

Pre-Soviet and contemporary contexts of the dialogue of Caucasian cultures and identities

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The article is devoted to problematic issues in the description of the Caucasian ethnicities and common Caucasian identities in the context of Pre-Soviet and contemporary history of the dialogue of cultures. It is noted that a comprehensive philosophical interpretation of the concept of Caucasian identity can hardly claim to universality and a satisfactory shared perception of social scientists, representing different fields of science. With regard to the actual problems of knowledge of Caucasian identity, the author proposes to use the appropriate traditional Caucasian scale of values of the semantic and semiotic transcriptions of Caucasian reality.

Effect of 19th and 20th century history on Caucasian cultures

Far from being isolated from the world, Caucasian civilization represents a remarkable fusion of the Arabic, Turkic, Iranian, Jewish, Greek and Slavic cultures. A reflection of the mingling of indigenous and Eurasian traditions during many centuries can be observed in the cultural characteristics of the Caucasian peoples, particularly in their material culture.

The history of the Caucasus may be observed as a permanent dialogue of cultures and civilizations. The dialogue was – and continues to be – always lively, sometimes peaceful, from time to time dramatic, and fruitful. For example, during the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries, when Tiflis became the administrative, cultural and scientific capital of the Caucasus, and Baku the economic center.

The Caucasus from recorded history is an integral cultural space. The natural development of Caucasian civilization was supported by political and trade-economic ties within the Caucasus and with the outside world. The inability to change the continuity of ancient and strong religious, cultural and ethnic identities, the futility of interfering in the communication of peoples, all this was realized by a succession of Empires which periodically captured parts of the Caucasus or, as in 1864, the whole

Caucasus. Yet the borders were always open between the Caucasian regions, both at the time when they were part of the Empires and in the Soviet period. However after the collapse of the USSR, the once solely geographic significance of the Great Caucasus [Mountain] Range as the watershed between the North and South Caucasus increasingly became filled with geopolitical significance.

Post-Soviet destruction of Caucasian identities

In the post-Soviet period there has been increasing confusion and debate about national identities, such as Brexit and the spread of its ideas, and arguably interlinked increasing political support for populist leaders. In contrast, the following presents an inclusive approach to dealing with the multi-ethnic Caucasus, where nation-state-ism is often questionable while the need to preserve ethnic identity is a given.

The current ethnic situation in the Caucasus cannot be characterized as positive for several significant reasons: a) foreign policy consequences of old and recent historical events that led to administrative-territorial changes; b) inter-republican nation-state conflicts of interest related to the requirements of various ethnic groups in relation to their social status as well as linguistic and cultural needs. In the Caucasus, it was not acceptable both to point the finger at the nationality of a person, and to restrict their rights to follow their ethnic traditions.

Effect of Russian education after conquest of Caucasus from 1860 to 1920 contrasted with Soviet repression of local Muslim culture

The history of the Caucasus from the end of the 19th to early 20th centuries was shaped by the development of new types and forms of art and culture, through the activity of the new generations of Russian-educated national intelligentsia. However, the foundations of the national culture of that period were actually formed by the large number of local Caucasian written languages, unintelligible to virtually all Russians. The autochthonous languages included those which used Arabic and non-Classical Arabic consonant phonemes/graphemes, and so were part of Arab-Muslim transnational cultural traditions.

Radical changes in socio-cultural life were imposed during the Soviet period. The ‘supreme values of humanity’, a condition of human progress, were not derived from

the peoples with their traditional cultures and writings, but from the class struggle for a new life. In Dagestan this struggle in the cultural sphere featured the destruction of centuries-old manuscripts, as well as everything written using Arabic script. A complementary part of this policy was the elimination of traditional Arab-Muslim education and Muslim scholars (religious and language teachers in madrassahs). Arabic was declared to be a tool of the exploiters and a means of oppression and enslavement of the working masses. At the same time, it must be credited that from 1920 to 1960, unique conditions were created for the extension of social and cultural functions of local languages, for raising the prestige of these languages, and for raising the level of national artistic consciousness. This compared well with the fate of minority languages elsewhere in the world.

