



About Homecoming

*To those I tried to reach
and to those who reached me.*

Abstract



In *Homecoming*, I explore my relationship with the village of Khinalig, my ancestral home, through an artistic-ethnographic project that seeks to preserve its heritage and culture. Khinalig, a unique and isolated village in northern Azerbaijan, has a rich history and an indigenous language. My project combines digital archiving, collaborative publications, and artistic installations to capture and share the cultural narratives of Khinalig authentically.

I ask (1) *how we might preserve living culture without reifying its forms* and (2) *how to empower local voices in curatorial decisions traditionally made by external authorities*. This project also attempts to reconnect with my heritage through artistic practice, reflecting on identity, belonging, and the complexities of cultural preservation in a globalised world. Through the method I call Homecoming, I aim to offer an alternative approach to heritage that respects local agency and keeps culture alive within its context without extracting its meanings.

Introduction



This is a written part of my Master's thesis, a project that explores my connection to Khinalig. It does so through an artistic-ethnographic endeavour that combines personal experience with a broader exploration of heritage and digital preservation. The research includes three key components:

1. *Collaborative Publications: Four books created in collaboration with local researchers were combined with the research text into one publication—project documentation.*

2. *Digital Archive: A repository of archaeological findings.*

3. *Art Installation: A reflective artistic presentation tying these threads together.*

Through this work, I navigate the interplay between personal heritage and broader cultural preservation issues. I constantly shift between the researcher's perspective and a deeper, more personal exploration through generations of family history.

Project components

The publications of this project comprise four books and a written part of my master's thesis that seeks to contextualise, describe and problematise the research. The first publication is a monography collecting general information about Khinalig; the second is a book on the Khinalig language; the third is a publication about archaeological findings; and the fourth is an artist's book based on the diary of a local researcher. All the publications are made in collaboration with the historian Izzət Bağırov of the State History-Culture and Ethnography Reserve of Khinalig. The collection of publications explores the project at large, including a discussion on the motivation, methodology, outcome and references that inform the work. The publications have a value not as a written text but also as a designed and printed object.

1. Monography on Khinalig

I have created a monograph introducing some aspects of Khinalig's life and history. The format and layout of this monograph draw inspiration from the Census of India village survey books, a format used by post-colonial governmental administration workers. However, the format is loose so that the publication can be used as an introduction to the research about Khinalig. The publication relies heavily on oral history and uses references more loosely, intentionally moving away from academia's strict approach to sourcing knowledge. Some topics included in the census are history, geography, social life, faith, and heritage.

2. Book on Khinalig Language

The book on the Khinalig language is a book that reads like a

collage that covers the origin of the indigenous language, its relations to other languages in the region, and its transformations from an oral to a written form through digitalisation and design. My chosen method to gather information on the language is motivated by the dialogical exchange between multiple linguistic scholars with minimal interference from my side. First, I did textual research, ranging from internet searches to article readings, and then I extracted quotes from research papers and articles to support my narrative. My approach was to differentiate the quotes visually as well; hence, I displayed them as cut-outs and put them together in a collage.

My main motivation in talking about language is to cover the design and accessibility problems that inevitably appear if the language does not have a consistent script. I interviewed Adelina Shaydullina and Tural Əlisoy, experts in the field of type design and discussed the digitalisation process of unique scripts and making fonts for endangered languages. The interview text is at the end of the publication.

3. Publication based on researcher's diary

During one of my travels to Khinalig, I found the diary of a villager who was composing the archaeological excursion hiking route. After his sudden death, relatives stored the diary in his family house but never read it. I deciphered, digitalised and translated the material in the diary and selected several excerpts. This work is a commentary on the information that gets lost in transliteration: the younger generations of Khinalig people cannot read the script their ancestors used to write their notes. The style of the book reflects the decay and fragility of ancestral knowledge.

4. Book on archaeological findings

A publication about the archaeological excavations in Khinalig and the archaeological findings found there. The text is a translation of Izzət Bağırov's scientific work, followed by a catalogue of photographs of archaeological findings.

Digital archive

Workers of Khinalig Reserve have been indexing the findings in the museum archive and displaying them in local museums.

The way objects are displayed in the museum is relatively informal and refreshing: no bureaucratic explications, no white cube. No colonial power has looted precious findings from Khinalig, allowing villagers to create their cultural narratives and organise the museums their way. Having seen this, I realised that one could avoid further on-site classification (that inevitably will come once the place gets more famous and institutionalised) by shifting it to other mediums.

I have offered the museum workers and Khinalig Reserve the opportunity to create a digital archive and a printed publication about the village's archaeological findings. This accessible solution gives residents autonomy over their heritage.

The digital archive is a webpage that contains 3D scans of the findings with descriptions and text about the project. The web archive focuses on imagining knowledge-sharing practices by creating a platform where locals in Khinalig can document and preserve their heritage. The process can be dynamic and non-linear. Each object in the archive is accompanied by its source—a description by local researchers and sometimes an

audio story told by villagers. One of the motivations is to decentralise knowledge production and to create space for multiple voices and perspectives. It offers an alternative to hierarchical systems of knowledge by putting the tools for preservation and storytelling directly into the hands of the community.

Art installation

Thinking about the art installation that will tie this multifaceted project together has been difficult. At first, I had a simple idea of displaying the findings in a cabinet of curiosities format with oral descriptions of each object; then, I began to expand this idea and incorporate some prepared/altered objects into my installation. At some point, I went beyond the idea of having an imitation of the museum. My installation reflects the process of researching, tracing, and reconnecting. I want to translate my work on this project: endless hours of writing, correcting, designing, communicating, researching, editing and printing into a mechanical movement of the machine. Searching through archives, talking to people, digging through the complicated past and unravelling the suppressed emotions—I want to translate these memories through my installation.

The installation was specifically created for the Master Thesis exhibition that took place from the 3rd until the 5th of April 2025. It has various parts linked to the project and includes many interactive pieces. Each of them is made of a different material but is united by one principle: the piece is not evident by itself and requires different ways of activation. Some pieces are publications, showcased in a special way, some contain photo or video material.

A big stone is located on a large wooden table. First, it is not so obvious, but an image is printed on a stone: it is an old photograph of my grandfather, who is from Khinalig and his children. A small screen is located under a big stone, embedded in the table itself. The screen shows a video footage of my first project trip to Khinalig, with a running subtitle line describing my vague thoughts. The text says:

comically small device trapped on a comically big table like a fly trapped in a sticky yellow tape dangling above our heads. how is it possible to dangle and push through simultaneously, this is what i never understood. why do i talk like a george costanza if i am from russia and to write messages in azerbaijani i sometimes use google translate. globalisation made me not alone in this boat — i bet in this room alone there are a couple of people with the story of double migration. i hope you feel seen, i hope you understand what i mean i write this text very late, the fruits of homecoming labor are almost ripe — the juicy fruits of the contrast temperatures. many friends, half friends, total strangers will view this video and ask: whats with all this dangling? it is ok, my parents dangled, so did my grandparents, other ancestors living on the mountain had no time for such intricate self observation. thank you ancestors for making me strong and resilient, able to resist the smelly winds of art world, neoliberalism and schufa rating... enough with the mental exercise, i want to hear you. this project is a mirror through which you can see me but this is not important, what matters is the question how can we help each other in this individualist world. have each other's back, remember what is important proximity and friendship and trust the action of one person, one who tries their best this person can be you. i am trying to be one as well.

Photobox

I wanted to combine the visual and olfactorial experience of Khinalig in one mini installation. For that, I used the artworks of a photographer I hired during the second field trip as well as some archival pictures from the village. I did not want to show the photos in a straightforward way, so instead I built a box in which a viewer can fit their eyes and nose and see the pictures and smell some plants I brought from Khinalig.

Publications in space

My project has five publications, I needed to find some way to show them in space and highlight their individualities. The Village publication was displayed on a Rahle, a special bookstand traditionally used to read the Quran. The Language publication was hidden under a pillow with a “Pillow of Language” embroidery on a pillowcase, an allegory to the students’ superstition telling them to put a book under the pillow to memorise it before the exam. An archaeological book was presented in a box among some archaeological curiosities. The researcher’s diary was put inside of a trunk of the tree, a raw material that had a crack exactly the size of the publication. The master thesis book was laid up on an industrial shelf, hinting at its more refined content.

Tooth

I wanted to include one object that would represent my love for cabinets of curiosities. During my first field trip, I was invited to participate in the archaeological excavation. The work was going very slow so by the time I needed to leave we only discovered a couple of beads and an incisor tooth. The crew members

gifted me these findings and I decided to follow an impulse and solder them on a small metal plate. I exhibited it on a big wall with a spotlight on top of the plate to emphasise the importance of this piece and the intuitive approach in my work in general.

