

Introduction

Florian Mühlfried

When the eminent Caucasologist Heinz Fähnrich retired in 2006, there were great (justified) concerns that the Caucasus Studies Program he had established at the Friedrich Schiller University Jena would be abolished. After all, the Program had always produced very few students and received little attention beyond the narrow circle of regional specialists. The only value it seemed to have was that it made the university unique. But was this value more than symbolic? Was it somehow convertible into money? With neoliberal reforms hitting hard on universities of the former GDR after German reunification in the 1990s, this question was a pressing one. In addition, Fähnrich was one of the very few remaining professors in the Philosophical Faculty of the Friedrich Schiller University Jena who had already taught in Socialist times and who carried the stigma of an upbringing and academic socialization in East Germany.

In the end, the university decided that the Caucasus Studies Program was a unique selling point (“Alleinstellungsmerkmal”) worth maintaining. Yet, it was far from clear what the Program should look like. Should it maintain its focus on linguistics and literature like most classic regional studies such as Slavic Studies? Or should it produce more practical knowledge of relevance for politics and marketable to media? Should it be concerned more with the past or the present?

Fähnrich had been capable of covering most of these aspects, albeit with little interest in producing marketable knowledge and responding to political concerns. Under his auspices, the Program was meant to be apolitical – an impossible task, however, as the instrumentalization of academic knowledge in the various regional conflicts that broke out in the Caucasus after the collapse of the Soviet Union clearly illustrated. But he could teach history and folklore as well as linguistics and literature, all this related to the region of the Caucasus, of course. Within the framework of area studies, he was a polymath, which is reflected in his publications.

Not coming to a clear understanding what Caucasus Studies was supposed to be, the university leadership decided to maintain the broad focus that had been covered by Fähnrich previously, providing the space for the development of the Program in various directions in the future. For this task, somebody was needed who could cover an equally broad spectrum as Fähnrich, with linguistics and socio-cultural studies as pillars. Only very few people world-wide fit this profile, and there was wide consensus that Kevin Tuite was the most capable among them.

But how to lure him to Germany and convince him to take on a position at the Friedrich Schiller University Jena? After all, he held (and still holds) a prestigious professorship at the University of Montreal in the field of linguistic anthropology, with family and professional ties mostly in North America. When contacted, Tuite indeed did not want to give up his job in Canada. But eventually, an arrangement could be found that looked promising to all parties involved: He would spend one semester in Jena and the other in Montreal. I was hired to support his mission to reform the Program and to make sure that somebody would look after the Program in the time of his absence.

During Tuite's time in Jena from 2010 until 2014, student numbers were only gradually rising, but the Program triggered international attention once the word spread that an internationally well-respected scholar had taken over as Chair. This was crucial, as the Program was just ticking over between Fähnrich's retirement in 2006 and Tuite's appointment in 2010. During this period, it was mainly two people that had kept the Program alive: Elguja Dadunashvili, who acted as interim professor and acting director of Caucasus Studies, at times supported by a grant from the Volkswagen Foundation. And Natia Reineck, who kept on teaching Georgian and managed the administration. It is thanks to these two people that the Program persisted.

The increasing reputation of the Program resulted in successful applications for project funding. One such application with the Volkswagen Foundation, co-authored by Tuite and me, focused on the "Transformation of Sacred Places, Pilgrimages and Conceptions of Hybridity in the Post-Soviet Caucasus". The project was a collaborative one, with six teams from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, the Russian Federation (Krasnodar and Moscow), and Jena as well as three consultants from the USA, France, and Germany; altogether, it included 21 established and early career researchers, among them Levon Abrahamian, Vladimir Bobrovnikov, and Igor Kuznetsov. With the grant money, we could significantly increase our team in Jena by hiring Tsypylma Darieva as a Program coordinator and Sebastian Härter, Michael Stürmer, and Stefan Schönrock as student assistants.

Another research project that was part of a larger consortium called CASCADE and dealt with the "Security-Democracy Nexus in the Caucasus" financed by the European Commission allowed us to hire two PhD students (Tamar Haupt-Khutsishvili and Weronika Zmiejewski) as well as a student assistant (Annika Jooß). The consortium was led by the Paris-based Foundation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme and comprised eight universities and research centers in the European Union, the Russian Federation, and the Caucasus, among them the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI, Sweden), the Institute of Geography of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Russian Federation), and the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS, Georgia). The project was divided into ten work packages, with Jena team members participating in those on "Migration, Mobilities and Poverty", "Local Economic and Social Developments in the Caucasus", as well as "Religion and Politics". Within the framework of the project, Zmiejewski did research among women from Georgia working in Thessaloniki, Greece. Haupt-Khutsishvili conducted fieldwork in an Armenian village close to the border with Turkey on issues of privatization and land use.

