Performing National Identity in Uzbekistan

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Note: This is a work in progress. It may read as a bit pasted together and I will keep working on making the argument flow more smoothly.

PROLOGUE

Imagine you come home after a long day and settle down with your dinner in front of the TV. The television shows a broadcast from Lincoln Center where there is some sort of amateur folk group performing on stage. The camera zooms in on a young woman in a white wedding gown and a portly older woman dressed in a beaded powder blue dress. The older woman narrates in a singsong voice and points to various components of the bride's costume, "something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue." Then the wedding march begins and a middle-aged gentleman in a tuxedo leads the bride down a makeshift aisle to join her groom. A "minister" stands before them and intones, "dearly beloved..."

The audience claps politely and the camera focuses on some contest judges scribbling notes. Pairs of women dressed in various ethnic costumes, one in formal dress and one in a wedding gown, parade across the stage, the "bride" smiling shyly behind her veil and her escort singing a wedding song from her tradition. One by one, different pairs step to the front to sing their verse: an Irish wedding song, one in Polish, an African-American spiritual.

The scene then shifts to a demonstration of the traditional "American" post-wedding rituals: the best man's toast, the father-daughter dance, the garter and bouquet tossing. Again, the television cameras show the judges taking notes and conferring with each other. Another group takes the stage and enacts the same rituals with varying degrees of virtuosity. The group to follow them shows a similar setting but with Jewish rituals. As they leave the stage, you notice a stage hand removing a sign saying, "Borough Park Cultural Center," and you think to yourself, "so that explains the Jewish stuff." Three more groups do their bit on stage, mind numbing in their similarity, and you start to look for the remote control. Before you manage to dig it out from under the couch cushions, the emcee announces, "ladies and gentlemen, our judges have reached a decision. I am pleased to announce the winner of the 1997 New York City Folklife Competition: the East Harlem Community Theater!"
ACT I: FOLK CULTURE AND THE SOVIET SCHEMA

The scene described above is a reasonably fluent cultural translation of a type of event that was broadcast quite often on Uzbek television during the 1990s. I attended the Tashkent version of this contest in 1996 where the competitors were not performing archaic or exotic rituals; they were the wedding practices that people in more traditional Tashkent families engage in today, rituals I had seen myself in real life several times. The display of the culture of everyday life and the awarding of prizes for its performance, the transformation of the banal into "art," was especially striking to me because I did not understand its function. This was not art -- it was neither playful nor skillful, and I wanted to know why this kind of performance was being supported by the government so I asked one of the judges why people would want to see televised performances of the things that they see every day. "Some regions of the city have an interesting mixture of cultures, with more Kazakh influence, for example," he explained, "and some people have never seen these Kazakh elements before. What's more is that people don't even remember their own traditions. We're showing the young people what their culture is."

This explanation points to some interesting assumptions behind the Uzbek conception of culture. The first is that everyone is something of an ethnographer, interested in getting to know the cultures of her ethnic neighbors -- an essential component to the Soviet ideology of "friendship of the peoples" and the Uzbek counterpart, "Turkistan -- our common home." The second assumption is that an important part of ethnic identity is knowing what your cultural practices and symbolic systems are, even if you yourself don't participate in them. Theoretical knowledge about "your" culture is given a positive moral value: young people should know their traditions, even if they don't practice them.

National identity in Uzbekistan is entwined with ideas of what it means to be traditional and what it means to be modern, both of which are loaded terms in any language. As Handler and Linnekin point out, in any spectacular preservation of tradition, the performers and
spectators "do not so much participate in a preserved past as they invent a new one....Those elements of the past selected to represent traditional culture are placed in contexts utterly different from their prior, unmarked settings...Traditions thought to be preserved are created out of the conceptual needs of the present" (1984, 280). When I asked cultural elites about the importance of tradition and modernity in Uzbekistan's culture, I often received the explanation "our culture is a combination of national traditions and universal human values." Uzbek elites see that there are cultural elements peculiar to the history of the Uzbeks, as well as other elements that all nations seem to share. This dichotomy divides the content of cultural objects in a way that pairs the idea of Uzbek tradition with the idea of the "particular,\" as opposed to the "universal.\" Values that are seen by Uzbek elites as particularly Uzbek are such things as hospitality, the family, and respect for elders. These values can be contrasted with the elite's perception of Western cultures, which are often seen as on the opposite end of these values: private instead of welcoming; individualistic instead of family-oriented; admiring youth rather than wisdom. But when Uzbek elites speak of universal human values, they are referring to things such as peace, love of one's homeland, and scientific progress.

In this paper I will be examining how these universal and particular values are expressed through folkloric culture, especially in the mass spectacles that take place on national holidays. In these holiday spectacles, universal values are expressed mainly through Western-influenced culture (for example, European classical or pop music), while particularistic values are more frequently expressed through national and folk culture. For example, even though Andijon region had a new, state-of-the-art Daewoo auto plant, one did not see dancers dressed up as auto workers welding joints during Andijon's dance number in the folksy Regions Block of the Independence Day spectacle of 1996. According to the schemas of culture producers, those kinds of modern accomplishments should certainly be portrayed in holiday spectacles, but in a block more appropriate for expressing international values such as technological progress. The image of a modern worker juxtaposed with traditional music and dance does not fit into the schema of Uzbekistan's culture producers. We can contrast this with the opening ceremony of the
recent Olympics in Turin, where one aspect of Italian identity was expressed through a formula 1 race car.

