Primordialism, Perennialism, Modernism and Ethno-Symbolism: The Perception of Homeland and Identity Among Azerbaijani Lezgis

Abstract

The state of ethnic self-perception amongst Lezgis, one of Azerbaijan's largest ethnic minorities, has been in constant realignment in the post-Soviet period, as borders both physical and cultural have been built up or brought down, facilitating a multifaceted perspective of members of the same ethnic community. In the contemporary context, relative ethnic isolation of portions of the Lezgi population has resulted in perceived characteristics becoming the focal point for individuals' ethnic identities, with theories such as primordialism, perennialism, ethno-symbolism and modernism becoming the primary explanatory features for where these hypothetical lines may be drawn. The research on this case study has sought to see what differences in perceptions between Lezgi communities from different districts of Azerbaijan there are and to what degree it affects their ethno-political identity. Research through semi-structured interviews has analyzed ethnic self-narratives of individuals from Azerbaijani regions of Qusar, Quba, Gabala, Ismayilli, Sheki and other districts. Findings have considered the main camps of ethno-nationalist identity and how it may affect the political dynamics of the broader Azerbaijani Lezgi community. On the basis of these findings, we have also sought to identify the theoretical void that renders the failure to inform different ethnic self-perceptions.

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Despite contemporary discussions of the liberal political theories being heavily invested in themes of multiculturalism (see: Kymlicka 1995; Kymlicka 2002; Modood 2007), cosmopolitan universalism (see: McCarthy 2002; Habermas 2000), constitutional patriotism (see: Calhoun 2002) and postnational future (see: Habermas 1998; Ferry 2005), a "thick" culture of *ethos* such as language, territory, traditions and collective memory still continue to run the loyalties amongst the masses well into the twenty-first century (see: Guibernau 2011; Seymour 2011). Given the continuing power of ethnicity, Anthony Smith remarks, "It would be folly to predict an early supersession of nationalism and an imminent transcendence of the nation" (Smith 1995, 160). Hence, ethno-national salience is still omnipresent and the ambitious moot point within the scholarship regarding their expected disappearance is yet to be unpuzzled. Conceding this bare reality, our research aims to rediscover ethnic imaginations and its implications on people's everyday lives, their individual and communal self-understanding and how it affects their

political salience. It is affirmed that many ethnic groups, despite having no political institutions of their own, still continue to relate, self-identify and *re-imagine* the nature of their ethos. Rogers Brubaker, Margit Feischmidt, Jon Fox, and Liana Grancea's findings from the ethnic politics in Cluj, Romania show that ethnicity is more of an "*intermittent* phenomenon", which "*happens* at particular moments, and in particular contexts" than a "continuous" or "everyday preoccupation" (Brubaker, et. al. 2006, 207-8). Nonetheless, it does "happen" that people interpret everyday experiences, and channel identifications through the lens of ethnicity (or nationality, as is more often used in the Soviet/post-Soviet context) (Goff 2020, 16). Drawing on Eric Hobsbawm, nationalism is "constructed essentially from above", yet they "cannot be understood unless also analyzed from below..." (Hobsbawm, 1990, 10-11). With this in mind, our study has sought to make a bottom-up analysis focusing on similarities and differences among Lezgis, an ethnic group in northern provinces of Azerbaijan. There are few studies on Lezgi communities in Azerbaijan focused on the interactions of Lezgis as an ethnic minority *vis a vis* Azerbaijani Turks as a majority, or Lezgis *vis a vis* Azerbaijan as their host-state (see: Sayfutdinova 2022; Goff 2020). As an outcome, we uncovered an array of similarities and differences in ethnic self-perceptions among Lezgi communities living in several districts of Azerbaijan. Given that ethnic perceptions of Lezgi individuals and their interest group (e.g. Lezgi community) usually do not act as a monolith (ontological holism), but act as a dynamic, diverse and changing set of beliefs, values and projects which defines the identity of its members (ontological atomism), we will reframe this case study through the lens of ethnicity and nationalism paradigms. The aim is to identify to what extent existing paradigms of ethnonationalism are able to explain similarities and differences in Lezgi ethnic self-perceptions. If not, what are the conceptual gaps, over-determinations and inadequacies within these paradigms that generate their failure to

explain it? This research will have a focus on discovery of ethnic self-perceptions among Lezgis with overtones of theoretical scrutiny.

The provincial origins of the collected Lezgi narratives are Quba, Qusar, Qabala, Shaki and Ismayilli districts of Azerbaijan. These districts are noted to have a sizable Lezgi composition. Particularly, Qusar district can be discerned from the rest of the three for it is the most homogeneous Lezgi district in Azerbaijan. The other districts, however, are more diverse in their ethnic composition absorbing not only Lezgis but also Azerbaijani Turks and Tats in the case of Quba district; Lezgis, Azerbaijani Turks, Udis, Molokans and Tats in the case of Qabala and Ismayilli districts. When it comes to the theoretical framework, we have sought to utilize certain paradigms that were conceived by ethnicity and nationalism studies scholarship and are relevant to our research data.

Theoretical Framework

For this research Walker Connor's (1973; 1994) foundational conceptualization of ethnonationalism will be used as the basis for analysis of ethnic self-identification. It was Connor's concept of ethnonational self-identification which paved the way to the paradigms explaining how and when an ethnic group may self-identify. The paradigms that are utilized in analysis of the semi-structured interviews with regards to the state of self-perception amongst Lezgis have been termed as primordialism, perennialism, modernism and ethno-symbolism. The paradigms developed by the scholars of each category exhibit a bewildering diversity (Ozkirimli 2000) which are exemplified below .

Primordialism

This paradigm views nations as the natural, pre-existing and organic divisions of humanity who were thought to be ubiquitous and universal (Smith 1999). For primordialists, the key to the

nature, power, and incidence of nations and nationalism lies in the rootedness of the nation in ethnicity, kinship and the genetic bases of human existence. Most importantly, primordialist thought attributes certain *givens* of human existence with common blood, common custom, religion, language or territory, all of which will be useful points of departure for our semi-structured interviews (Geertz 1993).

