

Factors Affecting Tajik Identity

by

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Formation of Tajik Identity

According to Tajik Academician Babajan Ghafurov, Tajik identity was formed under the rule of the Samanids of Bukhara (AD 875 - 999). In his view, the newly formed Tajik identity consisted of three things: 1) development of a centralized, independent government; 2) revival of the Persian language as official state language; and 3) reintroduction of ancient Iranian, primarily Sassanian, traditions into the predominantly Islamic lands of the Eastern Caliphate. Ghafurov's contention is that after an invasion the culture of the conquered people does not perish altogether; vestiges of it survive (Ghafurov, 1972, 370ff; cf., also Hirsch 1981, x). Ghafurov's views are supported by Holzner and Robertson who study modification of identity patterns in cultures that undergo upheavals. In this regard, they say, "constraints resulting from the underlying civilizational codes remain discernible" (Holzner and Robertson, 1979, 33). It is up to the custodians of the old culture, therefore, to identify the elements germane to survival and reintroduce them into the new milieu forcefully and purposefully.

By the time of the Samanids, three centuries of Arab overlordship had reduced the Persian language to a mere means of communication among the peasantry. Medicine and medical care, for the promotion of which the University of Gundishapur had been established, had fallen in the hands of witch doctors and hypocrites. Music, dance, and the plastic arts, too, had suffered major set backs.

The Samanids identified the Persian language as the most germane element to be rejuvenated; it was reinstalled as the official state language. They also established a vibrant educational system; assembled an informed medical community that drew on the expertise of physicians from China, India, the Arab world, and Iran and reintroduced music, emphasizing instrumentation and the arts, especially performance. Their Sivan al-Hikmat, modeled on the University of Gundishapur, contributed Ibn-Sina's *Shifa*, al-Biruni's *Saidana*, and, al-Razi's *Hawi* to world civilization. The translations of these works, themselves based on the achievements of the ancient Greeks, formed the core on which medieval European theorists drew for inspiration and substance.

The Samanids, however, were not the first to attempt a redefinition of Iranian identity. Alexander III the Great undertook a far-reaching reconstitution of the world, including a redefinition of the Greek and Iranian cultures. By combining the two cultures, the Macedonian warrior-king intended to forge a new breed of statesmen, warriors, jurists, and artists. But his Hellenism, although a mighty influential force, did not last long enough to absorb the deeply-set vestiges of Iranian culture, especially its most hated hierarchy of authority that was accentuated by the divine right of kings.

Thereafter, Parthians and Sassanians made a colossal attempt at reintroducing the Ahuric Order and the institutions that sustained it. But to no avail. Neither the Order nor the institutions could be meaningfully restored--a consequence of the nature of identity which will be discussed further below. Instead, the state underwent an internal redefinition of its own, dictated by decentralization, urbanization, and communism, all evidenced in the reforms of Mazdak. In addition, encroaching nomads--bedouin Arabs in the west and pastoral nomads in the east--coveted the wealth and the identity of the Khusraus.

Neither was the Arab Empire that succeeded Sassanian rule immune to the continuous erosion of authority. Unlike the Greeks who had relied on their experience in administering city-states under democratic rule, the Arabs employed brutal force, discrimination, and coercion to effect universal change. At the end, the un-Islamic nature of their actions--injustice, disregard of human rights, and a dogmatic adherence to the *Shari'a* law--caused the demise of their Empire.