The old forms do not seem to die out, but since they are not useful to the state and to cultural entrepreneurs, they do not play nearly as large a role in public culture in Uzbekistan. Instead they are transformed to suit universalistic purposes. Residual cultural forms (Williams 1984), ways of celebrating and performing, etc. exist alongside more modern forms, but they are often made into emblems of culture rather than being practiced as culture. An example of this is a folk games "Olympiad" I saw in a rural area. There were many "universal" features to this event's form: the games were being played as part of a contrived event and not as part of life cycle or annual rituals; the teams wore identical uniforms (if they could afford them); awards and trophies were given; and the event had an opening processional, Olympic style. Uncharacteristically for a modern sporting event, however, various groups of locals were camped out on the sidelines of the playing field dressed up in fancy contemporary and traditional clothes, singing and dancing for their own entertainment (though, here again, eventually judges walked around evaluating their performances and gave out awards!) These amateur performers, working without the focused attention and resources of the state, stick closer to traditional cultural forms for traditional goals than do performances in Tashkent. But even this traditional form of self-entertainment takes on modern characteristics when it is removed from the traditional place (the courtyard or teahouse), when the sexes dance together, and when the groups themselves have been organized by state culture houses not according to traditional (in this case, tribal) affiliation, but by modern administrative districts.

Performances in Uzbekistan often express both particular and universal values, but the way that these different values are expressed reflects the enduring hegemony of the Soviet schema of culture. Going into the field, my assumptions about the mindset of Uzbekistan's cultural elites were that they perceived that Soviet policies had distorted authentic Uzbek national culture, and that they had long had the desire, which could now be realized, to restore this authentic Uzbek culture. I also assumed that they had as their primary concern not
necessarily a political project of nation building, but rather that they, like artists I know in the U.S., put a high priority on autonomy and creative control over the cultural objects they produced. While I found these concerns about cultural revival and artistic autonomy were expressed fairly often, I realized they were only part of a way of thinking about culture which I characterize as a *Soviet schema of culture*.

**The Soviet Schema of Culture**

The way the Soviets thought about and taught about culture allowed for the rejection of Soviet power without rejecting the Soviet institutional logic of culture. The way the Soviets institutionalized culture created contradictions which meant that the cultural elites I studied could simultaneously perceive that Soviet policies had distorted authentic culture, while apprehending the object "authentic Uzbek culture" through a Soviet lens. This meant that even though they had a desire to restore traditional culture, they also believed that traditional culture is in some ways backward and unenlightened. Also, though they were concerned with creative control, most of them were unwilling to remove themselves from the state-controlled system of cultural production, and not just for reasons of personal financial security, but also because they saw market-driven cultural production as potentially generating "harmful" culture.

The Soviet state defined the parameters of what officially constituted culture in Uzbekistan and, to some extent, the content of what was contained within those parameters. Culture was to be Uzbek in form and Socialist in content, though this formulation was neither completely accurate nor extremely successful at transforming Uzbek culture. Today, Soviet-defined cultural forms, such as folklore contests, folk game Olympiads, and mass spectacles are used by Uzbekistan's cultural elites as the vehicles through which they explore ideas about Uzbek national identity. One of the most immediately discernible changes after independence in 1991 was the removal of the "socialist content" of Uzbekistan's culture and its replacement by "national" content.
I use the concept of schemas to describe the forms of knowledge that culture producers have about culture: what it is and what they should be doing to produce it. The idea of the schema has taken on a huge importance in the growing field of cognitive sociology, which is closely tied to the new institutionalism in social theory. Beginning with Berger and Luckman's (1967) statement that humans would be overwhelmed by the quantity of stimuli in their environment if they did not have some sort of categorization mechanism, the social scientists who depend on the concept of schemas (Paul DiMaggio and William H. Sewell Jr., to name two, and those who use similar concepts such as Charles Tilly, Mary Douglas, Ann Swidler, Pierre Bourdieu, and Anthony Giddens) focus on the idea that schemas have a dual role: they are both representations of the social world and strategies of action. A schema tells a culture producer not only what is good art, but how to make good art. This means that schemas are information processing mechanisms that also direct people toward available repertoires of action.

I invoke the concept of the Soviet schema of culture as a way to refer both to cognition and agency, linking institutions with individuals by linking the way Uzbekistan's elites were taught to think about their world to the ways they react and adapt to it. Historians (e.g. Slezkine 1994b; Suny 1993) tend to characterize Soviet nationality policies as a combination of European romantic nationalism, Russian cultural imperialism, and Soviet state centrism. Scholars of Soviet culture note that there are two main interrelated features of Soviet culture: "its strong tendency towards a fixed hierarchy of cultural production and the particular way that it fetishized high culture" (Condee 1995, viii). The way that the Soviet state institutionalized culture, and therefore the schemas of culture producers today, can be broken down into two elements: culture produced by and for the state; and a typology of cultures that reflects both Orientalism and imperialism, ranking Western culture above Eastern, and culture of the center above that of the periphery. In this paper, I focus mainly on the latter element.

Soviet culture generally wasn't typified according to the Western high/popular culture split. The high/popular split reflects the importance of class distinction in the West, whereas the Soviet typology emphasizes differences between the culture of the center and the culture of the
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periphery. In Soviet discourse, there are four main kinds of culture (in order of relative prestige): international culture (jahon madaniiati; mezhdunarodnaia/internatsional'naia kul'tura), national culture (miliy madaniiat; natsional'naia kul'tura), popular culture (ommaviy madaniiat; massovaia kul'tura), and folk culture (halq madaniiati; narodnaia kul'tura). International culture is associated with progress (towards a modern/European ideal, towards a better standard of living), while national culture is associated with tradition in the form of homogenized, objectified, charming, and colorful ethnic cultural forms which represent the unchanging essence of a nation. Popular culture is a syncretic blend of local and international contemporary influences, enjoyed by people of all ages, but thought of as "light" entertainment, lacking the edifying qualities of the first two types. Folk culture is literally culture produced by the people themselves (as opposed to by professionals), and is associated with backwardness (the culture of the village and of the unsophisticated masses), as well as with a romantic ideal of the authenticity of the simple person.

