CASPIAN VIBES

DECEMBER 2024

PAKHLAVA OR BAKLAVA?
Answering the age-old question

Striking Black Gold:
The History of Oil in Azerbaijan

Repairing LOVE
A journey of freedom, identity and love of rugs

Tar, Saz Kamancha

AN AZERBAIJANI AMERICAN MAGAZINE

Featured



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History was made in 1846 when Azerbaijan successfully drilled the world's first oil well in **Bibi-Heybat** – more than a decade before the American Edwin Drake discovered oil in Pennsylvania in 1859.

20 **Repairing Love**

One sunny June afternoon, I was invited to the home of **Amir Oskouei**, a fine rug dealer of Azerbaijani heritage, to explore his antique rug collection. He had remodeled his basement into a fully-fledged museum housing an impressive array of rugs from different time periods.

36 **Tar, Saz, Kamancha**

If you ask any Azerbaijani to name the traditional instruments of Azerbaijani folk music, *mugham*, you will receive the same responses: **tar, kamancha, and saz**. These national instruments are so beloved that they are found on the Azerbaijani one manat banknote.

43 **Pakhlava or Baklava?**

Azerbaijani pakhlava is a beloved national dessert. The sweet goodness can be tasted year-round, but truly enjoyed on special occasions. In March, when the Spring equinox marks the local New Year and the coming of spring – **Novruz** – the pastry gets its ultimate spotlight.

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Cover Photo

The cover photo is a 3D generated image showing two men struggling to incorporate the numerous and distinct parts of their identity, drawn in a surrealist style.

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FROM THE EDITOR

hello!



Dear Reader,

This much-anticipated issue comes at a time of racial, ethnic, and identity reckoning that is sweeping across social justice movements worldwide. The struggle for freedom of speech and expression of identity is known all too well to millions of people, with its benefits not equally afforded to all. We hope to raise awareness of one such movement and shed light of its devastating effects on people who lived through it.

Roza

Editor-in-Chief

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Meet Our Team



Hokuma Karimova

Hokuma is a **sustainability expert** who spent a decade working in the field of **international development**. Her travels and exposures to many diverse cultures have helped her see the role that valuable storytelling plays in **cultivating open minds** and loving hearts. By sharing the insights and lessons she gathered from her own life experiences with others, Hokuma hopes to contribute to the creation of a more interconnected, peaceful and sustainable world for generations to come.



Dr. Jeiran Hasan

Jeiran enjoys a multi-faceted career as a **flutist** and **educator**. Based in Iowa City, Iowa, she is the principal flutist of the Knox-Galesburg Symphony, a flute instructor at the Quad City Symphony, and recently served as the flute instructor at Western Illinois University. She has been a prizewinner or finalist in over 20 national and international competitions and gave her debut at **Carnegie Hall**. Dr. Hasan has given masterclasses and performances around the globe, teaching in Azerbaijani, Russian, Spanish, and Arabic.



Aidin Eminov

Aidin is a dynamic professional with over four years of experience in **project coordination and leadership**. Currently pursuing a master's in International Affairs with a focus on **global governance** from American University, he has developed strong analytical and research skills, having contributed to impactful projects, such as evaluating citizen **education programs** in Northern Ireland. As a program fellow at Civica, Aidin continues to refine his expertise in global policy and governance. Aidin is fluent in Turkish and Azerbaijani.

CASPIAN VIBES

Meet Our Team



Dr. Nazim Mamedov

Having penned about 100 scientific publications, book chapters, and articles in peer-reviewed journals, Nazim is an expert on **ethnobotany** and **ethnopharmacology**. He earned his PhD in Botany from the Highest Attestation Committee of the Council of Ministers of USSR at Moscow Lomonosov University. Nazim currently works as an Adjunct Assistant Professor at University of Massachusetts in Amherst. In his spare time, he enjoys reading about **medicinal plants** and alternative medicine.



Dr. Roza Eynula

Roza works in education and non-profit management. She completed her doctorate dissertation on the effects of interrupted education of Azerbaijani IDP and refugee children during the First Karabakh War. She is the founder and president of the non-profit organization **Azerbaijani Society of New England**. and manages the cultural magazine **Caspian Vibes**. Roza also played on the **national chess teams** of Azerbaijan and South Korea. She speaks Azerbaijani, Russian, and Korean, and currently works as a middle school teacher.



About Us

Caspian Vibes is a biannual cultural and educational magazine dedicated to raising awareness of unique Azerbaijani-American perspectives on topics that matter to our community. We are a partner of the 501(c)(3) non-profit **Azerbaijani Society of New England.**

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Flame Towers overlooking
the Martyr's Alley
Baku, Azerbaijan

Photo: Dr. Roza Eynula

MEDICINAL PLANTS OF AZERBAIJAN

By Dr. Nazim Mamedov



The Republic of Azerbaijan is situated on the farthest southeastern border of the European continent – to the east of the Transcaucasia region – and occupies an area of 33,436 sq mi. It borders Russia in the north, Georgia in the northwest, Armenia and Turkey in the west, and Iran in the south. ***Caspian Sea****, the largest lake in the world, adjoins the country to the east, spanning over 528 mi.*

The climate of Azerbaijan varies from region to region, comprising of nine out of eleven climatic zones. Vegetation in Azerbaijan is represented by varied types of greenery, such as wetlands, steppes, and deserts. The long-standing diversity of the natural landscape has created an incredibly distinct flora.

The most unique natural heritage of Azerbaijani plant life, however, is that it hosts **relict trees** known to be survivors of the vast Eurasian forests that lived over 20 million years ago. Although some regions, such as the islands of Crete in Greece and Sicily in Italy, are known to have around a dozen relic trees left today, ***Azerbaijan boasts an entire forest of relict trees.***

The relict forest is located in the south of Azerbaijan in in the **Hirkan Forest** of the **Talysh mountains**. It is abundant with *Iron trees* (or Persian ironwood, Parrotia persica) and *Lankaran acacia* (or Persian silk tree, Albizia julibrissin).

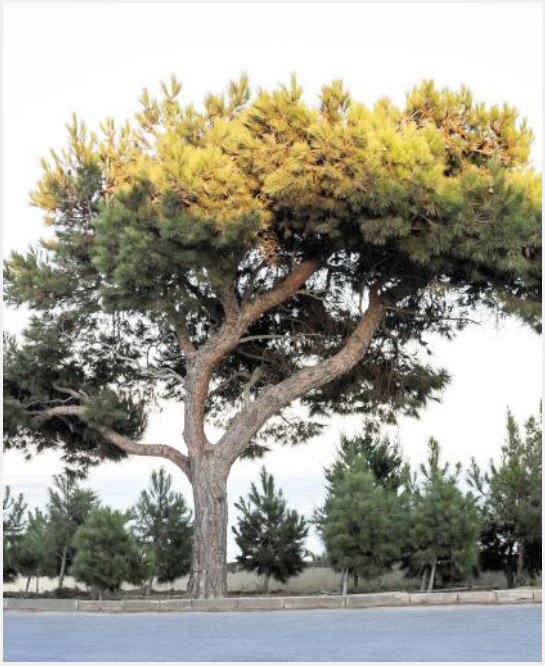
Botanical Institute of National Academy of Sciences in Baku has identified around 4,500 species of vascular plants growing in the country. This places Azerbaijan as the **number 65 most biodiverse country in the world** (the United States is in 10th place).