Cabinet

This piece was what I initially imagined to be my whole installation. The cabinet is built from clay and mud and displays some findings from the village, artefacts representing it among some old photos. To draw parallels with the way museums work in Khinalig, this piece is only activated when the exhibition tour guide tells more details about it.

Horn and a family tree scribble scan

At the beginning of the project together with my dad, we were trying to reconstruct our family history in Khinalig. My dad would only remember his grandfather's name and some other odd name, that he was told in childhood. We decided to try our luck in the Baku city archive and research the Russian Empire censuses from the 19th century. These censuses were used to count, and, in case of war, draft the male population. Using these censuses we have been able to recreate our family tree up to eight generations.

At the same time, during my visit to the village, I got to know some of my distant relatives, who have been also researching the family tree and sent us a scribble of the research, that I exhibited later on.

Khinalig people use a skull or horn of a mountain goat in front of their house to protect themselves from the evil eye. I carved

the names of my ancestors on one of the horns. The horn has eight annuli rings (that means the goat was eight years old) exactly matching the eight known generations of my family.

Gravestone frottages

So far we have not discovered many evidences of written Khinalig language that date earlier than the 20th century. Before globalisation processes, writing was only used by scholars who learned the Quran, and the only inscriptions we could find are in Arabic script, including the tombstones in the cemetery. Inspired by the traditional Chinese technique of 榻本 my collaborators and I have made frottages of the gravestones in the village.

Website

The website was shown on a big screen with a carpet underneath so people could sit down and have enough time to check the archaeological findings and stories about them.

Design collaborations outcomes

I have invited some friends to create a postcard or a stamp that will be used in the official Khinalig post office and provided them with some visual references. Some friends painted postcards, some designed them. One friend made a website that would use Google Street View panoramas of Khinalig to generate a postcard. Another friend has made a draft for a poster with Khinalig ABCs for kids.

Collaboration is an important project due to two reasons:

1. It is impossible for one person to do everything alone
2. It is important to prevent the hegemony of one style. The

urbanistic projects that are creating a cultural code of the city where everything follows a design code are contributing to the commodification of the village and heritage.

In the future, I plan to make more collaborative initiatives and find funding for them.

Performative aspects

For me, a solo exhibition is a space to interact, as opposed to a standard setup, when people come to perceive the existing completed work. My project is many-faceted and is a result of multiple collaborations, so I find it logical to introduce it through a dialogue rather than a monologue, as well as leave many things unspoken.

Discussion

After my introduction to the project, I invited two key collaborators to discuss topics that they found important to mention. Mikhail Lylov talked about using reclaiming improvisational and exploratory research processes that are perceived as non-academic (such as *Inchiesta sociale* or *Kraevedenie*), later on, he linked them to the project.

Dunya Savilova talked about the art world being contained, detached from reality and unable to provoke pure emotion in a viewer. I have attached her text below.

I mostly talked about the collaborative aspect of *Homecoming* and about almost sixty people who made it possible. Unable to believe that the work had finally been concluded, I teared up almost after the first words.

The exhibition setup was based on the way the museum works in Khinalig. My text about the museum:

Museum: an assembly of significant things, a tapestry of cultures, collaged by a hesitant curator who puts a golden horn next to an embroidered crown in front of a marble tomb. Visual contexts evaporate leaving only a dry exegesis, providing a reasonable meaning to lonely, kidnapped things.

Mwazulu Diyabanza, among other pan-African activists, is taking the artefacts that belong to his ancestors and culture from the museum and bringing them back to his homeland. In the interview he says: "When the Europeans arrived, the first bases they broke were cultural bases, now with this action, we try to restore them." This act of decolonisation left a big impression on me and made me think about ways the museums are or can be made.

Khinalig, the village on the mountain was too isolated and remote for archaeologists and museologists so the first excavations started only around 2010. Nowadays there are three museums: one governmental and two initiated by the residents. The villagers are curating these museums by themselves, and so far there is little to no interference from the side of the government. It is not a white cube, you can touch and use some objects, there are unwritten stories that are told about the things exhibited, the museum, the future of the village, and archaeological excavations.

Home museum is especially precious: it is located in the living room of a hunter who has collected things in the mountains by himself throughout decades. You come into the living room, eat, drink tea, listen to him and look at the objects, take them in your hands and rotate them, feel their

history not in an alienated manner but here, right in front of you, close to the place they were found at.

To oppose the soulless white cube + description setup, I have made the exhibition with a plan that only the contribution of a storyteller/knowledge holder/guide will activate some parts of it. The storyteller is unreliable, and is not neutral, with each iteration their story change. The reliability, and source identification a key components of the Western knowledge system, the system that loots artefacts from their origin places and puts them under the glass. I do not want heritage to get classified, examined and neutralised. Hence the storyteller prevails.

Music

To bring an element of festivity to this exhibition, I asked DJ friends to play some tunes after the end of the discussion. Before the DJ sets we would need to research and find some Azerbaijani tracks that would resonate with the project, many things were sourced by asking my parents for recommendations.

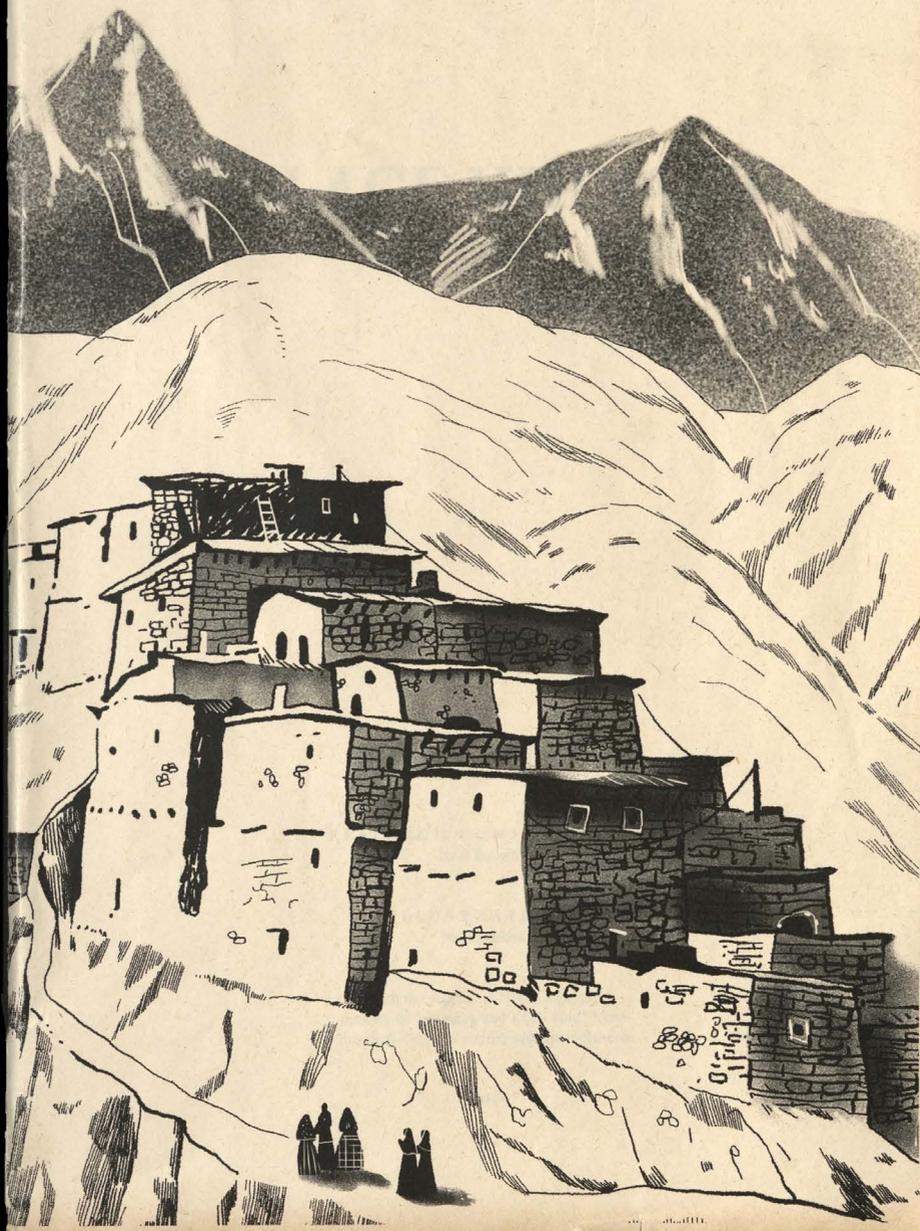
The unspoken

There were things that I did not mention such as: why do I do this project? What is the context of this project in my self-exploration, what is the position of Khinalig in Azerbaijan? Will this project ever get its recognition? Will I be able to do such an ambitious, high-volume non-profit project? How to fund such projects? How to initiate them? How to find the people who can help with the research part of the project?

