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The Historical Background and Social Dynamics of the Turkish Presence in the Caucasus

Abstract

The complex fabric of cultural interactions in the Caucasus region has long been influenced by the historical and social dynamics of Turkish culture, which serves as both a foundation and a transformative force in the formation of regional identities. This article aims to explore the multifaceted influence of Turkish culture on social dynamics and identity formation in the Caucasus, a region characterized by its diverse ethnicities, languages, and traditions. This paper is completed using methods of research, analysis, and interpretation, addressing the historical context, contemporary influences, and future trajectories of Turkish influence in the Caucasus based on literature sources.

Historically, Turkey's proximity to the Caucasus has facilitated significant cultural exchanges and led to the spread of Turkish traditions, language, and social norms among various ethnic groups in the region. As a result, the interaction between Turkish cultural elements and local traditions has not only shaped social identities but also influenced social structures, governance, and intergroup relations. This analysis examines specific case studies that illustrate how Turkish cultural practices have been integrated into the social fabric of the Caucasus, while also addressing the tensions and synergies arising from such interactions.

Keywords: *history, culture, Turks, Caucasus, social dynamics*

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Qafqazda türklərin varlığının tarixi əsasları və sosial dinamikası

Xülasə

Qafqaz regionundakı mədəni qarşılıqlı təsirlərin mürəkkəb toxuması uzun müddətdir ki, həm regional identikliklərin formalaşmasında əsas, həm də çevikləşdirici bir qüvvə kimi çıxış edən türk mədəniyyətinin tarixi və sosial dinamikaları tərəfindən formalaşdırılmışdır. Bu məqalə müxtəlif etnosları, dilləri və ənənələri ilə seçilən Qafqazda türk mədəniyyətinin sosial dinamika və identikliklərin formalaşmasına çoxşaxəli təsirini araşdırmağı qarşıya məqsəd qoyur. Tədqiqat, təhlil və şərh metodlarından istifadə edilərək hazırlanmış bu işdə türk təsirinin tarixi konteksti, müasir dövrdəki rolu və gələcək inkişaf istiqamətləri ədəbiyyat mənbələri əsasında araşdırılır.

Tarixən Türkiyənin Qafqaza yaxınlığı mühüm mədəni mübadilələri asanlaşdırmış, türk ənənələrinin, dilinin və sosial normalarının bölgədəki müxtəlif etnik qruplar arasında yayılmasına səbəb olmuşdur. Nəticədə türk mədəni elementləri ilə yerli ənənələrin qarşılıqlı təsiri yalnız sosial identiklikləri formalaşdırmamış, eyni zamanda sosial strukturlara, idarəetməyə və qruplararası münasibətlərə də təsir göstərmişdir. Bu təhlildə türk mədəni təcrübələrinin Qafqazın sosial toxumasına

necə inteqrasiya olunduğunu göstərən konkret nümunələr araşdırılacaq, həm də belə qarşılıqlı təsirlərdən doğan gərginliklər və sintez prosesləri işıqlandırılacaq.

Açar sözlər: tarix, mədəniyyət, türklər, Qafqaz, sosial dinamika

Introduction

The article emphasizes that Turkish cultural policies not only shaped institutional frameworks but also contributed to the formation of identity narratives that deeply resonated with local populations. This aspect suggests a nuanced layer of soft power employed by Turkey in the region, one that could be further explored through comparative studies assessing the impact of Turkish cultural diplomacy alongside other regional powers. However, the research also carries limitations; primarily, while it focuses on cultural aspects, it may not sufficiently account for economic factors that could also drive socio-political changes. Future research could benefit from a more interdisciplinary approach, combining economic, historical, and cultural analyses to provide a holistic perspective on the region's dynamics. Moreover, the article opens pathways for exploring how the evolving Turkish identity—shaped by both domestic transformations and external perceptions—continues to influence the socio-political landscape of the Caucasus.

Research

The origins of the Turkic peoples are deeply rooted in the vast steppes of Central Asia, where they began extensive migrations that would eventually lead them to the Caucasus region. This movement was not solely the outcome of a nomadic lifestyle but was also driven by the pursuit of fertile lands and strategic locations. Communities such as the Scythians and the Huns relied on their equestrian skills and adaptability to diverse geographical landscapes as they embarked on their journeys across the Eurasian steppes (Taşağıl, 2021). Migration routes were shaped by a combination of environmental factors and pressures from other migrating groups, compelling them to seek new territories in which to establish their communities.