The diverse species are grouped into 186 families and 1142 genera, with the number of species endemic to Azerbaijan standing at 240. Accordingly, Azerbaijan is the only place in the world where those plant species, e.g. **Eldar pine** (Pinus eldarica) and **Chestnut-leaved oak** (Quercus castaneifolia), originate.

The country also boasts 349 species of birds, 11 species of amphibians, 65 species of reptiles, 85 species of fish, and 103 species of mammals.



Hirkan Forest in Talysh Mountains
Photo: Elvin Sadikhov



Eldar pine



Relict trees



Quince fruit

MEDICINAL PLANTS

in Azerbaijan represent about 1,545 species, making up 34.3% of all the flora in the country. Among them are 825 essential oil plants, 600 species of alkaloid-containing plants, over 200 plants comprised of fatty oils with medicinal properties, 450 plants high in vitamin content, 300 plants containing tannins, and about 500 dye plants.

These plants have been used in traditional Azerbaijani medicine for many centuries. Comprehensive records were first presented in Azerbaijan in the 10th century by **Abu Mansur Muvaffag al-Haravi**, who described 477 varieties of medicinal plants in his expert publications.

In the 12th century, prominent physician and scientist **Kafiyaddin Omar ibn Osman** founded the Malham School of Medicine (also spelled as Melgam) in Shamakhi city, Azerbaijan, where medicinal properties of herbs were taught, attracting many prominent Karabakh doctors. By the 13th century, studies by other Azerbaijani scholars on the efficacy of preventative Eastern medicine through the varied use of medicinal and aromatherapeutic plants were beginning to abound.

The smell of quince was believed to uplift one's energy and apples stimulated the brain.

The groundbreaking 15th century physician **Ramazan ibn Sheykh Ali Lenkorani** focused on the effects of organic and inorganic substances on living organisms. By the 17th century, well-known physician and scientist **Haji Suleyman Kajar Iravani** had described about 600 medieval pharmacological plants and their healing qualities in his book '**Fawa'id al-Hikmat**' (*Benefit of Wisdom or The Book of Knowledge*). In 1712, the distinguished palace physician for Shirvan Shahs **Muhammad Yusif Shirvani** penned '**Tibbname**' (*Book of Medicine*) entirely by hand, essentially consolidating all the current knowledge into a comprehensive medical encyclopedia, documenting all known diseases and their treatments at the time.



Lankaran acacia flower

Ancient medicinal plants have always had a special place in Azerbaijani culture. Although their use has significantly decreased with the advent of modern technology and western medicinal practices, traditional Eastern medicine is still used today as the first line of defense in healing an ailment. As Azerbaijan's most distinguished medical historian who has authored over 200 scientific and educational works, **Dr. Farid Alakbarli**, former President of Azerbaijan Association of Medical Historians, once noted,



Iron tree leaves

"Modern medicine is only a few hundred years old. Traditional medicine has been around for many millennia."



STRIKING BLACK GOLD:

THE HISTORY OF OIL IN AZERBAIJAN

By Aidin Eminov

Oil is unequivocally the most sought-after commodity in the world. It's what drives the world economy. Without oil, modern technologies such as cars, boats, aircrafts and electricity would be of no use. Agriculture would become painstakingly slow with farmers not being able to mass produce without the necessary oil to power their machines, which would prompt an inevitable global food shortage.

> *Until a more viable and* ***eco-friendly source*** *of power becomes available, oil and gas will continue to reign supreme.*

EARLY HISTORY OF OIL

There is one country, however, that has a long and storied history with oil dating back millennia. Despite only possessing a land area slightly smaller than the state of Maine, the South Caucasian country of Azerbaijan is one with exorbitant amounts of oil to boast. Situated directly west of the mighty Caspian Sea, its natural gas and petroleum deposits account for approximately 80% of the country's economy.

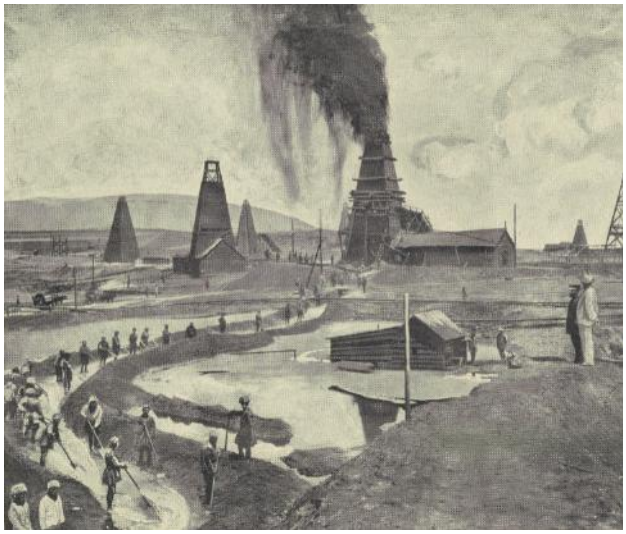
Evidence of oil drilling and trading petroleum can be dated back to as early as the 3rd and 4th centuries. Historical accounts of the area's oil and natural gas sightings can be found in old Arabic and Persian manuscripts, as well as the writings of famous travelers, such as Marco Polo. Interestingly, oil and gas in Azerbaijan was so plentiful that the Persians dubbed the area the "Land of Fire," a moniker that stuck to this day.

History was made in 1846 when Azerbaijan successfully drilled the world's first oil well in Bibi-Heybat – more than a decade before the American Edwin Drake discovered oil in Pennsylvania in 1859. Modern drilling soon followed in 1870, attracting a sizable investment for production technology, distillation, and transportation from the Nobel Brothers that paid back multiple times over. By the 19th century, Azerbaijan was pumping so much oil and gas that it quickly shot up to become the global leader in the oil and gas industry. In fact, by the beginning of the 20th century, the oil industry in Azerbaijan produced more than half of the world's oil supply, outpacing the United States by a wide margin of 17.6 million barrels of oil per year.

By the start of World War I, Azerbaijan's oil wells were supplying 175 million barrels of crude oil a year, which equated to 75 percent of the country's entire oil supply. By 1930s, oil output in Baku was growing at an expeditious rate, reaching 22.4 million tons produced in 1938. It is estimated that Baku oil fields accounted for over 80% of total oil output in all of USSR.



By 1882, oil wells belonging to the Nobel Brothers started distilling oil 24 hours a day. Photo: Asbrink Collection



A gushing oil well in Azerbaijan, 1909
Photo: James Charles Philip

CITY IN THE SEA

One of the greatest feats Azerbaijan would become known for was the city of Neft Dashlari or Oil Rocks. Commissioned by the Soviet government in 1949, this “city in the sea” is the oldest offshore oil platform in the world and is included in the Guinness World Book of Records. Located about 35 miles from the coast of capital Baku, the industrial settlement of intricate network of bridges and man-made platforms was the world’s first attempt to tap into offshore oil drilling and a symbol of technological progress. One over-sea drilling platform after another was built and linked up with piers, with the foundation formed by sinking 7 discarded tankers and warships 1,000 meters into the seabed. Moreover, this grand operation led to the construction of 186 miles of roads and 256 individual oil wells.

