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Circassian architecture as an example for social space being shaped by tradition

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Abstract

This study is pointing out that Circassian architecture especially in villages is substantial different from the building style of local buildings in Asia Minor from the local buildings in its surroundings. Its pointed out that the Circassians preserved the of the ancestral homelands which reflected itself in architectural patterns according to that tradition. As an example we might point to the importance that was given to guests by the construction of a space especially assigned to guests and known as “haçes”. Furthermore gardens were not confined with walls as usually the case in the region. Nevertheless changing living patterns fostered by urbanization let to the slow disappearance of distinctive architectural features and the tradition of Circassian community.

Keywords: Circassians, architecture, immigration from Caucasus, traditions

Gelenekler ile biçimlenen yaşam alanlarına bir örnek: Çerkes mimarisi

Öz

Bu çalışmada Çerkes mimarisinin, özellikle köylerde bölgesel mimari farklılık gösterdiğini, Çerkeslerin geldikleri coğrafyadan yani Kafkasya'dan birlikte getirdikleri geleneklerine sıkı bağlılık gösterdiklerini, ev inşa etme tarzlarının da bu duruma uygun bir biçimde geliştiği belirtilmektedir. Örneğin misafire verilen önem ve değer; yalnızca onun kullanımına açık haçes adı verilen bir bölümün açılmış olmasıyla kendini göstermiş, evlerin bahçelerinin kapalı olmamasıyla diğer evlerden farklılığını ortaya koymuştur. Ancak yıllar içerisinde köyden kente göçle beraber, toplu yaşamın kuralları gereğince (apartman daireleri vs.) geleneksel ev tarzı doğal bir değişikliğe uğramış ve bu değişikliklerle beraber günümüzde birçok adet ve gelenek yok olmaya yüz tutmuştur.

Anahtar kelimeler: Çerkesler, mimari, Kafkasya'dan göç, gelenekler

The Circassians: A short historical introduction

The Circassians, a tribe that used to live in the Northern Caucasus Mountains until the second half of the nineteenth century, were first and foremost known for the warrior qualities. While the term “Circassian” (Çerkes) has been used to describe those people in Ottoman Turkish, the autochthonous word to define themselves is “Adighe or Adyghe”. It has to be added that Kabardians are also classified as Circassians. From a linguistic point of view the Circassian or Adyghe language (Adigebze), being part of North-West Caucasian languages, is classified as “Western Circassian” while the Kabardian dialect is classified as “Eastern Circassian.”

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The language, defined as autochthonous by many linguists, does employ a number of old Iranian / Ossetian loanwords and later loaned a great number of Ottoman Turkish and Arabic words through the process of cultural diffusion (Trubetzkoy, 2001: 165). Most Circassians traditionally went under the self-description of “Adigha/Adighe”, others called themselves Abaza, etc., besides that, a variety of Adighe tribes does exist.

In the 19th century, Russians colonized the North Caucasus and founded many Cossack villages in the region. When we look at the Adygeya Region, we can see that after the Russian Revolution, The Black Sea Soviet Republic and Kuban Soviet Republic were declared in 1918. In May 1918 those two republics were united. In July 1991 Adygeya’s status has changed and became a republic. Adygeians, with Kabardinias and Circassians are known as descendants of Adygeis. Those North Caucasian Muslim tribes migrated to Ottoman Empire from 1870 to 1880’s. From 1871 to 1884, 13.586 people were migrated to Ottoman Empire from Kuban region and approximately % 84 of those were Adygeyans. The Colonization of the Kuban Region by the Russian Empire became a catalyst for the migration of the North Caucasians to the Ottoman Empire (Lordkipanidze and Totadze, 2010: 254).

The term Circassian (Çerkes in Turkish, often translated but not proven as “fast soldier”) itself was coined by the Ottoman Turks and applied to a group of Caucasian tribes that in some cases spoke the same language or a shared dialect, but in other cases spoke totally different idioms. Nevertheless all of the tribes were similar in terms of social norms and cultural patterns.

With the Circassians being largely pagans, Orthodox Christianity began to spread between them during the Middle Ages. Ottoman influence led to large scale conversion to Islam since the 16th century, nevertheless paganism or at least pagan traditions remained widespread between the Circassians. Bodenstedt notes, that the religion of the Adighe (around the 1840’s) was more or less a mix of Christian, Pagan and Islamic elements. However, he stresses that due to the influence of the Chechen war leader Sheik Mansour, who fought the Russians (and gained the title as an Ottoman emissary) in the last quarter 18th century, Islam became more widespread and more influential between the Circassians (Bodenstedt, 1849: 199). Over the times Islam became one of the main cultural and political factors to dominate Circassian society, contributing to an even closer association with the Ottoman Empire. The closer association with Islam, without giving up their Pre-Islamic customs and manners, would turn out to be an very important factor to integrate Circassians into Ottoman society after their migration. Nevertheless, relations between Christian and Muslim Circassians were neither strained nor did Muslim Circassians discriminate against their Christian kinsmen. Common language, heritage and customs did continue to form a large bond between them, a pattern that can also be observed between other Caucasian people as Muslim and Christian Georgians or -in the Balkans- between Albanians of different creed. Bodenstedt also implies that in the strictly hierarchical Circassian society the noblemen tended to embrace Islam, while the simple folk tended to worship their ancient gods for a longer time (Bodenstedt, 1849: 201).

