

Peoples of the Caucasus, by John Colarusso

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1. Introduction

Between the Black and Caspian Seas rise the Caucasus Mountains. These stretch in a line 600 miles (1,000 kilometers) long from the northeast corner of the Black Sea, near the Sea of Azov, southeastwards down to Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, near northwestern Iran. This region has traditionally been considered to be the southeast corner of Europe. As such, it has the highest mountains in that continent: Mount Elbruz, whose twin peaks rise to heights of 18,441 feet/5,621 meters and 18,510 feet/5,642 meters, and Mount Kazbek at 16,512 feet/5,047 meters, all being higher than Mount Blanc in the Alps (15,781 feet/4,810 meters). In the north the region grades over into the plains of southern Russia and is bordered by the Kuban and Terek rivers. In the south it runs into the highlands of eastern Turkey and northern Iran where it may be thought of as ending at the borders of these two nations, which largely follow the Aras River. The region is a meeting place for European, Central Asian, and Middle Eastern civilizations, and shows a mixture of features from these cultures as well as many that are strictly its own.

There are fifty languages indigenous to this region. The ethnic complexity of the Caucasus is unequalled in Eurasia, with nearly sixty distinct peoples, including Russians and Ukrainians. While there are two regions (Papua-New Guinea and the Horn of Africa) which exceed the Caucasus in the absolute diversity of their ethnic makeup, their cultural levels are neolithic. Only in the Caucasus is such diversity coupled to a cultural level typical of European peasants. The Trans or South Caucasus is home to three new nations which formed at the break up of the Soviet Union: Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The first has an ancient history dating back to the second century AD. It was annexed by Russia in 1801. The second is the sole surviving fragment of the Armenian nation, which at one time occupied most of eastern Anatolia (Turkey). It was annexed to Russia in 1828. The third was once the part of Iran called 'Aran'. It has arisen as a mixture of Turkic peoples who have mixed with and assimilated the earlier Caucasian Albanians or Alwanians, and was annexed to Russia also in 1828. The Cis or North Caucasus has seven republics, all part of the Soviet legacy. From west to east they are: Adygeya, Karachay - Cherkessia, Kabardino - Balkaria, North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Chechnia (Ichkeria), and Dagestan. In addition, the southern portion of Krasnodar kray (district), extends south of the Kuban. The central region of the North Caucasus traditionally looked to Moscow for protection against raids from the Krim Khans (Crimean Tatars) and formed political links early, in the case of Ossetia in 1796. The Northwest region traditionally turned to the Ottoman Empire for trade and hence saw Russia as an enemy. It was only annexed in 1864 after prolonged and bitter war. The Northeastern region traditionally turned south to the Middle East and hence also saw Russia as an enemy. It was annexed in 1859 after prolonged resistance led by the famed Imam Shamil. To some extent this threefold west to east division crosses over into the south as well and in many ways rivals the customary north - south division in its social and political importance.

The region is potentially wealthy. Gold, iron, zinc, molybdenum, copper, lead, aluminum, chromium, tungsten, and coal deposits exist. Diamonds, semi-precious stones, fine mineral springs, hot baths,

and skiing resorts also can be found. Agriculture is well developed with tea, tobacco, cotton, corn, wheat, walnuts, melons, apples, peaches, pears, pomegranates, and citrus fruit being grown, along with fowl, cattle, oxen, sheep, and fine horses. Most important, however, are vast reserves of oil and natural gas, particularly in Azerbaijan and Chechnia. The crude oil from the latter is the finest known, emerging from the earth nearly clear.

Political stability could bring prosperity, but the Caucasus is the most unstable region of the former Soviet Union. Since 1989 the region has witnessed five wars: Nagorno-Karabagh (Armenia - Azerbaijan) (1989-1995), South Ossetian - Georgian (1991-1992); Abkhazian - Georgian (1992-1993); North Ossetian - Ingush (1992); Chechen - Russian (1994 - 1996). Not only have these wars been ruinous in the loss of lives and property, but they have befallen a region whose economic collapse was also precipitous. Furthermore, nearly every area has some serious dispute between peoples over borders or land rights that arise from Communist patterns of abuse and manipulation. Many of these go back to Stalin's wholesale deportations of the Karachays, Balkars, Noghays, Ingush and Chechens from the North Caucasus during 1943-44 and their repatriation under Khrushchev in 1957. Land claims and losses from these tragic episodes have never been settled. Further turmoil can be expected in what the West has only just begun to realize is a geopolitically crucial region.

2. Location and homeland

The Caucasus region is roughly the size of Spain (approximately 150,000 square miles/388,498 square kilometers). The South Caucasus is arid in the portions which constitute the eastern extremity of the Anatolian highlands, primarily Armenia. Azerbaijan is arid toward its Iranian border, but becomes more lush as it rises into the foothills of the Caucasus. Georgia, by contrast with these two, is lush and well watered. Even in its highlands it enjoys substantial rainfall from the winds off the Black Sea. This verdant landscape becomes semi-tropical along the Abkhazian coast of the Black Sea, and becomes colder but still verdant across the mountains in the north. Only in the east, in Daghestan, does this pattern alter and the land become dry, all the moisture having been taken by the western side of the summits. There the lowlands along the Caspian Sea coast are arable, but the Daghestani highlands can vary from alpine pastures to alpine deserts.

The ethnic makeup of two of the three southern states is relatively simple. Armenia and Nagorno-Karabagh are almost wholly Armenian, with a few enclaves of Kurds (pop. 3.6 million). Azerbaijan (pop. 7.4 million) consists almost wholly of Azeri Turks, close kin of the Turks of Turkey and of the Turkomans of Central Asia. A few Daghestani peoples spill over into it, but these will be treated with the North Caucasians. At the extreme eastern end of the mountain chain (the Apsheron peninsula) are the Iranian speaking Tats (pop. 10,000). Adjoining Iran at the extreme southeast is an Iranian speaking people called the Talysh (pop. 22,000), most of whom (100,000) live across the border.