Oil production officially began in 1951 and its expansion continued with the addition of two dormitories, a 100-seat dining hall, a library housing 25,000 books, a bathhouse, a movie theater for an audience of 300, and even a museum. The residents of this mesmerizing fully-functioning city operated on a one-week shift rotation. Although much of Neft Dashlari has been reclaimed by the sea, its rigs continue to produce oil, and about 5,000 people still inhabit the world’s first and oldest floating oil city in the world.



Fun Fact:

*Neft Daşları, or Oil Rocks, made the **Guinness Book of Records** as the oldest offshore oil platform.*



Neft Dashlari
Photo: NSRP



Aerial view of Neft Dashlari
Photo: NSRP

Oil and gas production made up half of Azerbaijan's GDP and 91% of its total exports in 2022.



THE BURNING MOUNTAIN

In the 13th century, Venetian merchant and explorer Marco Polo famously visited Baku, where he mentioned seeing gushing flames that could be found all over the Absheron Peninsula region. Five centuries after Marco Polo's travels, French writer Alexandre Dumas witnessed natural flames in a mysterious fire temple. These natural fires found throughout Azerbaijan are considered to have played a pivotal part in the creation of Zoroastrianism — a mystical faith with ceremonial fire worshipping as its cornerstone, which appeared in the region around 2,000 years ago.



Marco Polo. Photo: Silk Road

The simple explanation for the omnipresent, continuously burning flames is due to Azerbaijan's expansive gas reserves stored beneath its surface. The oil reserves are so vast that people often see it seeping through the topsoil. Some areas are so saturated that as little as one lit match will cause it to ignite. If a fire over a natural gas pocket is set, it will continually burn until it runs out of fuel. The fires, which used to be widespread, have become less prevalent over the years as oil companies have been developing the gas reserves for decades, decreasing the amount of fuel escaping into the environment. Of the natural fires that burn today in Azerbaijan, Yanar Dağ or Burning Mountain is arguably the most impressive. It is a 33-feet long wall of fire that never extinguishes and is most picturesque at night, offering a breathtaking experience for both tourists and locals alike excited to witness the ever-burning fire. Local legend has it that it was a shepherd that accidentally ignited the fire in 1950s by tossing a cigarette onto the ground – and that it has burnt ever since.

Yanar Dag, the Burning Mountain

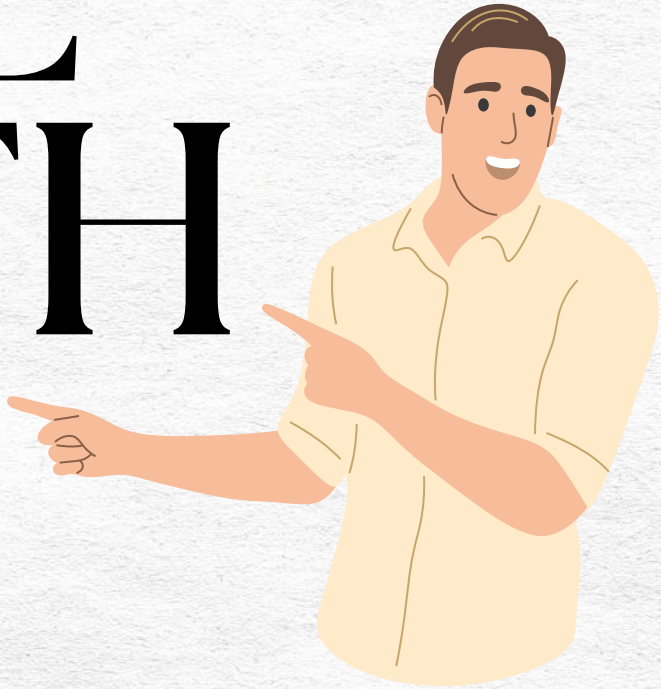


Fun Fact:

12%** of the Nobel Prize came from Alfred Nobel's shares in the three brothers' **petroleum company in Baku.

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REPAIRING LOVE

by Dr. Roza Eynula

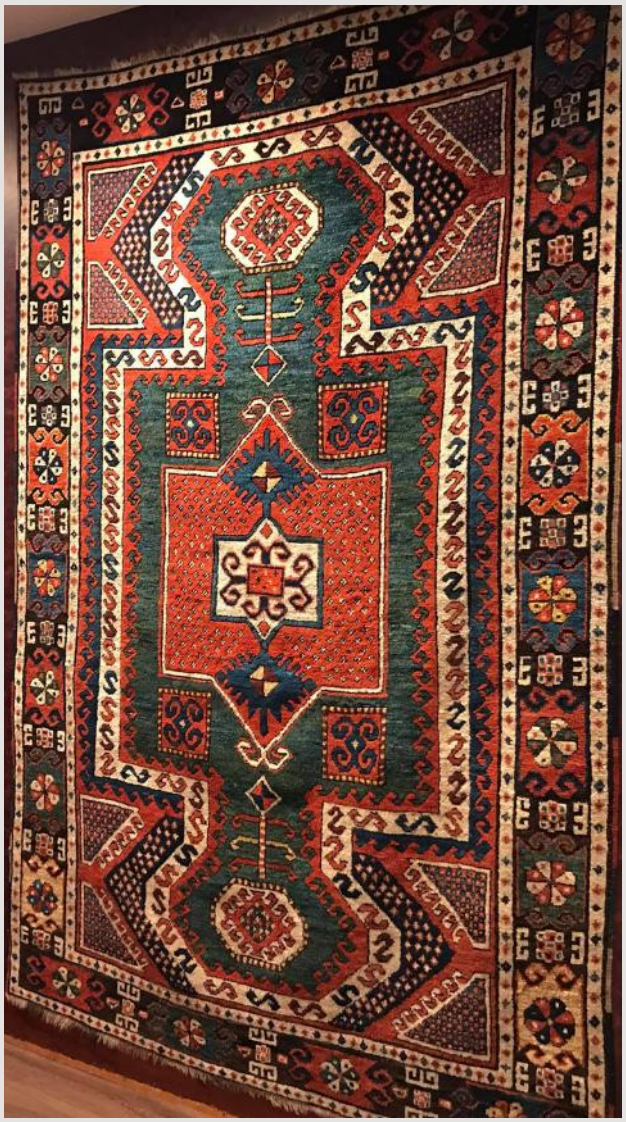
One sunny June afternoon, I was invited to the home of Amir Oskouei, a fine rug dealer of Azerbaijani heritage, to explore his antique rug collection. He had remodeled his basement into a fully-fledged museum housing an impressive array of rugs from different time periods, prominently displayed on every inch of the walls and floors. His collection displayed showstopping masterpieces with an array of vibrant colors, unique designs, and intricate geometric patterns – each with their own fascinating history. About a dozen more rugs were rolled up on a cart, waiting for their time in the spotlight.



