

By Fatma GANIYEVA,
PhD in History

TEA CEREMONIES IN AZERBAIJAN'S HOSPITALITY TRADITIONS

Armudu and bowl, copper. 16th –17th centuries. National Museum of History of Azerbaijan.



Although tea originated in China, it has played an important role in the social and cultural life of the Azerbaijani people and has influenced the formation of tea culture characteristic of Eastern societies since the Middle Ages. Tea culture functions as an inseparable part of the daily lives of all social groups and is also regarded as an important marker of Azerbaijani cultural identity. During the 17th session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, held in Rabat, Kingdom of Morocco, from November 28 to December 3, 2022, “Tea culture: a symbol of identity, hospitality and social in-

teraction” was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Tea is not merely a beverage; it also occupies a significant place in social relations as a means of communication between people. Tea was introduced to Azerbaijan through trade during the period of the Safavid state (16–18th centuries). Russian historian Mikhail Chulkov, writing about trade relations between Azerbaijan and India in the 17th century, noted that among the Indian goods brought into the country were silk, cotton fabrics, various metals, precious stones, and tea. This information proves that tea was already being used as an everyday drink in Azerbaijan at that time.

Teapot and tea set, porcelain. 20th century. National Museum of History of Azerbaijan.



According to the national and ethical values shaped within the ethnic and cultural worldview of the Azerbaijani people, guests must always be treated with great respect. It is therefore no coincidence that Azerbaijanis prepare delicious meals for visitors and serve them using their finest tableware, while tea is traditionally presented in special pear-shaped glasses known as *armudu*. In addition to their elegant appearance, these glasses retain heat well and help keep the tea warm for longer.

The tea table is the main attribute of *elçilik* (the traditional matchmaking ceremony), which constitutes the first stage of the Azerbaijani wedding tradition, as well as of the subsequent “yes” ceremony. If consent was not given during the matchmaking visit, the visiting matchmakers would refuse to drink the tea offered to them as a sign of displeasure. In several regions of Azerbaijan, a two-colored tea is served during the “yes” ceremony. Half of the glass is first filled with hot water, to which sugar cubes or granulated sugar are added. A teaspoon is then placed across the top of the glass, and strong tea concentrate is poured onto the spoon. Since the concentrate is lighter than the sweetened water, it remains on top without mixing, creating two colors in the glass — white and red. When stirred before drinking, the tea symbolizes the union and blending of two families [3, p. 16].





In urban areas of Azerbaijan, especially in crowded places such as bazaars and caravanserais, tea establishments were traditionally operated by men known among the people as *çayçı* (tea masters).

Craft objects used in everyday life and ceremonies during the 19th and early 20th centuries provide valuable insight into the main features of Azerbaijani tea culture. In this regard, the material culture items preserved in the collection of the National Museum of Azerbaijan History attract particular attention. These include tea ceremony tablecloths, samovars, teapots, trays, porcelain dishes, and many other objects. The household items used in tea ceremonies may be divided into several groups: tablecloths (*qələmkar*, *tirmə*, silk, velvet, etc.); utensils used for preparing tea (samovars and teapots); items used for serving tea (trays); drinking vessels (glasses, saucers, porcelain tea sets); and other objects such as sugar bowls and jam dishes.

Tablecloths. Tablecloths are ancient household items that reflect history, cultural traditions, artistic decoration, and the craftsmanship of different peoples. As one of the important examples of Azerbaijani material culture, tablecloths are considered essential attributes

of the tea ceremony. The production of high-quality textiles in the country enabled the manufacture of many varieties of tablecloths. Turkish traveler Evliya Çelebi wrote that *"the printed fabrics and qələmkar tablecloths of Nakhchivan are renowned throughout the world."* [1, p. 454] Another belief widespread among Azerbaijanis concerns the tradition of laying tablecloths during wedding and mourning ceremonies. In the past, weddings were held in private homes, and tablecloths made of red fabrics were regarded as important elements of the celebration. According to popular belief, the color red symbolized happiness, sanctity, and purity. During mourning ceremonies, once the gathering ended, the tablecloth was folded from the lower edge upward, symbolizing the wish that no further tragedy or death would occur in that household. According to tradition, this task had to be performed by the same individual.

The museum collection contains valuable examples of tablecloths made from *qələmkar*, broadcloth, *tirmə*, and other fabrics dating from the 19th and early 20th centuries. The Ethnography Fund also preserves a tablecloth belonging to the family of prominent Azerbaijani poetess Khurshidbanu Natavan, which is nearly two centuries old.

