

RITUALISM AND INSTITUTION OF FAMILY IN CENTRAL ASIA: CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

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ABSTRACT

Culture an important concept in Social sciences is considered a design for living or a roadmap that guides and moulds the behavior of the members of a society. In the broader sense it includes material and non material aspects like, dwellings, food habits, entertainments, educational and religious buildings, beliefs, religion, traditions, art, literature and values .To quote Ottaway, the culture of society means the total way of life of a society. Different societies adopted different Cultures according to the prevailing geographical conditions. Since Central Asia is having different geographical conditions and adopted the culture accordingly. For centuries Central Asia remained a hub of all ancient Civilizations, absorbing the best traditions of ancient Greeks, Persians, Chinese, and Indian Cultures, enriching the Culture of the region which represented a colorful mix up of many ethnic groups who lived together for many generations, sharing and enriching one others cultures, customs, and traditions till Russian conquest. Under Soviet Rule Central Asia underwent an intensive process of modernization rather Sovietization. In fact region was wretched out of Asia and thrust into the Europe. To create a uniform socio-political system for all the citizens of USSR traditional culture was either destroyed or rendered invisible. The present paper intends to analyze the impact of socio-cultural changes introduced by the Soviets with regard to the institution of family, a pivotal centre of Central Asian Society. The institution despite intrusions served as a torch bearer of traditional culture throughout the 7 decades of Soviet rule. The paper will also focus on the challenges of Soviet Cultural Legacies in the newly independent Republics of Central Asia which are passing through transition process and are in search of National identity.

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Introduction

The beginning of 20th century witnessed the incorporation of huge parts of central Asia into the Russian domain. In terms of surface area, a territory far larger than encompassed by modern India. The indigenous population was almost entirely Muslim, in north (i.e. The territory of present day Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) and the South west (present day Turkmenistan), the local people followed a nomadic way of life or semi-nomadic way of life rather than an Islamized one. In the Oasis-river belt of Transoxiana [present day Uzbekistan and western Tajikistan] there was an ancient urban culture with cities having been famous as centers of Muslim scholarship, where students from Muslim world used to study Islamic law and jurisprudence. The focal point of the social as well religious life of the community was the mosque. Folk traditions and customs were inextricably intermingled with Islamic practices.

The establishment of Soviet rule resulted in drastic transformation of traditional societies since regime under took strong and systematic measures to achieve their cherished objectives i.e. the absolute control of political power, large –scale economic extraction, the destruction of traditional societies and cultures by creating and establishing new alternatives I.e., the Soviet society.

The aforesaid objectives of the regime were achieved at macro level by two effective ways; isolation of the region from its historical and scientific heritage, the closely related neighboring Turko –Persian Muslim societies and rest of Muslim World by drawing iron curtain and introducing a series of alphabetic changes which ultimately culminated into the introduction of Cyrillic alphabets and Russian as an official language.

At micro level the focal point of regime was institution of family, a pivotal centre of Central Asian Society .The family was a perpetual organization comprising of many generations living with cooperation in a house hold.¹ Since family jointly owned the dwellings and cultivated land, domesticated animals possessed agricultural tools and equipments, the size of the family in rural areas was determined by land holdings and in urban areas it was determined by their business. The families were also part of lineages and clan based, with clear understanding of clan allegiance for mutual aid and defense. Traditionally the daughters had no claim on the property of the family once they were married and received the dowry². The property was usually distributed among the sons who

received the parental estates in two stages, at the time of marriage, and on the death of their father when the residual property was divided. Eldest son inherited fathers rank and title whereas younger son inherited his parental hearth and appurtenances.³The existing joint family along with its traditions and customs was anathema to the Soviet regime and an obstacle to the growth of Soviet state. The regime emphasized that the ultimate allegiance of the individual was not to his primordial Clan structure, but to the evolving socio-economic set up under Soviets. A series of federal and local laws were enacted to destroy the extended family as well as to accelerate the growth of nuclear family system.⁴The nuclear family consisted of not more than four or six members, including parents and unmarried children. Almost all the young married couples were provided apartments which could accommodate only four to five persons.⁵

