

Postcolonial Reflections on Azerbaijani Identity: Insights from a Public Podcast Discourse

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ABSTRACT

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Central Asian national identities resurged. This article explores the meanings of Azerbaijani national identity over the last three decades, utilising a non-traditional data source, public podcast episodes. Using Kulkov's Seven-Step Methodological Guide, this study reveals unique insights underscoring the importance of local epistemologies in reshaping national identities in postcolonial societies such as Azerbaijan. Drawing on Bhabha's concepts of hybridity, ambivalence, and mimicry, Alatas's notion of intellectual imperialism, and Brubaker's binary of civic and ethnic nationalism, the paper examines how Azerbaijani identity is constructed in the post-Soviet period. Thematic analysis revealed three primary themes. (1) Confusion over terminology, which shows that, despite the formal end of colonial rule, ex-colonised societies such as Azerbaijan continue to use deeply rooted colonial concepts and colonial language leftovers, which still shape public discourse on national identity. (2) Azerbaijani national identity is analysed through the concept of the civic and ethnic nationalism binary, demonstrating that neither concept alone is sufficient, and Azerbaijani identity emerges as a hybrid form. (3) The theme of colonialism explores how colonial knowledge production continues to affect identity formation today, particularly through mimicry.

Contribution/Originality: This study uses innovative methodology in qualitative research. The study uses public podcast as a main data to explain current trends in Azerbaijan society.

1. Introduction

The demise of numerous world empires in the 20th century led to the emergence of new nation-states, and commensurate confusion and trauma over the definition of national

identity in postcolonial societies (Dizayi, 2017, 1). Due to its varied interpretations, the concept of “national identity” is inherently complex and contentious within the social sciences, and this complexity intensifies when examined in postcolonial settings (Nasser, 2018, 12). This article aims to clarify the confusion surrounding the definition of national identity in the case of Azerbaijan. After two centuries of Russian and Soviet imperialism, the newly independent post-1991 Azerbaijan poses questions related to national identity.

Such questions revolve around what exactly it means to be Azerbaijani. Is this a civic identity that all citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan share, or is it an ethnolinguistic designation associated with Turkic heritage? It is of the utmost importance to revisit the fundamentals of national identity today, when nation-states are confronted with political, economic and ideological challenges, from the outside and within (Reeskens & Hooghe, 2010, 580-581).

This paper explores these questions with regard to popular media expressions, including a public discussion on the Azerbaijani identity in the podcast “Азербайджанские турки или азербайджанцы: нация, язык, идентичность - кто они?” [Azerbaijani Turks or Azerbaijanians: nation, language, identity- who are they?], hosted by Mr. Dandastic (a YouTube moniker).¹ Notably, the discussion took place in the Russian language. As alluded to in the discussion, these issues are particularly pertinent in the case of Azerbaijan due to the following reasons: (1) the liberation of Karabakh region of Azerbaijan, after 26 years of Armenian occupation, which became a restarting point in the post-Soviet nation-building process, which had not been completed due to the occupation (Ergun, 2022); (2) the need to redefine the notion of national identity relative to the genuine strands of Azerbaijan’s cultural and historical experience, including its archetypal Turkic heritage, Persian and Islamic influences, and Tsarist and the Soviet imperialism, as well as its intrinsic ethnic diversity.

The central issue discussed in this podcast was the clash of understandings of “ethnic” and “national” identities; this paper argues that while these can be interrelated, they are in fact distinct concepts. Ethnic identity is rooted in shared ancestral relations, language, and cultural contexts, whereas national identity encompasses a broader understanding of civic affiliation, based on social constructs manifest in politics, citizenship, and collective identity (Reeskens & Hooghe, 2010, 579-580). The culminating point of the podcast discussion was reached when the host, whose *bona fides* as an obvious part of Azerbaijani society are beyond reproach, articulated the following statement: “If you call yourself an Azerbaijani, with the meaning of ethnic origin, then I will not call myself Azerbaijani – because my ethnicity is Lezgi” (Participant 1, Male, Host).

This highlights the core of our problem statement: national identity, defined in ethnically exclusive terms, cannot be definition be multicultural (or indeed “inclusive”). However, it can become a collective (and inclusive) identity if it evolves into a purely *civic* entity. In the case of Azerbaijani national identity (hereinafter “ANI”), the primary point in defining it is how national identity is produced and socially constructed, as well as its nature in a postcolonial context. Debates over ANI have gained popularity in recent decades due to the uncertainty and failure of academicians to provide a concrete definition of related terms, as they often shift their stance depending on their own political agenda and the prevailing orthodoxy.

¹ https://youtu.be/XWWMit9x0dY?si=ssb59_1QlmcR2zuu

2. Literature Review on Theories of National Identity

To understand the origins, nature, and structure of national identities, it is necessary from the outset to note the axiom that national identity is not a monolithic concept, and it has been conceptualised and studied according to various theoretical frameworks. This literature review analyses five principal approaches: primordialism, modernism, ethno-symbolism, civic and ethnic nationalism, and postcolonial theory. The literature review is trying to assess their significance in the study of national identity in postcolonial Azerbaijan.

Historically, one of the earliest approaches to national identity emerged in the form of primordialism. In the mid-19th century, a dominant belief in the public imagination, supported by the Eurocentric scientific community, posited that nations were as “natural” as familial ties, language, or even the human body, and nations were habitually referred to as “races” (e.g., the English, French, and German “races”) (Smith, 1988). Primordialist scholars perceive the nation as a naturally occurring and enduring social entity, characterised by intrinsic cultural attributes such as shared language, religion, customs, traditions, and a collective sense of historical continuity (Smith, 2005). From this perspective, nations are understood to exist throughout all stages of human history, often conceived as latent entities that merely await ‘awakening’. Geertz (1973) emphasised the foundational role of immediate contiguity and kinship in primordial attachment, framing national identity as something deeply embedded and inherited. This approach is manifesting ethnic descent as the leading indicator of national identity; however, it cannot provide a proper definition for postcolonial and multicultural societies like Azerbaijan.

