ETHNOCIDE IN ARTSAKH

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Scholars no longer express doubt that the Azerbaijani identity was constructed during the Soviet years. This identity was created on the territory of Soviet Azerbaijan, legalized through a Soviet policy of ethno-national identity, and legitimized through myths of antiquity—at the expense of distorting and destroying the histories and cultures of ancient Media, Atropatene, Caucasian Albania (Aluank) and Armenia's historical northeastern regions of Utik, Artsakh and Nakhichevan. Since the people of the territory of Soviet Azerbaijan consisted not only of the newly-named Azeri ethnos, this provided Azerbaijan with the expansionist opportunity and ambition, if not a license, to assimilate ethnic and religious minorities, including the majority of Kurds, Udis, Lezgis and Tats.

It is widely-documented that this policy's ultimate political goal was to present Azeris as indigenous heirs to the ancient peoples who had lived in what Azerbaijani nationalists refer to as 'Northern Azerbaijan' (the constituent state of Soviet Azerbaijan) and 'Southern Azerbaijan' (northern Iran), namely: the Caucasian Albanians, Medians, and Atropatenians. This essay attempts to clarify and classify Azerbaijan's political and scientific mechanisms employed for the systematic usurpation of Armenian history and culture.

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Cultural heritage is best preserved when it is perceived as a socially, economically and politically critical component of the present and future. Cultural heritage functions not merely aesthetically or symbolically, but coalesces into ethno-national identity. As a result of Sovietization, including forced annexation to Azerbaijan and government-sanctioned atheism, the indigenous Armenian population of Artsakh loosened its grip on its cultural identity (save for secular practices such as a distinct dialect, ceremonial rituals, traditions and mythology). Heritage began to stop functioning as an agent of identity preservation. Under such circumstances, Azerbaijan's aggressiveness toward Armenian heritage was met with no serious resistance.

The forced misattribution of Armenian heritage was, at first, conducted through an official propagation of atheism, in which propaganda and deliberate cultural destruction went hand in hand. The nomadic Muslim population, the base of the developing Azerbaijani identity, suffered few cultural losses as opposed to the indigenous and agriculturalist Christian populace, whose material heritage could be physically reduced to meet a political agenda.

The most visual and dangerous outcome of official godlessness was the political downgrading of immobile heritage to something unworthy of protection. Official atheism was hence translated into an active campaign against cultural monuments. First and foremost, this policy directed the destruction, deformation and re-adaptation of architectural structures. As a result, churches in hundreds of Artsakh villages were converted to storage areas or, at best, into 'cultural centres.' The Monastery in Charektar, for example, has functioned since the 1960s as a house and barn for an Azerbaijani family. The demolition of hundreds of churches and khachkars (cross-stones), and the use of their rubble for construction, was an extreme material and moral blow to Armenian heritage. The act of destroying and mistreating cultural monuments reduces their value to simple decorations and removes any sense of sacredness from them. Further, such a campaign eliminates the irreplaceable scientific and documentary value that all historical monuments possess. It must be noted that some Armenians participated in this destructive campaign in the name of atheism.

One method of instituting atheism was to target 'folk' culture, 'scientifically recovering' its traditional roots and, thus, redefining cultural identity without religion. The classic example of such a policy can be found in an ethnographic book by Dr. Petrushevskiy titled "About the pre-Christian beliefs of the villagers of Nagorno-Karabakh". The term "villagers" is used in place of the more accurate designation "Armenians" to suggest that non-indigenous Muslims also had pre-Christian roots in that region.

It was anti-Christian atheism that compelled Petrushevskiy to secularize sacred Christian heritage, His claim, for instance, that "folk wedding traditions" have survived at Artsakh. Petrushevskiy describes the ritual of a bride who, before leaving for her new house, worships her paternal house's ground oven (tonir) which, he claims, is more sacred to villagers than the church itself. For the Armenian villager, he concludes, the wedding ritual is essentially the worshipping of the oven rather than a Christian rite. In truth, 'oven-worshipping' was historically practiced in villages without churches, and the worship of the sacred oven in Artsakh occurred within an administrative-political context, as I had argued in a separate publication. There are many deliberate factual errors in this research. Petrushevskiy, for instance, in his comments about Artsakh considers ojakh (the oven inside the house) and tonir (the outdoors cooker) as one and the same, even creating the combined term of ojakh-tonir. This approach implies that the author does not consider holy ojakhs as sacred sites, even though he has encountered them. This kind of negligent scholarship is designed to downplay and downgrade the inconvenient role of Christianity in traditional heritage.

