

# Tradition and Change in Central Asian Culture: An Appraisal of Soviet Cultural Policies

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**Abstract:** The present paper aims at highlighting some specific components of Central Asian culture which despite witnessing the onslaughts of Soviet cultural policy preserved its originality and flavour even after adopting assimilating approach during seven decades of soviet rule. The paper maintains that the changes adopted during period under study proved functional in many respects as the Post independent period registered revival of customs and traditions of pre soviet period, though soviet legacy has not been abandoned altogether.

**Keywords:** Culture, traditions, marriage, bride price, Kalym, Toies, funerals.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Culture in a broader sense is a social heritage of a group of humans or society. It is an expression of responses discovered, developed or invented in the course of times from interaction among its members and their environment. Culture encompasses all learned and shared, explicit or tacit assumptions, beliefs, knowledge, norms and values, as well as attitudes, behaviour, dress and language. In other wards culture can be defined as a way of thinking, the way of acting and the material objects that together shape people's way of life. Culture therefore revolves around individual and society. People create and transmit culture and Society provides the structures in which these things take place. In Cultural evolution, new elements are introduced or developed and it is generally admitted that the change to some degree is a constant feature of all cultures. The process of cultural innovation (that is, the introduction of new thoughts, norms, or material items) occurs as a result of both internal and external forces. Mechanisms of change that operate within a given culture are called discovery and invention. Despite the importance of discovery and invention, most innovations introduced into a culture are the result of borrowing from other cultures. This process is known as cultural diffusion, In the process of cultural diffusion consciously or unconsciously, certain elements are adopted and assimilated either gradually or abruptly to give rise to a culture that with the passage of time becomes indigenous to the people of the region. The best example of this assimilation and synthesis is Central Asian culture which attained vibrant and rich culture owing to its strategic position on silk route, fetched not only smooth path to traders and missionaries but also allowed cultural exchange between the Greek, Persian, Chinese and Indian civilizations. Memories of innumerable caravans that for centuries moved people, goods and ideas from the east to west, the fearless nomadic warriors who defeated the most formidable armies of their times, still live in local legends and epics. Past glories and achievements in science and art are reflected in numerous architectural monuments and found in archaeological sites. Besides, various religions influenced the region in their own way, for instance Islam as a religion acted as cementing force to unite together various ethnic groups. Even though the religious apparatus of the Shamanism has wiped out, but it never died down and remained in rituals, dogmas and practices of the natives. Islam created an atmosphere that allowed Arab cultural elements to assimilate the rituals and traditions of the natives there by providing a fertile soil for radiation of Islamic culture to other regions as well. The diversity of the culture that was enriched by the interaction led to the crystallization of the unique central Asian culture, expressed fabulously in the celebrations of local, familial and communal events.

With the decline of Silk rout during mid-18th century region was torn apart by endless wars and military campaigns, turning this prosperous region into a lawless land of feuding khans and tribal leaders. By 19<sup>th</sup> century, region was one of the most isolated, in accessible and in a sense, quite forgotten part of the globe. The situation turned around again in mid-nineteenth century when Central Asia became the bone of contention between the British and Russian empires. Being weak and under developed, Central Asian states in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were unable to resist the colonization and cultural onslaughts of the Czarist and Soviet regime respectively. Under Soviet regime, iron curtain was imposed and region was virtually closed to the western influences in general and to Islamic world in particular. The people were pressured to accept new national identity i.e. Soviet national identity. Not only religion but customs and traditions were equally perceived as obstacles for socio economic transformation of traditional society and as such became target of Soviet onslaughts.

Some important socio –cultural variants of Central Asian society witnessing change and revival during Soviet and post-Soviet period are under:

## 2. FAMILY TOIES

Central Asians were fond of festivals, ceremonies and parties, therefore an individual's life passed through series of rituals and traditions often considered as a part of Islam. Among such traditions was birth of a child .The occasion was filled with a lot of pleasure, and numerous customs and rituals were associated with it.<sup>(1)</sup> Birth was handled by the experienced lady called "Doya", soon after the birth sacrifice of sheep was offered, for natives held the belief that besides evoking the blessing of God it was meant for the health of mother and baby.<sup>(2)</sup> As a part of the Islamic custom, "azaan-shqiru"<sup>(3)</sup> was performed in the ear of new born within three to four days. Next associated ceremony with the birth of a child was "bosuks toi" i.e., cradle ceremony,<sup>(4)</sup> name giving<sup>(5)</sup> and circumcision.<sup>(6)</sup> With regard to girl child, a ritual of plaiting the hair of girls at the age of nine or ten indicating her adult hood was also celebrated.<sup>(7)</sup> Irrespective of the possession of the riches it was customary to celebrate these moments and a feast was offered to relatives and friends which casted huge expenditure and sometimes occasion lasted for several days.

