

Azeri Literature

Introduction

The centre of north Caucasus literary production in antiquity was Caucasian Albania, which extended from western Azerbaijan and southern Dagestan from the 2nd century BCE to the 8th century of the common era. Aghvank was the primary written language of Caucasian Albania. The creation of its alphabet, which resembles the Georgian, Ethiopian and Armenian scripts, is attributed to Mesrob Mashtots, who is also credited with creating the Armenian alphabet. Except in the form of epigraphy, extensive literary works in Albanian have not survived. The script as well as the language is still in the process of being deciphered. Although there is no extensive extant written literary corpus in the literatures of the northern Caucasus prior to Islamicization, there is a rich oral tradition which was given written form in later centuries. In addition, the northern Caucasus figures centrally into world literary history, well before its literatures acquired written form, as home of the Greek mythological Prometheus, and for its associations with Medea (the subject of Euripides' play) and Jason and the Argonauts.

The city of Derbent served as the residence of heads of the Christian church of Albania, the Catholicoi, until 552 CE and there was a sizable Christian population at the time of the construction of Anushirvan's wall. Although there is no extant Turkic-language poetry from the ancient period, the region of Azerbaijan coincided with the territory of Caucasian Albania, which had a written literature and likely a vibrant oral tradition as well, practically none of which is extant. Poetry in Aghvank, the language of Caucasian Albania (believed to be closely related to the modern languages of Udi, spoken on the border of Dagestan and Azerbaijan) has not reached us.

Persian Influence

There are more Zoroastrian than Christian symbols among the mason marks left by the builders of Derbent's fortifications, which can be explained by the fact that Zoroastrianism was the official religion of the Sasanian state. For example, the sign showing three discs which has been found on the defense walls of Derbent has been interpreted as a visual representation of the divine triad of the Zoroastrian faith: Ahuramazda, Anahita, and Mithra. Some mason's marks found on the walls of Derbent have also been found in ancient Iranian archeological sites such as Taq-i Bustan and Persepolis. Many of the signs found in Derbent have also been located in Azerbaijan on monumental architectural constructions dating to the 6th-7th centuries.

Another set of signs that have been found on the walls and fortifications of Derbent resemble letters of various alphabets: including Caucasian Albanian, Armenian, Georgian, Middle Persian, Greek alphabets, and various Syrian scripts. The presence of signs resembling the Syrian script is particularly suggestive, given the close ties between the Caucasian Albanian empire and Syrian Christians monks who preached Nestorian Christianity throughout that empire. Also of interest is the abundance of signs resembling Middle Persian scripts. Amid these Middle Persian signs, the names of three architects have been preserved: Adurgushnaps, Rashn, and Moshi. The first two of these names, which appear repeatedly on the Derbent walls, are Iranian in origin. Their placement and recurrence suggests that the names belong to high-ranking supervisors rather than to everyday laborers.

Overall, the general profile of the mason's marks on the walls and fortifications of Derbent proves the accuracy of Dasxuranci's claim: the majority of the manual laborers who constructed Derbent were natives of the region, from the empire of Caucasian Albania, and they used this script when making inscriptions on their buildings they constructed, even when these buildings were commissioned by a Sassanian king. Further, the organization of the mason's marking on different buildings and fortifications suggests the complexity of the ancient social structures in this region. Archeologists have documented divisions of labor among stone-cutters, porters who transported the building materials to the construction site, makers of lime mortar, as well as architects. In their chronicles, ancient Armenian historians such as Favstos of Byzantium, Movses Dasxuranci, and Ghevond Vartabed described how professional stone-cutters and layers contributed to the construction of cities and palaces in the region of Derbent, to the repair of Derbent's defensive walls, and to the erection of churches.

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Discussion Questions:

- 1) What role has Derbent played in the literary history of Azerbaijan?
- 2) What role has epigraphy played in shaping Caucasus literary culture?
- 3) What was the written tradition of the region of modern Azerbaijan in antiquity?

POST-CLASSICAL/MEDIEVAL

Persian in Azerbaijan. Although Azeri was not regularly used for written literary expression until the 14th century, the region of Azerbaijan, which was then part of the wider Persian world, was the birthplace of many of the most important poets of the entire Persian tradition, including Nizami of Ganja (1141-1209) in northwestern Azerbaijan and Khaqani of Shirvan (1120-1199).

Khaqani Shirvani

Khaqani's literary milieu of Shirvan, not far from the border with Daghestan, also included a number of lesser known poets including Falaki of Shirvan, Mujir al-Din Baylaqani, and Qatran Tabrizi. Nizami's father-in-law Abu'l 'Ala Ganjevi was also a poet of note, although the majority of his poetry is no longer extant. Although he left Shirvan for a pilgrimage that took him across Iraq and passed the final years of his life in Tabriz, where he died, Khaqani had deep roots in the Caucasus and often referred to it, mostly in negative terms, in his verse. His mother was a Christian convert to Islam—in the *Two Gifts from Iraq* (*Tuhfat al-'Iraqayn*), his autobiography in verse, he suggested that she was kidnapped, enslaved, and forcibly converted—and scholars have detected puns in his poems based on the Georgian language. Khaqani's Christian Qasida is a landmark work that reflected in poetic terms on the intertwinement of Islam and Christianity, while also using Christian theology as a means of criticizing the Muslim sultan. Khaqani wrote frequently about imprisonment in his poems, and is known for bringing the genre of Persian prison poetry (*habsiyyat*) to new level of poetic exigency.

Nizami Ganjevi

Unlike Khaqani, Nizami never left the place of his birth (or at least he never wrote about any travelling he may have done). Yet the romances he composed, all of which were written from his home in Ganja, circulated across the Persianate world and inspired countless imitations in Turkic literatures (Azeri, Ottoman, Chaghatay, and others), Kurdish, Georgian, Pashto, Urdu, Judeo-Persian, and in many other languages of West Asia. Nizami married a Kipchak slave girl sent to him by Fakhr al-Din Bahramshah, the ruler of Darband, who died soon after he completed the love story *Khusrow and Shirin*.

Nizami's romances

Nizami's romances belong to a type of Persian verse called the *masnavi* (derived from the Arabic word for "two"), which consists of rhyming couplets. Although the term *masnavi* refers to prosody of a poem,

masnavi denotes more than a poetic form; poems that conform to this structure tend to be lengthy narratives that follow a certain pattern in terms of their themes topics as well. More often than not, they deal with love in one way or another, although some *masnavis* (such as Nizami's own *Treasury of Mysteries* (*Makhzan al-Asrar*, c. 1163) are spiritual or didactic in their orientation. Nizami is the unrivaled master of the *masnavi* form not just for poets from the Caucasus, but for Persian literature as a whole. It could even be argued that his *hamsa*—literally, his quintet—made Persian literature into a world literature that could traverse continents, religions, and empires.

Khusraw and Shirin

Nizami's *masnavis* were influential everywhere in the Persianate world, but for the Caucasus in particular it would be difficult to overstate their importance. His story of *Khusraw and Shirin* (c. 1177) draws on earlier legends concerning the Sasanian king Khusrow Parviz (r. 591-628) and his beloved Shirin. In Nizami's version, Shirin is depicted as Armenian, although Shirin is described in early historiographic sources as Aramean, meaning that she was from Aram in modern Syria and of Semitic background. In both the historical account of chronicles and the fictional account of Nizami, Shirin is a Christian woman in a world in which the ruling class was Zoroastrian. In addition to *Treasury of Mysteries* and *Khusraw and Shirin*, Nizami's quintet comprises *Layli and Majnun* (1192), which is a Persian remake of the Arabic tale of the 7th century poet Qays ibn al-Mulawwah, *The Book of Alexander* (1194), on the conquests of the Alexander the Great, founder of the Greek kingdom of Macedon, and *The Seven Beauties* (1197), which renders the life and exploits the Sassanian king Bahram V in fictional form.

Mijnuroba, love madness

In terms of its subject matter as well as its form, Rustaveli's *Knight in the Panther's Skin* is a Georgian counterpart to the *masnavis* of Nizami. The conceptualization of love as well as the plot structure are clearly borrowed from earlier Persian romances, including those of Nizami. Even the very word for Rustaveli's meter, *shairi*, reflects the influence of Persian, since it is a Georgian adaptation of the Persian and Arabic word for poetry. Similarly, the dominant theme of Rustaveli's story, *mijnuroba* (love madness) is inspired by Nizami's *Layli and Majnun*, in which the male protagonist is assigned a name that reflects his spiritual condition: driven mad by love (*majnun*). *Mijnuroba* is a Georgianized version of the Perso-Arabic word for someone who is driven to madness by his or her love (the *-oba* ending being a Georgian suffix). The word *mijnuroba* entered Georgian culture through Rustaveli's work, and is part of everyday Georgian language to this day. Georgian was one of the earliest literatures to vernacularize the Persian tradition, a process best known through Turkic and later Urdu translations of Persian narratives.

