

Caucasian Albania



An International Handbook

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DE GRUYTER

[Berlin/Boston 2023]

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16 Reverse Engineering: A State-Created “Albanian Apostolic Church”

Abstract: This Chapter provides a brief historical overview of Christianity in Nagorno-Karabakh in the wider context of the modern Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict and disputed territories. It then focuses on how the Azerbaijani state is constructing an “Albanian Apostolic Church” – variously called “Udi Church” or “Udi Orthodox Church” – as part of a new narrative that connects modern-day Azerbaijanis to ancient peoples, cultures and early Christianity in the Caucasus. The common features of this state-“engineered” narrative are denial of facts, erasure of evidence and reinvention of history, which goes back to Soviet times.

1 Introduction

At the height of the second Karabakh war, the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences published an interview, in October 2020, with the chairman of the small Udi community in Azerbaijan, Robert Mobili. A geologist by profession, Mobili expressed hope that “after the complete liberation of Karabakh from occupation”, Azerbaijan will be able to “show the world” how Armenians had “falsified” monuments which “historically belonged to Azerbaijan”. More significant, he declared that upon Azerbaijan’s victory, “the restoration of the Albanian Apostolic Church will be the final blow to Armenia”.¹ Indeed, in February 2022, Azerbaijan’s Cultural Minister Anar Karimov announced: “A working group of specialists in Albanian history and architecture has been set up to remove the fictitious traces written by Armenians on Albanian religious temples”.²

In September 2020, Azerbaijan attacked the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh to “liberate” it from the control of the self-declared Republic of Artsakh. The war was portrayed as Azerbaijani government’s last resort response to decades-long Armenian intransigence to negotiate a settlement. By the end of a 44-day devastating war, Karabakh Armenians not only lost control of significant parts of territory, but also a security buffer zone of seven regions around Kara-

1 Mobili *apud* Hacıyeva (2020): interview prepared by Gülnar Hacıyeva, Deputy Head of the Press and Information Department of the Presidium of the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, 13 October 2020.

2 Karimov *apud Report* (2022).

bakh, which they had controlled since the first Karabakh war in the early 1990s as a bargaining chip in the negotiations process for final political status. A ceasefire agreement was signed on 9 November 2020 with Russian mediation and deployment of Russian peacekeepers.

Presidents Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey celebrated the “historic victory” at a joint military parade in Baku on 10 December. Mr Aliyev proclaimed that “there is no Nagorno-Karabakh conflict anymore”. The conflict was resolved militarily. Nevertheless, the absence of a final peace agreement keeps this oldest conflict in the former Soviet Union simmering for some time to come. Nagorno-Karabakh – a 4,400 sq. km enclave within the internationally recognised boundaries of Azerbaijan – was an Autonomous Region in then Soviet Azerbaijan, with a population of about 150,000. Starting in the early 20th century, the core of the conflict has been Azerbaijan’s territorial boundaries and integrity and the Karabakh Armenians right of self-determination.

Since November 2020, the status, condition and utilisation of places of worship in the territories that have changed hands are uncertain and increasingly endangered. A significant number of Armenian churches, monasteries and religious monuments have come under Azerbaijani control, among them the 13th century Dadivank monastery in Kalbajar, which is one of the few places of worship that is being protected by the Russian peacekeeping forces.

Within months after the war, while visiting a church building in the newly renamed village of Hünərli (Khojavend district) – which was called Tsakuri until 25 November 2020 – an angry and determined President Ilham Aliyev, dressed in army fatigue along with his wife, vowed to “renovate this ancient Albanian church”. Talking into the camera following him, he said:

This is an ancient Albanian temple, an Albanian church, it is located in the village of Hünərli. The Armenians wanted to Armenianise this church too, made inscriptions here in Armenian, but could not achieve this.... This is our ancient historical monument, the temple of our Udi brothers.... All these inscriptions are fake, they were made later. They have created a falsified history for themselves on our ancient lands. But we exposed them. The fact that this church – an Albanian temple – is in such a state once again demonstrates the falsifications of the Armenians. If it had been an Armenian church, they would have repaired it.³

The battle has moved to the spheres of history, religion and culture. This Chapter shall discuss as to how, especially following the second Karabakh war, religion

3 “Это – древний албанский храм, албанская церковь, она расположена в селе Хунерли. Армяне хотели арменизировать и эту церковь, сделали здесь надписи на армянском языке, но не смогли добиться этого. Если бы это была армянская церковь, неужели они оставили ее в таком состоянии? Она похожа на хлеб, словно хлеб, мусорная свалка. Это – наш

and cultural heritage is instrumentalised for political interests, territorial claims and to re-writing history of the region. While historical revisionism is not new and goes back to the Soviet era, what is new is how the Azerbaijani *state* is constructing an “Albanian Apostolic Church” – variously called “Udi Church” – as part of a new narrative that connects modern-day Azerbaijanis to ancient peoples, cultures and early Christianity in the Caucasus. Even as Azerbaijan instrumentalises the country’s Moslem credentials in its foreign relations, especially to mobilise support in the Islamic world, the state is aggressively engaged in branding and presenting *all* Armenian Christian monuments on its territory as “Caucasian Albanian” and the Udis as the descendants of “Azeri Christians”. According to this construct, the Albanians are ostensibly the “Christian ancestors” of the *Azerbaijani people* – even in the absence of ethnic, religious or linguistic connection.

2 The official narrative

For context, a brief discussion of the “scholarly basis” of the Azerbaijani narrative is in order. Farida Mamedova, Azerbaijan’s preeminent “Albanologist” and a leading proponent of the Caucasian Albanian theory – like her mentor Ziya Buniyatov and colleagues Igrar Aliyev, Davud Akhundov, Rashid Geyushev and Kamil Mamadzade⁴ – articulates the fundamental basis of the Azerbaijani ethnogenesis and culture in the preface of her 500-page book *Caucasian Albania and Albanians*:⁵

The people of Azerbaijan are comprised of three primary ethnocultural layers: Caucasian-speaking (Albanians), Persian-speaking (Medes, Kurds, Talysh, Tats), and Turkic-speaking. The Azerbaijanis and peoples of Dagestan are descendants of the Albanians, heirs of a vast ethnocultural layer and rich Albanian culture manifested in material, spiritual culture stretching back to antiquity, the early and late Middle Ages, and modern times. I am not

древний исторический памятник, храм наших удинских братьев. Они приедут и сюда. Армяне осквернили албанский храм так же, как осквернили наши мечети. Но мы восстановим. Все эти надписи – фальшивые, они были сделаны впоследствии. Они создали для себя на наших древних землях сфальсифицированную историю. Но не смогли добиться этого, мы их разоблачили. Тот факт, что эта церковь – албанский храм — находится в таком состоянии, еще раз демонстрирует фальсификации армян. Если бы это была армянская церковь, то они бы ее отремонтировали”: Aliyev *apud* Minval (2021); cf. also *Report* (2021).

4 Cf. Buniyatov (1965), Aliyev (1989b), Akhundov (1986), Geyushev (1984), and Mamadzade and Salamzade (1987).

5 Mamedova (2021: 3).

just referring to the cultural heritage of the 1000-year-old Albanian state but also that of the Albanians of later history, the five Albanian melikdoms [i.e. Karabakh; H.T.] and the remainder of Albanians.

