

The Multiple Identities of Azerbaijan

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Introduction

In contemporary scholarly literature on Azerbaijan, the terms Azeri and Azerbaijani are used interchangeably and are understood to represent the majority Turkic-speaking population living in the northern Republic of Azerbaijan, in southern Azerbaijan and Iran, as well as in (Azeri) Diaspora. Further, these terms also represent the non-Turkic citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan as well as the non-Turkic residents of southern Azerbaijan who may choose to identify themselves as Azeris or Azerbaijanis. Throughout this paper I use 'Azeri' and 'Azerbaijani' as the two common categories to refer to this complex population. In her valuable book titled *Borders and Brethren: Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity*, Brenda Shaffer astutely observes that "Until the early 1990s, most Azerbaijanis in Iran referred to themselves as Turks. Some researchers and Azerbaijanis themselves refer to this group as the Azerbaijani Turks... I have used the term most commonly employed by the Azerbaijanis today, and which is considered most neutral. This is "Azerbaijani."¹

Since Shaffer's observation a few years back, the debate around finding a uniform ethnic / linguistic / national identity for the people of Azerbaijan has intensified. Based on their lived experience and spatio-temporal contexts, the Azerbaijanis are now using identity categories as diverse as Azeri, Azeri-Turk, Turk, Iranian-Turk, Azerbaijani-Turk, South-Azerbaijani-Turk, and North-Azerbaijani-Turk to identify themselves. This rich choice of categories may in itself be an indication of how confusing the situation has become. While the existence of fragmented and multiple identity categories are normal manifestations of living in postmodern/postcolonial globalizing environments, the necessity of using a more comprehensive and inclusive designation is becoming pressingly evident. However, notwithstanding the increasing debate over a common designation, consensus is nowhere within sight regarding a uniform Azeri identity.

In its current stage, the ongoing debate over the ‘correct’ identity category for the Azerbaijanis evokes an image similar to that of Rumi’s² ‘the Elephant in the Dark’ parable, where a group of people tried to identify an elephant in a dark room by placing their hands on different parts of its body. Unable to see the animal in its entirety, they each described it based on where they touched it. For instance, a person whose hand landed on the trunk, called it a ‘drain pipe;’ while another, whose hand reached the elephant’s ear, called it a ‘kind of fan;’ and someone else who placed his hand upon its back called it a throne, and so forth.

Similar to the case of the people describing the elephant in the dark, the Azerbaijanis identify themselves based on their lived experience within specific environments, without being able to connect these various contexts under a more comprehensive general term. These kinds of multiple, uncertain and disrupted processes and categories of identification are quite normal in light of contemporary understanding of identity offered through postmodern and postcolonial discourses. It, however, becomes problematic when some Azerbaijanis adopt an essentialist notion of identity and try to compel others to follow this essentialist version.

This paper argues that despite the existence of ruptures and fragmentations, the choice of an inclusive democratic identity category is not only possible but extremely necessary in providing a common zone of struggle based on self-identification. In contrast to an essentialist understanding of identity, the paper forwards a postcolonial and postmodern understanding of identity as an effective means through which reaching a democratic and inclusive designation can be made possible. The democratic nature of such a common designation should be understood through its distance from racist and chauvinistic categories; whereas its inclusivity should be illustrated through its capacity in simultaneously defining the Azeris in Iran, in the Republic of Azerbaijan, and in Diaspora.

The paper seeks to demonstrate that a postcolonial/postmodern vision of identity would be effective in an Azerbaijani context in that such a vision:

Defines identity in terms of its non-fixity, fluidity, and flexibility. This means that it is perfectly alright if some Azeris living in Iran refer to themselves as ‘Turks,’ ‘Iranian-Turks,’ or ‘Azerbaijani-Turks.’ Likewise, it should be understood as normal for other Azeris living in the Republic of Azerbaijan or in Diaspora to identify themselves as ‘Azeris’ and/or ‘Azerbaijanis.’ An understanding of this phenomenon will reduce the resorting to symbolic violence of those whose essentialist understanding of identity compels them to accuse others of being ‘traitor’ or ‘sellout’ due to their choosing of a different identity category. Such accusations are becoming quite common as identity based struggles gain increasing momentum in contemporary Iran.