In contrast to these essentialist assumptions, modernist perspectives offer a fundamentally different explanation. Modernist theorists tend to regard the formation of nations essentially as a consequence of broader economic and political transformations, adopting a marxist understanding of the nation in relation to economic production and social organisation. Gellner (1983) argued that nations arise in the context of industrialisation and the decline of agrarian societies, distancing them from any notion of primordial origins. For Gellner and others, nationalism is viewed as a response to class conflict and structural changes brought about by modernity (Stahl, 2017).

Within this modernist framework, Anderson’s contribution is particularly influential. Anderson’s (2006) conceptualisation of the nation as an “imagined political community” underscores the socially constructed nature of national belonging, whereby a shared identity is contrived and fostered through mechanisms of production, such as print capitalism (or digital social media nowadays). During the 19th century the dissemination of vernacular languages in print enabled people to develop a sense of affiliation with others whom they had never met, beyond their immediate local communities.

Anderson (2006) thus describes nations as “imagined communities” inextricably linked to modernism, with commensurate attributions of “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (p. 6). This idea aligns with Hobsbawm and Ranger’s (1992) notion of “invented traditions,” in which nationalism and national symbols are seen as deliberate constructions by social engineers rather than organic developments. This approach is highly relevant to understanding the emergence of the Azerbaijani nation-state, specifically the Azerbaijani Democratic

Republic; however, its failure to fully embrace postcolonial reality does not adequately explain the nature and origins of the emergence of postcolonial national identities insofar as they manifest an authentic grassroots sense of identity, rooted in ethnic and cultural artefacts (e.g., language).

Seeking to bridge the gap between primordialism and modernism, ethno-symbolism offers an alternative lens. Ethno-symbolism offers an alternative to both primordialism and modernism, emphasising the symbolic, historical, and cultural continuities that exist latently and authentically within ethnic communities. While rejecting the modernist view of nations as purely contemporary political structures, this perspective contends that national identities are rooted in pre-modern ethnic communities through the use of collective myths, memories, symbols, rituals, and shared values (Smith, 2009). Although these symbolic patterns may evolve, their modes of expression often retain traditional forms (Smith, 1988). Moreover, the modernisation of empires in the 19th century did not necessarily lead to the emergence of nation-states, and many postcolonial nation-states evidently emerged from within imperial frameworks (Malešević, 2013). This approach is highly relevant to the Turkic heritage, Islamic cultural distinction, and related historical narratives pertaining to Central Asia. However, this approach overlooks the colonial construction of the primary narratives, which consist of memories, myths, and other elements.

Alongside these broader theoretical debates, another influential line of scholarship distinguishes between civic and ethnic understandings of the nation. The dichotomy between civic and ethnic nationalism reflects differing historical trajectories and ideologies of national belonging. In France, the development of a robust and centralised monarchy played a foundational role in shaping a national identity grounded in political institutions and shared territorial space, which is the core of what is typically referred to as civic nationalism. In contrast, Germany's political structure, comprising multiple kingdoms and principalities, led to a national identity based on shared language, culture, and ethnicity, representing an ethnic understanding of the nation (Brubaker, 1992). Contemporary scholarship often aligns civic and ethnic nationalism with liberal and illiberal nationalism, respectively; however, such binary classifications are problematic. As Kymlicka (2001) argues, even democratic nation-states often promote a dominant language and culture, blurring the lines between civic inclusion and ethnic exclusivity. This is one of the practical approaches in explaining the contradictions between ethnic and civic understanding of ANI.

Finally, postcolonial theory offers a critical re-evaluation of many of the assumptions embedded in the aforementioned approaches. Postcolonial scholarship challenges the dominant Western-centric definition of the nation, asserting that many nationalist discourses are products of colonial constructions. Bhabha (1990), in his seminal essay "DissemiNation," disrupted conventional notions of national unity and continuity by framing nationhood as a performative act shaped by cultural negotiation. He introduced three interrelated concepts to illustrate the complexities of identity formation in colonial and postcolonial contexts, which he dubbed "hybridity," "mimicry," and "ambivalence." Hybridity refers to the creation of new cultural identities through the interplay between coloniser and colonised; mimicry denotes the subversive imitation of colonial authority; and ambivalence captures the instability of colonial and national discourses. Together, these concepts reframe the nation not as a stable or organic entity, but as a contested and performative construction, which develops and is co-created dynamically.

In a parallel critique, Chatterjee (1993) argued that anticolonial nationalism in societies such as India did not merely imitate the Western model; instead, it developed distinct strategies of resistance. He challenges the universalist assumptions of scholars like Anderson (2006), Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992), and Gellner (1983), contending that such frameworks marginalise the historical specificities of colonised nations. Chatterjee (1993) thus introduced the distinction between the “outer” and the “inner” spheres. The “outer” realm comprises the colonial West’s state institutions, economic policies, and public life, while the “inner” domain encompasses the family, tradition, religion, and culture, where national identity was preserved and reasserted as a form of resistance. Extending this critique of colonial knowledge production, the postcolonial theorist Alatas’s (2000) concept of intellectual imperialism is not directly linked to the nation and nationalism, but it is useful to explain many aspects of these notions in postcolonial societies. Alatas argued that postcolonial societies often use the colonial knowledge system to explain social phenomena, which causes additional problems. For instance, in the case of Azerbaijan, the problem of borrowing terms into the Azerbaijani language and understanding them through colonial lenses creates confusion over terminology.