In both Armenian and Georgian, literary production declined towards the end of the fourteenth century, due largely to the Mamluk and Timurid invasions of 1375 and 1387. This period and subsequent centuries also witnessed the beginnings of a classical Azeri literature, that was for the first time beginning to acquire written form.

Azeri literature

Arguably, the growth of Azeri literature during this century was due in part to the same invasions that account for the decline of Armenian and Georgian. Azeri literature as such did not begin during this period, but the 13th century does mark its written beginnings, although Turkic literature from Central Asia and Kashgar had existed in writing for centuries by this point. The earliest written poems in Azeri are ascribed to Izzeddin Hasanoğlu (d. 1260), who was born in Khorasan. He took the nom-de-plume (*takhallus*) Pur-i Hasan, meaning "son of Hasan." Pur-i Hasan wrote in Persian as well as Azeri and his poems circulated across the Islamic world, including in Egypt.

Izzeddin Hasanoğlu

Hasanoğlu was followed by poets such as Qazi Ahmad Boran al-Din of eastern Anatolia and Imad al-Din Nasimi (1369–1417), who was born in Shemakhi but died in Syria. Nasimi was the most famous Azeri follower of the school of antinomian mysticism known as Horufism (the name refers to the Perso-Arabic term for letters, "*huruf*"). Hurufis engaged in numerological interpretations of the letters of the Perso-Arabic alphabet and incorporated these readings into their poems. Nasimi believed in the primacy of the divine word as a basis of creation, the deification of humanity, and the eventual manifestation of paradise on earth. He was executed for his beliefs in Aleppo. Among his disciples were Refi'î, who wrote two exegeses of Hurufism: *Beşâretnâme* and *Gencnâme*. Many Azeri works relating to Horufism were translations of Azeri

originals. These include Abdülmeçid Firişteoğlu's Divine Book of Love (*Işknâme-i İlâhî*), which is an Azeri translation of the *Book of Eternity (Javdannama)* of Fazl-Allah Astarabadi, the founder of Hurufism.

Persian and Arabic

Overall, post-classical poetry throughout the Caucasus operated under the shadow, first and foremost of Persian poetry, and, more indirectly, of Arabic literary norms and genres. Poetry was produced in Georgian, Armenian, and Azeri often independently of neighboring literatures, yet each of these literatures was responding to the same global trends.

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Discussion Questions

- 1) What is the significance of Khaqani within medieval poetry in the Caucasus?
- 2) What evidence is there of connections, overlaps, and/or parallels among the Georgian, Armenian, and Azeri poetic traditions?
- 3) How did medieval Azerbaijani poets negotiate the relationship between oral and written traditions?

EARLY MODERN

Persian. As during the post-classical period, Persian was the dominant literary and cultural influence on literature in the Caucasus throughout the early modern period. While this was the era of Safavid power, when Iran exerted more control over the Caucasus than did Russia, Persian influence extended well beyond Iran; it also provided the channel through which the works of Central Asian poets such as Jami and Chaghatay Turkic poets such as Nava'i reached the Caucasus.

Hurufi tradition

After his defeat of the Ottomans at Caldiran in 1514, Shah Esmail abandoned the pursuit of empire and dedicated himself to poetry. Alongside Ferdowsi's *Book of Kings*, the Hurufi tradition as articulated by Nesimi exerted a great influence on Shah Esmail's poetics. Many of his poems engage with Hurufi alongside Sufi and Alevi (Anatolian Shi'a) themes. Alongside the ghazals for which he is most renowned, Shah Esmail composed a work called the *Dahnama* in *masnavi* (rhyming couplet) form, which is comprised of ten letters between the lover and beloved. The exchange of letters ultimately culminates in their union, and ends with a series of ghazals that have the same meter as the *masnavi*.

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ESSAYS AND LEARNED PROSE (Antiquity to the 20th century)

ANTIQUITY

Caucasian Albania

While literary culture in the Caucasus was dominated by Armenian and Georgian, there are traces of a written culture among high-ranking administrators of Caucasian Albania. The earliest evidence of written culture in Caucasian Albania dates to 65 BCE. Classical Greek and Latin sources (Plutarch, Dio Cassius, Paulus Orosius) refer to an exchange of letters between Ohod, the king of Caucasian Albania and the Roman general Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus that took place during this year. Four centuries later, the Armenian King Tiridates (Trdat) invited the king of Caucasian Albania and his retinue to his court to celebrate a Christian holiday. Notwithstanding this evidence for a written culture in Caucasian Albania, traces of writing from this empire has not survived. Scholars assume that this written culture used the Aramaic script, as was the case throughout the Near East, including Armenia.

Caucasian Albanian writing

Although little is known concerning these early instances of Caucasian Albanian written culture, we have firmer knowledge for the beginnings of Caucasian Albanian writing in a 5th century script designed by the same Mashtots who invented the Armenian alphabet. Working alongside Albanian priest and translator Benjamin and with the support of the empire's King Aswahan and the Bishop Jeremy, Mashtots created an alphabet for the Caucasian Albanian language, that is called Gargarean by Armenian historians such as Xorenats'i. Albanians and Gargareans were two different but closely related peoples who spoke different dialects of the same language, not unlike Ingush and Chechens. According to Armenian sources, the Gargarean dialect was chosen as the basis for the Caucasian Albanian alphabet in the interest of imposing a unified literary culture across the multilingual and multinational geography of Caucasian Albania, which according to Strabo (citing Theophanes of Mytilene) had at least twenty-six different languages or dialects. Mashtots himself did not know Albanian but he worked closely with Benjamin, whom Xorenats'i refers to as a "gifted translator" and who communicated with Mashtots in Armenian.

Literacy

Following the creation of the alphabet, schools were opened for teaching it, and religious texts, including the Bible, began to be translated into the Caucasian Albanian language using the new script. Mashtots' 5th century biographer Koryun reports in his *Life of Mashtots* that, as soon as the alphabet was created, King Aswahan and the Bishop Jeremy issued an order requiring that all children across the Caucasian Albanian empire be taught to read and write in it. In the past few decades, new religious texts have been discovered in Caucasian Albanian which support these accounts, including a lectionary (book containing portions of the Bible appointed to be read on particular days of the year) comprising passages from the Old and New Testaments.

Caucasian Albanian alphabet

Azerbaijan. Caucasian Albanian writing fell into disuse following the collapse of the empire in the 8th century CE, which coincided with the Islamic conquest of Sasanian Persia in the mid-7th century. Hethum, a historian of Cilician Armenia, referred to it in 1307, but there are few traces after that. The script was "rediscovered" in 1937 by Georgian professor Ilia Abuladze in an Armenian manuscript at the Matenadaran Institute of Ancient Manuscripts dating to the 15th century. The Caucasian Albanian alphabet was depicted in this manuscript alongside other ancient alphabets, including Georgian, Coptic, Latin, Greek, Arabic, and Syriac. According to Abuladze, the Caucasian Albanian alphabet was based on the Georgian alphabet. More examples of the Caucasian Albanian alphabet were discovered throughout the 1940s and 1950s on tiles, vessels, a stone altar, and candlesticks. Georgian scholars attribute the creation of the of the Caucasian Albanian alphabet not to Mashtots but to the Georgian King Pharnavaz I of Kartli (Iberia), in the late 4th or early 5th century CE. Since the 1950s, Azerbaijani academics and political leaders have replaced the names of Armenian historians, writers, and political leaders with names from Caucasian Albanian history. According to Russian historian and anthropologist Victor Schnirelmann, these replacements were part of a project to erase all traces of Armenian history and culture from Azerbaijani history. The trend of revisionist scholarship was initiated by Ziya Bunyadov in the 1950s and continued by his student Farida Mammadova.

Further Reading

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Discussion Question

What types of written culture from Caucasian Albania are extant and how were they discovered by later scholars?

POST-CLASSICAL/MEDIEVAL

The medieval period was marked by extraordinary growth in both Georgian and Armenian written culture and learning, as well as for Persian literature—poetry and prose—composed in the region of Azerbaijan. Both Georgian and Armenian were shaped by their location within the Persianate literary sphere, just as these literatures had earlier been shaped by their proximity to Greek and Syriac literary traditions. Disciplinary traditions in Persian and Arabic shaped the way in which these disciplines evolved across the southern Caucasus, sometimes in cosmopolitan languages such as Persian and Arabic, and sometimes in local languages like Georgian and Armenian.

