



# HOKKAIDO UNIVERSITY

Title	Satire and Political Imagination in the Caucasus: The Sense and Sensibilities of Molla Nasreddin
Author(s)	Grant, Bruce
Citation	Acta Slavica Iaponica, 40, 1-17
Issue Date	2020
DOI	<a href="https://doi.org/10.14943/ASI.40.1">https://doi.org/10.14943/ASI.40.1</a>
Doc URL	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/2115/84130">https://hdl.handle.net/2115/84130</a>
Type	departmental bulletin paper
File Information	40_01_pp.1-17.pdf



## Articles

## Satire and Political Imagination in the Caucasus: The Sense and Sensibilities of *Molla Nasreddin*

BRUCE GRANT

It is 2002 and I am in the village of Bash Shabalid, in the foothills of the Caucasus mountains, some six hours northwest of the Azerbaijani capital of Baku. I am there to look at rural religious practices and histories of Sovietization in a corner of the former USSR long thought by many as a home to its more tepid patriots. Taking a break one day, a local history teacher, Araz, heads with me for tea to the house of a farmer who has dug up some dozen earthenware pots in his fields, each pronounced to be of ancient vintage. It was everything one might picture of the ancient Caucasus region, of everyday life in a world area continuously settled for millennia, where the ground at times bursts with the objects and scenes of its past. Araz gestured to one of the larger pots and said, “Georgian archaeologists used to come here regularly and buy these from us. Then one year one of us went to a museum in Tbilisi and saw that the same pots had been labeled ‘Georgian.’ Georgian pots! From our village!” I asked him why the classically shaped urns, from a long ago period when the divisions between states were less pronounced, could not indeed have been Georgian, and what it would mean to get them back. He looked at me briefly, shook his head, and said, “We have a proverb for that. ‘Su axan arxa birdə gələr.’” Water will return to the channel where it once ran.

I smiled in polite confusion, “Wait, what, water? So you think the pots will come back, because they are from here?” He laughed, clearly pleased that he had baffled me. He switched into Russian and offered me one of many well-known Hoca Nasreddin jokes, from a seemingly bottomless archive of clever stories based on the life and times of the Nasreddin trickster who is said to have lived on the Anatolian plateau in the fourteenth century.<sup>1</sup> “One day the hoca asks to borrow a pot from his neighbor. He keeps it for several days and then gives back not one pot but two. ‘Where did the second one come from?’ the neighbor asks. ‘The pot you gave me was pregnant,’ Nasreddin answered. ‘It gave birth to this second one.’ Several days later, the hoca returns to borrow the pots again. The neighbor, happy to double his inventory one more time,

---

1 *Hoca* is an honorific in older use in the Turkic world, signaling “master” or “lord,” but especially signaling someone possessing of wisdom or knowledge. It joins related terms, such as *khawaja*, found across southeastern Europe, the Middle East, Central and South Asia.

hands them both back, but weeks later, he is chagrined to have heard nothing. 'Where are my pots? You said you would return them.' 'I'm sorry,' Nasreddin replied, 'I can't return them. Your pots died.' 'What do you mean they died? That's nonsense!' the neighbor replied. 'What do *you* mean,' Nasreddin parried. 'You believed that they gave birth, so why can't they die too?'" By this time both Araz and our farmer host, smiling broadly and clutching glass cups of tea, were very pleased with themselves. I attempted to recover. "So you're trying to tell me that pots lead their own lives, and will come back one day on their own?" Araz signaled his happy triumph, "I'm trying to tell you that you spend too much time talking to mollas when the only real molla is Molla Nasreddin!"

This scene was typical of dozens I experienced when I followed in a long line of strangers entering the Caucasus, asking questions and seeking answers about a region where the dense saturation of peoples, languages, and competing social traditions has long confounded the ready command of others. It was not hard to recall the cheerful warnings of Pierre Bourdieu from *Outline of a Theory of Practice*: When you ask formal questions, you get formal answers. Or more specifically, when you ask for detailed explanations of the kinds of things most people navigate everyday through practice, you risk distorting things, generating "too much sense" where only sensibility or the sensuous reigns.<sup>2</sup> "It is significant," Bourdieu wrote, "that 'culture' is sometimes described as a map," for maps, like renderings of "culture" alongside them, with their one-size-fits-all approach to space, persons, and experience, privilege an impossibly abstracted explanatory platform designed only for those in a muddle.<sup>3</sup> In place of maps, graphs, or careful exegeses, I was routinely treated to long conversations rich in jokes, proverbs, and cheerful evasion over the struggle to firmly "know" in an area that has somehow long been known established for its elusiveness.

In this essay, I take the chance to parse through what I have come to think of as the near ritual role of indirect speech found in proverbs, folklore, and the particular Nasreddin cycle of humor in circulation through Azerbaijani ambits of the Turkic world over the past century. The Nasreddin playbook is by no means limited to the South Caucasus: These tales of the Nasreddin trickster are loosely but widely distributed, with earnest claims to their origins and provenance across Eastern Europe, Russia, Turkey, the Caucasus, Persia, and Central Asia.<sup>4</sup> However, the South Caucasus location is an important one for us since it was there in 1906 that a group of polyglot writers and artists banded together

---

2 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 2, 98.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

4 Marzolph makes the case that the social function and many folkloric afterlives of Hoca Nasreddin place him as a later iteration of Juha, a staple figure in Arab folklore, someone who was less trickster than fool. See Ulrich Marzolph, "Molla Nasr al-Din in Persia," *Iranian Studies* 28:3-4 (1995), pp. 159-166. For a sampling of the Hoca Nasreddin genre see Havva Aslan and Demet Küçük, *Selected Stories of Nasreddin Hodja* (Istanbul: Profil, 2007), Hasan Javadi, *Satire in Persian Literature* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press,

in Tbilisi to create the weekly magazine, *Molla Nəsrəddin*. This Azerbaijani-language broadsheet began in the wake of revolution in the Russian empire of 1905, on the heels of an attendant relaxing of press laws that reluctantly and unevenly opened doors on social criticism in print. A ready hit, it went on to have a longer life than most satire of its day could hope for, continuing to publish through political upheaval, revolution, civil war, and the rise of Stalinism before folding in 1931. Nor was history the journal's only foe: confused censors and outraged readers alike repeatedly called for the press's shuttering. Yet, as I illustrate, the journal not only kept thousands of others in rapt attention, it has proven an unlikely popular success well through to the present day.

