

## Modern American Anthropologists' View of Culture and Correlated Attitude towards Caucasian Traditions and Values

Tamar SHIOSHVILI\*

### Abstract

The United States functions symbolically as a hyper-present model of culturally plural or multicultural nation. American adaptation of multiculturalistic approach is comparatively new though, and contradicts the melting pot principle, which meant melting of different cultures of immigrants in one pot at the initial stages of the creation of the new nation. In recent times we observe that some American cultural anthropologists modify the traditional definition of culture, that only peoples who speak different languages, not dialects – have distinctive cultural patterns.

According modern scholars every identity group that shares a similar pattern of perceptions constitutes a culture. Following this approach, while considering the Caucasian traditions and values, even within a big traditional cultural group, we can single out culture of unit identities and explore how can communication between smaller groups can be encouraged, in order to increase national communication, that is so vital for coping with one of the most complicated regions in the world – Caucasus, with many different peoples.

**Keywords:** Ethno-cultural, identity, traditions, national communication

### Introduction

The world is shrinking in diverse ways at an incredible rate. Alien and often intimidating groups are coming into contact with each other at an increasing rates. Isolation is unimaginable. More people are living and working and studying among people of different cultures today than at any previous time in history. That experience can be made easier and more productive if we better understand culture, perceptions and human behavior. And although intercultural communication may be a difficult task, it is not impossible.

In an enormously interrelated world, the United States functions symbolically as a hyper-present model of a culturally plural or multicultural nation of individuals with complex identities. This American adoption of multiculturalism is comparatively new, although. The theory of multiculturalism is contradictory to the melting pot principle, which meant melting of different cultures of immigrants in one pot at the initial stages of the creation of the new nation, probably a more accurate argument for the Americanization process.

The U.S. continues to be regarded across the world as the paradigmatic nation of immigrants and as a place where transformation of ethnicity and identity are obvious. Thus the theory of multiculturalism emerged as contradictory to the melting pot myth described as a principle of assimilation – a process of consistent integration when members of ethno-cultural group are “absorbed” into an established generally larger community,

and it presupposes a loss of all or many characteristics which make the newcomers different. Whereas, in the multicultural approach, each ingredient retains its integrity and flavor, while contributing to a successful final product. So, as time passes, the tendency of generalized character of the definition of American culture is getting more disintegrated nature.

As an example, I'd like to discuss Marshall B. Singer's approach, who according some anthropologists is destroying the concept of culture. Singer considers useful to talk about the culture of each group and then examine - for each total society – the groups that comprise it. Each society is certainly different from every other society, but that is because no two societies contain all, of the same groups and only those groups (Singer, 1987).

He pushes the concept still further. He argues that because no person is a part of all, and only, the same groups as anyone else and because each person ranks the attitudes, values, and beliefs of the groups to which he/she belongs differently, each individual must be considered to be culturally unique. He is not arguing that every person is a culture unto herself or himself, as culture is a group-related phenomenon. What he is arguing is that each individual in this world is a member of a unique collection of groups, that no two humans share only and exactly the same group membership, or the exactly the same ranking of the importance, to themselves, of the group membership they do share. This

\* Prof. Dr., Faculty of Education and Humanities, International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia  
E-mail: tshioshvili@ibsu.edu.ge

means that every interpersonal communication must, to some degree, also be an intercultural communication. According to Singer, this conclusion might be unacceptable by some anthropologists. I'm dubious about this statement and agree with Alfred G. Smith\* who argues, that most of the journals, texts and syllabuses focus on the individual and personal level of communication, the street floor of human interaction: face to face, eyeball to eyeball, nose to nose, and maybe heart to heart. The world needs better human relations, but that depends on alleviating poverty, ignorance, injustice, and war, and that cannot be done on the interpersonal level. It takes better economic conditions, a job for everyone, freedom, and peace. Some Protestants and Catholics in Belfast may achieve some personal accord with one another, but that does not solve the basic discord in their country. Peace and justice between peoples are not gained at the level of personal adjustment. Intercultural communication between Black and White, Arab and Israeli requires rearrangements of political and economic institutions.

When societal environments improve and people can take care of themselves and their families, then there is some foundation for better interpersonal relations (Smith, 1982, pp. 252-262).

