

Exploring the Turkic Identity of Azerbaijan's Ethnic Groups: A Comprehensive Analysis

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Abstract

The Republic of Azerbaijan is home to several ethnic groups, religious communities, and nationalities that coexist in a diverse society. Understanding one of the core aspects of Azerbaijani social identity, such as its Turkic component, sheds light on this theme. There is a common sentiment widely shared in society, which assumes that ethnic and religious diversity in Azerbaijan is purely superstructural, while Turkophone is regarded mostly as something inevitable and essential, a result of historical destiny and the outcome of location. In contrast, contemplating the phenomenon of the “Turkophone identity of Azerbaijan” is paramount both in terms of contemporary assessment and with respect to historical depth and cultural relevance. Moreover, it demonstrates that the Turkic ideological context is not only crucial to articulating the Azerbaijani national mythology, but also constitutes an economic realm of today's politics of statistics and architectonic ethnic folklore. Ethnicity, as primarily a cultural phenomenon, opens the path for the identification of the intelligentsia and small cultural elite with the upper-class elements and for the detection of the indifference of other social strata or sections to any ethnic group. Yet the Turkic mythology could not operate like a traditional integration in a thoroughly stratified Oriental society because the Caucasus societies were, and are predominantly so, underdeveloped, preclassical, or lowest-class, semi-nomadic. The Turkic identity should, in the first instance, be examined conceptually and empirically in all these layers before and rather than in small networks stretched over the whole region. Turkic heritage operates today as a necessary component of national identification in scholarly literature and in everyday policy, the Turkic ideology has become a part of the first line of national country report writing in Azerbaijan. This will be an attempt to scrutinize these links not as separate issues but as more or less dialectic contours of the same dynamic identity.

Keywords

International Relations, Eurasia, Azerbaijan, Turkic, Turkophone

1. Introduction

The Caucasus is a region with rich historical accounts. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, a spate of research delved into various aspects of societies in the region. As an important part of this, the history and identity of ethnic groups falling under the labels of Turkic, Azeri, Caucasian, and Caucasian-speaking have been studied. Despite various signs of diversity, cultural diffusion, and ethnic admixture, significant segregating tendencies have also been observed, suggesting pre-ethnic, linguistic/post-ethnic, and linguistic-as-cultural cohesion. However, efforts to find out the Turkic identity have seldom been seen in any society in the region until now. The present study investigates Turkic identity amidst Turkic, quasi-Turkic, and non-Turkic ethnic groups in the Republic of Azerbaijan, with a special focus on its ethnic Turk communities [1].

Linguistic, heroic, religious, and other historical evidence gathered from various epochs indicates that community exchange and the emergence, merging, splitting, modifications, assimilations, and integrations were highly rampant in the region. Against this backdrop, attempts to preserve the “ancient” community are relevant. One contemporary issue facing researchers, policymakers, institutions, and individuals working for the survival of the “endangered” non-Turk communities in the country is the urgency to understand how Turkic identity pervades through the people in the Republic of Azerbaijan. Contemporary Kurds, Tats, and Lezgins show manifestations of Turkic assimilation via their language, culture, and, to an extent, ethnicity. However, the Turkicness of Mountain Jews, Tats, Udins, Khinalugs, Kryz, and Lezgins in general can only be visible through their language-related expressions, and not in their faith or other culture. Discourses on Turkic identity and language studies give such symptoms, too. To understand Turkic manifestation better in these many different ethnic groups living in Azerbaijan, this study untangles and summarizes ethnic, socio, and linguistic insights on the community of Mountain isolated people for the first time [2].

Research Questions

For centuries, Turkic identity has been a recurring topic among Central Asian scholars. However, some questions concerning ethnic background and their potential to become a Turk are still unanswered. This study asked the following questions, enabling the analysis of the facts leading to their formation. What historical events, relationships, and conditions were the convergent factors leading to the formation of a pan-Turkic identity? What is the Turkic identity of ethnic Azeri groups today, taking into account their self-awareness? Furthermore, the study inherits a question addressed to Azerbaijan’s ethnic groups. The points that are to be analyzed

in the study of this group are as follows: Do the ethnic groups of Azerbaijan have the potential to become a Turk according to the possibility of creating cognitive maps based on analogies and our social intuition, or do they refer respectfully to the Turkic identity as it developed in the past? If they identify themselves with the Turkic identity, in which dimension do they qualify as Turkish? In order to make this analysis, some aspects must be taken into account: language, culture, historical genealogy, cuisine, and music. Therefore, the collection of comparative data on these topics would create a clearer picture of the research. The study interprets historical events and cultural levels in various parts of the different regions from Azerbaijan up to today and tries to show the place where these people are in terms of Turkishness. This is only the first part of the study [3].

2. Historical Context

In the history of the Turkic world, it is a generally accepted fact that various groups of Turkic ethnic communities from Central Asia found their place in the region along the way of their migrations. Thus, the migration of Turks is not the issue of domestic importance of a particular country or region, but a historical event that affected the fate of a large part of the world. The Central Asian political climate in the 4th - 5th centuries played a large role in the substantive integration of various Turkic tribes into Caucasus politics, and their arrival in the Caucasus was a precedent for stirring the tip of the political iceberg [4].

Using an example, it can be put forth to extirpate the idea that a person can be ethnically identified by their language. The Huns invaded the territory of Caucasian Albania in 367, establishing their dominion in the Aghgoyun Principality of the region present-day Nakhchivan. The social, economic, and political life of the people, having spoken in Albanian, which has no relationship with the Huns' language, was put under the control of the elite resistance of the Hun aristocracy through the establishment of their territories there. These and similar historical evidence suggest that the arrival of the Huns has had far less influence, for a short while, on the ethnic identification of the country itself [5].

In the Middle Ages, the Turkic element took an increasingly consistent place in the history of the area of present-day Republic of Azerbaijan. In the middle of the first millennium, a relatively large part of the Western Turk khanate was formed on the territory of present-day Azerbaijan. However, after the separation of the Gokturk khanate into two administrative units of the Eastern and Western world, a process known as "Turkification" began in the Western Gokturk khanate by the beginning of the second millennium [6].

