

# REGIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF SHEKI (NORTH-WEST AZERBAIJAN) OLD BELIEFS AND THEIR RELEVANCE TODAY

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## Abstract

The study looks at the enduring and unique manifestations of old beliefs in the culture of Sheki, a historical region in Northwestern Azerbaijan. It was highlighted how these pre-Islamic traditions and ancient practices have influenced the local population's distinct worldview and way of life, often blending with later religious activities. It looks at how these long-standing customs have blended with elements of Islam to create a unique religious and cultural environment in the area. Centuries of religious influence have not eliminated the prevalence of ancient mythological, totemic, and animistic elements. In fairy tales, myths, legends, rituals, and ceremonies that depict ancient gods, natural spirits, and valiant heroes, the study explores the manner in which these ancient beliefs are reflected. The social role of these conventional beliefs in maintaining group identification, transmitting moral values, and creating a sense of kinship is examined in this study. They frequently serve as unwritten rules for conduct and social peace. The abstract essentially emphasizes that Sheki's "old beliefs" are dynamic, alive elements of its regional identity rather than merely historical artifacts, highlighting the significant and enduring influence of ancient spiritual traditions on the contemporary Azerbaijani cultural environment.

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Azerbaijani oral folk literature connects us to the cultural heritage of our past, shows its mutual connections with various cultural cultures, attempts to reveal the basis of humanity's existence, and stands at the center of humanistic research. Yashar Garayev assesses the importance of folklore as follows: *"Our map has not changed only in our folklore, it has remained intact. The name of the spiritual space in which we live together with Kerkuk and Tabriz, with Goycha, with Derbent and Borchaly is folklore"* [AFA (2008), Garayev, p.3]. Maharram Gasimli characterised folklore as *"the oral wealth of the people developed over centuries, encompassing their national-spiritual identity, historical-ethnographic lifestyle, philosophical-aesthetic thought, poetic imagination, and cognitive framework, serving as the primary and principal source of intricate"* [AƏT (2004), Gasimli, p.29]. S. Rzasoy presents folklore as *"<...>people's memory: individual memory, ethnos memory, nation memory..."* [AFA (2004), Rzasoy, p. 3]. *"Folklore serves as a foundation for the concurrent evolution of human comprehension and rationality"* and *"embodies the essence of the populace"* [Murshudova (2012), p.100].

Folklore from the Sheki region is reflected in a variety of handicrafts, such as shebeke stained glass and silk embroidery, which represent the region's traditions and past on the Silk Road. *"In examples of folk art of Azerbaijan, a diverse attitude towards natural beings, especially plants and animals, is observed"* [AƏT (2004), Abdullayev, p.67]. *"The Sheki-Zagatala region is abundant in valuable and rich folk art of many sorts and genres, with numerous specimens"* [Murshudova (2021), p.66]. Proverbs, traditions, and anecdotes about brave ancestors are also part of it, as are beliefs in the strength and wisdom of nature, especially sacred trees. Museums in the region preserve its rich cultural legacy by displaying folk art and antique artifacts from all across its history. *Before our ancestors hunted or sowed seeds, they would draw pictures of game and domestic animals and play games to ensure that their hunts would be successful* [Gaffarli (2010), p.275].

Ancient city Sheki's history extends over 2,700 years, with archaeological evidence showing the presence of ancient villages as early as the sixth century BCE. Sheki's rise to prominence in the first century of the ancient state of Caucasian Albania was crucial to the region's early history. The city's long history under numerous imperial regulations is directly reflected in its architectural character and urban structure, which exhibit the distinctive imprints of Safavid, Ottoman, Gajar, and Russian building traditions. An important turning point was the founding of the Sheki Khanate in 1743, which brought a new administrative structure to the area and became

the first and most potent of several Khanates in the Caucasus. Particularly between 1743 and 1819, there was a significant development of the arts and architecture. Together with the lavish interiors of prosperous merchant homes, the Sheki Khan's Palace is a superb illustration of the architectural genius of this age. Sheki's standing as a significant Silk Road trading and cultural hub was cemented throughout the Khanate era, which also left a lasting impression on the city's current cultural scene [Murshudova, p.2-3].

