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Iranian Georgians: Prerequisites for a Research

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Abstract

Iranian Georgians are the descendants of Georgians, who were moved to different parts of Iran from the Safavid until the early Qajar period, either voluntarily or by force. The main wave of these migrations occurred in 17th century Safavid Iran.

The paper discusses some preliminary issues to the study of the Iranian Georgians, particularly as to conducting fieldworks among them.

Keywords

Iranian Georgians, Fereydani Georgians, Fieldwork, Ethnic Groups in Iran

Iranian Georgians are the descendants of Georgians, who were moved to different parts of Iran from the Safavid until the early Qajar period, either voluntarily or by force. The main wave of these migrations occurred in 17th century Safavid Iran.

According to Persian sources, around 225,000 Georgians during the two centuries of the Safavid, 5000 families during the Afsharid, and 15,000 persons during the Qajar era were moved from Georgia to the territory of contemporary Iran. According to Georgian sources, these numbers are respectively 245,000, 30,000, and 22,000 persons (Mūlyānī 2001: 204). The main areas of settlement were Isfahan, Fereydan, Mazandaran, and the region between Isfahan and Shiraz, during the Safavid era, and Khorasan in the Afsharid period (ibid.: 226-231).

The Georgian community of modern-day Iran is relatively small. Today, the Fereydani Georgians are the only Georgian-speaking ethnic group in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Their number is estimated at 61,000. The Georgian language and self-awareness among other communities of Iran is vanishing or extinct. There are self-aware Georgians in northern Iran, in Mazandaran, and notably in the Behshahr county

(*šahrestān*). This latter group, however, no longer speaks Georgian, but is largely aware of its Georgian roots. Georgians, with varying degrees of self-awareness, live in other regions of Iran as well.

The information about the Georgians in Iran is mainly limited to historical references of their services to Iranian empires. Only the entry of P. Oberling (2001) in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, which relies heavily on his earlier paper (1963), deals with Iranian Georgians as a living ethnic group. However, there are no references to any fieldwork conducted by him.

There are also some works written by scholars from the Caucasus, the most important of them being Zurab Šarašenize's research (1979) on Fereydani Georgians.¹ Although, the Georgian authors have their native perceptions on "what is Georgianness, who is a Georgian and how he should act" and, to a certain extent, are biased, their works can be useful in the sense that they have noticed differences between Georgians in the Caucasus and those in Fereydan.

Publications about Iranian Georgians by Iranian authors are scarce. The few works are written by members of the ethnic group themselves.

There are only four books published in Iran about the Iranian Georgians as a living ethnic group. Three of these are about Fereydani Georgians; one is about a Georgian village in the Behshahr county in the Mazandaran province, authored by a Mazandarani Georgian (see Sepyānī 1979; Mūlyānī 2001; Raḥīmī 2001). This situation reflects another reality. Despite the fact that there were more Georgian settlers in Mazandaran than in Fereydan, the latter group takes more active steps in researching and promoting Iranian Georgian related issues. In addition, the only sizable Georgian-Persian dictionary, which is worthy of mention, is written by a Fereydani Georgian (see Lačīnani 2007). Apparently, the ethnic awareness of the subgroups themselves reflects the attention they pay to their native issues.

There are few written sources on Iranian Georgian history or Iran-Georgia relations; in the first place Eskandar Beyg Monshi's *Tārīx-e 'ālam-ārā-ye 'Abbāsi*, and Astarabadi's *Tārīx-e jahāngošāy-e Nāderī*, which contain valuable information about the Georgians of Iran.

¹ It is remarkable that Šarašenize's book is titled *P'ereidneli Gurjebi* and not *P'he-reidneli Kartvelebi*. He does not use the Georgian self-designation of *Kartveli* (pl. *Kartvelebi*) for Fereydani Georgians, using instead the Persianised term *gurji* (pl. *gurjebi*), probably, to stress the observed and perceived differences between them and the predominantly Christian Georgians from the Caucasus.

The scarcity of sources may deter many researchers, but it also invites the curious to study and learn more about a less known ethnic group.

Culture is usually seen as a subject and theme, rather than as a research instrument itself. Nevertheless, culture itself could be used as a source for relevant evidence and an instrument of research. Cultural phenomena, such as painting, folklore, traditional clothes, etc. are not only subjects of study but also could be used as sources of information. Similarly, the language, toponyms, various artefacts, and, even architecture of the Iranian Georgian settlements can be helpful in defining the original area of their exodus from Georgia, their cultural belonging and the historical circumstances of their migrations, etc. (see, e.g., Rezvani 2008; also Mūlyānī 2001, Raḥīmī 2001).

Iranian Georgians are a non-politicised ethnic group and, therefore, research on them is not deemed sensitive. This is due to two reasons: ethnicity in Iran is a relatively non-politicised social category, and Iranian Georgians are not exploited by internal or external (ethno)-politicians.