One of the three forms of primordialist thought is the naturalist approach. It views nations as elements of nature and not just of history which explanation can be exemplified by Abbe Sieyes' claim "Nations exist in the state of nature", thereby the ultimate source of power and will (Smith 1999, 4). A second form of primordialism stems from sociobiology. As an example from Van den Berghe (1978, 1995) who argued that ethnic and national groups are indeed an extension of kinship units, formed from the same nepotistic drive of inclusive fitness first as smaller clans and later as bigger ethnonational groups. In line with this, Van den Berghe was supplementing the primordialist thought with his conviction that the myth of shared descent indeed corresponded to biological descent. Finally, a third form of primordialism suggests a culturalist approach. Cultural primordialists lay their emphasis on the role of overwhelming power of the perceived *primordial tie* attributed to earlier mentioned *givens*. Clifford Geertz counts that it is the members' communal belief in the primordial *givens* and of its ineffability (rather than the ontological validity itself). Although primordialist interpretation is rather passé in academia, it is shared by the majority of the people all across. Therefore, suggested examples of primordialist self-perceptions will be used to uncover similarities as well as distinctions between different Lezgi communities living in different districts of Azerbaijan. Beliefs and assumptions of Lezgi individuals with regards to above-mentioned *givens* and its ineffable power can give useful insights for distinctive ethnic self-perceptions and reasons behind among Lezgins.

Perennialism

This is another paradigm that can be useful to reframe the ethnic self-perceptions among many *ethos*, including Lezgis. Unlike primordialism, the adherents of perennialism do not regard nations as part of the 'state of nature' (Smith 1995). Nevertheless, perennialists hold the view that nations (if not nationalism) have existed throughout recorded history, thus they are linear descendants of their medieval or ancient era counterparts" (Ozkirimli 2000). To concede with this view, we might come across nations everywhere in recorded history, - e.g from ancient Egyptians and Babylonians to the modern British and French - thus explaining the history of humanity in terms of national alignments and conflicts. This view disregards primordial kinship ties the same way it disregards the effects of modernity. The school textbook narratives with regards to national histories of the vast majority of the education curricula are the most ubiquitous evidence for the perennialist interpretation (see: Ghazaryan, M. Huseynli 2022). Despite, it may be possible to trace the origins of some nations to Middle Ages, at least for their elites - as Adrian Hastings (1997) has done for English, Irish, Scots, etc. - there is always a danger of imposing a *retrospective nationalism* onto communities whose identities were local, regional and religious, but barely national (Smith 1999). The perennialist interpretation is also shared by the majority of the people all across. Therefore, the use of this paradigm in the case of Lezgis in Azerbaijan could suggest different frameworks of ethnic identification based on their interpretation of ethnic memory.

Modernism

This paradigm gives a defiance to all of the interpretations above. Modernists essentially regard both primordialist and perennialist interpretations as expressions of nationalism itself, or heavily influenced by its assumptions, and therefore fatally flawed (Smith 1999). Adherents of

modernism seek to disenchant the origins of and causes for modern collectivities from their pre-modern pasts by presenting the "constructed" nature of nationhood in opposition to the primordialist claim of predetermined, natural organicism and in opposition to perennialist claim of national continuity since recorded history (Smith 1999).

According to modernism, it was modern developments (e.g social, cultural, political and economic) that paved the way for the emergence of modern nations by breaking down the pre-modern feudal and patriarchal relationship with the help of increased contacts which enabled better lines of communication, modern education, industrialization and the mobility of populace (Hroch 1989). As per Ernest Gellner who stresses the role of high cultures imposed on societies, "Nationalism is not the awakening of an old, latent, dormant force … It is in reality the consequence of a new form of social organization, based on deeply internalized, education-dependent high cultures, each protected by its own state … Nationalism is the general imposition of a high culture on society" (Gellner 1983, 48). Michael Hechter, another modernist scholar from neo-marxist camp gives a socio-economic explanation, suggesting two forms of national development, both of which emerged from an uneven wave of modernization over different regions of the country (Hechter 1975). "Diffusion model of development" offers an assimilationist perspective where the developing core would "diffuse" into the periphery in the long-run by industrialization and increased contacts which will blur the ethnic and cultural boundaries between the modernizing core and the dislocated periphery. "Internal colonial model of development"offers an increased core-periphery contact where the core would dominate and exploit the periphery, creating substantial economic inequalities as an end result, which, in return, would lead to social stratifications, ethnic isolations and divided society (Hechter 1975). Brubaker suggests that the Soviet Union republics were defined as the states of and for particular

nations, legitimating the preferential treatment for the "titular" nationalities at the expense of non-titular nationalities (or ethnic minorities) living in the republic. This legitimized the promotion of the language, education curriculum and ethnocultural practices of the "titular" nationality and was generally tolerated by the Soviet center (Brubaker, 1995, 38). The latter policies were hand in hand with what Janet Klein regards as "the process of minoritization" where ethnic minorities came to be regarded as threats to the territorial integrity and power of the titular nationalities within the union republics (Klein, 2019, 17-18), therefore, was being subject to assimilationist policies (Brubaker, 1995). Following this, a policy toward Lezgis during the Soviet (as of 1930s) and post-Soviet Azerbaijan correlates to Michael Hechter's "Diffusion model of development"which translates as assimilationist approach to peripheral ethnicities (see: Goff 2020). Lastly, modernist claim is that nations were not found but created (not *ex nihilo*, of course); and they were created in response to historical contingencies and for political purposes. The latter is especially clear in the case of former colonial entities as well as former Soviet Republics, including Azerbaijan, where designated territorial boundaries cut across traditional ethnic groupings and homelands (McCarthy 2002). Lezgis and many other minority groups can serve as the best examples that are cut between Dagestan and Azerbaijan as their homeland. Given that modernism as a paradigm is epistemologically more substantiated in terms of its academic legitimacy compared to its predecessors, it is expected to exhibit a lower scale of exposure to a popular audience as knowledge in Azerbaijan and elsewhere. However, people can frame their experiences with regards to their ethnic self-perceptions through the modern realities and benefits of it despite having no academic exposure to it as a paradigm, which will be interpreted in the analysis as modernist influence. This discussion of the modernist paradigm will be utilized in the analysis of the informants' ethnic self-perceptions.

