The Caucasus — article for the Encyclopedia of cultural anthropology

[David Levinson & Melvin Ember, eds. Lakeville, 1996]

Kevin Tuite, Université de Montréal

A medieval Arab geographer once referred to the Caucasus as “a mountain of languages,” and indeed we find in this small region a greater linguistic diversity than that of all Western Europe. Over forty indigenous languages, grouped into three linguistic families, are spoken in the North and South Caucasus, along with representatives of the Indo-European and Turkic families.

Geography.

The Caucasus is the highest mountain chain of Europe, with several peaks over 5000 meters. The rugged terrain and steep mountain valleys have provided refuge and a degree of isolation for the indigenous peoples and more recently-arrived groups such as the Ossetians. There are lowlands as well, along the coastlines of the Black and Caspian Seas, surrounding the major rivers (Kura, Rioni, Terek) and to the north of the region.

History of settlement.

According to some archeologists, at the end of the Stone Age the ancestors of the three indigenous Caucasian groups were already in place: [1] the Northwest Caucasians (Circassians [Adyghes], Abkhazians, Abazas) occupying a territory extending from Abkhazia northward along the Black Sea coast to the Sea of Azov, and inland to the Kuban River; [2] the Northeast Caucasians, (Chechens, Ingush, and the numerous Daghestanian peoples: Avars, Andis, Laks, Lezgins, Dargins, etc.) from somewhere north of the Terek River southward along the Caspian Sea into Azerbaijan; [3] the South Caucasians (Georgians, Mingrelians, Laz, Svans) approximately where they are now: the Republic of Georgia and parts of northeast Turkey.

There is no firm linguistic evidence that these three groups are related either among themselves or to other speech communities of the ancient or modern world. The possibility of a common ancestry for the Northwest and Northeast Caucasian language families is taken seriously by many specialists, but remains to be proven. Many researchers have been comparing the Caucasian language families with Proto-Indo-European, the reconstructed ancestor of most of the languages of Europe. Should this comparative work yield positive results, it could imply that the Proto-Indo-European speech community once dwelt in the vicinity of the Caucasus, although it is not yet clear which side of the mountains they would have been on: some researchers postulate that they originated in the steppes north of the Black and Caspian Seas, while others locate the Proto-Indo-European homeland in Anatolia or modern Armenia.

The Armenians, then, can be regarded as either early Indo-European arrivals in Transcaucasia (2nd millenium BC more or less) or, if one accepts one of the proposals mentioned above, as the Indo-Europeans who never left home. In any event, their long residence in the region has left its imprint on the Armenians' language and culture (e.g. ejective consonants and Caucasian loan words in the Armenian language, and such practices as the speech taboo imposed on a new bride in her husband's home, and the growing of beards during mourning). Similar Caucasian influences can be found in the culture of the Ossetians, an Indo-Iranian people who settled in the plains north of the Caucasus sometime before the Christian era, and who were subsequently forced to retreat into the mountains.

There are at present a half-dozen peoples speaking Turkic languages in the vicinity of the Caucasus: Azerbaijanis, Nogays, Karachays, Balkars, Kumyks and Meskhetian Turks. Turkic tribes are known to have been present in the North Caucasian plains at least as early as the 5th century AD; by the 11th century the Turkish Seljuks ruled in Azerbaijan. Not long afterward their dominion included what is now Turkey, and much of Armenia and Georgia. Many distinctly Caucasian practices are observed among these groups, e.g. ritual siblinghood.

General characteristics of the cultures of the Caucasus.

(Religion)

It is most likely the case that the first of the modern world religions to enter the Caucasus was Judaism, perhaps as early as the 4th-5th century BC in Georgia and Daghestan. Christianity was accepted as a state religion by the Armenians, Georgians and Caucasian Albanians in the 4th-5th centuries, and began to make its way into the North Caucasus. With the invasion of eastern Caucasia by the Arabs in the 7th-8th centuries, Islam gained its first foothold in the area, though the consolidation of Islam in the North Caucasus and Azerbaijan did not take place until the 15th-18th centuries.

'Pagan' religious practices and beliefs — a complex syncretism of indigenous Caucasian, Christian, Iranian and Turkic elements — have been observed up to the present day, especially in western Caucasia (among the Abkhazians and Svans), and in the mountain communities of central Caucasia (Ossetians and Pshav-Khevsurian Georgians). There are numerous differences from one ethnic group to another, but some beliefs are widespread among the peoples of the Caucasus:

The indigenous religions are polytheistic, headed by a chief god, usually represented as remote from human affairs, who presides over a congeries of deities with more specific functions. Among these can be noted a goddess or god — sometimes reinterpreted as a demon under the influence of Christianity — who supervises the wild animals, especially those most prized by hunters (ibex and deer). Hunters must appeal to this deity for permission to kill an animal, and must observe a series of taboos to avoid offending her or him. In some central and western Caucasian communities particularly harmful phenomena (smallpox, wolves, swarms of crickets) are personified as quasi-human or even divine beings which must be propitiated with rituals and songs, and persuaded to leave the community in peace.