### What is Culture?

All of us must eat, drink, sleep, find shelter, give and receive affection. But what we eat, when we eat, and how we eat are all behaviors we have acquired from the group in which we have grown up. Not only the language we speak and the way we think but what we see, hear, taste, touch, and smell are provisioned by the cultures in which we have been raised.

Every culture has its own language, code. Language is the demonstration – verbal or otherwise – of the perceptions, attitudes, values, beliefs, and disbelief systems that the group holds. Language, once fixed, further compels the individual to perceive in certain ways. So, to my mind language is one of the ways in which groups preserve similarity and perception. Genetically, we inherit from our parents those physical traits that discern us as their progeny.

Surely, there is a great deal of individual difference, physical, and empirical, but there is great deal of likeness. The son of two white parents will always remain white, no matter in what circumstance he will appear after birth, but the son of two English-speaking parents may never speak English if instantly after birth he is brought up by a totally non-English speaking group. Thus while physical inheritance is comparatively inalterable, cultural inheritance may change.

Although there is theoretically an almost limitless number of possibilities, the number of group learned experiences to which most individuals are introduced is amazingly restricted. For example, the overwhelming

majority of individuals, who have a chance to explore the whole world, will still be attached to their place of birth through speaking the language that their parents spoke; practice the religion that their parents practiced; support the political parties that their parents supported; and broadly acquired most of the cultural perceptions that their parents accepted, ultimately, they will perceive the world, similarly in the way their parents perceived the world. That is exactly what makes them a part of the same broad cultural groups of which their parents formed a part. However individuals may swerve from the perceptions of their parents, surely some only slightly, others more cardinal, but that is only natural, because every individual is unique.

So are the experiences that every person has. Whereas, most of those experiences will be learned from other groups into which the individual will be socialized during his/her lifetime, some of those experiences will not be group oriented.

Cultures themselves are continuously changing, partially because the environments in which people live are perpetually changing. So people's perceptions of the surrounding world are also constantly changing. Furthermore, some people, especially in Western societies revolt against the values of their parents and adopt different group values for themselves. Although most people in the West go through a period of rebellion while in their teens, by the time they are adults the big majority return to the cultures of their parents. This is what happened in the US in 1960s in the period of the emergence of the "hippie" counterculture.

Each of us is a member of a number of different identity groups, but it is a relatively small number compared to the large number that exist in the world. A very large number of the most important groups to which we belong are the same groups to which our parents belonged (Singer, 1987, p. 30). According to Singer, "a pattern of learned, group-related perceptions - including both verbal and nonverbal language, attitudes, values, belief systems, disbelief systems, and behaviors - that is accepted and expected by an identity groups is called culture. Since, by definition, each identity group has its own pattern of perceptions and behavioral norms and its own language or code (understood most clearly by members of that group), each group may be said to have its own culture (Singer, 1987, p. 30).

Early cultural anthropologists wanted to collect data on how different groups met their biological needs and accommodated to their environments. For that purpose they presumed that they had to find remote, insulated "primitive" groups that had not been "polluted" by contact with Western societies. So they went to the South Pacific, to isolated American Indian reservations, to the Latin American mountains and remote jungles, and to the Asian subcontinents searching for people, who were presumed to have been isolated so that they would have been living in the same ways for millennia. Meanwhile they created the impression that it was only those

\* Alfred G. Smith, the Professor of Speech Communication and Anthropology, University of Texas, Austin.

“primitive” peoples who had cultures that were vividly diverse from one another. Later anthropologists corrected that misinterpretation by demonstrating that all peoples have unique histories, belief systems, attitudes, values, traditions, languages and acquired and expected patterns of behavior, and that these combinations constitute culture. Especially noteworthy is the work of Benjamin Lee Whorf and Edward Sapir, who stressed enormously crucial role of language in shaping patterns of thinking – and thus the relationship between language and culture. Although doing so they also argued that only peoples who spoke dissimilarly different languages not dialects – had distinctive cultural patterns.

Only in recent times have cultural anthropologists come to approve the notion that every group that shares a similar pattern of perceptions –with all that implies – constitutes a culture. Since every identity group has different learned cultural totality, in greater or lesser degree, then every identity group may be said to have its own culture (Diamond, 1982, p. 401).

