



STUDYING SOCIOCULTURAL DYNAMICS OF THE CAUCASUS REGION

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Abstract

Situated between Europe and Asia, the Caucasus is widely recognized for its sociocultural diverse and abundant terrain. This abstract provides a thorough examination of the socio-cultural dimension of the Caucasus, with an emphasis on its distinctive amalgamation of cultures, languages, traditions, and ethnicities. This analysis explores the ethnic mosaic, which comprises various groups including Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Georgians, Chechens, and others, all of which have made unique contributions to the linguistic, religious, and cultural heritage. Moreover, this study delves into the linguistic diversity that encompasses the Indo-European, Turkic, and Caucasian language families. It also examines the function of Russian as a lingua franca and the religious pluralism of Orthodox Christianity and Islam, as well as the intermittent tensions and harmonious coexistence of these faiths. Furthermore, the research examines conventional practices, festive occasions, gender expectations, and familial arrangements, clarifying the changing dynamics that have emerged in response to modernization and globalization. Furthermore, this analysis underscores the challenges posed by political complexities, historical conflicts, and geopolitical tensions in shaping the sociocultural landscape. By conducting a comprehensive examination of the Caucasus region, this abstract seeks to enhance comprehension of its intricate sociocultural structure and historical and modern dynamics that underscore its importance as a crossroads of heritage, diversity, and intricacy.

Keywords: *Caucasian region, sociocultural facet, ethnic diversity, religious pluralism, language plurality, traditional customs .*

Introduction

The word "Caucasus" comes from the old Greek word Kaukasos (Καύκαπος). The Caucasus is not clearly defined¹. Although the West Caucasus exists as a distinct geographic region within the North Caucasus, the Caucasus is geographically divided into the North Caucasus and the South Caucasus². The northernmost portions of the Greater Caucasus Mountain range are jointly occupied by Georgia, Russia, and the northernmost regions of Azerbaijan. The southern portion of the Smaller Caucasus Mountain range is inhabited by several sovereign states, primarily Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. However, its territory also extends to northeastern Turkey and northern Iran. The Caucasus region is under the perpetual watchful eye of the Caucasus Mountains, an enduring natural barrier that has traditionally divided Eastern Europe and Western Asia³. Mount Elbrus, the tallest peak in Europe, is situated in the Western Caucasus region of Russia⁴. The southern aspect of the Smaller Caucasus comprises the Turkish-held territory of the Armenian Highlands and the Javakhk Plateau⁵. Approximately 680 miles (1,100 kilometers) in length, the Caucasus Mountains divide the Black Sea from the Caspian Sea. The mountain range in question functions as a distinctive characteristic of the

¹(Откупщиков, 2001)

² (Ismailov and Papava, 2008)

³(Owen et al., 2023)

⁴(Russia - the World Factbook, n.d.)

⁵(Кавказ, n.d.)



area, boasting multiple peaks that surpass an elevation of 5,000 meters (16,000 feet). The region's topography is extraordinarily varied, including verdant plains, towering mountain ranges, extensive forests, and numerous rivers. The North Caucasus region's Caspian Sea coastline contributes to this diversity. The climate along the littoral of the Black Sea varies from subtropical to continental. Winters in high mountains are severe, characterized by significant snowfall.

Boundary separating the northern and southern portions of the region is the watershed of the principal mountain range, which contains the highest summits. Although the northern region is officially named the North Caucasus, it is more commonly called the Middle Caucasus. With the exception of the Black Sea coast, it encompasses the Russian portion of the Caucasus (including Chechnya, Dagestan, and Ingushetia)⁶, as well as portions of northern Georgia and northeastern Azerbaijan. The South Caucasus, alternatively referred to as Transcaucasia, encompasses the Russian Federation's Black Sea coastline in addition to the majority of Georgia and Azerbaijan. Additionally, the Caucasus has been an arena in which foreign powers such as Russia, Turkey, and Iran have vied for influence. The region's socio-cultural dynamics have been significantly impacted by its geopolitical importance, which has further defined religion, language, and social norms. The Caucasus is a region characterized by the coexistence of various faiths, including Christianity, Islam, and others, which exert a substantial influence on the local culture⁷. Religio-cultural customs and cultural norms have interacted to produce a diverse array of artistic, musical, and literary works.

Therefore, the socio-cultural dimension of the Caucasian region is an intricate and diverse occurrence, intricately intertwined with its historical background, geopolitical importance, and diversity.



Caucasus map

⁶(Peuch, 2008)

⁷(Motika, 2004)



Historical background

The region of the South Caucasus has experienced the ascent and decline of a multitude of ancient communities and states. The kingdom of Urartu, alternatively referred to as the Urartians, emerged as one of the most ancient civilizations in the Caucasus⁸. The region was under their occupation between the 9th and 6th centuries BCE. A portion of their realm presently comprises eastern Turkey, northwest Iran, and Armenia. By way of imposing fortifications, inscriptions, and artifacts, the Urartians demonstrated their prowess in metallurgy and architecture. The western region of the South Caucasus was inhabited by the Colchians, particularly along the Black Sea coast in present-day Georgia⁹. Colchis, which housed the Golden Fleece, is a renowned location in Greek mythology and was also significant in the legendary account of Jason and the Argonauts. It is postulated that Colchis maintained extensive trade relations and had affiliations with the Greek world.