Table 1.1: Typology of Culture in the Soviet Schema

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status Association</th>
<th>Geographic Association</th>
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<td>Classical (highbrow)</td>
<td>Center (universal)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contemporary (middle/lowlbrow)</td>
<td>Periphery (particular)</td>
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Since independence, Uzbekistan's cultural elites, working within an institutional structure that is nearly identical to its Soviet predecessor, have generally rejected cultural content associated with communism and the "Russian elder brother." Instead, they have been producing cultural objects with more traditional themes based on folktales, historical documents, and Islam. Yet these "new" themes are usually explored through cultural forms adopted during the Soviet period. This is a phenomenon of colonialism where "notwithstanding the rejection and transformation of many elements of 'the' European worldview, its forms became authoritatively inscribed" on the cultural landscape (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991a, 18). The Soviets
institutionalized cultural forms that remain hegemonic today, even though Soviet cultural content has been delegitimized.

The Soviet schema of culture that I discuss in this paper directly relates to one of these paradigms: the distinction among various types or levels of culture, most importantly, between folk culture and other types of culture. This paradigm shows up in an internationally prevalent phenomenon called cultural objectification. Cultural objectification means seeing culture as a thing, a natural object or entity made up of traits, characterizable in terms of the properties it "bears" and separated by these features from other cultures (Handler 1988, 14). The objectification of culture means that

dancing folk, for example, can be "recorded," that is, abstracted from an ongoing social milieu; their activity can be redefined as a thing (a dance) which is part of the cultural content unique to a bounded social entity; then...the thing (and the people) can be re-presented, in the frame of a theatrical stage, as authentic pieces of national culture (ibid, 16).

Ethnographers, nationalists, and state bureaucrats all engage in cultural objectification, albeit for different purposes. Although the intention is to preserve culture, the result is a particular kind of cultural change (Dominguez 1989; Handler 1988; Handler and Linnekin 1984).

The folklorists have objectified those aspects of social life that they sought to preserve; that is, they have transformed them into discrete things to be studied, catalogued, and displayed...But to select aspects of a social world as traits, and then to isolate the chosen traits in a new context -- to photograph them, inscribe them, perform them on stage, immure them in museums -- necessarily changes the meaning that those traits have to objectifiers, trait-bearers, and onlookers alike...To the degree that these new interpretations become incorporated into the "things" themselves -- that is, become part of the understanding that the folk have of their lives -- to that degree will the objectifiers change folk culture by creating it as "tradition" (Handler 1988, 77).

The meaning of the traditional Uzbek way of life was transformed by the Russian and Soviet "objectifiers," so that the "trait-bearers" became self-conscious about the status of their culture as marked and ethnic, as evidenced by their presentation of their culture as such to "onlookers" like myself. For example, the traditional Uzbek home (hovli), a one-story dwelling built around a courtyard, is often contrasted with the cement-walled, box-like apartments
(seksiiia) the Soviets constructed in huge blocks of multi-family buildings. The majority of Uzbeks and many Europeans actually prefer the more expensive "traditional Uzbek" homes because they are roomier, cooler in the summer, and considered generally healthier to live in than the mass-produced buildings. There is one major disadvantage to the traditional house: the pit toilet, and this feature was pointed out to me with grim humor as, "this is our Uzbek national toilet." Through contact with other cultures and the Soviet objectification of their culture, Uzbeks are conscious of every detail of life which differs from the Russian/Soviet standard and is thus labeled "Uzbek national": dance, costume, dishware, food, and even toilet facilities.

A few more examples will help make the point and distinguish between what is today a marked, Uzbek culture and the unmarked culture of everyday life. The urban culture of daily life is seen by people in Tashkent as "modern" but even more accurately could be called Soviet. Everyone in Tashkent shops for food in two places: the Soviet version of a grocery store (gastronom) and at the bazaar. People would ask me, "have you seen our Eastern bazaar?" but no one inquired if I had paid a visit to the equally curious (to my eyes, at least) gastronom by the Tashkent hotel. Another oddity that went unnoticed by the locals was the way Tashkenters decorated their apartments, often using three to five different kinds of wallpaper in the same room to create cut-out arches and columns: blue flowers against green bamboo, perhaps with pink and green floral patterns trimming the edges of the ceiling. To them, this wallpaper extravagance was nothing remarkable, but they always pointed out to me the way they hung rugs on their walls, "Oriental style," or the embroidered wall hangings (so’zana) which, they explained, are part of the Uzbek dowry.

A final example noted by Abramson (1998, 11) is that European-identified people in Uzbekistan will ask if you want your tea "with or without respect." This refers to the Uzbek custom of pouring a small amount of tea into the guest's cup as a signal of the host's willingness to constantly attend to the guest (thereby showing respect). This playful question implies both that Uzbeks are excessively attentive to silly traditions but have good manners, and that while Europeans may be crass and lazy, at least they don't make a big deal over trivial customs (1998,
In all these ways, aspects of Uzbek culture have been marked, made strange, set apart from the everyday and turned into symbols of identity. At the same time, aspects of Tashkent culture that were, to my eyes, Soviet, remained unmarked (and unremarked on) by my informants.

**The Performance of National Identity**

Post-colonial states are faced with the question of "now that we are free to express ourselves, who are we?" In some cases, revolution brings a radical break with the colonial bases of identity. In Uzbekistan, where there was not even an independence movement, let alone a revolution, there is a great deal of continuity with the past. The government of Uzbekistan devoted a lot of its resources to nation-building through ceremony and performance. Political and cultural elites in Uzbekistan had a narrow agenda which they tried to get across to the populace primarily to insure social stability. If these performances "mirror the world the world should imitate" (Geertz 1977, 160), the world of Uzbekistan was a harmonious blend of the best features of international progress and indigenous traditions, a peaceful, multi-ethnic country that values children, sovereign nationhood, and its secular heritage. Spectacle producers aimed to inculcate this version of national identity in a citizenry still reeling from their break with the Soviet past.