Sheki region is rich with folklore which is a system of shared beliefs, practices, and ideas that have been passed down orally from generation to generation within a culture or group and are used to explain life, nature, supernatural powers, and human destiny. In contrast to established faiths, it is more closely tied to people's everyday lives, means of subsistence, economic endeavours, and hopes and anxieties. Traditional dances and music are frequently performed during festivals and wedding seasons, fulfilling "purposeful social roles" as opposed to being purely manufactured cultural acts in Sheki. The ancient customs and several stages of Azerbaijani wedding rituals themselves serve to strengthen ties within the community and guarantee the continuation of cultural standards across generations. Folk belief is a set of collective ideas, beliefs, and customs developed by a culture or group to explain life, nature, supernatural powers, and human destiny, which are passed down orally from generation to generation. Unlike official religions, it is more concerned with everyday life, livelihood, economic activity, and people's worries and hopes.

## **HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF BELIEFS**

Natural occurrences, daily living, and the geographic surroundings all have an impact on how beliefs are formed and modified. In this sense, the mountainous and wooded region of Sheki offers intriguing traits. "A belief is a personal opinion that something is true or that a situation is true. The mental state of holding a position, viewpoint, or opinion regarding something is known as a subjective attitude" [Primmer, p.9-11]. One of the most vibrant, rich and ancient regions of Azerbaijan folklore is Sheki. The above-ground texture of "<...>ancient civilization" in the region is just as significant as its subterranean sources [AFA (2005), p.9]. "Unlike perceptions or episodic memories, beliefs do not need sensory properties to represent something, making them a unique class of mental representations" [Borchert (2006), p.5-7]. "A more comprehensive alternative to the "language of thought hypothesis" is the map-conception, which explains the

nature of beliefs through an analogy of maps. Different beliefs are classified from one another because they correspond to different materials stored in the mind” [Katz (2021), p.11-12].

The distinctive and old culture of Sheki, a region of Azerbaijan, is further set apart by the special features of its beliefs. The region's geographic circumstances, historical background, relationships with nearby cultures, and local population lifestyle have all contributed to the formation of these traits.

Beliefs are typically inherited from earlier generations and developed over a lengthy historical period. The ideas that are common here have a long history because Sheki has an old past as well. These roots were created as a result of the centuries-long exposure of the area to a variety of civilizations, religious traditions, and historical occurrences. By breaking them down into major periods, it is possible to examine the development of the beliefs that are common in Sheki and the nearby villages and are a subset of Azerbaijani beliefs:

During the Early Beliefs (Paleolithic - Bronze Age) period, people worshipped the forces of nature (sun, moon, stars, water, fire, earth). The mysterious and powerful manifestations of nature aroused a sense of fear and admiration, leading to their deification.

- **Fetishism:** items, talismans, and amulets that are thought to possess supernatural abilities have been created. In anthropological and theological contexts, fetishism refers to the belief that natural or man-made items (fetishes) possess supernatural abilities, or that they can be worshipped or used for a variety of reasons (e.g., to bring good luck, protect, cure). These kinds of beliefs date back thousands of years in Sheki. This category includes talismans, springs, trees, stones, and other items that are regarded as sacred.

**Animism:** It is the concept that both live and inanimate natural objects—such as trees, mountains, water bodies, stones, etc.—have souls, consciousness, or a living essence is known as animism in Sheki. Many parts of Azerbaijan, including Sheki, have historically practiced animism, an old belief system. Some customs, folklore, and folk beliefs still represent these beliefs, even though they haven't entirely vanished in current times. “*The horse's connection with the Sun, spring, water, and Khidr was the primary source for the emergence of the listed trials*” [Abdullayev, p.67].

**Totemism:** A belief system known as totems are defined by the idea that particular plants, animals, or natural objects are their ancestors, guardians, or symbols. This system ascribes a magical connection to the totem, avoids harm, and treats it with special reverence.

**Ancestor worship:** The idea that departed ancestors' spirits are significant in family life has grown.

**Folk belief has the following functions:**

**Synergistic functions:** Folk beliefs are often synthesized by combining elements of recognized religions (e.g., Christianity or Islam). For instance, the cults of fire, water, and earth associated with the Nowruz holiday blend elements of Islam and Zoroastrianism with ancient customs. Both old pantheistic and religious ideas can be seen in beliefs about shrines such as Pir (holy site), sacred trees, sacred springs, or mountains.

**Practical functions:** Beliefs in folklore often respond to people's fears, hopes, agricultural activities, illnesses, or desires for happiness in everyday life. They sometimes form certain rules of behavior (taboos, prohibitions). People interpret natural phenomena, animal behavior, or certain signs in everyday life (a black cat crossing the road, a frown, etc.) to make predictions about future events. Many beliefs and treatment methods in folk medicine (prayer, herbal remedies, and etc.).

In short, belief in folklore is a living embodiment of a people's collective memory, form of understanding the world, and culture.

