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New Veiling in Azerbaijan

Gender and Globalized Islam

Farideh Heyat

LONDON AND BAKU

ABSTRACT In the past few years, the growing presence of veiled women in Azerbaijan, particularly in the capital city, Baku, has been striking. This article traces the background to Islamism in Azerbaijan under the state dogma of atheism, and the post-Soviet changes that have facilitated a resurgence of religion in the country. It examines the motivations and the generational divide among women who have recently adopted veiling. Notions of 'traditional' and 'modern' are questioned here, pointing out the impact of identity politics and foreign Islamic forces on Azerbaijani society in today's increasingly globalized world. Furthermore, the article reveals the tensions and insecurities in the independent era that have reinforced the rise of Islamic ideology in the country and the contradictions involved in new veiling for Azeri women.

KEY WORDS Azerbaijan ♦ gender ♦ globalization ♦ Islam ♦ post-Soviet ♦ veiling

One of the striking social changes of the past few years in Azerbaijan is the increase in religious following, and the growing presence of veiled women on the streets of Baku. On the surface, this indicates a return to tradition and resurgence of Islamic belief and practices, in line with the increasing global popularity of Islam. However, a closer examination reveals many facets of the phenomenon in Azerbaijan that are at odds with its 20th-century history of social development. Following the breakdown of the Soviet system, the country emerged from 70 years of atheistic rule and various stages of modernization under a Communist regime that brought mass employment, compulsory primary and secondary education, and equality in law for women. More crucially, the unveiling of women, a process that took a few decades to fully accomplish and entailed great sacrifices by some of its pioneers in the 1920s, was embedded in the collective psyche as a major achievement by the Soviet regime.

Today, in the centre of Baku, there remains the memorial statue of a woman casting off her veil as she stands tall and proud looking into the distant horizon.¹

This article traces the background to Islamic following in Azerbaijan under the state dogma of atheism, and the post-Soviet changes that have facilitated resurgence of religion in the country. Despite decades of material development and Soviet modernization, concepts of male superiority and imposition of strict codes of morality on women remained at the core of ethnic Azeri identity. This article examines the generational divide among women who have recently adopted veiling, their motivation in doing so and their perception of it in terms of their status, liberation and empowerment. Notions of 'traditional' and 'modern' are questioned here, pointing out the impact of identity politics and foreign Islamic forces on Azerbaijani society in today's increasingly globalized world. Furthermore, the article reveals the tensions and insecurities in the independent era that have reinforced the rise of Islamic ideology in the country and the contradictions in Azeri women's gender norms, and their rights and status.

The research for this article was conducted during June and July 2007. There were 22 women interviewed in total, four of whom were the key informants. These and other respondents for this research were selected from my network of friends, acquaintances, contacts at Baku State University, local women's NGOs and from my neighbourhood in Baku. An earlier research on the position of women in the southern region of Azerbaijan, conducted for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, March–April 2006, forms part of the background to this study.

Azerbaijan is a country of 8 million, strategically situated between Russia, Turkey and Iran. It shares a long history and most of its cultural traditions with Iran. A far larger Azeri population in fact live south of the border in Iran. The overwhelming majority of the population, around 95 percent, are Muslim. Shi'ism was the majority sect, especially strong in the Baku region, and south of the country, near the Iranian border. The Sunni population were traditionally scattered in the north and the west of Azerbaijan. In recent years, the Shi'a–Sunni balance in the country, particularly in Baku, seems to have shifted in favour of Sunnism; Sunnis are estimated to compose 35 percent and Shi'as 65 percent of the population.² A recent survey of 600 young people in Baku (aged 16–35) further indicates a rise in the number of Sunnis among the young.³ However, a majority of respondents in this survey, 57 percent, considered themselves Muslims without distinguishing between the two sects.

