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STUDYING

OF ISLAM AND ISLAMIC CULTURE IN AZERBAIJAN

ESTUDIO DEL ISLAM Y LA CULTURA ISLÁMICA EN AZERBAIYÁN

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ABSTRACT

Historically at the political level, the negative reaction to Islam has made it difficult to study Muslim culture, which contains different legal and ethical norms from Western culture. Although Islam has often been portrayed as an enemy of progress, or its material on religion and culture has been quietly passed on, the impact of Islam on the world is undeniable in all fields. Because of this, the objective of this paper is to analyze the progress of the study of Islam and Islamic culture, specifically in Azerbaijan. The main research methods used were the analysis of documents and the historical-logical method which served to discuss important facts for the study of Islam in Azerbaijan. Although the time of the caliphate is highlighted in the article, elements of the study of Islamic culture during Czarist Russia and the Soviet era are also addressed. In addition, elements of achievements of the modern era and difficulties and challenges still to be overcome are provided. It should be noted that the arrival of Islam in Azerbaijan added new colors to the nuances of the local culture, and its study not only allows us to deepen this great culture but also to learn more about our history and national values.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, Islam culture.

RESUMEN

Históricamente a nivel político, la reacción negativa al Islam ha dificultado el estudio de la cultura musulmana, que contiene normas legales y éticas diferentes a las de la cultura occidental. Aunque el Islam a menudo ha sido retratado como un enemigo del progreso, o su material sobre religión y cultura se ha transmitido en silencio, el impacto del Islam en el mundo es innegable en todos los campos. Por ello, el objetivo de este trabajo es analizar el avance del estudio del Islam y la cultura islámica, específicamente en Azerbaiyán. Los principales métodos de investigación utilizados fueron el análisis de documentos y el método histórico-lógico que sirvió para discutir hechos importantes para el estudio del Islam en Azerbaiyán. Aunque en el artículo se destaca la época del califato, también se abordan elementos del estudio de la cultura islámica durante la Rusia zarista y la era soviética. Además, se aportan elementos de logros de la era moderna y dificultades y desafíos aún por superar. Cabe señalar que la llegada del Islam a Azerbaiyán agregó nuevos colores a los matices de la cultura local, y su estudio no solo nos permite profundizar en esta gran cultura sino también conocer más sobre nuestra historia y valores nacionales.

Palabras clave:

Azerbaiyán, cultura islámica.

INTRODUCTION

Technically in Arabic, the term Islam is the fourth infinitive form of the verbal root s-l-m, meaning “submission,” producing *aslama*, “s/he has submitted,” and *Muslim*, “one who has submitted.” In the definite form, *al-islam* denotes the religion founded by the prophet Muhammad in early seventh-century CE Mecca and its principal tenets and rituals as these subsequently evolved; in addition, and at a stroke, *al-islam* is the koine (common language) of the social imaginary of more than a billion adherents around the globe. The numerous possible configurations of the relationship between the received historical tradition (mediated by its scholastic guardians but increasingly appropriated by new actors) and varied cultural contexts constitute locally and subjectively for its adherents this world of Islam. From the inception of this community to the present, the psychospiritual and existential act of “submission” is what for all Muslim practitioners quintessentially characterizes the message of the Prophet and the teachings of the scripture revealed to him as the Qur’an. More mundanely, for others born within the cultural perimeters of the world of Islam, and given modern dislocations, increasingly without such traditional geographical boundaries, Islam is inextricably tied to notions of cultural and political identity (Martin et al., 2016, p. 537).

Islam has had a significant impact on the history and culture of numerous peoples throughout the Middle East, including the Arabs, Iranians, Turks, Indians, Indonesians, many peoples of Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Volga area, the Balkans, and a sizeable portion of the African population. The fates of the peoples of the “Islamic world” were directly influenced by Islam and the Arab invasion, as well as the cultural traditions, ideological baggage, social norms, morals, myth-poetic and epic images, and stories that continue heavily impact their lives today. Of course, the nations and peoples that the Arabs conquered maintained and developed their own pre-Islamic cultural traditions; this was especially true in the nations where Islam peacefully spread (Saydulloevich, 2022).

