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## **Attachment to a Nostalgic Place: Remaking of the Azerbaijani Chaikhana by IDP Men from Karabakh**

- *You see, but you don't observe. The distinction is clear. For example, you have frequently seen the steps which led up from the hall to this room.*
- *Frequently.*
- *How often?*
- *Well, some hundreds of times.*
- *How many are there?*
- *How many? – I don't know.*
- *Quite so! You have not observed. And yet you have seen. That is just my point.*

Arthur Conan Doyle, *Scandal in Bohemia*

### **Introduction**

Based on 3 months of my ethnographic fieldwork in Azerbaijan among internally displaced persons from Nagorno-Karabakh,<sup>1</sup> this paper examines the role of the chaikhana (tea house), a traditional local social institution, in the social lives of Azerbaijani IDP men. More specifically, the study focuses on the social functions of chaikhana remade by IDPs in their new living environments after the Karabakh war, including (re)socialization and overcoming cultural trauma through informal everyday conversations. Drawing on literature in spatial anthropology and nostalgia, this paper argues that war-driven displacement allowed IDPs to reconsider their past social ties and customs

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<sup>1</sup> In this article official name of a disputed territory between Armenia and Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh) is used, which, officially is recognized as a part of Azerbaijan. In some parts of the text the toponyms (such as Karabakh, Aghdam and etc.) are presented as they were used by my interlocutors during fieldwork.

critically. The remaking of chaikhanas serves both as a symbolic expression of nostalgia for a shared past – reconstructed in the present with hopes for the future – and as a vital spatial setting for social gatherings and the reproduction of relationships.

During my initial fieldwork from February-March 2022, I conducted participant observations and semi-structured interviews with displaced men from Aghdam, living in Baku. These interlocutors were victims of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the first major ethnic identity crisis in the Soviet Union post-World War II, which erupted into full-scale war in 1988.<sup>1</sup> It displaced 604,000 Azeris and 72,000 Armenians.<sup>2</sup> <sup>3</sup> By 1999, over one million people had been displaced, leading to poor living conditions, property loss, and integration challenges.<sup>4</sup>

Later, my research expanded to Bilasuvar, the largest IDP settlement located in southern Azerbaijan, where I interviewed people from various parts of Nagorno-Karabakh (mostly Jibrail region). The hotel owner in Baku, also displaced from Jibrail, introduced me to his outdoor café, a type of chaikhana, which deepened my interest in the social significance of these spaces.

In the next sections, I will discuss three different chaikhanas from my fieldwork and their roles in the everyday life of IDP men from Karabakh. The first one is situated in students' old dormitory building in Baku, which was remade by IDPs as a meeting place for maintaining their social relationships and sharing news. The second one, also located in Baku is actually a part of a hotel and can be characterized as a modernized version of chaikhana. It was created by a young IDP man based on his childhood memories and his need for socialization. The third one is located in Bilasuvar's rural settlement of IDPs which resembled a restaurant and had lesser social importance than the previous ones. I argue that these three chaikhanas illustrate different answers on different needs of IDPs – in the first case, the tea house served as the main space for IDPs in the urban area to maintain social relationships and exchange information, while in the third case, this function was fulfilled by the Muslim religious practice of performing prayers together. Besides, in the second case, we are dealing with an individual interpretation of this social institution, which is presented as a gathering place for youth culture and open to women as well. In the other cases, tea houses retained their traditional function as spaces for male social interaction only.

Conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Azerbaijan presented several challenges, including limited access to IDPs, language barriers, and the closed nature of the community, especially after Karabakh conflict. When initial plans fell through, I recalled the importance of proximity and informal interactions in ethnographic research, as

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<sup>1</sup> Askerov, Brooks, Tchantouridze (eds.), *Post-Soviet Conflicts: The Thirty Years' Crisis*, pp. 56-58.

<sup>2</sup> Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars, Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict and Nationhood in the Caucasus*, p. 180.

<sup>3</sup> de Waal, *Black Garden*, p. 270.

<sup>4</sup> Johansson, *Putting Peace to the Vote*, pp. 124-125.

highlighted by Geertz's concept of 'getting caught or almost caught'<sup>1</sup> and Anderson's emphasis on social bonding, such as 'drinking beer with locals'.<sup>2</sup> A chance meeting with a displaced hotel owner in Baku led me to his uncle in Bilasuvar. Using the snow-ball method, I accessed Azerbaijan's largest IDP settlement, where chaikhanas again became key settings for trust-building and interviews.

## Theoretical Framework

In analyzing chaikhanas among Azerbaijani internally displaced persons (IDPs), this article employs Gh. Hage's<sup>3</sup> concept of nostalgia as an active, future-oriented emotional practice, alongside Y.-F. Tuan's<sup>4</sup> theorization of place as sensory landscapes. Rather than viewing nostalgia simply as a passive longing for the past, Hage positions it as an active, agentive process where individuals creatively manage feelings of displacement by integrating remembered pasts into current and future-oriented identities. This active nostalgia enables displaced populations to reclaim a sense of control and purpose amidst uncertainty and disruption.

Gh. Hage's active nostalgia emphasizes how nostalgic practices can actively shape everyday life and social interactions. Nostalgia is thus reframed as a dynamic process where memories and idealizations of the past are not merely mourned but actively utilized to cope with present hardships and to envision hopeful futures. Within displacement contexts, this active nostalgia becomes especially poignant, providing individuals and communities a means of creatively adapting to disrupted lives by actively reconstructing their identities and social networks through remembered experiences and collective narratives.