Belief formation and change are influenced by the geographical surroundings, natural phenomena, and daily lifestyle. Sheki's mountainous and forested landscape has some interesting features in this regard. Sheki, an Azerbaijani region with an ancient and unique culture, is marked by regional beliefs.

The primary traits of folk belief are:

- The rich culture and old history of Sheki and the nearby villages set them apart. In this area, a lot of fascinating beliefs that have been passed down through the generations are still alive or have been maintained in memory. Natural occurrences, various phases of human life, holy sites, and legendary animals can all be connected to these beliefs.

- Beliefs are intimately related to the local culture, customs, folklore, and artistic expression.

Its belief system has also been shaped by Sheki's distinct culture. The rich cultural heritage of this historic city and its environs is deeply and irrevocably intertwined with Sheki beliefs. One of the pillars of culture, beliefs permeates all facets of society and help to define Sheki's distinct identity.

The ancient region of Sheki in North-West Azerbaijan offers an engaging example of how belief systems influenced by distinct historical and geographical factors can endure. Due to its advantageous location and function as a crucial crossroads, it has developed a complex cultural and spiritual environment in which long-standing customs coexist with more recent religious influences.

## AIM OF THE STUDY

The primary goal of a study on the research work has been investigated national and spiritual values from an ethnographic perspective. The purpose of this study is to produce an in-depth report on Sheki's cultural life, with a focus on how the region's beliefs and everyday activities influence its modern cultural identity. Examine how ethnic values are represented in contemporary material, spiritual, and socio-normative cultural spheres. It is also talked about the factors that influence the formation of moral principles, their continuity across generations, and their relevance today.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF BELIEFS IN THE SHEKI REGION

The spiritual and cultural richness of the Sheki region is reflected in the abundance of shrines and holy sites. These locations play a significant part in the religious life and cultural identity of the community since they are frequently linked to regional tales, historical personalities, and religious rituals. The regional characteristics of beliefs in the Sheki region can be classified as follows:

**Sacred locations and shrines:** The spiritual and cultural richness of the Sheki region is reflected in the abundance of shrines and holy sites. These locations play a significant part in the religious life and cultural identity of the community since they are frequently linked to regional tales, historical personalities, and religious rituals. These sites are typically linked with religious luminaries, legendary heroes, or miraculous events. People visit these shrines to make vows,

worship, give offerings, and seek healing. The region's uniqueness stems from the local legends and beliefs surrounding these temples.

The village of Kish is well-known for its religious and archaeological significance. Numerous tiny chapels and shrines may be discovered all over the place, and local folklore links it to prehistoric spiritual rituals.

Sheki's old mosques, including the Sheikhlar Mosque, are hallowed spaces for worship and social gatherings, frequently hosting religious events and celebrations.

**Regional customs and traditions:** Weddings, mourning, holidays, and other events in Sheki may differ slightly from those in other parts of Azerbaijan. These discrepancies reflect local attitudes and worldviews. For example, the symbols and melodies used in wedding ceremonies, the bride's welcome, the dowry presentation, and other rituals are reflective of local beliefs.

**Features in folklore and legends:** Sheki folklore and stories contain a wealth of information about the region's nature, history, lifestyle, and beliefs. Fairy tales, epics, songs, and proverbs reflect local beliefs, good and evil forces, mystical beings, and other aspects of belief. For example, legends and stories about Sheki are part of the region's historical and cultural character.

**Local influence in religious beliefs:** Although Islam is the prevalent religion in Sheki, religious ceremonies and religious perspectives exhibit regional differences as a result of local traditions and historical beliefs. For example, parts of local customs can be seen in how religious holidays are celebrated or religious rites are performed.

The culture of the area is enhanced and given a distinct hue by these regional characteristics of Sheki beliefs. Studying these ideas yields important insights on Sheki's history, social structure, and cultural identity. The sustainability of Sheki's cultural legacy greatly depends on the preservation of these characteristics and their passing down to future generations. Its belief system has also been shaped by Sheki's distinct culture. The rich cultural heritage of this historic city and its environs is deeply and irrevocably intertwined with Sheki beliefs. One of the pillars of culture, beliefs permeates all facets of society and help to define Sheki's distinct identity.

The main manifestations of this close relationship are the following:

- **Beliefs expressed through rituals and ceremonies:** The region's belief system is expressed



in real life through Sheki weddings, mourning, holidays, and other rituals. The people's religious and spiritual beliefs are reflected in these ceremonies' rites, symbolic actions, prayers, and spoken words. The practice of burning bonfires during the Novruz holiday celebrations, for instance, has roots in ancient beliefs, whereas the custom of presenting gifts at funeral rites is strongly associated with Islamic principles.