One day when I become a person who has the power and resources to change things fundamentally, not just as a solo

activist, I will bring these questions back. For now, they are in the unspoken category.

VILLAGE KHINALIG



General information

Khinalig is located just south-west of Quba, at 41°17' north latitude and 48°07'36" east longitude in the middle of the Greater Caucasus mountains that divide the Northern Caucasus in Russia from the South Caucasus. Khinalig is also the highest, most remote, and isolated village in Azerbaijan and among the highest in the Caucasus. The weather changes dramatically during summer and winter, ranging from -20 °C to 18 °C.

Khinalig has an area of 44,829.41 hectares. The length of village streets is about 3 kilometers. The development of Khinalig has gone beyond its historical part, and now a new residential area has been built on the banks of the Khinalig River.

The population of Khinalig village is around 2100 people. The main occupation of the population is animal husbandry. Folk art has developed. Tourism has been developing in recent years.



In the old quarters of Khinalig, 160 houses have survived until now, and 1600 people live in these houses. 82 ancient houses in Khinalig were completely or partially destroyed.

58 families live in 100 houses in the new housing estate of Khinalig. As of the beginning of 2011, there are 260 farms in Khinalig.

The name

The name of the village, just like most of the Azerbaijani toponyms does not have a universal trans-

literation to English. Khinalig is an exonym, villagers call the village *Ker*, and themselves *Kerli*. It began to be used approximately after the middle of the 19th century. According to the researchers, it is derived from the word "kern" and the suffix "-lik" which means the concept of belonging in the Azerbaijani language, and means "those from Kern, people from Kern".

The toponym Khinalig is found for the first time in the 16th century in the manuscript "The events of Shivan and Dagistan" written by Mahmud Ali Khinalig.

There are several versions of the origin of the name of the village. According to legends, the village was named Khinalig because the mountains surrounding the village is colored brown when the sun rises. One possibility is that the name of the village is derived from the name of a ferns-colored plant that grows only here. According to some assumptions, there is a connection between the name of Khinalig and the name of the town of Xenia (Xenia, Xenia) in Albania in the 11th century. Currently, the remains of this city are located on the Dagistan side of Russia, on the border with Azerbaijan.

Khinalig village and its people call themselves *Kerli* people (*Kerli* or *Kerli*), and their village *Kerli* or *Kerli*. *Kerli* can be translated as a place where many kerli live. The meaning of these words is "body".

Geography

Khinalig is located on a plateau on a high peak of the Caucasus Mountain. Khinalig village, located at an altitude of 2350 meters and facing the Quba in the Guba district, borders Gubala from the west and Gusa district from the north and is surrounded by the mountains of Buzakura (4466 m), Gholi Goya (3723 m), Shakhlar mountain (420 m), Yulafing (419 m) and Khinalig (3740 m). At the foot of Yulafing, 7 kilometers away from Khinalig, there are 2 different lakes at an altitude of 2300 meters. There are many springs and caves around the village.

Roads

In the past, it would take a whole day to travel to the village as there were no roads. If indeed, the paths would get muddy up to the knees. The first automobile road to Khinalig was constructed in 1968, it was often

closed in winter, requiring people to travel on foot. In 2006, an asphalt road was constructed, due to the constant landslides and rockfalls, a repair team must constantly maintain the road.

Flora

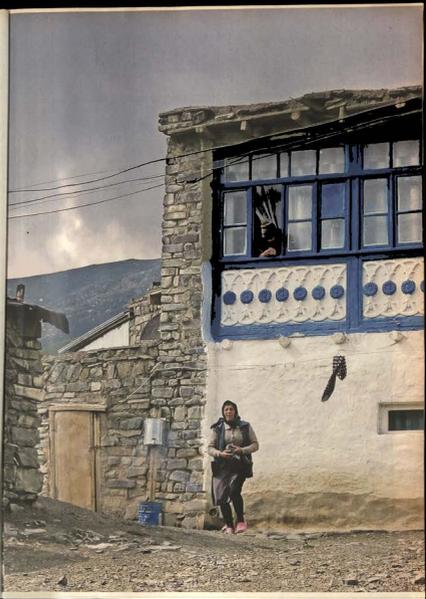
These plants can be found in the village:

- Khinalig* — Azerbaijani — English
- Adi xala — Adı halğalan — Hesperid
- Balgayraq — Balğayraq — Psittac
- Mələ gəl — Bəyqaraq — Yarrow
- Qığıl — Çay — Cassia
- Cəbrayraq — Cəbrayraq — Mayweed
- Maqlala — Daxoz — St John's wort
- Dələyə yarpağı — Bərkəşən — Galium
- İndi — Dəvrik — Dock
- Mə — Əriləli — Heric
- İbura — İbura — Rosehip
- Kaklıta — Kəlikli — Thyme
- Təni xala — Qığıl — Thistle
- Qəbrayraq — Qəbrayraq — Horsetail
- Qəbrayraq — Qəbrayraq — Knapweed
- Qəbrayraq — Qəbrayraq — Dandelion
- Qəbrayraq — Qəbrayraq — Dock
- Ping Macu — Marshmallow
- Ping — Pınqotu — Barlock
- Nin ağac — Pərk otu — Southern globe-thistle
- Sığayraq — Sığayraq — Mullein
- Mələ — Təyraq — Mountain aconite
- Vəli qyabak — Vəli qyabak — Wild Strawberry
- Ləli — Vəzi — Penstemon
- Kind — Yerdinq — Pursue
- Alimik — Yənli — Salify

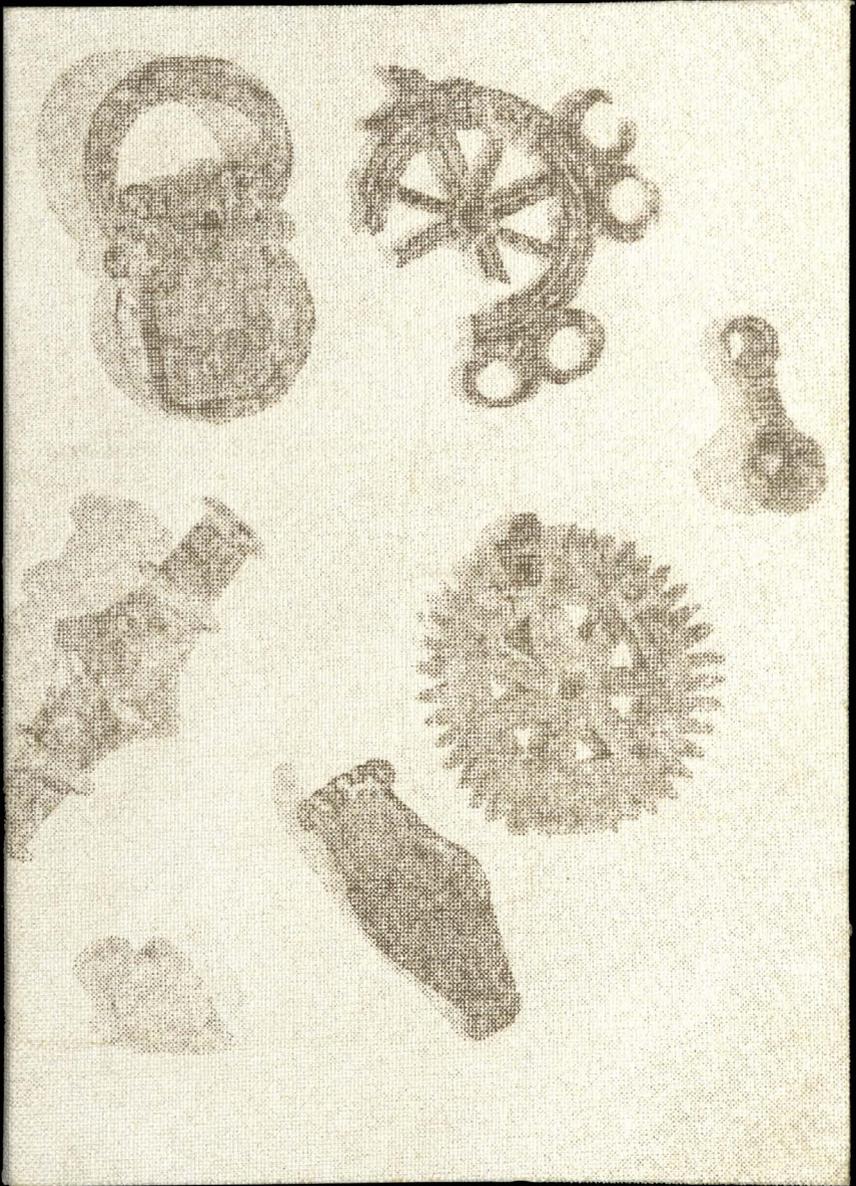
There is a forested area close to the yaylag area (summer pastures) at 2,300 meters altitude, a rare phenomenon for this subalpine zone. This area is called *Məlik* and is considered sacred by the Khinalig people. The locals protect this small forest fragment, where falling trees is taboo for the community members.