2.1. Early Turkic Migrations to the Caucasus

The early Turkic migrations into the Caucasus at the beginning of the Middle Ages were not isolated, as commonly linked to the Khazar Kaganate and the big migration of Oğuz Yabgu in the 9th century. Research has identified several other wave movements where Turkic groups arrived or moved through the same Caucasus

region. Historical sources and recent genetic studies track the base of these Turkic groups arriving in the northern Caucasus foothills back to the southwest of Central Asia. There is no consensus in the literature over which exact wave these Turkic groups arrived with, but the route from which they entered is more agreed upon, being mainly through the Darial Gorge or occasionally east of this [7].

Internal Turkic factors regarding the motivations for this movement revolved around better pasture land, better climates, and high degrees of autonomous routes along with fleeing war. External factors involved recruiting Turkic auxiliary groups by local states and empires. The number of movements was multidirectional and diverse, evolving into a web that was interwoven with European, Asian, and Iranian tribes. It was this layover, intersection, and the process of gradual diffusion that actually gave rise to the complex ethnic and cultural fabric of the Caucasus, including the Azerbaijani people who are settled in a land carrying mixed reflections of Anatolian, Mongolian, and Iranian geography. By discussing these pre-Azerbaijani Turkish movements and new data, we aim to emphasize the importance of the deep-rooted Turkic effect in the ethnicity of the region and exchange this new knowledge [8].

Early Turkic Migrations and Turkic Influence through Empire

The initial Turkic migrations to Azerbaijan and the broader South Caucasus were part of larger waves of movement from Central Asia that significantly influenced the cultural, linguistic, and demographic landscape of the region. These migrations began with early groups like the Huns and Khazars, nomadic tribes whose movements across the Eurasian steppe brought them into contact with the South Caucasus as early as the first millennium CE. The Khazars, in particular, established a prominent khaganate in the region, creating political and economic networks that connected the Caucasus with the steppes. These interactions set the stage for subsequent Turkic migrations and facilitated cultural exchange and intermingling with local societies [9].

The Oghuz Turks, a significant Turkic-speaking group, began migrating into the South Caucasus around the 10th and 11th centuries. As they gradually settled in Azerbaijan, the Oghuz Turks introduced their language, customs, and social structures, contributing to the region's Turkic identity. Over time, these early settlers integrated with the local populations, which led to a blending of Turkic and indigenous cultural elements. This assimilation process laid a foundation for the widespread adoption of Turkic languages and customs within Azerbaijan.

The consolidation of Turkic influence in Azerbaijan was further reinforced by the political dominance of Turkic empires, notably the Seljuks and the Safavids. The Seljuks, a powerful Oghuz Turkic dynasty, expanded into the South Caucasus in the 11th century, establishing administrative and military control over large parts of the region. Their rule promoted the use of Turkic as a lingua franca, especially in urban centers and court settings, which helped institutionalize Turkic culture and language across the region [9].

The Safavid Empire, which originated in the 16th century and included Azerbaijan

as a key territory, continued this process. Although the Safavids were originally a Persian-speaking dynasty, their reliance on Turkic-speaking Qizilbash tribes as military and political elites meant that Turkic culture and language held a central position in the empire's administrative and social hierarchy. The Safavid period not only reinforced the Turkic linguistic presence but also shaped Azerbaijan's cultural identity by blending Turkic, Persian, and Islamic influences.

Archaeological and historical studies of burial sites, inscriptions, and artifacts from these periods provide further evidence of the Turkic influence in Azerbaijan. Material culture, such as weaponry, pottery, and architectural styles, reveals the fusion of Turkic and local elements, demonstrating how Turkic-speaking groups integrated into and influenced the region. This legacy is reflected in Azerbaijan's identity today, where Turkic language and cultural elements remain central to its national character, distinguishing it from neighboring Caucasian and Persian-speaking societies [10].

2.2. Turkicization Process in Azerbaijan

The process of Turkicization in Azerbaijani territories occurred over a long period of time. Studies thus far suggest that communities living in the area—regardless of their ethnic origin—gradually replaced their original languages, religions, and cultures with those prominent at the time of their settlement. It is hard to learn with certainty the speed and the level of the rate at which they did so. Nevertheless, we know that by the 16th century, the only citizens of the territory were the Turkic language speakers. Significant numbers of them were Islamized, and they adopted the local customs and rituals, folklore, art forms, and other traditions, which were Turkish in form and content. The Shirvan, Karabakh, Ganja Garabagh, and Tabriz tribes and peoples were Iranian speakers. They were gradually mixing with the original settlers and were being assimilated by the population [8].

Azerbaijan's history shows that changes in political power have often had an effect on the Turkicization process in the region. Both the states ruled by the original population and the following states supported the process of replacement of the settlers. The Romanov states, the Safavids, and the Ottomans, the Afsharids, the Qajars, and, finally, the Pahlavis have, in general, maintained and supported that policy. According to the rules and policies of the time, there were occasions when the original leaders of the settlers established and ruled independent states as vassal states of the rule of the superior power. Regardless of that situation, the ruling power treated the top elite in the same way at all times. Thus, gradually over time, the top elite were Turkified, as their right to choose a ruler and political power also diminished when it came to an alliance, or they entered the institutions that regulated the management of the country. They even sometimes had a right to govern [10].

3. Azerbaijan's Ethnic Diversity

This section provides a balanced exploration of Azerbaijan's ethnic composition,

covering both major and minority groups. While the Turkic identity is prominent, Azerbaijan also includes non-Turkic groups whose cultural heritage remains integral to the nation's diversity.

The Republic of Azerbaijan, situated at the crossroads of the South Caucasus and the Middle East, constitutes a meeting point of many cultures and religions. Aside from a predominantly Turkic population, several other ethnic groups create a structure of social plurality that shapes Azerbaijan as an essentially multicultural country. Today, Azerbaijan encompasses distinct communities such as the Lezgins, Avars, Talysh, Jews, Tats, Tsakhurs, Udins, and Talysh without mentioning the major Armenian and Russian communities that migrated between 1988 and 1991. This unique social structure has enriched the Azerbaijani climate for centuries, thanks to the various values, customs, norms, and traditions these cultures brought. In every region, we can indeed observe a cohabitation between Azerbaijanis and numerous other ethnic groups, in a long-lasting story of intellectual osmosis. This interaction allowed different Islamic religious communities to influence one another, with obvious cultural consequences [8].