The primary role of family to upbringing the children was also shifted to crèches and kindergartens as communist regime believed that the children must be removed from the influence of the family and should be grown under the healthy influence of Communist nurseries and schools.⁶ Soviet policy of empowering women with extended employment opportunities, not only helped in the decline of extended family system but also saw increasing number of women working outside the home which brought fundamental changes in family relations and between the genders of family⁷. Although father remained the head of the family but he lost his significance as the sole economic administrator and he considered the opinion of the other members as well. Exposure to modern education, ideological propaganda and influences of mass culture in the wake of Russian migration directly or indirectly affected the family forms in one way or other way⁸.

Central Asian people were fond of festivities, ceremonies and parties, therefore an individual's life within family passed through a series of traditions and rituals often accepted as a part of religion. Child birth, was therefore, a moment of joy and many rituals like cradle ceremony, name giving, hair cutting and circumcision of baby were associated with it. Grand feasts which lasted for days together, were arranged for guests who in return brought presents⁹. Soviet government worked intensively to eradicate such custom and tradition¹⁰ by substituting new ones which involve less expenditure. Since the birth ceremony was celebrated in a fabulous manner in the pre-revolutionary times the government spread a network of medical institutions and facilities in the towns and villages. Henceforth birth of a child used to take place in the maternity hospitals¹¹ where, the role of traditional midwives

was taken by new trained nurses¹² since a child was kept in the hospital for the first seven days, many existing ceremonies were eradicated with the passage of time. Another ceremony associated with, was name giving to the child where not only mullah but the elders were involved along with an extra expenditure spent on feast. Soviet simply introduced the registration of a birth in the maternity hospitals within the seven days. Accordingly boeshk toi¹³ (cradle ceremony) in urban areas was substituted by crib or perambulate, a Russian alternative used to help baby to walk without stumbling. The new rituals were introduced in the hope of replacing old ones, which were a vital part of the traditional family and community. It is also fact that festivities associated with such occasions were not altogether ignored instead, the communist party encouraged small scale family parties in which small number of guests from both husbands and wives side were invited. The government also attacked the circumcision custom and declared it “a barbaric, primitive, and unhealthy”. They used the influence of spiritual board who declared the practice non obligatory for Muslims, since Islam has adopted the practice from the Arabs of pre-Islamic period. Despite restrictions, the practice continued at mass level, irrespective of whether they practiced other Islamic rituals.¹⁴ Soviets were compelled to announce that surgical operations be carried in hospitals, for they were more safe and less painful.

Marriages. - Arranged traditionally and conducted religiously, marriage celebration was yet another lavish custom celebrated by the central Asian family. Thereafter the rite was transferred to secular civil administration and Nikah was deprived¹⁵ of its legal recognition along with the centuries old institution of match makers. Instead, arranged marriages were fixed by the parties themselves in a formal way. People were forced to register their marriages as per civil law and only then they could get the benefits like apartment allotment etc. Many more civil laws were framed to bring the change in the existing marriage system like polygamy, marriage of girls under 18. Kalyam and gaytarma were forbidden by law and were considered criminal offences with severe punishment¹⁶. Although endogamy was not actually made illegal but was made the subject of vigorous propaganda campaign as a result marriages between different ethnic groups showed increasing tendency. Between 1970s and 1980s inter ethnic marriages remained relatively low and did not exceed 12- 18%¹⁷.