## 3. RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS

Besides the rituals, religious festivals played key role in the Central Asian societies; one such festival was "kichik-bayram" or *Eid-ul-fitr*,<sup>(8)</sup> a fair celebrated with great fervent to mark the end of the month of *Ramadan*. Similarly "Qurban-bayram" or *Eid-ul-Duha*,<sup>(9)</sup> the commemoration of *Abraham's* willingness to sacrifice his son was celebrated with great enthusiasm. Nomadic pastorals, which had plenty of animals to commemorate the sacrifice associated with *Qurban- Bayram* was never forgotten. The choicest sheep reared during the year was slaughtered by the rural people while the sedentary people used to purchase the sheep for the commemoration of the ritual. Some families even made joint contribution for sacrifice,<sup>(10)</sup> two-third of the meat was distributed among the poor, orphans and disabled, the Mullah was offered the most honoured piece along with the skin of the sheep. Though these occasions had religious significance, yet festivity was also associated with them, choicest feast used to be prepared on these occasions. Accordingly it was mandatory to celebrate "Eid Milad-un-Nabi", the birthday of Prophet Mohammad (SAW) and 'Nauroz', a traditional spring festival marking beginning of New year.<sup>(11)</sup> Besides, following the fundamentals, they practiced mixed folk Islam, as such the shamanistic practice of visiting Shrines and *Mazars*, making offerings for the redresses of their curses and disease, to gain living benefits etc remained the backbone of cultural ethos of Central Asian society.<sup>(12)</sup> The *Mullah* were always omnipresent at such sites in each locality and among each tribe, earning their livelihood in response to the jobs rendered to the believers.

## 4. MARRIAGE CUSTOMS AND CELEBRATIONS

Marriages carried special significance in traditional societies. In central Asia these were typically arranged by the parents through match makers.<sup>(13)</sup> Girls were generally considered marriageable from 11 to 15 and usually a boy was married at the age of 15 to 16years. Marriages were generally settled within a tribe or a clan<sup>(14)</sup> and proposal for marriage was often sent on behalf of the groom's family, who deputed two women for the formal consent of the bride's family. After this, groom was allowed to see his future wife without veil.<sup>(15)</sup> Once approved the two families negotiate on the amount of *Kalym*,<sup>(16)</sup> which was paid in cash or kind; in the form of domesticated animals and ornaments. The *kalym* was not payment for a chattel as often interpreted by foreign observers; it provided a sort of financial security in case of divorce.

Moreover the amount of *kalym* was determined on the basis of social status, beauty and youth of a bride; it was high in case of a girl than a woman of a middle age. Though it was not necessary to pay the *kalym* before marriage yet it was obligatory for a groom to pay it and wife had every right to refuse consummation of marriage with her husband till *kalym* was not paid. In many cases marriages used to be postponed till the payment of *kalym*. In many cases groom used to work in the house of his father in law in lieu of the *Kalym*.<sup>(17)</sup> The other forms of marriages, in vogue especially among nomads were, bride kidnapping<sup>(18)</sup> and levirate marriages.<sup>(19)</sup> Though rituals of marriage ceremonies used to vary from nomadic, semi nomadic and sedentary people but every marriage was solemnised with the religious rite of *Nikah*, performed by the *Mullah* in presence of relatives and community members.<sup>(20)</sup> This was followed by a grand feast at groom's home and guests used to present gifts and blessings to the couple for their newly married life.<sup>(21)</sup>

## 5. FUNERAL CEREMONIES

Not only moments of joy, but sad moments were also shared by families or clans together. The funeral rituals of Central Asia were many and required a dedicating following on the part of the family and relatives. Funeral feasts were arranged by the family of the deceased on 4<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 40<sup>th</sup> and 100<sup>th</sup> day. On these occasions verses of Quran were read and prayers were sent to the deceased soul.<sup>(22)</sup>

