

**IRS** Great Return



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# AZERBAIJANI CULTURE COMPLETE WITH THE LIBERATION OF KARABAKH

*The Khudaferin bridge is a masterpiece of medieval architecture of Azerbaijan.  
It was badly damaged during the years of Armenian occupation*

*Imaret is the palace of Panahali Khan of Karabakh in Aghdam. 18th century. During the occupation of Aghdam by the Armenians, it was used as a cattle corral*



A significant part of the abundant historical and cultural heritage created and cherished by the Azerbaijani people for millennia, preserved to date and passed on from one generation to another, is linked to Karabakh. This historical cradle of our nation has been known around the world for centuries for its ancient monuments and unmatched art. The extensive history of Azerbaijan's national culture has taken hold in this land. Culture, music (Mugham art), literature, as well as architecture and various types of folk art, covered a long path of development in this area particularly following the establishment of the Karabakh Khanate in the 18th century.

The land of Karabakh emerged in the present-day Azerbaijani territory in the 4th century BCE. Beginning with Caucasian Albania, which existed until the 8th century CE, it was part of states headed by rulers of Azerbaijani descent in different periods of history. The Karabakh Khanate was one of the Azerbaijani khanates that emerged in lieu of the collapsed empire established by Azerbaijani Nadir Shah Afshar in 1747.

The founder of the Karabakh Khanate was Panah-Ali Khan (ruled in 1747-1763). It was later ruled by his son, Ibrahim Khalil Khan (in 1763-1806). The khanate was integrated into the Russian Empire under the Kurakchay treaty signed on May 14, 1805 by Ibrahim Khalil Khan

and the Caucasus troops commander of the Tsardom of Russia, Gen. Pavel Tsitsianov. In 1822, the khanate was abolished.

It is worth mentioning that the Karabakh khan retained his special status after the signing of the Kurakchay treaty and it was further passed on to Mehdiqulu Khan Javanshir, a son of Ibrahim Khalil Khan. Mehdiqulu Khan (died in 1845), who was granted the military rank of Major-General in accordance with an order of Russian Tsar Nicholas I, went down in history as the last Karabakh khan.

The Karabakh khanate covered vast territory stretching from the Araz river to Lake Goyche and encompassed the Karabakh plain and the mountainous area, as well as Zangazur, Bargushadi, etc. Initially, the Bayat Castle (Kabirli area) was the administrative center of the khanate, but it was later transferred to the area where Shahbulag Castle (a fortress in the present-day Aghdam district) built by Panah-Ali Khan (in 1751) is located. However, local wars ongoing in the region were prompting Panah-Ali Khan to construct a new and more reliable fortress city that would be unapproachable for an enemy attack. Thus, the city of Shusha that was surrounded by mountains and precipitous rocky areas from three sides providing natural fortification was founded in 1752 at the most strategic point of Karabakh.

***Restoration of the mausoleum of the vizier of the Karabakh Khanate and poet, Mullah Panah Vagif, in Shusha is nearing completion. The mausoleum was built in 1982, but was plundered and seriously damaged during Armenian occupation***

The period of prosperity in the Karabakh cultural heritage is closely related to local khans and the activity of their successors. The Shahbulag Castle, built in the 18th-19th centuries, the Asgaran Fortress, as well as dozens of mosques, madrasas, caravanserais, bridges and mansions, were considered to be pearls of Karabakh. The Shusha fortress city was an uncovered museum with one-of-the-kind architectural samples. There were a total of 17 neighborhoods in the city with each possessing its own shades and hues, historical buildings, mosques, bath-houses, water springs, etc.

Shusha was a significant cultural center of not only Karabakh but the entire Azerbaijan in the second half of the 19th century, along with being a cradle of national music. It was called "the South Caucasus conservatory". Dozens of outstanding personalities like the great khanendes (singers) who promoted the Azerbaijani mugham in Europe, including Jabbar Garyaghdioghlu and Mahammad Kechachioghlu, as well as the author of the first opera in the Muslim East, composer Uzeyir Hajibayli, hail from this territory. Theatrical and circus performances were staged in Shusha for the first time in the history of Azerbaijani culture, along with European and Oriental concerts, musical and scientific events. A publishing house and a library were opened as well.