Y.-F. Tuan highlights that places gain meaning through the embodiment of feelings and memories, transforming abstract spaces into emotionally significant locations. He further distinguishes between seeing and other sensations, noting that seeing implies a distance between self and object, whereas objects close to us are experienced through touch, smell, and taste rather than through sight. This distinction underpins his differentiation between tourists – who view places objectively – and locals, who maintain emotional attachments to those places.<sup>5</sup>

This article integrates Tuan's sensory place-making with Hage's active nostalgia to show how tea rituals in Azerbaijani chaikhanas transform spaces into emotionally significant sites. These tea houses help IDPs recreate lost homes, reinforce belonging, and manage trauma by intertwining nostalgia, sensory experience, space,

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<sup>1</sup> Geertz, *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight*.

<sup>2</sup> Anderson, *Jelly's Place: An Ethnographic Memoir*, p. 218.

<sup>3</sup> Hage, *Migration, Food, Memory, and Home-Building*.

<sup>4</sup> Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*.

<sup>5</sup> Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, p. 146.

and identity. As traditional male social spaces, chaikhanas foster community through shared rituals, enabling displaced men to reconstruct identities and communal bonds amid loss and uncertainty. It is also important to note that Material environments are essential to social life, as spaces not only support but also shape and are shaped by social relations.<sup>1</sup> Connerton further emphasizes that material spaces act as repositories of collective memory, encoding a group's history and shared experiences. Similarly, Low and Altman highlight place attachment as a dynamic interplay of physical and emotional connections, underscoring how individuals form bonds with familiar environments.<sup>2</sup> Herzfeld's study of Cretan coffeehouses similarly illustrates how gendered spaces become focal points for community bonding and nostalgic remembrance, functioning as sites where cultural identities and social relationships are continuously affirmed and negotiated.<sup>3 4</sup>

Drawing from these theoretical insights, this article addresses the following research questions:

1. How do Azerbaijani IDP men actively use nostalgic practices to reshape social and emotional attachments within chaikhanas?
2. In what ways do sensory experiences (tastes, smells, textures) reinforce or complicate nostalgic attachments and cultural intimacy within these spaces?

Chaikhanas are gendered spaces rooted in Azerbaijani and Muslim traditions. Also, they serve as sanctuaries for men and sites for rebuilding social networks. These spaces reflect broader socio-cultural changes among Azerbaijani IDPs as they manage nostalgia, trauma, and displacement.

### **Chaikhana as a traditional Male interactional Space in Muslim Cultures**

Tea houses are integral to Muslim daily life across Central Asia and the Middle East. Notably, many top tea-consuming countries are Muslim-majority, including Turkey, Morocco, and Kazakhstan.<sup>5</sup> Tea drinking is a ritual with important social functions in cultures like China and Japan, leading to the establishment of specialized tea houses for social interaction. During the Soviet era, every city in Islamic Central Asia featured neighborhoods with mosques and chaikhanas.<sup>6</sup> Rywkin described the "café life" style of chaikhanas as a hallmark of Muslim life that adapts well to modern conditions.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Connerton, *How Societies Remember*.

<sup>2</sup> Low, Lawrence-Zúñiga (eds.), *The Anthropology of Space and Place*.

<sup>3</sup> Herzfeld, *The Poetics of Manhood*.

<sup>4</sup> Herzfeld, *A Place in History*.

<sup>5</sup> Keen, *Tea in Islamic Cultures*.

<sup>6</sup> Castillo, *Soviet Orientalism: Socialist Realism and Built Tradition*, p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> Rywkin, *Moscow's Muslim Challenge: Soviet Central Asia*, p. 90.

Levkowitz studied chaikhanas in Muslim Kurdish society, describing them as abundant social infrastructures where community members maintain relationships. Though exclusive to men, these spaces also foster interaction across diverse political and cultural views, enabling the emergence of new shared ideas.<sup>1</sup>

Chaikhanas play a central role as exclusively male social spaces in Azerbaijani daily life. Strezmežalska notes men frequent chaikhanas for leisure, including events like Meykhana performances, across Central Asia, where women's visits are socially restricted.<sup>2</sup> Heyat highlights chaikhanas as gender-segregated spaces persisting despite Soviet-era gender equality policies, reflecting traditional norms in Baku and similar regions.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Rzayeva observes that strict gender roles grant males greater freedom from childhood, leading to segregated public spaces such as chaikhanas, sports venues, and beaches, limiting female social activity.<sup>4</sup>

Chaikhanas are so vital to Muslim daily life that migrants often establish them near new settlements to support social interaction. Ehrkamp observed that in Duisburg-Marxloh, Germany, Turkish men gathering at mosques and chaikhanas visibly shape the neighborhood's identity, with the area nicknamed "bazaar street", highlighting the chaikhana's importance alongside the mosque.<sup>5</sup>

Examples from this neighborhood in Germany show that chaikhanas hold significant social importance as gendered spaces shaped by culturally invested meanings. They function as sites where sex-differentiated practices reproduce asymmetric gender relations of power and identity while sustaining social interaction despite changing environments.<sup>6</sup> The chaikhana's persistence among Turkish migrants in Germany underscores its role as a male-only institution integral to traditional Muslim culture. The next sections explore three chaikhanas used by Karabakh IDP men: one in a student dormitory serving as a social hub, a modernized version in Baku created by a young IDP inspired by childhood memories, and a rural chaikhana functioning mainly as a male gathering spot for brief interactions.

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<sup>1</sup> Levkowitz, *Places for the People*, pp. 25-25.

<sup>2</sup> Strezmežalska, *Slam in the Name of Country*, p. 324.

<sup>3</sup> Heyat, *Azeri Women in Transition*, p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> Rzayeva, *How Youth, Gender, and Intergenerational Relations Affect Democratization in Azerbaijan*, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Ehrkamp, *Risking Publicity: Masculinities and the Racialization of Public Neighborhood Space*, p. 122.