The weakening of the divide between Shi'a and Sunni faiths in Azerbaijan has its roots in the long period of Soviet rule, when religious practice was severely restricted. Consequently, in the makeshift mosques and at home, the Shi'a and Sunni communities tended to integrate in their practice of religion, whether in performing prayers, religious rituals or

mourning ceremonies (*yas*) (Lemercier-Quelquejey, 1984). Furthermore, under the Soviet system, with atheism as the official doctrine, the state denied access to religious knowledge, which led to a loss of religiousness (retaining religious knowledge) among the great majority of people. But ironically, religiosity (using religion as an idiom, manifested in frequent references to Allah and retaining strong religious sentiments) flourished. This process of privatization of religion, driving it from the public arena to the private realm of the home and kin group, and its consequent impact on gender relations and expectations of womanhood have been discussed for the Azerbaijanis (Heyat, 2002; Tohidi, 1996, 1997) and for the Tajiks (Harris, 2004; Tett, 1994). In my book on Azeri women (Heyat, 2002), I have discussed the dualistic system of education that evolved in the early years of the Soviet regime in Azerbaijan, leading to a dichotomous approach to religion by the individual; a case of 'religious hearts and atheist minds' (Heyat, 2002: 140). Coming from a strong religious tradition, Azeri children in the 1920s and 1930s were receiving atheist education at school, while at home they were brought up by parents and grandparents who observed Islamic mores and performed their religious duties. Many women of mid-generation today (those over 50) still remember their grandmothers wearing the large headscarves, *kalaghe*, performing their daily prayers, *namaz*, fasting and attending the religious rituals of *marsiye*.⁴

Along with religious practice in the home, a basic belief in God and many religious concepts and mores were inculcated in the children of that first generation. However, in the decades that followed the ban on religion, with the imposition of atheism and the growing interethnic mix (socializing with Russians, Armenians and Georgians), many of the religious prescriptions and norms, such as those regarding dietary prohibitions and gender relations, were weakened or eroded. Nevertheless, a basic belief in God, or more precisely, the fear of Allah, remained in the hearts and minds of the population. As a result, throughout the Soviet period certain religious practices such as visiting shrines, *ziyarat*, paying alms, *nazir*, and religious tax, *fitre* (paid at the end of Ramadan) remained strong, even if the wording of *namaz* were forgotten and nobody fasted any longer. The isolation of the Azerbaijani religious establishment from its Shi'a sources of authority (in Iran and Iraq) also led to a confusion of religious belief and folk practice. Consequently, as in Central Asia, religion and ethnicity formed complex and interchangeable frames of reference to which cultural norms and practices were ascribed in a fluid way (Gross, 1992). Thus, being a Muslim and an Azerbaijani became synonymous, attributing many ethnic customs and cultural norms, including aspects of gender relations and femininity, to being Muslim, *Musulmanchilik* (Dragadze, 1994). Islam thus encompassed an identity category far beyond religious belief and labelling.

When the country gained its independence in 1991, it was against this backdrop of ideological confusion and ignorance of religious knowledge that the doors opened onto the outside world and increasing contact began with the surrounding Muslim countries. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, with their huge resources and Islamizing agenda, Iran, with its desire to promote political Islam and Shi'ism, and Turkey, with its growing Islamism, all entered the scene. Thus in the 1990s an increasing number of mosques and madrasahs were built and renovation of shrines and old mosques took place. With the support of Saudi, Iranian and Iraqi governments, pilgrimage trips to Mecca, and the holy Shi'ite sites in Iran (Mashad) and Iraq were also facilitated.

The reaction of the Azerbaijani government to the influx of Islamist groups and foreign religious organizations and charities, and their publications, was to initially adopt a completely open door policy. The political turmoil in the country, war with Armenia and the resultant refugee situation were the major problems for the state. In the post-Soviet ideological vacuum, identity politics in Azerbaijan, as in the other formerly Soviet Muslim republics, promoted Islamic beliefs and practices. Christian churches and missionary groups, as well as other denominations, also began to proselytize, often through charitable activities.

But by the end of the 1990s, restrictions were introduced to curb the activities of religious groups, requiring them to register officially. Two official bodies took charge of their monitoring: the State Committee for Religious Affairs and the Caucasus Muslim Board. The latter was headed by the chief imam of the Taza Pir, the largest old mosque in Baku. However, of the estimated 2000 different religious groups currently in operation, only 347 have received registration. Those most under pressure are the fringe groups not traditionally known in Azerbaijan, and the more radical Muslim mosques. These include the Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hare Krishna and Wahhabi Muslim groups. Successive governments have had a particularly difficult task to balance: on the one hand, the post-Soviet craving for religious knowledge and spiritual fulfilment; on the other, the fear that a militant Islamist group might become a source of opposition, with the power to mobilize large numbers of people.