Armenian in Azerbaijan. The flourishing of literary culture was accompanied by an efflorescence in other fields of inquiry, including mathematics, philosophy, cosmology, theology, literature, hymnology, and pedagogy. One polymath who excelled in all of these areas is Hovhannes Imastaser (c. 1047–1129) from the village of Pib in the district of Gardman in what is today Nagorno-Karabakh. Kirakos Gandzaketsi's *History of Armenia* contains an extended account of the life of this scholar, who worked in the domains of mathematics, philosophy, cosmology, theology, literature, hymnology, and pedagogy.

Persian in Azerbaijan. Nasir al-Din Tusi (1201-1274) developed an even more diverse set of skills in the domains of mathematics, engineering, logic, rhetoric, and mysticism. With over one-hundred and fifty works to his name, Tusi is among the most prolific scholars in the Islamic world. Although, like Ferdowsi, he was born in Tus, at a time when the city was part of the Khwarzamanian empire, Tusi persuaded the Mongol ruler Hulegu Khan to construct an observatory in the ancient city of Maragheh (now in eastern Iranian Azerbaijan). It was from this observatory that Tusi was able to produce the material for his book *Ilkhanic Tables*, the most accurate tables of planetary movements during his era.

Nasirean Ethics

Among Tusi's most famous works is the *Nasirean Ethics*, in which Plato and Aristotle are defended and incorporated into Muslim thought. Alongside this ethical treatise, which attempts to synthesize ancient Greek teachings with Islamic ethics, Tusi composed works of Shi'a theology. He also contributed to the study of logic in the Avicennian tradition, and composed a commentary on Avicenna's theory of absolute propositions. In mathematics, Tusi composed a *Treatise on the Quadrilateral*, in which he introduced the science of spherical trigonometry to a Muslim readership.

Tusi in Azerbaijan

Tusi's works are renowned throughout the Muslim world, yet Azeris take particular pride in them. He was the subject of a commemorative stamp issued by the Republic of Azerbaijan in 2009. The Soviet astronomer Nikolai Stepanovich Chernykh also named a planet he discovered in 1979 after Tusi. Two scientific institutes have been named in honor of Tusi: the Shamakhi Observatory in the Republic of Azerbaijan and the K. N. Tusi University of Technology in Iran (Tehran Province). Finally, it is believed that Tusi's astronomical research may have influenced Nicolaus Copernicus' theory of heliocentrism.

Discussion Questions

- 1) What were the main disciplines of intellectual activity in medieval Azerbaijan and surrounding areas?
- 2) What major scientific advances did Tusi help to bring about?

EARLY MODERN

Scholarly production in Azerbaijan continued to transpire mostly in Persian, and occasionally in Arabic. Historiography was among the most vibrant fields of activity, specifically relating to the history of Qarabagh, a Turkic-ruled khanate that was the subject of frequent contestation by Russia and Iran. (The word *qarabagh* itself is a Turco-Persian compound meaning “great meadows” which came into use after the Mongol invasion.) At least three authors composed a history of Qarabagh in Persian: Mirza Jamal Javanshir Qarabaghi (1773-1853), author of the *Story of Qarabagh (Qarabaghnama)*, and Mirza Adigozal Beg (1780-1848), author of the *History of Qarabagh (Tarikh-i Qarabagh)*. Ahmad Beg Javanshir (1828-1903) additionally composed an account of this history in Russian entitled *On the Political Existence of the Qarabagh Khanate*. Finally, mention should be made of Abbas Quli Agha’s Bakikhanov’s (1794-1847) *Heavenly Paradise (Gulistan-i Iram)*, named after a mythical garden in the Quran), which situates this period in Azerbaijani history within a wider framework.

Mirza Jamal Javanshir

Mirza Jamal Javanshir’s work was commissioned in 1847 by the first Russian Viceroy of the Caucasus, Prince Mikhail Semenovich Vorontsov (r. 1803-1856), although the majority of the text appears to have been written years prior to the commission. The history spans the years 1740 to 1806, at which point the Khanate was annexed by Russia, a process formalized by the Treaty of Gulistan in 1813. Mirza Jamal Javanshir worked for both the Qarabakh khans and Russian military rule during his career. For Mirza Jamal Javanshir, the Turkic Muslims of Qarabakh and Armenian elites shared more in common than set them apart, in that their wartime activities are driven more by strategic tactics than innate loyalty. Although he wrote in Persian, Mirza Jamal regarded Iranians as foreigners to Qarabagh, without a legitimate claim to this territory.

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Discussion Question

- 1) What are the major historiographic works composed in Azerbaijan during this period, what region did they focus on and why?

19th Century

Perhaps the most outstanding figure in 19th century learned prose in the Caucasus is Mirza Fath-‘Ali Akhundzadeh, a polymath who was fluent in Persian and Russian, alongside his native Turkic. Akhundzadeh’s output is remarkable for, among other things, the number of cultures, genres, and languages it traversed. Born in the town of Sheki in 1812, in what was at the time of his birth part of the Persian empire, Akhundzadeh came of age in the very different world of imperial Russia. The transformation came as a result of his geographical location: Sheki became a Russian vassal state as a result of the Treaty of Gulistan in 1883.

Mirza Fath-'Ali Akhundzadeh

Although Akhundzadeh was also a playwright and fiction writer, it is arguably in the domain of criticism that he had the greatest impact. Sometimes for Akhundzadeh the boundaries between criticism and fiction were blurred. One such example is the work known simply as his *Letters of Kamal al-Dawleh* (*Maktubat-e-Kamal-al dawleh*, 1860-1864, first published in Baku in 1905), which contains the fictional correspondence of two imaginary princes, one from late Mughal India and one a scion of the Qajars. A reader conversant with European literature—as Akhundzadeh was—will inevitably draw comparisons between this work and Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* (1721). Both works use satire to criticize the moral and cultural norms of their societies, and both authors take advantage of the allegorical form of the fictional epistolary exchange to say things that they might have been unable to say directly or in other genres.

Akhundzadeh's Alphabet

Akhundzadeh critical writings were wide-ranging. Although most of his essays, like his plays, were originally composed in Azeri Turkic, they were translated into Persian almost immediately after their composition, often with the author's cooperation. By producing work that belonged simultaneously to the Persian and Turkic spheres, Akhundzadeh built a wide audience for himself, that extended across the Caucasus, and into the Ottoman empire, as well as Iran. He was in many respects the first writer from these regions to acerbically criticize tradition as such. Akhundzadeh's desire to replace classical literary norms with modern influences led him to propose a modified and simplified alphabet which he had developed himself, and which he considered better suited to modern ways of thinking. To his lifelong disappointment, Akhundzadeh failed to persuade the Ottoman sultan to shift to his new alphabet, the idea of alphabet reform was to gain traction across the Soviet Union and Ottoman empire during the 20th century. Akhundzadeh was in this sense a harbinger of changes to come.

Parallel to the discovery of criticism in modern Azeri—and Persian—literature, Georgian writers such as Ilya Chavchavadze were imbibing the new literary currents from Russia and across Europe. Although best known as a poet, Chavchavadze also made his mark in nonfiction prose. His impact on Georgian culture parallels that of Akhundzadeh in many ways; both were engaged with various strategies to modernize their respective literatures, including through alphabet reform. (Only Chavchavadze was successful in reforming the alphabet during his lifetime.) Like many intellectuals of his generation from the Caucasus, Chavchavadze's intellectually formative years were passed during his time at St. Petersburg University, where he studied from 1857-1861.

Tergdaleulebi

Chavchavadze was at the lead of a group of young Georgian intellectuals who called themselves *Tergdaleulebi*, literally meaning “those who have drunk from the Terek River,” which divides Georgia from Russia. The term referred to the Russian-educated Georgian gentry class to which Chavchavadze belonged, and indicated that they had crossed the Terek on their journey to study in Russia. It was in 1861, the year that he left St. Petersburg University and returned to Georgia, that Chavchavadze penned what has been called “the single most important piece of political writing of the Georgian generation of the 1860s” (Manning 2019): *Letters of a Traveler* (1864).

Iveria

Alongside his own writing, Chavchavadze played a crucial role in the formation of 19th century Georgian literary culture, particularly in the domain of journalism. In 1877, while Daghestanis and Chechens to Georgia's north were engaged in a rebellion against tsarist rule, Chavchavadze founded the newspaper *Iveria*, on the model of the Russian newspapers that he had encountered while studying in St. Petersburg. The only rival to *Iveria* during Chavchavadze's lifetime was *Droeba* (Times), a newspaper that was published from 1866 to 1885. Both newspapers published the best Georgian prose of that period, but *Iveria* had a much longer lifespan. Chavchavadze edited this newspaper, until 1902. Alongside his literary activities, Chavchavadze was Vice President of the Imperial Agricultural Society and President of the Georgian Dramatic Society, and President of the Board of Georgia's first bank. In short, Chavchavadze was a statesman and a polymath who is widely regarded as the most important and influential Georgian writer of the 19th century.