Burial sites (dolmen) around the Maykop area of the Caucasus dating back to between 8000-4000 B.C. are often connected to Circassian settlement, however it is not easy to establish a straight connection to present Circassians. What can be said surely is that a megalithic culture did exist in the region since around 8000 BC. It remains controversial whether classical authors did refer specifically to Circassians while describing the geography

of the Caucasus. It is often expressed that Circassians have been cited by some classical authors like Strabon, using the term “Meots. Nevertheless, it seems tough to prove a continuous line of Circassian ethnogenesis from the Iron ages on; what is known certainly is that in the 8th and 9th centuries B.C. there are well established traces of an Iron Age culture in the western Caucasus region. Due to the autochthonous character of the language and the isolated geographical location, it was often presumed that there must have been continuous settlement of the Circassians in the Caucasus region for a longer-but unspecified- time (Moser, 1856: 44).

War and exile

The year 1863 marked the beginning of a mass exodus of a group of warrior tribes, commonly known as Circassians, from their ancestral homelands in the mountains of the Caucasus to various parts of the Ottoman Empire. It should be noted that Circassians as well as other Caucasian Muslim tribes and people like Georgians, and Chechens etc. were moving towards the Ottoman Empire as well (Karpat, 2002: 791).

Russia had actively been trying to subdue the Caucasian mountain tribes since the end of the 18th century, a development that is explainable by a number of geostrategic reasons. After powerful Czars like Peter the Great and Catherine the Great had fought various wars against the Ottoman Empire in the 18th century with the Ottoman Empire having experienced a transformation process from an economic and political viewpoint, Russia was pursuing a strategy of dominating the Black Sea region. The logical continuation of that policy would have been to gain control over the Turkish Straits in order to gain access to warm water ports in the Mediterranean. The first step in that policy was the treaty of Kucuk Kaynarca (1699) after the Turco-Russian War of 1686-1700 that ended total Ottoman sovereignty over the Black Sea (Behrens-Abouseif, 1992).

The second step was the Russian campaign against the Crimea, a sovereign vassal state of the Ottoman Empire ruled by the Turkish-Tatar Giray dynasty, resulting in the annexation of the Crimean peninsula by Russia in 1783. As a reaction, demographical changes or emigration from the Black Sea region led to the first big wave of Crimean Tatars and other Turkish and Muslim tribes from the Russian conquered areas towards the Ottoman Empire. Military conflict between the Russian and the Ottoman Empires continued between 1787 and 1791 with the Circassians actively aiding Ottoman war efforts. The Turkish-Russian War of 1828-29 that also ended in a Russian victory over the Ottoman Empire led to a further wave of immigration from Muslim inhabitants of the Caucasus region, namely Muslim Georgians, Circassians or Azeri-Turks. The Ottoman Empire formally had to renounce any claims regarding sovereignty over the areas inhabited by Circassian and other Muslim tribes which would contribute to a continuous exodus from the area (Turgay, 1991: 195). While some people voluntarily chose to escape from the rule of a non-Muslim power, others were forcibly driven out of their ancestral homelands, as the Russian government actively started to locate Non-Muslims (Christian Armenians) to formerly Muslim populated areas as Yerevan in order to gain strategic depth and reduce the danger of a potential rebellion against Russian rule in the newly conquered territories.

The years between the 1820's and the 1860's saw constant fighting between the Caucasian tribes (i.e. Chechens, Caucasians, Georgians, Ossetians and others) and the Czarist

military as Russia wanted to “pacify” and uphold its rule in a mountainous, hardly controllable area in proximity to the Ottoman Empire (Esatze and Paşu, 1999: 79). The fighting between Russian regular line troops and Cossacks on one hand and the Caucasian warriors on the other side was merciless but also bore elements of a knightly and epic struggle, an epoch that would be immortalized by Tolstoi in his famous novel *Hacı Murat*. As a young Russian officer, Tolstoi had participated in the Turco-Russian War of 1828 and various military operations against Circassian and other Caucasian warrior tribes and had been able to observe first-hand the results of a the struggle in which the mountaineers would be doomed to loose due to material and technical superiority of the Russian army. Both sides fought valiantly, Circassian, Chechen and Georgian warriors tried to make up their disadvantage in terms of numbers and weapons with valor and spirit (Esadze and Paşu, 1999: 60).

That epoch in Russian and Caucasian history would be known as Caucasian Wars and resulted in the defeat of the Caucasians (Reid, 2000: 140). The tide turned towards the favor of the Russians as Sheikh Shamil was captured in 1859. On May 21st 1864 Russian Czar Alexander III signed a decree in which he ordered the banishment of a great number of Circassians from their ancestral homelands. Karpat describes the policy in the years predating the final defeat as “preplanned action” that “intended to drive the Muslim Circassian population southward, into the Ottoman territory” (Karpat, 2002: 791).

While the number of people banished, again according to Karpat, was around 1.2 to 1.6 million Circassians (without adding other Muslim groups who migrated too) this policy dealt a deadly blow to the presence of the Circassians in their ancestral homeland. It is estimated that about 500-600 thousand Circassians perished on their way into exile. The greatest part of the refugees tried to reach the only safe heaven, the Ottoman Empire by boat via the Black Sea, others chose to reach Turkey via the land route. Bound by religion and loyalty to the Ottoman Empire (some Circassian tribes as the Jane / Cana) had accepted Ottoman suzerainty in the 16th century) a great number would perish on the way or die of diseases after reaching Ottoman lands. It has to be stressed that this exodus would not be last wave of immigration from Muslim emigrants or “muhacirs” from the Caucasus to the Empire. For example, the Crimean Tatars, also left their homeland in great numbers during the same period (Williams, 2000: 63-92).

