

## **The Mountains of Languages and Peoples: Interweavings and Transfers in the Caucasus Area**

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The cultures of the Caucasus are too often seen as a juxtaposition of identity building, nations and languages. Georgians are not Azerbaijanis nor Ossetians. Armenians are not Chechens. A mosaic of languages and nations attached to their traditions, the Caucasus area can also be approached, in the very long term, in the context of cultures interweaving and creating new forms. Although the development of protohistory does not yet allow a definite answer, clearly there existed links between Mesopotamian and Caucasian cultures. A meeting organized at Khazar University in Baku, Azerbaijan, served as a starting point for the study of characteristic crossbreeds of the Caucasus area in the long term, from Antiquity to the end of the Soviet period. The Kingdom of Georgia took its administrative divisions from a Persian administration. If it is not wrong to say that Azerbaijanis, being of Turkic origin nation, share some elements of Persian culture; that Armenians and Georgians have long had a common history and that perhaps some Cossacks descended from the Cherkess; that the peoples of the North Caucasus were sometimes followers of pagan religions, sometimes Orthodox Christians, sometimes Muslims and that settlements of Jewish or Kurdish populations always played important roles, can these interweavings be the subject of a particular history, an aspect or feature through which to address the complexity of the region? If we observe each of the Caucasian nations or, more realistically, a range of these cultures, some of which, like the Ubykhs valued by Georges Dumézil, supposedly disappeared, we see that they all appear, it seems that for a long time they settled in isolation in the mountains – like the Chechens or Ingush, who established relations with their neighbors or with nations like the Byzantines, Persians, Greeks or Mongols, who had control of the

Caucasus for some periods. The Caucasus was on one of the routes through which the “Silk Road” passed and is therefore labeled by this route of cultural exchange. It was populated partly by people from Central Asia, such as the Seljuks, as well as people sent by Genghis Khan or Tamerlane. It was part of the mysterious Khazar Empire and recognized the suzerainty of the Mongol empire. Invaded by Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, by Turks Mongols, hedging long between Christianity and Islam and, partially, Buddhism, the region has combined many cultural layers to which it is heir. The homeland of Prometheus and Medea, Colchis – the depository of the golden fleece – was an area penetrated by Hellenism and fell under what may be referred to as Pontic Hellenism. While the study of the Caucasus in the context of diachronic transfer implies a relation to ancient mythology, it also involves keeping in mind the seam of Zoroastrianism. The regular repositories of ancient coins reveal the complexity of the commercial exchanges transacted across the Caucasus since antiquity.

Of course, any discussion of cultural transfers in the Caucasus requires first of all that a linguistic perspective be considered. The sixty languages spoken in these mountains by so many ethnic groups are formed notably with borrowed and ‘contaminant’ words that suggest comparisons sometimes with the languages of ancient Anatolia, sometimes with Mesopotamia, sometimes with the Persian world. It was with reference to Caucasian languages that Nicolas Marr, the Kutaisi-born official linguist of the Soviet Union, developed the idea of “Japhetic languages” as pre-Indo-European. This linguistic museum fascinated generations of scholars, especially Germans, and this fascination could itself become a subject of study. There is an ancient or, rather, prehistoric layer in studies of the Caucasus that forces one to leave one’s own subject area to observe the possible substrate value of another. Hattic, Urartian and Hurrian were languages conveying cultures that followed the spread through Anatolia as far as Mesopotamia, without excluding the possibility of a link with the Caucasus, even while historical depth must encourage great prudence here.

The Caucasus has been particularly important for the Russian literary imagination, from Lermontov to Pushkin, or from Griboyedov through Tolstoy to Mandelstam, Tynianov and to Yesenin. Its poets, such as the Georgian Rustaveli or the Persian-speaking Azerbaijani Nizami, are themselves at the confluence of several literatures and Nizami delivered literary models to most cultures of Eurasia. The course taken by Lev Nussimbaum, aka Muhammed Essad Bey and Kurban Said, shows the persistence of literary multiculturalism in Baku in the 20th century.