The ethnic policies in Iran are liberal. Nevertheless, ethnic cultures do not flourish. Small ethnic groups are victims of an unconscious assimilation process catalysed by mass media. An increasing number of children choose to speak the fashionable Tehrani Persian and discard their traditional clothes for western styles or, as they call it, *šahri* (i.e. urban) clothes. However, there are no official policies of assimilation and discrimination, nor is the Iranian state territorially divided into ethnic areas, although some provinces have ethnic names (Kurdistan, Baluchistan).

As non-Islamic minorities are few, the main sources of ethno-religious problems are found at the border regions, where Sunni ethnic groups are largely concentrated. The mobilisation among the Kurdish and Baluchi separatists are a case in point. Hypothetically, attempts towards politicisation of ethnicity could also occur among Shi'ite ethnic groups, especially when they border a foreign co-lingual state and when they are exposed to foreign manipulation. In recent years, ethno-political movements can be seen among Azaris and Khuzistani Arabs. While the former is not really a separatist movement and lack substantial popular support, it poses a serious threat to public order and inter-ethnic relations. In both cases foreign involvement serves a certain geopolitical agenda. It does not mean necessarily that authorities in the Republic of Azerbaijan and Iraq officially support these separatist movements, but their main sources of support come from political parties

and movements in these countries, with linkages to global networks (for an elaborate discussion on these cases, see Farrokh 2005a; idem 2005b; Abedin/Farrokh 2005; Harrison 2007; Goldberg 2008; and for general discussion, see Ahmadi 2005).

Iranian Georgians constitute a very different case, as there are neither indigenous causes of ethno-political dissent nor foreign agitation. In addition, they are not located in large concentrations in any strategically-sensitive area.

Kin-states often show interests towards their ethnic kin-folk in neighbouring states. In this specific case, Iran and Georgia do not have any hostile relations, nor do they share a common border (Hitchins 2001). Iranian Georgians are Shi'ite Muslims, while Georgians of Georgia are Orthodox Christians. Therefore, it is unlikely that Iranian Georgians would be suspected by either country for being potential agents of the other.

Accessibility of resources on the object of study is a main prerequisite for any research. Very often access to the research population is deduced to their sociability. The latter is, of course, important for gaining access into a community, but there are more determinant factors of accessibility than mere open-handedness or hospitality. How accessible are Iranian Georgians? In their case, experiences of the few researchers were positive. Many have recorded difficulties in interviewing Iranian Armenians and Jews, which can be explained by their closed and protective attitude conditioned by their religious minority status. These communities restrict inter-communal interaction to a minimum, and have traditionally viewed relative segregation from Shi'ite society and strong intra-communal loyalty as effective strategies for identity maintenance.

As earlier mentioned, there has not been much effort to introduce the Iranian Georgians to the outside world. The field of research is, therefore, not saturated. Due to this, it is expected that members of this ethnic group will welcome and cooperate with researchers for the present. It can be said that the notion of hospitality is a naïve one, but it can more correctly be regarded as a result of other factors. The minority status of an ethnic group and its relative integration or isolation from mainstream society are factors that serve as proxies for hospitality. Another factor is the desire of the community to become known and to be heard. My own experience as a researcher shows that the Iranian Georgians are willing to answer questions and speak about their community.

The location of a community is also of great importance. Physical access to the place of study is a problem, which deserves increased attention. The places with the highest Iranian Georgian concentration are easily accessible by relatively good roads. Moreover, they are not dangerous places, nor has the Iranian government ever issued any restrictions on visiting these areas.²

The Iranian Georgians are concentrated in Fereydunshahr county and in the sub-county (*baxš*) of Buin-Miandasht of Fereydan county. There are also Georgian neighbourhoods in Mazandarani cities, such as Behshahr and Amol, and, in addition, there are Georgian villages in Behshahr county. As the Iranian statistics do not distinguish between ethnic groups, the census data of administrative territories can not serve as a source of information. Nevertheless, the respective data on the numerical aspect of the Georgians' presence in Iran can be easily gathered by the researchers themselves. Regarding the fact that in these areas the Georgian population is relatively large, analyses will often lead to statistically significant results. The method is very simple. The researcher should first identify the Georgian households and assure himself an entry point into this network. The elderly and those in education or public administration know many people. These people can introduce a researcher to new networks. Residents of traditional Georgian towns and villages have family members residing in big cities, such as Tehran, Isfahan, and Karaj, who, in turn, can introduce the enquirer to their relatives and friends.

In order to interview and communicate with Iranian Georgians, one should have a command of Persian and preferably Georgian and Mazandarani languages. Knowledge of Georgian helps one understand the name of some local traditions and places, and enables the researcher to communicate with a wider range of respondents and informants. Men and younger generations of Iranian Georgians know Persian but some elderly females exclusively speak Fereydani Georgian or Mazandarani. Iranian Georgian elders are an important source of knowledge and information about folklore and traditions. Command of English (or any other European language) is not sufficient for ethnographic work on the Iranian Georgians.

The Iranian Georgian community is a very symptomatic object of study; it offers insights and would help formulate new theories about

² Sistan and Baluchistan, Kurdistan and the border area with Afghanistan are unsafe places. Iranian authorities often put restrictions on foreigners visiting these regions.

ethnic coexistence, maintenance, and reconciliations of ethnic and religious identities.

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