

Characteristics of the Development of the Religious Education System in Karabakh (The Second Half of the Nineteenth - Early Twentieth Centuries)

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Abstract. *This article examines the development of the religious education system in Karabakh from the second half of the nineteenth to the early twentieth century through historical-comparative, source-critical, and historical-geographical approaches. It analyses the functional distinction between madrasas and mollakhanas, the territorial distribution of religious educational institutions, Shusha's position as a regional centre, curricular content, waqf financing, the social roles of graduates, and changes associated with Russian imperial policy. The comparison of sources shows that religious education was not confined to urban settings: it also operated in mahals and villages, although institutional density and continuity varied according to population, mosque networks, local resources, waqf property, and the availability of trained teachers. Shusha became the principal centre because administrative, economic, religious, and cultural resources were concentrated there, while rural instruction was organised mainly around mosques, mollakhanas, and local teachers. Madrasas trained religious personnel but also transmitted literacy, written culture, classical languages, and skills relevant to local administration. The expansion of secular schools did not immediately displace traditional education; the two sectors coexisted and served partly different social needs. The study argues that the period was characterised not simply by decline, but by uneven adaptation under conditions of administrative supervision, competition, and institutional diversification.*

Keywords: *Karabakh, Shusha, religious education, madrasa, mollakhana, waqf*

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Qarabağda dini təhsil sisteminin inkişaf xüsusiyyətləri (XIX əsrin ikinci yarısı - XX əsrin əvvəlləri)

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Xülasə. Məqalədə XIX əsrin ikinci yarısı - XX əsrin əvvəllərində Qarabağda dini təhsil sisteminin inkişaf xüsusiyyətləri tarixi-müqayisəli, mənbəşünaslıq və tarixi-coğrafi yanaşmalar əsasında araşdırılır. Mədrəsə və mollaxanaların funksional fərqləri, dini təhsil müəssisələrinin ərazi üzrə yayılması, Şuşanın regional mərkəz kimi mövqeyi, tədris proqramları, vəqf maliyyələşməsi, məzunların sosial fəaliyyəti və Rusiya imperiyasının siyasəti ilə bağlı dəyişikliklər təhlil olunur. Mənbələrin müqayisəsi göstərir ki, dini təhsil yalnız şəhərlərlə məhdudlaşmamış, mahal və kəndlərdə də fəaliyyət göstərmişdir. Lakin müəssisələrin sıxlığı və davamlılığı əhali, məscid şəbəkəsi, yerli icmanın imkanları, vəqf əmlakı və hazırlıqlı müəllimlərin mövcudluğundan asılı olaraq fərqlənirdi. İnzibati, iqtisadi, dini və mədəni imkanların Şuşada cəmləşməsi şəhəri əsas təhsil mərkəzinə çevirmiş, kəndlərdə tədris daha çox məscid, mollaxana və yerli müəllimlər ətrafında təşkil olunmuşdur. Mədrəsələr ruhani kadrlarla yanaşı savadlılıq, yazı mədəniyyəti, klassik dillər və yerli idarəçilik üçün zəruri bacarıqların yayılmasına xidmət etmişdir. Dünyəvi məktəblərin genişlənməsi ənənəvi dini təhsili dərhal aradan qaldırmamış, iki istiqamət müəyyən müddət paralel fəaliyyət göstərmişdir. Araşdırma dövrün yalnız tənəzzüllə deyil, inzibati nəzarət, rəqabət və institusional şaxələnmə şəraitində qeyri-bərabər uyğunlaşma ilə səciyyələndiyini göstərir.

Açar sözlər: Qarabağ, Şuşa, dini təhsil, mədrəsə, mollaxana, vəqf

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Introduction

The second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries marked a period of increasing institutional diversity in Karabakh's educational landscape. Traditional religious schools continued to operate while state, urban, rural, Russian-Azerbaijani, and vocational schools expanded. Interpreting this development solely as a conflict between an old and a new school system would simplify a more complex process. Madrasas and mollakhanas remained important providers of religious knowledge, elementary literacy, writing skills, and trained religious personnel even as secular institutions altered their social position.

