

SACRED TIME AND ORDINARY TIME: CAUCASIAN ALBANIAN AND MOUNTAIN JEWISH TEMPORAL CONCEPTS IN THE RELIGIOUS CULTURE OF AZERBAIJAN

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Abstract

Azerbaijan, as a multi-confessional space at the crossroads of East and West, has preserved distinct religious perspectives over time, as evidenced by the practices of both indigenous Christian (Albanian) and Jewish (Mountain Jewish) communities. In contemporary scholarship on the region's religious history, the question of time – its sacralization, cyclicity, linearity, and ritual function – is largely overlooked. Understanding how different religious tradition's structure sacred and profane time can help us gain a better understanding of Azerbaijani culture, identity, and interreligious interaction.

The purpose of this article is to analyse and compare the religious concepts of time among Albanian Christian descendants (particularly within the Udi community) and Azerbaijan's Mountain Jewish community. The goal is to reveal how differences and similarities in temporal frameworks influence ritual practices and liturgical calendars; religious education and tradition transmission; social and religious communication; and interaction with state-imposed temporal structures.

Special attention is paid to the boundary between “sacred time” and “ordinary time”, as well as the mechanisms of transition between these temporal regimes in the context of local religious cultures. The study seeks to reconstruct the specific “grammars of time” in the religious lives of these two communities and demonstrate how sacred time contributes to stable models of collective identity and social order.

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The research is based on a comparative religious studies approach, combining historical-analytical methods (study of religious calendars, community statutes, oral traditions), ethnographic fieldwork (participant observation of rituals), and elements of the phenomenology of religion (time as religious experience).

Keywords: *sacred time, profane time, Caucasian Albanians, Mountain Jews, identity, rituals.*

Introduction

Time, in religious studies, is never merely a neutral chronological framework. It is a symbolic architecture, a tool for ordering the world and legitimizing identities. The distinction between sacred time and ordinary time, articulated by scholars, helps us understand how communities create rhythms of meaning, collective memory, and ritual life.

The religious culture of Azerbaijan is a unique tapestry woven from centuries of coexistence between various ethnic and confessional groups, where the intersection of sacred and ordinary time has shaped a distinct national identity. Azerbaijan's religious culture feels like a patchwork quilt stitched together over centuries by all kinds of people living side by side. It has always been a place where different faiths meet. Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians, and Muslims all crossed paths here, mixing old pagan beliefs, fire-worship, and the big monotheistic traditions. You can see this blend everywhere [Pashayeva 2018].

People marked time in two different ways. Sacred time followed the rhythm of rituals and religious festivals. That's what held communities together. Day-to-day life ran on a different clock, one set by farming, trading, and the rise and fall of ancient states like Caucasian Albania [Pashayeva 2016].

This article delves into the ways how two groups (the Caucasian Albanians and Mountain Jews) thought about sacred time, considering their calendars, their rituals, and how these traditions have survived or changed, especially now that Azerbaijan champions multiculturalism. In Azerbaijan, a region characterized by exceptional multicultural continuity, we find noteworthy examples of how temporal concepts function as markers of identity and as instruments of cultural resilience. Understanding how different religious tradition's structure sacred and profane time can provide a better understanding of Azerbaijani culture, identity, and interreligious interaction.

1. Methodology

The research is based on a comparative religious studies approach, combining historical-analytical methods, ethnographic fieldwork, and elements of

the phenomenology of religion. The study seeks to reconstruct the specific “grammars of time” in the religious lives of these two communities and demonstrate how sacred time contributes to stable models of collective identity and social order.

