard every evening, making a great noise. They were having rows, squabbling, playing. They're a very noisy people, they never stop shouting, screaming, crying. They don't have human language. They talk like a drum: “Boom–boom–boom” (33k).

“I often heard their cries at that time. I was keeping my sheep near the rocks, and every evening I heard them screaming. They cried out, they fought, they scolded one another – to judge by their cries. Then, they made peace and muttered peacefully. But, very quickly, the cries started again” (26k).

Without dwelling here on the rich variety of sounds made by the *almasty*, I shall note only its habit of “muttering,” “grumbling,” almost without stopping, even when alone, which fact often causes it to be discovered by the observer. The enormously powerful cry, which carries far in the night, is probably a call. One of our informers was able to follow an exchange of cries between two individuals, one summer night. Beginning from two distant ridges, these cries approached one another and ended at the moment, in the opinion of the witness, when the two *almastys* found one another (158k).

The *almasty* is endowed with excellent vision, by day as well as by night. Reports concerning its sense of smell are rare and, moreover, contradictory. Those who say that it is remarkable are probably closer to the truth, the *almasty* appearing from all points of view to be perfectly equipped for its wild existence.

This existence, as affirmed unanimously by

all of the old mountaineers, is lengthy and can be compared to the longevity of man. I was told of a case of a food-supply relationship involving the same *almasty* and the grandparents and then the parents of the narrator.

The relationships between the *almasty* and beings living in its surroundings and, more particularly, with man, will be the object of another study, ethological this time. Nevertheless, this is an aspect which belongs to its biology. Either through absence of belligerent inclinations or because a coexistence over thousands of years has taught it its place, the *almasty* manifests no aggressiveness toward man (although it appears very spiteful). The only cases of “aggression” that are known to me involve females with respect to men, and principally young ones. Apart from rare and vague cases of “*they say*,” I have never heard of the opposite, i.e., the pursuit of women by males, for the simple reason that this type of confrontation is materially impossible. In small communities, which are governed rigorously by Shari'a, and confronted with the dangers of a harsh environment, a woman has no occasion to find herself alone and at a distance from her home. Conversely, the lengthy solitude of the shepherd in his alpine pastures favors this type of encounter. Great was my surprise when I discovered the enthusiasm, tinged with glee, with which my interlocutors approached this subject, which seemed to me to be of an extreme delicacy. This, of course, was to misjudge completely these simple people, these adventures of a grandfather or of an uncle, which offer proof of their liveliness and are the pride of the family.

To my questions concerning the possibility of an offspring, they answered that pregnancies had been observed. However, the transhumance having ended and, with it, all interest on the part of the sire, it was not known if parturition had occurred, and even less “what she was going to bring forth, out there in her forest.” Nevertheless, certain cross-checks and a few more precise observations lead to a suspicion of

the possibility of the mutual fertility of the two species, with the appearance of a lineage with human traits dominant, itself fertile as well.

In nature, the *almasty* does not encounter any competing species, capable of disputing its biotopes (I do not take account of the rare skirmishes with bears, these rough individuals, who are encountered around a raspberry thicket which both antagonists consider to be their personal property. As one might guess, these are the joy of spectators – “[...] the bear stood up but, as for him, his arms are longer, and he boxed it and boxed it, the head of the bear was knocked back and forth, from side to side [...].” As an aside, this illustrates the prodigious strength of the *almasty*).

Agile, precise, prudent, knowing astonishingly well each corner of its territory and all of its inhabitants, it is quite unlikely that it runs any great danger there. The only deadly menace – and, moreover, only in open terrain – comes from the wolf and the fierce dogs of the shepherds, the resemblance of which to the former throws the *almasty* into a state of terror which is well known to the villagers. One may thus suppose, as a general rule, that the *almasty* succumbs to a slow death (old age, illness), which gives it the time to withdraw into a last and secret refuge.