One day in Baku, I shared my surprise to an Azerbaijani colleague about always being treated to proverbs, jokes, and stories every time I asked why property was disbursed the way it was in a rural village, or what one did at a roadside shrine, or how state ceremonies in the capital were coming more and more to recall their Soviet predecessors. "The world of *Molla Nəsrəddin*," she remarked, "is an entire code of behavior, but a special kind of behavior without rules. Instead of telling you how things work and what to do, they are just laughing at what not to do." Such language of circuitous guide and of negative capability draws on a long Turkic tradition of Aesopian criticism—in contemporary Azerbaijani, this is the art of *kinayə ilə danışmaq*, an often ribald form of everyday speech. The concatenated texts found in the journal's pages equally drew on Persian traditions such as the *qit'a* of fragmentary poetry, extracts from the world of *shikayət*, cultures of complaint, or *ghazals*, the language of lament.<sup>5</sup> But like most social forms, the boundaries governing *Molla Nəsrəddin's* origins and genealogies need not be overdrawn: the artists and editors behind it drew far and wide on available late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century satirical templates.

In sharing this material, I have two main goals. First, by focusing on the journal and its long resonance we find a remarkably rich catalogue of life in a corner of the Eurasian world that has been relatively understudied. Reconstituting that world, however briefly as here, reminds us of the plasticities and fragilities of cultural geographies past and present. It was perhaps only ever in the pages of *Molla Nəsrəddin* that the South Caucasus was presented as central to anyone's landscape in a sea of competing imperial powers where they were, otherwise, almost always someone's else's periphery.

Secondly, I draw on the journal's trademark brand of satire—where the reader's angle of observation was continually being shifted, deferred, and de-

---

1986), M. S. Kharitonov, *Dvadtsat' tri Nasreddina* (Moscow, 1978), Necat Muallimoglu, *The Wit and Wisdom of Nasraddin Hodja* (New York: Cynthia Parzych, 1986), and Lucille Vartanian, "Armenian stories of Hodja," *California Folklore Quarterly* 2:1 (1943), pp. 27–29.

5 Turan Həsənzadə, *C. Məmmədquluzadənin cənubi və "Molla Nəsrəddin" jurnalının Təbrizdə nəşri* (Baku, 1991), Hadi Sultan Qurraie, *Modernity and Identity in Azeri Poetry: Mo'juz Shabustlar and the Iranian Constitution*, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Department of Comparative Literature, 1997.

flected—to ask about the longstanding links between circumlocution and social struggle in times and spaces of rapid social upheaval. In earlier work, I have reflected on enduring political traditions in this world area where some twenty-five centuries of near continual incursion have made the region near axiomatic with violence.<sup>6</sup> A long line of would-be overseers—Greek, Roman, Turk, Khazar, Arab, Mongol, Ottoman, Persian, British, and Russian, to name only the best known—peoples who entered as foreign and who emerged, in most cases, as native, have left many peoples of the Caucasus quite practiced in the arts of fraught cohabitation. When most today hear of the Caucasus in the press, it is often through Chechens, who seem to most stand out in the popular imagination for their relative steadfastness in refusing the colonial encounter for so long. For the rest, a diplomatic ability to both engage but also maintain distance from one’s neighbors began to echo in the very conversations that peopled my own time as a traveled outsider. It has led me to ask if this skillful frustration of more normative, flattening gestures of sense-making could tell us something of a Caucasus landscape that has long slowed ready access by others. Historically speaking, we might be tempted to think of this as a “Caucasus style.” As I would like to make the case, however, *Molla Nəsrəddin*’s earnestly elusive grip may be all the more relevant well beyond those borders.

#### EURASIAN WORLDS PAST

The mastermind behind the twentieth-century revival of the cult of Molla Nasreddin was the writer Cəlil Məmmədquluzadə. A playwright, short story writer, and civic leader, he is best known for his shepherding of the Azeri-language journal that became so closely tied to his own persona that when he traveled, eager crowds would call after him, “Molla!” Some would cheer on the famously shy writer to entertain them with comedy, while the more fearful would take cover lest they become subjects of an upcoming profile in the magazine. Məmmədquluzadə operated the journal in three phases: out of Tbilisi from 1906–1917, then out of the northern Iranian city of Tabriz for a year in 1921, and then in Baku from 1922 until ill health and the chilly political climate forced him to close up shop in 1931, not long before his death.

Digging into the journal and its many legacies, one runs into ready obstacles. For its prehistory, one can find hundreds of folklore collections about Nasreddin the character, and his humor. Many such corpuses are jealously protected by those who grew up with the Nesreddin tradition and who take it to be an exclusive Persian, Russian, or Turkish property. But the journal itself has been more celebrated than analyzed. This owes in large degree to the polyglot ambitions of its writers: To fully map the journal’s message, one needs a fluent command of early twentieth-century Azeri and Persian, where both

---

6 Bruce Grant, *The Captive and the Gift: Cultural Histories of Sovereignty in Russia and the Caucasus* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

are already umbrella categories for a number of styles of writing and speech, alongside the Ottoman Turkish and Russian that make frequent cameos on the journal's pages.<sup>7</sup> This is in part what has led me to ask: If the journal may never have been fully grasped by most readers even at its inception, maybe fully "grasping," as it were, making sense from all the journal offered, was perhaps never the real goal?

