

# **What is Culture? Schemas and Spectacles in Uzbekistan**

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“What is culture?” is potentially an irritating question. Although I do not intend to provide a clear answer to this question in this paper, I am not asking it rhetorically. The question “what is culture?” is rather an interrogation of the schemas that my informants and I use to understand culture. Schemas are both representations of knowledge and information processing mechanisms (DiMaggio, 1997: 269) which are applied in the enactment and reproduction of social life (Sewell, 1992: 8). Schemas are a way to refer both to cognition and agency, linking the way we are taught to think about our world to our ability to react and adapt to it, linking institutions with individuals. The schemas I will be discussing in this paper refer specifically to the way people think about and produce culture, which I am using in this context to mean the arts.

In this paper I propose that there are particular ways that culture producers trained in the Soviet system think about culture, and that we can identify a set of Soviet cultural schemas which continue to influence the arts in post-Soviet societies today. My analysis is based on a year of fieldwork in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, studying the cultural elite. In order to understand these Soviet schemas, I also explore my own schemas of culture and contrast them with what my informants say and do as they produce culture.

## **Concerns about Culture in Post-Socialist Societies**

One good way to begin thinking about schemas is to figure out what people take for granted as common sense versus the “points of concern” that occupy them (Laitin, 1986: chapter 5). The back and forth process of ethnographic understanding allows us to gain some insight into what both we and our informants take for granted and what concerns us. I will begin by discussing what concerns me. In the next section I will outline the Soviet schema for culture and the way my common sense about culture was interrogated by my informants.

There are three main issues that concern me about culture in the post-Soviet world. The first issue is the changing value placed on indigenous culture versus Russian or Western culture.

The second issue is the participation or marginalization of various regional and ethnic groups in public life. The third issue is a pair of problems experienced by the cultural elites in the former Soviet Union, namely the consequences of the economic crisis and the dependence of culture producers on the state.

Even during the Soviet period, it was not the case that indigenous cultures were ignored or repressed in favor of full-scale Russification. While Russification was the official policy as well as the common practice, indigenous arts were supported by the state and by local communities through organizations ranging from musical ensembles at the local house of culture to the world class national dance troupes of Tashkent. When looked at from the point of view of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984), Russian culture clearly had more value in political and economic transactions, but indigenous culture was valued in other situations and on a different scale. In some places like Ukraine, indigenous cultural capital is being re-valued and derussification campaigns are being waged (Wanner, 1995). In Uzbekistan however, Uzbek cultural capital is still placed on a different scale from Western (including Russian) culture, limiting its higher value to certain situations. For example, in the holiday theatrical spectacles that were the main focus of my research, Western culture is used to demonstrate Uzbekistan's equality with other nations, while Uzbek culture is used to demonstrate pride in heritage. Both are important to Uzbekistan's cultural elites, but they serve different purposes and are evaluated differently by outsiders.

The second issue is the degree to which various regional and ethnic groups are allowed to participate in public life in the newly independent states. The case of Russians in Estonia or Latvia is the most extreme example, but the marginalization of various groups is a problem in many places. In Uzbekistan, the participation of ethnic groups in public life is channeled through national cultural centers which have very limited autonomy from local authorities. The cultural expression of Russians, Tatars, Koreans and other large ethnic groups in Uzbekistan is largely limited to their own community, with the exception of festivals which feature performances of stereotypical ethnic folk culture. In other realms some of the guarantees offered to Russians and Russian speakers by the Soviet system are no longer in effect; ethnic quota systems in education and hiring are not used and many schools are offering classes in Uzbek only. On the other hand, the government of Uzbekistan is putting some emphasis on the development of regional identities and cultures, replicating the Soviet empire writ small within

its borders. The Ministry of Cultural Affairs is devoting time and energy to get ensembles from each region to refine the expression of their own “local color” for display in festivals locally, nationally, and internationally.

Finally, there is the problem of economics facing the cultural elite. Nostalgia for the Soviet past is strong, especially among performers who became used to touring throughout the Union and internationally. The money for trips abroad dried up years ago and many elites express concern that their art is suffering from lack of interchange with professionals from other countries. The international market for cultural products from Uzbekistan is largely limited to colorful folk song and dance, which results in a marginalization of Uzbek culture to a “token” ethnic group of exotic Central Asia. The free market, often with the help of Western funding agencies, supports a few theaters and popular musicians who blend Uzbek and Western instruments, music, and production styles, but for the most part artists in Uzbekistan continue to depend on the state. The state puts limits on creative expression and, as during the Soviet period, encourages a great deal of kitsch.<sup>1</sup> The state in Uzbekistan carries on the Soviet tradition of using culture as an ideological tool, and it is this key concern of mine which leads to the clash between the Western and the Soviet cultural schemas.

