

Constructing ethnic identity: Azerbaijani Mountain Jews in late 19th century Caucasian ethnography

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Abstract: The *Collection of Materials on the Description of the Territories and Peoples of the Caucasus* (SMOMPK) remains one of the most significant ethnographic sources documenting the history, everyday life, and folklore of the peoples of the Caucasus in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Published between 1881 and 1929 in forty-six volumes, the series assembled extensive materials on ethno-national composition, domestic life, ritual practices, settlements, and oral traditions across the region. Among the communities represented in this corpus were the Mountain Jews. This article focuses on the works of Mikhail Bezhanov published in the fourteenth (1892) and eighteenth (1894) volumes of SMOMPK. In his article “Brief Information about the Village of Vartashen and Its Inhabitants” Bezhanov provides detailed observations on the Udins and Jews of the area, drawing on personal experience and local knowledge. His descriptions encompass aspects of material and spiritual culture, including family structure, customs and traditions, wedding and mourning rituals, birth ceremonies, and children’s games. In a subsequent publication devoted specifically to the Mountain Jews of Vartashen (Elisavetpol Province, Nukha District of Azerbaijan), he addresses questions concerning their language and origin. Rather than serving merely as descriptive accounts, these ethnographic texts participated in shaping a structured image of the Mountain Jews within the broader framework of late nineteenth-century scholarly discourse. Through an analysis of narrative strategies and classificatory language, the study demonstrates how ethnic identity was articulated through religious, linguistic, and cultural markers that reflected both academic inquiry and the intellectual paradigms of the period.

Keywords: SMOMPK, Azerbaijani Mountain Jews, Caucasian ethnography, identity construction, Bezhanov

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Introduction

In 1881, the *Collection of Materials on the Description of the Territories and Peoples of the Caucasus* (SMOMPK) began publication in Tbilisi under the auspices of the Caucasus Educational Department. Over nearly five decades (1881–1929), the series produced forty-six volumes. The first forty-four volumes were published in Tbilisi between 1881 and 1915, while the final two appeared in Makhachkala in 1926 and 1929. During this period, SMOMPK became one of the most extensive ethnographic enterprises devoted to documenting the peoples of the Caucasus, assembling materials on language, customs, folklore, everyday life, demography, and social organization.

The establishment of such a large-scale ethnographic project in the context of the Russian Empire was not ideologically neutral. Like many scholarly initiatives of the late nineteenth century, it was embedded within broader imperial frameworks of knowledge production. Ethnographic research functioned not only as a descriptive discipline but also as a mechanism for systematizing and classifying the diverse populations incorporated into imperial structures. Through detailed accounts of religious practices, linguistic features, social customs, and cultural traditions, ethnographic writing contributed to the construction of structured representations of ethnic difference.

Contemporary intellectuals were aware of this dynamic. In 1936, Azerbaijani scholar Hanafi Zeynalli observed that imperial authorities demonstrated particular interest in studying the Turkic and Caucasian peoples within the framework of colonial policy:

The Russian bourgeoisie, from the point of view of its colonial policy, tried to study the Turkic people more “zealously” than the Turkic masters. That is why, in Tiflis under the editorial office of Lopatinsky, he was publishing a collection describing the natives and tribes of the Caucasus (Zeynalli 1936, 2). [my transl.]

His remarks suggest that ethnographic documentation was understood not merely as scholarly activity but as part of a broader political and intellectual project.

Despite these ideological dimensions, SMOMPK remains an invaluable historical and ethnographic source. Its volumes contain extensive materials on the communities of the Caucasus, including those settled in present-day Azerbaijan. Among them were the

Mountain Jews, whose cultural life, traditions, and linguistic characteristics were described in several publications within the series. Although SMOMPK has long been recognized for its documentary value, its role in shaping ethnic representations has received comparatively limited critical attention. Existing studies have tended to emphasize the descriptive richness of the materials rather than examining the discursive mechanisms through which identities were articulated and stabilized. The case of the Azerbaijani Mountain Jews provides a particularly revealing example of how late nineteenth-century ethnographic writing participated in defining communal boundaries and interpreting cultural distinctiveness.