A self-professed 'rug lover,' Amir has remarkable historical knowledge and business acumen of the precious antique rugs he handles, making his reputation highly sought after. He has established good relationships with notable auction houses in the United States and Europe, acting as an intermediary for clients who wish to procure or sell their precious rugs.

But it is not just a job for him. He doesn't rush to sell the rugs he acquires, instead taking in and enjoying its beauty, history, and patterns, and reveling in the joyous feelings that these antique rugs instill in him. When he comes upon a priceless item, the thought of adding it to his own personal collection often crosses his mind.

EXPLORING THE ROOTS



Azerbaijan, last quarter of 19th century

Amir pointed to a rug from the second quarter of 19th century that originated in Ganja, Azerbaijan. When I asked him how he came to acquire it, he told me that most of his antique rug collection was bought from private collectors and auction houses. "There are no antique rugs left in private homes in Azerbaijan, Iran, or Turkey anymore. Most of them have been exported outside of their countries of origin," he lamented.

"I am a second-generation antique rug collector," Amir explained. "I learned this trade from my father, who, unfortunately, passed away in 2011 at the age of 70. He used to sell a variety of antique items, not solely rugs. He traded decorative pieces, European antiques, and other specialty items. I decided to specialize only in rugs."

Amir left his hometown of Tabriz, Iran, when he was just 18 years old, excited to venture out on his own and learn the trade of antique rug procurement.

Like any ambitious young man, he wanted to make a name for himself, and to make his family proud. His sudden freedom came at a hefty cost, however, when he unwittingly got involved in what he thought was trivial social justice activism as he began to explore his ethnic Azerbaijani identity.

Unfortunately, the Iranian government didn't see it that way. His actions were labeled "subversive," and Amir suddenly found himself a target of political repression.

GOVERNMENT SANCTION DISCRIMINATION

*According to former Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi, around 40% of Iranians are **Turkic**. The majority of them live in northern provinces of Tabriz, Ardabil, Orumiyeh (Urmia), and Zanjan.*

Yet, ethnic Azerbaijani Turks living in Iran are routinely jailed for studying their native Azerbaijani language, reading Azerbaijani books, speaking in their native tongue, or publishing in their native language. These discriminatory policies of ethnic repression towards Iran's ethnic Azerbaijani population have been going on for decades.

Charges against those accused of subverting these policies usually range from "propaganda against the regime," to "organizing meetings in opposition to the regime," to "supporting underground opposition groups," and "disturbing public order," or being guilty by mere association.

Before the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Amir's father's relatives were actively campaigning for a free and democratic Iran, but the new government turned out to be not that different from the previous one. Agents of the regime killed one of Amir's uncles for his involvement in the movement, while his father, other uncles, and aunts were all jailed and served six-months to four-year sentences.



A cartoon depicting a cockroach speaking Azerbaijani.



Azerbaijani Turks in Iran protesting against ethnic discrimination. Photo: Report.az.

Amir recalls when he found himself in trouble with the Iranian government for the first time in 2006. Big protests broke out in Tabriz after newspapers referred to Iranian citizens of Turkic heritage, like Amir, as 'bugs.'

It sparked a nationwide movement of ethnic awakening after continuous repression and human rights violations. Amir decided to participate in those protests as well, a choice which ultimately landed him in jail for four months.

The guards frequently interrogated him for long periods of time, repeatedly questioning whether he was following his father's footsteps. In response, Amir remembers asking them how speaking his mother tongue broke any laws, since Iran's Constitution specifically permitted it.

"How could my ethnic identity be the reason for being surveilled by state agencies? My language and culture are a part of me - it makes me who I am. How could one's identity be considered criminal?" he somberly asked.

A year later in 2007, Amir traveled from Tabriz to Tehran for business. He recalls receiving a phone call from an unknown number, commanding him to return to Tabriz and visit the police department for questioning. The call turned out to be from Ettela'at, Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security. An intelligence organization somewhat akin to a hybrid of CIA and NSA, Ettela'at is notorious for infiltrating and surveilling domestic as well as foreign institutions, using a variety of intelligence gathering and counterintelligence operations. Its officers have been known to work as undercover agents in Iranian embassies abroad, some even posing as refugees and spying on local Iranian populations, while others monitor journalists, prominent political and literary figures, and dissidents. The organization's symbolic green eye is a constant reminder that they are ever-watchful.

Amir agreed to return to Tabriz after his business affairs in Tehran were in order. However, two days after the phone call, Amir realized that his checks wouldn't cash - government officials had frozen his bank account, a common intimidation tactic, to urge him to speed up his trip and come in for questioning as soon as possible.

This was Amir's time of reckoning. His first imprisonment lasted four months, while his friends with similarly minor misdemeanors were still jailed. His second run-in with the officials was going to be harsher. He knew he couldn't remain in Iran anymore for fear of constant intimidation and jail time on trumped-up charges hanging over his head. He decided to escape.



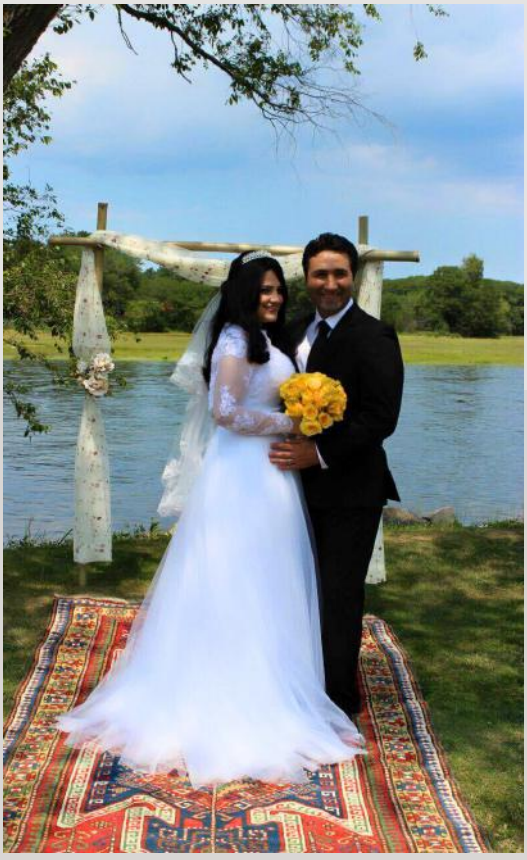
Ettela'at (or VEVAK)
Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security

THE BIG ESCAPE

Certain details in the next part of Amir's story are kept confidential for privacy concerns for those who helped him escape.

Amir found someone who agreed to smuggle him out of Iran and into Turkey by car. He threw away his phone and initially traveled from Tehran to Orumiyeh, the largest city in West Azerbaijani Province of Iran, some 470 miles northwest from Tehran.

Amir and his wife



From there, Amir continued on until he reached Ankara, Turkey, with nothing but $140 in his pockets. Amir reveals that after being forced to leave his home in Iran and escape to Turkey, he fell into a deep depression. After four tough years of waiting in bureaucratic limbo, UNHCR, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees – a UN agency mandated to aid and protect refugees worldwide – finally processed Amir's paperwork, and he got the approval to immigrate to the United States.

