

Abstract

This book discusses the formation of the Azerbaijani national consciousness. Azerbaijanis are a Turkic ethnic group who live in the present-day Republic of Azerbaijan (hereinafter, this region called “Southeast Caucasus”) and the northwestern part of the Islamic Republic of Iran (hereinafter, “Āzərbayjān”).

Originally, the geographical name “Azerbaijan” referred to just Āzərbayjān, which lies on the south side of the Aras River. Meanwhile, the Southeast Caucasus was called “Arran (Qarabagh)” and “Shirvan”. However, the area referred to as “Azerbaijan” gradually expanded to include the Southeast Caucasus. Firstly, the northern border of “Azerbaijan” moved from the Aras River to the Kura River in the 16th century. This meant that the region which had been referred to as “Arran” or “Qarabagh” was incorporated into “Azerbaijan”. This geographical recognition was entrenched by the 17th century and can find this usage not only in Persian sources, but also in works written in the Ottoman Turkish and European languages. The remaining part of the Southeast Caucasus, the land of “Shirvan”, which lies on the north side of the Kura River, was also incorporated into “Azerbaijan” in the 18th century. However, contemporaries who lived in the Southeast Caucasus did not consider their homeland to be “Azerbaijan”.

In the Southeast Caucasus, Turkization of people and language had progressed since the 11th century. European people referred to the Turkic language used in the Southeast Caucasus by various names, such as “Turkish” or “Tatar”. The first person to call this language “Azerbaijani” was Mirza Kazem-Bek (1802-1870), the founder of the Kazan School of Oriental Studies. We can find the oldest example of this usage in his work written in 1846. He used “Azerbaijani” to distinguish the language spoken and written in the Southeast Caucasus from other Turkic languages such as the Ottoman Turkish and Tatar languages. Since then, this linguistic name spread out mainly over academic circles in Russia.

Meanwhile, contemporaries in the Southeast Caucasus called their language “Turkish” in general. They recognized a difference between their language and other Turkic languages, but they did not give it a unique name to distinguish it from others. The first native people who adopted the linguistic name “Azerbaijani” were Turkic Muslim intellectuals living in Tiflis (present-day Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia) such as Jalal Unsizadeh (1854-unknown). This adoption happened in ca. 1883. They thought language was one of the most important elements that define a nation; therefore, they came to recognize themselves as the “Azerbaijani” nation because they spoke the “Azerbaijani” language. The first use of “Azerbaijani” as an autonym was found in the journal *Keshkul* issued in 1890.

Until then, “Azerbaijanis” were called “Tatars” or “Turkish people” by Russian and other

European people. In that time, native people in the Southeast Caucasus called themselves “Caucasian Muslims”. The term “Caucasian Muslim” was very important because it was the first name that put them in a single group. One of the first examples of this usage was in the newspaper *Ekinchi*, founded by Hasan bey Zardabi (1837-1907) in 1875.

Considering that the term “Caucasian Muslim” preceded “Azerbaijani”, it can be said that the conquest of the Southeast Caucasus by Russia marked the beginning of the formation of their national identity. Because of the incorporation of the Province of Caucasus into the Russian Empire, and dispersing of “Caucasus” as a geographical name or recognition, native people could first imagine a clear outline of their nation. It is also an important factor that most of the intellectuals who lead enlightenment activities in the Southeast Caucasus were educated in Russian-style schools or worked as Russian bureaucrats.

“Mellat-e Eslām (Muslims)”, a national name used by Mirza Fatali Akhundzadeh (1812-1878), would also affect the appearance of “Caucasian Muslim”. He used “Mellat-e Eslām” to refer to inhabitants of Iran, the Ottoman Empire and the Southeast Caucasus. It is also noteworthy that his self-consciousness was complex and multi-layered. Depending on the context, he sometimes identified himself as an “Iranian”, “Turkish” or “Tatar”.

The self-consciousness of native intellectuals was very obscure before the appearance of the term “Caucasian Muslim”. Another such example is the geographical recognition “Eastern Caucasus”, which was proposed by Abbasqulu aga Bakikhanov (1794-1847). This geographical recognition is vividly aware of the unity of “Shirvan” and “Dagestan”. On the other hand, the connection of “Shirvan” and “Arran (Qarabagh)” is not clear.

Most recent studies of national identity agree that a nation is not an essential existence but rather a product of specific historical circumstances. This concept likely fits the case of the Southeast Caucasus. Bakikhanov’s “Eastern Caucasus”, Akhundzadeh’s “Mellat-e Eslām” and Zardabi’s “Caucasian Muslim” indicate the possibility that a national consciousness different from “Azerbaijani” was formed. Present-day “Azerbaijanis” may perhaps call themselves “Iranian” or “East Caucasian”, but in reality, “Azerbaijani”, which developed from “Caucasian Muslim”, survived.

Even after the appearance of “Azerbaijani”, the self-consciousness of the inhabitants of the Southeast Caucasus was not concrete. “Azerbaijani” as a national and linguistic term was widely spread in the beginning of the 20th century; however, most native intellectuals had multi-layered identities. In 1918, they built a nation-state named the “Azerbaijan Democratic Republic” so that “Azerbaijan” as a geographical name to indicate the Southeast Caucasus became common, but they continued to call their nation and language “Turkic”. It was only in 1936 that “Azerbaijani” became the official name of their nation and language. The unity of the terms for

homeland, nation and language must have strengthened their nationalism. It is said that “Azerbaijanis” were truly born at that time.

The national identity of “Azerbaijanis” was formed through the process described above. Present-day Azerbaijanis recognize that even Āzərbayjān is a part of their “homeland” and sometimes aim to “seize it back” from Iran. Based on historical facts, their territorial claim is not supported. “Azerbaijan” has never lost any lands, and has never been split into two parts because “Azerbaijan” in the modern meaning did not exist when the Russian Empire took over the Southeast Caucasus.

Previous studies assume that the formation of the “Azerbaijani” nation was closely related to the unification of Āzərbayjān and the Southeast Caucasus; however, historical facts indicate the opposite. The formation of the “Azerbaijani” nation went through a step of separating the Southeast Caucasus from Iran (of course, it includes Āzərbayjān) and “Caucasian Muslims” from Iranians. Originally, the outline of the “Azerbaijani” nation was drawn based on a geographical administrative division “Caucasus” and the religion “Islam”. It would be a consequence of the adoption of “Azerbaijani” as their national name that the nation came to include inhabitants of Āzərbayjān. Therefore, it is not true that “Azerbaijan” made “Azerbaijani”, but “Azerbaijani” made “Azerbaijan”.