

# Perspectives of religious tourism in Azerbaijan

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## Biographies

Dr. Darius Liutikas is scientific researcher at the Lithuanian Social Research Centre (Vilnius). Research interests: modern and traditional pilgrimage, religious tourism, sociology of tourism, forms of mobility, sacred places and sacred spaces, geography of religions. He has published around 30 articles in Lithuanian and international academical journals. The authors' monograph about manifestation of values and identity in the journeys was published in 2009 (in Lithuanian language).

## Abstract

The paper deals with the analysis of religious tourism possibilities in Azerbaijan. The potential for Christian travelers is presented. Analysis includes historic background, and contemporary challenges of visiting Christian sacred places in relation to the themes of ancient history of Christianity and heritage maintenance. Religious heritage analysis of ancient Caucasian Albania is introduced. Despite diversification, phenomenon of religious tourism becomes more and more important, it involves people to consume narratives of places, which encapsulate their values. Visiting religious places in Azerbaijan such as Kish and Nij has opportunity of the growth. In order to evaluate perspectives of religious tourism in Azerbaijan SWOT analysis was done. The results of the research could be important not only to scientific community, but also to the policy makers, and tourism practitioners.

**KEY WORDS:** religious tourism, Christian routes in Azerbaijan, Caucasian Albania, religious places in Azerbaijan.

## Introduction

Azerbaijan is a country in South Caucasus, dislocated nearby the largest world lake – Caspian Sea, which is to the east of this almost 10 mill. population country. Today Azerbaijan is a secular country, which has predominant Muslim religious communities, but also some Christians or Jewish. The soviet atheism stamped a deep imprint in the minds of people. Azeri are not religious, Islam here more just as a cultural tradition. Country has the rich Christian heritage and underdeveloped potential for religious motivated tourists. Caucasian Albania was the Christian country, which existed in the current territory of Azerbaijan in IV-VII century.

The analysis of the perspectives of Christian religious tourism in Azerbaijan is presented in this paper. Religious tourism is different from pilgrimage (Liutikas, 2012) and considered to be an intermediate form between religious pilgrimage and secular tourism. Religious tourists visit religious objects and sacred places mostly for cultural motives.

## **Literature Review**

### **Christian history in Azerbaijan**

Caucasian Albania hasn't connection with the Republic of Albania, South European country. Caucasian Albanian territory was located in present Azerbaijan as well as in southern Dagestan areas in V century. The state bordered with Caucasian Iberia (present Georgia) in the west, with Sarmatia in the north, with the Caspian Sea in the East and with territories of Armenia in southwest. The name of the country – Albania – for the first time was mentioned already in 331 B.C., when the locals took part in the battle against Persia. Already in the II century B. C. Albania was known as the united kingdom that belonged to the Roman influence. In the IV century A.D. Albania fell under the Sassanid influence, the kingdom became the part of Sassanid Empire. It is known, that the Albanian king Urnayr arrived in Armenia in 313, where he was baptized by St. Gregory the Illuminator, the same who brought Christianity to Armenia. The grandson of St. Gregory's the Illuminator named St. Gregory was invited to lead Albanian and Iberian churches after the death of king Urnayr. Unfortunately, St. Gregory was killed, and his body buried in the monastery of Amaras (current Nagorno-Karabakh).

Caucasian Albania became a Christian country. Armenian, Albanian and Iberian kings fought against the Sassanid king Yazdegerd II in 451, who wanted to convert to Mazdaism all his empire. The battle was lost, but Christianity survived. Albanian church carried out missions, founded and supported monasteries in the Holy Land. Archbishop of Albanian resided in capital Gabala in IV century. From the sixth century, he moved to the new capital Barda. Christian Church of Caucasian Albania flourished till VII century. At the beginning of VIII century Islam came to the region. The Caucasian Albania state was incorporated into Islamic Rashidun caliphate. However the Caucasian Albanian Church remained until 1836. Caucasian Albanian Church became subordinate body of Armenian Apostolic Church in VIII century, but they had separate patriarchs and self-government. In 1836 Russian tsar Nicholas I issued decree and Albanian Church was connected to the Armenian Church (Fautre, 2013).