Nevertheless the Soviet attempts to transform the traditional institutions like family and its rituals have not achieved enough success. The change in many spheres exhibited only a functional approach. A close observation of social life in Uzbekistan reveals some

interesting continuities with the past. The Uzbek family structure is still patriarchal¹⁸. The eldest male retained the superior position in the family. In the rural areas there are still joint family structure in which sons brought their brides to the parental home and all employed turned their earnings to the family head. Tradition has therefore allowed the eldest son to retain the position of an elder who often continues to live at parental residence even after marriage. The residual property of the family is still retained by the son,¹⁹ though in terms of care, affection and opportunities daughters no longer appeared to be less privileged. In such societal structures, where family is one of the most important societal units, respect to elders and family ties remain important in day to day life. Even after the marriage if son established a separate residence, family ties remained strong.²⁰ To show their allegiance towards their parents the young couple normally obtained an apartment in the same building²¹. The changes in economic and cultural values during the Soviet period had not influenced the rituals of family to the large extent. In many instances modernization has even strengthened some rituals so that tradition became more visible. Many newly created Soviet rituals entered the private sphere because of their legal force and also additional opportunities for celebrations have been created²². Moreover, Post-Soviet period witnessed revivalist trend²³ and governments of these newly independent states issued directives for discarding European culture and adopting those traditions and rituals as were based on their age long customs. Besides legal recognition to the revival of traditional customs and rituals, the agricultural restructuring, restoration of rural values and village institutions, contributed to the revival of traditional norms²⁴. The marriages are still arranged by the parents but it is also true that dating is becoming fashion and young girls are encouraged to meet with the young men to indicate their likes and dislikes and are not blindly led into marriages. The wedding ceremony also reflects the synthesis of two cultures. The tois are held either on the streets in front of the host's house or in open air restaurants where the tables are filled with food and drinks. The bride and groom sit at a table in a most formal way throughout the whole evening. The old custom of accompanying the bride and groom along with wedding procession to their new home has reappeared where they stay until the "yozotchi" rite "show her face" is conducted.²⁵ After wedding rites, elder women use to accompany the newly wedded couple to visit the shrines for blessings.²⁶ The wedding ceremonies have become more lavish because of new dishes served at these parties and the gifts given to new couples are very costly.

The revivalism is brought almost in all spheres, both in ideology and concrete materialism. Yet the socio-cultural changes that are being witnessed in the immediate post Soviet period are revivalist in character only to the extent that will guarantee the subservientness of both, the individual and society to the state. Religion for instance is preached and presented in a way to suit the requirements of the state and language, that is one of the superlative medium to get culture changed or assimilated, also made to look like state friend.

References

1. Traditionally extended family consisted of father, his wife, his married and unmarried daughters and sons and the children of his sons. For details see, Lawrence, Krader, *Peoples of Central Asia {1959}, P, 141.*
2. Although daughters had no direct inheritance right but they could inherit father's property through her son .Lawrence Krader, *Peoples of Central Asia, {1959} P145.*
3. Annette, M, B Meakin, *In Russian Turkistan; a Garden of Asia, P. 134.*
4. Liberalizing family codes were issued in1918, 1926 and then revised in 1936 and during World war 2nd.Shamsu-din, *Secularization in the USSR, A study of Cultural Policy in Uzbekistan {1982}, p, 109.*
5. Quarrels and jealousies among daughter in laws and mother in laws was a general phenomenon in central Asian society. After revolution when such quarrels occurred, the daughter in laws received administrative support to move into her husband's single unites residence. Elizabeth E. Becon ,*Central Asian s under Russian Rule ,A study in cultural change {1966}, p,168,Cronell University Press, Ithaca and London.*
6. Joseph Saud, (edi) *Encyclopedia of Women &Islamic Cultures, {2003}. V, 1, p, 168, Leiden.*
7. W.K.Medlin, W.M. Cave, F. Carpenter, *Education and Development in Central Asia; A Case Study of social Change in Uzbekistan, {1971}, p, 63, laiden.*
8. Krader Lawrence, *Peoples of Central Asia, p. 142.*
9. For details see Annett M B Meakin, *In Russian Turkistan, a Garden of Asia, p, and 95-100.*
10. Z Arifkhana, *The journal of Central Asian studies {2003}, p2.*