The journal was revolutionary in its aspirations at the outset of the twentieth century when it angled to reach a diverse population across the Caucasus and northern Iran. Its greatest success came in the hiring of gifted illustrators who entertained the predominantly illiterate men and women among whom it circulated. Yet the question of its actual registers of engagement, then and now, is a trickier one to answer. Even among the well-read, there were few who could grasp all the subtleties of its texts: printed in the Perso-Arabic script of the day, the pages of the journal presented a cascade of code-switching, from Azeri to Persian to Russian in a single text fragment or short story, and across local Caucasus and Ottoman writing styles. By the 1920s, the journal joined the USSR in experimenting with a dizzying range of Latin and Cyrillic-based alphabet reforms.<sup>8</sup> Today, popular command of the journal and its message remains a partial one: Most encounter its pages transliterated into a Standard Azeri Latin of the post-Soviet era, if they encounter them at all. The world of Molla Nasreddin, like Hoca Nasreddin before it, remains a dominantly oral tradition.

To date, studies of the life and work of Cəlil Məmmədquluzadə and the journal he shepherded have tended to follow specific paths. The best known—one cultivated over the Soviet period and beyond in both Russian and Azeri-language scholarship and in the popular press—cites Məmmədquluzadə and his journal's ability to send up authoritarian rule in all manner, speaking on behalf of the downtrodden, the exploited, and (especially where the Caucasus' significant Muslim population of the day is concerned), the maligned. This is the journal as a redemptive project, one which casts its creators in a heroic mode by advancing national culture against the effacements of imperial and socialist leviathans.<sup>9</sup>

---

7 A steady command of Russian is needed, in turn, to track the debates among the project's censors and supporters both before and after 1917.

8 Debates over alphabet reforms at this time and Məmmədquluzadə's role in them are explored in an excellent essay by Nergis Erturk, "Toward a Literary Communism: The 1926 Baku Turcological Congress," *Boundary 2* 40:2 (2013), pp. 183–213.

9 Examples of this tradition include Nazim Axundov, "*Molla Nəsrəddin*" *jurnalının nəşri tarixi* (Baku: Azər nəşr, 1959), Alexandre Bennigsen, "Molla Nasreddin et la presse satirique musulmane de Russie avant 1917," *Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique* 3:3 (1962), pp. 505–520, Isa Gabibeili, *Genii epokhi* (Baku: Işıq, 1993) and *Dzhalil Mamedkulizade* (Molla Nasreddin) (Moscow: Nauka, 1999), Firidun Hüseynov, *Molla Nəsrəddin və Molla Nəsrəddinçilər* (Baku: Yazıçı, 1986), Mirzə İbrahimov, *Böyük demokrat: Molla Nəsrəddin* (Baku: Elm, 1957), Mukhtar Kasumov, *Boevoi revoliutsionno-demokraticeskii zhurnal "Molla Nasreddin"* (Baku: Obshchestvo po rasprostraneniuu politicheskikh i nauchnykh znaniy,

A stricter scholarly path, found more readily in Oriental and Middle Eastern Studies, primarily through both German and English-language area studies, takes up the journal as an artifact of the jadidist, progressive, or modernizing movement, sometimes glossed as a westernizing phenomenon.<sup>10</sup> Depending on how one views those outcomes, Məmmədquluzadə and his colleagues were either part of an inexorable and successful movement to transform Eurasian social spaces, or, part of a Lost Democratic Atlantis in a sea of misplaced ideals.

Both of these approaches make ready sense, and go a long way toward helping any reader navigate what is over a quarter of a century of homespun news stories real and imagined; reports on revolution and world war told in fiery, indignant tones; and parodic cartoons of everyday life and its tribulations in a rapidly transforming world area.

Yet I would make the case that any reader looking to make *too much* sense of the work of Molla Nəsrəddin and its afterlives may be themselves too hasty. The content of the journal itself, the genres on which it relied, the context in which its content has been told and retold over multiple decades, and perhaps not least of all, the world area where it thrived—the Caucasus—offer us a very different chance to ask if the most enduring message of the Nasreddin cycle is not the destabilizing of sense-making itself, and by extension, the claims to sovereignty that go with such knowledge. Indeed, as it hunted down target after target—poverty, illiteracy, backwardness, misogyny, corruption, and all manner of false prophets, princes, and potentates—the very unpredictability of the journal, through both its form and its content, is part of what has kept readers on edge so many years, long after it closed its doors. It invites us to recall a Caucasus setting where centuries of foreign invasion raised canny, often elusive forms of engagement to high art.

---

1960), Chantal Lemercier-Quelquejay, “La presse périodique musulmane de Russie avant 1920: Essai bibliographique,” *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique* 3:1 (1962), pp. 140–165, and Abbas Zamanov, *Mollanəsrəddinçi şairlər (satirik şe’rlər)* (Baku: Yazıçı, 1986).

- 10 See, for example, Volker Adam, “Auf der Suche nach Turan: Panislamismus und Panturkismus in der aserbajdschanischen Vorkriegspresse,” in Raoul Motika and Michael Ursinus, eds., *Caucasia between the Ottoman Empire and Iran, 1555–1914* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2000), pp. 189–205, Tofiq Hacıyev, “Molla Nəsrəddin” in *dili və üslubü* (Baku: Yazıçı, 1983), Evan Siegel, “A woman’s letters to Molla Nasr od-Din (Tbilisi),” in Christoph Herzog, ed., *Presse und öffentlichkeit im Nahen Osten* (Heidelberg: Orientverlag, 1995), pp. 143–153, and Evan Siegel, “An Azerbaijani Poet’s Duel over Iranian Constitutionalism,” in Christoph Herzog, Raoul Motika, and Michael Ursinus eds., *Querelles privées et contestations publiques. Le rôle de la presse dans la formation de l’opinion publique au Proche Orient* (Istanbul: Isis, 2002), pp. 115–145. The rich exhibition catalogue produced by the art collective, Slavs and Tatars joins in this approach. See Slavs and Tatars, *Molla Nasreddin: The Magazine that Would’ve Could’ve Should’ve* (Zurich: Ringier, 2011). Jadidism was a movement best laid out for Central Asia by Adeeb Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