In this way, Islamic studies is understood as the academic study of Islam, the Muslim religion and culture, and their influence on world history and culture. According to Khir (2007), the second half of the 20th century saw two further significant advances in the subject of Islamic Studies, the first was connected to the development of the so-called scientific study of religion’s history, which was subsequently cemented in an effort to include the study of Islam within the field of religious studies (Martin, 1988) and the second change occurred within the social sciences when an increasing number of sociologists started to show an interest in researching ‘foreign’ cultures and peoples.

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the history of Islamic Studies in the West demonstrates that “there never existed in the past a permanent paradigm that operated universally; the borders were continuously being changed” (Nanji, 1997).

Due to this, the field span a wide range of disciplines, including history, theology, literature, philosophy, and sociology of Islam. Islamic studies also include the study of the sacred texts of Islam, such as the Qur’an and hadith, as well as the life and work of Islam’s prophets and religious leaders. For this reason, Islamic studies is a complex field of study which in the words of Ashaari et al., (2012), ideally, should be able to respond to the challenges brought by modernity at the level of theory and application. Therefore, teaching and learning Islamic studies should be developed as the relevant subject to cope with the contemporary needs of the modern world in light of the principles as stated in al-Quran and al-Sunnah. Indeed, Islam should become part of global modernity and should be brought into line with the age.

Due to the above, Islamic studies have a special relevance due to its influence on world history and culture, as well as to approach and understand the idiosyncrasies of Muslim communities whose population represents approximately 1.57 billion people among the 6.8 billion in the world (~23%) and with a rising trend (Salim, 2020). Considering this,

the objective of this paper is to analyze the progress of the study of Islam and Islamic culture, specifically in Azerbaijan. For this, different research methods were used, highlighting the analysis of documents and the historical-logical method.

DEVELOPMENT

The problems manifested in both the socio-economic and cultural-ideological spheres of the Azerbaijani society, which was a part of the Caliphate in the emergence of a great culture in the Middle Ages, could be understood only in the “Islamic context”. Turkish-Islamic culture has come a long way in Azerbaijan, which was created with the advent of a new culture along with Islam, or rather, the addition of new colors to the shades of local culture. By the middle of the 19th century, this road had more ups and downs. As in Central Asia, Siberia, the North Caucasus, and the South Caucasus, all means were used to alienate the indigenous peoples who practiced Islam. Since the reign of Tsar Alexander I, with his consent, as a result of the active work of foreign missionaries, the “Holy Book” (“*Ahdi-Atiq*”, “*Ahdi-jadid*”), published eight times in London, Stockholm, Istanbul and even Urmia,

was actively promoted in Northern Azerbaijan. The policy of Christianization was carried out under the control of the tsarist administration, and certain institutions of the Russian Orthodox Church. At the same time, a policy of humiliating Muslim clerics was pursued through oriental missionaries like Ostroumov N. P. who presented Islam as a fanaticism, an enemy of progress, which created enmity among Muslim nations (Ostroumov, 2015). Such works served the Muslim conflict.

At the political level, the negative reaction to Islam has long made it difficult to study Islamic sciences, which contain legal and ethical norms (Chaudhry, 2018). Ignoring the scientific methodology was evident in two versions. If the first option was to praise Christianity, as mentioned above, and to portray Islam as an enemy of progress, the second option was to pass over material on Islamic religion and culture in silence. It was as if such facts and documents did not exist. In addition, there was a third option. Researchers who have chosen this path, no matter how great the difficulties, have managed to promote Islam by writing several valuable works that help to understand Islamic culture. One of them is Mir Muhammad Karim al-Bakuvi (1853-1938), a prominent religious figure and public figure. Along with the explanation of religious issues, in order to understand the Qur'an correctly, he prepared a three-volume commentary on the Qur'an, entitled *Kashful-haqqayig* (Discovery of Truths). At the same time, unlike Ostroumov, al-Bakuvi criticized some clerics and called on Muslims to unite in the Qur'an, eliminating sectarian differences. His commentary was published with the help of another prominent figure of Azerbaijan, Haji Zeynalabdin Tagiyev. It is gratifying that the publication of the work caused a great stir in the Islamic world. In accordance with the desire to eliminate sectarian differences among Muslims and unite them, the author of this work was awarded an eight-cornered medal of white platinum by Abdulhamid II, and the medal "Shiri-Khurshid" from Iran (Farhadov, 2012, pp. 80–93). Bakuvi's work "*Kashful-haqqayig*" was transliterated by researcher A. Farhadov (2012, 2014) and made available to Azerbaijani readers.

