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Seeking Divine Harmony: Uzbek Artisans and their Spaces

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Key Points

- Despite extensive Soviet purges and the state monopoly in manufacturing, Uzbekistan today still remains home to the most fascinating artisanal traditions in Central Asia.
- For more than a millennium, great masters and their disciples have expressed their virtuosity in weaving silk, shaping metals, carving wood, and turning mud into pottery.
- The most fascinating region, rich with such traditions, is the Fergana Valley where, dotted along a stretch of the ancient Silk Road, numerous small towns are specialized in particular crafts.
- Through tireless repetition of time-honored practices, many artisans and families have managed to maintain their crafts as rituals, as well as a source of identity and livelihood.
- The social fabric of the community is nested in craft production, cottage industries and barter trade. Neighbors and relatives frequently cooperate and perform additional tasks. Extensive networks of relatives and friends help with buying and selling.
- Uzbek Government praise artisans as symbols of Uzbek national authenticity, sources of pride and generators of jobs. But, there seems to be no real will and structure in place to improve the working conditions of artisans. Moreover, trade restrictions, arbitrary customs rules and corruption suffocate small enterprises.

Introduction

The Fergana Valley is the cultural and spiritual heart of Central Asia. This fertile terrain has long been the most celebrated epicenter of agriculture, crafts and trade between China and Europe. Its past glory is long since gone, swept away by a couple of centuries of economic and spiritual decline along the Silk Road.¹ Nevertheless, these towns exude a melancholic dignity and an almost surreal, timeworn visage. Although most of its land mass lies within the boundaries of modern

repeatedly shown vocal opposition to external power domination, as seen during the Basmachi revolts in the 1920s against Soviet expansion and most recently in 2005 in Andijon, against state suppression. There is something else to be said about this most densely populated region in the middle of the inhospitable geography of Central Asia. Its soul has been preserved through passion and loyalty to traditional craft forms. Through tireless repetition of time-honored practices, many artisans and families have managed to maintain their crafts as rituals, as well as a source

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Uzbekistan, beyond the Fergana's western gate is the historic city of Khojand (in Tajikistan) and to the east it is embraced by the ancient towns of Osh and Uzgen, on the Kyrgyzstan side of the border. Since the Arab conquest of the 7th century, the Valley's people have been predominantly Sunni Muslim. However, Persian, Chinese and Hellenic cultures once intermingled here. After the separation of Eastern and Western Turkic Empires, it came under the domination of Turco-Mongolian dynasties and the westward migration of their tribes.² Compared to the sparsely populated mountainous areas and steppe lands, the Valley is dotted with many small and medium-sized towns renowned for their crafts and productive small farms. Today it has a predominantly Uzbek population along with Tajik-speaking villages and other small ethnic communities, including Russians, Meskhetian Turks, Kazakhs and Uyghurs.

The Fergana Valley is unlike other parts of Central Asia. Throughout my travels in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan I came to appreciate the region's distinctive character, resilience and charm.³ Nowhere in Central Asia had I observed such a powerful sense of belonging and defiance. How did this small oasis survive the Soviet bulldozer? Many scholars and travelers have pointed out that distinct features of agriculture and trade have long supported an integrated economy and society. This is why the Fergana people have

of identity and livelihood. Craft-based enterprises have occupied people's daily routines, created a sense of purpose and evolved into diverse forms of colorful *ikat* silk patterns, glazed pottery, wood carvings, beaten copper vessels and many other craft products. These exemplify a blessed divine harmony transposed to the material world and one also linked to Islamic traditions and crafts.

However, there is no simple uniformity in the Valley: each town has a history to tell. The diversity in artisanal family traditions is also reflected in the social nature, temperament and skill of individual Fergana towns. Kokand, for instance, was the capital of the last khanate before the Russian colonial expansion and became the center of an independent Turkestan movement in the 19th century. It still is the de facto cultural capital of the Fergana with long traditions in Islamic teaching and major crafts. Margilan, once a center of Soviet silk production, is known to have a more relaxed attitude to Islamic traditions, with its streets enlivened by women walking in traditional colorful *ikat* dresses. Andijon has long been a trade node between Kashgar (Xinjiang) and Khojand (Tajikistan) but it lost most of its historical center through Soviet urban planning. Russian settlers and intellectuals established the town of Fergana near the ancient city of Sim.