All theoretical approaches mentioned above provided valuable insights. However, with the exception of the postcolonial approach itself, they do not consider the colonial inheritance, whereby the ex-colonial system of knowledge is still capable of shaping the socio-political discourse of the society, especially about the issue of national identity.

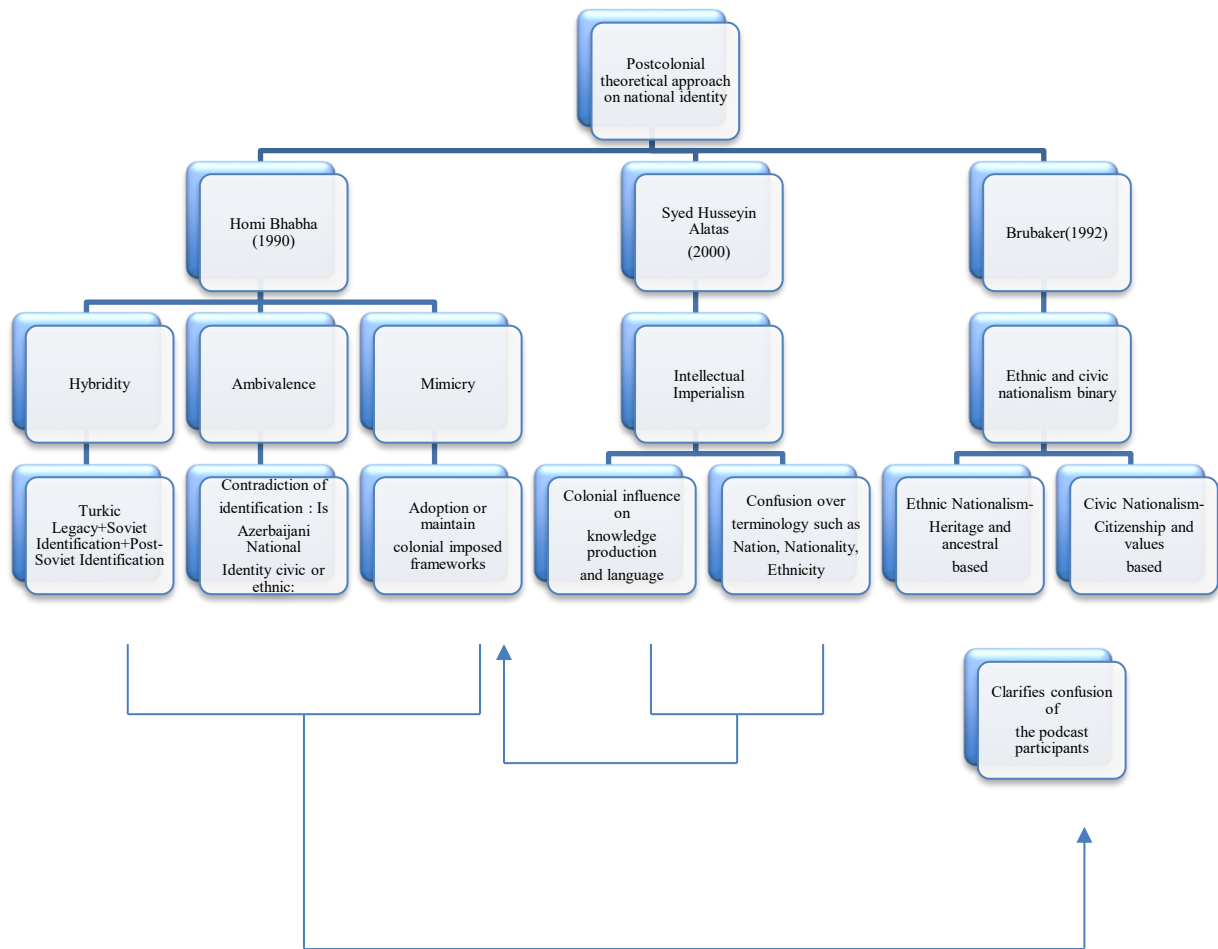
3. Methodology

3.1. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in postcolonial theory that critiques the discourse of the construction of national identities in a postcolonial context. According to Bhabha’s (1990) concept of hybridity, ANI is not a static and fixed identity, but an ambivalent construction that emerged at the intersection of Turkic ethnic legacy and the colonial identity policies of Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union (i.e., the policy of creating “Soviet ethnicity”). Bhabha’s concepts (hybridity, mimicry and ambivalence) help to understand contradictions and ambivalent meanings of discourses, where podcast participants turn around, causing terminological chaos.

In addition to this, the study utilises Syed Hussein Alata’s (2000) concept of intellectual imperialism to examine how colonial power influenced knowledge production and language use in Azerbaijan, which causes confusion over terminologies. The uncertainty surrounding terms like “nation,” “nationality,” and “ethnicity” can be attributed to borrowed or imposed conceptual frameworks from colonial origins, which continue to prevail in academic and political discussions. The history of imposed meanings, particularly evident in the Azerbaijani language and educational framework, highlights how colonial power continues to influence modern identity discussions.

In order to structure the analysis of types of identities articulated in the podcast, the study uses Brubaker’s (1992) binary concepts of *ethnic* and *civic* nationalism (Brubaker, 1992; Kymlicka, 2001). The distinction between these concepts helps clarify the confusion expressed by the podcast participants during the discussion. Figure 1 summarises the theoretical framework adopted.



