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Religion as Maintenance of National Consciousness: Islam in Soviet Azerbaijan

Milli Bilincin İdame Ettiricisi Olarak Din: Sovyet Azerbaycan'ında İslam

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Religion as Maintenance of National Consciousness: Islam in Soviet Azerbaijan

Abstract: National consciousness emerged among the intelligentsia in Azerbaijan, at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the XXth century. However, along with Soviet period this process was interrupted and could not spread among the community completely and therefore the “Muslim Identity” continued to survive like a fundamental identity connection for the Azeri society. Along with purge of the intelligentsia and abolition of nationalist symbols and the slogans that they used, Turkish nationalism disappeared as an ideology in Azerbaijan. Politico-ideological nationalism and its slogans were deprived of the chance of keeping the national consciousness alive. In this paper, I will argue that the main factor which sustained national consciousness in Soviet Azerbaijan was Islam and Muslim identity. Despite the fact that the communist regime succeeded in minimizing Islamic intellectual and ideological dimensions, it could not erode its elements that had become a cultural norm and life-style. To be a Muslim in Soviet Azerbaijan was perceived as to be a member of Azeri society and as a devotion to life-style of this society. As a matter of fact, the life-style to which the definition of “Muslim” refers to, was a main factor whereby Azeri society could distinguish itself from the surrounding – Russian, Armenian and Georgian – societies. In this sense, Islam, which refers to common lifestyle and cultural norms, had kept the national consciousness alive by firming the sameness sense of society in Soviet Azerbaijan.

Summary: This study focuses on the role of Islamic identity and Islamic lifestyle in maintaining national consciousness during the Soviet era. The main claim of the study is that Muslim identity and Islamic life style are effective in maintaining national consciousness. In order to prove the accuracy of this claim, analyses of political, social, demographic and cultural issues in a certain historical period are carried out. In this context, the occupation of Russia, the process of nationalization since the second quarter of the XIXth century and the subsequent Sovietization process are discussed in the context of Muslim identity and Islamic lifestyle. This period was discussed and commented on in the light of statistical sources, intelligence reports, propaganda books and academic research on the period.

When the present Azerbaijan region, which was under the influence of Iran politically and culturally until the XIXth century, was occupied by the Russian Empire, the people of the region came under the rule of the Christian rulers for the first time. The Muslim people in Azerbaijan found themselves surrounded by Christian communities for the first time after the Tsarist administration made Armenian and Russian populations migrate to the region to empower its existence. The Azerbaijani society, which was always a part of the Muslim society, had to redefine its own identity in the midst of Christian communities including Russians, Armenians and Georgians. The Tsar administration’s providing a number of privileges both legally and in practice to the Armenians and the Russians, who were brought to Azerbaijan, caused the Azerbaijani Turks to feel themselves under social, cultural, economic and political pressure of Christians. It has been observed that this pressure and favoritism were more intensely felt in the conflicts that broke out between Azerbaijani Turks and Armenians in the years of 1905 and 1918. All these experiences have allowed Azerbaijani Turks to embrace their identity, namely their Muslim identity, towards non-Muslim communities around them.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the intelligentsia and the bourgeoisie, who not only put efforts to promote the national consciousness of the people to ensure social development but also embraced the Muslim identity, had formed. This process resulted in the establishment of the Republic in Azerbaijan in 1918 with the flag that brought together blue, red and green colors symbolizing the turkization, modernization and Islamization. However, the republic was able to survive for only 23 months, and in 1920, after the Soviet invasion, the nationalist ideology, its ideologists and symbols were completely liquidated and Soviet policies were intensively implemented. Even though nationalism had disappeared in the ideological level during the Soviet era, a number of equipment common to nation-state, which provided homogenization of the people, was provided. A national state apparatus, national borders, national history, and national education system were created, even if they were in the Soviet version. As a result, a nation was formed that shared the same language, the same history consciousness and the same boundaries but lacked a national ideology. A cultural nationalism based on culture and lifestyle developed in Soviet Azerbaijan, where ideological nationalism was a perilous venture. Cultural nationalism has evolved in Soviet Azerbaijan as an attitude defending the people's language, history, and especially the way of life. All of these, namely, cultural characteristics and lifestyle, were the main characteristics of the Azerbaijani society, distinguishing itself from environmental societies- from Russians, Armenians and Georgians. In this sense, to be nationalist and patriotic in the Soviet Azerbaijan meant to embrace the culture and lifestyle of Azerbaijani society. Therefore, cultural nationalism played an important role in maintaining the ethnic borders with the surrounding peoples and keeping the national consciousness alive.

The point that should be emphasized in terms of our research subject is that a significant part of life style and culture in Azerbaijani society is closely related to Islam and Islamic traditions. Although Sovietization policies were largely successful in eliminating the intellectual and ideological dimension of Islam, its cultural norms and elements, which became lifestyles, continued their existence strongly. The failure of the Soviet regime was that they could not offer an alternative culture and lifestyle to the Muslim societies they ruled. Even though, in the Soviet era, the concrete symbols of Islam such as mosques and headscarves etc. were destroyed, the elements that appeared in interpersonal relations, social structure and family relations continued to exist. All these were important cultural elements of the Azerbaijani society to distinguish itself from the ethnic identities surrounding it, from the Russians, Armenians and Georgians, and to maintain its national identity. Life cycle rituals such as *kebin* (Islamic marriage), circumcision, funeral and mourning ceremonies were perceived as very important indicators of being an Azeri. In many of the research carried out by the Soviet atheist ideologues and intelligence reports, it was stated that the people, including the communist party executives, continued their life-cycle rituals as they were national customs. Even the atheists were performing these rituals with the concern that they would be accused of opposing national customs and would be excluded from the society if they did not comply with the life-cycle rituals.