**MOLLA NƏSRƏDDİN: A SHORT HISTORY**

Cəlil Məmmədquluzadə was born in 1866 in the province of Naxçıvan along the border of the Russian empire and the fragmented collection of Persian principalities to its south. For those who know the Caucasus region, the mere mention of Naxçıvan will already conjure up scenes of fragmentation, cleaved as it is today from central Azerbaijani territory and wedged between Turkey, Armenia, and Iran. Life at the time begins to tell us something about the kind of world in which *Molla Nəsrəddin* would come to operate. By the outset of the twentieth century when Məmmədquluzadə had come of age, Baku was then a small oil town just beginning to grow rapidly in size, the larger, contemporary Armenian city of Yerevan was then dominated demographically by a significant Muslim population; and today's capital of Georgia, Tbilisi, was a regional imperial center gathering all peoples of the Caucasus and their Eurasian neighbors, including the regular flow of arrivals from the northern Iranian city of Tabriz, where today's most sizeable Azerbaijani population continues to live. It was, in short, a widely mixed and quite flexible social territory at the heart of the South Caucasus nexus of empires, states, and competing social traditions.<sup>11</sup>

Born into a modest merchant family—his father sold salt from a street kiosk—Məmmədquluzadə began his education in a local madrasah. He spoke Azeri at home but first learned to read and write in Persian. He began learning Russian at the age of thirteen when he transferred to the local city school run by the imperial Ministry of Education, doing so well that he would move a few years later to the more storied teacher's college in Gori, not far from Tbilisi. The college would go on to train a number of leading lights in Azeri civic life of the day, including Nariman Narimanov, the leader of the first Soviet government in Azerbaijan in 1920, the musically gifted Üzeyir Hacıbəyov, and Sultan Qənizadə, the renowned etymologist—in brief, a who's who of the Azeri intelligentsia from that time. Məmmədquluzadə went on to teach for five years in and around the Armenian center of Yerevan, before then moving to Tbilisi where he remained through to 1917. This is to say, he was entirely of the south Caucasus, with a network of family and colleagues across all its key satellites.

Arriving in Tbilisi in 1903, he worked for his friend Məhəmməd ağa Şahxatinski on what was then the leading Azeri-language newspaper, *Şərqi-Rus* (The Russian East), eventually becoming its lead editor. In various memoirs, he described the labor of reporting hard news as burdensome. The need to continually curry favor with imperial officials in order to report on contemporary

---

11 Məmmədquluzadə's early life and its influence on the journal are best tracked in a series of works by a family friend, Məmmədquluzadə's own memoirs, and those of his wife. See Əziz Şərif, "*Molla Nəsrəddin*" *necə yarandı* (Baku: Azərbaycan dövlət nəşriyyatı, 1986), Dzhəlal Mamedkulizade, *Feletony, stat'i, vospominaniia* (Baku: Azerbaidzhanskoe gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1966), and Gamida Mamedkulizade, *Moi vospominaniia o Dzhəlile Mamedkulizade* (Baku: Elm, 1970).

politics proved overwhelming, not least for a team of writers known for their rebel streak.<sup>12</sup>

When others surrendered work on the paper in 1905, Məmmədquluzadə took a different path, pooling funds with two colleagues to purchase *Şərqi-Rus*'s printing operation, and lining up permissions for a very different kind of publication, one that would evolve into an eight-page broadsheet, with a full four pages devoted to cartoon-like illustrations from local and international political life as well as everyday scenes from across the Caucasus, greater Turkic and Persian worlds, and beyond. Editors knitted these together with four pages of short articles, lists, telegrams, and stories. Though Məmmədquluzadə dominated as the intended weekly's central contributor, he began with a team that included some of the finest figures of the Azerbaijani-language intelligentsia: Mirzə Ələkbər Sabir, Salman Mümtaz, Məmməd Ordubadi, Ömər Faiq Nemanzadə, and many others.<sup>13</sup> Though the initial visual team would eventually be joined by brilliant sketch artists such as Əzim Əzimzadə, it was two German-born, Tbilisi-based illustrators, Oskar Schmerling and Joseph Rotter, who launched the magazine's tradition of biting caricature.<sup>14</sup>

In its first run from 1906 to 1917, the journal proved a ready hit. While no verifiable subscription lists survive, the range of reported figures impress by any standard of the day. On their own pages, the editors boasted a print run of 25,000 copies for their fifth issue, with some 15,000 heading south to Iran, and the remaining 10,000 circulating across Russia, Turkey, and the Caucasus.<sup>15</sup> Orders within the Russian empire were led by subscribers in Naxçıvan,

---

12 Ataxan Ə. Paşayev, ed., *"Molla Nəsrəddin" jurnalının nəşri tarixindən* (Baku: Çəşioğlu, 2009), pp. 16–17. On the work and reputation of Şah-taxtinskii, see James Meyer, *Turks across Empires: Marketing Muslim Identity in the Russian-Ottoman Borderlands* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), ch. 3.

13 Nemanzadə, and especially Sabir are among the often most underestimated contributors, as the Slavs and Tatars collective observed in their exhibition catalogue. My goal in the present text is to draw on Memmedquluzade for the sake of focus.

14 The journal's early visual tradition drew on a wide range of influences, especially those of a grotesque honed in the European Middle Ages, outlined well in the classic study by Thomas Wright, *A History of Caricature and Grotesque in Literature and Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1875). Many studies are devoted to the particular styles of both Əzimzadə and Schmerling. See I. Həbibbəyli, *Mollanəsrəddinçi karikatura üstəsi: Oskar Şmerling* (Naxçıvan: Gəmiqaya, 2002) and Mursel Nəcəfov, *Xalq rəssamı Əzim Əzimzadə* (Baku: Uşaq və gənclər nəşriyyatı 1959). The journal's place in a broader Azerbaijani tradition of caricature is the subject of Bayram Hacızadə, *Azərbaycan karikaturası dünən i bugün* (Baku: Azərbaycan karikaturası rəssamlar birliyi, 2007), and M. Nəcəfov, *Isskustvo rozhdennogo revoliutsii* (Baku, 1981).

