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AZARBAIJAN VI. POPULATION AND ITS OCCUPATIONS AND CULTURE

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vi. Population and its Occupations and Culture

Population. Azarbaijan, the main Turkic-speaking area and one of the richest and most densely populated regions of Iran, presents a picture of ethnic distinctiveness and homogeneity that is perhaps misleading. Not only are there various linguistic, religious, and tribal minority groups, but Azarbaijanis themselves have settled widely outside the region.

The great majority of the people of Azarbaijan are native speakers of the language known as Azarbaijani Turkish or Azeri (q.v.). Kurdish speakers are mainly found in the border districts of western Azarbaijan. Iranian Tāti (Tati) dialects are still spoken in small communities south of Jolfā, east of Mīāna, and in Qaradāḡ (see Azarbaijan vii and Bazin, 1980, II, p. 85 for references to studies by Henning, Yarshater, and Kārang).

Tribalism is no longer of great social relevance for most Azarbaijanis, but most have a recent history of tribal allegiances, whether Turkish or Kurdish. The main Turkish tribal groups that can still be identified are the Šāhsevans of

Meškīn and Ardabīl, the Afšārs of Urmia and Ṣāʾīn Qaḷʿa, and the Bayāt and others of Mākū. Kurdish tribal groups (from north to south along the frontier) include the Ḥaydarānlū, Mīlān, Šakāk, Herkī, Begzāda, Zarza, Māmāš, Pīrān, Mangūr, and Dehbokrī.

Tribal groups in this region were essentially political groups, bearing the names of dominant chiefly sections. The chiefs were not necessarily linked culturally or genealogically with the "commoners," who frequently changed allegiances, although a long association with one tribe often led to the adoption of the chiefs' language and culture and possibly the invention of a common pedigree. Whole tribes have sometimes changed identity, particularly when relocated as a linguistic or religious minority in a new area. Thus, several Turkish-speaking groups are known to have more or less recent Kurdish origins, for example the Donbolī of Ḵoy, the Lek of Salmās, the Šaqāqī and related tribes of Mīāna and Ḵalḵāl, most of the tribes of Qaradāḡ, and some of the Šāhsevan. The Korasūnnī of Dowl and Salmās appear to be mixed, while some of the Ḵalḵāl groups are reported to speak Kurdish at home. The Qarapapaḵ and Šamsaldīnlū of Soldūz, on the other hand, are of Turkish origins but nearly assimilated to Kurdish language and culture. The Čārdowlī of Ṣāʾīn Qaḷʿa finally, are Turkicized Lors, immigrant from Fārs (see Oberling, 1964a and 1964b; Tapper, 1974 and 1983).

Almost all Turkish-speaking Azarbaijanis are Shiʿite Muslims, like the large majority of Iranians. Kurdish speakers are mainly Sunni, as are the few Ṭāleši villages northeast of Ardabīl, and some at least of the Turkicized Kurds of Ḵalḵāl and the Kurdicized Turks of Soldūz. There are some Ahl-e Ḥaqq or ʿAlī-Elāhī villages, notably Īlḵčī south of Mount Sahand (Sāʿedī, 1964), the Qara Qoyunlū of Mākū (Oberling, 1964a, p. 62) and some Qaradāḡi (Melikoff, 1975). Christian minorities, Armenian, and Assyrian/Chaldean, live west of Lake Urmia and near Delmān.

Azarbaijanis have emigrated and resettled in large numbers, some in Baku and Istanbul, but mainly in Tehran, Khorasan, Qom, and other Iranian cities and provinces; wherever they have settled they have become prominent not only among urban and industrial working classes but also in commercial, administrative, political, religious, and intellectual circles. Azarbaijani Turkish, moreover, is spoken widely in provinces to the south and east stretching to the vicinities of Hamadān and Tehran, while both the official language of Soviet Azarbaijan and the Turkish spoken in eastern Anatolia are very close to the Azarbaijani of Iran.

Some writers are of the opinion that the Turkicization of Azarbaijan has been relatively superficial, citing as evidence both the persistence of Tāti dialects and the "bastardization" of the Turkish language, notably the loss of vowel harmony characteristic of Tabrīzi speech (Minorsky in *EI*[2] I, p. 191).