Economic transformation a part, Cultural transformation of traditional society was major Objective of Soviet regime. To establish a new society, free of religious connotation, purely based on Socialist ideology, they embarked upon a program of eradicating all superstitious beliefs, rituals and traditions of Central Asian society. Termed as religious archaic, Soviets believed that rituals like child birth, circumcision, grand marriage ceremonies, funeral celebrations cost huge expenditure, therefore vigorous efforts were made to eradicate such rituals by substituting new ones consuming less time and expenditure. For instance to eradicate the lavish birth ceremonies soviet government established the network of medical institutions and provided facilities in towns and villages. Henceforth, the birth of a child used to take place in the maternity hospitals, where the role of traditional midwives (*Doya*) was taken over by new trained nurses.<sup>(23)</sup> Registration of birth was introduced whereby name was given to the child within seven days. As a result many customs and rituals associated with the occasion were wiped out.<sup>(24)</sup> To substitute the grand *Toi* on the occasion, Soviets encouraged small scale parties in which husband and wife together contributed and invited small number of friends and relatives of both parties. The next social institution witnessing change as well continuity during period under study was institution of marriage. Laws were passed against the traditional marriage practices like payment and acceptance of *kalym*,<sup>(25)</sup> forced marriage and *polygamy*.<sup>(26)</sup> The practice of early marriages was banned and official age for marriage was fixed. *Nikah*, the religious rite was deprived of legal recognition; instead official registration of the marriage at the marriage bureaus was declared mandatory.<sup>(27)</sup> The institution of match makers disappeared since Soviets encouraged choice of partners, dating became common and widely acceptable.<sup>(28)</sup> The power of parents in selecting the partner of their offspring remained still strong as the family of the groom was expected to pay large dowry in the form of money or gifts to the bride<sup>(29)</sup> The parents usually finance for the wedding and honeymoon and raised fund to help the young couple to start their new life.<sup>(30)</sup> Despite Soviet efforts to ban lavish customs, wedding ceremonies remained a grandiose event and provided excellent opportunity for developing social network.<sup>(31)</sup> Similarly even during peak era of communism, when registration of marriage was obligatory, followed by a visit to the local Lenin memorial involving singing, dancing and the consumption of alcohol, parents used to confirm marriage, though secretly according to the religious rite called *Nikah*, since a man and a woman could become husband and wife in the eyes of local communities only after the special wedding prayer.

In the post-Soviet period marriage institution is witnessing extraditions of Soviet policy and revival of pre-Soviet era practices. The first thing to disappear is the mandatory registration of marriages in the civil courts. *Nikah*, performed secretly in the Soviet era is now being performed freely, openly and even in certain places the young couple performs it in mosques.<sup>(32)</sup> With the legalization of *Nikah*, the institution of *mehtar* has also been restored.<sup>(33)</sup> Next tradition that has reappeared is *Kalym*. The tradition is defended by the girls themselves who feel dishonoured, suspected of sexual misbehaviour or of some shameful illness if they are not offered a substantial amount of *Kalym*.<sup>(34)</sup> In fact, the amount of *Kalym* has increased after independence,<sup>(35)</sup> To avoid the payments, the earlier tradition of *bride kidnapping* has been revived. Certain pre Islamic beliefs like purifying the newly wedded couple by burning the fire, the ritual of '*yuzotchi*' and visiting of newly married couples to *shrines* for their blessings has also been revived. Not only marriage rituals but, the old traditional festivals like *Nauroz*, a non-Islamic New Year celebration, are now being celebrated in a splendid