A new homeland: the Circassians in the Ottoman Empire

The Turco Russian War of 1877-78 that resulted in a crushing defeat for the Ottoman Empire led to the immigration of Circassians and other Caucasian people to the Ottoman Empire as they were seen as a “fifth column” by the Russians. Some left forcibly, others were driven by the wish to live rather under the rule of their Muslim Turkish brothers than under Russian control. As a result, around 90% of the Circassian population left their ancestral lands in order to settle abroad. The Circassians were settled in various regions of the Ottoman Empire where they would meet –or confront- people with various cultural and religious backgrounds. We may establish the Balkans, Anatolia as well as certain parts of the Near East (today’s Syria, Jordan, Israel) geography as the primary re-settlement areas assigned to the various Circassian tribes. Nevertheless, according to Ersoy and Kamacı a great number of Circassian settlers would even perish in their new homesteads due to adaption problems vice versa the

different climate conditions as well as falling victim to various diseases (1992: 155).

It is important to stress that the Circassians refugees were accepted in the Ottoman Empire primarily due to their religious and cultural background as fellow Muslims, nevertheless other factors were existent, too. The Ottoman Empire, in economic terms still an agrarian and peripheral country, was in desperate need of settlers that could develop new agrarian resources or settle in still thinly populated territories. On the other hand, due to their combat experience and the high status warriors enjoyed in the pre-modern Circassian society, newly arrived Circassians were a welcome pool of potential soldiers for the Ottoman Empire. Due to their ancestral traditions of military organization, Circassian irregulars could provide security in areas regular security forces were spread out only thinly. Whether we may make comparisons with the soldier-peasants (Grenzer) at the Ottoman-Habsburg borders in the Balkans from the 16th to the 19th century may be disputed; but we may state that the resettlement of population groups in order to provide security and economic development in strategic areas of the Empire were perfectly in line with the “iskan” (settlement) policy the Ottoman Empire had actively engaged itself since the 15th century (Barkan, 2000: 489). Therefore, Circassians would provide military assistance against possible Russian intrusions in boarder areas, but also to check raids by nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes in the southern part of Anatolia as well in the Arabian provinces (Aydemir, 1988: 98).

It is also important to stress that conflict between Circassian settlers and the local population certainly did exist during the first years after the resettlement. The reasons for that conflict were partly due to different cultural and social norms, but economic factors and political developments did play their part, too. Within that scope, Circassian irregulars’ warriors were feared by their Bulgarian and Russian counterparts during the Bulgarian uprising between 1875 and 1878: their fresh memories of their conflict with the Russians made them fanatical fighters whose “savagery” was to be echoed by literary sources in the following years. As a result, after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the Turco-Russian war of 1877-78, the Treaty of Berlin made the (organized) resettlement of most of the Circassians from the Balkans (where they had been settled roughly 15 years ago) a provision (Ersoy and Kamacı, 1992: 115). As a result, a second migratory wave from the Balkans to Anatolia and the Arabian provinces did occur, only a few places as some villages in the Kosovo area (Mitrovica) did continue to have a significant Circassian presence until the end of Yugoslavia in the 1990’s (Besleney, 2014: 96).

As we have seen, more than a million people left for Ottoman lands between 1828 and the 1880s. That massive influx led to great social and economic changes, as the exiles would bring with them their customs and traditions and pass them on to their new neighbors only to be influenced themselves by local customs. It is quite important to stress that the newcomers were not the foreigners in a cultural sense. While speaking a different language and having a rich cultural heritage, the common religion, loyalty and gratefulness to the Ottoman Empire that had given them a new home would create a kind of synthesis that made the newcomers an integral part of the politics and society of the late Ottoman Empire. Caucasian “muhacirs”, especially Circassians, set foot to new careers preferably in the armed forces and in bureaucracy as that way of live matched their deeply rooted sense of honor and service. Therefore they would, even if not a majority in terms of numbers, become a defining element in the period that saw the final demise of the Ottoman Empire but also the emergence of Turkey as a modern nation state from the debris of the fallen Ottoman Empire. Circassian

“muhacirs” distinctively preserved their heritage but also became an integral part of the Turkish nation, leaving their footprints as soldiers, statesmen, intellectuals but also, last but not least as builders and architects.

“Habze”: The roots of social customs and tradition

Circassians do have a complicated and complex social structure and define their whole way of live according to certain traditions known as "habze". It may be described roughly as a system that is based on chivalry, respect, braveness, hospitality, honor and all important, loyalty. It is quite aristocratic and seems to be modeled for the live of a rough warrior society that sees its cause of existence in defense of the aforesaid principles. Differing from that system will lead to a loss of face, known as "hanep" or more exactly to social ostracizing. That way of life sets daily social behavior and if strictly implied, leads to a close knit and confined system of behavior and social patterns. As prominent examples we might cite intra clan and family respect towards socially higher accepted of elder family or group members. Circassian society used to be strictly divided between the lower folk, the noblemen (Usde) and the warriors (Bodenstadt, 1849: 203). Nevertheless, it was possible to rise up one's social status trough bravery in combat. Tribal life might be described as a continuation of family structure on a more complicated social stratum. As in other mountain people, the blood feud used to be widespread amongst Circassians, nevertheless the habza also provided alternatives to the bloody settlement pf conflict, i.e. the intervention of women who might reconcile warring parties by stepping between the warriors. Furthermore, a person pursued by his enemy might apply to the protection of women and would not be attacked in their company.

The system of habze more or less regulated the whole life of Circassian society and even while it is quite natural that the full implementation of that rich heritage seems to have become less common, certain distinctive customs have survived. The aforesaid system is based on oral tradition and daily routine. On one hand it may be assumed that the immigration of Circassians to Turkey has led to a changing role for the status of traditional customs and habits due to a changed socio-cultural environment which is true up to a certain point. It has to be pointed out that this process was and is shaped by the respective communities' geographical and sociological composition. Whereas Circassian communities in rural areas or more distant places that are exclusively inhabited by members of that certain social group tend to preserve their heritage longer, settlement in bigger towns leads to more social interaction with other social and cultural groups.¹ Nevertheless, certain customs are also observed after generations in big towns and those conditions naturally have an impact on the design of living spaces as houses, gardens etc.