Many Caucasian rituals are accompanied by offerings of meat from sacrificed animals; flat round loaves baked for the occasion; and wine or vodka. Commemorations of the souls of the departed, who rely upon their survivors for sustenance in the afterlife, include sacrifices and the pouring of libations. Men play a leading role in what might be considered public worship, with women relegated to a secondary, auxiliary role. A village elder was chosen or inherited the role of ritual celebrant. Villages churches often functioned as sanctuaries for these religious rites, along with simple stone shrines erected in forests, atop mountains or at other holy sites.

(Kinship)

In many parts of Caucasia, especially among the Circassians and Georgian mountaineers, fathers maintained a distance from their children, especially in public, a restriction that did not apply to mothers. On the other hand, relationships between siblings, and between maternal uncles and their sisters' children were more familiar and openly affectionate. Among the Circassians, a man's brother's sons are deemed his sons.

In all of Caucasia except the northeast (Daghestan) marriages with known relatives are strictly forbidden. The northeast Caucasians traditionally preferred cross-cousin marriages. Caucasian societies are patriarchal and virilocal, and until quite recently in many localities a woman marrying into a household was subjected to speech taboos and other strictures. For example, in some Abkhazian communities a newly-arrived bride conferred new names upon her husband's near relatives, since she was prohibited from using the names by which blood relatives addressed them. In turn she was given a new name, which the members of her husband's family would henceforth use. She was not permitted to sit in the presence of her father-in-law, nor had she the right to initiate a conversation with him or any other male in-laws who were older than her.

Several types of fictive kinship have been described in the region. The best-known is the custom of milk-siblinghood, a bond established between unrelated children who have fed at the same breast. Among the Circassians and Georgians it was often the case that aristocratic parents entrusted their child to be raised in a peasant family, forming a bond across class boundaries. Probably related to this is the western Caucasian practice of a man kissing the breast of an unrelated woman in order to be accepted as an honorary family member, resorted to in some communities to bring an end to a feud or legitimize an extramarital affair. Among the Khevsurians and Pshavians of northeast Georgia, but evidently nowhere else in the Caucasus, young couples from the same clan could form extremely close and intimate relationships. Pregnancy must not ensue, however, nor could the couple ever marry.

(Village and home)

Caucasian mountain villages are located in valleys alongside rivers. Many villages, or even individual homesteads, were protected by tall defense towers (still to be seen in Svanetia and Chechenia). The Daghestanian village, or aul, is often placed at the head of a high mountain valley, laid out like an amphitheatre with the houses arranged in terraced rows, the roofs of one row serving as the courtyards for the next. The Caucasian home is centered around the hearth, over which a cooking pot is suspended on a chain. In some communities the hearth is the locus for certain domestic religious rites, and the chain is a symbol of family pride and continuity. The family members and guests seat themselves around the hearth, often segregated by sex, though not always according to the same principles: Svanetian women sit on the inside half of the floor, with the menfolk on the side nearest the door, while their Karachay neighbors on the north side of the Caucasus do just the opposite.

(Economy)

The traditional mountain communities subsisted primarily on animal husbandry and agriculture, with sharp distinctions between tasks performed by the two sexes. The menfolk led the sheep and goats to graze in mountain pastures during the summer, and (in some Daghestanian communities) to lowland areas during the winter, while women remained in the villages to tend to larger livestock and most agricultural tasks. The range of crops suitable to high mountain climates was quite limited, and tremendous labour was expended for relatively meagre returns. Many Daghestanian communities also specialized in manufacturing goods for trade (silversmithing, tailoring, etc.), and mountaineer men often worked as hired labourers in the lowlands during the long winter months. During the Soviet period, collectivization and the introduction of modern farming methods led to significant changes in the village economies of the Caucasus.

The history of anthropological research in the Caucasus.

The writings of Greek and Arabic geographers such as Strabo, Procopius and Al-Masudi contain many valuable descriptions of the Caucasian tribes and their practices, as do the journals of European travellers passing through in the 17th-19th centuries. Notable contributions by natives of the region include the "History of the Armenians" by the 7th-century writer Mowses Khorenatsi, and the "Description of the Kingdom of Georgia" by the 18th-century prince Vakhushti Bagrationi.

Intensive ethnographic work began in the mid-19th century, involving both foreign (mostly Russian and German) and indigenous researchers. After the incorporation of the Caucasus into the Soviet Union, regional and republic-level Academies of Science and ethnographic institutes were established. Throughout the Soviet period and up to the present day, most anthropological and linguistic research involving the Caucasus, both in the field and in the universities and institutes, has been carried out by natives of the region. Some prominent researchers in cultural anthropology from the Caucasus are the Abkhazian Shalva Inal-Ipa, the Georgian Vera Bardavelidze and the Ossetian Vasili Abaev, among many others.