Just because *kebin* was only allowed for Muslim couples and marriages without religious ceremony were not welcomed in the society, the rates of marriage with the Russians, Armenians and Georgians were very low. Circumcision of a male child was perceived as making him a member of the Azeri community and as a means of providing a feature that distinguished him from the

members of other societies. The burial of a deceased person according to Islamic methods was a sign that the funeral belonged to an Azeri, not to a Russian, Armenian or Georgian. Hence, setting boundaries with the surrounding ethnic groups, the life-cycle rituals from the Islamic culture also kept national and ethnic consciousness alive. Thus, the Islamic culture and lifestyle became one of the most important antidote of the Soviet Regime's *Homo Sovieticus* project, which aimed to create a new type of human and society beyond the national and ethnic identities.

Keywords: Sociology of Religion, Soviet Azerbaijan, Islam, Nationalism, Identity

Milli Bilincin İdame Ettiricisi Olarak Din: Sovyet Azerbaycan'ında İslam

Öz: XIX. Yüzyılın sonları ve XX. yüzyılın başlarında Azerbaycan'da entelijansiya arasında milli bilinç ortaya çıkmış olsa da Sovyet dönemiyle birlikte bu süreç kesintiye uğramış ve toplumsal tabana yayılamamıştır. Sonuç olarak, var olan "Müslüman Kimliği", Azeri toplumu için temel bir kimlik bağı olarak varlığını sürdürmeye devam etmiştir. Entelijansiyanın tasfiyesi ile birlikte, kullandıkları sloganlar ve milliyetçi semboller de ortadan kalkmış, Türk milliyetçiliği Azerbaycan'da bir ideoloji olarak varlığını koruyamamıştır. Sonuç itibariyle, politik-ideolojik milliyetçilik ve onun sloganları, milli bilinci canlı tutma imkanından yoksun bırakılmıştır. Bu makalede, Sovyet Azerbaycan'ında milli bilinci besleyen temel faktörün İslâm ve Müslüman kimliği olduğu savunulmaktadır. Komünist rejim İslâm'ın entelektüel ve ideolojik boyutlarını en aza indirmeyi başarmasına rağmen, kültürel norm ve yaşam tarzı haline gelen unsurlarını aşındırma konusunda başarısız kalmaktaydı. Sovyet Azerbaycan'ında Müslüman olmak Azeri toplumunun bir üyesi olmak ve söz konusu toplumun yaşam tarzına bağlılık olarak algılanmaktaydı. Nitekim, Azerbaycan'da "Müslüman" tanımının göndermede bulunduğu yaşam tarzı Azeri toplumunu çevredeki -Ruslar, Ermeniler ve Gürcüler- toplumlardan ayıran temel faktör olmuştur. Bu anlamda, ortak yaşam tarzına ve kültürel normlara atıfta bulunan İslam, Sovyet döneminde Azeri toplumunun özdeşlik duygusunu pekiştirerek milli bilinci canlı tutmuştur.

Özet: Bu çalışma Sovyet döneminde Azerbaycan'da İslam kimliğinin ve İslamî yaşam tarzının milli bilincin sürdürülmesindeki rolü üzerine yoğunlaşmaktadır. Çalışmanın temel iddiası milli bilincin varlığını sürdürmesinde Müslüman kimliğinin ve İslami yaşam tarzının etkili olduğudur. Bu iddianın doğruluğunun kanıtlanması için belli tarihsel dönemde gerçekleşen, siyasi, toplumsal, demografik ve kültürel konularla ilgili analizler yapılmaktadır. Bu bağlamda XIX. yüzyılın ikinci çeyreğinden itibaren Rusya'nın işgali, milletleşme süreci ve arkasından yaşanan sovyetleştirme süreci Müslüman kimliği ve İslamî yaşam tarzı bağlamında ele alınmaktadır. Söz konusu dönem istatistikî kaynaklar, istihbarat raporları, propaganda kitapları, ve dönem üzerine yapılan akademik araştırmalar ışığında ele alınmış ve üzerine yorumlar yapılmıştır.

XIX. Yüzyıla kadar siyasi ve kültürel açıdan İran'ın etkisi altında bulunan şimdiki Azerbaycan bölgesi Rusya İmparatorluğu tarafından işgal edilince bölge halkı ilk kez Hıristiyan yöneticilerin yönetimi altına girmiş oldu. Bölgedeki dayanaklarını güçlendirmek için Çar yönetiminin bölgeye yoğun bir şekilde Ermeni ve Rus nüfusu göç ettirmesi sonrasında ise Azerbaycan'daki Müslüman halk kendini ilk kez Hıristiyan topluluklarla çevrelenmiş olarak buldu. Hep kendisi gibi Müslüman olan toplumun bir parçası olan Azerbaycan toplumu Ruslardan, Ermenilerden ve Gürcülerden oluşan Hıristiyan toplulukların ortasında kendi kimliğini yeniden tanımlamak durumunda kaldı.