15 So extensive was the journal's writing on the Iranian constitutional revolution of 1906 to 1911, Janet Afary remarks that many readers believed the journal to be an Iranian publication. Janet Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906–1911* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 120. See also Turan Həsənzadə, *C. Məmmədquluzadənin cənubi və "Molla Nəsrəddin" jurnalının Təbrizdə nəşri* (Baku: Elm, 1991), and A. Sharif, "The Journal 'Molla Nasreddin' and Its Influence on Political Satire in Revolutionary Persia, 1905–11,"

followed by Crimea, Kazan, and Orenburg, alongside the contemporary Azeri cities of Baku, Gəncə, and Şamaxı.<sup>16</sup> Later figures suggest a run of only a tenth that size, some 2500 copies at its peak, though a police report from 1913 indicates that when officials moved to seize copies of an issue that ran afoul of press laws, they collected over 3500 copies off the shelves of Tbilisi kiosks alone.<sup>17</sup> At a time when most satirical journals in Russia ran into only the low thousands of copies, and when *Məzhər*, a significant, competing Azeri-language humor magazine topped out at 200, *Molla Nasreddin* circulated not only far but wide, reportedly passing from hand to hand given the predominant number of teahouses, grammar schools, and state offices among its subscribers.<sup>18</sup>

The journal's sharp visual profile was surely among its leading strong suits, abetted by the short texts that lampooned every possible stripe of injustice, inequality, and human puffery that peopled political and social life of the day. But in its first eleven years, it is open to debate just how much of any given copy of the magazine could be fully comprehended by any but the most selectly educated reader from Məmmədquluzadə's own world: texts switched in and out of local Azeri dialects into more formal Ottoman language styles without notice; Russian and Persian calques were everywhere on its pages, and entire passages of Persian greeted readers both north and south of the imperial borders. This was standard fare for a small caste of educated elites of the South Caucasus at that time, but as the editors strained to demonstrate with their insistence on rich pictorials intended for the literate and non-literate alike, those elites were never the main target audience.

In the history of the journal's pages, the easiest episodes to narrate are those of greatest struggle. For while the journal, like so many across the empire, took flight after the 1905 law that extended greater press freedoms, it by no means enjoyed smooth handling from either the Committee on Press Affairs based in Tbilisi or the very Muslim communities it sought to reform. Despite

---

*Central Asian Review* 8:1 (1960), pp. 14–23. An excellent new translation of Dehkhoda best illustrates the intertextual ties across north and south. See Ali-Akbar Dehkhoda, *Charand-o Parand: Revolutionary Satire from Iran, 1907–1909*, translated by Janet Afary and John R. Perry (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

16 "İdarəmizin əhvalatından: Bir neçə söz," *Molla Nəsrəddin* (5 May 1906: 2) Also found in the transliterated volumes produced in the late twentieth century, as here, vol. I (Baku: Azərbaycan dövlət nəşriyyatı 1996), p. 34.

17 Paşayev, "Molla Nəsrəddin," p. 21.

18 On Russian counterparts of the day, see Oleg Minin, "The Value of the liberated word: The Russian satirical press of 1905 and the theory of cultural production," *The Russian Review* 70:2 (2011), pp. 215–233. Later subscription lists from the Soviet period can be found in the archives of the *Əlyazmalar İnstitutu* (Əİ, or Institute of Manuscripts of the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences in Baku) in folders 6/330/2; 6/341; and 6/345. In 1931, the final year of its more subdued print run in the early Soviet era, authorities approved a printing of 5500 copies, with 3000 going to subscribers and 2500 for public sale (Əİ f. 6, v. 330, p. 2).

the journal's rather skeptical view of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906–1911—prior to Mossadegh, one of the moments of greatest hope for Iranian self-rule in the twentieth century—it was continually accused of aiding in the rebellion. Censors first began seizing copies from the printing house in 1907 and 1908 when the Ottoman sultan took offense at caricatures of his empire as a rotting tree being robbed of its last branches, or of the Ottoman court as a scene of decrepit men at the feet of dervishes.<sup>19</sup> A long line of Persian plenipotentiaries, Bahai's, and rural mollahs soon also fired angry letters to Russian officials looking for protection. South of the border, in Iran, the journal was repeatedly banned, and in 1908, a number of imams offended by Məmmədquluzadə's biting portrayals of their indolence issued a fatwa calling for his death.<sup>20</sup> After a foiled attempt on his life, the second in the single year of 1908—this time coming from Baku-based clerics angered by a drawing of one of their own, torn between the Qur'an in one hand and *Molla Nasreddin* in the other—he began to carry a revolver.<sup>21</sup> More commonly and more frequently, the journal's pages echoed scenes from everyday life across the Caucasus, showcasing young boys taunting their mothers over limited women's rights; and all manner of local efforts to achieve high social standing with a minimum of effort.

For all the headaches that the Russian Viceroy's office in Tbilisi endured at the hands of both the journal's editors and readers, the secret to the journal's endurance may well have come in the fact that many (though by no means all) of its messages coincided with the aspirations of the empire to advance its Muslim populations. Sharp as its pen could be, the journal proved a steady ally in the government's efforts to promote education, advance health care, and curb what it believed to be religious excesses. Come early October of 1917, a long-awaited guarantor of *Molla Nəsrəddin's* commercial and social success appeared within reach. "Having won the sympathy of all sections of the population," it declared, the Ministry of Education deemed the journal fit for official distribution in all primary schools across the Transcaucasus.<sup>22</sup> Yet just weeks later, revolution would overturn the Russian empire, and the journal's reluctant but approving sponsors were no more.

In the closing years of WWI, when the politics of the Caucasus began to rise and fall anew, Məmmədquluzadə spent much of his time farming in the hills of Nagorno-Karabagh, where his third wife, Həmidə Cavanşır, who came from landed gentry, had family property. Come 1920, he took the risky journey of traveling with his family to Tabriz, across the militarily charged landscape of

19 See the issues of 1906, no. 29 (20 October), pp. 4–5 (Vol. I (1996), pp. 228–229); and 1907, no. 11 (17 March), pp. 4–5 (Vol. I (1996), pp. 396–397).