The book "*Majlis-hukamayi-Islam*", which emerged from the collection of articles published in the "Tercuman" newspaper in the form of a series of articles by prominent thinker and publicist Ismail Gasprinski, is important for the study of Islamic culture. Al-Farabi (870-950), Ibn Sina (980-1037), Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), Ibn Rushd (1126-1198) and the thoughts of other Islamic philosophers are widely covered. The language of the book is close to Ottoman and Azerbaijani Turkish of that time, and it is very valuable in terms of the author's desire to unite all Turkic peoples around a single Turkic language.

Ahmad bey Agaoglu (1863-1938), an enlightened public figure of the early twentieth century, was one of the first researchers to analyze the ideas of Islamism and Turkism in his fundamental works. As a Muslim intellectual, Ahmad bey expressed his attitude to Islam, the Koran, and religious figures in Azerbaijan. Unlike Mirza Fatali Akhundzadeh, he did not oppose religion, but he did criticize religious figures such as al-Bakuvi and Ostroumov. Like al-Bakuvi, he saw the way of salvation of Muslims in the Holy Quran. In a series of articles entitled "Muslim Conversations" published in the "Kaspi" newspaper in 1904, he not only spoke about the religious evolution of Muslims but also showed the way out. According to the author, Islam, like Christianity, must be reformed and led to progress, not ignorance. According to him, "Muslim countries will remain in the dark corners of the earth for many years until the masses purify their minds, feelings, views, and beliefs through religion (Azerli, 1965).

One of the factors contributing to the study of Islamic culture in Azerbaijan was the translation of Islamic literature from Arabic, the language of the Qur'an. Mir Mohammad Karim al-Bakuvi had a great service in this field as well. Several copies of his translations from George Zeyda's 5-volume work "Culture-Islamic History" are preserved in the Rare Fund of the Library of the National History Museum of Azerbaijan, and now they are given to the library of ANAS. Al-Bakuvi also translated George Zeyda's *Azrai-Quraysh* from Arabic, which deals with the period of the Rashid caliphs of Islamic history. Analyzing the work, the researcher A. Farhadov (2012, 2014) shows that this work was written by the Prophet Muhammad, who raised his voice against oppression in the way of God and justice and did not shy away from the martyrdom of himself, his family, and his relatives. Because he narrates the history of Hussein and his supporters in an instructive language, it is of great importance to all Muslims around the world, and especially to us Azerbaijanis, whose lands were under occupation.

If Christianity was praised by all means in the studies of Tsarism, Muslim clergymen were considered lustful, pro-profit, "Kaspi" and "Hayat". However, Azerbaijani intellectuals in the period of the Democratic Republic gave a positive assessment of Islam and noted the great role of Islam in the education of the people, to put an end to sectarianism and to represent it in different spiritual. During Soviet rule, the victory of atheism, in general, fell in history due to the extremely low level of religious culture. Many architectural monuments in the country (mosques, temples, khanakahs, tombs, etc.) were damaged because there were Muslim monuments, Arabic-written monuments. Even decorative Arabic-written carpets

were destroyed due to their connection with the religion of Islam. The biggest blow during this period was hit by the rouhans. The libraries of prominent religious figures, including Akhund Mevlazade Shakavi, Akhund Aga Javad Oglu, were plundered and burned (Alizade & Samadov, 2016, pp. 515–517).

