

## **Oponent Review**

### **Ph.D. Thesis „Queer in Azerbaijan: State Violence nad Practices of Resistance“**

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Ph.D. thesis deals with everyday reality of queer community in Azerbaijan, post-Soviet region situated in Eastern Caucasus area bordering Caspian Sea, and its “challenging” and permanently negotiating and balancing identity in highly centralized and authoritarian Azerbaijani state. Its oscillating between mockeries, humiliation, persecution, jail, abuse and torture on the one hand and a possibility to live a “normal life” is characteristic for LGBTQI communities not only in Caucasus area, regardless dominant religion of majority population (Azerbaijani Shia Islam, Armenian Apostolic church, Georgian Orthodox Christianity).

Author depicts actual situation of queer community, when Azerbaijani authorities perceive homosexuality as a “mental disorder” – despite the irreversible fact that approaches and attitudes of pre-Soviet Azerbaijani (Caucasus) society were different; if not to say completely opposite. While homoerotic relations in Ottoman or Persian milieu were considered as an inseparable part of everyday life, the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century was marked by significant shift. Soviet regime treated the queer issue as a “disease” that should be treated and even cured. Communist government used biopower (according to Foucault’s thesis) to control and dominate queer lives – this approach being the final result of 20<sup>th</sup> colonialism pressure on the whole region of Caucasus.

Today, the omnipresent homophobia backed by public broadcast media as well as mainstream social networking services is supported by ruling elite class formed around Aliyev clan. LGBTQ community members are generally considered to be “non-conforming” gender identity as they are not a part of general discourse of accentuated “Caucasus style” masculinity. State violence intertwined with honor@shame identity strategies on individual and collective level are responsible for honor murders (murders for the” sake of family honor”, which are (from the anthropological point of view) not limited on the cultural area of Mediterranean). Generally, in such a kind of “patriarchal” structures are women – as well as all men regarded as effeminated – considered to be objects, not subjects of their lives. Therefore, every not normative behaviour or appearance should be strictly condemned, rejected and eliminated.

State policy in Azerbaijan could be “tagged” as performing and spreading out political homophobia. Queer identity is marginalized and usually described as a result of “European import” or “Western influence”. In the regard of post-Soviet heritage, Azerbaijani approach towards LBTQI communities is backed – to a great extent – by Russian regime and its “homosexual propaganda laws” as well as by Turkish AKP leaders. Seen through this lens, queer identity becomes a sort of “power struggle” in Russia-US discourse as well as in East-West or North-South discourse, through which LGBTQI members are considered to be subverters/underminers of national identity as such.

Nagorno Karabakh conflict is deeply rooted in Azerbaijani national identity construction. Author clearly shows in the first chapter, how anti-Armenian sentiments are interconnected with state policy and its repression of LGBTQ community. In the tense atmosphere of (until 2022 unresolved) wartime conflict, when everyone is supposed to unite under the flag of unified Azerbaijan national identity, the persecution of LGBTQ members becomes a “logical outcome” of an effort to unify a nation vis-à-vis a common threat.

Author opted for local folk taxonomy (*qiy* rather than queer), which I find the most appropriate way how to depict everyday reality of LGBTQ members living in Azerbaijan and their “hidden” identity. Author also examines in details the role of state institutions – TV, radio, social media and mainstream platforms, strictly controlled by state. The whole narrative is sidelined by author’s auto-ethnography, in which he explains his positionality, framed from the one hand by his insider standpoint and from another by his “powerful passport” protection.

Field research based on participant observation and on numerous interviews as well as informal interactions was conducted in obviously very difficult field. From the point of view of higher anonymity, dating websites were used (besides personal contacts mostly based on NGO activities). However, dating apps could become a target of suspicion, as their users (together with their families) were afraid of being potentially blackmailed.

I find an introduction a little bit “journalist” style; however, it matches very well with autoethnography writing used by author during the process of his positionality definition. Generally, it could be stated, that main objectives of the thesis were achieved. The candidate proved his abilities; the thesis contributes significantly to the field of research.

#### **Questions on author:**

- 1) Is there any influence of Ottoman köçek dance in Azerbaijan? Is the notion of köçek similar to mutrib? Is there any relation to kinto, kinto dance/kintauri etc.?
- 2) In the discourse between global North and global South, where is the role of Azerbaijan? Could be the concept of “geography of violence” used in connection with Communism and post-Socialism? How about Islam?
- 3) Are there any influencers suspected to be Armenian or PKK origin and forming a part of visible LGBTQ community in Baku?

#### **Conclusion**

The topic of Ph.D. thesis is highly actual and relevant; as LGBTQI perspective was (and still is) usually neglected, ignored and even forcibly silenced in the area of Caucasus.

I appreciate that author already published in peer-reviewed journals. The structure of Ph.D. thesis follows the recommendations required in the case of doctoral thesis. The text fulfils the elementary demands on dissertations in Ph.D programme.

I recommend the thesis to be defended.

In Prague, 10.9. 2024

Signature of reviewer

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