

Slam in the Name of Country: Nationalism in Contemporary Azerbaijani Meykhana

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A large backyard of one of the houses on the Absheron Peninsula is decorated with colorful lights.¹ The lamps throw shadows on the serious faces of men of various ages dressed in dark patterned shirts. The most honored among them are the members of *mejlis*—a gathering.² They are sitting at long tables, drinking fragrant black tea with thyme and lemon, and eating sugar cubes. Young men, sometimes even teenage boys, when they are not busy with their chores of bringing cigarettes or water, are intently watching the adults. There are multiple honorable guests among the group—Islamic religious leaders, dervishes, local businessmen, poets, and most importantly, *meykhana* performers—*meykhanachi* (Azerbaijani: meyxanaçı). Tonight, they have gathered to “read” *meykhana* for their friend named Afghan, who was released after many years in prison.³ Snapping their fingers to the rhythm, they take turns singing about their joy for their friend’s return, about him being an honest person, and the unrestful situation in the country.

The people are singing meykhana. *Meykhana* (meyxana) means musical poetry, recitative improvisation, facetious and humorous songs, sometimes called “folk rap,” that originated in Absheron and in the last two decades has spread across much of Azerbaijan.⁴ The variety of the genre’s definitions results from the significant changes in the content, context, and manner in

1. The Absheron Peninsula (also called Absheron) is a peninsula in Azerbaijan. It is the location of Baku, the biggest and the most populous city of the country, and also the Baku metropolitan area, with its satellite cities Sumqayıt and Khyrdalan. There are tens of villages located on the peninsula, known as Absheron or Bakuvian suburban villages; most of them have a rather long history, while others were formed from working-class settlements in the Soviet era.

2. Mejlis (Az.: məclis)—gatherings, in literal translation “a place of gathering.”

3. To read and to sing meykhana are denoted with the same word in Azerbaijani—“oxumaq.” Due to meykhana not being considered a music genre for many years, but rather a recitative, or poetry of sorts, the Azerbaijani say, “read meykhana” or “he said meykhana.” In this paper, I use the expression “to read meykhana,” however, it is also correct to say, “to sing meykhana,” especially if one has in mind the musical form of the genre.

4. Meykhana is most popular in such regions as the Absheron Peninsula and the Lankaran economic region (Astara, Jalilabad, Lerik, Lankaran, Masally and Yardymly), which is mostly inhabited by the Talysh people—an Iranian ethnic group. Nevertheless, meykhana is performed throughout Azerbaijan with the exception of the northern boundary, inhabited by Georgians, Avars, and Lezgi peoples, and even beyond the country, primarily in Russia and other post-Soviet republics.

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which meykhana has been performed over the last two decades.⁵ Before the 1990s, meykhana was read solely among men living in Bakuvian suburban villages called *kends* and in poorer districts of the city.⁶ Sometimes performers of this genre gathered late at night in private places—as it was described in the paragraph above—often, at chaykhanas or traditional weddings when most of the guests had already left.⁷ The participants of these mejlises smoked anasha or drank alcohol, and were entertaining themselves by composing and performing verses about current events.⁸ The rhythm and order of the verses were discussed prior to the performance. The challenge was not only to express one’s own opinion about current political and social events or everyday concerns, but to do so—often in reply to an interlocutor—in a joking manner and within the strictly-established poetical form resembling *aruz*.⁹ Otherwise, everything was allowed: foul language, dialect or slang phrases, non-grammatical forms, and words with foreign origin (primarily Russian). The meykhanachi, who, following the given form and topic, were able to perform the most ingenious utterance spontaneously and at the same time entertain the audience, enjoyed considerable prestige.

The way of reading meykhana described above is considered traditional and is rarely performed today. New formats of the performances (meykhana began to appear on the radio during public holidays, in films, and most importantly on television) and a different audience (women started to listen to and perform meykhana) led to a change in the essential characteristics of the genre. Contemporary meykhana, although it retains its characteristic rhythm, increasingly resembles popular songs and is now often being sung, not read. Thus, in its form and function, it has become an element of mass popular culture. At the same time, meykhana as a phenomenon is claimed to be defined as a full-fledged “national genre,” which proves its uniqueness as a musical tradition, and even became considered a national symbols on a par with other traditional musical genres.

5. In recent years, meykhana has been gaining more and more interest among scientists skilled in music, folklore, and literary science. The fundamental study of the phenomenon has been done by Aytac Rəhimova, *Azərbaycan musiqisində meyxana janrı* (Baku, 2002). In the book she explores the main structural features of the genre, the history of its development, and also analyzes the ways of translating meykhana into other artistic means of expression, such as opera, theater, cinema, or classical music. A valuable contribution into existing scholarship on meykhana, first of all, describing its composition and genre links with other literary forms, is Nizami Tağısoy and Zülaim Zakariyya, *Meyxanənin poetikası* (Baku, 2011).

6. *Kend* (Az.: *kənd*)—urban-type settlement with a population between that of a town and a village.

7. Chaykhana (çayxana; chay—“tea”) is a tea-house or a tearoom, an establishment popular in all Central Asian countries: Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey, which primarily serves tea and other light refreshments, sometimes alcohol and food. A visit to the tea-house by a woman is considered improper.

8. Anasha—a colloquial name for marijuana, widespread throughout the post-Soviet area.

9. Azerbaijani researchers claim that a large part of meykhana is related to *aruz* (əruz)—a system of prosody based on the alteration of long and short syllables, which originated in Arabic poetry in the sixth-seventh centuries and then, with some modifications, was adapted by the Azerbaijani from Persian.

There exist two main traditional musical phenomena that embody the “spirit of the people” in Azerbaijan.¹⁰ The first one is *mugham* (muğam), the genre of vocal and instrumental cyclical professional music of the oral tradition that is based on modes, each of which has its own melodic formula. We can also talk about *ashig art* (aşıq): folk jesters who accompany themselves on the *saz* (saz) (less often *balaban*).¹¹ Ashigs perform epic works—*dastans* (dastan), or special songs, often heroic or dance songs.¹² Azerbaijani mugham and ashig traditions are geographically separate: Mugham, famous in the east of Azerbaijan, is associated with the Persian-Arab musical tradition, and ashigs, more popular in the west of the republic, are tied to the Turkic heritage. Yet both have a special place in shaping Azerbaijani nationalism.¹³

Therefore, in this article, I propose that meykhana’s contemporary dual nature, which is understood differently by different constituencies within the Azerbaijani population, each with their own politicized agenda, is inherently nationalist in nature. Using such aspects of nationalism as ethnicity, tradition, modernization, and folklorization I highlight different levels of this phenomenon and the various actors involved in its implementation. In order to examine constituent elements of nationalism, I ask the following questions: how is meykhana incorporated, fused, and symbolized in nationalist discourse and demonstrated in institutional practices? How does the broad historical and cultural heritage used by the meykhana experts provide the tools to understand the nation in one way or the other? How does the national ideology (nationalism) work in specific cultural, social, political, and economic contexts?

This paper contributes a case study to the rich body of literature on nationalism in musical performances by analyzing the ways in which identities are constructed and mobilized.¹⁴ Using concepts of ethnicity, tradition, and modernization from the Soviet period, I attempt to answer the question how the (post-Soviet) Azerbaijani nation is sustained and maintained. Moreover, studying Azerbaijani nationalism as a political ideology in the context of meykhana, this study contributes to the body of research on contemporary

10. One should remember that in Azerbaijan exist more than the two musical genres that are considered national. Valuable insights pertaining to the topic of nationalism in Azerbaijani music and culture are presented in the following monographs: Inna Naroditskaya, *Song from the Land of Fire: Continuity and Change in Azerbaijanian Mugham* (New York, 2002); Anna Oldfield, *Azerbaijani Women Poet-minstrels: Women Ashiqs from the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Lewiston, NY, 2008); Aida Huseynova, *Music of Azerbaijan: From Mugham to Opera* (Bloomington, Ind., 2016).