The Samanid society that Babajan Ghafurov and other Tajik scholars regard as the formative stage of Tajik identity enjoyed an intriguing dual character: on the one hand, it was an Islamic version of a set of ancient Iranian traditions with specific ancient Iranian values; on the other hand, it was an Iranian version of a set of Islamic values based on Sufic and Shu'ubi thinking. Rising against the worldliness of the Caliphs, the Sufis redefined the relationship between man and God. In the process, they also redefined fragments of Iranian identity along spiritual lines. Conversely, the ambitious Shu'ubis centered their redefinition on gnosis. By undermining faith, they redefined fragments of Iranian identity along rational lines. The convergence of these world views, usually referred to as the "Renaissance of the Tajik," gave birth to a unique Perso-Islamic identity symbolized in the revival and re-establishment of the Persian language alongside Arabic, centralization of the bureaucracy, and establishment of a relatively just society. Emergence of sages like Ibn-i Sina, al-Biruni, Rudaki, and Firdowsi underscores the positive impact of this well-balanced convergence.

This, however, is not to say that investigation into the formation of Tajik identity under the Samanids is not fraught with difficulties. The most we gain from sifting through the information are a linear historical narrative, an impressive group of well-known scholars, and a worthy list of scholarly contributions. Narratives that could shed light on aspects of individual, collective, or generational accounts of identity are absent. Books like Nizam al-Mulk's *Siyasatname* are in existence, of course; but the information they provide is anecdotal at best. They lack the vigorous philosophical, sociological, and psychological

discourses that would address pressing concerns regarding survival (Brennan, 1988, 37-50); continuity, either compositional or causal (Brennan, 1988, 17-33; Hirsch, 1982, 212); and sameness. Additionally, they lack discourses outlining the everyday life experiences that had led to the development of the intriguing dual character mentioned above. Such discourses would be of great benefit to present-day scholars who study the socialist movements that place an exclusive emphasis on reason.

What Is Identity?

Identity is not a single phenomenon. Rather, it is the result of the interactions among a multiplicity of phenomena which gather around a sensitive core and give it expression. Since the interactions among the contributing phenomena are diverse, the relations that emerge from the interactions, too, are necessarily diverse, fluid and, thereby, susceptible to change. The following abbreviated model illustrates the multi-functionality of identity, Tajik identity included.

At the most elementary level, the individual is conceived of as a biological entity; a universally defined genetic code assures his or her corporeal development. The individual also carries a memory imprint which, among others, accommodates the body's mental and spiritual needs against the outside forces that comfort him or threaten his survival. In what follows, we shall refer to these outside forces, which determine the identity of the holder of the biological code and the memory imprint, with the term Other (with a capital O) (cf., Brennan, 1988, 28-29).

After birth, the physical part of the body expands according to the dictates of the genetic code and its interaction with Other. The individual's main features, for instance, remain as coded while the individual's general appearance conforms to the dictates of Other. At the end, the combination of genetic coding and Other emerges as a human being with a specific physical description. Twins and look-alikes, for instance, accidentally or otherwise, share a similar genetic coding and a similar Other.

Physical description is a facet of personal identity. The latter emerges as a result of interactions between the memory imprint and the more abstract and complex side of Other. In fact, the memory imprint acts very much like a fresh floppy. The birth process formats it according to the dictates of the genetic code as well as of instinct and intuition, mechanisms which assure continuity. After birth, the formatted floppy develops its sensitive files according to the dictates of the memory imprint and the wisdom or folly of Other. Visual experience plays a major role in relating the two "worlds" to each other (cf., Schoeberlein-Engel, 1994, 179-183).

While physiologists and psychologists concern themselves with an understanding of the body and the mind, philosophers, sociologists, and political scientists concern themselves with the relationships that obtain as a result of the interactions among the templates within Other. These templates, which reflect the contributions of generations of memory

imprints, not only play a pivotal role in the formation of presuppositions but also in the analysis of current information leading to authoritative decisions and choices. In other words, consciously or otherwise, the individual's world view, social mode of existence, ideological inclination, and ethnic and regional preferences are molded by authority in conjunction with the information in these templates (Holzner and Robertson, 1979, 10; Schoeberlein-Engel, 1994, 195). After all, as Holzner and Robertson state, "identity and authority stand in a relationship of mutual dependency" (Holzner and Robertson, 1979, 37).