There was a warning of the latter in the disturbances in 2002, following the government's imposition of control over religious activity in the small town of Nardaran, neighbouring Baku, in which one person was killed and many injured.⁵ The harassment of the congregation of the historic Juma mosque in Baku's Old Town, whose imam had voiced political ambitions, and his removal, was another indication of the state's attempts to quash discontent voiced by the fledgling autonomous Muslim establishment in Azerbaijan. However, political Islam has not as yet made any significant inroads in the country. In the southern region, bordering Iran, the Iranian attempts to radicalize the local population in the 1990s were

met by stiff resistance from the local clergy and the authorities. Similarly, much of the activities of the Wahhabi Islamist groups in the north of the country, where the majority are Sunnis, were obstructed.⁶

The term 'Islamist' is often used indiscriminately in the West to refer to religiously inspired political movements across the world who differ vastly in their outlook on issues of democracy, human rights (including women's rights), the state and nationalism. Olivier Roy (1994), in his major study of radical Islamism, points to its common call to fundamentalism, while at the same time, paradoxically, its attempts to integrate modernity. Radical Islamists today, he argues (Roy, 1994: 79), attempt to re-Islamize society at a grassroots level, with the aim of conquering it through reform of mores centred on the return to individual religious practice that will promote public virtue and maintain personal piety. This line of thinking is very much evident among the Wahhabis/Salafists in Azerbaijan, a Sunni sect rapidly growing among the educated young in Baku. They adhere to the ideology of Salafiyya (return to ancestors), a 19th-century Muslim fundamentalist movement inspired by Muhammad ibn Abdal-Wahhab. Their main centre is the Abu Bakr mosque in Baku, established in 1998 with Kuwaiti funding and led by a charismatic young Azeri imam, Gambet Suleymanov. He was educated in Medina in the 1990s, and is highly respected by his congregation for his intelligence and his integrity. Today, this mosque attracts the largest congregation, with its Friday prayers being attended by up to 10,000 men. Duval (1998) points out that Salafi followers, prominent in Egypt, have synthesized action-oriented Islamism with Sufism. They strive for social change through self-discipline in purifying oneself from previous sins, which would then reflect on the outside, and the whole society.

Similarly, Suleymanov preaches the need for individuals to start with cleansing and purifying their inner self and gaining piety before they can effect social change and deal with inequalities. They can then work on their families, neighbours and friends. He states that the great attraction of religion today is the inner peace and stability it offers. 'The youth especially, are confused by all the changes and the social upheavals, globalization, the problems with Karabakh [conflict with Armenia], and the growing wealth gap. They feel disturbed and they are looking for ways to calm their anxieties.'⁷ Suleymanov offers a rationalist view of religion distinct from traditional beliefs and practices (such as veneration of saints and shrines and payment of alms in fulfilment of wishes) that is particularly appealing to his educated and professional followers. In contrast, the leadership of the main mosque in Baku, Taza Pir, are perceived as being only interested in enriching themselves through religious donations and commercial deals. For the young, educated women in Azerbaijan impressed by the messages of Islamist movements, veiling is a public expression of their new identity as socially responsible, pious individuals.

NEW VEILING: INDIVIDUAL INITIATIVES AND POLITICAL CHALLENGES

Studies of the new veiling phenomenon among various Muslim communities (Duval, 1998; Hessini, 1995; Jansen, 1998; El Guindi, 1999; Watson, 1994; Yegenoglu, 1998) point to a number of common features. Most notably, this is no return to old traditions of veiling and confinement of women to the home environment, but a voluntary act of self-assertion in adopting a form of dress that signals respectability (through an image of modesty and chastity) while leading an active public life. In the case studies presented, the women often refer to the greater degree of mobility in the public space and freedom from male harassment they have enjoyed since adopting Islamic dress. Hessini (1995), in her analysis of women wearing the *hijab* in Morocco, points out the importance of division of space in Muslim communities and assumptions about differences between men and women that underline the respect for veiled women among them. In effect, a veiled woman in the public space is presumed to signal distance and unavailability to unrelated males, thus warding off any unwanted approaches. This aspect was also pointed out by my young informants who found being veiled helpful in gaining permission from jealous husbands and possessive parents to move more freely outside the home.