Georgia is by far the most complex (pop. 5.5 million) of the southern states. Recently eighteen ethnic groups could be found there, but three have either been driven out or emigrated. In the southwest there are Ajars, Mingrelians, and Laz, the last extending well across northern Turkey to the city of Trabzond. The Ajars are Muslim and constitute the eastern tip of a large Georgian-speaking region in eastern Turkey. These Muslim Georgians and the Ajars form a cultural continuum, but the Laz and Mingrelians stand apart from the rest of Georgia both in language and customs. In this southwestern region dwelt a Turkish speaking group called Meskhetians, who were deported to Central Asia in 1944. In 1989, following riots against them in Uzbekistan, most of them relocated to Azerbaijan. In addition there are in the south large groups of Armenians, Greeks, and Azeris. In the center of Georgia are the Georgians proper, (formed from four earlier groups: the Gurians, Imeretians,

Kartlians, and Kakhetians). In the highlands are found Georgian-speaking peoples so distinctive as to form separate ethnic groups. These are the Khevsurs, who wore chain mail and fought with broad swords and bucklers until World War I, the Pshavs, and the Tushetis. A Georgian speaking Shi'ite Muslim people, the Ingiloi, who wear Maltese crosses on their clothing, reside across the border in western Azerbaijan. Also located in the Georgian highlands is one village of people who speak a language related to Chechen and Ingush, the Batsby or Kists. A few Daghestanis (Avars) were driven from their highland villages in 1991. By contrast only recently the Udis have found refuge from religious turmoil in Azerbaijan among their kin in the village of Oktomberi in eastern Georgia. The Udis, a Daghestani people, were the central ethnic group around which the old Christian kingdom of the Caucasian Albanians or Alwanians was formed. The central highlands are home to the South Ossetians (pop. 125,000 ?), who have fought a war of secession in an effort to unite with their kin in North Ossetia. Further to their west live the Svans, a people only distantly related to the Georgians but who are nevertheless content to be part of this nation. Along the northwest coast, however, live the Abkhaz (pop. 150,000), who fought a war to establish their own state. Unique to Abkhazia was a small community of two or three villages of African ancestry, who were completely assimilated in culture and language to the Abkhaz. Finally, Georgia was home to a distinctive community of Jews. These now dwell in Israel.

The North Caucasus is home to some 4.7 million people, and is divided into three zones: Northwest, Central, and Northeast. The Northwest Caucasus was home to five ethnic groups, the first three of which are related: Circassians, Abazas (northern Abkhaz), Ubykhs, Mountain Turks, and the distinctive, Caucasianized Kuban Cossacks. In 1864, after nearly fifty years of warfare, the Russians, aided by the Cossacks, expelled nearly all of these people into the Ottoman Empire. Only 20% remained behind, with the exception of the Ubykhs, who were all expelled. Today the remaining Circassians are scattered in and around three republics: Adygheya (pop. 109,000), Karachai-Cherkessia (pop. 46,000), and Kabardino-Balkaria (pop. 322,000). The 58,000 Abazas are located in Karachai-Cherkessia. Population figures are suspect, but a total of 658,000 is possible if the numerous Circassian villages to the west of Adygheya are counted. This should be contrasted with roughly 4 million Circassians, 0.5 million Abazas, and 50,000 Ubykhs in Turkey. The tendency to distinguish three ethnic groups: Adyghey, Cherkess, and Kabardian, has some basis in dialect diversity and some political motivation (the Kabardians, being in the center of the North Caucasus tended to have good relations with Moscow). Nevertheless, they themselves do not recognize these divisions, referring to themselves simply as 'Adyghey'. A small population of Circassian speaking Jews is also considered to be Adyghey. Similarly the Mountain Turks are now called Karachay (pop. 276,000) and Balkar or Malkar (pop. 71,000), but here too the latter are distinctive merely in their proclivity to see in Moscow an ally because they fall in the center of the North Caucasus, as opposed to the Karachay who dwell in the western highlands.

While one can speak of the Kabardian Circassians and the Balkar Mountain Turks as being Central North Caucasians, the North Ossetians (pop. 0.5 million) are the only people largely treated as such by the Russians. There is a distinctive western group, the Digoron, and an eastern, the Iron. The southern Ossetians are called tuallaeg, which simply means mountain men. They are the descendants of the ancient Alans, Sarmatians, and Scythians of the Central Asian steppes.

To their east are the Ingush (pop. 197,000) in Ingushetia, but this too is another case of political proclivities splitting an ethnic group in two. Together with the Chechens (pop. 792,000) further east, they form the Vai Nakh peoples (which include the Kists or Batsby (pop. 3,000) of Georgia), and are relatives of the Daghestanis of the Northeast Caucasus. Prior to the Chechen - Russian War there was a small population of Chechen speaking Jews, but these have fled to Israel. The northern

reaches of Chechnia are also home to the distinctive Terek Cossacks, old Russian speaking settlers who have adopted many local ways. The Merkhi of southern Chechnia, while Chechen-speaking, are considered by the Chechens to be a remnant of a non-Vai Nakh people of unknown origin.

Daghestan is unquestionably the most complex of the Caucasian republics (pop. 1.8 million), with thirty-two indigenous ethnic groups. In the lowlands can be found Turkic nomads: Kumyks (pop. 251,000), Noghays (pop. 77,000), and a few displaced Turkomans (18,000). In the northern highlands are the Avars (pop. 501,000), and higher still are the Andis (9,000), Karatas (5,000), Chamalals (4,000), Bagwalals (4,000), Akhwakhs (5,000), Botlikhs (3,000), Godoberis (2,500), and Tindis (5,000). Still in the high valleys but going south toward the Georgian border are the Tsez (Dido) (7,000), Ginukhs (200), Hunzibs (400), Khwarshis (1,000), and Bezhitas (Kapuchis) (3,000). South of the Avar are the Laks (92,000), Dargwas (282,000), Kubachis (3,000), and Khaidaqs (28,000), all forming a related group of peoples. In one high village, standing apart from them, are the Archis (1,000), whose links lie further south with the so-called Lezgian peoples: the Aghuls (14,000), Tabasarans (78,000), and Rutuls (15,000). A few of the Lezgis (367,000) and most of the Tsakhurs (19,000) spill over into Azerbaijan in the south. Other Daghestanis who are restricted to northern Azerbaijan are the Kryz (6,000) in one mountain village and three coastal ones, Budukhs (1,000) (one mountain village), Udis (formerly 6,000) (two mountain villages), and Khinalugs (2,000) (one mountain village). There is a group called "Mountain Jews" (Givrijor Dagchifut) (13,000) who speak an Iranian language in Daghestan. They are sometimes called "Tats," but are not to be confused with the Muslim Tats further south on the Apsheron peninsula of Azerbaijan. In addition there are a few Daghestani Cossacks who are strongly assimilated to indigenous patterns.