3.1. Methods

This paper uses Kulkov et al.'s (2024) "Seven-Step Methodological Guide" for qualitative research methodologies (Figure 2). It is specifically used to adapt and thematically analyse a specific podcast episode, which is what the method was specifically developed for, in Kulkov et al.'s (2024) article titled "Leveraging podcasts as academic resources: a seven-step methodological guide." This novel technique is designed to use podcasts as a credible source of qualitative data. This method advocates using podcasts as a source to enrich academic data by deriving original and unique ideas, unspoken realities, and uncensored data (Kulkov et al., 2024).

Using podcast content as a resource for academic analysis is relatively new, despite the evident mass appeal and importance of such media as a lens to understand contemporary popular discourse. Consequently, this study contributes to this emerging and novel academic episteme in order to uncover lived data (i.e., pertaining to ANI in this case) that would otherwise fall below the radar of traditional academic analyses for many years (Quintana & Heathers, 2021), bringing real and pertinent material into the academic spotlight (Kulkov et al., 2024).

The uniqueness of Kulkov et al.'s (2024) method lies in the fact that podcast and episode selection credibility is based on a Weighted Scoring System, making it a solid and valuable approach. For instance, the first stage of the seven-step method is selecting a podcast. This selection process, which involves four criteria, is as follows: topic relevance (40 per cent), credibility (30 per cent), audience engagement (20 per cent), and accessibility (10 per cent). The resultant net score ranges from 0-4 (Table 1). The calculation of the final score involves multiplying the score by one-tenth of the indicator weight. The sum of all the results is the final score. The podcast or episode that receives three or more points is considered a relevant academic source.

Figure 2: Schematic view of Kulkov et al.'s (2024) seven-step method.

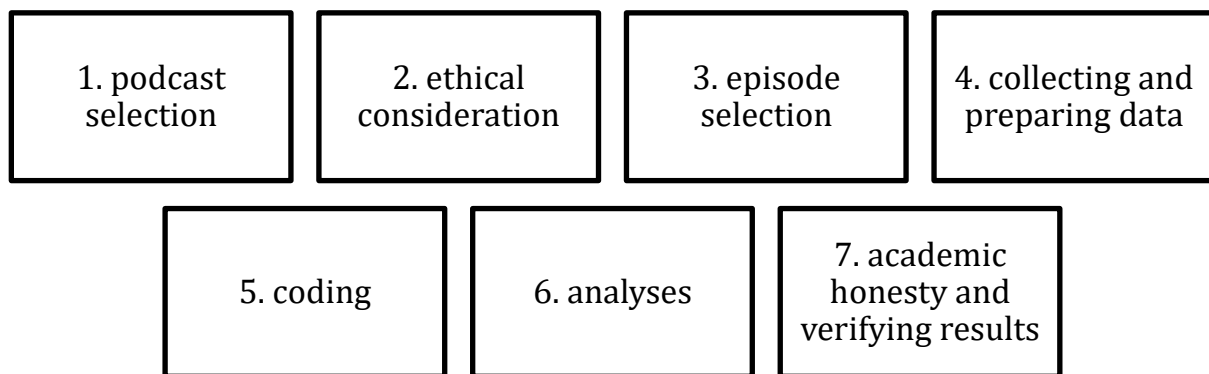


Table 1: Explanation of Kulkov et al.'s (2024) weighted scoring system

Score	Description
0	Not relevant/credible/engaged/accessible
1	Slightly relevant/credible/engaged/accessible
2	Moderately relevant/credible/engaged/accessible
3	Very much relevant/credible/engaged/accessible
4	Completely or highly relevant/credible/engaged/accessible

This paper correspondingly applies Kulkov et al.'s (2024) "Seven Step" method: podcast and episode selection, collecting and preparing data, coding, analysing, ensuring academic honesty, and verifying results. This research selected a specific podcast episode. The data (i.e., the transcript of the podcast) were coded in NVivo using an inductive thematic approach. Initial open codes (n = 56) were organised into higher-order categories (n = 3) by theme, such as: "Azerbaijani National Identity," "Colonialism," and "Identity problem." These thematic categories formed the basis of the article's analytical framework.

The initial transcripts of the podcast were in Russian (i.e., the language of the podcast itself). language. One of the authors (EH) translated the transcript into English, while retaining the original tone and meaning. Subsequent coding and further processes were undertaken in English. Representative themes and excerpts can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Coding and quotation samples

Theme name	Description	Example quote
Confusion over terminology	Expression of confusion over identity issues.	Look, if you take it like this, Russian, is that a national identity? For Russia. Look, there's a "русский" [Russian ethnically] и "россиянин" [citizen of Russia]. Which one is the national identity? Is it national or ethnic? (Participant 1, Male, Host) ²
Azerbaijani national identity	References to the discussion, ideas, attempts to define and related issues regarding Azerbaijani national identity. The codes under these themes answer the question "Who is Azerbaijani?"	"If you consider me an Azerbaijani just because I was born in Azerbaijan and I have an Azerbaijani passport, for example, yes, only by state affiliation as a Russian, ok, no problem." (Participant 1, Male, Host) ³
Colonialism	Discussion about Russian colonialism, its effect on Azerbaijani national identity, and related topics.	"Why were we called 'Tatars' in the Russian Empire? Because it was easier that way." (Participant 2, Male, Guest 1) ⁴

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1. Theme 1: Confusion over terminology

This theme comprises 20 codes, which frame a statement of the problem in this thematic analysis. The theme reflects the complexity of the discourse related to notions such as "nation," "ethnic," and "civic" identities. The analysis revealed that the discussion in the podcast revolved mainly around confusion over the definition of terms such as "nation," "ethnic group," and "state." In this context, one of the participants mentioned:

"Let's clarify: we must first understand that 'ethnic' and 'national identity' are entirely different, because your ethnicity predates the advent of modernism; however, national identity is a product of modernism. We cannot erase ethnic identity, nor can any national identity erase ethnic identity. They might be a match, as if one ethnic group established a state for itself, and national identity is the same ..." (Participant 3, Male, Guest 2)⁵

² Original: "Вот смотри, если вот так взять, россиянин, это национальная идентичность? Для России. Вот есть русский и россиянин. Вот смотри, есть русский и россиянин. Кто из них национальная идентичность? Народная или этническая?"