Ask and Tjomsland point out that today's Islamic dress, far from being traditional, 'reflects innovation made by the younger generation of women who use change of clothing to accentuate their identity and response to a changing world, and thereby even create a resourceful place for themselves within that world' (Ask and Tjomsland, 1998: 11). Indeed, the changes in form and meaning associated with the veil, and more broadly women's attire, in the 20th-century Middle East affirm its political nature and its relation to identity politics of the region. The most notable example here is perhaps the case of Iran where the traditional veil, *chador*, was outmoded in the process of modernization under the Shah. Then, by the end of his regime in 1979, a new modified form of veiling was adopted by the revolutionary women protesting against his regime and western imperialism in Iran (Azari, 1983). In recent years, the tide has turned once more; women are in the forefront of resistance to the theocratic regime, dressing in ways that are often considered un-Islamic, *badhijab*.⁸

The ironies of the situation in Iran are not lost to Azerbaijanis, whose country lies just across the border. In my recent discussions with various groups of self-employed women in Baku (street vendors, beauticians, tailors), they often remarked with surprise and irony that while so many Iranian women tourists cannot wait to cast off their headscarves the moment they arrive, some Azeri women are today voluntarily putting it on. This was an issue that members of the largest women's NGO in

Azerbaijan, Women's Rights Defence Committee, were particularly concerned about. The head of the group, Novella Jafarova, who has been campaigning for democracy and women's rights in Azerbaijan since independence, voiced the group's concerns in an interview, as follows:

Ten years ago we really didn't think religion and Islam were an issue or a problem for our country. But today as we see all these recently veiled women we begin to fear a fate such as that of women in Iran. We certainly cannot afford to lose any of our gains from the Soviet era. But if we are not careful, Islamism could creep up on us and we'll all be pushed back under the *chador*.

The association between veiling and infringement of women's rights has not so far surfaced much in the public discourse in Azerbaijan, and was not acknowledged by any of my veiled informants. As becomes clear later in this analysis, equality under current laws (a legacy of the Soviet system) is taken for granted and restrictions for women under the Sharia law are dismissed as irrelevant by these women.

SHADES OF *HIJAB*: AZERI FEMININITY UNDER COVER

In Baku today there are a multitude of Islamic stores selling outfits for women observing the *hijab*, as well as CDs and cassette tapes containing religious lessons, sermons and Koranic readings. The long skirts, tunics and headscarves on display are often as colourful and pretty in design as the clothing sold in nearby fashion boutiques. The local understanding of being veiled is to be covered head to foot, except for the face and hands, though a great variety of styles are adopted, from a long, loose coat-type dress to tight jeans and tops. The current notions of Islamic femininity, requiring modesty, chaste demeanour and way of dress, were in fact highly idealized feminine traits in Soviet Azerbaijan (Heyat, 2002: 194; Tohidi, 1996). Even as late as 1992 (during my first visit to Azerbaijan), it was extremely rare to see women in trousers or short skirts on the streets of Baku. Furthermore, the ethnic Azeri culture under the Soviet system, as with many other male-biased patriarchal cultures, assumed women's primary responsibility to be the domestic care, and men's, the financial maintenance of the home. The present-day rise in religiosity and intrusion of Islamist ideology into family life, therefore, does not create conflict or tension in many aspects of everyday life. The traditional separation of male and female space is still observed today, for example in the case of mourning ceremonies (*yas*), or weddings (*toy*) in rural areas, and restaurants and cafes in provincial towns being a male domain.