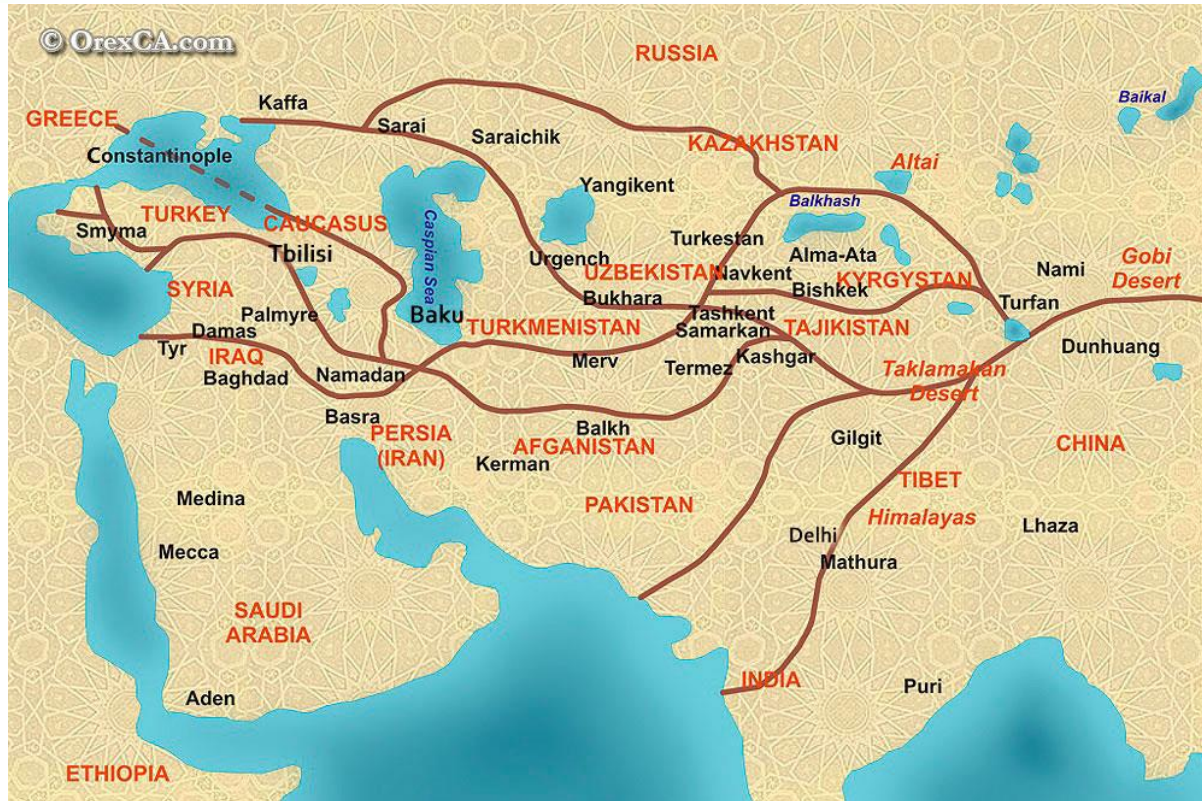
The Caucasian ancient past is indicative of the region's dynamic and heterogeneous characteristics. Trade routes linked distant lands, empires exerted their influence, and indigenous cultures flourished in that region. The modern cultures, languages, and traditions of the Caucasus region bear the imprint of this extensive historical tapestry. The Caucasus region was impacted by numerous empires throughout the centuries, including the Roman and Persian empires. By attempting to control the region's resources and trade routes, these imperial powers influenced its culture and history. During the Achaemenid dynasty, the Persian Empire extended its sphere of influence into the South Caucasus, with a specific focus on the regions that are now Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Persian Empire incorporated these regions into its fabric, thereby imposing its cultural, administrative, and Zoroastrian influences.

The South Caucasus region was of significant strategic value to Persia on account of its geographical proximity to vital trade routes, such as the Silk Road¹⁰. Primarily for the export of silk from China, the "Silk Road" was utilized; hence, the name "Great Silk Road." During the Middle Ages, the caravan route linked East Asia to the Mediterranean Sea. In 1877, the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen coined the term. From the 2nd century BC to the 16th century AD, the road was operational. The northern route traversed Turfan northern route to Kazakhstan, while the southern route reached Iran, India, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean Sea via Lake Lobnor along the southern border of the Takla Makan desert. It provided an essential connection between Persia and the Black Sea and further afield. The exchange of commodities, ideas, and cultures was thereby facilitated.

⁸(Movsisyan, 1998)

⁹(Braund, Georgia in Antiquity, 1994)

¹⁰(Wood, 2002)



Silk Road map

Caucasian historical heritage extends back to antiquity¹¹. It was inhabited by numerous tribes and civilizations, such as the Urartians, Colchians, and early Georgian nations. It was influenced throughout the centuries by empires such as the Romans and Persians. During the Middle Ages, influential kingdoms such as Georgia and Armenia rose to prominence and played crucial historical roles in the region.

