Trans-Cultural Tricksters in between Empires: Eurasian Islamic Borderlands in Modernity

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I would like to point out from the start that I am not either an Islamic intellectual or a Western style area specialist in Islamic thought. I do not share the view point typical of most Western Sovietologists, who after the collapse of the Soviet Union hastily reoriented 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 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 (Olcott, 1993). The same logic is typical of the post-Soviet pale copies of area studies specialists, such as Alexei Malashenko (Malashenko, 1993), the main Russian expert on Islam, whose extremely Eurocente-

red 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.

Finally, there is the position of the Western left, which all too often applies automatically the cultural essentialist model within which the inhabitants of the other locales are interpreted as given once and for all, stuck in some particular point of development which is proclaimed for them as the only possible and organic and which the Western left want to defend from the infringement of modernity, capitalism or other such entities. This attitude does not promise any prospects for the future dialogue either. In "Globalization Muslim Resistances" a Moroccan by origin scholar, living in Western Europe, Tariq Ramadan observes that many representatives of the Western left, seeking an alternative to neo-liberal globalization,

> think of cultural and religious diversity as a principle of goodwill to be affirmed, but rarely see it as a reality with which it is necessary to engage, venture into and to build (…) From forum to forum, one grows accustomed to meeting this new species of activist—a living contradiction of the contemporary left—economically progressive

> but culturally so imperialist; ready to fight for social justice but at the same time so confident and sometimes arrogant as to assume the right to dictate a universal set of values for everyone. (Ramadan, 2003: 27.)

The cultural opaqueness of the East for the West is connected not only with the objectively existing differences, which nobody can deny. Rather it is connected with the lack of real interest and curiosity on the part of the West towards anything that is not the West, and with the lazy inertia of primitive stereotyping. Today invariably the Islamic cultures and countries are negatively stereotyped according to the well known scenario—from the exclusionary stage to the idea of threat to the civilized society and order and, further on, to confrontation, presenting the people from these locales as not quite people, but the champions of unmotivated cruelty, irrationality and underdevelopment. This is how the images of bearded Muslim terrorists, the wondrous riches and poverty, and no less astounding cruelties are being circulated. They can acquire various forms in the Western mind, but their essence has remained the same in the last several centuries.

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 impossible to remain practicing Muslims for any of us. People like me are multiply colonized by many

imperial traditions and by the ubiquitous "coloniality of power,"[1] acting on the 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 out of the general logic, imposed upon the world by the several centuries of Western European supremacy and also—out of the prevailing Arabic Islamic tradition. Moreover, being doubly or multiply colonized in epistemic as well as economic and political sense, these regions have developed throughout the centuries their specific techniques and strategies of survival, resistance and, in some cases, the positive models of thinking and subjectivity formation, that even if virtually unknown in the West and in the Islamic world at large, can constitute a way out of the contemporary dilemma—the Christian West versus Islam.

The territories of Eurasian Muslim frontiers for centuries have objectively given birth to various models of transcultural, border, hybrid, mediating thinking and subjectivity, that even if suppressed by various imperial regimes, turned out to be impossible to completely destroy. 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 the imperial influence and control. I would like to link this sensibility to the subjectivity of a new trans-cultural[2] migrant of globalization époque, 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 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 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 crossroads 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 prototypal 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. (Meyer, 2004: 145.)

But this geopolitical point can and should be complimented 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 [Anzaldúa, 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. (Anzaldúa, 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 that a Russian semiotician Y. Lotman called the space of intensive semiotization and metaphoric translation-transformation, where new texts and new meaning are being frequently generated (Lotman, 2000).

Both 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 remote, from Europe and America, spaces suddenly come to play an important role in the new world order. Hence comes a new round of struggle between various forces for the 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 destabilizing of the general situation and potentially can also lead to the growth of the influence of Islamic extremist movements (such as Khizb-ut-Takhrir or Wahhabism). It would be nearsighted 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 Renaissance, which unfortunately resulted among other things, in the decline and fall of both Central Asia and Caucasus. It was precisely starting from the Western modernity in all its forms (including the Marxist model), that these locales fell into the permanent decline cycle, and even today, when they finally became politically inde-

pendent, they still cannot leave this vicious circle of multiple colonization. So instead of continuing to demonize and exoticize Central Asia or Caucasus, it is better to try to understand, under the influence of which global factors their history took this particular turn. And it would be much more fruitful if this task is performed by the thinkers from these regions themselves, and not by the Western experts.