This article therefore seeks to analyze how Azerbaijani Mountain Jewish identity was constructed in late nineteenth-century Caucasian ethnography, focusing on the publications of 1892 and 1894. By applying textual and historical-discursive analysis, the study explores the narrative strategies, classificatory language, and conceptual frameworks through which the community was represented, situating these representations within the broader intellectual paradigms of the period.

Methodology

The study is based on a close reading of two articles by Mikhail Bezhanov published in the SMOMPK collection in 1892 and 1894. These texts are examined as nineteenth-century ethnographic documents produced within a specific scholarly and institutional environment. In addition to these two articles, related SMOMPK materials and later scholarly assessments are used to clarify authorship, context, and reception.

The analysis focuses on how the Mountain Jews are described in the texts and which categories are used to define them. Particular attention is paid to recurring themes such as language, settlement history, economic activity, religious life, family structure, ritual practices, and folklore narratives. The quotations are preserved in the original Russian, accompanied by English translations, in order to maintain textual accuracy while allowing analytical interpretation.

A comparative perspective is applied to identify the difference between the two publications: in the first article, the Mountain Jews appear within a broader multi-ethnic setting, while in the second they become the central ethnographic subject. The study therefore approaches these materials not only as historical sources but also as

examples of how ethnic identity was framed within late nineteenth-century Caucasian ethnography.

Ethnographic representation of the Mountain Jews in SMOMPK

A close examination of the complete SMOMPK series shows that two substantial articles devoted specifically to the Mountain Jews were published in the collection during the late nineteenth century. Both were authored by Mikhail S. Bezhanov and appeared within a short interval of time.

The first article, “Краткие сведения о селе Варташен и его жителях” / “Brief Information about the Village of Vartashen and Its Inhabitants”, was published in the fourteenth volume of SMOMPK in 1892 (Bezhanov 1892, 214–261). Spanning nearly fifty pages, the study provides a detailed account of the population of Vartashen, including the Udins, Tatars (Azerbaijanis), and Jews residing in the area. Although the article addresses several ethnic groups, it contains extensive material concerning the social life, occupations, and cultural characteristics of the local Jewish community.

Two years later, Bezhanov published a second and more focused study in the eighteenth volume of SMOMPK, entitled “Евреи села Варташен (Елисаветпольская губерния, Нухинский уезд)” / “Jews of the Village of Vartashen (Elisavetpol Province, Nukha District)” (Bezhanov 1894, 110–227). This article, covering more than one hundred pages, is devoted entirely to the Mountain Jews of Vartashen. Its scope is notably broader, offering detailed descriptions of everyday life, religious practices, and elements of spiritual culture.

The scholarly value of these publications has been recognized by later researchers:

Two very valuable articles by M. Bezhanov about the village of Vartashen date back to the end of the 19th century. One of them gives brief information about the Jews of Vartashen, while the second is directly devoted to the description of the daily and spiritual culture of the Jews of Vartashen. M. Bezhanov describes in particular detail the preparatory work of local Jews for Passover and also provides examples of their oral folk art, mainly of religious content. (Semyonov 2018, 162) [my transl.]

These assessments underline the significance of Bezhanov’s contributions not only as ethnographic documentation but also as key textual sources for understanding how the Mountain Jewish community was represented within late nineteenth-century Caucasian scholarship.

Mikhail Bezhanov as a local author of imperial ethnography

The publication of SMOMPK required not only editorial coordination but also a broad network of contributors capable of documenting the diverse communities of the Caucasus. Given the vast geographical and ethnic scope of the collection — encompassing North Caucasian peoples such as the Ossetians, Chechens, Avars, Aysors, Turukhmen, and Jews, as well as Azerbaijanis, Armenians, Georgians, Tats, Udins, Talyshes, and Mountain Jews — the involvement of locally educated individuals was essential. The systematic study of such a wide and culturally complex region could hardly have been accomplished without the participation of those who lived within these communities. As noted by Efendiyev, local teachers played a particularly significant role in this process:

In this work the Teaching Department was closely helped by teachers who taught in village schools. Each of these authors, with little experience and competence, studied the village and settlement in which they lived, described the facts and events that he or she saw with the eye and heard with the ear through the filter of his/her personal observations. (Efendiyev 1999, 17) [my transl.]