Religious education in Karabakh cannot be explained without reference to space. The location and continuity of schools, mollakhanas, and madrasas depended on the administrative status and population of settlements, the presence of mosques, local economic resources, waqf property, and access to trained teachers. In towns and large villages where these conditions were more favourable, institutions tended to be more durable; in smaller settlements, instruction was usually organised around mosques or local mollas. Chingizoglu characterises the network succinctly: "Madrasas and mollakhanas operated in most of these mahals. There were several madrasas and mollakhanas in the city of Shusha" (Çingizoglu, 2013, s. 4). This evidence points to a regional network rather than an exclusively urban phenomenon.

Existing scholarship has examined nineteenth-century schooling, pedagogical thought, the urban and cultural history of Shusha, religious institutions, the Muslim clergy, and imperial confessional policy (Ağayev, 2000; Əhədov, 1991; Əhmədov, 2006; Hacıyev, 2010; Kuliyeva, 2003; Mahmudov və Şükürov, 2009; Məmmədov, 2005, 2016). Bakhishova provides a regional account of culture and education, whereas Farhadov and Agaev establish the broader political and legal context of religious administration (Araev, 2015; Baxışova, 2024; Fərhadov, 2025). However, the territorial organisation of religious education, the contrast between Shusha and rural centres, and the relationship between institutional continuity and local material resources have not been sufficiently integrated within a single historical-geographical analysis. The article therefore asks three related questions: which factors shaped the territorial distribution of religious educational institutions; why did Shusha become the principal regional centre; and how did the expansion of secular schools affect the functions and social position of traditional institutions? Its purpose is to identify the organisational structure, spatial patterns, and changing role of religious education in Karabakh during the period under study.

Methods

The study combines the historical-comparative method, source criticism, and a historical-geographical approach. Its source base includes factual works on education in Karabakh, studies of religious processes and imperial educational policy, and published materials relating to the period. Chingizoglu's encyclopaedic study is the principal source for the names and locations of institutions, teachers, curricula, financing, and the later history of individual schools. Because its evidence is arranged by institutions and persons rather than as a continuous statistical series, comparable facts were grouped thematically and assessed by function, location, and chronology. Bakhishova's regional study was used to contextualise the relationship between traditional and secular education, while Farhadov, Agaev, Bayramov, and Urusmambetova were consulted for the political, legal, and administrative framework. These works differ in scale and purpose: some address Karabakh directly, whereas others examine Northern Azerbaijan or the Caucasus as a whole. General conclusions from the latter were applied to Karabakh only when supported by regional evidence.

Regional evidence was compared with studies of education legislation, the Muslim clergy, and imperial administration. The analysis distinguishes between a source's factual statement, an author's interpretation, and the conclusions advanced here. The terms "mollakhana", "mosque school", "religious school", and "madrasa" are not treated as interchangeable, since their meaning varies across sources. Statistical figures are used cautiously when categories or territorial boundaries differ. All translations from Azerbaijani and Russian sources are by the author unless otherwise indicated.

Results

Functional and Organisational Structure

Within Karabakh's traditional educational environment, mollakhanas and madrasas did not perform identical functions. Mollakhanas generally provided elementary literacy, Qur'anic reading, the Arabic alphabet, and rules of religious conduct. Madrasas required more advanced preparation and offered instruction in the religious sciences, classical languages, written culture, and selected secular fields. Chingizoglu summarises the distinction by stating that "education in Karabakh was conducted in mollakhanas as secondary schooling and in madrasas as higher schooling" (Çingizoğlu, 2013, s. 6). Although this formulation is not an exact equivalent of modern educational levels, it indicates an internal functional hierarchy. Mollakhana instruction was not governed by a uniform state curriculum; it depended on the teacher's preparation and local resources. Pupils learned reading and writing, Qur'anic recitation, and elementary Arabic and Persian. Age restrictions were flexible, which

increased accessibility. Bakhishova accordingly emphasises the mass and non-estate character of traditional Muslim schools and their contribution to elementary literacy (Baxışova, 2024, s. 17).