Post 1960s displacement of local languages

Since the 1960s the trend toward narrowing social functions of the national versus native languages became more and more obvious. The role of the national languages in the transmission of ethnic cultures, in the appreciation of national-linguistic forms of folklore and traditional arts was gradually reduced. At the same time there was a declining level in the teaching of native languages and literature. The displacement of the national language component from the education syllabus, which started in the 1970s, was the main cause of cultural stagnation and the gradual displacement of the native languages from functional life outside the family. In contrast to this reality, scientific and journalistic literature promoted the aspiration towards full development of national languages and cultures over the generations.

The Soviet language policy crumbled

The extinction of national differences also implied the process of transforming one of the most advanced international languages into a single world language (Hanazarov 1963: 225). As Rasul Gamzatov (1923–2003), the late national poet and leader of the Dagestan and Caucasus idea, said: “Of all the stars, they want to make one Moon”.

Since the history worthy of humanity began, in the conviction of orthodox Marxist-Leninists, with the establishment of Soviet power in 1917, any real or mythical obstacle on the “main road of human history” – on the way to communism, was to be overcome,

eradicated, destroyed. Alternative thoughts about the prospects for the development of peoples and cultures were regarded as anti-Soviet, as dissent, dissidence. Yet in Soviet society there were people who dared to talk about the inhuman essence of the idea of the merging of nations. For example, in 1985, the Georgian philosopher and poet Zurab Kakabadze (1926–1982) wrote:

The awakening of national consciousness observed throughout the world today indicates that the process of merging nations is contraindicated to human nature, because a person wants to be, first of all, but to be is to be something definite, i.e. to have your own individual person. If humanity has a future, then in the future it will certainly abandon this idea of merging and leveling and open up for determination by a new understanding of being, according to which the true and perfect being of humanity is not in indifferent uniformity, but in the unity, individually peculiar nations. (Kakabadze, 1985: 245)

The Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) did not declare assimilatory attitudes in national policy, but at the same time adhered to the idea of the progressivity of natural assimilation. The attitude to the growth of ethnic (national) self-consciousness was twofold. On the one hand, this saw the achievement of the national policy of the CPSU, which is concerned with the development of the material and spiritual culture of nations and nationalities, and on the other, the phenomenon containing the danger of nationalism.

Modern theory on reduction of ethnicity vs. globalization

The reduction of the basic characteristics of an ethnos (for example, language, customs, traditional etiquette) does not necessarily lead to a loss of ethnicity, a decline in popular morality, etc. As noted by researchers (Tishkov, 2001; Guboglo, 2003; Bgazhnokov, 2003) ethnic consciousness consists of compensatory functions, which are expressed in the actualization and mobilization of ethnicity. This is for the purposes of social self-affirmation, achievement of success in business, education, science, artistic creation, public service, sports.

Today, *inter alia* cultural identity with one's people, knowledge of one's mother tongue or adherence to traditional ethics, has in the eyes of a considerable number of

Caucasians far less value than the demonstration of material well-being, ostentatious piety or loud mantras of concern about the “fate of the people”.

External markers and attributes of ethnicity more easily acquire a semiotic meaning, because they are easier to “read”, and more quickly perceived and mastered.

Sometimes deviations from popular traditions are presented by socially advanced or materially prosperous sections of the population as a kind of “standard of behavior” to which (consciously or unknowingly) the rest of the inhabitants are pressured to try to “pull themselves up”.

In political life, ethnicity is often clothed in the form of the “will of the people”, although the spokesmen for this will usually come from socially and institutionally organized groups with power and wealth, in a position to use the intellectual, creative resource of the personnel serving them. In public life, ethnicity can be actualized in both creative and destructive ways.

Complications of scientific study

The perception and understanding of a person’s own social essence, as well as knowledge of personal and social identity, is impossible without analysis. Personal incentives and motives for social and interethnic cooperation or confrontation need to take into account the psychological, emotional, confessional context of self-consciousness. Theoretical problems about language are difficult and debatable, for example the social nature of language, the relationship of language and culture, language and consciousness, and language and ethnicity.

