Heritage and territorial disputes in the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict: a comparative analysis of the carpet museums of Baku and Shusha

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ABSTRACT
On 27 September 2020, Azerbaijan went to war with Armenia on a scale not seen since the ceasefire of 1994. The conflict ended in another ceasefire on 10 November 2020, however, in addition to the theatre of war, the conflict has been prosecuted and continues to be fought post-ceasefire, through claims to cultural heritage which are employed in international organisations to substantiate the legitimacy of territorial claims. In this paper, we specifically focus on carpets and their display in museums to unpack the relationship between carpet as an instance of instrumentised cultural heritage and the two countries’ territorial conflict and claims. Focusing on two major carpet museums in Armenian-occupied Nagorno-Karabakh (Shusha) and Azerbaijan (Baku), respectively, we will explain how ostensibly innocuous claims of cultural ownership and authenticity underline territorial claims with violent outcomes.

Introduction
On 27 September 2020, Azerbaijan went to war with Armenia on a scale not seen since the ceasefire of 1994. The conflict ended in another ceasefire on 10 November 2020 with most of the territory occupied by Armenia during the First Karabakh War (1992–1994) being either recaptured by Azerbaijan or handed back, although a lasting peace agreement is yet to be reached. While armed confrontations draw international media and political attention to the conflict, the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan has also been fought, and continues to be fought post-ceasefire, through claims to cultural heritage that are employed in international organisations to substantiate the legitimacy of territorial claims.

In this paper, we will analyse the cultural theatre of the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict to explain how instances of heritage are instrumentalised to establish territorial and ethnic homogeneity by the nation-state. We utilise a well-established notion of heritage as selective invocations of the past in the present in association with material culture and practices, and specifically focus on carpets and their display in museums. We will argue that although this heritage is shared among many nations in the region, its instrumentalisation by both Armenia and Azerbaijan implicates the carpet in their territorial claims and thus in their conflicts. Through analysing two major carpet museums in Armenian-occupied Nagorno-Karabakh (Shusha) and Azerbaijan (Baku), respectively, we will explain how ostensibly innocuous claims of cultural ownership and authenticity underline territorial claims with violent outcomes. Each side utilises international law and in particular appeals to geographical indication (a subset of intellectual property law linking products to their geographical origin and defined in several international agreements) to claim sovereignty over territory in what amounts to a heritage diplomacy contest.
This contest comes in a broader context of competition over claims of common heritages in the region. Examples of this abound across various nations; for example, art and architecture have been the focus of several conflicts across the Middle East (De Cesari 2019; Dallen 2020), Europe (Herzfeld 1991) and South Asia (Sachdeva and Medin 2009). Disputes over heritage that extend into territorial claims have also emerged in items of intangible heritage, including disputes over food; for example, claims by Israel over hummus have been incorporated into disputes with both Lebanon and the Palestinians, (Avieli 2017; Bascuñan-Wiley 2019) and a dispute over cultural ownership of the Tor-Tor dance arose between Indonesia and Malaysia (You and Hardwick 2020).

In the context of the post-Soviet world, heritage of items such as textiles have been central to national self-definition as well as disputes between states (Mentges and Shamukhiddinova 2017). In the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, disputes over cultural heritage have not been linked only with historic buildings or carpets (as in this case study) but also bread. Lavash, a flat bread common to the region, was claimed by both Armenia and Azerbaijan, with each country disputing the claim of the other, and eventually UNESCO granted recognition to both countries (UNESCO 9.COM; UNESCO 11.COM). The controversy suggests that the listing of intangible heritage has been integral to both nationalism and nation building (Levin 2017, 283).

Our paper’s contribution is twofold: firstly, it contributes to the understanding of the specific use of carpet as heritage in conflict especially those running across ethnic and religious lines. Secondly, it explores the relationship between cultural heritage and territorial claims in this region, specifically, the use of carpets in pursuit of aggressive nationalism, an angle that remains under-researched in the scholarship. The case study, the carpet, is itself an interesting material culture with a complex history. As a highly mobile object, the carpet generates multiple meanings for its creators and owners, at once a marker of affluence and status, collectable high art (Helfgott 1989), a functional object of everyday life, and a facilitator for national and ethnic identity formation (Moallem 2018, 24).

Existing scholarship on carpets follows three major and somewhat interconnected patterns: carpet as an art or craft object; as ethnographic object; and as a commodity. The first approach frames carpets in terms of the conventions of art history and as applied art (Dimand 1971; Cammann 1976; Jackson et al. 2016). This scholarship, commonly used and produced in museums and collections, covers issues including iconography, weaving and production techniques, artistic symbolic expression and provenance of the art object. Ethnographic studies of carpet production focus on the tribal groups from which the carpets originate, and their social structures, examining questions of locality, mobility and gender, as well as techniques of production in an anthropological and sociological context (Azadi 1975). Commodity-based studies view carpets within an increasingly global network and circulation of commodities, as a representation of capital and labour (Light, Rezaei, and Dana 2013; Moallem 2018).

From the multiplicity of the scholarly approaches, two propositions may be adduced. First, that the carpet itself is an ambiguous entity that lends itself to multiple identities and divergent interpretations at different scales. Second, there is a close relationship between carpets and the formation and assertion of identities that can be traced to ethnic origins and geographical locales, while at a regional scale, they share a common language of motifs with minor variations. Such qualities suggest that carpets are readily incorporable into contending discourses of identity, especially national identity and nationalism. This paper will illustrate this in the Armenia–Azerbaijan context. Given the ethnic and religious diversity of the Caucasus region, the carpet provides an informative case study as it transcends ethnic and religious boundaries both as a product and as a symbol.

In this paper, we will introduce the key concepts that inform the role of museums in advancing nationalist claims and heritage diplomacy, followed by a brief description of the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict. From there, we will move on to our specific case studies, the two carpet
museums representing Azerbaijani and Armenian claims over heritage. Through these case studies, we argue that the heritage of carpets is deployed as a tool for heritage and public diplomacy, and as a means for validating and legitimising conflicting territorial claims.

**Museums, heritage, and conflict settings**

Our analysis will be built on two overlapping sets of scholarship: the relationship between heritage, the museum, and nationalism; and heritage diplomacy. The museum is the representational space that fulfils both functions of collecting and exhibiting national identity and diplomacy.¹ Museums, especially national museums, direct the idea of the state on two levels: addressing the body politic (the nation) and addressing outsiders. The latter points out that national identity and sovereignty are situated in an international context made of other more or less equal nation-states. Thus, museums have a diplomatic function, the logic of which falls under the rubric of heritage diplomacy. Through this function, the museum becomes a player in international contests pertaining to the nation-state.