### **What is Culture? The Soviet Schema**

Historians (e.g. Slezkine, 1994; Suny, 1993) tend to characterize Soviet nationality policies as a combination of European romantic nationalism, Russian cultural imperialism, and Soviet state centrism. In Uzbekistan, culture producing institutions were intimately connected to Soviet nationality policies, therefore we can't talk about the Soviet schema for culture separate from the Soviet schema for nationality. The way that the Soviet state institutionalized culture, and therefore the schemas of culture producers today, can be broken down into four related theories:

- 1) A theory of the state that encompassed all aspects of public life including culture and the arts.

- 2) A theory of group identity: integration into the larger state is pursued through the manipulation of (usually) ethnic identity. Each people had to have its own set of cultural institutions, each people had to have its own distinctive arts.
- 3) A theory of cultural development: the culture of a group evolves in accordance with the stages of the group's socio-historical development, although change can be forced. The development of culture is the responsibility of the state; unhealthy forms should be eliminated and healthy forms should be encouraged.
- 4) A theory of social engineering - the primary purpose of cultural products is the betterment of the people according to the designs of the state.

First, using data from my fieldwork I will illustrate how the elements fit together into a schema, then I will conclude by looking at the broader implications of the Soviet schema for post-Soviet cultures. My fieldwork in 1996 focused on the multimillion dollar theatrical spectacles the government of Uzbekistan sponsors on national holidays. The time, resources, and attention of nearly the entire artistic community of Tashkent are devoted to these bi-annual holiday performances on Navroz (the Zoroastrian spring equinox holiday) and Independence Day (September 1). On these holidays a variety of festive activities are held throughout the country, but the main event is a 90-minute song and dance extravaganza on one of the central squares of Tashkent which is attended by thousands and watched on television by millions. I study these spectacles not simply as texts which reflect ideas about culture, or as outcomes wholly determined by ideological dictates from the top, but as the end product of a process involving individuals and institutions (Becker, 1982). Therefore I focus mainly on the festival production process, where the struggle within the elite becomes visible.

### **The Theory of the State**

The first element of the Soviet schema, the role of the totalizing state, is still hegemonic in Uzbekistan. This is not an unfamiliar concept as it was the basis for most Leninist states which made all aspects of life the business of the government. From the perspective of the Soviet cultural schema it is difficult to imagine that culture can exist without state control. When I explained to one of my informants that the United States doesn't have a ministry of culture, the

response was, "well who directs [*ypravliaet*] culture, then?!" The idea that cultural institutions would direct and support themselves sounds improbable if not alarming to many Uzbek cultural elites, who fear the market more than the state. While artists resent the state meddling in their creative affairs, the idea of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs playing an active role in the arts is rarely questioned. For the first few years of independence, the Ministry's role shifted away from heavy-handed censorship, a positive change from the perspective of this theater director:

Before, even when we picked out a play ourselves, it was subject to approval from Moscow and locally, from those who were controlled by Moscow, and they said if we could perform it or not. Now we ourselves chose a play, find an author, a playwright. When a playwright brings a play to the theater, if the collective likes it we include it in our repertoire. The dramaturg or the head of the theater goes to the Ministry of Culture and shows a certificate that his play was accepted, he comes back here and we can put on the play. Just through his own efforts he can accomplish it all. Before, it was different. First they said, "first we will have to read it and if it passes inspection, then we'll tell you if you can put it on or not.

This relative freedom may not last long, as the policy on repertoire selection has yet to be decided by the newly formed UzbekTeatr organization. The Ministry has begun a process of re-centralization, uniting all state-run theaters, dance ensembles, and musical groups under governing organizations respectively titled UzbekTeatr, UzbekRaqs, and UzbekNavo, all under the direction of the Ministry.<sup>2</sup> When I asked a Ministry official about this re-centralization and its effect on the independent development of the arts, he responded, "Well if the government is giving them money, then why shouldn't we have a say in what they're doing? We have to have quality control after all. You should see what some of the theaters in the provinces are putting on these days! Besides, if they want to find sponsors, then let them run themselves, be our guest." But with the state controlling most resources needed to create performance arts (venues, printing presses, bureaucratic regulations), even events with outside sponsorship find it hard to mount a production in independent Uzbekistan.