After establishing the linguistic ethnogenesis of the Azerbaijanis, Mamedova explains the “multicultural”, “multi-religious” historical environment of contemporary Azerbaijani culture and ethnic identity, where “Albanian culture” stands out:

Although the Albanian culture and the ethnos were transformed with the adoption of Islam, we are the bearers of the rich culture created as a result of the succession of the religious systems of mankind. In other words, our culture originates in the Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim environment. It is the invaluable wealth and uniqueness of Albanian culture.

These theories are the fundamental “historical” and “scientific” background upon which the Azerbaijani state and authorities construct their narrative and policies. Mamedova’s book is published by the Baku International Multiculturalism Centre. Established in 2014 by the decree of President Aliyev, the Centre “ensures the preservation of tolerance, cultural, religious and linguistic diversity in accordance with the ideology of Azerbaijanism, as well as represents Azerbaijan as the centre of multiculturalism in the world, explores and promotes existing multicultural models”.⁶

Wolfgang Schulze, an eminent German linguist and a leading scholar of the Udi language “and its presumed ancestor, usually named ‘Caucasian Albanian’”,⁷ argues that “it is far from being self-evident to assume the existence of an ethnic unit because of a distinct language, just as a distinct language does not necessarily hint at a distinct ethnic unit”.⁸ He further explains that in Classical times the “language” aspect “generally played a minor role when attributing ‘ethnic’ features to a group of people”. Schulze agrees with Jonathan Hall that “language cannot be used as an objective definition of ethnic identity”.⁹

While historical information about the Albanian statehood is provided mainly by medieval Armenian sources (5th to 11th century),¹⁰ Schulze poses the question

⁶ Baku International Multiculturalism Centre (2019).

⁷ Gippert (2020b: 289).

⁸ Schulze (2018: 275).

⁹ Schulze (2018: 281).

¹⁰ Such as Movses Kalankatuatsi’s *History of the Country of the Albanians* (edition Arakelyan 1983, English translation Dowsett 1961a); Koryun’s *Life of Mashtots* (edition Abeghyan 1941; English translation Norehad 1985); Anania Shirakatsi’s *Guide to the Country* (edition Abrahamyan 1944; English translation Hewsens 1992); Movses Khorenatsi’s *History of the Armenians* (edition Abeghyan and Yartutyunyan 1913 [1995]; English translation Thomson 1978). Cf. Chapter 2 of this Handbook (Dum-Tragut and Gippert) for details.

“whether we can relate this statehood to a particular ethnic unit termed ‘Caucasian Albanians’”.

Even as the ethnogenesis of the Azerbaijanis continues to be a matter of academic debate, most scholars agree that Azerbaijan, as a national entity, emerged after 1918, with the declaration of the first Republic of Azerbaijan after World War I.¹¹ The debate as to how to name the Azerbaijanis goes back to the late 19th century. The population of Azerbaijan, formerly known as “Türk” or “Transcaucasian Tatar” was formally re-identified as “Azerbaijani” in 1937.¹² Indeed, the founder of the first Republic of Azerbaijan, Mohammad Amin Rasulzadeh, “admitted that naming the new republic *Azerbaijan* had been a mistake”.¹³ On the political level, a prominent advisor to the President of Azerbaijan had affirmed that “the very concept ‘Azerbaijani’” is an anachronism from the Soviet period. “Our language is Turkish, and by nationality we are Turks”, Vafa Guluzade had explained in 2000.¹⁴ In the Middle Ages, the territory of what is Azerbaijan today was inhabited by indigenous Caucasian peoples, which included the Caucasian Albanian Christian kingdom. The territory of today’s Azerbaijan came under numerous imperial jurisdictions, “among them ‘Turkic’, sometimes Persian (with whom present day Azerbaijanis share Shia Islam and not Sunni Islam which is that of the Turks [in Turkey, H.T.]”.¹⁵

According to the official Azerbaijani narrative, the Armenians in the Caucasus are “newcomers”. They plotted, with the Russian Tsarist government in the 19th century, “to de-ethnicise the Albanians, to which end a well-thought-out and, perhaps, centuries-old plan of the Armenian Church was created”, according to Mamedova:¹⁶

The first and decisive step on the path of de-ethnicisation was the relocation of Armenians from Iran and Turkey and settlement of them on the lands of the Azerbaijani khanates. The next step was the Regulations of the Tsar’s Government of 1836, approved by Emperor

11 Cf. Swietochowski (1990: 45); Atabaki (1993: 25); Hunter (1993: 230); Gachechiladze (1996); Kazemzadeh (1951); Smith *et al.* (1998: 50–53). For a discussion of Azerbaijani ethnogenesis and formation of the Azerbaijani nation, see Altstadt (1992). Altstadt provides an exhaustive history of Azerbaijan up to the present time, based, as the book indicates, “almost exclusively [on] Russian sources”. Cf. also Chapter 12 of this Handbook (Hakobyan).

12 As explained by prominent Azerbaijani historian Suleiman Aliyarov who argued in 1988 that the “full history of ethnonymic changes undergone by the Azerbaijanis should become public knowledge and no longer hidden” (cited in Saroyan 1997: 161 n. 5).

13 Atabaki (1993: 25).

14 Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty (2000).

15 Dragadze (1989: 68).

16 Mamedova (2021: 80–81).

Nicholas I, according to which the Albanian Apostolic Autocephalous Church was abolished and subordinated as a diocese to the Armenian Church of Etchmiadzin.

The “Albanian connection” has become a politicised issue of irredentism, especially in the context of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict in the last three decades. By establishing a connection between present Azerbaijanis and Caucasian Albanians, Azerbaijani historians provide a common *national history*, by promoting the idea of ethnic continuity and presence in Karabakh, and “proving” that Karabakh Armenians are relatively recent immigrants to the region. Therefore, Armenians are “non-indigenous” people living on ancient Azerbaijani lands. Indeed, modern Azerbaijani authors omit references to Armenians who inhabited Karabakh before the Turkic invasions of the region.¹⁷ For example, in the new Azeri edition of the 19th century chronicler Mirza Jamal Javanshir’s *Tarikh-e Qarabagh* – written in Persian – the statements that “in ancient times [Qarabagh] was populated by Armenians and other non-Muslims” and most other references to the Armenian presence in Karabakh are deleted.¹⁸ In the version of history promoted by academia and state officials in Azerbaijan, Albania is presented as the social, cultural and territorial predecessor of contemporary Azerbaijan; thus, refuting Armenian claims to Karabakh and even to the current Republic of Armenia. In a book by Aziz Alakbarli, published by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 2007 – and no less edited by Academician Budag Badagov, Prof. Vali Aliyev and Dr. Jafar Giyassi of the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences – the entire territory of the current Republic of Armenia is presented as Western Azerbaijan. *The Monuments of Western Azerbaijan*, reprinted several times in recent years and in different languages, opens with “The map [of] the Ancient Turkish-Oghuz land – Western Azerbaijan (present day the Republic of Armenia)” [sic!]. According to this “study”, endorsed by the Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences, *all* monuments in Armenia are of “Turkic”, “Turkish” or “Arman-Turkish” origin, including the first-century Roman Temple of Garni, “referring to

¹⁷ See, for example, Zeynaloglu (1989); Aliyev (1989a); Mamedova (1986); Buniyatov (1965); Aliyev (1974).

