

MIGRATION, MINORITIES & REGIONAL IDENTITIES

Turkey and the Black Sea region are situated within a range of different geographical and political areas: Europe and the Balkans, the former constituents of the Soviet Union, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Iran and the Middle East. This location inevitably has constituted them as a physical bridge and placed them at the crossroads of different historical forces and empires. This was as much a feature in prehistoric as in historic and contemporary times, when cross-boundary migration remains an important domestic and international concern. The interplay between geographical factors, diverse political entities and patterns of migration has been a significant factor in shaping the domestic and social make-up of Turkey and the Black Sea region. It has played an important role in forming cultural identities, whether at individual, regional, national or supra-national level. Simultaneously, these processes in relation to migrant communities have also influenced neighbouring areas. This strategic research initiative aims to promote research across different academic disciplines that relate to the themes of migration, minorities and regional identities in Turkey and the Black Sea region.

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Azeri-Turkish poetry and song in Georgia

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*Sabah namazını Hələf özündə.
Günorta namazını Qarsın düzündə.
Axşam namazını yar Tiflisində.
Mövlam qanad verdi uçdum da gəldim.*

Morning Prayer in the heart of Aleppo
Midday Prayer in the plains of Kars
Evening Prayer in beloved Tbilisi
My Master gave me wings, I flew, and I came.

The poetry of *aşık/aşiq* bards spreads across a wide geography that cannot be confined to the borders of modern nation states. The stanza above from the *dastan* epic ‘Aşiq Qərib’ demonstrates the inherently translocal nature of this tradition. The protagonist, after being estranged from his lover for seven years, miraculously travels, with the help of the Prophet Khidr, from Aleppo to Kars before continuing to his lover’s home in Tbilisi – three cities situated in three different countries today. *Aşıqs*, in both their literary imaginations and in actual practice, have long traversed such a geography. Historically, these singer-poets filled the role of both entertainers and bearers of news, travelling far and wide, and often performing for different audiences in multiple languages. Even in recent history, during the period of hard political borders between Turkey, the Soviet Union and Iran, the sounds of these bards crossed frontiers on radio waves and cassette tapes.

In the summer of 2019 I was lucky to spend time carrying out fieldwork researching the contemporary status of Azeri-Turkish *aşiq* practice in the Republic of Georgia. Azeri-Turks make up the largest ethnic minority community in Georgia – roughly 8% of the overall population. Living mostly in the capital city of Tbilisi and the province of Kvemo-Kartli, also known as Borçalı, Azeris in Georgia have struggled in the period following independence from the Soviet Union, being caught between changing borders. Institutional, political and social discrimination and a lack of educational opportunity



An older generation of *aşıqs* (photo Aşiq Kamandar House Museum in Kəpənəkçi village).



Aşıq Həvəskar Borçalı performing at the Sadaxlı El Bayramı.

have led to large-scale labour migration to Turkey, Russia and Azerbaijan. Despite the lack of state support for the Azeri-Turkish language and cultural heritage in the country, poetry and *aşıq* art continue to thrive in the community and are often highlighted as a source of cultural pride and a marker of identity.

Since 2009 ‘*Aşıq Art*’ has been inscribed in UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage List under the Republic of Azerbaijan. Whilst several initiatives have aimed to promote this ‘national’ tradition within that republic, the art form in Georgia receives no state support and performance contexts are extremely limited. In the past, musical education was provided in Soviet-era ‘houses of culture’, but today only a handful of *aşıqs* in the country continue to teach in more informal settings. In Tbilisi, *Aşıq Nargile Mehdiyeva* is the sole teacher, with over 20 students coming to classes weekly. Nargile is currently the only female *aşıq* in the Borçalı region and has managed to establish herself as one of the leading voices in *aşıq* art, both locally and internationally. Her students, who are between the ages of eight and 35 – both male and female – travel across the city and from nearby villages to learn to play the *saz*, the long-necked lute central to *aşıq* music, and sing. The style of the lessons follows the way Nargile herself learnt almost 30 years ago: in the time-honoured process of apprenticeship known as *usta-şagird* in which the music and poetry are transmitted orally without the use of musical notation. More recently, in the Azeri-majority city of Marneuli, just south of Tbilisi, there has been an initiative supported by the Georgian branch of the Yunus Emre Institute to provide regular *saz* lessons to children living in the area.

Despite the continued popularity of *aşıq* music in Borçalı, there are increasingly fewer performance opportunities for these musicians locally. In the past, most weddings in the

region are said to have included performances by *aşıqs* who would sing and recite *dastan* epics, which would at times be spread over the three or four nights of the wedding. With the shortening of weddings and their relocation to large new purpose-built wedding halls, the intimate gatherings conducive to this performance practice have been lost. In Georgia today, summer festivals, known as *el bayramları*, are the main annual occasions at which *aşıqs* perform to large audiences. These festivals have, however, become sites in the struggle between national and minority identities. One such festival held in the pastures of Dmanisi (known by the name of Armudlu in Azeri-Turkish) was initiated by the Azeri-Turkish community ten years ago as a celebration of their culture and community, but has since been co-opted by local state officials and transformed into a ‘national’ Georgian festival. Although the majority of attendees at this year’s festival were local Azeris, the main event featured only Georgian-language poets and musicians, pushing *aşıqs* off the stage and leaving the audience extremely dissatisfied. At other village festivals, however, *aşıqs* appear as the main attraction, including at the *Sadaxlı El Bayramı*, where I counted no less than five different *aşıqs* performing as well as a group of young students.

These changing social and political contexts have led to these professional musicians having to travel once again between Georgia, Azerbaijan and Turkey to make a living, performing at festivals across these countries. Despite the decline of radio and the state-supported recording industry, which were the main means of distribution during the 20th century, new media and online platforms allow recordings of these musicians to circulate across a wide region – between Kars, Tabriz, Baku and Tbilisi. The future of this ‘local’ tradition therefore appears to be dependent on its continuing translocalism as audiences remain spread across Anatolia and the Caucasus.



The Sadaxlı Children’s Ensemble at the Sadaxlı El Bayramı.