As a result of the Persian Empire's presence, cultural exchange between Persian and indigenous Caucasian societies flourished. By assimilating aspects of Persian architecture, art, and language into the indigenous customs, a syncretic cultural environment was formed. Ancient Persian religion Zoroastrianism had a significant impact on the religious milieu of the Caucasus. Later religious practices in the region bear discernible indications of Zoroastrian symbolism and belief.

Western Georgia was previously under the control of the Roman Empire, specifically the Byzantine Empire's eastern portion. In this region, the Colchian Kingdom maintained diplomatic relations with the Roman Empire. Roman influence is evident in the cultural and commercial interactions of the region. The Romans, like the Persians, acknowledged the Caucasus as a strategic trade crossroads.

Additionally, the Caucasus was a region of religious importance. Traditions implicate Saint Grigor and Saint Nino in the Georgian people's conversion to Christianity, which contributed to its emergence as

¹¹(Coene, 2009)



an early Christian epicenter. The Georgian Orthodox Church continues to maintain a hegemony in the South Caucasus.

Armenia is renowned for being the inaugural country to formally embrace Christianity as its official religion during the reign of King Tiridates III in the early 4th century. The enduring consequences of this event extended far beyond Armenian society, culture, and identity. The Armenian Kingdom contributed significantly to the religious and cultural heritage of the region. Throughout the Middle Ages, Armenian scholars and theologians were instrumental in the preservation and transmission of knowledge.

Georgia, in the early 4th century, followed Armenia in embracing Christianity as its official state religion. The Georgian Orthodox Church significantly influenced the religious and cultural identity of the nation. The middle Ages are frequently called the "Golden Age" of Georgian literature. Prominent poets and academicians, such as Shota Rustaveli, have made substantial contributions to the annals of world literature. The epic poem "The Knight in the Panther's Skin"¹² by Raulfalvi is regarded as a medieval poetic masterpiece.

The expansion of numerous empires and a succession of invasions have shaped the history of the Caucasus. The Mongol Empire, under the leadership of Genghis Khan and his successors, ravaged Eurasia in the thirteenth century. It was the Mongol invasion of the Caucasus that significantly altered the region. The Georgian Kingdom was subjugated to the Mongols and was obligated to pay tribute. Timur, widely recognized by his common name Tamerlane, ruled the Timurid Empire in the latter part of the 14th century. His empire spanned portions of the southern Caucasus. The invasion led by Timur inflicted severe devastation and loss of life throughout the region.

The South Caucasus region witnessed the expansion of the Ottoman Empire between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Azerbaijan and portions of Georgia were among the territories that fell under Ottoman rule. During this time, Turkic and Azerbaijani influences converged.

The territorial expansion of the Safavid and Qajar dynasties of the Persian Empire into the South Caucasus. A portion of the territory that is now Armenia and Azerbaijan was under the Safavids' dominion, whereas Georgia and Armenia came under the Qajars' later influence. These regions were profoundly influenced by Persian culture, including in the domains of architecture, art, and language. The Caucasus underwent significant socio-cultural transformations as a result of the Mongol, Timurid, Ottoman, and Persian invasions and dominance. Religious alterations were among the many effects of these empires' influence in the region. For example, the Safavids advocated Twelver Shia Islam, and their policies had a significant influence on the religious milieu. In the South Caucasus, indigenous languages and literature were impacted by Persian as a result of its cultural and administrative influence.

During the early 19th century, the Russian Empire launched a sequence of military offensives in the Caucasus region¹³. The objective of these conflicts, referred to as the Caucasian War (1817-1864), was

¹²(Pirtskhalava, 2018)

¹³(Pestereva, 2019)



to establish dominion over the North Caucasus¹⁴. Diverse ethnic groups, including Circassians, Chechens, and Dagestanis, inhabited this region and resisted Russian encroachment with ferocity.

Additionally, the Russian Empire's territorial growth in the South Caucasus was facilitated by a succession of wars and treaties. Georgia was already fragmented into lesser kingdoms and principalities at the turn of the 19th century; these entities sought Russian protection against Persian and Ottoman incursions. As a result of a succession of Russo-Persian wars, portions of modern-day Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia fell under Russian authority at the turn of the 19th century. Ottoman Empire and Turkmencha Treaty (1828)¹⁵ and Adrianople Treaty (1829)¹⁶ both served to expand Russian influence in the South Caucasus. The Russia's occupation of the Caucasus region resulted in significant geopolitical ramifications. Particularly imperial rivalries between Russia and the Ottoman Empire emerged in the region. The revolutionary Russian Empire's rise to dominance in the Caucasus rearranged the region's political landscape¹⁷.

The establishment of the Soviet Union can be historically linked to the October Revolution of 1917¹⁸, during which the provisional government that had succeeded the Romanov dynasty subsequent to the February Revolution was overthrown by the Bolsheviks under the leadership of Vladimir Lenin. They established the Russian Soviet Republic, the first socialist state to be constitutionally recognized worldwide. Established in 1922, the Soviet Union (formally the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics; USSR) was a former communist federal socialist state in Eurasia. It comprised numerous republics, such as Georgia, Russia, Ukraine, and Armenia, among others. A centrally planned economy, one-party rule under the Communist Party, and a Marxist-Leninist state ideology distinguished the Soviet Union.

