

Nakhchivan as a Microcosm: Reflections on Language, Culture, and History

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Abstract:

This article explores *Nakhchivan as a microcosm* of the broader Azerbaijani and Caucasian cultural-historical landscape. Situated between Armenia, Iran, and Turkey, Nakhchivan's geopolitical isolation has fostered a distinctive synthesis of language, culture, and history that both mirrors and amplifies wider regional dynamics. Through an interdisciplinary qualitative analysis, this study synthesizes linguistic, cultural, and historical research to interpret how Nakhchivan's evolution reflects the resilience and adaptability of its people. The linguistic dimension emphasizes the preservation and modernization of Azerbaijani as the main language, alongside growing attention to English education. The cultural dimension examines Yallı folk dances, cuisine, and heritage preservation as vital symbols of identity and transnational Turkic unity. The historical analysis traces Nakhchivan's development from ancient settlements to its present autonomous status, highlighting struggles for survival, autonomy, and modernization amid geopolitical shifts. Collectively, these findings affirm Nakhchivan's significance as a living reflection of Azerbaijan's linguistic vitality, cultural endurance, and historical continuity, providing insights into how small regions can embody and sustain the essence of broader civilizations.

Keywords: *Nakhchivan; language; culture; history; identity*

Introduction

Nakhchivan is an autonomous exclave of the Republic of Azerbaijan, distinguished by its rich tapestry of language, culture, and history. Geographically separated from mainland Azerbaijan and nestled between Armenia, Iran, and Turkey, Nakhchivan has often been described as a microcosm of the broader Caucasus and Near Eastern region. Over millennia, this land has absorbed influences from various civilizations while cultivating its own unique identity. From ancient legends – such as those connecting Nakhchivan with the Biblical patriarch Noah – to modern developments, the region encapsulates a spectrum of human experience.

This article examines Nakhchivan's multifaceted character through the lenses of language, culture, and history. By reviewing scholarly literature and historical accounts, we aim to illuminate how Nakhchivan's local experiences reflect wider patterns in Azerbaijani and regional contexts. The

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language of Nakhchivan, primarily Azerbaijani Turkish, carries traces of historical contact and faces contemporary challenges in education and globalization. The cultural heritage of Nakhchivan, from its traditional dances and cuisine to its monuments and folklore, highlights a convergence of Turkic, Persian, and Caucasian influences, symbolizing the region's role as a cultural crossroads. Meanwhile, Nakhchivan's history – spanning ancient civilizations, medieval empires, and modern autonomy – exemplifies resilience and adaptation amid shifting geopolitical currents.

Framing Nakhchivan as a microcosm suggests that despite its modest size and population, the region's internal dynamics mirror broader themes found across Azerbaijan and the wider Turkic and Caucasus worlds. In the following sections, we first outline our methodological approach, then delve into the findings on Nakhchivan's language and education, cultural identity, and historical trajectory. Finally, we discuss how these elements interrelate and conclude with reflections on Nakhchivan's significance in the larger regional narrative.

Methodology

This study employs an interdisciplinary qualitative approach, synthesizing information from historical, linguistic, and cultural research on Nakhchivan. We conducted a literature review of academic sources that focus on the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic's development in various domains. Key materials include historical analyses of Nakhchivan's political struggles (e.g., Abbasov, 2024), ethnographic and cultural studies (Askerov, 2018; Rzayeva, 2025), archaeological reports (Bahshaliyev, 2018), and educational research (Khalilov, 2022; Hacıyeva, 2024). By integrating sources across disciplines, we adopt a holistic perspective on how language, culture, and history intertwine in the region.

No new empirical data were collected for this article; instead, we rely on secondary data and existing scholarship. The historical analysis draws on published works covering periods from antiquity to the modern era, while the cultural analysis references studies on traditional dances, cuisine, and heritage preservation. For the language and education perspective, we consider research on language learning and educational transformation in Azerbaijan with specific attention to Nakhchivan (Hasan, 2023; Nakhchivan, 2023). This combination of sources allows us to cross-verify information and ensure a comprehensive understanding. All references are cited in APA style. Given the scope of this review, our approach remains theoretical and interpretive, aiming to weave a narrative that connects the diverse facets of Nakhchivan's identity without introducing new primary findings.