¹⁸ See Farzaliyev (1989: 108, 111, 112) and others, cited in Bournoutian (1994: 37 n.). Bournoutian (1992–1993: 185–186) reports that in “the 1950s and early 1960s, during the Soviet period, a number of Persian primary sources dealing with Karabakh, which were located in the Baku archives, were accurately translated into Azeri and Russian by scholars of the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan. All of these early translations were issued in limited editions and are now out of print”. However, in the 1980s and 1990s, in the background of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, “many new editions of these earlier translations have been published by the Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan, or by other state-sponsored publishers, in which most references to Armenia and Armenians have been altered or deleted”.

ancient Gargar Turks” [sic!], and the Cathedral of the Holy See of the Armenian Apostolic Church as a 7th-century “Arman-Turkish Christian temple Uchkilsa/Echmiadzin”.¹⁹

This kind of re-writing of “history” is based solely on sources produced by Azerbaijani authors, notably prominent academician and national figure Ziya Buniyatov, whom President Heydar Aliyev described as “the constructor of our identity and self-consciousness”.²⁰ This constructed narrative is echoed in the political discourse of President Aliyev and is woven into state policies, diplomacy, public relations, identity construction and, critically, in the construction of extreme anti-Armenianism in Azerbaijan. A representative example of this is a statement by President Aliyev in a speech of 2005, where he said: “The propagation of false scientific information and the distortion of history and the use of disinformation were used by the Armenians to concentrate world opinion to the myth of the Armenian point of view”.²¹ Such “talking points” are aggressively and extensively reproduced, embellished and disseminated on the internet and social media through thousands of fake accounts and trolls.²² One such page on Facebook is called “Monuments in Western Azerbaijan”, which states:²³

Territory of Western Azerbaijan is one of the historical parts of United Azerbaijan. Today, the Republic of Armenia is located on these ancestral lands of Azerbaijani Turks. Countless examples of material culture – the ruins of ancient settlements, necropolises, burial mounds, cemeteries, fortresses, bridges, temples, caravansarays, baths, sacred places testify to the historical past of the Turks in these territories. Both the written sources and similar monuments located throughout the territory of Azerbaijan testify to the belonging of these monuments to Turkic culture. Many of the monuments remaining on the territory of Armenia were destroyed or appropriated by the Armenians, who mainly appeared in the region at the beginning of the 19th century.

For decades, long before the start of the armed conflict in Karabakh, the “authentication” of the history of the region has been the scholarly battleground of historians, political scientists, archaeologists, researchers and bureaucrats. The consequences of Soviet scholarship – particularly in the process of construction of histories – have been disastrous and continue to have a negative impact on how conflicting parties in this region view “the other”. The roots of this historiography go back to the policy of “nativisation” (*коренизация*) in the Soviet Union, where by the construction of “national histories” in the Soviet republics was part of the

¹⁹ Alakbarli (2007: 7, 33, 61).

²⁰ Aliyev (2002: 21–25), quoted in Crombach (2019: 184).

²¹ Alakbarli (2007: 6).

²² See, for example, Alonzo (2020).

²³ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/westernazerbaijan> (accessed 12 February 2023).

official state teaching: that national identity is inseparable from the given territory of a national republic. The “nativisation” policy was intended to promote, for instance, national cultures, higher education and increase the number of natives in the Communist Party structures in a given republic. In line with this policy, the “official history” of the majority ethnic populations and that of their republics became virtually interchangeable. The Soviet state’s political operational code was “one republic, one culture”. Thus, “Azerbaijani historians produced histories of ‘Azerbaijan’ in the medieval period based not on the historical facts of a prior national state but on the assumption that the genealogy of the present-day Azerbaijani republic could be traced in terms of putative ethnic-territorial continuity”.²⁴ Hence, the once prosperous Armenian community in Baku and Armenian culture in Karabakh are not covered in the official history of Azerbaijan.²⁵ In turn, the history of Azerbaijanis and Moslems who lived in Armenia as the majority population at the turn of the 20th century of what is Armenia today is not part of the official history of Armenia.²⁶

2.1 Selective multiculturalism and controlled religious tolerance

The Azerbaijani state’s aggressive branding of the country as a hub of multiculturalism and religious tolerance intensified after the “Karabakh victory”. In an address to the nation on 25 November 2020, President Aliyev boasted that “Azerbaijan’s policy on multiculturalism and inter-religious relations is praised by the whole world and world leaders”.²⁷ Yet, this extensive and sustained campaign comes at a high cost to the very ethnic and religious communities, which are ostensibly promoted and protected by the state. For instance, the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations “already oversees all Muslim educational establishments, censors religious literature of all faiths and approves or bans the building or renovation of any place of worship”. Recent amendments to the Law

²⁴ Saroyan (1997: 141).

²⁵ For example, Baku’s Armenian architects are “assimilated” into the broader Russian and European architectural categories and Armenian architectural monuments in Baku are not discussed at all, nor are the Armenians’ key business and industrial positions in Baku at the turn of the 20th century; see Fatullaev (1986), cited in Saroyan (1997: 162 n. 15). In a more recent presentation of cultural life in Shusha (Shushi) there is no mention of Armenian cultural institutions (Alibeyli 1998: 52–54).

²⁶ Tchilingirian (2003: 20–21)..

²⁷ Aliyev (2020).

on Religion introduced to the Parliament “hand[s] responsibility for naming prayer leaders in all mosques from the Caucasian Muslim Board to the State Committee”.²⁸ Back in 2018, in a report on Azerbaijan, *Forum 18*, a Norwegian-Danish-Swedish NGO for freedom of thought, conscience and religion, expressed concern about the continued utilisation of religion in state affairs:

The regime [in Azerbaijan], foreign apologists, and religious leaders coerced or co-opted by the [authorities], use claims of what the regime calls “tolerance”, “dialogue”, “multiculturalism” and similar terms to deny the reality of the regime’s serious human rights violations. For instance, delegations of religious leaders are used for propaganda when the regime seeks international trade agreements.²⁹

The Azerbaijani state, like the Republic of Turkey, controls the functioning of Islam and other religions through strict laws and regulations. The construction, control and dissemination of the narrative about the Udi connection to Albanian Christianity follows this pattern, the ultimate goal of which is serving the state interests – not necessarily the perturbed communities who have no choice but to follow the government’s line. A tweet by a diplomat, Nasimi Aghayev, Consul General of Azerbaijan in Los Angeles, summarises the state narrative:

On this #Christmas day [25 December 2021], let’s enjoy these beautiful images of ancient Azerbaijani Christian heritage [showing Gandzasar and *Dadivank* monasteries]. #Christianity arrived in #Azerbaijan in 1st century, becoming state religion in 313. Today hundreds of thousands of Christians live peacefully and practice freely in Azerbaijan.³⁰

Historical details or references to Armenian Christianity are left out or modified in the official narrative about Christianity “being a state religion in Azerbaijan”. Wolfgang Schulze explains that “King Urñayr of Albania was baptized by Gregory the Illuminator at about 314 AD” – the patron saint of the Armenians – “and he subsequently declared Christianity as the official religion in Albania (lasting until the 8th century). From that time on, the history of the regions of Albania was dominated by two factors: (a) by the political relations to Armenia and the Sassanid empire, (b) by the local Church history”.³¹ Such features of the “Caucasian Albanian Christianity” are absent in the Azerbaijani narrative. Interestingly, in *The Monuments of Western Azerbaijan* cited above, one reads that “Gregori Enlightener (he was ethnically Turkman Anak’s son) [sic!], started “by destroying... former temples in the country during the spreading of Christianity”, beginning

²⁸ *Forum 18* (2022).