Defines identity and its contexts in terms of their multiple and shifting natures. This definition allows for various parties to come together and negotiate the possibility of choosing a common democratic and inclusive identity, while allowing for the usage of diverse categories in different contexts. This way, the choice of a uniform identity category is determined in terms of such category's usefulness and effectiveness, rather than its real or perceived racial / ethnic rootedness.

Provides the opportunity to widen our vision from a limited local context by linking the local to broader global contexts. In our increasingly globalizing environments, it is only through an understanding of various global and local perspectives that one can have a more sensible understanding of one's own environment and the ways of transforming it. As such, the locally constructed identity categories such as 'Turk,' 'Iranian-Turk' and so on will need to be examined in terms of their usefulness in both global and local contexts.

Azerbaijan: An Historical Overview

Azerbaijan literally means "the Land of the Keepers of Fire" and is the historical name of the region where Azeris live. As a geographic region it extends from northwestern Iran to Caspian Sea to the east, Kurdistan, Armenia and Turkey to the west, Georgia and Russia to the north. This strategic positioning reveals Azerbaijan's geopolitical significance as a gateway to Russia and Turkey, and through them to the West. At the present time Azerbaijan is geopolitically divided into two parts: The northern Azerbaijan which became an independent country after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the southern Azerbaijan which is currently a part of Iran. Apart from the Azeri-Turks who constitute over 80 percent of the inhabitants of Azerbaijan on both sides of the Araz River, there are other ethnic and religious minorities such as the Kurds, Armenians, Lezgis, Taleshis, Jews, Christians, and Bahai's living in Azerbaijan.

The language of the majority of Azerbaijanis is 'Azeri' (variously known as Azeri-Turkic, Turki, Azerbaijani) and the religion of the majority of them is Shia Islam. There are over 50,000,000 Azeris living in today's world, of which 32,000,000 are believed to be living in southern Azerbaijan and Iran, around 8,000,000 in the Republic of Azerbaijan, close to 2,000,000 in Turkey, about 2,000,000 in Russia, and the rest are living in such countries as Georgia, Iraq, Ukraine and so on. In *The Ancient History of Iranian Turks*, Professor M.T. Zehtabi has traced the origination of current Azeris to ancient Sumerian and Ilamite civilizations, dating back to 6000 BC. Through the examination of archeological and linguistic evidences, Zehtabi

has shown that today's Azeris are remnants of such racial/ethnic components as the ancient Ilametes, the Medes, and other agglutinative language peoples like Kassies, Gutties, Lullubies and Hurraies.³

According to other sources, three different ethnic components have participated in the formation and the evolution of Azeri people: first, the Medes who were mainly concentrated in southern Azerbaijan; second, the Aran-Albanese who were living in the north; third, the Turks who have been living in various parts of Azerbaijan from the time immemorial.⁴ In the year 600 BC, Azerbaijan was conquered by the Persian emperor, Cyrus the Great. In 330 BC, Alexander the Great defeated the Persians and reconquered Azerbaijan. And three centuries later it was occupied by the Roman Empire. Later on, Azerbaijan continued to be ruled by the Roman Empire, the Persian Empire, and the Confederation of Caucasian Turks.⁵ Within the space of ten years from the death of Prophet Mohammed in 632 AD, around thirty-thousand Muslim Arabs attacked and Conquered Iran through the three famous battles of Qadisiyya and Jalula in 637 AD, followed by Nahavand in 641 AD, overthrowing the decaying Sasanid Empire. After the demise of Sasanians, segments of Azerbaijan became a part of the newly founded Muslim empire. Resistance against Arab invasion in northern and central Azerbaijan continued well through the 9th century.

