

Abstract: While the cosmopolitan turn in political and literary theory encourage us to move beyond national frameworks, the Caucasus remains mired in the ethno-national categories of the Soviet past. This essay examines how these categories are being mobilized in the service of a nominally cosmopolitan agenda in the contemporary memorialization of the writer and critic Mirza Fath 'Ali Akhundzadeh (1812-1878). My discussion focuses on Akhundzadeh's house-museum in contemporary Tbilisi, the renovations it has undergone, and the uses to which it has been put over the course of the past decade. I consider how bringing together the divergent trajectories of Akhundzadeh's legacy (in Soviet, Azeri, and Iranian literary and intellectual history) can foster a robust cosmopolitanism that moves beyond the normativity of the nation as the basic unit for writing literary history. This example shows that when the literary history of the Caucasus is viewed from outside nationalist paradigms, its geography appears less marginal, and its margins more central, to world literature than our current literary geographies envision.

Keywords: Tbilisi, cosmopolitanism, cosmopolitics, nationalism, Soviet, post-Soviet, empire, postcolonial, Persian, museums, Akhundzadeh, Akhundzadah, Akhundov, Caucasus, Iran

Memorializing Akhundzadeh: Contradictory Cosmopolitanism and Post-Soviet Narcissism in Old Tbilisi

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As many commentators have noted, the Soviet Union created one of the most multi-ethnic transnational communities known to human history. This multi-ethnic community promoted local identities in new ways and to degrees unknown under tsarist rule. Yet the promotion of local identities often transpired amid unprecedented persecution of ethnic minorities, whereby groups were systematically targeted for extinction based on their language, culture, religious affiliation, class, background, and beliefs. Such was the paradox of communist cosmopolitanism, which, as Ray and Outhwaite (2016: 59) argue, “is not an oxymoron but more like a complex mixture of contradictory elements which some might like to call dialectical.” While the Soviet experience extended “the moral and political horizons of people, societies, organizations and institutions” (Delanty 2012: 22) of the peoples who were shaped by it,

cosmopolitanism was never fully realized as a Soviet project. Soviet remained a utopian vision in the sphere of culture, and an ideology that was selectively and strategically deployed only when its deployment suited certain political interests. Hence, communist cosmopolitanism as a political project remained aspirational, yet culturally significant, and dialectical in the sense of being embedded yet never wholly manifest.

Nowhere in the Soviet Union was the dialectical dimension of communist cosmopolitanism more fully realized than in the Caucasus. This essay considers how the city of Tbilisi, the capital of the Republic of Georgia, engages with its cosmopolitan pasts and while seeking to generate a cosmopolitan present. I pursue this inquiry by exploring the changing imagery and function of the house museum of the Azeri writer Mirza Fath-Ali Akhundzadeh (1812-1878), who is among the most important writers, not only in the Caucasus, but within both Persian and Azeri Turkic literatures. By way of better situating the importance of Akhundzadeh's literary legacy, I briefly review the history of cosmopolitanism in the Caucasus, with a specific focus on its internal contradictions, following which I turn to the house museum as a bearer of this legacy.

Caucasus Cosmopolitanism

Often marginalized within existing geopolitical frameworks, the Caucasus is often symbolized as a "land bridge connecting Eurasia with the Middle East between the Black and Caspian Seas" (Kemper 2007: 117). This bridge unites Asia and Europe, Islam and Christianity, and Russian, Iranian, Ottoman and other imperial formations. Tbilisi, located in the center of the Caucasus, and with a geographic placement that confounds the division between an Ottoman-Persianate South and a Russian north, is the central element in this structure. By absorbing a series of imperial projects, the city has helped to keep the entire structure intact. As Georgia's

ancient capital, Tbilisi has witnessed a wider variety of colonial conquests than have most urban centers. From the Sasanians to the Saljuqs, Mongols, Ottomans, Safavids, and Qajars, Tbilisi has been a prime destination for most of the empires that converged on it during its lengthy history.

What happens in Tbilisi has always been linked to what transpires in the metropolitan centers of power. Yet the city has only recently come to figure centrally into Georgian literature. Prior to the Safavids (1501-1722), Georgian literary production was concentrated in western Georgia, in close proximity to Byzantium. More cosmopolitan than ethnically or nationally Georgian, Tbilisi has never wholly belonged to any single ethnic group. Rather, it has functioned as a site of rebellion, dissent, and cultural exchange for multitudes of different peoples. The city's distance from the imperial centers of St. Petersburg, Moscow, Isfahan, Tehran, Istanbul, and other imperial centers facilitated substantial divergence from official positions and views, and enabled it to function as a refuge to dissidents of many different regimes and orthodoxies. As a result of this complicated history, Tbilisi has historically set the terms for a cosmopolitanism specific to the Caucasus. When we think together about the Caucasus and the Soviet dispensation, we end up with a cosmopolitanism so internally various that it tests the limits of this word itself. Cosmopolitanism in the Caucasus is the "in between that unites and divides peoples at the same time" (Ray and Outhwaite 2016:42). Particularly during the Soviet period, cosmopolitanism in the Caucasus came to be "inextricably bound up with...internationalism and patriotism, yet not reducible to either" (Clark 2011: 5). The tension between these two categories, which are necessarily in conflict and necessarily coeval with each other, are brought into focus by the legacy of Mirza Fath 'Ali Akhundzadeh.