11. The saz is a stringed musical instrument with a long neck, used in classical Ottoman, Turkish folk, Iranian, Azerbaijani, Kurdish, Assyrian, and Armenian music, as well as in parts of Syria, Iraq, and the Balkan countries.

12. Dastans are an ornate form of oral history from Central Asia that are usually folk or literary interpretations of heroic myths, legends, and fairy tales.

13. It is worth remembering that the territorial division into the influences of ashig and mugham is to some extent arbitrary. Two phenomena derive from each other: in Azerbaijani mugham one finds elements of ashig art and vice versa. However, the division is necessary for further understanding of the paper due to its emic nature; it is important for my informants.

14. Martin Stokes, “Introduction,” in Martin Stokes, ed., *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place* (Oxford, 1997), 1–27.

Azerbaijani music, which in recent years has been at the periphery of anthropologists' interests.

This paper is organized as follows. I start with a presentation of the key theoretical concepts, which are the basis of my analysis. Azerbaijani nationalism, expressed largely in ethnic categories, also draws from seemingly opposed categories of tradition and modernization, while folklorization is understood as a tool for realizing nationalization of the genre. All these approaches are useful for describing the dynamics of the musical space of modern Azerbaijan and explain why meyxana is a heterogeneous and often contradictory phenomenon. Then I go on to describe the cultural and historical context in which meyxana developed: Baku and its suburbs, as well as the importance of the Tat language to the formation of the musical culture of the Absheron Peninsula. The cultural and ethnolinguistic divide connect directly with the historical relationships of meyxana to Turkic and Persian cultures and to meyxana's folklorization, which are the matter of the next subsection. Finally, I discuss the process of nationalization via divergent interpretations of meyxana's history and visions of its future development, which resulted from different understandings of the concept of tradition and modernization by competing interest groups.

The material used in this article stems from my field work, which took place in Baku and surrounding kends between April 2012 and November 2016 (9 months total). The main methods used are participant observation as well as interviews with representatives of the musical community of Baku: meyxana performers and audience members, researchers, pundits, employees of cafés in which the performances take place, as well as government employees who are responsible for cultural programs in the country. The paper was created above all on the basis of the ethnographic method, therefore, all quotations, unless stated otherwise, come from my field diary.

Theoretical Framework

The formation of meyxana as a part of official cultural policy is directly related to the process of nationalization of the genre—the result of the interaction of verbal recitatives with local nationalism. Nationalism, as Michael Billig argues in “Banal Nationalism” is the collection of ideological habits (including beliefs, assumptions, habits, representations, and practices) that are reproduced daily, in a banally mundane way in order to “establish nations as nations within a wider world of nations.”¹⁵ The notion of banal nationalism

15. Micheal Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London, 1995), 6. For more on this issue, see Tim H. Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (Oxford, 2002); Tim H. Edensor, “Reconsidering National Temporalities: Institutional Times, Everyday Routines, Serial Spaces and Synchronicities,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 9, no. 2 (November 2006): 525–45; Jon E. Fox and Cynthia Miller-Idriss, “Everyday Nationhood,” *Ethnicities* 8, no. 4 (December 2008): 536–63; Robert J. Foster, *Materializing the Nation: Commodities, Consumption, and Media in Papua New Guinea* (Bloomington, 2002); Emilia Pawłusz and Oleksandra Seliverstova, “Everyday Nation-building in the Post-Soviet space: Methodological Reflections,” *Studies of Transition*

is a top-down phenomenon, which means that the “objective” criteria of the nation state—components of the ideology of nationalism—are generated by political elites. It does not mean, however, that the receivers of nationalism have homogeneous views. As Billig emphasizes: “different factions, whether classes, religions, regions, genders or ethnicities, always struggle for the power to speak for the nation, and to present their particular voice as the voice of the national whole.”¹⁶

In Azerbaijan, the construction of the ideological foundations of nationalism started in the second half of the nineteenth century, and it was materialized for the first time in the founding documents of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic. The essential primacy of the nation (and nationalism) over other social categories, particularly class, was challenged by Ronald Suny’s study of the revolution in multiethnic Baku at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁷ Since then Azerbaijani nationalism, despite the strong Turkic cultural identity of the local population, is defined by more common principles, such as general identification with Muslim culture, and some liberal values that connect Azerbaijan with Europe.¹⁸ A view of nation as a relatively observable, objective phenomenon based on a community of language, culture, shared myths of origin or kinship, and perhaps territory then became the basis for the creation of a Soviet political community, and it was analogous to other nation-building projects, even if it renounced the crucial term of “nation” itself.¹⁹ The Soviet regime institutionalized its territorial structure as well as ethnic and cultural nationality as units of basic cognitive and social categories that in many cases began to structure political perception, form

States and Societies 8, no. 1 (2016): 69–86; Tanya Richardson, *Kaleidoscopic Odessa: History and Place in Contemporary Ukraine* (Toronto, 2008).

16. Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, 6.

17. Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Baku Commune, 1917–1918: Class and Nationality in the Russian Revolution* (Princeton, 1972).

18. Tadeusz Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan, 1905–1920: The Shaping of a National Identity in a Muslim Community* (Cambridge, Eng., 1985); Tadeusz Swietochowski, *Russia and Azerbaijan: A Borderland in Transition* (New York, 1995); Audrey L. Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity under Russian Rule* (Stanford, 1992); Svante E. Cornell, *Azerbaijan Since Independence* (Armonk, 2011); Viktor Shnirel’man, *Voiny pamiati: Mify, identichnost’ i politika v Zakavkaz’e* (Moscow, 2003); Aidyn Balaev, *Azerbaidzhanskoe natsional’noe dvizhenie v 1917–1918 godakh* (Baku, 1998); Aidyn Balaev, *Azerbaidzhanskaia natsiia: Osnovnye etapy stanovleniia na rubezhe XIX–XX vv.* (Moscow, 2012).

19. Joshua Sanborn, “Family, Fraternity, and Nation-Building in Russia, 1905–1925,” in Terry Martin and Ronald Grigor Suny, eds., *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin, 1917–1953* (Oxford, 2001), 93–110. For more information on the Soviet nation-making process, see Teresa Rakowska-Harmstone, “The Dialectics of Nationalism in the USSR,” *Problems of Communism* 23, no. 3 (May–June 1974): 1–22; Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, 1993); Ronald Grigor Suny, “Rethinking Soviet Studies: Bringing the Non-Russians Back In,” in Daniel Orlovsky, ed., *Beyond Soviet Studies* (Washington, D.C., 1995): 105–34; Yuri Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism,” *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 414–52; Philip Roeder, “Soviet Federalism and Ethnic Mobilization,” *World Politics* 43, no. 2 (January 1991): 196–232; Francine Hirsch, “Toward an Empire of Nations: Border-Making and the Formation of Soviet National Identities,” *Russian Review* 59, no. 2 (April 2000): 201–26.

political rhetoric, and determine political decisions.²⁰ In this case Azerbaijan's ideology can be regarded as nationalizing nationalism—nationalism directed towards the core nation, which is defined in ethnocultural terms.²¹

Modernization (also called Europeanization), and nationalization are generally acknowledged as being the main characteristics of the Soviet intervention in the musical culture of the newly-formed union republics.²² Modernization has been expected to lead to the development of rootedness in the Middle Eastern community of Azerbaijani Muslims, whereas a shared heritage with Oguz Turks, which includes a common language, faith, and ethnic ancestry, was envisaged as a means to root them in the cultural and political frameworks essential for modern societies to form.²³ The two aspects remain valid in Azerbaijan up to this day and can be recognized in the music: the first one has entailed both the installation of European art music and the reformulation of local music according to European models (instruments are tempered, tunes are given western harmonic accompaniment, and vocal timbres are moderated into a pop style, with a bright and wide tone); the second is highlighted in the folklorization of art—"the act of canonizing and, typically, standardizing what were once essentially community based artistic expressions."²⁴

The Soviet period is important for understanding Azerbaijani nationalism because then the gradual overlapping of the notions of "traditional," expressed in ethno-cultural terms, and "national" which largely catalyzes representations of the national self, occurred.²⁵ The ethnomusicologist Theodore Levin analyzes the factors that influenced the perception and practice of traditional music in the Soviet era, and concludes that "all the greatest accomplishments of professional music lean on the tradition of

20. Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge, Eng., 1996).