In terms of political representation, the precise criteria ensuring the participation of different religious and cultural communities in public life have remained widely debated, especially within a context that is significantly changing due to increasing globalization and migration patterns. Nonetheless, debates and methods of managing cultural diversity in the best possible way are under constant scientific scrutiny. Despite frequent positive acts and welcome speeches by governmental officials towards the fruitful activities carried out by national minorities, these communities are not represented by elected parliamentary members. In order to encourage better interaction between the different social actors inhabiting Azerbaijani soil, we shall carefully untangle the threads of the population's coexistence, which is characterized by the presence of various ethnic and religious communities united by the complexity of everyday life and the will to live together as long as possible. This "ethnic *mélange*" presents not only a challenge to the ethnic society of Azerbaijan but will also constitute a favorable basis for Azerbaijan's entry into the increasingly large social mosaic of a multicultural society [11].

3.1. Early Turkic Migrations

The initial Turkic migrations to Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus were part of larger movements from Central Asia. Key migrations include those of the Oghuz Turks and earlier Hun and Khazar movements. Archeological studies provide insight into these interactions, which laid the groundwork for the assimilation of Turkic elements in local societies [9].

3.2. Turkic Influence through Empire

Empires like the Seljuks and Safavids played essential roles in solidifying Turkic influence in Azerbaijan. Their political and cultural dominance accelerated Turkic language and cultural adoption in the region, helping to shape Azerbaijan's identity

as a Turkic nation [10].

3.2.1. Major Non-Turkic Ethnic Groups

Non-Turkic ethnic groups such as the Lezgins, Talysh, and Tats contribute distinct languages, religious practices, and traditions to Azerbaijan's cultural fabric. These communities, while numerically smaller, have a strong historical presence [12].

3.2.2. Socio-Political Representation of Minorities

Despite constitutional protections, non-Turkic minorities have limited political representation. Further study could focus on the effectiveness of policies designed to ensure cultural inclusion and equitable representation for all ethnic groups [12].

3.3. Major Ethnic Groups

Azerbaijan is home to several ethnic groups, indicating the multifaceted nature of its society. The largest secondary Turkish ethnic groups, Lezghins and Talish, are indigenous to the country, whereas other groups, like the Russians and Armenians, were relocated as a result of imperial policies. Smaller pockets of other communities can also be found in various parts of Azerbaijan. The interaction of these various communities has left a deep influence upon the contemporary Azeri identity. At present, ethnically, the country is dominated by four major ethnic groups. There are members of the Dievari clan, Helsin of the Davapiti clan, Dolags of the Gaytli clan, and Glatembey of the Galgai clan, all regarded as Lezgin subtribes of especially the Gartala tribe [12].

Most important of these ethnic groups are the Lezghins and Talish, who constitute about 2.0% and 1.0% of the total population in Azerbaijan, respectively. The Talish primarily lives in the southeastern part of Azerbaijan. This population has its own language; however, the Talish do not speak the purest form of their mother tongue. Of the remaining smaller communities, the Kryz people are one of the most important and well-known minorities in the country due to their distinct language, culture, traditions, and their identity with ethnic roots in the Turkic ethnonym. Turmoil, wars, migrations, and a life characterized by primitive agriculture and animal husbandry weakened links to the historical past. Through wars, discrimination, bias, and being victims of genocide, the Kryz lost and blacked out their historical memory, longing for their own ethnic identity hidden behind a thick curtain of legends, tales, songs, and fairytales [13].

3.4. Minority Ethnic Groups

Although often less acknowledged in and sometimes even ignored by Azerbaijani society, there are some ethnic groups in the country that have lived there as self-identified communities for centuries. Many of them preserve their distinct culture, tradition, and language. While their history, tradition, and language are not widely recognized and they usually find representation in academic literature in

the category of ethnographic essays, they are part of the complex mosaic of the country.

In this research, the Karkın, Terekeme, Hemshin, Udi, Ashaghi-Konalar, Khinalugh, Georgian, Karapapak, and Udi ethno-religious groups are particularly taken into account as case studies. Each of them refers to themselves using different self-identifiers. From the late 1800s onwards, these groups were usually studied by local and foreign ethnographers and Soviet-period orientalists. Some of the characteristics that are usually stressed are their close relations, harmony of beliefs with majority Muslim Azerbaijanis, preserving local Christian (mainly Orthodox) or other cross-belief as an ethno-cultural identity, living mainly in rural areas in key mountainous geographies, and preserving local languages or their own Turkish dialect.

Despite some ethnic representations in Azerbaijani political and public discourses, the majority of these and others do not find much space. Furthermore, the extensive semantics of the ethno-religious classification of these groups is missing in available materials. The new official policy of the “unity between Shia and Sunni Islam” initiated by President Aliyev in 2012 indirectly asserted Sunni identity as the norm in the country. In recent years, associations of several seven-day Adventist communities in Russia and Germany developed projects for the establishment and development of dialogue or collaboration with the Christian communities in Azerbaijan. The Summer School “From Origins to Political and Cultural Process” at Leibniz University of Hannover in Germany also started to attract academic attention to these and related ethno-religious groups. These examples of these groups’ recent representation have been very rare to date, and overall, out of addressing territorial “minorities” such as Talysh or Lezgins, the field of the academic and semi-academic literature on these people is narrowly scattered between religious and secular congregations’ reports, some interviews or articles, and the Ottoman or Soviet records. Thus, their formative and contemporary socio-political representation is rather slim in the country. However, the diversity and pages created can initially touch upon the communities’ hierarchies of constraints, equality, and differentiation, experienced for diverse reasons [8].

4. Language and Linguistic Heritage

This section examines the linguistic heritage of Azerbaijan and the prominence of Turkic languages, especially Azerbaijani. It also explores linguistic policies, cultural pressures, and the experiences of both Turkic and non-Turkic language groups.

Azerbaijan is a multilingual and multiethnic country, but the dominant language belongs to the Turkic language family, as the early communities and states in the South Caucasus and the eastern parts of the South Caspian region have always been Turkish-speaking people. In contemporary Azerbaijan, the official language is Azerbaijani, the standard Turkic language of the country with a long literary history. Yet, there is a growing number of Turkic languages spoken in the Republic.

Historical and sociopolitical challenges have shaped the Turkic language communities, which have different life stories and identities under the Azerbaijani label. This text begins chronicling the linguistic heritage of Azerbaijani languages and Turkic ethnic groups.