The life and legacy of the Azeri writer Mirza Fath 'Ali Akhundzadeh illustrates well Tbilisi cosmopolitanism's contradictory trajectories. Often lauded today as the pioneer of a new

mode of critique within Iranian thought, Akhundzadeh's biography intersected only sporadically with Iran (a country he visited only twice) in geographic terms. Yet, as scholars past and present have attested (Ādamīyat 1970), Akhundzadeh's influence on Iranian intellectual history was disproportionately huge. Akhundzadeh has been credited with, among other accomplishments, introducing the very concept of modern critique, with an unmistakably European etiology, to modern Persian literature (Parsinejad 2003: 44). Born in the village of Nukha, in the province of Shekhi in a part of Azerbaijan that was to be annexed by the Russian empire during his lifetime, Akhundzadeh was as influenced by literary developments within Russia as within Iran. He dedicated his life to translating these influences into Azeri and Persian. He did this, however, not from his native Shekhi, but from cosmopolitan Tbilisi, a city that during the nineteenth century was better known for its contributions to Armenian, Persian, and Azeri literature than for its contribution to Georgian culture. Himself a proponent of anti-Arab sentiments, Akhundzadeh also propounded a cosmopolitanism comprised of Persianate and Russian cultures. He believed in modern scientific learning, even—perhaps especially—when it contradicted religious faith.

As controversial as Akhundzadeh was during his lifetime, his legacy in Soviet times is even more contradictory, and in a way that brings to light tensions internal to the cosmopolitan ethos. During the Soviet era, Akhundzadeh was made to symbolize values he could hardly have envisioned representing. His name was invoked to support the violent suppression of the Arabic script, authoritarian modes of governance, censorship, and a militant opposition to religion. At the same time, Akhundzadeh's polemics laid the groundwork for the erasure of pre-colonial Islamic pasts that transformed the Tbilisi landscape during the Soviet period and generated new aesthetics across the Soviet ecumene, from Ajaria to Dushanbe. This article explores the contradictory uses made of Akhundzadeh's cosmopolitan legacy, including in particular its

material realization in the his house museum, and the memorials to Akhundzadeh scattered throughout Azerbaijan. Notwithstanding his canonicity within Soviet literary historiography, Akhundzadeh's legacy bears multiple contradictory meanings, which this essay seeks to unpack.

Museums and Memorials

I first came to know Mahmed Gulmahmedov, an Azeri scholar, author, and keeper of the museum, in 2005, while I was residing in Tbilisi. I was visiting the Azerbaijan Cultural Center and Akhundov House Museum in the heart of Old Tbilisi's Bath District for the first time, and saw him immersed in writing in an office tucked away on the second floor. As he reported to me, Gulmahmedov created this institution in 1996 by securing the return of artifacts that had been held by the Georgian National Museum on Rustaveli Avenue.

Abanotubani (as the Bath District is locally known) epitomizes the core strands of Tbilisi cosmopolitanism. The museum is located between the colonial-era Botanical Gardens and the Blue Mosque (figure 1) on a street named in honor of Vaxtang I (r. 447-522), the Georgian hero-king whose biography seems fashioned after the legends of Sasanian kings, as recorded in the medieval Persian romances of Nizami of Ganja (Allen 1932: 77; Rapp 2014: 271). Vaxtang I, whose statue majestically overlooks the Mtkvari Rivers that encircles Old Tbilisi, is also known as Vaxtang Gorgasali, meaning "wolf head," in recognition of his distinctive helmet, "bearing the face of a wolf" (Hass 2014: 30). According to legend, King Vaxtang founded the city of Tbilisi in the fifth century of the Common Era. Out on a hunting spree, his falcon wounded a bird, which fell into a hot spring and perished. In order to memorialize this event, King Vaxtang cleared the forests surrounding the hot springs and built there a city, which he named for the springs, *tpili* meaning "warm" in the Georgian language. A nominal ending was grafted onto

tбили, whereby it came to denote the city of Tbilisi. The street named in Vaxtang Gorgasali's honor marks Old Tbilisi's bathing district as the symbol origin of urban life in the Caucasus.



(Figure 1) The Blue Mosque in Tbilisi's Bath District, near the Akhundov Museum. Photograph by author.

The writer, critic, and translator Mirza Fath 'Ali Akhundzadeh lived in the building that is now his museum from the age of twenty-two, when he moved to Tbilisi to work in the tsarist administration as a translator of Oriental languages. An image of Akhundzadeh from his period in Tbilisi (figure 2) offers a visual representation of how he merged his Caucasus identity with the professional identity that enabled him to serve as a civil servant of the Russian empire.



(Figure 2) Akhundzadeh in Caucasian clothing and Russian regalia. Image held in Institute of Manuscripts, Baku, now in the public domain.

Akhundzadeh lived in the house on 17 Gorgasali Street from 1834 to the end of his life in 1878. During these forty-four years of his residence in Tbilisi, he managed to become the most important Azeri critic and writer during his lifetime. Born into a family of Shi'a clerics, and in the expectation that he would follow the path of his predecessors, Akhundzadeh rebelled against his religious upbringing and decided to become a writer (Ādamīyat 1970: 143). He created an uproar in 1837 with his first publication, an elegy on the death of the Russian poet Alexander Pushkin, with whom he strongly identified. Originally composed in Persian (Ākhūnduv 1958), his “Eastern Elegy on the Death of Pushkin [*marsiye-ye sharq dar vafat-e Pushkin*]” was immediately translated by the author into Russian prose and published in the journal *Moscow Telegraph*. He dedicated his translation to Baron Rosen, commander-in-chief in the Caucasus from 1831 to 1837, a figure well-positioned to support the career of a budding author such as Akhundzadeh.