This approach was also applied in the case of the Vartashen materials. The author of the articles on the Mountain Jews, Mikhail Bezhanov, was himself a resident of Vartashen and served as a school supervisor and teacher. In the fourteenth volume of SMOMPK (1892), in the article “The information about the village of Vartashen and its population,” he is introduced as the supervisor of the Vartashen school. The same designation appears in the eighteenth volume (1894), confirming his institutional role within the local educational structure.

Further references within SMOMPK indicate that Bezhanov was deeply involved in educational and cultural activities. In the sixth volume, he is described both as Head of the Vartashen two-year school and as a teacher. His ethnic background is explicitly stated in the note accompanying the Udi tale “Rustam”:

This tale was delivered by the Teacher of the Vartashen School, Mikhail Bezhanov, an Udin from Vartashen. (Bezhanov 1888, 7) [my transl.]

Bezhanov also provides autobiographical information in his 1892 publication:

There are two schools in Vartashen: General and Armenian Church. The general school was opened in 1860 by my father Stepan Bezhanov; in 1876 my father left the teaching profession and his place was taken by his student Mr. Kotiev; in 1880 my brother, Georgy Bezhanov, was appointed as a teacher from the Society for the Restoration of Orthodox Christianity in the Caucasus; but in 1883 the school was closed. The current two-year school was opened at the expense of the local authorities in 1887. (Bezhanov 1892, 216) [my transl.]

Additional evidence from volume XXX (1902) reveals the broader intellectual environment of the Bezhanov family:

The translation of the Bible into Udi was carried out in 1893 by the priest Semyon Bezhanov. Its publication was delayed. Late S. Bezhanov, who was from Vartashen, was originally an Udi and together with his brother Mikhail Bezhanov worked in collecting and studying folk songs, fairy tales, proverbs and compiling a dictionary about the Udins. All these materials were to be published in two editions: in the first - folk songs, fairy tales, proverbs with a dictionary, in the second - a translation of the Holy Bible, now only the second edition is printed. (Foreword 1902, 1) [my transl.]

These materials demonstrate that Mikhail Bezhanov was born into an educated Udi family of Vartashen and was actively engaged in scholarly, educational, and linguistic work. His background as a local intellectual and cultural mediator is particularly significant for the present study. The articles devoted to the Mountain Jews were not written by an external observer unfamiliar with the region, but by an individual embedded within the local social and cultural environment. This positionality strengthens their documentary value while also inviting careful consideration of the perspective from which ethnic identity was interpreted and articulated.

Ethnographic representation of the Mountain Jews in SMOMPK

The first article “Краткие сведения о селе Варташен и его жителях” / “Brief Information about the Village of Vartashen and Its Inhabitants” (1892, Volume XIV) constitutes the earliest reference point for examining the representation of the Mountain Jews in SMOMPK. Although described as “brief” in its title, the publication is extensive and systematic in scope, covering geographical, economic, demographic, and cultural aspects of Vartashen. While the Udins are the principal focus of the study, the Mountain Jews are mentioned within the broader multi-ethnic composition of the settlement. Their portrayal, though fragmentary, reveals several thematic dimensions through which identity is described.

The language of the Mountain Jews

Linguistic distinction is presented as one of the primary markers differentiating the communities of Vartashen. Bezhanov introduces this distinction in the following way:

The Udins live in the villages of Vartashen and Nij and speak the mountain language that contains many Tatar (Azerbaijani) words. ... Orthodox and Gregorian Udins speak the Udin language among themselves. The Jews speak the Persian language. (Bezhanov 1892, 215) [my transl.]

