



Life in Samarkand

Caucasus and Central Asia vis-à-vis Russia, the West, and Islam

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Abstract: This paper aims at defining the specific negotiating subjectivity of a trickster that can be found in such bordering locales as the Caucasus and Central Asia, positioned in-between Europe and Asia on the one hand and Western modernity and Islam on the other hand. Being multiply colonized in an epistemic as well as economic and political sense, these regions have developed their specific strategies of survival, resistance to various regimes and, created hybrid, trans-cultural border models of thinking, that are still alive today and can constitute a way out of the contemporary dilemma—the Christian West versus Islam. The article traces the complex history of both locales in modernity, trying to understand the influence of those factors that turned them into the threatening images of paradigmatic anti-spaces, fallen out of time, for the West, and how Western modernization brought such foreign concepts to these territories as ethnic and linguistic nationalism, religious and linguistic purism and intolerance, that are the real threats today for the trans-cultural continuum of Central Asia and the Caucasus. A complicating factor in this case is that they were not directly colonized by the Western capitalist empires, but by the so called subaltern empires, like Russia, which was itself epistemically and culturally colonized by the West. Both the Caucasus and Central Asia were and are torn between the influences of the modernization via the Russian empire, via the Ottoman empire and sporadically directly by the West, but also both refuse(d) to make a final choice—instead they resort to the age-old tactic of balancing, of mediation, of a trans-cultural trickster type sensibility that gives them a lot of potential for the future. Another problem that is addressed in the article is that of Islam in the Caucasus and Central Asia (vis-à-vis ethnicity and nationalism) and the evolution of its interpretation by the Russian and Soviet imperial ideologues from relative tolerance to ethnicization, politicization and often demonization of Islam. The revival of specific forms of ethnic and territorial nationalism and in many cases Islamism in Central Asian or the newly independent states of the Southern Caucasus after the collapse of the Soviet Union are also addressed. In addition, there is the opposition of official cultural and political models of ethnic “etatism,” and the specific mediating border subjectivity of the people themselves which unexpectedly echoes the globalization flows of a rootless work force around the world, but which also presents a way out of the dead end of fundamentalism vs. neo-liberalism or the “clash of civilizations” model. These trans-cultural subjectivities and epistemologies can be expressed in many ways—from the “theology of liberation” to the ‘progressive Muslims project’, from other thinking to border thinking, but is always based on questioning the neo-liberal modernity from an in-between position. The Caucasus and Central Asia are close to this in the prevailing sensibility, being part of this global yet non-unified and loose movement of alternative critical and border thinking. What is needed is the development of coalitions and dialogue between such various border thinkers and trans-cultural multiply colonized locales on a global scale that would enable us to oppose both ethnic and religious fundamentalism and extremism of all shades and Western neo-liberal globalization as well.

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I would like to point out from the start that I am neither an Islamic intellectual, nor a Western style area specialist in Islamic thought. I do not share the viewpoint typical of most Western Sovietologists, who after the collapse of the Soviet Union hastily re-oriented themselves to the typical area studies discourse, based almost entirely on their efforts to subsume the logic of post-soviet development of newly independent states under the existing postcolonial models. Mostly it comes to finding similarities with the de-colonized new nations gaining independence after the collapse of the Western colonial system—be it Africa, South-East Asia, Middle East, or the Caribbean (a good example here would be the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard with its clear goal of establishing an epistemic control over the newly independent states in Caucasus and Central Asia, or the works of a well known area specialist in this region, Martha Brill Olcott (1993)). The same logic is typical of the post-Soviet pale copies of area studies specialists, such as Alexei Malashenko (1993), the main Russian expert on Islam, whose Eurocentered and politically biased works unfortunately are virtually the only available for the Western and non-western audience alike. On the other extreme there stand the voices of Islamic radicals—again, mostly either from the Arabic countries or the West, who if writing about the Eurasian Islamic borderlands at all, are mainly preoccupied with just using the local cultural and epistemic traditions and people as a polygon to manipulate in arguing for the realization and justification of their own theories, models, and designs, that can easily turn out to be dangerous.