The government exerted substantial authority over all facets of society, including religion, during the Soviet era. At the outset, the Soviet regime sought to eradicate religion on the grounds that it was deemed incongruous with the Marxist ideology. Actively suppressing religious institutions, practices, and clergy through a variety of channels—including persecution, censorship, and propaganda—the state promoted secularism. Religious practices endured in numerous regions of the Soviet Union, particularly in rural areas and among certain ethnic groups, notwithstanding these endeavours. In the newly independent states, the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 ushered in a new era of religious liberty and the end of official state secularism¹⁹.

Commencing with the Soviet Union's 1991 dissolution, the post-Soviet era in the South Caucasus entailed substantial and intricate challenges, encompassing political, economic, and social revolutions. The South Caucasus nations of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia achieved independence in the early 1990s. These countries initiated the arduous process of nation-building, which entailed the establishment of their respective identities and systems of government. In order to achieve

¹⁴(King, 2008)

¹⁵("The Treaty of Turkmenchay between Russia and Iran Signed.")

¹⁶("The Adrianople Treaty")

¹⁷(Henze, 1983)

¹⁸(Suny, 1983)

¹⁹(Walker, 2003)



independence from the Soviet Union, borders, national symbols, and official languages had to be redefined²⁰.

In the South Caucasus, the post-Soviet era was characterized by political experimentation and transformation. Every nation constructed its own political system. Azerbaijan transitioned to a presidential system, whereas Armenia and Georgia adopted semi-presidential systems. The degree of political stability, electoral procedures, and governance difficulties encountered by these systems varied.

The shift towards market economies presented considerable obstacles. The nations of the South Caucasus implemented economic reforms, which encompassed liberalization and privatization. The reforms yielded varied results, characterized by phases of economic expansion and contraction. The issues of income inequality and corruption became urgent.

As numerous individuals pursued employment opportunities overseas, specifically in Russia and Western Europe, labor migration patterns in the region underwent transformations. Remittances originating from the diaspora were vital in sustaining the economic operations of numerous households.

Additionally, the post-Soviet era was marked by a cultural resurgence. The nations comprising the South Caucasus embraced their cultural heritage prior to the Soviet Union, revitalizing and commemorating traditions, languages, and historical accounts. Literature, music, and the arts flourished during this time, when writers and artists investigated topics such as identity, transition, and historical memory. Cultural institutions, cultural festivals, and museums were instrumental in preserving and promoting the region's rich heritage²¹.

Following the decline of state atheism, religious observances returned to prominence in the South Caucasus. The Armenian Apostolic Church and the Georgian Orthodox Church experienced a resurgence in prominence. Azerbaijan witnessed a revival of Islamic observances and customs. The profound impact that the interaction between culture and religion continued to have persisted extended to architecture, art, and traditional practices.

The geopolitical importance of the area endured, as Turkey, Russia, the European Union, and the United States all endeavoured to establish and maintain influence. Energy pipelines assumed a pivotal role in shaping regional geopolitics, such as the South Caucasus Pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan crude pipeline²². Protracted disputes, including the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, persisted without resolution, exerting an influence on regional stability and bilateral relations among the nations involved.

In the South Caucasus, the post-Soviet era has been marked by an intricate interplay of sociocultural, political, and economic forces. In pursuit of democracy, prosperity, and nation-building, the nations comprising the region have encountered a multitude of obstacles. As a result of the continuous

²⁰(Suraska, 1998)

²¹(Companjen et al., 2010)

²²(Bayatli, 2006)



influence of geopolitical complexities on regional affairs, the South Caucasus remains a region of global significance.

Ethnic communities residing in the Caucasus regions

The Caucasus region is renowned for its exceptional ethnic diversity, wherein a multitude of ethnic groups inhabit this area²³. The analysis of ethnic communities in the Caucasus regions is a multifaceted and intricate undertaking, encompassing the investigation of their historical, linguistic, cultural, and social aspects²⁴. Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Georgians, Russians, Lezgins, Abkhazians, Ossetians, Circassians, Talish, Kurds and others are among the region's significant ethnic groups²⁵.

Armenians: The South Caucasus is home to the indigenous people of Armenia, known for their rich history and resilience. The Armenian Apostolic Church plays a pivotal role in their identity. The Armenian diaspora, particularly in the United States, France, and Russia, has played a crucial role in preserving Armenian culture and advocating for the recognition of the Armenian Genocide (1915)²⁶, a tragic event that continues to shape Armenian identity and international relations.

Georgians, a dominant ethnic group, have a unique language and Orthodox Christianity history. UNESCO recognizes Georgian polyphonic singing as an intangible cultural heritage, and Georgian vocal music, a unique musical tradition, is integral to the nation's cultural identity.

Abkhazians: Georgia's western part is home to the Abkhazians, native inhabitants of Abkhazia, located on the eastern coast of the Black Sea. They speak the unique Abkhaz language and have a rich tapestry of customs, traditions, and rituals reflecting their cultural heritage. However, the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict in the early 1990s²⁷ significantly impacted the Abkhazians' sense of identity and homeland relations.

Ossetians: Georgia and South Ossetia are historically bordered by Georgia, with Ossetians being the predominant ethnic group. The region has been a point of contention between Georgia and Russia, with the 2008 Russo-Georgian War leading to Russia's recognition of South Ossetia's independence. Ossetians have a unique cultural heritage, including the Ossetian language, which uses a Cyrillic script²⁸.