In addition to the secularization of Christian traditions, another mechanism of neutralizing Armenian identity was the 'discovery' of overlapping histories. Since cultural differences between Christian-Armenian and Azeri-Muslim histories were apparent, a process of cultural usurpation, under the guise of internationalism and the brotherhood of nations, was constructed. This process artificially created syntax of cultural 'kinship,' 'common roots' and 'similarities.' Petrushevsky's research, for example, attempts to prove that Christian holy sites and rituals were less valuable to Karabakh Armenians than pre-Christian folk traditions. He claimed that as far as pre-Christian/folk traditions are concerned, Armenians and Tatars have almost the same cultural pillars. To demonstrate this, Petrushevskiy argued that the legends surrounding the worship of Christian sacred sites are, at their core, the same for Armenians and Azeris. Not surprisingly, the same mechanism was utilized by Azeri scholar Zia Buniatov for the purpose of arguing a common ancestry. According to Buniatov, the rituals and customs of Armenians from various regions were similar to the customs of their Azeri neighbors which supposedly demonstrates that modern Armenians and Azerbaijanis descend from Caucasian Albanians, some of whom have joined the Armenian Church and assimilated, while others have become Muslim.

This same technique was utilized to equate Armenian architectural culture to late medieval Islamic architecture in Azerbaijan by noting random similarities. As we can see, the next step was: if Armenian and Azerbaijani cultures are so interrelated, then we can assume that the creators of these cultures were the same.

The next mechanism may be called a state monopoly over studying cultural heritage. This meant that the history and culture of territory of Soviet Azerbaijan, including Artsakh, was only to be studied by Azerbaijani academic institutions. Such studies were under the strict review of Communist Party apparatus. Local Armenian scholars were persecuted and even deported for attempting to study their own history and culture. I recall, for instance, a 1977 research trip to Artsakh villages to

document khachkars. In some villages, school principals refused to support my research, arguing that I needed a written permit from the local Communist authorities if I wanted to photograph khachkars. My PhD chair and academic advisor, Babken Arakelyan, once commented that all his initiatives to establish cooperation with the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences had been fruitless. According to him, the only positive step had been a 1960s agreement allowing Armenian researchers to document medieval Armenian inscriptions in Artsakh-Karabakh and Azerbaijani researchers to document Arabic-script inscriptions in Armenia. The Armenian research team was led by S. Barkhudarian and the Azerbaijani team by M. Neymatova. Interestingly, both Barkhudaryan's and Neymatova's books were not published until the 1980s. While Barkhudaryan's research had only documented Armenian inscriptions, Neymatova included inscriptions from the tombs of Islamized Armenians, including descendants of the famed Orbelyan clan, who were presented as Azerbaijani.

These Moscow-backed policies hindered the training of Armenian specialists. Armenian studies departments were unable to train specialists in the Caucasian Albanian alphabet, yielding the field to Georgia.

We must also acknowledge the role of 'Albanophobia' in Armenian academic circles. An entire generation of scholars has attempted to separate Caucasian Albanian culture from Armenian culture, as if accepting, from the very beginning, the Azerbaijani thesis that 'Caucasian Albanians' were to some extent 'Azeri.' To concede this academic point, is to also accept the political undertones of the Azerbaijani thesis. Indeed, this is one of the victories of Azerbaijani historiography's usurpation. Armenian studies were compelled, on one hand, to counter the direct connection of Azerbaijanis and Caucasian Albanians, while, on the other hand, separating Caucasian Albanian culture from Armenian heritage.

The next Azerbaijani step toward usurping Armenian cultural heritage was to construct terminology that supported revisionism. We can think of this as usurpation through re-labeling. Azerbaijan's entire Armenian heritage—historical and famous figures, noble classes, lineages, the entire material heritage—was proclaimed by Azerbaijani scholarship to be Caucasian Albanian-Azerbaijani. These baseless misattributions are now being countered by Armenian researchers.

Even as Armenian scholars overcame their confusion, caused by this revisionist process, another usurpation mechanism was being developed. The architect of this practice was Azeri scholar Zia Buniatov. In place of the scholarly practices of discourse, documentation, and demonstration of evidence, Buniatov's approach was to simply re-label existing records. In Buniatov's work, Armenian historical sources are proclaimed Caucasian Albanian, Armenian historians as Albanian historians and even Old Armenian names have been re-transcribed in Russian and Azerbaijani manners.

