

***The Spectacular State. Culture and National Identity in Uzbekistan.* By Laura Adams. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010. ix, 242 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Photographs. Figures. Tables. \$22.95, paper; \$79.95, cloth.**
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In this rich analysis of state-organized holiday spectacles in Uzbekistan, Laura Adams argues that elites in Uzbekistan have used cultural productions to advance diverse political projects, but failed to mobilize their intended popular audiences. Through comparisons with studies of other authoritarian regimes she offers valuable theoretical discussion of political communication in post-Soviet polities. The result is a provocative consideration of cultural elites creating events under state auspices, and showing how diverse participants and audiences—including the international community—come together around such public performances.

Adams shows how elites produce culture in holiday spectacles as part of redefining national history, weakening identification with multiethnic Soviet society, strengthening ties to Uzbek identity, and recreating Uzbekistan as a “normal” member of the international community of nations (9). Her research is based in interviews with creators of the holiday celebrations, as well as observation of planning meetings and performances, primarily in 1996 and 1997, but also in later years. The author focuses on the two most important state-sponsored annual events: Navro’z (vernal equinox festival) and Independence Day. She contextualizes the cultural spectacles within the history of post-Soviet re-creation of a heroic and distinctively Uzbek past, the making of new public meanings for urban spaces and buildings, and the ongoing public and private debates over Islamic practice.

National honor and autonomy were important symbolic resources that Karimov pursued in the 1990s through his “ideology of national independence” (58), which Adams argues was part of an effort to demonstrate that Uzbekistan was becoming a “normal” state (28, 66, 152, 195). Adams shows that large international events, particularly Olympic spectacles in Moscow, Los Angeles and Atlanta, provided models for “normal” performances. The Uzbekistan state replaced Soviet-style parades based in mass participation with Olympic-style song and dance spectacles promoting elitist cultural ideals and images of the glorious Uzbek past.

Achieving both autonomy and normality called for distinctive and valued ethnic traditions. Already during Perestroika the revival of the Navro’z festival was a key means to reassert Uzbek identity. Navro’z was and is highly contested: it was attacked in the Soviet period because it was identified as Islamic, although at the same time some purists rejected it as non-Muslim; and its association with Zoroastrianism is avoided in official history even in post-Soviet Uzbekistan (71, 163). In fact, Navro’z’s weak links to Islam eased its use as a symbol for local traditions that could be revived in the Perestroika era and supported even in resolutely secular Central Asian states such as Uzbekistan. Adams shows in fine detail how

the planning and performance of Navro'z spectacles reflected tensions among religious, populist and elite ideologies.

The elitist approach to national culture involved elaborating narratives of cultural, social, political, and military excellence from Uzbekistan's putative past, as well as limiting the importance of religion. In particular, the era of the Timurid dynasty was made into a Golden Age of cultural development, with Amir Timur as the central hero of a "cult of personality by proxy" established by President Karimov (40, 147). In one skit, Amir Timur declares that if the Prophet had tasted the traditional Navro'z ritual food *sumalak* he would have declared "let every day be Navro'z" (148). Although Adams does not spell this out, Timur here calls for Muslim respect of popular tradition by inventing a hypothetical *hadith* (Prophetic saying). Portraying Timur as shaping Muslim belief downplays Islam's influence on Central Asian popular practices, but by relying upon the authority of the Prophet it remains subtle in its challenge to Islamic doctrine.

Despite the light irony of such vignettes, Adams finds that in general, cultural elites took the project of creating Uzbek national culture seriously and there was little of the irony and cynicism that Lisa Wedeen finds in Syria, in her book *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (1999), a study which Adams frequently draws upon for comparison. However, Adams does find unspoken resistance emerging when organizers must persuade institutions and groups to perform in spectacles. Because many official performing arts institutions and artists were over-extended, they avoided new obligations and organizers had to find ways to put pressure on them. Outright refusal was rare but resistance took other forms, including simply not appearing as promised. Other performers came from amateur regional and ethnic troupes and were more enthusiastic about the status and other benefits brought by being invited to participate in these performances.