The discussion of the nature of the templates which define ideology, authority, ethnicity, regionalism, gender, and race, as well as of the categories and subcategories within each, is outside the purview of the present study (for details see, Wetherel, 1990, 227). Suffice it to add that as Other-related phenomena, these relations are devoid of a genetic code; are mostly resistant to empiricist sorting, and are highly predisposed to presupposition. Furthermore, rooted in the individual's innate tendency to classify objects, they are necessarily ephemeral in their nature (Quine, 1969, 116ff; Hirsch, 1982, 240). Therefore, unless they are documented synchronically and stored over time, they tend to disappear into history. Our inability to attest to the veracity of the formation of a tenth-century Tajik identity is a case in point.

Identity, whether personal, collective, or generational consists of a fluid set of relations (Holzner and Robertson, 1979, 20; Kuehnast, 1997; Wetherel, 1990, 227; Hardison, 1981, xi). It develops as a consequence of the interactions among the genetic code, the memory imprint, and Other. It does not assume a unique shape and never ceases development (Hall, 1990, 225). A tentative assessment of the interactions between authority and two of the categories in the ideology template of the present-day Tajik identity paradigm is presented below. The presentation is incomplete; nevertheless, it is indicative of the complexity of the issue at hand.

The Tajik Ideology Template

Present-day Tajik ideology draws on a set of presuppositions rooted in the Perso-Islamic identity fragments discussed earlier as well as on a new set of directives imposed by the Marxist-Leninists earlier in this century. The word "imposed" is used advisedly to denote a redefinition of authority, a process as sensitive and fluid as the phenomena it controls.

Redefinition of identity is usually followed by a neutral space (Holzner and Robertson, 1979, 30). This space, which allows the individual, or the collectivity, an opportunity to readjust, I believe, includes an introductory phase, a peak, and a denouement. Psychological hardships, including feelings of alienation, guilt, shame, and resentment towards authority, culminate in the peak, a relatively short period (cf., Kavolis, 1979, 46). During the denouement, more and more fragments of the old identity are assimilated into the new identity.

This, of course, reflects the normal course of events. What happens if a new element, such as abandonment, is added? If the redefinition process, for whatever reason, is abandoned in midstream? This is often the case at khaniqahs when a Sufi disciple, striving to redefine his self, becomes too frustrated to continue on the Path and leaves. He is invariably overcome with bewilderment and is filled with an intense resentment for authority. More importantly, redefinition and abandonment apply to individuals and collectivities with similar results. The redefinition of Zoroastrianism into Islam and of Islam into the Soviet system are good examples, respectively, of a successful and an aborted redefinition of collectivities.

The introductory phase of the redefinition of Zoroastrianism into Islam, i.e., until the redefinition peaked in the convergence discussed earlier, took about three centuries. Perhaps the harshest period of readjustment Iranians have undergone in their entire cultural history. During the denouement, which lasted until the fifteenth century, Ahura Mazda merged with Allah, the preeminence of goodness and truth found a new home in the universality of justice, and adherence to free will was limited to belief in the will of Providence. Narratives emerging from the transition, the *Mathnavi* of Rumi, the *Bustan* and *Gulistan* of Sa'di, and the sonnets of Hafiz testify to the success of the redefinition. For a cultural history of the period, see Bashiri's [Iran and Islam to AD 1400](#) on this site.

The establishment of Communism in Central Asia, on the other hand, was an artificial redefinition that bordered on adventure. Artificial in the sense that the principles continued to be hammered out as the redefinition progress moved along. Hardly allowing for a neutral space, the communists disestablished belief in the existence of a supreme authority; undermined the primacy of justice, and violated the sanctity of the family unit. In their place, they imposed atheism, the authority of the Communist Party, and the primacy of state authority. They did not produce either a viable role for the individual or a meaningful closure for life. Their all-encompassing liability to labor went against human potential and their insistence on total conformity trampled over human dignity. In some cases, reclassification surpassed redefinition. This to the point that the individual no longer knew who he or she was (cf., Holzner and Robertson, 1979, 32).