- **Reflection of beliefs in folklore:** The region's worldview is richly reflected in Sheki folklore, which includes fairy tales, epics, stories, ballads, and proverbs. We frequently come across religious themes, mystical entities, holy locations, and forces of good and evil in these cases. Beliefs are an essential component of culture, as evidenced by the fact that religious and spiritual issues are also discussed in written literature.

- **Traces of beliefs in art and architecture:** Sheki's ancient mosques, tombs, and other places of worship show how strongly Islam influenced the local architectural and artistic traditions. These structures' ornaments, calligraphy, and decorations all incorporate religious themes and symbolism. Folk art, such as woodcarving, coppersmithing, and carpet weaving, also incorporates symbols and patterns associated with religious and spiritual beliefs.

- **Influence of beliefs on domestic life:** The daily lifestyle of the people of Sheki, their eating and drinking habits, their clothing style, and even the structure of their homes, can be influenced by religious and spiritual beliefs. Examples include the concept of halal (honest) food, fasting on certain days, and modesty in dress. Man knows his place in the pattern of life on Earth, never gets lost, and never seeks himself out. Here, man sleeps comfortably and fearlessly, wakes up to the sun, wanders the land, hunts, fishes, gathers, and farms, and occasionally just sits, observes, and listens. Everything has value here, from the tiniest insect to the biggest bear: everything has a reason and a purpose, and everything is handled with dignity and respect. The lakes are alive with their fish, the paths are cleared of signs of life, and the waters get purer as they flow. The wind, birds, and running water all play springtime tunes in people's hearts, and trees flourish to avoid being felled. The mouth, tongue, hands, and eyes are merely instruments for communication. People merely meet to chat, and the atmosphere is dominated by trust and brotherhood. Since death and suffering are a normal part of life, they also occur in this cosmos. However, the laws of nature, not humans, are to blame for this suffering and death. They are intended to teach children, not to harm them. Death is both a fresh and supernatural beginning and a physical one. God is the creator of everything and the master of this dwelling place. Plants,



which are the remedy for a thousand maladies, are symbols of a healthy and active lifestyle. God created man with love and made everything for his comfort. The intelligent leaders of society are Medicine men and women.

• **The role of beliefs in the formation of social norms and values:** Beliefs determine the moral norms, rules of behavior and social values accepted in Sheki society. Values such as respect, compassion, justice, honesty have been formed under the influence of religious teachings and spiritual beliefs. These values play an important role in ensuring the unity and harmony of society. Mother Earth sent species to live on it since it was made for human habitation. Living giants adjust their energy to human or animal characteristics and change into different animals on Earth. Good-energy giants become innocuous creatures, whereas bad-energy giants become predatory creatures. Women are represented by plants, which are also human. Women's desires transform them into flora and birds. Additionally, some giants have demon and death-related abilities in their bodies. To guard against the existence of evil forces and the harm they may do to people, a number of rites were carried out. Protecting a newborn kid from the energy of bad forces was especially crucial. To stop his soul from becoming evil energy, a variety of magical artifacts were placed in his cradle. From birth, his name and identity were whispered in his ear to help him remember that he was a human. To help them remember that they were human, they mumbled their name and identity into their ears from birth. In order for these teeth to erupt normally and without the influence of demons, they undertook specific rituals during the teething process. In order to break the enchantment and purge the soul of bad forces, they would take the scythe away after forty days. Babies' spirits would be spiritually cleansed, shielded from the power of evil powers, and enhanced with a sense of divine love through lullabies. Our people's creation and country is the subject of numerous myths and stories. In these myths, everyone coexists peacefully with everything, there are no crimes like envy, theft, or murder, and instead, everyone gives what they have to others. Everyone owns the land; no one person owns it exclusively. Life and everything associated with it are revered here. Man exists for a purpose; his energy has an impact on the universe and environment. Every food that people consume is regarded as sacred, as is the location where they seek refuge and walk.

• **Reflection of beliefs in language and terminology:** There are many words and expressions in the Sheki dialect and in the general Azerbaijani language that express religious and spiritual concepts. Prayers, oaths, curses, and religious idioms show how beliefs permeate the language.

Therefore, beliefs in the Sheki region are a broad phenomenon that encompasses the entire cultural life of the region rather than being limited to distinct belief systems. Through a variety of cultural expressions, beliefs are passed down, maintained, and evolved from one generation to the next. One of the key elements guaranteeing the depth and distinctiveness of Sheki's cultural legacy is this intimate relationship.