Çar yönetiminin Azerbaycan'a göç ettirilen Ermeni ve Ruslar'a hem yasal olarak hem de uygulamalarda bir dizi ayrıcalıklar tanınması Azerbaycan Türklerinin kendilerini toplumsal, kültürel, ekonomik ve siyasi açıdan Hıristiyan baskısı altında hiss etmelerine neden olmuştur. Söz konusu baskı ve kayırmanın 1905 ve 1918 yıllarında Azerbaycan Türkleri ile Ermeniler arasında patlak veren çatışmalarda daha yoğun bir şekilde hiss edildiği görülmektedir. Yaşadığı tecrübeler Azerbaycan Türklerini dışlanma nedeni olan kimliklerini, yani Müslüman kimliğini, çevresinde bulunan gayri-muslim topluluklara karşı sahiplenmelerini sağlamıştır. XX. Yüzyılın başında toplumsal gelişimi sağlamak üzere halkın milli bilincini geliştirmeye yönelik faaliyetlerde bulunan, aynı zamanda Müslüman kimliğini de sahiplenen entelejensiya ve burjuvazi kesimi oluşmuştu. Bu süreç 1918 senesinde Azerbaycan'da, türkleşmeyi, çağdaşlaşmayı ve İslamlaşmayı simgeleyen mavi, kırmızı ve yeşil renkleri biraraya getiren bayrağı bulunan Cumhuriyetin kurulması ile sonuçlandı. Fakat cumhuriyet varlığını sadece 23 ay sürdürebildi ve 1920 yılında gerçekleşen sovyet işgali ile birlikte Azerbaycan'da milliyetçi ideoloji, onun ideologları ve sembolleri tamamen tasfiye edilerek yoğun bir şekilde sovyetleştirme politikaları uygulanmaya başladı.

Sovyet döneminde milliyetçilik ideolojik düzlemde ortadan kalkmış olsa bile, halkın homojenleşmesini sağlayan, ulus devlete mahsus bir dizi donanımlar sağlandı. Sovyet versiyonunda olsa bile, milli bir devlet aygıtı, milli sınırlar, milli tarih, milli eğitim sistemi oluşturuldu. Neticede aynı dili, aynı tarih bilincini, aynı sınırları paylaşan fakat milli bir ideolojiden yoksun olan bir millet meydana geldi. İdeolojik milliyetçiliğin tehlikeli bir girişim (perilous venture) olduğu Sovyet Azerbaycanı'nda kültüre ve yaşam tarzına dayanan kültürel bir milliyetçilik gelişti. Kültürel milliyetçilik halkın dilini, tarihini ama özellikle de yaşam tarzını savunan bir tutum olarak Sovyet Azerbaycan'ında gelişme gösterdi. Bütün bunlar, yani kültürel özellikler ve yaşam tarzı Azerbaycan toplumunu kendini çevre toplumlarından –Ruslardan, Ermenilerden ve Gürcülerden– ayırdığı başlıca niteliklerdi. Bu bağlamda Sovyet Azerbaycan'ında milliyetçi ve vatansever olmak Azerbaycan toplumunun kültürüne ve yaşam tarzına sahip çıkmak anlamına gelmekteydi. Dolayısıyla kültürel milliyetçilik çevredeki halklarla etnik sınırları sürdürme ve milli bilinci canlı tutma açısından önemli bir role sahipti.

Burada araştırma konumuz açısından üzerinde durulması gereken nokta Azerbaycan toplumunda yaşam tarzının ve kültürün önemli bir kısmının İslam ve İslamî gelenek-görenekle yakından ilişkili olduğudur. Sovyetleştirme politikaları İslam'ın entelektüel ve ideolojik boyutunu ortadan kaldırma konusunda büyük ölçüde başarılı olduysa da İslam'ın kültürel normları ve yaşam tarzı haline gelen öğeleri kendi varlığını güçlü bir şekilde sürdürmekteydi. Sovyet rejiminin başarısız olduğu nokta, yönettikleri Müslüman toplumlara alternatif bir kültür ve yaşam tarsi sunamamaları idi. Sovyet döneminde İslam'ın cami, başörtüsü vb. somut sembolleri yok edilse de kişiler arası ilişkilerde, sosyal yapıda ve aile ilişkilerinde tezahür eden öğeleri varlığını sürdürmeye devam etmekteydi. Bütün bunlar Azerbaycan toplumunun kendini çevresindeki etnik kimliklerden Ruslardan, Ermenilerden ve Gürcülerden ayırt ettiği, dolayısıyla da milli kimliğinin sınırlarını muhafaza ettiği önemli kültür öğeleri idi.

Kebin olarak bilinen dinî nikah, sünnet, cenaze ve yas merasimleri gibi yaşam döngüsü ritüelleri Azeri olmanın çok önemli göstergeleri olarak algılanmıştır. Sovyet ateist ideologlarının yaptıkları birçok araştırmalarda ve istihbarat raporlarında komünist partisi yöneticileri de dahil olmak üzere halkın söz konusu yaşam döngüsü ritüellerini milli gelenek-görenek olduğu gerekçesiyle

sürdürdükleri belirtilmekteydi. Ateistler bile, bahsedilen yaşam döngüsü ritüellerine uymadıkları taktirde milli geleneklere karşı gelmekle suçlanacakları ve toplumdan dışlanacakları endişesiyle ritüelleri yerine getirmekteydiler.

Kebin sadece Müslüman çiftler arasında kıyıldığından ve dini nikahsız yapılan evlilikler toplumda hoş karşılanmadığından Ruslar, Ermeniler ve Gürcülerle evlilik yapma oranları oldukça düşük kalmaktaydı. Erkek çocuğa sünnet yaptırmak o çocuğu Azeri toplumunun bir üyesi yapmak olarak algılandığından çocuğa sünnet yaptırmak onu diğer toplumların üyelerinden ayıran bir özelliğe kavuşturmak anlamına gelmekteydi. Ölen bir kişinin İslamî üsullere göre gömülmesi o cenazenin bir Rusa, Ermeniyeye veya Gürcüye değil, bir Azeriyeye ait olduğunun göstergesi olmaktadır. Dolayısıyla İslamî kültürden kaynaklanan yaşam döngüsü ritüelleri aynı zamanda çevredeki etnik gruplarla sınırları belirlemekte, dolayısıyla milli ve etnik bilinci canlı tutmaktaydı. Böylece İslamî kültür ve yaşam tarzı Sovyet rejiminin milli ve etnik kimliklerin ötesinde yeni bir insan ve toplum tipi oluşturmayı amaçlayan *Homo Sovieticus* projesinin de en önemli panzehirlerinden biri olmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Din Sosyolojisi, Sovyet Azerbaycan'ı, İslam, Milliyetçilik, Kimlik