Although the Pushkin poem has the formal features of a *qasida* (ode), the Persian title situates this text within the more personal genre of elegy (*marsiya*). Whereas the *qasida* could function in Persian literature as a celebratory panegyric, the *marsiya* is by definition a poem of mourning. The title is revealing for other reasons than its choice of genre; in labelling his text an “eastern elegy [*marsiye-ye sharq*],” Akhundzadeh signals that his intended audience has limited knowledge of the original. A Persian readership would not have needed to be told that the poem is of “eastern” provenance. The “eastern” geographical label is a clear sign that, notwithstanding its having been originally composed in Persian, the readership uppermost in Akhundzadeh’s mind was Russian. Hence the poem marking Akhundzadeh’s entrance into the world republic of letters is a text composed specifically for translation, in this case into Russian.

Best known to Soviet literary history by the Russified version of his name, Akhundov, Akhundzadeh is arguably the most influential figure in nineteenth century Persian and Azeri intellectual history.¹ Many of his propositions, such as reforming the alphabet through a simplified Arabic script, were radical for his time, and reflect an original (if idiosyncratic) interpretation of European thought. While Akhundzadeh's anti-clericalism endeared him to the Bolsheviks, his love of Russian literature endeared him to the tsarist administration. What is most striking about Akhundzadeh's ideas, however, is how gives them imaginative expression through a wide variety of genres and forms. In addition to poetry and polemical essays, Akhundzadeh's writing took the form of satirical plays that have inspired comparisons with Molière and a fictional exchange, *The Letters of Kamal al-Dawla* (1865), that bears comparison with Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* for its epistolary form and satirical content. In the process of fashioning himself as a creature of the European Enlightenment, Akhundzadeh alienated many of his more traditional colleagues, while also winning many allies. His work functioned as a barometer of dissent throughout the Soviet period and remains controversial to this day.

The wall facing Gorgasali Street bears a plaque in Akhundzadeh's honor in Georgian, Azeri, and English (figure 4). The museum attempts to reconstruct the rooms as they were known to Akhundzadeh. Especially after renovation, the size and scale of its ambitions exceed that of the many writers' shrines that populate the former Soviet Union. Using Akhundzadeh as a cipher for a form of cultural interaction much larger than him, this museum memorializes the foundations for a contemporary Azeri-Georgian symbiosis by reshaping narratives about the past. The narrative of cross-ethnic exchange is both Soviet in its etiology and post-Soviet in its pragmatic insistence on cultural links even after the collapse of an overarching political framework within which such links can be sustained. This form of cosmopolitanism is also

¹ For recent work situating Akhundzadeh within Iranian intellectual history, see Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, *The Emergence*

specific to the Caucasus, a region notorious for its “narcissism of minor differences,” to borrow the phrase Ignatieff (1999) adapted from Freud. Already in 2005, Gulmahmedov dreamed of fostering dialogue between Azeris and Georgians by organizing conferences, lectures, poetry readings, and performances for members of both ethnicities. He wanted to make the museum he created embody Tbilisi’s cosmopolitanism, wherein peoples of divergent cultural backgrounds could come together and create together new modes of culture.

These dreams were mere abstractions when I visited in 2005. By the time I returned in 2013, the Akhundov Museum had become a fixture within the new post-Soviet cosmopolitan imaginary, that was however heavily inflected commercialism. It housed an art gallery, a wine cellar, and a café named after one of Akhundzadeh’s plays, *Monsieur Jordan*. Even as it commemorated Azerbaijan’s most famous writer, the building has also acquired the accouterments of market capitalism. It has come to symbolize a confluence of cultures under the banner of transnational (and neo-liberal) capital. Within such a framework, the accumulation of capital becomes a self-sufficient end that prevails over the ideology of the state. In this particular juncture of post-Soviet Old Tbilisi, the Soviet aesthetic has been replaced by cosmopolitan consumerism.

The renovated house museum introduces new commercial opportunities as well as new possibilities for cultural exchange. The changes are manifested in the languages through which the museum’s various publics are addressed.² In 2005, the rudimentary website for the house museum had been in Azeri, Georgian, and English, with Georgian as the default. By contrast, the flashier website of 2013 was accessible in only two languages: English and Georgian, with English as the default. No Azeri version was made available, and English was the dominant

² I have been following the museum’s activities since 2005, and during that period none of the various websites have been active for more than a few years. As of January 2018, there is no dedicated website for the museum online.

language on every page. Even on the Georgian version of the site, the twenty-two-page menu for the Monsieur Jordan Café is in English only. The menu did not exist in local languages such as Georgian, let alone Azeri. Such discrepancies reveal the commercialism driving the renovations, which cater above all to tourists and the income that their visits bring.

At first glance, the art gallery and a café named for one of Akhundzadeh's most famous plays might appear to foster a more cosmopolitan spirit than the Soviet-style nationalism that emphasized state policy over aesthetic expression. But, here as elsewhere, Tbilisi cosmopolitanism emerged within a framework dominated by the "narcissism of minor differences" that the Soviet system helped to foster in the Caucasus. The Georgian poet Vazha Pshavela captured this dynamic well in a 1905 essay that argued for the compatibility of two seemingly opposed ideologies, cosmopolitanism and nationalism. "No one can love ten thousand places," wrote Vazha.³ "We are only born once," he insisted, "in a single and unrepeatably place, into a single family. Anyone who claims to love every nation to the same degree, and in the same way, is for Vazha either "a liar...a hypocrite, crazy, or barred from speaking the truth by the doctrines of his political party." Although he regarded Georgian literature as the common heritage of humanity, Vazha was also emphasized the singularity of his love for his country.