Feelings of ethnic identity are experienced and expressed by different people differently (depending on their social status, age, gender, upbringing, level of education and general culture, physical health, family well-being, material well-being, etc.). In addition, the ways of expressing ethnic identity are determined and regulated in accordance with the ideological, legal, cultural, humanitarian and political priorities of the state.

The existence of ethnic specificity in the configuration of objective and subjective signs and symbols of identity, in their content, degree of importance, and emotional perception is explained by the fact that historical, natural-geographical, socio-economic,

political-legal, demographic, etc. conditions of existence for different peoples were formed differently.

Confusion of superposing international concepts on mismatched local ethnic issues

Another significant aspect of ethnicity is that in the modern world, people and nations find answers to questions about ethnic life, consciousness, self-consciousness not only in the traditions of a purely ethnic or religious worldview, but also in international philosophical concepts.

In the conditions of modern life and the known monotony of consumer culture, significant changes occur in the way of life of peoples unavoidably affected by globalization. And no matter how much we find similarities with the types, and/or archetypes of distant ancestors in our contemporaries, it is only an apparent similarity, because every new piece of research is not able to cover all the spectra and horizons of the rapidly changing ethnic world-view. We are overwhelmed by the volume of social media and the Internet and our inability to master fast-developing techniques of “deep learning” that would enable a new sort of understanding.

Descriptions of ethnic archetypes outside the sociological context seem artificial only because each person, in addition to ethnicity, has gender, age, education, social and family status, healthy and, finally, bad inclinations. In addition, there are no peoples whose standards of conduct would be “prescribed” without regard to the age, gender and social characteristics of their fellow tribesmen, or which would not naturally in the Caucasus distinguish male and female roles in home and social life.

It should be emphasized that the modern socio-cultural image of the Caucasian peoples cannot be represented in purely ethnic or cultural components, to present Caucasians as completely satisfied with what they can “offer” to only national cultures or to only national sources of information. Indeed, in the era of globalization and clearly emerging trends in the formation of world information and culture, the cultural needs of contemporaries, including those belonging to the largest nations, are not satisfied with what they can “offer” to their ethno-national cultures and ethno-national sources of information. And no matter how keenly people have felt the powerful onslaught of globalization on their national identity, the processes of modernization of lifestyle,

leveling and subsequent transformation of ethnic specificity are universal and threatening to cultural diversity in the modern world.

The academic challenge of arguing for ethnic recognition in a populist multi-ethnic Caucasus

But this does not preclude the academic community from thinking about the consequences of this process. The question is why the loss of cultural diversity and cultural identity of the Caucasus, as can be observed from the media, is accompanied by political turbulence and inter-ethnic conflicts.

Over the past centuries, mankind has accumulated vast experience in overcoming social and racial inequalities, hostility and prejudice on interfaith and inter-ethnic grounds, but leaders rarely learn the lessons of history. They have still failed to drastically overcome the ideas of the superiority of some nations over others; to eradicate medieval stereotypes about the anthropological ugliness and cultural inferiority of the “lower” races. They have still failed to suppress ideas about the moral inferiority and aggressiveness of individual nations, about the amorality of history and religions, the primitiveness of the languages and customs of “alien peoples – the other”.

Challenge of social media, the web and ethnic stereotyping

Sources of the creation and elaboration of ethnic stereotypes can be very different: The media, social media, fiction, movies, direct communication, rumors, anecdotes, pseudo-scientific writings and a mixture of the above are some of the sources or combinations of sources. Stereotypes serve as a psychological mechanism for the regulation of human behavior. The atmosphere of inter-ethnic relations also depends on the content of stereotypes. Depending on the stereotypes that are common in a particular environment, attitudes towards persons who are “not their own” or “the other”, their appearance and nationality can be benevolent or unfriendly, affable or alienated.

But ethnic prejudices and stereotypes are formed not only on the basis of rumors or propaganda of distorted images of peoples. An individual objectifies themselves and their life purpose in joint activities and communicating with other people. And in this sense, the reputation of a particular nationality and its prestige in the eyes of other nations does not consist of its non-existence, but is created by people belonging to it.