2. Case studies

2.1 Caucasian Albanian tradition

The conceptions of holy and ordinary time in the culture of Caucasian Albania were intricately entwined, reflecting the shift from pagan astral cults to institutional Christianity, as well as the intricacies of its economic system. The sacred time of the Albanians was determined by liturgical cycles, astral cults, and rituals that connected the community with the divine world [Ozdashli 2016]. Astral worship, in which the sacred calendar was determined by the motions of celestial bodies, was the source of Caucasian Albania’s temporal conceptions. Albanians mainly worshipped the Moon (Selena), the Sun (Helios), and the Sky (Zeus), according to ancient sources, most notably Strabo [Bekirova 2021; Kirzioghlu 1994]. To be closer to the heavens, human and animal sacrifices were made on high mountains during sacred times in pre-Christian times. In the “sacred region” of Sheki, where high priests were second only to the king, the worship of the Moon was especially important [Mamedova 2005; Gipper 2023]. The time of death was perceived as a transition to another world, requiring the burial of the person with all their belongings and the sacrifice of animals (sheep, horses) to ensure the soul’s sustenance [Kirzioghlu 1994]. A syncretic sacred tradition involved the worship of the sky god Tanri-han. Rituals included sacrificing horses to tall oaks and hanging the skins and heads of animals from branches to ensure divine favour. The Udi tradition has preserved the *patorah* (funeral) ritual, which has its roots in the Albanian period [Bekirova 2021]. Profane time for many was synchronized with the arrival of international caravans. Goods from India and Central Asia travelled through Albania via the Kura River toward the Black Sea [Afandiyev 2019]. For many Albanians, daily life was tied to cycles of international trade. Life in the foothills was governed by the cycles of livestock migrations to summer and winter pastures [Pashayeva 2018]. An ordinary custom that significantly impacted social welfare was the practice of burying the deceased with all their material property. This often leaves heirs in a state of poverty, stripping them of inherited wealth.

Albanian sacred time changed to a liturgical framework with the introduction of Christianity by St. Elishe (Yeqishe) in the first century AD and its subsequent adoption as the state religion in the fourth century [Akhundov 1986; Gipper 2023; Pashayeva 2022]. A new ritual cycle centred on churches like Kish, which was constructed on the site of an old pagan temple, was introduced with the founding

of the Albanian Autocephalous Church. By building 365 churches (one for every day of the year) and codifying religious laws at the Council of Aguen to govern social and spiritual behaviour, separating them from worldly affairs [Velikhanli 2007]. King Vachagan III further institutionalized this holy period in the fifth century (488 BCE) [Kalankatuklu 2006; Ozdashli 2016; Jafarov 2025]. According to Strabo, vineyards had a harvest every two years; everyday time was based on practical demands like ploughing with wooden ploughs and the ripening cycles of the grapes.

Archaic aspects of everyday life, like agricultural sacrifices and the worship of holy trees, continued as syncretic customs among the local populace despite Christianization.

A Christian culture that flourished in the eastern Caucasus until the Middle Ages, traces of which survive today in the liturgical practices and community memory of the Udi people, especially in Nij and Oghuz [Pashayeva 2016; Velikhanli 2007]. Although the institutional Albanian Church disappeared under later political and religious transformations, its temporal structures left a durable imprint [Schulze 2015; Afandiyev 2019]. Albanian Christianity preserved a strongly agricultural interpretation of sacred time. Festive cycles were synchronized with agricultural seasons, linking Christian celebrations, such as the Nativity or the Feast of the Cross, with older patterns of seasonal renewal [Gipper 2023].

Landscapes (mountains, springs, and groves) were imbued with ritual significance. Sacred time unfolded not only in churches but also in natural sites, where memory and myth fused with the rhythm of the year. Patronal feasts, village-based celebrations, and remembrance days connected temporal identity to local lineage and territory. Thus, sacred time anchored community cohesion even under cultural pressure. In the modern era, Udi communities maintain a layered perception of time: the Christian liturgical cycle coexists with post-Soviet secular calendars and with traditional seasonal customs that trace their origin to the Albanian past.

For the Albanians, holy time was like the design of their temples, unchanging, oriented toward heaven and eternity. In contrast, ordinary time mirrored the flow of the Kura River, which fluctuated with the seasons, political winds, and the needs of field irrigation [Gipper 2023; Pashayeva 2022].