²⁹ *Forum 18* (2018).

³⁰ Aghayev (2021).

³¹ Schulze (2018: 283).

with “the famous fire worshipping temple, located in the capital of the country Vagharshabad... in the territory of the Western Azerbaijan”.³² Yet, in another government-endorsed Azerbaijani publication, a book entitled *Christianity in Azerbaijan: From Past to Present*, Anar Alizade writes that “after receiving religious education in the Anatolian city of Caesarea, Gregory the Illuminator came to the Caucasus and began to preach there”. Alizade adds that according to “famous Albanian historian Moses of Kalankatuk” [i.e. Movses Kalankatuatsi], the Albanians had asked for his young grandson Grigoris to be their catholicos. “For our king Urnayr”, Alizade continues, “had asked St. Gregory to consecrate him bishop of his country... Grigoris was appointed as the bishop of Albania and Iberia. Some Albanian nobles who were in favor of Christianity, called Grigoris to their land. Thus, Grigoris became the Catholicos of Albania”.³³ While this kind of muddled “historical narrative” is intended to construct an ethnic connection between Albanians and Azerbaijanis, Schulze suggests that even though “religion can surely serve as an important marker of societal identity, it can hardly be related to ethnicity as such”.³⁴

2.2 Enter the Udis

Why would a state – where 96 percent of its 10 million population is Muslim, at least nominally, and where the government instrumentalises Islam in international relations – nurture and spend large resources on a Christian community of about 3000 Udis? In the official discourse, this is presented as part of Azerbaijan’s state policy of multiculturalism and government generosity towards non-Moslem minorities. Indeed, the Department of Interethnic Relations, Multiculturalism and Religious Issues of the Presidential Administration is tasked, among other things, “to ensure protection of the religious values of Christians living in the country within regulation of religious diversity”. The Udi community is a significant element in the official narrative, where Azerbaijan is presented as “the motherland of the Ancient Eastern Church – Albanian Apostolic Church, being one of the most ancient churches in the world. Ancient Albanian Christian temples dating to the present day clearly show how Christianity has ancient roots in the region”.³⁵

Yet, the underlying expected effect is to “response to the unfounded accusations of Armenians in relation to Caucasian Albania” and to expose “Armenian

³² Alakbarli (2007: 12).

³³ Alizade (2016: 25, 27–28).

³⁴ Schulze (2018: 307).

³⁵ Alizade (2016: 5, 4).

lies and falsifications”. In the preface of Alizade’s book – “intended for historians, religious scholars, representatives of the press who are interested in Christianity, as well as for a wide audience of readers” – Professor Etibar Najafov, Head of the Department of Interethnic Relations, Multiculturalism and Religious Issues of the Administration of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and Mubariz Gurbanli, Chairman of the State Committee on Work with Religious Associations of the Republic of Azerbaijan, write:³⁶

As we know, Armenians are trying to falsify the history of the Caucasian Albania, attempting to assimilate the Christian heritage of this ancient Azerbaijani state. The purpose of the Armenian fraud is clear. According to academician Ramiz Mehdiyev, during the destruction of Albanian church archives and other rich samples of materials reflecting the history and culture of Albanians, Armenians tried to prove that there was neither Albanian state nor Albanian Apostolic Church in history. And the Albanians’ lands historically belonged to Armenians. However, the historical truth is that the only heir of this heritage is the Azerbaijani people. ... The author reveals Armenian lies and falsifications and proves that the ancient Christian Albanian temples located both in Karabakh and in other parts of Azerbaijan, belong to the Azerbaijani people.

The author of the book, Anar Alizade, underlines that “the restoration of the Albanian Church is very important for our country, because Armenian aggressors making territorial claims against our country have been trying to appropriate ancient Christian Albanian temples, to reduce the influence of the Albanian Church, and to take possession of its rich heritage”. He goes on to explain the connection and importance of the Udis in Azerbaijan to the Albanian Church. Alizade says, “reviving the Albanian Church is both redressing a historical injustice, and answering false claims from an occupying force [i.e. Armenians] from a religious and historical perspective”.³⁷

As already stated, the reconstruction and restoration of “the Albanian Apostolic Autocephalous Church” is an official state policy of Azerbaijan. For about a thousand years the Albanian Church had followed the Armenian Apostolic brand of Christianity, but this is denied, erased or re-branded in the Azerbaijani narrative. The process of relaunch of the “Albanian Church” today has become a critical element in the consolidation of Azerbaijani identity. As Farida Mamedova explains:³⁸

The Albanian Apostolic Autocephalous Church gave guidance to and cared for the Albanian ethnos from the fourth century until 1836 without fail. Initially, from the fourth to the

³⁶ Alizade (2016: 7).

³⁷ Alizade (2016: 45).

³⁸ Mamedova (2021: 380).

eighth century, the Albanian Apostolic Autocephalous Church was the single church of the entire Albanian kingdom, and after the collapse of the Albanian state, the Albanian Apostolic Autocephalous Church served the Albanian ethnos in the revived Albanian kingdoms: Artsakh, Utik, Shaki, and Aran. The Albanian Apostolic Autocephalous Church, unlike the Armenian Church, had never left its domain, its Albanian kingdoms, principalities, its Albanian ethnos, just as the Albanian ethnos, with some exceptions (emigration), remained on its historical homeland. Only the tsarist policy could suppress its activity and liquidate it. The primary sources testify to the aspiration of the Armenian clergy and the Armenian secular nobility to establish relations with the Albanian Apostolic Autocephalous Church.

Since de facto an “Albanian Apostolic Autocephalous Church” does not exist, in order to remake this “ancient Eastern Church”, the state is engaged in a process of what could best be described as “reverse engineering” of a church. Large resources are provided and political, financial, diplomatic tools are utilised to acquire all the defining elements that would make the invention of such an “Eastern Christian Church” possible. The Udi community is the “living base” from where this state project starts.