Ethno-symbolism

It is a paradigm emerged within the latter debate. It critiques modernism's over-determination to reveal the 'invented' or 'constructed' nature of nationalism which overlooks the weight of pre-existing symbols, values, memories and ethnic ties of modern nations (Smith 1996, 361). The underlying shortcomings of modernism are: their hefty stress on elite actions of nation-building processes which neglects the affective role of popular beliefs, memory and actions; their failure to distinguish genuine, *ipso facto* constructs from *la longue duree* structures in which successive generations have been shaped by long before modernism came to play. For ethno-symbolists, nationalism generates its power from values, traditions, memories, symbols of ethnic heritage and the ways in which the popular *living past* can be rediscovered and reinterpreted by modern national intellectuals. It is from these elements that ethnic or national identities are reconstituted in each generation which forms the basis of competing claims to territory, patrimony and resources (Smith 1999).

In general, Anthony D. Smith (1999) gives six main attributes for ethnic communities: a collective proper name, a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, differentiating elements of a common culture, an association with a specific homeland, a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of the population. In the case of Lezgins, some of these features could have ethno-symbolic salience such as the term Lezgin as a collective proper name, shared stories as an ethnic memory, an *imagined* designated map symbolizing Lezgic patrimony, shared traditions such as cuisine, ethnic dance, cultural artifacts, etc. While ethno-symbolist paradigm may fill in the gaps created by the preceding paradigms, it may also exhibit the similar problem of having short of conscious popular adherence - as modernism does - owing to its theoretical complexity and academic appeal. Secondly, people can still reframe their perception of their ethos through

valuing common traditions, institutions, ethnic cultures and symbols as well as fixed-common patrimony, despite having no knowledge of the debates of ethno-symbolism, of which will be interpreted in the analysis as ethno-symbolist influence. The operationalization of collected ethnographic data - in the forthcoming paragraph - will further exhibit both similarities alongside discrepancies among Lezgin ethnic self-perceptions and how well these paradigms explain them.

Research Methods

More on the research design, in line with the constructivist ontology and interpretive epistemology, we conducted eighteen semi-structured interviews between September 2022 and October 2024 with twenty Lezgi participants from relevant districts. Two of the interviews were conducted in group settings at the discretion of the participants. The semi-structured interviews were designed by and originated from the first author whose research analyzes minority ethnonationalist mobilization amongst Lezgis. From the interviews conducted for that research a divergence was discovered in the self-identification of Lezgis based on regions resulting in this analysis. Regarding the language of the interviews, considering the authors do not speak the Lezgi language, Azerbaijani was used as the language of mediation. There is an exception of two informants who mixed English and Azerbaijani and four interviews that were conducted solely in English. Another limitation to the research was enclosing the data collection to Azerbaijani districts of dense Lezgi populace, despite there being twice as many Lezgi communities in Dagestan. The reason we confined our research to Azerbaijani borders was due to logistical barriers (at the time we conducted the research, the Azerbaijani land border with Russia's Autonomous Republic of Dagestan was closed due to COVID-19 restrictions) as well as our lack of network with Dagestani Lezgin communities. Additionally, given the sensitivity of the topic - especially our informants' persistent distrust towards our research agenda, the research

encountered practical constraints for sampling as some potential informants declined to participate or never responded. Similar challenge was also experienced with many of our informants, especially those taken outside of Baku, which kept looming in the background throughout the interviews. Given the minority issues have been heavily securitized in the country due to the trauma of ethnic conflicts in 90s tinged with what is termed as “deepening authoritarianism” (Delcour & Wolczuk 2021, p.12) pertinent to Azerbaijan, it resulted in an overall air of *en masse* insecurity toward certain topics. The latter was the *raison d'être* for the bare number of interviews collected despite taking a prolonged time span. The recent wave of political arrests against independent media, political activists, politicians - and this time even scholars - in Azerbaijan has further impaired civil society resistance, let alone popular resolve to voice grievances (European Parliament, 2024; Feminist Peace Collective, 2024). In particular, the latest arrest of the young scholars with “high treason” charges has made a dramatic turn for the research community (Amnesty International 2024). Constrained by the given circumstances, the result was interviews with twenty informants of which the gender share amounted to eleven females and nine males. The age range of the informants amounted between 23 to 73 and the length of the interviews approximately averaged over an hour, discussing both the individual’s self-perception and view of the circumstances of Lezgis throughout the country.The majority of the Lezgi informants were based in Baku at the time of interviewing, with the exception of three interviews taking place in Qusar district and another four in Quba district. Almost all of them originated from rural and urban communities in Qusar, Ismayilli, Qabala, Quba and one informant was from Sheki district. Only three of the informants are currently in diaspora in different parts of Europe. Concerned about the political environment and research ethics

particularly in Azerbaijan, we decided to keep interviews anonymous during the collection process.

Lastly, despite earlier research on Lezgis have employed the term “Lezgin” (see: Sayfutdinova 2022; Goff 2020), this name tag seems to be influenced from Russian “Лезгинь”. As the self-identified name tag is “Lezgi”, we are determined to use this term throughout our research. When it comes to the term “Azerbaijani”, its ambivalence lies with the fact that it is used both as an ethnonational term to identify the state-bearing majority and as a formal citizenship irrespective of one’s ethnic origins. Considering the name tag for formal citizenship coincides with the one for ethnonational belonging, we have decided to use “Azerbaijani Turks” instead of “Azerbaijani” in order to thwart any form of analytical confusion.

