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# LAHIJ

## An Azerbaijani Historic Cultural Reserve

LAHIJ IS ONE OF THE MOST ANCIENT VILLAGES IN AZERBAIJAN AND IS NOW A SETTLEMENT IN THE ISMAYILLI REGION OF THE REPUBLIC. IT IS LOCATED ON THE EASTERN SLOPES OF THE GREATER CAUCASUS AT THE FOOT OF THE NIYAL MOUNTAIN RIDGE AT A HEIGHT OF 1200 METRES ABOVE SEA LEVEL. THE SETTLEMENT STRETCHES OUT FOR ALMOST 2KM ALONG THE LEFT BANK OF THE GIRDIMANCHAY RIVER.

**T**he language of the inhabitants of the village, who call themselves Tats, belongs to the Iranian branch of the Indo-European languages and is a dialect of New Persian. The population of Lahij is mostly bilingual: Azerbaijani is widely used in addition to the native Tat language.

There are a few legends about the origins of the people of Lahij, which say that they were peasants from Lahijjan in Iran (Gilan Province).

The eminent Orientalist V. Minorsky supposed that the location and name of modern Lahij correspond to the Layzan Principality which is mentioned in sources from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC (Minorsky, V. *История Ширвана и Дербенда в X-XI вв. (A History of Shirvan and Derbent in the X-XI Centuries)*, Moscow, 1963). This does not however, prevent the local population from considering themselves as a native people of Azerbaijan.

Lahij has long been famous as a handicraft centre, in particular for the preparation of highly artistic copperwares. The development of handicrafts here has left traces in the everyday life of the population and in the structure of the whole village, in the past as well as today. This unique corner of Azerbaijan has long attracted travellers' attention and it is visited by tourists from all over the world today as well. When travelling in Azerbaijan they always



come here.

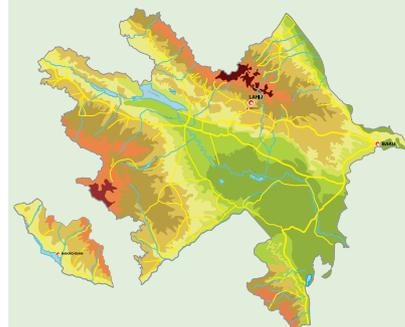
Traditional methods of copperware production still survive in Lahij and copper production here has reached a high level of development. Moreover, coppersmiths from Lahij, many of whom resettled closer to the copper smeltery, contributed significantly to the development of this field in many other areas of Azerbaijan and the whole Transcaucasus. The successful development of copperware production was favourable for the emergence of related handicrafts – tinning, blacksmiths work and charcoal production. In total, about 40 types of handicrafts and related