³ Original: "Если ты меня считаешь азербайджанцем только из-за того, что я родился в Азербайджане, и у меня азербайджанский паспорт, к примеру, да, только по государственной принадлежности как россиянин, окей, нет проблем."

⁴ Original: "Почему нас называли татарами? Российской империи. Потому что легче так было."

⁵ Original: "Давайте clarify, для выяснения, мы должны сперва понять, что этническая принадлежность и национальная принадлежность она совсем разная, потому что ваша этническая принадлежность была до модернизма, а национальная идентичность это продукт модернизма. Мы не можем вам, или же какая-либо национальная идентичность не может стереть этническую идентичность. Она может совпадать, как бы одна этническая группа создает для себя государство, и у нее национальная идентичность самая..."

However, the confusion between the terms “national” and “ethnic” identity is not easy to explain, due to their inherently complex and overlapping nature, as explained above. While it is generally accepted nowadays that a nation is a social construct and not an organic entity, nationalism often identifies important indicators of a nation that are rooted in primordial “ethnic” realities, such as a common language, as well as biologically and geographically inhabiting certain borders (i.e., a nation living in a nation state, with shared cultural attributes). However, this is not a universal rule, and the modern nation “state” is certainly a product of modernism, regardless of the conceptualisation and provenance of the “nation.” States have appeared without nations, while other nations and states have emerged independently (Gellner, 1983).

Applying specific terminology to socio-political phenomena according to the reality of societies is one of the ways that can prevent this kind of confusion. This is the process of borrowing, coining, or modifying the existing words, as a new meaning, from the languages of developed societies into languages of developing societies. As most sociological and political science frameworks pertaining to nationality originate in Western analyses. The author or orator who brings a term into a specific language should find an equivalent of the owned/borrowed or modified word in the language of the people, considering the specificity of the society, to reduce the risk of falsification of terms (Fulass, 1971). One of the participants of the podcast raised an issue of the need for a glossary that will explain terms such as nation, nationality, ethnic group, etc., which will consider the reality of Azerbaijani society:

“...Well, for that, we need to give a precise definition. I understand that your approach is scientific. A scientific approach always has a glossary... A scientific approach should always include a dictionary. An explanatory dictionary. What does that mean? That is, when we say nation, what do we mean? When we say people, what do we mean? When we say ethnic, what do we mean? (Participant 2, Male, Guest 1)⁶

There is no doubt that “terminologisation” implies a power dynamic within the epistemological process of framing the debate. Put simply, the discourse is led by the person who gives a definition. It would be overly simplistic to expect political actors to offer precise or objective definitions, as competing interests and power dynamics inherently drive political processes. For instance, the terminology used in Azerbaijani academia to conceptualise nationalism-related concepts is derived from “foreign” narratives, typically Russian, transliterated into the Azerbaijani Latin alphabet (Abdullayeva-Nəbiyeva, 2020). This reflects the legacy of the Soviet education system, which projected Western assumptions (often ultimately derived from Western European languages *via* Russia) into the local context (Кулиева [Guliyeva], 1990), as alluded to by some participants:

“And regarding this dictionary [i.e., hypothetical lexicon of nationality-related terms], these words are interpreted differently in each language, so in the Azerbaijani language, we have problems with terminology, because the terms came to us through the colonisers, and to them, literally

⁶ Original: “...Ну для этого тогда нам нужно дать четкое определение. Я понимаю, что твой подход, он научный. У научного подхода всегда бывает глоссарий... А у научного подхода всегда должен быть словарь. Толковый словарь. Что это означает? То есть, когда мы говорим нация, что мы подразумеваем? Когда мы говорим народ, что мы подразумеваем? Когда мы говорим этнический, что мы подразумеваем?”

translated from other languages. For example, many words passed from the German language to Russian, and then to us. And from the French language also. Therefore, we must either create our own words to explain all this or define it very broadly.” (Participant 3, Male, Guest 2)⁷

“...we need to come up with a term that will reflect my ethnicity, like a Turk, so to speak, but which will not identify me with Turkey. That is, it could be Azeri...” (Participant 3, Male, Guest 2)⁸

Such statements illustrate a conflict between primordial perceptions and modern interpretations of national identity. This is a problem rooted in lexicology, which is also deeply ingrained in the epistemic heritage of colonialism, as terminology introduced by the Russian Empire and then by the Soviet Union shaped the way in which identity was classified and understood. Alatas’s (2000) concept of intellectual imperialism implies that even after the formal end of colonialism, colonised societies continue to use the conceptual frameworks of the colonisers via the language of the colonial authorities, which persists and shapes the notions that ex-colonised people use to identify themselves.