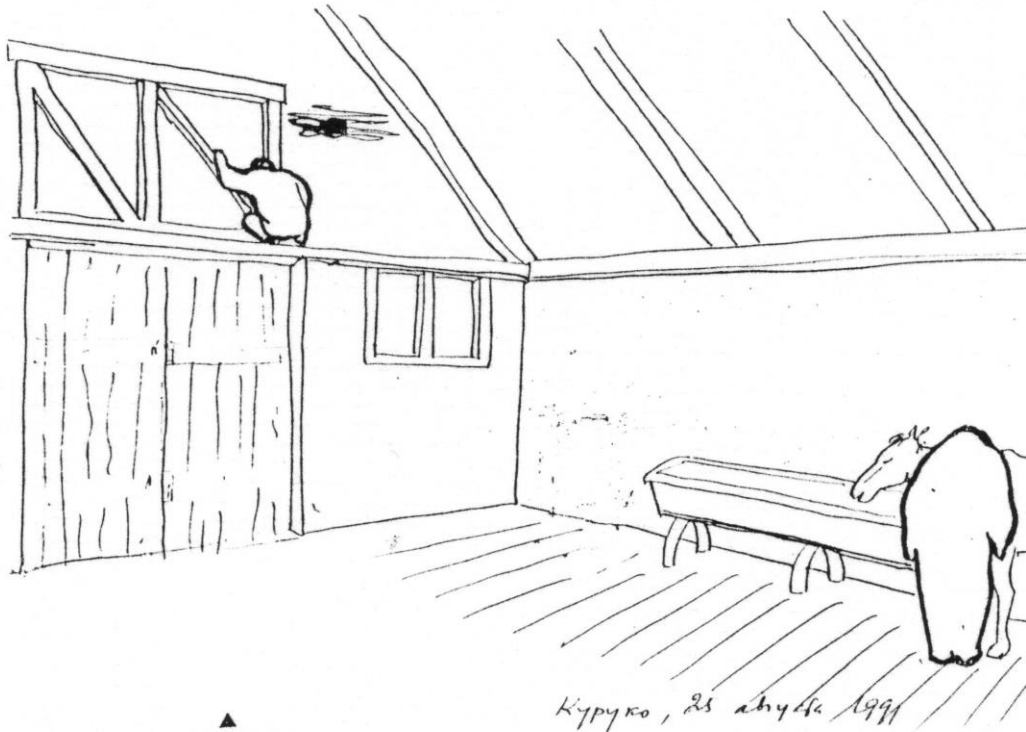
At the end of this overview, we note that, as it was for the morphology of the species, the information, laconic, precise and simple, this time regarding its biology, as furnished by the rough and humble inhabitants of the remote valleys of the Caucasus, constitutes a balanced picture which corresponds exactly to the biological requirements of the great primates – biotopes, sources of food, migrations, winter survival, longevity of the *almasty*, daily and annual cycles marking its existence, these facts complement one another and give mutual support to one another. What is more, they are upheld by morphological criteria and, in turn, they often explain them.

Well then? This *almasty* – is it a personage imagined through ignorance and superstition, or

is it a biological reality? May each reader evoke the logic of her own response.

Dr. Marie-Jeanne Koffmann was born in France in 1919, but returned to Russia in 1935, as a surgeon in the hospitals of Moscow, anatomist and mountaineer. She commanded a battalion of alpine troops during WW II. Koffmann was a member of the Soviet Union's official expedition to the Pamirs in 1958, as physician. She concentrated her hominological research in the North Caucasus, where she spent decades exploring, collecting ethnographic evidence, modern eyewitness accounts, as well as documenting footprint evidence. Her initial findings were announced to the Russian Geographical Society of the Academy of Sciences (of which she is a member), in 1966. Koffmann has served a term as president of the Cryptozoology Association of the USSR, and was honorary member of the International Society of Cryptozoology. She now resides in her native France.





LAST MINUTE...