It is quite remarkable that Circassians stubbornly tended to uphold their way of life even in a changed environment withstanding practical needs, different circumstances or even heavy obstacles. As an example we might stress the long time refusal of Circassians settled in desert like areas in present Jordan to adapt their clothing style to more practical needs. Heavy fur hats, long woolen robes and the like are designed for the harsh weather conditions of the Caucasian mountains but not the arid conditions of desert areas (Bustan, 1963: 18). Withstanding, Circassians clinged to their style for a long time, a fact that is still visible in the ceremonial dress uniforms of the Hashemite King of Jordan's Household Guard's.

Interestingly, Circassian men did not have any difficulties in donning the different

uniforms of the profession most revered between them: soldiering. In the Ottoman Empire and its successor states as Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, Syria etc. Circassians tended and still tend to choose professions related to government service, preferably the Armed Forces, but also other branches of government office (Mitteilungen, 1896: 43). Of course that does not mean that Circassians did not choose trade, handcrafts or any other professions the job market has been offering them. Nevertheless, as a social group Circassians seem to have a certain affinity to serve the state in a position as “loyal servant”. The reasons for that behavior are rooted in history as well as the Circassian societies social patterns. Being a clearly structured, quite hierarchical society that reveres loyalty all over everything, government service is not only a way of making money, but also of integrating social customs and patterns of behavior that have been adapted consciously and sub-consciously over generations into daily life. In their mountainous homeland there was always a good chance or, to express it in a different way, the bitter need to defend one’s own and his family’s life against multiple adversaries. Circassian noblemen deemed it their solely honorable way of live to be a warrior and defend its kinsmen’s freedom (Goldsmith and Percival, 1826: 211).

As expressed by oral tradition, Circassians who act within that self-selected or society defined way of live tend to create themselves the necessary circumstances to find themselves opportunities to re-create that environment. Of course that does not mean to seek necessarily physical violence or even a random brawl as such uncontrolled and emotional patterns are shunned as “hanep” or face loosing actions. Membership in the armed or security forces therefore creates the opportunity to adapt such elements into modern live, government service with its well established structures gives the opportunity to integrate the bounds of loyalty and preset order and hierarchy into the way of life. Keeping in mind that personal honor does play a central role within the warrior ethic so revered by Circassian society, service as a soldier or government official does give opportunities to transfer a rather anachronistic seeming way of live into the boundaries of modern societies.

The inclusion into preset social structures and hierarchies seems to be attractive to Circassians after establishing themselves into their new places of dwelling. The loyalty factor certainly also does bear historical connotations. We should remember that the Ottoman Empire accepted vast numbers of Circassian emigres into its borders. While their settlement was not always without problems and conflicts-the rough mountain warriors in the beginning not always were good neighbors to the people they were settled beside- in general the acceptance as fellow Muslims who were allowed to live side by side in the Empire created deep bonds of loyalty. The state, for its part could profit from a pool of potential officers, army recruits, civil servants etc who were willing to offer their service and loyalty to the hand that had assisted them in times of need. It is no coincidence that Circassians were drafted by the Ottoman authorities as fierce and loyal auxiliaries who were deployed to secure unsecure regions (as the desert posts and railway stations in modern day Jordanian) or to suppress uprisings (as during the Bulgarian uprising in 1877-78). The aforementioned loyalty and respect for established models of order made them ideal to employ as defenders of state authority as long as they were able to identify themselves in that cause using their traditional role models. They tended and tend to shun disloyalty and tendencies of uprising and anarchy as long as their sense of honor is preserved. On the other hand, due to that loyalty bounds, it became necessary for the respective authorities to integrate pre-established structures of kinship and companionship as long as Circassians were deployed in broader units or unit like

formations under their own command. Otherwise there was the danger to lose the leader as well as his followers in case they felt themselves disgraced or even worse insulted.

Keeping tradition, adopting a new homeland: Integration into Turkish society

Circassians tend to be settled spread on the territory of modern Turkey. While-especially in rural areas- communities remain intact relatively homogenous, settlement in bigger towns tends to be more diverse and scattered. As an interesting fact, a few Circassian families originally from Kosovo, in the 1950's did migrate to parts of Istanbul (Yenibosna (meaning new-Bosnia), Esenler, Bayrampaşa) which until nowadays have a huge presence of Turks, Bosnians and Albanians from the former Yugoslavia.² On the other hand it has to be stated that-especially in bigger towns- we cannot speak of homogenous areas or even a singular group identity: intermarriage, daily life interaction and modern means of communication naturally tend to make Circassians an integral part of mainstream society.

Furthermore, identity, being a part of self-perception as well as the perception by others, tends to be a more diverse concept in the background of globalization.³ It may further be stated, that while most people of Circassian descent are quite aware of their origins, this does not really lead to a conflict of identities: one can be a Turk but also see himself as Circassian, even if language and important cultural norms of the latter often don't play such a great role anymore in the urban environment. It is also possible to explain that behavior with traditions hailing from the Ottoman past: being identified with the mainstream religion (Islam) was usually the dominant group identity, meaning in practical terms that i.e. a speaker of Aromunian or Albanian who happened to be a Greek-Orthodox would dub himself Greek, while a Circassian or Bosnian would tend to be define himself as Turk. On the other hand, the concept of Turkish nationhood as defined by thinkers like Ziya Gökalp was not an exclusive concept of ethnicity or language, but a perception of shared cultural values that, conscious or subconscious, included the religious factor. If a migrant relocating himself in the Ottoman Empire (or even modern secular Turkey) was a Muslim, he usually would be accepted as fellow Muslim/Turk without discriminating him due to his background as an emigre. This question of identity, group identity, self- and external perception certainly is above the scope of this small paper: nevertheless, it is important to stress that in the Balkans as well as in the Near East, nation or national identity are not easily to be explained with the concept of (real or perceived) ethnicity; factors as religious background and social strata may play an even more dominant role.