<sup>6</sup> Low, Lawrence-Zúñiga (eds.), *The Anthropology of Space and Place*, p. 7.

## Examples of Chaikhana in Aghdam, Baku, and Bilasuvar District

### Chaikhana of Aghdam IDP settlement

Accompanied by my interlocutor Enver, who translated between Azerbaijani and Russian, I first visited the IDP settlement in Baku. The atmosphere was palpable – laundry hung between old Soviet dormitories, signaling life amid harsh conditions. Enver recounted how IDPs had scattered across Azerbaijan after the Karabakh war, often living in train wagons during harsh winters, recalling those difficult early years with sorrow.

My initial encounter with a traditional chaikhana was in a modest backyard building marked “*CAY XANA*”, flanked by Azerbaijani flags and the inscription “*A.02*”, referencing Aghdam’s license plate. Enver explained that this served as a symbol of identity and loss, representing attachment to a place that no longer exists. As Conner-ton notes, such remembrance exists through both the “moral” and “material” life of a society.<sup>1</sup>

Several old Soviet cars, including “Zhiguli 06”, stood on the street filled with household items. Many had flat tires or no batteries – locals explained car batteries were once used to power TVs during outages – indicating the cars were largely unused.

The chaikhana stood in a backyard behind the dormitories. My first meeting with Aghdam male IDPs happened there. Inside, the air was filled with brewed tea and wood smoke. Elderly men sat at wooden tables, playing dominoes and backgammon while discussing family events. Upon entering, Emir, a respected elder, warmly welcomed me after learning I was Georgian, explaining his trust stemmed from having a Georgian friend during his Soviet Army service, which shaped his positive view of Georgians. His respected status seemed linked to his past ownership of a tea house in Karabakh. Another elder, Ali, initially dismissed the chaikhana as a “*gathering spot for idle men*”, but then fondly recalled the pre-war Aghdam chaikhana as a large, lively place where many teapots were sold daily and joyful evenings were shared with neighbors, emphasizing that their gatherings were about friendship rather than money – times he lamented as lost.

Ali’s memories reflect Hage’s active nostalgia, showing how past experiences help reshape identities amid displacement. Though he joked about the current chaikhana, his vivid recollections revealed its emotional role as a link between past prosperity and present hardship. He contrasted the “real chaikhana” of the past – larger and more vibrant – with the modest present, noting its declining condition as symbolic of broader social and economic changes. This spatial object thus serves as a site of collective memory, embodying a “glorious past” lost over time.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> Zerubavel, *Time Maps*, p. 16.

According to my interlocuter's narrative, before the Karabakh war, Aghdam had *"The best three-story chaikhana in Azerbaijan"*, which for them was a symbol of the friendly character, wealth, and prosperity of the Azerbaijani people of Karabakh:

*"[Chaikhana] was huge. Every day 30 teapots were sold. Orders had been made and we sold them. We are from Aghdam. There was only one three-story Chai Khana there, which was called 'Station' and it was one of the most famous. And there were all kinds of jams with 50 Kopeks worth".<sup>1 2</sup>*

Ali's perspective was especially meaningful to me; he described his daily meetings with his friend, who was a waiter, and other fellow villagers in Aghdam chaikhana:

*"And we ate every evening and drank tea [together] and we started dragging the menu with them because 'I will pay' – 'No, I will pay' and so on... Now it's gone. In my opinion, no relationships, but the time has changed..."<sup>3</sup>*

In this passage, it is worth noting that chaikhana was represented as a symbol of self-identity materialized in space and that there is a contrast between the public space and the phenomenon of time. Thus, a stable value system and shared cultural identity were emphasized, in contrast to the ever-changing nature of time.

Unlike in Aghdam, people in Baku are busier and have less time for relationships. Although certain IDPs remain in the same neighborhoods, most of their fellow villagers are now scattered across Azerbaijan, making it difficult to sustain regular contact.

*"We were also neighbors... we kept our relations... We still have a relationship [with the other IDP's]. When somebody dies, we go. [...] For example, we talk on the phone... but we gather seldom... Now our relationship is colder".<sup>4</sup>*

The sensory landscape Tuan describes became tangible as an elder poured me tea, its steam carrying the familiar scent of home. For him, tea evoked comfort and memory. The chaikhana, alive with the rhythmic clack of dominoes and casual chatter, served not just as a social hub but as a sensory refuge where IDPs re-lived and shared

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<sup>1</sup> The author translated original texts of interviews from Russian to English language. The original Russian texts of interviews have been included. The style of English lingual interlocutors is completely preserved.

<sup>2</sup> [shakes head with regret (G. V.)] "... [Чай хана] Большие било. Каждый день 30 чаиник продавался. Заказы были да и продавали. Ми из Агдана. Единство чаихана у нас било там, в Агдане називался Станция – и один из самих извесних било, 3 этажное ... И лубое варение было. 50 копеек стоиль".

<sup>3</sup> "И ми каждый вечер кушили, пить чай [вместе (G. V.)], и начинается драгать меню ними потому что я буду платит – не я буду и тогда. сейчас уже нет. По моему нет отношения, но время изменился ..."

