

Communication Culture and Folk Diplomacy in the Caucasus

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Abstract

Caucasus is historically one of the most complicated regions due to ethnic-cultural diversity of its population. Scarcity of land, economic conditions and strained political environment often gave rise to attacks, revenge and conflicts between Caucasians. It was particularly dangerous for small ethnic groups because they were put at threat of extinction under such conditions. In such situation it was vitally important to introduce folk diplomacy. Caucasians developed the means of regulating their relations during living together over centuries and laid the foundation to a reasonably designed communication culture. The hospitality tradition is the basis of this culture which has acquired sacral signs as it was based upon religious principles and became the best means of regulation of relations. The rule of making friends by families of various ethnic origins (so-called "Konagoba") which is widely spread in the Caucasus is generated from this tradition. It facilitated closer relations between neighboring tribes and served the common peace interests. Disputable questions were often resolved and non-aggression promise was made with the help of these families. Temporary exchange of children and upbringing them was actively used as the means of folk diplomacy. These mediator children became guarantors of future peaceful relations. The report mentions communication cultural traditions of Caucasians and the unique examples which had place in ethnographic everyday life and were reflected in their folklore and literature.

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Hospitality of Caucasians now seems a tradition arising out of their nature but if we consider folkloric-ethnographic materials, sacral-ritualistic signs are also evident there. There is a legend that the God appeared as an old beggar and walked house by house and checked how he would be met. As people say, a guest is sent by God (or the guest himself is the God) and receiving a guest with due respect was considered as a service to God. The Georgian word "sautskhoo" means the best, special. It derives from the word "utskho" which also means "guest" by the content. Both invited and uninvited guests were received with similar respect

in the Caucasus. The guest of one village was considered to be the guest for the whole village. The guestless man was called “not mixed with people”. If somebody would not provide an accommodation to the guest at night, the village residents would burn his house.

The host was obliged to protect the guest and if he could not protect him, the village would judge him and expel from the village. Killing a guest was considered a great dishonor for the family, so the relatives would kill the killer as the offender of the descent. The Georgian ballad (“Shiola and Mtrekheli”) says that a sister took revenge upon her brother who had killed her guest in the house. The topic of hospitality is reflected in works of Vazha Pshavela.

The Georgians and their northern neighbors were connected by political and cultural-economic relations from the old times. They had much in common in their traditions, material culture and social institutions. It seems that it was due to this fact that peoples residing in the Caucasus managed to find the ways which would strengthen their relations and create guarantees for security.

Hospitality became the basis of those Caucasian customs which acquired a special image of folk diplomacy. Folk traditions of artificially becoming relatives, friends and good neighbors between Georgian and North Caucasians, established as a result of acquaintance and being a guest, come from the ancient centuries. In Georgia, such relations were described by the following terms: “Mtsnauroba” (relationship based on acquaintance), “Kerdzoba” (the one who is a relative, own), “Jalaboba” (visiting a family), “Becoming sworn brothers”. In the North Caucasus it was mainly referred to as “Konaghoba”. “Konagh” is a term of Turkish origin and means “guest”. Over the time, its meaning widened and was used to describe friendly relations of representatives of various tribes.

People residing in the Caucasus often had to visit neighbor tribes for various reasons (trade, work, hunting, escaping from revenge etc.). So it was very important to have a konagh – a friend, sworn brother, a family turned into relatives. They would be provided with meal, accommodation and protection there.

“Mtsnauroba” was mainly based on economic relations of the mountain and lowland population. Friends used their house for guest, meals and drinks were free and they were also connected by household issues. There should not be any lie, betrayal between them. If they had one religion they tried to become relatives – to baptize, marry the women.

“Kerdzoba” was based on closer relations. It was the same as sworn brotherhood and marriage between their families was prohibited. The persons becoming close in such manner would mix their blood or a piece of silver. Mother of one of them would attend sweating the oath, because the sworn should hold a tooth on her breast. After that he was considered as her acquired son and the family member. Sworn brotherhood was transferred to generations and there was no need to carry out the ritual again. Children were taught the language, names of sworn brothers, villages where they lived and the children continued the deeds of their fathers.

Wives of sworn brothers were considered as sworn sisters. During the prayer women would first bless sworn brothers of their families and then their husbands. They used to give present to each other. If brothers would divide their property, it was distributed among sworn brothers too in order of age. If somebody died, sworn brothers were notified first of all and they would come not only for sympathy but also to provide material assistance to the family.

Konaghoba took place among representatives of various confessions. It is an artificial form of making relatives- coming closer which was very spread in the Caucasus. Georgians had konaghs in Chechnya, Ingushetia, Ossetia, Kabard, Dagestan, Azerbaijan. There was no man who would not have a konagh in both parts of Kavkasioni Mountain. Konaghs used to give each other generous gifts, helped each other in everything and often interfered in disputes of the family. As a rule, konaghs gave their children to each other for up-

bringing. This rule aimed not only to strengthen kin relationship but also making the public closer, as these children learnt languages, household activities, customs of other peoples and served as mediators between various ethnic groups.

It should be mentioned that difference of confessions and politics never hindered centuries-long traditions of sworn brotherhood. Konaghs treated religion of each other with special care. They would not touch religion of the child given for upbringing and would not take him to their chapel. Once a konagh visited a Rachian man and remained there for several months. The host did not slaughter a pig in order not to offend the Muslim guest (Georgians would necessarily slaughter a pig for New Year!)

It should also be mentioned that if a konagh had no heritor, the other konagh would give his child as a heritor and many examples are known in folk legends about it. According to one story, a Lezgian konagh in Kahketi shot a gun accidentally and killed a little child of the konagh. The Lezgian went to his country and sent his two children to the Kakhetian konagh instead of the blood. The Kakhetian brought up both sons as his own children and when they became of full age, he left one for himself and sent the other brother to Lezgia.

Konaghoba-friendship, artificially becoming relatives, close relations did not remain only within the family boundaries, as the sworn brother of one man was considered as the relative of the whole village and therefore, villages of different parts appeared to be friends. Peacemaking functions of konaghs also widened. They were asked to interfere in deeds of the village and they played the role of public judges. They settled problems and reconciled opposing parties. Their decision had legal force and nobody protested it.

The above relations of Caucasians are described by various terms but essentially they are one and serve an important goal. It was communication culture, progressive form of relationship which connected peoples tired from religious and tribal conflicts. It was a wisely designed unique form of folk diplomacy which united ethnically and religiously different Caucasians and provided grounds for their peaceful coexistence.