This explains why participants of the podcast discussed the need for a new dictionary or glossary. Furthermore, Bhabha’s (1990) concept of ambivalence is visible in the uncertainty of participants in the definitions of ethnic and civic national identities. The theme of confusion over terminology often arose in the discussion, particularly in the case of ANI, as analysed under the second theme.

4.2. Theme 2: Azerbaijani National Identity

This theme encompassed 32 codes that highlight the central point of the discussion. This theme focuses primarily on the disputed meaning of being “Azerbaijani.” Is this term delineated by ethnolinguistic heritage or by civic/territorial affiliation? The core question that this theme seeks to answer is: “Is ANI a civic or ethnic national identity?” As mentioned above, one of the podcast participants articulated the following statement: “If you call yourself an Azerbaijani, by the meaning of ethnic origin, then I will not call myself Azerbaijani. Because my ethnicity is Lezgi.” (Participant 1, Male, Host)

This reflects the rejection of the definition of “Azerbaijani” identity as an ethnically exclusive national identity. This tension between attempts to define the term “Azerbaijani” requires providing a proper definition of the term from both ethnic and civic perspectives on national identity. In this context, another podcast participant stated the following:

“... an Azerbaijani Turk cannot be an ethnic Azerbaijani. This was changed, as I mentioned earlier, during the Soviet era. In 1918,

⁷ Original: “И, кстати, насчет вот этого словаря, эти слова интерпретируются в каждом языке по-другому, поэтому в азербайджанском языке мы имеем проблемы с терминологией, потому что термины к нам пришли через колонизаторов, а им тоже буквально перевели из других языков. Например, с германского языка много прошло на русский, а потом к нам. И с французского языка также. Поэтому мы должны либо создать свои слова, которые разъясняют это все, либо очень расширенно определить, что это такое.”

⁸ Original: “...надо придумать термин, который будет отражать мою этническую принадлежность, вот как Тюрка, так скажем, но который не будет меня идентифицировать с Турцией. То есть это может быть Азери...”

Azerbaijanism meant, he said (Mahammad Amin Rasulzadeh ed. Elchin Huseynov), it is Musavatism (equality ed.), it is a struggle for independence, it is a struggle for existence, that is, at that time, Azerbaijanism was utterly different, and in Soviet times, after 1936, let us say, a specific date, I will say, it was changed to ethnicity, in order to separate us from Turkey, to separate us.” (Participant 3, Male, Guest 2)⁹

This is one of the widely utilised explanations of ANI formation. According to Yilmaz, prior to 1936, the majority of the Azerbaijani population were consistently referred to as “Turks” in all documents; however, after this date, the designation changed to “Azerbaijanis” (Yilmaz, 2013). However, analysis of the podcast revealed another version of the formation of the ANI:

“...this is the identity by which we now say ‘Azerbaijanian,’ that someone called us ‘Azerbaijanis,’ or we call ourselves that. I was talking about Uzeyir Hajibeyov, who is known for a very famous saying. He says that when he asks an Armenian a question, he asks, ‘What is your nation?’ and the answer is ‘Armenian.’ he then asks, ‘what is your religion?’ and the answer is ‘Armenian.’ he finally asks, ‘what is your language ?’ and the answer is ‘Armenian.’ then he asked a Lezgin, ‘what is your nation?’ – ‘Lezgin.’ ‘What is your religion?’ – ‘Muslim,’ and ‘what is your language?’ – ‘Lezgi.’ Then he asks a Talish, ‘What is your nation?’ - ‘Talish.’ ‘What is your religion?’ – ‘Islam’; ‘What is your language?’ - ‘Talish. However, when I ask this question to a Turk, let us say an Azerbaijani, and they answer, ‘What is your nation?’ - ‘Muslim’; ‘what is your religion?’ - ‘Muslim’; ‘What is your language?’ – ‘Muslim.’ After all, can there be such an identity? Our language is a Turkic language. We must admit that we speak a specific dialect of the Turkic language. Today, I cannot find it difficult to express this thought, but I believe this problem was created by Atatürk when he called the country Türkiye. That is why today we are in Azerbaijan, we can no longer call ourselves ‘Turks,’ and not only in Azerbaijan, but Uzbeks also cannot call themselves ‘Turks,’ and so to speak, Kazakhs cannot call themselves ‘Turks.’ That is, we have this common identity, but since today, this identity has been borrowed by the state of Türkiye; when we say ‘Turk,’ it means that you are a citizen of Türkiye. So, here, this identity already prevents us from identifying ourselves as we need to. The Turkish citizenship prevents us from identifying ourselves as an ethnic group.” (Participant 2, Male, Guest 1).¹⁰

⁹ Original: “... но азербайджанский тюрк не может быть этническим азербайджанцем. Это было изменено, как я уже сказал, в советское изменено, потому что в 18-м году азербайджанство, он говорит азербайджанизм это мусаватизм, это равноправие, это борьба за независимость, это борьба за существование, то есть в то время азербайджанизм был совсем другой, в советское время, после 1936 года, скажем, конкретная дата, скажу, было изменено на этническую принадлежность, чтобы разделить нас от Турции, совсем разделить.”