<sup>4</sup> "Тожь были соседи... мы сохранили отношению... У нас ещё есть отношения [с другим переселниками.] Когда кто-нибудь убит, ми едем. [...] Например по телефону общаемся... но иногда встречается... сейчас наши отношение более холодно".



experiences, including news of life events among fellow villagers who dispersed across the other parts of Azerbaijan:

*“We help each other here, keep our relationships, and for the wedding, for example, we call, and say come to us. This is how our chaikhana helps”.<sup>1</sup>*

The absence of a chaikhana weakens social ties, creating a sense of “coldness” marked by infrequent, distant interactions – like phone calls replacing face-to-face contact. This limits the renewal of communal bonds. Connerton emphasizes how daily village conversations sustain collective memory, making individuals both subjects and narrators of shared histories.<sup>2</sup> In this context, the chaikhana becomes essential for IDPs to exchange news, revisit memories, and process displacement through ongoing social interaction:

*“After [becoming] a refugee, in any place when we meet (after the war) we speak right away... Keep the relationship, right? – We talk like it was before the war; well we open our hearts to each other so to say... But 30 years passed, right?!”<sup>3</sup>*

Ali’s remark here is important for one key reason – that sharing emotions and deep talk with fellow villagers is something beyond space and time – according to him, it can happen “in any place” although “30 years passed”. Thus, the need for social interaction led to the remaking of chaikhana to facilitate the exchange of information and sharing of emotions.

Hage reframes nostalgia as an active process of home-making, where spaces like the chaikhana help displaced people rebuild a sense of belonging through collective memory and social ties.<sup>4</sup> The ongoing conversations in chaikhanas embody what Hage calls the “affective building blocks” of home-making – security, familiarity, community, and hope – which empower displaced men to sustain cultural identity and social networks despite temporal and spatial disruptions. In Baku, the Aghdam chaikhana continued its traditional role after displacement, offering IDPs a space for connection and emotional healing. This reflects Alexander’s view that overcoming trauma relies not just on structural change but also on rebuilding social networks.<sup>5</sup>

Despite its importance, some IDPs dismiss the chaikhana as a “slackers’ spot”, revealing a nostalgia that idealizes the past. This echoes Tuan’s distinction between distant observation and close sensory experience – locals, unlike tourists, relate to places through emotional and embodied attachment.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “У нас ещё есть мы друг друга помогаем тут, сохранением отношение и на свадьбе например позвонят и говорят приезжи к нам. Так помогает наша чай хана”.

<sup>2</sup> Connerton, *How Societies Remember*.

<sup>3</sup> “После беженство любом месте когда встречаем, мы сразу расскажем... отношению сохраняем да? разговариваем, было это до воины, ну сердцу открываем друг-другу так можно сказать... но у нас 30 год прошло, да?!”

<sup>4</sup> Hage, *Migration, Food, Memory, and Home-Building*.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, p. 191.

<sup>6</sup> Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, p. 146.



Though dismissed as a “slackers’ spot”, personal stories revealed the chaikhana’s role as collective therapy. Daily conversations helped IDP men process trauma and rebuild bonds, prompting them to recreate the space once living conditions improved. The next section explores a modernized version of a tea house built by an IDP in Baku.

### *Flora as a “New type of Chaikhana”*

My host and main interlocutor, Turkai, introduced me to *Flora*, a self-described “New Type of Chaikhana” in the heart of Baku. In his early thirties, he managed both the hotel and café, moving fluently between Azerbaijani, Russian, and English. His blend of traditional hospitality and modern ambition reflected a balance between nostalgia and forward-looking energy. Displacement had deeply shaped Turkai’s life. As a child during the Karabakh war, he endured hardship with his family, even surviving for weeks in the forest. After resettling in Baku, improved conditions – thanks to his father’s position as a judge – enabled Turkai to pursue education and develop a cosmopolitan outlook grounded in both experience and aspiration.

As a student, Turkai recalled his childhood dream of a chaikhana that would bring people together. One evening after university, he visited a local tea house in Baku but found older men unwelcoming toward him and his friends. This experience sparked his idea of creating what he called a “New Type of Chai Khana”:

*“You know, when I went to the chaikhana before 2015, I was a young university student, [...] And they were looking at us like this [...] and when I finished university, I decided to like, I’m gonna make chaikhana just for youth/young people, you know because we also need communication and a place like that”.*

Turkai’s childhood memories left a strong impression, drawing him to spend time in chaikhanas with friends. He wanted to transform the chaikhana into an inclusive space where everyone could connect and feel welcome:

*“[According to my previous experience... (G. V.)] I can see that this place somehow connects people...”*

*Flora* was located within the hotel’s courtyard, its open-air tables bordered by a small kitchen and bar. Unlike the quiet, male-dominated chaikhanas of the past, *Flora* pulsed with youthful energy – indie music, laughter, and vibrant murals replaced the subdued atmosphere of traditional tea houses. He designed *Flora* to be inclusive, welcoming both women and young people:

*“Here [this (G. V.)] is also chaikhana, but it’s a different one. Maybe in Baku totally different [one] is this, because only young people are coming here, in Azerbaijan, in Baku, you cannot see young people enter chaikhanas but here I made it so comfortable for girls [so (G. V.)] they can come in here, and because that nobody can... you know... disappoint them?!”*

The air at *Flora* carried a mix of Turkish coffee, shisha, and international teas, creating a sensory experience unlike traditional chaikhana – yet still rooted in their spirit. Despite its modern vibe, *Flora* maintained a sense of community. Board games like chess and Uno sat on tables, while live music, DJ sets, and other events brought people together in a lively, social atmosphere Turkai proudly cultivated.