Therefore, the Circassian community in Turkey does preserve various social norms, customs and folkloric elements from their former homeland, not in a homogenous but rather diverse pattern. It has also to be remembered that Circassian tradition does root itself on several regional and tribal backgrounds hardly to be defined as "rocher en bronze. Notwithstanding that, may say that important social norms ("habze"/or habze) still form the root of Circassian identity. Thus said, Circassians were of course influenced by the cultures they got acquainted within the last 140 years. As stated, the term culture itself is consisting of a permanent transition and development. When we analyze customs that are still a part of living culture we may say that while the Circassian society is strictly hierarchic and some

Circassian tribes in the past did in fact practice a system that may be compared to the caste system in India we may say that social discrimination is almost non-existent and the society is organized according to the modern standard of the division of labor. Given that fact, the aforementioned complex social system of “Xhabze” is the most active and promoted part of Circassian culture that is sought to be actively preserved as an integral part of daily life. The most important part of that system is respect towards the elders as well as respect by younger people towards older (more experienced) persons.⁴

Family relations and close kinsmanship is another important aspect, furthermore, likewise Turks in the Balkans and in certain parts of Anatolia, interfamily marriage is frowned upon; traditionally marriage was even not accepted between people from the same village. Another important Circassian institution is function of “thamade”. A thamade is usually the oldest, most respected and most experienced person and acts as a kind of “chairman” during gatherings. When meeting as a group, as said, people will usually select the thamade as a group leader that takes decisions, if seniority is not really existent, the thamade will be chosen to be the most respected one.⁵ As a general rule, the decision of the thamade is final and has not to be challenged. When alcohol is drunk at a gathering he may function as a kind of toastmaster, very traditional gatherings (with or without alcohol consumption) would place the thamade in top of the table, when he raised his glas, everybody would drink, when he stopped to eat, everybody would act in a similar way. The traditional family model is the model of extended family, consisting of great parents, parents and their children as well as grandchildren who would live in the same house or close by. The father would be the leader of the family whose decisions had to be respected and obeyed; the older a person is, the more respect he does command (Bodenstedt, 1849: 206). In the homestead of the Circassians, after a certain age children, especially sons would often be entrusted to respectable persons outside of the close family in order to raise them as warriors; it was thought that it was avoided to spoil children through such an education. The educator of the son was known by the Turkish word “Atalık”, (in fathers’ place) and would be revered as close kinsmen by the family, even if he was not of noble descent (Bodenstedt, 1849: 217). In terms of living space and architecture, people who are moving out in order to establish their own households will keep close relationships with their family is home which is known as “house of the elders or mothers home.” The leader of the family does, in tribal manner, not only command over his kinship, but also over his younger siblings as well as their families. When the father, the leader of the “home of the elders” passes away, the kinship is gathering around his wife and children, even then, it is expected that households should be established in the proximity of the “elders house or mothers house”. As the child would be raised by the “Atalık, he would only return to his father’s home after reaching manhood, in a festive ceremony he would be formally accepted as part of the household (Bodenstadt, 1849: 218).

The hierarchic structure of Circassian society is ensuring cultural continuity which did manifest itself in architecture, too. Family structure and, therefore the space of living were affected by these social norms. In the upbringing of children and their education love and respect, to be lived by example by the elders, were the most important principles. Not only the parents and the inner family circle, but society as a whole was seen as responsible to bring yup children in a respective and responsible way. There is even a Circassian proverb that may me roughly translated as “If a child is rised well, it belong to his family as well to society, if raised bad, it only belongs to his family.” This might reflect the now-extinct tradition of the

“Atalık”, the raising of one family’s children by other kinsmen. As a result of close societal bonds, houses and living spaces tend to be open, not secluded as often observed in the Middle East. The participative role of women in Circassian society does play a great role in creating living spaces as accessible places and not as an intimate recluse where strangers are not allowed.

Women are respected members of their “elders or mothers house”, and like the men are expected to live up to the *habze*, the unwritten traditions and complicated code of behavior. Women are not expected to retreat when men are entering the public or living space which does contribute to the more open spaced architecture. Shortly, women are highly revered in Circassian society (Bodenstadt, 1849: 211). Nevertheless, relationships between men and women are a part of the traditional code of behavior which manifests itself in the traditional way to find a wedding partner. Meetings, known as “*zekes*” between men and women seeking marriage are a socially accepted way for young men and women to get known better to each other, to dance and to talk. This might lead to more intensive social contact which in modern terms might be described as flirting, so people would start to see each other regularly. This socially accepted meetings between men and women are known under the name of “*kaşenlik*”. It was believed that young men and women who are willing to marry might get known better to each other in order to get a more realistic view of each other. It might be concluded that in Circassian society there is and was no strict seclusion of men and women (Eser, 1999: 76-78). Pre-arranged marriages were non-existent. Each of the parties, -men women- were free to choose their partner, nevertheless after marriage the women would be part of their spouses household and the marriage itself was and is also a family matter. Furthermore, the partners had to be of equal social standing. Before marriage, the groom would have to pay the bride’s father a certain price, the marriage ceremony itself did include the symbolical kidnapping of the bride by the groom who would be “defended” by her own family. Here, architecture is again shaped by that customs. In the evening, traditional dances would be conducted in the guesthouse.⁶

Traditional Circassian weddings involved society as a whole, it was expected to help out and invitations would go to villages and places far away. Guests, as long as they were no close relatives, were distributed throughout the houses of the whole village so that all houses were virtually “open space” for strangers and society as a whole participated at the event. Most interestingly, the groom himself would not attend the wedding festivities and stay at a friend’s house. The couple’s house, was seen as a newly established household and the moving in of the new family would be celebrated with a small ceremony. Besides that, the house and the household of the friend in which the groom did stay during the festivities would be evaluated as if it was part of the family itself, forging closer bounds within society. Nevertheless, outside of traditional villages and especially in bigger settlements and towns these traditional customs are hard to implement.