Azerbaijani literature has an abundant history traced back to Karabakh. In the Middle Ages, this land nurtured such well-known thinkers of the East as Said Amirul Bardayi, Sadullah Bardayi and Mahammad Garabaghi. Molla Panah Vagif, vizier (chief minister) of the Karabakh Khan, laid the foundation of a new national school of poetry in Azerbaijani literature in the 18th century. Furthermore, the 19th century was the "Golden Age" of literature in Karabakh. This era was mainly tracked in the city of Shusha. "Tazkireyi-Navvab", a piece of work composed by Mir Mohsun Navvab, a Shusha-based painter, poet and scholar, cites the names of up to 100 writers who lived in the city in that time period. Prominent poetess Khurshidbanu Natavan (1832-1897), known as "Khan's daughter" (a daughter of Mehdigulu, the last Karabakh Khan), made a special contribution to the enrichment of literature in Shusha and Karabakh overall. Natavan brought together a great number of poets of that era by establishing a literary community called «Majlisi-uns» in



Shusha. In addition to writing poetry, Natavan was a talented artist and excelled in artistic embroidery. French writer Alexandre Dumas ('father') wrote in his "Tales of the Caucasus" in 1858 about his meeting with Natavan and her creative talent. Natavan was also known to have undertaken charitable activities, such as the construction of numerous buildings in Shusha, along with assisting the needy people and building a water pipeline in the city. The Karabakh literary community was also home to well-known satirical poet Gasim Bay Zakir and Ashiq Pari, a poet and folk singer. In the late 19th century and the early 20th century, this land also nurtured such writers and playwrights as Najaf bay Vazirov, Abdurrahim bay Haqverdiyev, Yusif Vazir Chamanzaminli and Suleyman Sani Akhundov.

The Karabakh school is one of the seven main carpet-making schools in Azerbaijan. Barda and the city of Shusha have been recognized as major regional centers of craftsmanship since the 10th-11th centuries and the 18th century respectively. Carpet-weaving was widespread in Aghdam, Fuzuli, Jabrayil and other regions. Numerous Azerbaijani carpets made in Karabakh adorn well-known museums around the world.



*The Govhar Agha Mosque in Shusha. 19th century. It was built by Azerbaijani architect Kerbalai Sefikhan of Karabakh. During the years of Armenian occupation, original Azerbaijani ornaments and elements were destroyed and attempts were made to falsify it as a “Persian” mosque*

Horse-breeding in Karabakh has a long history as well. Purebred horses from Karabakh have been known well in many countries since the Middle Ages. Karabakh horses have been part of special royal cavalry units in Europe and a number of races.

Azerbaijan’s Karabakh region has also been famed in the world for the Azykh Cave, an ancient human habitat dating back around 2 million years. Karabakh is also home to the successors of the Paleolithic-era Guruchay culture, as well as the Kura-Araz and Khojaly-Gadabay cultures that existed during the Bronze Age and the Iron Age and superseded one another. Scores of historical and cultural monuments have been recorded in Karabakh, including 13 monuments of global importance (including six architectural and seven archaeological sites), 292 monuments of nationwide importance (119 architectural and 173 archaeological sites) and 330 monuments of local importance (270 architectural monuments, 22 archaeological monuments, 23 gardens, parks, monumental and memorial sites and 15 decorative art samples).

A significant number of Christian monuments dating back to the epoch of Caucasian Albania, including ancient places of worship and shrines, are available in Karabakh as well. The Albanian Apostolic Church was the most ancient Christian shrine with an extensive his-

tory in the Caucasus. The Armenian Gregorian Church had always been disgruntled over this fact. Armenian clerics started making claims to Albanian churches following the mass relocation of Armenians from Iran to the northern Azerbaijan territories, in particular, Karabakh, as a result of the Russo-Persian Wars in the early 19th century. The process became endemic after the Russian Orthodox Church synod (governing body) passed a decision in 1836 to transfer the Albanian Apostolic Church to the jurisdiction of the Armenian Gregorian Church. Afterwards, dozens of Albanian churches were Armenianized in Karabakh. During the period of the Armenian occupation of Karabakh, the Armenians began presenting Ganjasar and Khudavang, the well-known Albanian temples dating back to the early Middle Ages located in the Kalbajar district, and Aghoghlan Monastery in Lachin, as their shrines internationally, and also attempted to alter the initial architectural appearance of these structures and their crosses.