Alexandre Qazbegi

Another Georgian writer of fiction who also contributed to Georgian nonfictional prose is Alexandre Qazbegi. Qazbegi's "Notes of a Shepherd" (ნამწყემსარის მოგონებანი/*namtqemsaris mogonebani*, 1883) offers a landmark combination of ethnography and autobiography in order to shed light on the mountaineers of Khevsuretia. Qazbegi's writing is notable for its empathy with impoverished shepherds as well as his first-hand knowledge of their everyday life. Ultimately, he uses his experience with the shepherd-mountaineers to develop a critique of industrialized civilization, and, by implication, of the Russian imperial administration that facilitated Georgia's modernization.

Further Reading

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Discussion/Questions

- 1) What kind of control did the tsarist state exert over literary production in the southern Caucasus?
- 2) How did serial publications contribute to the formation of national identity in Azeri?
- 3) How did social class and economic status impact the horizons of writers from the Caucasus during the 19th century?

20TH CENTURY

Comparisons. The 20th century was an age of great achievements and cruel repressions for throughout the Caucasus. Nonetheless, during these difficult years, Orientalists such as Salman Mumtaz and Ziya Bunyadov in Azerbaijan, Georgi Tsereteli and Nikolai Marr in Georgia, and I.A. Orbeli and A.A. Kalantar in Armenia all played monumental roles in rediscovering the region's premodern literary culture.

Azerbaijan. Salman Mumtaz was, like Mirza Fath-'Ali Akhundzadeh, born in the same Shekhi that had witnessed a rebirth of Azeri literary culture throughout the 19th century. His father died while he was still a young child, and he moved in with his uncle, a rich man who owned land in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan. Salman attended primary school in Ashgabat, where he learned Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and the Turkic languages of Central Asia. (He later learned Russian in adulthood during his business travels to Russian.) At the age of nine, while still living in Central Asia, Mumtaz became acquainted with the Azeri poet Sabir. This encounter marked the beginning of his love for literature.

Mulla Nasreddin

When the influential satirical journal *Mulla Nasreddin* (1906-1931), edited by Mirza Jalil Mahmedqulizadeh, began publishing in Tbilisi, Mumtaz became one of the regular contributors. He also began writing poetry in classical Azeri. His work attracted the attention of the Azeri critic Yavuz Akpinar. In 1908, he published, together with Abdurahim Akhverdov and Qurban-'Ali Sharifzadeh, the work *The Journey of Mosalan Bek* (*Puteshestvie Mosalana Beka*) in the pages of *Mulla Nasreddin*. Many of Mumtaz's contributions to *Mulla Nasreddin* were published under the pseudonym Khordtan-bek. Mumtaz's first book-length publication, on eighteenth-century Persian-Azeri poet Sayyid Ahmad Hatef Isfahan, was published by the editor of *Mulla Nasreddin*, Mirza Jalil Mahmedqulizadeh. In 1916, Mumtaz attempted to arrange for a performance of Mirza Jalil's play "The Dead," but the local authorities would not permit it to be staged. Alongside his contributions to the journal, Mumtaz contributed to the dissemination of *Mulla Nasreddin* across Central Asia while he was still residing in Ashgabat.

Salman Mumtaz

When the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic was founded in 1918, Mumtaz was among the many Azeris who returned to their homeland to help build this new state. He served as editor of the newspaper *Communist* (*Kommunist*) and worked at Azerneshr publishing house. He maintained a regular column for *Communist* entitled "Forgotten Leaves" (*Zabitie list'ya*) in which he regularly published articles about Azeri literature. During these years, he actively grew his collection of Oriental manuscripts, which he sourced while journeying throughout Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia, Russia, Iran, Turkey, and Central Asia. This collection

impressed Orientalists of the previous generation, such as Vassily Bartold and Sergei Oldenburg. On the basis of his private manuscript collection, Mumtaz was able to conduct groundbreaking research into modern and premodern Azeri poetry. Among his many achievements was the discovery of many hitherto unknown manuscripts of Azeri poets and *ashuqs*. From 1920 onwards, Mumtaz chaired a commission dedicated to the revival of the Azeri literary language.

Editorial Work

Mumtaz presented his collection to the first Turkological Congress in Baku (1926), where he spoke on the Azeri poet Nasimi (discussed in the article on post-classical/medieval poetry). He published a short study of Akhunzadeh's Persian poem (composed in 1837) on the death of Pushkin, and single-handedly discovered the forgotten tomb of Nizami Ganjevi in a Ganja cemetery. In total, Mumtaz published over a hundred essays, only twenty of which are still extant, and fifteen books on Azeri literature. His remaining works were destroyed during the Soviet terror, or are yet to be located. Mumtaz also published critical editions of classical Azeri poets such as Fizuli (in three volumes), Waqif, and Zakir. He also edited book-length collections of recollections of Mizra Alekper Sabir and Abbas Saxxat by their contemporaries. His two-volume anthology *National Poets (El' shairlari, 1927-1928)* was comprised of examples of *ashuq* poetry as well as of the widely popular genre of Azeri folk poetry called *bayati*.

Maxim Gorky

In 1929, Mumtaz was appointed Director of the Department of Azeri Literature before Capitalism in Azerbaijan's State Scientific Institute. In 1933, he was appointed as a research in the literary heritage department of the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences, of which he was appointed director in 1937. In 1934, Mumtaz attended the First Congress of Soviet Writers in Moscow, where he met Maxim Gorky. Gorky later obtained a home for Mumtaz and his family in Moscow. While in Moscow, Mumtaz also participated in the millennial celebration of Ferdowsi's epic, the *Shahnama*.

Repression

Along with countless other intellectuals of the Caucasus and beyond, Mumtaz became a target for repression by the Soviet state beginning in 1937. In this year the newspaper *Baku Worker (Bakinskii rabochii)* ran a story criticizing him, along with the Azerbaijani writers Hussain Javid, Sayyid Hussain, and Atababa Musakhanli, for their "ideological errors." In June of that same year, Mumtaz was expelled from the Union of Azerbaijani writers, and during the next meeting the association officially declared him an "enemy of the people." Nine days after his expulsion from the Union of Writers, Mumtaz was released from all of his work responsibilities and accused of pan-Turkism and nationalism. Even during these difficult months, Mumtaz persisted with his manuscript collecting activities, and conducted research in his private library. He was arrested in his home in October 1937. Among the accusations made against him were that, through his work on the Koroghlu epic, he had called people to struggle for independence from the Soviet Union. He was also incriminated for his role in preparing a critical edition of the works of 11th century medieval lexicographer Mahmud al-Kashgari. Mumtaz's rich library of manuscripts was confiscated by the Soviet state. Post-Soviet research has attempted to reconstruct the contents of this lost library.

Further Reading

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Discussion Questions

- 1) What role did 20th century Orientalists from the Caucasus play in the rediscovery of ancient and medieval Caucasus cultures?
- 2) What kind of control did the Soviet state exert over literary and scholarly production?
- 3) What role did the St. Petersburg State University (later Leningrad State University) play in shaping the development of disciplines in the South Caucasus?

FICTION, LEGENDS, MYTHS (Antiquity to the 20th century)

ANTIQUITY & POST-CLASSICAL/MEDIEVAL

Comparisons. Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan all have rich oral traditions that long preceded written beginnings in these languages, even though Armenian and Georgian pre-Christian literary heritage was deliberately erased by the Christian church. Legends overlap considerably with drama and the performative arts as well as with poetry, which can make it difficult to erect firm and clear boundaries around these categories. Some of the texts and narratives mentioned elsewhere in this study guide will be presented here from a different point of view.

There is no straightforward division between the legends of antiquity in the Caucasus and the legends of the post-classical period. While the themes and tropes that featured in the legends of antiquity were reimagined during the post-classical period and adapted to new circumstances, the basic features of these tales remained constant. As in antiquity, the Caucasus served as an intermediary between literatures further east and European literatures. Since the Caucasus' role as the crossroads of empires greatly impacted its literary culture, the works that combined different cultures are a logical place to begin.

EARLY MODERN

Azeri Epics. The early modern period globally was marked by a rapid rise of vernacular literatures around the world, and Azeri, a branch of Oghuz Turkic, is no exception. Although Azeri oral traditions and legends long precede their written form, it is in the early modern period that we first find traces of this literature in writing. Azeri folk poetry reflects themes common to settled peoples. Two major Turkic epics influenced Azeri literature during this period: *The Book of Dede Korkut* consisting of twelve stories relating the exploits of the Oghuz Turks, and the *Epic of Koroghlu*, which tells of a noble bandit in the tradition of Robin Hood.