My positioning rather can be defined as that of the internal other of the Russian empire, not a practicing, but rather a cultural Muslim with a rather circular and cosmopolitan identity, because both my parents were born into such ethnically Muslim families and my great grandfather was even a Mullah, but of course, the Soviet atheist years and modernization made it impossi-

ble to remain practicing Muslims for any of us. People like me are colonized in multiple ways by many imperial traditions and by the ubiquitous “coloniality of power,”¹ acting on a global scale in the world. I would also argue that this positioning characterizes not only my personal view, but can be found in more general terms in such bordering locales, positioned in-between Europe and Asia, Western modernity and Islam, the Ottoman Empire, the Russian empire, China, India and Persia as Caucasus and Central Asia. These locales fall outside of the general logic, imposed upon the world by several centuries of Western European supremacy and also—out of the prevailing Arabic Islamic tradition. Moreover, being doubly or multiply colonized in an epistemic as well as in an economic and political sense, these regions have developed their specific techniques and strategies of survival, resistance and, in some cases, positive models of thinking and subjectivity formation throughout the centuries, that even if virtually unknown in the West and in the Islamic world at large, they can constitute a way out of the contemporary dilemma—the Christian West versus Islam.

The territories of Eurasian Muslim frontiers have objectively given birth to various models of trans-cultural, border, hybrid, mediating thinking and subjectivity, that even if for centuries suppressed by various imperial regimes, turned out to be impossible to destroy completely. On the contrary, the trickster sensibility of a particular kind, incorporating various cultural, ethnic, religious, epistemic traditions, and demonstrating particular empathic models of treating the other, managed to survive and was only strengthened by imperial influence and control. I would like to link this sensibility to the subjectivity of a new trans-cultural² migrant in the époque of globalization, an individual who lives in the world and not in a particular (xenophobic) national culture, who is rootless by definition, who is a wonderer with no links to any particular locality. Today it is necessary to stop seeing Central

Asia and the Islamic part of the Southern Caucasus as only the source of exotic culture or dangerous terrorism and instability, as a new risk factor in the world after the collapse of Soviet Union, as the sinister “dust of empire” (Meyer 2004) that the West has to be aware of. Instead, it is necessary to give voice directly to these people, to let them express themselves within the wider global logic of “other thinking” and “border epistemology,” unfolding in the world.

Central Asia and more so the Southern Caucasus are paradigmatically border spaces. It is a geographic, a geo-political and ontological phenomenon, as they are positioned on the cracks of not just mountain ranges or deserts, caravan cross-roads and between the seas, but also on the borders of empires and civilizations. A noted journalist and political scientist Karl Meyer in his *The Dust of Empire* points out that “culturally and physically, Caucasia is the prototypical borderland. Its mountains, stretching six hundred miles from sea to sea, not only form the divide between Europe and Asia but also separate the two earliest Christian kingdoms (Armenia and Georgia) from Islam’s two major branches, the dissenting Shias, mostly inhabiting what is now Azerbaijan, and the majority Sunnis who predominate in the North Caucasus” (2004: 145). But this geopolitical point can and should be complemented by epistemic and existential rendering of the border, that we can borrow, e.g., from a Chicana poet and philosopher Gloria Anzaldúa. Her border sensibility seems to me very much in tune with trans-cultural multiply colonized discourses and subjectivities of the Islamic Eurasian borderlands.

Anzaldúa states that “a borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants” (1999: 25). “The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for ambiguity. ... She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust

out, the good, the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else” (1999:101). A very similar sensibility is to be found in Caucasia and in Central Asia alike. Both regions happen to be simultaneously inside and outside the Muslim tradition, in any case they are marginal for the Islamic world, always playing a secondary part in it, at the same time constantly finding themselves in the zone of clashing interests of various empires. This positioning gives them, among other things, an epistemic potential of the border as a generator of new meanings.

Both the Caucasus and Central Asia remain for the West a paradigmatic anti-space, a non-space. It is quite logical because the universal Hegelian history never unfolded there. Even a Ferghanian Babur left his motherland in quest of fame and only after he conquered Kabul, he was able to found the Great Mogul Empire. But in today’s global geopolitics these spaces, remote from Europe and America, suddenly come to play an important role in the new world order. Hence comes a new round of struggle between various forces for dominance in these regions. An important role here is played by the economic and social factors—from the high density of population to the low level of economic development, from the limited land and water resources to mass unemployment. Besides, an important factor has been also the political clan struggle which leads to destabilization and can also potentially lead to the growing influence of Islamic extremist movements (such as Khizb-ut-Takhrir or Wahhabism). It would be near-sighted to blame only the Soviet empire for this, because it happened to be just the latest and not the most important colonizing agent in these locales. In fact, it seems that they were doomed much earlier, in the marvelous époque of the Renaissance, which unfortunately resulted among other things, in the decline and fall of both Central Asia and the Caucasus. It was precisely starting from the Western modernity in all its forms (in-

cluding the Marxist model), that these locales fell into the permanent decline cycle, and even today, when they finally became politically independent, they still cannot leave this vicious circle of multiple colonization.