Pursuing a deliberate policy aimed at misappropriating the national cultural heritage of the Azerbaijani people, the Armenians referred to the legacy of Caucasian Albania as “Armenian heritage” and failed to refrain from not only stealing samples of material culture but also claiming affiliation with historical personalities. Graphic examples of these attempts include their efforts to “Armenianize” Hasan Jalal, the founder of the Albanian Cross principality in Karabakh in the 13th century, and Arzu Khatun, his successor.

During the occupation of Azerbaijani territory the Armenians were engaged in persistently ruining ancient samples of the Islamic civilization in Karabakh that had history spanning centuries. About 70 mosques in Shusha, Aghdam, Gubadly, Zangilan and other areas were adversely affected by the Armenian occupation and only a few of these shrines remained in these territories. The shrines are either semi-dilapidated or their historic appearance was altered under the pretext of “restoration” (such as Yukhari Govhar Agha Mosque in Shusha). A Russian Orthodox church in the Kuropatkinovillage of the Khojavand district, which dates back to the 19th century, is among the religious sites destroyed as a result of the Armenian occupation.

*Bread Museum in Aghdam. It was built in 1983 but was destroyed during Armenian occupation of the city*



Karabakh was also known as a beautiful tourism zone with delightful nature and recreation areas. The resorts and health centers located in the region were attracting visitors from across the world.

The historical part of Shusha was declared historical-architectural reserve on the initiative of Azerbaijani national leader Heydar Aliyev in 1977. Strides were further taken to boost the development of tourism in the city.

The historical, cultural and natural abundance created and cherished by the Azerbaijani people in Karabakh for centuries had been subjected to unprecedented aggression and vandalism during the Armenian occupation in 1992-2020. Acts of vandalism were regularly committed against the Azerbaijani historical-cultural heritage during this time period, which also saw the displacement of about a million Azerbaijanis by Armenia. Moreover, the homes of the evicted people were plundered, dozens of cities and settlements and hundreds of villages were razed to the ground. The invaders destroyed over 20 museums featuring up to 40,000 exhibits. Scores of valuable samples, paintings and sculptures, keepsakes of prominent personalities and other exhibits pertaining to Azerbaijani history and culture were stolen from those museums. While looting residential areas, the enemy appropriated hundreds of Azerbaijani carpets, sold many of these items in foreign markets and completely destroyed, misappropriated or changed the purpose of ancient monuments.

“There have been many wars and destruction worldwide in the history of mankind, but in my opinion, such vandalism and devastation taking place in the 20th century and the deliberate destruction of cities and villages is unprecedented. This is barbarity, cultural genocide.” This is a statement from the Azerbaijani President and it is the truth.

Armenia displayed particular ruthlessness in dealing with the Azerbaijani cultural legacy in the occupied land. The objective behind these actions was to wipe out the entire cultural heritage created by Azerbaijanis over many centuries along with all traces of their history and existence in these territories.

President Ilham Aliyev repeatedly stated in his speeches that Azerbaijan would never reconcile to the occupation of its territory and liberation of its native land at any cost was the paramount task and objective for the country. In addition to holding talks brokered by international mediators, an emphasis was placed on building Azerbaijan’s armed forces and improving their logistics and combat readiness. The Azerbaijani army was ready to restore the country’s territorial integrity in accordance with an order of the Supreme Commander-In-Chief. Finally, the day has come and Azerbaijan declared to the whole wide world that it would no longer tolerate invading Armenia’s persistent provocations. The powerful and victorious Azerbaijani army taught a historic lesson to the invader under the leadership of the

*The Shahbulag castle in Aghdam. It was built in 1751-1752.*

*During Armenian occupation of the city, an attempt was made to falsify the monument as “ancient Armenian”*



Supreme Commander-in-Chief in the Patriotic War that started on September 27, 2020. Karabakh and the city of Shusha, a cradle of Azerbaijani culture, were liberated in the 44-day war following their occupation by Armenian armed forces for about 30 years.

The Patriotic War ended in a glorious victory. Azerbaijan put an end to the injustice that was merely observed by the world community for many years, having reinstated not only its own territorial integrity but also international law. Azerbaijanis witnessed the bitter ramifications of vandalism defying the values of humanity as soon as they set foot on their land cleansed off the Armenian intruders. In addition to residential homes, historical and cultural monuments dating back many centuries and left behind by our forefathers, including fortresses, tombs, mosques and churches, house museums, caravanserais and other historical structures, as well as cemeteries, were levelled.