INTRODUCTION

It is a well-known fact that Soviet regime was on bad terms with Islam and nationalism. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union it was observed that both the feeling of being Muslim and national consciousness managed to survive and they were still alive. This fact was interpreted by a number of foreign researchers as an expression of the *taqiyya* doctrine (the act of precautionary dissimulation) of *Shi'i* Islam.¹ But for the reason that it excludes *Sunni Muslims* who constitute about 40 percent of Azerbaijani population, this interpretation cannot be accepted as appropriate. As a matter of fact there is not any data that proves less faithfulness of *Sunni Muslims* to the lifestyle which arises from Islamic tradition in Azerbaijan. Moreover the *taqiyya* is not characteristic even of the *Shi'i* population of Azerbaijan and it is difficult to observe any cultural peculiarity that results from the *taqiyya* doctrine and differentiate them from *Sunnis*. As a matter of fact, since the conversion to *Shi'ism*, Azerbaijani *Shi'i Muslims* lived under the Iranian *Shi'i* administration, and therefore the doctrine of *taqiyya* did not strike roots as a cultural peculiarity among *Shi'i* population who did not need to resort to *taqiyya*.

Survival of both the feeling of being Muslim and national consciousness depended on the mutual relations between them and the appropriate explanation of these relations requires studying of the nationalization process in Soviet Azerbaijan and understanding of how, in the Soviet period, Azeri society connected its national identity and Islamic life style with one another. However, since a comprehensive study of these relations requires more extensive research, this paper focuses only on the role of Muslim identity and Islamic life style in the survival of national con-

¹ Tadeusz Swietochowski, "Azerbaijan: The Hidden Faces of Islam", *World Policy Journal* 19/3 (2001): 72; Chantal Lemerrier-Quelquejay, "Islam and Identity in Azerbaijan", *Central Asian Survey* 3/2 (1984): 48.

sciousness. Although a number of valuable studies have examined the creation of national identity in Azerbaijan during the Soviet period,² keeping national consciousness alive by the Islamic life style has not yet been sufficiently examined. Since the national consciousness emerged among the intelligentsia in Azerbaijan at the end of the XIXth century and the beginning of the XXth century, we need to glance at this emergence process.

1. EMERGENCE OF NATIONALISM IN AZERBAIJAN

With the Russian occupation of South Caucasus at the beginning of the XIXth century, the Muslim Turks who lived on the north bank of the river Aras became the subject of the Christian administration for the first time in their history. Following the occupation, the Russian government which wanted to constitute a reliable base in the region, resorted to the policy of emigration of his Armenian coreligionists to the region from Iran and Anatolia, and Russians from Russia.³ As a result, the percentage of Armenian population in Erivan and Nakhchivan provinces increased to 50% in 1832, while it was 20% in 1826. Following the emigration of Anatolian Armenians to those provinces by the Russian Tsar government after the Ottoman-Russian wars in 1855-1856 and 1877-1878, the majority of the population in these provinces was Armenians.⁴ Although in the early years of the occupation Russian inhabitants in Azerbaijan were the Russians who were official there, in the following years ordinary Russian emigrants became inhabitants of the Azerbaijan, too. The influx of Russian emigrants increased gradually. There were 136 settlements belong to Russians in 1912.⁵ While the Armenian emigrants were generally settled along the Anatolian border, some of Russian emigrants along the Iranian border. It was written in a report, which was sent by the central government, that "For the political reasons, settling of the Muslim population along the Iranian border must not be permitted and in accordance with the policy, Russians must settle there."⁶ So, what were the impacts of the emigration policy of the Russian Tsar government on the ethnic and religious identity of the Azeri Muslim people?

First of all, it should be noted that after the Russian occupation Azeri Muslims found themselves amid the Christian society which consisted of Armenians, Russians and Georgians. This factor played an important role in the shaping of the identity of the Azerbaijan society. The Azerbaijanis were the part of Muslim society and did not need to differentiate themselves until

² See: Audrey Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity Under Russian Rule* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1992); Tadeusz Swietochovski, *Russia and Azerbaijan. A Borderland in Transition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), Ebulfez Süleymanlı, *Milletleşme Sürecinde Azerbaycan Türkleri: Rus İşgalinden Günümüze Sosyolojik Bir Değerlendirme* (İstanbul: Ötüken, 2006).

³ See: George Bournoutian, "The Ethnic Composition and the Socio-Economic Condition of Eastern Armenia in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century", *Transcaucasia, Nationalism, and Social Change*, ed. Ronald Grigor Suny (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1983), 78-80; Kemal Beydilli, *1828-1829 Osmanlı-Rus Savaşında Doğu Anadolu'dan Rusya'ya Göçürülen Ermeniler* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1988), 368, 370; Türyan Ezizov, *Azerbaycan XX. Esrin Evvellerinde* (Baku: s.n., 1997), 37-38.

⁴ Bournoutian, "The Ethnic Composition", 78-80.

⁵ Ezizov, *Azerbaycan XX. Esrin Evvellerinde*, 37-38.

⁶ Ezizov, *Azerbaycan XX. Esrin Evvellerinde*, 38.

the Russian occupation. For the reason that, after the occupation, Azerbaijani society was separated from the context to which it belonged, it needed to redefine its identity. One of the main factors, which determined the characteristics of the new identity, was the relations with the Christian society that surrounded it.

