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**IDENTITY (TRANS)FORMATION IN DIVIDED ETHNIC  
GROUPS: THE CASE OF LEZGINS IN AZERBAIJAN**

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## IDENTITY (TRANS)FORMATION IN DIVIDED ETHNIC GROUPS: THE CASE OF LEZGINS IN AZERBAIJAN

*The primary purpose of this paper is to shed light on identity issues, with the focus on identity transformation in split ethnicities. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the majority of ethnic conflicts, such as those involving the Lezgins, Talysh, Ossetians and Armenians, sprang out of people's perception of separation by borders as a major threat to their unique identity. In the case of Lezgins, identity transformation from ethnicity to religiosity occurred in a quarter of a century, causing an identity clash within this ethnic group. Individual interviews were conducted with 9 Lezgins to research problems of identity (trans)formation of Lezgins in Azerbaijan at a time of an upsurge in religiosity among Lezgins of Russia and Azerbaijan. The paper illustrates, that besides religion various factors, such as urbanisation, education and integration significantly influenced the perceptions of identity and ethnicity in Lezgin case.*

**KEY WORDS:** *ethnicity, nation, religion, Islam, Azerbaijan, Lezgin*

### INTRODUCTION

Historically, the North Eastern region of Azerbaijan is a multi-ethnic region, with several ethnic groups that identify themselves distinctively as Lezgins, Udis, Tsakhurs, Ingiloys, Kryzs, Avars, Khinaligs and Budugs, whereas their religious identity remains united (i.e. Islam). Lezgins are the predominant subgroup, with a population of 180,300 according to the 2009 nationwide census (State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan 2009). By comparison, according to the 2010 census, there were more than 473,722 Lezgins living in Russian side of the border (Federal State Statistics Service, 2010).

In 1860, as part of the Russian Tsarist territorial policy, Lezgin-populated regions were split between Russia (Dagestan oblast) and Azerbaijan (Shemakhanskaya Guberniya) by annexing the Kurin Khanate and Derbend County to Russia and severing Lezgins historic connections to the South Caucasus. However, the Lezgin community remained close-knit, as national borders that split the region did not come into force until and after the establishment of USSR. However, in 1921 and 1965, there were two Lezgin revolts (Matveeva/McCartney 1997–1998, 213-252) expressing a

desire for unification of Lezgin-inhabited lands of the region under Russian administrative control. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Lezgins split into two camps and lost their cultural interactions with their counterparts on the other side of the border due to problematic relations between Russia and Azerbaijan in the early period following independence. This split contributed to the sudden emergence of an ethnic conflict in the region, with Lezgins at a crossroads of self-determination due to being ethnically split by two states.

Furthermore, the first war in Chechnya forced Russia to implement strict border controls to prevent Islamic guerrillas entering the Chechen Republic through Azerbaijan. These border controls led to an intensification of nationalistic ideas among Lezgin people on both sides of the border, with both groups viewing the border as a threat to their ethnic unity (Minahan 2002, 1084-1090). In 1996, following talks between Azerbaijan and Russia on simplification of border passes; the threat of isolation of the Lezgin people was eliminated.

The second Chechen War, in which the idealistic goals of the Chechen movement shifted from ones based on ethnicity to ones focused on religion in a concise period with the Islamic ideological and financial support of Arab countries (1995 to 1999), had a significant influence on the approach of the Lezgin people to their identity. In particular to those living on the Russian side of the border (Gordon 2007, 174-216; Yarlykapov 2012, 28-30). On the contrary, there were two contradictory views of ethnicity and religiosity among ethnic Lezgins in Azerbaijan, with one side supporting Islamic Sharia and the other rejecting Islamic way of life and appearing apathetic towards their counterparts in Russia for their radicalised devotion to Islam (Minahan 2002, 1084-1090).