Nonetheless Azarbaijanis, despite their insistence on their Iranian identity, generally call themselves, and are called, "Türk," by contrast with "Kürt" (speakers of Kurdish), and "Fārs/Pārs" (Persian-speakers), the major ethnic groups with whom they have most contact. Otherwise, opposed to various Christian groups or the Soviets they are "Musulman;" as distinct from the Sunni Turks of Anatolia, they are firmly Shiʿite, an identity which more than anything else has kept them loyal to Iran. Within the region, people claim a variety of local and tribal identities, according to context. One of these is "Tat (Tāt)," a term with two main meanings: the first, synonymous with "Tājīk," "non-Turkish speaker," is used by Turkish groups inside and outside Azarbaijan and conforms with both the linguistic term for the dialects mentioned above, and the ethnonym "Tājīk" prevalent in Afghanistan and Tajikistan. The second meaning of Tat, peculiar to Azarbaijan, designates the Turkish-speaking, settled, non-tribal population by contrast with nomadic tribal groups, especially the Šāhsevan, from whom they otherwise differ little in language, religion or, culture (see Tapper, 1979; Sāʿedī, 1965). In fact, although no systematic comparison of regional Azarbaijani Turkish dialects has been published, there is evidence that in some respects, for example the vowel harmony, the nomad Šāhsevan speak a "purer" Turkish than their settled Tat neighbors.

Iranian society has been characterized for centuries by a cleavage between the Turks (dominant but "uncouth" tribes, mainly from Azarbaijan) and the Persians (subordinate but "civilized" townspeople and peasants of the central provinces). This ethnic division is marked by a number of stereotypes on both sides. Turks, for example, are often seen by Persians as slow and dull, while their martial, commercial, and organizational capacities are recognized. Iran was politically dominated by Turkish rulers since medieval times, with Azarbaijan, on the frontiers of the Ottoman and later the Russian empires, economically and politically the most important province outside the capital. The Persians, however, gained the upper hand by the end of the nineteenth century. Azarbaijanis were prominent in the Tobacco Protest of 1908, the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-11, and ensuing political struggles and movements, but under the Pahlavi Shahs Azarbaijan as a whole lost its

primacy, while central regions were favored, Persian language and culture were strongly promoted, and publication in Turkish (except for poetry and folk literature) was banned. Nonetheless, despite various separatist movements in this century, some fostered by Turkey or the Soviet Union, Azarbaijanis have remained strongly committed to Iran. Having played a significant role during the 1978-79 Revolution the Azarbaijanis were granted some cultural freedom afterward, but greater autonomy sought by some among them for the region and minorities have been denied.

Tabrīz, by far the largest city of Azarbaijan, was for long the second city of Iran. As the major commercial entrepôt on the main routes from Europe through Turkey and Russia, and also the seat of the Heir Apparent in Qajar times, Tabrīz developed a substantial middle class of merchants, clerics and intellectuals. Tabrīzis acquired a reputation for liberal nationalism, through active involvement in the Tobacco Protest, the Constitutional Revolution, and Ḵīābānī's Āzādestān movement. Later, however, suffering from the curtailment of transit trade through and from Russia and from changes under the Pahlavis, Tabrīz declined. Restored to favor somewhat during the 1970s, Tabrīz was by 1980 the fourth largest city with a population of some 600,000. Capital of western Azarbaijan is Urmia: (Reżāʾīya), with about 170,000 people, the center of the Afšār tribe, located near the Kurdish borderlands and noted too for the nearby Christian minority. In the northeast Ardabīl (population 150,000) owes its importance originally to the presence of the Safavid shrines but also to its location as trading entrepôt between western Iran, the Caspian, and Russia. Somewhat smaller is the old Mongol capital, Marāḡa, in the west. Other towns of any size are local market centers or staging points along the main routes.