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 1403 document—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 Turkish invasion, as they put it. Tamerlane himself is an interesting semiotic sign of trans-cultural exchanges between Europe and Asia, Christianity and Islam. In the late 19th century the French would even put a gilded statue of Tamer-

lane in one of Parisian streets commemorating him as the liberator of Europe from the Ottoman conquest. The irony is that it is the 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 the 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 Vasko da Gama's ships blazed the sea route from Europe to India and further, to China, and the Great Silk route suddenly lost its significance. While 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 Caucasus and Central Asia clearly demonstrates the complex and multiply colonized nature of these locales throughout history. Both territories have been always cultural, linguistic, religious and ethnic cross-roads. Various religions and ethnic and linguistic groups came one after another into these locales, some of them stayed and hybridized their cultures with those of the people who lived there before, creating a unique and complex history. E.g. in the territory of Modern Azerbaijan antique Zoroastrianism gave way to Christianity which later was replaced by Islam, when Azerbaijan became a part

of Arabic Caliphate. Central Asia with its heart in Ferghana valley (Transoxiana or in Arabic "*maa-waraa-nahr*"—a place between two rivers Amu-Darya–Oxus and Syr-Darya–Jaxartes) has been also a site of multiple religious, ethnic and linguistic mixing, starting from the same Zoroastrianism, which many scholars believe to be born there, in Khorezm, and to Buddhism and Hellenism, the nomadic pagan cultures of the steppe and the metropolitan master-craftsmen traditions, the scientific and cultural achievements, borrowed from India, China, Persia, Greece, Middle East and Turkey—all of them synthesizing in the flourishing medieval Central Asian culture, which also came under the Arabic control in the 7-9th centuries, to become finally Muslim under the Samanid dynasty, and in the 13th century, once again, being conquered by Genghis-Khan's army. Thus, both territories from the start had been the sites of intense cultural, linguistic, religious hybridizing and trans-cultural tendencies due to their specific geographic positioning in the world, and their taking active part in what was then the pre-capitalist world economy. Consequently they elaborated their own unique and tolerant ways of dealing with this cultural multiplicity as well as strategies of survival under various regimes, which, I would argue, are still alive even today in the subjectivity of the majority of people who live in these locales, even after the distorting influence of Western modernization brought with it such initially foreign to these territories concepts as ethnic and linguistic nationalism and the strong sense of ethnic belonging, religious

and linguistic purism and intolerance, racialization and ethnization, artificial divisions into the major ethnicities and minorities, into "Arians" and "Mongolians," etc.

Both Central Asia and Southern Caucasus featured a variety of independent and semi-independent states in medieval époque—the so called khanates (with the exception of a rather large and powerful Tamerlane's empire with its capital in Samarkand—the ancient Marakanda) virtually up to European Enlightenment, when the main colonial spaces were already divided between the large Western capitalist empires and there started a process of appropriation of the less attractive but still geo-strategically or economically important territories, such as Central Asia and Caucasus. A crucial feature here was that they were colonized not directly by the Western capitalist empires, but by the so called subaltern empires, or empires-colonies, like Russia and the Ottoman Empire, which were themselves colonized epistemically and culturally by the West and thus, acted as mediators, as champions of Western modernity in these locales, albeit in the 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 Anzaldua'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 Central Asia which after the collapse of Timurids 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 and mainly from the British empire, up to minute details, such as the famous concept of the "tools of empire" (e.g. railways). It is worth noting that immediately Russia began making a cotton colony out of Central Asia, intending to shake the cotton monopoly of the US South. This project of Central Asia modernization was only continued by the Soviets with larger and more violent excesses, ultimately resulting in ecological and humanitarian catastrophes of the second half of the 20th century.

It is only natural then that both Azerbaijan and Central Asia were torn between the influences of the modernization via Russian empire (that after all controlled Azeris for almost 170 years and Central Asia for almost 130 years), via the Ottoman empire (especially in Azeris case) and more traditionalist Muslim Persia and the countries of the South-East Asia (in case of Central Asia). Their modernization model came directly from Russia and later from Soviet Union, up to the 1990s, when the circular Turkish model (very attractive and compatible for both Central Asia and Islamic Caucasus and also more politically pragmatic for them today) 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 here that even if the West never succeeded in directly colonizing these locales, there were several Western attempts in modernity at establishing its direct or indirect rule over both 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. This is what happened roughly in the 1917-1920 when the collapsing Russian empire slackened its grip and both Azerbaijan and Turkestan became independent states, if only for several years. Immediately the Western European countries attempted (unsuccessfully) to take over both Central Asia and Caucasus, but the strengthened Bolshevik empire quickly restored its dominance. In Azerbaijan there was an earlier attempt at Western economic colonization connected with the sudden though short skyrocketing of Baku in the late 19th century to the status of the world oil capital, which opened this traditionally multicultural city to the direct influences of Western modernization, not via Russia. It became the city of oil barons from all over Europe and even America. Another most recent example of the same imperial tactic we witness today, after the collapse of the Soviet empire, when once again the West and particularly the US are trying to establish control over these regions—economically, politically, culturally. However, today, in 2006, it is obvious that the Western tactic is skidding once again. As these regions are not so ready to chose the neo-liberal model of modernization for themselves. True, the influence of Rus-