However, state ceremonial should not be seen simply as something designed to awe or dupe the people into obeying the state, nor merely as a crude device to give rationalized bureaucracy a sense of moral legitimacy. "In all these views, the semiotic aspects of the state...remain so much mummerly. They exaggerate might, conceal exploitation, inflate authority, or moralize procedure. The one thing they do not do is actuate anything" (Geertz 1980, 123). These performances were not just exercises of power; they were constitutive of power. When the state mobilizes 10,000 bodies in a performance, when those bodies are organized through institutions of employment and education controlled by the state, when the pageantry those bodies play out interprets history and attempts to define a new national identity - - it becomes clear that ritual *is* politics.
National holidays are commonly used by states as conscious expressions of national identity (Binns 1979/80; Kertzer 1988; Lane 1981; Ozouf 1988; Spillman 1997), but rarely to the extent that we see in spectacular states such as Uzbekistan. In 1993 the government of Uzbekistan formed a new department in Tashkent city government uniting the various artists and officials who oversee the execution of holidays such as Independence Day and Navro’z. Government officials saw these holidays as opportunities to entertain and educate the people. The state controlled these celebrations from top to bottom, producing similar mass theatrical concerts for each event. These holiday spectacles offered a concentrated burst of a variety of the kinds of visual and performing arts practiced in Uzbekistan, and therefore gave a glimpse of a variety of artistic genres within one production process.

The national identity I am talking about is a public one, just as the kinds of culture I focus on are public. Various aspects of this public identity are no doubt contested by people in Uzbekistan, but understanding this dynamic would be an entirely different project. In line with the top-down nature of cultural and ideological production in Uzbekistan, I chose to focus on elite interpretations of Uzbek national identity and culture. It is important to study performance as an expression of national identity since so much of the work on Soviet culture has focused on literature and visual art (Allworth 1990; Clark 1981; Condee 1995; Dunham 1990; Golomstock 1990). Because they are fixed in time and space, literature and the visual arts have been a readily available source of data for scholars, but focusing on these genres may give a distorted picture of artistic freedom in the Soviet Union. Since they are reproducible and available for mass consumption, such art forms are especially vulnerable to censorship. Performances are more fleeting and are exposed to a much smaller segment of the public, so their producers are more free to express a range of styles and themes (Goldfarb 1980; Haraszti 1987).

ACT II: FOLK CULTURE AND NATIONAL CULTURE IN SPECTACULAR FORM

The Navro’z spectacle takes place every year in the Alisher Navoiy National Garden, located in Tashkent's central district. Framing the staging area are five dramatic backdrops: three impressive modern buildings (a "wedding palace," a concert hall, and the parliament building);
A 200-year-old religious building that served as a museum of atheism during the Soviet period; and a hill, upon which a wide staircase leads to a large, newly built blue-domed gazebo housing a statue of the fifteenth century poet, Alisher Navoiy. Along with the president, prominent political and religious figures, and the international diplomatic community, the seating area holds 10,000 more ordinary audience members lucky enough to obtain an invitation to the event. The seats are in a U shape around the staging area and those seated in the center section have the ideal position for viewing the backdrop of the hill.

Navro’z 1996: the center stage is crowded with young women dancers in diaphanous green costumes designed in the style of women in Persian miniatures, the typical costume for professional women's dance ensembles. This costume typically consists of a solid-color long dress with a wide, flowing skirt; sleeves that are narrow at the shoulder and wide at the cuff; a tailored bodice covered by an embroidered velvet vest in a complementary color; and a flowing head scarf or colorful skullcap. The typical costume for women in folk ensembles is the shapeless dress made of multi-colored atlas (ikat) silk that is referred to in everyday life as "Uzbek national dress." The dance style is modern: geometric patterns embellished with stylistic elements of Central Asian hand and head movements. On the outskirts of the stage is the Uzbek National Chorus: middle-aged men wearing tuxedos and middle-aged women, some of whom are wearing European chiffon dresses, others wearing long, Central Asian velvet robes. The chorus is mouthing words to a majestic sounding song celebrating the coming of Navro’z, which had been recorded for the spectacle's soundtrack a week or two before (unlike in Turkmenistan, there are no live performances in Uzbekistan's holiday spectacles; everything is lip-synched). The song itself, blasting from the loudspeakers, is the genre known as national orchestral music: European-style music played by Uzbek national instruments, accompanied by the choir, which is also an imported music genre.

Surrounding the central stage are four smaller stages which are also occupied by dancing girls in beautiful costumes. Between the stages are lanes through which performers can enter and exit the main stage, and visible in the background are the puppets and costumed performers waiting to take the stage for the next number. The lanes are lined with artificial flowers (it is still too early in the season for real flowers) donated by the local Italian-Uzbekistan joint venture plastic factory. For now the lanes are empty, but they, too, become part of the staging area later in the show when residents from each of Tashkent’s neighborhood districts parade through, carnival style, dressed in all sorts of costumes, only some of which play on the official theme of animals from the Chinese zodiac. Also still to come are more background effects that constantly draw the viewers' attention to something new and interesting: high wire acts; fountains; 20-meter-tall, brightly colored balloons that are in the shape of horses, bulls, and roosters; kites flying; children on roller skates zooming through the staging area; young men dressed as Temurid era soldiers marching or doing tricks on horses; expensive mylar balloon strings, imported from Moscow, being set free to decorate the sky with their snaky rainbow trails. There are probably few events anywhere in the world that approach the scale, the extravagance, and the visual chaos of Uzbekistan's holiday spectacles.
On February 12, 1996 I attended my first meeting of the "creative group" responsible for the production of the show to take place on Navro’z, the Zoroastrian spring equinox holiday that is one of Uzbekistan's two major national holidays. The group was headed by Rustam Hamidov, a well-known actor who had risen to the position of director of the Hamza, Tashkent's main Uzbek language theater, during the Soviet period. In the post-independence period, Islam Karimov, the President of Uzbekistan, had granted Hamidov control over all of the national holiday spectacles (except for the 1995 Navro’z the direction of which had been given to Hamidov's longtime rival, Bakhtiyor Yo’ldoshev). In attendance at the morning meeting every day were a number of the nation's most prominent choreographers and theater directors, charged with making the holiday spectacle beautiful, interesting and edifying. Also present was Hamidov's co-scenarist, Yo’ldosh Muqimov, an octogenarian who had been a journalist, a historian, and eventually something of a minor dissident during the Soviet period. More recently, he had begun publishing volumes of folktales that he had written and then hidden away many years before, some of which dealt with the "true" stories and traditions associated with Navro’z, which he had recorded based on memories of the tales his grandmother told.