An early reminder of the inextricable link between the state and heritage is in Anderson’s (1983) *Imagined Communities*, in which he delineates the relationship between the three tools of the census, the map, and the museum. Anderson focuses on the role of archaeology and the proliferation of edifices through print capitalism, raising two points with direct bearing on carpets and their museums. Firstly, he frames the process of popularising heritage or monuments through print as ‘political museuminizing’, which reveals ‘the real power of the state’ (Anderson 2006, 183). Secondly, he points out how through that process of popularisation and naturalisation in daily life, heritage functions as a logo standing in for the state (ibid.). Both processes are at work with carpets in the museums we analyse.

Within the museum space, representations of heritage map out the geography of the nation, and punctuate and modulate its history. In asserting a sense of belonging, domesticity and indigeneity, national museums often promote a kind of banal (Billig 1995) or grounded nationalism (Malešević 2019), reproducing a national consciousness among their visitors. That consciousness is supplemented by and instilled through affective feelings of belonging (Watson and Waterton 2015) to a national territory that is suggested through the experience of place (Mozaffari 2014). Through such emotional and representational constructs, the stability and antiquity of the nation-state is correlated with the strength and veracity of the heritage it claims. Through the museum, cultural and territorial sovereignty are made coextensive.²

Thus, the museum avoids or actively contests divergent interpretations of history and authenticity. It becomes a site of incontestable ‘truths’ (Meskell 2002) and implies or asserts competition over precedence and authenticity. It is, therefore, no surprise that heritage conflicts or contestations appear almost simultaneously with the rise of nationalist movements in the late nineteenth century (Graham and Howard 2008, 3). Such contestation is particularly poignant if the authenticity and indigeneity of exhibits cannot be asserted to the exclusion of other nation-states, in which case the museum, as part of the public sphere (Barrett 2012), is bound to be embroiled in various forms of national, religious or ethnic conflicts (Ross), especially those referring to exclusivity of the national territory (see, for example, De Cesari 2009). This contest over heritage may foreshadow more violent territorial conflicts (for example, see Ross, 2007, 2008).³ This not only applies to the carpet museums of Armenia and Azerbaijan, but is also exacerbated by the continuing conflict that threatens the nation-states involved.

As noted, the logic of the museum’s diplomatic function, its engagement in heritage diplomacy, is informed by a transnational context and is discharged as a form of public diplomacy in international relations (Sylvester 2015; Winter 2015). Heritage diplomacy is usually state-driven and, like soft power, conveys and projects official culture, domestic values, and foreign policy. Schneider (2006) explains public diplomacy as consisting of ‘all a nation does to explain itself to the world’, the content for which is supplied by cultural diplomacy. It has three dimensions: daily
communication, which in the case of the carpet is facilitated by virtue of it being a renowned international commodity as well as a ‘state logo’; strategic communication, in the making of which carpet museums actively participate; and building long-term relationships with individuals which, especially in the case of Azerbaijan, occurs through the array of activities promoted by its state carpet museum. In short, the museum becomes a medium for these dimensions.

The carpet museums of Armenia and Azerbaijan operate in a complex national and international setting and are particularly charged because of the live conflict between the two nations. This intricate setting is further complicated by the very nature of the heritage artefact, the carpet. But before explaining this further, it is important to provide a brief background of this conflict and its historical setting.

**Armenia and Azerbaijan: conflict and claims**

Until the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 and the sparking of a de facto war on Ukraine’s eastern frontier, the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict was unique among post-Soviet wars as being the only dispute between two internationally recognised nation states (Broers 2019). The conflict has a complex history shaped by two interrelated factors: the history of the two countries’ establishment and their independence that has involved phases of forced population displacement. The geopolitical position of both countries is also important, as the region sits on the peripheries of three major regional powers: Russia, Iran and Turkey. At the core of their conflict is the two countries’ state identities and perceived threats to the survival of the two nations, which in the case of Armenia is further compounded by the Genocide perpetrated by the Ottomans during the First World War, and a pan-Turkish identification, especially among some powerful factions of the Azerbaijani elite, which allies them with Turkey.

The root causes of state identity formation may be found in regional transformations and consequent changes imposed on ethnic groups in South Caucasus in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These identities have also been influenced by external ideas that began to develop among Armenian and Turkish speakers in the late Ottoman and Russian Empires. Religious identification in the region underpins aspects of ethnic identity, with previous religious orientations of identity such as Christian and Muslim being ethnicised. Language and to a lesser extent religion were instrumentalised to create seemingly biological ethno-racial categories of people: the Armenian and Azerbaijani groups.

Civil unrest in the nineteenth century caused significant changes in the population composition of the region (Tsutsiev 2014). The fifth Russo–Persian war, which resulted in the Treaty of Turkmanchay in 1828, legitimised Russian control of the region. The treaty also allowed Armenians, whose ancestors were deported to Iran during the seventeenth century, to migrate north, while speakers of Turkic languages (formerly known as Tatars, a condescending label ascribed by Russians to Turkic people who would come to be known as Azerbaijans in the following century) living in the Caucasus migrated in the opposite direction (Bournoutian 2001). Furthermore, many urban areas previously dominated by Turkic people, such as Yerevan, saw a steady demographic decline as speakers of Azerbaijani Turkish were encouraged to migrate east both before and during the Soviet period. The socially engineered differences between Armenians and Tatars/Turks was fostered during the nineteenth century, as a mostly Turkic Muslim proletariat and rural peasantry came to see Armenians as representing a merchant and industrial class that dominated the region (Mostashari 2006; Valiyev n.d.), while the Armenian population likewise understood their Tatar neighbours as a hostile community. These tensions, coupled with the labour tensions that accompanied the Baku oil boom of the late 1890s, sparked large-scale violence between Armenians and Tatars throughout the South Caucasus in the wake of the 1905 Revolution.

Violence continued through the formation of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan (1918–20), when the term Azerbaijan (up to this date exclusively a province within Iran) was for the first time used for the new country and nation. Ethnic strife between Azerbaijans and Armenians continued
in their new respective independent states, although both fell to advancing Bolshevik forces with little resistance shortly after. During this time, the region of Nagorno–Karabakh became an autonomous republic within the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic (AzS SSR) despite its clear Armenian majority. The inclusion of this region in Azerbaijan reflected its occupation by the forces of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan when the Bolsheviks captured the area in the 1920s. Nagorno–Karabakh remained a sore point for Armenians, both in the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic (ArSSR) and in Nagorno–Karabakh itself, throughout the Soviet period.

Early on, the Soviet government introduced a nationalities policy as a means of resolving inequality in the former Russian Empire. The nationalities policy classed different ethnic groups in terms of their material and educational development. While the official Soviet logic of this programme was to create a more equal society in the longer term, this policy effectively disadvantaged Azerbaijanis in the first few decades of Soviet rule as they were underrepresented in the official hierarchy of the Azerbaijani SSR. As the Soviet nationalities policy evolved, it also created a hierarchy between nationalities, with non-titular nationalities (those without a Soviet Socialist Republic or autonomous status) being at the bottom of the pecking order (Goff 2020). This was particularly apparent after the 1930s, when a reform of the nationalities policy changed the focus of korenizatsia (indigenisation) from defining and recognising all possible nationalities in the Soviet Union (regardless of size of population) to a more specific prioritisation of titular nationalities (Goff 2020; Panossian 2006). This meant that many smaller groups, such as the Talysk in Azerbaijan, were designated to be absorbed into the larger titular nationality (Goff 2020). This situation further evolved in subsequent decades, particularly during the Khrushchev (1953–64) and Brezhnev (1964–82) eras, where the policy of merging nations (sliianie) was favoured with the object of fostering a Soviet identity at the expense of ethnic national identities (Panossian 2006; Rakowska-Harmstone 1992).