Since the 1990s, with the oil boom, the presence of foreign companies and NGOs and travel abroad, much of the social scene in Baku has

changed dramatically (Heyat, 2006). Western cultural influences are paramount everywhere, beamed through the media (satellite, Turkish and Russian TV channels), wide use of internet and student exchanges abroad. Most young Azerbaijanis are indeed socially and culturally oriented towards Europe and the US. Today, there are growing employment opportunities for educated young women with a knowledge of western languages, and greater autonomy for those with absent fathers and husbands (mostly due to massive labour migration to Russia and elsewhere). Young women appearing on their own, often dressed in revealing western fashion, is a common sight, and considered sexually provocative to recent male migrants from rural regions. Some of these are refugees and displaced persons in the war with Armenia, others have come in search of employment and to escape poverty in the regions. The social upheavals of the past 15 years, the prominence of money as the new arbiter of social life, the astronomical rise in corruption and the display of permissiveness in the media, have all led to a sense of insecurity and loss of morality in society, for which some men and women consider religion as a panacea.

Gureyeva (2003), in her study of new veiling among women in Azerbaijan, confirms this. All her respondents had pointed out that Islam and veiling had empowered them by giving them a sense of stability and strength, and helped them gain confidence in themselves and in their future. The accounts of my key informants that follow elucidate similar points, while revealing the contradictions in their status as independent women, and the gender norms they were subject to requiring them to submit to male authority.

Laleh is a 19-year-old, third-year student of international relations at Baku State University. Her only sibling, a younger sister still at school, has not followed her example of veiling. Laleh presented herself to me as a Sunni Muslim and a Salafi, arguing that Sunnism was 'true' Islam. Shi'ism, the sect her family believed in, was a later invention, she said, 'a deviation from the original path'. Her parents are both university-educated professionals. According to Laleh, around 20 percent of the students at her university are newly veiled. She, herself, had become interested in religion during her last years at school when Islamic following was becoming popular among her fellow pupils. Her family, however, displayed no interest in religion and when she decided to veil, her parents, particularly her mother, were at first against it. It took many arguments to convince them that she was making the right choice. Her grandfather had been especially baffled to see her covered up. His generation had struggled hard to cast off the veil. He had commented to her: 'You look like your great grandmother, why do you want to turn the clock back?' The establishment in Azerbaijan are generally unsympathetic to the idea of veiling and suspicious of veiled women. Such women are subject to discrimination in employment and have difficulty in obtaining passports and identity cards (photographs of veiled women are rejected).

In 2006, Laleh finally made up her mind to embark on veiling. She then went with a former class mate to the main mosque near her home, the Abu Bakr mosque in central Baku, and took her vows of repentance, *toabeh*. Since then she has been attending the mosque at least once a week, taking religious lessons and attending lectures by the imam. She also regularly visits Islamic websites that publish religious news and views in Azeri and Russian language. She does her daily prayers, *namaz*, five times a day in the Sunni tradition. 'I am very happy now that I have made my decision', Laleh told me when we first discussed her recent religiosity. 'I feel pure and virtuous, and I get a lot of respect from men on the street. On the bus and the metro, even older men get up and offer me their seat.'

Laleh's cousin, 23-year-old Yasmin, was another recent born-again Muslim who attended the Abu Bakr mosque. She had been very inspired by Laleh's study of Islam and religious devotion. She believed her to have become more confident and articulate since then. Yasmin was married, with a two-year-old son. She lived with her in-laws who were not religious and questioned her recent adoption of the veil. She had married her husband at the end of her first year of university. He had turned out to be very possessive and jealous of her outside movements. She had dropped out of studying after her first year and had a baby. Now, since being veiled, he seems more relaxed about it, so she has embarked on a new course of study. He himself took up religious observance over the past couple of years but found it difficult to keep up with. Yasmin's brother, on the other hand, is steadfast in observing his religious duties since his *toabeh* three years ago, though he did not pressure her to wear the veil. But now Yasmin and her brother are both encouraging their mother to take up religion. They have often discussed with her the sinful ways in which many people in Azerbaijan, especially the wealthy, live their lives, and warned her of *ghiyamet* (Judgement Day) and the need to follow Allah's commands.

The fear of Allah and *ghiyamet* was also articulated by a number of my other informants, such as Nigar, a 24-year-old doctor, who graduated a year ago. She is married with no children, and is currently unemployed. To get a job at a hospital she would need to pay a substantial bribe to the chief consultant who then passes part of it to higher up authorities.⁹ Nigar's family are all professional people, but not rich. She began praying regularly and keeping fast four years ago. She would like to veil but is wary of her mother and mother-in-law's disapproval. She is also concerned that it may prejudice her job opportunities. Her former class mate, Gulnur, took up the veil a year ago, and has been a major influence on her. But then she already had a job as a dentist at her brother's private clinic. Nigar's husband, a graphic designer, has very recently started doing the *namaz*, persuaded by her. He attends the Abu Bakr mosque for Friday prayers, along with Gulnur's brothers.