The Book of Dede Korkut. Dede Korkut, after whom the first of these epics is named, was a bard and oracle. He was reputed to be the inventor of the lute, which he played with great skill and charm. Although Dede Korkut is a legendary figure, he is also an historical person, mentioned by the Mongol court historian Rashid al-Din, who claims that he lived for two hundred and ninety-five years. Correspondences between the events and characters described in the epic and actual historical events are notoriously difficult to pin down. Many of the stories have been traced to the struggle of the Oghuz Turks during the 11th century against non-Muslims Pechenegs and Kipchaks, who later converted to Islam. A later set of narratives relates to later battles, including the Aq Qoyunlu's struggle against Georgians and Abkhaz, as revealed by a reference in one of the stories to Dadian, the 16th century ruler of Imeretia in western Georgia, known as Barehead. (This same reference mentions the Georgian city of Akhaltsikhe, which is called Aksaka.)
Aq Qoyunlu

The focus on the Aq Qoyunlu is unsurprising given that *The Book of Dede Korkut* is believed to have been composed under Aq Qoyunlu patronage (1378-1503), most likely during the early phase of their reign and at the latest during the early 15th century. The fact that the Aq Qoyunlu Sultans claimed descent from Bayindir Khan, leader of the Oghuz Turks, and that he frequently features in the epic's stories suggests the mutual influences of epic literature and court politics on each other. The embeddedness of the epic in Aq Qoyunlu empire building has contributed to the status of *The Book of Dede Korkut* as an inaugural work of Azeri Turkish literature.

Tepegöz

In terms of dating, Arabic sources indicate that some version of this work, under the name *Oghuznama*, was in circulation by the early 14th century. In his *Durar al-Tijan*, Mamluk historian Sayf al-Din al-Dawadari attests that this work was passed "from hand to hand." Al-Dawadari then goes on to describe a figure who resembles the one-eyed ogre Tepegöz, who also appears in the Armenian tale, "King Zarzand's Daughter." Tepegöz's name is etymologically linked to the Greek *sarandapekhos*, meaning "forty cubits," and hence denoting a giant. According to al-Dawadari, the tales that circulate about this ogre are performed by wise Turkish bards who are skilled in playing the lute.

Earliest manuscript

The earliest extant, albeit partial, manuscript of *The Book of Dede Korkut* dates to the 16th century. This manuscript, consisting of twelve stories from the epic, was found in a library in Dresden in 1815 by German Orientalist H.F. von Diez. Soon after making this discovery, Diez published a German translation from this epic of the story of Tepegöz. Further intriguing comparisons between Tepegöz and the cyclops figure Polyphemus in Homer's *Odyssey* have been posited by later scholars, such as C. S. Mundy.

Soylama

The stories that make up *The Book of Dede Korkut* are in prose. They are interspersed with declamatory passages in alliterative prose called *soylama*. The work presents itself as being narrated by a bard (*ozan*) who tells tales in the tradition of the greatest of all bards, Dede Korkut. Internal contradictions within the text and its plot—certain characters die twice, for example—suggest that it was the work of many individuals over a long period, each of whom made additions and alterations to their version of the narrative. The 16th century manuscript discovered by Diez begins with a five-part composition, called “The Wisdom of Dede Korkut.” This consists of an introduction to Dede Korkut, a selection of proverbs attributed to him, a series of sayings asking the audience to be generous to the storyteller, a list of beautiful creatures and objects, and, finally, a typology of four kinds of wives. In Lewis’ translation of *The Book of Dede Korkut* into English, this introductory material appears at the end, in recognition of its ancillary status and of the apparently late date of its composition.

Epic of Koroghlu. Alongside the *Book of Dede Korkut*, the epic of Koroghlu, literally, “the blind man’s son,” is the other major epic of the early modern Turkic world. As such, this account of the exploits of a 16th century Turkish *ashuq* is regarded as a foundational work of Azeri Turkish literature, though versions have also been found in Georgian, Armenian, Kurdish, Lezgi, Avar, Turkmen, Tajik, Kazakh, Uzbek, and Arabic. Across these different versions, prose narrative is interspersed with a widely varying repertoire of poetry. Koroghlu is a Robin Hood-like figure, a noble bandit before the concept had been formalized.

Jelali rebellions

The epic reflects the economic tensions of the early modern period, with Ottoman rulers disproportionately taxing the poor. It was a time of political upheaval, as reflected in the Jelali rebellions, in which noble bandits and local leaders organized to overthrow Ottoman rulers throughout the 16th and 17th century. The initial revolt occurred in the province of Toqat in 1518 under the reign of Shah Selim I, and enabled the rebellion leader Shaykh Jalal to come to power. The 17th century Armenian historian Arakel of Tabriz lists Koroghlu among the leaders of the Jelali uprising, and specifies that it is the same Koroghlu who recited the songs performed by *ashuqs*. It has been suggested that one of the participants in the rebellion must have adopted the name of the already-famous bard Koroghlu. Possibly, the early modern Koroghlu took his name from a more ancient, even mythical predecessor.

Koroghlu as bard

Koroghlu is a charismatic figure. He is at once a bard, a bandit, and a trickster who cleverly adapts to the exigencies of the moment in order to avoid getting caught. The epic claims that he led a group of three to seven hundred fighters, and that he managed to live as a bandit, stealing from the rich and giving to the poor, for the duration of his life. Reciters of the Koroghlu epic have traditionally been drawn from the ranks of the poor. In modern times, this group includes tenant farmers seeking to supplement their existing income with the tips they receive from storytelling, often to the accompaniment of a lute or stringed instrument.

Shah Abbas

The story begins with a magic horse who emerges from the sea and impregnates one of the mares of the king, who in several versions is the Safavid Shah Abbas (1588-1629). The royal stable master Ali informs the king of the circumstances of the impregnation, and predicts that the colt resulting from the union of the two horses will be the greatest horse in the world. The king awaits the birth of the baby horse with excitement. When it is born, however, the colt turns out to be less magnificent than the shah had expected. The Shah orders the colt to be destroyed and has Ali the stable master blinded.

Rowshan

Even after he has been blinded, Ali manages to save the colt. He tells his son Rowshan, whose name significantly means “light,” to sequester it for forty days. When Rowshan grows up, he escapes with his father to Ottoman lands. According to some versions, Koroghlu receives the gift of poetry on this journey while bathing in a magical spring. At the crossroads of routes leading to Baghdad, Isfahan, Tabriz, and Istanbul, they set up a fortress called Jamlibel, meaning “misty mountain.” His father soon dies, and Rowshan takes on the name Koroghlu, in recognition of his father’s blindness. Rowshan’s retinue of outlaws and bandits bear the epithet *dali*, meaning “crazy.” Like Mahmud of Ghazna, Rowshan has a young companion named Ayyaz. While building this realm, he carefully watches over his horse Kirat, whom Shah Abbas had ordered to be killed.

Koroghlu as *ashuq*

While living in this region, Koroghlu develops a reputation for robbing the rich and giving to the poor, as well as for his musical skills, which earn him the title *ashuq*. As the story reports, his sense of enmity towards the ruling class is informed by his father's having been blinded by the ruler, and the son's desire to avenge this injustice. The stories he tells are often narrated in the first person, with himself as protagonists, but sometimes they are told in the third person, as when he is taken captive and eulogizes Koroghlu as if he were not himself Koroghlu.

Reception

Although filled with Turkic and Persian names, this work has enjoyed great popularity among Armenians and Georgians as well as Azeris. Several versions of this epic exist in Armenian, all of which are transcriptions from oral recitations. The first printed Armenian version, dating to 1897, is a translation from Azeri Turkish into Eastern Armenian, by the *ashuq* Jamali. Alongside its Muslim—and particularly Shi'ite—influences, the work bears the traces of pre-Islamic Iran, including the Arsacids who ruled over the Armenian population in antiquity and to some extent merged with them. Elements of the story have even been found in more ancient traditions as well, including Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities* (93-94 CE), which narrates a bandit epic featuring two brothers, Anilaeus and Asinaeus. Transcriptions of the Koroghlu epic predate those of the *Book of Dede Korkut*. The first was done in the 1840s in the region of Tabriz at the request of Orientalist Alexander Chodzko. This epic had a significant impact within modern Turkic literature, as evidenced Azerbaijani composer Uzeyir Hajibeyov's five-act opera *Koroghlu* (1937), based on a libretto by Habib Ismayilov, with poetry by Mammed Said Ordubadi. The latter is arguably the most influential work to premiere at the Azerbaijan State Opera and Ballet Theater. Beyond Turkish literature, the Armenian writer and nationalist Joseph Emin (1726-1809) translated into Armenian a quatrain attributed to Koroghlu on the subject of courage. Even more significantly, the first modern Armenian novel, Khachatur Abovian's *The Wounds of Armenia* (1841) describes Koroghlu in terms befitting an Armenian *ashuq*. Finally, the Armenian poet and revolutionary Raphael Patkanian created his own version of the Koroghlu epic, which remained unfinished at the time of his death. Patkanian's Koroghlu is an Armenian Muslim patriot who has rejected Armenian Christianity. Outside the Caucasus, American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem "The Leap of Roushan Beg," (1878) memorialized this epic for Anglophone readers.