Like many Georgian and Azeri writers of his era, Vazha's analytic powers absorbed the age's cosmopolitan ethos even as his feelings followed the circuits of nationalist sentiment. In insisting on the interdependency of cosmopolitanism and patriotism, Vazha anticipated Martha Nussbaum's (2002) approach to the cosmopolitan imperative. To his way of thinking, cosmopolitanism's lofty moral goals can never replace the more intimate affection for one's home. Indeed, even many apparently post-nationalist theorists of cosmopolitanism recognize that

³ Vazha-P'shavela, *T'xzulebat 'a sruli krebuli at' tomad* (Tbilisi: Sabch'ot'a Sak'art'velo, 1964), 9: 252-254. This work has been published as "Cosmopolitanism and Patriotism," trans. by Rebecca Gould *Asymptote* 23 (2016).

“cosmopolitanism sometimes works together with nationalism rather than in opposition to it” (Robbins 1998: 2). In light of the persistence of the nation as a locus of solidarity within even avowedly cosmopolitanism agendas, it is imperative that we recognize the multiple ways of being cosmopolitan that emerged from the Soviet and post-Soviet experience.⁴ In the absence of such differentiation, there is a danger that the celebration of cosmopolitanism may obscure the persistence of old nationalisms. The notion of Tbilisi as a cosmopolitan crossroads, and Akhundzadeh as a locus for it, is among the aspects of the cosmopolitical project that merit further scrutiny.

Alongside Soviet efforts to conjoin the cosmopolitan and the national, capitalist accumulation has introduced a new framework in the post-Soviet period. The reception and memorialization of Akhundzadeh illustrates well how, in post-Soviet modernity, nationalism, cosmopolitanism, and capitalism are uncannily intertwined. Among the more striking illustrations of this entanglement is the wax figure of Akhundzadeh, created and imported from Madame Tussard’s wax museum in London, and now centrally located within the Café Monsieur Jordan (figure 3). Artificial yet aesthetic, this figure reminds viewers of the author’s connection to his domicile. Through its depiction of the writer at work, it also reinforces the centrality of learning to the reformist agenda. Having enumerated some of the preliminary considerations that inform any contemporary consideration of cosmopolitanism, I now turn to the museum’s urban setting: Tbilisi, a city that has long had the reputation as the center of cosmopolitanism in the Caucasus (Van Assche and Teampau 2015; Frederiksen 2012).

⁴ Although only one of its chapters is explicitly concerned with Soviet cosmopolitanism, the essays in Bhambra and Narayan (2016) offer a promising foundation for such a differentiated framework.



(Figure 3) Wax figure of Akhundzadeh in Monsieur Jordan Café. Photograph by author.



(Figure 4) Akhundzadeh memorial plaque in Tbilisi. Photograph by author.

Tbilisi as a Cosmopolitan Crossroads

Like Odessa, Trieste, Isfahan, and Aleppo, Tbilisi has long been regarded as a crossroads, of empires, religions, languages, and cultures. Historian Stephan Rapp (2014: 2) locates Tbilisi within what he calls the “Iranian commonwealth,” in the process of documenting how “the entire corpus of early Georgian literature is encoded with elements of the Irano-Caucasian nexus.”

While Tbilisi’s Iranian links date back millennia, Persian culture in Tbilisi developed in unique and distinctive ways under the Qajars and, following the annexation of Georgia to the Russian empire in 1801, under the tsar. During this period, Armenian merchants lived side by side with Georgians, Turks, and Iranians, in tall wooden houses along the banks of the Mtkvari River, which flows through the city, circling around the high-perched Sioni Cathedral and past the

statue of Vaxtang Gorgasali. By serving as a home for generations of Azeri writers and critics, Tbilisi influenced the literary nineteenth century Azeri Turkish literature more directly than did Baku, the provincial capital of the Republic of Azerbaijan itself and the center of the oil industry. Like their Armenian and sometimes Iranian counterparts, many Azeri writers, including Akhundzadeh, travelled to Tbilisi for education and enlightenment and gradually came to think of the city as a second home. The city's demographics enabled them to continue writing and publishing in Persian and Azeri without needing to learn Georgian. The Georgian poet and critic Ioseb Grishashvili eulogized this cosmopolitan world in *The Literature of Old Bohemian Tbilisi* (1927–1928). The Armenian, Turkic, and Persian writers whom Grishashvili described knew Tbilisi better than many Georgians, committed the city's urban landscape to memory, and recreated its streets and rivers in their memoirs, diaries, songs, and poems.

Tbilisi's status as a stimulus to cultural exchange in Azeri, Armenian, and Persian has long been recognized by scholars. The poetry of Sayat-Nova (1712-1795), whose poetic compositions in Armenian, Georgian, Azeri Turkish were brought to life in Sergei Parajanov's classic film *The Color of Pomegranates* (1969), is only one of the better known examples of multilingual literary production on the streets of Old Tbilisi.⁵ And yet, Georgia's debt to Azeri culture is consistently ignored within Georgian literary history itself. According to stereotypes prevalent among many Georgians, Azeris are ignorant and primitive, while Georgians themselves are civilized and refined. This disdain further complicates the concept of Tbilisi cosmopolitanism. Having internalized many Orientalist tropes, Georgian literary histories frequently relegate traces of "eastern" and Muslim culture to a civilizational backwater and make affiliation with such traditions a source of shame. Yet, as Vaxtang's biography suggests,

⁵ This legacy is discussed in Zaza Shatirishvili, "A Word About Tbilisi Culture," trans. Rebecca Gould *Film International* 23.4.5 (2006): 48-51.