## **THE ROOTS OF BELIEF: PRE-ISLAMIC TRADITIONS IN SHEKI**

Ancient pre-Abrahamic traditions, which are marked by a strong connection to nature and celestial phenomena, form the spiritual foundation of Sheki and the larger North-West Azerbaijan region. These early belief systems have had a lasting impact, influencing later religious developments and surviving for millennia.

Azerbaijan's land, especially the Sheki region, has a long history of heathenism, which includes a variety of old polytheistic beliefs. These comprise archaic faiths including shamanism, totemism, fetishism, and animism. These pre-Islamic beliefs are still held by certain rural Azerbaijanis today, especially with regard to the reverence of particular trees and rocks and the sanctity of particular natural areas.

The worship of deceased ancestors, natural occurrences, heavenly bodies, and specific trees like maple and oak was widespread among the ancient Azerbaijanis. According to historical narratives like Strabon's, the Albanians held the Sun, the Moon (particularly Selene), and the Sky in high regard, comparing them to the Greek gods Helios, Zeus, and Selene.

It is also mentioned that there is a temple to the Moon close to Iberia. Ancient Azerbaijanis widely believed that the cosmos was made up of four fundamental elements: fire, water, air, and ground. Fire was revered and thought to have the ability to eradicate evil and cleanse people, making fire-worship in particular a powerful force.

Human sacrifice, frequently carried out by priests in a condition of religious ecstasy, is evidence of pre-Christian Albanian paganism. Although not specifically Sheki-specific, archaeological finds throughout Azerbaijan have uncovered anthropomorphic figurines and massive stone idols, suggesting widespread ancient religiosity.

Sheki is nestled at the foot of the Greater Caucasus Mountains. Mount Yeddi Gardash (Seven Brothers), Mount Garagaya (Black Rock), Mount Agaya (White Rock), Mount Seyidyurd, and

Khanyaylagi (Khan's plateau) are examples of sacred mountains in the larger Caucasus region that highlight the spiritual significance attached to natural features in these ancient belief systems.

The Church of Kish, which is close to Sheki, is a crucial example of this continuity. It is stated clearly that "pagan cult rituals since ancient times" have been performed at this location. A worship space beneath the church's altar that dates to around 3000 BC has been discovered at this site thanks to radiocarbon dating. These archaeological findings support a long-standing hallowed use of the site, suggesting that some places had an inherent sanctity that went beyond particular religious beliefs. This persistent holy geography implies that the ancient Sheki beliefs are closely related to the natural environment rather than being purely theoretical ideas. A regional trait where the sacredness of place is a recurring and fundamental component of spiritual life is highlighted by the ongoing reverence for these sites, even when reframed by later religions. This belief system forms a continuous thread from ancient paganism to modern practices. The pantheon of Azerbaijani mythology, which includes deities like Tengri (sky god), Umay (fecundity goddess), and Erlik (underworld deity), reflects polytheistic and animistic beginnings. The mythology itself is characterized by a blending of ancient Turk, Zoroastrian, Islamic, and local Caucasian beliefs. Additionally, Azerbaijani folklore makes it clear that ancient ancestors had a profound knowledge of nature, worshipped trees as gods, and used sacred tree talismans for healing and protection.

The religious history of the area was significantly influenced by the ancient state of Caucasian Albania, which was founded in the northern portion of modern-day Azerbaijan in the fourth century BC. Ancient Caucasian Albanian churches, like the well-known Church of Kish, date back about 1,500 years, or even to the first and second centuries CE. Christianity was brought to Sheki as early as the first century CE. As was already mentioned, the Church of Kish is especially important because, before it was Christianized, it was used for pagan cult rites. Archaeological studies have shown that a worship site beneath its altar dates to approximately 3000 BC.

Zoroastrianism was the predominant religion in the Caucasian region in Albania. A living example of this intricate religious mosaic is provided by the Udi people, who are thought to be the only remaining members of the ancient Caucasian Albanians. The practice of keeping an eternal flame in their homes, which has its roots in fire worship, and the veneration of the Moon

(called Ay), Sun, fire, sacred stones, trees, rivers, and springs are among the pre-Islamic beliefs and rituals that they have maintained despite being Christians. They also persisted in ancestor worship, magic, and divination; Christian Udis, in particular, still offered prayers to the Moon.

The Sun had a significant role in Albanian pagan traditions, with Sun worship at the heart of important annual celebrations and calendar ceremonies. Fire rituals were employed for protection, purification, and divination.