11. Compared to 7000 in 1914, there were over 120,000 beds in the public maternity wards of the Soviet Union in 1938, with their number constantly on the increase; Nithan Berman' *"The place of child in present day Russia,"* Social force, 1943, vol, 21, No. 4, p, 446-456.
12. During the first decade the nurses were from Russia, but after words the native women were trained and assigned the job. In the initial stages the people were persuaded to come to government hospitals without any hesitation, but once women come to the maternity hospital, her relatives even brought traditional Doya with them to perform the old custom; Victir Vitkovich ,*A Tour to Soviet Uzbekistan, {1998} p.27.*
13. The ritual called bosuk toi or cradle ceremony was a customary practice. It was performed by all irrespective of the material possession .It usually took place on the 9th or 12th day of the birth when a cradle was carried by the maternal grandparents staked with flat breads ,for distribution among the relatives to rejoice the birth of new born. Ritualism demanded that grandfather of the baby passed the cradle along with toys, clothes and other gifts, for baby to his son-in-law who delivered it to the mother of the baby. Elizabeth E Bacon, *Central Asians under Russian rule; A Study in Cultural change, {1966},* p, 165.
14. Yaacovi Roy, "The Task of Creating the New Soviet man: Atheistic Propaganda in the Soviet Muslim Areas," *Soviet studies, 1984, Vol, 36, No, 1, P, 27.*
15. Rafis Abazov, *Culture and customs of Central Asian republics, 2007, Green wood Publishing group, P, 218, UK.*
16. Rafis Abazov, *Culture and customs of Central Asian republics, Green wood Publishing group, Rafis Abazov, Culture and customs of Central Asian republics, 2007. Green wood Publishing group, P, 218, UK.*
17. Rafis Abazov, *Culture and customs of Central Asian republics ,Green wood Publishing group , Rafis Abazov, Culture and customs of Central Asian republics, 2007 ,Green wood Publishing group, P, 224, UK.*
18. W.K. Medlin, W, M Cave, F. Carpenter, *Education and Development in Central Asia; A Case Study of social Change in Uzbekistan, 1971, P63, laiden.*
19. Zulfiya Tursunova, "Preventing Human Trafficking A Case of Uzbekistan", 2004, P2.

20. To preserve the integrity of traditional family system Central Asians usually celebrated the festive occasions jointly which allowed little change to the structure of traditional living.
21. Moreover in post Soviet era ,new economic policy privatization and change in proprietary/ownership structure, high cost of houses etc is forcing families to join heads to make decent living .Today family is an important social institution ,providing psychological support to the individuals and guaranteeing economic stability to its members .Timu Dadabaev “,post Soviet realities of society in Uzbekistan” ,*Central Asian Survey*,2004, Vol,23,p.158, Routledge.
22. In post-Soviet period Tui’s are nearly observed, but some of these ceremonies also awash in a sea of vodka, the drinking of which also became a part of national custom, since it has become customary to drink vodka on the occasions like marriage. Adeb Khalid, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol, 35, p, 587.
23. While inaugurating the marble of Amir Timur, President Karimov remarked ,the museum will remind the people of Uzbekistan about the of importance of preserving and reviving their culture,heritage,and traditions. K Warikoo,” “Tradition and Modernity in Uzbekistan”, 2005 ‘*Himalayan and Central Asian Studies Vol, 9, No, 1-2, P 7.*
24. For instance the mandatory registration of marriage in the civil court has disappeared. Nikah is now a legalized act performed with the approval of the government. With Nikah, institution of mehar has been restored and the tradition of Kalyam reappeared with the argument that it lessens the expenses of bride’s family. For details see Arifkhana, Post soviet Transformation in Uzbek ritual Life”, *The Journal of Central Asian Studies*, 2006, Vol. xvi, No. 1, P2.
25. Feride Acar and Ayse Gune Ayata, “Gender and Identity Construction, women in Central Asia,” *The Caucasus and Turkey*, P, 300.
26. As most of the young couple doesn’t know how to perform these rites so they are accompanied by elderly women to help them in such practices.