Up to the second modernity and the establishment of Western European absolute dominance on the global scale, the power asymmetry based on the Hegelian understanding of world history was not yet absolute and hence, e.g. the other, exotic Tamerlane's empire could not possibly be interpreted by the Europeans as something low, primitive, underdeveloped and in need of civilizing, as fallen out of history and modernity. An interesting example illustrating the lack of xenophobia and religious intolerance in the relations of European and Asian oikumene to the modern extent is a document from 1403—a diary of the Spanish envoy Ruy Gonzales de Clavijo, the chamberlain of Henry (Enrique) III's, the king of Castile and Leon, who was sent to the court of Tamerlane. The latter, after his victory over the Turks, maintained the widest political, trade and military contacts with Europe and mainly with France and Spain, which were thankful to Tamerlane for saving Europe from the Ottoman invasion, as they put it. The irony is that the gilded Tamerlane statue put on one of the Parisian streets, became an acknowledgment of the person who contributed indirectly to the fact that later Europe managed to throw Asia out of history and make a non-space out of it, a passive exotic material for the study of Western anthropologists.

However, the beginning of the end of Tamerlane dynasty's prosperity and, consequently, Central Asia's falling out of future world history was linked with nothing but capitalism and the shaping of the new capitalist world economy, with the European absolute dominance—in the 16th century. It was then, that Vasco da Gama's ships blazed the sea route from Europe to India and further, to China, and the Great Silk route lost its significance. Central Asia also lost its

strategic economic importance on which it had rested for two millennia and became a periphery, a border—for several centuries.

Even a very brief glance at the history of the Caucasus and Central Asia demonstrates the complex and multifaceted colonized nature of these locales throughout history. Both territories have been always cultural, linguistic, religious and ethnic crossroads and hybrids (e.g. of Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Islam). Consequently both locales elaborated their own unique and tolerant ways of dealing with this cultural multiplicity as well as the strategies of survival under various regimes, which, I would argue, are still alive today even in the subjectivity of the majority of people who live in these locales, and even after the distorting influences of Western modernization which brought with it such initial foreign concepts as ethnic and linguistic nationalism and the strong sense of ethnic belonging, religious and linguistic purism and intolerance, racialization and ethnicization, artificial divisions into the major ethnicities and minorities, into "Arians" and "Mongolians," etc.

A crucial feature in the colonization pattern in both Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus was that they were colonized not directly by the Western capitalist empires, but by the so called subaltern empires, or empires-colonies, like Russia, which itself was colonized epistemically and culturally by the West and thus, acted as mediators, as champions of Western modernity in these locales, albeit in a distorted form. The Shia Persia, the Ottoman Empire and Russia were all competing for Azerbaijan in the second modernity. And Russia got it after its victory over Persia in the early 19th century. As a result, one of the many Eurasian artificial borders was drawn on the river Arax (echoing Gloria Anzaldúa's border semiotic interpretation of Rio Grande, that continues to bring people death, suffering and humiliation), that even today divides the Azeri people of Northern Persia and those of Azerbaijan.

A similar history is to be found in Cen-

tral Asia which after the collapse of Timurid dynasty and several centuries of decay, was also conquered by the Russian empire in the 1860s. Russia imposed upon this space its own colonial model of modernization, copied from the West. This project of Central Asian modernization was only continued by the Soviets with larger and more violent excesses, which by the second half of the 20th century brought about ecological and humanitarian catastrophes.

It is only natural then that both Azerbaijan and Central Asia were torn between the influences of the modernization of the Russian empire (that after all controlled Azeris for almost 170 years and Central Asia for almost 130 years), of the Ottoman empire (especially in the Azeri case) and of more traditionalist Muslim Persia and the countries of South-East Asia (in the case of Central Asia). Their modernization model came directly from Russia and later from the Soviet Union, up to the 1990s, when the circular Turkish model with its pan-Turkic vision, as well as the more local Muslim influences of Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan—in case of Central Asia, and the renewed attempts at directly Western control—came back and flourished.

It is necessary to stress that even if the West never succeeded in directly colonizing these locales, there were several Western attempts to bring about modernity by establishing its direct or indirect rule over both the Caucasus and Central Asia—all of them within the logic of redistribution of colonial spaces when the collapsing empires give a chance to their more successful rivals to gain control over their previous territories. Today we witness a more indirect example of colonization by the West when after the collapse of the Soviet empire, it is trying to establish control over these regions—economically, politically, and culturally. However, in 2007, it is obvious that the Western tactic is skidding once again, as these regions are not ready to choose the neo-liberal modernization model for themselves. True, the influence of Russia diminished, the influence of

Turkey grew somewhat and there have been sporadic attempts at cultivating a new generation of pro-Western elites in these locales in the last two decades, but the Islamic Caucasus and Central Asia both refuse to make a final choice—instead they resort to the age-old tactic of balancing, of mediation, of the trans-cultural sensibility of a trickster type that I believe gives them a lot of future potential.