Here, language functions as a defining ethnic marker. By identifying the Jews as Persian-speaking, the author establishes a clear linguistic boundary that separates them from other local groups and situates them within a distinct cultural-linguistic category.

The occupation and economic activity of the Mountain Jews

Economic differentiation is another important aspect of the description. The occupational structure of the Mountain Jews is characterized in contrast to that of the Udins and Tatars:

... the Udins and Tatars (Azerbaijanis) are engaged in agriculture, sericulture, horticulture, gardening, cattle-breeding and partly in trade; ... but the Jews are engaged in tobacco growing and trading; the rich of them are engaged in trade and the poor in tobacco farming; they sow shag on foreign lands for half the harvest and receive food from the owner. (Bezhanov 1892, 215) [my transl.]

The emphasis on tobacco cultivation and commerce constructs a specific socio-economic profile for the community. The internal division between “rich” and “poor” further reinforces this structured economic portrayal.

The land ownership of the Mountain Jews

The issue of land ownership introduces an additional structural distinction within the local hierarchy. Bezhanov explicitly notes:

There are about 10,000 dessiatines of land behind the village of Vartashen, divided into plots that residents use by lot; they sow wheat, millet, barley, rice and so on. The Jews have no land... (Bezhanov 1892, 215) [my transl.]

The statement that “the Jews have no land” implies a differentiated economic position within the village structure. Land ownership is

implicitly associated with stability and integration into the agrarian system, and its absence marks a distinctive communal status.

The religion of the Mountain Jews

Religious organization is described through spatial and ritual details. The synagogue is presented as follows:

The Jews have two synagogues. The synagogue is a large hall, in the middle of which there is a pulpit for a rabbi; there are many niches in the walls where the Jews put their prayer books and white shawls; the floor is covered with carpets – the Jews sit cross-legged on them during worship” (Bezhanov 1892, 219) [my transl.]

This description highlights confessional distinctiveness while presenting religious life as structured and orderly within the broader multi-ethnic setting.

The clothing culture of the Mountain Jews

Cultural identity is further marked through clothing. Bezhanov draws a comparative distinction:

The Jewish men dress the same as all Tatars, but wear long garments; the Jewish women dress almost the same as Tatar women, but with a slight change in the headdress and wear a special veil. (Bezhanov 1892, 219) [my transl.]

The comparison emphasizes both similarity and difference. While outward resemblance to Tatars is acknowledged, specific elements of attire serve as visible markers of communal identity.

The household ceremonies and marriage practices of the Mountain Jews

Family structure and marriage customs also contribute to the portrayal of communal specificity. Bezhanov notes:

Among the Jews the groom is 12 years old and the bride is 5 and 7 years old; in this case, the groom’s parents educate the bride at their place (Bezhanov 1892, 232) [my transl.]

The reference to early marriage practices introduces a culturally specific detail that further distinguishes the Mountain Jews within the ethnographic narrative.

In this first article, the Mountain Jews appear not as the central ethnographic subject but as one element within a broader multi-ethnic composition. Their representation is organized through thematic

categories — language, occupation, land ownership, religion, clothing, and family practices. These categories function as classificatory tools through which identity is described and implicitly structured. Although fragmentary, the portrayal reveals a systematic process of categorization that frames the community within the ethnographic discourse of the period.

A comprehensive ethnographic portrait of the Mountain Jews

The second article published in SMOMPK, “Евреи села Варташен (Елисаветпольская губерния, Нухинский уезд)” / “The Jews of the Village of Vartashen (Elisavetpol Province, Nukha District)” (1894, Vol. XVIII), represents a far more systematic and comprehensive study of the Mountain Jews than the earlier publication. Written in accordance with the editorial program established by SMOMPK’s editor, the article follows a structured ethnographic scheme designed to ensure complete and organized documentation of ethnic communities. As a result, it offers an extensive portrayal of the material, social, religious, and folklore life of the Mountain Jews at the end of the nineteenth century.