20 Əİ 6/274 [n.d.]. A particular cause for concern was a 20 January 1908 cover illustration casting imams in the northern Iranian town of Najaf as riding on the backs of townsmen to avoid soiling their feet (Vol. II (Baku: Azərbaycan dövlət nəşriyyatı, 2002), p. 20).

21 Both 1908 events calling for Məmmədquluzadə's death are narrated by his third wife, Həmidə, in "Kratkaia istoriia revol'vera," in the folder, "Ərizələr" (Əİ f. 6. v. 395).

22 Əİ "Təliq—Şaxtaxinskii" (10 October 1917), f. 6. v. 299.

that time, looking to relaunch the journal on Iranian territory. His new editorial group produced a total of eight issues in the spring of 1921 before being shut down by a local government far less tolerant than their Tbilisi-based censors before them, despite ample ongoing popular support.<sup>23</sup> When his wife took the children back north for their safety, he voted with his feet and accepted an invitation from the nascent Soviet government in Baku to set up shop there later that year.

Whether Məmmədquluzadə himself changed his political leanings over the ten remaining years he would live and work in Baku, or whether it was the dramatically changed political circumstances that slowly restrained his parodic style (or of course both, and many other possible factors), it was clear that the journal itself grew tamer, paradoxically, in the socialist state that had pledged to make permanent revolution its hallmark. Initially, the press worked on an independent cost basis, using its income from sales to fund meager salaries for Məmmədquluzadə and his circle of contributors. As the 1920s wore on, however, the government provided him with an expanded apartment, took over distribution of the magazine, the typography, and eventually funded Məmmədquluzadə through a direct pension when ill health began to set in. The journal's pages softened their tone: While letters occasionally still arrived to protest its barbs, the biting *Molla Nəsrəddin* of the pre-Soviet era transformed into the tamer, more anodyne Hoca Nasreddin of pan-European, pan-Persian, and pan-Turkic folklore. While one could still be attacked for signs of social backwardness such as religious superstition or the suppression of women's rights, the range of critical topics narrowed, and existing government leaders found themselves less and less in the crosshairs. Yet reader demand remained steady, and by the mid-1920s the Central Committee of the Communist Party in Moscow could be found among the regular subscribers.

### SATIRE AND UNPREDICTABLE DICTION

What should we make of the life and times of this remarkable social actor? As I mentioned earlier, approaches have followed a somewhat regular number of paths. From the journal's inception through the 1920s, a small number of critics and occasional articles in the popular press routinely praised Məmmədquluzadə and his work for its raw humor and for his advocacy of improved living standards across the Caucasus. It was clear that by the time of his death in 1932, however, that official embrace of his work had become more ginger. With Stalin's rise to power in 1929 it was by no means evident what place the lampoonist could have in Soviet society, as ample studies of the Russian journal, *Krokodil*, and others have shown. Nonetheless, across the socialist period there was modest but steady appreciation for the journal's jaundiced look at Russian imperialism. Since the 1960s, when the Soviet political world began to exhale

---

23 This period in the journal's history is best covered in Həsənzadə, *C. Məmmədquluzadənin*.

and when parody might again return to the public sphere, the number of books and articles on Məmmədquluzadə's life and work ballooned, though interestingly with remarkably little direct engagement of the journal's pages. *Molla Nəsrəddin* could be adopted as a symbol, but somehow only through a kind of lens, foggily. Come 1992 and post-Soviet independence, praise for the magazine took on more nationalist terms, as the journal not only stood for release from the tsar, but also from the Soviet system itself, standing in as a beacon of self-determination. This proved the journal a redemptive project again. But the uneven reception of local elites that once accompanied the journal's earliest days continues to haunt. As an archivist in Baku said to me one afternoon, when I told her how difficult it seemed to coherently track what the journal was about, "Məmmədquluzadə is a special kind of animal—everyone admires him, but a little cautiously. Because even long after his death, if you look too closely, you can still get bitten. No one knows quite what to do with him. Don't forget, too: You can still admire someone but do it from a distance."

Indeed, on paper, the editors' politics varied widely. Where one would expect the journal to embrace the leaders of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution in the early years of the twentieth century, Məmmədquluzadə, instead, ribbed them for their ineptitudes and their vanities. For a time, he appeared an apolitical anarchist, championing the rights of the oppressed, and seemingly disavowing any overly centralized power. Yet when he moved to Baku from Iran he entered Soviet civic life rapidly. He seized the chance to pilot Azerbaijani-language reforms in the new Soviet state and was an active member on the state Committee for a New Alphabet, eventually leading to one of the five hugely ambitious but also hugely disruptive alphabet changes that Azerbaijan endured in the twentieth century. Despite years of withering caricatures of what he believed were religious excesses, he resisted any labels of himself or his journal as secularist. In the Soviet era, his anti-Islamic professions grew louder, but he spurned repeated state efforts to link his funding to the then extant Union of Militant Atheists, or in Azerbaijan, the *Allahsızlar*. In keeping with the times, on the other hand, he was soon presented as candidate for the Central Committee of the Azerbaijani SSR in the years leading to his death.<sup>24</sup>

It is tempting, in all of this, to rely on context to explain the journal's character and reach. And to be sure, the times themselves hardly made for regular models of any kind. Why should Məmmədquluzadə and his fellow editors not have evolved, changed their minds, compromised, suffered, and then died, as so many others did before and after them? I would go further and suggest that the geopolitical space of the Caucasus of the early twentieth century was already a germane one for any public culture that refused ready patterns. In a

---

24 "Kto oni?" *Zaria vostoka* (Baku), 16 June 1929, p. 1. Məmmədquluzadə does not appear in lists of communist party members for the republic, although no list for 1929 appears to be publicly available, following searches in both Baku and the archive of the former communist party in Moscow.

world area so long under sovereign control by one foreign overseer or another, the late nineteenth century had been a surprising time of respite and pluralism across north and south. In the north, centuries of confrontation with Chechens who so steadfastly rejected the colonial encounter led to a strategic if selective openness on the part of imperial overseers about the observance of certain social practices to appease the Chechen's neighbors; in the south, the fall of Nadir Shah in the mid-1700s meant that Persian oversight had finally begun to cede.