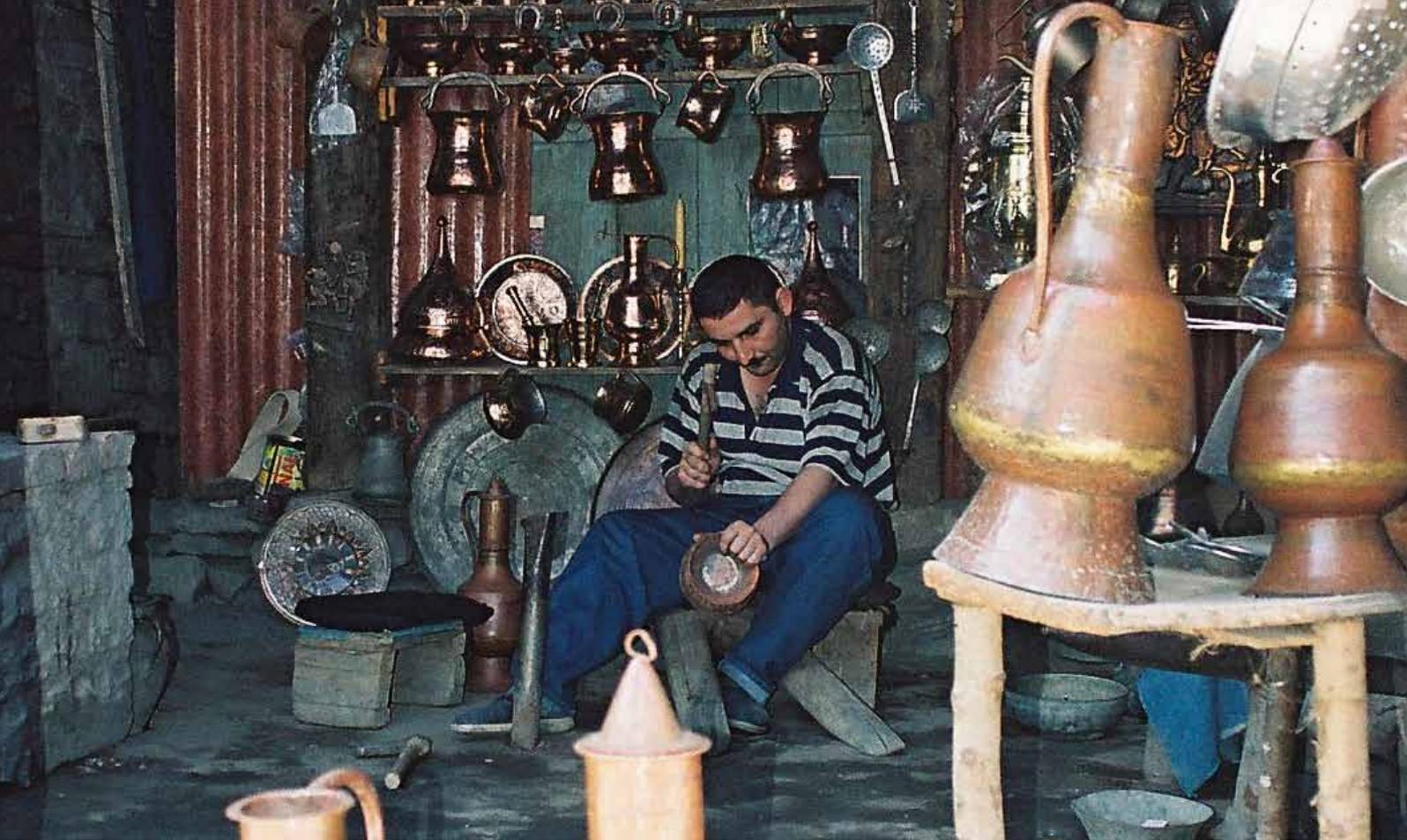
activities were developed in Lahij in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Guliyev, G. A. and Taghizade, N. *Металл и народное ремесло. (Copper and Handicraft)*, Baku, 1968).

Copperware production was mainly concentrated in the Aghali Quarter of Lahij, which was so named because of the great number of copper workshops located on both sides of the 'Misgar Bazari' (Bazaar of Coppersmiths) street. Copperware was produced and sold in the workshops, the fronts of which functioned as shops.

Research material about domestic craft production in the Caucasus contains information about

## WHERE IT IS?





the quantity of copper workshops in Lahij in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, O. Yevetsky noted that there were 200 copper workshops here (Yevetsky, O. Статистическое описание Закавказского края. (*Statistical Description of the Transcaucasian Land*), St Petersburg, 1835).

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the number of such workshops had significantly reduced as a result of import of cheaper Russian factory produced wares. Along with copperware production other types of handicrafts – blacksmiths' wares, tanning and gunsmithery also diminished. Despite a significant reduction in copper production, the traditional appearance, work process of copper-melting, casting of sheets, smithery and engraving of wares are preserved even today in the structure and equipment of the workshops.

**Written sources and rich collections of copper tableware preserved in museums in Azerbaijan,**

**Georgia, Russia and Europe testify to the rich diversity of copper utensils which numbered more than 80 types in the past.** Most of the copperwares made in Lahij were tin-plated and decorated with ornaments. This was usually carried out by special master engravers – *khakkak*.

Regarding the demand for copperwares from Lahij, it should be noted that they were sold not only in Azerbaijan but across the whole Transcaucasia and also in Dag-estan and the countries of the Near East and Asia Minor («Кавказский календарь» на 1851 год. (*Caucasian Calendar for 1851*), Tbilisi, 1850). The wares of the Lahij coppersmiths were highly valued in different exhibitions. **In an exhibition of Transcaucasian works in 1850 wares by the master Mammad Kadir were awarded with a money price for 'a copper vessel'** («Кавказский календарь» на 1851 год. (*Caucasian Calendar for 1851*), Tbilisi, 1850).