Despite this interest in cultural revival and recovery, as the show took its final form, the attitude of the artists towards issues of cultural renewal struck me as strangely passive. Though Muqimov had been brought in because of the authenticity of his folktales, in the course of rehearsals, the flavor of Muqimov's folklore was sacrificed to special effects, the requirements of "massness" (hundreds of performers on stage at once), the desire of the producers to get a message across instead of "just" entertaining, and sometimes to plain disorganization. Later, during previews of the spectacle for representatives of the literary elite and Cabinet of Ministers,

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1Linguistic notes: in the text I will use the standard English transliteration for place words found in the English language press (Uzbekistan instead of O’zbekiston, Tashkent instead of Toshkent). For all other words, I will use a simplified transliteration from Uzbek (Navro’z, viloyat) and Russian (kul’turnyi, sektsiia). Whenever possible I will give both the Russian and the Uzbek versions of terms as I encountered them in context.

2His real name. In all situations where confidentiality can be protected, I use aliases, but when the information is public knowledge in Uzbekistan, I will give credit to people by using their real names. When quoting an interviewee, I also use Uzbek honorific conventions, e.g. aka (elder brother)
cultural history was overruled by foreign policy concerns and ideological dictates. Hundreds of hours of creative work devoted to dramatizing Zoroastrian legends went to waste in the interest of keeping the exploration of "Uzbek national history" within the limits already established by Soviet historians and contemporary ideologists. It appeared that Soviet ideas about what culture is and how it should be produced were hanging on a lot longer than Soviet ideology had.

The Folktales Block of the Navro’z ’96 spectacle was the focus of intense creative energy. The first reason for this was a reaction to the way Navro’z was produced in 1995 (see the epilogue):

Hamid aka: Navro’z last year especially was very contemporary, very orchestral, and I didn't really like it. I'm not conservative, but Navro’z 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.

To this end, the scenario for the Folktales Block was based on a recent publication by Yo’ldosh Muqimov (cited as Otash 1992, Muqimov's pen name), Navro’z Legend. Though Muqimov himself spent most of his life as a Tashkent correspondent for Pravda, he had a gift for collecting and preserving folktales, especially those which he remembers his grandmother telling during his childhood near Bukhara. Another source for the scenario is Muqimov's interpretations of the writings of Ibn Sino (Avicenna). Muqimov and the others working on the scenario had the goal of reviving Navro’z rituals and "making Tashkent the Navro’z capital of Turkistan, and beyond." They aimed to do this by making Navro’z ’96 "deeper, more historical," with "images from ethnography," using the "most ancient things" found in textual sources. One director called the scenario, "almost documentary. The texts are the most authentic, the most original, and this will preserve the continuity of Navro’z" [field notes]. One of the legends portrayed could be called, "why we don't salt the sumalak." The legend has it that 30 angels (se malak, in Persian), descended and helped out the sumalak makers, who had fallen asleep and forgotten to put salt in. Another legend was "Bobodehqon," or grandfather farmer, who helps out the young farmers in their spring sowing. A third legend was "Aiamajuz," which illustrated the battle of good against
evil, and the rescue of a princess and her prince from the forces of darkness by the forces of light.

The producers wanted to delve deeper into folklore not just to educate and revive forgotten traditions, but also to entertain:

Nodir aka: It's boring to repeat the same thing year after year. By making it deeper it will be more interesting for us and for the people....We showed the sumalak and all that before, but this time we showed the history, where these things are from.

One of the main aspects of the Soviet schema was that culture should serve a socially useful purpose and spectacle producers saw themselves improving the cultural level of the people by teaching them about "their own ancient traditions which were forgotten" during the Soviet period. Soviet cultural content is considered irrelevant now, and the focus is on reviving legends and practices from earlier periods. From an outside perspective, the interesting thing about the way that spectacle producers go about this cultural renewal campaign is that they do not raise the question of the renewal of cultural forms, only of cultural content.

**Analysis of Content**

The choice of focusing in this paper on folk culture means that the holiday Navro’z will be the focus of my content analysis, though for comparison, data on both holidays will be presented. The organizers of the Navro’z '96 spectacle made an effort to keep it distinct from Independence Day, repeating instructions (to those who would like to simply re-use a number from last Independence Day) that this holiday is *milliy* (national), *halq* (folk), and *ommaviy* (mass, popular), unlike Independence Day, which is a *siyosiy* (political), holiday for the *vatan* (homeland).³ The distinctions holiday producers see between the holidays are nicely

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³This distinction between Navro’z as a holiday of the Uzbek people and Independence Day as a holiday of the nation of Uzbekistan is present not just in the discourse about the holiday, but also in the practice of language use among spectacle producers. In the organizational meetings for both holidays Russian was the dominant language, but during the Navro’z meetings Uzbek was spoken much more frequently than it was during Independence Day meetings. Since the people who were working on the spectacles were the same, with the same proportion of monolingual Russophones, the difference in language use clearly indicates the spectacle producers' understanding of the ethnic exclusivity of Navro’z, contrasted with the inclusivity of Independence Day.
summarized by one choreographer who said that Navro’z should be a folk holiday focusing on (Uzbek, ethnic) national culture, while Independence Day should also focus on the universal elements of Uzbekistan's culture.

Hamid aka: 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 Navro’z. That's why I didn't like last year's Navro’z [directed by Bahodir Yo’ldoshev], it was so full of orchestral music you couldn't even get the sense of the holiday. This year was the most interesting one we've had so far. And it was also of the highest quality so far.