His statement makes it clear, that boundaries between the tea house he created, and the youth cafe or clubs are blurred. Despite this similarity, the interlocutor himself characterized this place as a tea house and did not pay attention to its similarity with, for instance, a youth café. Yet, he spoke a lot about how this place differs from its existing, “*traditional*” type. In *Flora*, unlike the traditional type of chaikhana, as he said, they have live music, club nights, different types of tea and sweets, and board games. At the same time, *Flora* serves as a hotel too:

*“We put the chess here, before I put the domino and they [guests] started screaming. They like playing Uno as well... I want to change things. We make also chess tournaments here... We [also] have too much table teas here, like German teas, like Chinese teas, all of the world brands [...]. We have too much events here, we make music festivals, bazaars here... We bring DJs here who play music. So, when the young people come here, they see that it is not a chaikhana. Because we have Chilim<sup>1</sup> nights here, on the second stage we have a theatre here. And we have a painting house here... Chaikhana is an art place. Everything is like together. Hostel, Chai house, and art place. I can explain that it is [a (G. V.)] chaikhana and also it is not a chaikhana [Laughs]”.*

Because of these special features listed above, according to Turkai, *Flora* is primarily a space for young people, yet it remains open to everyone:

*“But here is, here is... social and young peoples come, also older people, when they come, they don’t like it here, they are welcomed, but everyone was young here and they very soon left...”*

Despite its vibrant atmosphere, *Flora* remained firmly rooted in the symbolic framework of a chaikhana. For Turkai, it represented more than just a commercial enterprise; it was a personal reclamation of a childhood dream – a dream disrupted by war and displacement. Forbidden entry as a child, he viewed it as an exclusive domain of mature masculinity, a threshold he eagerly anticipated crossing one day. Displacement disrupted this rite of passage, leaving him with unresolved feelings of exclusion and longing. *Flora*, therefore, as described above, embodied his attempt to reconcile this disruption, creating an inclusive social space reflective of contemporary Azerbaijani youth culture while honoring his nostalgic connection to Karabakh.

*Flora’s* atmosphere reflected a fusion of tradition and modernity. Unlike typical cafés or youth clubs, it retained a strong link to Azerbaijani tea culture – offering specialty teas in traditional armudu glasses, reinforcing cultural continuity. for Turkai, *Flora* was more than a venue – it was a chaikhana that encouraged connection thro-

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<sup>1</sup> In Eng. Hookah.

ugh shared memory. Its identity rested not on formality but on emotional resonance, adapting the chaikhana model to fit the lives of a younger, displaced generation. *Flora* embodied his vision of nostalgia reimaged, blending resilience with innovation.

*“Well, when I became refuge, I also felt that such places is necessary. Yeah, like it is mostly for youngsters but generally people need places to meet and share things”.*

Thus, *Flora* is more than a commercial venture; it serves as a space for young Azerbaijanis to renegotiate identity, memory, and community amid displacement. Unlike the Aghdam IDP chaikhana, *Flora*’s inclusive, modern nature means it lacks a focus on collective trauma recovery. Also, it transcends the classical tea house, functioning as a youth cultural hub shaped by its owner’s vision and childhood memories of Karabakh, alongside his urban hotel business.

After the two cases of chaikhana, above, the next section discusses the function of the tea house as a place of social interactions in a rural settlement of Karabakh IDPs.

### **Jibrail IDP Settlement Chaikhana in Bilasuvar district**

My third ethnographic encounter took place in the Jibrail IDP settlement located in Azerbaijan’s southern Bilasuvar district. Contrasting starkly with the vibrant, youthful energy of *Flora* in Baku and the traditional tea house culture found among IDPs from Aghdam, this chaikhana presented a distinct social and spatial dynamic. Arriving with assistance from Turkai, I was greeted by his uncle Habil. His welcoming manner was softened by his reserved nature, reflecting his deep religiosity and conservative worldview.

The settlement itself spread across eleven sequentially numbered villages, each linked by a single main highway that functioned as the lifeline of the community. Essential services like grocery stores, pharmacies, marriage halls, and indeed the local chaikhana lined this main thoroughfare. The chaikhana itself was ambiguously known as both a “chaikhana” and a “doner khana”, highlighting its dual function and somewhat diminished cultural centrality compared to my previous experiences.

My interlocutor’s houses were at different distance from the tea house – my key interlocutor Habil lived about 400 meters away, but local shepherd from Jibrail, Bilal, lived less than 100 meters from here. Positioned on the second floor of a modest two-story structure, this chaikhana offered a view of the surrounding rural landscape. Its interior consisted of several small rooms partitioned by thin wooden panels; each room connected centrally by a larger communal space featuring a sizeable fireplace. Plastic tables and chairs spilled onto the first floor and into the courtyard, adding to the ambiguity of its identity – half restaurant, half tea house.

Bilal’s livelihood depended on regular trips to Baku to buy and sell livestock, leaving him limited opportunities to socialize within the settlement. The local chai-

khana, therefore, offered him a much-needed platform for social interaction, a weekly respite from his demanding routine. Bilal described his visits vividly, emphasizing sensory rituals: His narrative highlighted the sensory pleasure of sipping hot tea from glasses, the tactile satisfaction of handling domino tiles, and the comforting background murmur of familiar voices:

*“There [i.e., in chaikhana] – you know how it happens – people go there in the evenings; They play dominoes, there is a restaurant near it. At dinner, in the evening everyone sits there, they play dominoes, people do it and things like that... For example, my son lives in Baku, his son studies in Ganja... and I go to work on the sheep farm myself, right? – So sometimes I go outside to meet people. Every week on the morning of the 11<sup>th</sup> I go to the chaikhana and drink tea there. Just like you have coffee; we drink tea everywhere... Well, in general, people meet there, yes, they play and that’s it... They have relationships here”*.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to Bilal’s regular interactions, Habil rarely frequented the chaikhana. As a devout Muslim and follower of Turkish theologian Said Nursi, Habil prioritized religious practices and gatherings over secular spaces like the tea house. Without a mosque in the settlement in his words, due to unspecified “*political reasons*”, Habil’s house frequently served as an informal place of worship and theological study for fellow *Nurcular* adherents.<sup>2</sup> He emphasized that for him, communal prayer and Quranic study offered deeper connections and more meaningful emotional support than secular gatherings.