Azerbaijan’s nationalization policies

The disintegration of the Soviet regime in the early 90s led to the declaration of independence by all the fifteen union republics, including Azerbaijan. In line with Brubaker’s term, the political elites of the incipient Azerbaijani nation-state have launched their own “nationalizing” policies and discourses (see: Brubaker, 1995, 108). The most prominent among these is known as the discourse of Azerbaijanism and that of multiculturalism, each coinciding with the last two presidential terms of the country respectively. The former identity discourse was aimed at overcoming the identity crisis of the early 90s that attempted to balance social ideals of inter-ethnic unity between Azerbaijani Turks and ethnic minorities. It was meant to remake an inclusive form of social imaginary which was based on common adherence to *statehood*, *territory* and *shared traditions* acquired through centuries of cohabitation in the same territory

(see: Mehdiyev, 2003, p. 93). While the latter discourse remained active in the government's political agenda throughout the 2000s, another discourse called multiculturalism surfaced to the political agenda. It was especially brought in the wake of the refugee crisis in Europe in early 2010s. Baku International Center for Multiculturalism was established in May 2014 which was aimed at promoting *Azerbaijani model of multiculturalism* on an international scale, and to facilitate relations between the state and representatives of religious and ethnic minority groups (see: Azərbaycan Multikulturalizmi, 2016). In the same year, the president Ilham Aliyev stated at IV Baku International Forum: "Multiculturalism is a way of life in Azerbaijan. True, this term is relatively new. But for centuries, there have been multicultural societies in Azerbaijan. Friendship and solidarity between nations is a clear example of this […]" (see: Azərbaycan Multikulturalizmi, 2016; Cornell, Karaveli, and Ajeganov 2016, 48–57).

Our critical examination of Azerbaijani president's speeches delivered between 2010-2020 also confirms that the discourse of multiculturalism only amounts to taking credit for inter-ethnic conviviality in the country that predates any of the state policies. Our data collected through semi-structured interviews does not suggest any reference to the state policies such as Azerbaijanism or multiculturalism, that affected their intra/inter-ethnic engagement. Except, while answering the interview questions, many of our informants self-identified as ethnic Lezgi to varying degrees. When asked about their relation to the country, a majority clarified themselves to be Azerbaijani citizens. The self-differentiation from the larger Azerbaijani society manifested through ethnic markers, indicating the primacy and salience of Lezgi-ness for many of our informants. The latter will be elaborated further in the coming sections. Lastly, given the sense of insecurity among many of our informants, we could not directly address their perceptions with regards to the country's policies.

Commonalities and Differences among Lezgins

Commonalities

The study of the collected ethnographic narratives among Lezgi individuals coming from three different districts of Azerbaijan manifest some commonalities amongst. The major commonality across Lezgi individuals - be it Qabala, Ismayilli and Quba Lezgis or Qusar Lezgis - who were interviewed as part of the social data collection is, most if not all informants expressed primordialist geographic connection to the north-eastern Azerbaijan (Quba-Qusar region particularly) and Dagestan. Particularly the memory narratives expressed by the Qabala & Ismayilli Lezgis is the main striking point for they detach the origins of their so called "native" geographic space with Qabala and Ismayilli districts of Azerbaijan by tracing to the southern Dagestan, the space that is still predominantly inhabited by the Lezgi population. Almost all the collected memory narratives of Qabala & Ismayilli Lezgis claim to have migrated to what is now mainland Azerbaijan from regions currently in Russia's Dagestan over the various periods throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Another common theme in perception through all interviews, regardless of region of origin, suggested ethnic self-perception associated with sociobiological primordialism. One of the suggested extremes of this view was substantiated by a male individual (aged 31, 2023) in the diaspora and another male individual from Quba district (aged 52, 2023) who held a sociobiological perception of Lezgi-ness by construing his *ethos* with Caucasian characteristics e.g. lighter skin tone and a rounder facial shape as supposed biological features to be shared amongst all the Lezgis that slightly distinguishes them from the majority of Azerbaijani Turks.

Differences

While these commonalities reigned true throughout the interviews, it did not mitigate the differences in mutual self-perception amongst the Lezgi individuals. According to the interviews (2022; 2023), the major difference in ethnic self-perceptions have run along the lines of 1. Qabala, Ismayilli and Quba Lezgis; 2. Qusar Lezgis, each of the two giving distinctive interpretations of Lezgi identity. To elucidate these differences further, while some of the informants exhibited positive association with Dagestani Lezgis, there were also narratives of difference marked by the discourse of "us vs them", albeit the cognizance of shared ethnic heritage. The latter is expressed in an interview with an Ismayilli Lezgi (aged 34, 2023) who depicted Dagestan Lezgis as more traditional and "backward" which features the assumed contrast to the Lezgis living in Azerbaijan. This particular narrative already postulates the elements of rupture - between Dagestani Lezgis and Azerbaijani Lezgis - in what it means to be everyday Lezgi for Lezgis of Azerbaijan. *On par* with this, the elements of rupture are not confined to cross-border accounts solely. Different elements of rupture are likewise observed between Lezgis of different districts of Azerbaijan such as Qabala, Ismayilli and Quba *versus* Qusar Lezgis. The latter informants presented more salience in ethnic understanding of the self in contrast to former informants who considered distinctive ethnic attitudes above all else to be socio-politically divisive and ethically unacceptable. These perceptual discrepancies in particular pit the two communities in two different camps with regards to what presupposes Lezgi-ness *per se*. To elucidate further, the next paragraphs will provide more in-depth analysis of Lezgi self-perceptions by using the given paradigms. This will reify a more elaborate understanding of how and why the provincial lines can be a source of variance among the same *ethos*.

Primordialism - Views of Biological and Ancient Origins

The operationalization of the semi-structured interviews with Lezgis from Azerbaijan manifests the elements of primordialist understanding of ethnicity, community and space, and how Lezgi individuals relate to these notions. Much of this can be linked to the Lezgi self-perceptions with regards to their ancestral homeland and how ancestors of contemporary Lezgis have lived in that homeland for a length of time that predates traditions. The interviews with informants exhibit certain commonality in the precise spatial origins of Lezgis as an ethnic group which is attested through their reference to Qusar district and southern Dagestan as a micro space. The informants also relate to the greater Caucasus region as a macro space, a perceived ancestral homeland where they lived longer than history and folklore can describe. The common attachment to an ethnic homeland - both micro and macro level - is a focal point in an identity that predates tradition. The operationalization of these interviews with the paradigm of primordialism demonstrate that there is a particular cross-border land space that Lezgis perceive as an ancestral homeland which predates contemporary ethnic consciousness and political discourse.