There are two important qualities Hamid aka commented on that differentiate Navro’z from Independence Day: the first is the type of culture that the holiday features (e.g. folk or contemporary culture), which I will discuss later on in this chapter; the other quality, which I focus on here, is the themes highlighted in the spectacle. Navro’z is a holiday to celebrate Uzbekistan's traditions, and since part of the state's legitimacy rests on staking a claim to a certain heritage, there is an ideological component to Navro’z. Likewise, there is a heritage component to Independence Day which expresses the traditional/ethnic component of the country's national identity. As Alisher aka explained at the first staff meeting for Independence Day '96, "all countries have their independence day. The focus is on contemporary Uzbekistan and its accomplishments: the regions showing their color, pride in sport, etc."

The main structural unit of these holiday spectacles is the “block.” Blocks are composed of one or more thematically coherent song and dance numbers. The individual numbers, most of which last from one to three minutes, may have very different styles of costume, music, and movement, but all of the numbers in a block are linked by particular theme. These blocks are broken down into three different types: entertaining (which I will not address here), demonstrative, and narrative. The logic for this breakdown comes from the language the spectacle producers used to talk about their goals for the different blocks. Demonstrative blocks are those that the producers have designed to "show off" a particular aspect of culture or national
identity with the goal of evoking a familiar image of culture or nation in the minds of the audience members. These kind of blocks are very schematic and repetitive, presenting the same basic thematic content from year to year. Narrative blocks, such as the “legends” block mentioned above, vary from spectacle to spectacle in terms of the story they present. These are the blocks that holiday producers think of as the most pedagogical; stories are never presented simply as entertainment, but rather as a means to teach about heritage or ideology. Narrative blocks are often somewhat arcane in their content, while the other blocks are very straightforward and easy to understand. The empirical basis for my arguments about spectacle content comes from my analysis of the themes addressed in holiday spectacles. I will now discuss a few of the themes that show up in these blocks and discuss how they relate to folk culture as opposed to other kinds of culture. I will conclude by linking these themes to the Soviet schema of culture I discussed earlier.

Demonstrative blocks are used mostly in expressing the "color" of a particular group through folklore or national culture. In these blocks, historical accuracy and cultural authenticity are not a very high priority. The main goal the spectacle producers have for demonstrative blocks is that they clearly communicate a particular idea, evoke a specific time or place with a few stereotypical images such as costume or backdrop. In planning meetings, producers save time by picking the most stereotypical song, dance, and costume for each region, whatever first comes to their minds. One choreographer is arguing for research: go to the Jewish cultural center and see their videotapes, borrow their authentic costumes, and another choreographer's answer is along the lines of, "sure, go ahead, waste your time, because by the time you get that done the holiday will be over already" [field notes].

4 Based on video tapes of 7 holiday spectacles (Navro’z 1995, 1996, and 1998; Independence Day 1993, and 1995-1997) I coded each block in terms of its thematic content. This was done based on the overall impression the block conveyed, though some blocks were so heterogeneous that they had to be split and counted separately. If the words were intelligible (some vocal styles made it difficult to understand the Uzbek lyrics and some blocks had songs with lyrics that were not Russian or Uzbek), I gave those the first priority in determining up to five content keywords for each block. I also assigned keywords based on the visual symbols in the scene and based on what the spectacle producers told me each block was supposed to convey. The coding scheme was simplified after I analyzed which themes tended to go together in the same blocks and combined similar keywords into one aspect of content.
The Russian term *fol'klor* as used in Uzbekistan covers a wide range of artistic expression: folk tales, folk dances, traditional dress, oral poetry, ritual songs, wedding rituals, games, masks and puppets, props representing household implements, and the demonstration of everyday life activities associated with rural life or the past, such as spinning yarn or pounding grain. These activities are often portrayed in blocks that feature folk culture and the holiday producers think of them as expressing "regional color." Another way that color is expressed is through national culture, which is more limited in its scope when presented on stage: usually just music, dance movements, costume, and backdrop are used to represent ethnic or "national color." This stylistic difference corresponds to the hierarchy of cultures in the Soviet schema, and in spectacle blocks folklore is almost always used in numbers representing a particular region or sub-national ethnic group, and never in numbers representing a nation such as Russia or Turkey.

The slogan "friendship of the peoples" is very familiar to anyone who has studied the Soviet Union. It continues to be a symbol for the desire that all the groups in the multi-ethnic state respect each other and keep inter-ethnic tensions at a minimum. Photographs from the Soviet period show that friendship in holiday parades was demonstrated by having representatives of each of the Soviet republics march under the flag and seal of that republic (State Photo and Film Archive, various documents), though it is not clear whether these were delegates from the republics or representatives of the republic's titular ethnic group who now resided in Uzbekistan. In any case, now these individuals of Azeri or Ukrainian ethnicity no longer represent the republics of Azerbaijan or Ukraine: they are all presented as citizens of Uzbekistan with their own folk cultures.

The purpose of the Friendship Block is to demonstrate the cultures of the peoples who live on the territory of Uzbekistan. The Friendship Block appears every year in the Independence Day spectacle, and until 1996 it was part of Navro’z as well. After 1996, the Navro’z performances of Tashkent's ethnic cultural centers were moved to a different square as part of the post-spectacle public entertainment program. In 1994, a reporter stated that "the holiday would have lost much, not just in its brilliance, but in its main idea, were it not for the
participation of the national cultural centers' own program" (*Narodnoe Slovo* 3/24/94). But over the next few years, non-Uzbeks were gradually marginalized by the holiday that was every year more fully devoted to exploring themes of traditional Uzbek culture. Navro’z is for Uzbeks; Independence Day is for the citizens of Uzbekistan.