## The Theory of Group Identity

The second element, a theory of group identity, is clearly illustrated by the attitude towards ethnic participation in holiday spectacles. During the Independence Day spectacle, a group of dances is devoted every year to "Friendship of the Peoples," a familiar Soviet trope. Here we touch again on my concern about the symbolic participation in public life of non-Uzbeks in Uzbekistan: does the friendship go beyond sharing the same stage for 10 minutes a year? No doubt it does; people of all nationalities work together in Tashkent and since 1989 there have been relatively few inter-ethnic incidents. Still, the Soviet schema dictates how and when nationality should be emphasized in a holiday performance. Even though the cultural centers who were charged with the responsibility of putting together a number didn't particularly want to devote their time and energy to the spectacle, they were more or less commanded to participate by the Organizational Committee of the holiday.

Uzbekistan's holiday performances clearly show the staying power of the Soviet definition of nationality, which set up a strict hierarchy of nations, nationalities, and peoples, along with creating objective definitive boundaries between ethnic groups. Kyrgyz and Kazakhs, for example, are at the same level in the hierarchy as Uzbeks because they are both independent republics, while Tatars and Koreans rank a notch lower because they are among the many "peoples of Uzbekistan." Since holiday spectacles are divided up into different thematic blocks (sets of songs, dances, and props), these differences place differently ranked ethnic groups in different blocks. Thus, the organization of the holiday spectacle forces a distinction between ethnic groups that belong in the "friendship" block, such as Tatars and Koreans, and those that belong in the "Turkestan, our common home" block, such as Kyrgyz and Kazakhs.

The boundaries that exist in the minds of the spectacle producers showed up several times in discussions of a particular number which had elements that "didn't belong" in that block. For example, the Sirdaryo region incorporated Kyrgyz performers in Kyrgyz costume into their original program for Independence Day, but were told by the Orgkom to "lose the Kyrgyz," who belong in the Turkistan block, not the regional block. Even though the director of the Sirdaryo ensemble felt he was fulfilling the instructions to "express the regional character," by showing the importance in his region of citizens of Uzbekistan who happen to be ethnic Kyrgyz, this did not fit with the Orgkom's paradigm of "regional character." Diversity is allowed in the

representation of regions, but it must be intra-Uzbek diversity. Ethnic diversity goes somewhere else.

## **The Theory of Cultural Development**

The theory of cultural development is one of the more interesting aspects of the Soviet schema and deserves a bit of elaboration since it's not as obvious as the first two. From this perspective, nations with more developed economies also have more developed cultures, thus Russian culture is more developed than and superior to Uzbek culture. However, thanks to the efforts of the Soviet state to develop Uzbek culture, it now has achieved a status almost equal to Russian culture. Uzbek culture was developed through the importation of European forms, such as ensemble dancing, which were combined with Uzbek cultural content, such as traditional dance movements (Doi 1997).

The Soviet schema for culture was not identical to Soviet cultural policies which dictated that culture be national in form, socialist in content, and international in spirit. Rather, the schema is more of a reflection of how things actually worked in practice, where the distinctions between form and content, national and socialist, quickly dissolved. In reality, some aspects of indigenous culture were considered progressive while other were considered unhealthy. Thus the state encouraged the formation and performances of women's dance ensembles which combined the "healthful" expression of feminine vigor with the political agenda of combating the "unhealthy" seclusion of women in Uzbek society.

In holiday spectacles, the schema of cultural development again is expressed in the thematic blocks. Folk costume, song, and dance are used to represent Uzbekistan's national culture as a whole, as well as the cultures of its regions and peoples. Examples of this range from the "friendship of the peoples" block mentioned earlier to the patriotic pop songs done with a smattering of folk instruments among synthesizers and electric drums, accompanying dancing girls in modern-styled national costume. Contrast these blocks with the "military," "sport," and "international" blocks of the Independence Day spectacle, which feature largely European clothing, music, and styles of movement. Military uniforms, gymnastic moves, and Tchaikovsky are used to show Uzbekistan's place in the world, while silk dresses, delicate hand movements, and national instruments indicate a particularly Uzbek identity. I never heard a member of the

cultural elite referring to these national forms as primitive, probably since during the Soviet period they saw these forms "developing," thanks to state patronage. On the other hand, the tastes of the elite for the Soviet versions of these developed arts over their earlier versions indicates that the schema of cultural development is still in place.