Fauna

The wildlife near the village of Khinalig is rich, consisting of many valuable species. Some of them are East Caucasian bear (*Ursus cyllenus/orientalis*), Caucasian chamois



Ketsch
(Khinalig
language)
in excerpts



Book on archaeological findings

Dagger head IV-III centuries BC Kima Liqebriş



10

Fossilised cone Date unknown Place unknown



11

Hand-shaped amulet III millenium BC Zangar settlement



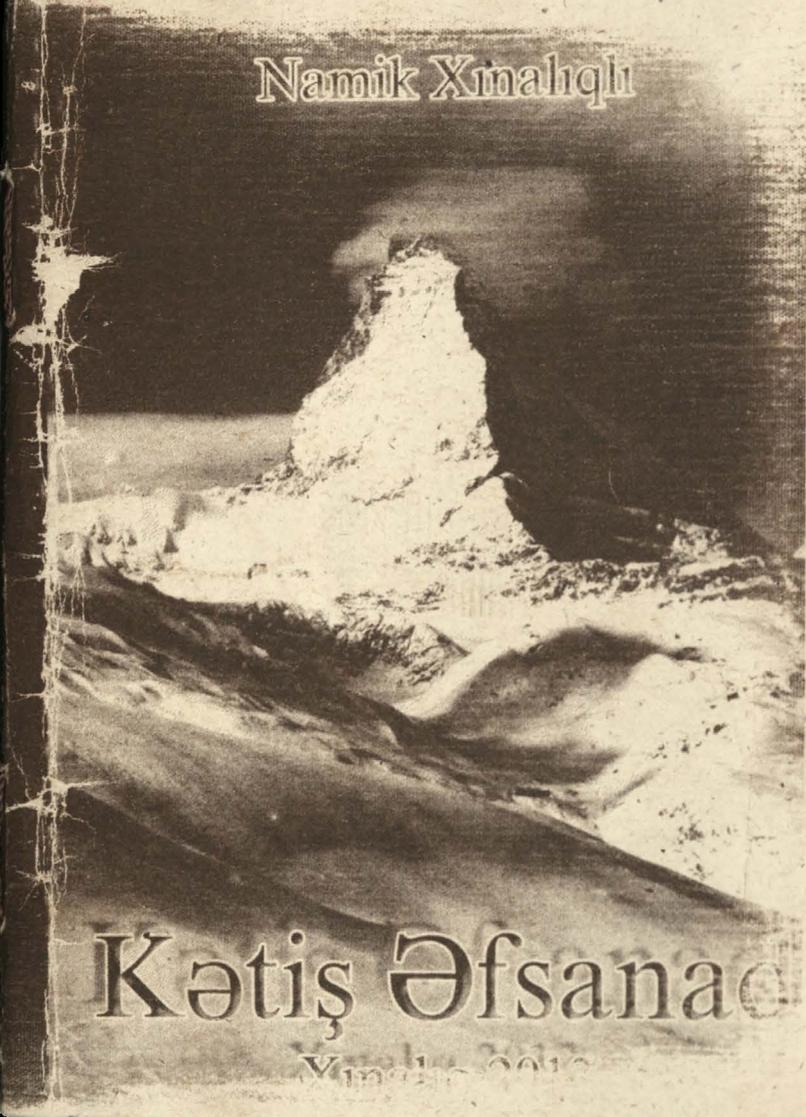
34

Hairpin ornament III century BC Kima liqebriş



35

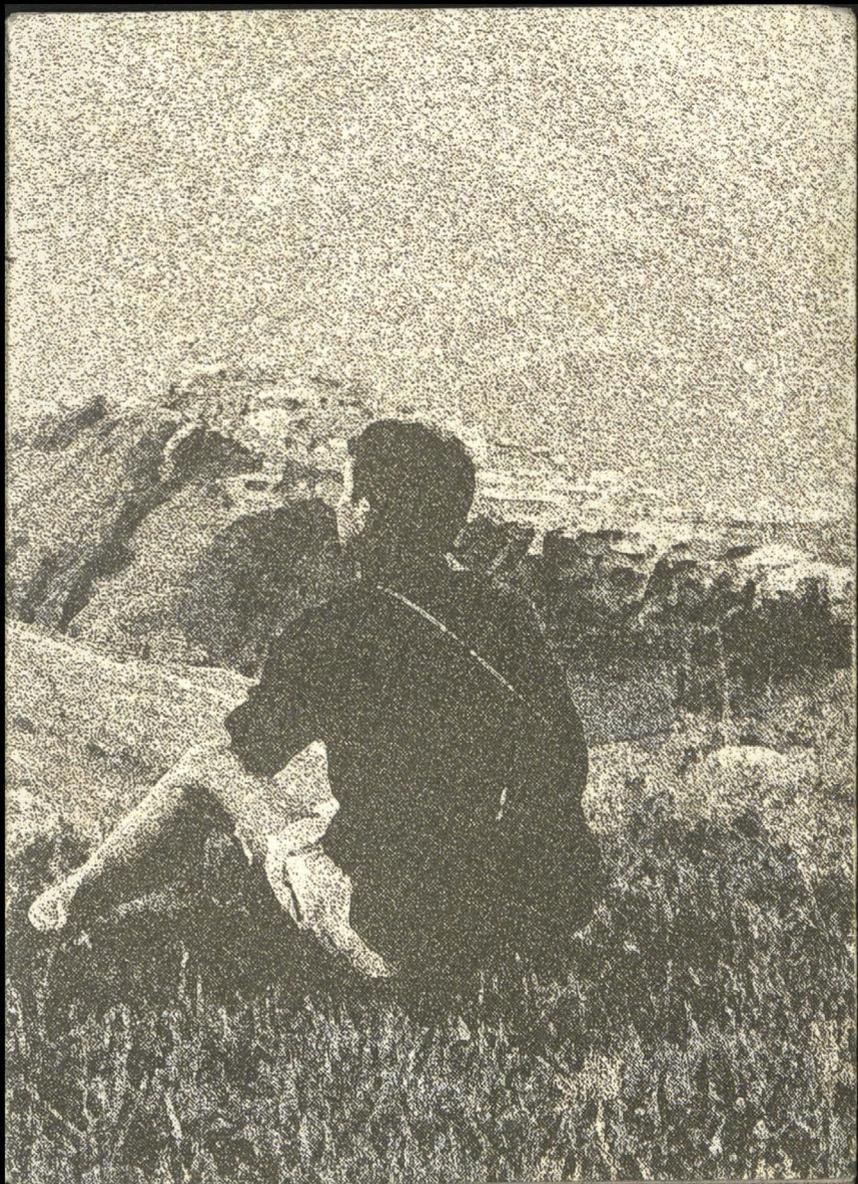
Namik Xımalıqlı



Kətiş Əfsanəsi

Xımalıqlı 2016

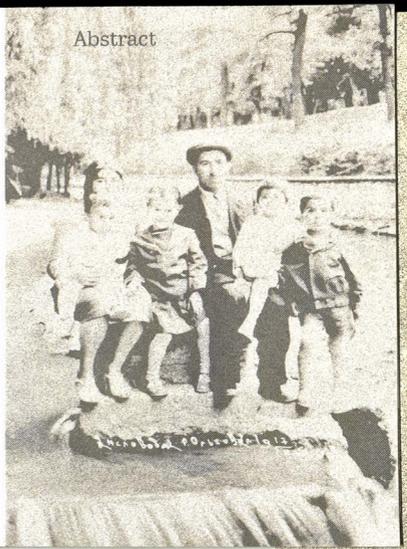
Publication based on researcher's diary



On homecoming (theoretical part + project documentation)

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Collaborative Publications

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Artifact

Bronze amulet



Date

III millennium BC

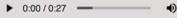
Place

Zangar settlement

Description

Bronze amulet found in the Zangar settlement, III millennium BC (Early Bronze Age).

Story



[Read Transcript](#)



Artifact

Bronze amulet



Date

III millennium BC

Place

Zangar settlement

Description

Bronze amulet found in the Zangar settlement, III millennium BC (Early Bronze Age).

Story



[Read Transcript](#)

Told by Yvaelif on March 6, 2025
Translated by Nilufer Museeva
Transcribed by Gunay Ramazanova

[Close](#)

Found in the ancient human settlement of Zangar in 2012. It is snail-shaped, with seven circles visible on its surface. The upper part has a hole for hanging. Dated to the 3rd millennium BCE. Material: bronze.