Azerbaijanis

As an ethnic group, Azerbaijanis originated from Turko-Mongolian tribes. Cultural and historical connections exist between them and the Turkic and Persian empires. In the past, the Persian Empire influenced certain regions of modern-day Azerbaijan. These historical connections have influenced the language and culture of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani, a Turkic language, is distinguished from Persian, which employs Arabic, by its use of the Latin alphabet.

²³(Murray, 1994)

²⁴(Roudik, 2008)

²⁵(Colarusso, 1997)

²⁶(Adalian, 2012)

²⁷(Coppieters, 2001)

²⁸(Cyrillic Alphabets of Slavic Languages, 2022)



The Talysh people inhabit the southern portion of the South Caucasus region predominately. They exhibit a higher density in the southern regions of Azerbaijan, specifically in the Talysh Mountains. They inhabit regions adjacent to the Caspian Sea and the Azerbaijani frontier in Iran. The Talysh people, like numerous other ethnic communities in the Caucasus, actively participate in efforts to safeguard their cultural identity. This encompasses initiatives aimed at preserving their language, transmitting traditional customs to subsequent generations, and commemorating their heritage via cultural gatherings and festivities. The Talysh people speak a language that is geographically unique and is called the Talysh language. It is classified within the Northwestern Iranian subfamily of the Indo-Iranian language lineage.

Kurds

Despite not being native to the region, Kurdish groups in the Caucasus are mainly descended from Kurds who immigrated there at various points in history. The migration of Kurds to the Caucasus can be historically attributed to a multitude of eras. During the late Ottoman Empire and the early 20th century, for instance, a number of Kurds migrated to the area, frequently due to socioeconomic and political considerations. The Caucasus region is home to Kurdish communities that uphold their cultural identity, characterized by the preservation of the Kurdish language, unique customs, music, and cuisine.

Lezgins live mostly in the North Caucasus, more precisely in areas of Azerbaijan and the Russian Republic of Dagestan. The history of the Lezgin people is intertwined with the broader history of the North Caucasus. Like many other ethnic groups in the region, they have encountered complex interactions with neighboring cultures and historical events that have shaped their identity. The Lezgins speak the Lezgian language, which is a member of the Northeast Caucasian language family.

Circassians

The North Caucasus, a region renowned for its exceptional ethnic diversity, has traditionally been inhabited by Circassians. Their cultural influence in areas such as Kabardino-Balkaria and Adygea have enriched the fabric of this region. The languages spoken by Circassians are unique and classified within the Northwest Caucasian language family. Adyghe and Kabardian are the two primary languages of Circassian, and each has its own dialect. The preservation of these languages is vital to the cultural identity of the Circassians and is integral to their identity. Circassians have an extensive dance and narrative tradition. Their oral traditions and folklore comprise legends and epic stories that have been transmitted across generations. Historical occurrences, cultural values, and the North Caucasus' natural environment are frequently reflected in these tales.

The Avars, a significant ethnic group in the Russian Federation, primarily inhabit the North Caucasus region of Dagestan. Their unique linguistic features, grammar, and script, make them a significant part of the region's cultural identity. Their history and interactions with other ethnic groups have shaped their cultural identity, making them a significant part of the region's diverse ethnic landscape.

There are many more ethnic groups in the Caucasus region. Each of these collectives has made a unique and significant contribution to the diverse array of cultures, languages, and traditions of the region. In addition to their historical and cultural origins, the examination of ethnic groups in the Caucasus must also consider their identities, interactions, and contemporary dynamics within the region's complex socio-cultural landscape.



Interactions and conflicts between different ethnic groups

The Caucasus region has been a hub for diverse ethnic groups for centuries, shaped by historical interactions and trade. The region's rich cultural diversity is enriched by these interactions, which have been influenced by the Silk Road, which connected East and West²⁹. The region has also seen the coexistence of different ethnic and religious communities, such as Armenians, Georgians, Azeris, and Jews in cities like Tbilisi. Language interactions, such as borrowing words from Armenian, Russian, and Persian, have also contributed to the region's unique culture and architecture³⁰. The Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh is a prime example of how conflicting historical narratives and territorial claims have led to a protracted and violent conflict³¹.

The contention surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh originates with the period following the Russian Empire's demise and the subsequent establishment of sovereign nations in the South Caucasus, such as Azerbaijan and Armenia (1918–1923). A region inhabited primarily by Armenians, Nagorno-Karabakh, emerged as a source of contention. Both Azerbaijanis and Armenians asserted historical claims to the area according to their respective interpretations of historical documents.

Amidst the expansion of the Russian Empire into the Caucasus in the nineteenth century. To consolidate its dominion over the area, the empire implemented a multitude of tactics. One such initiative was the encouragement of ethnic divisions. With the intention of establishing a buffer zone between Ottoman and Russian territories, Russia encouraged Armenian migration to the South Caucasus, specifically to regions within the Ottoman Empire. The outcome of this policy significantly altered the ethnic makeup of the area.

Throughout the 20th century, the Soviet Union established and sustained a formidable influence in the Caucasus region, guided by Russia. Borders and ethnic identities were frequently manipulated by the Soviet government to divide and control the region. The deliberate establishment of republics and autonomous regions with distinct ethnic affiliations, for instance, was a Soviet strategy to control ethnic diversity. Illustrative instances include the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the Georgian Abkhazian conflict, and the Georgian-Ossetian conflict³².

