

Faces

by Marco Buttino

Faces, clothing, objects, ways of doing things, relationships, families, activities, rites, differing beliefs: In Central Asia and the Caucasus the traveller is overwhelmed by diversity. Infinite variations that entwine themselves around certain prevalent traits: Muslims, Turkic languages. There are majorities that are inevitably heterogeneous at their core and minorities with strong cultural characteristics: Armenians, Georgians, Jews, Slavs and others that are less numerous. They live in various parts of this immense territory. They are peoples that form small communities, that inhabit entire regions, or that find recognition in huge states, asserting their particular identity and their rights.

The idea emerges that different peoples and traditions are simply a legacy of the past, of migrations long since forgotten, and of conquests and wars; that they come from constructions and transformations that span centuries and which are therefore not driven by anybody, if not by the instinctive tendency within all of us to perpetuate ourselves and to resist the changes imposed by the forces of other men and by natural catastrophes.

In the differing faces and manners, these variations enthrall us, as we imagine them lingering with slow transformations over time. Yet in reality this is not the case. Changes in traditions, in language and in faces take place continuously, sometimes at an astounding rate. This was the case in the past and still applies today.

We follow the course charted by Giada Ripa with her camera, from east to west. In Xinjiang we can take the city of Kashgar as a point of reference. Over the last few years the city has been completely transformed: It was previously inhabited by the Uighur people, who spoke a Turkic language and were Muslims. Now nothing but a few districts remain of the old city; grand buildings and skyscrapers have sprouted like fungi and hoards of new Mandarin-speaking residents have arrived. China is conquering its fringes; today's city is modern, and in the main square stands a huge statue of Mao. Anyone who lived there previously feels out of place. Change has taken place over a period of months, not centuries.

Moving on to Central Asia, which was part of the USSR, we find the opposite process: After decades of uniformity and forced assimilation, the differences have been asserted overwhelmingly following the fall of the Soviet regime and then, over the last few years, the region's course has branched out in different directions. This is happening in cities like Almaty, Bishkek, Osh, Tashkent, Samarkand and Bukhara on the Silk Road. During the last decade of the twentieth century the Slav colonizers left, having arrived at different times over the course of the previous century. The minorities that had been deported to this region during the Stalin era emigrated, as did Germans, Koreans, Chechens, Ingush, Meshket Turks, the Tartars of the Crimea and others. The Jews of Bukhara, who were autochthonous, also left. In the Caucasus, during the same period, there were mass migrations of Azeri from Nagorno-Karabakh, of Armenians from Baku, of Jews from the mountain regions and of Georgians from the Abkhaz and Ossetian regions that had by then been conquered by Russia.

Those who remained found themselves in charge of their own resources, their homes, their jobs, in positions of responsibility. Having theoretically become masters of their own lands, the Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Georgians, Armenians, Azeri and others asserted their own right to existence and to autonomy. They thus constructed their own rituals, rewrote and exalted their traditions, affirmed their own language as that of the state and trampled on books, clothing and all memories of the recent past. Nationalism is asserting itself within the new, post-Soviet states as they seek new common roots and shy away from diversity.

These are changes that have taken place over the last twenty years, which have witnessed the distancing of an imposed culture – that of Russia and the Soviets – and the transformation of ways of life and of languages spoken in settled areas into traditions. Minorities have disappeared that coexisted in the region not for centuries, but merely for decades; new national identities have asserted themselves; variations that did not exist previously have emerged.

The camera captures motionless faces from a world that is witnessing accelerated change. Everything quickly becomes out of place, disappearing and regenerating itself.