Azerbaijan is inhabited by a number of closely related Turkic people who have lived in Baku, Ganja, and many small towns of the Republic, especially in the mountainous Gadabey, Qazax, Quba, Gusar, Oğuz, Şamaxı, Şirvan, Şuşa, Tovuz, Zagatala, and Qusar towns near the border of Georgia, Russia, and Armenia. The total number of ethnic Turkic groups today living in Azerbaijan is approximately estimated to be 750,000, a modest increase from the early 20th century. The estimated number of members of these communities varies between less than a hundred and hundreds of thousands. Turkic peoples of Azerbaijan speak different eastern and western Azerbaijani languages of the Oğuz branch. It is no secret that language, seen as a living creature, is affected by the passage of time. Today, Azerbaijan is home to not only an ethnic Abrahamic country but also to two more ancient Oğuz Turks. In addition to these, thirty-five different languages of the Turkic people exist as one of the six language families in the country [13].

4.1. Linguistic Diversity and Minor Turkic Languages

Azerbaijan's linguistic landscape is characterized by a rich tapestry of languages, with Turkic dialects playing a prominent role alongside languages of other ethnic groups, such as Lezgian, Talysh, Avar, Russian, and Armenian. The Turkicization process, which began centuries ago due to the migration of Turkic-speaking groups, had a profound impact on the region's linguistic and cultural makeup. This process intensified during the medieval period and was further cemented during the reigns of various Turkic empires, such as the Seljuks and later the Safavids, leading to the widespread adoption of Turkic languages by diverse communities.

Despite this shift towards Turkic languages, many ethnic groups within Azerbaijan retained unique linguistic and cultural identities. For instance, Lezgian and Talysh speakers continue to use their native languages within family and community settings, maintaining linguistic diversity within the country. This co-existence highlights a dynamic where assimilation into a dominant linguistic group does not necessarily entail the loss of ethnic distinctiveness. Instead, cultural practices, traditions, and languages persist among various communities, contributing to Azerbaijan's multicultural identity [14].

The Turkicization of Azerbaijan also reflects broader socio-political and historical influences. Soviet language policies, which promoted Russian as a unifying language while supporting minority languages to a limited degree, further complicated the linguistic landscape. Today, Azerbaijani, a Turkic language, is the official language of Azerbaijan and is widely spoken across the country. However, minority languages enjoy a degree of protection, and cultural initiatives seek to preserve linguistic diversity in the face of modernization and urbanization pressures. This

linguistic diversity exemplifies how Azerbaijan's history of interaction between Turkic and non-Turkic groups has led to a uniquely hybridized cultural and linguistic environment.

4.2. Language Policies and Minority Rights

Modern language policies in Azerbaijan emphasize the promotion of Azerbaijani as the official language and primary medium of instruction, aligning with national identity and state-building goals. However, recognizing the importance of cultural heritage and linguistic diversity, there are also efforts to preserve the languages of non-Turkic minority communities, including the Talysh, Lezgin, Udi, and others. These efforts, supported by both state and non-governmental organizations, include initiatives for language documentation, cultural festivals, and local language media programming, which aim to sustain the use of these minority languages within their communities. Researching ethnolinguistic vitality in Azerbaijan could therefore provide a nuanced understanding of how language policies influence social cohesion, interethnic relations, and cultural preservation. It would also offer policymakers and educators a framework to assess the effectiveness of current preservation efforts and make data-driven decisions that could further strengthen Azerbaijan's linguistic and cultural diversity [14].

4.3. Turkic Languages in Azerbaijan

As mentioned earlier, the Oghuz tribes who migrated to the southern Caucasus inhabited the region and formed part of the Turkic population called "Azeri", thus giving the name to the original local population as well as the name of the present-day Republic of Azerbaijan. During their historical settlement and the bloody fights on these lands, different Turkic dialects were crystallized and transformed into a number of independent languages. All of these languages belong mainly to intra-species branches that emerged from the Proto-Turkic and Proto-Oghuz languages. For centuries, using different grammatical endings, borrowing new words, adding meanings, intensifications, reducing, and syncope, the different intonations of the Turkic spoken dialects in Azerbaijan have turned into different minority Turkic ethnic languages in the wider ethno-geographical sense. The special linguistic heritage of the social history of these peoples is still an exciting sociolinguistic and ethnic subject for scholars who focus on this ancient, rich, and very interesting region. Today, it is appropriate to acknowledge that the interests of the scientific and research world in local Turkic ethno-linguists are becoming wider. Azerbaijan is a multilingual country. The native languages in Azerbaijan by every ethnic speaker are: Azeri (Turkic) 90%, Russian 2.5%, Armenian 2%, Lezgi 1.5%, Talish, Tsakhur, Avar, Rutul, Tats, and Udi, each of them less than 1%, while Georgian and Mingrelian also exist. People are bilingual if not trilingual. In a tiny region, sometimes it is possible to hear different micro-dialects spoken in different adjacent streets. It has been summarized that 300 Turkic dialects are spoken in Azerbaijan, 9 being unique, 14 spoken by 1000 people, 8 spoken by 300 people, 30 spoken by 300 people,

and finally 100 nearly extinct Azeri Turkic languages in the country, which are practically understood by scholars but spoken by nobody [12].

4.4. Language Policies

The official language of Azerbaijan is Azerbaijani, which belongs to the Oghuz group of Turkic languages. It is spoken by roughly 85.6 percent of the overall population. In the earliest years of independence, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijani authorities felt it necessary to promote the use of Azerbaijani in an attempt to unify society and improve the people's identity. However, this intention seems to be contradictory to the rights promoted by international conventions. As formerly determined, in Azerbaijan, multilingualism was a traditional lifestyle of the citizens who inhabited the areas of the current Azerbaijan Republic. All of the languages belonging to different language families such as Indo-European, Turkic, Uralic, North-Caucasian, and so on, could harmonize in the same space. Like the Azerbaijani language, languages of other nationalities have been affected as well, and some of them even had a lower prestige than before.

An ethnic Azerbaijani official speaking on condition of anonymity outlined the official language policy as promoting the language of Iranian Azerbaijan, not the usurper country's official language. The motherland of Azerbaijani Turks is Iran. Between preserving the language of the home or adopting whatever language the host country proclaims as its official, for Iranian Azeris, the conflict between these social forces is hard. Learning and speaking the Azerbaijani language is indeed largely connected in their thoughts with recognizing the occupation of their historical territories. At the same time, opposing the Azerbaijani language somehow means opposing the Islamic Republic of Iran. That's because in terms of their identity, language is important, and they want Shia Islam to be their religion. In other words, they are customarily closer to the Azerbaijani ethnic community than to the Persians or the Kurds ethnically [1].