Results

Language and Education in Nakhchivan

Language in Nakhchivan is predominantly Azerbaijani (a Turkic language), which serves as the mother tongue for the vast majority of the population. Over the course of history, other languages such as Persian, Armenian, and Russian have also been present due to various imperial rules and neighboring communities, but Azerbaijani has remained the cornerstone of local identity. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, secular schools began to appear in Nakhchivan (alongside traditional religious education), giving rise to a local intellectual class. By the early 1900s, a network of modern schools

had fostered widespread literacy and a lasting appreciation for education as a vehicle of social progress (Khalilov, 2022).

Under Soviet rule (1920–1991), Azerbaijani was the primary language of instruction in Nakhchivan's schools (with Russian taught as a second language). After Azerbaijan's independence in 1991, Nakhchivan, like the rest of the country, transitioned its script back to the Latin alphabet and renewed emphasis on the national language and heritage. The challenging years of the early 1990s – marked by the conflict in neighboring Nagorno-Karabakh and an economic blockade on Nakhchivan – had significant impacts on education and society. Despite those hardships, the autonomous republic invested in rebuilding and expanding its educational institutions once stability was restored. As noted by Hacıyeva (2024), the post-1995 period in Nakhchivan saw concerted efforts to revive socio-cultural development, including improvements in education infrastructure and programming. Local leadership prioritized schooling and cultural institutions as a means to overcome the isolation imposed by regional conflicts (Hacıyeva, 2024).

In recent decades, Nakhchivan's education system has continued to evolve, aligning with nationwide reforms and global trends. Higher education in the region is exemplified by Nakhchivan State University (NSU), which has become a hub for academic activity in the exclave and contributes to the diversity of Azerbaijan's higher education landscape (Isakhanli & Pashayeva, 2018). Researchers have highlighted innovative approaches emerging from Nakhchivan's academic community, particularly in language education. For instance, there is increasing focus on teaching English as a foreign language to meet international communication needs. Studies by Hasan (2023) discuss innovative strategies for teaching English to novice learners in higher education, reflecting broader efforts in Azerbaijan to modernize language instruction. Similarly, Hacıyeva (2024) examines the phenomenon of language anxiety among English as a Second Language (ESL) learners – an issue relevant to students in Nakhchivan as they navigate multilingual competencies. These works suggest that educators in Nakhchivan are actively engaging with contemporary pedagogical methods to improve foreign language proficiency, recognizing English as a key to greater academic and professional opportunities.

A concrete example of pedagogical innovation in Nakhchivan is the integration of eclectic teaching methods in linguistics courses at NSU. An eclectic method combines various instructional approaches to optimize student engagement and learning. Nakhchivan (2023) reports on the application of such methods in teaching phonetics and phonology at NSU, highlighting that empowering students through research-oriented learning can deepen their understanding of language. By blending traditional lecture-based teaching with interactive, student-led projects, instructors have found that learners become more confident and skilled in both theoretical and practical aspects of language. This approach not only enhances pronunciation and linguistic competence, but also helps reduce learners' anxiety by providing multiple avenues to grasp concepts (Nakhchivan, 2023).

In summary, the linguistic and educational domain of Nakhchivan reflects a microcosm of wider trends: a commitment to preserving the national language and identity, coupled with openness to global languages and instructional innovations. The region's long-standing value of education – dating back to early 20th-century enlightenment initiatives – parallels Azerbaijan's broader development,

while current efforts in language education demonstrate Nakhchivan's engagement with global academic and cultural currents.

Cultural Heritage and Identity

Nakhchivan's cultural heritage is extraordinarily rich, blending indigenous traditions with influences from across the Middle East and Central Asia. One emblematic aspect of this heritage is the traditional dance known as Yallı. Yallı is a collective folk dance performed in a circular formation, accompanied by folk music, and it holds a cherished place in Nakhchivani identity. Often called the "land of yallis," Nakhchivan has been a cradle for these dances for centuries (Askerov, 2018). Scholars note that Yallı is among the oldest collective dances in the region, with roots tracing back to Bronze Age petroglyphs found in the mountains of Nakhchivan (Askerov, 2018). The dance's endurance through millennia underscores a continuity of cultural expression. Yallı dances embody communal values such as unity, solidarity, and the celebration of nature and life. The themes of many Yallı songs and movements express reverence for the homeland, heroism, and the joy of collective existence (Askerov, 2018). In modern times, Yallı has gained international recognition as part of Azerbaijan's intangible cultural heritage – it was inscribed on UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding in 2018, specifically highlighting its Nakhchivan variants. This recognition has helped mobilize efforts to preserve Yallı for future generations, reflecting how a local art form carries global cultural significance.