Namangan, in contrast, appears to be an introverted city with grim-looking streets. Situated

in the northern part of the Valley, it is one of the biggest cities in the country, with almost half a million urban inhabitants and its surrounding district home to almost 2 million people, mostly engaged in small crafts, cotton farming, small-scale trading and food processing. Today Namangan's vernacular architecture has certain similarities to old Mesopotamian buildings, with tall mud-brick walls and houses set along snaking roads. Soviet town planning with its straight wide boulevards and public buildings is juxtaposed against this old fabric

Artisans and Worship

The rulers and officials may be in charge of streets, bazaars and public spaces, with their power extending into neighborhoods, tea-houses and mosques through various forms of hierarchy. However, their power has failed to eliminate the bonds of family and the sanctity of home. Despite economic hardship and bad management since the fall of the Soviet Union, strong family ties have maintained the vitality of Fergana people. The traditional walled house

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along with radiating main intercity axes. The result is a seemingly detached co-habitation of two forms, awkwardly out-of-touch with one another. The one is characterized by elongated concrete blocks, meaningless large open spaces and wide roads, whilst the other comprises smaller blocks of buildings secluded somewhat by the traditional winding pattern of roads with their low-rise houses protected by tall fences and garden walls veiling vivid, colorful, traditional quarters.⁴

Crafts prevailed even under the Soviet Union, when all means of production for private purpose were strictly prohibited. Collectivization and Soviet industrial planning aimed to eradicate the independent artisanal spirit and production entirely. Following the failure of early cooperative experiences during the 1920s, silk and pottery factories were established and all privately held equipment, including looms, were confiscated in order to prevent household production. Artisanal traditions were channeled into Soviet factories, thus deforming the quality and style of craftsmanship. Despite this, traditional techniques managed to survive underground at home. Home-based craft production not only passed from one generation to another but also became a symbol of resistance to the Soviet efforts to annihilate it.

is a sacred space and as such is a world within worlds. Behind tall ornate wooden gates and walls, multiple rooms often encircle a courtyard. This is where households with extended families carry out their daily routines. Most crafts rest on patriarchal traditions and lineage. However, unlike in the formal separation of modern workplaces, women do take part in the organization of daily tasks and routines, being adept in the use of domestic space. They frequently join in the production of textiles, pottery, and embroidery. The social fabric of the community is nested in craft production, cottage industries and barter trade. Neighbors and relatives frequently cooperate and perform additional tasks. Extensive networks of relatives and friends help with buying and selling. Many time-honored artisanal traditions are transformed into "mundane" routines and economic livelihoods at home; households consent to government authority but resist the intrusion of the state and the market. Some crafts are performed collectively while others, being highly specialized, require specific skills. In the mostly Tajik town of Rishton, more than 200 households work in the production of pottery and ceramics. They each function as an independent unit, but also cooperate at various stages of glazing and design. This is a form of networked production in which almost all fam-

ily members take part, including children and the elderly. Houses and courtyards are busy with the activities of production, classification and planning. All are enmeshed with family life and social obligations (see picture 1).

In Kokand there are rich and diverse craft traditions with over 600 members registered with the artisans' association (united through the institution of *Oltin Miras*, "Golden Heritage"). Hundreds remain unregistered as they could not afford to pay the annual fee. For instance, I met Osman, a senior artisan who at the age of 11 began working for a master so as to learn how to shape copper. He now carries on engraving and pounding old delicate patterns on copper samovars, trays and plates with his son and a small team of apprentices. During the Soviet era, state institutions ran courses on copper-work, but, he says, "they were inferior to age-old teachings". Osman inherited an extraordinary notebook from his master. This is a hand-written document of 42 pages, which recounts the lineage of coppersmith masters in Uzbek (see pictures 2 and 3).