Georgians from antiquity onwards existed in a relationship of debt and intimacy to the Iranian and Islamic cultures that had nurtured, sustained, and instructed the most important poets of the Georgian literary tradition: Rustaveli, Teimuraz I, and Besiki. Among other Tbilisi monuments, the walls of the Georgian National Museum, which are covered with paintings produced by Georgian painters at the Safavid court, belie the narrative of cultural antagonism that nonetheless structures the contemporary popular Georgian imagination, and which infuses any cosmopolitan tendencies with the flavor of nationalism.

While the post-Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan often finds itself in political opposition to actions taken by the Republic of Georgia cultural proximity is not undone by such political tensions. Literary culture in the Caucasus has proven to be more various, and more difficult to predict, than has political animosity. Even among writers such as Vazha Pshavela who link cosmopolitanism and nationalism, the patterns and aesthetics of literary production challenge the monolithic perception of minor differences. Although he was among the most articulate exponents of nationalist affect, Vazha also authored works such as *Aluda Ketelauri* (1888), an epic poem that narrates the development of friendship between a Christian Georgian mountaineer and a Muslim Chechen (known in Georgian as Kist).

Alongside their engagement with Muslim mountaineers to the north, Georgian poets from the plains drew inspiration from Persian verse forms while Azeri writers migrated to Tbilisi in search of European learning. The modernist poet Titsian Tabidze (1893-1937), whose writings memorialize cosmopolitan Tbilisi, was among the group of Georgian poets who were most keen to emphasize how their adopted city had been shaped by outsiders to Georgian culture. Although, like his cousin Galaktion, he was born in western Georgia, near Kutaisi, most of Titsian's poems were set in Tbilisi, which became the locus of his cosmopolitan poetics. Titsian (as he is known

in Georgian scholarship) invoked Sayat-Nova in his “Ode on Tbilisi” (1923), as his literary predecessor. Addressing Tbilisi in the second person voice, Titsian declaims:

თავი შეგაკვლა საიათნოვამ, უცხო სომეხმა,
გემრიელ წყალით ნაქებია მველადვე მტკვარი,
და თუ შენ ახლა პოეტისგან მოგესმის შესხმა,
ეს გედი მღერის – ყელწაჭრილი და ცოცხალმკვდართ.
მე ვარ მიმინოა ხახამშრალი და კაპოეტი,
მე ვარ ტფილისის აგონიით მკვდარი პოეტი...

The foreign Armenian Sayat-Nova gave his life for you.
The Mtkvari River nurtures as before.
If you hear praise from a poet, if the swan sings,
know that its neck is slit in a death lock.
I am your falcon, empty-handed, destitute,
I am a poet, broken with Tbilisi’s agony.
(Tabidze 1966, 3: 153)

Although he refers to Sayat-Nova as a “foreign Armenian” (*utsxo somexi*), in insisting that this poet “gave his life for you,” Titsian indicates that Tbilisi’s Armenian and Turkish inhabitants contributed more to the city than did many Georgians who were born there. With such words, Titsian reveals Tbilisi’s foreignness to itself, and brings the city into focus as an urban space populated by non-Georgians. Titsian’s xenology supports the views of cultural anthropologists who remark on the tension in Georgian cultural memory between the country’s nominal political autonomy and its long history of succumbing to demands from more powerful neighboring countries and empires to the north and south. Although “semi-independent, the country was from [the thirteenth century] onwards under shifting foreign domination,” notes Frederiksen (2012: 122). And yet even the empires that wielded hegemony over the Caucasus politically often exercised this hegemony in cultural domains in non-coercive, or at least reciprocal, ways; they took much from Georgian culture, but they also bequeathed a great deal in the way of genre, literary language, and aesthetic form. The competing claims of cultural hegemony from Safavid, Ottoman, and Russian sources are reflected in the oeuvre, as well as the

legacy, of Akhundzadeh. An iconoclast who rejected prejudices from times past, particularly when they pertained to religion, Akhundzadeh's creations gripped the Azeri and Russian imagination for the duration of the Soviet period. They also, in less unchartered ways, gripped the literary imagination and critical spirit of readers in Iran (Gould 2016).

The Museum Renewed

Dr. Gulmahmedov's stories complicate the commonplace view, propagated among the contemporary Georgian intelligentsia as well as in universities abroad, that Georgia's most salient cultural ties are with Europe. In fact, Georgia has close historical and cultural links to Iran in the south, and to the north, where the Muslim mountaineers of Daghestan, Chechnya, and Circassia produced texts in Arabic, Persian, Turkic and vernacular literatures for millennia. The confluence of European learning, which him through Russian, and Persian learning and in many of Akhundzadeh's writings speaks to the ability of his geography to bring together strands of culture that elsewhere were separated from each other.

The dialogue transcribed below combines my exchanges with Dr. Gulmahmedov, during 2005, when the museum was under repair and closed to the public, with the exchange during my last visit in 2013, after the museum had opened its doors again. Our conversations took place primarily in Russian (we therefore referred to the writer by the Russified Akhundov rather than by his name in Azeri, Persian, and Georgian, Akhundzadeh), with some Georgian interspersed. The new Akhundov Museum (figure 5) reflected the many infrastructural changes that had taken place in the Bath District over the course of the past decade.

During my second trip, Gulmahmedov was busy welcoming visitors passing through, which left less time for conversation with me. Our first meeting revolved largely around Akhundzadeh and the circumstances leading up to the creation of his museum. Our second

conversation focused on the status of Azeri culture in Georgia today, with concluding thoughts on Gulmahmedov's own contribution to Azeri-Georgian cultural exchange.



(Figure 5) Exterior of the Akhundov House Museum. Photograph by author.

Remembering Akhundzadeh: An Interview

Let's start with the history of this museum. When was it founded and by whom?