Several factors influenced the settlement of Turkic peoples in the Caucasus, a region known for its complex ethnic fabric. Home to Indo-European, Iranian, and Turanian peoples, the multiethnic structure of the Caucasus provided a favorable environment for the integration of Turkic tribes (Tellioglu, 2017). The region's strategic position as a bridge between Asia and Europe made it an attractive destination for tribes seeking to expand their influence and control trade routes. Furthermore, the presence of mountain passes such as Derbent and Daryal facilitated their movement into the region, offering relatively accessible routes across otherwise formidable mountain ranges (Türk Göçleri, 2025). Combined with the region's dynamic socio-political landscape, these factors encouraged Turkic peoples to settle and thrive in the Caucasus.

Findings from historical and archaeological research reveal striking similarities between the religious beliefs, customs, traditions, clothing styles, and material culture of the Hittites and those of the North Caucasians. This parallel has led some scholars to suggest that the Hittites may have originated from North Caucasian populations. Indeed, certain historians have even regarded the Hittites and North Caucasians as members of the same ethnos. However, experts in ethnography, archaeology, and philology have not reached a definitive consensus, and this issue remains unresolved to the present day (Mahmut, 1965).

Archaeological evidence plays a crucial role in tracing the early presence of Turkic peoples in the Caucasus. Although assumptions regarding their existence in the pre-Cimmerian period lack substantial proof (Tellioglu, 2017), the discovery of artifacts and burial sites provides tangible evidence of their influence in the region. Excavations have uncovered materials that demonstrate the expansion of Turkic communities into Eastern Anatolia, highlighting their significant role in the region's early history (Taşağıl, 2021). These findings not only shed light on Turkic migration patterns and settlement strategies but also contribute to a broader understanding of the cultural exchanges that unfolded in the Caucasus over the centuries.

According to Herodotus, the renowned Greek historian of the 5th century BCE, the Cimmerians had settled along the northern shores of the Black Sea, adjacent to the Caucasus, since ancient times.

By the 8th century BCE, the Scythians, migrating westward from Central Asia, crossed the northern Black Sea passes and launched raids into Median and Persian territories. In response, Persian rulers Cyrus and Darius undertook military campaigns against the Scythians. Cyrus was killed in one such campaign, while Darius marched through Anatolia into the Balkans to confront them, though his campaign ended in failure.

By the late 2nd century BCE, the Scythians faced attacks from the Huns advancing from the East, after which their history became closely intertwined with that of the Huns. Herodotus further notes that prior to the arrival of the Scythians in the North Caucasus, the region was inhabited by numerous smaller groups speaking diverse languages, alongside the Cimmerians. Among these were the Meoti, Sindi, Teroti, and Kerketi peoples living in the Kuban, Bela, and Laba river basins, as well as along the northern Black Sea coast. (The term “Kerketi” was used by the Greeks of that period to denote the Circassians) (Mahmut, 1965).

The Seljuk Turks played a pivotal role in the early migration and settlement of Turkic peoples in the Caucasus. Their expansion into the region marked a significant transformation in its demographic and cultural landscape. Originating from Central Asia, the Seljuks began their incursions into the Caucasus in the 11th century, motivated by both strategic and economic interests (Bedirhan, 2014). Their arrival introduced new dynamics, as they established control over key areas and integrated with existing populations. The Seljuks’ military prowess and administrative strategies facilitated their dominance, laying the foundations for subsequent Turkic influence in the region. This expansion was not merely a military campaign but also a movement of peoples bringing their traditions, language, and customs, which significantly shaped the cultural mosaic of the Caucasus.

As the Seljuks consolidated their presence, various Turkic tribes began to settle throughout the Caucasus, further solidifying Turkic influence in the region. These settlements were not isolated events but part of a broader pattern of migration and integration, as Turkic groups gradually merged with local populations (Taşağıl, 2021). This process was marked by both conflict and cooperation, as tribes navigated the intricate networks of alliances and rivalries in the Caucasus. The establishment of Turkic communities often introduced new social structures and political alliances that blended with preexisting systems. This period witnessed the emergence of distinct Turkic communities that would play a vital role in the historical and cultural development of the Caucasus as they adapted to and influenced diverse environments.