It must be emphasized that all of the above are distinct peoples, however small they may be, with their own languages, customs, costumes, arts, and architectures. Many are further subdivided by tribes, clans, and blood lines. Conversely, most will traditionally form larger units for self-defense when threatened. This is particularly true of the smaller peoples of Daghestan. In ethnographic, social, and political terms the Caucasus is like a miniature continent.

In physical appearance the people in the South Caucasus tend to be "Mediterranean," with dark hair and olive complexions. The Daghestanis often have olive complexions that are suffused with a ruddy undertone, an adaptation to cold mountain air in the form of enhanced blood flow to the skin. The Armenians tend to have marked aquiline features, while the Azeris have the more regular features typical of Persians. The Georgians show the regular features also seen among the North Caucasians. Georgians and North Caucasians often have dark hair with light skin, though individuals who are almost brown can be seen. Aquiline profiles are also common. The Ingush are the tallest people in the Caucasus, while their kin, the Chechens, are among the shortest. The Circassians and Karachay-Balkars are famous for their beauty, with many individuals showing fine regular features, tall stature, and graceful movement. Among the Ubykhs and Circassians are many individuals with blond or red hair and pink complexions. The variety of its people reflects the region's complex history.

3. Language

Known as the Mountain of Tongues, the Caucasus is home to five language families, three of which are indigenous. In the north, four languages are spoken which belong to the Altaic family (which includes languages spoken across Central Asia and southern Siberia): Karachay, Balkar, Noghay, and Kumyk. These belong to the Kipchak Turkic branch. In the south two Turkic languages, Meskhetian and Azeri, are found, both belonging to the Ghuzz branch, to which Turkish and Turkoman belong. These Altaic languages show rich verbal inflection (person, tense, mood), and elaborate case systems

(alternation of the nouns to reflect their roles in a sentence), but are very regular and transparent in their formation. They have a pleasant, mellifluous sound. Only Azeri is a written language, and now uses a Latin based script.

Of the Indo-European family (which includes languages spoken from Ireland to India), the Slavic branch is represented by Russian and Ukrainian. The Kuban and Terek Cossacks speak Russian. These complex languages have large case systems that extend both to their nouns and adjectives, with many irregularities. Further, nouns come in three categories, called genders: masculine, feminine, and neuter. The Slavic verb is highly sensitive to “aspect,” the degree of completion of an action. There are more than a dozen verbs of motion that reflect subtle differences in movement. The languages are mellifluous, having unusual sustained intonation patterns that give them a song-like quality. One of their hallmarks is palatalization, raising of the tongue to produce a y-sound along with the main consonant. The Iranian branch is represented by Tat, Talysh, and Kurdish in the South, and by Ossetian in the North. This last is the sole surviving form of the language of the ancient Alans, Sarmatians, and Scythians, nomadic horsemen of Classical Antiquity. While retaining verbal aspect, much as does Slavic, the grammars of these languages have lost most of their case systems and have levelled out most irregularity. Only Ossetian has kept an elaborate case system due to neighboring Ingush and Chechen influence. Iranian languages make abundant use of fricatives (s- sh- and kh-like sounds). Armenian forms a distinctive branch of Indo-European in the south. In grammatical complexity it stands mid way between Iranian and Slavic. It is remarkable for its elaborate consonant clusters. Russian, Ukrainian, Ossetian, and Armenian are written languages. The first three use a Cyrillic based script, while Armenian has its own, distinctive national writing.

The Southern Caucasian or Kartvelian language family consists of Georgian, Mingrelian and Laz (collectively called Zan or Chan), and distantly related Svan. Only Georgian is written, using its own national alphabet. These languages have complex sentence formation (syntax), with Georgian and Svan being “ergative.” Ergative languages mark the person (or thing) undergoing an action by the absolutive case), whether it is done by the person alone (intransitive) or brought upon it by another (transitive). The person or thing that brings the action upon another is marked by a special case, the ergative. For example,(using English), a Georgian would say “the boy-absolutive sleeps,” but “the teacher-ergative bores the boy-absolutive.” If the action is incomplete, then the case marking switches with the subject in the absolutive and the object in a sort of geometric role (“dative” case), “the teacher-absolutive is boring at the boy-dative.” Word formation is highly irregular and highly unusual in that grammatical material is stuck both on the front and end of a root (circumfixation). The noun exhibits a large number of cases, while the verb inflects not only for person, but also for intentions, distinguishing between accidental, purposive, direct, and self-serving actions. The sound systems show difficult consonant clusters, as in mtskheta a place name, Tbilisi name of the capital (meaning ‘of the warm spring’), tqbili ‘sweet’, or prtkhili ‘careful.’ Long strings of vowels are also possible. A contrast between regular and back k-sounds occurs (transcribed as “k” versus “q”) . Glottal ejectives, characteristic of the Caucasus, also occur. These are consonants made with a slight popping sound by shutting the vocal cords and causing a momentary smothering sensation.

The Northeast Caucasian languages are also ergative. Most word modification is by means of attaching grammatical material to the end of a root (suffixation). The verb is relatively simple, in most cases not even inflecting for person, though some, as in Archi or Chechen, can be elaborate. Most complexity resides in the noun system, where large numbers of cases are used to denote almost every conceivable grammatical role or spatial relationship. Cases even have cases and can express, for example not only whether something crosses something else (the “translative”), but whether the crossing took place horizontally, or from above to below, or from below to above. Some languages, such as Lak and Tabasaran have nearly fifty cases, the largest such systems known

anywhere. These systems are suited for the geometric complexity of their mountainous environment. The nouns further belong to class systems. These are gender systems like that found in Slavic, but with as many as nine categories: male, female, neuter, animal, plurals, mass objects (sand, water, etc.), long objects, edible objects, etc. The sound systems have a profusion of fricatives (s-, sh-, or kh-like sounds), many of them gutturals (made in the back of the mouth or in the throat). One form of Aghul makes such sounds in more places than any other known language: at the soft palate (velars), at the back of the mouth (uvulars), at the back of the mouth with the throat contracted (pharyngealized uvulars), in the upper throat (pharyngeals), in the lower throat (epiglottals or adytals), and in the voice box (laryngeals). Prolonged consonants also occur, as do glottal ejectives, and rounded consonants (simultaneous kw, klw, or tw, for example). Many languages show a profusion of l-like sounds, (Archi has eleven), some of which are made in the back of the mouth. Consonant clusters are few. Elaborate vowel systems occur, with ordinary vowels (oral), vowels made with the nose open (nasalized), with the throat constricted (pharyngealized), or with the epiglottis lowered (adytalized). The languages of the Andi group (Andi, Botlikh, Godoberi, Chamalal, Bagwalal, Karata, Akhwakh, and Tindi), have tone (like Chinese), as well as breathy voiced vowels, and “stiff” vowels. Chechen and Ingush are written languages, as are Avar, Lak, Dargwa, Tabasaran, and Lezgi. Most recently Aghul, Rutul and Tsakhur have been raised to literary status. All languages use a modified Cyrillic script.