The analysis of the interviews indicate the existence of primordialist self-perception among a majority of Lezgi informants in the course of this study. Despite the shared biological and spatial origins of the Lezgis are acknowledged by all self-identifying as ethnic Lezgi, in fact, there are also unforeseen discrepancies in level of ethnic salience among Lezgis of different districts. One of the discrepancies that evokes to reframe Azerbaijani Lezgis into two - Qusar Lezgis and non-Qusar Lezgis - is a higher degree of ethnic salience amongst the former. In contrast, the same ethnic salience is expressed with indifference amongst the latter. While there is a baseline of Lezgi identity and its association to its predated occurrence, this is where we can begin to differentiate the way their identity has begun to change and become modernized, in particular amongst Lezgis living in Qabala, Ismayilli and Quba districts. Given the fact that

there's still relatively high levels of ethnic homogeneity of Lezgis living in Qusar district, the role of primordialist ethnic self-perception seems to persist amongst as an effort to hamper any potential of ethno-cultural erosion out of Lezgi identity. To achieve that, informants suggested formal institutions (e.g language teaching, printing press, museums and a form of self-rule) primarily would ideally be a means to which cultural preservation may be achieved. A female informant currently in diaspora but originally from Qusar district (aged 29, 2022) emphasized the lack of infrastructure as the core impediment for the preservation of Lezgi culture and stated her desire for institutionalization of Lezgi cultural establishments be it Lezgi language newspapers or Lezgi language schooling. This was followed by a reflection that the Azerbaijani government, which tends to take any unilateral support for the minority institutions with suspicion, and does nothing to support Lezgi institutions. Hence, it is left to the local Lezgis themselves as a community to form and preserve such institutions. This particular reply evinced a higher degree of ethnic salience with indications of primordialist leanings, given that it is directed towards Lezgi cultural establishments. While this was corroborated throughout interviews with Qusar Lezgis, the same degree of sentiment was underperformed when discussed with non-Qusar Lezgis. At last, the sensitivity of Qusar Lezgis towards the preservation of Lezgi culture and its institutions particularly demonstrate indications of cultural primordialism amongst.

Another finding is demonstrated in an interview with a male from Qusar district (aged 26, 2022) that asserted that Lezgis have lived in the Caucasus region for longer than the historical record, suggesting their relationship to Caucasus as macro and Qusar as a micro space alluding to its effect which gives them a historic right to continue to exist in this cross-border space. This was emphasized in a quote with the same participant: "we have lived here for a longer time [than the Azerbaijani Turks] … my [Lezgi] teacher said there's no area where [Lezgi] blood wasn't

spilled." While this research does not seek to substantiate these claims, it does seek to report that such interviews help us to detect the discrepancies with other interviews originating from Qabala, Ismayilli and its adjacent districts. The main point of discrepancy in this theme is while informants among the latter districts do express similar views with regards to their perception of Lezgi living space, they demonstrate less to no pronunciation on allusions that the given cross-border space should exclusively be owned and governed by the Lezgis and only. In contrast, several informants originating from Qusar district and demonstrating primordialist self-perception suggested that they did in fact have a desire for Lezgi lands to be governed by Lezgis. While the discussion was continued by a concession of its impracticality, it ultimately does show that this connection with a primordialist identity resonates within political desires. This distinguishes itself from all interviews taken from informants other than Qusar most of whom had no desire to have a Lezgi state for Lezgis.

Perennialism - Historical Continuity (or lack of)

With reference to the perennialist paradigm, the interviews with Lezgi informants display limited manifestations of perennialism as a feature of self-identification. The analysis of the interviews evinces no proof of *retrospective nationalism* in the form of perennial continuity from pre-modern period up until modernity as a narrative, similar to Adrian Hastings' (1997) attempts to conceive it for English, Irish, Scots and other nations. Wherever there was a glimpse of a claim for some form of historical continuity of Lezgic ethos in the so-called Lezgic space expressed by informants, it used to accompany a primordialist vision of ethnicity extended by kinship unity. Therefore, we reframed many of these narratives as primordialism and not perennialism.

Another challenge with perennialism as a category of analysis and Lezgi narratives as objects of study lies in an ability to distinguish a thin line between the collective narrative and the top-down discourse. Despite there were observable signs of perennialism among the Lezgi narratives, further articulation of the story through semi-structured interview methods helped to detect certain indicators of a modernist top-down discourse, of which includes, *inter alia*, knowledge produced through history-textbooks, modern political and public discourse enabled through mass media and increased contacts and so on. Especially given that the national history curriculum in Azerbaijan and in many other places is designed in line with a perennialist paradigm, it is unlikely that informants are to be immune to the influence of any of the above-mentioned top-down discourses. One of the perennial sounding top-down discourses is the narrative of continuity from historic Caucasian Albania up to modernity which is shared by many Lezgis and Azerbaijan Turks alike. The research only detected such historical retrospectives which mirrors the top-down discourse in many ways. Notwithstanding informants' convictions regarding shared historic past, it is most likely to be influenced from the modernist trend of nation-building which is irrelevant for a perennialist frame of trajectory.

The overall conclusion from the taken interviews seems to present little to no perennialist ethnic narratives among Lezgi individuals. Therefore, perennialism as a paradigm gives tenuous aid to advance the aim to find out ethnic commonalities and faultlines amongst the Lezgi population at large. Modernism, on the other hand, is yet another explanatory feature that can shed a light to another dimension of the Lezgi ethnic self-perceptions which is articulated in the following paragraphs.