Ethnic competition and rivalry was a principal externality of the Soviet nationalities policy and this informed existing tensions between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Firstly, territory was a source of dispute between the Armenia and Azerbaijan SSRs, particularly Armenia’s persistent requests for the integration of Nagorno–Karabakh into their republic. Second, the permissibility of nationalism during the Second World War created aspirations for territorial expansion in both republics: a short-lived Soviet puppet regime in occupied Iranian Azerbaijan during the 1940s reinforced a desire to reunite with ‘South Azerbaijan’ which has endured to the present. Meanwhile, Soviet tensions with Turkey in 1945 fostered a hope among Armenians that they would be able to reclaim territory in Eastern Anatolia (Goff 2020), especially lands ceded by the Soviet Union to the Republic of Turkey in the 1921 Treaty of Kars. Third, both Armenian and Azerbaijani nationalism developed in the Soviet context with a clear anxiety about one another: Armenian memories of the Genocide made them fearful of a repeat in the case of ethnic conflict with either Azerbaijan or Turkey, while Azerbaijanis were apprehensive of Armenians and other groups in the Caucasus portraying Turkic speakers as non-indigenous newcomers to the region (Goff 2020). These tensions laid the groundwork for the explosion of violence at the fall of the Soviet Union.

The politically permissive environment of glasnost (the Soviet policy of openness and transparency), implemented by Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev in 1986, led to a rise in nationalism in both Armenia and Azerbaijan, which erupted into violence in 1988 over the Nagorno–Karabakh region. The foundation of the Karabakh committee in early 1988, with its platform for the incorporation of the Nagorno–Karabakh region into Armenia, coincided with the arrival of Azerbaijani refugees from Armenia, which fuelled a public perception in Azerbaijan that Armenians were planning to take territory in the Azerbaijan SSR by force (Broers 2019). Azerbaijan’s leadership fanned this sentiment, allowing a pogrom to break out in Sumgait in February 1988, which resulted in the death and exile of a large proportion of Azerbaijan’s Armenian population outside the Nagorno–Karabakh and adjacent Shahumyan district. The first few years of the conflict that followed (1988–1991) involved ethnic cleansing on both sides. However, the Armenians, who did not have the upper hand in a legal sense, chose to oppose
Soviet intervention rather than negotiate with the central committee in Moscow, in contrast to the Azerbaijanis, which meant that Armenia militarily had the upper hand following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Broers 2019). By the time of the 1994 ceasefire that ended the first war, Armenia had occupied most of Nagorno–Karabakh, which had declared itself an independent republic in 1991, as well as surrounding districts, comprising 20% of Azerbaijan’s pre-1991 territory.

Among the significant sites occupied by the Armenian forces was Shusha (Shushi in Armenian), the historic capital of the Karabakh region. While settlements where the city now stands date back to the Middle Ages (Bournoutian 2001), the current city came to prominence as a fortified stronghold in the eighteenth century. The region had been part of Iran during the Safavid Era (see Figure 1), but became the capital of a de facto independent Khanate of Karabakh after the collapse of that dynasty. Attempts by Qajar Iran to reclaim the city in the 1790s sparked the fourth and fifth Russo-Persian Wars (1801–1828), in the midst of which Russia gained control over the Karabakh Khanate, including Shusha, in 1813 (Figure 2) (Shafiyev 2018).

Shusha had a long history of Armenian and Azerbaijani conviviality. By the early twentieth century, Shusha was caught up in the rising nationalisms that accompanied the general decay of Romanov rule, and the city fell victim to communal violence between its Armenian and Azerbaijani inhabitants in August 1905, with significant casualties on both sides (Swietochowski 1986). This incident would create the basis for further violence a decade later. After the collapse of the Romanov Empire, Shusha first fell under the short-lived Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic (Seym) before being claimed by both the newly independent Armenian and Azerbaijani republics. The situation was complicated by the mixed demographics on the ground, with each community, Armenian and Azerbaijani, seeking the governance of their respective representative states. Furthermore, British interference and the looming threat of Ottoman and Bolshevik invasion further complicated the issue. Azerbaijan took hold of Shusha with British help in 1919, but the Armenians of Karabakh resisted incorporation into the new republic (Broers 2019). In March 1920, coinciding with the annual Nowruz festival, a massacre took place in Shusha, which led to the

![Figure 1. Map showing the extent of Iranian rule over in the Safavid period (1501–1736), including the Caucasus (Art work in public domain).](image-url)
expulsion of the Armenian community and burning of their quarter (Chorbajian, Donabedian, and Mutafian 1994). Following Bolshevik takeover, the situation calmed, and while Shusha was placed within the de facto Armenian autonomous republic of Nagorno–Karabakh, it had now transformed into a mostly Azerbaijani city, in the Azerbaijan SSR.

Cultural identity, and by extension, heritage, have been at the heart of the disputes between Armenians and Azerbaijanis since the fall of the Soviet Union. Armenia has mostly engaged in spoliation, such as leaving mosques and other heritage sites in a ruined state or allowing them to be pillaged for materials by local Armenian villagers (both during and after the Soviet periods), or through urban development often centrally planned in Moscow (during the Soviet period). In Azerbaijan, since independence, there has been a more systematic process of erasure of Armenian heritage, both through destruction and reclassification of sites. Heritage destruction has been particularly characteristic of the autonomous Nakhichevan enclave, where the deliberate destruction of Armenian heritage, such as of the famous ornate sixteenth-century khatchkars (stone crosses) of Julfa in 2005, has over the past three decades led to the partial or complete obliteration of all Armenian heritage in the district (Maghakyan 2021). In other parts of Azerbaijan, destruction continues to a lesser extent, mostly for churches and other monuments built after the Soviet period (Jonah Fisher 2021). Instead, Baku has more often pursued a different tactic by either preserving more recent monuments (from the nineteenth century onwards) as evidence of Armenians being more recent arrivals, or by erroneously redesignating older Armenian heritage as part of the Caucasian Albanian civilisation (Agha 2021), which has been a method of ‘indigenising’

Figure 2. Map showing the change of borders during the Russo-Persian Wars (Original art work by en:User:SiamaxOriginal uploader was Kaveh at fa.wikipedia – Map collection of the Perry-Castañeda Library (PCL)Originally from * Farsi Wikipedia, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2218013).
Armenian churches as Azerbaijani churches since the mid-twentieth century (Goff 2020). The erasure tactic, which some legal commentators call ‘cultural genocide’ (Maus 2021), is reflected in the presentation of carpets in the Baku Carpet Museum, and the countering narrative of erasure is likewise present in the now closed Shusha Carpet Museum.