This study will attempt to explain how and why ethnicities divided by borders establish and tend to change their identities, drawing on the case of Lezgins in Azerbaijan. It will also consider the preconditions conducive to the emergence of identity clashes within specific ethnic groups and communities. The existing literature mainly reflects on stateless ethnicities with respect to a single home state (Minahan 2004, 25-139; Hannerz 1989, 78-102). Indeed, Alesina et al. (2011, 15-33) assume that the states that split one specific ethnicity by border are an artificial one. The nature of the ethnic identity (i.e. matching or contradictory) of ethnic communities, such as Kurds, Azerbaijanis, Lezgins, Pashtuns, Balochians, Ossetians et al., residing in territories of two or more countries has rarely been studied. A comprehensive study is needed to identify the major and minor players in the identity politics of these communities. This paper looks at the identity crisis faced by Lezgins after the fall of the Soviet Union. It considers factors that played a role in this formation, including their historical background, in addition to religion. It also asks whether identity transformation is possible.

## DEFINITIONS OF CORE CONCEPTS AND THEORETICAL PILLARS

Identity is the result of subjective inner perceptions, self-reflection on the environment and external naming (Tajfel 1978, 77-101). Mol (1978, 35-57) claims that identity conception should be perceived in two different ways in the social sciences. The first stream of identity theory argues that identity is an immutable or slowly changing element of individuals. The second stream asserts that identity is adaptable and transitory and can rapidly shift as individual moves from one social setting to another. According to Mol (1978, 35-57), institutions are the decisive factor in determining whether identity is adaptable or immutable, with family-, religious- and ethnic-oriented institutions stimulating the maintenance of identity.

Foucault (1977, 79-108) was the initial and foremost exponent of the idea that collective identity is a concept that serves to maintain the balance of the power triangle of authority, resources and status. Following other social constructivists and social identity theorists, Foucault's theory is based on the belief that the collective wisdom of identity is a tool for the reduction of inter-group threat, which is caused by asymmetric power. Brubaker and Cooper (2000, 176-179) argue that individual or collective identity not fall within the spectrum of self-interest but is strongly associated with self-understanding and sameness perception.

In definitions of ethnic identity, there are many recurring themes, such as a shared history, culture, language, race and geographical settlement, in addition to a strong sense of religious solidarity. Both internal and external factors play a role in ethnicity. External aspects of ethnic identity include observable behavioural patterns, such as speaking the same language, practising ethnic traditions, attending ethnic-based institutions (church and schools) and taking part ethnic-based activities with family and friends. Internal aspects of ethnic identity indicate mindsets, attitudes, images (historical symbols, events or leaders) and feelings (Wsevolod 1993, 267-269).

There are three core schools of thought as regards the importance of external and internal aspects of ethnic identity: Primordialist, constructionist and instrumentalist. The Primordialist school of thought (Geertz 1973; Shils 1957; Isaacs 1975; Berghe 1989) argues that ethnic identity is inherited from one's ancestors and that it is a static notion, locked in a particular ancestral bloodline. This school of thought includes culturalist and sociobiologist perspectives and considers that physical and cultural elements play essential roles in defining ethnic identity. For example, maternal blood kinship (culturalist) is sufficient to be considered Jewish or having a physical appearance to someone of Japanese descent (sociobiologist) is deemed sufficient to be identified as Japanese. However, primordialist theory cannot explain how ethnic identity changes or disappears. The theory also falls short in considering the roles

that outside the box factors, such as economic and political influences, play in ethnic romanticism and tradition (Glazer/Moynihan 1963, 207-213).

The constructionist school (Anderson 1991, 1-47; Bloom 1990, 55) asserts that ethnicity is an artificial impulse arising from a sense of belonging and that it can be socially constructed merely by highlighting non-static and adaptability features of ethnic boundaries. Constructivist theorist Sarna (1978, 370-378) defines the circumstances that cause the emergence of ethnicity as ascription and adversity. According to Sarna (1978, 370-378), under conditions of ascription, external factors define an individual's sense of ethnic belonging through formal institutions. Under conditions of adversity, the individual feels compelled to align him/herself with a specific group made up of the discriminated or prejudiced against. The core problem with the constructionist school of thought is that it fails to elaborate on the role played by ancestral ties, which primordialism adamantly assert play a vital role in ethnicity.

The approach of the instrumentalist school in explicating the emergence of an ethnic identity overlaps with that of social identity theorists and rational choice theorists (e.g. Banton 1983, 399-434; Hechter 1988, 57-69). All three schools of thought explain ethnic identity from the perspective of a power struggle over insufficient resources. Instrumentalists believe that a person is motivated to become part of an ethnos when the subscription to a cause promises profuse economic (material) and political (moral) returns. Instrumentalists perceive ethnicity as comprising a coalition of individuals over authority, resources and status (Collier/Hoeffler 1998, 79-82). Glazer and Moynihan (1963, 207-213) claim that ethnic groups are not only tools for political mobilisation but also interest groups that work efficiently due to their unique cultural homogeneity.

