uzbekistaninitiative

Uzbekistan Initiative Papers

No. 4

February 2014

Navro'z and the Renewal of Uzbek National Culture

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Key Points

- Navro'z is an important holiday in contemporary Uzbekistan not just because of its profound popularity, but also as an exemplary case of a broader phenomenon of post-Soviet cultural renewal.
- National holidays are often used by states as conscious expressions of national identity, but Navro'z is an especially felicitous case to examine as it is inherently a celebration of renewal.
- In other parts of the world, Navro'z is linked with the symbol of fire, though fire plays almost no role in Uzbekistan's contemporary Navro'z celebrations and reference to fire rituals was actively discouraged by the government.
- The defense of Navro'z was the catalyst for the defense of national-cultural traditions in general in late Soviet times.
- In addition to this story of struggle against the cultural domination of Moscow, the way Navro'z is celebrated in Uzbekistan today shows us that there is also an important component of global modernity to the way that cultural renewal took place in Uzbekistan in the 1990s.
- The desire of the state to produce a slick, tightly controlled show for the masses has perhaps laid the ground for a new struggle over the meaning of Navro'z.

> Throughout history, various rulers have tried to use the people's most beloved holiday, Navro'z,[1] for their own purposes. We can observe this during the eras of conquest by the Arabs, Mongols, and Tsarist Russians. Especially during the Soviet era, Navro'z was in a pitiful state. Since national folk traditions did not serve Soviet purposes, they were attacked both officially and unofficially. They were not interested in whether a particular folk custom or holiday had positive or negative aspects. During the reign of their state, their goal was to transform all peoples into a single family, and to do this they fought against national values. The politics of prohibiting folk traditions grew stronger and stronger. As a result, having been torn out by the roots, the people's national traditions were not able to develop.[2]

I have been writing about the Uzbekistan's showy pop concert holiday celebrations for nearly 20 years now,[3] but I wouldn't be here today if it weren't for the work of more serious scholars of Uzbek holidays such as the man quoted above, Dr. Usmon Qoraboev. A leading expert on the history and regional folklore of Navro'z, Qoraboev's scholarship is important for understanding the meaning of the project of cultural renewal in post-Soviet Uzbekistan.

In this article I will be quoting Dr. Qoraboev liberally and contrasting his work with my analysis of the meaning of Navro'z in contemporary Uzbekistan. Qoraboev and other scholars in Uzbekistan tend to be puzzled by my interest in the pop culture interpretation of Uzbekistan's greatest, most ancient holiday. Why study the government-commanded fluff-filled concerts rather than the history and folkloric roots of the holiday? My response to such questions, no matter how many different ways I phrased it, never impressed my critics: my object of analysis was not Navro'z per se, but rather was what the people working on these concerts *thought* were the roots of the holiday, what meanings they sought to *project* through the holiday celebration, and very importantly, what ideas were considered and then rejected for ideological reasons. That is, I was approaching the research from a decidedly constructivist stance, one which many Central Asian scholars find fault with. While Qoraboev writes about this topic as part of his cultural renewal work, I attempt to analytically deconstruct what he and his colleagues are doing. I hope that this article serves as something of an apology to Usmon aka and his colleagues for stubbornly insisting on my own point of view!

The main point I want to make in this article is relatively simple: Navro'z is an important holiday in contemporary Uzbekistan not just because of its profound popularity, but also as an exemplary case of a broader phenomenon of post-Soviet cultural renewal. National holidays are often used by states as conscious expressions of national identity, but Navro'z is an especially felicitous case to examine in a post-independence context since, as a New Year holiday, it is inherently a celebration of renewal. Furthermore, the holiday is one that the people themselves would celebrate even without any direction from the state, which is not the case with a wholly invented tradition such as Independence Day. However, this is not to say that the state does not put its own stamp on the holiday; there are both political and folk cultural elements to the celebration of Navro'z in Uzbekistan.

Cultural elites in Tashkent talk about Navro'z as a holiday of spring which celebrates the triumph of warmth and light over cold and darkness and the renewal of nature. The first aspect, the triumph of light and warmth, is symbolically associated with the equinox and the lengthening of the day. Some scholars also talk about Navro'z as a time when the forces of evil rise up and must be put down for another year by the forces of good, but these references to the legendary or spiritual sources of Navro'z are not part of the everyday understanding of Navro'z I encountered among acquaintances and in popular culture. Although the 1996 Navro'z holiday concert was in part based on stories adapted from Avesta, in general there wasn't a lot of knowledge about the Zoroastrian aspects of Navro'z among the population in the 1990s. In other parts of the world, Navro'z is linked with the symbol of fire, though fire plays almost no role in Uzbekistan's contemporary Navro'z celebrations and reference to fire rituals was actively discouraged by the govern-

ment. For example, one director I interviewed described how a fire dance he worked on for the Navro'z 1996 holiday concert was artistically interesting for him, but it had to be cut because of concerns about how it would be understood in different countries.