The Udis were not always the darling of the Azerbaijani state and were looked at suspiciously in the early post-Soviet period. They “did not easily fit into the Turkic-dominated identity that the newly independent Azerbaijan promoted”.³⁹ Indeed, until the early 2000s, the Udis were not allowed to serve in the Azerbaijani army. They were perceived to have “Armenian connection” and “as a result of the policy of Armenianisation” by Armenians, ostensibly the Udis “were once forced to adopt the *-yan* surname ending (surnames have changed since and now Udi surnames end in *-ri*)”.⁴⁰

The government had even changed the name of their main city, Vartashen (‘town of roses’ in Armenian), to Oğuz, “honoring a famous Turkic tribe with no connection to the Udis or the area”.⁴¹ Today, the village of Nij is the main locality of the Udi community. According to Schulze, “Nij is divided into sixteen ‘family-based’ quarters (*şaq’q’a* or *mähällä*), two of which are mainly inhabited by Azerbaijanis (Yalgaşlı, Abdallı)”.⁴² During Soviet times, Vartashen had a population of

³⁹ Agha (2021).

⁴⁰ “Başqa bir maraqlı fakt: erməniləşdirmə siyasəti nəticəsində vaxtilə udilər “yan” soyad sonluğu qəbul etməyə məcbur ediləblər. Nəticədə Azərbaycanın müstəqilliyinin ilk illərində – 90-cı illərin əvvəllərində udilər hərbi xidmətə aparılmır. Hazırda isə onların soyadları daha çox “rı” sonluğu ilə bitir” (Astanbəyli 2019).

⁴¹ Agha (2021).

⁴² The Chotari quarter, which hosts the church of St Elisaeus in Nij (cf. 2.3 below), appears under the name of Chotanyan (Чотанян) in E. Lalayan’s archeological account (1919: 38), thus providing an example for the replacement of the suffix of surnames thematised above (cf. n. 40).

about 5,000 people, “roughly 40 % Armenians, 15 % Jewish Tats, and 30 % Udis”. In the late 1980s, Vartashen was “a more or less compact group of ethnic Udis, too, located some 20 km northwest of Nij”. However, as Schulze explains:⁴³

Together with the local Armenians, most of the Udis from Vartashen were forced to leave the village in 1990 due to the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict and thus moved to various places of the former USSR. The village of Zinobiani (named “Okt’omberi” from 1938–2000) in Eastern Georgia had been founded by emigrants from Vartashen in 1922 in the context of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict 1918–1920.

Nothing of this history is mentioned in contemporary Azerbaijani literature on the Udis. The main point of value that is often emphasised is their connection to the Caucasian Albanians. As Rafi Gurbanov writes: “The Udis are the successor of the 26 tribes within Caucasian Albania that played an important role in the history of multicultural Azerbaijan. Today, they managed to protect their language, culture, traditions and belief, as well preserve the moral legacy of Caucasian Albania in their ethnic identity”.⁴⁴

There are only about 3,000 Udis in Azerbaijan today. But what is critical to our discussion is the fact that the Azerbaijani authorities, not the Udis themselves, have determined that only the Udis are the descendants and followers of the Caucasian Albanians. This is part of a state-constructed narrative that has been especially promoted internationally during the reign of President Ilham Aliyev since 2003. Some believe the Udis are “hostages” of the state because the sole purpose of their protection by the Azerbaijani government is to use them as a political tool against Armenia and the Armenians and “strengthen its claims to Karabakh”.⁴⁵

As part of the process of the strategy to utilise the Udi legacy for state purposes, soon after President Aliyev came to power, the Udis were given official recognition as a community and organised under the umbrella of the Albanian-Udi Christian Religious Community, which acts as the formal representative of the Udis in Azerbaijan.

As historically the Albanian Church was absorbed into the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church from about the 11th century and on, there is no separate or “autocephalous” Albanian Apostolic Church, with its own liturgy, rites, doctrines, hierarchy, clergy, etc. In the 1990s, fragments of what is regarded as Caucasian

⁴³ Schulze (2018: 289–290); cf. Chapter 5 of this Handbook (Schulze and Gippert), 2.1 for more details.

⁴⁴ Gurbanov (2019: 30).

⁴⁵ Kharatyan (2020); Ostrovsky (2005).



Fig. 1: The Chotari church before its reconstruction (1979).

Albanian language were discovered by scholars at St Catherine’s monastery in Sinai. It has been proven to be related to the Udi language.⁴⁶ The Udis are considered to be the closest descendants of the Albanians. As such, the small Udi minority community in Azerbaijan has been enlisted by the government to recreate the Albanian Church – as an important political asset in the process of rejecting and erasing Armenian presence in these territories.

President Aliyev’s determination to physically “de-Armenianise” all religious and cultural heritage had started nearly two decades ago. A well reported case is the renovation of the church in Nij in 2005. Nij is a predominantly Udi village, where, as visiting Simon Ostrovsky wrote at the time, “although they call themselves Christian, there is little that Christians from other parts of the world would find in common with them”. Indeed, in the absence of any Christian church hierarchy or liturgical tradition, the Udis “celebrate[d] Islamic holidays together with their Muslim neighbors”.⁴⁷

The project of the renovation of the church came to the attention of the international public when the Norwegian Humanitarian Enterprise (NHE), the sponsoring Norwegian state-financed NGO, discovered that the Armenian inscriptions of the church had been removed or obliterated. As reported at the time: “To the Udi, who used Armenian script when their church was built, toeing the official Azeri line [had] become more of a priority than historical accuracy”. The centuries-old, white-stone church had not been tempered with until the reconstruction undertaken by the Udis under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture of Azerbaijan with Norwegian financing (see Figures 1–3 illustrating the state of the church before, during and after its reconstruction, and Figure 4 showing one

⁴⁶ Cf. Chapters 3–5 of the present Handbook (Gippert and Schulze) for details.

⁴⁷ Ostrovsky (2005).



Fig. 2: The Chotari church during its reconstruction (May 2004).



Fig. 3: The Chotari church after its reconstruction (August 2011).

of the deleted Armenian inscriptions).⁴⁸ “This is an act of vandalism and Norway in no way wants to be associated with it”, lamented Norway’s Ambassador to Azerbaijan Steinar Gil. Alf Henry Rasmussen, the director of the NHE in Azerbai-

⁴⁸ The inscription reads *ԿԱՌՈՒՑԵԱԼ Է ՅԱՅՍ Ե՛ | ԿԵՂԵՑԻ ԱՆՈՒՍԱՐ ՍՐԲՈ[Յ] | ԵՂԻՇԻԻ ՀԱՎԱԼ ԱՐԴԵՍԱՐԲ | ԵՆԳԻԲԱՐԻ Ե՛ ՈՐ(ԴԻ) Ե՛ Տ(Է)Ր Ա(ստուա)ԾԱՏՈՒԻՐ Ե՛ ՈՐ Է ՅՕԶԱՆ.ՋԱՆ|Ն ԻԻՐՈՆ* – “Erected was this church with the name of St Elisaeus, by pure fruits, (by) the son of Engibar, Tēr Astowacatowr, who is his Yöhanjan”; cf. Karapetyan (1997: 42 no. 219).



Fig. 4: Armenian inscription of the Chotari church (2004), now annihilated.

jan, said, “Luckily enough there are good pictures of all these writings. They are well documented. And it is my hope that when years have passed and the tensions between the two countries [Armenia and Azerbaijan] have eased, it will be possible to reinstall the original writings”.⁴⁹ A visit to the church by Norway’s prime minister was cancelled and no one from the Norwegian embassy attended the opening.