5. Cultural Traditions and Practices

The Turkic World presents fascinating linguistic and cultural similarities among populations that are spread over a vast region, from the Danube to the Great Wall of China. The common Turkic identity enjoyed and cherished by many peoples has in recent decades also prompted various attempts to co-opt others as part of the world of "the Turkic peoples". The Turksoy organization is promoting a pan-Turkic identity and works with this understanding and a sentiment of Ottomanism or "Turanism" [13].

An ethnic unit, especially in the "feudal" sector, was in fact a micro-society and, as such, advocated and preserved a series of material and immaterial customs and practices intertwined with kinship relations. This cultural or value patrimony is now primarily linked to community identity and collective memory. Among the most important elements of this original patrimony are religion, customary law

and traditions, language, social structure, and even the memory of the founding ancestor or the primordial myth. However, while material practices can provide useful anchors for highlighting the specific Turkic identity of the Chovgu, the predominant role of the “Turkic” linguistic and cultural elements in this sector may suggest that it also reflects a shared and continual tradition, preserved in neighboring contexts but emancipated from the transhumant original context.

Having studied the Turkic peoples’ customs, one can turn to the immaterial heritage of folklore, music, and arts to find a faithful image of the Turkic spirit. It speaks of the original purity in musical creativity, and the sharpness and richness of language. Much information about the way of life and consciousness of ethnic groups comes from epos, legends, stories, and balballar. Within popular culture or local folklore, the historical memory of a people has also been preserved. The belief in an afterlife, some notions about otherworldly beings, and customs associated with the transition from one life to another are other examples of the traditional beliefs of the people. Of course, the basis of the worldview of the poets of the time can be the beliefs of the circle in which they lived. This gives us information about the beliefs of the people of that time. An important component of local ethnic culture is the beliefs and notions about the universe surrounding the worldview. This worldview is reflected in the folklore of ethnic groups. In addition to the beliefs, the way of life of the peoples, their traditions, customs, holidays, and funerals is reflected in their folklore. The traditions, customs, and beliefs of the Turkmen people are also reflected in the folklore. If we consider folklore in this context, first of all, we should note the existence of a special “dastan” system in Turkmen folklore, which is related to historical tales. Studies within the framework of cultural anthropology make it possible to connect these statements with the specific forms of social organization and mechanisms to ensure public dynamism, as well as methods of socialization that were available to the Turkish people as members of the youth communities [13].

5.1. Turkic Influences on Azerbaijani Culture

Azerbaijani culture, both historical and modern, has been profoundly influenced by its broader Turkic context and heritage. The legacy of Turkic practices can be seen not just in Azerbaijan, but throughout Central Asia and other countries, where ritual customs, philosophy, music, dance, language, and even cuisine all bear marks of the Turkic presence. The Turkic tradition still plays a significant role in shaping the way people conceptualize themselves. Foreign guests to these countries easily recognize the stunning similarities among them. Perhaps most striking is the unity that exists within Turkic music and dance, from the Caspian to the Ural Mountains. This shared sociocultural experience has had a substantial impact on these societies and their internal structure. The bonds of unity extend beyond the course of history alone to the shared cultural legacy. This shared legacy emphasizes the significance of acknowledging the Turkic contribution to Azerbaijani culture.

Cultural history and similarities include:

- A shared cultural history: Muslim, Zoroastrian, and Shamanic pasts; Christian and Jewish communities; the visitation of Marco Polo.
- Similar music and dance: The similarities in music and dance from the Balkans to western China and Mongolia are stark.
- Large Turkish influence in daily life: such as naming children, historical structures and artistic designs, arts and crafts, linguistic similarities in everyday phrases and colloquial expressions, house designs and techniques, and community customs and life.
- The Turkic tradition as the core of Azerbaijani identity: cuisine, language, attire, and folkloric characteristics; mentalities; holiday customs (Nowruz, “Festival of Fire”, “Hıdırellez”); and home life. The common indigenous customs are the core of their existence. For example, “honor” is an integral tradition deeply rooted in Turkic societies; native villages and tribes located in regions of tough living conditions would either exert hospitality towards non-native dwellers or become engaged in disputes over territory [6].

5.2. Festivals and Celebrations

The most distinctive feature of traditional celebrations and secular festivals in the various regions of Azerbaijan is, of course, the fact that a large part of them embodies Turkic heritage. In sociological terms, festivals serve as communal gatherings, reinforcing group identity; at a personal level, they provide solidarity derived from shared cultural identity. The contemporary view of the function of traditional ethnic festivals, which are seen as social celebrations expressing patterns of human society and history, corresponds to the interests of social and cultural anthropology. In this field, a festive occasion is understood as a collective ritual event and the reproduction of social links within a society and is often seen as linked with major rites of passage. Clearly, the common denominator in all the examples given is the expression of specific cultural identity in the rituals, traditions, customs, beliefs, and moral values exhibited in these celebrations, which take place regularly year after year. Alongside the First Republic Day, major ethnic festivals include Novruz Bayram, the Spring Festival, Children’s Day, Clown Festival, Christmas, International Theatre Festivals, International Festival of Arts and Crafts, Easter, and World Music Day. Typically, during the preparation for a festival, efforts are directed toward attracting a broad range of initiatives and partners with whom to organize diversified activities. In this way, the festival can be an opportunity to showcase various organizations’ contributions to education, health, environment, and the economy in a very specific and evocative manner. Novruz Bayram is the biggest and most anticipated festival for the entire Azerbaijani population during the year. It has ancient roots in the entire Turkic world and was a condition when Turkic nations reunited as well as a preparation for a festival rather than a historical or religious date. Since the date of this festivity changes annually, it is determined theoretically based on astronomical solar days and occurs

every March 20-22 [6].