Beyond dance, Nakhchivan's cultural mosaic includes traditional music, crafts, and a distinctive cuisine, all of which reflect the intermingling of Turkic and Persianate cultures. Cuisine is an integral part of Nakhchivan's cultural identity. The region's cooking features hearty dishes and unique preparations that have been passed down through folklore and family traditions. Recent scholarship has delved into how historical folklore texts mention local foodways, indicating the longstanding importance of cuisine in Nakhchivan's social life. Rzayeva (2025) finds that many folk narratives and songs of Nakhchivan contain references to traditional foods – from staple breads and dairy dishes to festive meats and sweets. Such references suggest that food is not only a matter of sustenance but also a symbol of heritage and community values. Traditional meals like ash (grain-based porridge or pilaf) and qovurma (a method of preserving meat in fat) are deeply tied to seasonal cycles and rites of hospitality. The effort to study and document Nakhchivan's culinary heritage (Rzayeva, 2025) is part of a broader preservation initiative, recognizing that recipes and food-related folklore are intangible assets linking the present generation to their ancestors.

Heritage preservation in Nakhchivan also involves safeguarding its historical monuments and artifacts. The region boasts remarkable architectural landmarks, such as the 12th-century Momine Khatun mausoleum in Nakhchivan City, with its intricate Seljuk-era brickwork and Kufic inscriptions. However, not all heritage has been uniformly protected; the fate of certain monuments has become entangled in regional political conflicts. Dorfmann-Lazarev and Khatchadourian (2023) discuss how numerous medieval monuments in Nakhchivan (some of Persian or Armenian origin and others of Turkic-Islamic origin) have found themselves at the center of competing national narratives. The authors illustrate that in contemporary geopolitical conflicts, cultural heritage can be politicized – one

community's cherished monument might be targeted by another as a way of asserting a rival historical narrative. For instance, the medieval Armenian khachkar (carved cross-stone) cemetery of Julfa in Nakhchivan was famously destroyed in the early 2000s, an act condemned internationally as a devastating loss of cultural heritage. This example is often cited as evidence of how heritage sites can become casualties of identity struggles. The tug-of-war over monuments shows that Nakhchivan's cultural landscape is not just about local memory, but is also symbolic within a larger discourse on national identity and historical ownership (Dorfmann-Lazarev & Khatchadourian, 2023).

Another dimension of Nakhchivan's cultural identity is its relationship with the wider Turkic world. The Nakhchivan Agreement of 2009, which formally established the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States (now known as the Organization of Turkic States), was signed in Nakhchivan City. This diplomatic milestone linking Azerbaijan, Turkey, and other Turkic republics was deliberately set in Nakhchivan, reflecting the region's historical and cultural ties to the Turkic civilization. Kasseinov (2019) notes the importance of this event, explaining that Nakhchivan's heritage and location made it a fitting venue to reaffirm Turkic unity. Moreover, Nakhchivan has been active in TURKSOY (the International Organization of Turkic Culture) initiatives, hosting events that celebrate shared traditions such as music and art festivals. The Turkic Council's 10th anniversary commemorations highlighted Nakhchivan's role in fostering cultural diplomacy among Turkic nations (Kasseinov, 2019). Thus, the region serves as a cultural bridge – its very position at the crossroads of Turkey, Iran, and the Caucasus has enabled it to partake in a broad exchange of cultural practices and to act as a node in transnational cultural networks.

Nakhchivan's traditional knowledge is closely tied to its natural environment. Ethnobotanical research confirms that local uses of medicinal plants in Nakhchivan closely resemble those in neighboring regions, underscoring a shared cultural ecology that transcends political boundaries (Ozturk et al., 2018). In this way, Nakhchivan's local traditions echo those of a wider geographical expanse, reinforcing the idea of the region as a microcosm of the diverse yet interconnected cultures in its vicinity.