Holiday organizers described both an outward and an inward face to this block: the outward face was presenting a unified, multi-ethnic Uzbekistan to international guests, and the inward face was encouraging members of various ethnic groups to participate in their national holiday (Independence Day). In his instructions to representatives from Tashkent's ethnic cultural centers, one holiday organizer explained how he wanted them to put together numbers for the 1996 Independence Day spectacle:

> he wants to have people from the cultural centers up on stage performing, too, because "it's their homeland. Let the people themselves participate." He wants peace, friendship, and festivity in the songs. He emphasized that it's important, this being a multinational republic, to include all of them in the celebration: "your participation is obligatory," he said. And, implying what was in it for them, he said, "you all know your own, right? They'll be recognized on TV" [field notes].

There are several large ethnic groups in Tashkent with cultural centers and enough active and talented community members to put together a spectacle number, but most of them resist inclusion in the holiday due to time and budget constraints (the government funds for these centers are largely symbolic). The Korean cultural center has a very active amateur ensemble and is called on several times a year to perform at public cultural events. Likewise, the Tatar and Uighur cultural centers have fairly good talent available, but other centers (Latvian, Lithuanian, and German, to name a few) do not have the same talent pool to draw on. Russians and Ukrainians, however, are well-represented in the professional arts communities and can always be counted on to mount an ethnic dance number for a holiday spectacle. The nationalities that are represented in the final show are chosen partly on the basis of availability and talent, and partly on aesthetic grounds, so that no two dances in the same spectacle are too similar. For example, Tatars and Bashkirs are culturally similar, and the holiday producers ruled out asking both groups to work up a dance number.
The other variant on the Friendship Block is the Turkistan (short for the slogan "Turkistan, Our Common Home") Block, where Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are represented through short numbers. The content of this block does not vary from spectacle to spectacle, nor does the music and the costume. The only thing that varies is the one or two lines of introduction which emphasize that all the peoples of Central Asia belong to a larger historical entity, Turkistan, and continue to have common cultural, political and economic interests. This block corresponds to an idea that President Karimov has often reiterated in public forums, that the countries of Central Asia should unite in an economic union with Tashkent as its capital. This block usually ends with an Uzbek dance or there is some structural element of Uzbek culture unifying the various blocks, emphasizing Uzbekistan's leading role in such a federation.

The structure of most International Blocks is a series of dances from around the world, plus an Uzbek dance. The International Blocks are visually very similar to the Friendship Blocks, except that they usually feature nations that do not have co-ethnics living on the territory of Uzbekistan. Every International Block has ideological content, sending messages (through the choice of dances) about which countries are diplomatically important to Uzbekistan. There is also a heritage component, in that Uzbek music and dance is structurally placed on the same level as the national culture of these other states. The message is basically twofold: 1) if your country is friendly to us, you will be rewarded with a dance, and 2) we are all on the same level, politically as well as culturally.

The Regions Block occupies by far the most time of any type of block in each of the holiday spectacles. The regional ensembles (almost always amateur folklore groups) receive basic instructions on what themes to include in their program. The ensemble directors were actually brought to Tashkent before the Navro’z 1996 performance for a seminar on organizing a number for an open air stage. At the seminar, Tashkent academics and spectacle producers stressed the following points:
keeping things new yet "true" (to tradition); keeping Navro’z and Independence Day distinct; keeping up quality and not letting the numbers fall flat like they are a recital of some sort; adding local color such as folk games; and the use of the Navro’z Legend book as a source of inspiration and textual basis [field notes].

For the spectacle producers, one of the main reasons to focus so much on the Regions Block is the preservation of rich regional cultures. However, several of Uzbekistan's 13 regions are purely administrative districts, yet they are required to develop an idea of the unique culture and achievements of their region in order to present them in an interesting way during the spectacle. The ensemble from Sirdaryo Region (a purely administrative division within the Tashkent cultural sphere) arrived at the Independence Day '96 rehearsals with the most folkloric piece of all the numbers. Their performance included theatrical business such as singers who enacted traditional bread baking practices (which are still widespread throughout Uzbekistan) and dancers who had a bit of their performance dedicated to enjoying a slice of melon. "Our region is known for its especially sweet melons," the director explained when I asked why he chose melons as one of his region's "achievements" [field notes]. The body language of the melon eating dancers was quite well done for humorous effect, but the members of the organizational committee who watched Sirdaryo's performance laughed at it for another reason: apparently it was folksy to the point of being ridiculous to them. In the end it did not matter what the people from Sirdaryo thought was significant about their region, but what the Tashkent organizers thought would be emblematic and glitzy. The people from Sirdaryo put away their bread oven and their melons, and in the end were merged into the larger collective consisting of groups from Tashkent and Jizzakh Provinces, in essence re-creating what ethnographers would find a more organic cultural unit. 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.

The Children's Blocks (present in each of the Independence Day spectacles) tend to feature children who are age cohorts of the nation, so in 1993, the block featured mothers (dressed in both European and Uzbek "national" clothing) walking across the stage holding their
two-year-old children, while a narrator read a poem likening mothers to the motherland and children to the future of the nation. In 1997, the children were about to enter school so there were songs about the joys of education. Another analogy that came up more than once was the cradle as a symbol of family and country. Interestingly, one year the cradle was a traditional Uzbek *beshik* (a flat board on top of rounded pieces of wood, colorfully decorated) and another year it was a European pram. The spectacle producers originally had envisioned children representing all the different ethnic groups in Uzbekistan jumping up and down on a super-sized inflatable beshik, until someone pointed out that beshiks are flat boards on which nobody ever jumps, unlike a soft, springy pram. So the director agreed to change it, saying, "everyone here wheels their kids around in German prams anyway."

One block demonstrated the family-related theme of a wedding ritual, a favorite element of Soviet folklore performance that shows up very often in holiday spectacles as well as in festivals and contests, as mentioned earlier. This block had brides in European white gowns, eyes downcast, accompanied under a canopy by female relatives, and grooms dressed in European suits with festive Uzbek skullcaps surrounded by their male friends. The groups of brides met up with the groups of grooms on stage and that's pretty much where the wedding ritual ended, perhaps because nobody could decide if they should show what comes next: a visit to the registrar at the wedding palace, a visit to get blessed by the mullah, or both (most Uzbek couples do both now). Most likely the ritual ended there because the goal was just to give a taste of the ritual, not a reenactment.