For the reason that the Tsar Administration granted privileges to the Christian population, especially Armenian and Russian emigrants, Azerbaijani Turks felt themselves under the Christian pressure. The pressure was on the social, cultural, economical and political planes. The largest and most fertile lands, which had generally been in use of indigenous people, were assigned to the Armenian and Russian emigrants by the Tsar's administration.⁷ Furthermore, the representatives of the non-Christians of the South Caucasus population in the Duma (Parliament) were limited to 30% in 1892 which was 50% before that time.⁸ Likewise, serving Muslims as civil servants was forbidden in 1899,⁹ while not only Russians but also Armenians, who were also under Russian control, occupied important official positions due to their Christian identity.¹⁰ Accordingly the pressures influenced both ordinary people and leaders of the society. The complaints of the Azerbaijani Muslims to the government about the situation¹¹ and the memories of the intellectuals of the period manifest that the opinion of the Muslim Turks in the South Caucasus was that they were subjected to discrimination in favor of Christians and Russian-Armenian cooperation aimed against the Azerbaijan Muslim population.¹²

The tensions between Christian and Muslim population of the region manifested themselves in 1905 which known as "Armenian-Muslim war". The attitude of the Russian government during the conflict can be defined according to the letter sent to tsar II. Nicola by the governor-general Vorontsov-Dashkov. He wrote in the letter: "... Russian policy has been based from the time of Peter the Great on benevolence toward the Armenians who have rewarded us with their active aid in the course of wars."¹³

The function of the Muslim identity in the context of the relations of the Azerbaijani Turks with the Christians of the region was the mobilization of the indigenous Muslim population on the basis of the ethnic bond. So the Muslim identity played a strengthening role for the ethnic

⁷ Beydilli, *1828-1829 Osmanlı-Rus Savaşında Doğu Anadolu'dan Rusya'ya Göçürülen Ermeniler*, 373; Ezizov, *Azerbaycan XX. Esrin Evvellerinde*, 37-38; Tadeusz Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan 1905- 1920: The Shaping of National Identity in a Muslim Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 16

⁸ Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan 1905- 1920*, 15.

⁹ Hüseyin Baykara, *Azerbaycan'ın İstiklal Mücadelesi Tarihi* (İstanbul: Gençlik Publication, 1975), 114.

¹⁰ Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity Under Russian Rule*, 29-31.

¹¹ In the complaints of the Muslims at the end of the 19th century, it was claimed that in the civil service 50 to 90 percent of the positions occupied by Armenians in the South Caucasus. See: Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan 1905- 1920*, 40.

¹² See: Memmed Seid Ordubadi, *Ganlı İller: 1905-1906-cı İllerde Gafgazda Baş Veren Ermeni-Müselman Davasının Tarixi* (Baku: s.n., 1991); Mir Möhsün Nevvab, *1905-1906-cı İllerde Ermeni-Müselman Davası* (Baku: Azerbaycan Publication, 1993); Naki Keykurun, *Azerbaycan İstiklal Mücadelesinin Hatıraları 1905-1920* (Ankara: İlke Publication, 1998). It can be also observed in the numerous articles of the Azerbaijani intellectuals who immigrated to Turkey after the Soviet occupation in 1920.

¹³ Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan 1905-1920*, 43.

identity consciousness of the Azerbaijani Turks. As Swietochowski writes while interpreting the “Armenian-Muslim War”:

The ‘Tatar-Armenian War’¹⁴ generated for the first time solidarity among Muslims in a cause transcending local or sectarian loyalties, and from now on these divisions ceased to be a serious impediment to political action. The symbol of unity was still the green banner of the Prophet, but the religious appeal functioned mainly as a traditional means of mobilizing the Muslim population for an ethnic conflict.¹⁵

Azerbaijani Turks experienced, once again and more powerfully, the pressure of the Christian alliance in 1918 March. The *Bolsheviks*, who took control in Baku under the leadership of Shaumuyan, who was Armenian originated, declared that the establishment of the proletarian government depended on civil war which would provide superiority over other classes. As a result, the *Bolsheviks* attacked the Muslim Turks, and Azerbaijani Turks incurred grievous losses in the conflict. Paradoxically the ally of *Bolsheviks* was the ultranationalist Armenian *Tashnak Party*. The attitude of the *Bolsheviks*, who continuously declared their opinion against ethnic and religious discrimination, confirmed the belief of Azerbaijani Muslim Turks who believed that they should trust only the people that share their culture.

The cooperation of Russians and Armenians “urged Azerbaijani Muslims to think” as an Azerbaijani intelligent of the period writes in his memories.¹⁶ The activists were the intelligentsia and national bourgeoisie which had just emerged and felt the discrimination more clearly. By using press, school and theatre as influential means, these two groups were seeking the ways to organize their society. During this process, the main characteristics of nationalist ideology also started to be shaped. This process that began in the second half of XIXth century caused the formation of a stratum which included intellectuals and bourgeoisie, and consequently in 1918 established the first democratic republic in the Muslim world. The basic principles of this republic were Turkization, Modernization and Islamization which were symbolized by the blue, red and green colors on its flag. Certainly, the first place of Turkization in this enumeration was not coincidental and was one of the evident sign that nationalism was the baseline of the national ideology. Nevertheless, although Turkism was the dominant ideology among the intellectuals, it does not mean that this ideology was entirely internalized by the people or nationalization process was completed. Consequently, the “Muslim” identity continued to survive like a fundamental identity connection for the Azeri society. The first president of Azerbaijan People’s Republic M. Rasulzade complained this situation in the “First Muslim Congress in Russia” which held in Moscow in 1917: “If you ask any Turk his/her nationality they will say that they are Muslims. This theory is false.”¹⁷

¹⁴ For the reason that Russians called Azerbaijanis “Tatar”, the conflict is known in Russian sources as “Tatar-Armenian War” while in Azerbaijani sources “Armenian-Muslim War”.

¹⁵ Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan 1905-1920*, 42.