2.3 The Albanian Church

The Albanian Church, like that of Iberia (until 608), having been established by Armenian missionaries, pledged canonical allegiance to the Armenian Church. At the wake of the controversy over the “dyophysite” Christology of the Council of Chalcedon, the three churches jointly convened the Council of Dvin in the 6th century and rejected the decision of Chalcedon. In 552, the seat of the head of the Albanian Church was moved from Derbent to Barda and an Albanian Catholicosate was established. The patriarch of the Albanian Church was given the title

⁴⁹ Maghakyan (2006).

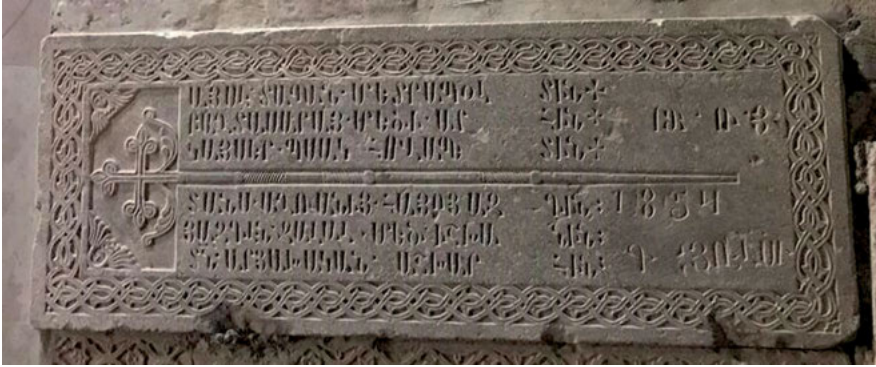


Fig. 5: Epitaph of Baghdasar (1854).

Catholicos of Aduank (Artsakh and Utik) and received his ordination and canonical authority from the Catholicos of Armenia.⁵⁰

From the 11th to the 13th century, more than forty monasteries and major religious centres were built in Karabakh through the patronage and efforts of the “Armenian princes of Artsakh”.⁵¹ One of the most famous clans to have contributed to the revival of the Church and piety in Artsakh is the Hasan-Jalalyan princely family who, besides building the famous monastery of Gandzasar, have given several Catholicoses and bishops. The epitaph of Metropolitan Baghdasar, the last clergyman in the Jalal clan, who is buried in the courtyard of the monastery of Gandzasar, reads: “This is the tombstone of Metropolitan Baghdasar, an Armenian Albanian, from the family of Jalal, the great Prince of the land of Artsakh, dated 3 July 1854” (see Fig. 5).⁵² Prince Hasan-Jalal was also buried in the same monastery in 1261.⁵³ Starting in the 15th century, the monastery of Gandzasar became the seat of the native Catholicos of the Albanian Church. The existence of a separate Catholicosate in Karabakh, with its own autonomous religious institutions, attests to the importance of the region as a religious centre.

In the 19th century, the status of the native Catholicosate was drastically reduced. When Tsarist Russia liberated Karabakh from Persian domination, Catholi-

50 Ulubabyan (1981: 201–204); cf. Chapter 7 of this Handbook (Dum-Tragut) for details.

51 Barkhutareants (1902: 194).

52 Այս է տապան Մետրապոլիտին | Բաղդասարայ մեծի արհին | Կալսեր պսակ հովապետին | տանս Աղուանից Հայոց ազգին | յգզգէն Ջալալ մեծ իշխանին | տեառն Արցախական աշխարհին; cf. Barkhudaryan (1982: 65, no. 177). The tombstone and the inscription are still visible to visitors to the Monastery of Gandzasar, situated in the village of Vank in the Martuni region. I transcribed the rhyming inscription during my visit there on 28 August 1995.

53 Cf. Barkhudaryan (1982: 40, no. 84).

cos Sargis of Albania (*Atuank*'), upon his return from exile, was demoted to the rank of Metropolitan by a decision of the imperial authorities in 1815. Metropolitan Sargis headed the See until his death in 1828. After his death, upon the request of the Meliks (princes), Catholicos Yeprem of Ejmiatsin, in 1830, ordained Baghdasar, a nephew of Sargis, Primate of the Diocese of Karabakh. He was ordained in the Cathedral of Ejmiatsin.⁵⁴ Thus, the Catholicosate located in Karabakh was reduced, first to a Metropolitan seat and then to a diocese of the Armenian Church under Ejmiatsin.

In the Azerbaijani narrative, the Albanian Apostolic Autocephalous Church had existed from ancient times until the 19th century, when the Armenians and Tsarist Russia conspired, as Mamedova asserts, to “de-ethnicise” the Albanian Church, “Armenianise” it and claim its historic heritage. She explains:⁵⁵

After the abolition of the Albanian Apostolic Autocephalous Church by the Russian tsarist government in 1836 and its subordination to Etchmiadzin Cathedral, the Armenian clergy started publishing Albanian literature in Armenian, having translated it into Armenian and edited with a deeply thought-out Armenian concept. And the Albanian originals were seized and possibly destroyed (this did not happen in 705 by the decree of the caliph, as opposed to what was believed in the literature, but much later). In this way, traces of the centuries-old, rich authentic Albanian literature were hidden.

This view is widely shared in Azerbaijan and frequently referred to in state and public relations discourse – at times, the Armenians are singled out as the culprits; in other times the Tsarist Russians, and sometimes both. President Aliyev, in a national address on television a few days after the second Karabakh war, referred to this period. He said: “Suffice it to look at history and anyone can see that in the 1830s, Tsarist Russia abolished the Albanian Church, gave all the property of the Albanian Church to the Armenian Gregorian Church, and Armenian priests and their patrons began to appropriate these churches”.⁵⁶ This is a common talking point, which fits President Aliyev’s “strategy of victory”, as it is called, whereby, he says: “We must not defend, but attack politically, from a propaganda point of view”.⁵⁷ For instance, Rafi Gurbanov affirms – in a state-financed publication – that the “historical mission of the [Gandzasar] monastery complex as headquarter [of the Albanian Catholicosate] was eliminated by the Armenians in 1837”.⁵⁸ More interestingly, it is reproduced in the narrative and public discourse

54 Ter Danielyan (1948: 62–67).

55 Mamedova (2021: 9).

56 Aliyev (2020).

57 Azertac (n. d.).

58 Gurbanov (2018: 14) with reference to Aslanova (2017). Gurbanov’s book was “Published by the financial support of Moral Values Promotion Foundation under the State Committee on Religious Associations of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Baku, Azerbaijan”.

of the Udi Albanian Christian community leaders themselves. According to community chairman Robert Mobili: “After the occupation of the Caucasus by Tsarist Russia, the church was directly subordinated to the Armenian Church”. He says, after Azerbaijan’s independence, “conditions were created” for the Udi Christian community to restore the Albanian Apostolic Church.⁵⁹ His deputy, Rafik Danakari, in an interview given to a Turkish newspaper, said, “Armenians wanted to destroy us. They stole everything, especially our religion, for centuries”. He repeats the main talking points and explains:⁶⁰

As a result of “Tsarist Russian colonial policy... the historical Albanian monument, the Saint Eliseus (Chotari) Church, built in 1723 in the village of Nij in Gabala province, was attached to the Armenian Gregorian Church in 1836 with a special decision of the Russian Holy Synod. But the Udis did not go to church in protest and started worshipping in their homes from that date on”.