6. Religion and Belief Systems

Islam arrived and settled in Azerbaijan as a result of its conquests and Persian migrations starting from the first half of the 7th century. There is a consensus among historians that Persian conquerors played an active role in spreading Islam to the territory of Azerbaijan. Initially, the locals were forcibly converted to the Perso-Arabic religion; however, the majority of the local population were Zoroastrians at that time. Azerbaijan's conversion to Islam occurred approximately 70 - 90 years after the demise of Prophet Mohammed. Islam became the dominant socio-political force in the region in the late 8th century and the early 9th century. Therefore, the influx of Persian Shias and Sunni Arabs immensely contributed to the spread of Islam in the country. Despite the dominant Arab Muslim governance for more than two centuries, Islamic religious views and lifestyle were integrated with the local ancient Turkic worldview more closely than was the case in other countries, leading gradually to the emergence of a unique Azerbaijani-Turkic Islam.

In terms of belief, religious and sectarian diversity, Azerbaijan's Muslim citizens distinguish three main groups: Sunni and Shia Muslims, and the descendants of the Bektashi sufis, along with a number practicing traditional Turkic folk Islam. Interestingly, people, particularly the elders, call themselves Muslims more than the followers of any sect; and hence, they point out the permissibility to change from one Islamic group to another due to changing life circumstances and personal awareness. Hence, interfaith marriages are common and religious sectarian hatred is seldom found. Demographically, the vast majority of the population are Shia Muslims, while around 10% - 20% are Sunni Muslims and 1% - 2% are officially registered as atheists and Christians. Religion brought with it and through the centuries has played a role in expressing and creating a sense of collective national and cultural identity and self-respect. In this respect, this paper considers religious identity as fundamental, especially against the backdrop of the multi-ethnic cultural, religious, and linguistic communities of the Soviet Union. Religion played a significant role in determining ethnic identity, and especially in shaping national identity, by marking both vertical and horizontal space. Despite the religious origins of the Turkic ethno-cultural continuum in Azerbaijan, religion has been marginalized since 1921 and its normative function inhibited in lifestyle design [12].

6.1. Islam in Azerbaijan

The Turkic Identity of Azerbaijan's Ethnic Groups: 6 Religion 6.1. Islam in Azerbaijan Azerbaijan is a Muslim-majority country. Islam has been the predominant religion in Azerbaijan since the 7th - 8th centuries. Islamic expansion into Azerbaijan started in 641 with the Muslim conquest and subsequent conversion to Islam of Derbent. Islam, a monotheistic faith, was brought to the territory of modern

Azerbaijan around the same time as the Arab invasion at the beginning of the Middle Ages, in the 7th-8th centuries. The spread of Islam in the region is closely tied to the Arab military campaigns. The adoption of Islam for pragmatic reasons facilitated the conversion of the local population. Language and culture have played a dual role: Islam came to the indigenous population in the language of the conquerors to make it easier, but at the same time, belief in Islam did not mean a loss of former notions of identity, culture, and language. Therefore, when the indigenous population adopted Islam, they often practiced it within frameworks of previous local religious traditions and customs. Thus, Islam played an important role in the dissemination of the language and culture of the conquering nomads in a number of neighboring territories, including Azerbaijan. Thus, two centuries after the installation of Islam and the Arabic alphabet in the territory, the first written monuments began to appear, written in Arabic script. In addition to the Arabic alphabet, a new influence also manifested itself in music, poetry, themes, and genres of arts: thus, Arabs brought new types of architecture, literature, and music. However, these years were a crisis of transition, an era of confusion and contradictions, and a time when the early Turkic states adopted Islamic culture. This was followed by Sufism and Mawlawi, which, however, the Shiites tried to keep, especially at the end of the 19th century. Islam has always been present in society. While Islam had been principally established in the Karabakh region in the 1st - 15th centuries, after the Iranian migration, Shia Islam became the rapidly spreading culture. By the 1820s, the wide range of feasts, traditions, and spiritual pilgrimages had changed the state of society. The Arabian Sahih and other hadiths, traditions from the 8th century, and the trip from Vovos were replaced by two religious factions starting from Hadji Sultan (Shiite) and Hadji Agha Ali Hajibayov (Sunni) [6].

6.2. Interfaith Relations

For centuries, various religious communities, including Muslims and Christians as well as smaller communities, have coexisted within the territory of Azerbaijan. These constituents hold a special place in state policies and societal norms promoting interethnic and interfaith dialogue and tolerance. Azerbaijan is positioned as a secular state that upholds freedom of religion. Historically, Islam has been the dominant religion; however, ancient churches and synagogues showcase the country's ethnically and religiously mixed history, including a high degree of interfaith harmony and peaceful cohabitation. In the present, a number of churches and synagogues alongside a variety of sects and believers of other religions can be seen throughout the country. Interfaith harmony has been fostered over generations with rituals and layers of identity reading simultaneously as Turkic, Azerbaijani, Muslim, Alevi, Shi'a, Sunni, Christian, and so on. State policies on interfaith dialogue, in turn, have been set in place since the early 1990s in the shape of a secular legal framework, celebrations, and the creation of various organizations and mechanisms to promote interfaith relations, including secular and religious education

and media content. Cultural practices and norms additionally anchor its social fabric. Members of these communities, however, have on occasion faced a range of difficulties and challenges, including during and subsequent to the Soviet period, from a decreased availability of religious education to a lack of integrated group representation. Notwithstanding, tales of cooperation between religious communities continue, and the significance and influence of minority religious groups continue to be visibly intertwined with the country's history, politics, economics, and culture. Spurred by international trends and developments, interfaith dialogue has also developed in recent years. Additionally, conditions in which intellectual debate, multi-faith discourse, and new religious thinking could emerge have been enhanced. An International Centre of Multiculturalism welcomes conferences on its grounds and provides cultural, religious, touristic, and literary experiences and knowledge for international visitors. Meanwhile, a Strategic Research Centre undertakes related research and publishes related materials for those interested. The interfaith relations found among Azerbaijani populations are very important in the evolution of ethnic and linguistic identity. In recognition of the unofficial nature of interfaith hierarchies, efforts to conceptualize Azerbaijan's various Turkic, Caucasian, and religious communities have thus far omitted faith as a layer of analysis of the ruling, scholarly, and subjugated classes. Settling terminology focused on religious aspects throws the multiple and overlapping identities into relief. Into this glossed-over layer of identity, then, are four perspectives. First are the residents for whom their Turkic or Caucasian identity could in no way be equivalent to their racial or ethnic identity. From the second perspective, exploring language, these groups are split via religious following of Islam or Christianity, which follows into an Azerbaijani or Lazi ethnolinguistic distinction among others. In the third perspective, interfaith relations between, for instance, various Christian denominations have to be distinguished from those within Islam. Fourth is the position that religious diversity among people in the same village consists of Iranian, Arabic, and Turkic faith or an enduring Zoroastrian thread. Diplomatic, economic, political, cultural, and religious links have also largely been state-sponsored rather than being woven into existing populations and affinities. Multiple faiths thus contribute to a greater unity, and religious identity can be seen as more important than ethnicity [12].