¹⁰Original: “...вот это идентичность по которому мы сейчас говорим, Азербайджанец, что кто-то нас назвал азербайджанцами или мы сами себя называли... Я говорил про Узеира Гаджибекова у него есть очень известное высказывание, он говорит когда я задаю вопрос армянину, спрашиваю что, твоя какая нация он армянин, какая твоя религия он армянин это эти языки армянин и потом он спрашивает у лезгина говорит какая у тебя нацию он говорит я лезгин вот какая религия я говорит мусульманин и в какая у тебя язык лезгинский и потом он задает вопросы талышу говорит какой тебе нация талыш какой тебя как религии ислам какой те язык талышский когда задаю нашим вопрос с тюрком да так

This statement echoes Yilmaz's (2015) observation that the creation of an aggressive and exclusive Turkish national identity by the Republic of Türkiye from the 1920s onwards threatened the Azerbaijani "Turkic" identity. In both countries, people are designated as "Turks" based on their native languages, but after Atatürk narrowed the meaning of the term "Turk" to refer to the nation of Türkiye, the identity of a Turk had a direct connection to Türkiye, rather than indicating a broader "Turkic" identity (which had formerly encompassed many peoples in a vast swathe from the Volga to the Mongol Steppe) (Yilmaz, 2015).

However, today the term of identity "Turk" is reverting to a broader understanding, connoting all Turkic speaking countries and societies, including Azerbaijan, Azerbaijanis in Iran, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, Turkmen in Iraq, Tatarstan (in the Russian Federation), the Crimea, etc. (Yaldiz, 2023). However, there are no clear borderlines regarding other ethnic groups living in those areas, and many people in various contexts tend to homogenise them. For instance, as mentioned previously, the host was of Lezgi (non-Turkic) ethnicity, and he resented being misidentified as a "Turk":

"... but when I go outside, I have a problem. In 2011, you probably heard about it. I was in the mosque with my brothers from Azerbaijan praying, they went out of the mosque, it was in the Sultanahmet Mosque [the "Blue Mosque" in Istanbul]. I prayed and decided to read a portion of the Quran, and do some Sunnah [supererogatory] prayers there, all that. And suddenly, some uncle saw me, well, a Turkish guy, an ordinary Turk. He said 'Oh, my son, let's talk.' The first question, which I hate when they ask, 'Where are you from' (Memleket neresi?) ["Where is your motherland?"]. I replied, 'Azerbaijan.' Then he said: 'Oooo, they are also Turks, our brothers, Turks.' And when they tell me this, normally I say 'Stop! I am not a Turk!' He had an 'Error-404,' like most Turks. I mean, like, there are Turks, but I am not. Because for Turks [i.e., citizens of Turkey], the whole Caucasus is 'Turk.'" (Participant 1, Male, Host).¹¹

скажем Азербайджана и они говорят у них спрашивают какая у тебя нация мусульманин какая у тебя религия мусульманин какое у тебя язык мусульманский ведь разве может быть такая идентичность то есть у нас тюркский язык надо признавать что мы разговариваем на определенном понятно что диалекте тюркского языка и на самом деле для нас сегодня но как бы не могу не высказать это мысль создал эту проблему Ататюрк то есть когда он назвал Турцию Турцией сегодня мы в Азербайджане себя уже не можем называть тюрками и только в Азербайджане узбеки не могут назвать тюрками да так сказать казахи не могут назвать тюрками то есть у нас есть это общая идентичность но из-за того что она сегодня так скажем заимствована государством Турции когда мы говорим тюрк все значит ты гражданин Турции здесь уже вот эта идентичность она нам мешает себя идентифицировать надо то есть это гражданство вернее турецкое гражданство нам мешает идентифицировать себя как этнос."

¹¹ Original: "Но когда я выхожу за пределами, у меня была проблема. 11 год, ты, наверное, слышал про это. Я в мечети мы с братьями из Азербайджана читаем намазы, они вышли, это было в Султанахмеде. Я прочитал намаз, решил там чуть-чуть Сунну прочитать, все такое. И вдруг какой-то дядька увидел меня, ну, турецкий, обычный тюрк. Он сказал, ой, мой сын, давай поговорим. Первый вопрос, который я ненавижу, когда они спрашивают, да, это армянин или нет, но у нас, где ты, например, да? Я говорю, что Азербайджан. -Азербайджан? -А, они тоже тюрки, наши братья тюрки. И когда мне говорят, что они тюрки, я говорю, стоп. Я говорю, я не тюрк. У него "Error-404," как у большинства тюрков. В смысле, как бы, там тюрки есть, но я не тюрк. Потому что для тюрков весь Кавказ тюрки."

Ambiguity over ANI, whether civic or ethnic, perpetuates Brubaker's (1992) concept of the civic and ethnic nationalism binary. In this sense, it is helpful to elaborate on this dichotomy. According to Brubaker (1992), civic nationalism is inclusive and primarily based on citizenship, embracing all inhabitants of a particular territory; however, ethnic nationalism is centred on common ancestors and linear heritage.

Furthermore, the podcast participants articulated an idea that implies Bhabha's (1990) concept of hybridity, which leads to the conclusion that ANI is a type of identity that is located not on the sides, but at the crosspoint of ethnic and cultural plurality, with a major domination of Turkic heritage and state-building policy (citizenship). ANI's hybridity reflects the legacies of the Tsarist Russian, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods, as well as the role of Persian and Turkish (Ottoman) culture in Azerbaijan's history, within which identity formation occurred through the close interaction of cultural and political factors. As a result, ANI appears as a coherent yet dynamic and inclusive construct, shaped by inherited cultural codes and institutionalised state narratives of belonging.

Additionally, during the podcast, another dilemma arose when trying to name the Turkic population of the neighbouring countries of Azerbaijan, who have historical-cultural ties with today's Azerbaijan, such as shared historical contexts, and being under the same Empires, and so on. The Turkic population of these countries are referred to as "Azerbaijani" for several reasons. For example, (1) the historical narrative of Azerbaijan in history and its territories implies some commonality regarding these people, dispersed across various modern nation-states; (2) these people feel a sense of belonging to the independent Azerbaijan "as a mainland".