This building housed a museum called “Friendship of Peoples [*druzhiba narodov*]” during Soviet times. The museum included an exhibit dedicated to Akhundov, but mostly it was about friendship between the peoples of the Soviet Union. Then the Soviet Union fell apart and [the Georgian President] Zviad Gamsakhurdia came to power. He liquidated the museum and ordered that everything relating to Akhundov be moved to the Georgian National Museum on Rustaveli Avenue. I don't know whether his decision was good or bad, but that's what he ordered. After that, the Friendship of Peoples Museum became the Museum of Musical Instruments. They installed a piano in the room next door, and brought in clarinets, harps, and drums.

What do musical instruments have to do with Akhundov?

Absolutely nothing. Akhundov's artifacts were interred with the Georgian National Museum until 1996. On that year, we sent a letter to President Shevardnadze, asking him to return the artifacts to us. To our surprise, Shevardnadze agreed to return everything. I founded

the Azerbaijan Cultural Center and Akhundov House Museum with the artifacts that were returned to us.

Does the Georgian government provide funding to keep the museum open?

No. We get all our money from Baku. They paid for the latest renovation of the museum that has been going on for the past eight months. I thought it would already be over by now, but the repair job they did was quite awful.

Does the cultural center hold events relating to Azerbaijan culture while the museum is closed?

Yes, on the 15th of every month, we organize an event here in the museum. All are welcome to attend. Azeri, Georgian, and Russian are all spoken. Mostly Azeris attend these events, but Georgians visit us as well. We had an event dedicated to the Georgian writer Sixvarulidze and others engaged with furthering cultural relations between Georgia and Azerbaijan.

Can you tell me about Mirza-Fatali Akhundov?

He was one of the most important, and, along with Najaf Bey Vezirov⁶, probably *the* most important Azeri writer of the nineteenth century. Akhundov was born in the town of Sheki [in northern Azerbaijan] in 1812, and died in Tbilisi in 1878, where he is buried.

What languages did Akhundov know?

He knew Persian and his knowledge of Azeri made it easy for him to understand Turkish. Most Azeri intellectuals of his time were polyglots.

What genre was Akhundov most successful in? I know he wrote poetry, prose fiction, historical and philosophical essays, and well as plays.

⁶ Najaf bey Fatali oglu Vazirov (1854-1926) was a Moscow-educated writer of plays and criticism, who passed most of his life in Baku. Like Akhundzadeh, Vazirov was known for his biting satire and anti-clerical views.

Akhundov is best known as the founder of Azeri drama. No other Azeri writer wrote plays with such brilliant and incisive wit. Thanks to him, Azeri theatre flourishes to this day. We just opened an Azeri-language theatre here in Tbilisi one month ago. The first production will be of a play that I wrote, which has already been staged in Georgian. It's called "God Save Us from Unpleasantness." The theatre is located on Gorgasali Street no. 1, near this museum.

Do you mean to say that until a month ago, there was no Azeri-language theatre in Tbilisi?

An Azeri-language theatre was created soon after the October Revolution [of 1917], but it was closed down in 1938. After that closure, Azeris were unable to hear plays performed in their native languages.

How do Azeris today remember Akhundov? What do they think about his critique of Islam?

Akhundov was an atheist. He was too progressive for his time. When he was studying at a *madrassa* in Ganja, his teacher, a mullah and famous Azeri thinker named Mirza Shafī Vazeh [1794-1852] noticed his student's talent and told him he was too smart to bury himself in a strictly religious education. He advised him to leave school and see more of the world.

Akhundov took the wise mullah's advice. He had nothing good to say about religion. One of his most famous works, *Three Letters from the Indian Prince Kamal al-Dawlah to the Persian Prince Jalal al-Dawlah* [1865] deals with the negative effect of Islam on the development of Eastern civilization.

Many Azeris do not agree with what Akhundov wrote about Islam. Between you and me, many religious people who think they are pure and holy criticize Akhundov for his hostility to religion, but they will never reach Akhundov's level of wisdom. They don't understand what

Akhundov had to say. When they judge him, they manifest their own ignorance. Akhundov was the kind of man who said what was on his mind and did not worry about the consequences of being honest. He got into trouble many times because of his straightforward, honest heart.

Akhundov was not the only Azeri writer to make a home for himself in Tbilisi. Who else moved from Azerbaijan to Tbilisi to write?

There was Celil Memmedquluzade [1866-1932], known here as Mullah Nesreddin, after the Azeri-language journal that he founded.⁷ *Mullah Nesreddin* was a satirical newspaper, distributed throughout the Caucasus and Iran, which Memmedquluzade published in this very building in which we are sitting. That was before the October Revolution.

Who is Mullah Nesreddin? Why did he choose that name for his newspaper?

Many Turkic peoples claim Mullah Nesreddin as part of their own tradition. He's a joker, a wise man who makes fun of the pretensions of the world. Kazan Tatars and people from Central Asia will tell you that Mullah Nesreddin belongs to their literature, but we have our own Mullah Nesreddin.

It was also here in Tbilisi that the famous German writer Friedrich von Bodenstedt [1819-1892] met Mirza-Fath Ali Akhundov. They struck up a close friendship, and when Bodenstedt returned to Germany, he translated Akhundov's poetry. He neglected to mention that the poems were translations and presented Akhundov's writing as his own. So every German school child is now familiar with the writing of Mirza-Fath Ali, but not many of them know who is the author behind these texts. They think they're reading Bodenstedt, when they're actually reading Azeri literature in translation.

⁷ The journal *Mullah Nesreddin* was published in Tbilisi from 1906-1931 (so mostly during the Soviet, not tsarist period, as stated in the interview).