Madame M.-J. Koffmann has just received from Moscow the report of G. Pantchenko, zoologist with wide experience in the field, scientific staff member of the University of Kharkov, concerning his observation of 25 August 1991, mentioned on page 56 [of the French original]. Informed that a mare, which had an injured leg and was being kept immobilised in a large abandoned sheepfold, was being visited at night by an *almasty*, Pantchenko arranged to be locked up with her. He had with him neither high-speed film nor batteries. Nevertheless, the light of the full moon penetrated through a large opening above the door, at a height of 3 m, and enabled him to see the mare, attached to a feed trough about 6 m away from him. At 2:30 in the morning, the *almasty* appeared silently at the side of the animal, whose snorting and stamping alerted the observer who, after a strenuous forced march during the day, had just dozed off. The *almasty* remained at the horse's side for 3 to 4 minutes, then disappeared in the darkness for several tens of seconds, and then reappeared in a single bound (Pantchenko heard the sound of it) to the gaping embrasure of the window, above the door. Clearly visible against the background of a very clear sky, it then slipped "rather clumsily" between the supports and jumped out. The sketch (above) of Pantchenko represents these two episodes.

DIETARY REGIME OF THE *ALMASTY*: SUMMARY OF OUR KNOWLEDGE

For the sake of accuracy, the list which follows is limited to those foods the consumption of which is attested to by the observers.

Foods of vegetable origin

Wild plants:

Fruits and berries (oak, walnut, mountain-ash, hazel-tree, cornel-tree, wild rose, raspberry, blackberry, black currant).

Fungus growths on the trunks of trees.

Green plants on the surface of stagnant water.

Anthriscus, cow-parsnip, bugloss, shepherd's-purse, lichens, sorrel, meadow-rue.

Cultivated plants:

All species without exception (vegetables, fruits, oil-seeds, grains, etc.).

There is no need to demonstrate that this list is certainly quite incomplete. One example will suffice: In the course of an experiment carried out by the Pavlov Institute of Saint Petersburg, young chimpanzees, born and raised in the laboratory, were released on an uninhabited island in the north of Russia. Let loose in a fundamentally foreign environment, within three weeks thereafter the chimpanzees had already been observed to consume 73 species of wild plants, 24 of which are eaten by other animals, 28 of which are used in folk or classic medicine, and 12 of which are poisonous to man!

What would the *almasty*, born and raised "at home," not gather? The response came to me, laconically, from a very old shepherd: "It eats all of the wild plants that man ate when he was wild himself."