Nigar estimated that around 15–20 percent of the female students at her former university are veiled. She thinks that influences from Turkey are partly responsible; students from provincial Turkey with a religious outlook and the Turkish religious TV channel are promoting Islamic ideology in Azerbaijan. The religious channel regularly broadcasts documentary-style programmes on the topic of miracles in the Muslim world and popular serials that depict salvation through religious faith. Nigar seemed particularly burdened with the notion of sin, *gunah*, and the struggle to absolve oneself from it. Today in Azerbaijan, she told me, there are too many people who don't care about the welfare of others and only think about their own pockets and their families; the fear of Allah is missing among them. When she discovered that I did not practise Islam, the religion I was born into, she kept asking me: 'but aren't you afraid of *ghiyamet*?' She went on to tell me that she had felt lighter and happier as a person since she started performing the *namaz* regularly.

Nigar's deep-rooted fear of Allah was part of the belief system that had never been eroded from the hearts and minds of Azerbaijani Muslims living under the veneer of atheism. The strength of this feeling was also reflected in the survey of religious following among the youth (mentioned earlier) in which 80 percent of the respondents had a strong belief in God, and only 2 percent professed to be atheist.

For Azeri youth today, subject to the global rise of Islam and proliferation of Islamist movements, the atheism of the Soviet era is associated with their parents' generation. Paradoxically, today's greater mobility and the intrusion of western youth culture encouraging autonomy and individuality may be the driving forces behind the rebellion by those young educated women who adopt the veil against their parents' wishes. For the middle-generation Azeri women, however, some of whom have also adopted new veiling as part of their strict observance of Islam, the motivation may be in their need to find solace at times of crisis in life and to face the challenges of the post-Soviet era of economic and social insecurities. This became clear in a focus group discussion I held with members of a religiously devout group, the Al Zahra Women's Association. A self-funded, independent organization with 2500 members, mostly university educated, it was registered as a religious charity in 1998. The founder of the group, a former member of the Azerbaijan Women's Association (AWA; successor to the old Zhensoviet) is in her fifties, and from an old religious family. I have known her well since my involvement with the AWA in 1994–5. Following a number of trips to Iran in the early and mid-1990s, she decided to take up veiling in 1998.

At my meeting with some of the core members of the Al Zahra group, there were nine women present, all of them veiled. They ranged in age from mid-forties to late fifties, all professional women who were either in early retirement, or unemployed.¹⁰ Among them there were a number of

teachers, accountants, administrators, a chemist and a painter. Their accounts of what had inspired their new found religiosity revealed the passage of a particularly difficult time in their life, such as bereavement or serious ill health, just prior to their conversion. The most dramatic case was that of an Azeri-Russian former teacher who had joined the group following the murder of her 18-year-old daughter. The feelings of love and reassurance she had received from reading the Koran and from the group members had helped her survive the tragedy.

For most of the women in the group, I was told, the pilgrimage to Mecca, or Mashad, had been the defining moment in their new religious zeal and observance of the *hijab*. All the women spoke of *muhabbat* (love) as their great gain in their new way of life. Some of the women began to cry as they spoke of their recent spiritual enlightenment. They were also very keen to speak of the bond they had formed as members of their group, helping and supporting each other, emotionally, as well as materially. 'We are closer than sisters', a number of them stressed to me. For these women, as for those in the case of Kyrgyzstan I have discussed elsewhere (Heyat, 2004), the sense of shared problems and connectedness in the face of post-Soviet upheavals seemed to be a source of empowerment, confirming their allegiance to the ideology of the group and its requisite practices.