Further Reading

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Discussion Questions

- 1) What were the major Turkic epics of the early modern period and how did they develop in relation to neighboring literatures?

- 2) How can *The Book of Dede Korkut* be situated within world literature? What influences, parallels, and cross-overs may be detected?
- 3) What is the evidence for the cross-pollination of the epic of Koroghlu by other cultures of the Caucasus, including Armenian?
- 4) What was the impact of the Koroghlu epic on 19th and 20th century culture?

19TH CENTURY

The Shift from Persian to Russian. The 19th century was a watershed period for literatures across the South Caucasus, particularly in the domain of fiction. Although legends had been composed and recited for centuries in the literatures of this region, fiction in the modern sense—epitomized by the short story and novel—was by and large an importation from Europe, often via Russia, but sometimes directly from France. Major works of fiction were published in each of the region's major three literatures: Armenian, Georgian, and Azeri. This was a century that saw the boundaries of the Caucasus being significantly redrawn, particularly after the Treaty of Gulistan (1813), which followed the storming of Lankaran by Russian forces, and the Treaty of Turkmenchai (1828). This latter treatise caused Qajar Iran to cede control over the Yerevan Khanate, the Nakhichevan Khanate, and the Talysh Khanate to the Russian empire. In addition, the boundary between Russia and Iran was newly drawn at the Aras River. As a result of these changes, many Armenian and Georgian writers grew up in geopolitical contexts that were radically unlike those into which they had been born. Often, they grew up speaking Persian alongside their native language, but by the time they reached adulthood, it was Russian, not Persian, that offered the greatest number of opportunities to ambitious writers.

20TH CENTURY

While Armenians were facing genocide across the former Ottoman empire, in the regions of the former Russian empire, a new literature was being born. One of the most popular novels about the Caucasus written during the early decades of the Soviet period is *Ali and Nino* (1937). The novel was written in German and published by the Austrian publisher E.P. Tal. The author published under the pseudonym Kurban Said, meaning "fortunate sacrifice." Kurban Said's identity is disputed, although commentators accept that it is the Ukrainian-Jewish writer and journalist Lev Nussimbaum (1905-1942), who published under the penname Essad Bey. Other candidates for the novel's authorship include Azerbaijani statesman and writer Yusif Vazir Chamanzaminli (1887-1943) and Baroness Elfriede Ehrenfels von Bodmershof (1894–1982), who registered the copyright to the work with German authorities and claimed that the pseudonym Kurban Said was hers. Nussimbaum, although educated in Baku until the age of fourteen, was not well-versed in Azeri, and Chamanzaminli did not study German beyond high school. These limitations on both sides lend credence to the thesis that the novel is the result of composite authorship between these two.

Ali and Nino

Ali and Nino tells of the longstanding love of Ali Khan Shirvanshir for the Georgian girl Nino Kipiani, whom he dreams of marrying. The uniqueness of this novel, and the primary reason for its wide appeal in the more than thirty languages into which it has been translated, is the way in which it brings into dialogue cultural strands of East and West, specifically Muslim Azerbaijani culture with Georgian Christianity. The work is also remembered for its striking evocations of Baku during the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (1918–1920).

LIFE-WRITING (Antiquity to the 20th century) EARLY MODERN

Ottoman Travel Narratives. Alongside hagiographic biographical texts in Georgian, narratives composed by early modern travellers from Europe and the Islamic world flourished throughout this period. Among the best-informed travel narratives is the detailed account of Ottoman explorer Evliya Çelebi. Çelebi documented in detail his journeys throughout the Caucasus, including Azerbaijan and Georgia, during 1645-1647 and 1655. Çelebi described the oil in Baku which “bubbles up out of the ground” and the pools of oil that “congeal on the surface like cream.” He also provided insight into the local economy, in which merchants collecting the bubbling oil with ladles, fill goatskins with the liquid, and sell them in different areas. The money earned from these transactions went directly to the Safavid shah. Çelebi also remarked on the popularity of alcohol among the rulers of Nakhchivan. Çelebi traveled through Georgia en route to Russia. He also exhibited familiarity with the Armenian language in one of the twenty-six glossaries included in his ten-volume travel narrative. In this work, he claims that the Armenian language is comprised of seven dialects, and that the dialects correspond to seven different Christian sects.

Further Reading

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Discussion Questions:

- 1) How were tensions between Persian Shiism and Georgian Christianity manifested in early modern biographical literature?
- 2) How did early modern travellers perceive the growth of mercantile culture in the southern Caucasus?

19TH CENTURY

Comparisons. The 19th century abounds with autobiographical narratives by Armenian, Georgian, and Azeri writers. These writings are of particular relevance to understanding relationships with and attitudes to the new imperial power, which had by now almost entirely replaced Persian influence in the Caucasus: Russia. Russian imperial rule was to have a tremendous influence on most writers of the Caucasus, not just in the realm of geopolitics, but also in the domains of language and culture. The most educated writers of this era were educated at Russian schools and fluent in Russian. Many attempted to import what they learned from Russian and other European sources into their local curriculum, sometimes going so far as to attempt to reform their native alphabet. Mirza Fath-Ali Akhundzadeh is perhaps the most prominent example of a writer whose life and work conforms to this trajectory.

Mirza Fath-Ali Akhundzadeh. Akhundzadeh’s short autobiography, first published in the Persian newspaper *Kashkul* in 1887, is one such example. This work provides a snapshot of life under Russian rule among the Muslims of the south Caucasus. Akhundzadeh’s early education was focused on Persian and Arabic. In his own words, he learned to “speak like the theology students of Arabic in Daghestan.” However, the next phase of his education involved a turn away from religion and towards more secular studies. He describes how the poet Mirza Shafii Vazeh (1796-1852) discouraged him from becoming a mullah. “Do you want to become a deceitful charlatan?” he asked the young Akhundzadeh. Akhundzadeh was shocked by Mirza Shafii’s response—never before had he heard the Muslim clergy critiqued so forthrightly—but followed his advice. He enrolled in a local Russian school, though he was only able to study there for a year. In 1834, Akhundzadeh travelled for the first time to Tbilisi, which was then called Tiflis and was the center of Russian rule in the Caucasus. His father directly approached the Russian diplomat and general Baron Rosen with the request that his son receive employment as a translator and have the opportunity to perfect his Russian language skills. Baron Rosen agreed to take Mirza Fath-Ali Akhundzadeh into his service and he became his mentor. Akhundzadeh was himself appointed to the rank of colonel in recognition of his service to the Russian administration.

Azeri alphabet reform

Akhundzadeh places particular emphasis on his efforts to reform the Azeri alphabet, on which topic he composed a pamphlet in 1857. He received permission from the Viceroy of the Caucasus, Grand Duke Mikhail Vorontsov, to present his plan for alphabet reform to the Turkish sultan. Vorontsov agreed to cover the cost of his journal and to write a letter of recommendation for him addressed to the Russian ambassador. The Russian ambassador undertook to present Akhundzadeh's pamphlet to Fuad Pasha, the Ottoman Grand Vizier and influential advocate of *tanzimat* (modernizing) reforms throughout the Ottoman empire. According to Akhundzadeh, his pamphlet was discussed by Ottoman scholars. The main objection that was raised was that the letters could not be joined. Akhundzadeh's radical solution for this problem was to do away with joined letters entirely. Both the Ottoman ministers and the Iranian plenipotentiary Mirza Hussein Khan in Istanbul were opposed to this plan. Akhundzadeh also tells of the hostility that the Iranian plenipotentiary exhibited towards him as a result of his satire of Iranian characters in his Azeri plays.

Petitioning the Qajars

Akhundzadeh returned to Tbilisi with his plans unrealized, but he did not give up on his dreams of alphabet reform. He decided to instead direct his plans for alphabet reform to the Iranian government and sent a letter on the topic to Tehran along with his pamphlet. He proposed a compromise: the letters were to be printed separately like the Latin alphabet, but written from left to right, like the Arabic alphabet that was used for Persian and Azeri. Akhundzadeh later added to this pamphlet a document called *Kertika*, which consisted of answers to criticism by an Ottoman scholar named Samavi Effendi. Ultimately, this pamphlet didn't achieve anything either, and Akhundzadeh was forced to abandon his project without ever living to see its fruition. He composed a Persian poem in the style of Ferdowsi's *Book of Kings* on the subject of the alphabet that explained all of its features. In his letters from 1870, Akhundzadeh cited the positive impact of the alphabet reforms introduced to the languages of the northern Caucasus by Russian engineer, general, and linguist Pyotr Uslar as further evidence that Azeri and Persian would benefit from a simplified script.