Publications in space





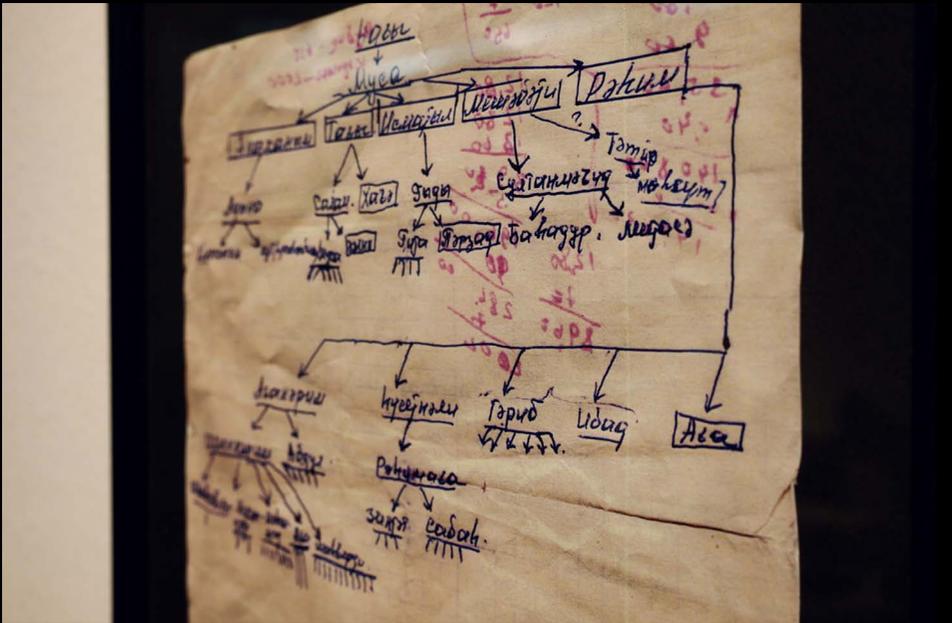
Stone and video



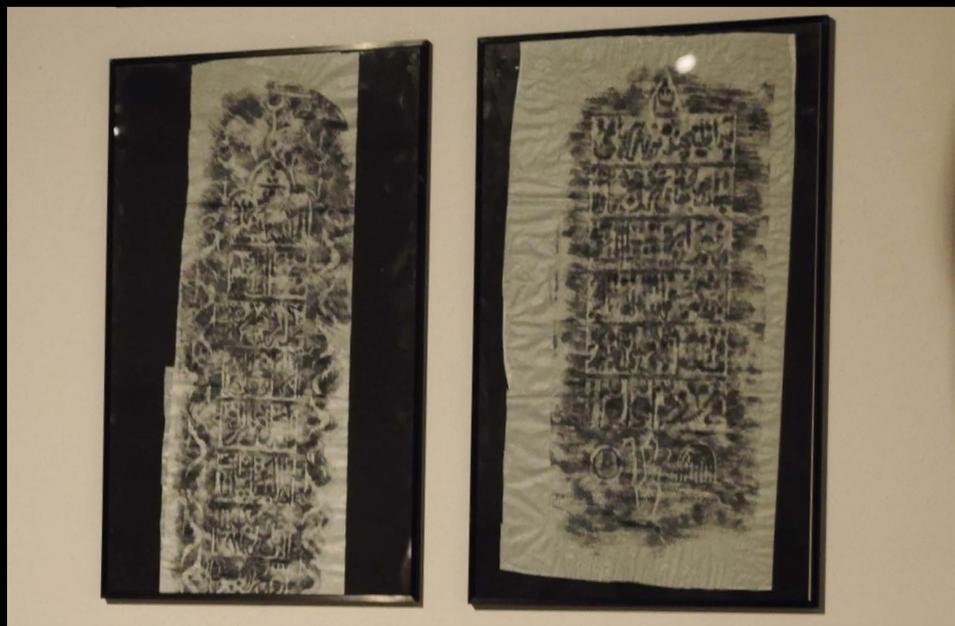
Photobox



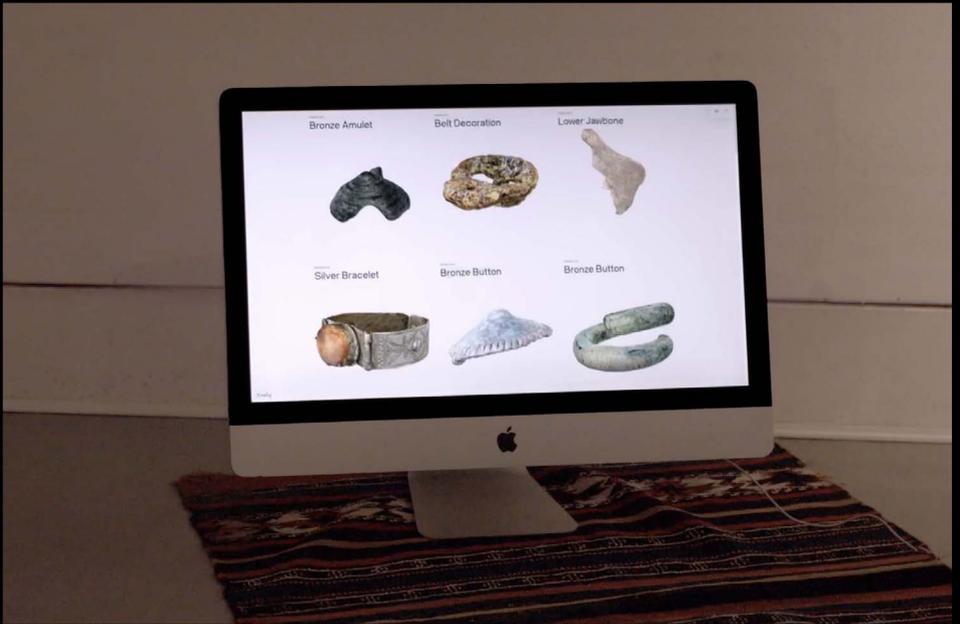
Tooth and cabinet



Horn and a family tree scribble



Gravestone frottages



Website in space



Mida

Khinalig ABC

Aa



Ank

Bb



Bi

Cc



Cina

Ĉĉ



Ĉa

Ĉĉ



Ĉuva

Çç



Çağuz

Dd



Doda

Ee



Enğ

Əə



Əja

Ff



Ficə

Gg



Gazar

Ĝĝ



Kiğ

Ğğ



Ğaç

Hh



Hilam

Ĥĥ



Ĥayal

Ĥĥ



Ĥədmi

Xx



Xəkindəval

Ûû



Ûu

Iı



Inka

İi



İji

Jj



Bija

Design collaboration outcomes

(Personal archive)

Bayramguli
Bağirov

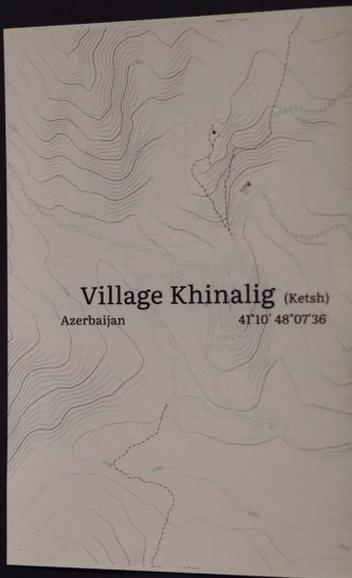
(1960s)



(60)

Village Khinalig

(Ketch)



Village Khinalig

(Ketch)

Azerbaijan

41°10' 48"07'36"





Discussion



Exhibition tour

Ethnographic Context



Village

Khinalig is one of the oldest and highest continuously inhabited settlements in the Greater Caucasus and Europe, known for its historical and cultural importance. Its unique language, which forms its branch within the Nakh-Dagestani language family, is spoken only by the people from Khinalig and is distinct from Azerbaijani and the languages of neighbouring villages.

The village's isolated geography has helped preserve its traditions, including indigenous practices, oral storytelling, and ancestral customs. This isolation has also kept Khinalig mostly unaffected by external powers and globalisation.

There are three museums: one governmental and two initiated by the villagers. The villagers curate the museums by themselves, and there has been little to no government interference. In 2023, after a submission by the State Party Azerbaijan Tourism Agency, UNESCO granted Khinalig cultural heritage status. After that, the Azerbaijani government started to follow UNESCO's guidelines, such as restoring the original houses.

Due to the village's isolated location, the Khinalig language has not assimilated with Azerbaijani and has only a distant relative in other Caucasus languages. It has 49 letters and characters that most interfaces do not render properly, and very few fonts support this language.