Foods of animal origin

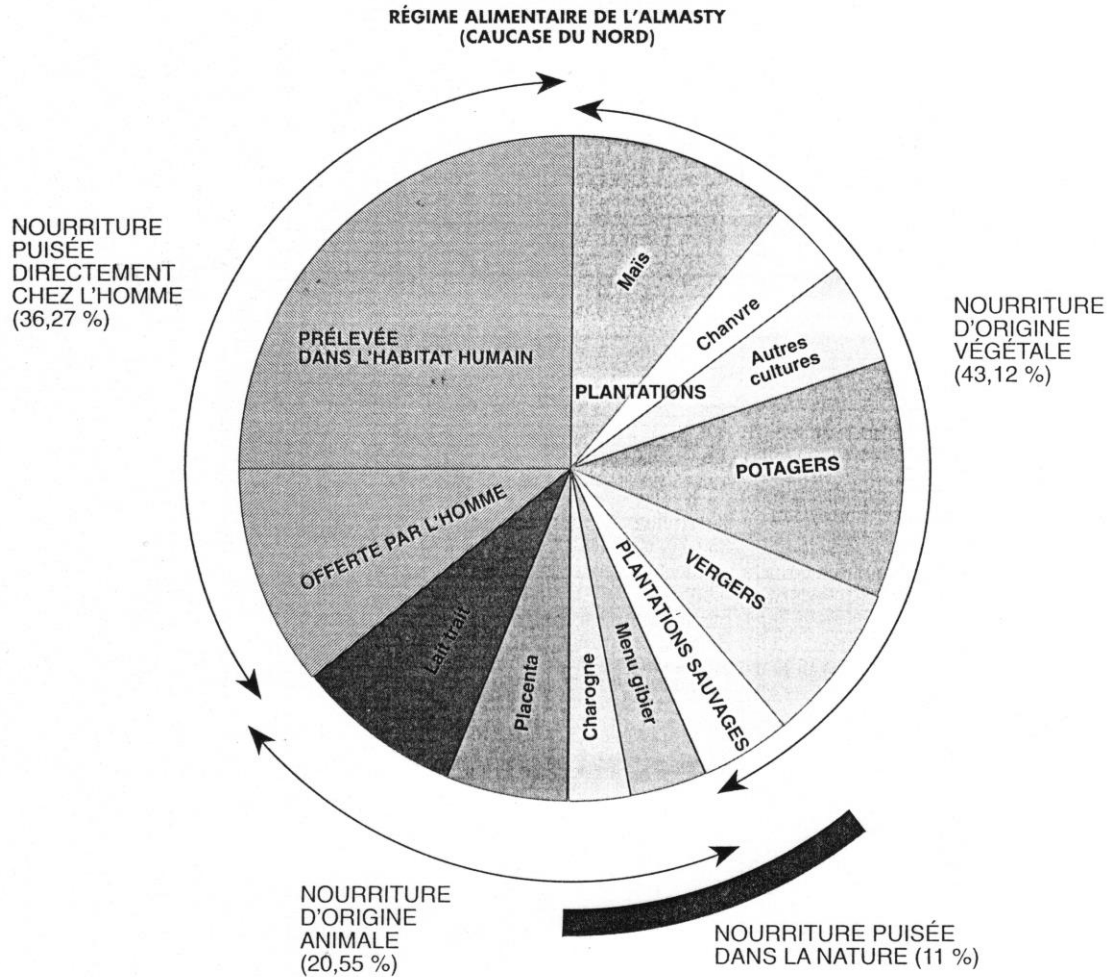
Mice, rats, spermophiles, squirrels, bats, newborn foals, placentae of domestic ungulates, carrion, horse-manure, frogs, frog eggs, lizards, tortoises.

Foods of mineral origin

Rock-salt, concretions at the edges of mineral-water springs (numerous in the Caucasus), clay (especially a type called "white").

Foods obtained directly from man

Milk, curdled milk, cheese, eggs, bread, flour, bran, meat, honey, prepared dishes (soups, porridges, etc.), preserves.