On Tuite's initiative, Caucasus Studies in Jena thus became heavily involved in fieldwork, conceptualizing the findings according to theoretical frameworks prevalent in socio-cultural anthropology. International conferences and roundtable discussions targeting recent political issues in the Caucasus and including speakers from both academia and politics completed the picture. Anthropological as well as historical approaches also dominated Tuite's seminars; yet, he continued to teach linguistics classes as well. Most of the students had a family background from or some other links to the Caucasus, mostly to Georgia. This came as a heritage of the Jena Program not only from the time of Fähnrich, but already from his predecessor and founder of the Program Gertrude Pätsch, a renowned Georgia specialist. Tuite maintained the Georgia focus, yet took great efforts to bring the whole Caucasus into the picture, including its Northern parts.

After Tuite left the Caucasus Studies Program at the Friedrich Schiller University Jena in 2014, the fate of the Program was once again insecure. Again, the question was: Is it really worth subsidizing a Program that receives only few students? Maybe the money spent on such an endeavor should rather contribute to other disciplines? The danger of closing the Program provoked the resistance of academic and political circles, and their petitions eventually proved successful; the Program was continued and a new Chair appointed: the linguist Diana Forker.

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What is it, then, that constitutes Caucasus Studies at present? What makes up the discipline, if it even is one? Is it more than a collection of various disciplinary approaches to a geographically defined region? And how clear-cut is this geographical definition? Can we talk of a region in regard to the Caucasus?

The unity of the Caucasus has been frequently contested. Some argue that the Caucasus is essentially a product of Russian imperial imagination (e.g. Andronikashvili/Jgerenaia/Thun-Hohenstein 2018), others state that the North and the South Caucasus are distinct units after the end of the Soviet Union, with the South Caucasus discernible as a region itself (e.g. Smith 2015: 1). Irrespective of the accuracy of such statements, they obviously correlate with a political agenda, for example the disentanglement of former Soviet republics from the sphere of influence of the Russian Federation and concomitant concepts such as the “Russian World” (*russkiy mir*) or the Russian “Near Abroad”. It is no surprise, then, that the Georgian political elite after the Rose Revolution tried to replace the “Caucasus” concept with the “South Caucasus” concept.

Caucasus Studies, however, do not have to follow the changing tides of political fashion. Instead, a stubborn insistence on old-school regional concepts such as “the Caucasus” provides the opportunity to undermine the official boundaries of state politics. It allows us to come to terms with transnational processes and alliances beyond national and religious affiliation. After all, these processes are embedded in long histories of cohabitation, hospitality, and kinship (Grant 2009), reflecting social, cultural, and religious affinities crisscrossing the entire region (Tuite 2004). In the context of the Russian war on Ukraine, these histories are not only of relevance to scholars, but also to inhabitants of the North Caucasus, who are considering alternative affiliations to the ones connecting them to the Russian imperium.

In diasporic circles in Tbilisi, for example, people from Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, Chechnya, Ingushetia, or Dagestan who left the Russian Federation, after its full-scale military aggression against Ukraine, for Georgia are actively reconsidering a life outside of the political realm of Russia and rediscovering the Caucasus as a valid reference point for alternative notions of belonging. Caucasus Studies should rather feed such interests instead of discarding the notion of the Caucasus as a Russian fantasy. Diaspora North Caucasians in Georgia and Armenia are also reconsidering their Caucasian past, e.g. the genocide committed by the Russians against the Circassians or the resistance to Russian colonialism in the 19th century. In the present-day North Caucasus, the commemoration of such histories is largely suppressed, and the diaspora opens up a space to reconsider a relation to Russia – both on an individual and on a national level. This indicates that Caucasus Studies has immediate implications for the present and future of the region’s inhabitants.