As complex as the South and Northeast languages are, the Northwest ones are more complex still, approaching what may be some sort of maximum. The family consists of Circassian, Abkhaz, Abaza, and Ubykh. Their syntax is ergative, but shows a wide range of alternative patterns depending upon the exact relationship of actor and object. The verb inflects for every noun in the sentence, as well as expressing a plethora of geometric information, by the unusual means of attaching a string of grammatical material to the front of the root (prefixation). Some sentences have two objects (ditransitives), while others have two subjects (causatives). In fact the verb is so expressive that conversations in these languages often turn into a series of verbs once the speakers know the nouns they are talking about. The case system on the noun is simple (Circassian, Ubykh) or absent (Abkhaz and Abaza). The vast majority of nouns, however, are made up of simpler terms. For example, in Circassian na-pa eye-nose means ‘face’; sh'ha-pq head-bone means ‘skull’; while wuna-pq house-bone is ‘frame of a house’ and woradi-pq song-bone is ‘melody’. The sound systems, however, are the most unusual feature of the family. All the languages have enormous consonantal systems, with rounded, labialized (simultaneous p-, b-, f-, v- or w- made with the sound), palatalized (raised tongue), and pharyngealized (squeezed throat) consonants made at almost every possible point in the mouth and throat. Kabardian is the minimum with 48 consonants, while Ubykh is the maximum with 81, (for example, Ubykh has 14 guttural, kh- or h-like, sounds and 27 sibilants, s-, ts-, sh-, ch-like sounds). These sounds also occur in elaborate clusters, especially in Abkhaz and Abaza. As hard as the consonants are, the vowels are harder still. This family is known for its “vertical vowel system,” in which vowels contrast only in degree of openness. By some analyses these languages have four, three, or only two vowels. Some linguists have even argued that the vowels of Kabardian are all predictable and therefore not really part of its sound system (phoneme inventory). Two dialects of Circassian serve as written languages, Chemgwi (West Circassian), and Kabardian (East Circassian). Both Abkhaz and the closely related Abaza are literary languages, while Ubykh, still spoken by a handful of people in Turkey, has been extensively documented by linguists and folklorists. The literary languages use highly modified Cyrillic scripts, while Ubykh has been recorded in an elaborated Latin one.

Scholars have tried to find links between various Caucasian languages and some of the languages of the Ancient Middle East and Anatolia, such as Hattic (with Northwest Caucasian), Sumerian (with Georgian or Daghestani), Urartean and Hurrian (with Daghestani). One such proposal that has attracted much interest and some support is that linking the Indo-European family with the Northwest Caucasian one.

Multilingualism is virtually universal among Caucasians. Nearly everyone speaks Russian in addition to their own language, and many have some command of several neighboring languages. The only people to be predominantly monolingual are the Russians, who tend to dominate in urban centers. The villages and countryside remain bastions of the native languages.

In the North as opposed to the South Caucasus the family name comes first and then the given names. In Russian practice this is reversed, but the original order is retained in the social practices of the individual peoples. The Circassians and their kin also have secret names known only to their family and intimate friends.

4. Folklore

The Caucasus is rich in folklore. In the southern highlands tales of a mountain sorceress, Dal, are widespread. She is beautiful and glowing, and is a protectress of the alpine wildlife, but she can also lure hunters to their doom. Other tales show strong Zoroastrian influences from Ancient Iran. In the North there are tales that recount battles with the ancient Goths, Huns, and Khazars, the last a Turkic people who ruled the Caucasus and adopted Judaism wholesale. One of the most noteworthy traditions is that of the Nart sagas, dramatic tales of a race of ancient heroes in which the figure of the all wise and all fertile Lady Satanaya is pivotal. She is mother to all the heroes and in many ways resembles the Greek goddess of love, Aphrodite. Other figures include a shape changer and trickster, Sosruquo. He is magically conceived by Satanaya when a shepherd lusts after her and is born aflame from a rock. The god of the forge, Tlepsh, seizes him with tongs and quenches him in a vat of water, thus hardening him and making him invulnerable everywhere but at his knees (much like the Greek hero Achilles), where the tongs held him. The mightiest and purest hero is Pataraz or Batradz, in some ways resembling Sir Lancelot of the Arthurian Romance. His father, Khimish, is murdered by the Narts for marrying a water sprite without their approval. They commit this murder in front of Khimish's mother, the worst possible atrocity in Caucasian eyes. Pataraz, still in his mother's womb, swears vengeance for his father's blood. When he is born the Narts abduct him and throw him into a torrent. He is washed away, found by a little old man and woman, and is raised in a burial mound. He quickly grows to maturity underground, and is in effect resurrected from the dead. He returns and first encounters a Nart ruler, Pshimaruquo, whose name means "Prince of Death." He triumphs over him and goes on to annihilate his enemies. There is also a giant or hero, Nasran, who, like the Greek Prometheus, is chained to a mountain top as a punishment for trying to return fire to humankind. There is a cyclopean giant, Yinizh, who traps some men in a cave just as the Greek cyclops Polyphemus did. He is blinded by the trickster Sosruquo, who thrusts a stake into the giant's one eye and escapes along with his men. These numerous links to the myths of Ancient Greece are matched by many to Ancient India and to Norse Scandinavia as well. There is even a sort of Christmas tree figure, Lady Tree, and a warrior 'Forest-Mother', Amaz-an, from which the Greeks took the figure of their women warriors, the Amazons.

There is also a wide spread belief in the western Caucasus in a wild man of the high mountain forests, especially among people who dwell in the upper villages. These hairy sub-humans are reputed to be about five feet tall and to travel in small family groups. Occasionally they are said to

come into the lowland fields at harvest time and feed on the ripening ears of corn. Men are said to be very brave if they can go into the high forests and trade with these wild men, because after having met with one or two of them in a clearing to offer trinkets they run the risk of being ambushed by the whole band as they return through the high, dense rhododendron forests.