Descendants of the Caucasian Albanian Church is Udi Christian community. They had to put a lot of efforts in order to save their identity and not to amalgamate with Armenians after 1836. Some of them even had prayers at home, avoiding visiting of new Armenians churches. The Caucasian Albanian Udi Christian Community was registered in 2003. It is estimated that Udi ethnic population has about 10000 people in the world, half of them live in present Azerbaijan (Mobili, 2012). Mostly they live in Nij and Oguz in the North-Western part of Azerbaijan. Udi language belongs to the lezgian branch of North Caucasian language family. These people managed to keep their language, culture and religion during the centuries, including ruling periods of Czarist Russia and Soviet times. Some of them assimilated with Armenians in XIX century, some of them with Azeri, but most of younger generation create families with the members of their ethnic group. The only one functioning Church of Caucasian Albania is in Nij. It was built in XVIII century and renovated in 2006.

## Religious tourism resources

In general about 2 mill international arrivals calculated in Azerbaijan (State Statistical..., 2016). According the State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2016) motivation of tourists is leisure and recreation (668,8 thous.), business (632,3 thous.), visiting friends and relatives (542 thous.), treatment tourism (36,5 thous.), religious tourism (11,5 thous.), other (115,1 thous.). Direct contribution of tourism impact on GDP was 2.8 per cent in 2015.

Top 10 countries/regions of tourists to Azerbaijan are Russian Federation, Georgia, Turkey, Iran, EU countries (Germany, United Kingdom, Italy, France, and Spain etc.), Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, USA, and Belarus. Possibilities of religious tourism could be interesting for part of the tourists coming from these countries/regions.

Although Azerbaijan is quite a secular country, exist some interesting resources for religious tourism. These are shrine of Zoroastrianism (Ateshgah), Christian heritage of Caucasian Albania, and mosques of Islam.

The Zoroastrian religion was entrenched before Islam and Christianity in the territory of Azerbaijan. This is one of the oldest religions on earth, its descendants mainly could be found in India and Iran. Zoroastrians especially appreciate the natural world, trying to stay as far as possible in compliance with the ecological principles. Water and fire takes up an important part in their rituals. One possible destination for tourists interested in religions is Zoroastrian Fire temple in Baku – Ateshgah. This temple was built in XVII-XVIII centuries and was used also by Hindus. The natural gas was used for the eternal holy fire. It was pilgrimage place attracted pilgrims from all over the region. Now there is a museum introducing the Zoroastrian religion and the history of the temple.

In the VII century the Arabs came to the current territory of the Country. Islamization of the area began. Azerbaijan was incorporated to the Soviet Union in 1920. Before the soviet regime there were around 2000 active mosques, most of them were closed or destroyed during the Soviet period. When the Azerbaijan regained independence, the number of mosques began to grow again. One of the most famous is Biby-Heybet mosque nearby Baku. This mosque was built in XIII century and destroyed by Bolsheviks in 1936. Mosque was rebuilt in 1999. Haidar Mosque was built in 2014. This is the largest mosque in Azerbaijan. Tourists especially like to visit it in the evening, when the special lighting accentuates the architecture of mosque.

Soviets destroyed all Catholic Churches in the country during the Soviet Era. John Paul II visited Azerbaijan in 2002. The only one Catholic Church – St Mary's – was consecrated in 2008.

A number of former Caucasian Albanian churches have survived in North West part of Azerbaijan. Most of them are abandoned and wrecked, others turned into a museum. Majority of Churches were built during the reign of Vachagan the Pious (ruled 487-510). It was the Golden Age of Christianity in Azerbaijan. Many churches also were built in the XII-XIII century. Today is better-known more than 20 Caucasian Albanian churches from Gabala to Balakan. It is estimated more than 150 Caucasian Albania architectural heritage sites (churches, monasteries or their remains) in total. The main and most interesting churches could be visit in 3-4 days. A new religious tourism route has developed (Bakı Gənclər Klubu, 2012).