2.4 A state-sponsored and led “restoration” of the Albanian Apostolic Church

The Azerbaijani state seems to be endeavouring to re-root the origins of the Albanian Church and deny and erase its historical, theological, ecclesial, hierarchical, liturgical or linguistic connections with the Armenian Apostolic Church. However, severing or erasing that connection is like hollowing the content and ending up with mere church buildings. A Christian church is not just a building (or “hardware”). Its content, essence – the “software”, as it were – is made of a system of teachings, dogmas, canons, liturgical practices, sacraments, hierarchy, religious functionaries, so on. Therefore, having re-written and invented the “history” of the Albanian Church over the decades, now the Azerbaijani state is engaging in acquiring the “content” of the Albanian Church. By erasing the Armenian dimension in the narrative, the Udi community in particular and the Azerbaijani state in general are faced with the issue of the “apostolicity” of the Albanian Church – the apostolic succession, which is a critical aspect in Eastern Christianity especially. The newly fashioned “Albanian Apostolic Church” as of yet is not recognised

⁵⁹ Mobili *apud* Hacieva (2020).

⁶⁰ “Ermeniler bizi yok etmek istediler. Başta dinimiz olmak üzere asırlarca her şeyimizi çaldılar ... Rusyası'nın Kafkasya bölgesindeki sömürge politikasının... Gabala ilinin Nic köyündeki 1723 yılında inşa edilen tarihi Alban anıtı – Kutsal Elysee (Çotari) Kilisesi, 1836 yılında Rus Kutsal Sinod'un özel bir kararıyla Ermeni Gregoryen Kilisesi'ne bağlandı. Fakat Udiler protesto ederek kiliseye gitmediler ve o tarihten itibaren evlerinde ibadete başladılar” (Danakari *apud* Kutlu 2021).

as an “autocephalous” church by any other established Christian Church or Patriarchate. Therefore, the Azerbaijani government “has sought help from other Orthodox churches in Turkey, Syria, Egypt, Israel, and Ukraine for support in bolstering its claims”.⁶¹ Udi community chairman Mobili acknowledged that “for the restoration of the Albanian Apostolic Church, everyone from ordinary Azerbaijani citizens to non-governmental organizations, the Caucasian Muslims Office and other organizations have supported us. In particular, the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan annually provides us with financial assistance”.⁶²

What needs to be underlined, again, is the fact that a Moslem-majority state is seeking recognition for a “national” Christian church it is creating – through its diplomatic relations and entire state resources. This is an endeavour that is much larger in scope than the needs of the mere 3000-strong Udi community in Azerbaijan. It helps that since 2012 the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, led by First Lady Mehriban Aliyeva, “has donated undisclosed sums to finance restoration work at the Vatican, including repairs to the Sistine Chapel”. As one commentator put it, given the Vatican’s influence in the Christian world, “there is more than a bit of realpolitik, and by helping the Vatican with restoration, the leadership of Muslim Azerbaijan hopes for support... from the pope’s side”.⁶³

Most critically for any church, the named Udi Albanian Christian Church does not have ordained clergymen. The two leaders who represent the Udi community under the auspices of the government are not ordained priests or clergy, even as they appear in public in clerical cassocks and headgear, interestingly resembling the garbs of Russian Orthodox priests. In the Christian tradition, priests are ordained by a church hierarchy that gives them legitimacy to conduct religious services or performance rituals. Virtually nothing is known about the liturgical services or religious practices of this Udi Albanian Christian Church today. For instance, a photo at the website of the Church in Nij shows an open Russian language Bible and, strangely, an “I love Türkiye” bottle opener as decoration on top of the lectern – apparently a souvenir that shows Istanbul’s skyline.⁶⁴ The icons in the church are in Russian (Byzantine) style, including a large reproduction of medieval iconographer Andrei Rublev’s famous “The Holy Trinity” icon, on the left side of the main altar.⁶⁵ At least the visuals in the church seem to reflect the

⁶¹ Agha (2021).

⁶² “Alban Apostol kilsəsinin bərpası üçün də sırası Azərbaycan vətəndaşlarından tutmuş, qeyri-hökumət təşkilatları, Qafqaz Müsəlmanları İdarəsi və digər qurumlara qədər hər biri öz növbəsində dəstəyini əsirgəməyib. Əsasən də Azərbaycan Respublikasının Prezidenti tərəfindən hər il bizə maliyyə yardımı ayrılır” (Mobili *apud* Hacıeva 2020).

⁶³ Owen (2016).

⁶⁴ *Azerbaijan Travel* (n. d.: gallery-1).

⁶⁵ *Azerbaijan Travel* (n. d.: gallery-5).

Chalcedonian tradition, which contradicts the official description of the Albanian Autocephalous Church. In the description endorsed by the government, it is said that the Albanian Apostolic Autocephalous Church “belongs to the branch of Ancient Eastern churches (a group of churches which recognize only the decisions of the first three Ecumenical Councils)... Thus, the Albanian Apostolic Autocephalous Church became monophysite”.⁶⁶

Recently attempts have been made by the Udi Albanian Christian Church to seek the patronage of the Syriac Orthodox Church. An opening to the Syrian Church seems to be through the Metropolitan of Mardin (Turkey), Archbishop Saliba Özmen, who has attended a number of government-organised conferences in the last few years, especially the much-highlighted and publicised conference on “Azerbaijan’s Albanian Christian heritage” in January 2021.⁶⁷ Reportedly, the two leaders of the Udi community pay regular visits to the Monastery of Mor Hananyo (“Saffron Monastery”) in the historic Tur Abdin region near Mardin to get religious training. For now, it appears that the Udi leaders’ connection is personally with Archbishop Saliba Özmen, rather than formally with the Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch. The Syriac Church is a member of the family of the Non-Chalcedonian Oriental Orthodox Churches, which includes the Armenian Apostolic Church.⁶⁸

Alizade reports, without details, that “several members of Albanian-Udi religious community are studying in religious educational institutions abroad in order to acquire religious titles”.⁶⁹ Ironically, in Mardin, archbishop Özmen’s Syriac Orthodox Church is caught in a maze of legal battles in recent years and is perpetually under state pressure. In 2017 alone, “the administration of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan [had] taken control of at least 50 Syriac churches, monasteries and cemeteries in Mardin province and declared them as state property”.⁷⁰ It remains to be seen whether there is a connection between the Syriac Orthodox archbishop’s good will towards the Udi Albanian Christian Church and the state of affairs in Turkey.

Since the end of the war, Mobili and Danakari often visit the churches that are claimed as Albanian in the territories that Azerbaijan retook during the war – mostly accompanied by TV cameras, journalists and scholars who provide on camera commentary on how Armenians have altered the Albanian sites. Interestingly, despite lack of a congregation, Danakari was appointed by Azerbaijani au-

⁶⁶ Alizade (2016: 24, 36).

⁶⁷ Azertac (2021).

⁶⁸ Agha (2021).