21. Rogers Brubaker, "Nationalizing States in the Old 'New Europe'—and the New," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 19, no. 2 (April 1996): 411–37.

22. Soviet politics on music have been studied in a number of scholarly contributions. See Theodore C. Levin, *The Hundred Thousand Fools of God: Musical Travels in Central Asia (and Queens, New York)* (Bloomington, Ind., 1996); Alexander Djumaev, "Musical Heritage and National Identity in Uzbekistan," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 14, no. 2, Special issue on Music and Identity in Central Asia (November 2005): 165–84; Tanya Merchant, "Popping Tradition: Performing Maqom and Uzbek 'National' Estrada in the 21st Century," *Popular Music and Society* 32, no. 3 (July 2009): 371–86; Donna A. Buchanan, "Soccer, Popular Music, and National Consciousness in Post-State-Socialist Bulgaria, 1994–96," *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 11, no. 2 (2002): 1–27.

23. For more detailed information on the Azerbaijani "national idea," see a chapter "Azerbaidzhanskaia 'natsional'naia ideia' v kontekste obnovleniia mezhnatsional'nykh otnoshenii" in Ramiz Mekhtiev, *Mezhnatsional'nye otnosheniia na iskhode XX stoletii: Problemy teorii i politiki* (Baku, 1995), 73–82.

24. Federico Spinetti, "Open Borders. Tradition and Tajik Popular Music: Questions of Aesthetics, Identity and Political Economy," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 14, no. 2, Special issue on Music and Identity in Central Asia (November 2005): 185–211. For in-depth discussion of the concept of folklorization, see Rebecca S. Miller, *Cariacou String Band Serenade: Performing Identity in the Eastern Caribbean* (Middleton, 2007), 216.

25. Spinetti, "Open Borders."

folk (*narodnyi*) creativity.”²⁶ Belief in musical evolutionism from “folk” to “professional” legitimized the synthesis of a distinct cultural heritage for each officially-recognized nationality group fashioned by Soviet architects of cultural strategy to bring glory to the past and honor to the present.²⁷ It should be noted that the traditions upon which national ideologies legitimize themselves mark simple inventions, and they need to be considered as invented traditions in which continuity with the past is evidently fictional.²⁸

Participation in modernity while maintaining ties to traditions shifted the boundary between the “traditional” and the “modern.” The factors used by contemporary musicians and audiences alike in the post-Soviet world to identify “tradition” in music, on the one hand include a number of aesthetic paradigms that did not belong to the pre-Soviet period, while on the other, given the widespread synthesis of traditional and pop music in Azerbaijan, some ethnomusicologists have noticed that any music genre under the influence of certain official cultural policies and social circumstances can be considered “traditional.”²⁹ Traditional music is hence understood and practiced in more flexible ways than any definition of bounded musical systems might predict, while popular music gets a new dimension as a means of making history (the retrospective definition of tradition), “not only as a form of social action directed at realizing a future.”³⁰

Bakuvian Kends: Geographical Location of Meykhana and the Tat Language

Until recently, only a few Baku neighborhoods were famous for *meykhana*. The biggest *mahallah* (məhəllə) was “Sovetskaia street,” commonly called “Sovetski,” by meyxana lovers in broken Russian, which was located in the very center of Baku between Nariman Narimanov Avenue (during the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic called Sovetskaia street) and Azerbaijan Avenue, with its illegal slums emerging among the prosperous houses and monuments of architecture.³¹ In Sovetski, as well as in Kubinka and Zavokzalni—similar but much smaller slums—*meykhana* was the most popular form of entertainment, usually read in the Tat language right in the street or in teahouses filled with tobacco smoke and frequented only by men.³²

26. Theodore C. Levin, “Music in Modern Uzbekistan: The Convergence of Marxist Aesthetics and Central Asian Tradition,” *Asian Music* 12, no. 1, Symposium on Art Musics in Muslim Nations (1980): 151.

27. *Ibid.*, 149–58.

28. Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, Eng., 1992), 1–14;

29. Spinetti, “Open Borders”; Merchant, “Popping Tradition.”

30. Christopher A. Waterman, “‘Our Tradition Is a Very Modern Tradition:’ Popular Music and the Construction of Pan-Yoruba Identity,” *Ethnomusicology* 34, no. 3 (Autumn 1990): 367–79.

31. Mahallah (məhəllə)—is a country subdivision or neighborhood in the Caucasus and many Middle Eastern countries.

32. Toponym “Zavokzalni” is also commonly used by meyxana lovers in broken Russian. The correct name of the mahallah is Zavokzalnaia.

From the moment of the architectural transformation of the capital at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the above-mentioned slums were destroyed, and *meykhana* continued to exist only in kends located around the city of Baku. The distance between kends and the capital is not large—half an hour to an hour by car depending on the traffic. That is why I was quite surprised that during my first field trip, my attempts to get acquainted with meykhana and meykhanchi turned out to be unsuccessful. All my Azerbaijani friends, representatives of the middle class, refused to accompany me into the teahouse to listen to live verbal recitations because it seemed dangerous to them: “You know yourself that this will end badly,”—they told me, having in mind the inevitable fight with kend youth.

The ambiguous perception of meykhana surprised me. On the one hand, verbal recitatives were quite popular and appreciated by the residents of kends—Bakili (*bakılı*). On the other hand, the mostly college-educated residents from Baku criticize meykhana performers for doing something reproachful and for being marginal. This contradiction, as well as the attempt to answer the question of where *meykhana* is located—on the margins or in the center of the sociopolitical space of contemporary Azerbaijan—became a baseline of my analysis of the transformation of verbal recitatives. I was searching for the answer to this question in the sociocultural geography of the Absheron Peninsula.³³

The Mashtaga Kend (*Maştağa*) is of particular importance in the described phenomenon. A population of 42,000 of this urban-type settlement located thirty-five kilometers from Baku considered themselves the descendants of Massagetæ—nomadic tribes from Central Asia.³⁴ Mashtaga residents speak about their Turkic origin and trace their heritage to queen Tomyris (approx. 570–520 BC) who successfully fought the Persian King Cyrus the Great. The legend can be understood to say that the Mashtaga Turks, the indigenous inhabitants of Absheron for centuries, were loyal and brave defenders of local (meaning national) traditions before the main enemy—Persia.

All the works published in the last decades by official academic publishers write about the Turkic origin of the Mashtaga people. For example, an encyclopedia titled “*Maştağa*,” consists of more than a thousand pages written by the Baku historian Vali Habiboglu (*Vəli Həbiboglu*) and other famous local professors, where they describe the life and activities of religious and cultural figures, scientists, medical workers, artists (including meykhanchi), and other notables, originally from Mashtaga.³⁵ The first

33. Stereotypes of Bakili and the capital can also be explained in terms of power relations and intersectionality, where masculinity/sexuality/social class/ethnicity are intertwining in the perception of different groups. For more detailed information about the concept, see James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, 1985); James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, 1990); Sherry B. Ortner, “Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37, no. 1 (January 1995): 173–93.

34. Censuses of Republic of Azerbaijan 2009, at <http://www.geohive.com/cntry/azerbaijan.aspx> (accessed October 17, 2019, no longer available).

35. Vəli Həbiboglu, *Maştağa* (Baku, 2003).

pages of the book contain a short overview of the history, culture, and education of the Mashtaga people, “one of the oldest and largest villages of Baku,” in which “Azerbaijani Turks” live.