These are most important locations have to be included into the itineraries of religious tourists:

- Kish (the main church “Mother of Churches”, museum now);
- Sheki (in one church is museum, others are abandoned);
- Yukhari Tala village (abandoned);
- Nij (the only active church is Jotari, another Churches in the town (Bulun and Gyoy) are abandoned);
- Qakh (Lakit) (complex of 7 Churches, abandoned);
- Ilisu (ruins);
- Qum village (the walls of Church survived);
- Mamrukh village (near Zagatala, abandoned ruins);
- Balakan (abandoned, in woodland);
- Pipan (abandoned, ruins).

The most known Church is the Kish church near Sheki. This is the only one religious travel object in Azerbaijan which is mentioned in the Index of Lonely Planet 2016 edition on “Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan” under the category “Churches”. It is believed that the first Christian church in the Caucasus region was built in Gis area (today probably it is Kish village). It is supposed, that St. Eliseus, who was one of the five disciples of Thaddeus of Edessa, built the Church in the first century. Later, the church will be considered as the "Mother of the Church", it has contributed to the strengthening of Christianity in the region.

This church was built in XII- XIII century and renovated in 2003. The restoration of Church was supported by Norwegian funds; next to the church is built a monument to the famous Norwegian traveler and historian Thor Heyerdahl (1914-2002). He came here and supported the restoration of the church. Today the church is the museum introducing Caucasian Albania and its Christian culture. This church-museum has been the main object for Christian religious tourists in Azerbaijan visited about 25000 tourists per year. This Church is included in majority of travel itineraries of Azerbaijan.

## **Methodology**

SWOT analysis was done in order to evaluate potential and perspectives of religious tourism in Azerbaijan. The SWOT analysis summarise internal (Strengths and Weaknesses) and external (Opportunities and Threats) conditions of the development of religious tourism in Azerbaijan.

## **Results**

Azerbaijan represents a very favourable area to discover new religious routes. The main positive aspects or strengths may be presented as follows:

- A fair amount of religious tourism and religious heritage places, especially in the North West part of Azerbaijan. Interesting and ancient history of Christian Church in Caucasian Albania;
- The attractive and scenic landscape of religious tourism sites (scenic landscapes, mountain views);

However, the development of religious tourism faces some important limitations or weaknesses:

- Requirement of visa to Azerbaijan. This is in general limits possibility to visit Azerbaijan as a country;
- Political – need to set the clear goals of Azerbaijan tourism policy. There is lack of clear idea of Azerbaijan as tourism country;
- The attraction of country is fragmented, the image of Azerbaijan as place for religious tourism is very limited, and tourism policies are more oriented to other goals;
- Promotion of religious tourism sites and religious routes is very marginal. There is lack of coordinated efforts to promote region favourable for religious tourism. There is no the developed routes for religious tourists in North West of Azerbaijan;
- There is no visiting traditions of Azerbaijan as the country for religious tourism;
- Lack of tourism infrastructure could create problems for some religious tourists (insufficient transport, accommodation, entertainment facilities). Majority of Christian sites related with Caucasian Albania heritage need restoration and adjustment to tourists needs.

The development of religious routes could create opportunities such as:

- Increase of religious motivated tourists and increase of attractiveness of Azerbaijan. This let to increase economic benefit for regions (additional income for locals);
- Development of new tourism products and services (e.g. sightseeing spots, accommodation places, local crafts and souvenirs, and etc.);
- Creation of image of Azerbaijan as multi-confessional region favorable for Christian travelers.

Finally, we can identify the main threats:

- Increase possibilities of disagreements between tourists and locals at the religious heritage places;
- Vivid competition from neighbouring countries in South Caucasus such as Georgia and Armenia.

In conclusion we could state that various existing and emerging projects associated with religious routes show the potential of religious tourism in the Azerbaijan.

## Conclusion and Discussion

Main recommendations for Azerbaijan tourism policy:

1. Recognition of religious tourism as potential niche market;
2. Development of religious tourism packages;
3. Improvement of the tourism infrastructure and the status of religious objects in the North West part of Azerbaijan (heritage of Caucasian Albania);
4. Promotion of religious tourism possibilities and routes;
5. Organization of special religious feasts in the Christian community of Caucasian Albania;
6. Making special seminars about the possibilities of religious tourism to the local communities and decision-makers;
7. Implementation researches on motivation of travelers in Azerbaijan.

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