Sacred elements like the sun, moon, sky, earth, fire, and stone were used to swear Besa (a sacred "word of honor" or pledge of loyalty, trust, and protection that cannot be broken). Animal sacrifices, bonfires, and prayers to the Sun were all part of the ritual pilgrimages to the summits of sacred mountains. Crescent-shaped tombstones and astral imagery demonstrate how deeply ingrained lunar worship was in pre-Albanian communities, where it was linked to ideas of death, rebirth, and feminine values. Albanian astral art also incorporates triadic iconography, such the triskelion (symbolize water, earth, and fire), which connects metaphysical regeneration and spiritual temporality. This illustrates how the spiritual environment of Sheki and Caucasian Albania was a complex synthesis of early Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and local paganism, with many aspects surviving through syncretic processes.

Table 1: Key Pre-Islamic Deities and Associated Elements in Sheki/Azerbaijan

Deity/Concept	Associated Elements Domain	Region/Group (Examples)	Source Snippet IDs
Sky father	Sun (right hand),  Moon (left hand), East/West, day/night	Azerbaijan (Sheki)	Turk Mythology
Gün (Sun)	Sun, light, sky, weather, life, health, energy, all-seeing eye	Azerbaijan (Sheki)	Turk Mythology
Tengri	Sky god, supreme divine power	Azerbaijan (Sheki)	Turk Mythology
Umay	Fertility goddess, motherhood, protection of children	Azerbaijan (Sheki)	Turk Mythology

Erlik	Underworld, death, darkness, guardian of souls	Azerbaijan (Sheki)	Turk Mythology
Od Ana (Fire Goddess)	Fire, hearth, protection	Azerbaijan (Sheki)	Turk Mythology
Yer-Su (Earth-Water Deity)	Sacredness of land and water	Azerbaijan (Sheki)	Turk Mythology
Fire Worship	Purification, destruction of evil, eternal flame	Azerbaijan (Sheki)	Turk Mythology
Sacred Trees	Protection, healing, wisdom, energy, abode of spirits	Azerbaijan (Sheki)	Turk Mythology
Sacred Mountains/Rocks	Pilgrimage sites, spiritual significance	Azerbaijan (Sheki)	Turk Mythology

## RELIGIOUS TRANSFORMATION AND SYNCRETISM

Christianity and Islam brought new religious frameworks to Sheki, but instead of completely replacing preexisting beliefs, these Abrahamic faiths frequently blended in with and adjusted to the local spiritual traditions, creating a unique syncretic religious character. Christianity made an early and major penetration into Sheki, with its introduction dating as far back as the 1st century CE. Its strong historical ties to the area are demonstrated by the existence of old Caucasian Albanian churches, some of which are 1,500 years old or even from the first to second century CE. One such church is the well-known Church of Kish.

Zoroastrian and pagan cults were gradually replaced by Islam when Arab conquerors brought it to Azerbaijan in the seventh century A.D. Although military force may have been used in its initial spread, peaceful methods were also used to distribute it along the Silk Road illustrated the Azerbaijani religious and cultural identity. With several churches and mosques coexisting in the city, Sheki's historical religious diversity is still visible today. The fact that Zoroastrian communities continued to exist and that Islam "gradually supplanted" older religions suggests that the conversion process was neither complete nor instantaneous. The fact that churches and mosques are still standing in Sheki shows that the prior religious landscape was not completely

destroyed when Abrahamic faiths arrived. Rather, it resulted in a complicated coexistence and layering of beliefs.

## **COEXISTENCE AND BLENDING OF TRADITIONS**

Explicitly fusing aspects of old Turk, Zoroastrian, Islamic, and indigenous Caucasian beliefs, Azerbaijani mythology is a notable example of syncretism. This merging is not limited to historical documents; rather, it is actively demonstrated in modern behaviours. A localised interpretation of Islam can be seen, for example, in the way that some rural Azerbaijanis incorporate traditional Islamic precepts into their religious observances, such as permitting wine consumption and not requiring women to wear veils or be segregated.

There was some degree of merging between Zoroastrianism and Islam because of their significant theological and eschatological connections. The oneness of God, the idea of creation, the function of prophets, the five daily prayers (typically at roughly the same times), and ideas about heaven, hell, judgement, and a bridge to cross are all shared by both religions. Additionally, both place a strong emphasis on moral principles and charity. Because of their historical contacts and the blending of elements from previous traditions, Christianity and Islam, two of the great world religions, are naturally syncretic. Islam, for instance, acknowledges Jesus as a major prophet.