Madrasas were more structured. Students lived in hujras within the complex, with the largest room used for teaching. Young men over sixteen who possessed initial literacy in their native language and Persian were generally admitted. Small madrasas reportedly enrolled 40-50 students and larger institutions 100-200. Instruction was led by a mudarris, assisted by a khalfa; senior students could also teach lower groups (Çingizoğlu, 2013, s. 11). These figures describe broad institutional types and should not be applied automatically to every madrasa in Karabakh. The distinction between the two institutions was functional rather than absolute. A mollakhana could prepare a pupil for further study, while a madrasa could also reinforce basic reading and writing for students whose earlier preparation was uneven. The quality and breadth of teaching depended heavily on the individual instructor, access to texts, and the stability of local financing. Consequently, the same label could describe institutions of unequal capacity, and administrative statistics do not always reveal the practical level of instruction.

Financial Provision and the Waqf Mechanism

Financial provision was decisive for institutional continuity. Many madrasas were maintained not by the state treasury but through resources assigned by wealthy individuals, benefactors, and local communities. Land, villages, bathhouses, shops, or other income-producing property could be endowed for a madrasa. A waqf deed regulated administration, revenue distribution, and the authority of the mutawalli; in some cases, this responsibility became hereditary (Çingizoğlu, 2013, s. 9–10). Waqf income supported building maintenance, teachers, and students, sometimes through stipends in cash or kind. The statement that "waqf lands constituted the material foundation of madrasa activity" captures the economic significance of this system (Çingizoğlu, 2013, s. 10). Mosque schools could follow a different model, relying on pupil fees, gifts, and the income earned by mollahs from funerals and other ceremonies (Çingizoğlu, 2013, s. 15–16). Religious education was therefore embedded in the economic and social relations of the local community, and its stability varied with local resources.

The waqf mechanism also shaped institutional autonomy. Because revenue was assigned to a defined religious or educational purpose, a madrasa could continue operating despite the absence of regular state funding. At the same time, dependence on a particular estate, shop, garden, or benefactor created vulnerability when income declined or management became disputed. The economic geography of religious education therefore reflected the distribution of property and patronage as much as the distribution of population.

Curriculum and Teaching Methods

The curriculum of Karabakh madrasas extended beyond the reading of religious texts. Sources list fiqh, kalam, sarf, nahw, writing, poetry and prosody, religious history, philosophy, logic, medicine, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, chemistry, mechanics, and music (Çingizoğlu, 2013, s. 14). This does not mean that every institution taught an identical programme. The range and level of subjects depended on the mudarris, available books, and student preparation, yet the evidence demonstrates the place of the classical Eastern scholarly and literary tradition within religious education.

Study was organised around mastery rather than a fixed duration. It commonly lasted six to eight years and could continue longer. Classes were held five days a week; instruction paused on Thursdays and Fridays and during Ramadan, Muharram observances, Novruz, and a short summer break. Scarcity of textbooks sometimes required an entire group to use one or two copies, making textual copying and calligraphy integral to learning (Çingizoğlu, 2013, s. 12–13).

The Bayt al-Adab madrasa in Shusha's Merdinli quarter illustrates the breadth of reading. Saadi's Gulistan and Bustan, the Divan of Fuzuli, Tarikh-i Nadir, Jami-i Abbas, and other works served as textbooks or instructional materials. Together they supported language and literary study and introduced students to history, ethics, law, and classical poetics (Çingizoğlu, 2013, s. 16). Teaching methods combined memorisation, oral explanation, textual commentary, copying, and discussion. The scarcity of books increased the importance of the teacher's oral exposition and the collective reading of a single text. It also linked education with manuscript culture: students did not merely read works but reproduced them, thereby acquiring calligraphic and documentary skills. These practices later facilitated employment in clerical and administrative occupations.

Territorial Distribution of Religious Educational Institutions

The madrasa network extended beyond Shusha. The institution in Veysalli in the Varanda mahal was attended mainly by Shia students and was associated with teachers such as Molla Panah Vagif and Mirza Mahammadali bey Munshi. The madrasa in Tumasli in the Dizak mahal primarily served Sunni students. The report that Seyid Molla Ahmad Effendi sent several pupils to Istanbul indicates that a rural institution could maintain links with the wider Muslim educational world (Çingizoğlu, 2013, s. 14–15).