Archaeological expeditions

Until the 2010s, the village had no official archaeological excavations due to its remote location. However, the landslides revealed

the previous burial layers, and the locals knew something was worth discovering. Since the construction of a new road to the village and increased attention to it, heritage and archaeological excavations began, led by Dr. Idris Aliyev, Fellow at the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences. The expedition uncovered several burial sites and ancient settlements and discovered ancient objects, some of which are the only ones of their kind in the region. Although the excavations have not been going on for very long, it is only a matter of time before what is found in Khinalig attracts the attention of researchers outside the village.

Museum and archive as concepts

Khinalig gained UNESCO status in 2023—this brings the village attention, which can be beneficial and create new issues. Now, the government has invested money to restore the original view of the houses; increased tourism will create new job positions in the village and language, and material cultural recognition will make younger generations more conscious of their heritage. However, at the same time, this situation will inevitably attract museum curators and other authorities from the bigger cities who will impose their visions of how museums should look and operate. The local heritage will become a political leverage tool and be displayed, archived and interpreted according to governmental needs.

Throughout the 20th century, Khinalig was a part of different governments and municipalities. Each of them would create a new archive from scratch and abandon the old one, sometimes even burning it down (according to one of the villagers). Before the 1950s, communication in Khinalig was mostly oral; only

religious or administrative texts were written down. With the development of oral tradition, more things must be added to the archive. Written material archive in Khinalig adapts the standard bureaucratic way of storing data. The museum archive of archaeological findings right now is only in the process of classification and organisation; it is located in the backroom of the museum and contains many findings that are not displayed in the exhibition space. The archive is still in its early, adaptable stage; working with it (for now) requires minimal bureaucracy.

Curatorial practices

Khinalig's museums have been curated and managed by residents, mainly due to the village's historical isolation from larger cities, shaped by its unique geography. The village remained relatively inaccessible until 2006 when an asphalt road was built connecting Khinalig to a city 20 kilometres away. This delayed globalization meant that Khinalig culture was "discovered" when post-colonial discourse was already active in academia. Additionally, the Azerbaijani government has not shown a colonial ambition to strictly control or erase indigenous cultures, languages, or knowledge. Local curatorial practices in Khinalig were preserved organically rather than through deliberate effort. Through this project, I highlight the significance of such decentralized, community-based approaches to curating and museology: While they arose naturally, sustaining them requires conscious intention and effort.

Research questions, motivation



Throughout my artistic practice, I have always been interested in the classification and taxonomy of bigger, sometimes odd structures. Naturally, this brought me up to the topic of bureaucracy and its intersection with the artistic world. After making a project about old, conserved institutions with hundreds of years of tradition, I wanted to encounter an area where bureaucratisation is yet to come.

During one of my first trips to the village, I met a museum worker who showed me the village's archaeological findings. He guided me through the objects (which had no explication) with his own unique narrative. At the same time, we discussed Khinalig's unique language and writing system.

Khinalig is known to researchers primarily because of it, linguists proposed various writing systems to accommodate all the sounds of the alphabet. I noticed that when locals designed the ABCs for kids, they added extra glyphs to the existing letters using simple MS Paint manipulation. All right, they have UNICODE letters now, but what next? The language formatting does not work on Mac OS because the system font does not recognise the glyphs, not even mentioning that they have only a couple of fonts available. This was the moment when I realised that my expertise might be helpful.

In my project, I offer my service to locals with some nuances of digitalisation and heritage preservation and introduce Khinalig and its wonders through various artistic mediums. I have contacted the archives of Tbilisi, Baku, Dagestan, and Moscow, requesting photos and written material on the village. With Type.Today, we released a long read about the

Khinalig language and introduced it to the design public; some font makers added Khinalig language support after this material. Then, I contacted the Azerbaijan post office, requesting a special stamp and postcard design dedicated to the village. We are developing an updated ABC poster for kids with illustrations.

Archaeological findings are a fascinating aspect of the village that is only becoming obvious now. The way objects are displayed in the museum is relatively informal and refreshing: no bureaucratic explications, no white cube. No colonial power has looted precious findings from Khinalig, allowing villagers to create their cultural narratives and organise museums.

Design has become a mostly meaningless bullshit job—creating interfaces for the sake of interfaces, making dark patterns for users to click the “buy” button, making millions of dollars in rebranding that just changes the logo very slightly, and spending hours at work moving pixels. I have always lived with this realisation and tried to bring meaning to my practice, not just by making projects for my portfolio but by making someone’s life easier. This village was not chosen by accident—this is the strongest bond I have with my ancestors. Villagers help each other, not even out of kindness; it is a custom. I am detached from village life, yet the villagers accept me as their own.

Khinalig’s living history is just around you, not kept behind the museum’s locked doors. Passionate enthusiasts and workers of the museum were detached from the bigger, fancier institutions with the curators who were educated in the western universities. They carry the knowledge of their ancestors and do not have a history database — many things are just

written down on paper in notebooks. After discussing their preservation and curatorial methods with museum workers, we agreed that my project and my design services were more than appropriate. Seeing the enthusiasm of the workers and the desire to collaborate with me, I started working.

The more time I devote to this project, the less utilitarian and more sentimental my tasks seem. Applied work with the culture of my family and ancestors smoothed out my difficulties and traumas associated with self-identification. The longer I am involved in this project, the more personal it gets; this is a transformation I embrace.

Research Questions

1. How digital archives help to preserve living culture without reifying its forms?

The dynamic, non-linear approach to the digital archive resists the reification of culture by privileging stories over static categorisations.

There have been some successful projects about using digital tools to partially restore the consequences of colonialism. One is Digital Benin, a digital “overview of the royal artefacts from the Benin Kingdom looted in the late nineteenth century.” This archive is a reparative tool since most objects were not returned to Benin and are still in colonial museums. In this case, the digital image is a simulacrum of reality, a shadow of hope that one day the artefact will return to the country it belongs to.

However, in Khinalig, digitalisation is proposed to be used

as an instrument, not as compensation for an existing object. Some of the objects have an owner, some belong to the museum, and some are not classified yet. Overall, the objects have been put in a rigid museological context just recently. The process of digitalisation lets us hear stories about these objects. The metadata system for the archive will be based on these contributions, offering an alternative to hierarchical systems of knowledge.

Instead of traditional museum categorisation, the collection has no filtering options (like date or location) and encourages a more unstructured exploration of the artefacts. Each digitised artefact opens in a popup where visitors can explore 3D scans alongside community-sourced stories and oral histories — that way, the collection allows for discovery through storytelling.

*2. How can local voices be empowered
in knowledge preservation medias?*

The motivation to make Homecoming brought together people from different geographies and contexts. The word empower should be used carefully since, before the project, Khinalig residents were already independently developing their autonomous knowledge production processes.

This project started with an encounter with Khinalig cultural representatives and an agreement to collaborate. Making this project is equally empowering for me. My research questions are not above the questions of collaborators; my work is a platform for their thoughts. In this collaboration, I bring my instruments, such as type design, digitalisation, and publication making, which give existing knowledge and heritage

more value.

Before we produced a monograph, general knowledge about Khinalig hadn't been classified, translated, written, designed and published to this extent and quality. This publication has been given added value through its design and illustrations, enabling it to reach a wider audience. The digital archive brings together personal stories, my activism to preserve them, and an interface design of my friend, resulting in a website that will be valued for its concept, content and visuals. The installation will combine my artistic practice and the written, filmed, collected, recorded, and photographed material from Khinalig. A wider audience will be introduced to the village's heritage, hear local stories and see the results of our work.

3. What are the solutions to sustain cultural production?

This project's important aim is to create essential instruments to facilitate cultural production and the dissemination of knowledge.

In Khinalig, these instruments took the shape of type design for the Khinalig Extended Latin script and language learning infrastructure for the younger generation. By designing typefaces for the Khinalig language, the project makes it more accessible digitally and keeps it alive in printed media. This allows the community to engage more easily with their language and culture without technological burdens.

Another example of sustainable infrastructure development is designing an ABC poster for kids learning the Khinalig language in school. Since the language is rarely used, not many materials are available for learning— only a coursebook and

materials prepared by teachers. Creating a colourful ABC poster with all the letters illustrated as objects or characters will bring kids more joy and motivation to learn their native language. The printed poster can be a nice and motivational gift for students.

Methodology and considerations



The concept of “homecoming” serves as both a literal return to Khinalig and a metaphorical approach to engaging with its culture and history. This duality shapes the methodological framework, connecting personal narratives with collective heritage. Homecoming is a process of navigating personal identity, familial connections, and the broader discourse of belonging while simultaneously addressing the responsibilities of cultural preservation and representation.

Homecoming emphasises collaboration between the artist and the community, providing a space for their equal contributions and dialogue. This approach enriches the research, creating a shared sense of ownership and agency over the cultural heritage being preserved and presented.