¹⁶ See: Keykurun, *Azerbaycan İstiklal Mücadelesinin Hatıraları 1905-1920*, 33.

¹⁷ Mehmet Emin Resulzade, “Memeleket İdare Usulü Hakkında”, *Rusya’da Birinci Müslüman Kongresi Tutanakları (Rusya-Moskova, 1-11 Mayıs, 2017)*, ed. İhsan İlgar (Ankara: Kültür Bakanlığı, 1990), 164.

Along with Soviet period, the nationalization process was interrupted and could not completely spread among the community. Consequently, although the Azerbaijani Muslims perceived themselves on the basis of their ethnic identity, the “Muslim” identity which intertwined with their lifestyle was the main factor whereby Azerbaijani Turks distinguished their culture from the surrounding – Russian, Armenian and Georgian – cultures. So, “Muslim” identity continued to survive as a fundamental identity connection for the Azeri society.

2. COMMUNIST REGIME AND CULTURAL NATIONALISM

Following the Soviet occupation in 1920, occurred the new socio-political conditions which included serious paradox concerning with the nationalization process in Azerbaijan. In the early years of the Communist regime, because of shortage of staff Soviet government collaborated with nationalist intellectuals and they were represented in the communist government. Nevertheless, after several years Moscow perceived them as a threat and decided to purge all nationalist intellectuals. Along with the massive purge of the intelligentsia and abolition of nationalist symbols and the slogans that they used, Turkish nationalism disappeared as an ideology in Azerbaijan. Consequently, politico-ideological nationalism and its slogans were deprived of the chance of keeping the national consciousness alive. For the reason that the Communist regime severely reacted to any form of nationalism, since the end of thirties, the nationalist ideology was obliged to be completely withdrawn from the scene.

In the ensuing years all equipments, however it was in Soviet version, like the “national government apparatus”, “national borders” and “national history” were provided by Moscow for Azerbaijan. Therefore, the impact of modern institutions, especially the education system shaped a society that shared the same language, same history consciousness and same national boundaries. Consequently, a society, which possessed the characteristics of a nation deprived of a national ideology, came into existence. In Soviet Azerbaijan, where ideological nationalism was a perilous venture, cultural nationalism, in other words nationalism based on culture and life style (not on ideology), became common attitude. As a matter of fact, the specific character of culture and life style was a main factor whereby the Azeri society could differentiate itself from the surrounding – Russian, Armenian and Georgian – societies. In this context, cultural nationalism enabled to maintain national-ethnic boundaries with surrounding societies and kept the national consciousness alive. Consequently, to be a nationalist in the Soviet Azerbaijan was perceived as a devotion to the Azerbaijani society’s life-style and culture which was most important factor that differentiated it from surrounding – Russian, Armenian and Georgian – societies.

The important point here is that the significant parts of the life-style and culture in Azerbaijani society were closely connected to Islam and Islamic traditions. One of the important reasons for the failure of Soviet ideologists was that they could not offer an alternative culture and life style to the Muslim societies whom they controlled. Islam, which refers to common lifestyle and cultural norms, functioned like an antidote to *Homo Sovieticus* project which aimed to shape an identity beyond the national identities. Consequently, in Azerbaijan where Soviet regime was not established by social dynamics, communism could not become a world view, a form of perceiving and evaluating the world and especially a life style. Although along with the collapse of

the Soviet Union communism gained strength in the field of politics in former North Soviet countries, it has disappeared in Azerbaijan as a political-ideological movement. The main reason of this situation is that the Soviet system was perceived in Azerbaijan as the rules which provided the system to work and as the necessary regulations to be obeyed. Consequently, for Azerbaijani people Soviet system was just a form of controlling and being controlled. As Olivier Roy says: "What was stamped on the South was neither communism nor socialism but Sovietism: Sovietism is a form, an apparatus, a technique of power and an organization of the social..."¹⁸

Despite the fact that the communist regime succeeded in minimizing Islamic intellectual and ideological dimensions, it could not erode its elements that had become a cultural norm and life-style. The erosion of the Islamic life style appeared generally in the concrete material embodiments of religious symbols. For example, in the first quarter of XX. century, women were obliged to take off their veil (chadra) which had been perceived as a national label that distinguished Azeri women from surrounding societies' women until the Soviet regime. Nonetheless, special clothes and some other elements continued to be national labels. The speech of a village nobleman addressing village women in 1929 shows how religious and national-ethnic values interplaced with each other. Therefore, to abandon religious values also meant to abandon national-ethnic identity. Nobleman in question, called out to his woman fellow-villagers: "Today they [communists] oblige you to take off your veils, then they will oblige you to wear European clothes and you will not look like a Turkic woman."¹⁹

Despite the fact that the communist regime succeeded in removing concrete embodiments of Islamic life style like veil and mosque, it could not damage the components which appeared generally in inter-personal relations, social structure and domestic relations. These components possessed the characteristics which included national specificity more than any other components and provided the Azeri society to keep its national boundaries which separated it from surrounding – Russian, Armenian and Georgian – societies. One of the Azeri researchers in his book published in 1983 mentioned the inclusion of religious components into national identity and the keeping this situation both religious and national consciousness alive. He writes:

Resulting from mistaken public opinion, religious rituals become "national" and one of the components of national-moral life, so condition for the surviving of the combination of religiousness and feeling of nationalism arise... Consequently, for the successful struggle against religious remnants and nationalist appearances in the contemporary situation, it is necessary to determine mutual relations between national custom and religious rituals and to differentiate them.²⁰

To combine Islamic life style with nationalism was not common only among ordinary people, but among atheists, too. During the first decades of the Communist regime all Islamic elements of cultural values were severely criticized. S. Agamalioglu who was one of the severe

¹⁸ Olivier Roy, *The New Central Asia: the Creation of Nations* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), XV.