⁶⁹ Alizade (2016: 44).

⁷⁰ Malado (2017).

thorities as Udi “preacher” at Dadivank, even as Armenian monks have been living there since the ceasefire under the protection of the Russian peacekeepers.⁷¹

One might ask, how did Mobili and Danakari become “religious” leaders of the Udi Albanian Christian Church or what process led them to conduct “religious services”? Anar Alizade, who handled non-Muslim religious communities at the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, provides the answer in his government-endorsed book. Repeating the narrative that the “autocephaly” of the Albanian Church “was broken” in the 19th century under Tsarist rule, he explains:⁷²

Besides [state] registration [as a religious organisation], some measures related to Christian traditions have been taken to restoration the Albanian Church [sic!]. The restoration of this tradition required the blessing of the ancient Eastern church. *And in 2008, several members of the Albanian-Udi religious community received a blessing from the Patriarchate of Jerusalem and were baptized in the Jordan river. Thus was restored the independence of the Albanian-Udi religious organization* [emphasis added H.T.].

It is still unknown what kind of liturgical books, sacraments, prayer services, and liturgies the leaders of this “independent” church use. Most of the literature produced in Azerbaijan about the Udi church is about its “history” and the Albanian connection, but there is virtually no discussion about the religious practices, theological teachings, congregations, structure, etc. For all appearances, it is a church run by the government and mostly for government purposes. In 2013, for instance, it was the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations of the Republic of Azerbaijan that organised and financed the 10th anniversary celebrations of “the revival of the Albanian-Udi church and the 1700th anniversary of the adoption of Christianity as the official religion in Caucasian Albania”.⁷³ The clergy and representatives of the Russian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Jewish and Moslem communities attended the formal ceremonies held at Nij. President Aliyev has even expressed enthusiasm to restore the Albanian alphabet “for the modern Udi language (which currently uses the Latin alphabet in Azerbaijan, and the Cyrillic alphabet in other countries)”.⁷⁴

The two leaders of the Udi community, with the full support of the government, are actively seeking recognition and legitimacy. At least Mobili realises that this is a long road that will take a long time:⁷⁵

71 Cf. Xalq qəzeti (2020) and Trend (2020).

72 Alizade (2016: 43).

73 Alizade (2016: 44).

74 Agha (2021).

75 “Onlar bu gün Şərqi Apostol kilsələrini bərpa etməyə hazırdırlar. Onlarla keçirilən görüşlər zamanı bu rəsmi dəstəyi biz hiss etmişik. Bildiyimiz kimi, kilsənin öz qanunları var və bu qanun-

Today they [“the Christian world”] are ready to restore the Apostolic Churches of the East. We have felt this official support during our meetings with them. As we know, the Church has its own laws, and we need time to follow them... To be spiritual, we must know the Eastern cultural heritage, we must know the laws of the Eastern cultural heritage. Hopefully, after the complete liberation of Karabakh from occupation, we will face many falsifications in the restoration of monuments and show the international community that all these monuments have historically belonged to Azerbaijan. I can say that the Eastern Churches are ready to bless us and support us.... This cultural heritage has been falsified so much that it is difficult to tear it from them. But despite all this, today there is a strong Azerbaijani state, the country has ample opportunities to restore its cultural heritage. We will restore the Church, but we must do it step by step in order to be blessed by following the laws of the Church. We have the support of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church.

3 Conclusion

The invention of a “national” Christian Church engineered by a majority-Moslem state is a spectacular phenomenon in the 21st century. Yet, as President Aliyev put it, “from a propaganda point of view” Azerbaijan does not need to “defend” or explain its intentions. Denial of facts, erasure of historical and physical evidence, and the rewriting of history are all part of the state’s “political attack” strategy.⁷⁶ The main objective of this endeavour and strategy is to consolidate Azerbaijani identity and “nation-building” efforts of the state. This is primarily accomplished by (a) propagating that the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijani people have millennia deep roots in the Caucasus – through purpose-produced “scientific research”, creation of state-planned and financed institutions dedicated to “culture”, “multiculturalism”, “religious tolerance”, etc.; and (b) by debasing and demonising the Armenians as the “enemy” – “fascists”, “hateful” and “despicable” people⁷⁷ that for centuries had stolen this “national heritage” of Azerbaijan.

lara tam riayət edə bilmək üçün bizə vaxt lazımdır. İnşallah Qarabağı tamamən işğaldan azad edəndən sonra biz abidələri bərpa edərkən nə qədər saxtalaşdırmalarla qarşılaşacağıq və beynəlxalq ictimaiyyətə də nümayiş etdirəcəyik ki, bütün bu abidələr tarixən Azərbaycana məxsus olub. Mən onu deyə bilərəm ki, Şərq kilsələri bizə xeyir-dua verməyə hazırdırlar, bizi dəstəkləyirlər. Çünki onlar bilirlər ki, bu tarixdir. Siz dediyiniz kimi də, bizə İslam dünyası qədər xristian dünyası da dəstək olmalıdır. Bu mədəni irsi o qədər saxtalaşdırıblar ki, onu onlardan qoparmaq çətindir. Amma bütün bunlara baxmayaraq bu gün güclü Azərbaycan dövləti var, mədəni irsini bərpa etmək üçün ölkənin geniş imkanları var. Kilsəni bərpa edəcəyik amma kilsə qanunlarına riayət edərək xeyir-dua almaq üçün addım-addım bunu həyata keçirməliyik. Rus Provaslav kilsəsi və Katolik kilsəsindən bizə dəstək var” (Mobili *apud* Hacıyeva 2020).

⁷⁶ Azertac (n. d.).

⁷⁷ See, e.g., *Letters* (2016), Karagan (2016), Rzaev (2016).

In the process of state engineering of the Udi Albanian Christian Church – also called Albanian Apostolic Church – the religious and cultural heritage of the Udi people is expropriated, re-rooted, rearranged and reinterpreted by the state and national institutions in order to “prove” that the Azerbaijani people living in the Republic of Azerbaijan today are the descendants of “the Albanians” from the early centuries of Christianity. Viewed with suspicion in the early years of post-Soviet Azerbaijan, the small Udi community today is treated like the “apple of the eye” of the Azerbaijani state. The Udis are a crucial link to Albania and the Albanians; they are the “proof” of the purported theory of ethnogenesis of the Azerbaijanis – and, by extension, their territorial claims.

Within weeks of the signing of the ceasefire in November 2020, the National Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan announced the establishment of a “Scientific Center for Albanian Studies”. As reported by Javid Agha, well-known historian and opposition leader Jamil Hasanli considered this a step towards “degradation of the quality research that had been done into Caucasian Albania in Soviet Azerbaijan”. Writing on his Facebook page, Hasanli, who served for two terms in Parliament, said: “the ignorance that intensified after the collapse of the Soviet Union created a lot of undesirable tendencies in scholarship into pre-Islamic culture and Christianity in Azerbaijan. All this has led to very unfortunate results, the neglect of the [true] historical, cultural and political heritage of Caucasian Albania”.⁷⁸

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- Figure 3: Photograph Jost Gippert, August 2011.
- Figure 4: Photograph Nikolaus von Twickel, May 2004.
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