Ironically, even the most outspoken representatives of the Caucasian Albanian thesis could not read Armenian, despite many 'Albanian' documents being entirely in Armenian script. It makes one laugh to read Buniatov's or Mamedova's citations of the medieval Armenian historian Movses

Kaghankatvatsi's work. These Azerbaijani scholars present the original Armenian text in semi-educated classical Armenian, and Cyrillic-font, in failed attempts to demonstrate the mastery of primary sources.

The most amusing examples can be found in the work of two other Azerbaijani scholars, D. Akhundov and N. Rzayev. In his photo-documents of Christian monuments in Soviet Azerbaijan, Akhundov lists every item as Caucasian Albanian-Azerbaijani heritage. To achieve this he fabricates Azerbaijani nomenclature for Armenian khachkars, renaming them "Nishandash," "khachdash," etc. Rzayev goes even further, labeling Caucasian Albanians as Turks, as Turkish as Azerbaijanis. This bizarre theory is reiterated on almost every page of his book.

The same zeal can be seen in the contradictory classification of Caucasian Albanian and Oghuz-Turkish in the eighteenth—nineteenth-century tombstones of Avetaranots, an Armenian village in Artsakh. These classifications demonstrate ignorance of the given monuments' dates and deliberately ignore inscriptions in the Armenian language. The following epitaph, for example, was inscribed on the 1736 tombstone of Melik Hise, son of Melik Shahnazar:

This is the gravestone of Melik Shahnazar's Son, Melik Hisein in year 1736. I am weaving words of praise About Melik Husein and ascribing into this tomb. He was Varanda land's lord, with thirty-five villages. His table was always full , and had mercy on everyone. had commendable character and was the crown and pride of the Armenian nation. He killed many Tajiks , and fought against the Ottomans Paid no tax to kings. Was the strong wall of our world, and was born in year 1709.

Would the forefathers of today's Azerbaijanis, the historical Oghuz-Turks, forgive their Azeri descendant, Rzayev, for classifying Melik Hise Oghuz when his tombstone venerates him as the pride of the Armenian nation and a killer of Turks?

In the past two decades, parallel with the Karabakh liberation movement, Artsakh Armenians have reconnected with their cultural heritage; in other words, this heritage is reemerging as an inseparable part of their identity. The first signs of this rebirth became apparent in the beginning of the Artsakh movement. The Ghazanchetsots church of Shushi, for instance, inspired many to seek liberation from Azerbaijani rule and, later, came to represent that freedom. In the besieged Karabakh capital, Stepanakert, not far from Shushi, locals would ask each other when they could again light candles, referencing the liberation of Shushi from Azerbaijani forces. During this movement, legends spread as far as Los Angeles about another sacred site—the monastery of Gandzasar and its minister Father Hovhannes. Even today, people visit the monastery to see the missile that hit the monastery but didn't explode.

A few years ago, factual and not-so-factual information emerged about the alleged discovery of Saint Dadi's remains at his namesake monastery. Today stories are spreading about the recent discovery of Tigranakert; a 2,000-year-old Hellenistic city built by the Armenian emperor Tigranes the Great, in Karabakh. These are just a few examples of many similar stories.

The organic rejuvenation of cultural stories and rites is testament to the natural function of cultural heritage– the process of fostering cultural identity. Perhaps ethnographers and specialists of Armenian studies should pay more attention to the mechanisms of reclaiming culture in order to understand and cultivate these processes.

The processes of cultural heritage usurpation can backfire on the fabricators. This is evident in Azerbaijan's new obsessive desire for antique roots, as well as the country's systematic and systemic hostility toward the cultural heritage of indigenous Armenians. The physical destruction of Armenia's historical record through the targeting of cultural monuments, such as the destruction of the medieval Jugha (Julfa) cemetery in 2005, is the zenith of such aberration.

Azerbaijan's approach to Armenian cultural heritage is unwavering and unremorseful. It represents a ruthless animosity toward Armenian culture and an obsession with its obliteration. This approach demonstrates a sad reality: that the Azerbaijani identity has been constructed through misattributing the rich heritage of their indigenous neighbors. In this light, expecting Azerbaijan's authorities and academia to respect and care for the Armenian people and the culture of Artsakh-Karabakh—the living opponents of the foundational myths of Azeri identity—are shortsighted.