Alphabets in the Caucasus

Akhundzadeh's interest in alphabet reform was widely shared across the Caucasus. His work in this domain runs parallel to the activities of Georgian poet Iliia Chavchavadze, whose alphabet reform proposals resulted in dropping five letters from the Georgian alphabet during the 1860s. Given that he was living in Tbilisi during the time that he developed his proposals for the reform of the Persian-Azeri alphabet, it is possible that Akhundzadeh was inspired by Chavchavadze's proposals to reform the Georgian script. He was also inspired by Mirza Malkam-Khan's efforts at alphabet reform, which were carried out mostly from London. In the decades after his death, the Republic of Azerbaijan shifted to an entirely different alphabet. In 1929, an Azeri alphabet, based on the Latin alphabet was introduced. Ten years later, on the order of Stalin, Azeri began to be written in an adapted version of the Cyrillic alphabet, in line with other Soviet Republics.

Akhundzadeh's autobiography

Overall, the style of Akhundzadeh's autobiography is straightforward and matter-of-fact. In contrast to his polemical writings, he does not seek to persuade. He simply narrates the basic details of his life and leaves it for the reader to judge whether he acts rightly or wrongly in a given situation. The genre of short autobiography to which this work belongs was later popularized during the Soviet era, and became a staple of many authors' collected writings.

Further Reading

Mirza Fath-Ali Akhundzadeh, "An Autobiography of Akhundzadeh," *Collected Dramatic Works of Mirza Fath-Ali Akhundzadeh: And the Story of Yusuf Shah*, ed. Hasan Javadi (Mazda Publishers, 2019), 309-315.

Discussion Questions

- 1) How was the growing importance of Russian imperialism reflected in the autobiographies of writers from the Caucasus?
- 2) What were the attitudes of Caucasus authors towards the complexities of their native alphabets and how did they conceive of the future prospects of these writing systems?
- 3) What light does autobiography shed on the experience of modernity in the southern Caucasus?

20TH CENTURY

Azerbaijani Entrepreneurs. While Armenians were enduring genocide, Caucasus people to the north were experiencing turmoil linked to the Bolshevik revolution. The first decade of the 20th century was marked by prosperity and growth in Azerbaijan, largely due to the oil boom. Prosperity facilitated cultural rebirth, and Baku became a cultural hub for people of many different backgrounds. The family of Ummulbanu Asadullayeva, better known as Banine (1905-1992), the author of one of the most important autobiographies of the early 20th century Caucasus, participated in this cultural and economic ferment. *Days in the Caucasus* (*Jours caucasiens*) was Banine's second book, her first being the novel *Nami*, which was published in France in 1942. Banine followed *Days in the Caucasus* with a second memoir, entitled *Days in Paris*, but it was the first volume of her memoirs that received acclaim. She also composed an account of her conversion to Christianity, entitled *J'ai Chose Opium*. She worked as a model as well as a translator from Russian and German into French. Banine's grandfathers were the famous oil tycoon Musa Naghiyev on her mother's side and the investor Shamsi Asadullaev on her father's side. Her father was a government minister in the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan. In her own words, she was born at a time when "the majority of the population of Armenians and Azerbaijanis were busy massacring each other." Her mother died from puerperal fever while giving birth to her, in the middle of a war.

Banine's Memoirs

In her memoirs, Banine provides a snapshot of a forgotten era, on the brink of revolution. She deploys her skills as a novelist to evoke a distant childhood, and to portray pre-revolutionary Baku through a child's eyes. Religion has a special place in this world, but it is a religion of culture and aesthetics rather than of belief. Her governess was a devout Lutheran German whom she came to regard as a mother. Her narrative exposes the close link between the oil boom in Azerbaijan and the cultural liberation of the Muslims of the Caucasus. Oil meant wealth, and wealth meant power, as her own family story illustrates in full. While commenting on the sources of her family's wealth, Banine remarks on the conflict between her interest as an author in telling the truth and the temptation to portray her family in a more favorable light. While she was growing up, Russian was the primary medium of Banine's education. She laments her lack of fluency in Azeri, which was the language of her grandmother, but not of her formal education. Yet she did absorb local Azeri culture to a great degree, and documents her perception of it, including practices such as polygamy and the veil, from the point of view of a sophisticated intellectual. The contrast between Banine's childhood naivete and her urbane perception as an adult makes for compelling reading.

Further Reading

Banina (Ummulbanu Asadullayeva), *Jours caucasiens* (Paris, 1945, revised in 1985). Translated into English by Anne Thompson-Ahmadova as *Days in the Caucasus* (London: Pushkin Press, 2019).

Discussion Questions

- 1) What role did women writers play in establishing modern Azerbaijani autobiography?
- 2) How was the pre-revolutionary Caucasus recollected by writers after the 1917 revolution?

DRAMA & THE PERFORMING ARTS

POST-CLASSICAL/MEDIEVAL

Turkic-Armenian Connections: Shadow Plays. The Turkic shadow play tradition was influential across the Caucasus, and has particularly shaped Armenian theatrical culture. This is a form of storytelling that uses flat cut out figures; the movement of the figures and the light source to create effects that impact the narrative. Shadow puppets can be shown walking, running, dancing, or fighting, for example. In the Ottoman tradition, the best known characters are Karagöz (“black eye” in Turkish) and Hacivat. This storytelling tradition spread across the Balkans and into the Caucasus.

Armenians feature in the shadow plays centered on Karagöz and Hacivat, often in a stereotyped fashion, such as in the role of footman or money-changer. There was also a specific character named Ermeni (Armenian) who was known for his fine voice and talent as a musician. Another domain in which the Armenian theatrical tradition borrowed from Turkish theatre is *orta oyunu* (comic theatre or *commedia dell'arte*), in which certain Armenian playwrights such as Hagop Baronian (discussed later) excelled. Since theatre was not part of the literary repertoire of Islamic culture, the absorption of Armenia by Arab empires slowed down the development of Armenia’s theatrical tradition. Archeological excavations have however shown that the Armenian theatrical tradition persisted on a smaller scale throughout the Islamic period. Specifically, statues of actors and animal masks have been discovered in the fort of Kaizun Bert in the Armenian province of Lori. From the 11th to the 14th centuries, theatre continued to be performed in the region of Cilicia.

19TH CENTURY

Comparisons. The 19th century was a period of reform across the Caucasus. In Azeri, Armenian, and Georgian drama played a leading role in translating political and social agendas into accessible prose. The center of literary and dramatic activity was Tbilisi (Tiflis), for Armenian and Azeri as well as for Georgian literature.

Mirza Fath-Ali Akhundzadeh. The outstanding playwright in this milieu was the polymath Mirza Fath-Ali Akhundzadeh, who was also discussed above in connection with nonfictional prose. Although Akhundzadeh wrote in Azeri, his writings had a wide readership, both in Russian and Persian. Akhundzadeh was prolific in many genres, but drama enabled him to develop his gift for humorous and biting satire. In a brief span of just a few years, he composed *The Story of Alchemist Mullah Ebrahim Khalil* (1850), *The Story of Monsieur Jurdan, the Botanical Professor, and the Drunken Dervish Alishah, the Famous Sorcerer* (1850), *The Story of Lankaran Minister* (1850), *The Story of Gholdorbashan Bear* (185), *The Story of the Stingy Man* (1852), and *The Pleaders of the Court* (1855). These six plays were published together, in a collection entitled *Tamsilat* (1855). The performances Akhundzadeh attended of Alexander Griboedov’s *Wit from Woe* (1823) and Moliere’s *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* (1670) are believed to have been formative in determining his style and writerly vision. While there are certainly significant parallels in terms of their attacks on hypocrisy and use of satire with Moliere and Griboedov, Akhundzadeh also drew on different and more local literary traditions in his creative practice.

Akhundzadeh’s dramas translated

Akhundzadeh’s dramas were widely translated into English during the 19th century. Three of his plays—*The Story of Monsieur Jurdan*, *The Pleaders of the Court*, and *The Story of Gholdorbashan Bear*—were included in Alexander Rogers’ bilingual edition intended for students of Persian employed by the British colonial administration in India. Although the plays were originally composed in Azeri, the English versions of the plays were translated from Persian. Akhundzadeh had requested their translation into Persian by Mirza Jafar Karajahdaghi (1834-1893), a young translator who worked for the forward-thinking Qajar prince for Jalal al-Din Mirza. These were the versions used for the first English edition. When the plays were translated into Persian, they played a major role in establishing theatre as a genre within modern Persian literature.