In the present paper, I underline the importance of the primordialist approach in explaining the Lezgin case. Although this approach is considered outdated today, Lezgins, especially those living in rural areas highlighted the role of ancestral kinship as a major attribute of being a Lezgin during interviews. However, weaknesses of the primordialist approach need to be acknowledged. For example, the approach cannot be applied to examine economic and political elements of the Lezgin case or questions regarding the revival of religious identity. Taking the issues above into account, I employed rational choice theory to test the following hypothesis (Hypothesis 1):

A sense of national identity (Azerbaijanism-civic nationalism) or universality would be significantly higher among urbanized, integrated and educated Lezgins than among rural-dwelling and poorly educated Lezgins.

This hypothesis does not consider urbanisation, integration and education separately. Just 21.8% of Lezgins in Gussary (one of the biggest Lezgin populated region/city) live in urban areas, and only 6.4% of the population in the city have a higher education (The State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan 2016). Despite the fact that very few members of the population live in urban areas or having higher education, I believe it is worthwhile considering how integration and economic factors influenced the identity perception of urbanised Lezgins since independence.

Taking into account that the vast majority (69%) (The State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan 2016) of Lezgins live in rural areas and have benefited little from the economic wealth of the country, they likely hold more primordialist views of ethnic unity, views that may well clash with the national identity of the country. Therefore, I propose the following (Hypothesis 2):

Ethnic identity would be superior to national identity among countrified ethnic groups, divided by political borders.

Furthermore, the second Chechen War dramatically altered societal dynamics in the North Caucasus, with religious affiliations and values coming to the fore. Just after the fall of USSR, compared with the north, the upsurge of religion was slow in the south (Minorities at Risk Project 2003). The rapid resurgence of Islam in the north had a significant adverse effect on ethnic unity among Lezgins. Taking these factors into account and presuming that Lezgins in Russia and Azerbaijan were Sunni Muslims since the Arab invasion of the Caucasus, I propose that (Hypothesis 3):

Although Lezgins in Russia and Azerbaijan were Sunni Muslims, religion/Islam was not an active unifying element of Lezgin identity among those living in the Caucasus region.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS, METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

In the present paper, I address the following questions:

1. How did the upsurge of religion/Islam change the identity perception of Lezgins in Azerbaijan?
2. Did religious affiliation contradict ethnic identity among Lezgins?
3. Was a strict border policy, which limited visits by Lezgins to relatives in the north or south of the country, the principal cause of the rise in ethnic sentiment among Lezgins?
4. Did urbanisation, integration or educational background influence the attitudes of Lezgins towards their identity?

Given the ethnic and religious dichotomy among the Lezgin population, this paper adopted a qualitative research method to understand public attitudes in the region towards identity perception. The weakness of qualitative methods is the subjectivity of both the interviewee and interviewer. Thus, the findings of qualitative research should take account of individual attitudes and thoughts (Sale/Lohfeld/Brazil, 2002, 43-53). In Lezgin case, views and attitudes towards identity differed significantly, depending on personal beliefs, place of residence (urban and rural), inter-ethnic marriage, education and employment. Thus, semi-structured interviews were selected to discuss identity perceptions, contradictions and trends. This methodology lends itself to open-ended questions that do not limit discussion and allows follow-up of specifics that require additional clarification. According to Cohen et al. (2000, 167), semi-structured interviews can provide a comprehensive of various aspects of narratives, facts and texts that are associated with ethnicity and religiosity perceptions from normative and descriptive stands.