sia diminished, the influence of Turkey somewhat grew, there were sporadic attempts at growing a new generation of pro-Western elites in these locales, in the last two decades, but 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 trans-cultural sensibility of a trickster type, that I believe gives them a lot of potential for the future.

The tactic of 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 the 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 leaving one region for another could easily change their status, name and enter into different hierarchies, due to the specific local mechanism of mutual adaptation, which allowed for this complex cultural multiplicity to coexist peacefully, categorized themselves in cultural, regional, social, economic and religious and not ethnic or linguistic sense, and only the Russian and later Soviet colonization forcefully and nearsightedly introduced the idea of ethnicity into this region and the model of modernization, based on ethnic-national identity.[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 Asian newly independent states. The tactic of Stalin's deportations of whole peoples into Central Asia (Meskhetian Turks, Crimean Tatars, Chechens, Balkars, etc.) and artificial borders, contributed to the future ethnic and economic tensions in these regions (Karabakh conflict between Azeris and Armenians, as a result of which over 30 thousand people were reported, according to several sources, to perish 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 modern inhabitants of Central Asia or Azerbaijan nations are not "imagined communities."

The most hard 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, starting from 1552, when Ivan the Terrible conquered Kazan and Astrakhan, was not always based on absolute rejection. This is a relatively new phenomenon, connected with modernization of Russia itself and the gradual naturalization in its mass consciousness of racism and Eurocentrism, interiorized by 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 lead to the fact that the more complex, nuanced and empathic models of interaction with Islam as an internal other were forgotten. In the last 200 years Islam itself in the territory of Russia and its colonies transformed into ethnicity and started 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 ethnization, racialization and politization of Islam took place. In many postcolonial spaces with traditionally weak idea of ethnicity, this risk is especially noticeable, as there, ethnic

nationalism often takes Islamist forms, they claim Islam for their own new nations and interpret it as first of all a manifestation of their own local culture. Both Central Asia and Azerbaijan unfortunately demonstrate some aspects of this dangerous tendency, although not to such a large extent as Northern Caucasus today. But even though there are unquestionably many crosses between the ethnic culture and larger civilizational specificity and Islam, still it would be incorrect to regard them as one. The former is much wider than the latter. And it is in the former that we find most promising prospects for the future.

The Russian empire was a lazy empire in the sense that it always performed its Christianizing mission half heatedly, particularly when it referred to Muslim people. A famous Russian poet Alexander Pushkin in his *Journey to Erzerum* urged the lazy Russian empire that limited its cultural mission to sending books to illiterate people, to apply along with economic and cultural tools the curiously archaic for the 19th century forms of imperial control over Caucasus 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" (Pushkin, 1934: 745). As for the Soviet period, in spite of its general tendency towards 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 the masked form of Russian national traditions, and rejected Is-

lamic thought and organizations—again, masking this tactic as a fight with "bourgeois nationalism." In Central Asia or Caucasus in the 1970s one could easily find an Orthodox church and even a Jewish synagogue in any relatively small town, but there was often not even one mosque left. As for post-soviet period, I would say that 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, the Islamic festivals, etc. On the other hand, the same authority pretends not to notice the extremist organizations, parties and politicians, who openly demonize Islam as a part of today's wider Russian xenophobia and migrant-phobia. On top of that there are clearly more calculated efforts to control the cultural-political unconsciousness and preserve the dominance by flirting with Islam in fear of possible non-systemic organizations and leaders, that the authorities in Russia see as a potential danger. E.g. the director of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Russian Academy of Sciences, an ex minister of nationalities of Russia and a member of many international commissions Valery Tishkov, finds the roots of global terrorism and the ways of fighting it in the following:

> 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, rejection of radical projects and appeals. (Tishkov, 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 this politics, but what worries me here is the ethical dimension. What we can read in between the lines here 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. This pragmatic logic is mirrored in the number of the so called Muslim intellectuals in the post-soviet space most of whom are successful or not very successful political projects and constructed identities even if they may be quite interesting and well-educated people themselves. The problem is how they are used by the state. And here history repeats and reminds us of the infamous Orthodox priest Gapon who in 1905 instigated the mass workers march which resulted in the mass massacre that goes in Russian history under the name of the "Bloody Sunday." Today such "Gapons" acquire sometimes a more exotic guise (e.g. of Russian Orthodox priests converting to Islam) and are used by the official power to ensure that Islam does not develop in any non-systemic uncontrollable forms.

