

[OPINION] A cultural angle on Azerbaijan

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The first thing I noticed was the angles. Signs composed of compact geometric letters generated a visual “snapshot” at Baku’s airport. Distinctly angular faces created a first impression of an Azerbaijani “type.” In the waiting lounge, sleek modern couches and some minimalist Azerbaijani design elements reinforced the overall sense of angularity.

Little did I know then how much angles would play a part in my first visit to Azerbaijan. What was I expecting as a first impression: the sinuous curves of an “exotic” Eastern culture?

Over my 10-day stay, my visual impression broadened to include magnificent swirls, vine-like designs, concentric patterns. But the theme of “angles” continued to dominate my thoughts. I thought of it when I walked in the clipped streets of Baku’s Old City and when I observed the sense of purpose in the movements and activities of Azerbaijanis I met across the country.

Maybe it’s no coincidence, this sense of ever-changing directions. The history of the modern republic of Azerbaijan is a veritable oriental rug of often complex, often colorful twists.

Why isn’t this fascinating and stunning country better known today in the West than it is? I’ve come to understand that Azerbaijan today, simply put, is in many ways defined by having Russia, Georgia, Armenia, Turkey and Iran as neighbors.

I think about how each Azerbaijani person lives on ground once inhabited by Caucasian Albans, Ottomans, Safavids, Soviets and more. Each Azerbaijani -- within a country the size of the US state of South Carolina -- lives not far from at least one ethnic group holding a radically different view of modern and probably ancient history.

Each day I am here I observe how painful historic memories play a part in the life of many in Azerbaijan. Perspectives on such matters find voice in each green park and elegant tea table where Azerbaijanis gather.

Each Azerbaijani I meet seems as touched by the Internet as by the rise and fall of ancient empires. Another angle suggests itself here: Does one examine Azerbaijani history starting with the so-modern oil economy looking back? Or does one begin with the ancients who took turns living here?

My Azerbaijani friend Elturan shared with me an Azerbaijani expression that suggests that each Azerbaijani’s life is like an Azerbaijani carpet. I will keep coming back to that concept on my return to the United States. (First I will have to explain that many so-called “Persian” or “oriental” rugs are

Azerbaijani in origin.)

I am more than a tourist here in Azerbaijan. My job as executive director of the new US cultural foundation, the Karabakh Foundation, requires me to experience Azerbaijani culture for myself. When I return, I will create programs and facilitate exchanges designed to introduce US audiences to the culture, arts and heritage of Azerbaijan.

For more than 20 years I have worked to “translate” the deep understanding of curators into language that reaches general audiences. I think of myself as a builder of bridges of cultural understanding.

Cultural diplomacy has certain advantages over traditional diplomacy. Everyone speaks the language of cultural diplomacy. Culture is in everything from the food we eat to the languages we speak. It is in the mother’s milk.

So here in Azerbaijan I am constantly striving for cultural experiences that will help me to build cultural bridges between Azerbaijan and the United States. Where a friendship already exists, I am creating opportunities for two peoples to know each other better.

If culture can bring two friendly parties closer together, what can it do for enemies? To my way of thinking, culture is a way of reminding human beings what is important. It is as simple as two mothers smiling at each other across a table while their children play. Ideally, it is a cup of tea shared.

Cultural diplomacy is a prime example of “soft power.” It does not require both parties to agree or even to like each other -- just to strive toward mutual understanding. If cultural celebrations also happen to bring out a naïve idealism -- bonus!

Back to Azerbaijan and my mission to introduce others to Azerbaijani culture. I realize that my obsession with angles will help me in my work. After all, if there were no angles, there would be just one side to every story.

**Diana Cohen Altman is the executive director of the Karabakh Foundation, a newly formed US cultural foundation that celebrates the culture, arts and heritage of Azerbaijan and the Caucasus.*