Decorated tablecloths embroidered using various techniques were widely used in traditional domestic life. Compared to the West, the Eastern tradition of *takalduz* embroidery was much richer in form and diversity. This embroidery technique, widespread throughout Eastern countries, possessed distinct local characteristics and was mainly used for clothing, table covers, pillowcases, and carpets. Another well-known embroidery style used on tablecloths was *güləbatın*. During the 16th and 17th centuries, this embroidery technique was generally applied to expensive and heavy fabrics. It became especially widespread in Baku, Nakhchivan, Shusha, Shamakhi, and other regions.

Samovars. Today, it is difficult to determine exactly where and when the first samovar appeared. However, some written sources mention ancient household items resembling samovars. In her work *The Tula Samovar*, Russian researcher A. Tikhonova refers to a samovar-like device in China and notes that its existence was closely connected with tea. Initially, such household items were used for preparing medicinal herbs, and later for boiling water, cooking food, and providing warmth [6, p. 5].

The impressions of travelers and specialists from various professions who visited Azerbaijan and observed tea ceremonies are also of great interest. Many authors mentioned samovars in their accounts. In the early 20th century, Russian historian and archaeologist V. M. Sysoyev, while on an expedition to the village of Mirik in Lachin district, wrote, "We were guests in the house of a wealthy family in Mirik village. At a time when most of the population lived in caves, we saw a nickel samovar there" [5].

In Azerbaijani daily life, drinking tea from a samovar around the table has long been regarded as an ancient tradition. Samovars were included in a bride's dowry as an essential household item. Considered symbols of prosperity, they were also passed down from generation to generation.

Today, various customs related to samovar tea preparation continue to exist in different regions of Azerbaijan. Ethnographer N. Guliyeva notes that in Zagatala, during modern weddings, the groom's uncles and close relatives traditionally request tea prepared by the bride herself, and after the wedding the bride boils the samovar and serves tea to the guests [4].

Samovars were made from copper, brass, and stone, and came in different shapes and sizes. Almost all of the samovars preserved in the museum's Ethnography



Fund were produced by the famous Batashov Brothers factory in Russia, established in 1840.

In some regions of Azerbaijan, such as Lankaran and Khachmaz, monuments dedicated to the samovar have been erected. The bronze samovar monument in Lankaran is 3.5 meters high, while the monument at the entrance to Khachmaz district reaches 12 meters in height.

Teapots. Another group of material culture objects preserved in the museum collection related to tea ceremonies consists of teapots. These were produced by both foreign and local factories. Among them are teapots manufactured by the famous Ganja Porcelain Factory, located in Azerbaijan's second-largest city, Ganja.

A new stage in the development of Azerbaijani decorative and applied arts began in the 1950s. Alongside mass-produced decorative objects, exemplary works of folk art were also created during this period. The Ganja Porcelain Factory began operating in 1971 and achieved considerable success throughout its years of activity. The enterprise produced more than fifty types of products, including tea sets, dinner services, and children's sets, Eastern-style sets, and various utilitarian and



decorative items. All factory products were decorated in a national style based on ancient forms and ornaments.

Teapots for brewing tea usually had a capacity of 0.5 liters or more. Ceramic teapots typically featured glossy gold, silver, or white surfaces and smooth interiors.

The Gifts and Souvenirs Fund also preserves tea sets produced not only by the Ganja Porcelain Factory but also by the Baku Porcelain Factory. Among the preserved items, tea sets decorated with *buta*, medallion, and floral ornaments occupy a special place.

Trays. Trays are another indispensable element of the tea set. The trays preserved in the museum are

divided into two groups: copper and ceramic. Copper trays were locally produced, while the others were manufactured in Europe. Copper trays remained widely used until the middle of the 20th century. Later, ceramic trays became part of Azerbaijani tableware because they were lighter and more practical for everyday use.

Cups. Among the objects included in the tea set and preserved in the museum collection are cups and cup sets. Porcelain dishes became one of the principal elements of tea culture and were widely used in domestic life. In some cases, such items were also employed to decorate home interiors. Both tea and dinner sets



formed an important part of bridal dowries from the beginning of the 20th century onward.

Among the exhibits preserved in the museum collections are tea set items belonging to the Azerbaijani scholar, artist, and carpet expert Latif Karimov, as well as to the Azerbaijani scholar, public figure, and corresponding member of the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences Khudu Mammadov.

Thus, the materials related to Azerbaijani tea culture that have been collected and preserved in the museum constitute valuable examples reflecting the everyday life and traditions of the past. 🌸



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