In the year 837, the Arabs conquered the Castle of Babak-a stronghold for a powerful resistance movement in central Azerbaijan- crushed Babak's resistance movement, and established their dominion all over Azerbaijan.⁶ The presence of Arabs in Azerbaijan and Iran culminated in the Islamization of the region. After the Arab invasion, towards the end of the 7th century, a local dynasty known as Shirvanshahs ruled the northern Azerbaijan from 668 through 1539, when they were incorporated into the Safavid Empire, once more becoming unified with the south.⁷ Being an indigenous Azeri dynasty, the Safavids easily succeeded in integrating Shirvanshahs and their territory into the Safavid Empire. Through this reunification, Azerbaijan once again continued to enjoy its economic, cultural, and linguistic autonomy as an integrated whole well up to the early 19th century.

After suffering various intrusions throughout its history, in the 19th century Azerbaijan was twice invaded by Russia. As a result, the vast territory of northern Azerbaijan, or what is now the independent Republic of Azerbaijan, was annexed to the Russian Empire in 1828. The annexation of northern Azerbaijan by Russia notwithstanding, the southern region of Azerbaijan still continued to enjoy a relatively autonomous status, particularly in the areas concerning trade and commerce as well as culture and language. However, with the climbing on power in 1921 of Reza Khan and the subsequent establishment of the absolute

monarchism of Pahlavi dynasty in Iran, South Azerbaijan's regional, economic, linguistic and cultural autonomy came to an end, and through Reza Khan's harsh centralization policy, the hitherto independent region of Azerbaijan now became divided into a number of dependent "Ostans" or provinces.⁸

The Pahlavi dynasty ruled in Iran well over a half century and throughout this period a policy of forced assimilation aiming at the artificial creation of a homogeneous Farsi-speaking nation was rigorously implemented. As a consequence, the publication of newspapers, magazines and books in Azeri language became prohibited and the people of Azerbaijan were denied the right to education in their own language.⁹ In 1979, the Pahlavi regime was overthrown and, subsequently, the Islamic Republic was formed. With the fall of the Shah, his sponsored Persian nationalistic ideology was briefly overshadowed by an emerging 'anti-nationalist' Islamic ideology. In the revolutionary atmosphere of the time, various ethnic demands and movements began to emerge particularly in Kurdistan, Khuzistan, Azerbaijan and Baluchistan. Upon consolidating its power bases, the new regime brutally suppressed the legitimate demands of various nationalities for cultural and linguistic rights. Identifying the Persian language as 'the second language of Islam,' the new regime vigorously continued to enforce the ban imposed on non-Persian languages during the Pahlavi era, notwithstanding that its own constitution had allowed for the teaching and learning of non-Farsi languages in the country.

In August 1991, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the formation of an independent Azerbaijani nation-state was declared north of the Iranian borders. With the coming of independence, the northern Azerbaijan once again continued to embrace the spirit of independence and autonomous nationhood as it had during the short-lived 1918-1920 period. Realizing the importance of such an event to the southern Azeris, the Iranian regime pursued a hostile relationship with the Republic of Azerbaijan, seeking to undermine its credibility, image, and achievements in every opportunity it got, particularly through the state-run media outlets both inside Iran and abroad.¹⁰ This animosity towards the Republic of Azerbaijan and its corresponding cultural, political, and linguistic policies vis-à-vis the Azeris inside Iran invoked various reactions on the part of Azerbaijanis. In turn, these reactions came to find their expression in the ongoing processes leading to identity formation among various segments of Iran's Azeri population.