Some modern anthropologists also share the view that every group has a culture of its own. For example, let's take English-speaking Americans with their diverse ethnic groups. Although they all speak English, every group has diverse ethnic culture. According Prof. Robert A. Gross, multicultural challenge that intellectual movement, as is well known for the last two decades, has called into question the impulse, once dominant in scholarship, to present “America” as a single “melting pot” society (Gross, 2000).

Why do scholars have started to make this distinction? Because this way encourages us to apply the instruments and techniques of intercultural analysis and communication to all interpersonal, intergroup, and international interactions. Moreover, it will facilitate observing any totality – a small informal group, a large organization, a tribe or nation – and explore, what are the identity groups represented in that unit of analysis? What is the degree of linkages between the groupings?

### **Culture and Traditions Caucasian traditions and values**

The Caucasus is characterized by an enormous variety of landscape and ecosystem because of its geography (different altitudes), geology (different soils) and climate (the east is more arid than the west). In total there are twenty different types of landscape, several occurring in only a small locality (GRID-Tbilisi, 2003, p. 32).

With a tremendous diversity of ethnic groups, the Caucasus owns a rich range of different traditions, customs, songs and literature. The local culture of the early Caucasian tribes was influenced by migrating tribes from Asia and other nations that had a political influence in the region (e.g. Greek, Roman, Byzantine and Persian). Influences from Western civilizations can be found in religion and literature, while more Eastern aspects are presenting the clan structure, the significance of family and the crucial role of older people in society.

The effect of Soviet customs is also vivid, and the Soviet socialist ideology and structure of society have transformed many old customs.

Caucasians have a very ethnocentric and nationalist point of view concerning cultural pride. Every ethnic group strives to put itself at the pivot of Caucasian culture and claims that all the region's cultural values originate from them and were adopted by other peoples; that their own ethnic group or tribe is the most valorous, civilized and cultured of all Caucasian nations. This cultural pride has been very important for the survival of each of these nations. Despite the fact that each nation claims to be different, many traits, traditions and values are common across geographical and ethnological borders. Even conflicting nations, such as the Armenians and Azerbaijanis, have a lot of shared cultural traits. Anyway, any feature perceived as ‘theirs’, like shashlik, is the typical national food of every nation and the *duduk* is the national instrument of most Caucasian peoples.

The most significant segments of these values and traditions are the family and its honor, hospitality, courage, and freedom. Family is one of the pillars of life, and several generations often live together as an extended family. The honor, name and image of the family and clan are crucial and therefore, many Caucasians fear shame and attach greater value to the honor of the family than their own lives (or those of their relatives). Hospitality is a significant moral rule in the entire Caucasus and guests are said to be sent from God. Hence, a guest cannot be sent away and should be protected and treated well by the host.

### **Names**

Until the South Caucasus came under the rule of the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century, each nation had its own way of constructing names. After late-nineteenth century Russian-enforced administrative reforms, naming was standardized throughout the entire Caucasus. All individuals used as a first name, a patronymic based on the name of the father, and a family name. In addressing a peer, or a friend one uses the first or a diminutive name. The use of the first name and patronymic together shows respect and was used professionally, and also with the elderly or people one does not know well. Family names were not often used during the Soviet era. Although, since the 1990s the form of Mr. or Mrs. combined with a family name, which was used in tsarist times, has reappeared. Georgia is a specific example, where *batono/kalbatono* and the first name are the form of address.

The patronymic, or *otchestvo*, consists of the father's first name and the suffix *-vich*, or *-evich* for a male and *-ovna* or *-evna* for a female – for example: *Nikolayevich*, *Ivanovich*, *Nikolayevna*, *Ivanovna*.

A person's name can reveal a lot of information about their roots, Russian family names have separate endings depending on the gender of a person, ending in the majority cases *-ov*, *-ev*, or *-in* for males and *-ova*,

-eva or -ina for females (e.g. Petrov, Petrova). Most Armenian family names end in -ian, -yan or -uni. Some Russified their family names during the years of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union – for example the family name Arutyunyan became Arutyunov. Most Azerbaijani family names end with the suffix -ogly, -bay, -bey, -beg, -bek, -bekov, -bayov, -li, -beyli or -zade.