> Mansur aka: [The dance] was interesting in and of itself, but since different viewers would see it, since it would be transmitted by television and tapes would go to different countries, it was an issue of

> During the early years of Soviet power, national and religious holidays were prohibited. The prohibition of Navro'z was particularly hard to endure. At first the politicians tried to get Navro'z to serve the purposes of communist ideology by organizing political performances in the city's main squares during springtime. … But by the beginning of the 1930s, the politics had returned to a battle against "holdovers from the past." Under this campaign, ancient national-spirituality, cultural heri-

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> Uzbekistan being a Muslim country, a Muslim state...There are these political nuances. "What are they worshipping? Where are they going with this?" So that we don't give the wrong impression to our neighboring countries, to Muslim governments.4

Many others shared this attitude, shrugging off the imperative to be authentic in favor of exploring the new 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.

Although the elites I interviewed did not frame cultural renewal specifically as a postcolonial or anti-colonial movement, it is clear that there was a backlash against Soviet culture in general and Russian culture in particular, and that people in Uzbekistan resented those Soviet policies that promoted Russification at the expense of Uzbek language and culture. In Usmon Qoraboev's writing on Uzbek national traditions, Navro'z stands for a whole set of cultural practices that were repressed by Soviet power. The repression of Navro'z, however, is seen as especially egregious by Qoraboev and other Uzbeks. Navro'z in Uzbekistan was not a religious holiday, after all, nor was it a celebration of bourgeois values. Just going by Soviet ideology, there was nothing especially objectionable about the holiday except that it was part of the old, national culture:

> tage, customs, ceremonies, and holidays all came under scrutiny. However, local people in out-of-the-way places secretly continued to conduct traditional festivals and rites.5

The struggle between those who feared any form of national cultural expression and those who saw Navro'z as a positive social force continued throughout the Soviet era. During the thaw of the 1960s, some discussion of Navro'z was allowed in the press but the openness of the public sphere to so-called national culture contracted again in the 1970s.

> During the 1960s, the national question thawed just a little bit and the discussion about national holidays and rituals was allowed a small revival. Articles about folk customs and festivals began to appear in the press. Thanks to the initiative of forward-thinking members of the intelligentsia and certain leaders who appreciated culture, efforts began to celebrate Navro'z again locally. However, Navro'z was not allowed to be celebrated at the level of a state holiday. Even though a number of intellectuals and other progressive leaders continually emphasized that Navro'z was a genuine secular, grassroots holiday, keeping in mind the old prohibition, many people were too frightened to support this tradition.

> In the 1970s there was more of an unofficial campaign against folk holidays. Local government representatives in the provinces were not given the okay to celebrate national holidays, and party organs gave orders, both openly and in secret, that new Soviet holidays had to be organized in their place. This is because the Soviets were deathly afraid of triggering a national awakening.[6]
>
> In a futile attempt to make concessions to national sentiment without giving up control over public culture, a holiday called Navbahor ('new spring,' to be celebrated on the first Sunday in April) was introduced as a Soviet substitute for Navro'z in 1986, but the holiday never had a chance to take root. Official fears grew stronger in the late 1980s when the discussion about Navro'z grew into a conflict between, on the one hand, advocates of glasnost and national cultural autonomy, and on the other hand, high level functionaries of the Uzbekistan Communist Party and others who were still committed to the "creation of a Soviet people."
>
> In the mid-1980s was the beginning of the end of the Soviet era and they defended their ideology with their last breath. National holidays such as Uzbekistan's folk holiday Navro'z faced new obstacles to their being widely celebrated. Between 1985 and 1987 the mass media organs were given orders not to say anything about Navro'z. If someone organized a street fair in a city square, the roads would be blocked. The tightropes of acrobats were knocked down. The cauldrons for making *sumalak* were knocked over. This caused the hatred of the people to boil up and resulted in many heated arguments. Writers, scholars, and culture workers tried to explain that Navro'z had always been a progressive, truly popular folk holiday, that its essence was not at all religious, that it was a celebration of the laws of nature, and they spoke seriously about how it was based on the best traditions necessary to develop [a culture].
>
> The defense of Navro'z was the catalyst for the defense of national-cultural traditions in general. In scientific assemblies and writers' meetings the supporters of Navro'z broadened their ranks. Educational elites in various localities began to celebrate Navro'z in defiance of prohibitions from their higher-ups. In the neighborhoods, the streets were all cleaned up, people put on new clothes, people exchanged holiday greetings, prepared *sumalak*, feasted, and partook in merry-making. They couldn't wait for Navro'z to begin.[7]