Historical Trajectory of Nakhchivan

The history of Nakhchivan is marked by continuity, change, and a steadfast sense of local identity. Archaeological evidence indicates that the region has been inhabited since prehistoric times. Excavations at sites like Nakhchivan Tepe have unearthed settlements dating back to the Chalcolithic period (5th millennium BCE), revealing that early inhabitants of Nakhchivan were part of the ancient Near Eastern cultural sphere (Bahshaliyev, 2018). Pottery and other artifacts from these digs show connections to contemporary cultures around the Urmia Basin and beyond, suggesting that even in prehistory, Nakhchivan was engaged in networks of trade and cultural exchange (Bahshaliyev, 2018). This deep historical footprint lays the foundation for Nakhchivan's later importance on the Silk Road and as a crossroads of empires.

Over the course of antiquity and the Middle Ages, Nakhchivan was ruled by various empires – Persian, Armenian, Arab, and Turkic – each leaving its imprint on the region's multicultural fabric. In the early modern era, Nakhchivan was contested between Persia and the Ottoman Empire, and was ultimately

ceded to the Russian Empire in 1828. The early 20th century was a tumultuous yet formative time, as Nakhchivan became the focus of competing national aspirations after the collapse of the Russian Empire. In the face of incursions by an independent Armenia and the advance of Bolshevik forces, Nakhchivan's Turkic population engaged in a determined struggle for self-determination and sought protection from Turkey. A series of conflicts and negotiations culminated in the 1921 Moscow and Kars treaties, which secured Nakhchivan's status as an autonomous territory under Azerbaijan's sovereignty (with Turkish guarantorship) in the Soviet Union (Abbasov, 2024). In 1924, the Nakhchivan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was officially established. This hard-won autonomy – achieved through local resistance and diplomacy – remains a source of pride in Nakhchivan's historical memory, testament to the population's resilience and political acumen (Abbasov, 2024).

Under Soviet rule, Nakhchivan developed in parallel with the rest of Azerbaijan, though its status as an exclave (separated from mainland Azerbaijan by Armenian territory) often made it reliant on external routes for access. During the Soviet era, significant progress was made in education, healthcare, and infrastructure in Nakhchivan, but the region remained somewhat peripheral – a quiet corner of the USSR known for its agricultural produce and historical sites. The ethnic composition of Nakhchivan also shifted: whereas early 20th-century Nakhchivan had sizable Armenian communities, by the late Soviet period the population was overwhelmingly Azerbaijani after the out-migration of Armenians (Mukhtar oglu, 2023). This demographic change was largely the result of the conflicts and population movements in the 1918–1920 period, after which Nakhchivan's Armenian population sharply declined.

The post-Soviet chapter of Nakhchivan's history began dramatically. As Azerbaijan and Armenia went to war over Nagorno-Karabakh in the early 1990s, Nakhchivan was also attacked on its northern border by Armenian forces. Though a full-scale invasion was averted, the region suffered from a blockade that cut off transport and trade routes. At this critical juncture, Heydar Aliyev – who had returned to his native Nakhchivan after a political fall-out in Moscow – assumed leadership of the autonomous republic's government. His governance (1991–1993 as chairman of Nakhchivan's parliament) is credited with stabilizing Nakhchivan during the war and humanitarian crisis (Hacıyeva, 2024). Aliyev negotiated with neighboring Turkey and Iran to secure supply lines, ensuring the exclave's survival when energy and food were scarce. In 1995, after Aliyev became President of Azerbaijan, Nakhchivan continued under the de facto leadership of his allies, and the region embarked on a path of rebuilding and development.

Between 1995 and 2020, Nakhchivan underwent significant socio-economic changes. The autonomous republic invested in modern infrastructure – airports, roads, schools, and hospitals – transforming the region into one of the more stable and developed parts of Azerbaijan. Hacıyeva (2024) notes that scholarship on this period highlights a deliberate strategy to foster socio-cultural growth despite the region's continued isolation by land. Initiatives included the revival of cultural festivals, the opening of new museums and libraries, and improvements in higher education. Education in particular progressed with new institutions and curricula, echoing the broader transformation of Azerbaijan's higher education system in the post-Soviet period (Isakhanli &

Pashayeva, 2018). By the early 21st century, Nakhchivan had not only preserved its historical heritage but also begun to embrace technology and globalization within the limits of its geopolitical situation.