[I returned to Tbilisi in the summer of 2013, and visited the newly renovated Akhundzadeh House Museum, which was finally open to the public. I began by asking Gulmahmedov about the status of Azeris in Georgia today. The conversation soon turned to his own writing and literary activities.]

Approximately how many currently Azeris live in Georgia?

300,000 Azeris live in Georgia, and 20,000 live in Tbilisi. Azeris in Tbilisi speak three languages: Azeri, Georgian, and Russian. Overall, there are happy and well adjusted to the Georgian environment. Azeris have always looked upon Georgia as their second home. The government treats them well, and they have strong cultural roots in Georgia, especially in Marneuli [in southern Georgia]. The mosque in Old Tbilisi is the only one in the Caucasus where Shiites and Sunnis pray together.

Which Sunnis are attending the mosque? Arent the Azeris Shi'a?

They are all Azeris, of course. Some Azeris are Sunni, but in Azerbaijan they go to separate mosques. Here, we all worship together, and everyone is happy.

Do Azeris marry Georgians?

Most often, when there is a mixed marriage, it is an Azeri man marrying a Georgian woman. Such occurrences are rare because it is a violation of the Quran to marry someone of another faith. I have nothing against it, however. Akhundov's daughter came here several years ago to Tbilisi. She was living in Japan at the time and was married to a non-Muslim man. The local Azeris invited her to go to the mosque. She said her father would roll over in his grave if he found out his daughter was attending a mosque, and she could never permit herself to do such a thing. Then she returned to Japan, and we never heard from her again. I don't know whether she is alive or dead.

She was the last of Akhundov's descendants. As far as I know, she didn't have any children. Akhundov's other child, a son, died before his time, while he studying in Switzerland. He was an historian, and his correspondence with his father was recently published.⁸ Akhundov and his son wrote to each other in Azeri and Russian. His son didn't have any children either, so as far as I know there is no one left in the world who is a direct descendant of Akhundov.

Let's turn to the conversation to you. The last time we spoke you mentioned that the Azeri theater was staging a play authored by you. Are you primarily a playwright?

Yes. I write other things besides plays. My book called *Georgians in Azerbaijan* was published seven years ago. It's about the Ingiloi, ethnic Georgians who live in Azerbaijan but have maintained their language and cultural traditions.⁹ Many of them have converted to Islam.

What language is the book written in?

Georgian.

Do you consider Georgian your native language?

My native language is and will always be Azeri, but when I write for a Georgian audience, write in the Georgian language.

What other sorts of work have you published?

I'm a scholar as well as a writer and dramatist. I defended my doctoral dissertation in Tbilisi State University in 1986. It was called *Azeri Schools in Georgia*.

How do you find the time to fulfill all your responsibilities?

⁸ Gulmahmedov is likely referring to the Azeri-language edition of these letters: *Räşid bāy Axundov: mäktublar, sänädlär, tärcümälär, mäqalälär*, eds. Häsän Häsänov and Mämmäd Adilov (Baku: Nurlan, 2003), which was earlier published in Russian: *Perepiska Mirzy Fatali i Rashid-beka Akhundovykh*, eds. G.A. Gasanov and E. A. Dzhamilzadeh (Baku: Giandzhlik, 1991).

⁹ For the Ingilo, see Elizabeth Fuller, "The Azeris in Georgia and the Ingilos: Ethnic minorities in the limelight," *Central Asian Survey* 3.2 (1984): 75-85.

I don't believe people who say that they don't have time. What is time? It can be conjured at will. Often, people who never have time for anything are the least productive because they're afraid to concentrate on things more important than time. I always have time to do what I want, and if I don't, I create the time I need.

What writers have influenced you? Does Akhundov inspire you?

I read everything Akhundov wrote many years ago. Now, I prefer to read contemporary writers, such as Chingiz Guseinov.¹⁰

Doesn't Guseinov write in Russian?

Azeri is his native language, but most of his works are in Russian. He used to live in Russia, but he recently moved to Azerbaijan.

What is your opinion of the quality of political life in contemporary Azeri society?

What kinds of differences and similarities do you see between Azeri and Georgian society?

Georgians are socially and politically progressive compared to Azeris. They criticize their leaders and never praise them blindly, as many Azeris do today when they speak of [the Presidents of Azerbaijan] Heydar and now [his son] Ilham Aliev.

When I was in Baku everyone spoke of the Alievs as though they were gods, incapable of making a mistake. Educated parents insisted that their children proclaim their love for their president, even when they were too young to know what love meant. And in Baku Slavic University, portraits of Putin hang in every corner, alongside portraits of Heydar Aliev. They remind me of icons in a church.

In these respects, Georgian society is far ahead of Azeri society. Azeris have been accustomed to living and thinking like slaves for too long. They don't ask their leaders the hard

¹⁰ Born in 1929, Chingiz Guseinov is the author of, among other works, *Mahomet, Mahmed, Mamish: a novel*. Translated from the Russian by Antonina W. Bouis (New York: Macmillan, 1978).

questions that need to be asked within a democracy. [The current President of Azerbaijan] Ilham Aliev is no enemy to me, but you have to look every man in the face and judge him by his actions rather than his prestige or authority. This applies particularly to a president who determines the fate of a country. There is no justification for choosing to live as a slave.

