

Traditional non-verbal communication forms among the North Caucasian peoples: gestural language and etiquette

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The studies carried out to date in the field of the evolution of human communication systems have provided sufficient ground for scholars to prove that historically the language of gestures preceded verbal language (Baiburin & Toporkov, 1990: 23). Observations on the means of communication in high anthropoids have made it possible to identify a number of gestures and poses, such as embracing, clinging, bowing, nodding (in inviting to joint walking), threatening poses, etc.

In cultures with traditional systems of communication, gestural communication has played a greater role than it does in the life of modern human-beings. In many cultural traditions a perfect system of gestures has existed (for example, an order of monks having taken a vow of silence, and Dervishes) that is not inferior to modern sign languages. Generally, traditional culture is characterized by the surplus of visual means of communication. This circumstance is particularly characteristic for rituals. Ritual action is based on the language of sign motion through which the most important information for the entire community is conveyed.

Discussions on systems of gestures and rituals as well as examples given in the remaining part of this paper are based on *Myths and Rituals of the Peoples of the Caucasus* (in Georgian) by Antelava (2017). A general observation is that the picture of the human world is created by opposing dichotomies like “life–death”, “happiness–unhappiness”, “masculine–feminine” and so forth. Among them binary oppositions have fundamental importance (“upper–lower”, “inside–outside”, “right–left”), on which a multi-layered system of human orientation (not only spatial) is based. One of the features of spatial opposition is that it can signal valuable information. This is especially characteristic for the opposition “right–left”.

First, we turn to communicative behaviors where movements of the hands play a special role. Such signal movements are observed even in modern communication and are of ancient

origin. Historically their meaning is closely linked to ritual-mythological symbols. Speaking about symbolic hand gestures, it should be taken into account the fact that in the past (partially, today) the right and left hands were not considered to be equal. They often convey opposite information. Accordingly, gestures performed with the right and left hands are different.

The “right–left” opposition

Due to the character of the “right–left” opposition, where the *right* is associated with the truth, righteous and *left* with the lie, wrong, the inequality of the right and left hand is directly defined: rightness is attributed to the right and negativeness to the left. The biological basis of the right hand is due to the functional asymmetry of the human brain. The cultural rules are based on the right-hand function and, consequently, the “right–left” opposition determines the many peculiarities of ritual and etiquette. In many peoples, including the North Caucasians, the movements performed with the right and left hands are strictly defined. According to the views of the Caucasian Kalmuks and Talyshs, the right hand is the good, only with this hand can one give and receive a gift, milk cattle, and so forth. Among the Kalmuks, Karachais, Balkars and Nogais the function of the left hand was determined from the cradle: they didn’t wrap the right hand of the infant for them to be able to fend off evil spirits.

Muslims, mainly peoples of Dagestan (Kumyks, Akhvaks, Chamals, Botlikhs, Khinalugs, Laks, etc.), considered the right hand “clean” in ritual terms and greeting, serving dishes, touching of the “clean” parts of the body were performed with a right hand and not with an “unclean” left hand. Each movement (dressing, eating, first ploughing, etc.) was performed with the right hand as well as the movement starting and stepping over the threshold – with the right leg.

Among many peoples right and left is not only a mythological concept, but also a social one: the right side symbolizes high social and age status and the left one a low one. For example, when two Adyghe men talk walking side by side, the junior man walks to the left of the senior. The picture changes when the number of persons is more: the most junior man takes the rightmost position, half a step behind the senior to hear the senior’s instructions or

tasks. The rest of the group (from senior to junior) is lined up to the left of the oldest man. Such order (of infantry or horsemen) can be a rudiment of military structure, where a junior on the left side plays the role of an “orderly”. He may be sent to conduct different tasks, and then the right side, as the most honorable one, is occupied by a senior person. At present, this standard is generalized: it determines the order of the seat position of three elderly men at the table and in the back seat of the car. If one woman is among two or more men, the place to the right of her is occupied by a junior (“orderly”) and the left of her the most senior person.

In motion or when travelling, a similar order is kept among other peoples of the Caucasus. For example, among the Vainakhs (Chechens and Ingushs), when two men (infantry or horsemen) travel, the senior person occupies the right side and the more junior one – the left one. When three men are moving together, the following order is observed: the oldest person is in the middle, the second oldest person is to the right of him and the youngest person will be to the left of the most senior person.

This kind of order is conditioned by respect and care for elders. While moving the senior person occupied a relatively convenient place for movement and possible defense, in order to keep the right hand free for maneuvering, unlike the junior person, whose task was to protect the senior from the left side. In case of three or more persons walking or moving together, the most senior person was protected from both sides. That the man was walking ahead of the woman had a protective function, and here the binary opposition (“front–back”) is in operation.