What I would also like to suggest, however, is that one of the keys for understanding the journal and its many afterlives is the brand of satire that Məmmədquluzadə championed. This is to say, we may want to pause less on content than on form. In his extensive study of the satirical genre, critic Dustin Griffin has shown that the popular notion of satire's function as the toppling of the pompous can be too simplistic. A work of satire is not purely designed to attack vice or folly, Griffin has argued: this would be too easy. Nor are there ready moral standards or boundaries on which satire relies—if so, it would verge into simple comedy or pure exhortation.<sup>25</sup> Certainly, one needs an audience that understands the conventions and references that are in motion; it helps even more if there is a readership with a taste not only for ridicule but also for the suspense of the uncertain, such as gossip, innuendo, and the allusions that feed on events all around them. But the satirical form, Griffin contends, is ultimately one that is more open than closed, a practice that is “concerned rather to inquire, explore, or unsettle than to declare, sum up, or conclude.”<sup>26</sup> In a Caucasus shaken by the Russian and Iranian upheavals of 1905 through WWI, the collapse of empires, civil war, and the rise of the world's first worker's state, we should well anticipate that Məmmədquluzadə's style of writing and illustration was destined to thrive. For Soviet and post-Soviet audiences, the journal's steady refusal to lay out its political plan left readers free to inhabit whatever social understandings they sought to take from it. What this resistance to formal closure also meant, however, was an ongoing openness to new social possibilities in a world that had long been pressed from all sides.

### LIVES AND AFTERLIVES

Məmmədquluzadə and his colleagues made a career of sowing doubt on systems of power around them, with a drive and tenacity that few matched in the course of the twentieth century. Yet the changing landscape of the South Cau-

---

25 In this and other respects, this lands Griffin much closer to the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin on satire than it does to Northrop Frye.

26 Dustin Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), p. 95. In brief, for Griffin, “satire is problematic, open-ended, essayistic, ambiguous in its relationship to history, uncertain in its political effect, resistant to formal closure, more inclined to ask questions than to provide answers, and ambivalent about the pleasures it offers” (*Ibid.*, p. 4).

casus today offers just as many targets of the kind *Molla Nəsrəddin* would once have lampooned.

Political observers of the former Soviet Union have ample evidence at hand to track the increasingly authoritarian turns taken by governments in the region's successor states, not least in Azerbaijan, where an emboldened, oil-rich administration has been crushing dissent in an often-brutal manner. Can we find responses that tackle state violence while circling it with laughter as in decades past? Consider a contemporary example: In the Spring of 2009, Adnan Hacızadə, a British Petroleum public relations officer in his mid-twenties and a prominent youth activist, went online in his hometown of Baku, the Azerbaijani capital, and ordered a donkey costume. A founder of the Azerbaijani youth movement *OL! (Be!)*, and a frequent videoblogger, his idea was to create a series of short online films around the satirical character of the *eşşək*, the proverbial donkey of Turkic folklore whose slow-witted, hanger-on status embodied all that the *OL!* movement looked to overcome across its community. Weeks later, when the government announced that it had imported donkeys to the petro-state at exorbitant prices for rural development purposes, Hacızadə and his colleague released a satirical video on YouTube celebrating donkey rights in a country where human rights and freedom of speech were considerably less well protected.<sup>27</sup> A donkey is said to have freshly arrived from the airport, delighted with his reception in a country that understands donkey sensibilities. The donkey is cultured, plays the violin, and basks in the attention of his fawning press pool. The video closes on the question: If donkeys are so privileged in Azerbaijan, could humans be next?

For Hacızadə and his friends, the consequences were not unlike that of many satirists who came before them. On July 8 of that year, the authors of the video, many of whom had received their undergraduate educations abroad, were assaulted in a downtown restaurant and arrested on charges of hooliganism. Hacızadə and his most active online colleague were sent to prison, each serving just under two years until being pardoned. Their trial—itsself conducted in multiple violations of state law—sent at least one prominent message to elite families across the former Soviet state: know the limits of your place in a narrowing national public sphere. Were the press not so muzzled, and the violence not so swift, *Molla Nəsrəddin* might have been there again to send up the simulacra of justice in the trial's unfolding.

I turn to tales of donkeys in the present day because, as I noted one of *Molla Nəsrəddin's* specialties came in the unexpected layerings of time and space from across Caucasus worlds. The journal's consistent hallmarks, found in a world of unsteady truths, seeming but not seeming, appear no less relevant in today's postsocialist orbit when we are told, remarkably, that a war in Ukraine may or may not have launched only a few summers back, or when the contem-

---

27 A version with English subtitles is online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aaecvg7xCIk> (accessed July 2018).

porary Azeri government, which in 2014 held the rotating chair of the Council of Europe, continues to steadfastly refuse claims to political prisoners (despite current estimates at over 140, well over the 100 reported for Russia, a country more than fifteen times its size), all while brutally cracking down on opposition parties, the media, and most recently, human rights critics.<sup>28</sup> Here again it may simply be the promise of unpredictability, rather than a coherent competing morality that seems to have kept people absorbed by the Nasreddin style. I stress that this is not simply the case of the pen being mightier than the sword.<sup>29</sup> Nor is it purely about satire on the contradictions of state power. Instead, it is about the very unsteadiness of diction from the start, especially in the speech of those who claim authority over others.

Today, the Azerbaijani Ministries of Culture and Education regularly promote Məmmədquluzadə as among the “fathers” of a modern, twentieth-century national prose tradition. This is already an irony for someone who did as much as any might to undermine the role of the patriarch in traditional political systems. Over the past several years, government money poured into the Institute of Literature in Baku to create expensive reproductions of the journal’s entire print run, and the work of Məmmədquluzadə as both essayist and editor is regularly praised in state-sponsored periodicals. His Persian roots have been almost entirely scrubbed, only to be occasionally cited to recall his having been chased out of Tabriz and welcomed to Baku in 1921.