The opinion of Azerbaijani researchers goes against the conclusions of many foreign specialists, most of whom reject the Turkic roots of the Massagets, citing the fact that they spoke an Iranian language.³⁶ George Tumanov explains that Tats are Persian immigrants who moved to the Caspian region under King Shapur II the Great from the Sassanid dynasty (309–379).³⁷ The Azerbaijani Tatars, in turn, are the descendants of the people of Central Asia who invaded Central Asia and Europe at different times under different names: Seljuks, Mongols, Tatars, Turks, and others.³⁸ The Tat language belongs to the southwestern subgroup of Iranian languages. Two groups of dialects can be distinguished: the northern varieties are mostly spoken by Jewish communities in southern Dagestan and the cities of the northern Caucasus, while the southern varieties are spoken in the Republic of Azerbaijan, mostly by Muslim communities.³⁹

The accumulation of an Iranian-speaking population in the east of Azerbaijan is also confirmed by censuses. According to the results of the First General Census of the Russian Empire in 1897, almost nineteen percent of Tats, who made up three-quarters of the Muslim population of this administrative unit, lived within Baku County.⁴⁰ The Ethnographic Map of Baku Province, published by the Caucasian Calendar in 1902, clearly shows that the Tat-

36. For more information about the origin of the Massagets, see, for example, Ilya Gershevitch, ed., *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 2, *the Median and Achaemenian Periods* (Cambridge, Eng., 1985), at <https://pl.scribd.com/document/319090974/The-Cambridge-History-of-Iran-Vol-2> (accessed April 9, 2020); Peter Wilcox, *Men at Arms*, vol. 3, *Rome's Enemies: Parthians and Sassanid Persians* (Oxford, 1986); René Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes: History of Central Asia*, trans. Naomi Walford (New Brunswick, 1989); Shnirel'man, *Voiny pamiati*, 147–82.

37. Georgii Tumanov, *Baku i ego okrestnosti* (Tiflis, 1891): 64. It is worth noting the fact that in the Soviet and Azerbaijani historiography there is a tendency to call Tats (regardless of language) a settled, agricultural, and urban population in opposition to the nomadic Turks. See Boris Miller, *Taty, ikh rasselenie i govory* (Baku, 1929) at <http://www.miacum.ru/docs/taty/index.html> (accessed April 9, 2020); Aidyn Balaev, *Etnoiazykovye protsessy v Azerbaidzhane v XIX-XX vv* (Baku 2005). Therefore, for their lifestyle Tats are sometimes equated with Sarts. For more information see Sergei Abashin, “Problema sartrov v russkoi istoriografii v XIX—pervoi chetverti XX v.,” in *Natsionalizmy v Srednei Azii: v poiskakh identichnosti* (St. Petersburg, 2007), 95–176.

38. Tumanov, *Baku i ego okrestnosti*, 64.

39. Gilles Authier “New Strategies for Relative Clauses in Azeri an Apsheron Tat,” in Volker Gast and Holger Diessel, eds., *Clause Linkage in Cross-Linguistic Perspective: Data-Drive Approaches to Cross-Clausal Syntax* (Berlin, 2012), 225–52; Aleksandr Griunberg, *Iazyk severoazerbaidzhanskikh tatov* (Leningrad, 1963).

40. The Baku district covered the Absheron Peninsula, as well as other Azerbaijani territories along the Caspian Sea, which are adjacent to it. The division into groups was made based on the native language. In addition to the Tats, Azerbaijanis also lived in the Baku district (34.7% in the census are indicated as “Tatars”), as well as Russians 24.0%, Armenians 12.3%, Persians 2.6%, Germans 1.8%, and Jews 1.1%. See *Pervaia vseobshchaia perepis' naseleniia Rossiiskoi imperii 1987 goda. 61. Bakinskaia guberniia*, Nikolai Troinitskii, ed. (Sankt-Peterburg, 1897–1905, at <https://www.prlib.ru/item/436609> (accessed April 13, 2020).

speaking population was concentrated on the Absheron Peninsula—in Baku kənd and south of the border with Dagestan, in the Hyzinsky, Siyazansky, Shabransky, Kubinsky, and Ismayillinsky areas.⁴¹

In the first half of the twentieth century, the use of the Tat language was quite common in the east of Azerbaijan, although it gradually lost its meaning. Aleksandr Griunberg, a famous researcher of Indo-Iranian languages, during an expedition to Azerbaijan in the 1950s, described the process of ousting the Tat language by the Azerbaijani language. He noted that there were only a few people who did not speak Azerbaijani: only old men, women, and children of preschool age who lived in villages far from major roads.⁴² Griunberg lists several reasons for the transition to the Azerbaijani language: lack of writing in the Tat language, bilingualism due to formal education in the Azerbaijani language, migration to multinational cities (Baku, Ganja), and mixed marriages (brides from Azerbaijani villages), as well as cultural commonality with Azerbaijanis.⁴³ Another Soviet Iranianist, Boris Miller, argues that the very name “Tat” was considered to be of little honor, which only accelerated the process of turning Muslim residents of Absheron (and other Tats) into Turks.⁴⁴

Today, one piece of evidence that the Mashtaga and other neighboring village residents (where meykhana came from) changed the language of everyday communication relatively recently is the fact that they speak Azerbaijani with expressive dialectal differences that make their speech incomprehensible not only to foreigners, but also to fellow citizens from other parts of the country. My interlocutors defined the language of the Mashtaga residents in the following terms: “they speak with an accent,” “they have a different Azerbaijani language” and “it is impossible to understand them.”⁴⁵

Bakili themselves, naturally, feel their cultural isolation, primarily due to their high level of religiosity as compared to the residents of the capital, Baku. Bakili consider themselves to be practicing Shiite Muslims, often sayyids—descendants of the Prophet himself.⁴⁶ Therefore, they prefer not to participate in the noisy city life, since this would go against their religious values. Moreover, they lead a rather patriarchal, secluded existence, not allowing outsiders in. For these reasons, even though the tangible contrast between Baku and its environs gradually began to disappear after the oil boom in the mid-1990s, until now, Bakili and Baku residents rarely interact.

41. The map is compiled on the basis of Pervaia vseobshchaia perepis' naseleniia Rossiiskoi imperii 1897 goda, at <http://ikalto.com/librarium/map-etno-baku.jpg> (accessed April 13, 2020).

42. Griunberg, *Iazyk severoazerbaidzhanskikh*, 6.

43. *Ibid.*, 6.

44. Miller, *Taty, ikh rasselenie*.

45. H. M., 26-year-old civil servant, interview, Baku, 2015; S. W., 32-year-old interpreter, interview, Baku, 2016; H. W., 35-year-old, journalist, interview, Baku, 2016.

46. A bastion of devout Shia Muslims neighbors with Mashtaga kənd Nardaran. Nardaran is home to a madrasa as well as the Rahima Khanim Mosque, a large Shia mosque built in the late 1990s over the tomb of Rahima Khanim, the sister of Imam Reza, which is the spiritual center of the Azerbaijani people.

If I knew that I could travel there, listen to meykhana, I would do it. It is interesting after all. But this is all sort of in secret. Well. . . They [the residents of Baku surroundings—A.S.] stay inside, do their things, get together. Smoke anasha. They read their, so to speak, poems. We [residents of Baku—A.S.] and they live as if in two different worlds, we have different values, and we do not really understand each other.⁴⁷

I wrote down similar statements in my field journal a few times.

Socio-cultural differences led to the two groups looking at each other with contempt. As my field research has shown, Bakili consider the capital “the center of debauchery.” The townspeople, in turn, attributed a number of stereotypes to Absheron Peninsula kend residents, including Mashtaga people: homosexuality (there are multiple jokes about Mashtaga “cocks”); Arabic origin (“they are an ethnic Baku minority, most likely Arabs,” “they have Arabic roots,” “they are black like Arabs”); connection with the criminal world (“they are criminally oriented people”); tendency to commit violence (“Mashtaga is our Bronx”); lack of education (“they are not very intelligent people”); and addiction to drugs (“do drugs or play cards—it is indecent to us, but it is their tradition”).