In ritual situations (especially in funeral traditions), the right and left could exchange places, which was caused by the following circumstances: according to archaeological and ethnographic data many peoples perceived the next world (the world of the dead) as the world “turned upside down”. Apparently, the perceptions of the world of the dead as the “world upside down” were universal: in the world of the living the right corresponds to the left in the next world. This is related to the different nature of funeral rules and traditions (direct contact with the next world) of peoples over the world. North Caucasian corresponding material illustrates the above-said: among Circassians, Ossetians, Karachians, Balkarians and Kumyks a so-called “messenger of grief” informed relatives and friends about the death of a close person. Instead of the usual rule, he sat on horseback from the left side and dismounted

from the left one, he held a whip in his left hand and traveled unarmed, which in other cases was unimaginable. Having seen this, each person who meets a messenger understood that the horseman was a grief messenger. In order to delicately inform anyone about the death of a close person, when entering the house, the Kabardian or Balkarian messenger closed the door with the back of his hand (like a sign of refusing, when a young girl who didn't like a boy who asked her hand in marriage, similarly closed the door). Generally, according to Adyghean etiquette norm, an unusual position of the hand, such as the left hand rising in the funerals, was a sign of grief.

If the human's right hand function has biological basis, there is no prerequisite for the correlation of the right and left hands with masculine and feminine essence. Nevertheless, in many cultural traditions, a woman is associated with the left hand (in general, the left side) and a man with a right one. The association of masculine with the right side, life, day and even numbers cannot be explained by the fact that these values are objectively closer to men than to women, but by the fact that these values are classified as belonging to the same group. Another thing is that such associations turned from conditional signs into normative orientation, with influence on people's behavior and psyche.

In daily life, linking the left side with female essence is quite sustainable. This is shown in topographical symbols of the dwelling, various fortune-telling signs of different peoples, including Caucasians: "Right-eyebrow itching – beg a man, left – a woman!", "Left-eye movement – a bad sign, right-eye movement – good news" (opposition "good–bad"). To this list, the motivation of the creation of Eve from Adam's left rib could also be attributed.

Apparently, for some later forms of etiquette, it became a significant fact that the right side (the man's side) was more honorable than the left (the woman's side). Therefore, in order to honor a woman, she was sometimes given the right side. This rule was established among European peoples in the Renaissance epoch to increase the status of the woman. Among the Eastern Circassians (Kabardians), unlike Western Circassians, the place of a woman was (and traditionally still is) to the left of a man. If a man's companion was his wife, she followed her husband on the left side, which demonstrates the marital relationship. Among the rest of the North Caucasian peoples, a wife walked behind her husband (opposition "front–back").

The traditions of hand-shaking and greeting gestures

Among the North Caucasians the tradition of hand-shaking in greetings is linked to Arab influence and is considered to have appeared in the period of the spread of Islam in the region. However, the standpoint based on Chechen and other material also seems to be substantial. According to this material, from ancient times hand-shaking expressed the reconciliation of hostile parties. The traditional practice of reconciliation of blood-feuds ended with the same gesture, and finally peace was established. There is a special verbal formula – “meeting with hand-shaking”, which denotes the ending of a blood-feud. Thus, the hand-shaking rule was not observed among people who had no possibility of enmity or blood-feud. For example, they did not shake hands with a woman, because she was never hostile towards anybody and therefore no reconciliation was called for. This gesture was not used with teenagers, who had not reached the age of carrying arms. The hand-shaking rule was not used when greeting the closest relatives (cousins, brothers, etc.), with whom any enmity was excluded, and thus no reconciliation was necessary. Among Ingushs hand-shaking was not a sign of greeting but of peace-making between the parties. This ritual still functions today and is called “bringing to hands”.

In the North Caucasus shaking hands in greetings between men, between women and between men and women was the traditional way. According to a widespread tradition among the Karachais, Balkars, Kumyks and Kalmuks, a man could greet a woman by shaking her hand without touching the palm of her hand.

Forms of non-verbal greetings are part of non-verbal communication. Hand-shaking and putting the arm on someone’s shoulder are important here. J. Bell who visited Circassia in the 1830s describes this as an essential component of bidding farewell: “Upon the end of the feast, the gatherers got ready to go home... I could see and take pleasure in watching that grace when the women were taking leave of each other: first they put their right arms around each other and then separated from each other by shaking the same hand...” (Translated from Russian), (Bell, 2007: 191–192).

The North Caucasian non-verbal greeting is performed by putting the right arm around the other person’s shoulder, which precedes the hand-shaking. It is also a necessary component in greeting among women. Frequently, putting the arm around the other person’s

shoulder is also used in greetings when both women who know each other closely and unknown women meet. The same is true for men. The technique used in this is of special interest. Kabardian women perform this movement according to the following pattern: left, right, and then left again. This greeting between a man and a woman is performed once, to the right, modestly, and at the same time, shaking hands. The movement of the arm is a synchronous movement: the man touches the woman's right shoulder lightly with his left hand and shakes her hand with the right one.