Together with his uncle and other IDPs living in the same settlement, Habil calls himself *Nurcular* and after performing the night prayers, he often reads Nuri’s commentaries on the Qur’an, or his other theological works (in Turkish, Russian, and English languages). Accordingly, as a deeply religious Muslim, he considered the chaikhana as a profane space and he preferred socializing with the other members of *Nurcular*. It is also important to note that Habil told me that his childhood during Karabakh would be “*Complete*” if he or other Azerbaijanis in general, were Muslims – only after the collapse of the Soviet Union was given him the chance to meet Turkish Missionaries in Baku, who helped him and many other IDP men from Karabakh to study Quran. After this, his life becomes meaningful and everything around him, even the war and other struggles were brought under an understanding with the help of Islam.

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<sup>1</sup> “Там, знаеш как – вечером люди идут, [и] там домино играется, возле его ресторана есть, на обеде, вечером все сидят там, домино играет, люди есть так... Например мой сын живет в Баку, у него сын учится в Гандже... И я иду на работу [овцеводческой] ферме, сам да? Иногда выхожу на улице чтобы люди встречаемся, каждую неделю утро 11 часов поеду да на чай хана и там чай пью. Как у вас кофе, так у нас везде чай пьюм. Ну, в общем, люди там встречаются, да, играют и все... Отношение есть”.

<sup>2</sup> Plural form of Said Nursi’s religious followers. They also described this word as “*The readers of Nuri*”.

Despite the fact that chaikhana had a much less importance to him, Habil's negative view of the tea house was not shared by other members of *Nurcular*. One of them, Adil who told me that he served in the Soviet army and goes with his brother to Habil's house to pray, noted that sometimes it is even necessary to visit this place, especially for older men. He mentioned overcoming trauma of the war as the reason for this:

*"Everyone got traumas, big traumas... All of us, even mothers... They meet there, they talk, they come here with the problem, and then they forget everything. They play cards a lot or drink wine or something, you understand me? – In general, such a guy is very difficult to find with whom you can speak about the problem... One can't find many young men in chaikhana, but old men can be found there, who talk to each other and so on".<sup>1</sup>*

Adil's remarks show that despite religious devotion, secular spaces like the chaikhana remain vital for emotional support, especially for older men who share experiences and find comfort there. Younger men's limited participation suggests generational shifts. While chaikhana help manage trauma through informal interaction, their role in this setting was diminished compared to religious gatherings. The differing views of Adil and Habil highlight how individual and generational factors shape communal space use. Adil sees the chaikhana as an emotional refuge, whereas Habil associates it with a secular communist past and downplays its current role. This reflects Hage's active nostalgia, where familiar rituals help displaced men navigate emotional continuity and security.

In the absence of a mosque, prayer gatherings in one interlocutor's home became key spaces for socializing and sharing news – partly replacing the chaikhana's role. Compared to urban examples like *Flora* or Aghdam's tea house, the rural chaikhana held less everyday importance. The dispersed layout and slower pace of village life meant people often prioritized work or religious practice over casual socializing.

The "chaikhana" doubling as a "doner khana" reflected these rural adaptations. It served different functions for different people – practical for some, nostalgic for others – highlighting how tradition bends and shifts depending on personal histories and community needs.

Despite its varied uses, the tea house remained a powerful symbol – adaptable yet rooted in shared rituals and emotional ties that support community resilience in displacement. This ethnographic case shows how personal histories and collective traumas shape the evolving meaning of spaces like the chaikhana.

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<sup>1</sup> "Все получил травм, большой травм... все я мы, и матери да... они там [в чайхан] (G. V.) встречаются, рассуждают... Они пришли проблема все забылся, они так сколько играет – карт или [пьют (G. V.)] вино, что то, вы понимаете? – Вообще, такой парень трудно найти с которое о проблеме можно [по]говори[ва]т... На чай хане нет много юноши да сейчас там старико надо найти которые говорят и тогдали...".

## Conclusion

In this article, I have explored the chaikhana as a meeting place for internally displaced men from Karabakh, using an ethnographic study of three chaikhanas across Azerbaijan. This analysis demonstrated how these spaces – both typical and atypical of traditional Muslim cultural settings – offer insights into broader socio-cultural, economic, and religious processes shaping the lives of IDPs. By focusing on the reconstruction and adaptation of chaikhanas, this study revealed their dual role: as a bridge between the past and present and as spaces where displacement and resocialization converge.

The ethnographic data explicitly addressed key research questions. Firstly, Azerbaijani IDP men actively used nostalgic practices within chaikhanas to reshape social and emotional attachments disrupted by displacement. The traditional chaikhana in the Aghdam IDP settlement illustrated active nostalgia through daily rituals and sensory experiences, helping men reconstruct their collective identity by recalling pre-displacement life. The *Flora* chaikhana, conversely, demonstrated how younger IDPs reimagined nostalgia, creating a modern, inclusive space that still resonated with cultural and emotional memory from childhood.

Sensory experiences within chaikhanas significantly reinforced nostalgic attachments and cultural intimacy. The aroma of brewed tea and tactile interactions with traditional games like dominoes and backgammon evoked powerful emotional connections to lost homes and communities. These sensory practices, as theorized by Tuan, transformed chaikhanas into emotionally significant sites where past and present converged, complicating but ultimately enriching their cultural and social roles.

Finally, chaikhanas facilitated navigation through displacement, trauma, and memory by offering spatial practices of active nostalgia. The Bilasuvar chaikhana illustrated this clearly, despite its diminished significance due to competing religious social practices. Here, chaikhanas still provided essential therapeutic outlets for older men to manage collective traumas, demonstrating their continued relevance even when partially replaced by religious gatherings.