To test the abovementioned hypothesis, interviews (average duration is 40 minutes) were conducted during the period from July 20 to August 5, 2017. The study group consisted of 9 Lezgins (6 males and 3 females, the average age of 39 years) living on the Azerbaijani side of the border. The participants were from very divergent educational (4 higher, 4 secondary, 1 ongoing higher) and residency backgrounds (5 urban, 4 rural/Gussary, Baku, Oguz and Khachmaz) and had different views on ethnicity and religiosity. The interviews were recorded with the permission of interviewee, and after transcribing the recordings, all recordings were destroyed. The qualitative analysis has been done by the Nvivo 11 software support.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Following independence (1992-1993), the ruling nationalist government of Azerbaijan failed to unify all ethnicities under a single flag. In response to widespread separatist ideas of Lezgin nationalists (Sadval), the government compromised on its goal of a unified identity for all the people in the country in favour of an all-inclusive multi-cultural model. After 1993, with strong support from the national government of the time, headed by Haydar Aliyev, the concept of "Azerbaijanism" finally succeeded in appeasing all parties involved in the process of unifying the various ethnic groups in the country. The way in which Lezgins perceive national identity in the context of Azerbaijanism is unclear. Arguably, there are very diverse views among Lezgins on this ideology. Many Lezgins, particularly well-educated individuals living in urban and suburban areas, maintain the importance of Azerbaijani citizenship side by side with expressing a unique ethnic belonging. Based on the interviews, it could be concluded that ethnic identity, as a whole does not contradict ideas of citizenship

and rights of Lezgins in Azerbaijan. However, it should be noted that the values and memories of Lezgins living in urban centres in the northern and eastern Azerbaijan are more in line with those of Azerbaijanis than Lezgins living in the Dagestan Republic.

Interviewee (7) (male, 45-year-old university professor, PhD, urban-Baku) underlined that: *“Although my family is originally from Makhachkala, a densely populated area with Lezgins, I always say that I am Azerbaijani first and Lezgin second. I was born in Baku, and I have more values in common with Azerbaijanis, as well as memories of my time here than with my relatives in Makhachkala. I have never introduced myself as Lezgin in conversation. However, if asked insistently, I will admit to being a Lezgin...I have very weak connections with my relatives living in Dagestan. Maybe that is because of my lack of spare time due to my lifelong educational goals”*

According to the interviewed Lezgins, it could be argued that national and ethnic identities are not two competing elements of identity for urbanized individuals. Interviewee (8) (Female, 21-year-old, university student, urban-Baku) clarifies this by stating:

*“Azerbaijan is my country, and it is my universal right as a citizen to be here. No matter what ethnicity you belong to, if you were born here, you have a right to claim to be an Azerbaijani. There is no other motherland for me except this one. In my view, being both a Lezgin and an Azerbaijani is not contradictory”.*

As shown by the interviews, the economic climate was one pivotal element in Lezgins' emerging pro-Azerbaijan disposition and re-evaluation of their choice of identity. About the life quality of Lezgin communities both in Russia and Azerbaijan, the interviewees indicated that Azerbaijan offered more economic opportunities than did Dagestan Republic, Russia. Interviewee (8) (Female, 21-year-old, university student, urban-Baku) expressed the following:

*“If we consider cultural rights, the situation in Dagestan is much better than in Azerbaijan. Linguistic rights are better protected in Dagestan, and we have our own TV channels, journals etc. However, the economic situation and welfare are significantly better in Azerbaijan for Lezgins [...]”*

During the early years following independence, Azerbaijanis, together with other ethnic minorities in the country, suffered gravely from an unstable and often unfavourable economic environment. However, after two decades of economic instability, oil revenues flowed into Azerbaijan as a result of oil exporting contracts in the early 2000s. As a result, GDP per capita increased from 397 U.S. dollars in 1995 to 7,825 dollars in 2014 (World Bank 2017). This kind of economic boom made Azerbaijan

a more attractive country for its citizens. During this period, the Azerbaijani government invested more than a billion dollars in tourism in Lezgin-inhabited regions. However, whether Azerbaijan remains a rational choice of ethnic identity for Lezgins since the economic crisis in the country in 2015 (3,876 in 2016) is debatable.

All this abovementioned arguments and approaches of interviewed Lezgins toward the question of whether ethnic or national identity feelings prevail for them revealed that national devotedness in the form of civic nationalism is considered as a privilege not opposing with their ethnic identity. As a result, urbanised Lezgins' attitude towards the raised query approves the Hypothesis 1.