This manual documents their names and dates as well as explanations of the drawings of the most revered motifs. The book lists Molla Atulla Muhammad, born in 1796, as the first master coppersmith of Kokand. Masters passed on their teachings first to their apprentices and eventually handed on the honored title to their most accomplished apprentice. This custom ensured both the continuity of skills as well as the craft forms themselves. The manual also notes that after 15 generations, the last master died in 1974. Osman is certainly proud to have inherited such an ordained calling and wishes to pass it on to the next generation. In another quarter of the town, the old master Abdulkhak, 78, showed his 26 different patterns of silk *ikat* "atlas". With trembling hands he gently stroked shimmering textiles hung in the veranda. Abdulkhak lived with his extended family in this house consisting of living and work quarters. His beautiful wooden loom was hidden in a small closet for years during Soviet rule and he showed us how he continued weaving at home quietly for decades (see picture 4).

Picture 1



Picture 2



Picture 3



Picture 4



Picture 5



The Namangan silk factory employed 3,000 people during the Soviet era, according to Arif, who came from a typical artisan-merchant family. His father was a silk weaver as his eight brothers were all involved in different stages of silk production, dyeing, weaving and marketing. One of his brothers served eight years in prison for weaving silk privately; during those years they used to steal materials from the factory and weave at home. Their silk patterns and the quality of weaving were always better than the factory-produced ones, which lacked care, patience and attention. The brothers then used to sell these to black-market traders in Samarkand and Bukhara. Arif believed in the miracle of silk and emphasized how main-

taining family traditions was his first duty to his father and generations of grandfathers, how silk is blessed by God and how he is a “slave of God” pursuing a craft that has such sanctity. But, despite his exaltation of silk, the craft was clearly in trouble. Arif had to weave nylon in addition to silk. Harsh economic circumstances have intensified competition and low incomes fuelled the demand for cheap products. The colorful shades of “adras” (*ikat* with cotton and silk weave) and atlas are giving way to cheap Chinese imports and lowering the quality of local production (see picture 5).

I came across one of the last old-style wooden block-printing masters in Margilan. In his courtyard, Rasuljan, 80, showed me a range of exquisite prints (see pictures 6 and 7). He was proud to stress that he and his family had not lost the sacred traditions that extended back several generations. Now, he was passing on to his children what his ancestors and father had perfected. Printing on fabric is a laborious process that involves boiling and washing the cloth several times before and after printing. Developing dyes and performing the prints require physical and emotional stamina. Plentiful supplies of dyestuffs are essential. The family used to use only natural dyes, but these have become difficult to obtain due to high customs charges, corruption at borders and state restrictions. Rasuljan explained that to get the color of black they had to boil iron ore for a week until 200 kilograms of water evaporated and grew dense with color. They used many other ingredients, such as resin, minerals and herbs, to obtain the desired colors. These came from as far away as Afghanistan. Many are in short supply. Squeezed between financial hardship, supply shortages and the lack of space in their family home for complex printing tasks, his sons decided to write a petition to President Karimov, begging him to grant at least some workshop space so that they could continue to carry on their own business. In the meantime, the large Soviet silk factory of the town was divided into smaller units and converted into a bazaar. These new trading sites were built across Uzbek cities to generate income for the new owners of urban property. When I visited the bazaar, the whole space looked eerily empty. Small traders took up only a tiny section of it and there was no trade to fill the upper floors.