Circassian architecture: Living space as a mirror for customs and communication

First and foremost, it shall be stated that Circassians certainly did engage in building activities which matched their needs according to the geography and environment of the Caucasus.

Besides that, as Circassians are a cultural community composed of different sub-groups that traditionally did not live in an urban environment, most of Circassian buildings do have a more profane nature. This does not mean, that there was no distinct architectural style or that Circassian buildings did not have distinct features, but that it would be hard to compare their architecture with that of urbanized communities.

According to Sedad Hakkı Eldem (1934: 11), at the Eastern and the Southern parts of the Ottoman Empire, we cannot see Turkish houses. In Caucasus district of the Empire, Iranian effect can be seen more than the Turkish style. Also in the Arab districts, Arabic style houses were more visible. Those two styles are different from the dominant Turkish houses which can be seen mostly in Rumelian and Anatolian districts of the Ottoman Empire.

Circassian houses in their traditional environment were mostly established in woodlands and near mountains while wood was the most natural material that was provided by nature. It is known that the construction of a traditional Circassian house would take about five to ten days. As solidarity within Circassian society was highly revered, friends, neighbors and family members would help at the construction of the building. The house itself, while important for its inhabitants, was easily to replace in case the dwellers had to flee from foreign attacks, they would burn it down with their own hands in order not to provide refuge for the advancing enemy (Baj, 1969: 177).

In the 17th century, Circassian homes were described as being founded by to rows of wooden posts around which basket work or branches of wood were plaited between. The space between them was filled with grout or cemented and the house was covered with straw afterwards. Houses of noblemen and common folk were of a similar style while the noblemen's houses were said to be more spacious. In order to protect themselves better from attacks by horse raiders, trees were often been planted around villages which would stand next to each other and shelter the village itself (Neumann, 1840: 44).

Again in the 19th century, it was noted that Circassian/Kabardian houses were of a simple and plain construction; due to the frequent enemy raids homes were said to be of temporary materials which might be destroyed before retreating from the enemy and easily be rebuilt afterwards. Timber and furniture were either carried off together or were destroyed in order to not fall into enemy hands. Preferred settlement places were near the water, if there was no river or stream, canals would be constructed. It is often noted that Circassians tended to live next to each other but preferred to leave some space between their dwellings for practical reasons (due to proximity to one's fields) but also due to privacy. The presence of trees next to the houses, either planted by the inhabitants or having been preserved by them should, besides practical reasons, also be linked to traditional customs and religious beliefs: woods were the place of worship for pre-Christian and pre-Islamic Circassians (Baj, 1840: 177).

On the other hand, for defensive reasons, in larger settlements houses would often be built closely knitted together, forming a circle and providing the settlement with a square; a single gate would guard the dwelling. Furthermore, the noblemen's (Usden) residences, consisting of several apartments, would stand detached from the square for themselves. Next to the settlement, but also separated, would be the place of the more comfortably equipped guesthouse. In some distance to the villages, there would be fenced corn-or haystacks. According to the owner's wealth, there might be a separate building for the close knit family and representative purposes, the aforementioned guesthouse as well as stables and a separate

stable for the guesthouse, haystacks, granaries and quarters for servants and slaves (Baj, 1840: 178).

The houses themselves, built in the form of oblong squares and having a length of four to five fathoms while being seldom broader than nine feet, would have walls erected of wicker wood and plastered with clay. When made out of wood, single trees were preferred. The walls were about four meters high, and, together with the roof would mostly stand to be around six meters. The posts would support the walls and be also the foundation for a flat roof made out of rafters, covered with long grass. Further isolation was provided by moss and reeds. Usually the dwelling would consist of one larger room for the owners and a smaller room for the servants, the door would be on the right hand of the principal room leading to the street and another one on the rooms left corner leading to the yard. The door itself often resembled a gate with two doors. Interestingly, one door of the gate would usually been left open for all the time, to close it would be associated with stinginess (Baj, 1840: 178).

According to Goldsmith and Percival a chimney made of plastered wicker-work would be the exit point of the fireplace, at the wall close to the yard couches or divans might be deployed together with carpets as part of the houses' scarce furniture (1826: 209). Just on the other side, in collateral direction, a window pointing out to the street might be included, too, often provided with a window shutter. Within the house, placed on poles were storing's for household items and foodstuff. The author's further note that the husband might sometimes living apart from his wife, most probably, this would only be the case for wealthier and noble families.

Neumann points out that around the 1840's the Circassians were living in open and unfortified settlements; the houses themselves, made out of wood, straw or reed were said to be built apart from each other (Neumann, 1840: 44). Bodenstedt, confirms this pattern, adding that Circassian warriors deemed it unworthy for a brave warrior to protect himself between walls made of stone if his "strong arm" could defend himself and his family (1849: 199). Traditional houses would mostly be single, one floor buildings. In order to protect those buildings from humidity and water-damage, gutters were being built that were opening into small ditches.

After re-settling in different areas of the Middle East, Circassians would preserve their type of housing for a certain time, sometimes they would also engage in building more visible landmarks as big mosques, mausoleums etc. where a mix of architectural elements would be visible. As an example we might cite Circassian settlements in Jordan, where the use of stone and wood as building materials in the tradition of the mountainous environment did continue. According to Shoup (2007: 63), there are a few remnants of Circassian architecture in areas as Jarash and Wadi al-Sir, where the Circassians were settled by the Ottoman Empire. Those buildings sport pitched, tiled green or red colored roofs in contrast to the flat roofs of traditional local architectural customs.