These stereotypes determined (and to some degree still determine today) the perception of meykhana as “low” and “connected to the criminal world.” This reputation of the recitatives predetermined their place in the country’s media—it was not allowed there. For that reason, some admirers of the verbal recitative felt indignant and decided to make an effort to change the image of meykhana in order to raise its status. One of the ways (perhaps even the only feasible one) to achieve this was through nationalization, that is, by making it fit the nationalist narrative and meet the requirements of official cultural policy. The turning point was a meeting of one of the respected meykhanachi from Mashtaga, Aghasalim Childagh (Ağasəlim Çıldağ, 1930–2008), with the President of Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev, the founding father of the contemporary Azerbaijani nation and the creator of the Azerbaijani national ideology. During the solemn meeting, the performer read a piece in honor of the leader of the country. The President showed appreciation to Aghasalim and, through him, to the whole genre of verbal recitatives. Through this interaction, meykhana received an official acknowledgement in the public media. Verbal recitative performances began to take place at posh parties, national holidays, birthdays of high-ranking officials, New Year’s celebrations and, most importantly, on television. The meykhanachi that take part in popular shows, for example, “De, Gəlsin!” live in affluence and can afford to support extended families, travels, and expensive cars. As a result, the profession of these performers has become more prestigious and popular and meykhana has been transformed from dissident, semi-underground work into a kind of popular culture, colored by other ideological meanings.

The new ideological dimension of the genre, drawing explicitly on ethnic rhetoric, required turning over the existing elements of the cultural space that concerned meykhana. The main condition was already satisfied—by ousting the Tat past from the consciousness of the residents of Baku kends

47. V. M., 41-year-old film studio director, interview, Baku, 2013.

and recognizing the genre at the state level, it was proven that meykhana was traditionally read and is read by Azerbaijani Turks. In this regard, it was becoming Turkic, and therefore could claim the status of traditional music with which most of the society would associate itself, not only the residents of Baku's eastern suburbs, who, although they declare that they are Azerbaijani Turks, are aware of their cultural differences in relation to their compatriots from other parts of the country.

The change of the discourse regarding the ethnic origin of the Azerbaijani people, however, did not change the character of Azerbaijan's musical space. Contemporary academic and intellectual circles in Azerbaijan deeply believe, as described in the introduction, that their national (traditional) music has been shaped by two opposing musical genres: Persian mugham and Turkish ashig art, from which derive other, minor musical genres. Moreover, in connection with the belief in the linear development of national music from "folk" to "professional," the next step of meykhana's nationalization was to insert the genre into the state musical landscape by emphasizing its connection with other types of "*traditional Azerbaijani*" art—mugham or ashig. Below I will attempt to reconstruct the historical facts, processes, and elements of local tradition that are at the center of attention of those who advance the verbal recitatives in Azerbaijan's cultural space and try to insert them into the framework of nationalism. One of a tools for realizing the nationalization of meykhana is its folklorization.

Between Mugham and Ashig Art: Folklorization of Meykhana

In discussing the importance of concretized folklore around the world, Deborah Wong perceives folklorization as "one of the main ways that nation-states control the meaning of the arts, often through a combination of coercion and persuasion."⁴⁸ In addition, Wong notes that "the framing gesture of "folklore" is potentially empowering even as it moves certain practices into new spaces of social control."⁴⁹

By applying Wong's remarks to Azerbaijan, one can talk about the folklorization of meykhana by emphasizing its relationship with the two genres most important for national ideology—mugham and ashig art. Identifying the connection between meykhana and ghazal is particularly important for my argument, since it unambiguously associates verbal recitatives with Middle Eastern (Persian) literature. Meykhana originated and was formed on the Absheron Peninsula, whose population a few decades ago was Iranian (Tat). Considering the linguistic peculiarities discussed above, as well as the religious factor—residents of Baku kends are Orthodox Shiites (many of them consider themselves descendants of the Prophet) and have historically close ties with Iranian religious organizations—there should be no doubt that meykhana formed under the influence of Persian culture. However, both in the academic works of local researchers and in public discourse, there is no

48. Deborah Wong, *Sounding the Center: History and Aesthetics in Thai Buddhist Performance* (Chicago, 2001), 249.

49. *Ibid.*

place for this lineage and meyxana is more often linked to the ashig tradition. This contradiction is analyzed below.

Azerbaijani mugham, although it has its own genre characteristics, is part of the general eastern professional mugham culture, a phenomenon characteristic of the entire Near and Middle East. It is known in such countries as Iran, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and India. The basis of the mugham composition are melodic models based on certain stages of a particular modus. A more developed and perfect form of mugham, called *dastgah*, consists of improvised parts free in meter and rhythmically clear sections—vocal works—*tasnifs* and / or instrumental *rangs*—pieces in a clear meter, with a certain tune.⁵⁰ Dastgahs are based on the lyric ghazals of famous Middle Eastern poets who historically sang primarily in Persian.⁵¹

Mugham is considered very complex both in terms of performance technique and intellectual (spiritual) interpretation. Its development requires many years of professional training, knowledge of literary material and form, as well as virtuosity and technology. Therefore, it is inextricably linked with professional education and urban high culture. Historically, it was performed only in the Shah's court and in sophisticated upper-class receptions, which were attended by well-educated art lovers who understood the many rules, features, and subtleties of music. Historically mugham developed in the most advanced cultural centers of Azerbaijan such as Shamakhi city (Şamaxı), Shusha (Şuşa), and in the cities of Tabriz and Ardabil located in the north of Iran. Today, the main (if not the only) center is Baku and the Azerbaijan National Conservatory (Azərbaycan Milli Konservatoriyası), which was founded in 2000.

Ashig art, in turn, is associated with the personality of the ashig—a folk singer-poet who along with music and poetry uses elements of dance and drama theater. It consists of two main genres: dastans and so-called ashig tunes performed by a singer accompanied by folk instruments. Intended for a wide audience, they use simple language that reflects the realities of everyday life. One of the most popular forms of ashig art is dueling contests (poetic battles), called *deyishme* (*deyişmə*), where two or more participants compete in improvising poems to a given rhyme, in the skill of playing instruments, dancing, etc.⁵²

Ashig creativity has historically flourished in rural areas inhabited by Turkic-speaking tribes who lived in a wide area of land from China to the Lesser Caucasus. In Azerbaijan, one can speak of several regional traditions of performing the genre, such as the Ganja-Gazakh, Nakhchivan and Garabagh genres, all of them in the west of the republic.

50. Dastgah (*dəstgah*)—is a collection of all the sections traditionally included in this mugham; melodic materials based on several related mugham frets that unfold sequentially and form a certain system.

51. Ghazal (*qəzəl*)—a genre and form of poetry, popular in the Middle Eastern region, including in Azerbaijan. It is composed in different meters of aruz. Usually consisting of 5–12 couplets (*bayts*). Two lines of the first bayt rhyme; in the subsequent bayts, each second line rhymes with the first and the second lines of the first bayt according to the sequence: aa ba ca da.

52. *Deyishme* in other Turkic languages is often called *aytysh*, *aytys*, or *atyshma*.

Discussing the relationship between meyxhana, mugham, and ashig art is possible through a comparative analysis of selected elements of these genres' compositions. Let me start by giving an example of the most popular form of verbal recitatives—a meyxhana with *redif* (rədif)—a permanent set of words (or one word, as in our case) that are at the end of a line, which follow the theme of the work, its rhyme (in our case is *-alı*), and complement its thoughtful composition.

Sevimli Sevgilim, sevdalı dilbər
Eşqimin kövhəri, cəlah dilbər
Vüsalın gəlbimi səyyad eylədi
*Dağların ən gözəl maralı dilbər.*⁵³

One can find many analogies between the structure of the poetic form of meyxhana and ghazals, which in turn serve as a textual basis for mugham. As mentioned earlier, the quality of meyxhana is related to aruz, a system of versification, in the metric of which a ghazal is also written. The similarities between the genres are especially audible during the reading of works—both the ghazal and meyxhana (primarily without musical accompaniment) imitate the alternation of short and long sounds. The correspondence between the phonetic and syntactic systems of mugham and meyxhana is also observed in the redif. According to my informants, in dastgah this refers to the body of classical melodic models, the rhythm of which almost completely corresponds to the rhythm and meter in Persian poetry. As mentioned earlier, there is no musical arrangement in classical meyxhana, but the redif in dastgah define the rhythm and melodic system of the entire work.⁵⁴

An important moment in connecting meyxhana with Persian (and in general Middle Eastern) poetry is the figure of the above-mentioned Aliqha Vahid (Əliağa Vahid, 1895–1965), who was born in the Baku kənd Masazir (Masazır) into a poor, Tat-speaking family. He was educated in a madrasa, where he learned literary Persian, Arabic, and Azerbaijani (Turkic) languages.⁵⁵

53. Abbasqulu Nəcəfzadə, *Nizami Rəmzi, Mahnılar və qəzəllər* (Baku, 2002); Trans. Zulaim Zakariyya, *Meyxhana: The Poetics of Time and Space* (Masters thesis, University of Oslo, 2012), 43, at <https://www.duo.uio.no/handle/10852/34226> (accessed October 17, 2019).