Modernism - Transitions in Self-Perception

Throughout the interviews, there appears to be, unsurprisingly, no consistent belief that the Lezgi national consciousness might have simply emerged in response to historical contingencies in the modern era (i.e. Russian conquest of the Caucasus, Soviet multinationalism, Soviet-era Lezgin movement *Rik'in Gaf* or the *Sadval* Movement in the course of Soviet demise) - in line with modernist interpretation - regardless of provincial origin and degree of affiliation with Lezgi heritage. While informants were *in toto* positive in their negation of a modernist account of their ethnicity, the impact of modernism still presented itself in their everyday life, particularly in the context of Lezgi integration to Azerbaijani society - in the sense of either acculturation or assimilation - which gives another dimension to the Lezgi ethnic self-perceptions. As mentioned earlier, in marked contrast to Qusar district which has an overriding Lezgi majority, other districts (e.g. Ismayilli, Quba, Gabala and Shaki) comprise mixed populations of ethnic Lezgis and Azerbaijani Turks (and other groups). In some cases, even villages subsume a mixed population where communities share neighborhoods of mixed cohabitation. Such mixed livelihood establishes the potential for much easier integration - in the sense of acculturation, if not assimilation - to the Azerbaijani speaking public life, given the majority in Azerbaijani society is composed of Azerbaijani Turks. It should be noted that the Lezgi curriculum is only included in Qusar whereas this is not the case in the non-Qusar districts. Everyday use of the language is a notable variable that directly prompts people's ethnic consciousness. This was exemplified in a male informant from Quba (aged 52, 2023) who stated that even though he is proficient in the Lezgi language, he and his wife have used Azerbaijani as the language of communication in the household. The everyday use of Azerbaijani language and not Lezgi was also mentioned by three other informants (a male informant aged 31, 2023 in the diaspora; a male informant aged 34, 2022 from Ismayilli district and a female informant aged 23, 2023 from

Gabala district). Both a lack of formal language instruction in public schools and its neglect in the household directly resulted in children's lack of proficiency in the Lezgi language. In a similar vein, a female (aged 58, 2023) and a male (aged 73, 2023) from Quba stated that they see no difference between Lezgis and majority Azerbaijanis - except for the accent - due to shared culture and life, which implies a high degree of acculturation to the majority culture.

All interviews taken from informants originating from districts outside of Qusar (2022-23) correlate Michael Hechter's "diffusion model of development" where either assimilationist or acculturationist tendencies are observed. As an example, an informant from Quba district conceded that living full Lezgi life, of which amounts to speaking the Lezgi language, practicing exclusively Lezgi traditions in everyday life and so on, would be detrimental to his social function whilst operating in majority Azerbaijani society. In each interview, informants from these districts presented relative fluency in Azerbaijani language. As proof of that, there was even an instance where an informant from Ismayilli (aged 34, 2022) expressed his effort to hide Lezgi accent while communicating in Azerbaijani language, which he considered a facile necessity in order to socio-economically get integrated into the bigger society. The same informant from Quba district (aged 29, 2023) in particular discussed how his Lezgi parents did not bring him up in the Lezgi language lest it may thwart his development in personal life and career. The informant was aware that having grown as a native Azerbaijani speaker, on one hand, granted him a competitive social advantage to succeed, on the other hand, complicated his ethnic consciousness leaving him at odds with his Lezgi lineage. Furthermore, his perceived "lack of Lezgi-ness" pitted Qusar district - a region with a Lezgi preponderance - as a place in which Lezgis had a "true" or some might say "exclusive" Lezgi identity. Only in one occasion where he compared Qusar Lezgis to himself as a Quba Lezgin, he suggested having

some form of connection with the Lezgi identity. Aside from that, he kept conceding to his current state of self-identification lest exclusive Lezgi identity would only be practical for those living in Qusar. His self-differentiation from Qusar Lezgis is an acknowledgement of the distinction between the two subsets of Lezgi-ness within Azerbaijan. This was also reconfirmed in a discussion with the Quba Lezgin informant (male aged 52, 2023) on how he thinks Qusar Lezgis perceive them, "They would probably see us as Lezgis, but a different kind of Lezgis because we have more Azerbaijani words [in our Lezgin dialect]." This shows some of the discrepancies noted in language due to modern trends. The sheer nature of labeling the same ethnic group as 'them' is in effect a form of transition in their ethnic identification which is a result of integration into the larger society in the sense of acculturation marked by relatively deeper exposure to Azerbaijani public life, all of which emanates from Gellnerian sense of nation-building buttressed by the majority's high culture or what Michael Hechter calls "diffusion model of modern national development" (see: Gellner 1983; Hechter 1975). It seems that individuals who are more exposed to the top-down generated modernist discourse, non-Qusar Lezgis being the most likely, are more prone to distance themselves from the ethnically homogeneous and salient Qusar district so to say. As other informants mentioned above, two female informants(aged 23, 2023; aged 25, 2024) from Gabala district also expressed a meager determination in prioritizing their ethnic identity over other interests. For instance, the first informant (aged 23, 2023) preferred to be associated with personal interests (e.g career or intellectual pursuits) rather than reducing herself solely to Lezgi identity. Second of the informants (aged 25, 2024) noted that due to her upbringing and Azerbaijani speaking environment, she grew up speaking and identifying as Azerbaijani. Only after becoming more aware of her ethnic lineage while in school period, she began adopting a dual identity in which

she prides her-self with both at the same time. The latter informant also saw no reason for particular language rights for Lezgis and other minorities lest it may result as a language barrier for their access to more opportunities in the bigger Azerbaijani society. A final note to the modernism section of the article, use of this paradigm well informs the reasons for divisions in ethnic self-perception among Lezgis of different districts of Azerbaijan. This particular division is especially felt in non-Qusar districts which are more exposed to the discourse of the bigger society, versus Qusar district which is less so. It is also felt in non-Qusar districts for the fact that the Lezgi language is not instructed in the latter districts which increases their exposure to Azerbaijani language public life contrary to what it is in Qusar district.