The influence of Turkic culture on local populations in the Caucasus was profound and multifaceted. As Turkic tribes established themselves, they introduced a rich cultural heritage encompassing language, art, and religious practices. This cultural infusion left a lasting impact on the region, evident in the adoption of specific Turkic traditions and linguistic elements by local communities (Tellioğlu, 2017). For example, dialects such as Azerbaijani and Kumyk Turkic gained widespread usage among Caucasian peoples, demonstrating the depth of cultural exchange. The integration of Turkic culture into the local environment facilitated a blending of traditions that enriched the cultural landscape of the Caucasus. Over time, this cultural synthesis contributed to the emergence of a distinctive regional identity that continues to reflect the historical presence and influence of Turkic peoples.

The historical background of Turkic presence in the Caucasus extends back to the early migrations and settlements that unfolded over the centuries (Berber, 2011). The region has long served as a crossroads for various ethnic groups, including Turkic peoples migrating from regions such as Central Asia. Particularly significant were the settlements of Tatars, Circassians, and Chechens, many of whom relocated to the area following major events like the Crimean War, which triggered mass migrations from their homelands (Berber, 2011). These migrations played a critical role in shaping the demographic and cultural fabric of the Caucasus, as the influx of Turkic-speaking communities contributed to the rich tapestry of languages, traditions, and practices that characterize the region today. The blending of cultures initiated during these early migrations laid the groundwork for the enduring influence of Turkic peoples in the centuries to come.

The military campaigns of the Ottoman Empire played a significant role in expanding territorial control in the Caucasus. Positioned at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, the Empire pursued military endeavors aimed at asserting dominance over key territories and trade routes in the region, establishing itself as a formidable power in the Caucasus (Tellioglu, 2017). These campaigns were marked by a series of well-coordinated invasions and battles that enabled the Ottomans to secure a strong presence. This military strength not only facilitated territorial control but also shaped the balance of power among rival empires and local entities. Through their military capacity, the Ottomans were able to safeguard their political and economic interests by securing vital areas.

Political alliances and conflicts with neighboring states constituted a critical component of Ottoman strategy in the Caucasus. The Empire's diplomatic engagements often involved complex negotiations with local rulers and other major powers, such as the Safavid Empire, with whom the Ottomans maintained a complex relationship (Mammadova, n.d.). These alliances and conflicts shaped the political landscape of the Caucasus as the Ottomans sought to expand their influence through both cooperative and confrontational means. Alliances provided the Ottomans with partners to support territorial ambitions and gain strategic advantages over rival states, while conflicts often resulted in protracted military engagements that tested the resilience and resources of the Empire. The interplay between alliances and conflicts ultimately determined the Ottomans' ability to sustain their presence in the Caucasus.

The Ottoman administration's impact on the Caucasus was profound, bringing significant changes to governance and socio-cultural dynamics. The Ottomans implemented administrative practices influenced by broader imperial policies aimed at integrating diverse populations under a centralized authority (Tellioglu, 2017). This governance facilitated the introduction of Ottoman legal and bureaucratic systems, which left lasting effects on local governance structures. Furthermore, the emphasis on cultural and religious integration helped shape the region's identity, as the Ottomans promoted Islam and Ottoman cultural practices. These policies contributed to the development of a multiethnic society in which diverse groups coexisted under a unified political framework. The legacy of Ottoman administration continues to influence the cultural and political landscape of the Caucasus today.

In this historical context, the Ottoman Empire's role proved crucial in establishing and expanding Turkic presence in the Caucasus (Yıldız, 2021). Following the conquest of Constantinople in 1453, the Ottomans extended their influence into the Caucasus and Crimea through military campaigns, while also promoting Islam among local populations (Valiyev & Yörük, 2016). Their expansion included the annexation of the Khanates of Kazan and Astrakhan, which further consolidated their foothold in the region (Kanat, 2011). Ottoman interactions with local tribes and communities facilitated the spread of Turkic culture, language, and Islamic practices, deeply shaping the social and cultural dynamics of the Caucasus. Consequently, the Ottoman legacy continues to resonate in the region, historically influencing everything from architectural styles to culinary traditions.