5. Religion

The nation states of Georgia (Georgian Orthodox Christian), Armenia (Armenian Orthodox Christian), and Azerbaijan use religion as central components in their identity. The first two claim to be the oldest Christian nations and have nationalist churches. Azerbaijan is Shi'ite Muslim (Azeri Turks and Georgian speaking Ingiloi), Sunni Muslim (southern Lezgi Daghestani peoples), and Albanian Christian Orthodox Christian, now a branch of the Georgian patriarchate, (the small Udi community). These nation states feel a sense of privilege in comparison with the smaller peoples of the Caucasus and have used their religion as a part of their pride. The Nagorno-Karabagh war, 1989-1995, was triggered by and accompanied by serious ethnic clashes between Azeris and Armenians that resonated with religious and ethnic hatred.

By contrast religious tolerance is one of the strongest features of the North Caucasus, and so Christians (Orthodox), Muslims (Sunni), Jews, and pagans can be found living side by side. Even during the recent wars in the North, religious hatred never emerged as a motive. The highlands also had mystical traditions of meditation and martial arts which in the east have become Sufi practices. In Daghestan holy men often have shrines, usually placed at the highest point of the village. Pagan elements persist throughout the Caucasus and many Abkhaz are avowedly pagan. Religion is always socially and conceptually subordinated to ethnic identity throughout the Caucasus.

There are enigmatic relics of older beliefs. For example, Ossetia preserves "beehive" mortuaries made of flat stones, that must reflect an older, local religion of unknown character. Most skulls from these mortuaries show deformation due to head binding practices. Daghestan shows many old beliefs surrounding animals, such as snakes, horses, and especially the bear. This last totemistic animal is associated with sacred rocks and even a half-bear half-man creature. Sacred rocks of "heaven" are also mentioned in some of the Nart sagas of the Northwest Caucasian Abazas. These are considered the heaviest stones and might even have been nickel-iron meteorites.

6. Rites of passage

Apart from Muslim and Orthodox Christian rites of circumcision and christening, there are no rites of passage into adulthood. Both boys and girls were considered mature at the age of sixteen. Marriage is the chief change in life for both men and women. As a sign of maturity young men are allowed to grow moustaches. Old men sometimes grow beards as a sign of their stature as elders.

In the Northwest special membership in hunting bands carried with it knowledge of a special language for its male members. In old Circassian this was she-ko-bzahunt-er-language. In Abkhazia a woodsman language is still used. There are spotty reports of a woman's language that seems to have been spoken until recently across the entire North Caucasus. One old Ossetian related how his mother and sister would speak in a monosyllabic language with tone (like Sumerian of Ancient Mesopotamia)!

7. Major holidays

These are those of the Orthodox Christian and Sunni, Moslem faiths. The Northwest Caucasians (Circassians, Ubykhs, Abazas, and Abkhaz) in the diaspora mark deportation day (28 May 1864), the anniversary of their expulsion from the Caucasus. In Daghestan the "first ploughing" at "New Year's" in the spring is widely celebrated with a ritual ploughing of a furrow by a bull and with festivities, races, and tests of strength.

8. Interpersonal relations

In all Caucasian societies siblings were supposed to be married in the order from oldest down to youngest. In all cases the bride went to live in the extended family of her husband (patrilocal marriage). Whether arranged or through love, marriage was viewed as the linking of two families. Accordingly, matters of social rank between them were frequently of concern.

Marriage was by abduction among the Northwest Caucasians. These were often prearranged by the couple in love. Mock abductions are still performed. A leather corset with many knots was worn by the bride for those prearranged abductions. After the first night the man had to present this corset with its thongs intact to both families as a sign of his courtesy to his new wife and of his restraint. Marriages often took place when the couple was in their thirties, which is extraordinarily late. Premarital life was filled with decorous and discrete romance. Young girls had a room in their family homes in which they were free to entertain their suitors. Trysts were arranged for an amorous young couple by the youth's maternal uncle, while a young woman's well being was the responsibility of her brothers. In Ossetia, marriage was generally for love, the couple marrying in their twenties, but family rank was still an important factor. In the Northeast Caucasus marriages were usually arranged, with young people marrying in their teens. Brides were subservient to their in-laws. In the South Caucasus, a similar pattern was followed in Armenia, where family negotiations and an "engagement" of their teenage children were begun as early as two years before a marriage. Brides were subservient to their mothers-in-law and had to observe a ritual silence in their new families, often for years. In public their faces were veiled or even tightly wrapped in silk until they had a child. Among the Georgians, young people marry by mutual consent in their twenties, with civic and church ceremonies. The bride is supposed to have an agreeable, but respectful relationship with her in-laws. Among the Azeris, couples marry in their twenties. Rural marriages are usually arranged, but even those urban marriages that are motivated by love are expected to take place between families that are well known to one another or are even related to one another. The latter case is unique in the Caucasus, where strict exogamy (marriage outside a clan or lineage) is otherwise the rule.

Throughout the Caucasus hospitality to strangers is one of the foremost social imperatives. Lavish feasts are given for guests, with strangers or distant kin being the first greeted and closer kin second. In theory the host would even give his life to defend a guest. In return, the guest is expected to act discretely and respectfully to his host and so bring honour to the host's family. Even a prisoner of war or an enemy could be treated hospitably if he had shown great valour. In the midst of a duel, it was possible for one adversary to seek a suspension of hostilities for a period of time as long as several days. The combatants would then resume their struggle at an agreed upon time and place. This chivalric code has been eroded by modern warfare.

Two other marked features are found throughout the Caucasus. First, elders are revered. The old are expected to have full and passionate lives. A woman, however, is cautioned that "a man past 100 is

no longer much of a man.” The elderly also have economic roles in the community, sorting fruit or tending to gardening, which permit them to contribute without taxing their powers. Young people are greatly honored to wait upon or care for an elderly member of their clan or their community. Many peoples have a chorus or dance troupe in which all the members are one hundred or more years old. They have special dances and distinctive songs.