It is also worth mentioning that these trends did not go without their outliers. A female of mixed origins (half Azerbaijani Turk and half Lezgin) from Qusar (aged 49, 2023) voiced a lack of sentimentality towards Lezgi institutions and leadership that represents Lezgis. She stated "[if there was Lezgin leadership] we would be proud … I would want them to exist but I would want them to represent everyone [Lezgi or Azerbaijani Turk alike] without making distinctions,". Although she was a native Lezgin speaker, it did not induce her to favor establishing Lezgi institutions in an ideal world. She was even expressly displeased for having asked such a politically pertinent question. This deviates from the Qusar and non-Qusar Lezgin trend observed in the research. Furthermore, she admitted her feeling of association to Azerbaijani and Lezgi identities simultaneously. This was emphasized in her statements when asked questions about how she associated with her Lezgi identity "My nationality is Lezgi, the place I live is Azerbaijan and my religion is Muslim." This showed a lack of a sentimentality towards any identity in particular but rather an awareness of the main components of her identity. The latter suggests that modernism in the form of acculturation also reduces association with the Lezgi

identity even in a region in which Lezgis make up an ethnic majority. Although this outlier shares some characteristics with non-Qusar Lezgis, it does not minimize the role of the symbolic elements of ethnic self-identification in Qusar, which will be discussed in the following subsection.

Ethno-symbolism - Language, Culture and Symbols

The paradigm of ethno-symbolism allows for an explanation on the collective identity amongst Lezgis regardless of the district. Its examples can be seen in an interview (aged 33, 2022) with a male of mixed ethnic heritage - Rutul-Lezgic and Chechen - from Sheki district who currently lives in diaspora. The informant, who himself was not a native speaker of the Lezgi language, stated that for him the sense of belonging to the Lezgi nation, regardless of mixed ethnic heritage, trumps any potential discrepancies. This can be through shared traditions, spoken language and even physical features, which from the ethno-symbolist perspective would yield grounds for what commonalities still exist between groups and allows for a continuation of a perceived unified ethnic nation. A Lezgi intellectual (2024), whose name and demographics are omitted due to safety concerns in Azerbaijan, listed conditions of Lezgi identity as such: “the first precondition is knowing the Lezgi language. The second precondition is that one needs to beware of his or her Lezgi identity. The third is to self-identify as Lezgi.” These conditions of identity, while may also correspond to a primordialist theorization, highlight ethnic markers depicted in the ethno-symbolist theorization (2009). For example, association with the Lezgi language or awareness of ancestral heritage, so described by the informant, can be unpacked into ethnic markers such as physical features, values or cultural practices. The conditions for Lezgi in-grouping provide a basis for some of the discrepancies within the Lezgi community, especially

between Qusar and non-Qusar Lezgins. These differences are evident in varying levels of language intelligibility and fluency in cultural practices among the groups.

As with the aforementioned Lezgi informant, throughout the conducted interviews (2022-2023), a high degree of association with the Lezgi language - regardless of dialect, level of fluency or even absence of the language knowledge - could be interpreted through an ethno-symbolist paradigm. In an interview with a male from Quba (aged 73, 2023) and a female from Qusar (aged 23, 2024), questions were posed regarding what made Lezgi people identifiable as an ethnic group from others beyond and within Azerbaijan, in each instance the informant regarded the Lezgi language as the identifying factor. The male informant noted that regardless of the dialect (in which he regarded the Qusar Lezgin dialect as the "purest"), Lezgi people self-identify through their language. In correspondence with Anthony Smith's interpretation, when a language takes on a symbolic form, it becomes the boundary to which ethnicity is created (Smith 1991). In the case of the Lezgis interviewed, the Lezgi language is one of the chief markers of self-identifications for the Lezgi people which runs in line with ethno-symbolist trajectory. The aforementioned 73 year old informant (2023) when asked about markers for the Lezgi ethnicity he states "it's our language" *tout court* and short, thus insinuating the degree of its significance for the community. The last quote underscore indication of ethnosymbolist interpretation of ethnicity and ethnic identity markers. The informant later went on to describe the transition in Lezgi language apprehension in Quba which has decreased due to schooling being conducted in Azerbaijani.

Beyond linguistic markers an association with the ancestral homeland was noted as Southern Dagestan and Qusar district (and parts of Quba) throughout the interviews, which can also be interpreted through Smith's (2009) characterization of ethnic boundaries which informs

ethno-symbolic interpretation of the imagined Lezgic patrimony. While the theory concurs that these are characteristics of ethno-symbolic self-identification, based on these interviews, they can not be deciphered to precision whether they sit exclusively within the ethno-symbolist paradigm or primordialist. In addition, the Ethno-symbolist paradigm was also unable to showcase any trajectory conforming to *Qusar and non-Qusar* lines. This undermines the merit of a purely ethno-symbolist interpretation. The limitations of this paradigm is epitomized when bringing in different perceptions shared between Lezgis of different regions. For example, a female informant originally from Qusar who is currently in diaspora (aged 29, 2022) described Lezgis of Dagestan to be more traditional by suggesting their higher degree of attachment to cultural traditions as well as the relatively higher use of Lezgic lexicon in their dialect in everyday life. When asked about Lezgis from Dagestan she stated "They [Daghestani Lezgis] are more focused on their ethnicity … more active in promoting this culture and heritage and keeping it. … They are more attached with the original Lezgi language." These statements show an aspect of "us" vs "them" in which new cultural and ethnic lines have begun to be drawn, in this case, along district and state borders. Nevertheless, it stands with the short of an ethno-symbolist explanation for the transition of identity.