**The Relationship of Content to the Soviet Schema**

Through holiday spectacles, we can see how the Soviet hierarchy of cultures continues to be enacted among culture producers today, reproducing a schema that places Western culture above Eastern, and culture of the cosmopolitan center over culture of the backward periphery. The hierarchy of cultures in the Soviet schema is illustrated by the way elites talk about different types of culture as well as the way they use the different types of culture to express different
ideas in holiday spectacles. As chart 1 shows, folk culture is the dominant type of culture in holiday spectacles, making it a significant part of the national identity expressed in these performances, but it’s place in the hierarchy is demonstrated by the way it is portrayed and the themes with which it is associated. To review, the hierarchy of cultures reflects a bias in favor of Western culture and a simultaneous denigration/romanticizing of folk culture. This aesthetic paradigm privileges what is seen as "developed" culture over every-day-life culture, Western over Eastern culture, and the culture of the center over the culture of the periphery.

Chart 1: Number of minutes in all coded spectacles devoted to the different types of culture, broken down by holiday

Examples of international culture in a holiday spectacle would be European classical music and dance, such as Tchaikovsky and ballet, as well as international costume such as gymnastic or military uniform. National culture differs from nation to nation, but to take the example of Germany from the 1996 Independence Day spectacle, the national culture was symbolized by means of male dancers in lederhosen and female dancers in ruffled frocks, doing a somewhat raucous and athletic dance to the tune of the song known in English as "Roll Out the Barrel." Thus even a European national culture represents something less refined than classical European ("international") culture. Popular culture uses electronic instruments in its music, unlike most of the other kinds, the costumes are flashier and sexier, and the dance moves are
extremely syncretic, drawing on Uzbek classical dance as well as American hip-hop. Finally, folk culture features acoustic, not electronic, music, colorful costumes with minute regional variations, and in addition to dance, features other kinds of movement such as game playing or daily life activities.

Earlier I mentioned the distinction my informants made between "national traditions" and "universal human values." These two aspects of Uzbekistan's contemporary national culture are expressed in different ways in holiday spectacles, with content relating to national traditions being expressed more than half the time through folk culture, and never through international culture. Conversely, universal values are never expressed through folk culture, but most often through international (40%) and popular (37%) culture. In the cases where the content expressed a thorough mixture of national and universal values, the producers chose national and popular culture forms, and international and folk culture were avoided altogether. This offers further evidence for my claim that Uzbek cultural elites see their own cultural traditions as particular, while European cultural traditions are seen as universal. The aesthetics and standards for a modern national culture have been accepted by Uzbekistan's elites, putting folk culture and uninstitutionalized traditions in a peripheral place in the understanding of Uzbek national identity.
The different types of culture are used to express not just different values, but also different themes (see Chart 3). Nature, for example, is apparently a suitable theme for any type of culture, while nationhood appears to be incompatible with folk culture. Heritage, it is not surprising, is most often expressed through the particularistic types of culture, national and folk. On the other hand, patriotism is more often paired with the universalistic types of culture, international and popular. Reading Chart 3 the other way, the "highbrow" genres of international and national culture are about evenly matched with the "lowlowbrow" genres of popular and folk culture in terms of the number of blocks devoted to each (47 and 51 respectively). Lowbrow forms are apparently less compatible with the theme of nationhood than with the others. This makes sense considering the nationhood theme is related to Uzbekistan's place in the world, an idea which emphasizes that Uzbekistan is an equal to other nations, all of which have their international and local high culture traditions.
Chart 3: The number of blocks in all coded holiday spectacles using international, national, popular or folk culture forms to express a particular theme

**EPILOGUE: AN ALTERNATIVE VISION OF NAVRO’Z**

In 1995, Rustam Hamidov was not asked to direct the Navro’z spectacle as he had done in previous years. Instead, Bakhtiyor Yo’ldoshev, director of Tashkent's Abror Hidoyatov Theater was given the job by President Karimov. However, Yo’ldoshev was never invited back to direct a national holiday spectacle. The President and Yo’ldashev apparently had “artistic differences” that underline the attitudes about the proper presentation of folk culture in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. So what was it that Yo’ldoshev did wrong? A likely explanation lies in the apparent differences in the form and content of the Navro’z spectacles of 1995 and 1996. On the most general level, they were formally similar, mass spectacles: they were both outdoor spectacles featuring song and dance, performed on multiple stages with additional activities taking place around the staging area. Within this genre, though, there were some differences in
the structure and sequence of the dances, and considerable differences in the thematic content presented.

Both Navro’zes featured folkloric themes and themes that were a part of the ideological set of inter-ethnic friendship and internationalism that Uzbekistan emphasizes in all its holiday spectacles. But the 1995 Navro’z emphasized patriotic themes more than subsequent years and its ethnically neutral "prologue/finale" blocks and marked "folklore" blocks had a much stronger emphasis on modern music (pop as well as light orchestral, "international" music), modern costumes (often with an Oriental flair), and choreography that reflected Yo’ldoshev's pictorial style of staging (Gray, 1998). The show was best seen from above, so the television audience got the best view thanks to one cameraman who was stationed on a crane high in the air: Yo’ldoshev choreographed flowing lines of bodies that formed geometric shapes on the background of the stage floor, and then dispersed. It is easy to understand why this might be incoherent to the viewers in the audience at ground level. Also, the folkloric themes were evidently more abstract and harder to follow than those of subsequent years, which drew less on what we would call a high culture aesthetic than did Yo’ldoshev's scenario.

Yo’ldoshev's vision of Navro’z did not "work" for President Karimov because it was too modern and abstract, and it was designed for viewing on television rather than oriented towards the president's chair, as subsequent spectacles were. The 1995 Navro’z did not pay enough homage to Uzbek cultural content through national or folk music and costume, and it violated the aesthetic sensibilities of the elite by expressing values of "national traditions" through international and popular cultural forms.
Bibliography


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