Thus, the analysis underscores how chaikhanas function as microcosms of complex processes shaping Azerbaijani IDP communities. These spaces actively participate in constructing cultural identity, offering both continuity with the past and adaptive responses to current realities. By exploring tradition, memory, and adaptation interplay, this study emphasizes the chaikhana's crucial role in sustaining resilience and community bonds amidst displacement.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Reflecting on Arthur Conan Doyle's epigraph, the chaikhana invites us to consider the nuanced difference between merely seeing and deeply observing. Like Dr. Watson, individuals may frequently engage with familiar spaces without genuinely recognizing their deeper symbolic and emotional significance. For IDPs, the chaikhana's sensory experiences enable a profound observation and appreciation of a place's intangible qualities, emphasizing that understanding



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displacement and nostalgia requires not only observing physical spaces but also perceiving and interpreting their emotional and symbolic dimensions. In this process, the chaikhana is not merely seen – it is experienced, felt, and remembered.



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**Attachment to a Nostalgic Place: Remakings  
of the Azerbaijani Chaikhana  
by IDP Men from Karabakh**

Summary

This article examines the social and emotional significance of tea houses (chaikhana) in the daily lives of Azerbaijani men who were forcibly displaced from Karabakh. Based on ethnographic research, it shows how and why displaced persons re-create these traditional spaces in their new living environments. Tea houses are presented as a means of preserving cultural continuity, coping with trauma, reinforcing social ties, and fostering new emotional attachments to place. This analytical discussion engages with scholarly debates on space, nostalgia, and the particularities of social adaptation.

The study is based on three months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2022 in Baku and Bilasuvar among Azerbaijani IDPs from Karabakh. Access to the field was challenging due to the sensitivity of the topic, the ongoing Karabakh conflict at the time, and other related factors. To address these difficulties, the article emphasizes the importance of informal relationships and personal rapport with narrators in post-conflict ethnography.

The theoretical framework draws on Gh. Hage's concept of *active nostalgia*, which understands nostalgia not as a passive and painful attachment to the past, but as an emotional practice oriented toward the future. For displaced persons, nostalgia serves as a means of restoring identity and forging new connections. During the inductive generalization of the ethnographic material, the study also engages with Y.-F. Tuan's theory, which highlights the role of human feelings and emotional experiences in transforming a specific space into a place imbued with meaning. The works of Connerton and Herzfeld are also significant here, as they provide useful insights for the anthropological analysis of memory and gendered spaces.

The article examines three cases of re-created tea houses by displaced Azerbaijani men from Karabakh. The first was located in Baku, in a former student dormitory, where IDPs from Aghdam decided to establish a traditional, men-only space after resettlement. In this setting, tea drinking and traditional games turn the tea house into a sensory refuge where men gather daily, exchange information, and reinforce social ties.

The second tea house is a modernized space, adapted to youth culture, operating as both a tea house and a hotel in central Baku. Its founder, a young displaced man, sought to transform the traditional space into an inclusive venue accessible to women, blending music, contemporary board games, and an urban aesthetic. *Flora* represents an original attempt to adapt the traditional Azerbaijani tea house to the interests of a

new generation, merging childhood aspirations formed in displacement with business ambitions and efforts toward the resocialization of displaced persons.

The third example is located in the Bilasuvar IDP settlement. Unlike the previous cases, this tea house operates as a type of restaurant. At first glance, its cultural significance appears similar to that of the first tea house discussed. However, the analysis of the settlement's social space revealed that the tea house, as a profane space, carries less meaning for some members of the devout community, who prefer to socialize in their home environments after performing *namaz* prayers. In this case, the tea house's social role is shaped not only by displacement but also by the rural context and the everyday practices of a religious Muslim community.

In conclusion, drawing on ethnographic material, the article highlights cases of re-creating tea houses as traditional Azerbaijani social spaces by IDPs from Karabakh. Through an analytical framework of active nostalgia and spatial practices, the tea house is presented as a kind of microcosm that reflects broader economic, religious, and socio-cultural issues within the Azerbaijani displaced community.

**მიჯაჭვულობა ნოსტალგიურ სივრცესთან: ყარაბალიდან  
იძულებით გადაადგილებული მამაკაცების მიერ  
აზერბაიჯანული ჩაიხანების ხელახლა შექმნა**

რეზიუმე

წინამდებარე სტატიაში განხილულია ჩაის სახლების (ჩაიხანას) სოციალური და ემოციური მნიშვნელობა ყარაბალიდან იძულებით გადაადგილებული აზერბაიჯანელი მამაკაცების ყოველდღიურ ცხოვრებაში. ეთნოგრაფიულ კვლევაზე დაყრდნობით, ნაშრომში ნაჩვენებია, თუ როგორ და რატომ ქმნიან ხელახლა იძულებით გადაადგილებული პირები ამ ტრადიციულ სივრცეებს ახალ საცხოვრებელ გარემოში. ნაშრომში ჩაიხანები წარმოდგენილია, როგორც კულტურული უწყვეტობის შენარჩუნების, ტრავმის გადალახვის, სოციალური კავშირების განმტკიცებისა და ადგილის მიმართ ახალი ემოციური მიჯაჭვულობის შექმნის საშუალება. ამგვარი ანალიტიკური მსჯელობა, თავის მხრივ, უკავშირდება სამეცნიერო დებატებს სივრცეზე, ნოსტალგიასა და სოციალური ადაპტაციის თავისებურებებზე. კვლევა ეფუძნება 2022 წელს ჩატარებულ სამთვიან ეთნოგრაფიულ საველე კვლევას ბაქოსა და ბილიასუვარში (ყარაბალიდან იძულებით გადაადგილებულ აზერბაიჯანულ მოსახლეობასთან). ეთნოგრაფიულ ველთან წვდომა რთული იყო თემის პრობლემურობის, იმ პერიოდში მიმდინარე ყარაბალის კონფლიქტისა და მასთან დაკავშირებული სხვა მიზეზების გამო. ამ პრობლემის გადასაჭრელად, სტატიაში ხაზგასმულია პოსტკონფლიქტურ ეთნოგრაფიაში არაფორმალური ურთიერთობებისა და მთხრობელებთან პერსონალური დაახლოების მნიშვნელობა.