While trying to navigate his uncertain life in Turkey, Amir saw a flicker of hope – he had met a woman who would go to become his future wife. She was also Iranian, from Orumiyeh, now living in Afyonkarahisar, a small city in western Turkey. They met while he was working as a Farsi interpreter for local Turkish officials, and like Amir, she was also waiting for immigration approval. Amir's big day to move to the United States finally arrived in July 2012. He was 40 years old and starting his life all over again.

After a brief stint at a small company upon his arrival, Amir found an opportunity to work for a renowned rug company in a Boston suburb. After a trial period, he was eventually hired as an Expert Restorator, a promotion that allowed him to purchase his first house and, more importantly, for his wife to finally join him.

After a few years of working at the antiques shop, and one week before his first child was born, Amir decided to branch out and start his own antique rug business. Slowly but surely, he established his trade and carved out a name for himself within the antique rug industry in the Boston area.

LOVE IS ALL AROUND



Azerbaijan, 1880
Chayli Kazak rug

I point to the most vibrant rug in the room that looks busy with an intricate set of decorations and symbols. He tells me that it is a late 17th to early 18th century Gordus carpet from the Ushak area of western Turkey – one of only two such carpets known to still be in existence today. The second one is prominently displayed at a museum in Budapest, Hungary. The original carpet has been cut into large fragments, which is easy to mistake for a complete carpet by an untrained eye.

Amir found out that his fragmented carpet had a sister fragment after accidentally stumbling upon it in a magazine.

As we continue our tour, Amir shows me inside his study, also tastefully decorated with carpets – they're everywhere. He points to a 19th century carpet from eastern Turkey. There is a thick issue of Hali magazine on top of the bureau, full of elegant carpet spreads and featured articles.



Traditional Azerbaijani
Armudu glasses

Amidst our talk, Amir's wife brings us tea in traditional Azerbaijani **armudu glasses** and sweets, their toddler son trailing close behind. As if mesmerized by his potential future calling, his son immediately makes his way towards one of the carpets.

"Maybe he'll be a third generation antique carpet dealer one day," Amir says with a gentle smile. Then he turns to his wife and adds, "Sağ ol. Əllərin ağrımasın" in Azerbaijani – "Thank you. Let your hands not hurt." I begin to understand why
Amir exudes so much love.



Amir's workshop



Amir playing his tar

In addition to the displayed carpets, tucked in one corner of Amir's museum is a cozy workshop where he finishes small restoration projects. Around 100 color-coordinated skeins of yarns of different hues, tints, shades, and tones are mounted on the wall. The museum is Amir's life – he works here, he rests here, and he even plays his tar here.

One of Amir's most personal connections to his culture is his tar, a long-neck stringed musical instrument in the lute family traditionally played in Azerbaijan. He taught himself how to play, and proudly displays his instrument in the museum alongside his precious carpets. Despite the joy in his voice, his eyes betray a bittersweet longing.

He tells me that his younger brother, who lives in Azerbaijan, also plays a traditional Azerbaijani musical instrument – kamança, a stringed instrument similar to a spike fiddle. Amir hasn't seen his brother in 15 years, after fleeing Iran.

WEAVING THROUGH HISTORY

I asked Amir why he thought his work was important. He sighed heavily and seemed to reflect deeply before answering. I felt that I had inadvertently struck a chord. "Unfortunately, the new generation does not know much about or appreciate antique rugs and textiles," he explained.

"If you go to carpet stores, you can see many carpets with factory-style cookie-cutter designs and patterns specifically made for mass consumption. Antique carpets are different – they have a special type of energy in them. When I see antique carpets, I can hear music and poetry."

The reverent way Amir speaks about carpets is akin to beautiful ballads sung by heartbroken aşıq bards. He goes on to explain that Azerbaijani carpets from the 19th century are unbelievably colorful and handcrafted with a lot of skill and passion. One can tell that Azerbaijani carpet weavers were not only happy people, but were extremely skilled in their craft.

He added that rural Azerbaijani craftsmen left an indelible mark on regional carpet weaving with their unique symbols and commitment to their trade. The knowledge and the emotional connection to the yarn was often passed on from older generations to the next, and that young women in the countryside would customarily weave carpets for their cehiz (dowry) when they were getting ready to get married.

Traditional carpet weaving in Azerbaijan dates back thousands of years. The earliest mention of Azerbaijani rugs was found in the writings of Greek historians Herodotus and Xenophon. Early period Azerbaijani carpets were highly differentiated from other regional carpets in their distinct Turkic designs, unique patterns, geometric structure, ornamentation, and natural color schemes.



Amir working on a restoration project

A high cultural and utilitarian importance was placed on them in society - all 11 khanates within Azerbaijan had well-established carpet-weaving production centers throughout their history, with the epicenters of Baku, Ganja, Qazakh, Quba, Karabakh, and Shirvan attracting the most highly skilled craftsmen.

With the expansion of the Silk Road, Azerbaijan began exporting its carpets abroad starting in the 13th century. As traveling became more accessible and merchants transported goods along the Silk Road route, English and Dutch travelers chronicled their fascination with Azerbaijani carpets as early as the 16th century.

With a wide range of distinct patterns and varying displays of technical and graphic difficulty, Azerbaijani carpets have been exhibited in world-renowned museums, such as New York's Metropolitan Museum, London's Victoria and Albert Museum, The Louvre in Paris, and countless major international events in over 30 countries.

This enduring worldwide influence has spurred UNESCO to recognize the rich carpet-weaving traditions of Azerbaijan as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2010.

Azerbaijan, 1920
Karabakh rug



JAW-DROPPING SHOWSTOPPERS

Azerbaijan, 19th century
Shahsavan sumac bag





Azerbaijan, 18th century
Quba rug

Amir then takes out a 16th century Isfahan silk rug, the capital of the Safavid Azerbaijani Turkic dynasty. It is an amalgamation of both light and dark pieces, woven with metal, gold, and silver threads depicting an intricately designed hunting motif with cheetahs, lions, cows, dogs, and deer. Amir acquired it from a famous dealer in New York, who, in turn, had bought the rug from the royal family in India 40 years ago for his personal collection.

Next, he points to a rug gently displayed on the floor. "It is from late 17th century Quba, Azerbaijan. You can't find anything like it even in Baku," Amir adds. He bought it at Skinner Auction, a premiere auction house in Boston specializing in rare antiques and unique collectibles. It belonged to James Nixon, a prominent collector from California, who collected a variety of antiques for his personal collection, including a number of astounding Azerbaijani rugs. He passed away on March 24, 2020.

He shows me another Quba rug that has different colors faded along its edges. The direction of the pieces is different. Amir tells me it used to be one big rug, but someone decided to cut it to try to save the biggest pile area, then sewed it up together when their original plan didn't pan out.

He then diverts my attention to a mid-19th century Azerbaijani Shirvan rug, originating near Ganja. There is also a famous Turkish carpet from the second half of the 19th century in the style of Hans Holbein the Younger, a German-Swiss painter of the European Renaissance style, considered one of the greatest portraitists of the 16th century. His paintings were often influenced by patterned carpet designs and having popularized Turkish stylistic patterns into his art, the design became so linked with his name that eventually these types of carpets came to be referred to as Holbein carpets.