What has happened in the political life of the Muslim Eurasian frontiers, after they gained independence, unfortu-

nately does not leave many hopes for the future, at least if the same logic continues to be reproduced again and again. E.g. 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 authoritarian, but fair and just patriarchal element in the family (Karimov, 1993). In Rasanayagam's words, 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 idea of the nation, but replaced the Marxist ideology as its glue, with ethnic nationalism (Rasanayagam, 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, which do not promise anything good either. As a Northern Caucasus social philosopher K. Tkhagapsoyev points out, in the post-Soviet space there emerged

> The ethnic states with the ethnic-clan system of power. Thus paradoxically the "space of freedom of ethnicities," that was proclaimed with the collapse of Soviet system and was a complex and contradictory multiplicity of cultural meanings and ideas—post-colonialism, traditionalism, neo-liberalism—rushed in the end into generating a certain "transmuted form" of social-political being: ethnic etatism.

> Such a result was influenced by certain features of Russian reforms and first and foremost by being an integral part of the reformers' "total othering." Othering of unitary and international forms of Soviet power quite logically turned into the locus of sovereignty, regionalization and ethnization of power. As a result, in ethnic republics the political instrument for the implementation of reforms—which were manifested as liberal and democratic in their aims and content—turned out in fact to be the authoritarian regimes of ethnic etatism—which has nothing to do with democratic principles (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) today often simply has to become a new nomad against his 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 e.g. to the West (that is possible only for the chosen few), looking for jobs and better life, because in the modern global configuration of power their entering the world economic system as labor force is still impossible. They do not have any other choice of entering the world of globalization, but go to Russia, as the North will never let in either Uzbeks, or Tadzhiks, or Russians for that matter. Another minor alternative for migrations from these regions would be South East Asia (e.g. Malaysia) and Turkey. As for Russia proper, which is beyond our interest in this conference but is worth mentioning, it also shapes today an ethnic etatist model, but of a more dangerous kind. The director of the Center for the study of xenophobia and prevention of ex-

tremism, Emil Pain calls it a model of the Third Reich or ethnocratic empire, based on the idea of superiority of Russians over everyone else (Pain, 2004: 309).

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 Soviet fake theory of proletarian internationalism. The roots of this linguistic, religious, ethnic and cultural tolerance are much deeper and after the initial ethnic nationalist explosion of the early 1990s today there is generally a nostalgia in these places for the times of tolerance and trans-culturation and what is more important—there are conscious if sporadic efforts to revive it. 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 historical cataclysms of the 20th century (e.g. Tashkent accepted several large migration waves, from the Russian settlers in the 19th century to the mostly Jewish families from the West of Soviet Union, who were evacuated here during WW2. Many of them after the end of war preferred to stay and not go back, and still stay there even today). 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 is as a cultural palimpsest of differ-

ent, 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 (Mamedov, 2000: 110).

Both Baku and Tashkent which were before a part of the great silk route, then went into decline for several centuries of European modernity march, only to reemerge in the second modernity as typically colonial subaltern spaces at the outskirts of empire—each with its specific task—in case of Baku it was the oil, in case of Tashkent it was being the center of colonial administration and cotton industry and trade. In other words, their role of the tolerant multilingual crossroads was revived to some extent even under the loss of independence.

From what I have tried to summarize above, it is clear that it was the second modernity that ultimately made an anti-space out of Central Asia and 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 were these people 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 the 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 for my attempt at defining of 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.

You can raise an objection and say that people living in Central Asia or Caucasus do not travel much, that they are inescapably tied to their locale and their destiny. But this is not so. Rather, they would probably prefer to stay home and make out of it once again a previously existing multicultural universe. But today's logic of globalization makes them be-

come migrants—there is no work in their countries or it is so low paid that it is not enough to survive. That is why among the younger generation of people from these locales we find so many migrants against their own will.

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, and have managed to preserve their own system of reference and world vision under all regimes, a system, marked with specific tolerance, for lack of better word in English, though as we know tolerance comes from the medieval concept of tolerating the poison and hardly matches the trans-cultural philosophy of treating the other. This trans-cultural personage is to be found in many traditions from India to Palestine, from Ferghana 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. This character has a pre-Islamic origin and among its sources there are the Acadian Gilgamesh epic, the novel of Alexander, the Judaic parable about Joshua b. Levi. 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 would he gain depends on how pure his intentions are." In this belief one finds a specific philosophy of treating other persons, other cultures. What kind of philosophy is that, I would like to illustrate by one example, but first let me quote the worlds of a progressive Muslim intellectual Omid Safi that refer directly to this issue:

> Adab (…) 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. (Safi, 2004: 13.)