ნაშრომის თეორიული ჩარჩო ეყრდნობა გ. ჰაჟის აქტიური ნოსტალგიის კონცეფციას, რომელიც ნოსტალგიას განიხილავს არა როგორც წარსულზე პასიურად და მტკივნეულად მიჯაჭვულობის განცდას, არამედ როგორც მომავლისკენ მიმართულ ემოციურ პრაქტიკას. იძულებით გადაადგილებული პირებისთვის ნოსტალგია ხდება იდენტობის აღდგენისა და ახალი კავშირების შექმნის ინსტრუმენტი. ნაშრომის ინდუქციურად განზოგადებისას ეთნოგრაფიული მასალის ანალიზი ეყრდნობა ტუანის თეორიასაც, რომელიც კონკრეტული სივრცის ემოციური დატვირთვის მქონე ადგილად გარდაქმნის პროცესში ადამიანთა შეგრძნებებისა და ემოციური გამოცდილებების როლს უსვამს ხაზს. აღსანიშნავია კონერტონის და ჰერცფელდის ნაშრომებიც, რომელთა დახმარებითაც შესაძლებელი ხდება მეხსიერებისა და გენდერული სივრცეების ანთროპოლოგიური ანალიზი.

სტატიაში განხილულია ყარაბალიდან დევნილი აზერბაიჯანელი მამაკაცების მიერ სამი განსხვავებული ჩაიხანის ხელახლა შექმნის ნიმუში. პირველი მათგანი მდებარეობს ბაქოში, ყოფილ სტუდენტურ საერთო საცხოვრებელში, რომელშიც ყარაბალიდან (აღდამიდან) იძულებით გადაადგილებულმა პირებმა, დასახლების შემდეგ, გადანყვიტეს ტრადიციული, მხოლოდ მამაკაცებისთვის განკუთვნილი სივრცის ხელახლა შექმნა. ამ სივრცეში ჩაის სმა და ტრადიციული თამაშები ჩაიხანას ერთგვარ სენსორულ თავშესაფრად აქცევს, რომელშიც მამაკაცები ყოველდღიურად იკრიბებიან, ცვლიან ინფორმაციას, განიხილავენ პრობლემებს და ამყარებენ საკუთარ სოციალურ კავშირებს.

მეორე ჩაიხანა წარმოადგენს მოდერნიზებულ და ახალგაზრდულ კულტურაზე მორგებულ ჩაის სახლსა და სასტუმროს ბაქოს ცენტრში. მისი შემქმნელი, ახალგაზრდა იძულებით გადაადგილებული მამაკაცი, შეეცადა ტრადიციული სივრცე გადაექცია ინკლუზიურ ადგილად, სადაც ყოფნა ქალებისთვისაც იქნებოდა დასაშვები და რომელშიც გაერთიანებულია მუსიკა, თანამედროვე სამაგიდო თამაშები და ურბანული ესთეტიკა. *ფლორა* წარმოადგენს აზერბაიჯანული კულტურისთვის დამახასიათებელი ტრადიციული ჩაის სახლის ახალი თაობის ინტერესებისთვის მორგების ორიგინალურ მცდელობას, რომელშიც ერთმანეთს ერწყმის დევნილობის პერიოდში ჩამოყალიბებული ბავშვური მისწრაფებები, ბიზნესინტერესი და იძულებით გადაადგილებულთა რესოციალიზაციის მცდელობანი.

ჩაიხანის მესამე მაგალითი ბილიასუვარის იძულებით გადაადგილებულთა დასახლებას მოიცავს. წინა შემთხვევებისგან განსხვავებით, ბილიასუვარის ჩაიხანა ფუნქციონირებს როგორც ერთგვარი რესტორანი. მისი კულტურული მნიშვნელობა, ერთი შეხედვით, ისეთივეა, როგორც განხილული პირველი ჩაიხანისა, მიუხედავად ამისა, იძულებით გადაადგილებულთა სოციალური სივრცის ანალიზისას გამოიკვეთა, რომ ჩაიხანა, როგორც პროფანული სივრცე, ნაკლებმნიშვნელოვანია დასახლების მორწმუნე საზოგადოების წარმომადგენელთა ნაწილისთვის, რომლებსაც ნამაზის ღოცვების შემდეგ, ჩაის სახლში სტუმრობას, საკუთარ საცხოვრებელ გარემოში ინტერაქცია ურჩევნიათ. შესაბამისად, ამ შემთხვევაში ჩაიხანის სოციალურ მნიშვნელობაზე, წინა შემთხვევებისგან განსხვავებით, გავლენას რურალური გარემო და მორწმუნე მუსლიმი საზოგადოების ყოველდღიური რელიგიური პრაქტიკაც ახდენს.

საბოლოო ჯამში, ეთნოგრაფიულ მასალაზე დაყრდნობით, სტატიაში გამოკვეთილია ჩაიხანის, როგორც ტრადიციული აზერბაიჯანული სოციალური სივრცის ხელახლა შექმნის შემთხვევები ყარაბალიდან იძულებით გადაადგილებულ პირთა მიერ. ამ პროცესის აქტიური ნოსტალგიისა და სივრცის ანთროპოლოგიის ჩარჩოებში ანალიზის შედეგად სტატიაში ჩაიხანა ერთგვარ მიკროკოსმოსადაა წარმოდგენილი, რომელიც აზერბაიჯანელ დევნილ მოსახლეობაში არსებულ ეკონომიკურ, რელიგიურ თუ სოციოკულტურულ პრობლემებს ასახავს.