Second, women enjoy high social prestige and sexual freedom. They are seen as the sources of fertility, social grace, and even intellectual knowledge. Until recently a woman could halt the most vicious fight simply by tossing her scarf between the two men. People who are attracted to one another or who admire one another can declare themselves to be “milk” brothers or sisters. Such a bond can cross gender lines. An older man can declare a woman to be his younger sister. He then assumes serious responsibility for her welfare. What is unusual in the Caucasus is that women have the right to initiate such altruistic friendships with men or even embark upon sexual ones if they do so discretely. Such overtures are difficult for the man to reject, because then he would be rejecting her whole family, so women accordingly do not make overtures lightly. One opener is for the woman to ask to borrow a pen or other small item even when it is obviously not needed. To comply is to show interest. To be chosen as a “milk” sibling is one of the greatest honours that can be bestowed upon some one by a Caucasian. Such bonds last for life and have all the force of true kinship. Often a man and a woman who cannot marry for some reason will instead form a life long bond in this way.

In Daghestan a woman can still have such milk brothers , but her sexual prerogatives are more circumscribed with the prowess of the menfolk being more important. This can be shown when the men set water buckets out on their porches in the evening for nocturnal ablutions after sexual intercourse: the bigger the bucket, the greater his presumed sexual prowess. Some men even set out two. The somewhat lower rank of the women in Daghestan correlates with a greater economic burden of toil on their part.

9. Living conditions

These are relatively good in the South and Northwest where the land is verdant, but are difficult in the Northeast where mountain deserts dominate. Life in the high reaches of Daghestan is especially harsh due to the prolonged winters and barren land. Men go on long outings to earn money in the lowlands, while the women remain behind to maintain the households through strenuous work. One advantage to living in the highlands is that every step is either up or down and the resulting exercise contributes to many people being long lived, with ages well over 100 frequently being claimed. Whatever their age people are often extremely strong and youthful looking.

The Northwest Caucasian house is long with one floor, much like a ranch style home. It was made of wattle covered in clay daub. Villages were formed of compounds containing a main house and several out buildings, including guest housing, that originally were strung out like necklaces along river banks. Tower fort homes were common in the highlands of Svan territory (Svanetia), of Ossetia, and in the Circassian and Abkhazian highlands. These striking buildings, sitting within a walled yard, were made of stone with a first floor for livestock, a second floor for humans, and a high tower in which all could take refuge when under siege from a blood feud. In Ossetia, Ingushetia and Chechnia villages are composed of clusters of houses, some quite large, that accommodate three or four generations of a family. The Northeast Caucasian stone houses run on top of one another, the roof of the lower serving as the porch of the upper, as they cling to hill sides to form compact villages called auls. The Andi aul of Muni is so compact that it forms one giant building with enclosed streets. Houses in such auls usually were made of local stone and had two floors: the first for livestock, the

second for people (also to be above the snows). Villages in the south have a more open pattern, with extended families occupying one or two story houses.

The cities, many of which were founded as Cossack forts, have a blend of older nineteenth century housing and modern Soviet high rise apartments. Most of these cities are attractive, with large parks and tree lined boulevards.

10. Family life

Extended, patrilocal families were the norm across the Caucasus. In the highlands people often live to be very old, so that great grandparents or even great great grandparents are part of the family. Children must respect elders and older siblings. Brothers have very close, protective relationships with their sisters. Boys have very close ties with their maternal uncles, while they have relatively formal relationships with their fathers. This is part of the Cherkess kinship system, where the husband's relationship to his wife is formal, the wife's bond to her brother is spontaneous and deep. The eldest man is master of the extended family unit in so far as he rules over disputes or regulates social relationships with the outside world. Within the confines of the home, however, the eldest woman is supreme and runs the details of the household. Often she works hard to organize feasts, supervising her daughters-in-law or even poor female relations who may come to help, but she can be rewarded after the dinner by having her family and guests gather outside the kitchen to applaud her while she takes a bow.

Family life is further integrated into the community by tight networks of clans and blood lines. These are centered around villages in Daghestan, where such clans will have their own tea houses in which their members gather. Clan houses are merely meeting houses among the Chechens and Ingush. With the Ossetians, Northwest Caucasians, Mountain Turks, and Armenians, clans are vital to social organization and have local "seats", but clan houses do not exist. In Georgia a loose network of noble families serves a similar function, with clans being absent. In Azerbaijan, clans and wider social structures are lacking. Even here, however, extended families have a social reality and structure such arrangements as marriages.

The clans were also the base for the blood feud or vendetta. Customary law, called adat, stipulated that if a member of one clan killed or even accidentally brought about the death of a member from another, then every man in the offended clan had the obligation to restore "the balance of life" by killing the man responsible, or if that was too difficult, another male from the killer's clan. This obligation passed down the male line for seven generations. There were only four ways to stop the bloodshed. First, one clan eventually killed all the males of the other, a tragedy which sometimes happened. Second, a blood price was stipulated, usually in livestock, and the offending clan was able to meet this demand. Third, an exalted social figure, an elder or an Imam (Muslim cleric), forced the offended clan to renounce their obligation or risk taking the blame for humiliating him in turn. Sometimes this peace maker would have to threaten suicide to force such a renunciation. Fourth, the killer could sneak up on a woman from the victim's clan, seize her, tear open her blouse, and place his lips to her breast. Such an act, however fleeting, would suffice to create a kinship bond between the two clans which precluded further bloodshed. This was not an easy feat, because many Caucasian women will fight and sometimes are armed with small daggers. During war, vendetta was suspended so that men could form an army and fight beside their blood enemies. In recent decades Soviet courts had begun to assume the roles of arbiters of justice in such cases, but with the collapse of Soviet authority vendetta is reemerging.

In the Northwest Caucasus princely and noble families practiced fosterage: they would give their sons to trusted retainers to be reared. This was nearly the highest honour which a retainer could know, because it linked his family to that of the nobility by fictive kinship bonds. The highest honour was when the foster child refused to return to his natural family at sixteen years of age, but chose instead to remain in the household of his foster parents.

11. Clothing

Distinctive to the Caucasus and borrowed by the Cossacks is a man's garment called the "cherkesska." This is a robe like suit, tightly fitting on the upper torso, and flaring out from the waist, with long flaring sleeves. On either side of the chest were sewn on cylindrical pockets arrayed in a row for cartridges or to hold small cases of gun powder for a musket. A long sleeved, high collared satin shirt is worn under it, together with fitted trousers. In the Cossack variant the trousers are baggy. As the name suggests, this dashing outfit originated among the Circassians ("Cherkess" in Russian). Over it can be worn a heavy, rectangular sheepskin cape, the burka, which can even serve as a makeshift tent. In Daghestan sheep's wool leather coats with long sleeves dangling below the hands were common as well. Lambs wool hats are worn, some high and cylindrical, others shorter and flaring, some shaggy and spherical, depending upon the region. Footwear, for riding, consists of soleless boots that resemble a leather knee sock. No man was considered dressed without a long dagger, the kinjal, hanging from a narrow leather belt.