But the scholar sadly continues that "it is precisely this compassionate humanness that is missing from so much of contemporary Islam (Safi, 2004: 13).

It is 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 to 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, even if often artificially restrained and deprived of this possibility, that can be a way out of fundamentalism vs neo-liberalism opposition. The latter, as we all had a chance to see lately, is a dead-end, leading only to global catastrophe of the clash of civilizations, the idea, that

being a carefully constructed myth far from reality, nevertheless has become very powerful today in the minds of both Western and non-Western thinkers and groups.

And now the promised legend that recently has found a scientific proof in the studies of both Polish and Central Asian scholars. In 1241 when Khan Batu had conquered many cities of Eastern Europe and finally came very close to the Polish Krakow, on the roof of the famous Maryat Cathedral a trumpeter was holding his post. He was the first to notice the enemy. He managed to warn his compatriots by playing his trumpet, before he was killed by the arrow of one of khan's warriors. Later Poland lost independence and the Poles believed that their country would become free again if a Polish trumpeter would climb one of the minarets in Samarkand which at that point was governed by Genghizids's successor Tamerlane, and finish the interrupted melody. In 1918 when the Polish army was leaving Samarkand after the failed Entente attempts at gaining control over this territory, one of the Polish soldiers did climb a minaret of the famous Registan square and played his trumpet. Soon Poland became independent again, if for a short time. Several decades had passed and during WW2 the members of the future Polish Army regiment happened to be in Samarkand. They were stopped at the market and asked by the local elders to bring their trumpeter to Registan and urge him to play his instrument because it was necessary to expiate the old sin of the Khan Batu warrior—the murder of the

"muezzin" of Maryat Cathedral. To wash off the sin it was needed that the trumpeter from that country would stand in the center of Samarkand market and finish his interrupted azan (http://www.e-samarkand.narod.ru/ poland.htm). This logic of Samarkand elders and their sincere willingness to correct the past and make the world more just and fair, is very far from any intolerance that Islamic cultures are often associated with today. Rather it is a 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. It is in the revival and cultivation of this element of Central Asian culture that lies a possibility of intercultural dialogue in the future. The West with its exotization and fear of 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. The Samarkand elders seemed to understand that, but can the modern world follow their route?

One of the most promising sensibilities that is being shaped today in the world on the 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, questioning equally each of them and not regarding one of them as an absolute point of reference anymore. This powerful deconstructive impulse we find not just 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 progressive Muslims project, from other thinking to border thinking, but is always based on questioning the neo-liberal modernity from in-between position. The Muslim frontiers of Eurasia such as 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 lose move-

ment of trans-culturation 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 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 the quotidian). Here the imperial assimilation tactic was needed not as a way of coping with metisation (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. Following Eduard Glissant's metaphor, we can say that both Central Asia and Southern Caucasus are the spaces marked by opacity,

> that is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity. Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand this truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its component. (Glissant, 1997: 190.)

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 the serious global canonical counter-discourse, offered several decades ago by Kazakh writer and philosopher Olzhas Suleymenov in his *Az i Ia* (Suleymenov, 1975), where he retold the Russian foundational epic *Lay of Igor's Campaign* from a Turkic viewpoint, and stressed a utopian possibility of creating a great secular Eurasian Slavic-Turkic confederation or state based on their common history and culture. In 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, Suleymenov's utopian, but global and positive model is equally unattractive to both parties. Instead we find only sporadic and local efforts at questioning both the Western modernity and the 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 the 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 (Baudrillard, 1979)? *Ilkhom* in its Jewish director M. Vile's words, 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 distopia, 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 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 real Tamerlan's empire capital, an important late medieval cultural center of the East, a city where one could find the famous observatory and 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 Islamic universities, where people could get an excellent education, combining the study of various circular disciplines and theology. 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 alterative 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 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 form different locales suffer from the same logic of coloniality 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 Eurasian steppe and then punishing these countries if they refuse to accept the Western dominance, like the US did recently with Uzbekistan. Our conference is one of the very few and fortunate exceptions from this rule. And I hope that in the future there will be more such exceptions that will eventually change the rule itself, as one important step in making this world a better place for us all.

Notes

1. The concept of coloniality of power was formulated by a Peruvian philosopher 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 trans-nationalism 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) the 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 that built the convenient—pure in 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 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 as well 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 principle.

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