7. Political Implications

This section investigates how Turkic identity influences Azerbaijan's domestic and foreign policy. It explores identity politics, nationalism, and minority issues in both historical and contemporary contexts, including insights from ethnographic studies.

The utility of such a study in a country like Azerbaijan cannot be minimized. It should be foremost in the minds of all operational and technical assisting personnel who serve the state. In the arena of national and regional politics, "identity" and especially "ethnic identity" play a major role. Nationalism is a doctrine that

holds out the proposition that the nation and the state are identical. The adherents of this doctrine seek to express subordination to state power chiefly, or solely, in terms of identity with the dominant ethnic group and ruler thereof. Modern states are using identity politics to create and define their own policies at home and abroad. One of the political movements may become solely interested in national projects and mixed ethnicity marriage; similarly, it may let a state become xenophobic. Insofar as it reflects the interests and the need for differentiation of individuals, communities, or peoples, ethnicity is a core feature of social relations, whatever the “politicization” of this consciousness may take place among the secular population. Thus, to act in a responsible manner in situations of conflict, it is of ultimate importance to understand and analyze the roots and dynamics of ethnic consciousness.

Given the close association of national identity, institutions, and policies toward ethnicities, it is thus normal to ask whether, despite official rhetoric, the many ethnicities in Azerbaijan are acknowledged and allowed to participate as such in the life of the state and society. Official rhetoric is in favor of a “multinational” state with all ethnic groups equally sharing its various institutions and serving its territory. Such rhetoric is not recent and can be traced back to the socialist period. It is, however, more and more often used in major speeches, now that the regime has been victorious in bringing a status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh for several years. According to observers, applications to international organizations encourage the regime to give a greater impression of democracy to the world; whether it will actually respect the spirit of these agreements and international standards, of course, is another story. In any case, rhetoric, whilst very useful to follow, is not at all determinant in itself. The aim of this paper is, however, not to study the respective topics of domestic and foreign politics in respect of ethnicities, but rather to. One could say it does not go much beyond—in the scheme of things—the stage of sociology, belle lettres, or philosophy (which is valid for many themes in the world). Even though ethnic disputes may be analyzed from the standpoint of geopolitics, their essence is a problem of human rights [8].

7.1. Turkic Identity in Nationalist Rhetoric

Nationalism is central to Azerbaijani state-building, often with the Turkic identity at the core of political mobilization. This subsection analyzes how nationalist policies impact both Turkic and non-Turkic communities.

7.2. Diplomatic Influence and Regional Cooperation

Azerbaijan’s diplomacy reflects its Turkic roots, with close ties to other Turkic nations. This dimension of identity politics is instrumentalized in international relations and regional alliances. Field studies on the impact of these relationships on domestic policies and minority perceptions could enhance understanding [15].

7.3. Turkic Identity and Nationalism

Turkic national identity has played a significant role in the modern politics of

identity and has produced strong emotional commitment among various layers of Azerbaijani society. Throughout the country's history since independence, the ruling elites have worked to crystallize a common Turkic identity and to use it for political mobilization, as manifested in their vision of ethno-national Azerbaijani kin-state and trans-state identity. Turkic nationalism resonates with the cultural preferences of the multi-ethnic population of Azerbaijan and can thus be said to be a convenient tool for promoting something whose historical and normative grounds are often found weak in contemporary nationalist discourses. Ethno-national identity issues are not novel to post-independence Azerbaijan. Turks (Azeris), like many peoples and nations throughout history, have struggled for their independence, statehood, and affirmation of their cultural self through the consolidation of a collective identity. Nationalism is a powerful rhetoric of mobilization even in situations outside of ethnic strife and can serve many legitimizing purposes as well as solidifying groups. In post-Soviet Azerbaijan, state status is often justified and reconciled through a nationalist discourse. State-building and statehood, at the same time, are backed by Turkic or Turkish national identity and by different versions of the Turkish origin of the Azerbaijanis. Educational policies and debates regarding Turkic influences in the history and culture of the Azerbaijanis, and especially in the rewriting of national or Euro-centric histories and scholarship, are fraught with difficult problems of conciliation, as negotiations that occurred in this region illustrate. Muslim minorities in Azerbaijan might feel even more marginalized by the official national cultural policies, which are significantly in favor of Turkic-Azeri customs and traditions. In conclusion, the Turkification project of the Azerbaijanis appears to have succeeded almost entirely in terms of one of its main goals: in the process of generation and consolidation of the public debt of nationally originated features [12].

7.4. International Relations

The research results confirm the Turkic identity of Azerbaijan's ethnic groups and put us in a position to analyze international relations. In this specific context, we will attempt to answer the following questions: How does Azerbaijan benefit and/or lose from the Turkic identity of its ethnic groups? What is the strategic importance of creating and maintaining relationships with other Turkic nations or communities? Furthermore, the findings from the research emphasize the great potential and therefore value of cultural diplomacy. The results of the research impose certain constraints on Azerbaijan's foreign policy. Moreover, Azerbaijan is inevitably and extremely interested in regional cooperation and stability in the countries where the Turkic ethnic minority lives. Cultural, ethnic, and historical factors present in the wider international context offer a clearer identity for Azerbaijan as well. Relations with neighboring countries, regional and international organizations, and the nation branding and positioning of the country are highly influenced by these results. Consequently, it is now obvious that the ethnic features and prevailing problems of external validity of ethnic conflicts cannot be separated from their cultural and regional context and mutual relations. Therefore, as this research examines

the Turkic identity of the non-Azerbaijani ethnic groups, it is expected to be considered not only among other research depending on the topics of “identity” and/or “ethnic conflict” but also to contribute to those studies concentrating on the dimensions and reflections of cultural and historical effects on international relations.