2.2. Mountain Jewish (Juhuro) tradition

Here, one encounters a markedly different temporal model, text-centered, historically conscious, and legally codified. Jewish sacred time is structured around collective historical memory: The Exodus, the destruction of the Temples, exile, and redemption. Time becomes a carrier of theological meaning, linking the present to foundational events. The Mountain Jews (Juhuro) of Azerbaijan, who claim ancestry from the Ten Lost Tribes or the Babylonian exiles, have a temporal paradigm that is

closely linked to their ancient roots in the Middle East [Anisimov 2002; Dimshits 1999].

Although their conception of sacred time is heavily influenced by centuries of life in the Caucasus, it is strictly governed by the Hebrew calendar. Their spiritual life is based on major holidays like Nisonu (Pesach), Omunu (Purim), Aaselte (Shavuot) and Kupur (Yom Kippur). Nisonu was traditionally observed as a six-day celebration in the Juhuro tradition; the customary seven-day celebration was later adopted. Festivals such as Shabbat, Passover, and Sukkot function according to strict ritual prescriptions [Gilalov 2018]. Holy Saturday: In the popular mind, this time was considered dangerous – they believed that the spirit of Jesus could harm the Jews, so they lit fires for protection. The daily life of a woman in labour was surrounded by magical prohibitions, such as covering the door with a white cloth to protect against evil spirits (Shegadu) [Anisimov 2002]. Sacred time is not merely commemorative; it is ritualized through law. For Mountain Jews, halakhic time becomes a powerful mechanism of cultural continuity [Penkowska 2022].

For the Juhuro, sacred time does not solely concern religious rituals; it is also linked with local traditions and folk beliefs. These customs in a way blur the line between monotheism and the world around them. For instance, the night of Aravo, at the end of Sukkot. People see it as this powerful moment when fate is decided. They even say that, just for a heartbeat, the rivers foam and stop flowing. During the festival of Aravo (Oshana Rabba), the Juhuro believe that human destinies are finalized for the coming year. A folk belief held that at exactly midnight, river waters stop flowing and begin to foam, marking a sacred intersection with nature. Everyday life ran on its own clock; the “Madder crisis” or the tobacco season marked time for the Mountain Jews. The community’s everyday existence has traditionally been defined by the production of madder (a 3–4-year cycle to make dye) and tobacco growing. But even then, religion shaped things [Shabtaev, etc. 2026]. No matter how urgent the work, whether in the fields or in the factories of Baku, they would not break Sabbath rules. Mountain Jews would not work in factories, even if they were going to lose their pay, since observing the Sabbath was essential to them. On Friday evening, the woman of the house always lights the sacred candles. In times of drought, a sacred ritual called Gudil was performed where a youth was dressed in rags and led through the village while neighbours poured water over him to invoke rain. Profane time often involved collective labour. The community gathered for *Bulka* to help neighbours with tasks like building houses, processing meat for winter (*sugum*), or harvesting tobacco. In rural ordinary life, women practiced *Vehre*, where they would take turns pooling their daily milk production so that one family at a time would have enough volume to produce large quantities of cheese or butter.

Through all of this, the Juhuri language (Judeo-Tat) held everything together. The use of the Judeo-Tat language served as an ordinary vessel for communal identity, distinguishing their daily internal life from the languages used for trade and external interactions [Shabtaev, etc. 2026; Penkowska 2022]. It was not just how they spoke, but the means for setting apart sacred moments from everyday business, keeping their world distinct from the wider region [Anisimov 2002].

Thus, in both traditions, sacred time served to deepen the connection with the divine and ethnic consolidation, while ordinary time represented adaptation to the landscape, economy, and social interaction in the Caucasus. For centuries, Mountain Jewish communities in Azerbaijan maintained a rhythm of life that balanced local adaptation with trans-local Jewish temporal structures. Their calendar created an internal cohesion across different settlements from Girmizy Gasaba in Guba (Red Village) to Baku. This model of temporal consciousness places strong emphasis on memory as identity, reinforcing communal boundaries while enabling coexistence within the multicultural space of Azerbaijan.