An interesting example of this merging is provided by the Udi people, who are direct descendants of Caucasian Albanians. The habit of maintaining an eternal flame and the reverence of the Moon, Sun, fire, sacred stones, trees, rivers, and springs are among the pre-Islamic beliefs and customs that they have maintained despite their Christian faith. Christian Udis still offer prayers to the Moon, and they still engage in ancestor worship, magic, and divination. There was also a lot of merging throughout the shift from pagan to Christian beliefs. Christian and pagan customs blended together to form a "rich tapestry of syncretic practices" that still exist today. Examples of this process of symbol adaptation and redefinition can be found in historical parallels from other regions, such as the transformation of Samhain into All Saints' Day or the incorporation of Norse Yule customs into Christmas. An actual example of how holy places were re-consecrated and incorporated into new religious frameworks while retaining their spiritual significance is the Church of Kish, which was first, used for pagan cult rituals before becoming a Christian church. Archaeological discoveries of a worship site beneath its altar date back to 3000 BC.

**Table 2: Examples of Syncretism in Sheki's Religious Practices**

<b>Syncretic Element/Practice</b>	<b>Original Roots/Influences</b>	<b>Abrahamic Influence/Integration (Examples)</b>	<b>Source Snippet IDs</b>
<b>Novruz Celebration</b>	Ancient spring , Zoroastrian (fire-worship, elemental veneration)	Celebrated widely in Islamic Azerbaijan as a national holiday, incorporating fire rituals.	Azerbaijan regional (Sheki) mythology
<b>Veneration of Nature/Celestial Bodies</b>	Ancient Paganism/Animism (Sun, Moon, elements, sacred trees/rocks)	Retained by Christian Udi people, who still direct prayers to the Moon, Sun, and sacred natural sites.	Azerbaijan regional (Sheki) mythology
<b>Sacred Sites (e.g., Church of Kish)</b>	Pre-Christian pagan cult sites (worship site from 3000 BC)	Converted into Christian churches; spiritual significance of location maintained and re-contextualized.	Azerbaijan regional (Sheki) mythology
<b>Folk Medicine/Healing Practices</b>	Ancient Turkic/Local folk beliefs (shamans, magic, amulets, cupping, herbs, sacred objects)	Elements integrated into Islamic folk medicine; belief in evil eye, use of amulets persist.	Azerbaijan regional (Sheki) mythology
<b>Architectural Symbolism (Shebeke)</b>	Ancient geometric patterns, symbolism of Sun, life, eternity	Integrated into Islamic-era architecture (e.g., Khan Palace), without explicit religious prohibition.	Azerbaijan regional (Sheki) mythology
<b>Kelaghayi (Silk Scarf) Symbolism</b>	Ancient values, folk life, resilience of Azerbaijani women	Produced within an Islamic cultural context, embodying traditional values.	Azerbaijan regional (Sheki) mythology
<b>Papaq (Traditional Hat)</b>	Symbol of honor and dignity	Cultural significance maintained within modern Azerbaijani society.	Azerbaijan regional (Sheki) mythology
<b>General Religious Observances</b>	Local customs	Islamic practices adapted (e.g., wine drinking permitted, women not veiled/segregated in rural areas)	Azerbaijan regional (Sheki) mythology



## LIVING FOLKLORE: SUPERNATURAL BEINGS AND ORAL TRADITIONS

Through its traditional crafts, live folklore, and group festivals, Sheki's "old beliefs" are actively preserved and expressed, demonstrating a vibrant cultural memory that continues to have an impact on contemporary life. Although numerous supernatural beings are common in the broader Azerbaijani folklore, Sheki, being a distinct geographical and cultural region, likely exhibits special local interpretations or a particular prominence of some characters. The fact that Sheki is situated in a "forested valley of the eastern Caucasian mountains" makes the presence of "Meshe Adam" (Woodman) as a "spirit, who lives in mountainous forests" particularly relevant, even though there isn't any concrete proof that all species have Sheki-specific variations. The folk belief that trees like cranberries, figs, walnuts, hazelnuts are dangerous after sunset due to the gathering of evil wood spirits and djinns would reverberate loudly and have special significance in a heavily forested place like Sheki. The significant prevalence of supernatural beings that reside in woods and are associated with trees in Azerbaijani folklore, given the mountainous and forested environment of Sheki, strongly suggests a deeply rooted animistic worldview in which nature is imbued with spiritual essence. These concepts most likely served practical socio-ecological goals, such as regulating how individuals interacted with their environment. Jinn-related warnings against sleeping beneath specific trees, for instance, could guarantee appropriate use of forest resources or subtly discourage exploitation, acting as a traditional means of environmental protection through the belief in supernatural retribution. The "Forest Man" persona may be a localized representation of a more common regional folklore figure in the Caucasus, given its resemblance to the Yeti/Bigfoot tale [Shukurlu p.5]. This would reinforce the people's strong bonds with their immediate, sometimes wild surroundings. These stories are not merely works of fiction, but rather vital cultural vehicles for the dissemination of ecological knowledge, social norms, and a sustainable, respectful relationship with nature, as suggested by the natural connection between supernatural beliefs and the environment. Their continuous presence affects the daily behaviors and environmental perceptions of Sheki people. Therefore, any degradation of the natural environment may have an immediate effect on the relevance and health of these specific folklore elements.