**Great success fell to the Lahij masters' lot at the International Vienna Exhibition in 1873.** This was written about it in the special newspaper of the exhibition: 'Lahij village (in Shamakha Uyezd) has been long and widely famous for copperwares and the collections of these wares, which are displayed in the Vienna Exhibition, may support and disseminate this fame. The plates, cups and jars on display are extraordinarily beautiful, characteristic and definitely belong among the most perfect works of these types. All this tableware is richly and elegantly decorated.' (Записки Кавказского общества сельского хозяйства (Transactions of the Caucasian Agriculture Society), Tbilisi, 1873). **The art of the masters of Lahij testifies to the centuries-old historic traditions of the Azerbaijani people in the field of decorative and applied arts. The samples of Azerbaijani handicrafts preserved in Europe-**

**an museums bear witness to the high skill of the people of Lahij in the production of copperwares.**

There is copperware from Lahij in the Louvre, among samples of Azerbaijani handicraft. The museum of Bern keeps samples of firearms and cold steel from Azerbaijan, among which rifles, sabres and daggers richly decorated with ornament and inlay made by Lahij gunsmiths stand out particularly (Efendi, R. Образцы азербайджанского ремесла в музеях Европы. (*Samples of Azerbai-*

leatherworks with great skill – shoes, belts, quilted jackets, book covers and bridles. Other handicrafts of domestic character blossomed as a result of the developed local tanning production: saddle-making, shoe-making, cap-making and furriery.

**Handicraft skills and traditions developed over the centuries and this created favourable conditions for rapid development and distribution of carpet making in Lahij. A carpet cooperative was created here in the mid-**

nificant income. Along with this, the importance of female labour also increased, which led to the liquidation of inequality for women.

When speaking about the tangible culture of Lahij, it should be noted that the handicraft production and the social inequalities linked to this strongly influenced the structure of the village and its houses.

Lahij is divided into two separate parts: Lahij and Arakhird, which in their turn are divided into eight quarters. The division of the settle-



*Lahij copperwares*



*jani Handicraft in European Museums*), Gobustan Magazine, Spring 1969).

For long, the most developed handicraft in Lahij after metal working was tanning. One of the quarters of Lahij, Zavaro, was mainly inhabited by tanners, the workshops and houses of whom were built along the Dariel-Iya River. The morocco-leather of local tanners was considered among the best in Transcaucasia. Lahij tanners were able to make shagreen, morocco and juft, from with they prepared all kinds of

**dle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.** Different types of traditional ornaments by Lahij masters – coppersmiths, jewellers, blacksmiths and others, were also used by carpet making masters and artists. Lahij carpets became famous very rapidly due to their high artistic qualities and there is a great demand for them on the world market. The origin and development of this new production in Lahij led to significant changes to the economy and family relations in the village. The economy was strengthened because carpet making gave sig-

ment in this way is a distinguishing feature also of other cities in Azerbaijan, the rest of the Caucasus and Central Asia. The characteristic division of the village into quarters is a result of the professional occupations of their inhabitants. Each of the quarters had its own square, mosque, baths and cemetery. Lahij, despite its close trade and handicraft ties with other settlements, managed to retain its originality and no essential changes took place in its appearance. Even today, squares (*meidan*) play an important social



**of Azerbaijan, to which Lahij belongs, are preserved to our day in the spiritual life of the people of Lahij.** Azerbaijanis, as the main ethnic group of the Republic, significantly influenced the principal elements of the material and spiritual culture of the Persian speaking Tat population of Lahij. Longstanding friendly relations between all ethnic communities sharing life and labour for centuries on the ancient land of Azerbaijan contributed to this still ongoing phenomenon.

Such historically traditional activities as copperware production, blacksmithery and tanning are still important today. These handicrafts are not disappearing. They continue among the population of Lahij.

**Lahij, which retains a strongly expressed identity, remains a**

role here.

In appearance Lahij is a small settlement with streets well-paved with a mosaic of flat stones. The traditional houses of the village attract special attention because they are as interesting as the handicrafts produced in them. The distinguishing features of these houses are peculiarities of everyday life and handicrafts. For example, many workshops of coppersmiths and blacksmiths were linked to the house of the master: there was an exit from the workshop to the yard. Ancient houses are preserved and no significant changes to the village plan have taken place in past years. As a result of a lack of free land new houses are usually built in place of old ones. The dwelling houses of Lahij have some distinguishing features. The ground floors of the houses built on the main trade street contain workshops or trade premises. Houses in Lagich are mainly two-storied, rarely single or three-storied, and they are built from local grey-white river-stones with consideration to the seismicity of this region.

Traditional elements in the interi-

ors of Lahij houses are niches of different sizes (*takhcha* and *jomokhantan*) and wall shelves (*raf*), on which decorative dishes and other items are placed. Another feature of the



houses is a closet built into the wall – *ovaro*, i.e. *baths used for the necessary religious ablutions – gusl*.

**Ancient traditions, customs and rituals with close interconnections principally with the northeastern ethnographic zone**

**unique ethnographic corner of Azerbaijan and continues to attract the interest of tourists, on whom it leaves a significant impression.**