The research and publication part of this project is being carried out in cooperation with the “Khinalig and Koch Yolu State Historical, Cultural and Ethnographic Reserve” and its employees. The collaboration with İzzət Bağırov, a historian and researcher of the reserve, is particularly active. With İzzət, we selected the material needed for the project; he wrote the text about the transhumance routes and proofread the information for the monograph. Bağırov’s current research is the basis for a publication on archaeological findings. Together with Bağırov, we are also discussing strategies for funding, publishing, and creating merchandise for Khinalig.

The collaborative nature of this project also applies to its outcomes. During the development of Homecoming I shared my vision of the project with friends: talented illustrators, designers, researchers and technologists. These professionals, driven

by the project's aim, have made an invaluable contribution. Especially versatile is the contribution of designs for potential Khinalig post stamps and postcards, for which many designers have created a proposal. These designs will be a part of the installation, and some will be used as actual products. Apart from valuable expert contributions, friends validate my engagement with the village from a personal side, learning more about my heritage and contributing to its preservation.

Ethical and Practical Considerations

In Homecoming, my design and artistic practice are intertwined with the village's personal story and material culture. Making a contribution to the Khinalig community is a part of my interest as a descendant, designer, artist and a person with a migration background.

I use mixed media and non-linear storytelling to show the process of homecoming and establishing local practices and institutes, processes that, if done with compassion, take time and are non-linear. I build my project on the heritage of my ancestors and add new layers of my personal experience/practice/journey/work. The quantity of work that can be done on this topic is vast and can take decades, and I work without a long-term strategy, mostly based on immediate needs and requests.

A personal narrative is integral to this research. My work oscillates between detachment and deep connection, allowing me to question not only my role as a researcher but also the impact of my own biases and assumptions. The evolving nature of this project mirrors my personal journey of identity reconstruction.

The challenges in managing this project are less about technical issues and more about human factors, often making progress slow and demanding. As a master's student with limited resources, the lack of a team, a budget, and institutional support creates significant barriers. Managing such a multifaceted project, spanning design, research, budgeting, production, and communication, is exhausting and demands patience and consistent effort.

Bureaucracy is constantly complicated, and even small tasks often require navigating multiple formalities. The slow pace of progress makes it difficult to sustain momentum—managing a multimedia project on this scale can feel isolating, as many responsibilities fall entirely on one person, from strategic planning to execution.

Gaining cooperation is one of the most significant burdens. People may refuse to help or engage until they see tangible results, and collaboration is not always guaranteed. Clear communication of the project's motivation and genuine interest can sometimes overcome these barriers, but it demands constant explanation and negotiation.

The lack of a widespread understanding of heritage preservation in Azerbaijan aggravates this challenge. Some individuals and institutions are unfamiliar with its value, leading to reluctance or unintentional obstacles. Advocacy becomes an integral part of the process—explaining why this work matters and how it benefits the community is necessary to gain support.

Reflections on Identity and belonging



I did not plan to make a project about myself, my ancestral background and my migration history. On the contrary, this topic is still deeply taboo in what it feels like in my body. I have a history of double migration: my Azerbaijani parents migrated to Russia, and then I moved to Germany. As a kid, I experienced xenophobia internally and externally, stopped using my full name and did not disclose my nationality until I was nineteen or so. Making the project about the village my grandfather is from was not an intention to show appreciation for my roots. While deep into developing the project, I wanted to stop everything several times: this is how psychologically hard it was to process certain aspects of dealing with my ancestry.

But Homecoming ended up being as much about self-discovery as cultural preservation. Growing up disconnected from my heritage has shaped how I approach this work. Revisiting Khinalig allowed me to confront fragmented identities and embrace my role as a researcher and descendant.

I hesitate to call this process “healing”, though it has been about understanding and coming to terms with my heritage.

Here is how I write about it:

I often ask myself—who am I? What do I look like? Do I accept myself for who I am? These questions usually brought back some grey noise that I preferred to ignore, go to sleep, listen to music, or simply doomscroll. Like a kaleidoscope, multiple identities and physical and mental wanderings silently echo somewhere deep inside and subtly leave. There has always been an aim: to rush from one place and achievement to another, iron my shirts, polish my shoes

and grades, perpetually move through days, milestones, and deadlines, survive neurosis, bitterly joke back to offensive commentaries, walk forward and never stop to reflect and hear the echoes.

Walking forward brought me far away from where my father is, and his walking brought him further from his dad. My grandfather was the first one who changed his ancestors' way of moving through life from a circle to an arrow; he ran down the mountain and chose education over marriage, so did my father, and so did I.

I am Nilufer, but I used to stop people from calling me by my full name. My parents are from Azerbaijan, but I hid that part of myself. My grandparents come from two mountainous villages and speak four languages, but I never asked why. Only now, when I take part in seminars on non-Western philosophies and read about decolonization, do I start to connect, approve, and research my culture. I was ashamed of who I was before, and now I am ashamed of being ashamed. Until the project came to an end, I was hiding and not confronting this motivation, but here is the truth. I feel many emotions about this. Thank you for reading until this part.

Once, my dad and I went to Khinalig without expecting anything. Suddenly, it all made sense to me. Circular life motion—moving between summer and winter pastures, counting years by sheep: 20,000 one year, 50,000 the next. Living on top of each other, where your backyard is someone else's rooftop. The hidden echoes transformed into a sudden, overwhelming feeling of belonging. This project unravels the unspeakable and indescribable. It is a gentle museum of collected, reflected and created matters.

This project did not have a title for a long time because it sparked not from the idea but rather from my willingness to serve a place. Only recently, when I overcame some inner self-identifying barriers did the project gain this name. Homecoming is not necessarily about me, an artist, going to Khinalig and researching roots. What is a home? Whose home is Khinalig? Not mine, not my father's, and even my grandfather left this place in favour of a successful future. In principle, their choice, and subsequently my own, influenced my life.

First, I felt the homecoming intention from my father: he was the first to initiate a visit to Khinalig and try to find traces of his father. Bahadir, my grandfather, was very cryptic about his national identity—he never told kids anything about Khinalig; he didn't teach them the language and used it to communicate with his sister in secret. So, this connection was barely there for my father.

When I started my project, my father accompanied me every time we went to the village, and most of the work I did there was done with his great help. I could see how this investigation nurtured him. When we found the supposed name of a great-grandfather he had heard as a child in the Russian Empire Census of Khinalig, I could feel the homecoming happening in him. A physical return to the village and the information was enough to make him settled.

For me, this relationship is even more fragmented. Since I was born, I grew up as a foreigner in another country, only then to become a foreigner again in my early twenties. For me, the notion of home is closely tied to the place where I feel recognized and accepted. This did not happen in xenophobic Russian

society, where I felt like an alien from an early age. This did not happen in Azerbaijan because society liked to judge and compare me to their expectations of a young lady. The first time I felt like I was playing by my own rules was in Germany, where I moved to become one among many foreigners. At first, it felt strange and liberating; now, I cannot imagine myself in a different environment. And finally, suddenly, I felt the home-like acceptance in Khinalig, the village from which I was very emotionally detached and did not know anyone. But this granted me the ability to present myself on my terms—not as someone’s daughter but first as a researcher. Only through this established position could I relax and expose my actual relation to the place—I am indeed someone’s daughter and descendant, and these people lived here. My surname comes from this village; at least 200 years ago, my grand-grand-grand someone was already here, and if we dig the soil a bit, we can find the signs of their presence.

In this project, I use all skills and mediums I have established during my education and used in the projects: work in cultural foundations, accessibility research, archive making, design, text writing, curating, and exhibiting. When I was learning to apply all these skills, I was worried about them and thought that I knew who I was and where I came from. Now, I am rebuilding my identity and am in the process of homecoming, and these skills help me in this matter.

Art as Personal Exploration

Artistic act is a valid methodology for creating new understanding, exploring the unspeakable, and expressing complex ideas.

Through its versatility, art bridges the gaps between what is felt, what is known, and what is shared. It allows for a nuanced engagement with themes that resist simplification or linear explanation.

Art is an act of will, truly performative and can take any shape and volume. We can endlessly debate the point or pointlessness of making art, but all arguments and counterarguments eventually loop back into one another, like a Moebius strip.

I work in all sorts of mediums and on many different topics. The combined factor is that I chose these things to be interesting enough to show other people. Although I am skilled at talking—small, big, and everything in between—sometimes alternative methods speak more effectively. Artistic practice allows me to reach places that words cannot, providing a platform for investigating and communicating the subtleties of heritage and identity.

Artists deliberately choose their mediums and methods and, unlike designers, do not try to make their art coherent. This ambiguity is not a limitation but an opening—an invitation for audiences to engage with the work on their own terms.