Akhundzadeh beyond the Nation

Here our conversation ended, with Gulmahmedov's indictment of his own people. Coming from a self-professed nationalist, who went so far as to rewrite the historical record in order to lionize Akhundzadeh's significance to German literature (by claiming that Akhundzadeh's poems were known to every German school child), this criticism of Azeri politics was unexpected. Yet it resonated with the many balancing acts between nationalism and cosmopolitanism that characterize literary culture in the Caucasus, since the beginnings of the colonial dispensation, and arguably before that as well. In part, Gulmahmedov's testimony afforded evidence of the enduring legacies of Soviet ideology, which united cultures otherwise divided by religion, language, ethnicity, and cultural memory, and crafted a sense of solidarity from disparate parts.

I did not dispute Gulmahmedov's history, notwithstanding its many obvious historical inaccuracies. During our conversation in 2006, Gulmahmedov had confused Akhundzadeh with his teacher Mirza Shafi ī, whom the German Orientalist Friedrich von Bodenstedt had also met in Tbilisi. Bodenstedt transcribed and translated Mirza Shafi ī's poems into German, and published what was to become "one of the biggest successes in 19th century German publishing," *Die Lieder des Mirza Schaffy* (Songs of Mirza Shafi ī), in 1851 (Sidorko 2002: 286). Bodenstedt later claimed to have authored the poems by himself and stated that he had only attributed them to Mirza Shafi ī for the sake of adding an exotic allure.

Accustomed as I was to impersonal registers of academic discourse, Gulmahmedov's invented antagonism between Azeri literature and this German writer seemed like an ill-informed revival of the narcissism of minor differences that permeates post-Soviet Caucasus literary histories, wherein every national tradition asserts its preeminence over the others. It was strange to observe the iconoclastic works of Akhundzadeh turned into an occasion for cross-cultural rancor and ethnic triumphalism, given his staunch resistance to provincial and his militant cosmopolitanism, which seemed to reject every form of affiliation that was hegemonic during his own lifetime. Yet this rewriting of Akhundzadeh's legacy offered a lesson: even as Akhundzadeh is memorialized as a paradigmatically Azeri writer, his role in creating a cosmopolitan Caucasus is suppressed, not least by the museum tasked with guarding his memory. Hence, Akhundzadeh is remembered as Akhundov in Azerbaijan: an Azeri playwright, while, within Iran, he is remembered as a maverick thinker who set Iran on path of genuine critique, which was cut short by the Islamic Revolution.¹¹ Astonishingly, the Soviet and Iranian Akhundzadeh never intersect.

Although they refer to the same writer, Akhundov and Akhundzadeh represent divergent literary trajectories. While Akhundov's cosmopolitan outlook is obscured within a Soviet and post-Soviet Caucasus that remains subjugated to the hegemony of Russian, Iranian writers too frequently appear unable or unwilling to conceptualise Akhundzadeh's non-Iranian origins. For Iranian readers, as for many Europeans and Americans, the Caucasus is an indeterminate zone somewhere between Russia and Europe, but never wholly a geography in its own right. A case in point is the analysis Farzin Vahdat (2002), who places Akhundzadeh's writings outside mainstream Iranian history when he states that "Akhundzadeh wrote *from abroad*, from the Caucasus which had recently been annexed by Russia in the treaty of 1828, while he was still an adolescent" (42). Vahdat's turn of phrase assumes that Akhundzadeh somehow belongs to Iran,

¹¹ For this latter genealogy, see Gould 2016.

without being able to explain the paradox of why, if Akhundzadeh belongs to Iran, he never actually lived there. This representational paradox reveals the underlying national dimensions of much Iranian cosmopolitanism. Another way of reading the situation would be to say not that “Akhundzadeh wrote *from abroad*,” but instead to recognize that he was both *alien and native* to Iranian intellectual history, at the very same time.

Titsian was keen to claim every foreign influence that intersected with the Caucasus as local to it, and to internalize this foreignness within Georgian literary history. By contrast, Vahdat’s analysis glosses over the fact that one person’s “abroad” is another person’s homeland, and Iran has no exclusive claim on Akhundzadeh’s literary legacy. Nor of course, does the Caucasus, for Akhundzadeh was much more than a regional writer, and one purpose of this essay has been to showcase how Akhundzadeh’s legacy has been impoverished by a certain kind of post-Soviet capitalist cosmopolitanism. In a sense, Akhundzadeh was a perfect exemplar of the Persian literary tradition. This tradition is unusual within literary history in that it has no precise linguistic referent in the Persian language itself, meaning that there is no single word in Persian to describe the concept to which the English word “Persian” refers. Persian is thus an imaginary (but neither false nor artificial) geography used in English to describe the concatenation of Farsi and Dari into a single literary language. While in practice, there was a reality of Persian culture across South, Central, and West Asia, linguistically this tradition rarely represented itself in such a totalizing manner as scholars, taking their cue from other global literary histories, are inclined, and even compelled, to represent it today.

Akhundzadeh’s fate is common to many Persian writers from the Caucasus whose cosmopolitanism reached beyond and the nationalist paradigms, including ‘Abbas Quli Agha Bakikhanuf (Gould 2019) and ‘Abd al-Rahim Talibuf (Gould 2018). Such writers conceived of

themselves as belonging to the broader Persianate world rather than to the Iranian nation-state, which is often the only connection in which they are remembered today. While much recent scholarship has broadened our understanding of the geography of Persian literature, the Caucasus is too frequently treated as marginal within this new cartography. The time has arrived for reconceiving the meaning of cosmopolitanism within the literatures and cultural life of the Caucasus, during and including the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. When the literary histories of the Caucasus cease orienting themselves to the nation, and when Iranian intellectual history becomes inclusive enough to recognize the broad sphere within which it circulated, then will the geography of the Caucasus appear less marginal, and its margins more central, to the more urgent tasks of cosmopolitics and thinking beyond the nation, as well as to the writing of world literature.

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