Amir's 'Safavid Splendors' exhibition, New York City 2024

Among the fifty or so carpets prominently displayed in his museum, I stumbled upon a couple that have obvious holes in them and are in desperate need of some TLC. When I asked Amir why he kept them that way when he could have easily restored them, he said that he wanted to keep them as is to preserve their unique history. Sometimes, he would prop the spot behind it to give it extra support and delay the pulling on the fibers, but for the most part he kept them as is.

His collection also includes a Cappadocia, Turkey, rug from 1820s, which looks very well-preserved. Amir procured it from a dealer who purchased it from the famous German collector, architect and urban planner Professor Dr. Gunther Marschall (1913-1997). His vast antiques collection ranged from a 1200 BC Mycenaean Chariot Figurine, a 3100 BC Ancient Egyptian Predynastic Period Pottery Vase, a 100 AD Teotihuacan Stone Mark, to a gray 2nd century AD Gandhara Standing Buddha statue.



Azerbaijan, 1800
Shirvan animal rug

COPYCATS AND FAKES

To ensure that he only deals with authentic carpets and not just imitations, Amir routinely sends the rugs he is interested in for age testing before acquiring or putting them up for auction.

However, not everyone who operates in this field is as scrupulous as he is. Before his escape, Amir had his own rug workshop in Tabriz, employing around 25 people who not only worked on rug restoration projects, but also helped create his own pieces. Occasionally, he would come across one of his own carpets during the course of his work.

Amir recounts the time when he encountered one of his own carpets at a high-end auction in a Boston suburb being advertised as an antique piece, despite it being no more than 15 years old. He immediately contacted the auction house about the inaccuracy, but Amir's attempt fell on deaf ears. They decided to keep the advertised date as is, willfully misrepresenting its origin and history to avoid damaging its reputation.

Amir then described a client who wanted to authenticate what she thought was a Turkish rug, but which turned out to be a replica. The seller had attempted to make the rug appear older than it really was. Wanting to authenticate it, the buyer reached out to Amir - who then confirmed that the rug was a copy. The client was understandably shocked and disappointed, returning the rug back to the Austrian auction house she procured it from.

When they asked how she came to know that the carpet was a copy, she gave them Amir's name. The conversation ended there as Amir's reputation preceded him. "The name makes the money, not the rug," is what his father used to say.

Amir explained that it is not easy to distinguish between an authentic rug and a knock-off, adding that "it's difficult to explain all the intricacies of what makes a carpet antique." Carbon dating the fibers is not always done, so the surest way to authenticate the piece is by handling it. Amir also looks at the oxidation of the colors, its design, the symbols native to the rug's area of origin, and the condition. In other words, he looks at every minute detail.





Azerbaijan, late 19th century Ganja rug

APPROPRIATION AND THEFT

In addition to fraud, another injustice prevalent within the antique carpet industry is the appropriation and mislabeling of Azerbaijani carpets as either Persian or Oriental. Better-informed antique houses identify them as Caucasian or Turkic, but oftentimes still omit their Azerbaijani origins. Traditionally, carpets were named after the towns in which they were produced. However, Azerbaijani Turkic carpet-producing areas of Iran were often made to continue using the 'Persian' label even after those areas became part of sovereign Azerbaijan.

Turkic and Persian carpet weaving techniques and designs are very different, varying in knot type, stylistic motifs, centerpiece designs, geometric shapes, and dyeing method. The consequences of this erroneous misclassification create an inaccurate representation of Azerbaijani Turkic antique carpets, perpetuating the appropriation of said carpets. Correcting blatant mislabeling of Azerbaijani carpets as Persian is a huge undertaking – one that Amir has been taking on for years.

Amir's dream is to one day showcase traditional Azerbaijani culture with its carpets and musical instruments in Boston, showing off Baku, Ganja, Qazakh, Quba, Karabakh, and Shirvan carpets alongside traditional Azerbaijani instruments such as balaban, tar, kamancha, ud, and qopuz. He wants to put a stop to Azerbaijani cultural appropriation and raise awareness of the rich Azerbaijani cultural heritage – a spotlight he feels is long overdue. That will be his proudest achievement and legacy.

The once-occupied city of Shusha used to boast a magnificent carpet museum in 1987, full of unique rugs, regional Karabakh costumes, and other traditional collectibles of Azerbaijani folk culture. After the city's liberation in the Patriotic War of 2020, around 160 prized carpets were smuggled out of Azerbaijan and are now displayed in museums in Armenia and egregiously mislabeled as Armenian, or transported abroad to be sold off to private collectors. Around a hundred other carpets deemed not so valuable were simply strewn along the floor, left to rot.

They are now painstakingly being repatriated back to their homeland. Eventually, they will appear for sale at auction houses and recovered by government officials to be returned back to Azerbaijan. It is slow but important work, and Amir wants to do what he can to assist in that process.

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

Amir has built something valuable in his short time in the States, but unfortunately, the political realities in Iran mean that his family may never get a chance to see it. His work brings joy to his life as he continues to make the connection between the carpets he so proudly displays in his museum and the love of the hands that weaved them. Carpets to Amir are akin to watching a movie – he gets a deeper appreciation for them the more he sees them. "Do what you love," is his life motto.

As a member of Boston rug groups, Amir interacts with many prominent members of the Boston society who are notable collectors. Most of them are over 70 years old and counting. He always wonders why there are only a handful younger members in the antiques industry. He believes it is because older members can't seem to pass on that appreciation of history to the new generation. They all boast cherished private collections, but lack the soul of a storyteller. Amir frequently ponders about the broader museum industry as a soulless element of our society. Is displaying items with a short description enough to draw in the viewer? Or is the lackluster display merely designed to whet our appetite to keep us interested long enough until we move on to the next big thing?

As we were wrapping up our interview, Amir began recounting his early school years. He was admittedly not studious in school, but the one subject that caught his attention was literature. The times his teacher would read a poem are his fondest memories. To Amir, his teacher didn't just read poetry – his hand gestures, tone, and pronunciation were all a manifestation of pure love. Amir's early love of literature carried over into his adult life – his passion for his work, his love of his culture – it all started with storytelling. Amir is a storyteller of carpets.



> *"Do what you love" is Amir's life motto.*



ATALAR SÖZLƏRI

THE WISDOM OF OUR ANCESTORS

by Hokuma Karimova
Part 2

telling lies

1

Yalan danışan hamını qanmaz bilər.
The one telling lies thinks everyone is stupid.

Oftentimes, while spreading lies, one starts to forget what was or wasn't said and assumes that those around won't remember.

Yalançının evinə od düşdü, heç kəs inanmadı.
The liar's house went up in flames and no one believed it.

2

After spreading countless lies, others stop believing anything a person says, even if it's true.

3

Yalanı necə istəsən dolandır, doğrunun yolu birdir.

Tell a lie whichever way you want, but the truth has only one path.

A lie can be said in many ways and take on different shapes, but the truth comes in only one.

opportunity

1

Bərəkət hərəkətdir.
Action is opportunity.

Opportunity is created by an individual through his/her actions and interactions. It doesn't just happen through sheer luck.

2

Yaxşı şeyə gül ki, başına gəlsin.
Smile at the good things so you can be blessed by them.