The Sheki History and Ethnography Museum features more than 5,000 artifacts that illustrate the rich history, culture, and traditions of the area, including an "Ethnography" part, even though it does not specifically discuss any supernatural creatures in its exhibition sections. This implies that even if particular supernatural stories are not listed, the larger cultural context—which

includes folk beliefs and traditional narratives—is maintained and conveyed. Irada Rovshan's scholarly articles, which particularly address the "Collection and analysis of samples of Balakan-Sheki region's folklore and folk arts," also point to a scholarly interest in regional folklore, which inevitably involves the examination of supernatural aspects and their regional variations.

## **THE ROLE OF SUPERNATURAL BELIEFS IN SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXTS**

Beyond simple amusement, supernatural beliefs have important social and environmental roles in Sheki and wider Azerbaijani folklore. Because they instill a belief that supernatural beings will punish those who harm nature, these beliefs can have a significant impact on community behavior and frequently embody moral lessons. One such example is the promotion of a sustainable relationship with the natural environment. The cautions against upsetting the "tree master" or coming across djinns in certain trees, for instance, can subtly discourage excessive harvesting or disrespectful use of forests.

Beyond their entertainment appeal, these supernatural narratives operate as potent, informal societal regulating systems. The idea that djinns or the "tree master" will punish people can subtly enforce resource management and environmental stewardship. Human heroes defeating evil "divs" is a common theme that upholds social norms, fosters fortitude in the face of hardship, and serves as a moral compass for proper conduct. This suggests that folklore is intricately intertwined into society, playing a vital role in fostering communal harmony and passing down moral values from one generation to the next.

This implies that these long-standing social and environmental standards may become less strong if people stop believing in these supernatural beings or if the oral traditions that pass them down fade. Therefore, maintaining ancient societal structures, ecological wisdom, and community-based ethical systems are all important aspects of preserving Sheki's living folklore. This demonstrates the timeless, useful value of these ostensibly fantastical stories.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The rich legacy of ancient beliefs that have moulded the social fabric of the society over the ages is eloquently illustrated by the regional features of Sheki in northwest Azerbaijan. The region's historical connections with many cultural influences are reflected in these beliefs, which include

a range of spiritual activities, folklore, and customs. For instance, customs pertaining to seasonal festivals, family life, and agriculture demonstrate the close relationships that exist between local communities and their natural surroundings and are based on traditional knowledge. These ancient ideas continue to play a major role in daily life despite the fast modernity and globalization that are affecting current society. As essential manifestations of regional identity and continuity, several cultural festivals, rituals, and oral traditions are maintained and actively practiced. They provide locals a sense of pride and belonging and serve as an important connection to their past.

Furthermore, these beliefs are important for reasons other than cultural preservation; they promote community togetherness and social cohesion. Recognizing and honoring these ancient beliefs is essential for preserving cultural variety and fostering intercultural understanding in a time when fast change and technical developments frequently threaten traditional ways of life. They enhance the larger Azerbaijani cultural landscape by providing insightful information about the history, culture, and social values of the area.

They contribute to Sheki region's distinctive cultural landscape, which draws both locals and tourists, in addition to protecting the city's historical legacy. Comprehending these historic ideas emphasizes how crucial it is to preserve cultural variety and acknowledge the lasting influence of ancestors' traditions in forming modern society.

All things considered, Sheki region's ancient beliefs not only demonstrate the people's tenacity but also the significance of protecting intangible cultural heritage in the face of contemporary change. Their continued significance emphasizes the necessity of honoring and preserving these customs so that they might continue to educate and inspire coming generations..

Contemporary Sheki artists maintain continuity with the artistic traditions of the past, in some cases even reviving nearly vanished skills, but at the same time artists often experiment with modern materials and themes. Sheki painting and sculpture were never absent, but have flourished nowadays.

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