Viewing Tajik society today, we can easily trace the causes of its chronic identity crisis as well as the sources of the feeling of guilt, shame, and resentment that the population harbors to this early stage of Communist takeover. The fall of Communism only exacerbated the latent sentiments by pushing them to the foreground. Before Gorbachev, when the socialist society was making its ascent towards the peak of redefinition, the ideology template contained two prominent categories: Communist and Muslim. When the socialist redefinition was aborted, a crisis of authority, a vacuum, occurred, bewildering everyone, Muslims and Communists alike. Unfortunately, of all Soviets, the Russians were identified with authority and, consequently, as the cause of the malaise.

According to the narratives on the Islamic template, Soviet Muslims have been systematically distanced from the sources of their spiritual inspiration for four generations. As a result, they have fallen victim to sectarian and regional disputes and, distrustful of people, they are in constant ethnic conflict with their neighbors.

Furthermore, the divisions are pronounced. Different segments of the population attend different mosques, perform different rituals, listen to different preachers, and form different alliances. A Vahhabi Sunni, for instance, is likely to shun an orthodox Sunni, a twelver Shi'ite, or an Isma'ili Shi'ite. He will not participate in their *tuys*, attend their wakes, or choose a husband or a wife from among them. If their paths cross, depending on circumstances, he will not hesitate in imposing his ideological will on them, even if it entails bloodshed. As mentioned above, to a degree, these sentiments are mutual.

This state of affairs, the Muslim Tajiks believe, would not have happened if the Soviets had not disrupted their peaceful Muslim community. Furthermore, it would not have been acerbated, they believe, if the Soviets had not aborted the redefinition that they should not have undertaken in the first place. Neither are the Soviets or the Russians the only ones to blame. The Tajiks blame themselves even more. They feel guilty of abandoning their family; of not taking care of their own children; and of allowing themselves to be coerced by inferior Russian bureaucrats. They feel guilty for not standing up for their rights and for allowing their resources to be shipped out of the republic without their knowledge and permission.

For some, this feeling of intense guilt is accentuated by the shame of inability to rise above their dependence and poverty; of seeing their people, especially their women and *aksakals*, treated roughly and inappropriately. More than any thing, however, Tajik intellectuals resent that the Russians, rather than their *aksakals*, who are entitled to it by the right of *ijma'*, should control the internal, external, and spiritual affairs of the republic.

The narratives for the democratic-minded Communists describe a group that is cut from a totally different cloth. They are mostly educated young to middle-aged men and women who seek to forge a new identity for the republic. Unlike their counterparts in the other category, they frequent the same socialist gatherings, listen to the same set of speeches, and promote the same set of ideas. More importantly, as long as the march to the ultimate Utopia is not halted, they follow Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin as much as Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine. The new identity they intend to forge employs the democratic institutions of the West as a bonding agent bringing about co-existence among the disparate groups. Having formed a centralist regime, at present, they act on behalf of the collectivity (cf., Holzner and Robertson, 1979, 35).

Conclusion

The Tajiks are undergoing a traumatic time in their history not because of who they are, but because of the circumstances in which they find themselves, circumstances that are beyond their control. Insecurity, feelings of alienation, distrust, and guilt are normal feelings for individuals or collectivities that undergo redefinition. Unfortunately, intense as these feelings are as part of the normal course of redefinition, they are compounded by a sudden crisis of authority, abandonment, and economic dislocation, a situation that would not have obtained if the redefinition had been allowed to continue at its own

steady pace. Depending on the outcome of the interaction between authority and the other templates, and granted that there would be no more set backs, in time, we might witness a new Tajik identity paradigm. Contributors to this new identity would include Soviet rational thinking, Islamic spirituality, and the democratic institutions of the West.

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