3. Results and discussion: Contemporary transformations

The 19th and 20th centuries profoundly challenged the old rhythms of life. In 1836, the Russian Empire shut down the Albanian Autocephalous Church. That move pushed Albanians out of their own faith community and into other religious groups, stripping away a big part of their identity [Gadjiyeva 2004; Hasanov, etc. 2023].

In modern Azerbaijan, especially after the 1990s, both traditions have experienced revitalization: the restoration of Udi Churches and renewed interest in the Albanian cultural legacy have allowed the rearticulation of traditional temporal practices within a national framework that values multicultural heritage [Schulze 2015]. For Christian Albanians like the Udis, keeping their sacred traditions alive meant hiding them at home, just to avoid getting swallowed up by the outside world. Then came the Soviet era, which altered the circumstances even further. The state cracked down on religious calendars and replaced them with its own schedules, and people stopped passing down religious knowledge the way they used to. The old ways started to fade [Bekker 2000; Maisak 2023].

After the Soviet Union collapsed, Azerbaijan started bringing back its old sacred traditions, part of its advocacy of what it calls “multiculturalism”. The country has spent a lot of energy restoring historic sites like the Kish temple and synagogues in Baku, Guba, and Oghuz, making them visible again and, honestly, hard to ignore. For Mountain Jews, rebuilding the synagogue in Red Village (Girmizy Gasaba) is not just about bricks and mortar; it concerns reviving a sense of sacred time for the whole community [Norkina, etc. 2024; Afandiyev 2019]. These days, people in

these groups live with a kind of double identity. They are part of the larger Azerbaijani story, whilst keeping the unique rhythms and rituals handed down by their ancestors [Gilalov 2018; Kolesov 2024]. Revival of Jewish community life, construction of new synagogues, and reestablishment of educational institutions have strengthened ritual observance and reinforced the temporal rhythms of Jewish sacred life [Dimshits 1999].

A comparison of the Albanian-Christian and Mountain-Jewish temporal frameworks reveals several analytical points:

- 1) **Coexistence without homogenization.** The two models have historically coexisted in Azerbaijan without conflict or forced syncretism, despite their stark differences (cyclical vs. linear, nature-based vs. text-centered). This reflects the pluralistic culture of the area.
- 2) **Mutual influence at the level of everyday time.** Sacred calendars might have stayed separate, but daily life, like farming routines, working together, and how people welcomed each other, brought everyone into the same rhythm. Living side by side, folks found ways to understand each other, even when their faiths set them apart.
- 3) **Temporal identity as a marker of cultural resilience.**

Both groups leaned on sacred time just to get by: Albanian-related communities held onto who they were through rituals tied to the land and the seasons; Mountain Jews kept their identity alive through stories, texts, and a strict ritual calendar. So, even though their sense of time looked different, both groups used it the same way, to keep going and hold onto their roots in a place full of different cultures.

This results in a dynamic interplay where sacred time becomes part of Azerbaijan's cultural pluralism, not as isolated traditions but as living temporal systems that contribute to the national mosaic. From a religious studies standpoint, the case of Azerbaijan demonstrates that: Temporal pluralism can serve as a foundation for peaceful coexistence. Sacred time does not necessarily seek dominance; it can remain particular while contributing to a shared civic space. The interplay of cyclical and linear temporalities challenges simplified models of cultural interaction, showing how communities negotiate identity without erasing difference.