The tactic of the Russian and later Soviet variant of modernization in both regions were strikingly similar. They can be summarized in the motto “divide and rule.” Artificial borders were drawn and ethnic and religious conflicts induced, alphabets changed to cut off the vital link with the past, history and tradition, new ethnicities invented, mosques closed and atheist campaigns launched, the so called “Oriental women” forcefully liberated—all that done to ensure the imperial dominance, but at the same time causing, particularly in Soviet period, a very cynical reflexive resistance to and distrust of official authority that is still there. Examples of this devastating imperial tactic are abundant. Russians used the Shia and Sunnis opposition in Azerbaijan to make sure that they cut off the Sunni Azeris from a possible alliance with Shamil Sunnis in Northern Caucasus. Later Soviets mapped Turkestan in such a way as to prevent any attempts at Turkic and Islamic reunification, when they once again put artificial borders between artificially created republics and ethnicities. Before the Russian modernization of the second half of the 19th century there was no idea of ethnicity in Central Asia and people who were much more socially mobile and flexible, who were leaving one region for another, could easily change their status or name and enter into different hierarchies, due to the specific local mechanisms of mutual adaptation, which allowed for this complex cultural multiplicity to co-exist peacefully. Categorization in cultural, regional, social, economic and religious sense existed, but not in an ethnic or linguistic sense, and only the Russian and subse-

quently Soviet colonization, forcefully and nearsightedly, introduced the idea of ethnicity into the region along with the model of modernization, based on ethnic-national identities.³

The Soviets divided the ethnic-religious-linguistic unity of Turkestan into artificial entities—creating the potential for ethnic explosions and today's territorial conflicts between virtually all Central Asia's newly independent states. The tactic of Stalin's deportations of entire peoples into Central Asia (Meskhetian Turks, Crimean Tatars, Chechens, Balkars, etc.) and the construction of artificial borders contributed to future ethnic and economic tensions in these regions (e.g., the Karabakh conflict between Azeris and Armenians, as a result of which over 30 thousand people were reported to have perished and around one million became refugees; the Osh conflict and other ethnic clashes in Ferghana valley). This is a direct result of Russian and later Soviet imperial tactic of ethnicity-building. Although the modern nations in Central Asia and Caucasus were formed artificially and even in some cases by chance, the result is there nonetheless. The scholarly constructs turned into political instruments which in their turn were implanted into the texture of economic, social and cultural life and began to be seen by the people as ancient and given once and for all. Therefore, for the majority of the modern inhabitants of Central Asia or Azerbaijan, nations are not "imagined communities."

The most difficult to understand and cope with for the Russian imperial ideologues remained the problem of Islam, although we must admit that the Russian tradition of interactions with Islam was not always based on absolute rejection. This is a relatively new phenomenon, connected with the modernization of Russia itself and the gradual naturalization of racism and Eurocentrism in its consciousness, interiorized by the Russians, who consequently grounded their relations with Islamic colonies in the firm belief in their own superiority as the

champions of Western modernity.⁴ It was precisely the wave of Western modernization in its Russian and Soviet forms that did away with the more complex, nuanced and empathic models of interaction with Islam as an internal other. In the last 200 years Islam itself in the territory of Russia and its colonies was transformed into ethnicity and came to be regarded not as a religion, but rather as a color of skin, eyes, hair, etc., i.e., religious opposition turned into an ethnic-racial one. In the last 20-30 years a radical ethnicization, racialization and politicization of Islam took place. In many postcolonial spaces with traditionally weak ideas of ethnicity, this risk is especially noticeable, as there, ethnic nationalism often takes on Islamist forms, they claim Islam for their own new nations and interpret it first of all as a manifestation of their own local culture. Both Central Asia and Azerbaijan unfortunately demonstrate some aspects of this dangerous tendency, although not to the same degree as the Northern Caucasus today. But even though there are unquestionably many intersections between the ethnic culture and larger civilizational specificity and Islam, it would still be incorrect to regard them as one. The former is much wider than the latter. And it is in the former that we find the most promising prospects for the future.

The Russian empire was a lazy empire in the sense that it always performed its Christianizing mission half-heartedly, particularly when it referred to Muslim people. The famous Russian poet Alexander Pushkin in his *Journey to Erzerum* urged the lazy Russian empire that limited its cultural mission to send books to illiterate people, to apply along with economic and cultural tools control over the Caucasus—for the 19th century forms of Empire curiously archaic, that would make it turn its back to Turkey—"the force of the gospel brought by Christian missionaries—as a means more powerful, more ethical and more in accordance with our educated century" (1934: 745). As for the Soviet period, in spite of its general tendency to-

wards atheism, at the moment of stability this regime tended to smuggle into the collective unconscious the idea of superiority of the Russian Orthodox church over all other religions—even if in a masked form of Russian national traditions—and rejected Islamic thought and organizations—again, masking this tactic as a fight with “bourgeois nationalism.”