Azarbaijan has long been noted as Iran's "breadbasket," as well as a major source of tax revenue and military recruits. Nearly two thirds of the population of about five million (both provinces) are still rural. It is a region of high mountains, fertile valleys, and broad rolling upland plains; of extensive pastures and farmlands, favored with adequate rainfall if cold winters. Villages (*känd*, denoting the houses and the lands) are sometimes very large, with thousands rather than hundreds of inhabitants. They grow a variety of crops; an abundance of wheat, but also barley, cotton, fruit, vegetables, and nuts; the honey produced in the neighborhood of Mount Sabalān is nationally renowned. Although some areas in the west and north are wooded, considerable amounts of timber are imported from the Caspian forests

through Ardabīl.

Before the Land Reform of Moḥammad Reżā Shah in 1963, much of the land in Azarbaijan was owned by absentee landlords, including tribal chiefs and city-dwelling clerics, merchants, officials, and professionals. These owned shares in one or several villages; often large landed proprietors owned scores of villages. Small landowners and peasant proprietors were relatively rare except in Urmia and Qaradāḡ. *Awqāf* (pious endowments) were uncommon except near Ardabīl, and there was little *kāleṣa* (state land) except in certain frontier districts (Lambton, 1953).

Peasant families in a village formed two classes, the contracted, crop-sharing cultivators (*jüṭčī*) and the landless laborers and others collectively known as *ḵošnešīn*, in about equal proportions. Landlords collected around a quarter of the crop, and extracted in addition a variety of customary dues, rarely giving in return loans, protection, and patronage. The peasants' shares in the crops were barely sufficient for subsistence, and had to be supplemented through livestock-rearing and the production of woven goods for sale. The general picture was one of great incomes accruing to the wealthier landowners, while peasants possessed a capacity for survival though in extreme poverty and debt. The village headman was either elected by the cultivators, or chosen from among them by the landowner; sometimes two different men were appointed to balance the factions into which villages were very commonly split. The headman was often assisted by the body of village elders (the *aq-saqal*s). Other officials were elected or appointed on a short-term basis, such as the *mīrāb* who supervised the distribution of irrigation water and negotiated with other villages sharing the same source.

Lambton refers to the Soviet-inspired separatist Ferqa-ye Demokrāt (Democratic Party) which held sway in Azarbaijan in 1946, and under whom the lands were expropriated, and writes that, after the fall of the Democrat government, "there was, broadly speaking, a reversion to the *status quo ante* in matters of land tenure and rural organization. The position of the landlords in Azarbaijan was, nevertheless, considerably shaken by this episode" (1969, p. 37).

Until recently, communications were poor, mountain ranges presented formidable barriers to intercourse, and villages were isolated and inward-looking. Houses clustered together, often within a village wall which, though now crumbling, once gave some protection against nomad raiders. This

danger ceased in the 1920s, but the narrow alleys, another defense against mounted raiders, are still present-day village features. Most marriages are still contracted within the village. However, the years since the 1920s have on several occasions brought close contact with the neighboring Soviet regime and socialist ideas with some salutary effects. Lambton's remarks on Ardabīl are more widely valid: "The peasants were more aware of the outside world than in many other districts and less amenable to pressure by landlords and others" (1969, p. 127).

Occupations and culture. With the establishment of comparative security and government control, communications improved, mobility increased, and villages became less isolated. Economic exchanges have proliferated along new all-weather roads; new market-centers have grown up; and every village has acquired at least one store, besides schools and other government sponsored services and administrative arrangements. Most important have been measures like the Land Reform, which brought considerable change to the structure of society in Azarbaijan. The reform was indeed first implemented in Azarbaijan, in Marāḡa and surrounding districts, and Ardabīl and Ahar were also among the first districts in the country to be affected. Other large-scale developments under the Pahlavi regime involved irrigation schemes at half a dozen sites in the region.