Based on the sentiments expressed by the interviewees, it could be argued that Lezgin ethnic identity is neither a choice nor an artificial concept. To elaborate, it is widely accepted that having Lezgin blood or being descended from a Lezgin is enough to be considered Lezgin. In contrast, an ability to speak Lezgi is not a decisive factor in being identified as Lezgin. Interviewee (6) (male, higher education, 36 years old teacher, rural-Oguz) explained this point by arguing the following:

*“Having a Lezgin ancestor is enough to be identified as Lezgin. However, speaking the language is not a strong reason for ethnic solidarity. For instance, learning Lezgi language or following Lezgin traditions do not make you Lezgin: You simply have to have Lezgin blood”.*

However, many of the interviewees were firmly in favour of the idea of teaching the Lezgin language to children, depending on their place of residence. It was also implied that marrying to a Lezgin girl or boy was one way of maintaining Lezgin culture and language. Interviewee (1) (male, middle school, 58 years old, rural-Gussary) clarified this as follows:

*“Ethnicity comes with specific values, family morals and traditions. These values may be considered meaningless by younger generations. Furthermore, linguistic and other differences may be a cause of conflict within the family. Maintaining and transmitting the Lezgi language and cultural values should be an obligation and honour for every Lezgin”.*

Another interesting finding was that although some of the interviewees claimed never to have learned Lezgi, they were still confident that a lack of linguistic awareness did not strongly influence or alter an individual's Lezgin identity. For instance, Interviewee (4) (male, higher education, 27 years old, urban-Baku) stated the following:

*“I do not speak Lezgi language. It is true that language is important, and we must learn it, but it is not an impediment to being Lezgin. To be honest, though, I am not planning to learn it. I would prefer to learn other languages. However, I do*

*worry about the future for my children. I used to think that if my children assumed an identity other than Lezgin, I would consider myself a failure in life. That is the reason why I married a Lezgin girl who can speak the language very well, and I hope she will balance this gap out”.*

Some interviewees held very antagonistic views of national identity, claiming that feeling Lezgin was much more important than any feeling of national identity. Interviewee (1) (male, middle school, 58 years old, rural-Gussary) stated the following:

*“The notion of ‘Azerbaijan’ is artificial. Lots of minorities in Russia, such as Ukrainians, Jews, Avars and Lezgins, may identify themselves as Russian, but the same is not true for Azerbaijan. We could not define every minority in here as Azerbaijani, as historically this term entails an association with a Turkic ethnic group. Even Russian historian in the 18th century emphasized that Azerbaijanis were a mixture of ethnic Turkic tribes and Kurds, but never Lezgins”.*

Interviewee (2) (male, middle school, 37 years old farmer, rural-Khachmaz) tackled the issue of Lezgins calling themselves Azerbaijani by underlining the following:

*“Citizenship of Azerbaijan is a reality for Lezgins. However, it is a slippery slope for Lezgin people because the same identity applied to Lezgins in the South cannot be applied to those in the North. It would make no sense. This identity contradiction threatens the cultural unity of Lezgins in the North and South of Samur River.”*

In the period following independence, although early ethnic sentiments mainly favoured unification of Lezgins, today, Lezgins have very diverse views on unification, independence and ethnicity. Some interviewees propose the European Schengen model that limits border checks. As interviewee (3) (female, middle school, 47 years old unemployed, rural-Gussary) stated:

*“I have always hated the borders because they put apart my relatives from me, but I have to obey the rules. I cannot help but think why I should be made to cross these strict border controls when I just want to visit my relatives, my brother’s house, for example. I think it would be better if there were no border controls, as is the case in Europe nowadays”.*

According to the interviewed Lezgins residing in rural areas, the prioritizing national identity (Azerbaijanism) over ethnic one is evaluated as a threat to their ethnic-cultural union with Northern Lezgins. That is why they punctuate Lezgin kinship even without maintaining language factor. In sum, the Hypothesis 2 is confirmed to be valid in Lezgin case.