As for the post-soviet period, it has been marked with pragmatism and cynicism in the relations between the state and Islam. On the one hand, the authority allows for the existence of Islamic centers, the building of new mosques, Islamic festivals, etc. On the other hand, the same authority pretends not to notice extremist organizations, parties and politicians, who openly demonize Islam as a part of today’s Russian xenophobia and migrant-phobia. On top of that, there are clearly more calculated efforts to control the cultural-political unconsciousness and preserve dominance by flirting with Islam in fear of possible non-systemic organizations and leaders, that Russian authorities see as a potential danger. For example, the director of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Valery Tishkov, finds the roots of global terrorism and the ways of fighting it as follows:

The global strategy of counteraction against terrorism is the strengthening of the state as a source of order and legitimate violence, keeping strictly the interests of the majority, imposing the will of the majority and restricting the non-systemic activists and the politics of minorities, and a rejection of radical projects and appeals.” (2004: 278)

Although this position is understandable as a manifestation of the state ethnic-cultural politics, suggested by someone who takes an active part in shaping of these policies, what worries me is the ethical dimension. What we can read in between the lines and in many other instances of geo-political

theorizing today is the pragmatic politics of brain-washing, that proclaims that it is better not to let the poor and the disenfranchised know that they are poor and discriminated against, because within this logic it is precisely the eyes, opened to this injustice, that become the eyes of the ‘terrorist’.

What has happened in the political life of the Muslim Eurasian frontiers, after they obtained independence, unfortunately does not leave a lot of hope for the future, not if the same logic continues to be reproduced again and again. For example, in Uzbekistan, the largest of the Central Asian states, the authorities are trying to use the ideas of Uzbek tradition and “Uzbekness” (uzbekchilik), and the comparison of the state with the family or community (makhalla), as a justification and a source of legitimacy for the existing politics and power relations. Then the authority is deliberately presented as a manifestation of an authoritarian, but fair and just patriarchal element in the family (Karimov 1993). In Rasanayagam’s opinion, the ethnic divisions that were imposed on this region in Soviet times were not questioned by the leaders of the post-soviet Central Asian states. Instead they stressed the validity of ethnic-territorial ideas about the nation, which replaced the Marxist ideology as its glue (2004). As a result, nothing changed in the life of common people who remained as powerless and vulnerable as before. Here as well as in Russia proper we find the peculiar transmuted forms of ethnic etatism, the creation of ethnic states with their specific ethnic-clan system of power, which do not promise anything good either (Tkhagapsoyev 2006).

In these conditions a citizen of such ethnic etatist states (and almost all of the post-Soviet states including Russia itself are ethnic etatist) often simply has to become a new nomad against his or her will. The inhabitants of Central Asia who are so much hated by xenophobic Russians and constitute a larger part of the labor migration today, still go mainly to Russia and not to the West (that is possible only for the chosen few), looking

for jobs and a better life. They do not have any other choice of entering the world of globalization but to go to Russia, which in its turn treats them as unwanted immigrants, as it is nourishing more and more the ideal of an ethnocentric empire in the manner of the Third Reich with the central element of Russian superiority over everyone else (Pain 2004).

And yet today, after almost two decades of post-soviet existence and in spite of the above mentioned problems, we can still find that such trans-cultural spaces as Southern Caucasus or Central Asia retain their particular sensibility. The specific multicultural sensibility that we find in cities like Baku or Tashkent was not the result of just a fake Soviet theory of proletarian internationalism. The roots of this linguistic, religious, ethnic and cultural tolerance are much deeper and in spite of all Russian chauvinistic and imperial attempts at casting slurs upon these locales, these places are still very tolerant of both the ex-Russian colonizers and other ethnicities that traditionally lived here or found themselves here as a result of major 20th century historical cataclysms. The topos of such colonial multicultural cities as Baku or Tashkent, carries the traces of the influence of various traditions and imperial models—we can study it as a cultural palimpsest of different, often conflicting or merging meanings—one can find here a Governor's palace or park of the Russian colonial times, traces of the circular colonial architecture in the form of gymnasiums or theaters, almost always they are copies of a copy, meaning that the Russian imperial imagery was in itself borrowed from the West and hence its colonial copies were double simulacra, which easily coincide with the later Soviet layers and the so-called "old town" with its typically narrow streets and fortresses (like Bakinian Icheri-Shekher). But what is crucial in all these multicultural colonial capitals is certainly the people. As an Azeri-Jewish writer Afanasy Mamedov wrote in his nostalgic novel about Baku, describing the old city's atmosphere, it is the

people that create this trans-cultural mood—"the old men with their Muslim beards under the palms and the tolling of the bells at the Armenian church that sounds so close from the Jewish quarter Juude-Meilesi—a real present for Shagal (2000:110).