My lovely love, beauty in love
 The extract of my love, beauty in jewels
 Your absence made my heart hunt
 You are the most beautiful deer of the mountains.

54. F. M., 39-year-old musician, interview, Baku, 2014.

55. Madrasa (Az.: mədrəsə)—educational institution, performing the function of a secondary school, whose graduates had the right to enter the university. Madrasas, since elementary schools—mektəbs (Az. məktəb), historically existed at mosques. In these institutions, classical literature, natural and exact subjects were taught, most often in Persian, less often in Turkic (Azerbaijani). At the turn of the XIX and XX centuries, the majority of Muslim schools in the territory of Azerbaijan were closed by the Russian authorities, which led to the fact that in 1917 the literate population of Azerbaijan was 6 percent of men and 0.1 percent of women, see Mieczysław Lepecki, *Sowiecki Kaukaz*.

He was fond of poetry and actively participated in literary circles, translating works by famous Middle Eastern poets (among others, Nizami Ganjavi, Fuzuli, and Khagani) from Persian to Azerbaijani.⁵⁶ Above all, he also wrote himself. Initially, he wrote satirical poems, but ghazals brought him real fame and they were so popular among the people that they even called him “Ghazalkhan.”⁵⁷

Aliagha Vahid is the most important contemporary figure for Azerbaijani poetry and meykhana. Many in Baku believe that his ghazals are “equal to Fuzuli himself”; his work thus serves as an example for many if not all local poets.⁵⁸ Moreover, for his compatriots, “Ghazalkhan” is more than a “master of the word”—he is perceived as a symbol of modern, independent, Azerbaijani culture; a “people’s poet” who “drew inspiration from the national poetic heritage” but created something new—“[t]he genre of the modern ghazal—meykhana.”⁵⁹ Meykhana’s involvement in ghazals is noticeable, in particular, in the poetic form in melody and rhythm. This is easiest to notice when opening collections printed in the twentieth century; it is sometimes difficult to distinguish meykhana from ghazal.

On the other hand, one can also notice links between ashig art and meykhana. One of them is the analogies between the semantic structure of *deyishme* in ashig and meykhana: performers battle on one chosen topic given in *gafiyə* (*qafiyə*), a kind of rhyme, as well as a chorus, which defines the metric and contextual scheme of improvised poetry followed by all the performers within one piece. Moreover, elements of the composition of *deyishme* in ashig and meykhana are described using the same terminology: invitation (*dəvət*), in which one performer invites the other to battle (*dəvət*). This serves as a focal point in which the artists show their knowledge and talent (*hərbə zorba*) and provide an invitation to next performer to take over (*ayaq vermək*).⁶⁰

Another way of comparing meykhana to ashig is the construction of a common image of an artist in both genres. A more suitable depiction of the “traditional poet-meykhanachi” became an image of “the uneducated but wise” performer who speaks the same language as the people. As my fieldwork has revealed, this thought was reflected primarily in the popularization of

Podróż do Gruzji, Armenii i Azerbejdżanu (Warsaw, 1935), 134. The secular education system, in turn, was formed only during the Soviet Union.

56. Nizami Ganjavi (Nizami Gəncəvi) and Khagani (Xaqani Şirvani) were twelfth-century Middle Eastern poets; Fuzuli (Məhəmməd Füzuli) was a sixteenth-century Middle Eastern poet and philosopher. All three are considered among the most important national poets and moral authorities in Azerbaijani.

57. Can be translated as “a ghazal master.”

58. The fact that the ghazals of Aliagha Vahid were equal to Fuzuli himself is also written in almost all the articles published on Azerbaijani portals. For comparison, here are just a few titles: “Vahid—Poet, Gazel’khan,” *Nash Baku*, February 22, 2018, at <https://tinyurl.com/ujmoxkb> (accessed April 13, 2020); Vugar Imanov, “Velikii gazel’khan Aliaga Vahid—vecher filosofii, muzyki i poezii,” *Trend.az*, February 19, 2016, at <https://www.trend.az/life/culture/2496528.html> (accessed April 13, 2020); “Statue of Aliaga Vahid,” *Baku Travel Guide* April 20, 2018, at <https://bakutraveltguide.com/statue-of-aliaga-vahid/> (accessed April 13, 2020).

59. Oksana Bulanova, “Aliaga Vahid—velikii Gazel’khan,” *Ekho—obshchestvenno-politicheskoe obozrenie Azerbaidzhana*, February 18, 2017, at <http://ru.echo.az/?p=56784> (accessed April 13, 2020).

60. For more detailed information, see Zakariyya, *Meykhana: The Poetics*, 54–61.

meykhana as a genre of national poetry (*xalq şeri növü*). It was emphasized in mass media and academic circles that “meykhana is an ancient genre”; it originated in the vicinities of Baku and represents “Absheron folklore” (*Abşeron folkloru*), which similarly, through the figure of the performer, approaches the works of ashigs that, as emphasized above, conquered the western territories of Azerbaijan.

Looking for confirmation that meykhana originated in Absheron, one of the supporters of this version told me that he sent a request to the Academy of Science to determine the roots of verbal recitatives. In response, the Institute of Folklore Council issued a statement that they were not able to confirm the ancient status of the genre due to the lack of materials that would indicate “the centuries-old history of meykhana development.” Moreover, the scientific establishment rightfully acknowledged that one cannot call meykhana a folklore genre because, first of all, it has certain and often well-known authors. Second, the works are based on Arabic prosody, which in turn is essential only to elevated poetry. Third, they are too long—starting with fifteen and reaching twenty verses, due to which they cannot be memorized fully.⁶¹

Despite the opinion mentioned above, many academicians, as well as other Azerbaijani intellectuals, hold the opinion that meykhana is a part of “ancient Azerbaijani culture,” and “meykhana originated from *ashigi*.” My informants primarily see cultural heritage in the competitive, improvisational, spontaneous, and playful manner of performing a piece, and by bringing a “religious” argument. A member of the Department of Folklore of the Azerbaijani Academy of Science explained:

Sufism was the main factor in creating ashig art. Ashig means enamored, but not in a person, but Allah. Islam is one and that is where all the wisdom of our art is coming from. . . . In the eighteenth century, ashig art was forbidden by the clergy and the padishah. Back then, ashigs were considered harmful. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, Sufis were working on uniting Muslims. Then ashig poems were sung by dervishes. . . . Sufis had two schools: the “sober” school and the “drunk” school. The “sober” school believed that a man can never reach Allah. The “drunk” school thought that if a man can reach a certain state, then he will unite with God. Ashigs sang about love and, because they were invited to weddings, they lost that spiritual heritage and esoteric faith. The “drunk” school found extension in classical poetry. Poets such as Nizami and Fuzuli, for example, continued the tradition. It is from them that meykhana derives its origin.”⁶²

As we see, meykhana absorbs many cultural elements that are considered “traditional” and national (Turkic then Azerbaijani) at the same time. Verbal recitatives belong simultaneously to folk art, and to written poetry. Owing to this, meykhana is identified as “national art” that people need to be proud of because it is also “ancient folklore.” All these discursive characteristics are

61. A. M., 45-year-old representative of the scientific establishment, interview, Baku, 2013.

62. A. M., 58-year-old research staff member, interview, Baku, 2014.

aimed at improving the image of verbal recitatives, so that they are admitted as prestigious and thus performed by groups with higher social status. The vision of improving social status is attractive to many representatives of the meykhana community, so it is no wonder that they join the ideology that favors them. There can thus be no doubt that such national identity negotiations between institutions and individuals are inherent in national projects, and the case of meykhana proves this.