Adams' central argument is that spectacles are one-way political communication that impose state discourses and attempt to mobilize people through an illusion of participation. Spectacles take "on a vibrant quality of democratic participation even though there is nothing democratic or participatory about" them (97-8). She suggests that unlike many spectacular states, such as Syria, in Uzbekistan the soft power of spectacles was felt adequate for mobilizing citizens and that there was no need for more repressive activities until 2003, when unrest in other post-Soviet states (98, 194) led Karimov to feel less secure basing his power only in such symbols. (She does not seem to think that Karimov's struggle with terrorism and suppression of Islam already 1997 and 1998 reflects such insecurity. See Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia*, 2007, pp. 171-185.)

Although she finds a culture of complaint and resistance that fits James Scott's concept of the "hidden transcript," Adams argues that it is the public transcript of deference and compliance that traps elites into believing that the public appreciates performances and the ideologies that they communicate (174). Despite the nominal popular orientation of state spectacles, they are not particularly effective for communicating ideology to the general public. Although Adams did not systematically research audience reception of spectacles, she provides evidence that they did not fit with popular concerns nor have widespread popular appeal. Instead, she argues that under the "command system of cultural production ... the only audience that shaped the final performance" was the elite politicians (including

President Karimov) and bureaucrats who saw the previews (174). Further, the only people whose ideologies were affected were the performers and other culture producers—the participants. Adams invokes Michel Foucault to argue that the power being exerted in these events works upon participants because of their pleasure in supporting state projects: “power is a generative force, producing pleasure, order, and knowledge” (188). She aligns this position with that of Alexei Yurchak’s analysis of the workings of Soviet power as encouraging contextually-appropriate performances of conformity: people support the official position because they know that is the proper way to participate in political groups (190). Adams concludes that the ultimate vulnerability of this system is that political and cultural elites are only addressing each other, and that the political elites fail to recognize this. Uzbekistan’s elites have created spectacles that do not mobilize popular audiences because they are either repetitive or lack a sufficiently elaborated ideology to motivate the masses to identify with the regime (197). Her book ends on the conclusion that such spectacles do not help connect elite and popular understandings of reality, and can lead to failure of the state, whether socialist or authoritarian (198-99).

Adams’ argument about the workings of power and ideology among elites, culture producers, performers and audiences is a valuable contribution to Central Asian scholarship. Nonetheless, her narrow focus on the effectiveness of popular mobilization and the trouble Karimov’s regime had upholding international norms (195) seems to neglect some of the richness of her data. The book’s many details about the processes of creating the spectacles themselves deserve more analysis. She documents interesting processes of many-sided communication among various elite groups. Innovations by culture producers were restrained by political feedback. Political elites insisted that state-authorized expression should be tactful, tasteful, historically orthodox, and reinforce international diplomacy. Innovations were shot down by invoking mass audiences: “the people are not ready” (132, 208). Performances sent messages “about which countries were diplomatically important to Uzbekistan”: belly dancers’ costumes were changed after complaints from the Egyptian embassy; to reflect positive ties, German and French cultural performances were incongruously included in celebrations of the Silk Road (137, 140). Art thus conveyed messages formulated by political elites. Perhaps Adams could have linked this to a broader version of Yurchak’s idea of contextually-appropriate performances of conformity, through which Uzbekistan’s elites construct and communicate normality in the world community.

Communication around deleting and adjusting history and culture also deserves further analysis. Dogmas about religion, politics, and ethnicity meant that Zoroastrian ritual, Shaibanid history, and Iranian heroes such as Siyavush were excluded from performances. Sexuality was also sensitive: When a stage designer wanted to include representations of *bacha* (dancing boys supported by wealthy men as love objects) he was told it would undermine the effort to be a “normal” nation (66). Eliminating homoerotic practices from Central Asian history suggests that performing acceptable gender ideologies is also part of validating a nation as a moral agent on the global stage. Soviet colonizers sought to control both women’s oppression and homoerotic practices, but the one campaign was public and has been extensively researched while the other has been little noted. Adams neglects a fascinating topic: she relies on Foucault’s theory of power but overlooks the ways the panopticon of the world community regiments gender and sexuality in both daily life and on

stage. Central Asian cultural canons and official histories are constructed under the global reach of largely Europeanizing ideologies that stimulate anxious propriety on the world stage, by defining perversion as much as democracy.

This valuable, well-written and insightful volume joins the growing number of careful ethnographic studies of states, and will be widely cited both for its strong argument about the relationship of elites, spectacles and popular ideological mobilization, and for its detailed discussion of the institutional processes through which spectacles come into being. It should be read by those interested in the workings of modern states and the ways that elites use cultural productions to construct state power and their place within the state.