**Carpets**

Despite there being nothing exclusively Armenian or Azerbaijani about carpet production or the symbolic content of patterns, both sides claim exclusive ownership of this heritage that is then tied to territorial claims. The carpet is one of the oldest human products predating contemporary designations of nations, ethnic groups and religions. The earliest surviving example of a pile carpet is the Pazyryk, which dates back 2500 years, and was discovered in the Altai district of western Siberia, although archaeologists believe it originated in either the Armenian highlands or the Iranian plateau (Bier 1996; Poghosyan 2008). The Pazyryk Carpet supports the theory that carpet production originated among the nomadic peoples of Central Asia within the Iranian Plateau.

European interest in carpets as a form of valuable commodity gives power to Armenian and Azerbaijani attempts to present carpets to the international community as representative of their respective national cultures and as markers of their territory. Since the fifteenth century, carpet production increased circulation in global trade networks when European gentry began adorning their houses with rugs from the Ottoman Empire (Karl 2019). In the nineteenth century, carpetmania in Europe sped up the commercialisation and industrialisation of carpet production in the Middle East, making carpets a valuable commodity in Europe (Rudner 2011; Quataert 2010). For example, the 1878 Paris exhibition and 1891 Vienna (Handelsmuseum) exhibition created renewed interest and appreciation for carpets in Europe (Carey and Volait 2020; Karl 2019). With the carpet’s commodification, a hierarchy of value for authentic carpets – prioritising those produced primarily in the former Ottoman territories, Iran, the Caucasus, and Central and South Asia – drove the production of rugs towards geographic indication and, subsequently, association with regional, ethnic and national identities (Moallem 2018). In short, locating the carpet was evidence for its authenticity and, conversely, it upheld the authenticity of the however loosely defined cultural and ethnic group that produced it.

The label of Armenian Carpet has existed in English since the 1850s, and appeared in scholarly writings in the latter part of the nineteenth century, as evidenced in the writing of Alois Riegl who referred to an Armenian carpet dating back to 1202 (Strzygowski 1908, 25). While it is difficult to find Azerbaijani carpet as a category on its own before the 1930s, Baku was known as a convenient place ‘for obtaining a constant and abundant supply of genuine article [Oriental carpets]’ (Coxon 1884, 2). In terms of national identity, carpets are key in reinforcing what Billig termed ‘banal nationalism’ and more recently what Malešević (2019) described as ‘grounded nationalism’. In Malešević’s conception of how twenty-first-century nation-states employ nationalism, he argues that they utilise three tools – ideological, organisational and micro-solidarity. While carpets embody all three, the nationalisation and ethnicisation is specifically targeted at ‘micro-solidarity’, creating a sense of pride and ownership of national identities among regular people. Seemingly ‘trivial expressions’ of national identity, such as carpets, form part of a wider discourse in nationalism that celebrates a nation’s achievements in the scientific, technological and sporting fields, either through media or other channels, which makes nationalism ‘much more grounded in the everyday life of ordinary individuals’ than before (Malešević 2019, 227). However, this is not limited to a domestic audience alone and national narratives involving carpets are also aimed at foreign audiences, with the intention of solidifying claims to territory and heritage, and enacted through heritage diplomacy.

Disputes over items such as carpets have globalised and drawn in more pacifist elements of Armenian and Azerbaijani society (such as intellectuals and artists). For example, Levon Abrahamian, a curator of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington DC, describes the ‘rather
complicated and delicate situation’ when scholarly and political interests overlap. Referring to areas in the south and east of Armenia, Abrahamian acknowledged that ‘Karabagh and Syunik regional carpets are [also] claimed by Azerbaijanis to be Azerbaijani as a result of territorial claims’ (Dixon 2018). Voronkova (2013) notes how Azerbaijanis and Armenians see the region as their historical homeland and calls for focused attention on ‘discursive and representational aspects of territorial politics’. Certain narratives, she notes, come to dominate the political and social space of regional conflict. In other words, through the political territorialisation of carpets, Armenian and Azerbaijani actors are able to recreate the frontline through material culture. In this light, a representational official space such as the museum plays a significant and sensitive role in the reflecting claims and mood of the government. We shall now turn to the two museum examples, in Baku and in Shusha (Armenian: Shushi), to trace how the representation is put to effect through the curatorial narrative of the museum as well as its architectural space.

**Carpets and the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict**

The text of the tweet in is an example of how heritage is employed in territorial disputes and how cultural spaces, in this case a carpet museum, actively participate in prosecuting the conflict. This invocation of heritage predates the 2020 war and its implied territorial claims are present in other museums. By engaging in curatorial propaganda and diplomacy, the museum exhibits nationalist claims over territory. Figure 3

Other than heritage destruction, another strategy has been the instrumentalization of heritage through diplomacy and soft power. Similar to outright destruction, this has been aimed at erasing the claims of opponents while legitimising one’s own political claims. Because of the international recognition of carpets and their value as commodity, both Armenia and Azerbaijan have contested each other’s claims over carpet production, and this has moved into heritage diplomacy. Therefore, both Yerevan and Baku use carpets to justify their positions when engaging with other nation states, and in seeking support. It must be noted that the campaign is stronger on the Azerbaijani side, largely because of the resources available to Azerbaijan.

Even during the Soviet Era, the state in Azerbaijan has shown a particular interest in investing in carpets as a tool of national identity. In this endeavour, since the end of the Soviet period, the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, along with the National Library and Carpet Museum, have continued as key actors in publishing and promoting research on carpets that emphasises the national character of carpets. Following this trajectory, in 2010 Azerbaijan succeeded in registering the ‘traditional art of Azerbaijani carpet weaving’ on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (https://bit.ly/36cLBsT). Furthermore, the production and export of carpets in Azerbaijan is under the direct control of the Azərxaļça (Azar-Carpet, formerly Azərxaļça Scientific Creative Production Association, established in 1927) with branches in multiple carpet production centres in the country. On 5 May 2016 the organisations were transformed by presidential decree into a shareholding company with the same name. Despite being under the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, the chairperson of Azərxaļça is appointed by and directly answerable to the President. The degree of ownership that Azerbaijan argues that it has over carpets is reflected in a statement made by President Ilham Aliyev (2014) upon the opening of the new building housing the National Carpet Museum in Baku:

We believe that Azerbaijan is the birthplace of the art of carpet weaving. Carpets are our national treasure and wealth, alongside mugham [traditional music] and architectural monuments.