Institutionally speaking, Caucasus Studies is highly marginal, currently only established at Malmö University (Sweden) and the Friedrich Schiller University Jena (Germany) in Western Europe. There are Caucasus specialists working in a variety of disciplines such as history, political science, linguistics, and socio-cultural anthropology, and there are fora that bring these together, e.g. the annual conferences of the Central Eurasian Studies Society in the USA or the journal *Caucasus Survey* that serves as a venue for interdisciplinary Caucasus research. And yet, there is no clear understanding if Caucasus Studies is more than a smorgasbord of various disciplines that do not share much beyond an interest in the same region.

The history of Caucasus Studies does provide some continuities, however. First of all, it is its colonial heritage, with the Tsarist Russian Academy of Sciences as a spearhead in the 18th and 19th centuries. The knowledge it produced was meant to be of practical value – for the military

domination and administration of the region as well as its economic exploitation. Secondly, it is its conceptual apparatus. This apparatus is strongly shaped by linguists – and it is here that we have an important link in Caucasus Studies between the discipline of linguistics on the one hand and disciplines such as history or social anthropology on the other.

A good way to elucidate this nexus is a reference to maps commonly used to represent the Caucasus. Language maps of the Caucasus usually differentiate between autochthonous (Schulze 2009) or indigenous (Harris 1991) languages and those belonging to language families also present elsewhere, e.g. Semitic, Turkic, or Indo-European languages (e.g. Geocurrents 2012). Ethnicity or nationality maps, in turn, often replicate this categorization and differentiate autochthonous or indigenous populations from others who are denied the status of indigeneity. A popular “ethnolinguistic map of the Caucasus” authored by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA 1992), for example, lists “Caucasian peoples” such as Georgians or Chechens alongside “Indo-European peoples” such as Armenians or Ossetians and “Altaic peoples” such as Azerbaijanis or Balkars.

Such a representation of ethnic groups in the Caucasus is misleading for at least two reasons. First of all, it is based on a narrow and static understanding of ethnicity that fails to take other identity markers such as territoriality, history, and culture into consideration. Secondly, it labels certain groups as more “Caucasian” than others – a highly problematic aspect in the context of conflicts that are construed as ethnic. Caucasus Studies have sometimes contributed to such an attribution of more or less Caucasianness to the populations of the Caucasus. For example, at the Friedrich Schiller University Jena, Caucasology was defined as the study of the autochthonous groups of the Caucasus until the 2000s.

Caucasus Studies is thus in dire need of revisiting its fundamental paradigms and of critically re-evaluating what I have elsewhere referred to as its “philological fixations” and “terminological essentialism” (Mühlfried 2020: 22–23). This also applies to a certain terminology shaped by Soviet academia and still prevalent in academic institutions of the Caucasus; groups are not only referred to as ethnic, for example, but also as sub-ethnic, ethnoterritorial or even ethnographic – with fundamental political implications, of course. It follows that Caucasus Studies should not only be concerned with languages spoken in the Caucasus, but also with its own language. It needs to deconstruct its vocabulary and learn to speak anew.

Such an endeavor is necessarily interdisciplinary, but also transregional. It needs to include scholars from inside and outside the Caucasus, from Western centers of knowledge production and post-Soviet academic institutions. It would entail the question of what we talk, but also how we talk and from where we talk. For it matters whether a scholar of the Caucasus is situated in the region or outside, not only in respect to academic upbringing and intellectual climate, but also concerning research capacities. In the field of socio-cultural anthropology, for example, it is still common practice that researchers of Western descent do research in the Caucasus as an elsewhere, whereas their colleagues from the Caucasus do fieldwork in the Caucasus as “their” region. The reasons are more structural than a matter of personal choice; they reflect mutual expectations and financial disbalances.

This is another obstacle to overcome. It needs a reconsideration of colonialism not only as a thing of the past, but also of the present in Caucasus Studies. But it also needs money; international donors and professional associations would do well to support fieldwork not only on the Caucasus, but also in the Caucasus. In the meantime, steps can be taken. Young Georgian anthropologists such as Tamar Haupt-Khutshishvili or Tamta Tatarashvili cross national boundaries and engage in research in Armenia, thus overcoming the routine of conducting fieldwork in one’s home-country – another heritage of Soviet academia.