The latest electronic technology allows the media to keep the population in a state of “tense awareness” of what is happening in the country and its provinces, including in the sphere of inter-ethnic relations.

Caucasians, for example, in recent years have a much more complete picture not only of how they themselves relate to individuals of certain nationalities, but also about how they are treated in various cities and regions of the Russian Federation.

Interpretations of ethnic identity, ethnicity and the identity of specific nations, often subjectively perceive and evaluate the orientations, preferences or prejudices of researchers, usually from their national and religious affiliation. In this regard, they cannot plausibly claim objectivity and sociological accuracy of the description of the “national spirit”.

Integrating cultures of largest nations

It is known that the Caucasus has historically been divided into a number of states and administrative-territorial units. Here coexist, periodically reconciling and conflicting, many formal and informal ethno-political, ethno-confessional parties and groups with their interests and contradictions. This multidimensional pattern of ethno-political colors and preferences was created over centuries. Since ancient times, the Caucasus has fitted into the general trends of intercultural communication at regional and global levels. The geopolitical and economic resources of the Caucasus were a bone of contention between Caucasians themselves and between major world powers, while in the cultural, communicative, informational relations of the Caucasus, due to the geographic location between Europe and Asia, it is one of the most open parts of the world.

In the 21st century, the most powerful onslaught of globalization is felt in all corners of the world. Even the large nations, not to mention small nations and ethnic minorities, are unable to resist the universal and almost, for the modern world, fatal ethno-cultural and ethno-linguistic consequences of this process, to prevent the assimilation of languages and the leveling of ethno-cultural foundations of identity.

What is called “transmission of global flows of cultural information” in modern anthropology/ethnology is, for the multilingual Caucasus almost from the Middle Ages, a natural condition. The specifics of ethno-cultural dynamics are expressed in the

permanent need for inter-linguistic and intercultural communications, in susceptibility to innovations and international cultural influences at the regional and global levels. In the modern era of globalization, the ever-increasing information and cultural needs of Caucasians cannot be satisfied by the relatively low-power local mass media and ethno-cultural resources. In addition, the presence of a certain (often not fully demanded) heritage of national culture and the figures who personify this cultural tradition are more an object of national pride than an objective basis of ethno-cultural identity.

Let us try to briefly illustrate the above general conclusions with the example of Dagestan:

The history of multilingual Dagestan is marked by the constant need to use the languages of interethnic communication, to master the achievements of Eastern and European civilizations. There is every reason to argue that the participation of Dagestan in the development of the Arab-Muslim cultural tradition from the first centuries of the adoption of Islam (8th century AD) was significant.

Generations of Dagestani sheikhs and Islamic scholars left a heritage consisting of many hundreds of manuscripts dated from the 12th century to the 1920s. The first written samples in Arabic script adapted to local languages appeared in Dagestan in the 16th century. Since the 18th century, we can ascertain that literature in a number of Dagestan languages (Avar, Lak, Kumyk, etc.) is a fait accompli.

In 19th century Dagestani historian Hasan Alkadari (1834-1910) wrote in the Turkic, Arabic and Persian languages. The Kumyk enlightener Abusufyan Akayev (1872–1931) wrote in his native Kumyk and in Arabic, and knew Avar and Russian. Sheikh Hassan Khilmi-Afandi (1852–1937), Muslim scholar, theologian, spiritual leader of Muslims of Dagestan, Sufi sheikh of Nakshbandi and Shazali tariqas wrote prose and poetic works on Sufism in the Arabic and Avar languages. Sayfulla-kadi Khalid Bashlarov (1853 or 1856–1919), Sufi sheikh and doctor knew 17 languages including Lak (native), Avar, Archi, Dargin, Kumyk, Tatar, Azerbaijani, Turkish, Persian, Russian, German and others. Gadzhimurad Amirov (1854–1917), known in Turkey as Mizanji Murad Bey, graduate of Stavropol gymnasium, wrote his first works in Russian. After emigrating to Turkey in 1873 he wrote in Turkish a six-volume world history and a book on the history of Turkey. He

was also the editor of the Young Turk newspaper *Mizan* (since 1896), and translated from Russian into Turkish Alexander Griboedov's *Woe from Wit*.