This practice influenced the South Caucasus' contemporary political landscape. The Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast was instituted by the Soviet authorities in 1923 as part of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic. Notwithstanding the administrative framework, the matter continued to be controversial. External powers, such as Russia, contributed to the escalation of ethnic tensions in each of these conflicts. The conflicts between Georgia and Ossetia, as well as Abkhazia and South Ossetia, were significantly exacerbated by Russia's intervention in those regions.

During the late 1980s, when both Azerbaijan and Armenia were provinces of the Soviet Union, the conflict escalated. Violent clashes ensued in 1988 when the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast submitted a petition to join Armenia. In 1991, as the Soviet Union started to disintegrate, a comprehensive armed conflict ensued. Historical narratives were utilized by both parties to support their territorial claims in the area. Armenia emphasized the ancient Armenian heritage of Nagorno-

²⁹(Hansen, 2012)

³⁰(Vamling, 2005)

³¹(Melander, 2001)

³²(Coppieters, 2001)



Karabakh, whereas Azerbaijan emphasized the administrative boundaries of the Soviet era. Although an armistice was mediated in 1994, the contentious issue continues to persist. Historical narratives that are in conflict remain fundamental to the issue. Nagorno-Karabakh is considered an inseparable component of Armenia's historical homeland, with an emphasis on the ancient Armenian influence that existed in the area. Azerbaijan, on the other hand, rejects Armenian historical assertions and upholds the principle of territorial integrity along the borders established during the Soviet era.

The OSCE Minsk Group, among other international mediators, has endeavoured to assist in the facilitation of a peaceful resolution. Nevertheless, the profound historical narratives and the sentimental ties that bind both factions to Nagorno-Karabakh have posed significant obstacles to reaching a comprehensive resolution.

The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict in the early 1990s led to the displacement of ethnic Georgians and Abkhaz, resulting in deep wounds and displacement of many people. The conflict also affected South Ossetia, causing ethnic cleansing and displacement of thousands. Despite these challenges, some Georgians and Abkhaz have maintained cross-border relations, and some families have even worked together on reconciliation efforts. Cross-border relations play a crucial role in the Caucasus, where people-to-people interactions, trade, and family connections continue despite political tensions. Armenians, Azerbaijani, and Dagestan communities maintain cultural and linguistic ties, while Chechens have formed diaspora communities in countries like Turkey, Europe, and the United States, advocating for the rights of Chechens and conflict resolution in their homeland. Understanding these interactions is essential for comprehending the complexities of ethnic identities, cultural exchanges, and conflict resolution in the Caucasus.

Diaspora communities, including those of Lezgins and Georgians, play a crucial role in maintaining cultural ties and promoting their respective heritages. These communities influence international perceptions and contribute to conflict resolution. The Caucasus, a site of geopolitical rivalries, is influenced by Russia, the European Union, and the United States. The complex interplay between history, identity, and territorial disputes in the Caucasus highlights the importance of addressing historical narratives and claims in peace negotiations. This highlights the complex dynamics of the region.

Linguistic-Cultural Resilience and Exchange

Language is a key marker of ethnic identity in the Caucasus, with various ethnic groups having distinct languages. Multilingualism is common due to the coexistence of multiple ethnic groups and languages. The region's linguistic diversity, including Indo-European, Northeast Caucasian, Northwest Caucasian, and South Caucasian, reflects cultural complexity and historical trade and commerce intersections.

The Indo-European language family, including Lezgian, is primarily found in the Caucasus, with Armenian and Ossetian being the most prominent. The Northeast Caucasian language family, including Avar, Dargin, and Ingush, is found in the North Caucasus, while the South Caucasian language family includes Georgian, Megrelian, and Laz.

The Caucasus has experienced significant linguistic diversity due to Soviet influence, with Russian being the language of administration and education. The region is home to diverse ethnic groups, including Georgians, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and Ossetians, each with their own language. The linguistic diversity in urban centres like Tbilisi, Baku, and Yerevan enriches the region's cultural tapestry, fostering cross-cultural understanding and maintaining social cohesion. Ilia Chavchavadze, a



prominent figure in the 19th-century Georgian national revival, emphasized the significance of the Georgian language in preserving Georgian culture, emphasizing its unique script and rich literary tradition as a means of communication. The Azerbaijani language, a Turkic heritage, is a significant part of Azerbaijani identity. During the Russian Empire, prominent poets like Muhammad Hadi promoted the language's development, highlighting its cultural distinctiveness and significance in the South Caucasus. The Armenian language, with its unique script, serves as a symbol of Armenian identity, preserving the cultural and historical heritage of Armenian communities worldwide.

Language policies in the Caucasus play a crucial role in promoting academic success, preserving linguistic diversity, and empowering marginalized communities. In ethnically diverse areas, multilingualism is common, reflecting cultural affiliations with different groups. Linguistic nationalism, the promotion and protection of a particular language for political or cultural reasons, plays a role in identity politics. Bilingual education programs are prevalent in the region, aiming to teach students in both their native language and the official language of their respective country. These policies empower marginalized communities and enhance their access to quality education, particularly in regions where certain ethnic groups have historically faced social and economic disadvantages. Language choice in the Caucasus is influenced by historical, cultural, and political contexts, serving as a powerful tool for individuals and communities to express their identities and affiliations within the region's complex cultural landscape.