Being a tool of nationalization, folklorization is a top-down initiative, but various local actors, not necessarily fully controlled by the state, take part in it. Below I will explain how the nationalization of meykhana—with its references to the concepts of tradition and modernization—led to the popularization of the genre throughout the country, using the example of a dispute in a community centered around meykhana. The intellectual dispute took place in the first decade of the twentieth century between two groups of meykhanachi, and focused on the role of meykhana in a “new Azerbaijan.”

Traditional Equals National: Two Meykhana Improvement Projects

The problem with the nationalization of meykhana and its treatment as part of traditional art lies in the fact that many people still perceive verbal recitatives as “low culture.” According to them, the sheer semantics of the name attests a low status and a low quality of the art; in the Persian language “mey” means wine, and “khana” means room, or quarters. In the Ottoman Empire, meykhanas (in Turkish language “meyhane”), were shops from which non-Muslim subjects were permitted to buy wine. At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they were transformed into urban socializing venues known as Turkish taverns.⁶³ Although a standard repertory of Turkish art and folk genres with classical distinction were performed there, meykhanas were predominantly frequented by Christians, usually owned by Greeks or Armenians, and sometimes run by Jews. The Turkish taverns were also famous for their sexual activities, historically involving male dancers (köçek) and (more recently) professional prostitutes.⁶⁴

In today’s Azerbaijan, the word for wine is “şərab” and the noun meykhana is not used to denote a drinking establishment. Its place was taken by chaykhana (chay can also be translated as “beverage”) and it is there that meykhana is currently read. Meykhana as the place where alcohol is consumed, however, persists in the memory of Azerbaijanis. It is used in the cinema and literature and has a rather bad reputation. My interlocutors

63. Martin Stokes, “Music, Fate and State: Turkey’s Arabesk Debate,” *Middle East Report*, no. 160, Special issue on Turkey in the Age of Glasnost (September–October 1989): 27–30; John M. O’Connell, “A Resounding Issue: Greek Recordings of Turkish Music, 1923–1938,” *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 37, no. 2 (December 2003): 200–16.

64. Raphaela Lewis, *Everyday Life in Ottoman Turkey* (New York, 1988). Nancy Micklewright, “Musicians and Dancing Girls: Images of Women in Ottoman Miniature Painting,” in Madeline C. Zilfi, ed., *Women in the Ottoman Empire: Middle Eastern Women in the Early Modern Era* (Leiden, 1997), 153–168.

told me that one of Azerbaijan's famous satire poets, Mirza Alakbar Sabir (Mirzə Ələkbər Sabir, 1862–1911), was comparing meyxhana with madrasa: “Madrasa became alien to me, and I don't need my khanqah: The dwelling for my prayers became meyxhana.”⁶⁵

The association of meyxhana with the drinking establishment became the main reason for the split in the community connected with it. The first movement—the majority—insist that the genre should be called meyxhana.⁶⁶ The second group—*bedie* party—argues that the name meyxhana, since it literally means tavern, “lowers the value of the art,” which, for this reason, needs to be called *bedie*. According to an adherent of the *bedie* group:

This previously almost forgotten talent [meyxhana—A.S.] came into our lives again. I am very happy about it. But I feel bitter that such beautiful and dignified words as *bedie* and *badia* (bədihə, bədyə) were replaced by the word meyxhana. Such a delicate word pronounced as bədahətən, that is impromptu, has nothing in common with meyxhana, which reminds people of *sharabhana* (şərabxana—winery). Possibly, this term was once used in informal speech as meyxhana, but its real name is now *bedie* (bədihə).⁶⁷

The leader of the *bedie* proponents, Namiq Məna (Namiq Məna, 1972–), told me that verbal recitatives started to be called meyxhana in the 1920s and 1930s, when the first collections of meyxhana appeared.⁶⁸ To support his point he showed me a whole set of books and dictionaries that he brought with him to our meeting. Opening them to pages marked in advance, he insisted that in the past meyxhana simply meant tavern.

Here in the book of Mirza Bagir (Mirzə Bağır, 1810–1882), Poetik mechlisler [it says] impromptu poems were called *Bedihe*. . . . And here is the information about the poet: “Mirza Bagir is one of the most famous poets of the last century who performed impromptu *badihe* during Bakuvian weddings and holiday celebrations.”⁶⁹ The *Badihe* that he performed were notable for their special socio-satirical character. . . . Further, in the remembrances of Elchin

65. Abdurrakhman Dzhami, “Gazeli,” in Iosif Braginskii, ed., *Irano-tadzhikskaia poeziia. Seriiia pervaiia*, (Moscow: 1974), 21, at <http://www.wysotsky.com/0009/109.htm#123> (accessed April 13, 2020). Original: “Mne chuzhdoi stala medrese, i khanaka mne ne nuzhna: Obitel'yu molitv moikh otnyne stala meyxhana.”

66. I use the word “party” to describe an informal group of people (musicians, publicists, academics, journalists, etc.) who are involved in an activity together; in this case, they strive to make meyxhana known as meyxhana, or *bedie*.

67. T. M., 69-year-old writer, interview, Baku, 2013.

68. Meaning the following publications: Süleyman Səfərov, *Satiragit Tjatroşunda deyilmiş Vahidin Meyxənaləri* (Baku, 1925); Əhməd Anatollu, *Qupletlər, Bütün dünya işçiləri birləşin!* (Baku, 1925); Əhməd Anadolllu, *Qupletlər “Şapalaq,” 3-ncü hissə* (Baku, 1927); Bağır Cabar zadə, *Qupletlər* (Baku, 1927); Əhməd Anadolllu, *Kupletlər, Çuvalduz, II təbi*, (Baku, 1930).

69. The Bakuvian weddings, also called traditional Azerbaijani weddings, in contrast to the modern, urban weddings are organized only in rural areas. Depending on the geographical location, it may have different characteristics. At Absheron, traditional weddings are usually held in large tents, men are separate from women and children. Meyxhana is read in the men's tent.

Guliyev, “Ezumuz və sezumuz,” we read: “After the English army finally left Baku, a worker named Bağlı Gasan wrote *badia*”. . . . And also, look at the dictionaries. *Mey–şərab, çaxır*, which means wine. All the dictionaries have the same meaning for *meykhana*: drinking establishment.”⁷⁰

In turn, proponents of the term *meykhana* argue that *bedie* merely means an “impression, first thought that came to mind.”⁷¹ According to my interlocutors, this term is more general and means “a poem told impromptu,” a “method of composing *meykhana*,” which is used in other Azerbaijani genres, for example, in the works of *ashigs* or *mugham*. I also came across the following opinion about *bedie*: “it was initially critical, satirical statements of one person, and later—a performance of two. Now *meykhana* is performed by several people.”⁷² The last statement indicates that originally, *bedie* could be a form of *meykhana*, although my interlocutors from the *meykhana* party did not agree with that hypothesis and strictly separated these terms setting them against each other.

Given the diversity of the terminology used in the scientific literature, as well as the synonymous use of *meykhana* and *bedie* by representatives of the *bedie* movement, it can be assumed that both options are right in some way. For example, video recordings of the first *meykhana* contests, which took place in 1992–96, provided by my informant, indicate that the names *meykhana* and *bedie* resonated with each other.

Taking into account the consequences of the notional conflict, the battle between the adherents of the terms *meykhana* and *bedie* led to discussions and disputes in the media and among academics. For example, two television channels were broadcasting the same verbal contests under two different names: *Bedie* (the name of the show was “*Sözüm var*”) and *Meykhana* (the name of the show was “*De gəlsin*”). It can be argued that the dispute is not only ideological. Behind the nomination bias are ideological and political motives that can also be considered in geographic and ethnic categories. Such an interpretation of the problem is apparent if you look at the composition of both parties and the ideas they promote.