Picture 6



Picture 7



Customs controls, tax inspections and police surveillance limit business transactions and push the dealings underground

Endurance without Splendor

Marxists regarded artisans as an appendage to small property owners. This “nuisance class” was supposed to have been eliminated for the victory of the proletariat. For liberal capitalists they represent pre-modern forms of production, a romantic but disappointing symbol of underdevelopment. In oligarchic Uzbek capitalism their survival is linked to the character of the regime. President Islam Karimov and his government officials praise artisans as symbols of Uzbek national authenticity, sources of pride and generators of jobs. Gulnara Karimov, Karimov’s ostentatious daughter, launches her fashion collection with *ikat* atlas silk patterns in Western capitals. But, there seems to be no real will and structure in place to improve the working conditions of artisans. Ruling elites extract value from all forms of enterprise. Major economic resources and activities in gas, cotton and mining are controlled by a small number of oligarchs. Import and export activities are centralized whilst bribery allows additional rents for a range of players. Moreover, trade restrictions, arbitrary customs rules and corruption suffocate small enterprises.

As part of this command capitalism, craft associations dictate government decrees and controlling measures to localities. Oltin Miras was founded by a presidential decree in 1996, uniting three separate artisans’ organizations. It now has 150 branches, many of them very small, throughout Uzbekistan. Although the association defines itself and is promoted by the government as a non-governmental organization, it is another example of state co-option. The president has appointed the national secretary of the association and all branch representatives are selected by the secretary with the approval of President Karimov. In order to function and stay on good terms with local authorities, artisans need to be registered with Oltin Miras. However, several interviews I had with the chairpersons of local branches in the Fergana Valley – as well as in Bukhara and Khiva – showed that these associations were unable to address issues faced by artisans on a daily basis. Leaders acted as civil servants and often felt insecure when asked about their activities and support for crafts.

Customs controls, tax inspections and police surveillance limit business transactions and push the dealings underground. Banks are designed for

private interests only. *The Corruption Perceptions Index* of Transparency International shows that Uzbekistan is among the worst countries in public sector corruption after Somalia, North Korea, Myanmar and Afghanistan⁵ and artisans face these general problems somewhat worse in the Valley. The region is cut off and especially since the Andijon uprising, it has been isolated. There is a severe trade blockade, while tourism is channeled away by the government and large tour operators to designated sites, mostly to the Khiva, Bukhara, Samarkand and Tashkent regions. Merchants from these towns control the prices and marketing channels.

The Fergana Valley belongs to a time and place beyond tablets and mobile phones. China is now producing most of the industrial and consumer goods of the region and dumping them into the ever-growing bazaars in Central Asia. Lack of incentives and low returns dissuade youngsters from taking up crafts as professions: they pick up a small trade or go to Kazakhstan and Russia to become construction workers instead. There is a dual economy, just as in Soviet times. One is the official discourse that has no reflection in reality: it may be publicly endorsed, but everybody knows that it is full of lies. Another is the private realm that is crammed with the naked truth and contempt for poor management.⁶ Uzbekistan has a failing economy, its public services are poor, living conditions are dire. Yet, the regime thinks of itself as a strong regional power. At present the story of Fergana artisans stands as an odyssey of endurance, but I fear there is little prospect for future splendor under the current circumstances.

owners in all major towns of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan between 2004 and 2009. Most observations and interviews referred to here are from a fieldwork trip at the end of 2006. See G.B. Özcan, *Building States and Markets: Enterprise Development in Central Asia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). I have a long interest in craft traditions and support *Anatolian Artisans* as an International Board member. See <http://www.anatolianartisans.org>

4. Thubron provides useful accounts of some towns in the Valley. See C. Thubron, *The Lost Heart of Central Asia* (London: Penguin Books, 1994). C. Thubron, *Shadow of the Silk Road* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2006).
5. See Transparency International's report on corruption perceptions http://archive.transparency.org/publications/publications/other/corruption_perceptions_index_2011 (Accessed on January 12, 2014)
6. See, T. Kuran, *Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

Endnotes

1. For an insightful analysis see F.S. Ülgener, *Zihniyet ve Din – İslam, Tasavvuf ve Çözülme Devri İktisat Ahlakı* [Mentality and Religion – İslam, Sufism and Economic Ethics of Disintegration Period] (Istanbul: Der Yayınları, 2006).
2. S. Soucek, *A History of Inner Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)
3. I carried out an enterprise survey with over 200 small and medium-sized business