¹⁹ "Snimat Chadru!", *Bakinskiy Rabochiy* (newspaper), 16 January 1929.

²⁰ Magsud Celilov, *Meişet, En'ene ve Ateist Terbiye* (Baku: s.n., 1983), 74-75.

atheists of the first Soviet generation criticized the concept of *namus*²¹ (honour) in his book entitled *Namus* which was one of the important atheist works of the period. He claimed that *namus* is one of the main factors that prevents the progression of Muslim societies. In the same way, in 1928, the famous Azeri writer Jafar Jabbarli in his play entitled *Sevil* wrote in the name of *Sevil*, who symbolized the free Soviet woman, that “*namus* was the biggest enemy of women.”²² But in the middle of sixties another severe atheist, in his anti-religious propagandist book blamed a sufi order for defiling the *namus* of its female members.²³ Similarly, the sentence “*namus* is the biggest enemy of women” did not exist in the theatre and cinema version of *Sevil* play.²⁴ The reason was that the norms and values, especially *namus* and *abır-haya* (shame), which were connected with Islamic values, functioned as the national-ethnic boundaries with surrounding – Russian, Armenian and Georgian – societies and emphasized the peculiarities of the Azerbaijani society. In this context, women were important label of both national and religious identity.²⁵ In addition to this, there were other important lifestyle elements that had Islamic roots which sustained national consciousness.

3. ISLAMIC LIFE STYLE AND NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The main factor that determined the characteristics of relations of the Azerbaijanis with surrounding nations was Islamic life style. According to 1970 official statistics, the percentage of the ethnically mixed marriages were 20.6% in Kazakistan, 10.9% in Uzbekistan, 12.2% in Turkmenistan, 13.2% in Tajikistan, and 14.9% in Kirgizistan, it was 7.8% in Azerbaijan.²⁶ If we take into consideration that marriages of Russians with Armenians are also included to this number it will be clear that Muslim and non-Muslim marriage percentage was lower than 7.8%. As a matter of fact Soviet ethnographer Kozlov also writes that the marriages between Azerbaijanis and Armenians were “particularly rare”.²⁷ The fact that the percentage of mixed marriages was 2% in rural areas, where Russian settlers were very few, and was 12.8% in urban areas²⁸, where Russians and Armenians lived more compact means that the majority of mixed marriages in urban areas were

²¹ The term of *Namus* is related to the sexual honors of women in Azeri society. The woman who has *Namus* is one who has not had any kind of premarital and illegitimate relationships that is associated to sexuality.

²² See: Farideh Heyat, *Azeri Women in Transition: Women in Soviet and post-Soviet Azerbaijan* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 102.

²³ Megsed Settarov, *Sosializm Guruculuğu Dövründe Azərbaycan Xalqında Ateizm Dünyagörüşünün Formalaşması* (Baku: Azərbaycan SSR Elmlər Akademiyası Publication, 1964), 105.

²⁴ Heyat, *Azeri Women in Transition*, 102.

²⁵ See: Nayereh Tohidi, “Guardians of the Nation”: Women, Islam, and the Soviet Legacy of Modernization in Azerbaijan”, *Women in Muslim Societies*, ed. Herbert L. Bodman and Nayereh Tohidi (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 157; Heyat, *Azeri Women in Transition*, 160.

²⁶ Viktor Kozlov, *The Peoples of the Soviet Union*, trans. Pauline Tiffen (London: Indiana University Press, 1988), 203.

²⁷ Kozlov, *The Peoples of the Soviet Union*, 200.

²⁸ Kozlov, *The Peoples of the Soviet Union*, 203.

between Russians and Armenians. Although, according to the statistics of 1979, in all Soviet republics (except Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) the percentage of mixed marriages increased, in Azerbaijan it decreased and receded to 7.6%.²⁹

Due to the patrilineal character of Azerbaijani society that based on Islamic roots, marriages of Azeri women with Russians and Armenians were rare. For the reason that children automatically were characterized according to the identity of father in Azerbaijani society, marriages with non-Muslim men were disapproved by the society and were perceived as a loss of membership of society.³⁰ As a matter of fact, one of the important conditions of *halal* (permitted by *sharia*) marriage was *kebin* (Islamic marriage) which is commitment only for Muslim pairs. Soviet generation regarded *kebin* as a label of Azeri nation. As Seyyid Miriř Habibov who was *akhund*³¹ of Sabirabad, a district of Azerbaijan, made a statement: "Since the religious marriage is not valid in the Soviets, it (*kebin*) is only the indicator of conjoint state of belonging to Islam and Azerbaijani people."³²

In the Soviet Azerbaijan along with *kebin*, other life-cycle rituals, which had Islamic roots and at the same time were the expression of cultural nationalism, were the more insistent elements of lifestyle. An Azerbaijani Soviet researcher needs to discuss differences between religious and national customs in a special chapter in his book which propagandizes atheistic views.³³ Indeed, a lot of elements of the life-style were connected with Islamic traditions and maintained through social dynamics.

One of the important life-cycle rituals for Azerbaijan society was male circumcision. The campaign against circumcision occupied a small space even in the books of Azeri atheist propagandists. As a Soviet researcher states: "Circumcision is perceived as an indication of belonging to Azerbaijani people and being Muslim."³⁴ As a matter of fact, in colloquial language in Azerbaijan the synonym of the phrase of "to circumcise child" is "to make child Muslim" and both of them imply "to make child a member of society." In reality, Soviet generation in Azerbaijan perceives circumcision as entering to the membership of society by gaining one of the main characteristics which distinguish itself from the surrounding societies, rather than as worship.