The article consists of two main parts: the first provides detailed ethnographic information, while the second presents recorded folklore texts. The second part is considerably larger in volume, indicating the author’s particular attention to oral tradition.

The key ethnographic themes in the first part may be outlined as follows:

The settlement of the Mountain Jews

M. Bezhanov situates the Mountain Jews within a historical narrative of migration: The Jews settled in the village of Vartashen about 200 years ago. (Bezhanov 1894, 111) [my transl.]

By dating their arrival to approximately two centuries earlier, the author establishes temporal depth and local rootedness. This information aligns with later historical accounts confirming migration from Gilan in the late seventeenth century. The confirmation from later sources further reinforces the historical framework:

The Jews moved to Vartashen at the end of the 17th century from the Persian province of Gilan and settled on the lower edge of the village. In the 18th century the Jewish population of Vartashen increased due to refugees from the neighboring villages of Zelem and Gutkashen”. (*The Jews*. 2023, 38) [my transl.]

This convergence between ethnographic description and later scholarship strengthens the documentary value of the account.

The number and demographic development of the Mountain Jews

The article also emphasizes demographic growth:

At first there were about 60 houses, and now, in terms of the number of souls, they surpass the rest of the inhabitants. (Bezhanov 1894, 112) [my transl.]

The focus on population expansion suggests not only stability but also communal consolidation within the settlement. Later demographic data confirm the significant presence of the Mountain Jews in Vartashen during the nineteenth century:

In the 19th century the Jewish population of Vartashen made up about a third of the total population of the village. In 1873 there were 1,628 Jews living in Vartashen and in 1885 there were already 2,282 Jews. Later, the number of Jews began to gradually decrease due to migration to Baku and Tbilisi. In the 1990s about 1200 Jews lived in Vartashen. In recent years, the Jewish population has sharply decreased due to migration and does not exceed more than 300 people. (*The Jews*. 2023, 38) [my transl.]

Making a margin, it should be noted that on the official website of the Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, as on the 1st of January 2022 the information is that 85 Jews live in Oghuz (Vartashen) now (statistics). However, according to the information received from "the place", that is, directly from the region, 70 Jewish families currently live in Oghuz (Vartashen). The comparison between historical and contemporary statistics highlights long-term demographic transformation and migration patterns.

The language of the Mountain Jews

Linguistic identity is briefly but clearly indicated: "They speak Persian" (Bezhanov 1894, 113).

Although concisely formulated, this statement reinforces the linguistic distinctiveness already mentioned in the earlier article. The reference to the Persian (Tat/Juhuri) dialect situates the community within a specific linguistic tradition.

The occupation of the Mountain Jews

Economic specialization is described in categorical terms: "They are exclusively engaged in trade and tobacco cultivation." (Bezhanov 1894, 112) [my transl.]

The adverb “exclusively” underscores occupational differentiation. The detailed explanation of tobacco cultivation further illustrates the economic arrangements under which the Mountain Jews operated:

Tobacco is sown on the lands of Christians and Muslims under such conditions: the owner plows and fertilizes the land, the Jew makes beds, plants seedlings, looks after them before harvesting, dries and makes bunches with roots, - the owner gives the Jew wheat, rice, money for meat and butter, and clothing all this time; the harvest is divided in half between the owner and the Jew. (Bezhanov 1894, 112) [my transl.]

This depiction presents a structured economic relationship between Jewish cultivators and Christian/Muslim landowners.

Trade practices are also described:

Some of the Jews trade in bazaars, while others are the door-to-door peddlers. The latter are especially convenient for women who cannot go to the bazaar themselves and choose goods they like - they pay extra for it. (Bezhanov 1894, 112) [my transl.]

The portrayal suggests integration into local economic networks while maintaining occupational distinctiveness.