Reception

The dissemination of Akhundzadeh’s plays was also facilitated by his connections to the Russian administration in the Caucasus. Akhundzadeh records in his autobiography how he presented his plays to Prince Vorontsov, the Russian Viceroy of the Caucasus. He was compensated for the plays, which were

performed in Tbilisi's Opera and Ballet Theater, which had been built by Vorontsov. During the 1920s, the Mailov Theatre in Baku was renamed Akhundov Azerbaijan State Academic Opera and Ballet Theater, in honor of Akhundzadeh (whose name was Russianized as Akhundov).

Translation

Translation played a huge role in introducing Armenian theatre-goers and playwrights to wider currents in world drama. Among the key works that were performed on the Armenian stage in Armenian translation during the 19th century were Griboedov's comedy *Wit from Woe* in 1827 and Racine's *Athalie* in 1834. Simultaneously in Azerbaijan, playwright and director Abdurrahim bey Hagverdiyev (1870-1933) occupied himself with Nikolai Gogol and Alexander Ostrovsky, Shakespeare, Molière, Schiller and other major European writers into Azerbaijani. In 1925, Jafar Gafar oglu Jabbarly produced a landmark translation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* into English that he directed the following year at the Azerbaijan Drama Theatre in Baku.

Further Reading

Collected Dramatic Works of Mirza Fath-`Ali Akhundzadeh and The Story of Yusuf Shan, ed. Hasan Javadi (Mazda Publishers: Bibliotheca Iranica, 2019).

Fath Ali Akhundzadah, *Persian Plays. Three Persian Plays with literal English Translation and Vocabulary*, translated by Mirza Jafar Karajahdaghi from Azeri into Persian and by Alexander Rogers from Persian into English (London and Calcutta: W. H. Allen, 1890).

Discussion Questions

- 1) What European and Russian playwrights exerted the greatest influence on theatre in 19th century Transcaucasia?
- 2) What social groups and classes were the primary targets of satire by 19th century Transcaucasian playwrights?
- 3) Alongside drama, what other performance genres were popular in the 19th century Caucasus?

20TH CENTURY

Reform and revolutionary activism

Dramatists of the 20th centuries followed the paths of reform and revolutionary activism pioneered by their predecessors during the preceding century. Women's liberation, the plight of the poor, and workers' rights were common themes in the drama of this period. The use of drama to advance social reform was supported by the aesthetic of the Soviet state, in which Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia all participated alongside other Soviet Socialist Republics.

Sakina Mirza Heybat qizi Akhundzadeh. Sakina Mirza Heybat qizi Akhundzadeh (1865–1927) was the first female playwright in Azerbaijani literature. She was born in the city of Quba. Her father was a poet who wrote under the penname Fada. She worked as one of the first teachers at the Empress Alexandra Russian Muslim Boarding School for Girls, the first secular school for Muslim girls in the Russian empire founded by oil baron and philanthropist Hajji Zeynalabdin Taghi oglu Taghiyev. This school offered a more accommodating space for promoting secular education than did her hometown. When she tried to introduce secular education to Quba, her husband was killed by religious extremists. In 1904, Sakina Akhundzadeh's first play, *The Benefit of Science (Elmin manfaati)* was staged by her students in Baku to great acclaim. This initial success encouraged her to continue writing, and she produced more plays, including *Truth Hurts (Hagg soz aji olar)* and *Daughter-in-Law and Mother-in-Law (Galin va gayinana)*. At this point, she began to acquire fame outside the Caucasus. In 1917, the year of the Bolshevik Revolution, Akhundzadeh's play *The Consequence of Evil (Zulmun natijasi)*, about the daughter of a Brahmin priest and modeled on an earlier opera by Leo Delibes, was staged at the Taghiyev theatre.

Judeo-Tat (Juhuri)

During the 20th century, voices from communities that had never before had the opportunity to express themselves in literature were registered for the first time. This applied to the increased space granted to women playwrights, and it also extended to authors of minor literatures not represented within

Georgian, Azeri, and Armenian. Judeo-Tat (Juhuri) writer Yakov Agarunov's (1907–1992) satirical comedy *King, Rabbi and the Rich Man (Padshah, rabbi, va oshir, 1920)* fits within this new trend, for it was the first play written in the Juhuri language of mountainous Azerbaijan and Daghestan. A second play by Agarunov, *Whose Fault? (Taxzir kini, 1928)*, achieved great popularity and was performed multiple times on the stages of Baku and Derbent.

Huseyn Javid. While many Soviet-era dramatists pioneered new themes, others reworked old subjects drawn from Islamic history, literature, and theology. Huseyn Javid (1882—1941) composed a series of historical and epic tragedies, as well as plays on historical themes, that fit within this trend. His play *The Devil (Iblis, 1918)* is considered his masterpiece, and is recognized as the first play in the Azeri language that is in free (unmetered) verse. It is a drama in three acts that presents the poet's vision for a humanity free from imperial war and colonial rule. Contesting the view that the devil (Iblis) is the source of all human problems, Javid argues that humans' misfortune actually originates in their greed, in the tyranny of rulers, and in strife among different religious sects. The play is said to have been inspired by Goethe's *Faust (1790)*. Notably, this view is in keeping with the Sufi tradition of thought pertaining to Iblis, who is seen less as an archetype of evil than as an embodiment of human flaws, foremost among which is arrogance.

Sheikh Sanan

Javid's play *Sheikh Sanan (1914)* borrows from a story famously recorded in the long poem *The Conference of the Birds (1221)* by medieval Persian poet Attar, which tells of a saintly old man who sees himself bowing down to an idol in his dreams. He travels to Rum, meets a Christian woman and falls in love with her. She imposes four conditions on their union. He must: bow down to an idol, burn the Quran, start drinking wine, and renounce his faith. Sanan sets about fulfilling these conditions and becomes a swineherd for his beloved's pigs in order to cover the cost of her dowry. His disciples find Sanan in Rum and persuade him to return to the Muslim faith. He returns to the Kaaba where he has lived for fifty years. The woman whom he fell in love with follows him and converts to Islam. This play reflects on the idea of a universal religion that would overcome differences among humans. Javid's plays on historical themes include *The Prophet (Peyghambar, 1922)*, *Timur (Topal Teymur, 1925)*, about Timur the Great, founder of the Timurid dynasty, and *Khayyam (1935)*, on the life of 10th/11th century Persian poet Omar Khayyam.

Uzeyir Hajibeyov. While Azeri drama flourished during the twentieth century, the musical traditions of Azerbaijan also came under the influence of global trends in music and performance. The Soviet musicologist and composer Uzeyir Hajibeyov (1885–1948) composed the first national opera *Leyli and Majnun (1908)*. Hajibeyov formulated the theoretical basis of Azerbaijani *mugham* for the first time in *The Principles of Azerbaijani Folk Music (Osnovi Azerbaidjanskoi narodnoi muziki, 1957)*. Although Nizami Ganjevi had made the story of *Leyli and Majnun* famous in Persian, Hajibeyov based his libretto on the Ottoman Turkish version of this story by Fizuli. Hajibeyov's *Leyli and Majnun* introduced a new genre into Azeri culture: the *mugham*-opera. This opera premiered in the famous theatre of Haji Zeynalabdin Taghiyev in Baku. The following year Hajibeyov produced another opera based on a Persian story, in this case the same story from Attar which Huseyn Javid would make the subject of his play five years later: *Sheikh Sanan (1909)*. Yet another *mugham*-opera in the Persian tradition was composed by Hajibeyov the next year: *Rustam and Zohrab (1910)*. After producing this series of *mugham*-operas on Persian themes, the composer turned in his later decades to Turkic material, such as the epic *Koroghlu (The Blind Man's Son, 1936)*, based on a libretto by the Azeri poet Mammed Said Ordubadi (1872-1950).

Further Reading

Uzeyir Hajibeyov, *The Principles of Azerbaijani Folk Music*, editor, E. Eldarova; translation from Russian by G. Bairamov; translation edited by A. Huseinov (Baku: Yazichi, 1985 [1957]).

Maliheh S. Tyrrell, *Aesopian Literary Dimensions of Azerbaijani Literature of the Soviet Period, 1920-1990* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000).

Discussion Questions

- 1) What new genres developed in Azeri dramaturgy during the 20th century?
- 2) How did minority voices and voices from marginalized communities make themselves heard in 20th century drama?
- 3) How was the struggle for gender equality in the Caucasus represented in 20th century drama?