Such schemes, as well as increasingly mechanized dry-farming, have now decisively reduced the grazing available to livestock, both in the plains and on the lower reaches of the mountain pastures. Pastoralism continues, however, as the climate and geography of much of Azarbaijan are even better suited to this form of production than to cultivation. The mountain meadows of Sabalān and Sahand, Qaradāḡ and the Kurdish frontier districts, and the rich winter pastures of Moḡān in particular, long ago attracted the first Turkish and Mongol nomad invaders. Most livestock raising is now done by settled or semi-settled villagers. The only remaining major nomadic group are the Šāhsevan of Moḡān, while in other districts smaller nomadic and semi-nomadic groups continue to migrate between winter and summer quarters. Nowadays, in much of the region Šāhsevan is synonymous with tented nomad, much as Kurd once was.

Livestock-rearing, by nomads or others, has always been geared to regional and national marketing systems, but now, with vastly improved communications and increased demand, this integration is vital to both the pastoralists and the national economy. Though the producers sometimes take

their own livestock for sale to Tabrīz or even Tehran, city-based cheese-makers, wool merchants, and livestock dealers visit the camps at various points in the year, buying up large quantities of pastoral produce to meet an insatiable urban demand. During the 1960s, the tribal chiefs, who had usually been among the large landowners, lost both this economic base and their official government appointments, and turned more to livestock-raising, which they developed on a commercial scale.

The categories Šāhsevan and Tāt, mentioned above, are locally held to imply a whole complex of cultural differences beyond the basic nomad/settled and pastoral/agricultural distinctions. For example, the Šāhsevan claim they lead by comparison with Tāt a cleaner, healthier, and more profitable way of life, maintain stricter moral standards, achieve a more direct approach to God, and are generally braver and more generous in nature. Tāt of course claim most of these qualities as their own, but lay special emphasis on supposed village characteristics such as more varied diet, more orthodox religious practices, and more law-abiding habits. These attitudes are greatly fostered by mutual ignorance. Šāhsevan and Tāt have little social interaction, even when linked by marriage (nomads give twenty percent of their daughters to villagers, and receive ten percent of their wives from them).

To the observer there are in fact only small differences between nomad and villager in dialect, religious beliefs and practices, oral literature, and customs such as lifecycle ceremonies. In many cases differences are less than those between districts. (The foregoing descriptions of village agriculture and pastoralism are drawn from northeast Azarbaijan but apply very broadly to the rest of the region.)

Azarbaijan is a region of cultural variation and contrast, differences between districts and between city, town, and countryside being greater than those between the region as a whole and other parts of Iran. Some distinctive features arise from Azarbaijan's combining elements from Central Asia and the Middle East, as shown in the meeting not only of Turkish with Iranian languages but of the Bactrian camel with the one-humped dromedary, which are here crossed to produce the larger and much prized hybrid (Tapper, 1985); or of the round, felt-covered *alačïḡ* of the Šāhsevan and Qaradāḡ nomads (see Andrews, 1978) with the rectangular black tent of the Kurds and others. Otherwise, in conformity with the climate, the traditional village house is a single-story mud-brick building set in a courtyard and with a south-facing, pillared verandah. Bread, whether oven or griddle-baked, is basic in the diet of

rural people at least, while the distinctive cuisine includes a wide variety of *āš* and *šorbā* dishes. Several districts of Azarbaijan have produced some of the varieties of Persian carpet best known in the West, especially Ardabīl, Herīs, Qaradāḡ, Tabrīz, and the Kurdish areas. Recently the subtle flat-weaves of the Šāhsevan nomads have acquired a considerable reputation.

In rural areas large patriarchal households are preferred, though not often achieved in practice. It is uncommon for married sons to leave their father's house, and even brothers often continue in a cooperative household for some time after their parents' deaths. In tribal contexts and in families of religious or other notable descent, lineal pedigrees are important, but usually both sides of the family are balanced in day-to-day life, though the maternal uncle (*dāʾī*) is a very different relation from a paternal one (*ʿamū*). If there is a particular theme in Azarbaijani kinship relations it is one of respect to age and seniority, to the head of household and to an older brother.

In all classes, especially close-knit village and tribal communities, marriage with cousins is common, but boys marry maternal cousins as frequently as paternal. Azarbaijani women have a reputation in the rest of the country for beauty and for being good cooks and household managers; locally they are expected to be strong, capable of running a home in the absence of their husband, and of organizing public activities (see M.-J. DelVecchio Good on urban women of Marāḡa, and N. Tapper on Šāhsevan nomad women, in Beck and Keddie, 1978).