Another important life-cycle ritual for Azerbaijanis is funeral rituals. In the late years of the Soviets, the representative of Azerbaijan in the Council of Religious Affairs in Moscow confessed failure of the regime relevant to funeral rituals: "Unfortunately the funeral rituals are under the initiative of mullas...we could have not formed any funeral ritual for advising it to people."³⁵ However some advices of the representative about the funeral rituals, which fulfilled only in the official funerals, clarify the failure of the regime. He recommends burying the deceased

²⁹ Kozlov, *The Peoples of the Soviet Union*, 203.

³⁰ Heyat, *Azeri Women in Transition*, 162.

³¹ *Akhund* is a spiritual rank in Shi'i Islam and means the head of regional mullas

³² Abdulla Ehedov, *Azerbaycan'da Din ve Dini Tesisatlar* (Baku: Azerbaycan Devlet Publication, 1991), 112.

³³ See: Celilov, *Meiřet, En'ene ve Ateist Terbiye*, 74-81.

³⁴ Ehedov, *Azerbaycan'da Din*, 115.

³⁵ Ehedov, *Azerbaycan'da Din*, 134.

dressed instead of the shroud (*kafan*) and performing sad song, making speeches about the deceased instead of *mulla*'s reciting the Qurʾān³⁶ All of these rituals that are recommended are known in Azerbaijan as Russian, Armenian and Georgian funeral rituals. Whereas the funeral rituals that fulfilled by Azerbaijani Muslims were one of the main lifestyle components that served society to maintain its specificity amid Christian nations. Therefore, “the religious funerals which are supposed the custom of Azerbaijani people are fulfilled by nonreligious people, too”³⁷ as the abovementioned representative writes. The funerals were not only one of the elements of specific Azeri life-style, but also the places where the knowledge about life-style in question was reproduced by *mullas* who were indispensable to funeral rituals. Religious funeral rituals, which include the meetings in the third, seventh, fortieth days and every Thursday until the fortieth day of a deceased, are also the places which bring the people together in the homes of a deceased instead of mosques which were under the control of the KGB³⁸ in the Soviet period. As an Azerbaijani Soviet researcher writes: “*Mullas* use the funeral rituals as a means of religious propaganda out of mosques. It is talked about the history of Islam there, and religious customs are introduced as the components of national culture.”³⁹ Therefore funeral rituals were one the main targets of atheist propagandists and of Communist Party.⁴⁰ In 1971, in an announcement by the Central Committee of Azerbaijan Communist Party, obedience to the traditional funeral rituals of the intellectuals, the members of the Communist Party and even of statesmen was criticized.⁴¹

In an Azerbaijan related report which was written by the inspector of Council of Religious Affairs in Moscow was declared that although neglect of prayers like *namāz* (daily prayers) was not condemned, to neglect circumcision of males or not performing funeral ceremonies according to Islamic traditions were condemned and people could be excluded from society for not obeying these rules. The inspector explains the obedience of Communist Party members to the life-cycle rituals with social exclusion in question.⁴²

Even periodical Islamic worships have been sometimes justified as “customs of people” in Azerbaijan. In 1982, in the eve of *Qurban Bayramı* (The Muslim Festival of Sacrifice- ‘*Id al-Aḏḩā*) the ritual was introduced in an official newspaper as a holiday of cattle breeders in ancient times which was some time later combined with Islamic elements, and then it was celebrated as a “custom of people” (political circumstances required to use “custom of people” instead of “national custom”) which had already lost its religious content.⁴³

³⁶ Ehedov, *Azerbaycan'da Din*, 135-136.

³⁷ Ehedov, *Azerbaycan'da Din*, 133.

³⁸ KGB or Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti translated in English as Committee for State Security, was the main security agency of the Soviet Union.

³⁹ Ehedov, *Azerbaycan'da Din*, 134.

⁴⁰ See: Megsed Settarov, *İslam Dini Gahıgları Haggında* (Baku: Azerbaycan SSR Elmler Akademiyası Publication, 1967), 83-85; Celilov, *Meişet, En'ene ve Ateist Terbiye*, 45.

⁴¹ See: Şefahet Hesenov, *Kendde Ateist İş* (Baku: Azerbaycan Devlet Publication, 1973), 32-33.

⁴² Yaacov Ro'i, *Islam in the Soviet Union, From the Second World War to Gorbachev* (London: Hurst & Company, 2000), 509.

⁴³ “Prazdnık doljen prinosit radost”, *İzvestiya* (newspaper), 26 August 1982.

CONCLUSION

On account of the pressures of the Soviet regime, a nationalism based on ideological ground could not develop in Azerbaijan and for this reason the society expressed its national-ethnic difference by embracing the specificities that existed in its life style.

Thus, the connection between the life-style and the national-ethnic identity was made and the life style became an explanandum of the national-ethnic identity. For the reason that the specificities in the lifestyle, in particular because of the elements, which differentiate the Azerbaijanis from their neighbors – Russians, Armenians and Georgians –, had arisen from the Islamic values, Islam did not remain only as a lifestyle, it also played an important role in preserving ethnic boundaries. Consequently, the Islamic elements of the life style that helped to conserve peculiarities of the Azerbaijani Turks sustained national consciousness. Because being Muslim in Soviet Azerbaijan was perceived as being a member of Azeri society and as a devotion to life style of this society. So the Islamic elements of the lifestyle that helped to conserve the peculiarities of the Azerbaijani Turks were protected even by “real” communists. In this sense, Islam, which refers to common lifestyle and cultural norms, functioned like an antidote to *Homo Sovieticus* project which aimed to shape an identity beyond the national identities, and kept the national consciousness alive by firming the sameness sense of society in Soviet Azerbaijan. Accordingly, the national consciousness got the chance for surviving through the lifestyle which was the only way in the Soviet conditions.

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