As discussed earlier, there is no evidence that Azerbaijan is the birthplace of carpets. More significantly, however, there is evidence of a deep history of motifs and techniques of weaving that are common across a vast region of the Iranian plateau, which also includes present-day Azerbaijan. The claim to heritage is instead an attempt to secure and legitimate national sovereignty through legal recognition.
A lovely project by Carpet Museum of #Azerbaijan depicting carpet patterns from different occupied regions of Azerbaijan. Each region has a distinct design and motif and is an integral part of Azerbaijani cultural heritage. #StopArmeniaOccupation #KarabakhhisAzerbaijan

Figure 3. Tweet by Karabakh Daily (@KarabakhDailyN), an Azerbaijani partisan Twitter account that introduced itself as ‘voice of truth, fairness, humanity and accountability’ (Work available in public domain).
For Armenia, the nuances are slightly different. At stake is the question of ethnic cleansing and genocide. Here, the carpet has been employed more often in lobbying for Armenian Genocide recognition, either through official exhibitions of ‘Genocide carpets’ (carpets that were taken by Genocide survivors into their countries of refuge) in Western states (Musayelyan 2014) or in the giving of carpets as a gift to visiting foreign dignitaries and celebrities that are tied to the issue of the Armenian Genocide (Muradyan 2018). Importantly, while Armenia does not have the resources to match Azerbaijan in terms of state-run carpet production and promotion (through museums and other institutions), Armenia still puts heavy emphasis on the role of carpets as symbols of national identity and continuity in the face of genocide, war and exile. Significantly, the Armenian narrative has not historically included Azerbaijan per se, but rather has focused on Turkey as their principal opponent. This reflects the Armenian narrative that portrays ‘Turks’ and ‘Azerbaijanis’ as the same enemy, or more particularly, Azerbaijani is portrayed as a subset of Turks (Astourian 2005). It is noteworthy that this is a prevalent view also shared by most nationalist circles in Armenia, and it is this narrative that is represented in Armenian presentations of carpets.

While the Azerbaijani claim over ownership of carpet as material culture targets other nations, including Iran, it is above all preoccupied with contesting Armenian claims to territory and legitimacy, and this is apparent in the discourse around carpets. For example, Baku’s key goal in founding and promoting Azərbaıcan is explicitly stated as ‘preventing the plagiarism of our carpets by Armenians’ (Sariyeva 2018). Plagiarism and theft are a key theme in Azerbaijani narrative on carpets, with carpets having been rescued from Armenians who had ‘stolen’ them. One such carpet, originating in Karabakh, was purchased in the United States and exhibited as a ‘liberated’ carpet in Baku (Daily Voice Correspondent 2017). This language mirrors Azerbaijan’s claims over territory, such as emerged during the 2020 war, where Aliyev put special emphasis on announcing the liberation of villages during his national addresses. In other words, carpet, like land, is to be liberated from the Armenians.

In addition to cultural claims backed by military force, in emphasising plagiarism, Azerbaijan seeks to use international bodies such as UNESCO in concert with territorial claims to legitimise its position to establish a precedent in geographical indication over specific items of heritage (Sargent, S., 2020). Azerbaijan’s influence has increasingly become a source of controversy, especially as Baku’s representatives, including the President’s wife Mehriban Aliyeva, have not shied away from celebrating and promoting the erasure of Armenian heritage (Rubin 2021). Azerbaijan’s claims to heritage in UNESCO have been built on the legal logic of geographical indication, which in the case of carpets is reflected in the resources used for weaving. Carpets are defined not only by their design, but by the dyes and wool used, with the local plants and livestock from which each was obtained varying from region to region based on the local climates (Radio Liberty Azerbaijan 2006). Furthermore, it is claimed that ‘the geography, historical, cultural and religious environment of different regions affect the unique ornament, composition and other elements of the carpet’ (Azerbaijan State News Agency 2018). A loss of these plants or animals, or the use of synthetic or imported products, dilutes the authenticity of the carpets. Authenticity is therefore presumably assured by the construction of state-run carpet factories or workshops in specific regions, as stated by the press secretary of the Azərbaıcan, Tural Səfərov:

Branches of Azərbaıcan have already started operating in ten regions of Azerbaijan. Construction of carpet factories has started in ten regions. Reception points for wool and dye plants are already being built in five places. The development of electronic samples is associated with the expansion of the field of carpet weaving. The return to ancient carpets has returned to our roots and history. Today, carpets belonging to Karabakh, Guba, Nakhchivian and other regions are woven on the basis of these patterns (Sariyeva 2018).

This striving for legitimacy and authenticity has an ethnicising effect on the carpets. While the materials and techniques do not have a human biological origin, there is a strong need for Azerbaijanis to create this impression to support their claims against Armenia. As both sides claim indigeneity to the region, and both accuse the other of being newcomers, the bonding of
material to ethnicity reinforces the claim made by both sides that the people themselves are a product of the earth, in much the same way as the trees from which the dyes are produced. These contesting discourses are evident in both the Baku and Shusha museums, representing Azerbaijani and Armenian claims, respectively.

The Baku carpet museum

Among the most spectacular buildings in present-day Baku is its carpet museum, a structure designed by Italian architects and completed and inaugurated in 2014. Carpets were first exhibited as cultural heritage in Azerbaijan in 1954, when carpet scholar, collector and master weaver Latif Karimov hosted an exhibition of Azerbaijani art that included his private collection, which would become the basis of a carpet museum in the next decade. Carpets and carpet museums were significant in developing Azerbaijani national identity, which was originally meant to foster a sense of nationhood amongst a mostly rural Azerbaijani-speaking population during the Soviet Era. It has since evolved into a projection of Azerbaijani nationhood into the international arena for the purposes of legitimising Azerbaijan’s position vis-à-vis Armenia and Karabakh.

The original carpet museum was set up in 1967 in the decommissioned Icheri Sheher Friday Mosque (named because it is located in ICLESHOR, the Old City), a structure also registered as one of the properties within the World Heritage Listing (see https://whc.unesco.org/document/154692) . Initially it was the museum of Carpet and Decorative Applied Arts and included ‘jewellery and copper vessels on display’ in addition to carpets (ibid). The museum was named in honour of Latif Karimov, who was perhaps the first Azerbaijani to engage in producing a systematic taxonomy of carpets (beginning in 1949), resulting in a comprehensive catalogue based on motifs and geographical, regional classification (published in three volumes between 1961 and 1983). Karimov classified 144 types under four main regional groups. He travelled beyond the borders of the Azerbaijani SSR, including to Iran, where he lived and studied for many years, to complete his classification. At present, the official nationalist line on Karimov’s work in Iran and elsewhere is that he was classifying Azerbaijani carpets exclusively, although it appears that Karimov too conceived his project with nationalist ideals in mind. The museum, which Karimov played a significant role in founding, was subsequently relocated in 1992 to the former Lenin Museum.15