Institute of mutual assistance in the Mountain Jews

From the article it is clear that the institution of mutual assistance in the Jews is very developed. It is interesting that even those Jews who are not on good terms with one another follow the rules of the same institution and in this way try to prevent those of the same religion from living poorly. Even those Jews who are in an enemy relationship manage to unite in the event of a difficulty and danger. The institution of communal solidarity receives particular emphasis:

But how they take care of their co-religionists... Every Saturday, especially on big holidays, they collect a lot of money for their poor; once a month wheat is collected from the rich for them. There is no begging among Jews. Often Jews from other villages also come to help and always return, receiving many generous gifts. In general, they support one another strongly: they protect even their personal enemies (Jews) from non-Jews. (Bezhanov 1894, 112) [my transl.]

The author stresses internal cohesion and strong communal bonds. The absence of begging and the protection of co-religionists are presented as defining moral characteristics of the group.

Institute of family in the Mountain Jews

Respect for elders and patriarchal authority is highlighted:

The Jews respect their elders and rabbis: young people do not dare to sit in front of them and behave very modestly. The father of the family is a complete ruler; even married sons, without his permission, cannot do anything or dispose of anything.” (Bezhanov 1894, 113) [my transl.]

The description portrays a hierarchical but internally stable family structure centered on paternal authority.

The status of a woman in the Mountain Jews

Gender relations are briefly addressed:

Women are not as oppressed as Muslim women (they are not allowed to go to the synagogue). (Bezhanov 1894, 114) [my transl.]

The comparative formulation situates the community within a broader regional framework, presenting Jewish women’s status through contrast with neighboring groups.

The clothing culture of the Mountain Jews

Clothing is described in extensive detail:

The clothes of the Jews are: a short, waist-length shirt, wide shawls, an upper dress (silk or calico) to the knees (chakpant/chapkan-A.R.) with silver buttons on the sleeves, a wide, silver belt; the head is tied with a silk scarf. Shoes – koshi (galosh); many people walk barefoot. The fingers are decorated with silver and gold rings. Girls wear beads on their chests, paint their hands with henna and chew sakhkuz (keva). Men’s clothing is a chokha made of shawl or cloth, a long arkhaluk, a short shirt, tight trousers; they fasten the backrest with a belt or silver belt, - in winter they wear fur or sheepskin coats; on the head a high cone-shaped hat and under it is a yarmolka / kipa; shoes are bast sandal, galoshes, chust. The costume is the same in summer and winter. (Bezhanov 1894, 115) [my transl.]

The meticulous inventory of garments functions as a visible marker of cultural identity, reinforcing both continuity and distinctiveness.

The structure of houses in the Mountain Jews

Domestic architecture is also characterized:

Houses are built of raw brick (recently made of stone). The walls are not plastered, except for the front part, which is plastered with clay and bleached (white clay); the new stone buildings are whitewashed with lime and the wooden ones are painted with oil paint.” (Bezhanov 1894, 115) [my transl.]

The description situates housing practices within local material traditions while noting gradual changes (stone construction).

Festive culture, ritual life and the calendar ceremonies of the Mountain Jews

The author lists major religious holidays:

The Jews of Vartashen strictly observe their religious rituals. I will name some of the holidays:

1. Песах - Passover (Pesach)
2. Пурим – Purim
3. Шомуный Асрит - Shemini Atzeret
4. Шарана Раба – Hoshana Rabbah
5. Кипр/Кипур - Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement)
6. Сокут - Sukkot
7. Шоут - Shavuot
8. Гатил – Tish'a be-Av
9. Руш ашана - Rosh Hashanah (New Year) (Bezhanov 1894, 117)

These holidays are fully described with all the elements. The systematic enumeration of festivals demonstrates strict observance and structured ritual life.

The article further documents ceremonial cuisine, birth, wedding, and mourning rituals, as well as songs associated with henna ceremonies. It also records beliefs about diseases and traditional remedies, indicating a rich system of folk medicine and mythological perceptions concerning heaven, hell, and taboos during pregnancy.

The second part of the article consists of twenty-six legends and tales organized into sixteen thematic sections. These texts range from narratives about King Solomon and Moses to moral-didactic stories and accounts connected with Rambam. The structured thematic organization reflects both religious orientation and ethical concerns within the recorded tradition.