It was the second modernity that ultimately made an anti-space out of Central Asia and the Caucasus, a non-space that can exist in the Western mind only in the form of a conventional topos of some exotic parables, where stereotyped Orientals reside. But who these people were the West never really wondered. They were interpreted as Deleuze and Guattari's "nomads" at best—the abstract agents of some conventional speculative history, who just illustrated the concept of deterritorialization and nomadic culture. However, in the East this trickster, wondering, mediating, rootless sensibility is no news—it is just that in globalization it acquires an unexpected confirmation and reification on a global scale. The abstract nomad turns out to be a real new Ahasuerus or rather, al-Hadir of the newest époque of the great migration of peoples, or in the more pedestrian variant—a wondering Hodja Nasreddin. I intentionally chose in my attempt at defining this contemporary trans-cultural empathic border subjectivity a metaphor from the Asian tradition which in my view, clearly expresses the positioning of the individuals from the Eurasian Islamic borderlands.

Saint Hadir, so popular among the Sufi mystical tradition, with its specific culture of respect for the other, standing in the center of the ethics of interpersonal relations—is initially a trans-cultural personage, in a way, a quintessence of the mentality of people who for centuries have lived between empires, between religions, between languages, in a complex imperial-colonial configuration, not always understandable in the West, a mentality of people who have managed to preserve their own system of reference and world vision under all regimes. This trans-cultural personage is to be found in many

traditions from India to Palestine, from Fergana Valley to China. Saint al-Hadir or al-Hidr, having a parallel in Christian Ilea, in modern terms, is the immortal protector of all migrants and travelers who is himself constantly traveling around the world, fulfilling his mystical mission. Hence the Central Asian popular belief: "Hospitality cannot be selective, for Hadir can come to your house in any disguise, any person can meet him, but what he would gain depends on how pure his intentions are." In this belief one finds a specific philosophy of treating other persons and other cultures. This philosophy is marked with what the Islamic tradition calls "Adab"—i.e. in the words of Omid Safi, "that most essential, basic and glorious of Muslim interpersonal codes. Adab is the compassionate, human, selfless, generous, and kind etiquette that has been a hallmark of refined manners in Muslim cultures. Almost anyone who has ever traveled to areas that have been profoundly influenced by Muslim ethics has no doubt seen great examples of this wonderful way of being welcomed and put at ease." But the scholar sadly continues that "it is precisely this compassionate humanness that is missing from so much of contemporary Islam" (2004:13). It may be missing from contemporary Islam, but it is certainly not missing from such border spaces as Azerbaijan and Central Asia and from the sensibility of the people who live here, which cannot possibly come from just Islam, even if unorthodox and mutated by various processes of hybridizing and syncretism with pre-Islamic traditions. It is this inherent trans-cultural border element—forever open to the dialogue with the world, that can be a way out of the opposition of fundamentalism versus neo-liberalism.

It is in the revival and cultivation of this logic of respect for any other culture, religion, history, a logic of dialogue and fairness, whose legacy is preserved in spite of any historical cataclysms, wars and colonization that lies a possibility of intercultural dialogue in the future. The West with its ex-

oticization and fear of the non-West, the East with its opaqueness and passive resistance—can they still hope to hear each other today, not in the fake clanking of neo-liberal multicultural discourse, which proclaims difference verbally, but in fact leads only to the commercialization of the predicted and attractively packed exoticism and whose fiasco demonstrated itself with devastating clarity in the last decade, but in real global and alter-globalist thinking? Are they still able to realize that the world is one in all its diversity, and interconnected within itself by thousand of threads?

One of the most promising sensibilities that is being shaped today in the world on a global scale is the trans-cultural border sensibility and epistemology that comes with it. This is what can give us at least a chance of a dialogue and a dialogue based on a symmetry and the birth of a specific critical thinking, which is born at the border, between two or more various traditions, equally questioning each of them and not regarding one of them as an absolute point of reference anymore. This powerful deconstructive impulse we find not only in Western postmodernism, which performs this task from within the Western tradition itself, but more and more we also find it in various alternative traditions, including the ones between Islam and the West. The most fruitful for the future are those that are marked with hybridity and trans-culturality, lacking religious and ethnic-national fundamentalism, based on cultural polilogue and syncretism. These traditions of thinking and seeing the world are clearly better realized in Latin America, in the Caribbean, in some parts of South-East Asia and Africa, most of which were also doubly or multiply colonized spaces.