At a time when many of these sources, which were written in the Arabic alphabet for Islam, were not involved in the study, some of our researchers did their best to protect Azerbaijani spiritual heritage from destruction. The sacrifices of the founder of the Tabriz National Library, Muhammad Ali Nakhchivani (1880-1962), who carried out the first edition of the Qatran Tabrizi Divan, for the protection of Islamic culture are unforgettable. He wrote: *“I have long dreamed of collecting and publishing all the poems of Qatran Tabrizi, the only document about the history of Azerbaijan a thousand years ago. I was of the opinion that these existing poems of his should not be destroyed as a result of various events”*.

Atheism, which was strongly accepted in Azerbaijan in the early twentieth century and became a “branch” of state policy, weakened somewhat in the middle of that century. The study of Islamic culture in the normalized scientific environment was on the agenda. However, the study of this culture made the study and teaching of Arabic and Persian important.

Such a mission was entrusted to Mukhtar Efendizadeh, a prominent pedagogue, teacher, orientalist-translator, who was fluent in these languages, and Professor Panteleimon Juzen (Bandali Juzen), an Arab professor, the first dean of the Faculty of Oriental Studies at the University of Azerbaijan. Mukhtar Efendizadeh’s textbook “Miftahul-lisan-ul-Arab” (“The key to the Arabic language”), published in 1947, was the result of the great work of an irreplaceable pedagogue. The publication of this textbook for higher education was highly praised by the world-famous Arabic scholar, academician I. Krachkovsky. However, it should be noted that many of Mukhtar Efendi’s manuscripts have not yet been studied and only a small number of experts know about them. After Mukhtar Efendi, the Department of Arabic Language of the Faculty of Oriental Studies of the Azerbaijan State University translated the Holy Quran into our language. It is important to highlight the role of professor Alasgar Mammadov, as well as the researcher of theological sciences Vasim Mammadaliyev and academician Ziya Bunyadov.

Translations of Azerbaijani excerpts from the works of Panteleimon Juzen (Bandali Juzen) from Arabic works of IX-XIII centuries Arabic authors were a great help to many scholars in the study of the medieval culture of Azerbaijan.

Unfortunately, some of his works have disappeared from the archives, and some, including several works that are important in the study of socio-political events in medieval Azerbaijani society, remain in unpublished manuscripts (Asir, 1940; Ostroumov, 2015; Timokhin, 2015).

In the 1960s, the remnants of the Soviet system of thought still had an impact on the work of some researchers. These authors, who looked at the problems of the Middle Ages from the Soviet point of view, focused on the class struggle in each case. M. Azerli (1965) in his dissertation entitled “Reform of Caliph Abdul Malik ibn Marwa and Azerbaijan (685-705)” studied the alphabet conducted by Caliph Abdul Malik, the Arabicization of divans, etc. The Soviet approach to reform, including both Arabization and monetary reform, has brought the class struggle to the forefront of these issues, showing that these reforms have turned against the working masses. M. Azerli also objected to George Zeyda’s idea that the ideas of pan-Arabism originated in the Umayyad period, claiming that these ideas originated from the first conquests and that the class struggle began from that period, i.e from Muhammad (sas) to the Rashid caliphs, and added that the Arabic language was one of the stimuli. The author linked the ease of Arabicization to the Qur’an, stating that *“.. the Qur’an compelled all literate people to write in Arabic”*.

In the 60s and 80s, the scientific environment also had a positive impact on the historiography of Azerbaijan, significant and important scientific research works on the ancient and medieval history of the country were written, and a school of source studies began to form. From this point of view, the services of Azerbaijani orientalists Ziya Bunyadov, Sara Ashurbeyli, Naila Valikhanli, Zakir Mammadov, Malik Mahmudov, and Mammad Sharifli should be specially noted.