Ethnological field-work during the Soviet period was primarily a summer activity, usually involving teams of researchers assisted by students, rather than a single researcher who remained in the field the year round (though some scholars, e.g. Bardavelidze, did employ this method on occasion). The extensive involvement of native researchers ensured that much of the data were collected in the local languages.

As was the case elsewhere in the USSR, Caucasian scholars at times tried to shoehorn their data into frameworks acceptable to the Communist orthodoxy. The ethnological literature of the Soviet period contains numerous attempts to propose diachronic models of indigenous Caucasian religion which followed the outlines of Engels' celebrated theory of cultural evolution, according to which "matriarchal" societies preceded "patriarchal" ones. Thus when a given divine figure was female in one variant of a myth and male in another, the female divinity was considered to derive from an earlier stage of the culture in question. One notes as well that many indigenous religious practices described in the past tense in Soviet ethnographic accounts continue to be observed to the present day in the Caucasus. This may have been due, as some have asserted, to a concern, conscious or unconscious, on the part of field workers to conceal ongoing religious activity from the authorities.

Important research areas.

Among the numerous questions that are guiding the research efforts of native and foreign anthropologists, three particularly interesting ones will be mentioned here.

Religion and gender. As was mentioned above, men presided at public religious observances, while women played a peripheral role. Until recently women were not allowed to enter many village churches, which functioned essentially as pagan shrines, especially during the Soviet period when the activities of official Christianity and Islam were restricted. Yet there were at the same time certain functions performed almost exclusively by women (e.g. communication with departed souls through spirit possession), and women's rites to which men were not admitted. Most of these were ceremonies performed either within the home, e.g. Svanetian rituals associated with sacred rocks, animal spirits and the hearth, or outside of the village in uninhabited spaces. These parallel rites have not as yet been thoroughly documented due to their more private nature, and the reluctance of many women to describe them to outsiders or even to their own menfolk.

The origins of Caucasian 'paganism'. Some researchers have expressed an interest in reanalyzing the hypotheses of earlier scholars concerning the origins and relative ages of certain local religious beliefs. While Soviet anthropologists assumed that non-Christian and non-Islamic elements necessarily predated the introduction of these world religions, some researchers have expressed the opinion that many of these elements may have arisen in historical times, when invasions and foreign occupation cut off the peripheral mountain provinces from the religious authorities in the cities.

The Caucasus and the Indo-European world. Recent research in Indo-European studies has indicated the likelihood of extensive contact at an early period (4th-2nd millenia BC, and perhaps much earlier) between the Proto-Indo-Europeans, the culture associated with the linguistic ancestor of most of the languages of Europe and northern India, and the indigenous peoples of the Caucasus. Intriguing evidence comes not only from linguistics, but also from archeology and comparative mythology (for example, the Abkhazian, Georgian and Armenian legends of a Prometheus-like hero chained to, or inside of, a mountain; comparisons between the North Caucasian sagas of a mythical race called the Narts, and early Indo-European religious texts). Among the key issues to be resolved are the length, period and place of contact, and the possibility of a common origin for the Proto-Indo-European language and some of the indigenous Caucasian languages.

Bibliography

Benet, Sula. Abkhasians — The Long-living People of the Caucasus. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974.

Charachidzé, Georges. Le système religieux de la Géorgie païenne. Paris: Maspero, 1968.

Charachidzé, Georges. Prométhée ou le Caucase. Paris: Flammarion, 1986.

Colarusso, John. "Parallels between the Circassian Nart sagas, the *Rg Veda* and Germanic mythology." In V. S. Pendakar, ed., South Asian horizons, I: Culture and philosophy. Ottawa: Canadian Asian Studies Association, 1984, pp. 1-28.

Dragadze, Tamara. Rural Families in Soviet Georgia. London: Routledge, 1988.

Dumézil, Georges. Le livre des héros: légendes ossètes sur les Nartes. Paris: Gallimard, 1965.

Friedrich, Paul, editor. Vol VI: Russia/Eurasia and China. In David Levinson, chief editor, The encyclopedia of world cultures. New York: G.K. Hall/Macmillan, 1994.

Kosven, M. O., L. I. Lavrov, G. A. Nersesov and Kh. O. Khashaev, eds. Narody Kavkaza. [The peoples of the Caucasus (in two volumes).] In the series Narody mira: ètnograficheskie ocherki. [The peoples of the world: ethnographic essays.] Moscow: Akademia Nauk, 1960.

Luzbetak, Louis. Marriage and the family in Caucasia. Vienna: St Gabriel's Mission Press, 1951.

Wixman, Ronald. Language Aspects of Ethnic Patterns and Processes in the North Caucasus. Chicago: University of Chicago Geography Department, 1980.

Kevin Tuite
Département d'anthropologie
Université de Montréal
Case postale 6128, Succursale centre-ville
Montréal, Québec H3C 3J7, Canada

Word count: 2475 words

(514)-343-6514 [office]
(514)-343-2494 [fax]
tuitekj@anthro.umontreal.ca