This new subjectivity and epistemology can be expressed in many ways—from theology of liberation to the progressive Muslims project, from other thinking to border thinking, but is always based on questioning the neo-liberal modernity from an in-between position. The Muslim frontiers of

Eurasia such as the Caucasus and Central Asia, with their hotchpotch of various traditions and unorthodox Islam are objectively close to them in the prevailing sensibility.⁵ They are undoubtedly a part of this global non-unified and loose movement of transculturation and border thinking as a new episteme.

Trans-culturation presupposes the inclusion of many and not just one cultural reference point, the criss-crossing and negotiation of cultures, a specific state of cultural in-between-ness. In the case of Central Asia such subjectivity has been always a norm in ethnic-cultural, social and linguistic sense (e.g. the specialization of languages: Arabic was used for the official sphere and law, Farsi referred to culture and poetry, the local vernacular languages like New Uzbek were connected with the sphere of daily life). Here the imperial assimilation tactic was needed not as a way of coping with metisiation (as in Latin America), but as a realization of the imperial principle “divide and rule.” But behind the surface, the age old processes of mutual cultural interaction, that do not recognize the difference between the dominant culture and the suppressed one, and refuse to accept the imperial cultural hierarchy, flourished, giving birth to new meanings and complex cultural codes and textures.

If for the West these locales remain the exotic or threatening others, then what happens in contemporary Central Asian or Azeri cultural and political imaginary itself? How do they see the world and themselves in the world? It turns out that in these marginalized non-spaces there are some attempts at critical rethinking of the caricature or exoticist image of the East, created by the West. Alas, this rethinking cannot happen any more or yet in the form of serious global canonical counter-discourse. In the post-soviet period, when the ethnic political pendulum, in Emil Pain’s words, goes from Yeltsin’s period of minority ethnic nationalism to Putin’s predominance of fundamentalist Russian chauvinism (2004: 309), we

find only sporadic and local efforts at questioning both Western modernity and ethnic nationalist or religious fundamentalist discourses. It happens mainly in the sphere of aesthetics, art, literature, music, rather than on the political or purely philosophic level, where still dead-end models of ethnic nationalism and fundamentalism or a blind repetition of Western discourses prevail. Maybe and even most probably there are interesting and original thinkers in this part of the world, but the problem is that their works and views are not accessible not only to the West, but today even to people in Russia. And yet, let me give you one positive example of trans-cultural aesthetic and border thinking coming directly from the heart of Central Asia.

It is the Tashkent theater *Ilkhom*, whose creators seem to have asked a question: what would happen if we blow the breath of real history and real culture and people into the western Orientalist metaphors and elegant parables, where Asia, e.g., Samarkand, acts as a paradigmatic anti-space where it is suitable to have a rendezvous with Death, to quote Jean Baudrillard’s famous essay (1979)? *Ilkhom* in its Jewish director M. Vile’s mind, mixes on its stage the languages, the faces of Tashkent people, their tempers and ways of life. This theater is as trans-cultural and hybrid in the true sense of the word, as the city where it exists. Their famous 1993 production that still successfully runs today, was a Samarkand fantasy based on Karlo Gozzi’s comedy *Happy Beggars (I Pitocchi Fortunati, 1764)*. The show was built on the mutual penetration and hybridizing of totally unexpected sources and traditions—comedia dell’arte and traditional Uzbek comedy “maskharabozami.” In fact this theater negates Gozzi’s orientalism, that presented Samarkand as a fantastic dystopia, a place nowhere, fallen out of time and progress, as well as Baudrillard’s beautiful and sad parable of the rendezvous with death in Samarkand. This production, in contrast with Baudrillard’s essay from *De la Seduction* can be called “Life in Samarkand.”

If we apply this example to a wider context, we can say that the lingering interpretation of Central Asia or the Caucasus as an exotic or threatening anti-space is just a continuing European and American practice of power asymmetry, of pushing the other out of the sphere of valuable, out of the myths of progress, linear world history, science, etc. While what is needed is so little—just to make this asymmetry vanish and accept that Samarkand is not just a fairy tale space, successfully exploited by the Western culture as a source of exotic imagery, but is also a Tamerlan's real imperial capital, an important late medieval cultural center of the East, a city where one could find the famous observatory and a library built by Mirzo Ulukbek's (Tamerlan's grandson), who yielded to no Western colleagues in his knowledge and who was reigning under the slogan "Striving for knowledge is a duty of every Muslim." It was the center of many Sufi orders and the city of three major Islamic universities. And what is more important, it is a place where life never stopped, even if Western modernity went around it, leaving it behind and beyond. And to learn what kind of life it is, we need to listen to the people who live, feel and think in Samarkand, Baku, Tashkent or Dushanbe.