A potential explanation for the discrepancies observed in the Lezgi identity using ethno-symbolist paradigm suggests that the lack of "Lezgi symbolism" within communities with a higher level of integration has resulted in perceived "us"vs "them". Most of the non-Qusar Lezgi informants came from settlements that either had ethnically mixed neighborhoods or Lezgi villages yet surrounded by Azerbaijani Turks and other settlements. This, in effect, may result in much easier acculturation, if not assimilation, of the Lezgi communities to majority Azerbaijanis due to shared community and space. This, in return, renders an erosion of symbolic

characteristics which determines the degree to which an individual associates with the ethnicity of origin. Such an example was given in an interview with a Lezgi informant from Qabala (aged 23, 2023) in which the informant had no knowledge about traditional Lezgi cuisine. She mentioned encountering Lezgi dishes only later in life and introducing the dishes to the family who also had loose knowledge about them. This is an example of the loss of Lezgi ethno-symbolism which generates a lower degree of association with Lezgi identity. Likewise, the same informant also acknowledged how Qusar Lezgis were more familiar with Lezgi traditions and the Lezgi language. She exemplified her claims by bringing up the Qusar dialect which is described as 'purer' than other Lezgi dialects for they use less loanwords from Azerbaijani. These examples show that while there are symbolisms attached to the Lezgi language and traditions, it does not account for discrepancies in the degree of association with these symbols. Therefore, while this argument has merit in analyzing features of Lezgi self-perception based on the interviews conducted, the ethno-symbolist interpretation does not allow for the major differences in self-perception.

Conclusion

Throughout this case study, the current state of self-perception amongst Lezgis in Azerbaijan was framed through theoretical standard bearers of ethnonationalism. The study encompassed participants throughout Lezgi inhabited regions and found discrepancies in Lezgi self-identifications running along provincial and geographic lines. The researchers took a view that heterogeneous self-perception based on the main pillars of pronounced ethnic salience exist within the different regions, with Qusar and non-Qusar Lezgis acting as the primary conceptual boundaries.

Based on the findings, primordialist elements within Qusar Lezgis act as the focal point for self-perception which are less pronounced among Quba, Qabala and Ismayilli Lezgis. While this discrepancy does not suggest complete lack of primordialist elements in non-Qusar Lezgi communities, it does dismiss primordialism as a catalyst for non-Qusar Lezgis' self-perceptions. Furthermore, as stated, this research does not seek to substantiate the primordialist origins of Lezgi identity, but rather decipher its existence in Lezgi ethno-political salience. Language in interviews of Qusar Lezgins revolving around characterizations of differences in biological features, the purity of the Qusar dialect and Qusar as part of the imagined Lezgic patrimony may indicate a primordialist interpretation. Further research concerning primordialism within Qusar Lezgi identity would be needed to conceptualize other forms of primordialism in Qusar.

In contrast, Lezgis originating from outside of Qusar, with participants from regions such as Shaki, Qabala, Ismayilli and Quba, show modernist elements in ethnic self-identification. The basis for this is based on interviews which discussed the perceived lack of "Lezgi-ness" or loss of "Lezgi-ness" due to modern conditions. Aspects of this may include lack of Lezgi language proficiency, different forms of exposure to the majority society's cultural traditions and norms, and erosion of key Lezgi cultural institutions, all of which facilitate an increased dissociation with, if not lack of, Lezgi identity. Finally, throughout many interviews conducted with non-Qusar Lezgis, a characterization of Lezgis from Qusar having a higher degree of association with Lezgi identity further cements the depiction of "us" vs "them"between Lezgi communities. An alternative explanation of ethno-symbolism acting as a framework of justification for the variations in Lezgi was offered. Many of the characteristics discussed in the primordialism section, like sociobiological perceptions or association with the ancestral homeland can be interpreted through an ethno-symbolist framework as well. While there are noted indications of

ethno-symbolism in Lezgi identity, the paradigm ultimately does not go far enough in explaining the “us” vs “them” between “Qusar” and “non-Qusar Lezgi”.

This research has characterized the themes in Lezgi self-perception based on region; it is ultimately the researchers’ view that heterogeneous self-perception amongst Lezgis exists but to varying degrees, which can loosely run along geography. While there are noted outliers in the interviews which did not fit firmly within the proposed characterization of Azerbaijani-Lezgi community, the trends in the interviews indicate variations in the Lezgi self-identification based on region. This is characterized by the ethnic Lezgi homogeneity as well as Lezgi language curriculum relevant to Qusar district and deeper integration to the majority society relevant to non-Qusar districts. Granted that the characterization of the self-perception of Lezgis can fit in the dynamics proposed, varying degrees of self-identification based on primordialism, ethno-symbolism and modernism is a stronger depiction of the circumstances.

This brings in the final findings of this study which relates to the theoretical development of ethnonationalism scholarship. Early scholarship on ethnicity emphasized that the term “ethnicity” fell under the dichotomy of “us” vs “them” (Baumann 2004, 12) where no group could be an identifiable ethnic group until they are regarded by a third party. As scholarship progressed with Walker Connor (1973; 1993), the concept of ethnic self-identification started taking a more prominent role in the study of ethnonationalism. It was his idea that an ethnic group can self-identify without a third party. This was also observed in our research regarding how a group (the Lezgis) self-identify in the contemporary setting. Given that scholarship has moved past these traditional interpretations of ethnicity concerning the concept of self-identification, it has neglected to emphasize the “us” vs “them” dichotomy within ethnic groups. Our study demonstrates that such dichotomy between different ethnic groups still plays a

significant role in ethnic self-identification. However, this research has discovered that it can also be prominent within the group itself, i.e. Qusar vs non-Qusar Lezgis. This leaves us with a gap within the standard bearers of the study of ethnicity and ethnic nationalism. What does it mean when the "us" vs "them" dichotomy occurs within a single ethnic group? Based on the interviews with Qusar and non-Qusar Lezgis, in-grouping within the ethnic group does occur, regardless of region, but out-grouping within the same ethnic group - due to perceived differences - has also been noted (albeit without unanimity). Using the pillars of ethnic nationalism studies social boundaries can be explained underscoring the continued significance of theoretical approaches.

Although scholarship on nationalism has moved away from modernism, ethno-symbolism and primordialism, this article has shown that they have continued analytical value in discerning how groups self-identify. As presented, modernist lenses do play a significant role in ethnic self-identification but ethno-symbolist and primordialist lenses also persist in communities to varying degrees, resulting in some of these inter-ethnic lines. As minority groups continue to splinter in rapidly globalized and federalized societies, these theories from bygone eras of nationalism studies continue to retain explanatory value in analysis of minority ethnic self-identification.

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