The Mountain Jews appear within a broader multi-ethnic framework in the first article, whereas the second publication constructs a more comprehensive ethnographic portrait of the community. The structured presentation — covering settlement history, demography, economy, religion, family life, ritual practice, and folklore — transforms the group from a marginal mention into a central ethnographic subject. Through systematic categorization and detailed description, the article contributes to the consolidation of Mountain Jewish identity within late nineteenth-century Caucasian ethnography.

The further fate of the materials of the Mountain Jews in the journal SMOMPK

The materials on the Mountain Jews published in SMOMPK did not remain confined to the nineteenth century. In subsequent scholarly literature devoted to the Mountain Jews, Bezhanov's articles consistently served as primary references and foundational sources. Their documentary value ensured that they became an enduring point of departure for later historical and ethnographic research.

An important retrospective re-publication of these materials appeared in 1993, when historian Igor Semyonov edited and reissued part of the folklore corpus under the title "Сказания горских евреев Кавказа" / "Tales of Caucasian Mountain Jews" (*Tales*. 1993). In his preface, Semyonov evaluates Bezhanov's work and emphasizes the collector's effort to preserve the narrative style of the original storytellers. At the same time, Semyonov notes certain limitations in Bezhanov's translations, pointing to cases in which literal rendering weakened the expressive qualities of the original oral speech. Thus, Semyonov's assessment combines recognition of the originality and cultural color preserved by Bezhanov with critical remarks regarding translational precision. This dual evaluation confirms both the importance and the limitations of the nineteenth-century ethnographic record.

In preparing his edition, Semyonov selected fifteen of the twenty-six folklore texts originally published in SMOMPK, noting that only "the best of them were chosen". The selected tales include narratives devoted to Shabbat observance, figures such as Rambam and King Solomon, moral-didactic stories, and legendary accounts connected with biblical and historical themes. The volume also contains illustrations corresponding to each tale, and both the selected texts and the preface were later made available in audio format on the website stmegi.com.

The later republication and reinterpretation of these materials demonstrate the continued relevance of Bezhanov's work. Although subject to critical reassessment, his ethnographic and folklore records remain indispensable for understanding the cultural and ritual life of the Mountain Jews of Vartashen at the end of the nineteenth century. The transmission of these texts into new editorial and digital formats further illustrates how nineteenth-century ethnographic documentation continues to shape contemporary representations of Mountain Jewish heritage.

Conclusion

Although more than a century has passed since the publication of the articles analyzed in this study, they continue to retain their importance as primary and indispensable sources on the Mountain Jews settled in Azerbaijan. The materials published in SMOMPK represent one of the earliest systematic attempts to document the social structure, religious life, economic organization, and folklore traditions of the Mountain Jewish community of Vartashen.

The comparative analysis of Bezhanov's two articles demonstrates a shift from fragmentary references within a multi-ethnic framework to a more comprehensive and structured ethnographic portrait. In the first publication, the Mountain Jews appear as one component of a broader local composition, described through thematic categories such as language, occupation, land ownership, and ritual life. In the second article, however, the community becomes the central object of ethnographic attention, and its material, spiritual, and folklore culture is presented in a systematic and organized manner.

Through linguistic classification, economic differentiation, descriptions of communal solidarity, family hierarchy, religious practice, and folklore narratives, these texts contributed to shaping a particular representation of Mountain Jewish identity within late nineteenth-century Caucasian ethnography. The categories employed by the author function not merely as descriptive tools but as structuring elements that defined communal boundaries and articulated cultural distinctiveness.

At the same time, the later reception and reinterpretation of these materials — including critical assessments and republications — confirm both their documentary value and their enduring influence. Despite certain inaccuracies noted by subsequent scholars, Bezhanov's work remains a foundational reference for the study of Mountain Jewish history and culture.

Thus, the articles published in SMOMPK not only preserve valuable ethnographic and folklore data but also illustrate the processes through which ethnic identity was recorded, framed, and transmitted within the scholarly discourse of the late 19th century.

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