In the 1990s, many intellectuals were uneasy with some aspects of the "Olympification" of Navro'z and advocated a greater emphasis on the recovery and propagation of authentic folk songs and rituals

The result was that in the mid-to-late 1980s, Uzbekistan's cultural intelligentsia took it upon themselves to make Navro'z one of the centerpieces (along with the status of the Uzbek language and the rehabilitation of repressed writers) of their campaign for greater cultural autonomy from Moscow.

In addition to this story of struggle against the cultural domination of Moscow, the way Navro'z is celebrated in Uzbekistan today shows us that there is also an important component of global modernity to the way that cultural renewal took place in Uzbekistan in the 1990s. In short, Navro'z simply isn't what it used to be. Navro'z used to

be celebrated in the marketplaces, city squares, and main streets, not unlike contemporary *sayils* (street fairs—which are now just one component of the planning that goes into Tashkent's Navro'z celebration). The entertainment consisted of clowns, musicians, storytellers, and games such as *kopkari,* a game of horsemanship played with the carcass of a goat or sheep.[8] Nowadays, in the era of the renewal of traditional culture, we still see the clowns, musicians, and storytellers, but they entertain us from an elevated stage in a carefully planned and rehearsed Olympics-style show worthy of the most modern nation-state.

In the 1990s, many intellectuals were uneasy with some aspects of the "Olympification" of Navro'z and advocated a greater emphasis on the recovery and propagation of authentic folk songs and rituals, both within the concert and throughout the city on the day of the holiday. But in the years since my original encounter with the planners of the 1996 holiday concert, Navro'z concerts in Uzbekistan have gotten ever more grandiose and cultural authenticity has lost even more ground to folkloric and pop culture kitsch. During the 1990s, the holiday of Navro'z itself became a focal point for discourse about the Soviet repression and renewal of culture, about global versus local, and modern versus traditional. However, the desire of the state to produce a slick, tightly controlled show for the masses has perhaps laid the ground for a new struggle over the meaning of Navro'z.

Read more:

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Kholmuhamedov, Komil. 1990. "Sen Navro'zni Soghinmadingmi." Pp. 4-5 in *Fan va Turmush*. Tashkent.

Otash, Yo'ldash Muqim o'ghli. 1992. *Navro'z Naqli*. Tashkent: O'zbekiston.

Qoraboev, Usmon. 1986. *Badiy-Ommaviy Tadbirlar*. Tashkent: Oqituvchi.

—. 1991. *O'zbekiston Bayramlari*. Toshkent: O'qituvchi.

Endnotes

1. Navro'z is the Uzbek name for the spring equinox holiday celebrated throughout this part of the world. See "Novruz, Nowrouz, Nooruz, Navruz, Nauroz, Nevruz," inscription on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/?RL=00282.
2. U. Qoraboev, *Madaniy Tadbirlar* (Tashkent: Toshkent Kartografiya Fabrikasi, 2003), 191.
3. Some of the material in this chapter can be found in my previous writings such as *The Spectacular State: Culture and National Identity in Uzbekistan* (Duke University Press, 2010); "Uzbekistan's National Holidays," in Jeff Sahadeo and Russell Zanca, eds., *Everyday Life in Central Asia: Past and Present* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 198-212; and "Invention, Institutionalization, and Renewal in Uzbekistan's National Culture," *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2/3 (1999): 355-373.
4. Interview, theater director, Tashkent, May 5, 1996. Interview excerpts use pseudonyms to conceal the identities of my interviewees.
5. Qoraboev, *Madaniy Tadbirlar*, 191.
6. Ibid., 192.
7. Ibid., 192-3.
8. *O'zbekiston Respublikasi Entsiklopediya* (Tashkent: Qomuslar Bosh Tahririiati, 1997), 540-41; U. Qoraboev, "Navro'zi Olam," *Guliston* (1988): 6.