Geographical indicators associated with regional carpets reflect the development of new form of state-sponsored national consciousness in Azerbaijan during the 1950s (Yilmaz 2015). In the process of de-Stalinisation, the Central Committee of the Azerbaijan Communist Party enacted a number of reforms aimed at defining and promoting Azerbaijani history, literature and art, as well as replacing Russian with Azerbaijani as the state language of the Azerbaijan SSR (Hasanli 2015). Most of the Baku Central Committee members at that time had been active in Iran during the 1940s as part of the Soviet occupation, and resolutely believed that Iranian Azerbaijan was a historical part of their nation. Furthermore, the controversial state language law was in part a response to neighbouring rivals Armenia and Georgia, who had had their respective languages made official in their republics in 1936 upon the dissolution of the Transcaucasian SSR, which was also the point when the descriptor ‘Azerbaijani’ replaced ‘Turk’ in official parlance (Goff 2020). Finally, in the midst of de-Stalinisation, the Karabakh issue arose again, with the Armenians of the Nagorno–Karabakh Autonomous Oblast raising complaints with the Moscow Central Committee of the Communist Party about their treatment by Baku, and requesting unification with the Armenia SSR (Hasanli 2015). In other words, the political environment in which many of these cultural initiatives emerged during the Soviet Era occurred in the milieu of greater freedom of expression, a subsequent rise of nationalism in the Caucasus, a historic political relationship and ideology regarding Iranian Azerbaijan, and a spike in competition with neighbours, particularly Armenia, over national rights and territory.
The above issues are the basis of classification and exhibition in the Carpet Museum in Baku. The implied territorial claims within the classification are put to contentious political use within the museum. These include claims over Iranian Azerbaijan, which the Azerbaijani government refers to as 'Southern Azerbaijan', and exclusive claims leaving out Armenia over territories in Karabakh. The current museum reflects Karimov’s taxonomy (which, as noted, was a nationalist project) as well as his detailed classification of the historical periods of carpet production. It is set up over three exhibition levels above an entry hall. The exhibitions are organised along broad thematic lines, with clusters showing the geographical distribution of carpets and their exemplary patterns. Beginning on the first level, the museum delineates the origins of weaving in pastoralist tribes (level 1). On this level, the curatorial narrative not only establishes the origins of carpet in Azerbaijan, but also links the artefact to the nature and authentic vernacular life of the country, as well as emphasising the material relationship that Azerbaijani have with the territory.

Throughout the other two levels, exhibits are clustered in groups along the linear space of the exhibition. While the act of weaving is on display (using not only electronic footage and imagery, but also live demonstrations by weavers), the exhibits illustrate various applications of carpets, including in domestic life but also their utility in reflecting some historical events. Of note is a carpet depicting heroes of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, many of whom were from Iranian Azerbaijan. Although naming them, the museum (following the official line in the Republic of Azerbaijan) remains silent on the national origin of the depicted heroes. In instances such as this, the visitor is left to the interpretation provided by official guides to understand the characters and their historical roles. The result is more often than not, affirming a nationalist Azerbaijani narrative, that makes implicit claims on territory outside of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

The third level of the museum is dedicated to Karimov and his students and illustrates the state of carpet weaving in present-day Azerbaijan. It shows the significant submissions to national competitions for design, innovative designs by Karimov as well as carpets dedicated to commemorative purposes and occasions, including a portrait of Stalin and Soviet space technology advances. The exhibits also include photographs of state visits and photos from Karimov’s archive showing him and others during work and teaching carpet weaving). The third floor of the museum reaffirms and celebrates Karimov as the undisputed authority in the science and art of carpet weaving, thereby establishing the accuracy of the exhibitions thorough the scientific standing of Karimov. Consequently, it projects an unbroken chain of weaving tradition that, despite responding to changing historical circumstances and modes of production, has maintained its Azerbaijani particularity.

Perhaps the most striking exhibit, in so far as territorial claims are concerned, is a woven piece on the second level of the exhibition. This piece reflects the classification and grouping of carpets (the taxonomy by Karimov) in woven form. Here, under the banner of Azerbaijani carpet, various forms, motifs and artistic commonalities between Azerbaijan and other nations and ethnicities, including Iranians and Armenians are claimed and appropriated.

The carpet museum stands as a national and tourist icon for Baku and Azerbaijan. It is also part of the political economy of carpet production, a node in the network of workshops, entrepreneurs, Azərəxalça outlets, international market dealers and international museums. The architecture, itself representing a rolled-up carpet, is a sign of Azerbaijan opening up to the Western world and using its oil income towards public and heritage diplomacy. This situation stands in contrast with that of Armenia and the Nagorno–Karabakh Republic (Figure 4).

**Shushi/a carpet museum**

Before the 2020 war, carpets did not figure prominently in Armenia’s strategy in the culture war with Azerbaijan. However, the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR), or Artsakh Republic, seriously engaged with the carpet dispute, both for the internal consumption by Armenians for developing national identity and for external consumption by non-Armenians. In the first instance, the
transnational nature of the Armenian Diaspora coupled with the geographic separation of the NKR from the rest of Armenia means that museums develop national identity in a way that emphasises ethnic Armenian sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh and (until 2020) adjacent occupied areas, and reinforces the feeling of threat from 'Turks', meaning both Azerbaijan and Turkey. This national narrative is meant to be consumed and then taken with the Armenian visitor back to their country of origin to be reproduced and repackaged as heritage diplomacy. This is especially important in the case of the NKR, which, as an internationally disputed region, does not attract many non-Armenian foreign tourists.

The dual practice of using heritage in national identity development and in heritage diplomacy was evident in the Shushi Carpet Museum, opened in 2013. The museum acted as a counterpoint to the territorial claims of its Azerbaijani counterpart, although it was dissolved due to the 2020 war. The museum was founded in 2011 by Vardan Astsatryan, a philanthropist who also worked as an advisor to the President of the NKR until 2015 (Artsakh Press Correspondent 2015). The Shushi Carpet Museum was housed in a building donated by the Moscow-based Armenian entrepreneur, Karo Sargsyan, and was part of a larger arts organisation, which also included four state-run museums and two private museums, that were strategically located across the city to re-establish Shusha as the cultural centre of Karabakh. These museums also included a History Museum, an Ethnological Museum, a Geological Museum, a Museum of Fine Arts and a Coin Museum. During the 2020 war, much of the material from these museums was packed up and put into bomb shelters. However, only exhibits from the Shushi Carpet Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts were evacuated from the city (to Yerevan and Stepanakert respectively) before Shusha was surrendered to Azerbaijan in November 2020 (Figure 5).
The Shushi Carpet Museum was much smaller than its counterpart in Baku, consisting of two main rooms exhibiting carpets (some as old as 300 years) from the surrounding Karabakh region, mostly following styles closely associated with Armenians, such as Dragon Carpets and the Kndzoresk or Syunik carpet styles (https://bit.ly/3gKXHiF, https://bit.ly/2WzuNLr). The exhibition also included non-Armenian carpets, particularly those from Central Asian countries such as Turkmenistan and Afghanistan. A small number of non-carpet related exhibits of artefacts and works of art, mostly from Russia, were also included in the museum. No mention was made of Azerbaijani (or indeed Turkish) carpets, although the museum still reflected a slightly different approach to Armenian claims on the carpet as heritage. The inclusion of non-Armenian carpets symbolised an acknowledgement that Armenians are not necessarily the inventors of this form of textile (in contrast to the bolder claims made by Ilham Aliyev about Azerbaijani carpets), but it was still directed towards geographical indication. The close relationship between carpet styles woven in Karabakh and motifs also found in Armenia were presented to give the visitor an understanding of both the continuity between Armenian communities and the regional variations found in their perceived homelands. This narrative was not always subtle, especially when confronting opposing claims from Azerbaijan.
The founder of the Museum, Vardan Astsatryan, repeatedly emphasised the link between the museum and the conflict with Azerbaijan. For example, in one characteristic interview, Astsatryan said that the express purpose of the museum was to combat ‘Pan-Turkism’:

I have been interested in the history of carpets and collecting them since an early age. I constantly heard many stories from my nan (tat), poppa (baba) and parents, about how the Turks [t’urk’erë] often came to Armenian villages, and from the houses they collected old Armenian carpets, exchanging them for new carpets or other goods. Being witness to such incidents, some hid the old carpets in their homes, while some were just compliant with the situation. Thus, the Turks deliberately wanted to destroy Armenian artisanship and pursued a state policy, the ideology of Pan-Turkism, towards the Armenians (Makaryan 2017).

Astsatryan positioned Azerbaijanis as Turks, and as an exploitative group who had taken older (more authentic) carpets from the Armenians and replaced them with newer (less authentic, imitation) carpets of Azerbaijani/Turkish artisanship. The ambiguity of Astsatryan’s statements, which are not specific in time or place, alongside the blurring of what he himself witnessed with what his parents and grandparents may have witnessed (or heard of), situate the museum within the frame of a timeless conflict between Armenians and ‘Turks’. That Astsatryan refers to Azerbaijanis and not theft of Armenian heritage by Ottoman Turkey is evidenced in other interviews where he has repeated the same story but used the word aderbejeants’i (Azerbaijani) rather than t’urk’ (Turk) to identify the ‘carpet thieves’ (Hayrapetyan 2021). Furthermore, Astsatryan’s statement directly addresses the issue of ownership of carpets, rationalising how Azerbaijanis may have illegitimately taken possession of authentic carpets that they now present as their own. For example, at the opening of an exhibition in Yerevan of items evacuated from the Shushi Carpet Museum during the war, Astsatryan claimed that 70% of objects displayed in the Baku Carpet Museum are Armenian carpets masquerading as Azerbaijanis (Hayrapetyan 2021). While the authors acknowledge that the erasure of Azerbaijanis claims over carpets is nowhere near as widespread as Azerbaijanis denial of the existence of Armenian carpets, Astsatryan’s assertions are important, since he is the owner of a carpet museum, the goals of which are in part to challenge and invert Azerbaijanis claims regarding the heritage of their carpets. Due to the potential for geographical indication on carpets, where regional carpets are defined by certain stylistic and material characteristics, claims of ownership over regional carpet styles extend to claims of legitimacy in the occupation of territory. Astsatryan’s assertions, therefore, are meant for consumption by Armenian visitors who can then use this narrative to counter claims made by Azerbaijan regarding both carpets and the territories of which they dispute Armenian ownership. This narrative is meant to eventually be communicated to a non-Armenian international audience.

The NKR Ministry of Culture and Youth Affairs explicitly stated in their report upon the opening of the museum in 2013 that the purpose of the Shushi Carpet Museum was ‘to save traditional Artsakh carpets and fabrics from loss or damage, to present the carpet-weaving culture of Artsakh through a permanent exhibition, and also to counter Azerbaijan’s policy of appropriating Armenian culture’ (News.AM Correspondent 2013). It was not the only purpose of the museum, however, with the President of NKR at the time, Bako Sahakyan (2013), placing heavy emphasis on the role of the museum in preserving Karabakh Armenian culture and encouraging tourism. This tourism had a dual function of both providing revenue to the region as well as creating an audience that would return to their country of origin with the narrative put forward by the museum. Therefore, the museum achieved several objectives: countering Azerbaijanis claims to territory through carpets, attracting tourists to consume local products alongside the Armenian perspective of the conflict, and finally attracting investment in further development and, hopefully, bringing Armenian settlers to the region.

The museum’s location on disputed ground added to its symbolism. After the city was emptied of its mostly Azerbaijanis population during the Karabakh War, the city remained an important rallying point for Azerbaijan, which used the symbols of historic cultural figures, including Karimov himself, to create a sense of longing for the recapture of the city. Both sides claimed monocultural
ownership of Shusha— with Armenians claiming indigeneity by pointing to its heights as strongholds of the Armenian meliks of the Middle Ages, and Azerbaijanis denying an Armenian presence in the city. Shusha was the main strategic objective for the Azerbaijani army during the war of 2020, evidenced both in Azerbaijan’s war tactics, which pushed to Shusha from the south, and the statements of Ilham Aliyev and other leaders. Two days into the war, for example, the Sheikh-ul-Islam of the Caucasus, Allahshakur Pashazadeh (an ethnic Talysh from Azerbaijan who had historically engaged with Armenian clergy in interfaith dialogue on Karabakh), openly stated that his greatest dream was to call the adhan (Muslim call to prayer) from the Shusha mosque (Pashazadeh 2020).

During the 2020 war, it was impossible for all exhibits to be removed from the museum for keeping in Armenia, and the museum fell under Azerbaijani control when the Azerbaijani army captured the city on November 8 following three days of intense fighting. On November 25, the museum’s founder, Vardan Astsatryan, informed by museum employees present for the exchange of the city, claimed that Azerbaijani soldiers had removed many of the carpets from the museum and taken them to the Shusha mosque to be used for prayers (Arshakyan 2020). However, Astsatryan later stated that he had managed to remove about two-thirds of the carpets in the week before Azerbaijan’s attack on Shusha (Minasyan 2021), and that these carpets were now to be exhibited in Yerevan (Armenpress Correspondents 2021). This was followed by a statement from Azerbaijan’s Ministry of Culture demanding that the carpets, which they argued has been illegally removed, must be returned to Azerbaijan. Furthermore, the Ministry statement engaged in explicit language of erasure by claiming that ‘Armenians have never engaged in carpet weaving, but in carpet trading, and in the process of trading, they have been trying to spread misleading information to the world by presenting Azerbaijani carpets as Armenian carpets’ (Statement of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Azerbaijan. 2021). This has been the most explicit statement outlining the Armenia–Azerbaijan carpet battlefront. It also exemplifies the mobile nature of heritage in the Armenian transnational community that a carpet museum from Shusha can be relocated to Yerevan and remain the Shushi museum. This speaks to the way that Armenians construct their national identity around lost territories as well as the importance of Yerevan as a mouthpiece for all Armenians.