For all the incredible diversity of the forms it takes, the culture of the various peoples of the Caucasus has a single inner thread running through it. This culture is so

vernacular, so harmonious, that it is often represented by outsiders as being a single entity with minor local differences, or as a kind of diversity in unity. Indeed, the particular features of the lifestyles, original clothing, beautiful music, brave dances and customs of the Caucasian nations are woven into a common cultural tradition. Only this enabled Sergei Parajanov, the Soviet Armenian filmmaker from Tbilisi, to create an amazing love story from a tale by Lermontov, which in turn had used motifs from the Azerbaijani folk epic *Ashiq Qarib*, such that his masterpiece became a manifestation of all Caucasian culture.

A cross-cultural history of the Caucasus may be envisaged from a perspective of places of crossed memories: its cosmopolitan cities like Azerbaijani Baku, one of the Muslim cities where a strong Jewish minority lived, or the Georgian Tiflis/ Tbilisi, which, from Ancient times to the Islamic period, from the Mongols to the Persians, from the Safavids to the Ottomans, knew innumerable occupiers before becoming an administrative and intellectual capital of the Caucasus under the Russian Empire.

Of course, we are not proposing here a general history of the Caucasus; that would require, among other things, addressing the complex issue of recent conflicts in Abkhazia and Ossetia, as well as Karabakh and Chechnya, that have swept the region; it is rather a question of concentrating strictly on the phenomena of transfer – historical, literary, linguistic, archeological and aesthetic – as a shaping principle in this region over a long history prior to the disappearance of the USSR and conflicts which, in the absence of historical distance, are difficult to deal with. The limits of the territory designated by the term Caucasus are not at all clear. Caucasian Albania expanded far to the south, the Khazar Empire far to the north. The Tabriz region is an integral part of the Azerbaijani cultural area. The Treaty of San Stefano attached an important part of Eastern Anatolia to the Russian Empire and the Caucasus that was lost with the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, and we do not even speak here of the diasporas of Caucasian nations in Moscow, Jerusalem or Paris.

The challenge here is to apply a new approach to cultural areas of paradigmatic complexity, using the various tools available and the skills of recognized specialists from the relevant regions and from the history of the social sciences to linguistics, through the history of cities and archeology.

Talk of cultural transfers in the Caucasus necessitates a reckoning with the historical representation of the periphery. The crossroads of cultures in the Caucasus is not on the periphery of the Russian or Turkish worlds, nor of Europe or the Middle East. It is a center in its own right. How not to put the oil wells of Baku at the center of the history of Russian and European industrial development, in at the origins of the enrichment of the Nobel family? How not to put a region at the center of the political

dramas of the twentieth century that was a focal point of intense Bolshevik ferment and the birthplace of Stalin, a Georgian of Ossetian ancestry, and Beria, a Mingrelian from Abkhazia, of Ordzhonikidze, a Georgian Bolshevik and later member of CPSU Politburo, of Eduard Shevardnadze, the Soviet Union's last Minister of Foreign Affairs, of Nariman Narimanov, Bolshevik revolutionary, of Heydar Aliyev, the First Deputy Chairman of the USSR's Council of Ministers, both from Azerbaijan, and of Anastas Mikoyan, of Armenian origin and member of the Bolshevik Central Committee? Baku and Tbilisi were very early cosmopolitan metropolises whose importance was not ignored by Napoleon while devising a strategy to conquer India.

Since the mid-eighteenth century, the Caucasus has also fascinated European travelers and scholars seeking to understand the mysteries of its complex territory and the genesis of its languages and nationalities. Most of them were Germans like Friedrich Bodenstedt, strangely forgotten nowadays, whose translations/reinventions of the works of the Azerbaijani poet, 'Mirza Schaffy', met with immense success in Germany, and whose ethnographic works helped to establish a grasp of the region. Understanding the Caucasus is not just about publishing travel stories or literary descriptions in the manner of Alexander Dumas' *Journey to the Caucasus* or Arthur de Gobineau's *Shamakha Dancer*. From the mid-nineteenth century, images were fixed in photographs that served both to organize military positions in the vast Russian Empire, including Central Asia, as well as to recognize the specificities of local customs and lifestyles.

Clearly, this book on cultural transfers in the Caucasus does not claim by any means to be complete. Not all the nations making up the Caucasian puzzle will be mentioned, but there will be discussion of conflicts among the nations, as well as the peaceful relations which mark out their history. We wished only to recall the interest for almost all disciplines within the social sciences in a field of research whose characteristics can be traced from prehistory to the twentieth century, and to test the reliability of a guideline, that of cultural transfers, as an approach to it.