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This is a festschrift dedicated to Kevin Tuite. It captures the breadth of his expertise and interest, reaching from linguistics to anthropology, from history to politics. As a linguistic anthropologist, languages and cultures are his most important fields of research, which is reflected in title of this book. It also means that most of our contributors are either linguists or anthropologists, with Stephen Jones providing a perspective from history and politics. Many of the contributing authors are prominent names in Caucasus Studies. They also share a history with Tuite. Some of the chapters explicitly reference this history. Nadia Proulx, for example, a former PhD student of Tuite's, remembers their relationship as shifting from mentorship to friendship. After spending some time in Tbilisi among Tuite's friends that he put her in touch with, she (in her own words from her chapter in this festschrift entitled "Respect for my favorite elder") "understood that Professor Tuite would not only continue to be my mentor and intellectual inspiration, but also someone I could rely on more broadly". He became "svoi". "Svoi" is a Russian term that can be translated as "our own" or "close ones".

Others share similar stories of a professional relationship turning into friendship, and most mention personal integrity as well as passion for the Caucasus as reasons. In my case, it has been a combination of both. When I was a PhD student of social anthropology affiliated to the University of Hamburg, I felt the need to attend an international conference to discuss my doctoral dissertation on the Georgian Banquet as well as to broaden my academic network. One great opportunity was the conference of the Central European Studies Society in 2004 that was taking place at Indiana University Bloomington. The only problem was that I did not have access to funding and had to rely on my limited personal resources for travel and accommodation expenses.

When I mentioned this issue in passing during an email conversation with Tuite, whom I had been in touch with due to some questions I had about Georgian ethnography, he generously offered to share his hotel room with me, because, so he said, the one he had booked contained two beds. Such generosity is impressive, especially when it refers to people like me who are maybe not complete strangers, but rather unfamiliar. In a way, it can be seen as an extension of the hospitality Tuite (and many others) have experienced in the Caucasus – a kind of hospitality that comes across as unconditional. Extending such hospitality allows one to pay tribute to one's former hosts. What is at stake here is not a "rational" decision to pay back debts from elsewhere, but rather a practice of multiplying a good force, it seems to me. And it also seems to me that Tuite is a master in this multiplication process. This force allows for making people "svoi" in the sense mentioned above by Proulx. And it is in this sense that all people present in volume are "svoi" of Tuite.

But my story doesn't end here. When I arrived in Bloomington and met Tuite for the first time in person, I was heavily jet-lagged due to my travel from Germany. I was very tired in the evening, but very much awake early in the morning. And it was a most pleasant coincidence that Tuite's habit was to wake up early in the morning; so, we would both be awake long before the others, and we would have coffee – and chat. During these early morning conversations, I learned essential things not only about the Caucasus, but also how to approach Caucasus Studies with passion. It is this spirit that I try to keep up with in my professional life, as surely all the others who became Tuite's "svoi".

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Many people have contributed to the making of this festschrift – not only the authors, but also people like Christine Jourdan, Winfried Boeder (†), and Kerstin Klenke, who supported the project in other ways as a means of paying respect to an eminent scholar. Indeed, this festschrift is a product of Tuite’s “svoi” in all respects. Special thanks also go Lina Ghvinianidze, who worked as an assistant to this project, to Jost Gippert and Manana Tandashvili for the publication in the series “Folia Caucasica”, as well as to Ursula Reichert, Anna Lahr and Henrika Peters from the publisher Reichert for their help in the production process. There are probably people who would have liked to contribute to this festschrift in one form or another but who did not have a chance to, because they were unaware of this project when it was in progress. We are all part of professional networks, and mine surely does not include all those who are part of Tuite’s, not even all of his “svoi”; thus, I surely haven’t managed to reach out sufficiently. Nevertheless, I hope that they can relate to this festschrift as a means to celebrate Tuite’s life and work.

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Florian Mühlfried is a Professor of Social Anthropology at Ilia State University. He has been a Lecturer at the Tbilisi State University, a Research Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, a Visiting Professor at UNICAMP, Brazil, and an Assistant Professor at the Friedrich Schiller University Jena. His publications include the monographs *Mistrust: A Global Perspective* (2019) and *Being a State and States of Being in Highland Georgia* (2014), the edited volume *Mistrust: Ethnographic Approximations* (2018), and the co-edited volumes *Sacred Places, Emerging Spaces: Religious Pluralism in the Post-Soviet Caucasus* (2018) and *Exploring the Edge of Empire: Soviet Era Anthropology in the Caucasus and Central Asia* (2011).