

Abstract - Galina Wood, 2015

Lahij, the Living Heritage of Azerbaijan

This research explores the various aspects of identity pertaining to the traditional, bilingual mountainous community of Lahij. Azerbaijan is little known and its minorities are largely under-researched. Previous work done by Russian and Azerbaijani linguists described grammatical features of the Tat language, and SIL-led linguistic field surveys by J. Clifton addressed some sociolinguistic attitudes, yet the Tat people, particularly the Lahij people, remain unknown.

This is the first time the Lahij community, which preserved a relict Southwest Iranian language and a unique culture, is a topic of inter-disciplinary research in English language. Resources such as Russian and Azeri literature and Western works dealing with related disciplines and issues (historical, socio-linguistical, anthropological etc.) are discussed, aiming to reach a balanced and informed perspective. To present the nuances and dynamics of the *emic* (insider) versus *etic* (outsider) points of view, anthropological methods of participant observation, structured interview and narrative analysis are used. Research was done while residing long term in Azerbaijan, and spending significant amounts of time in Lahij.

The sociolinguistic climate of Post-Soviet nation building and the promotion of titular language in Azerbaijan are presented as a background to the theme of marginalized minorities. The study argues that the building of a unified Azerbaijani nation has been accomplished and thus the focus should now shift to the endangered cultures and languages and their current identity crises. A question is posed on whether stable bilingualism could enhance the current multiculturalism in Azerbaijan, which is known for its tolerance.

The identity of the Tat is explored through the attitudes to the ethnonym *Tat*, a label, which was given, but not received. The problematic hypothesis of Tat ethno-genesis is addressed in a response to M. Aliev's monograph on the Tat people. The official and the local perceptions are compared in an attempt to reach a deeper understanding of the underlying patterns of thought. The history and present struggles of the trade of coppersmithing, which is integral to the culture of Lahij, are considered, hoping to focus on the core of Lahij identity, while introducing the key narrative, "The Resilient Cobbler." Lahij family values and *etic* choices in a time of re-evaluation and changes in gender perception are explored through participation in

life cycle events, interviews and popular narratives. Religious consciousness is shown on both the surface and underlying levels, mostly analysis of religious festivals as identity markers and the thread of daily blessings. As the salient problem of Lahij identity is multifaceted and has its own local variations, this research is a first attempt to begin to introduce it.