The traditional woman's garment is a long, flowing gown, with pendant sleeves, and either a high, crown-like hat, or a low boxy hat with a trailing scarf attached to it. Shoes are pump-like slippers without backs, but in older times noble women wore platform shoes. Northeast Caucasians had woollen sweater like tunics and heavy socks and mittens to ward off the winter cold. Daghestani women often wore baggy trousers and tunics. Daghestani, Chechen and Ingush women often wear head scarves, sometimes hanging far down their backs, but they do not wear veils. Women often wear pendant earrings, necklaces, and bracelets. Some Daghestani women wear large broach-like pieces of silver on their foreheads attached to their head scarves. Outside Daghestan modern dress is now the rule except for parties or festivals when formal attire is worn. This formal attire is the traditional costumes of either sex.

12. Food

Outside Daghestan food is relatively plentiful and varied in the Caucasus: Chicken, mutton, cornmeal and millet mush with lumps of meat or cheese, all seasoned with garlic or in the South with hot spices, as well as yogurt, a walnut paste, fruits, water melons, wine, cognac, and millet beer. One popular dish that has spread beyond the Caucasus is "chicken Circassian," which consists of a cornbread covered with ground chicken mixed with onions and walnuts, and topped with a cream garlic sauce. Pre-Soviet diets were low in fat and people were slender. Now, the diet is high in fat and starch, and people thicken with age. This is considered a regrettable development. One item that reflects such changes in diet is ground liver spread in a layer and then topped with a layer of lard. The whole is rolled up and then sliced and served like a jelly roll. Though feasting could last for days and drinking was heavy, over eating or drunkenness were considered disgraceful lapses in etiquette. The clan or community feast was an important affair, and was run by the tamada (a Circassian word that has spread across the Caucasus, up into Russia and down into Iran). Invariably a man was elected. He determined seating, and set the tempo for courses and drinks. People are judged by the eloquence and moral force of their toasts, women also being permitted to offer them. Only the Aghuls of Daghestan stand apart in that no toasting is done at their feasts. Daghestanis are

noted for grinding their grains after they have begun to sprout. This practice enhances the vitamin content of the flour.

13. Education

All children are reared from an early age to observe formal etiquette, to honour elders, and to dance. In the highlands, training in hunting and stalking was important. Lower down, training in the details of horse breeding was often vital. Formal education is in the larger native languages up to high school, but then is usually in Russian. Up until the Russian conquest the religious universities (Medrassas) of Daghestan were renowned throughout the Muslim world. While the Russians discouraged such institutions, they did introduce wide spread literacy in both Russian and in many of the native languages. The Russians also opened up the Caucasus to modern urban culture and science. The Caucasus can boast a high percentage of scientists, intellectuals, and artists.

14. Cultural heritage

The Caucasus has been a refuge for many peoples who were driven out of the steppes of Eurasia. It has preserved many values and customs that seem ancient. With the Russian conquest and with the advent of modernity, Caucasians face many challenges to their heritage and sense of identity. One dominant theme emerges from the array of local concerns. All Caucasians wish to be a part of modern culture in some sense, even those who are otherwise staunchly Muslim. Theirs is a desire to enter upon the stage of world culture as a respected and distinct form of civilization. They feel, rightly so, that they have much to offer. They have trouble, however, in sorting out the details and of finding new roles for old values. An ongoing debate centers upon how to reconcile the imperatives of the old customs, such as vendetta and hospitality, with the modern need for flexibility and compassion.

They have a range of difficulties in constructing a modern identity from their warrior heritage. They are still outstanding fighters, but urban culture offers them roles and goals that are new. Furthermore, the diaspora and the home populations have differing needs. The former seek to retain or revive aspects of identity in their new homelands, chiefly Turkey, while the latter try to find viable roles for older customs in the new urban centers established by the Russians. This problem is especially acute in the North. Despite these challenges, however, certain core traits still form part of the heritage of most Caucasians: a fierce love of freedom, the honouring of elders, keeping of one's word, showing hospitality, showing restraint, feeling the imperatives of vendetta and vengeance if not often acting upon them, forming fictive kinship bonds (milk siblings), avoiding a mercenary attitude toward money, adhering to old home territory if in the Caucasus, observing proper conduct and etiquette, and cultivating good humour and a sharp wit.

Other aspects of Caucasian heritage are the dance. Music at one time was played on violins and oboe-like instruments, but now clarinets and accordions are preferred. Drums, gourd rattles, and wooden clackers form the rhythm section. Long horns (like the Swiss alp horns) were used in Ossetia to communicate between valleys. Poetry recitals are another important aspect. Women as well as men can be bards in the Northwest. In times past in Daghestan, bards (only males) would hold contests in eloquence, with the loser reputedly loosing his head, literally.

Another vital heritage that has been carried down to modern times is an elaborate tradition of herbal medicine. This is especially active in Daghestan among the men, and in the Northwest highlands among the women. It has spread into Russia and Turkey along with Caucasian immigrants

and is a highly valued service among the population at large. Its practice is open only to the initiated, so that scholars or doctors have yet to study these remedies and techniques.

15. Work

This is specialized by gender across the Caucasus. Men work with livestock and in the open fields, whereas women tend gardens, thresh grain, do household chores, and tend to sewing. Men will do metal working and leather tooling. In Daghestan women, young and old, can often be seen carrying enormous loads of hay or kindling on their backs, or large jugs of water on their heads. Children and the elderly are given tasks suitable to their abilities that contribute to the prosperity of the village. Despite the gender based specialization, both sexes accord mutual respect to their roles.