Due to such intangible affiliation, such "diaspora" populations request humanitarian and cultural support from the Azerbaijani government when needed (Azərbaycan Diasporuna Dəstək Fondu [Fund for Support to Azerbaijani Diaspora], n.d.). In this context, referring to them as "Azerbaijanians" does not imply that the term "Azerbaijani" is equivalent to the term "Turk"; rather, it implies that the identity has a relationship with today's geographical and political Azerbaijan. Addressing the challenge of how to call these people by embracing them within the same identity that the Republic of Azerbaijan practises is minimising the confusion of who the Azerbaijanis are.

4.3. Theme 3: Colonialism

Although this theme emerged from only four codes, it carries significant analytical weight. The relevance of the theme "colonialism" is quite important, as Azerbaijan is a postcolonial country (having been colonised by the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union). The concepts of nation, process of national identity formation, and nationalised identity as products of modernism (Anderson, 2006) reached Azerbaijan during the colonial rule of Tsarist Russia (Valiyev, 2023). Azerbaijan consequently experienced modernity as a new norm of socio-cultural interactions through colonial interpretation, including in terms of national identity and nationhood. In this sense, the emergence of a national print media and a national intelligentsia triggered a national awakening, which ultimately led to the country's independence from the Russian Empire and the establishment of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic in 1918 (Swietochowski, 1985). Furthermore, participants recognised that ANI was significantly influenced by the Russian Empire and Soviet Union colonial rule. This coincides with the idea of one of the participants:

“Or should we speak from the period when all this had already begun? That is, the end of the 19th century, the beginning of the 20th century. When this nation, the concept of the ‘nation’ passed through postcolonial countries. There are pluses. These colonial countries became independent.” (Participant 3, Male, Guest 2)¹²

The Russian Empire’s supremacist policies towards “Muslims” and “Turks” within its borders sought to dominate and eliminate traditional identities and assert Russian and Christian domination over subject peoples. The Azerbaijani people were referred to in Russian as “Tatars,” which was criticised by local intellectuals in newspapers such as *Uzeyir bey Hajibayli* and *Mammad-Agha Shakhtatinskiy* (Балаев, 2020), as mentioned by the participants:

“Why were we called ‘Tatars’ in the Russian Empire? Because it was easier that way. Here I am identified, and all those who speak Turkic in our current understanding, if they look alike, are all Tatars. And the Crimean Tatars are not Tatars at all, for that matter. However, we also consider them Tatars.” (Participant 2, Male, Guest 1)¹³

Alatas’s (2000) concept of intellectual imperialism sheds light on how colonial policy influenced language and identification, which in turn affected current national identity discourse. Furthermore, Bhabha’s (1990) concepts of mimicry and hybridity reveal how today’s Azerbaijanis respond to the inherited labels they bear. In this context, this theme contextualises the colonial traces of ANI, which are still maintained. It is one of the main issues that should not be overlooked but is often neglected by the academicians.

5. Conclusion

The analysis presented in this paper demonstrated that the national identity discourse of Azerbaijanis is closely intertwined with the country’s colonial background, as well as terminological confusion and disputed understandings of the notion of national identity. Based on postcolonial theory, specifically on Bhabha’s (1990) concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence, the ANI is not static and fixed, but rather an active topic of discussion and negotiation. The hesitation of participants to affirm whether they regard ANI as civic or ethnic reveals that there is no exact definition, and Brubaker’s (1992) concept of a binary between civic and ethnic nationalism helps to understand this phenomenon. While analysing the forms of ANI, participants in the podcast realised that neither form is sufficient, which requires a hybrid form of national identity that embraces plurality.

Additionally, Alatas’s (2000) concept of intellectual imperialism was beneficial in identifying how the colonial knowledge system shapes not only academic but also social discourse. The concept of intellectual imperialism actually explains why colonial understandings of terms remain operational. Alongside Bhabha’s (1990) concept of

¹² Original: “Или же мы должны говорить от того периода, когда уже началось это все. То есть, конец 19 века, начало 20 века. Когда эта нация, концепт нации прошло через постколониальные страны. Есть плюсы. Эти колониальные страны стали независимыми.”

¹³ Original: “Почему нас называли татарами в Российской империи? Потому что легче так было. Вот я идентифицировал, и все тюрко-говорящие в нашем сегодняшнем понимании, если они похожи, все татары. А Крымские татары вообще не татары, ели на то пошло. Но их мы тоже как бы да считаем татарами.”

mimicry, Alatas explained how ex-colonial powers still actively attempt to control fundamental understandings and epistemic development, in addition to latent factors conducive to the same end (e.g., the Russian-language educational curriculum left behind as the default or reference in Azerbaijan after 1991), which may not be commensurate with local realities or aspirations. This is evident in the case of ANI, whereby some participants specifically referred back to ethnic classifications by Russians in their contemporary discussion of their own national attributions and consciousness.

Therefore, it is evident that there is a need for a new lexicon to understand and explain national identity-related terms, based on local social epistemology that considers the Azerbaijani sociological reality, in an attempt at epistemic decolonisation. Ultimately, this analysis will contribute to the ongoing academic research on national identities in postcolonial societies that face similar challenges. The imposition of terms by colonial narratives continues to iterate problems in social discourse. Debates and podcasts on this topic, as demonstrated in this paper, are a rich source for uncovering the hesitations, confusions, and disputes that are deeply rooted in social discourse, and which manifest lived realities of national identities, but which are typically overlooked and neglected by traditional academic approaches.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researchers used a public podcast on a social media platform (YouTube), obtaining consent from all participants in the episode.

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The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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