The Religious Diversity of the Caucasus Regions

The Caucasus Regions exhibit a rich religious diversity, with the Armenian Orthodox Church and Georgian Orthodox Church playing crucial roles in preserving cultural identities and histories. The Armenian Orthodox Church, one of the world's oldest Christian nations, played a pivotal role in preserving Armenian culture, language, and traditions during foreign rule and the Armenian Genocide. The Georgian Orthodox Church, similar to Armenia, has been integral to the country's identity, serving as a unifying force for the Georgian people. These churches have served as symbols of resilience and identity in the face of historical challenges, such as the Soviet period. Despite most countries guaranteeing religious freedom, issues of discrimination or restrictions on religious practices can arise. Armenia, predominantly Christian, upholds religious freedom through the Armenian Apostolic Church, despite occasional challenges faced by non-Christian religious minorities. The Georgian Orthodox Church, despite its religious freedom, has been a source of tensions with non-Christian minorities in Georgia. Azerbaijan, a secular Muslim-majority nation, has a diverse range of religious groups, with some restrictions on non-traditional or foreign-based ones. Azerbaijan, a region with a diverse religious landscape, is home to various religious minorities, including the Georgian Orthodox Church, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Zoroastrianism. The Caucasus is home to small communities of Christians, Catholics, Protestants, Yazidis, and Zoroastrians, who coexist with the dominant faiths. Geopolitical factors, such as Russia's influence and Iran's support for religious groups, have shaped religious dynamics in the region. Russia's expansion into the North Caucasus in the 18th and 19th centuries led to the conversion of some local populations to Eastern Orthodoxy, while Iran's influence has been linked to Shi'a Islam, particularly in areas with a significant Azerbaijani population. The establishment of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) in the early 20th century saw debates over religious identity influenced by regional powers, such as Iran's efforts to promote Shi'a Islam among the Azerbaijani population.



The traditional practices and customs in the Caucasus

UNESCO recognizes the traditional practices and customs of the Caucasus culture, particularly the role of the tamada, a toastmaster in Georgia and Armenia. The tamada is a respected figure in these regions, leading toasts and maintaining a happy atmosphere during gatherings³³. Georgian toasts cover a wide range of themes, from blessings to love, friendship, and nostalgia. Traditional Georgian music and dance are integral to the supra, creating a lively atmosphere. Georgian hospitality is renowned for its lavish feasts, including khachapuri, khinkali, and various dishes. Wine is a special part of Georgian hospitality, with winemaking and toasting deeply ingrained in the region. Armenian hospitality is also evident during gatherings, with traditional Armenian dolma, "lavash" bread, and Armenian brandy.

The Caucasus culture is deeply rooted in hospitality, reflecting the warmth, generosity, and sense of community deeply embedded in the region. The tradition of the tamada and the supra, or special table, in Georgia and Azerbaijan, symbolizes unity and social bonding. The sadaqa, a communal dining and celebration, is a culinary extravaganza, that fosters a sense of togetherness among people from all walks of life. The Caucasus is also renowned for its vibrant folk dances and music, including the Georgian dance "Lezginka"³⁴ and Azerbaijani "Yalli"³⁵ dances. The lezginka, a traditional dance originating from the Lezgian people of the North Caucasus, is known for its energetic, acrobatic movements and lively performances. These cultural traditions reflect the region's rich history and resilience.

Sabre Dance, Yalli, and Lezginka are traditional Azerbaijani group dances performed at celebrations and weddings. They reflect the cultural exchange and heritage between North Caucasian ethnic groups and Georgians. Lezginka reflects the shared heritage between North Caucasian ethnic groups and Georgians. Sabre Dance, an Armenian dance, is featured in Aram Khachaturian's ballet Gayane, showcasing the skill of sabres³⁶. Both dances are celebrations of cultural pride and unity, reflecting the shared heritage of the Caucasus region.

Religious celebrations in the Caucasus are significant for both Christians and Muslims³⁷. Christians observe Orthodox Christian festivals like Christmas and Easter, while Muslims observe Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, marked by prayers, communal feasts, and acts of charity. Eastern Orthodox traditions differ in the date of Christmas, with Armenia and Georgia celebrating it on January 7th. Easter, a Christian holiday, celebrates Jesus Christ's resurrection, while Ramadan, the holy month of fasting, is observed by Muslims in Azerbaijan and Dagestan. Eid al-Adha commemorates Ibrahim's sacrifice as an act of obedience to God.

The Caucasus region is home to numerous religious and cultural celebrations, including the UNESCO World Heritage Site Svetitskhoveli Cathedral³⁸ in Georgia, Saint Nino's Cross in Sagarejo, Geghard Monastery³⁹ in Armenia, and the Baku Temple of Fire in Azerbaijan. These events highlight the

³³(Kotthoff, 1995)

³⁴(Belaiev, 1933)

³⁵(Aynura, 2011)

³⁶(Robinson, 2007)

³⁷(Colarusso, 1997)

³⁸("Historical Monuments of Mtskheta", UNESCO.)