As shown by the responses of the interviewees, views of Lezgins on ethnic unification have dramatically altered since the 1990s. Although the vast majority of Lezgins supported the idea of unification in the 1990s, modern Lezgins do not share the same perception towards their identity. During the second Chechen War, religious institutions penetrated the Northern Caucasus and caused the enervation of the ethnic institutions. As a result, the identity of Lezgins living in Russia changed, adopting a religious dimension (shared comfort provided by Islam) that affected the cultural and ideological unity of the Lezgin people. Of note, modern and secular Lezgins living in Azerbaijani side now consider these religious and radicalised Lezgins a threat to their ethnicity. Interviewee (5) (female, higher education, 33 years old PhD, urban-Baku), very carefully expressing his views on high ethnic romanticism, had this to say about the issue:

*“My cousin is a practicing Muslim living in Makhachkala. I watched him become very religious, and he eventually started to ignore his Lezgin roots. Religious elements, the Islamic brotherhood, are very important in his view. I believe that many people living on the Russian side of the border feel the same way as my cousin does: being Lezgin is not important for devoted Muslim Lezgins”.*

However, as shown by the comments of Interviewee (9), the desire for such unification has now been abandoned or altogether rejected. Interviewee (9) (male, middle school, 49 years old, urban-Khachmaz) responded to the existence of the ideology of unification:

*“Illiterate and religious people living in Dagestan will negatively affect the people in the south. Anyway, the number of Wahhabis (Salafis) in the neighbourhood is increasing and they totally ignore Lezgin identity while asserting Muslim brotherhood. They even ignore their parents, siblings and relatives blaming them not to obey the Islam in Salafi way. I seriously meander if we unified with our Northern brothers, this trend will shrink the Lezgin identity in the South as well”.*

Today, religion/Islam (Shafi and Salafi) has become detrimental to unifying Lezgin identity by playing a major role in inter-community clashes. At present, both the dominating institutions in the north (religious institutions) and south (secular institutions) are stirring up opposing sentiments on ethnicity and religiosity. According to Shafi and Salafi teachings that based on the tonal language of the Kur’an preach lines, such as *“Surely the (true) religion with Allah is Islam”* (3:18) recognises no room in Muslim communities for nationalism other than Islam itself. As stated in the Koran (13:5), language, colour and race are not benchmarks for harmony and privilege. Taking into account that, there is no room for unification on ethnic grounds in Islam, as Hypothesis 3 argues, religion could not be a platform for the ethnic unity of Lezgins.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, it is difficult to determine whether support for the Islamic faith has grown considerably among Lezgins. Due to the existence of Sunni followers within this ethnic group, it has become increasingly difficult to estimate the actual upsurge of religiosity in Azerbaijan. However, according to the interviews with Lezgins, ethnic and religious identities are contradictory. It is worth emphasising that ethnic identity is not as important as it was in the past due to economic development and the improved social status of Lezgins in Azerbaijan.

It is an undisputable fact that ethnic identity is competing with national identity in Azerbaijan. Regarding the ideology of “Azerbaijanism”, the Azerbaijani government has made significant progress in realising a change in the ethnic sentiments of Lezgins living in urban areas. However, it has failed to realise a change among Lezgins in rural areas, which have not prospered economically and remain underdeveloped.

It can be argued that ethnic groups that maintain their cultural unity within Azerbaijan’s borders tend to hold on to their national identity but not so much their ethnic identity. In fact, none of the ethnic groups not separated by the border in Azerbaijan made claims for independence till now. However, this argument could not be applied to other ethnicities that split by the borders, like Talyshs, Lezgins or Armenians living in Azerbaijan.

In the 1990s, ethnic sentiment prevailed both north and south of the Samur River border dividing Lezgin communities. However, it declined after religiosity, and radical elements of Islam alienated Lezgins in the north. The changing tides in the North Caucasus as a result of the Chechen War, in addition to the emergence of a whole new generation of devout Lezgins in the north, further contributed to the growing divergence from their southern counterparts in Azerbaijan. Although this situation fractured the Lezgin community of Russia (Dagestan) and Azerbaijan, it resulted in increased camaraderie and close ties between Azerbaijanis and Lezgins of Azerbaijan.

This research could not address the questions on the role of social networks in identity formation, as it ignores the strict border control impediments for divided ethnicities. It also does not consider external factors, such as financing of religious and ethnic institutions influenced by the politically interested actors. It would be interesting to identify how the politics of such countries influence split ethnicities in future research. Such research could help shed light on the myriad of inter-related factors that affect ethnic identity and religiosity in Azerbaijan today.

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