Conclusion

In this article, we have demonstrated the complex but close relationship between cultural heritage claims and corresponding claims over territory in the South Caucasus, using the example of carpets in the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, specifically the Baku and (now-closed) Shusha/i carpet museums. The carpet shows the politics involved in asserting ownership over heritage and territory, and how such claims have the potential to be followed up by, or matched with, violent action. This can be seen in the important designation of the city of Shusha, which was the location of an Armenian carpet museum that in part countered the claims of Azerbaijan’s Baku Carpet Museum. Shusha was among the main objectives of the Azerbaijani military during the 2020 war due to its significance in Azerbaijani narratives on territorial ownership of Nagorno–Karabakh, and Baku’s future plans for the city, as demonstrated by a state visit by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in June 2021, hint at the larger geostrategic designs in which heritage will be employed. The specific case of the carpet as shared heritage also reveals a disturbing side effect of nationalities policies and nationalism more broadly. In their endeavour to make heritage and national borders coextensive, and in defining nations on an ethnic basis, these policies effectively promote intercommunal strife, even over shared heritage such as carpets or music. In the Armenia–Azerbaijan case, both sides challenge the other’s history of carpet production in a way that mirrors their dispute over territory. In other words, the ways in which carpet design can be used to indicate a geographic origin means that both Armenian and Azerbaijani actors have seen it as expedient to claim universal ownership of carpets produced in these regions.
Azerbaijan has strategically used the promotion of heritage through various international arenas (such as UNESCO) as a means of soft power, which collapses claims to heritage and to territory, and makes these claims palatable to and recognised by an international audience. In the case of shared heritage, where cultural flows transcend national boundaries, common practices of exhibition and heritage interpretation as well as diplomatic machinations around heritage, are not necessarily conducive to cooperation and mutual understanding. Instead, claims over heritage merge with claims over an exclusive past, which generate resentment and confrontation. While in principle a foundation of cooperation through shared heritage seems ideal, almost always this is unachievable due to obstacles created by the geopolitical and economic disparities among nations. This trend is already showing signs of deepening in the wake of the 2020 Armenia–Azerbaijan War.

While illustrating these problems with reference to contesting claims raised through carpet exhibitions in Azerbaijan’s National Carpet Museum, and the now closed Armenian Carpet Museum of Shushi, we have also explained how these institutions are mobilised to advance the two sides’ claims and counterclaims with reference to a deeper historical context. In so doing, we have mapped out the relationships of power on inter-state and inter-communal contestations that evolve over time. Further research should scale up this case study, looking at other areas of dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan (such as the strategic registration of lavash bread, dolma and khachkars with UNESCO) as well as comparative examples with Azerbaijan and Iran. Additionally, a definitive history of the ethnicisation of carpets, a process to which this study refers, has yet to be written, and a systematic account building on the conceptual work of scholars like Brubaker and Malešević would provide a strong framework for further comparative analyses of the politicisation of heritage in conflict.

Finally, our case reinforces Meskell’s (2018, 200) call for ‘critical reflection upon the shortcomings and failures of UNESCO’s [and we add heritage regimes] philosophies and practice’. While ours was an extreme case of potential problems with shared heritage and its ownership, we contend that claims to ownership of shared heritage are genuine to the point that ownership is not considered exclusive. Considering this caveat has the potential to liberate museums, allowing the carpet museums that form the basis of this case study to develop a curatorial narrative that recognises the circulation of materials, symbols, techniques and motifs across the boundaries of the nation-state; a proposition that has materialised in some museums and exhibitions, and certainly in some scholarly texts about material culture. However, as we have demonstrated, customarily such museums are only encouraged to take a hard-line stance and attempt to inculcate the diaspora community and tourists with nationalist ideology that suits the needs of their respective governments.

Notes

1. By definition, museums are public institutions serving ‘the purposes of education, study and enjoyment’ (International Council of Museums (ICOM), Article 3, Statutes, 2007).
2. This is affirmed by the connection made between culture and geography (Bonnemaïson 2005; Piterberg, Ruiz, and Symcox 2015) as well as the relationship between governance and heritage (Wang 2019; Harrison 2012; Smith 2006).
3. We can see this in other contexts such as the case of culinary heritage and its contestation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, see Bascuñán-Wiley (2019).
4. Armenians and Azerbaijanis were listed at different levels of the development hierarchy, with Armenians labelled ‘advanced’ and Azerbaijanis labelled as ‘backward’ (kul’turnaya-ojustalost’). While this was ostensibly meant to facilitate the faster development of so-called ‘backward’ nationalities, in practice it entrenched their marginalisation to the point where Azerbaijanis were under-represented in the governance of their own Soviet republic until the 1970s.
5. Qajars were the dynasty who ruled Iran between 1789 and 1925. For Russo-Persian Wars see Amanat (2017 Part Two. Shaping of the Guarded Domains).
6. The destruction of religious sites during the ethnic cleansing of the late Soviet period, and the subsequent war (1992–1994) has been a point of contention for both states (Broers 2019; de Waal 2002).
7. Some examples from the post-Soviet period include the mosque of the ghost town of Agdam in Karabakh, which was used as a shelter for animals since the war. Azerbaijan, on the other hand, is well known for wholesale deliberate heritage destruction that is aimed towards erasing evidence of an Armenian presence on the landscape.

8. As has been found in other studies of maximalist claims, such as those made between Iranian Azeris and Azerbaijani over the correct form of their language, a black and white and exclusivist approach is hard to challenge than a more nuanced understanding (Karimzad and Catedral 2017). Azerbaijan has made similar claims in various aspects of heritage. For example see Sargent (2020).

9. According to a Google Ngram viewer search using the search term ‘Armenian carpet’ (https://books.google.com/ngrams).

10. While Strzygowski notes that Riegl persuasively determined the date of the carpet in question (in Ein orientalischer Teppich vom Jahre 1202 n. Chr. und die ältesten orientalischen Teppiche – Berlin, 1895), he also points out that determining the exact location of origin for an old carpet is difficult.

11. Coxon also notes that there are ‘Tartar’ (sic) and Armenian dealers who facilitate the process.

12. For a different example see Sargent (2020).

13. For example see Rabimov (2020), Azerbaijani Carpets in UNSCO Silk Roads Programme (https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/content/azerbaijani-carpets) and United Nations educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2011).

14. For their official Facebook see: https://www.facebook.com/324903887532600/posts/147981918650217/; also see https://azerxalca.az)

15. See: https://bit.ly/3gtVSHB, the building which is today the Museum Centre (coincidentally hosting the Independence Museum of Azerbaijan among others).

16. In his books he described four periods from primitive to the more advanced and explain the association between the material, kind of carpet, and the tools and techniques of production. For example, see Volume 2, 1983.

17. For a fascinating account of Turkey’s machinations around sites that include Armenian heritage see Meskell (2018 Chapter 7: Danger).

18. See https://bit.ly/3AWRUii, https://bit.ly/2UavBVT and https://bit.ly/3ek85wv.

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