By being genuinely happy for others' success and achievements, we are creating a positive aura where good things can be attracted to us in return.

3

Yaxşılıq qapı açar, məhəbbət bu qapıdan içəri girər.
Kindness opens doors through which love can enter.

Reciprocating kindness opens doors for good things in our lives, and may bring us unexpected opportunities.



Church of Caucasian Albania
Kish, Azerbaijan

Photo: Dr. Roza Eynula



TAR SAZ KAMANÇA

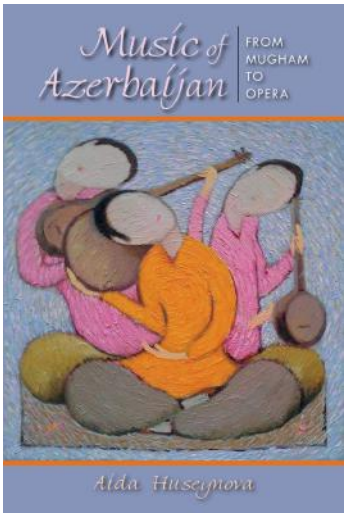
By Dr. Jeiran Hasan

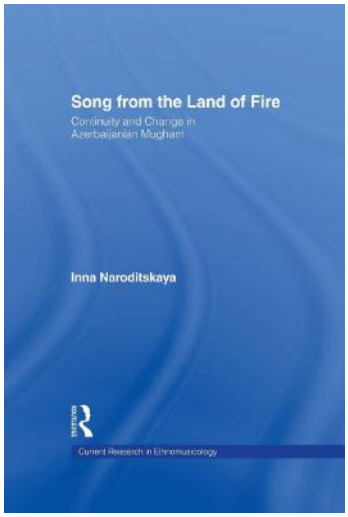
If you ask any Azerbaijani to name the traditional instruments of Azerbaijani folk music, *muğam*, you will receive the same responses: tar, kamança, and saz. These national instruments are so beloved that they are found on the Azerbaijani one manat banknote. Muğam can be heard on a daily basis on the radio, in subway stations, seen in live performances on television and concert venues, but most frequently, performed at weddings and other celebratory events. Muğam is the true essence and sound of Azerbaijani music.

Azerbaijani one manat



What is Muğam?





To understand the intricacies and complexities of this question, there are two main texts – Aida Huseynova's *Music of Azerbaijan: From Mugham to Opera* and Inna Naroditskaya's *Song from the Land of Fire: Continuity and Change in Azerbaijanian Mugham*. These books feature in-depth discussions on muğam, its history and future, and their prominence in capturing the intricacies of the Azerbaijani soul.

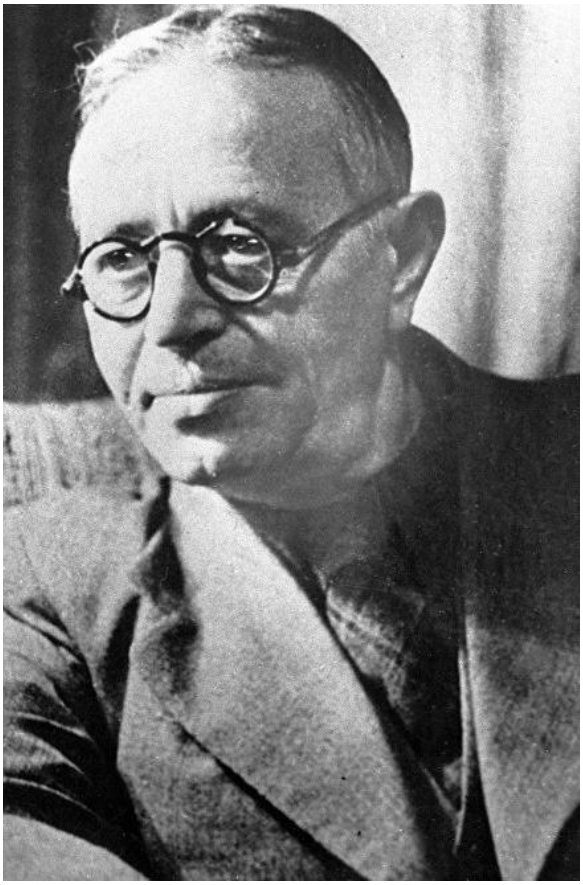
Muğam is similar to the melodious sounds of Persia, Arabia, and Turkey, extending from Eastern Europe to South and Central Asia. "Founded after the advent of Islam, it emerged as a musical system by integrating local oral traditions with Arabic writing," explained author Inna Naroditskaya. Although this art form is known by different names depending on the region, the basic principles and musical instruction are similar.

Muğam is a musical system built upon seven modes or scales, with each representing a specific mood, emotion, and tone, with roles similar to Western major and minor scales. According to Naroditskaya, "it is an anthology of melodies, themes, motifs, and rhythmic gestures. A muğam composition is a succession of improvisation mixed with songs, merging orally transmitted music with classical written poetry called ***ghazal***." As historic texts show us, ghazal is a melancholic ode based on lyrics formed from short and long syllables in Arabic. Muğam, on the other hand, is an improvisational art form where no two performances are identical. Although the text of the ghazal is fixed, the inclusion of lyrics and modes in mugham is solely based on the performer's musical intuition and emotion at the moment of performance.



Photo: Azerbaijans

> **MUĞAM IS AN ANTHOLOGY OF MELODIES, THEMES, MOTIFS, AND RHYTHMIC GESTURES**
> -Naroditskaya
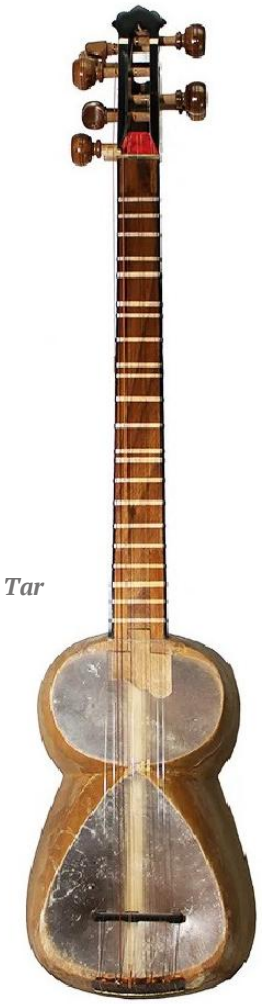


Recognized as the father of Azerbaijani classical music, Hajibeyli composed the music of the Azerbaijani national anthem.

A traditional muğam ensemble is comprised of a trio, including a singer holding a **gaval** (frame drum), accompanied by the stringed instruments **tar** and the **kamança**. From there, the ensemble can expand its sound variety and feature percussion, wind, and other string instruments. Each instrument has a specific role assigned to it, which can feature soloistic or accompaniment performances, resulting in an even greater varied intricacy of rhythms and melodies.