³⁹("Monastery of Geghard", UNESCO.)



region's rich religious traditions and the importance of spirituality and communal ties. Pilgrims, including those at these sites, offer prayers, light candles, and seek spiritual blessings. These events are a testament to the region's diversity and richness, highlighting the importance of spirituality and communal ties in the lives of its people. The Ateshgah Fire Temple, located in Surakhani, was once a religious site for Zoroastrians. It was a pilgrimage and philosophical center but was displaced by oil factories in 1883. The temple was nominated for UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 1998⁴⁰ and declared a state historical-architectural reserve in 2007. Pilgrimages in the Caucasus provide a sense of community and cultural identity, allowing pilgrims to deepen their faith and connect with their religious heritage.

The wedding celebration in the Caucasus is a rich tradition reflecting the unique cultural identities of various ethnic groups. In Armenia, the groom must pass tests and challenges before entering the bride's house to marry her. The traditional Armenian wedding ceremony includes the "kavor" and "kavorchar," decorated flatbread and wheat or barley plates. Armenian traditional clothing features intricate embroidery and craftsmanship, while Azerbaijani weddings are known for their grandeur and festive celebrations. The matchmaking process involves gifts from the groom's family, and the wedding celebration is a lavish affair with music, dance, and feasting. In Georgia, traditional clothing includes the "chokha" for men and the "kaba" for women, symbolizing Georgian national identity. The wedding celebration is a grand affair with music, dancing, and feasting, showcasing the rich heritage of the Caucasus region.

Traditional clothing varies across the Caucasus. In Georgia, the national costume includes the "chokha" for men and "kaba" for women, while in Armenia, traditional clothing features intricate embroidery. In Dagestan, traditional attire varies by ethnic group, with the Avar people known for their distinctive "kurki" headgear. Traditional clothing and attire in the Caucasus region reflect the diverse cultural identities and histories of the various ethnic groups. These examples showcase the rich tapestry of traditional clothing in the Caucasus, with each ethnic group contributing to the cultural mosaic. Traditional attire serves as a means of preserving cultural heritage and expressing ethnic identity, and it continues to be celebrated and respected across the region.

The Caucasus is renowned for its carpet-making traditions. Each region has its unique designs and motifs, with Azerbaijani carpets, in particular, celebrated for their intricate patterns and vibrant colors. These rugs are often used as decorative pieces and play a role in cultural rituals. Rug weaving, or carpet making, is a deeply rooted and celebrated tradition in the Caucasus. Each region within the Caucasus has its own distinctive style and designs, and these carpets hold cultural and artistic significance. Azerbaijani carpets are renowned for their intricate patterns and vibrant colors. They are often considered masterpieces of textile art. These carpets feature a wide range of designs, from geometric motifs to floral patterns. One of the most famous Azerbaijani carpet designs is the "Buta" or "Paisley," which has become a symbol of Azerbaijani culture. These carpets are not only decorative but also play a role in cultural rituals, including weddings and other significant events. Armenia has a rich tradition of carpet making. Armenian carpets often feature unique combinations of colors and intricate patterns, including depictions of historic events and cultural symbols. They are used as wall hangings, floor coverings, and decorations. Armenian carpets have historical and artistic significance, with some designs dating back centuries. Georgia has its own tradition of rug weaving, with distinctive

⁴⁰("Surakhany, Atashgyakh", UNESCO)



designs that often feature crosses, animals, and geometric patterns. Georgian rugs, like the Kazbegi rug, have a long history and are used for both practical and decorative purposes. They showcase the craftsmanship and artistic talent of Georgian weavers.

The Caucasus culture is deeply rooted in traditional craftsmanship, a skill that artisans pass down from generation to generation. This includes the art of carpet-making, which is a form of artistic expression and a means of preserving cultural heritage. The intricate designs, colors, and patterns in these carpets reflect the unique cultural identities of the regions where they are produced. The art of carpet weaving, particularly in Azerbaijani carpets, is celebrated for their vibrant colors and intricate patterns. The art of jewelry-making, a skill that involves crafting intricate ornate pieces of adornment, is highly regarded and integral to the region's cultural expression. Enamelwork and miniature painting, cultivated in Armenia and Georgia, are also significant aspects of the Caucasus culture. These crafts not only serve as a testament to the region's rich cultural heritage but also contribute to the local economy and community life.

Conclusion

The Caucasus, which is located between Europe and Asia, is a territory that is a combination of historical legacies and a socio-cultural environment that is defined by linguistic diversity, religious plurality, and ethnic diversity. These identities have been formed by the history of the region, which includes invasions, empires, and territorial shifts. As a result, hybrid identities and a sense of belonging to numerous groups have created hybrid identities.

The Indo-European language, which is seen as a significant indicator of ethnicity, has a significant role in the linguistic variety of the region. There is a significant contribution that religion, and more specifically Eastern Orthodoxy and Islam, makes to the preservation of historical and cultural heritage. Historical narratives and memories that are shared, such as the Armenian Genocide and the Nagorno-Karabakh War, serve to reaffirm the identities of different ethnic groups. Additionally, geopolitical forces such as Russia, Iran, and Turkey have exerted an influence on the boundaries and allegiance of the region. In spite of these obstacles, the Caucasus has been able to persevere and engage in cultural interchange, which has resulted in the proliferation of traditions, as well as debate and tolerance.

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