This split between the folk/ethnic and the national/international is also present in the different themes of the spectacles Navroz and Independence Day. Both are valued by the Uzbek elite, but different kinds of culture are clearly put to different uses. As one choreographer said: I'm not conservative, but Navruz is a folk festival so it should have more national music and instruments. We don't need orchestras, even orchestras of national instruments. It should be pure folk. Independence Day is an entirely different matter. During Independence Day we should show what we have gained in the past year. In agriculture, in sports, culture, military technology, art, literature, etc. There we should say, here's what we are Uzbekistan. Orchestral music is also part of our achievements, classical ballet is an achievement, our young military men, these are our achievements but they don't belong in Navruz.

Authenticity and purity in Uzbek cultural forms wasn't of interest to many of the people I interviewed. In general, the feeling among my interviewees seemed to be that there was something of a renewal taking place that didn't involve bringing back "authentic" culture from the past, but rather gave the freedom to express some of what had been repressed during the Soviet period, and the opportunity to do more of what had been allowed during the Soviet period. The revival of traditional Uzbek culture is considered a healthy form of development today, as is continued state support of Western cultural forms. Some parts of traditional Uzbek culture are still considered unhealthy, however, such as anything that might be labeled "religious extremism." It is also taboo to explore criticism of the present government or to present too complicated a picture of the new national heroes of Uzbekistan such as Amir Timur or the writer Fitrat.<sup>3</sup> People talked of building a new Uzbek cultural "arsenal" which would differ from Soviet cultural repertoires, but since all of this is channeled through official government organs, a great deal of institutional inertia and continuity with the Soviet period is to be expected.

## **The Theory of Social Engineering**

According to Soviet specialists, holidays were ideal as a pedagogical tool because they appealed to people of all cultural levels while at the same time lifting all of them to a higher level. Holidays, therefore, couldn't be just for fun; they had to serve as a means to self-improvement and enlightenment (Genkin, 1975). This aspect of the Soviet cultural schema ties up the other three nicely, as we can see using the case of Uzbekistan's national holidays. The state is in charge of producing the holiday spectacles with the goals of defining national identities (especially Uzbek identity), of developing culture through the forum of the spectacle which brings progressive ideas to the public, and of guiding the people in a way that serves the state.

As the quote above about showing off the achievements of Uzbekistan shows, the spectacles on Navroz and Independence Day aren't just for fun and entertainment. Independence Day is playing a role in building a national patriotic identity, and Navroz is seen as a way to educate the people, especially youth, about their forgotten traditions. These functions of national holidays can be seen in any country, but in Uzbekistan they express not just through their themes but through their very organization a particularly Soviet approach to the social utility of the arts. When I asked one of the spectacle directors what his goals were for the holiday, he said:

First and foremost, it is Navruz's job to mobilize people to work. There are several crops that Uzbekistan now grows in sufficient quantity to meet its own needs. And even from ancient times, people had this festival to get ready for the great task ahead. So that's the main goal of the festival, to help people get ready to work. The second goal is to illustrate our myths. Art always draws on life, and therefore through imagery and symbolism, through the media of dance, music, and art, creates [words unclear] Therefore it also aids the development of the arts, especially ethnic arts.

Another example that shows how the organization of holidays functions as a form of social engineering comes from the way Tashkent elites perpetuate a process of cultural objectification taught to them by the Soviets. During the Soviet period, experts on folk culture created new,

"national" forms of dance and music by sampling and adapting regional forms for European style public performance.<sup>4</sup> As one choreographer put it:

What the Soviet choreographer would do was to make the dancers face the audience: 'raise your head!' they would say, 'it looks better that way.' They cleaned up the movements, standardized them...The Soviets would want them to throw back their shoulders, or something, so that it's no longer the way the people would do it at home, but for the audience. They thought it looked better that way, and now that's how everyone does it because that's how they've seen it done.