Georgian family names often reveal information about the historic region where their ancestors lived: -dze (Kartli, Imereti and Guria); -shvili (Kartli and Kakheti) – ia (Samegrelo), -iani (Svaneti), -uri (east Georgia), -va (Abkhazia and Adjara), -ua (Samegrelo), and Georgian from Abkhazia. The suffix -eli mostly indicates a name based on a city – for example Rustaveli (from the city Rustavi). Abkhaz family names mainly end in -ba or -iya.

## Food and Drink

There is an amazing diversity of food in the Caucasus, involving delicate sauces and piquant spices, and a variety of ingredients. Every nation has its own food specialties, although there are many dishes that can be found throughout the region but whose roots are unclear. This uncertainty sometimes may cause debates among different ethnic groups, for example, the Georgians claim they invented Khachapuri, while Ossetians dispute its Georgian origin and claim that their ualibakh is the original. Caucasus food is well-known not only in the region, but in many restaurants of the former Soviet republics.

Caucasians also consume a variety of drinks. After a meal, tea or small cups of extremely strong coffee are the rule of the day. Georgia is famous for its wines, which are sold all over the former Soviet Union.

It should be mentioned, that it's not only food and drink that is important. Eating with others and socializing sometimes takes the form of theatrical performance. Probably the most famous of the Caucasian table cultures is the Georgian supra, a formal dinner where the plates with food can be placed in three or four deep by the end of the evening.

The event is almost always led by a "Tamada", or master of ceremonies, who should be eloquent and philosophical, have a good sense of humor, but also be serious. The Tamada is responsible for the evening's proceedings and well-being of the guests; he brings the people together, entertains them and leads the toasts. Many toasts to a specific theme or person are spontaneous, the speeches often lasting up to ten minutes, and take place in a strict hierarchy of the importance of the guests: toasts are to the guests, distant friends and relatives, women, peace, the departed, children, the motherland, memories and the future. No one is allowed to eat, drink or talk during a toast. After the tamada has finished speaking, each person at the table may complete and interpret the toast.

## Literature

Literature is loved throughout the Caucasus, and most people know their national poets and writers very well. The need to have read widely in order to become an educated and cultured person is a Soviet heritage.

The literature of the Caucasus can be divided into historical stages and it was linked to the political situation in the region. Popular myths and legends were primarily transmitted orally and only written down later after alphabet were developed for some languages.

Early writings were almost all religious, though time by time historical works and books containing proverbs and riddles earned. The eleventh to early thirteenth century period was a golden age of culture, including literature.

In this period poetry gained importance. The Azerbaijani and some other ethnic groups developed their literature from the fifteenth century onwards. With the conquest of the Caucasus by Russia, a larger Western influence became evident.

Most of the small ethnic groups fixed their stories and poetry after an alphabet had been created for their language, and especially after the October Revolution.

It's noteworthy, that many Caucasian authors did not write in their own language. For example, Azerbaijani literature was in Persian language until the sixteenth century. Many authors have been writing in Russian, both out of choice and as a result of Russification.

Traditional themes in literature are love for a women, love of the fatherland, heroes, mountains, the fireside and Caucasian hospitality (Abdulatipov, Khanchiev, & Khapsirokov, 2007).

Not only Caucasian countries have cultures of their own, though having some commonalities, but within one country we can differentiate cultures of Georgia's historic regions: Kartli, Kakheti, Imereti, Guria, Samegrelo, Svaneti, Abkhazia, Adjara.

## Conclusion

Considering modern American anthropologists' approach, we can explore: to what degree are the unit identities stronger than the group identities that comprise it? To what degree are the group identities stronger? How can communication between groups be encouraged? These questions can be answered if the effectiveness of personal, group, or national communication is to be increased. And the effectiveness of those communications will be enhanced if we permanently keep in mind the cultural differences that must be dealt with. Moreover, when Caucasus is one of the most complicated regions in the world: with many different peoples and political units, differing religious allegiances, frequent conflicts, and where historically major world powers have clashed and are still confronting with each other on many occasions, studying the culture of unit identities more thoroughly within the group identity will increase national communication.

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