Conclusion

The investigation of temporal concepts within the religious culture of Azerbaijan reveals a profound ontological architecture where sacred and ordinary time are not merely chronological markers but foundational elements of ethnic survival and national integration. The dualistic perception of time, one rooted in the eternal, ritualistic, and divine (sacred), and the other in the pragmatic, socio-economic, and historical (ordinary) – serves as a primary lens through which the resilience

of the Caucasian Albanian and Mountain Jewish (Juhuro) communities can be understood. In the modern era, these temporal paradigms have been seamlessly woven into the Republic of Azerbaijan's state policy of multiculturalism, transforming ancestral rhythms into a shared national heritage.

For the Caucasian Albanians, sacred time was originally defined by the celestial and the astral. Even after the institutional abolition of the Church in 1836 by the Russian Empire, the "sacred time" of the Albanians survived through the Udi people, who preserved their faith as a "domestic religion" [Afandiyev 2019; Hasanov etc. 2023]. Their ordinary time, once governed by the Silk Road trade and the irrigation of the Gabala plains, became a period of quiet cultural preservation, where rituals like *patorakh* (commemoration) served as anchors of identity against the pressures of Gregorianization and assimilation [Ganenkov 2015].

Similarly, the Mountain Jews (Juhuro) of Azerbaijan maintained a sacred calendar – Nisonu, Kupur, and Aravo – that stood in sharp contrast to the ordinary time of the surrounding empires. Their sacred time was characterized by the strict observance of the Sabbath, a temporal boundary so rigid that members of the community historically refused industrial labour in Baku even at great personal cost [Dimshits 1999]. Ordinary, profane time for the Juhuro was defined by the cycles of the Caucasus: the cultivation of madder and tobacco, and the seasonal migrations between mountain auls and lowland settlements. The survival of the Juhuri language served as the linguistic vessel for this temporal identity, allowing the community to operate within the "ordinary" multilingual reality of the region while maintaining a "sacred" communal interior [Bram 2009].

The way people in Azerbaijan think about time dates far back into history. It is revealed in the ways how ancient spiritual cycles still shape their religious traditions. The Albanians blended lunar and solar calendars, and the Juhuro stuck to a calendar that is strict but still replete with folk customs. For centuries, these sacred rhythms have helped protect different groups from getting swept up in whatever politics or trends come along. Even now, Azerbaijan invests real effort into keeping these traditions alive. Instead of letting global routines dilute everything, the country holds on to the old ways, making sure they keep adding to its cultural richness [Pashayeva 2016].

The contemporary position of these communities in Azerbaijan reflects a successful model of integration without assimilation. The Mountain Jews today are an integral part of the Azerbaijani national project. Today, the Juhuro community benefits from state-supported educational programmes and religious freedom, ensuring that their unique traditions are not lost to the globalized secular world [Kolesov 2024]. For the Alban-Udi community, the post-Soviet period has been one of "renaissance" [Ganenkov 2015]. The establishment of the Albanian-Udi Christian community and the revival of their autocephalous aspirations represent

a rectification of 19th-century historical injustices. The Udis of Nij and Oghuz have maintained their distinct linguistic and cultural features, with the state providing a platform for their “sacred” traditions to be recognized as part of the broader “spiritual culture of Azerbaijan” [Mobili 2011; Maisak 2023]. Their participation in international conferences and the restoration of their temples have transitioned them from an “invisible” minority to a cornerstone of Azerbaijan’s claim to being a multi-confessional bridge between East and West.

Ultimately, the religious culture of Azerbaijan is characterized by a “harmony in difference”. The sacred time of the Albanian and the Jew provides the spiritual depth and historical continuity necessary for the preservation of ethnic identity, while the ordinary time of the modern Azerbaijani state provides the inclusive, secular framework for their peaceful coexistence. The state does not seek to homogenize these temporal experiences but rather to curate them as a “national-spiritual value”.

In the end, Azerbaijan’s religious culture shows how sacred and everyday time shape who people are together. The way different groups like Albanian Christians and Mountain Jews mark time still adds new layers to the country’s culture. Studying how these groups think about time does not just promote understanding of old traditions. It also provides a better sense of how communities build meaning, remember their past, and find ways to live together.

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