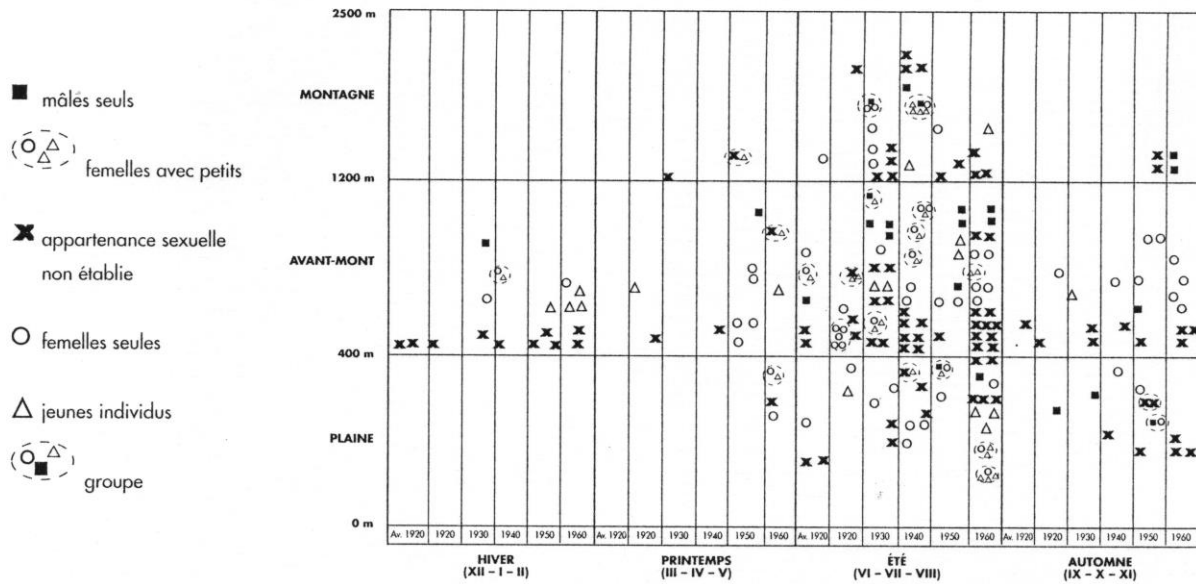


In granting a very important place to the portion of its food obtained by the almasty from man, this graph permits only an approximate estimation of the relative weighting of its various food sources. In fact, it will be understood that a rural population will have infinitely more occasions to encounter the almasty in its fields, vegetable gardens and sheepfolds than in the depths of wild nature, where the almasty certainly obtains much more- than would be inferred from this table. This leads to a certain distortion which makes it impossible to draw specific over-all conclusions. Nevertheless, the figures presented here correspond to real observations, and reflect with exactness the situation as it prevails in the immediate surroundings of man.

Captions outside of the pie chart, reading clockwise from the top:
 FOOD OF VEGETABLE ORIGIN (43.12%), FOOD OBTAINED IN NATURE (11%), FOOD OF ANIMAL ORIGIN (20.55%), FOOD OBTAINED DIRECTLY FROM MAN (36.27%)

Captions in the sections of the pie chart, reading clockwise from the top at right:
 Corn, Hemp, Other Cultures, Vegetable gardens, Orchards, Wild plants, Wild game, Carrion, Placentae, Milk (drawn from domestic animals), Offered by man, Collected in the habitat of humans

FRÉQUENCE DES RENCONTRES EN FONCTION DE L'ALTITUDE ET DE LA SAISON
 (Kabarda-Balkarie, Caucase central - 1920-1969)



FREQUENCY OF ENCOUNTERS AS A FUNCTION OF ALTITUDE AND SEASON
 (Kabarda-Balkaria, Central Caucasus - 1920-1969)

Legend at far left, reading from top to bottom:

- Single males
- Females with little ones
- Sexual appurtenance not established
- Single females
- Young individuals
- Groups

Legend on left ordinate, reading from top to bottom:

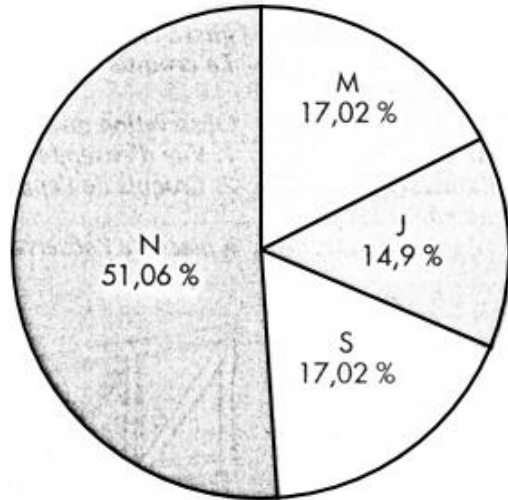
2500 m – Mountain – 1200 m – Piedmont – 400 m – Plain – 0 m

Legend below abscissa, reading from left to right:

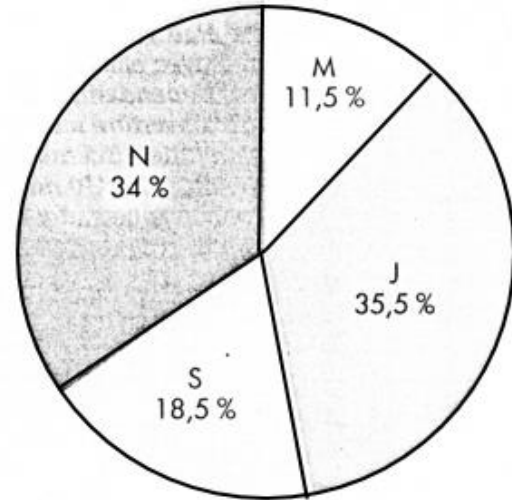
Winter (XII - I - II) – Spring (III - IV - V) – Summer (VI - VII - VIII) – Autumn (IX - X - XI)

CYCLE JOURNALIER D'ACTIVITÉ DE L'ALMASTY
(répartition des rencontres selon la période de la journée)

AZERBAIDJAN



CAUCASE CENTRAL



M - matin (5 à 11 heures)
 J - journée (11 à 18 heures)
 S - soir (18 à 22 heures)
 N - nuit (22 à 5 heures)

DAILY CYCLE OF ACTIVITY OF THE ALMASTY
(distribution of encounters according to the time of day)

Left subcaption: AZERBAIJAN

Right subcaption: CENTRAL CAUCASUS

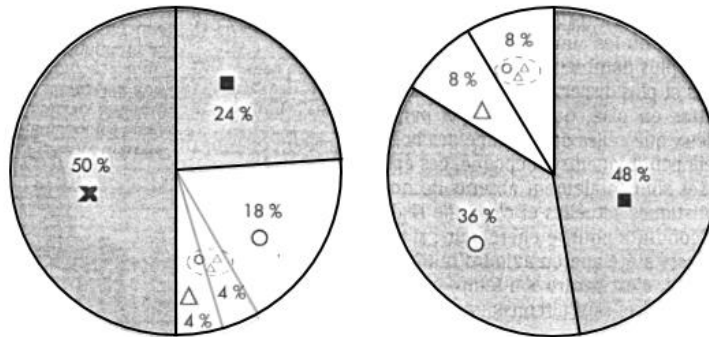
M - morning	(05:00 to 11:00 hours)
J - daytime	(11:00 to 18:00 hours)
S - evening	(18:00 to 22:00 hours)
N - night	(22:00 to 05:00 hours)

SEXE-RATIO ET GROUPES D'AGE

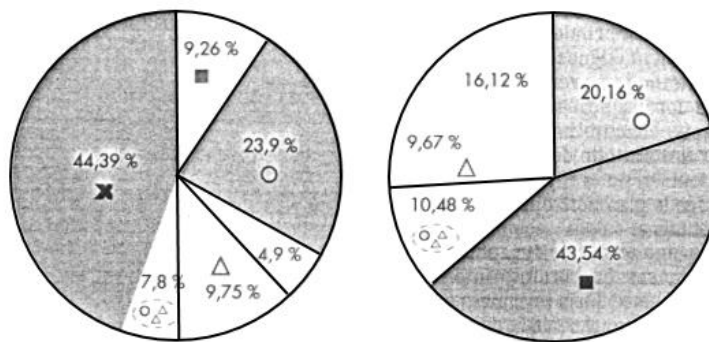
Sexe-ratio et groupes d'âge en % du total des individus observés, y compris ceux dont l'appartenance sexuelle n'a pu être établie.

Sexe-ratio et groupes d'âge en % du total des individus à appartenance sexuelle établie.

AZERBAIDJAN



- mâles seuls
- △ femelles avec petits
- ✕ appartenance sexuelle non établie
- femelles seules
- △ jeunes individus
- △■ groupe (2 individus et plus)



CAUCASE CENTRAL

SEX RATIO AND AGE GROUPS

Sex-ratio and age groups in % of the total of the individuals observed, including those for which the sexual appurtenance could not be established.

Sex-ratio and age groups in % of the total of the individuals for which the sexual appurtenance was established.

- Single males
- Females with little ones
- Sexual appurtenance not established
- Single females
- Young individuals
- Group (2 individuals and more)