Art helps me cope with difficult questions while simultaneously providing food for thought for others. In my practice, the process of art-making becomes an act of understanding and living through the phenomenon. Quoting an artwork from Louis Bourgeois: “Art is a guarantee of Sanity”.

The Role of Art in Reconnecting with Heritage

This project started as a rational attempt to offer my design skills to the community. Gradually, hidden behind the excuse

of project-making, I slowly started to open up to my roots. Art was a great way to do this because there is no conventional way to start or end a project and no expectations about me covering this or that topic. Step by step, I explore and express what feels too fragmented, complex, or unspoken for conventional means.

Homecoming helped me to develop my own language. I use it to speak about my ancestry—writing, visual language, spatial decisions, communicating with collaborators, and presenting the project. I started from the topics that felt safe to access, working with someone else’s diary and translating their thoughts, showing my artistic will only through book design decisions. Then, I could move on to writing, collecting or managing a project part from scratch. Only in the end—writing about deeper topics.

Art is more than a tool for self-expression—it is a means of reaching out to unreachable things. It offers a gentle, distanced way to translate emotions, questions, and connections.

On collaboration and my position in this project

Homecoming project was a tying knot between the Digital Media community that surrounds me nowadays, my friends’ art and design community back in Russia, my relatives in Azerbaijan, and Azerbaijani culture in general (by Azerbaijani I mean all the constellations of different minorities and cultures that shaped my family: Tats, Azeris, Khinalig people and others as well as the influences on Azerbaijani society from Iranian, Turkish, and Soviet imperialistic powers). This project does not exist in an academic bubble, neither it is a per-

sonal one, it is located somewhere on the junction (or periphery?) of research, storytelling, social action and interpersonal relations. Often times the workflow of Homecoming has been influenced by sudden encounters, discussions, and suggestions from others. In the beginning, I felt like a ship that will float wherever the wind of incident will blow.

During the research phase of the project, I sent the research proposal to an acquaintance who works with ancestral knowledge and heritage preservation in Brazil. They sent me this passage:

It is important to start by saying that you are not going to interfere, you are going to add to the construction of memory using the tools you master. They are complementary actions, which when perceived as such, suggest a contribution from both parties towards the same objective. The difference is that, in this space, you are an apprentice because attentive listening is what you will need to use with greater discipline. Understand listening as broadly as you can, we don't have time for concepts and Jean Luc Nancy right now. But what I can tell you is that good listening, generous, virtuous, affective, sincerity and understanding of a worldview will open doors for you. The world is a barn culture of perspectives of existence, you are going to the roots of your origin, remember that this is also about your genesis, that's why you go there. The place of discovery is also from yourself to the world, and how these things cross you. In general, in works of artistic mediation in a given culture, it is important to be careful and attentive in finding devices, methods, and artifices, to "amplify the voices" of that culture, but I think that in this case, you find yourself in a space with a little more margin, because you are also a channel of this culture because of close ancestral ties. After all, there is also a relationship of belonging in this journey. I read your description in

a technical way, but I know that deep down you know that it is the affection that will lead you to make the best use of the technique. Alterity, is an important concept in anthropology, perceiving that the look of the other has value in your look.

You exposed a web of relationships in which time connects all of them human and non-human actors (things), this is part of an important theory of anthropology, by a guy called Bruno Latour. Connecting this network of elements exposes the potential of each one of them. And you have many elements in this network. I think it's cool that when we talk about territory we also talk about maps and cartography, and when I say cartography it's also in the broad sense of the term in which you can map. When we talk about words, we also have this in the scope of your Calligraphy project, an important element for demarcating the identity of a people. When we talk about the artefact, we have archaeology, and the material record of action (in this case, human) in a space. When we talk about voices we have stories, but which stories will access? After all, I imagine that they are not really interviews that I want to do, but experiences, which can be recorded in audio or video, articulate elements in a creative way in a given context. Network of elements ...a place - with a certain person - with a certain object - in a specific arrangement - registered in a specific way... Find the way the river flows between these diverse elements that connect this culture, ancestry, place, things, people and you.

I simultaneously took many roles: a family member, an artist, a designer, a project manager, a distant relative (in Khinalig) and, oftentimes, a listener, shapeshifting between each of these roles multiple times a day. But in the end, I am just one human, and having so many roles does not feel like being several separate persons but more like having some percentages of identities mixed in me. So to not feel split in fractions (1/4

designer, $\frac{1}{4}$ German Uni student, $\frac{1}{8}$ Caucasus culture representative, $\frac{1}{16}$ distant relative...) I decided to become whole by inviting other people to complete my fractions. Let's take my friend Dunya as an example: also an activist, a person with the same background as me, having exquisite taste... For example, we share $\frac{1}{4}$ in the fields of art institutions critique, loving mountains, bookbinding and hating capitalism. So in our collaboration, we already become $\frac{1}{2}$. Let's add more people who contributed their designs for postcards, websites and stamps and we have a whole unit that is responsible for the design part of the project. The same logic applies to my collaborators in Khinalig, but there the ratio is even more tilted, more like $\frac{1}{16}$ of me and $\frac{15}{16}$ of the community and their wishes. And for us to form a single unit I, as an artist and a project manager needed to listen and learn from the other contributors.

This is the way I perceive the collaboration in this project, it is tangled and intuitive, but so is the topic and the journey of Homecoming. "Perceiving that the look of the other has value in my look." has become the guiding method in my project.

Thank you to everyone who collaborated:

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17. Dunya Savilova
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Conclusion

While making the project, as an artist, I could not predict the reaction and reception of this project in the audience. I was tangled too deep in self-exploration, defining my method, and translating the unspeakable into the text of this book. Besides that, I was managing the work process among multiple collaborators. On top of that — applying to grants and getting rejections, one after another. Each application involved writing more texts and involving in more inner detangling. Many consecutive actions and huge efforts, would just echo and come back to me. It was easy to lose myself and my motivation in this flow.

When the exhibition opening day came, I lost the hope of recognition and artistic ambition and became something like a train operator bringing the cumbersome vehicle to the final (or at least next) stop. Not expecting much, I got overwhelmed by the reaction of many people who have related to different aspects of the project, not only those I articulated but also the unspoken parts. Here is what one visitor wrote me after seeing the project:

“I don’t know why you mentioned it twice while you spoke of your work, about refraining from sentimentality. I was moved by the sentiment that actually pushed your intelligence in the way it took shape through your work. The research, the collaboration, the end result — all of it is brilliant, but for me, you managed to share the soul of a place. Maybe I could absorb this energy because of how I somehow relate to your personal tryst through my own calling. It is such a powerful feat to not drown in the surge of emotional unrest, and to actually let it emerge and not drain away.”

When I showed the preliminary version of Homecoming in

Berlin last September, my educator from my teenage years, a curator of indigenous origin from Russia came by to see the project. She told me that I could have made this topic a work of my life and continue applying the methods used in homecoming to other smaller villages in Caucasus. Suddenly the temporality of Homecoming expanded, encasing itself in the temporality of my life or will.

Both of these people pointed out to the topics I did not even bring up in written or oral description: the temporality of Homecoming and the emotional drive behind it. Everytime the project ends it stops existing for me, as if I gave birth and am ready to move on. With this project it will not be so easy: I feel the obligation to touch the unspeakable and detangle more (not immediately though).

One more obligation or emotional drive (that i would usually avoid) is to continue and disseminate. This project is initiated by me but is about a community and is a fruit of labor of many people. I created this initiative and need to spread it further, introduce it to new audiences and find means to create more tools for the community.

For now, though, I will rest a bit.

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Timeline

August 2022

first conscious visit to the village

January 2023

decided to make the project, offering locals to collaborate

August 2023

field trip to the village with a videographer

October 2023

talking with HfK professors, sending inquiries

December 2024

making the first publication based on the personal archive

March–October 2024

moving to Berlin for an internship to meet people from a similar field of research, writing first publications drafts

June 2024

second field trip to the village

September 2024

exhibiting the intermediate version of the project

October–January 2024/2025

supervising various strands of the project, mostly writing

January–March 2025

designing, and preparing bits of installation

April 2025–onwards

exhibiting, documenting, disseminating

Nilufer Musaeva
About *Homecoming*

Peer review: Mikhail Lylov
Design advice: Lesya Voronina
Bookbinding: Eudokia Savilova

Font: CoFo Robert
Exhibition photodocumentation: Hsun Hsiang Hsu
Photographs: Lali Bunyatova, personal archives of Izzet
Bağirov, personal archives of Musaev family

A part of the Master Thesis Homecoming
Supervisors: Dr. Petra Klusmeyer, Mikhail Lylov,
Prof. Dennis P Paul

University of Arts Bremen
March 2025