The famous Azerbaijani composer, Uzeyir Hajibeyli, learned the tradition of muğam from his family. Hailed as Azerbaijan's first composer in the 1920s, much like composers Bela Bartok of Hungary and Antonin Dvorak of the Czech Republic, Hajibeyli began notating Azerbaijani folk songs and transcribing them. Later, he taught and paved the way for a lineage of professional composers writing in both muğam and traditional Western classical styles. These composers, such as Fikret Amirov, Gara Garayev, and Arif Melikov, "aimed to express the Azerbaijani musical character by integrating the music they grew up with and the European classical repertoire they learned in Azerbaijan and elsewhere, developing hybrid muğam genres along the way [and] helping Azerbaijani music prosper internationally," added Naroditskaya. They also began writing individual pieces for these three instruments as solo instruments accompanied by non-muğam ensembles, such as orchestras in full or chamber settings or with piano.

TAR

The tar is a plucked, stringed instrument which is performed by holding the instrument in a horizontal position. It is a member of the lute family and has a long neck with the body shape similar to the number 8 and a smaller circle on top connecting to a large circle on the bottom. According to Encyclopedia Brittanica, a tar is hand-crafted from the trunk of a 10-15-year-old mulberry tree, or sometimes walnut, apricot, or pear. Comprised of 11 strings made from steel, brass, and wrapped brass, it also features twenty-two frets. A unique feature of this instrument is that for every song performed, the instrument is tuned specifically for the muğam mode utilized.



Tar



Saz

SAZ

Also known as the ***bağlama*** in Turkish, the saz is another plucked string instrument and can be performed with a pluck rather than with fingers or fingernails. It has seven strings and three pegs and its body is also carved from a mulberry or walnut tree. The strings are made from fishing lines, which allows for easy tuning adjustments. The saz is most famous for its association with the Azerbaijani **ashiqs**, or bards, who play the traditional instrument. “The art of Azerbaijani ashiqs combines poetry, storytelling, dance and vocal and instrumental music into a traditional performance art that stands as an emblem of national identity and the guardian of Azerbaijani culture,” noted Huseynova.

KAMANÇA

The kamança is a unique-looking bowed instrument as it is played on the knee of the performer. Of the muğam string instruments, it is the only non-plucked instrument. Featuring four strings attached to pegs and a small rounded body, it has a very long neck. The kamancha ends in a tapered spike, assisting the player to hold it. Also carved from a walnut or apricot tree, the wood is dried for many years under hay. It is covered in the skin of a fish and the body can be decorated ornately with pearl or bone inlay and various wood designs.



Kamança

HERITAGE

In 2003, UNESCO recognized Azerbaijani muğam as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. Today, muğam performers appear on the most prestigious international stages, bringing unique sounds to curious ears. It has become the main symbol of Azerbaijani music and culture both in the country and abroad. Most recently, the Silk Road Ensemble has featured legendary Azerbaijani muğam performer **Alim Qasimov**, in addition to featuring many traditional muğam instruments, specifically the kamança.

"**Muğam** is a musical tradition that shows the distinctiveness of Azerbaijani music and this genre reflects the power and ongoing significance of traditional music in Azerbaijan," stated Huseynova. Furthermore, a recording of muğam was included on the Voyager golden record sent to space in 1977 along with a dozen other world music tracks, paying homage to the unique Azerbaijani cultural asset that is muğam.

"MUĞAM IS A MUSICAL TRADITION THAT SHOWS THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF AZERBAIJANI MUSIC AND THIS GENRE REFLECTS THE POWER AND ONGOING SIGNIFICANCE OF TRADITIONAL MUSIC IN AZERBAIJAN," STATED HUSEYNOVA.



Alim Qasimov and his daughter Fargana
Photo: The Ismaili

PAKHLAVA OR BAKLAVA?



by Hokuma Karimova



DELICIOUS PROFILE:

PAKHLAVA PAHLAVA PAXLAVA BAKLAVA

This sweet flaky pastry is a regional favorite for any occasion, but what makes it so special?

BY HOKUMA KARIMOVA

Azerbaijani pakhlava is a beloved national dessert. The sweet goodness can be tasted year-round, but truly enjoyed on special occasions. In March, when the Spring equinox marks the local New Year and the coming of spring during the biggest holiday in the country – Novruz – the pastry gets its ultimate spotlight.

Its geometric diamond shape is intentional. When several pakhlavas are placed together, they embody the element of fire, as well as form the eight-pointed star on the country's flag and the national emblem. Some have even suggested that the eight-pointed star is a reference to the eight traditional Turkic people – Azerbaijanis, Ottomans, Jagatais, Tatars, Kazakhs, Kipchaks, Seljuqs, and Turkmen.



Map of Turkic countries



Country Life Vlog star (with 7M+ YouTube followers), Aziza Ramikhanova, showed how to bake pakhlava.

AZERBAIJANIS DON'T SAY BAKLAVA – THEY SAY PAKHLAVA.

The blend of two consonants k and h actually functions as a digraph (ex. ch, sh, wh in English) and is represented by one letter in Azerbaijani – x. Because the English alphabet doesn't have an equivalent sound to the Azerbaijani x, it is pronounced between a k and an h and Romanized as kh. Still, those that prefer an even more simplified version of the word may find it spelled and pronounced as pahlava.

THERE ARE MANY REGIONAL VARIETIES OF PAKHLAVA IN AZERBAIJAN THAT DIFFER BY SHAPE, COLOR, AND SWEETNESS LEVEL. BELOW ARE SOME OF THE MOST POPULAR TYPES ENJOYED BY ALL PAKHLAVA LOVERS.



BAKU VARIETY

- Made of 10-12 thin layers of dough
- Top: almond, walnut or hazelnut
- Shape: diamond
- Feature: uses cardamom

SHEKI VARIETY

- Made with rice flour
- Top: beet syrup or honey
- Shape: rectangular
- Feature: also known as Sheki halva





Photo: Milli.az

GANJA VARIETY

- Made with peeled walnuts
- Top: Gülab or rose water
- Shape: diamond
- Feature: uses saffron and rose petals

BAKLAVA AROUND THE WORLD

The more internationally used spelling baklava originated from the Ottoman Turkish language and entered the English language in 1650. Its root 'bayla' is attributed to the Mongolian word meaning 'to tie, wrap up, and pile up', and describes the many layers of the filling within the desert. Different varieties of baklava are found across the Balkans, Central Asia, Middle East and Northern Africa, and South Caucasus. All of them have their distinct tastes, ingredients, and come in different shapes.



Photo: Alexio Ferrao



Photo: Daily Sabah

1



2

Photo: Allrecipes

BAKLAVA VARIETIES

1

Turkish

- Shape: rectangular
- Finely grounded pistachio
- Written as baklava

2

Greek

- Shape: triangular
- Walnut and cinnamon
- Written as μπακλαβά

3

Lebanese

- Shape: round
- Nuts and rose water syrup
- Written as البقلاوة

3



Photo: Baklawa King

NATIONAL BAKLAVA DAY

The diversity in preparation, presentation, and the taste of pakhlava makes it one of the most unique dishes on the planet. Claims of its origin and best taste aside, pakhlava is a cultural bridge that unites people in its rich culinary traditions.

In the United States, November 17 is recognized as National Baklava Day. Here's to celebrating good food, diversity, and creativity.

Happy eating!
Hokuma



Photo: Aramco World



Thank you!

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