Rural madrasas demonstrate that religious education was not exclusively urban, but its organisational level was uneven. Small or economically weak villages usually relied on a mosque cell or a molla's home. Settlements with larger populations, waqf income, and respected teachers could sustain more durable institutions. The madrasas of Mollaburhan in the Bargushad mahal and Baghirbeyli in the Garachorlu mahal provide further examples. Some Mollaburhan graduates served as mirzas under a mahal deputy, while others worked as village mollas, showing that religious education supplied literate personnel for record-keeping and local administration as well as for religious service (Çingizoğlu, 2013, s. 17). The examples also reveal the importance of confessional and intellectual connections. Veysalli and Tumasli did not simply duplicate the same model in different locations: the former is associated mainly with Shia students, whereas the latter served a predominantly Sunni constituency. The transmission of pupils from Tumasli to Istanbul shows that a village institution could operate as an entry point into a wider network of Muslim learning. Such links increased the prestige of particular teachers and helped selected rural settlements acquire influence beyond their immediate population.

Shusha as a Regional Centre of Religious Education

Shusha became the principal centre of Karabakh's religious education system because administrative authority, trade and crafts, mosque networks, clerical circles, and intellectual activity were concentrated there. Mosque schools remained accessible to lower and middle-income families, particularly where state-school fees and Russian-language instruction limited participation. The city's institutions also served surrounding settlements, giving Shusha a regional rather than merely municipal function. The Ibrahimiyya and Bayt al-Adab madrasas illustrate the organisational link among mosque, madrasa, and neighbourhood community. Two schools established in 1801 and 1803 operated under the Ibrahim Khalil Khan Mosque, while the Merdinli Mosque financed Bayt al-Adab and provided a khalfa to assist the mudarris (Çingizoğlu, 2013, s. 15–16).

The Govhariyya madrasa was distinguished by its social provision. After restoring the Great Friday Mosque, Govhar Agha allocated a hujra for a madrasa and paid the expenses of poor pupils. In 1917 a Muslim student committee opened a free reading room at the school, indicating that the institution was acquiring a broader educational function beyond formal religious instruction (Çingizoğlu, 2013, s. 16). The concentration of institutions in Shusha did not mean that the city served only its permanent residents. Its teachers, books, mosques, and endowed premises attracted pupils from surrounding settlements, while graduates could return to villages as mollas, teachers, or clerks. This circulation

of people and knowledge connected the urban centre with a wider educational hinterland. Shusha's importance therefore lay both in institutional density and in its capacity to redistribute trained personnel across Karabakh.

Urban concentration also affected institutional variety. Shusha could sustain mosque schools, larger madrasas, endowed instruction, and later reading-room activity within the same educational environment. Rural settlements generally depended on fewer teachers and narrower financial resources, so a single institution often performed several functions at once. The contrast was therefore not simply between the presence and absence of education, but between a diversified urban centre and smaller local nodes whose survival depended more directly on individual teachers, mosques, and community support.

Imperial Control and the Legal Status of Religious Education

Russian imperial policy sought to place Muslim clergy and religious institutions within an administrative framework. Agaev links the creation of the office of Sheikh al-Islam for the Caucasian Shia in 1823 to efforts to supervise the clergy and reduce the influence of Iranian religious centres. The Regulations on the Shia and Sunni Muslim Spiritual Administrations of the South Caucasus, approved on 5 April 1872, established a Sunni administration under the mufti and a Shia administration under the Sheikh al-Islam (Agaev, 2015, p. 15; Fərhadov, 2025, s. 33). This policy formed part of a broader centralisation of education. Following the regulations of 25 June 1835, the direct administration of educational districts was transferred to trustees, strengthening oversight of the political reliability of schools (Urusmambetova, 2025, p. 41). In 1873 religious schools and madrasas were formally removed from the jurisdiction of school directorates, while the teaching of Russian in these institutions received legal recognition (Baxışova, 2024, s. 16). The apparent contradiction is significant: formal separation from the school administration did not eliminate imperial influence over curriculum and language.

Denominational policy also affected institutional organisation. Bakhishova interprets separate schools for Shia and Sunni Muslims as an instrument of governance that could reinforce communal division. The Shia Muslim state school established in Shusha in 1849 was closed in 1862 on the stated grounds of "insignificance", showing that state support for a religious-school model remained conditional and unstable (Baxışova, 2024, s. 16–17). These measures did not create complete administrative uniformity. Traditional schools continued to depend on local communities and religious authorities, while the imperial state sought influence through registration, clerical hierarchies, language policy, and the regulation of teaching. The result was a layered system in which formal legal status, practical supervision, and local custom did not always coincide. This helps explain why religious institutions could retain substantial local functions while operating within an increasingly centralised political order.