8. Challenges and Opportunities

One of the most significant challenges facing Azerbaijan as it strengthens its presence in the world and adapts to modernity is the preservation and enhancement of its Turkish identity. While the global marketplace represents an unprecedented playing field for all, few would argue that uncritical participation in such interchanges leaves no appreciable stamp on who we are as a people. On this basis alone, celebrating the cultural dynamism resulting from shared experiences in a global arena is no assurance of the authenticity that remains so central to determining the ultimate value of these exchanges. Working together, genuinely appreciating the differences between people and benefiting from distinctive cultural traditions, must continue to occupy a lion’s share of our investment because our survival is yet another probable outcome. Stable national identity can only be envisioned if the Turkic heritage can be secured within it.

In addition to recognizing the distinct ways in which the Turkic peoples have come to be spread throughout the world, we must also acknowledge that similar processes have brought some members of many of these groups to make their homes in Azerbaijan. The question of how best to help in the successful integration of these different peoples into a cohesive society is the most important part of the challenge for Azerbaijani identity. The fabric of identity is also affected by new generations learning different languages, different accents, and using norms from varying degrees. One of the most potent challenges of living in a multi-ethnic society is meeting the level of expectations and preventing ethnocentrism. It is a part of universal human nature and the right of every ethnic group to values; at the same time, few people are engaged in isolation, restriction, or other people’s rights. The importance of Turkic heritage in expanding our borders and building our future opportunities is due to the cultural and other aspects of this heritage. For protecting the national memory, it is our responsibility to be varied and informative about the Turkic world. Few people will think of their group and their people as part of the world where they live. We have the opportunity to enrich and preserve the free movement of our citizens in this space with transparent and strong soft power, such as media, education, entertainment, and others, but only by using universal human visual tools. Public policy should provide the necessary conditions for the segregation of national identity, that is, wholeness, for different ethnic groups. A good national identity involves two benefits: promoting the country as a place for peace and prosperity and reducing the threat of ethnic diversity in the country. A good public policy foreground resolves the tension between representing a complex society and having a mutual component for all people. The fundamental principles include

the following: Provide an inclusive position on ethnic diversity. This includes recognizing the ethnic landscape that forms in part of globalization. Promote Turkic identity, heritage, and regions within it. Be aware of and promote concepts of fraternity and respect, and in practice, address racial inequalities. Be active in advocating human rights in specific ethnic interests. Be active in promoting educational, associative, and cultural links with other national groups [6].

8.1. Preservation of Turkic Heritage

In order to better understand the Turkic identity of the ethnic groups of Azerbaijan, it is important to reflect on the initiatives aimed at the preservation of the Turkic heritage. The Turkic history of Azerbaijan dates back to the first century. Throughout the years, many measures have been taken to safeguard the Turkic language, traditions, and way of life. The massive process of globalization has increasingly led to challenges in preserving traditional culture. For many years, the international community has implemented initiatives to revitalize and protect the traditional Turkic way of life by establishing schools, researching traditional practices and traditions, as well as setting up community committees representing various fields and government institutions. Furthermore, the government focused on the recognition of national heritage, tourism, diplomacy, and education. Promoting heritage safeguarding and education is also one of the main areas of attention with regard to the creation of wider public awareness. Besides villages, information about the intangible cultural heritage could be disseminated in schools. This would be especially important to show the relevance of Azerbaijan's cultural heritage in the historical context. There are features that mainly distinguish ethnic minority groups in Azerbaijan from the rest of the population: namely, their dialects and other cultural specifics. In order to provide the necessary support for the preservation of these two criteria in the modern world, the respective action should, however, show a deeper and more knowledgeable approach to examine the symbolism that lies behind each cultural process. In this way, it would be possible to appreciate the diverse cultural circumstances of the ethnic groups in Azerbaijan [15].

8.2. Integration of Diverse Ethnic Groups

Azerbaijan's ethnic groups have been living in the contemporary state's territory for centuries. From this perspective, not only the ethnic groups that have sworn allegiance during the period of state formation, but also ethnic groups such as Lezgis, Talysh, and Udis should be recognized as potential territorial communities from the perspective of public formation. Not only did they live together for a long period of history, but they also mingled with their blood, whether intermixed or not. Azerbaijan is the place in the region where the greatest number of nationalities live in peace and dignity in one place, in the same nature, in the same atmosphere, in a small area. Ethnic diversity is managed by socio-political objectives. By creating a socio-political constructivist public service framework, it is presented

as a national and territorial public capability that reflects national assets and development capital.

In this context, ethnic communities and ethno-national relations depend on the constitution, language policy, and educational policies within the framework of the state public service structure in ethnic institutional types and membership, attitudes, behaviors, preferences, choices, and accreditation of that institution, meaning, and scale. The analysis of ethnic interrelations between community relations also depends on group relations, led by the democratic and open-door government system model proposed by political thinkers. The process of construction and institution of these types of ethnic identities highlights the importance of policies. The question is how to achieve and reinforce the participation and membership of ethnic officials in the shaping and reformation of this capacity. The main issue is how Azerbaijani society in this field has become successful or unsuccessful [6].

9. Conclusion and Future Research Directions

This study shows that ethnic identity is a multi-faceted phenomenon that is deeply intertwined with language, culture, ethnicity, and race. Today, the Turkic identity is the dominant identity in Azerbaijan. Approximately 90 - 95 percent of the citizens of Azerbaijan belong to this identity. The Turkic identity is important because it not only encompasses the idea of the Turkic linguistic genealogy, but is also related to the transcendence of Turkic ethnicity and culture. The weak national identity of Azerbaijan is also based on the Turkic identity. Further, having about 30 ethnic groups, which are subcategories of the Azerbaijani-Turkic ethno-linguistic group, provides vast ground for national unity in Azerbaijan. Turkic identity is one of the most important instruments for the social cohesion of Azerbaijan. Given the academic potential of this issue, a number of future academic research directions could be provided. We believe scholars will find it interesting to research the conditions keeping Azerbaijan as a “Turkic Island” in the South Caucasus region during the socialization process of ethnicity in the South Caucasus. In this regard, if the recent history of Azerbaijan provides the independence of the country as a relevant subject for so many scholarly works, why not state the very identity of the country as a subject of serious research? These are the fields that could interest international researchers, particularly those in the fields of Caucasian, Middle Eastern, and Turkic studies. Current focus on the concept of ethno-cultural diversity and studies in this very domain in Azerbaijan may serve as a part of a rich, multi-faith, multinational context of the world. The rich practical experiences of such a unique and ancient land in the modern states’ policy of ethnic-cultural diversity management may be of interest to academicians, as well as to policymakers and practitioners.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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