Language, Literature, and Identity ¹¹

In current Iran, aside from three Azeri provinces of Ardabil, Eastern and Western Azerbaijan, the Azeri-Turkic is spoken in provinces and regions of Zanjan, Hamadan, Arak, Saveh, and northern Khorasan. Azeri-Turkic is also spoken by the Qashqayi Turks as well as various other Turkic-speaking peoples concentrated in the province of Fars and in central Iran. In addition to northern Republic of Azerbaijan, Azeri is also the indigenous language of Turkic peoples in Iraq as well as in Eastern Anatolia.¹² The origination of an earlier written Azeri literature can be safely traced back to the famous epic of Dede Qorqut Kitabi (the Book of Dede Qorqud), the narratives of which were orally materialized in pre-Islamic Caucasia and were written down around the 6th and 7th centuries. The book is an invaluable collection of epos and stories, bearing witness to the language, the way of life, religions, traditions and social norms of peoples inhabiting large portions of Central Asia, parts of Caucasia and the Middle East centuries before the emergence of Islam. This is how the book introduces itself and its main character:

We begin with the name of the Creator and implore his help. Years before the time of the Prophet [Mohammed], there appeared in the Bayat tribe a man by the name of Qorqud Ata. He was the wise man of the Oghuz people. He used to prophecy and bring reports from the unknown world beyond, having been divinely inspired...¹³

In the course of the past two centuries, the book has been translated into many languages. In 1815, the German scholar H.F. Von Diez, produced a German translation of the book based on a manuscript found in the Royal Library of Dresden. In 1950, another manuscript was discovered by the Italian scholar Ettore Rossi in the Vatican library. Following the German rendition, Turkish renditions were published by Kilishli Rifat and Orhan Saik Gokyay in Istanbul in 1916 and 1938 respectively.¹⁴ Professor Hamid Arasli, a well-known Azeri scholar, published the first full text of the collection in Baku in 1939, reprinted in 1962 and again in 1977. Following Arasli's rendition, the famous south Azerbaijani poet, Bulut Qarachorlu, in collaboration with Professor Mohammad Ali Farzaneh, provided a unique rendition of the book in two volumes in Arabic alphabet for Southern Azerbaijani readers. The first volume, titled Sazimin Sozu (the Tales of My Lute) was clandestinely published in Iran in 1960s with no publication date on it. The second volume titled Dedemin Sozu (the Tales of my Father) has not been published so far, although has been widely discussed through various sources.¹⁵

Aside from Dede Qorqut Kitabi, there are other common Turkic works such as Diwan Lughat at-Turk, written by Mahmud of Kashghar in 1072-73, and Qutadghu Bilig, written by Yusuf Khas Hajeb in 1077, that bear witness to the early literary

formations in Azerbaijani language. Around 11th and 12th centuries, the Azeri language and literature flourished under the rule of Shirvanshahs. Among the leading representatives of Azeri literature in this period were such prominent figures as Qetran of Tabriz, Mekhseti Khanum, Khaqani of Shirvan, and Nizami of Ganja. Nizami's well-known Quintuple, Seven Beauties, Khosrow va Shirin, Iskandar-Nameh, Tohfatul Iraquein (Gifts from Iraq), and other works are among the Islamic world's classical literary heritage. Although Nizami did not produce his work in Azeri language, his narratives are, nonetheless, rooted in Azeri culture and tradition.

The 13th and 14th century Azerbaijan witnessed the birth of Hasan-Oglu's famous Ghazals, Qazi Darir's Yusuf va Zuleykha, Qazi Burhan ad-Din's Divan, and Imad ad-Din Nasimi's Quatrains. An outstanding Hurufi philosopher, mystic, and poet, Nasimi left an inerasable mark on Azeri philosophy, literature and culture.¹⁶ From a linguistic and literary viewpoint, Nasimi's language is of outstanding poetic quality. His poetry's artistry, depth, and veracity have gained Nasimi a lasting place among the pioneering literary figures in the Islamic world. Having perfectly mastered the three languages of Turkish, Persian and Arabic, Nasimi has prolifically written in each of these languages (although the survival of his Arabic works are in question). In essence, Nasimi's language marks the emergence of a distinct language and literature unique to Azerbaijan. In the words of M.F. Koprulu, "although Nasimi was not unfamiliar with the dialect of Anatolia, he used that of the Azeri Turkic more often."¹⁷