Among the Western Adygheans the hand-shaking ritual is characterized by several features. According to the greeting tradition among Bzhedug and Shapsug women, a junior woman bends forward as if she wants to kiss the right hand of a senior woman. Kiss-imitation can be observed in greetings between men and women. In some cases it is a real kissing. For instance, when a Shapsug woman greets a male guest she first puts her hand on his right shoulder and kisses him on the cheek, then she shakes his hand, and finally, bends forward and kisses him on the right hand. This greeting form reminds us of the information given by D'Ascoli (1974: 127) about Circassian girls who “do not hide from the guest, but they kiss a guest on the hand and take care of the cloth cleanliness.” It should be said that Apkhazian women not only put an arm round, but also kiss the guest's shoulder (guest's chest). Among Shapsugs, Bzhedugs, Ubykhs and Apkhazians the kissing is one of the signs of expressing hospitality. A meeting with a Bzhedug nobleman is described as: “One of them kissed his hand, and the other – the tail of the Caucasian coat” (Translated from Russian), (Khajimuqov, 1880: 98). This is also supported in a ceremonial meeting with the Ubykh nobleman Izmail-Beye.

In the above cases, kissing is symbolic, non-sexual and has a ritual character. By establishing bilateral sympathy between people, the greeting kiss is similar to a kiss of worshiping, when one of the partners is distinguished by sacral status (for example, a guest), or by a high degree of prestige. Even among peoples who did not have a kissing ritual, it was an essential element in the relationship of sworn brothers (e.g. among the Balkars, Karachians, Chechens, Nogais, Dagestanian peoples).

The use of both hands in situations where one hand is sufficient (for example, to pass something to another person) gives an action additional meaning. Among some peoples, a

guest is served with two hands. Among the Caucasians, whatever a housewife serves a guest – be it a bowl of vodka, tea, koumys or any other dish, she does it with two hands or the right hand. There is a special gesture used among the Kalmuks as a new-year ritual greeting gesture. It is used by all who meet each other for the first time in the new year: a junior person turns the palm of his hands to the senior person (or a woman to a man, if they are of same age) on which the senior person puts the palms of his/her hands on the junior person's hands. This gesture expresses respect and promising to help if need be. It is obvious that the gestures of junior and senior persons are not equal. Firstly, when a junior person turns the palm of his hands to the senior person, this is a request gesture. The addressee of this gesture may be not only the older person but a deity, as well. The gesture of the senior person is a gesture of kindness.

In greetings the Circassians use both hands or hand-raising as a sign of a special attitude. Among the Caucasians, even a utilitarian movement such as hand washing, was and still is symbolic. Among Muslims it is necessary to wash the hands in two cases: during prayer and sacrifice, which is determined by strictly defined rules and not only by hygienic requirements but also religious obligation. Hand washing was strictly observed in the case of touching a dead man or a murderer, because both were considered to be unclean, not in terms of hygiene, but in relation to evil and sin.

The hand-clapping gesture requires special mention. This gesture was perceived differently in the ethnoculture of many peoples. It was (and still is) common that it expresses emotional mood. In the European tradition, as well as in the North Caucasian ethnoculture, hand-clapping was a gesture of like, encouragement, joy (especially among children). Theatrical or sporting applause should be considered to be a continuation of this line.

Among many Eastern peoples, as well as among the Caucasians, applause is an outward expression of grief and despair. Among the Azerbaijanis, hand-clapping and then the crossing of the hands in front of the interlocutor expressed disappointment, despair, while among the Apkhazians and the peoples of North-Western Caucasus, strong hand-clapping was a sign of great surprise.

Raising hands is a gesture that expresses many feelings in contemporary culture: disappointment, curse, hopelessness, victory, and others. Its prototype is a gesture of

adoration (prayer), when both hands are raised towards the god or object of worship. This is one of the oldest gestures widely represented in Christian iconography, and is therefore perceived as specifically Christian, although this gesture was well-known among non-Christian peoples of Asia, Africa and America, not only in the Palaeo-Caucasian ethnolinguistic groups, but also among the Turkic, Mongol and Iranian Caucasians that appeared later in the region.

There is reason to assume that some greeting gestures originate from the adoration gesture, when a person raises one or both hands. Apparently, a middle form between adoration and modern greeting was the Kabardian custom as described here: “If a nobleman or peasant meets a noble woman, he instantly, if he is on horseback, dismounts from the horse, raises his hands (this is a gesture of greeting) and stands until she is far away from him” (my translation from Russian) (Orbeliani, 1974: 232).

Concluding remarks

Despite the differences, the analyzed gestures have one feature in common: they display ritual origins. A gesture such as one expressing adoration, serving a dish/drink with two hands observed in Caucasian ethnoculture, is borrowed from the ritual practice of the relation with God. In them it is still possible to observe the relationship of low rank with high rank. At the same time, the hand-shaking in rituals and etiquette underlines equality in a partnership. Being developed as signs of daily relationships, the gestures change their functions, gain new motivations, although the memory of their previous existence is still preserved.

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