In their traditional environment, Circassian buildings usually would be composed of wood with some additional materials, sometimes also with a tiled roof, as the local climate is one of the main factors regarding the development of local architecture. According to Bodenstedt, in the motherland, houses were explicitly made out of wood, never out of stone (1849: 206). The roof was often supported by posts and if not built as a tiled roof, might also be covered by grass in order to regulate the temperature (Williams and Percival, 1826: 209). Besides that, houses had a wooden ceiling, walls might also be made from adobe, i.e. clay.

The houses walls were plastered with white gypsum. It was a traditional task for women to put fresh white gypsum on the ceiling as well as on the walls of the house in order to preserve a neat and orderly look. The traditional house (wuna) therefore was single storied, low and long with a porch in its front yard. Sometimes an enclosure was added, too, in order to care for the livestock (Colarusso, 1992: 4).

British travelers wandering about the Caucasian mountains in the late 19th century point out that traditional Circassian homes were rather Spartan in their appearance. Often being knitted into trees or gardens, the rooms are described as “bare and without ceilings”. The walls were made out of wooden planks, wealthier people might use rugs in order to prevent the blowing winds to cause too much discomfort (Hope and Harvey, 1871: 241). Some houses also were said to have had a veranda, much like a Swiss chalet.

Due to migration, changing environmental habitats and the relative short durability of wooden buildings, it is somehow hard to find traditional buildings. Those buildings were usually resembling each other closely and were a sign that society as a whole was seen as a close knitted community. Traditional buildings rarely would be composed of two floors, mostly they possessed just one floor. Preferably, houses were built close to springs or rivers. As noted, women were not separated in the living space, although in some settlements bigger residences might have a separate building where women would gather together (Kingston, 1854: 169).

While in a wealthy home the head of the household would have his own room, children might have their own space, too. Women’s servants (if present) might also have their own quarters next to the family but in a separate room or have their own smaller buildings. Besides that, the married male members of the household would have their own rooms for themselves and their wives, single males would often sleep in the guesthouse (provided there were no guests to care for.) It is important to stress that each family might have bigger or smaller houses according to their material wealth, nevertheless, if houses were built with some space between, overabundance and the demonstrational presentation of wealth (i.e. showing off) would be prevented. In a nutshell, houses were built according to Circassian societies needs and social standards, customs were the driving factor for architectural design (Baj, 1969: 179).

In some areas more distinct architectural varieties may be found, one of them being the so-called “Kible evi (house)” As houses were often built towards the direction of the Kaaba in Mecca (kible), those houses are described as “Kible evi ” by researcher Nurettin Akçal.⁷ Basically, there might be a variety of 6-7 houses in a village where the front side of the buildings is pointing towards the direction of the kible. While it is likely that religious factors did play a role, it should also be noted that buildings were protected from the icy north winds due to that feature.

Houses were composed of a number of rooms and might be smaller or bigger according to the number of inhabitants, but all of the them possess a separate annex building known as “Haçeş”, (haçe: guest) meaning guest quarters. That part of the building was used to provide comfortable lodging for guests, its separated location was not due to the wish of excluding a non-household member, but in order to provide the guest more space and tranquility, not to be disturbed by the daily tasks of the host (Longworth, 1840: 48). It should be noted that the guesthouse (haçeş) would be situated near the property’s entrance and besides an own stable would also have its own sanitary facilities. Besides that, sanitary facilities would be also

present near the other buildings, segregated according to gender (Baj, 1969: 178).

As hospitality is one of the most revered traditions, special means were employed to ensure a pleasant stay. Neumann states that the guest as well as the host were being described by the term “konak” (in Turkish; konuk: guest, konak: guesthouse). The term konak also defined the guest’s standing within Circassian traditions. Being highly revered, the guest would be accompanied by his host until he reached his next destination (Neumann, 1840: 44). If the Circassian would befriend a stranger, not only him, but also his kinsmen were required to rise up arms and defend the guest if necessary, just as if the guest would be a close relative (Goldsmith and Percival, 1826: 211). The guest would be the most respected person of the household, he would be given the best place on the table and the host himself would only sit down when asked for by the guest himself (Bodenstadt, 1849: 211).

The guest would not be affected by smells from the kitchen area as the guest house was situated as far away as possible from the kitchen area. If there was no separate building for guests, at least a special room would be reserved for guests that provided comfort. Close to the guest room or guest building there would be the living room, a small extra room and the traditional oven (haku). Furniture was scarce also in the guesthouse, weapons and personal items would be hung up at the walls. Longworth describes a typical guesthouse as made out of earth and basket-work, oblong shaped, with walls of stakes and hurdles, plastered with light colored earth while the floor was of hard earth. The middle of the room was composed of a semicircle while a huge, spacious bell shaped chimney was protruding through the roof (Longworth, 1840: 43). The chimney was made in a conic structure and would be about half a meter high.

Foreign observers often would comment on the relative plain nature of Circassian houses and scarce furniture. The house was expected to be clean and plain. Besides mattresses there would be rush mats in order to sit or lay down, those being richly decorated, sometimes a canapé or some seats, besides that there would be some chests to store the inhabitants belongings. When a guest arrived, special prepared pillows would be put on the canapé or on the rush mats which would be stored away after the guest left. Besides guests, only revered household members, thamades and revered old women were reserved the privilege to sit on the canapé or sedir. Some settlements in the Caucasus were constructed like a circle or square, the houses forming a line of defense to the outside while they would share a big square in the middle. Therefore intruders would have to attack the settlement as a whole, this kind of settlement being guarded by a big gate (Williams and Percival, 1826: 209). This kind of settlement type was not preserved in the new settlement areas of Circassians after their immigration. Besides that, round buildings resembling small towers were built in the open field for defense purposes though those don’t seem to have been as big as the characteristic defense towers of Chechens and Georgians in the Caucasus.