Today the same process showed up in the preparation for the "regions" blocks in the Navroz and Independence Day spectacles. Uzbekistan has 12 provinces (viloyati) and an "autonomous region" inhabited largely by the Karakalpaks, who are considered a distinct nationality separate from the Uzbeks but are included in the "regions" block because their "native territory" is within the borders of Uzbekistan. These provinces are administrative districts that don't always coincide with ethno-cultural differentiation, but in some cases it seems that drawing administrative boundaries encouraged regional differentiation. This is certainly true today, with pressure coming from the holiday organizers to have each region express its own character. These regional differences are of great importance to the producers of Uzbekistan's holiday spectacles. One of the main conflicts between the performers and the organizers of the regions block was that of insufficient differentiation among the regions. Many of the people involved in holiday production complained that the regional ensembles didn't turn out different enough from each other.

They didn't express the range of cultures in Uzbekistan and the show ended up being monotonous. We need to work on differentiating our dances, for example, to work on the development of our arts. Even the professional collectives have become similar to each other. They should each develop their own style. We should have competitions, etc. maybe we need to have a symposium for choreographers to fix this. One collective should have a Bukharan flavor and another should have a Khorezm flavor. But of course the very basis of all of this should be folk art.

The basis may have been folk art, but in the end the art of the people gets transformed into the Tashkenters' vision of what real regional folk culture should look like. The directors of the regional ensembles had been given instructions to prepare material that reflected the region's unique characteristics as well as that region's achievements of the last five years, but their ideas, such as singing about the region's sweet melons, were laughed at by the cultural and political elites in charge of the spectacle. In the end it didn't matter what the natives thought was significant about their region, but what the Tashkent organizers thought would be emblematic and glitzy. Yet after imposing conformity to the top-down definition, the organizers complained that the regions' performances turned out too similar, that they failed to express their own regional flavor. This example ties together all the elements of the Soviet schema, and brings me back to my concerns about state control and participation in culture.

### **Conclusion: Soviet Schemas and Post-Soviet Cultures**

Now I'd like to come back to my points of concern, the things that, to me, aren't commonsensical about cultural production in Uzbekistan. The four aspects of the Soviet schema of culture I just outlined stand out for me because of the concerns I raised earlier: the evaluation of Uzbek culture in its role as a resource for renewal and a basis for identity, the role of non-Uzbek and regionally distinctive groups in forging a multi-ethnic national identity, and the combination of economic pressures and continued control by the state. These concerns were prompted by what I saw, and in turn led me to formulate a systematic understanding of the schemas employed by Uzbekistan's cultural elites. This is why I have been discussing the Soviet cultural schema in conjunction with my own understandings and assumptions: the analysis of the former is dependent on the latter. My concern over the Russification of Uzbek culture probably stems from the part of my schema that says cultures can't be ranked in terms of development; that pluralism is good and no one should be forced to adopt alien cultural practices in order to improve their life chances. My concern over the participation of different groups in public life is related to my understanding of the benefits of a lively and diverse civil society, and my mistrust of nationalist ideologies. My concern over the economic and political pressures is related to my contradictory impulses to resist the intrusion of the forces of capitalism into Uzbekistan while at

the same time believing that state control stifled healthy creative expression and produces bad art.

The most striking difference between the two schemas is the relationship between culture and politics. While I found ways to translate my ideas about pluralism and market forces into ideas my informants could understand, my distrust of the state in its role of directing culture was something most of my informants couldn't understand. However, a few people in Tashkent share my concerns about state-run culture, and they are concerned for the same reasons as I am. The role of the state in cultural production isn't just a concern from a creative point of view, but also from the point of view of civil society, as Goldfarb (1980) has shown. Mark Vayl (1998) writes about his experimental youth theater, the Ilkhom, serving in the 1970's as a forum for the development of independent ideas, a space for the formation of opinions not directly dictated by the government. Any organization that brings people together to solve problems, be it a theater or an organization for women entrepreneurs, serves to build civil society. This process is hindered greatly, however, when the state is unwilling to relinquish its control over any sector of society, as seems to be the case in Uzbekistan today.

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## Notes

1. On the relationship between state-sponsored mass culture and kitsch, see Boym 1994, especially p. 16.
2. For information on this reorganization proces, see Bahodir Abdurahimov, "Madaniyatga Investitsia Jalb Etish [Attracting Investment in Culture]," *Gulistan* 1/1998 pp.5-7.
3. See the criticism of various scholars from Uzbekistan and elsewhere in *Ozbekiston Adabiyoti va San'ati*, 24/3409, June 13, 1997.
4. Mary Doi in her dissertation (1997) on dancers in Uzbekistan found that this process of experts and professionals defining regional cultures goes back to the very beginning of the development of Soviet Uzbek culture. She also found that this resulted in a standardization and homogenization of dance styles.