manner without any threat. Local communities and local governments organize and sponsors different performance shows in public places and city corners.<sup>(36)</sup> A ritual dish called “*Nauroz-Kozhe*”<sup>(37)</sup> is cooked and meals on this occasion are taken together with parents and other relatives. Instead of Soviet heroes, celebrations are organized in favour of past national heroes like Amir Timor, Kazakh poet Abai Kunanbayev<sup>(38)</sup> etc.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The artifice policy of modernization and Sovietisation did not succeeded in revolutionizing the traditional institutions and bringing about any drastic structural changes in the socio-cultural milieu of traditional societies of Central Asia. The establishment of western-style cultural amenities like museum, art galleries, operas, and theatres never achieved complete acculturation and could not shunt the central Asians from traditional beliefs and value system. Indigenous societies preserved many important characteristics of their traditional life style and beliefs, of course curiously mixed with certain elements of modernity. They not only preserved their creativity, imagination, and uniqueness during suppression and coercion but prospered in many respects<sup>(39)</sup> Patriarchal set up and strong tribal kinship traditions were maintained besides the social change imposed by the soviets. Despite nuclear family system introduced by Soviet regime, apartment dwellers maintained strong relations not only with their parents and grandparents but with all their close and distant relatives as they believe on interdependence both on the occasions of joy and sorrow. It is considered a social obligation to know the names of all close and distant relatives. Even today the first question people ask each when they meet, are questions about the health and well-being of family members and other relatives. People prefer to celebrate many festivals and holidays with their extended families and neighbours and are ready to undertake long travel several times a year to attend family celebrations like wedding, birth of the new children and circumcision. Traditional culture proved to be flexible, dynamic and capable of adopting and assimilating without losing their traditional flavour. The revival of old customs, rituals and traditions is a marked change of the post independent period. Today Central Asia represents a symbiosis of traditional cultures and customs, the legacy of Soviet era cultural engineering and post-independence changes, since new governments in all five Republics are investing substantial amount of State budget for popularizing and reviving the traditional customs and rituals during the formative period of nation building and cultural identity process.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Right from the initial stage of pregnancy amulets were used to protect the pregnant women from the evil spirits. On the occasion of birth, ritualism demanded to burn the fire in the yurt for nine consecutive days for the safety of the birth giving women. To ease out the malicious sprits called “Albarst” the loaded gun was placed just above the women s head on the yurts trellised framework. Meakin, A.M.B, (1903) In *Russian Turkistan A Garden of Asia*, George Alien, London, p.134.
- [2] The sacrifice is known as *Akika tui*, in which two sheep were sacrificed for the son and one sheep for the daughter.
- [3] Elizabeth E. Becon, (1965) *Central Asians under Russian Rule, A Study in Culture Change*, Cornell University press, Ithaca and London, p.81.
- [4] It was a festive occasion and face of the new born was shown to all friends and relatives who were invited to make the moment memorable. According to ritual the name of the baby which was decided by father was repeated over the infant in a prayer by the Mullah. Meakin, A. M. B, (1903) In *Russian Turkistan A Garden of Asia*, p.99.
- [5] To rejoice the moment, new born baby was presented to the paternal grandmother in a cradle with flat breads, for distribution among the relatives, and toys and clothes etc. for the child. A. M. B. Meakin, (1903) In *Russian Turkistan A Garden of Asia*, p 99.
- [6] *Sunnati-tui* or circumcision, an Islamic ritual was a surgical operation to remove the foreskin from the pines. In Islam it represents the cleanness and commitment to religion and is noted conversion and adulthood .The elders present on the occasion used to read verses of Quran believing that it will ease away the pain of young boy. The occasion was rejoiced by throwing a grand party for relatives and friends usually held in autumn or winter when there was plenty of available to consume. Annette M. B Meakin (1903) In *Russian Turkistan, A garden of Asia*, pp99-104.
- [7] [www.svetlansbrides.culture/folklore.html](http://www.svetlansbrides.culture/folklore.html). Accessed on 06/12/2012.

- [8] Elizabeth E. Bacon, (1965) *Central Asians under Russian Rule, A Study in Culture Change*, Cornell University press, Ithaca and London, p.81.
- [9] Ibid, p.10.
- [10] Elizabeth E. Bacon, (1965) *Central Asians under Russian Rule, A Study in Culture Change*, p.81.
- [11] Rafis Abazova, (2007) *Culture and customs of the Central Asian Republics*, Green Wood press, p 226.
- [12] Elizabeth E. Bacon, (1965) *Central Asians under Russian Rule, A Study in Culture Change*, p 82.
- [13] No consideration was given to the sentiments of prospective couple. Sometimes marriages were setup in infancy and even pre natal. Lawrence, Krader, (1963) *Peoples of central Asia*, Indiana University, Bloomington, The Netherlands, P.142.
- [14] It is believed that sedentary people disliked misalliance and emphasized that marriages must be settled on the rules of decent and exogamy. However among nomads exogamy marriages were prohibited up to five generations. Elizabeth E Becon, (1965) *Central Asians under Russian Rule*, P 37
- [15] Eugen Schuyler, (1865) *Notes of a journey of Russian Turkistan, Khokand, Bukhara and Kuldja*, Charles Scribner, New York, P78, According to Fred Burnaby the practice was only common among the nomads whereas among sedentary people boy was not permitted to meet his future wife till marriage. Fred Burnaby, (1876) *A Ride to Khiva, travels and Adventurism central Asia*, Tasell Peter & Galpin, New York, P.179.
- [16] It was paid by groom's family and remained the absolute property of bride. E G, Schulyer, (1885) *Notes of a Journey of Russian Turkistan, Khokand, Bukhara and Kuldja*, P.78.
- [17] E G, Schulyer, (1885) *Notes of a Journey of Russian Turkistan, Khokand, Bukhara and Kuldja*, P.78.
- [18] The Kazakh word for bride kidnapping "*alyp qashu*" literally means to take away and run is generally used to refer to both consensual and non-consensual bride kidnappings. In pre soviet period the practice was common and was an alternative way for a poor to get married since it does not involve substantial expenses.
- [19] The strict tribal codes made it difficult for women to survive alone once her husband deceased. Under levirate marriage a widow for the sake of her children was compelled to remarry to any other member of her deceased husband's family.
- [20] Many nomadic wedding ceremonies bear religio-tribal characteristics like showering of sweets to newlyweds, drinking of water from same cup, jumping or circling around fire etc.
- [21] The bride was introduced to family members in a ritualistic ceremony called "*youzochi*" or "*batasher*" face showing, where young relatives of the groom used to raise the veil slightly with a small stick in midst of a women gathering who used to sang songs of joy. Elizabeth E Becon, (1965) *Central Asians under Russian Rule, A study of cultural change*, p.70.
- [22] In Uzbekistan commemorative ceremonies were held on every Thursday. Joseph Saud, (2005) *Encyclopedia of women and Islamic culture, Family, body, sexuality and health*, vol viii, p.275.
- [23] During first decade trained nurses from Russia were employed, but after wards the native women were trained for said the job. In the initial stages the people were persuaded to come government run hospitals but later on women came to the maternity hospitals without any hesitation. Victor Vitkovich, {1954} *A Tour To Soviet Uzbekistan*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Mascow , p27.
- [24] The organizational process of these celebrations needed many people, guests contributed in a nice manner by offering small sums of money to meet the financial burden imposed by such events. Rafis Abazova, (2007) *Culture and customs of the Central Asian Republics*, p. 225
- [25] It was generally believed that the *kalym* was a bride price given by the husband to the father of the bride and it was in the nature of the purchase money. However, Schyler has clearly pointed that kalym was absolutely the property of the bride and remained with her as a sort of financial support in case of divorce. *Kalym* was paid in the form of cash