Discussion

The findings answer the first research question by showing that territorial distribution was shaped by a combination of demographic, institutional, and economic conditions. Mosques and local teachers enabled elementary instruction to reach many settlements, but larger madrasas required population concentration, waqf revenue, books, and qualified mudarrises. The network was therefore broad but uneven. This spatial distinction helps explain why individual rural centres could become locally significant without approaching the institutional density of Shusha. Regarding the second question, Shusha's centrality resulted from the overlap of administrative, economic, religious, and cultural functions. Its mosques, neighbourhood communities, benefactors, teachers, and links with surrounding mahals produced a cumulative advantage. The city did not monopolise religious

education, but it concentrated more durable and differentiated institutions and acted as a source of teachers, clerics, mirzas, and written culture for a wider region.

The third question concerns the relationship between traditional and secular schooling. The expansion of district, municipal, real, rural, new-method, and vocational schools broadened educational choice and weakened the previous predominance of religious institutions. Bayramov argues that new schools in the imperial borderlands served ideological as well as practical objectives (Bayramov, 2017, s. 10). Yet the evidence from Karabakh does not support a simple replacement model. Religious schools retained functions in Qur'anic instruction, classical languages, religious service, and traditional writing, while new schools trained personnel for administration, trade, and technical occupations.

Statistics for 1870 list one district school, twenty-three private schools, and eleven religious schools in Shusha; in 1895, 235 educational institutions with 10,100 pupils were recorded in the Yelizavetpol Governorate, including 127 schools and madrasas (Çingizoğlu, 2013, s. 23). Because these categories are heterogeneous, the figures cannot be treated as a precise series for religious education. They nevertheless indicate institutional diversification. The same source notes that religiously oriented schools expanded from 1908-1909, although some were short-lived, while the total number of schools rose sharply between 1902 and 1914 and new commercial, technical, and vocational types appeared (Çingizoğlu, 2013, s. 5).

The principal change was thus not the immediate disappearance of traditional education but a redefinition of its position within a more plural educational landscape. Some institutions broadened their reading materials, accommodated limited secular knowledge, or developed reading-room functions; others remained dependent on local teachers and community finance. Adaptation was selective, territorially uneven, and constrained by administrative supervision and competition. This interpretation qualifies both a decline narrative and an uncomplicated modernisation narrative. The growth of secular schooling expanded access to new subjects and occupational paths, yet it did not remove the demand for Qur'anic instruction, classical languages, or locally recognised religious authority. Conversely, the persistence of madrasas did not imply institutional immobility. The evidence instead points to coexistence, differentiation, and gradual functional adjustment, with Shusha changing more rapidly than many rural localities.

The study's source base also requires caution. Much of the regional evidence is descriptive rather than statistically continuous, and terms for schools are not used consistently across publications. It is therefore possible to identify spatial patterns and institutional functions with greater confidence than to calculate a complete annual series of schools or pupils. This limitation reinforces the value of combining source criticism with historical geography rather than relying on aggregate figures alone.

Conclusion

From the second half of the nineteenth to the early twentieth century, Karabakh's religious education system preserved inherited organisational forms while responding to new social and administrative conditions. Mollakhanas remained important for elementary literacy and religious instruction; madrasas provided more advanced learning in religious sciences, classical languages, and written culture. Their functions differed but were complementary.

The network had a regional character. Madrasas in Veysalli, Tumasli, Mollaburhan, and Baghirbeyli demonstrate the significance of rural centres, while unequal access to population, waqf income, books, and trained teachers produced marked territorial variation. Shusha became the principal centre because it combined administrative status, mosque networks, economic resources, benefaction, and an intellectual environment capable of sustaining several institutional forms. Waqf financing

underpinned continuity, and madrasa graduates contributed not only to religious life but also to local administration as mirzas, clerks, and teachers. Imperial policy strengthened administrative supervision, organised clerical structures by denomination, and expanded the role of Russian. Nevertheless, secular expansion did not immediately eliminate religious education. The defining feature of the period was the coexistence of institutions with different legal statuses, financing models, and curricula, accompanied by uneven adaptation rather than a uniform decline.

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