On the question of women's rights under Islam, however, the group did not seem very willing to engage in debate. When I mentioned the issue of polygamy, two of the women simply stated that they would seek a divorce if they found out that their husband was engaging in a serious relationship with another woman. One of the women mentioned that in Azerbaijan a man cannot marry two women and after a divorce, custody of children is usually given to the mother. Another one claimed that according to the Koran a man has to obtain his wife's permission to marry a second wife. The founder of the group then began to talk about the complexities involved in Sharia law and that it was open to discussion and debate. 'We have our laws, the civil laws, and we don't want them changed. Sharia can only be applied in a truly Islamic state', was her final assessment, with which other women in the group seemed to concur.

Ignorance of discriminations in Sharia law was also common among the newly veiled young women I had discussions with. They seemed a little baffled and surprised when I pointed out some of the gross inequalities women would be subjected to under Sharia law. But they did not seem particularly concerned. When I asked Yasmin, for example, what would she do if her husband wanted to exercise his Islamic right to take a second wife, she simply said 'I would divorce him'. She seemed to take it for granted that under Azerbaijani law a woman had as much right as a man to petition for divorce on grounds of incompatibility, and she would automatically be awarded the custody of her young son. On the question of imposed male authority, however, this was an element of their

ethnic/national culture that most Azeri women did not challenge vocally, but managed to accommodate their own wishes and demands despite it. The ambiguities and contradictions in Soviet Azeri culture with regard to femininity and gender relations had facilitated women's agency and offered a degree of empowerment while retaining male superiority in public discourse and in gender relations at a formal level (Heyat, 2002: 219). Women could do and did much, behind the scenes and in collaboration with their close kin and female friends, yet always deferred to their husband, father or older brother's authority (Tohidi, 1996, 1997). For example, when I brought up the issue of male authority in Islam with Nigar, the young doctor, she told me quite bluntly: 'If I get ready to go out and just before leaving the house my husband says to me "Stay in the house, don't leave", I will obey him and not go out.' When I asked her what would be his response if she asked the same of him, she hesitated for a moment, then replied: 'He would do the same. We respect each other's wishes.' I remained sceptical, but felt that in her brief hesitation Nigar reflected the tension between the traditional Azeri gender norms, based on notions of male control and female submission, and her status as a western-oriented professional woman expecting full equality. The contradiction born of this schism, however, is very rarely articulated in public discourse in Azerbaijan.

Harris (2004), in her analysis of gender identity and performance in Tajikistan (a society culturally similar to Azerbaijan), makes the argument for a 'variant gender performance' to explain women's intentional projection of an image of submission to male authority to conform to Tajik society's gender norms, and thus gain social approval. But she maintains that gender identities and performances are never fully internalized. They are only assumed to suit the circumstance, like the donning of a Greek mask (Harris, 2004: 21). This may be too positivistic an interpretation of women's behaviour, when in fact every individual in these formerly Soviet Muslim societies was subject to observing sets of dualities (official/unofficial, and inner/outer self) in their speech and behaviour. These were governed by strong rules of deference and social hierarchy emanating from their ethnic cultures, and the need for concealment in a secretive society. Today, one can see how in the light of the insincerities of the Soviet culture and the complexities born of the dualisms that governed their society, the young Azeris are attracted by the image of simplicity, honesty and purity projected through the religious groups' teachings, whether Christian or Muslim.

CONCLUSION

In Azerbaijan, the economic, social and political upheavals following the breakdown of the Soviet system have been unfolding in the era of

globalization. As elsewhere in many Third World countries, a prominent feature of the latter has been the increasing wealth gap and inequality of access to western know-how and languages among social groups, and between centre and periphery (Heyat, 2006). Baku has thus become a magnet for employment, business and educational opportunities in the country, attracting large numbers of rural migrants with more conservative social and cultural mores. It is also a place where there is greater prevalence of sexual permissiveness and a more acute contrast in wealth and poverty. Given the greater freedom of association in the city, it has offered fertile ground for foreign and emerging local Islamist groups to operate and publicize their message of salvation through personal piety. While a small minority of the Azeri population have turned to Christian churches and other denominations, the majority have reaffirmed their Muslim identity and taken interest in Islamic beliefs and practices, influenced by religious knowledge emanating from Iran, Turkey and the Arab states.