Beyond kinship and marriage, individuals are linked in a variety of ties of personal friendship and pseudo-kinship, for example *siqäqardašlïx* (akin to blood-brotherhood) or the more purpose-based *qonaḡlïq* contact). A third kind of relation, *kirvälik*, may approach the disinterested amity ideal of both friendship and kinship, though it often has distinctly political overtones. The *kirvä*'s role is to hold a small boy when he is being circumcised, but socially he approximates the godfather in many Christian societies. The boy's father will seek an influential friend for the purpose, thereby inaugurating a lifelong tie of patronage and support. The range of social relationships is summed up explicitly in the concept of *xeyr-ü-šärr* (lit. good and evil), denoting relations of reciprocal attendance at lifecycle feasts and also the personal networks so formed. "My *xeyr-ü-šärr*" means all those whose ceremonies I attend and who attend mine.

Though the major themes in Azarbaijani life-cycle ceremonies are similar to

those elsewhere in Iran, there are variations in detail that distinguish districts and classes of society. The main occasions for joyful celebration and gatherings of large numbers of people are parties (*toy*) at circumcisions and weddings, when the host arranges feasting, music, dancing, and games for days on end, but with contributions made by all *xeyr-ü-šärr* guests. *Xeyr-ü-šärr* also contribute to the expenses of funeral feasts and the journeys of pilgrims to Mecca. In effect, *xeyr-ü-šärr* networks constitute a form of rotating credit association (see Tapper, 1979, pp. 150-52).

Religious practices among Azarbaijanis are not significantly different from those of other Iranian Shiʿites, though they are reputed to be more than usually pious. The religious classes of the major cities of the region exercise considerable control over belief and practice throughout the countryside. In some towns and villages the Moḥarram passion plays have been regularly performed (see Good, 1984 on Marāḡa); otherwise, dramatic and highly emotional *rawżaḵᵛānī* are put on for special occasions or in fulfillment of vows, but especially during the ten days of Moḥarram together with processions and dirges (*dästä/dasta*, *nowhä/nawḥa*, *märsiä/marṯīa*) (see Tapper, 1979, pp. 159-63; Lassy, 1916). Other religious occasions are Ramażān and the concluding feast of *fitr-bayramï*; the feast of sacrifice (*qorban-bayramï*), and in some places the festival of *ʿOmar-bayramï*; when an effigy of the Caliph ʿOmar is burned (Sāʿedī, 1965, p. 152). As in the rest of Iran, Nowrūz is a major festival, preceded on the Wednesdays of the last month by special ceremonies, including fire-jumping. Shrines of varying importance are common in town and countryside, from Shaikh Ṣafī's tomb at Ardabīl to wayside "rooms" (*ojaḡ*) and praying trees (*pir*). Women especially make pilgrimages to these, seeking cures, remedies and intercessions. Mullahs, wandering sayyeds, and dervishes may act as prayer-writers (*doʿayazan*), providing more or less "unorthodox" cures, protections, and exorcisms. Modern cosmopolitan medicine, with government personnel, hospitals and health centers, has during the present century all but driven underground the traditional *ḥakīm*s and other specialists in *torkidava* (herbal and humoral medicine, see B. Good, 1981). In the realm of popular culture, Azarbaijan is known for distinctive dresses, music, dances, and oral literature. One particular tradition associated with Azarbaijan, as well as neighboring areas of the Caucasus and Anatolia, is that of the *āšeq*, wandering minstrels with a wide and well-loved repertoire of songs, ballads, and folk epics.

In the twentieth century, Azarbaijan, like other parts of Iran, has undergone

enormous social changes. In particular there has been a sharpening of distinctions of wealth and status, as well as a growing divergence between those who favor more traditional attitudes and ways of life, with roots in the countryside, religion, and the bazaar, and those who seek a more cosmopolitan "modernity," through secular education, the professions, the civil service, and government-sponsored industry and commerce. (See B and M.-J. DelVecchio Good, 1984).

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