Some groups show trends toward careers that carry on older cultural specialties. Many diaspora Caucasians have become military leaders in Russia, Turkey, and the Middle East, following the earlier example of the Circassian Mamelukes (non-Muslim warriors hired by Muslim rulers) who ruled Egypt in the 13th to 15th centuries. The Circassian Sultan Kutuz of Egypt was the first to defeat the Monghols during their onslaught in the early 14th century. The same family name was born by General Kutuzov of the Tsarist army who defeated Napoleon five hundred years later. 'Kutuz(ov)' is still a common name among the Chechens. One odd effect of this warrior heritage is that you cannot offer to help a Caucasian man without offending him, since such an offer implies that you see him as unequal to his task. He must ask you for help. Another effect is the heavy emphasis throughout the Caucasus on etiquette and proper conduct in order to curb the excesses of the warrior code in normal social life.

Other diaspora Caucasians have become skilled machinists, pharmacists or physicians. In Turkey the Ubykhs, for example, who were known for their healing skills back in the Caucasus, are frequently doctors in Turkey. Others raise horses, while others are merchants.

16. Sports

A popular reworking of the old warrior ethic appears to be soccer, the most popular sport in the Caucasus. A close second is wrestling, which combines a kick-boxing like manner of fighting, perhaps descended from the older mystical martial tradition of hand to hand combat. Caucasian dance has the quality of a sport, demanding enormous strength in jumps and leaps, and attended by a pervasive grace. The men twirl, strut, and leap with a proud bearing, while the women glide and swirl in a demure manner. Arm motions are an important part of the dance, with one straightened arm held upward and the other downward with the hands flexed at the wrists. Chechen dance adds to these features one that exemplifies the Caucasian virtue of self control. While the woman glides about, the man whirls around her, moving in and out. At unexpected moments he will shout abruptly and powerfully into her face or ear, and if she is a skilled dancer, she will neither flinch nor even bat an eye. Even the very young and the very old have their own dances, and so can participate in this activity. Skill at horseback riding and horse racing are popular. Skill with knives and sabres is seen as a great achievement. One of the most spectacular feats is to cut through 21 oranges (the product of two magical numbers, 3 and 7) with a sabre without moving even one of them. It is achieved by slowly pulling the razor-sharp sabre toward you while you sweep it through the lined up oranges. The nobles of the Circassians, Ubykhs, and Abkhaz still practice a martial art form. From the age of twelve they toughen their hands by thrusting them into huge bags of clay. In olden days they were said to have been able to thrust their hands into an enemy's body and rip out his heart. The rule was "in a fight don't get close to a noble."

17. Entertainment and recreation

Many of the cities have national museums, theatres, and dance troupes based upon local ethnic customs. These are well attended. Music, dance, and bardic recitation are still popular forms of entertainment. The arrival of a guest is an opportunity for such entertaining, as well as for feasting with a tamada. In the highlands hunting boars and badgers, stags and bears, is a popular pastime.

18. Folk art, crafts, and hobbies

The peoples of Daghestan are famous for their woven rugs, tapestries, and textiles, with each ethnic group having its own distinctive patterns. The peoples from the Northwest Caucasus make felt rugs and folk costumes, as well as leather goods, including saddles. Their favoured decoration is a pleasing open exfoliate pattern (resembling leaves and vines). Poetry is an active folk art, with some groups, such as the Abaza, producing volumes of popular poetry by hundreds of amateurs. Some groups, such as the Kubachis of Daghestan, are famed for their metal working. Kubachi metal goods, including swords and daggers, are considered among the best examples of Islamic metal working in the world. Many Daghestani peoples supplement their meagre economies with home knitting (socks, mittens, sweaters). These are often done by hand in a matter of hours or days by the women, and they are then sold in Georgia or in Russia by the men.

19. Social problems

The problems faced by Caucasians, both in the Caucasus and among the diaspora, are numerous and acute. In the Caucasus endemic violence, dislocations in social structure, new and seemingly arbitrary borders, sharp ethnic rivalries, the recovery of lost practices and identities, and a coming to terms with the Communist legacy are all problems that must in some sense be solved. In the damaged hierarchical Northwest Caucasian societies, where there were princes, nobles, freemen, and slaves, there is chronic struggle for prestige and rank, since former princes and nobles no longer command deference from former freemen or slaves. In North Ossetia problems center around ethnic identity and union with the South Ossetians. North Ossetians are highly Russified, but have been brought up short in this evolution by the influx of roughly thirty-five thousand conservative South Ossetian refugees. Northeast Caucasian societies are also hierarchical except for the Chechen, Ingush, and Lezgi. In this region the major problem is balancing the competing claims of the numerous ethnic groups. The Chechens face the acute problem of rebuilding after the disastrous war with Russia and of normalizing their relations with the vastly more numerous former imperial masters whom they have nevertheless driven out. These tasks are made harder by the horizontal organization of Chechen society into clans. Chechens are not accustomed to following a hierarchical authority, even when it is their own. Georgian society has endured an acute economic collapse, with South Ossetia and Abkhazia only loosely part of the new nation after having fought wars of secession. The role of the old Georgian noble families is being revived and reappraised in an effort to enhance social cohesion. Armenia and Azerbaijan are locked in a stalemate over Nagorno-Karabagh, with Armenian forces holding more than a fifth of what was Azerbaijani territory. Azerbaijan has embarked upon a strategy of an ethnically and religiously homogeneous social identity which seems ill suited to accommodate the Lezgi, Tsakhur, Kryz, Budukh, Khinalug, Ingiloi, or Udi peoples who live within its borders, not to mention the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabagh.

Wars have adversely affected Georgia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Ingushetia, Chechnia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Nagorno-Karabagh. Preventing renewed or future hostilities and rebuilding in the

aftermath of those that have already happened will be a major challenge for the future of the region.

These same wars have reawakened ethnic identity among the diaspora Caucasians in a vivid and abrupt way. These people face their own array of social problems. First, is finding an accommodation for their newly revived identities within their host countries, not to mention finding tangible forms for these identities after six generations spent in exile. Second is native literacy among the diaspora. There is a renewed desire both to publish in the languages of their heritage, as well as to learn and to preserve them. The last few Ubykh speakers in Turkey, for example, are the center of an effort to revive this small people. Turkey has shown political tolerance and innovation by permitting its large Caucasian minority to establish a North Caucasus Studies Center, and to record these languages. A limited amount of publishing in the Caucasian languages is also allowed. Jordan and Israel have long allowed their Caucasians language rights. The diaspora offers the promise of assisting the other Caucasians through trade and investment. If patience and wisdom prevail, the old tragedy of the ethnic cleansing of the Caucasus may yet prove to be the foundation for the salvation of the mountain peoples.

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