A visible and poignant consequence of the rise of Islam among Azeri women has been the adoption of the veil, in contrast to a long history of attempts at women's emancipation and unveiling under the Soviet regime. Their motivation for this may be diverse, ranging from peer pressure, to finding solace and support among fellow-believers, or simply due to ideological conviction. More often though, it is a combination of these. Nevertheless, globalizing influences that underline this relate to the phenomenon of new veiling in many Muslim countries around the world. The veil, in its modern, non-traditional form and usage has acquired symbolic meaning that signifies women as bearers of national identity and moral standards, expressing their protest against western consumerist culture. Furthermore, it has given individual women a degree of agency and empowered them in their public presence. In Azerbaijan, however, there is a more complex process at play.

During the 20th century, despite certain male-biased, patriarchal features of the ethnic Azeri culture, women gained societal acceptance of their public presence and equal rights in education, employment and under the law. The newly veiled women in Baku are not unaware of their present advantageous position, even if they take it all for granted. They do not want to turn the clock back. The phenomenon here has a generational dimension. The youth are more easily influenced by globalized Islamist movements targeting the young through the internet, television and the news media. For young women, distanced from the atheism and anti-veil outlook of their parents and grandparents' generations, the veil signifies rebellion against establishment and a protest at the rampant corruption and gross inequalities in their country. They are attracted by the messages of sincerity and honesty imbedded in the religious worldview, in contrast with the culture of concealment and the dualistic presentation of the self that dominated the lives of former generations.

What is problematic in all this is the fact that a notion of 'natural' difference between men and women underlines Islamic social order, and designates different roles for men and women. In this worldview, also publicized through Islamist publications and websites in Azerbaijan, female sexuality is deemed as dangerous and damaging to the social order, and the veil is considered an essential means of its suppression through the control of the female body and the imposition of strict moral codes on women. For Azeri women, the adoption of the veil, though initially and in some respect liberating, in the long run confirms their social submission to ethnic and religious norms that are inimical to their independence and empowerment. Although at present the state in Azerbaijan is strictly secular, the growth of Islamism and the deepening ideological divisions in the country, along the lines in Turkey, may endanger the secular foundation of the state. The challenge for Azeri women in future years will be to safeguard their gains of the past and build on these for a more equitable future.

NOTES

1. This statue was erected in 1930 to commemorate the murder of an Azeri woman by her father outraged at her unveiling. It was a culmination of punishments, harassments and even murders of unveiled women in Baku in the late 1920s, in response to the unveiling campaign by the Communist Party (Heyat, 2002: 131).
2. These are government estimates provided by the Azerbaijan International Religious Freedom Report 2006, released by Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, US Department of State; at: www.today.az/news/society/30286.html
3. Among the practising respondents, two-thirds were Shi'a and one-third Sunni. The survey was carried out jointly by the Centre for Research on Religion, and Republican Youth Movement, found in the islam.az website, at: www.islam.az/az/modules/news/article.php?storyid=26
4. These take place during the holy month of Muharram, that peaks on the day of Ashura, commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Husain, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, and also on the occasion of the martyrdom of his father, Imam Ali, the fourth Khalif after the Prophet.
5. A report of the clashes in Nardaran, traditionally one of the most religious villages around Baku, can be found at: religion.rus.ru/event/20020625html
6. For a full discussion on the Islamic following in Azerbaijan see the report 'Islamic and Ethnic Identities: Emerging Tendencies in Azerbaijan'; at: www.osce.org/item/23087.html
7. The statements attributed to Gamet Suleymanov are taken from an interview I conducted with him at the Abu Bakr mosque in June 2007.
8. In the past few years, young women in large cities such as Tehran and Karaj are wearing minimal size scarves, body hugging tunics, well above the knee, mid-calf trousers and heavy makeup. The regime's intermittent campaigns of warnings, harassment and punishment have so far proved unsuccessful.

9. The system of corruption in Azerbaijan has become more widespread since the breakup of the Soviet Union. In the field of employment in the public sector, for example, to get a professional job, it is often the case that in the absence of strong personal connections, substantial bribes have to be paid to the chief of the organization concerned.
10. Asian Development Bank's 'Azerbaijan: Country Gender Assessment' report, December 2005, indicates a much lower level of economic activity among women (59.5 percent), compared to men (83.6 percent).

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