Looking toward the future, further strengthening multilingual education and leveraging cultural heritage for sustainable development are often highlighted as priorities for Nakhchivan (Taleh, 2021). In essence, Nakhchivan's historical trajectory – from ancient settlement to modern autonomous republic – encapsulates narratives of survival, adaptation, and continuity that resonate with the experiences of many small regions navigating larger geopolitical currents.

Discussion

Positioned as a microcosm, Nakhchivan reflects in miniature the broader historical and cultural dynamics of Azerbaijan and its surrounding regions. The examination of language, culture, and history in Nakhchivan reveals a tapestry where local specifics mirror regional themes. For instance, the commitment to language and education in Nakhchivan – from early 20th-century enlightenment efforts to contemporary English teaching – parallels the nationwide prioritization of education as a means of progress. The challenges faced (such as geographic isolation and foreign language anxiety among learners) and the solutions applied (innovative teaching methods, policy support) are not unique to Nakhchivan, yet the region's contained setting accentuates their impact. As a result, Nakhchivan offers a case study in how strong educational values can persist even in adverse conditions, illustrating that investment in human capital is a universal strategy for community resilience.

Similarly, Nakhchivan's cultural heritage underscores themes of both unity and contestation common in the Caucasus. The preservation of Yalli dances and local cuisine exemplifies how communities maintain their unique identity through traditions, even as those traditions engage in dialogue with neighboring cultures. The inclusion of Nakhchivani dances and practices in international heritage lists demonstrates how local culture can gain global recognition, reinforcing local pride and encouraging preservation efforts. On the other hand, the disputes over historical monuments highlight how culture and history can become battlegrounds for identity – a phenomenon seen across many multiethnic regions. This dual aspect of culture – as a source of both solidarity and conflict – is vividly present in Nakhchivan's experience. It is a reminder that cultural heritage management is crucial for peace and mutual understanding, not just a matter of local interest.

In the realm of history, the narrative of Nakhchivan encapsulates the broader story of a small region navigating the currents of great-power politics. Nakhchivan's people faced the dissolution of empires, the rise of nation-states, and the ideological divisions of the Cold War, yet they leveraged diplomacy and local unity to secure a degree of self-governance that has lasted into the present. This is emblematic of many regions worldwide that have maintained distinct status or autonomy through turbulent historical changes. Nakhchivan's continued autonomy within Azerbaijan, and the relative success it has made of that status, can be seen as a microcosm of the balancing act that many small polities must perform – aligning local aspirations with the realities of larger political frameworks.

Another insight from viewing Nakhchivan as a microcosm is recognizing the interdependence of language, culture, and history. Each facet reinforces the others: historical experiences shape cultural identity (for example, dances or foods that commemorate historical events), while cultural practices and language help transmit historical memory. In Nakhchivan, the Azerbaijani language serves as a repository of folklore and collective memory, binding people to their past. Educational institutions in the region teach not only modern skills but also the history and literature that form the core of local identity. In turn, a strong sense of history and culture has contributed to the resilience Nakhchivan showed during periods of crisis, as people rallied around shared values and narratives.

Conclusion

Nakhchivan stands as a vivid example of how a small region can encapsulate a broad swath of human cultural and historical experience. Through the exploration of its language and educational progress, we see echoes of national development in a local setting. Through its cultural traditions – from age-old dances and culinary arts to the stewardship (and sometimes politicization) of monuments – we observe the interplay of local pride and external influences. Through its historical journey, we witness the microcosm of a people's resilience amid empire, conflict, and change.

In framing Nakhchivan as a microcosm, this article has highlighted that the significance of the region extends beyond its geographic bounds. Nakhchivan offers lessons in the preservation of identity, the adaptation to shifting political winds, and the value of cultural continuity. It reminds us that every small community is a world unto itself, yet also a mirror reflecting larger patterns of human civilization. In the case of Nakhchivan, that mirror reveals the indomitable spirit of a people who – against many challenges – have maintained their language, celebrated their culture, and remembered their history, thereby contributing an essential chapter to the story of the Caucasus and the Turkic world.

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