The problem remains, however, that at this point the alternative thinking models are still not properly consolidated in spite of such exemplary events as the World Social Forum. What is needed is the development of coalitions of such border thinkers and trans-cultural multiply colonized locales on a global scale, which in spite of such technical means of globalization as the internet, still remains a problem to be solved. Moreover, they lack not just financial support, but also a sufficient global knowledge and global drive in themselves to be able to include into their sphere such paradigmatic others as Azeris or Uzbeks to name just two. This void, this lack of dialogue, of communication among the groups of people in the world that although coming from different locales suffer from the same logic of coloni-

ality of power, is immediately filled by completely different ideologies, that normally do not suffer from lack of resources to promote themselves on the global scale—such as ethnic and religious fundamentalism and extremism of all shades and, of course, the Western neo-liberal modernization in all its traditional forms from military bases and economic pressure to opening English speaking universities in the vast spaces of the Eurasian steppe and then punishing these countries if they refuse to accept Western dominance. Still, let us hope that in the future there will be more exceptions to this rule that will eventually change the rule itself, as one important step in making this world a better place for us all.

ENDNOTES

1. The concept of coloniality of power was formulated by the Peruvian scholar A. Quijano as a set of various strategies of colonization in modernity on the global scale. For Quijano, coloniality of power has been a constant reproduction of colonial difference, penetrating all spheres of human life and defining all cultural models of modernity (Quijano 2000).

2. I view trans-culturation as a new episteme, corresponding to globalization, a new type of specific linguistic thinking and discursiveness, as a cultural and political unconscious of our time. It is expressed not only on the level of social reality, e.g., in ethnic convergence, but also on the conceptual level, in bringing forward the principle of hybridity instead of previous purity, the changing attitude to national languages and cultural traditions whose immutability gives way to transnationalism and poliglossia. It changes the relations between language, thinking, knowledge and "things." Trans-culturation is an episteme of problematizing the difference and diversity, and shaping of new ways of communication between various others in the world.

3. In general, the Islamic world was as united as the medieval *Orbis Christianus*, while the ethnic and state belonging of its representatives did not matter that much. A large number of Azeri or Central Asian thinkers, scientists, philosophers,

poets were regarded within the parallel non-European (Asian) history not as the sons of their ethnic cultures, but as representatives of the Islamic oikumene that were also recognized as such by the West (Abu Ali Ibn Sino (Avicenna), Beruni (Albiron), Ulugbek, Navoi and many others.

4. Even in the prime time of Russian absolutism under Katherine the Great the attitude to Islamic people was not as demonizing as today. Katherine's minion prince Potyemkin, when he administered the loyalty oaths of Tatar princes, interpreted it in a symbolic sense comparing the conquering of Crimea with the actions of European powers in Asia, Africa and America and predicting the birth of a new Russian Paradise, which he peopled with the refugees from other empires—the German Mennonites, the Swedish protestants, the Orthodox Romanians fleeing the Ottoman empire, the Jews escaping the Polish pogroms. But the same Potyemkin stood for the rights of the Tatars and defended them from the intolerance and cruelty of the Russian army. He granted the Tatar aristocracy (murzas) rights equal to the Russian gentry and started the long process of co-opting the Muslim elites into the Russian society which with some violent excesses remained intact until the Soviet time.

5. There are many parallels between the Islamic borderlands of Eurasia and other locales marked with trans-cultural impulses. One of them is the idea of hybrid, impure ethnicity, mixed blood. Thus, it was the Russian imperial scholars who built the convenient—pure blood—classification of people living in Central Asia. In reality they never existed. And even the imperial ideologues themselves realized that. The first Turkestan general-governor von Kaufman lamented that the local population is mixed and often impossible to define in ethnographic terms (Abashin 2004: 49). Moreover, there was a specific variant of Central Asian Creoles—the “Sarts”—half Uzbek and half Tadzhic, in an ethnic sense and in some elements of the way of life resembling the Tadzhic, but speaking a Turkic language (new Uzbek), and not Farsi. And again, as in the Caribbean or in Latin America here also there was a supra-identity which made these internal names unimportant for the people themselves, because they knew that there is a certain pan-Turkic identity working for the unity of all Central Asian tribes. The latter was dangerous for the Russians, because it did not correspond to the “divide and rule principle” and Russia fought this threat in many ways—from the forceful change of linguistic hierarchy to census of the population, based on binary principles.

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