It is worth mentioning that Azerbaijan’s Ministry of Culture has appealed to UNESCO and ICESCO, the UN Alliance of Civilizations, as well as the culture ministries of 150 countries, over the hostile acts committed by Armenia with regard to the Azerbaijani cultural heritage in our historical land during the occupation period. The appeals called for international condemnation of our ill-wishing neighbor’s actions and taking action in accordance with the requirements of relevant conventions. At the same time, the Azerbaijani government is taking security measures in the territories liberated from occupation and demining activities are underway. Azerbaijan is also ready to host a UNESCO mission in the

liberated territories. A pertinent query has been sent to UNESCO in this regard.

Consistent efforts are also being made to inform the world community of Armenia’s hostile actions in Karabakh. Delegations of numerous countries and international organizations, representatives of diplomatic missions accredited to Azerbaijan and foreign media outlets visit the freed Azerbaijani regions and witness firsthand the consequences of the 30-year-long occupation of these territories. Major world media publish news reports and air programs concerning the barbaric actions committed against the Azerbaijani culture.

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In accordance with President Ilham Aliyev’s decree “On organization of temporary special governance in the territories of the Republic of Azerbaijan liberated from occupation”, issued on October 29, 2020, Ministry of Culture representatives continue their monitoring activities aimed at preliminary inventory control and safeguarding of historical and cultural facilities in the liberated territories. A total of 314 historical and cultural monuments registered by the state have been examined to date (by June). Moreover, monitoring was carried out upon 125 facilities (newly discovered monuments) with historical, architectural and archaeological features that had not undergone state registration in those territories. The monitoring led to a conclusion that most of the reviewed historical and cultural monuments and facilities with historical, architectural and archaeological features had been completely destroyed by the invaders.

***A Karabakh carpet. Karabakh carpets make up a separate group of Azerbaijani carpets. Armenia tries to portray them as “Armenian Artsakh carpets”***

Only ruins of some of these monuments remained on the spot and they sustained tampering and vandalism. In addition, 855 cultural facilities have been revealed during the preliminary monitoring in Shusha, as well as the Jabrayil, Fuzuli, Zangilan, Khojavand, Gubadly, Aghdam and Kalbajar districts. These included 457 libraries, 345 clubs, 20 museums, 25 children’s musical schools, a movie theater, two theaters, two galleries and three film clubs.

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Large-scale restoration and rebuilding work has been launched in the territories liberated from the Armenian occupation. Overall, this process could be considered as the beginning of a new stage in the country’s social and cultural life. It is reassuring that the Azerbaijani people tackled the efforts made under the leadership and supervision of the head of state with great vigor and victorious zeal.

Firstly, extensive construction operations are being carried out in Shusha. President Ilham Aliyev and First Vice-President Mehriban Aliyeva visited the city four times since the beginning of 2021. Close familiarization with the ongoing rehabilitation and rebuilding activities indicates the attention and care provided by the country’s leadership for this ancient cradle of Azerbaijani culture.

Rehabilitation is currently underway upon the tombs, caravanserais, house museums and mosques that were affected by Armenian vandalism in Shusha during the occupation, as well as the Gazanchi Church, whose historical looks had been altered. The church, built in the 1880s, was listed among the monuments under state protection in the Soviet era (according to a decision No.145 passed by the Council of Ministers of Azerbaijan SSR on April 27, 1988). Furthermore, it was recorded by the government in a relevant register approved under the ruling No.132 of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan on August 2, 2001 (inventory item No.358). Restoration of the Gazanchi Church based on historical documents and archival material is envisaged in compliance with its initial art style and architectural appearance, just like all other historical-cultural monuments in Azerbaijan. The ongoing overhaul and rehabilitation efforts in Shusha are expected to reinstate its historical and cultural image and turn the ancient city into a new and attractive destination on the world cul-



tural heritage map. The primary goal of the rehabilitation endeavors is to restore the city of Shusha, which has been declared the “Cultural Capital” of Azerbaijan by the President, and its historic role in the country’s cultural heritage, as well as inform the international community that it is a cradle of national art and music. The “Kharibulbul” music festival was organized by the Heydar Aliyev Foundation on the Jidir Duzu plain in Shusha on President Ilham Aliyev’s instructions on May 12-13, 2021, which marked our glorious return to the capital of Azerbaijani culture. Just six months after its liberation from a long-lasting invasion, the ancient city once again embraced the environment of national music and art, which was embedded in history as an overall triumph of Azerbaijani culture.