Besides that, in the front area of the house was an open area known as çöpe or hallway, the respective rooms of the house were accessed by it. Village communities that have been founded by migrants hailing from the Caucasus in Turkey sometimes did preserve their traditional structure in terms of architecture, sometimes only small parts did survive or reminiscences are preserved only in remembrance. What can be said definitely that Circassian villages in Turkey at the time of their foundation in Turkey were more or less an exact copy of the lost homesteads in the Caucasus, furthermore place names were often preserved and “transferred” to the new homeland. It is also remarkable that village

communities and tribal communities often preserved common settlement patterns in their new places of living. Within that context, Circassian homes were constructed to lodge a vast number of extended family and therefore a lot of rooms were preferred.

One of the distinct aspects of Circassian houses is the fact that enclosed courts, quite common in Turkey, the Middle East and even the Balkans, are nonexistent. The family and its women are not seen as a community that has to be protected from the “preying” views of strangers, but an active part of society that acts under auto and societal control in order to live up to the high and complicated social etiquettes of customs. Besides that, Circassian homes also usually did possess gardens which, unlike their counterparts in the Middle East were not enclosed but actually visible from the street. A tidy garden was a sign of the owner’s tedious efforts to be an active part of society and not a closed refuge for the family. But, the more profane and non-representative buildings of an agricultural society as stables, the kitchen area, depots etc. were usually situated more far away from the street.

As Circassians did settle in the Middle East before the Ottoman period, too, especially in Mamluk Egypt, it might be interesting to research how far any traditional style elements or cultural traditions, expressed in architecture, were visible. Behrens-Abouseif describes the epoch between 1382 and 1517 (until the Ottoman conquest) as “Circassian Mamlouk period”. The founder of the dynasty, As-Zahir Barquq/Berkyaruk, himself of Circassian origin would continue the tradition to recruit Circassians from the Caucasus into his army (Behrens-Abouseif, 1992: 133). While a steady flow of Circassians would come to settle into Egypt, it might be stressed that this was not a totally new phenomenon; Circassians and other people from the Caucasus region as well as Turks from the Turkestan/Central Asia regions had been serving as soldiers to different rulers in Islamic Egypt. Nevertheless, the buildings of that period as mosques, tombs, public buildings etc. may be described as part of traditional Islamic architecture. On the other hand, the usage of style elements like the dome for religious buildings as mosques etc. is a tradition that was inspired by Byzantine Orthodox- Christian religious architecture, partly also by the Turkish/ Central Asian architectural tradition (Petersen, 1996: 68). Also, we should note that the artisans employed in the building process most likely were of local origin.

Conclusion

The Circassians, a tribe hailing originally from the Caucasian mountains, have been scattered all over the geography of the former Ottoman Empire. With heritage rich in oral traditions and distinctive customs, modernity and the influence of different cultural patterns in their new homelands led to cultural diffusion that reflected itself in daily habits as well as in architecture. It has to be taken into account that the Circassians as pre-modern society did not develop a literary tradition until Soviet rule, therefore the development of architecture in various geographical locations is serving as an important reference to the change in cultural patterns of a migrant community. It might be concluded that cultural traditions as reflected in daily interaction, customs, language and architecture have been most well preserved in more isolated, mostly rural communities within the new host-countries. Nevertheless, traditions have been kept alive also in urban environments in various degrees. Changing cultural patterns, especially in architecture and daily customs are not necessarily to be evaluated as a loss of tradition but should be treated as a sign of flexibility by Circassian

migrants to integrate themselves into the host society. Within that context, it is also of interest to note that geographical factors as the availability of certain building materials and climate factors have been contributing to changes or stability in patterns in architecture.

Notes

¹Interview with Mr. Eşref Genç, Istanbul, 20.11.2014. Mr. Genç's family is hailing from the small Ciraccian settlements around Mitrovica, Kosovo/former Yugoslavia where they settled approximately after the 1860's.

²Interview with Mr. Eşref Genç, Istanbul, 20.11.2014

³As an example, we might cite the unusual but explaining case of a person of Ciraccian descent, born in Yugoslavia, emigrating to Turkey, migrating to Germany to look for work and, due to career reasons residing in Canada today.

⁴Interview with Mr. Eşref Genç, Istanbul, 20.11.2014

⁵The function of "thamade" may show itself in everyday life, when i.e.a group of youth gathers and a the oldest between them as thamade makes the final decision where to go, what to do, where to eat etc.

⁶Interview with Mr. Eşref Genç, Istanbul, 20.11.2014

⁷http://www.asagidemirci.net/makaleindex-makale_goster-23.htm

Appendices:

Pictures

The following pictures are the courtesy of Mr. Lütfü Parlak.



Picture 1. Circassian architecture in Düzce province, Turkey. While new buildings have replaced traditional architecture, an example of traditional Circassian architecture can be seen in the center of the picture. Note the (smaller) building in front, the traditional guesthouse and the main building in the back. Furthermore, all buildings, including the modern ones, are situated in gardens.



Picture 2. A closer look at the main building. Single-storied building with tiled roof, supported by the characteristic posts in front of the building. White facade covered with gypsum.



Picture 3. Note the use of wood for the roof construction. A modest level of modernity has been introduced with electricity lines added to the building.



Picture 4. Another view of the building. The chimney in the center of the building, another traditional element is visible on the roof. Note the open space towards the street.



Picture 5. The haçeş, the old guest house, apparently no longer in use. Nevertheless, the crumbling building is showing the usage of wood, clay and gypsum as traditional building materials.

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