Koprulu's observation has been confirmed by M. Ergin, who makes similar remarks regarding the language of Qazi Burhan ad-Din, a contemporary of Nasimi and another forerunner in the 14th century Azeri literary scene. "Qazi Burhan ad-Din's language," writes Ergin, does differ from the Anatolian texts and bears certain of the distinguishing features of Azeri-Turkic, which gave promise of its becoming a separate language. In view of this, it is not far of the mark to consider it the product of the period when the Azeri Turkic dialect was heading straight towards separation.¹⁸

Devoting his entire life to the struggle for freedom of expression, through his poetry Nasimi boldly attacked rigid regulations and religious bigotry. As a consequence, he was skinned alive in broad daylight at the Bazaar in the town of Heleb (Aleppo). Irrespective of his tragic destiny, Nasimi's poetic and literary legacy for millions of Azerbaijanis continued to manifest the evolution as well as the consciousness of Azeri as an autonomous language and Azerbaijan as the national homeland.

The Azeri language and literature continued to develop and evolve during the 15th century when the Houses of Qara Qoyunlu and Agh Qoyunlu ruled in southern Azerbaijan and Iran. To this period belong such literary figures as Jahanshah Qaraqoyunlu (Haqiqi), Habibi and Sheyx Qasim Enver, among many others. The 16th century saw the establishment of the Safavid rule in Iran. The founder of this new dynasty, Shah Ismail, was a great lover of poetry and literature. Azeri was the main language in his court, followed by Farsi and Arabic, respectively. Under the pen name Khatayi, Shah Ismail produced his famous *Divani Xetayi* in Azeri-Turkic. Moreover, a unique literary style known as "Qoshma" was also introduced in this period, utilized and developed by Shah Ismail and later on by his successor Shah Tahmasp.¹⁹

Paralleling the Azeri written literature, various forms of profoundly rich folk and oral literature were also developing in this period. Included in Azeri folk literature were numerous forms of tales, proverbs and sayings peculiar to Azerbaijan such as Bayati, Sayaji, Duzgi and so on. In a sense, the 16th century was characterized by the rapid growth of Azerbaijan's folk literature. Such famous masterpieces as Kor-Ogli, Esli-Kerem, Shah Ismail, and Ashiq Qerib were created in this period. At the same time, the indigenous Azerbaijani minstrels, bards and Ashig poetry were also blossoming in this period.²⁰

Perhaps it was no accident that Mohammed Fuzuli (1498-1556), the world renowned Azeri philosopher and poet emerged at this time. Masterfully building upon the legacy of his predecessors, Fuzuli became the unrivalled literary figure of his environment. His major works in Azeri language include *The Divan of Ghazals*, *The Qasidas*, and the poem *Leyla ve Majnoon*, among others. Fuzuli's poetry manifested the spirit of a profound humanism, reflecting the discontent of both the masses and the poet himself with totalitarianism, with feudal lords and establishment religion. From a linguistic perspective, his poetry marked a turning point in the development of Azeri language. In her pioneering work on Azeri literature, titled *Azeri and Persian Literary Works in Twentieth Century Azerbaijan*, Professor Sakina Berengian rightly identifies Fuzuli "as both the Ferdowsi and Hafez of Azeri literature."²¹ According to Professor Berengian, it was in Fuzuli's hands "that the Azeri language was brought to maturity and it was in his works that Azeri classical poetry attained its ultimate refinement."²²

In the course of the 17th century, Fuzuli's unique genre was taken up by such prominent poets and writers as Saeb and Qovsi of Tabriz, Shah Abbas Sani, Amani, Zafar, and many others. Thus, the uninterrupted and natural development of Azeri literature and language continued well into the 19th century, when the Qajars ruled Iran. The Nineteenth century Azerbaijan was characterized by

separation in 1828 of northern segment of Azerbaijan and its annexation into the Russian Empire. According to a veteran Azeri scholar, Dr. Javad Heyat, separation of the northern Azerbaijan was not able to sever the ties between the Azeris. Far from it, this separation gave birth to a unique genre of literature and poetry "whose subject is the theme of separation between brothers."²³ In his famous poem, *Hesret/Longing*, Kamran Mehdi has captured the feelings of Azerbaijanis regarding this forced separation:

**True, the Araz divides a nation
But the earth underneath is one!**²⁴

The early 20th century marked the beginning of a new national and social consciousness in Azerbaijan. Influenced by various literary and socio-political trends in the wake of the Russian Revolution of 1905 and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, the Azeri writers, intellectuals and poets began to revolutionize the Azerbaijani as well as the Iranian socio-cultural landscape. Fethali Akhundzadeh introduced drama into Iranian literature. Taliboff and Zeynal-Abedin of Maragheh laid the foundation of modern creative prose, social criticism and literary realism hitherto unknown in Iran. At the same time, Jelil Memet Quluzadeh and Aliakber Saber produced their leading social and political satires, widely spread through the now internationally renowned paper, *Molla Nesred-Din*.²⁵

The northern Azerbaijan also produced such literary giants as Samed Vurghun, Suleyman Rustem, Resul Reza, Mir Jalal Memedxanli, and many others. In Tabriz, Mirza Hasan Rushdiyye laid the foundation of modern schooling and pedagogy. He wrote and used the first modern textbooks in the history of Iran, titled *Veten Dili* (the Language of Homeland) and *Ana Dili* (the Mother Tongue) in Azerbaijani schools, replacing the Quranic and traditional religious texts.²⁶ Simultaneously, such poets and writers as A. Qarajadaghi, M. Hidaji, M. Xelxali, Nebati, Zikir and Shokuhi were promoting the ideals of social justice and democracy through their works.²⁷ With the flourishing of all these literary and cultural production, it was not surprising that Azerbaijan became the center of Iran's Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911).

This rich literary legacy reached its climax in contemporary times in Mohammad-Hussein Shahryar's (1905-1988) poetry, particularly in his masterpiece 'Heyderbabaya Salam' (Greetings to Heydar Baba).²⁸ Commonly cherished by both the northern and southern Azerbaijanis, this work brings together various cultural and literary tendencies in a single genre, emphasizing once again a common origination of Azerbaijani language, literature, culture and identity for all Azeris. This kind of 'common imagining' in cultural / ethnic / linguistic realm

provides a major building block for the construction of a unified and unifying identity.

The continuous development of this rich literary and cultural tradition, despite various ruptures and interruptions, is a strong indicator of a deep-rooted awareness on the part of Azerbaijanis regarding their language, nationality, culture, history and heritage. This clearly shows that Azeri was and has always been a powerful medium of literary, poetic and creative expression throughout Azerbaijan. From the beginning it was, and has always been, the national language of Azerbaijani Turks. This fact alone may explain the central significance of language in the formation, maintenance and endurance of Azerbaijani people's national and cultural identity.

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*Summary***The Multiple Identities of Azerbaijan****Babajide George Iloba**

Heliopolis Giza, Egypt

This paper focuses on the emerging Azerbaijani identity and its competing articulations in the Republic of Azerbaijan, in Iran, and in Diaspora. The northern Republic of Azerbaijan has a population of over 8 million people, the majority of whom have different social and political experiences than over 30 million Azeris in the South, or in Iranian Azerbaijan. However, there are formidable historical, socio-cultural, ethnic, and linguistic ties that bind all Azerbaijanis together as one people. This necessity of coming together finds its highest expression in Diaspora and among the Azeri émigrés. In the process, the Azeri Diaspora experiences a host of problems and challenges emerging from multiple identities, globalizing environments, and intercultural communications. This paper examines the multiple identities of Azerbaijan as complex sites of struggle, inclusion and exclusion. As such, the paper argues for an understanding of a common democratic identity that would be simultaneously applicable in the Republic of Azerbaijan, in Iranian Azerbaijan as well as in Diaspora.