It is also important to point out that the large number of sources scattered in museums and libraries around the world makes it difficult to involve them in research. In this regard Azerbaijani researchers have visited various cultural centers, taking their manuscripts to those countries. There are reports of such manuscripts in Turkey, Iran, India, and even other countries. Some of the manuscripts belonging to Azerbaijani people have been left out of the study, and very few people know about them. Due to this fact, Azerbaijani intellectuals brought these manuscripts home and delivered them to the scientific community. An example is Farid Alakbarov, an employee of the Institute of Manuscripts, who brought medieval manuscripts from the Vatican in 2011 and then from Paris, which are still unknown and new to Azerbaijani science. In addition, copies of different works kept in the National Library of Paris were brought to the Institute of Manuscripts of ANAS like

Al-Bakuwi (1906). As a result of his research in the archives of the Vatican, F. Alakbarov came to the conclusion that the rulers of the states that existed in Azerbaijan in the Middle Ages sent letters and books to the Vatican through missionaries, received answers and book gifts.

There are unexamined manuscripts, not only abroad, but also in different parts of the country, as they are kept at home. In the past, some of the manuscripts stored on roofs, walls, and underground were acquired and sold, and unfortunately, most were exported because they were not purchased by government agencies. Unfortunately, this way some very valuable examples of Azerbaijani culture have been lost.

In modern times, some problems, including the definition of the historical boundaries of Azerbaijan, which is part of the Caliphate and the spread of Islamic culture, have again become a topic of discussion in the scientific literature. Academician Naila Valikhanli points out that the claims of some researchers (A. Shaginyan and others) that the administrative-political term "Azerbaijan" belongs only to the south of Azerbaijan (now northwest of the Islamic Republic of Iran) by Arab authors are unfounded, as well as from the Araz River confirms that the territories in the north (the territory of the modern Republic of Azerbaijan) do not belong to the so-called "Persarmeniya, Paytakaran and Vaspurakan" inhabited by the autonomous Armenian population, but also to the Upper (i.e. Northern) Azerbaijan or simply Arran province called Azerbaijan (Velikhanly, 2017, pp. 110–119).

The distorted interpretation of some of the terms in medieval Arabic, Persian and Armenian sources in the works of modern historians lead to the repetition of the terminological problem at a new level of research. According to sources, in the early 13th century, the Georgian Empire, the Atabey State, and the semi-independent Arran existed in the South Caucasus. The region named after Armenia was presented as an independent state with central and other attributes, which means that the sources were distorted. Researcher Timokhin (2015) rightly describes the political use of the term "Armenia" as a distorted transmission of medieval Arabic and Persian sources. For example, one of the unfortunate cases is the distortion of the names of books in medieval sources. For example, Ganjali Kirakos's work translated by T. Ter Grigoryan in 1946 was called "History", and one of the original versions of this work was given in this way by K. Patkanov and published in Russian by L. Khanlaryan in 1976. This version is called "History of Armenia". It is surprising that the same historical source has a different name, and the publisher and translator do not give any explanation or comment on this fact.

At the same time, since Azerbaijan was part of the Caliphate with the countries of the Middle East in the Middle Ages, it is important to study its cultural relations with these countries. Several achievements have been made in this area as well however, they will be addressed in future works.

CONCLUSIONS

Studying a culture is important because it allows us to better know and understand other people and societies. By learning about the beliefs, customs, traditions, and values of a particular culture, we can gain a deeper and broader view of how other people live and think, as well as develop greater empathy and respect for them. It can also help us better understand our own culture and our own beliefs and values by comparing ourselves, identifying similarities and differences, and in the process highlighting the relationships that unite us or make us unique. This can help us to have a broader perspective and to be more open and flexible in our way of thinking and seeing the world. Even in an increasingly globalized world, it is important to understand other cultures in order to work and communicate effectively with people of different origins and cultural backgrounds.

In this regard, much progress has recently been made in the study of the cultural history of Azerbaijan in the Middle Ages and specifically the Muslim culture. Numerous sources have been translated and researched and presented to the scientific community. However, it should be noted that due to the anti-national policy of the past in the field of studying the medieval culture of Azerbaijan a bitter consequence is that even today, the people of Azerbaijan are not fully aware of their millennial past. This way, although some of the works of our scholars written in Arabic have been translated into Azerbaijani many works are still awaiting translation and study. We hope that in the future, both local and foreign experts will continue to work on the study of Turkish-Islamic culture, revealing new facts, and new successes will be achieved in the study of Azerbaijan as a branch of Turkish-Islamic culture.

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