Were more personal documents or security records at hand, we could be asking much more about Məmmədquluzadə’s life in the Soviet period. He seems an unlikely candidate, for example, to lie so close to the late President of the republic, his body having been interred in what is today the highest row of honor in the country’s lead cemetery down the street from today’s parliament. Could he truly have launched so many barbs at the country’s ruling officers that none would have taken revenge? What did it mean in a rising atheist state for him to sharpen his anti-religious rhetoric, given that so much of his early work hinged on scenes of fraught inclusion, agonistic pluralisms, and above all, a multitude of voices?

How and when Məmmədquluzadə even died remains the subject of popular speculation. I walked into this fray years back when I was at work on histories of Bash Shabalid, the village I mentioned at the outset of this essay, in the Soviet 1930s. As I sat in an archive and read the prison interrogations

---

28 For Azerbaijan, see the March 2018 report released by a collective of human rights activists, online at: <https://nopoliticalprisoners.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Political-Prisoners-Report-Azerbaijan-WG-FINAL-March-2018.pdf> (accessed July 2018); for Russia, see the October 2017 report released by the Human Rights wing of the organization, Memorial: <https://memohrc.org/ru/bulletins/list-individuals-recognized-political-prisoners-human-rights-centre-memorial-and-0> (accessed July 2018).

29 Although Azeri, like most languages, has a variation on this proverb, too: “Xəncər yarası sağalar, söz yarası sağalmaz” (The cut of the knife will heal, while the cut of the word does not).

of a rural preacher, I was struck how the police records were scribbled down on street flyers, extracts from the pages of *Molla Nəsrəddin*, stamped with the date, April 1932, three months after Məmmədquluzadə was said to have died of a brain hemorrhage. “That’s the thing,” a local historian explained to me. “In the newspapers, they say he died in January. But everyone knows they took him away and shot him in prison later that spring.” When I made mention of this assertion in print, not a single person took me to task for what was, nonetheless, unsubstantiated news of this later time of death.<sup>30</sup> “Everyone knows they took him away,” an Azerbaijani undergraduate no older than twenty told me one day in Baku with surprising ease, a reminder (at least to me) that most things from the world of *Molla Nəsrəddin* defied easy resolution. There would appear to be every evidence that Məmmədquluzadə did indeed die on January 5, 1932, as reported. Many saw him at his home in the weeks leading up to his death, the family posed for a photograph next to his open coffin in mourning, and the newspapers filled with outpourings of grief in the days following.<sup>31</sup> Yet even sharing copies of this photograph with friends in Baku yielded stubborn resignation, “You don’t understand. I know someone who met one of his descendants. They all said his death was a sham. I promise you, they shot him.” For a man whose life work was to refuse the finality of authoritative readings, longtime supporters refuse his own end in telling ways.

This very flexibility about the world of the hard and the true returns us back to the realm of folklore, where the Hoca Nasreddin of centuries back was equally loose on his own demise. As one chronicler has written, “They said that he died more than once—he sometimes imagined himself dead, he sometimes just acted that way; at one point people planned to bury him alive. Others recount that he continued to prank people from beyond the grave. But did he die at all? By some versions, he managed to trick even the Angel Israel and continue to walk the earth. One could believe this too, for Nasreddin is immortal.”<sup>32</sup>

It may be greeted with some irony that, in recent years, it has become a badge of bourgeois status in Baku to own the recently released, expensive multi-volume set of the complete journal run, transliterated into the contemporary Latin script. Release of this new glossy run, gladly re-introducing the work one of the republic’s leading lights, has roughly coincided with the removal of beautiful mosaic tiles wrapping around the city’s famous Nizami Museum of Literature, for example, in order to strip it of all traces of the Perso-Arabic-script. Məmmədquluzadə, an avowed progressivist and new alphabet advocate, might have been pleased to know that Latin script is now the order

---

30 Bruce Grant, “An Average Azeri village: Remembering rebellion in the Caucasus Mountains,” *Slavic Review* 63:4 (2004), p. 729.

31 The only unusual element in the paper trail over Məmmədquluzadə’s passing comes in two separate death notices, the first marked 5 January 1932, as expected, and a later one marked 7 July 1933, giving the same cause of death. “C. Məmmədquluzadənin ölümü haqqında sənəd,” *Əf* f. 6, s. v. 275.

32 Kharitonov, *Dvadtsat’ tri Nasreddina*, p. 18.

of the day. Yet inviting him to haunt the contemporary age obliges us to ask what he would make of the erasure of the competing languages of others in the literary world of Azerbaijan, in a country where only some twenty-five years after the close of the USSR, pictures of the Great Leader hang on every wall of every public space, where almost all university professors are now monitored by cameras in their classrooms, beaming into dean's offices; and where dissent of almost any kind is quickly put to rest behind bars. This is not to say that the government is unpracticed in the arts of humor: The youth wing of the ruling party has been firing back at its Facebook and YouTube opponents, of the kind we saw earlier, with provocative puns and new memes of their own.<sup>33</sup> But it is once again genre that separates them from the Nasreddin style: Theirs is the kind of humor that decisively mocks rather than questions. At least by the terms of Hoca Nasreddin and the magazine that succeeded him, they miss the point.

As I have argued here, the circumlocutions central to satire—found in the allegories, ironies, and unpredictable depths of perspective at the heart of parody—remind us of the equal unsteadiness of social spaces in a world of rapid political transformation. While *Molla Nəsrəddin* astonishes for its tenacity and tenure, it also showcases how and when particular genres can thrive at particular times. The editors and artists behind the magazine took a South Caucasus world on the peripheries of almost all political radars and endowed it with a bold centrality by relying on the same arts of keeping would-be sovereigns at bay that had become the region's trademark since the arrival of the Greeks in the fifth century BCE. In this diverse, polyglot world of pilgrims, pashas, and tradesmen, it is the trickster molla who, having once come alive on its pages, still comes back to haunt, and sometimes, to bite.

---

33 Katy Pearce and Adnan Hajizada, "No Laughing Matter: Humor as a Means of Dissent in the Digital Era. The Case of Authoritarian Azerbaijan," *Demokratizatsiya* 22 (2014), pp. 79–85.