The settlement of Turks in the region significantly shaped the cultural landscape of the Caucasus, marking its complex relationship with Turkic identity (Çam, 2004). A notable development was the influx of migrant communities from the Balkans, Crimea, and the Caucasus into the Ottoman Empire during the mid-19th century, which further enriched the region's cultural diversity (Tavkul, 2001). Additionally, Ottoman incursions accelerated the spread of Islam among the Circassians, strengthening religious ties that would shape cultural practices in the region (Yıldız, 2021). The convergence of various ethnic groups and cultures resulted in a unique synthesis, where Turkic, Islamic, and local traditions blended to create a vibrant cultural heritage that continues to define the Caucasus today. This complex history underscores the importance of understanding the multifaceted interactions between Turkic culture and the diverse communities of the region, laying the foundations for the enduring influence of Turkic culture. Following World War I (1914–1918), the Turkic presence in the Caucasus underwent significant transformations. The collapse of empires and the redrawing of borders brought both new challenges and opportunities for Turkic communities. With the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, an ally of the Central Powers, Ottoman influence in the Caucasus

diminished considerably. This decline opened space for the emergence of new national identities and the reassertion of Turkish cultural and historical ties to the region. Amid shifting geopolitical landscapes, the Caucasus became a contested space in which Turkic presence was redefined. This transitional period demanded resilience and adaptability from Turkic communities, who navigated the complex interplay of emerging Soviet influence and local nationalist movements. Their ability to maintain cultural continuity amid these changes underscores the enduring significance of the Turkic heritage in the Caucasus (Tellioglu, 2017).

In contemporary geopolitics, Turkey plays a vital role in the Caucasus by leveraging its historical ties and strategic interests. The collapse of the Soviet Union opened a new chapter for Turkey, enabling engagement with newly independent states across multiple fronts (Yapa, 2008). Turkey actively cultivated diplomatic and economic partnerships with countries such as Azerbaijan and Georgia, with whom it shares cultural and historical connections. Moreover, Turkey's strategic location as a gateway between Europe and Asia has enhanced its influence in the region, particularly in matters of energy transit and security cooperation. The complex geopolitical dynamics of the Caucasus—characterized by competing influences from Russia and the West—require Turkey to carefully balance its efforts to safeguard its interests while promoting regional stability. Through these endeavors, Turkey has positioned itself as a key factor in the Caucasus, fostering dialogue and cooperation among neighboring states.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the historical presence of the Turkic peoples in the Caucasus constitutes a complex tapestry woven from early migrations, the expanding influence of the Ottoman Empire, and the subsequent changes brought by Russian expansion and modern geopolitical dynamics. The Seljuk Turks laid the groundwork for cultural and political integration, leaving a legacy that influenced local populations through language, traditions, and economic ties. The Ottoman Empire further consolidated this presence not only through military strength but also by forging alliances and engaging in trade, enriching both Turkic and Caucasian societies. Yet, the decline of Ottoman influence and the rise of Russian power reshaped the landscape, introducing challenges while fostering resilience and adaptability among Turkic communities. In the modern era, Turkey's role in the Caucasus continues to evolve, reflecting historical ties while fostering diplomatic relations that highlight ongoing cultural connections. As the region navigates contemporary geopolitical challenges, the enduring legacy of Turkic influence remains an integral component of the Caucasus's identity and dynamics. The establishment of Turkish states and administrations in the Caucasus played a significant role in shaping the political landscape of the region from the early periods of history. As Turkic tribes migrated and settled in the area, they began to form organized states that implemented various models of governance. These states not only facilitated the administration of the region but also fostered a sense of unity among different Turkic groups, thereby enhancing their political influence. The leadership styles they adopted often reflected a synthesis of traditional Turkic customs and local adaptations, which enabled them to integrate effectively with the indigenous populations. This distinctive approach to governance contributed to the creation of a coherent identity among diverse Caucasian societies and ultimately laid the foundations for enduring political stability and cultural exchange.

The military strategies developed by Turkic tribes and the significant battles they fought were decisive in establishing and maintaining their dominance in the Caucasus. The Turkic groups were known for their mobility and strategic positioning, which allowed them to conduct swift and decisive campaigns. These strategies were frequently characterized by the effective use of cavalry units, a hallmark of Turkic military tradition, enabling them to exploit the region's varied terrain. Major battles—whether against rival powers or during territorial expansion—often showcased the tactical brilliance of Turkic commanders. These conflicts not only consolidated the military reputation of the Turks but also influenced the broader geopolitical dynamics of the region, shaping the balance of power among neighboring entities and determining the course of Caucasian history.

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