On June 15, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan signed the Shusha Declaration. In addition to other significant clauses, the historic document inked in Shusha envisions overhaul of the socio-economic and cultural infrastructure in the liberated Karabakh, as well as cooperation





*Monitoring is conducted on the lands liberated from the occupation for subsequent restoration*

in ensuring that the region regains its previous fame. Shusha will host a plethora of traditional cultural events in the future. This year, Days of Vagif Poetry will be held in the city. Organizations from Turkic and Islamic world countries are expected to be closely involved and support these events.

ICESCO recently made a tremendously important proposal with regard to Shusha. During a visit by its director-general to Azerbaijan in January, the organization suggested announcing Shusha the cultural capital of the Islamic world. Moreover, the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TURKSOY) suggested declaring Shusha as Cultural Capital of the Turkic World in 2023. These proposals indicate the high appreciation of the Turkic and Islamic world to the cultural richness of this ancient city.

Comprehensive rehabilitation is also underway in the city of Aghdam, the largest residential area in Karabakh that was razed to the ground entirely during the occupation period. A number of foreign nationals who witnessed Armenian vandalism in Aghdam, regarded those ruins as "Hiroshima of the Caucasus". During another visit to the region by President Ilham Aliyev on May 28, Republic Day, the foundation was laid for the rehabilitation of Aghdam, the city's general plan was drawn up and a number of infrastructure projects, in-

cluding Victory Museum and Open Air Museum of Occupation, were presented.

In addition to implementing construction and renovation operations in all residential areas liberated from occupation in line with high standards on the President's instructions, Museums of Occupation will be established outdoors. These museums will be instrumental in conveying internationally the acts of vandalism perpetrated by Armenia in the occupation period and will also inform future generations of this page in history.

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The liberation of Karabakh from occupation signifies not only restoration of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and the return of Azerbaijanis to their homes, but also the return of culture to this land on a broader scale. Therefore, the Ministry is implementing relevant projects and events under the "Getting culture back to Karabakh" slogan. Having brought back culture and restored historical-cultural heritage in these territories, we will demonstrate to the rest of the world that the Azerbaijani people are the real and indigenous possessors of Karabakh, in contrast to those who had been engaged in barbaric actions and plundering of these territories for about 30 years.

*International Music Festival “Kharibulbul” in Shusha. 2021. It was first held in 1989 and was not organized during Armenian occupation*



The restoration of territorial integrity in the 2020 Patriotic War paved the way for presenting and promoting Azerbaijani culture in the world comprehensively. For the first time in Azerbaijan's independence history, the country's cultural heritage could be displayed with its entire diversity and abundance. One of the priorities of the Azerbaijani government's cultural policy is preserving and protecting the customs and traditions, languages and religious beliefs of minorities and small ethnic groups represented in the country. Restoration of shrines pertaining to different religions, including samples of the ancient Albanian Christian heritage that were looted and appropriated by the Armenians in Karabakh during the occupation, is in the focus of the government's attention. According to the President's instructions, rehabilitation of Albanian-Udi shrines will be carried out in these territories as well.

The Ministry of Culture is implementing various projects in this field as well. The first stage of the "Let's get to know our Christian heritage" project, launched in November 2020, is being completed. As part of the project, short videos relating to Christian temples, churches and shrines under state protection in the Azerbaijani territory are made and aired.

As part of the "Let's get to know our Islamic heritage" project, videos about monuments of Islamic culture located in Azerbaijan, including mosques, tombs, khankahs and caravanserais, have been made and presented to the public this year through the ministry's website and social media. Recently, the ministry also launched a global campaign called Peace4Culture. The project is aimed at protecting cultural heritage through peace, building sustainable peace-loving communities, as well as studying the contribution of culture to peace-making and the role of peace in the development of culture.

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The Azerbaijani culture is starting a new stage in its development. Karabakh and Shusha stand out for their abundance with every patch and stone built there reflecting national historical and cultural legacy; the projects undertaken by the government are swiftly bringing us closer to the day when this land will open up and embrace the rest of the world. Mankind in unaware of most of our cultural riches that had been inaccessible to ourselves for many years. From now onward, the Azerbaijani culture, which is now complete and enriched, just like our native land, will be presented to the world community within a variety of new projects. ✨