The adherents of the name *meykhana* are concentrated around the village of *Mashtaga*, discussed in the previous subsection. A high level of religiosity, belief in their Turkish origin, a conservative lifestyle, and closeness created a very advantageous position among the *Absheron* rural population, which led them to believe that they are the “real Azerbaijanis” responsible for preserving local traditions, including *meykhana*. The *Mashtaga* residents’ status as guardians of recitatives is justified by many respectable performers living in the village during the Soviet period and now. As an example, we

70. N. M., 42-year-old, *bedie* representative, Baku, 2014. Similar information can be found in an article of the Azerbaijani writer and employee of Baku State University, *Aziza Djafarzade* (Əzizə Cəfərzadə). In the publication titled “What does the word *bədahətən* mean?” the professor interprets the term *bedie*: “*Bedie*” (*bədiyə*) means a beautiful word, told impromptu, without preparation; a witty poem told impromptu, *Əzizə Cəfərzadə*, “*Bədahətən nə Deməkdir?*,” *Mədəniyyət* (2002): 5–18.

71. J. M., 45-year-old *meykhana* representative, interview, Baku, 2013.

72. A. M., 58-year-old research staff member, interview, Baku, 2014.

can recall the above-mentioned Aghasalim Childagh. Childagh is considered a follower of Aliagha Vahid, the most famous meykhanachi-ghazalkhan who also received the title of “the follower of the immortal Fuzuli,” and “the father of meykhanachi,” whose monument occupies a place of honor in Baku Old City, known as Icheri Sheher (İçəri şəhər). As my fieldwork revealed, Mashtaga meykhanachi rarely come to the city or communicate with the residents of Baku. Instead of performing on television and other mass media, they prefer meykhana mejlises in small, secluded circles of people that gather in chaykhanas or at village weddings when only men are present. They believe that, thanks to the performance of the genre in the “traditional setting” and the “traditional” way, their work is “authentic,” it is “part of the Islamic culture,” of the “eastern heritage.”

On the other hand, Namig Mena, the head of the bedie group, a native of Sumgait (Sumqayıt), received a professional education at the Azerbaijan Academy of Arts and conducts competitions in the most prestigious places, such as—Icheri Sheher.⁷³ Namig Mena is considered a successor of Nizami Remzi (Nizami Rəmzi, 1947–97), the founder of musical meykhana, recitatives that are accompanied by original music. Nizami Remzi, after Aliagha Vahid, was considered the most famous meykhanachi of the Soviet period, and especially in the 1980s. He was born in Baku, but his family is from the small town of Khizi (Xızı)—a city located in the northern part of the republic near Nabran and Quba, where the locals spoke Persian (Tat), even in the Soviet era.

As opposed to the adherents of meykhana as the guardians of tradition, the enthusiasts of the term bedie consider themselves more Europeanized and more forward-thinking, because they are friends with different performers, not only those who grew up in Baku kends.⁷⁴ Moreover, they fight for the inclusion of women in the practice of recitative performances and argue against the use of obscene words. Bedie adherents also maintain that “their verbal recitatives” today are a kind of popular culture and not a kind of folklife culture, and unlike the meykhanachi, they call themselves performers rather than poets. In their opinion, a quality reading of bedie requires professional training. That is why they aspire to open a new area of study at the Academy of the Performing Arts in Baku, where the verbal recitative performers would receive relevant training. The bedie party proposals, however, did not find support from conservative Azerbaijani society and government leaders. The department where the reading of meykhana would be taught did not open, the TV program “Bedie” is no longer broadcast, and in the media verbal recitatives are almost always called meykhana, not bedie.

The loss of the more liberal group should not be surprising, because they did not get to the heart of Azerbaijani nationalism. Both parties—in terms of the concept of invented tradition—are undoubtedly creating a new tradition of verbal competitions based on preserving the “old tradition,” and the only way of preserving it, as correctly understood by both sides of the dispute, is continuing its development (modernization) through its nationalization. Nevertheless, it was the representatives of the “meykhana party,” perhaps

73. Sumgait is located 30km North of Baku, with a population of 284,600.

74. V. M., 51-year-old actor and academic teacher, interview, Baku, 2012.

even unconsciously following the Soviet national ideology, who used the word “traditional” and the word “national” almost interchangeably in discussions of meykhana performances. The discourse on the traditional, that is, national music, understood in ethical terms, decided about the nationalization of verbal recitatives. The very characteristics of the genre (the spontaneous nature of the performances, the “mysterious,” inaccessible performance environment, the informal language, the aruz-like features) had little relevance for its perception, therefore meykhana, which we hear everywhere, resembles popular song. In this way, according to the analysis of my material, the discourse about the traditional character of creativity, which simultaneously implies a national character of performances, takes a step towards meykhana’s integration with the cultural policy of the new Azerbaijan.

In this article I analyzed the gradual transformation of meykhana from a “traditional” and local form of entertainment of sub-Bakuvian villagers into an element of Azerbaijani national identity and a tool of sociocultural unification. Meykhana has a dual nature. On the one hand, it consists of witty verses on present-day topics improvised and read, accompanied by simple music. On the other, it is an instrument of nation-building. Moreover, meykhana is a symbol of a certain lifestyle, a transformation of the socio-political space of Azerbaijan and a product of the new economic situation.

Meykhana’s transformation and sharp shift in status from a genre of low culture to the embodiment of the national spirit results in contradictory concepts in Azerbaijani informational space about verbal recitatives—a constant trait of nation-building, which never ends and never loses its internal inconsistencies. Meykhana has not been nationalized completely, which can arguably be attributed to social heterogeneity and the division of a society that contains multiple local groups and regions with their special nature and interests, which in turn create their own “performative contexts” and their own interpretations of meykhana. Consequently, many actors are involved in the nation-building process: representatives of multiple social strata and ethnic groups that make political elites think about the image of the country.

While analyzing meykhana’s social dimensions and their transformations, the mechanism of combining popular culture with “traditional” constituents—elements of local culture that were considered “pure Azerbaijani,” “real,” “ancient,” and “respected”—becomes evident. Meykhana’s links to folklore, an authoritarian tradition of competitiveness, its closeness to the religious sphere, as well as the comparison of the meykhanachi figure to the Turkic story-teller, the ashig, leads to an increase in prestige of the art due to the associations with uniqueness, originality of form, and authenticity of content. Including the “traditional” elements mentioned above in pop culture creates a new “contemporary traditionalism” that, despite referring to the fixedness of the phenomenon, shows its progressive character. Thus, both competing movements talk about the development of meykhana, each in their own way and under different labels. Proponents of the name “bedie” speak openly in favor of including the genre in the official education system, making its practice available to all talented children. The second faction, Mashtaga residents, strive

to monopolize the new and officially recognized meykhana to benefit from its increased status. This however comes at a cost: the Mashtaga people are forced to engage with popular culture, perform on television and in national contests that naturally change the character of the competitions and, simultaneously, popular culture's social role.

In the near future, it is unlikely that meykhana will become a more homogeneous phenomenon and be perceived as an inherent part of national Azerbaijani art because, regardless of the efforts of the supporters of local competitions, it lacks a distinctly defined, fixed meaning. This may seem to be a negative attribute of the phenomenon; however, this is exactly what makes it possible for the government elites to use this genre to exercise nation building and popularize the sometimes-disputable slogans of Azerbaijani nationalism in the context of the authoritarian regime.

In conclusion, it is worth stating that owing to meykhana, the Azerbaijani cultural space has become more exuberant. "National rap," as verbal recitatives are sometimes called, together with mugham and ashig art are perceived as national symbols, the country's brand. This new role has led to a change in meykhana themes: everyday topics with satire and self-irony have been replaced by jokes or "lighter" topics, with a necessary positive tinge. The question is how far the process of "brushing up" meykhana will go. Without doubt, there is a certain line, the crossing of which stops artistic development. This appears to be a challenge not only for meykhana as an art, but also for the nation that is forming this art.