Haidar Bammat (1889–1965) was a graduate of Stavropol Gymnasium and the Faculty of Law of St. Petersburg University, and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Union of Highlanders of the North Caucasus and Dagestan (in 1918–1919). From 1921 onwards he lived in France and Switzerland. In 1934–1939 he was the head of the *Kavkaz* organization and the editor of its printed organ, the *Kavkaz* magazine, published in Russian, French, English, German, Turkish, Georgian, and Armenian. Noteworthy are the themes and languages in which the works of Haidar Bammat are published: *Le Caucase et la revolution Russe* (Paris, 1929), *Visages de l'islam* (Lausanne, 1946) *Islamiyetik Manevi ve Kultureel Degerleri* [Islamic, Spiritual and Cultural Values]. (Istanbul 1963), *Den Beitrag des islams zum kultrurgut der menscheit* (Geneva, 1962).

The famous Avar artist Khalil-bek Musayasul (1897–1949) lived a significant part of his life in Germany (1921–1948). In 1926 he graduated from the Academy of Arts in Munich. In 1936, his partially autobiographical book, *Das Land der Letzten Ritter* (Country of the Last Knights), was published in German (Munich, 1936).

Jalal Korkmasov (1877–1937) entered the natural faculty of Moscow University in 1898 and after the first year of study continued his education at Sorbonne University, as well as at the Higher School of Sociology and Anthropology in Paris. A diplomat and publicist, he was one of the founders and long-term leader of the Republic of Dagestan. In 1909–1910 he published at his own expense the first Russian-language newspaper in the Ottoman Empire *Stambul'skiye Novosti* (Istanbul News) with a circulation of 1000 copies.

From the end of the 19th century to the present, there has been a process of formation and development of Dagestan Russian-language fiction and journalism, represented by dozens of works of many Dagestanis by origin, starting from Russian lieutenant general Maksud Alikhanov-Avarsky (1846–1907), Said Gabiev (1882–1963), Efendi Kapiev (1909–1944), Magomed Khurshilov (1905–1958), ending with Shapi Kaziev (born 1956) and Alisa Ganieva (born 1985).

It seems that these examples, typical for other regions of the Caucasus, do not need special comments regarding the dialogue of cultures.

Caucasian self-identity: a summary

To paraphrase the words of Rasul Gamzatov, one can say that every Caucasian has his own Caucasus. The description of Caucasian identity in the form of some generalized, identical image of Caucasian peoples, Caucasians in general, is not only an extra-complicated task, but also a useless one. More important is the understanding that the very concept of “Caucasian identity” contains the idea of unity, coexistence, and community.

Caucasian identity has such a socio-psychological hypostasis (i.e. the underlying state or underlying substance and is the fundamental reality that supports all else). It manifests itself in real social practices, and is expressed in the worthy deeds and actions of decent people who feel like Caucasians.

Caucasian identity is not a neologism of modern times, but an historical reality, testified by Leontij Mroveli (Georgian historian of the 11th century, bishop, and one of the compilers of *Kartlis Tskhovreba* (“Life of Georgia”), ancient Georgian chronicles compiled into a single book between the 12th and 14th centuries) in his wonderful story about the forefather of the Caucasian peoples of Targamos, the grandson of Yafet, and great grandson of Noah (Mroveli, 2008: 14).

The fact that Caucasians are one people with many languages, but with a similar national character, clothing, folklore, dances, and traditions, has been stated by many. Prof. Vasilij I. Abaev (1900–2001), Soviet and Russian scholar, a philologist, linguist, and cultural historian of the Caucasus, wrote: “With all the impenetrable multilingualism, in the Caucasus, there was a single essentially cultural world.” (Abaev, 1949: 89).

Caucasians are interesting to themselves and the world as creators and subjects of history, and not just because they have ethnic fragmentation, ethnographic quirks and the ability to establish the prominent role of their fellow tribesmen in the world-historical process.

The traditional identity of the cultures of the peoples of the Caucasus is based on the similarity of moral orientations, domestic and gender stereotypes, on human dignity.

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