or kind like livestock goods etc. Eugen, Schuler, (1885) *Notes of the journey of Russian Turkistan, Khokand, Bukhara, and Kuldja*, Charles Scribner, New York, p.78. .

- [26] Polygamy is an Islamic practice where a man is allowed to have four wives at any time on the condition that all are treated equally and the practice was especially in vogue among well rich families in pre Soviet times.
- [27] Elizabeth E .Bacon, (1965) *Central Asians under Russian Rule, A Study in Culture Change*, p.29.
- [28] Rafis Abazova, (2007) *Culture and customs of the Central Asian Republics*, p.225...
- [29] Rafis Abazova, (2007) *Culture and customs of the Central Asian Republics*, p.225...
- [30] M. Tokhtakhodjaeva, (1995) *between the slogans of communism and the laws of Islam; the women in Uzbekistan*, Lahore, Pakistan, p.96.
- [31] Arifa khanova, (2006) "Post-Soviet Transformation in Ritual life". The journal of Central Asian studies, vol.15, No.1, p 6.
- [32] As a matter of fact to belittle the lengthy marriage rituals Soviet introduced new secular customs like sending gifts to bride and groom on dates corresponding special importance in Soviet calendar, for instance if the period coincided with 23 February, i.e. soviet army day, the boy used to receive a special gift, and conversely if the date coincide on 8th march, international women's day, the girl used to get a special present. Rafis, Abazova, (2007) *Culture and customs of the Central Asian Republics*, p.225...
- [33] Arifa khanova, (2006) "Post-soviet Transformation in Ritual life" The journal of Central Asian studies, vol.15, No.1, p.7.
- [34] Feride Acar and Ayse Gunes-Ayata, (2000) *Gender and identity Construction, women in Central Asia*, The Caucasus and Turkey, Brill, Netherlands, p. 301
- [35] The practice has reappeared during the last phase of soviet rule due to inflation in the market. Arifa khanova, (2006) "Post-soviet Transformation in Ritual life" The journal of Central Asian studies, vol.15, No.1, p.7.
- [36] In the post independent period a trend has emerged in Kazakhstan to erect *yurts* (woolen nomadic tents) on the main parkes and squares which serve as improvised cafeterias or shops besides organizing wrestling, rooster fighting and horse-racing contests on the occasion of Nauroz. Rafis Abazova (2007), *Culture and customs of the Central Asian Republic*, p.239.
- [37] According to ancient Iranian tradition a special dish on the occasion is prepared from seven ingredients.
- [38] Cynthia Warner, (2000) *Consuming Modernity, Imagining tradition: Globalization, Nationalism and Wedding feasts in post-colonial Kazakhstan*, Texas A & M University, vol.18, No.2, p.129,
- [39] The fact a matter is that Soviet ethnographers have admitted the survivals of old traditions and customs as an obstacle for full Sovietization and modernization of Central Asian society. Soviet scholars attributed the preservation and survival of Central Asian customs and traditions especially to women who despite profound transformation under Soviet yoke strived hard to preserve the cultural identity by investing lot of their energy, earnings and time for these occasions.